

His body is human but he has a *tiracchāna* heart, a few rotten fish in the rattan basket – or, how the prevalence of child sexual violence in Cambodia even includes Buddhist monks

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Background

In Cambodia, a Buddhist country, more than half of all children experience physical violence, a quarter suffers emotional violence, and sexual abuse is common. The aim of the study is to document the patterns of sexual abuse of children in their families, in the community and by Buddhist monks and ritual officiants and to provide some understanding of the ways in which Cambodians make sense of this abuse perpetrated by such trusted members of the society.

Method

Adopting a conceptual framework originally developed for the cultural context of violence against women, 110 cases of child abuse were ethnographically studied, comprising 61 cases of sexual abuse (50 girls and 11 boys), 26 cases of physical abuse (13 girls and 13 boys), and 23 cases of emotional abuse or neglect (13 girls and 10 boys). In addition, ethnographic data were collected from 70 cases of abuse in the Buddhist sangha, including 38 monks who had been accused or proven to have abused children as well as lay temple ritual officiants, who easily come into contact with boys who live there and girls who visit.

Results

The perpetrators included fathers and other close relatives, neighbors and also lay Buddhist officiants and monks. Most informants displayed a range of specific Khmer and Buddhist beliefs in interpreting the causes of sexual or physical abuse of children. These “cultural attractors” include blighted endowment caused by deeds in a previous life, a bad character starting early in life, astrological vulnerability to abuse, preordained entanglement between the child and the abuser (they are “fated” to meet), sexual craving, “entering the road to ruin,” and a moral blindness that portrays the abuser as blameless. Although these traits are similar to those identified in the explanations of violence against women, there were notable differences, such as the imagery of the perpetrator as a wild beast from hell that crawls (*tiracchāna*) in explaining sexual abuse, including incest.

Monks committed sexual abuse including anal sex on boys, including those in their care as novice monks. They also abused girls who had visited the temple. Monks when denounced were immediately defrocked before being charged. No psychological support whatsoever was provided for the children (or for the perpetrators). Four patterns were identified: Group A – Rape of young girls, mainly on special Buddhist occasions. Group B – Abuse of trust and rape of girls or boys in vulnerable positions of serving monks in temple e.g. temple boys, temple girls, novice monks, young female devotees. Group C - Abuse of magical methods e.g. love-charm to groom

vulnerable patients of monks to succumb against their free will to multiple technical rape in the context of an ongoing 'relationship'. Group D - Exercise of power over adolescent girl (not a patient of monk) through drugs or money to manipulate and groom her to acquiesce to multiple sexual abuse in context of a 'relationship'. Reports of abuse by monks, which has been steadily increasing year by year, came to an abrupt end in late 2018, immediately after the Prime Minister condemned whistle-blowers as seditious to Buddhism.

Discussion

Based on many years of in-depth study of Cambodian culture by the authors, a cultural epigenesis of sexual abuse of boys and girls is identified, which could provide a blueprint for developing culturally responsive policies and strategies that are effective because they are rooted in local cultural and religious systems. This paper highlights a disturbing breakdown in the social fabric, in which Buddhist clergy lose their prestige and trust, and in which they are by no means immune from perpetrating child abuse. The findings show how in Cambodia, no differently than in almost any other country, a small number of people entrusted to safeguard public and religious morality do betray that trust. They are said to be 'a few rotten fish in the rattan basket'. It does not follow, however, that Buddhism condones it, or that Buddhist institutions have contributed to it. It is far-fetched to imagine that monk child abuse abruptly ended in 2018 and, more likely, the problem has been swept underground.