The Cambodian family after the Khmer Rouge genocide: continuity and change

Background

Few countries have experienced as much political and social upheaval as Cambodia has in the 20-year period from 1970 to 1989. This period encompassed civil war, the Khmer Rouge genocide, American bombing, famine, and the transition of three successive governments. The Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) was particularly destructive as far as Cambodia's social solidarity and family fabric were concerned because of its policies of indoctrination, suspicion and denouncement. Compulsory migration, expropriation of land and dispatch based on age and sex to labor camps drastically fragmented Cambodian families, in the country's leader, Pol Pot, quest of regaining the dominant influence and economic power of the Angkor civilization of the past.

Today, Cambodia is endeavouring to reconstruct and modernize itself. Recent rapid and challenging changes such as the decline of fertility and marital stability, urbanization and labor migration imply that the Khmer family is trying to maintain continuity.

In this paper, we focus on characterizing both demographic changes and the determinants of the changes that have taken place in the last decade. On the basis of individual life spans, we explore the events behind the changes in individual household structures. In fact, the main demographic changes in marriage, birth, death and migration imply transition towards a new nuclear family, with a single-parent composition or an extended structure. Furthermore, a comparative perspective of a cohort's family members who did or did not

experience genocide will permit of a better understanding of the impact of the Pol Pot regime on individual Khmer life spans.

What is known, in part, about the Cambodian family, are the trends before the 1970s. Civil war, genocide and the consequent political instability which prevailed until the 1990s led to a lack of quantitative data. There were no demographic data surveys between the 1960s and the beginning of the 1990s, but once Cambodia had achieved political stabilization at the end of the twentieth century, demographic surveys were again carried out. However, the rapidity of change and the lack of data about the Cambodian family unit mean that recent trends in Khmer family structure remain unelucidated.

In general, traditional family systems in Asia have been influenced for centuries by two philosophies: Confucianism and Buddhism. The latter essentially took root in South-East Asia, including Cambodia, and according to Buddhist values couples should establish independent households based on marriage. However, much remains to be done to characterize this supposed neolocality. The South-East Asian ancestral family system is essentially nuclear and has remained relatively unchanged since the beginning of the 19th century. What we might expect, according to the convergence theory (Goode, 1963), is a nuclearization of the Cambodian family in proportion to industrialization. But how can Cambodia be more nuclear than it was, even without modernization? And do such recent changes as urbanization or divorce imply a transition towards an increase in single-parent households? Or a complexification of the Khmer family? Because of Western ethnocentrism, complexity has often been opposed to modernity. In fact, in Cambodia the nuclear family may prevail in the lower class, not from a choice, but because of precariousness. On the other hand, Khmer urban families, even if they are bearers of modernity, might perpetuate

kin solidarity patterns and might constitute extended families.

Data

Analysis of family transformation and structural evolution requires longitudinal data over an extended period of time. In this paper, we focus on data from the Mekong Island Population Laboratory (MIPopLab). The MIPopLab empirical database is a longitudinal survey. It is a demographic-surveillance system launched in December 2000 on an island called Koch Dach, located in Kandaal, a province surrounding Phnom Penh. This sample is not intended to be representative of Cambodia. However, because of its geographical location between the urban capital and its rural province, many demographic evolutions such as fertility or marriage follow national trends. This MIPopLab database is updated twice a year – i.e., a maximum of 12 waves to date. The basic demographics of the entire Koh Dach population of 11,090 (in 2006) are included in the interviews. For each member of the household, variables as age, sex, marital status, location, live/dead parents and relationship to the head of the household are known. Event panel data as marital disruption or remarriage, in/out migration, death of a member and birth history are updated every six months.

Method

A valuable feature of the surveys for the analysis of household structure is the imputed family 'relationship to head' variable. This variable is available for each member of the family unit and makes it possible to rebuild the household structure. For instance, a household containing the head, his wife and his

child/ren become a new structure variable at household level, called 'nuclear'. In contrast, a multigenerational family – i.e., a nuclear household including at least a parent or a grandchild – is called 'extended'. We have also identified other contemporary structures including the lone-parent family ('women/men alone with children') or 'coresident siblings'.

Once the structure for each wave has been calculated, the impact of demographic changes such as fertility, migration and mortality is analyzed. The only way to determine the life span of an individual and to measure precisely his household patterns and his in/output sequence is through a longitudinal study and an individualized data system. The longitudinal MIPopLab data provide the opportunity to analyze the effect of demographic events using sequential analysis. Based on response to MIPopLab survey modules, time varying characteristics such as fertility, nuptiality, mortality and migration of each member of household are examined. A sequential analysis of transition rate between two structure modalities, using the new "R" software, is also made. The probability of changing structure because of a demographic event is calculated, together with a study of different transition matrixes such as two different birth cohorts (i.e., members with and without genocide experience).

With regard to the time-varying characteristics, we have tested the hypothesis of the neolocality tradition. The nuptiality module might demonstrate the major role that marriage plays in nuclearization. Migration could have different effects on household structure, depending on the sex and age of the family members concerned. Finally, the death of an older family member might be a major cause of structural change.