



VIRGINITY CULTURE IN CAMBODIA

A PERCEPTION STUDY

FINDINGS FACTSHEETS

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FINDINGS FROM A PERCEPTION STUDY

1.1 Traditional teachings, norms, and customs: The chhbab srey, written by Buddhist monks around the 14th century, has greatly influenced the upbringing of Khmer girls and women, sets out a code of conduct for behaving as ideal, proper Khmer women, just as the chhbab pros does for Khmer men.

Teachings and proverbs:

“Men are gold, and women are like white cloth,”

“Daughters are like a folded skirt”

“Women are white cloth that cannot be washed if dirtied”

1.2 Classic literature: Tom Teav

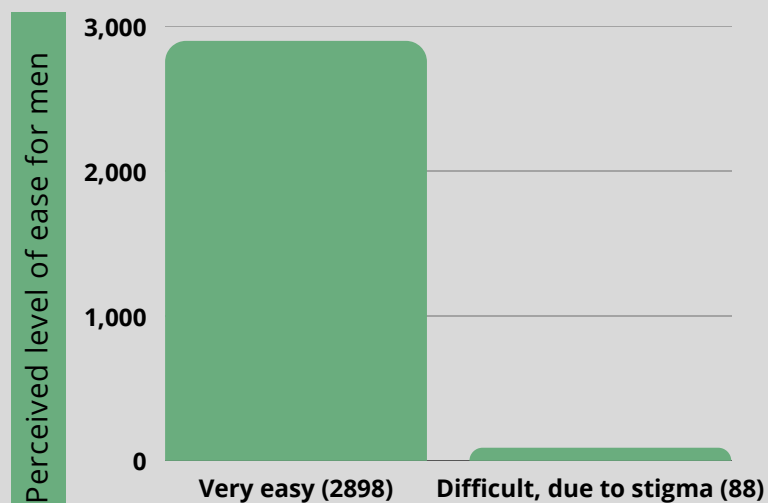
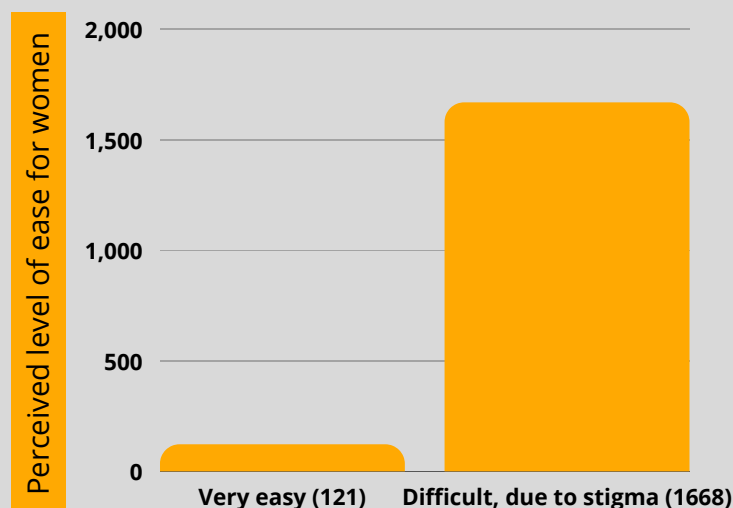
“I think the issue of virginity can also be reflected through Khmer literature as well, for example, in Tum Teav... I think the story tries to show that having sex before marriage is wrong, through the actions of the main protagonist”
-Young male respondent

1.3 Religion: “Women are required to be virgins until marriage following tradition. This is the old mindset being practiced, especially for those who are religious followers”
-Young female respondent

FINDINGS FACTSHEET 1/8:

WHAT CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS ARE THERE OF UNMARRIED CAMBODIANS?

How easy is it for Khmer women and men to have premarital sex?



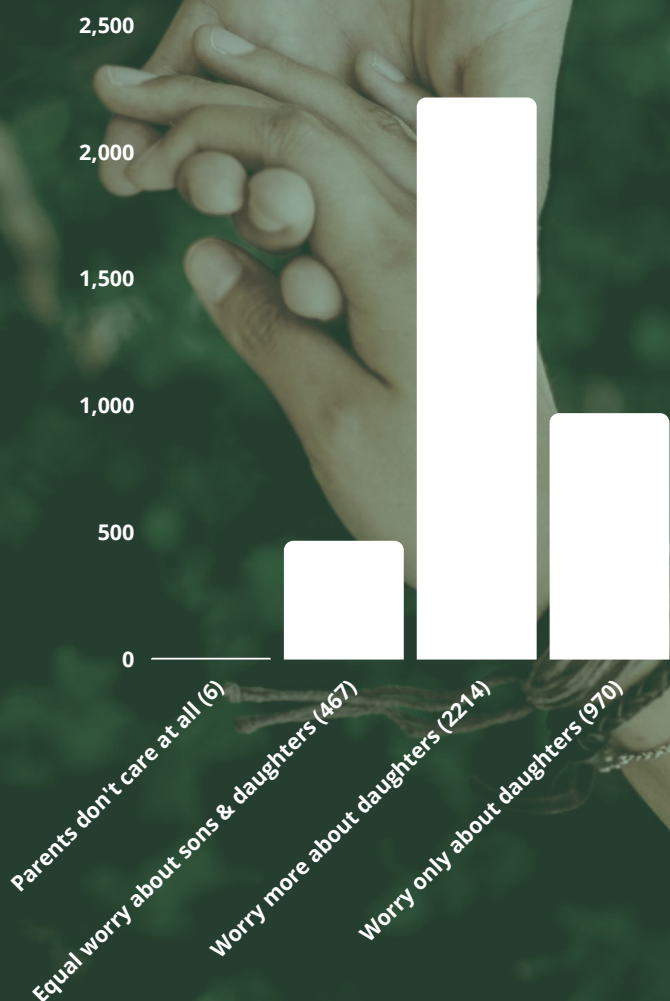
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Do you think Cambodian parents worry the same about their 15-18 year old children having premarital sex?



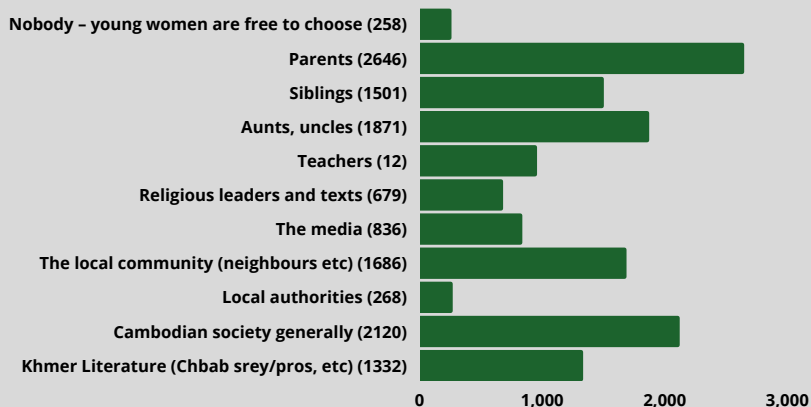
Many of the responses from participants across all age groups spoke about young women's virginity as comprising a duty or responsibility to their families.

The failure to uphold this responsibility reportedly leads not only to shame and dishonor for a young woman but also reflects badly on her relatives.

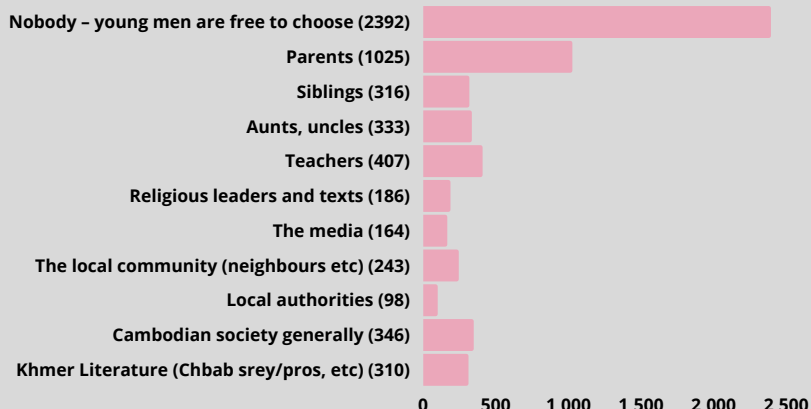
FINDINGS FACTSHEET 2/8:

WHAT EXPECTATIONS DO FAMILIES HAVE OF UNMARRIED CAMBODIANS?

Who do you think pressures young WOMEN into remaining virgins until marriage?



Who do you think pressures young MEN into remaining virgins until marriage?



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Participants emphasised the importance of maintaining an unmarried woman's virginity, often alleging this must be done in order to maintain her supposed "value" within society.



"Virginity illustrates the fact of giving value to oneself, protecting oneself and maintaining the family reputation until marriage... for women who are playful and not giving value to herself, they should not be given much value"

-Monk respondent

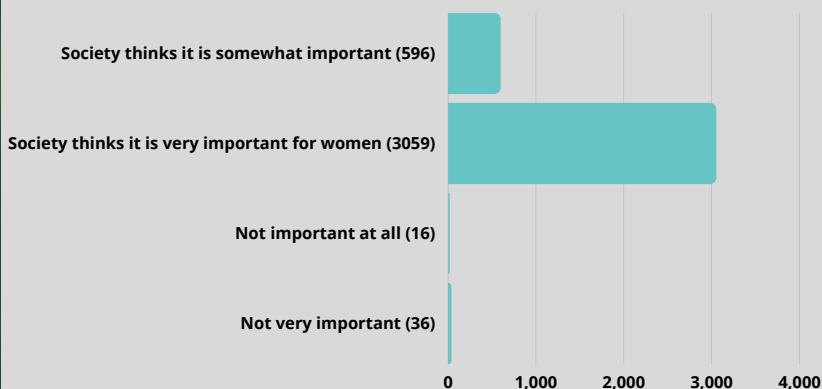


Double Standard: In terms of how much of this societal value judgment is experienced by men, virtually all interview participants expressed the view that this was experienced significantly less if experienced at all.

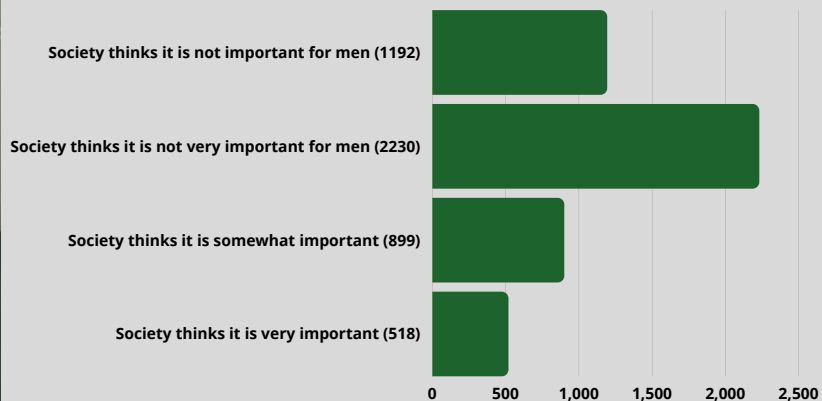
FINDINGS FACTSHEET 3/8:

WHAT EXPECTATIONS DOES SOCIETY HAVE OF UNMARRIED CAMBODIANS?

How important do you think Cambodian society values WOMEN remaining virgins until marriage?



How important do you think Cambodian society values MEN remaining virgins until marriage?



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FINDINGS FACTSHEET 4/8:

WHAT PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES ARE THERE PERCEIVED TO BE, FOR THOSE WHO HAVE PRE-MARITAL SEX?

Perceived psychological impacts reported by participants:

Criticism and judgment:
improper women,
self-hate and even suicide

Less of a woman: loss
of women's respect for
themselves after having
"suffered" the "damage"
from the loss of virginity.

Extreme Heartbreak: when a
relationship breaks off before
it culminates in marriage and
women often face desertion
after the loss of their virginity

The findings of this study strongly indicate that Cambodian women who are known to have engaged in premarital sex are very often shamed and stigmatised as a result. The consequences that a woman faces are reportedly severe and long-lasting.

Improper women: Indeed, a woman who fails to remain a virgin until marriage is reportedly viewed as an improper woman (Srey khat leak). As one CSO respondent explained, "Young women who have sex are usually named and shamed as a slut and improper woman".

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The notion in relation to being able to 'tell' if a woman is still a virgin has been raised by participants and those who complete the online survey.

"As a man, they have nothing to lose when they have sex before marriage. For example, no one would know and no one can identify whether a man is still a virgin... This is different from women. People can know – especially her partner/husband if a woman is a virgin or not"
-Older male respondent

FINDINGS FACTSHEET 5/8:

WHAT PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCES ARE THERE PERCEIVED TO BE, FOR THOSE WHO HAVE PRE-MARITAL SEX?

Many participants in this study reported the perception that a woman's loss of virginity prior to marriage can have multiple physical implications related to **women's sexual health and autonomy**.

- **Unplanned pregnancy and STI**
- **Damage of women's reproductive organs**

This is despite the fact that men can also contract STIs, and premarital sex is not particularly 'damaging' to women's bodies. These findings show a clear need for improved sexual health education.

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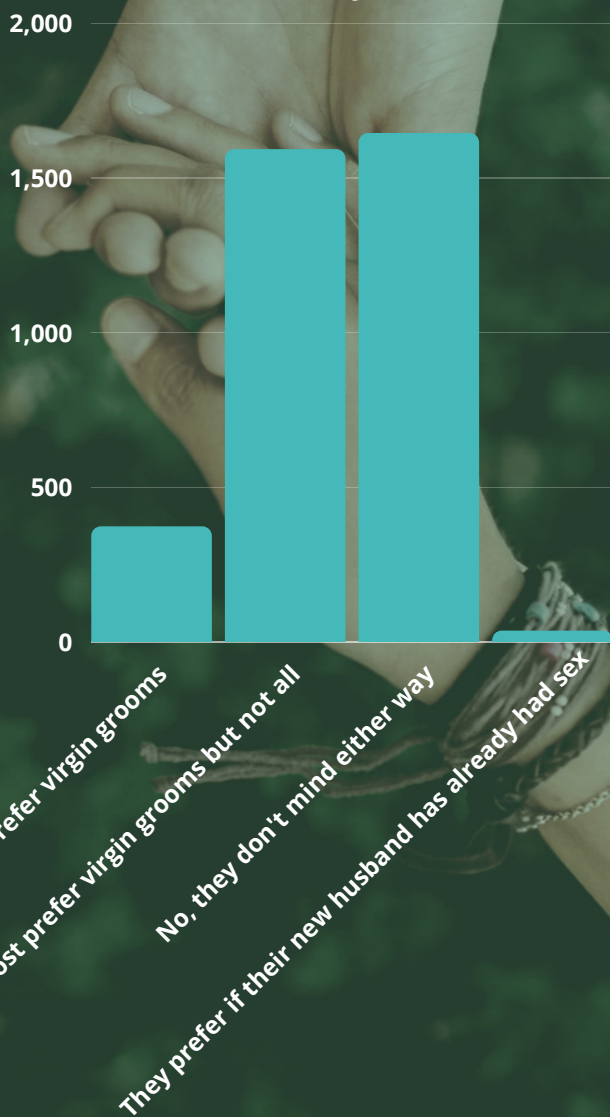
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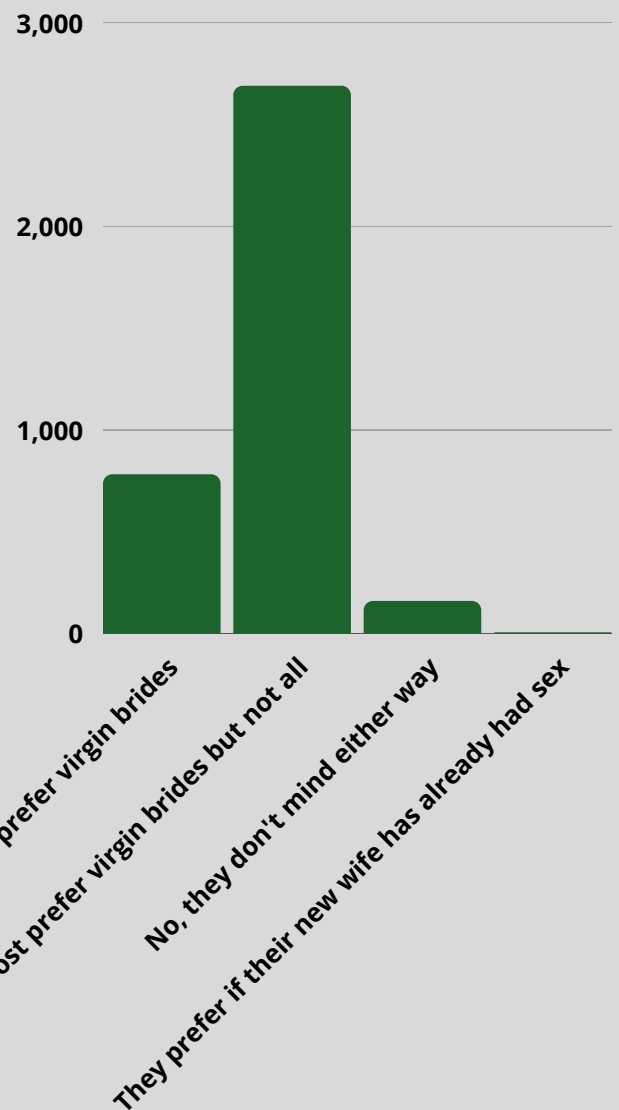
FINDINGS FACTSHEET 6/8:

WHAT MARITAL CONSEQUENCES ARE THERE PERCEIVED TO BE, FOR THOSE WHO HAVE PRE-MARITAL SEX?

Do WOMEN prefer to marry virgins in Cambodia nowadays?



Do MEN prefer to marry virgins in Cambodia nowadays?



- Pressure on a young couple who were discovered to have had sex to quickly marry
- The inability of a young woman (but never young men) to find a husband
- Future marital strife due to the woman's lack of 'purity' at the time of marriage.

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Perceptions about the importance of LGBTQI+ people's virginity

There are participants who expressed a lack of understanding or tolerance towards LGBTQI+ people and their relationships. For example, one older woman, when asked if she thought LGBT people should wait until living together to have sex, answered as follows:

"Honestly, I don't understand why they choose to be LGBT so I am not sure I can answer this question – I have no idea about it"
-Older woman respondent

Experiences and perceptions among LGBTQI+ participants

Consent & happiness

"I think [LGBTQI+] do not discuss virginity specifically but they discuss safe sex... Instead, it's about how to be together in a way that is comfortable and provides them both with happiness" -Young female respondent

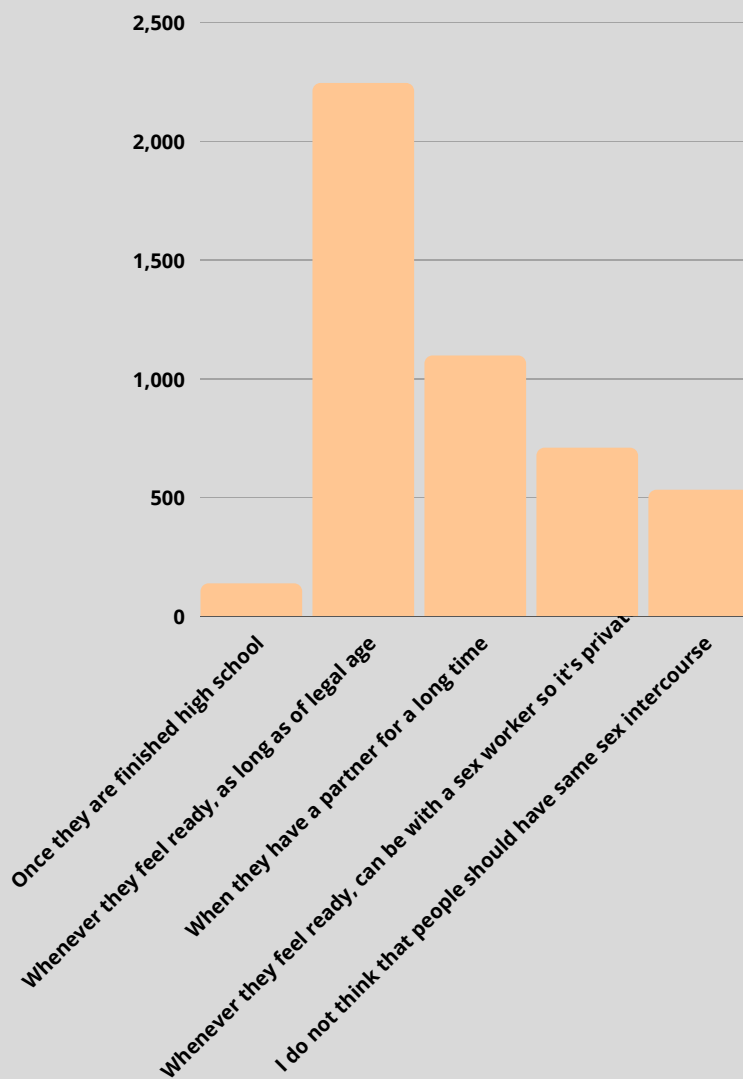
Safe sex practice

"...The LGBTQI+ community only waits for same-sex marriage to be legalized... Virginity is no longer a topic of discussion for LGBTQI+, especially for me, the topics for discussion are instead related to safe sex"
-Young female respondent

FINDINGS FACTSHEET 7/8:

WHAT EXPECTATIONS & ATTITUDES DO LGBTQI+ CAMBODIANS HAVE TOWARDS PRE-MARITAL SEX?

At what point should an LGBTQI - identifying person have sex for the first time?



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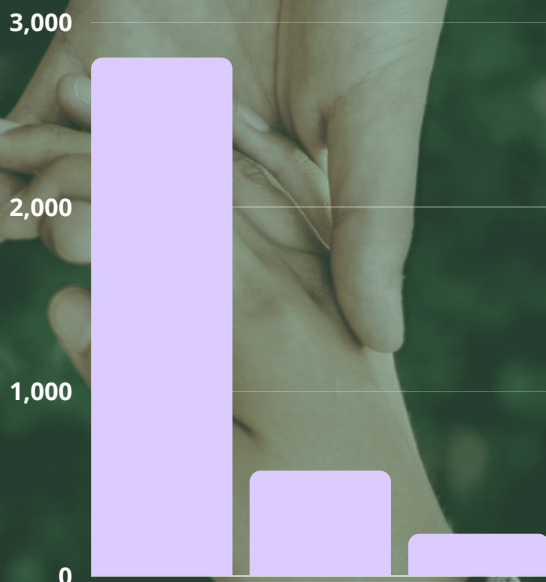
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FINDINGS FACTSHEET 8/8:

LOOKING FORWARD, DO CAMBODIANS FEEL THAT ATTITUDES ABOUT PRE-MARITAL SEX WILL CHANGE?

Is it less important for women to be virgins at their wedding today than it was in the year 2000?



Our societal norms nowadays have evolved and positively changed in favour of women's freedom... People are actually starting to support women to go everywhere that they want to go... [and] it is not so important for women to remain virgins... Men and women have equal rights to make decisions when it comes to choosing their intimate partners and sexual relations"

-Older man respondent

"[young people] understand more about love and virginity... People who've changed their mindsets know that they love their partner – their thoughts, and anything else – not just their virginity. It means that it's beyond sex..."

-Young male respondent

The data indicate clearly that across generations, most Cambodians perceive the society around them to be changing in relation to virginity norms, towards a decline in their significance;

However, on an individual level, a majority of respondents across all age groups still reported that virginity for women before marriage is something that they personally consider to be at least somewhat, if not very important.

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Facebook Page: @klahaankh

Telephone Number: 023 238 741

Email for more information: info@klahaan.org

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**Address: #5CE1, Street 157, Olympic Sangkat, Boeng Keng
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