

One confusing conversation later and Kim is reminded of the difference one word can make!



Sitting with my neighbour as we harvested cotton and picked the white fluffy balls from the seeds, we chatted. It's one of those tasks that is like shelling peas, it doesn't take much thought, but is a good time to sit and talk while our hands are busy.

She was telling me stories about ghosts, well at least that's what I thought we were talking about!

Khmer people seem to love ghost stories in all their forms. They can be horrifying stories told to bring fear, sad stories of past loves that have returned, dramatic stories that stir up emotions of family connections and respect of elders, or they can be funny. Ghost stories in Cambodia are everywhere! At the local cinema there are usually at least three ghost movies showing and when we go for other movies, our kids are often freaked out a bit by the advertising posters!

For our Khmer neighbours, ghosts are a very real part of life. Most people will have at least one story of an experience with a ghost. A long vacant plot of land can signify that the land may be cursed because of supernatural beings encountered there. A tree may have a ghost story attached to it, or a whole region may have its origins rooted in a story of spiritual activity.

Ghosts are also entwined in family life. Beliefs are held around deceased relatives and whether their spirits have gone somewhere else or whether they hang around the family home to either bless, cause mischief or strife.

Ghost stories can also be told as a way of deterring people from immoral behaviour. One such story tells of an unfaithful husband who had a mistress in a different village. One night after visiting her he woke to find it wasn't a woman at all, but actually a ghost. He was so frightened he returned to his wife and remained faithful.

So there I was sitting with my neighbour, harvesting cotton, thinking that we were having a conversation about ghosts (she has talked to me about them before). The conversation went something like this...

"I had a ghost once."

"Really, were you scared of it?"

"No."

"Where was it?"

"In my bedroom."

"Really? Perhaps you shouldn't watch so many stories at night."

"But night-time is the best time for it."

"Perhaps it's better during the day-time?"

"But I need it at night to sleep."

Turns out she wasn't using the word for ghost, 'Kmaoij', but the word 'Knaoi' which means pillow!

Stories can have a big impact on our lives, but it only takes us misunderstanding even one key word and the meaning can be completely changed. Stepping into another culture, it can take us hearing stories over and over to be able to begin to grasp some of the meanings behind them. **Here in Cambodia, we ask people to tell us stories so that we can learn and grow, and hopefully gain enough cultural understanding that we can share stories of Jesus without being misunderstood.**

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