



SECRETS OF THE LOVE HUTS

By Fiona MacGregor, Pictures Louis Quail



What happens when you give a teenage girl her own house and allow her to have as many boys as she likes come and stay the night with her?

It may sound like a recipe for broken hearts and unplanned pregnancies, but the Kreung tribe of remote North Eastern Cambodia believe this is the best way for their daughters to find true love. When girls there reach their mid teens their parents build them their own tiny “love huts” and encourage them to have different boys spend the night with them until they find one they want to marry. Fiona MacGregor and Louis Quail travelled into the jungle to meet the Kreung girls in their love huts and find out whether having such sexual independence really is the secret to forming long lasting loving relationships. What they discovered was a surprisingly romantic society where teenage girls are confident in dealing with boys and have a powerful sense of what they are looking for in a relationship. Divorce there is extremely rare and rape is virtually unheard of. At a time when young women in the west face conflicting ideas from the media and exponents of “traditional” values about appropriate sexual behaviour, the Kreung offer a valuable insight into what happens when girls are trusted to run their own love lives free from adult interference. But as it has more contact with the outside world, this remarkable culture is under threat from the increasing influence of Western society through television and even internet porn. Could the secrets of the Love Huts soon be lost forever...?





Vria, 21, has been married to his wife, Gaham, 21, for a year and have and they now have a two year old baby. Kancherng, O'chum District, Ratanakiri, They pose for pictures in front of their old "love hut". In Kreung tradition, when girls reach their early teens their parents build them their own tiny houses or "Love Huts" where they are allowed to have as many different boys as they wish come to spend the night with them.

"Before we have our small houses we can't open our hearts, but once we have our own houses we are able to open our hearts to boys. It is dark and quiet in the huts at night so it is very romantic."



Kampan, 55 has been married to her husband Brang, 60 for 40 years. They are the parents of Gaham, opposite. "I'd had lots of boyfriends – more than ten – before I agreed to marry Brang. I think he was a bit jealous, but it didn't matter to him really because he loved me."

It's darker than any under-18s nightclub in the Cambodian jungle tonight and the local teenagers are taking full advantage of the blackness. Only a few playful silhouettes in the glow of a hastily-put-together bonfire, and a lot of giggling, hint at the flirtations that are going on.

But when the party comes to an end, these teenage girls of the Kreung tribe won't be forced to abandon their would-be-boyfriends and return to their parents' homes. Instead they'll be heading back to their own tiny love huts, miniature houses built specially for them by their families so they can spend their nights alone with whichever boys they wish and get to know them intimately

For the Kreung people of North East Camodia's remote Ratanakiri province – a wild, fertile land of jungle and mountains where bears, elephants

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and the nation's few remaining tigers still roam the forests - encouraging teenage experimentation and trusting girls to make their own choices is believed to be the best way to ensure their daughters find true love.

It may seem a risky practice to Western minds, but to the girls, who are usually aged between 13 and 15 when they first move into their love huts, and their parents, the tradition helps create young women who are confident, independent, and respectful of their own sexuality.

Teenagers in America may face conflicting pressures from the explicitly-sexy role models they see on screen and the virtuous virgins exalted by the purity movement, but for Kreung girls things are very different and they appear to have little trouble determining what they want and expect from their love lives. Divorce is very rare here and rape is virtually unheard of say the village elders.

It takes 13 hours of rattling, spine-crunching bus ride from the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh to reach Ratanakiri's only town Ban Lung. To find the remoter Kreung village requires a further two hours motorbike ride over un-tarred roads that, when dry, disperse vast clouds of blinding, choking, red dust into the air and, when wet, become almost untraversable rivers of sludgy orange mud.

The community where I meet 17-year-old Nang Chan is typical of most Kreung villages. Bamboo houses, most without electricity and none with running water, are raised on stilts where old people laze, children play, and a clamour of pigs, dogs and chickens shelter in the shade beneath the scattered buildings. Daily life here revolves around tending rice and vegetables on little farms hidden deep in the jungle, and while many now have mobile phones and motorbikes, the men still use crossbows to hunt the wild pigs, rats and forest birds which the women then cook over open fires.

Nang Chan is a delicately built and softly spoken young woman, but she has strong opinions on the important role the love huts play in creating powerful young women and helping girls find true love : “The huts give us independence and are the best way to find out which boys we really like,” she explains sitting on the bamboo steps of her tiny hut as several small piglets scabble around in the rust-orange dust beneath her feet.

Stories of women in undeveloped countries being dominated by men and having few or no rights have been told so often that it can almost seem as if this is somehow the “default” human state. Yet in Kreung culture, which has remained virtually unchanged for centuries, women are not judged on their virginity and the rules of sexual conduct are determined by teenage girls as much as by male religious, social or political leaders.

“When boys come to stay the night if I don't want them to touch me they won't. We will just talk and sleep. If I have a special boyfriend and we're in love I will be intimate with him, but if I stop loving him and find a boy I think is more attractive and prefer, I will stop having sex with the other one,” says Nang Chan.

Inside her hut, just 6ft by 4ft wide, the bed is a simple bamboo mat on the floor with only a couple of brightly-coloured floral cushions and a blanket decorated with kitsch cartoon animals for night-time comfort. It is hardly the glamorous boudoir of some experienced seductress, but Nang Chan is confident she knows how to handle her night time visitors.

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Like all the Kreung girls I speak to she is very clear that she feels no obligation to have sex with a boy just because he spends the night with her. Many of the love hut relationships never progress beyond simple friendship and Nang Chan says she and her friends are always adamant that before any very close encounters occur, a boys must “prove” their love for them.

She is unwilling, or unable, to explain exactly how this demand is fulfilled, but it apparently involves some tough questioning by the girls, and much “romantic talk” and vows of everlasting adoration on behalf of the hopeful boys.

But Nang Chan's attitude to sex is as practical as it is romantic. NGOs operating in the region are now enthusiastically spreading the word about



Nang-Chan, 17 with male friend Pneang, 20, Kuhn, O'chum District, Ratanakiri,

Her life is typical of a Kreung teenage girl. Her morning begins at 5.30 am when she gets up at sunrise to prepare the day's food over an open fire before setting out on a demanding two hour trek through dense forest and fast flowing rivers to where her parents' little farm lies hidden deep in the jungle. After a day helping in harvesting rice and vegetables she will return at dusk to her own love hut in the village and await her evening visitors

condoms, but until very recently contraceptive methods apparently involved a rather unpalatable and dubiously effective (to say the least) cocktail consisting of wood alcohol and a centipede. Ensuring your lover genuinely cares about you and any consequences before “going all the way” is, under such circumstances, simply sensible, and Nang Chan seems confident of her own and her female friends’ ability to work out which boys fall into that category.

Indeed rather than leading to indiscriminate sex, broken hearts and unwanted babies as Western parents might fear allowing their daughters such freedom might lead to, Nang Chan believes the trust and independence girls here are given encourages them to be responsible and careful with their hearts and bodies.

“I do worry about pregnancy, but we’ve been taught how to prevent it and the boys are usually responsible,” she says. “But we only have sex with boys if we are in love. I don’t know about women in other cultures, but I think Kreung girls are strong, because they are able to decide which boys they like and if they don’t want a boy to do something, the boys won’t do it.”

Her mother Galung, 45 and father Puang, 56, met in Galung’s love hut almost three decades ago. Both are certain that the independence the love huts provide Nang Chan and their other daughters will ensure they will have strong marriages in later life.

“If a girl gets pregnant by a man who doesn’t love her, but another boy does love her he will marry her anyway and bring the baby up as his own -”

Galung, who stands little more than 4ft 8 in height and when we meet is wearing fresh herbs in her ears as a kind of natural jewelry with added perfume and magical protection benefits included for good measure, explains: “The houses give the girls the opportunity to find boys who are a good match. They get the chance to spend a lot of time talking and also to find out if they are physically compatible.”

With four decades of happy marriage behind her, she believes this is why divorce is so rare in their society. In a Kreung village of around 150 families just one or two couples are likely to have broken marriages.

Like most Kreung parents I speak to, they say they did not give their daughters any specific advice about how to deal with boys before giving them their own houses. Instead they trusted they had instilled enough self respect and strength of character in their girls that they are able to make their own decisions. Crucially however, if girls here do make a “bad” choice, it won’t stand in the way of future relationships.

“If a girl gets pregnant by a man who doesn’t love her, but another boy does love her he will marry her anyway and bring the baby up as his own - although the village will fine the boy who did it” explains 30-year-old Leum, a gentle father of three, who clearly adores his wife of nine years Kawan.

“We don’t worry about female “purity””, says another father in his early fifties watching a teenage boy enter his daughter’s hut which is decorated outside with two posters of handsome Khmer pop stars. “Who know what a girl does when she goes to another village anyway.”

His attitude is a far cry from that in mainstream Cambodian society where women are expected to remain virgins until they marry and those who don’t often end up cast out into the country’s notorious sex trade.

One evening, as we relax over shared vats of rice wine, I ask the village men about whether Kreung boys ever feel jealous if they know the girl they want to marry has had many lovers before they get together.

They tell me “not usually”. It’s only after a couple have declared love for one another that jealousy enters the picture. It’s up to the individual how many partners they want, but the men agree “about ten” is the average number of love interests a person needs to meet their “soul mate” (most Kreung girls get married between 15 and 18) though it wouldn’t be usual to have full sex with all of them.

“If someone has had sex with more than about five people, some people might be worried that person didn’t really mean it when they said they were in love,” Leum explains. He adds this applies to young men as well as women. Many Kreung boys are very shy to approach these independent girls with their own houses, in case they are rejected, and often wait a long time, until they are very sure a girl likes them, before making a move, he says.

While young Kreung women are typically very reserved speaking to strangers their mothers and grandmothers are anything but.

I arrive in one village during a spirit ceremony and the alcohol and music is in full flow. In Cambodia’s dominant Khmer culture women are considered disreputable if they smoke and drink heavily, but Kreung women are enthusiastic partiers, their hair often pinned up with the little silver pipes they use to smoke tobacco as they sup for hours on vast jars of homemade rice wine through lengthy bamboo straws. The only women in the long, dark meeting hall who are not drinking are two unmarried pregnant girls.



Parents of Nang chang (see 9) , Galung, 45 and Puang, 56 (husband) on their farm in Ratanakiri.

The couple met in Galung’s love hut almost three decades ago. Both are certain that the independence the love huts provide Nang Chan and their other daughters, including 14 year-old Wan, will ensure they will have strong marriages in later life. ““The houses are important because they give the girls the chance to find boys who are a good match.”

“My daughter and that other girl are both pregnant,” a twinkly-eyed woman called Segar tells me merrily between songs. “It’s ok because both their boyfriends love them and they’re going to get married, but since it happened to two of them at the same time, we thought we should have a ceremony.”

The girls look relaxed hanging around with their boyfriend and there’s no indication that their forthcoming nuptials are in anyway forced or unwanted. They would almost certainly have married these men any way, and the pregnancies have simply meant it will happen sooner rather than later.

While pregnancy before marriage is understandably common here, some Kreung girls say they will choose to wait until they’re married before having full sex. Whether it has always been this way, or is a reaction to growing outside influences regarding ideas about female purity from mainstream Cambodian culture, is hard to determine. However most of the girls who feel that way still want to have their own houses.

“Having your own house means boys are more likely to come and visit you, they are too shy to come if you live with your parents,” says Tia, 15, who wants to get married at 17, but whose father has still not built her her a love hut yet, much to her indignation. “You might think it’s because he’s strict about me meeting boys, but I think he’s just too lazy to build it. I don’t have a boyfriend yet and that’s why I want my own house.”

Her claim that her father’s failure to provide her with a love hut is the main cause of her current single status may not be entirely unfounded.

Kong Kam, 20, is a serious and edgy young woman with startlingly long hair that sweeps down to her waist. Like most Kreung she believes in ghosts, but she is particularly nervous of them and didn’t want to live alone. Eventually, after her younger sister got married following a love hut romance, Kong Kam decided that she would have to move into her own if she was to have any chance of finding a boyfriend.

“ When I was living in the big house the boys didn’t come to see me as often as they do now, because they were too shy to meet my parents so I couldn’t get to know any of them properly. Maybe I would have met someone special before this if I had had my own house earlier,” she says.

Gaham and her husband Vria, both 21, have been married for a year and a half and now have a two-month-old son. They believe the love huts play a vital role in romantic success. Chatting to them individually they both say they had more than 20 boyfriends or girlfriends before they got together, but when we meet again on their parents’ farm – a two hour trek or 40 minute skidding, hazardous off-road motorbike ride through dense jungle - they are rather more reticent about numbers.

Although Kreung parents have what may seem a liberal attitude to teenage love, girls never tell their parents who has been staying with them before they’ve found the person they want to marry. Unless a couple is engaged, the boys will always arrive after dark and leave the girl’s house before dawn so her parents “cannot see the face” of whoever has stayed the night with her. So ingrained is this sense of secrecy that when I try to speak to Gaham about it in front of her parents she literally runs away and locks herself in the chicken coup and it takes considerable persuasion to entice her out.

Eventually, sitting in her parents tiny farm hut, nursing her baby and snacking on a spicy dish of stewed jungle plants, she explains why she believes the love huts are so important for young women.

“Having your own houses make you feel more confident and happy because lots of people come to visit you and you make many friends, not just the boys who become your boyfriend or you end up marrying. That makes us feel good so we are more open to romance. “Before we have our small houses we can’t open our hearts, but once we have our own houses we are able to open our hearts to boys. It is dark and quiet in the huts at night so it is very romantic.”

The male/female friendships that develop during the girls’ time in their Love Huts mean that it’s good for building a sense of community and means that men and women have stronger bonds with each other and a lot of respect, adds her father. Kreung women and men consistently say that “men and women are equal and that they make decisions together”. If a situation arises where a couple really can’t reach agreement they will turn to their parents or other elders to help them reach a resolution.

But for all the Love Huts are perceived positive role in young women’s lives, the tradition is facing threats from the outside world. Many villages now have at least one television, which serves like a community cinema in the evenings. The Khmer, Thai and American programmes the community gather together in the darkness to watch portray women and sex very differently from how the Kreung have traditionally viewed them.

Modern Western culture is often held up as having had a positive, emancipating effect on women’s lives, for the Kreung the opposite appears to be true.

“ They see things on tv about sex that we didn’t used to know about. The boys aren’t as respectful as they used to be. Young people are being infected by tv says Lung Wen, a 49-year-old village chief.

An even more recent development has been the arrival of mobile phone technology in the region which means some boys have started download-



Friends Nang-Kuan, 13 and Runta 14, (left) with their friends from the Village, set off at dawn two walk two hours through the jungle where they will help their parents on their farms, Ratanakiri.

ing porn onto their mobiles. It's less than a decade since the Kreung gave up their traditional tribal dress and even now married women, especially the older ones do not feel any need to cover their breasts. The sudden introduction of pornography into such a society is having a worrying effect says Lung Wen .

Poeun, 17, is known among the local boys for having a relaxed attitude towards who she lets stay the night, and has a busy schedule of evening visitors to her love hut, but she is also concerned about changing attitudes.

“ I really like having my own house, because of the privacy. At the moment, I have three different boys who come to stay with me. Usually five nights out of the seven in a week, someone will stay over with me. If a boy wants to have sex and I don't want to, I will just say no and we will just play around instead and talk,” she says.

“But now it is more difficult because many of the boys are not very good . Some of the boys who come to see me are very arrogant. If they try to do things I don't want I tell them off in a loud voice that usually works,” she adds.

As we sit outside her hut love hut she says she is proud of her culture's distinctive attitude towards young women but worries it won't survive.

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“Things are changing. Boys see a lot of things on television and the also download porn onto their mobile phones. If someone could tell the boys to be good so we could go back to having our old traditions that would make us so happy.”

Yet despite Poeun and others' worries, most young Kreung people remain positive about keeping the love hut going for future generations.

After the late-night bonfire party, Nang Chan and her friends agree to meet me at her hut early one morning before they go off to work on their parents' farms. Every one of them says they believe that love huts are still the best way to meet their future partners.

And when they do eventually get married, will they build love huts for their own daughters one day? The teenagers look at each other shyly for a second before bursting into giggles: “Yes,” they all answer with bashful grins.

These young people are keen to learn about Western culture, but they have some valuable lessons to teach in return. Protected, until recently at least, from the commercialisation of sex or religious dictates, young women have had a powerful place in Kreung society and full say over their own love lives.

The independence girls have here, and the lack of many taboos and restraints regarding their romances, have resulted not in a orgy of casual teenage sex, but to young people – girls and boys - who will have sex only in loving, respectful relationships.

Whether the Kreung way of life will survive the onslaught of modern Western culture hangs in the balance, but for now it remains a rare and inspiring example of how strong relationships flourish when young women are given freedom over their sex lives without fear of condemnation or judgment.



Tia, 15, outside a friend's love hut. She does not have her own love hut yet, but would very much like one. “Having your own house means boys are more likely to come and visit you, they are too shy to come if you live with your parents,” she says



Pooun, Krola, O'chum District, Ratanakiri.



Long (left) and Pooun, with her parents, Li-Mon, 48 and wife Ath, Krola, O'chum District, Ratanakiri.

Pooun, 17, has her own love hut and is well known among local boys for her relaxed attitude about who she lets stay the night. At the time this photograph was taken she said she had about three different boys visiting her regularly on different evenings, but no one special boyfriend.



Kablim, 15 female with future husband Nying, 20, Krola, O'chum District, Ratanakiri.
Nying and Kablim believe that the love huts gave them the chance to get to know each other they might not have had otherwise: "I'd liked her for more than a year, but I was too shy to come and visit her in her parents' house in the evenings," says Nying.



Nang-hir, age 28, with husband Lambak, 31, Kancherng, O'chum District, Ratanakiri, holding their wedding photograph.



Kong-Kam, 20, only moved into her own love hut one month ago after failing to find a boyfriend while living in her parents' house.



Grola-Graw, 68, and her husband Lam-Harleum, 79, were childhood sweethearts. They finally married 7 years ago after they were both widowed following more than 30 years of marriage to other people .



Mobile phones, Television, condom retailers: the Kreung culture is changing fast. Kim-Cheat, 78 (bottom left) dances to documentary footage (played on a vhs player on the village's only tv) . He is nostalgic for a past that is only 10 years away such is the fast moving pace of change for the Kreung tribe.



The following shots give a flavour of Kreung life, more pictures are available to view for editing and caption information at these two websites: one is for the film shot and the other for digital pictures.

<http://www.louisquail.com/lovehutfilm>

<http://www.louisquail.com/lovehuts>







For more information please contact photographer, Louis Quail

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Mobile number: +44(0)7958 542 437

Web: www.louisquail.com

Email: mail@louisquail.com

Blog: <http://louisquail.wordpress.com/>

Facebook Louis Quail Photographer. <http://tiny.cc/k36vh>

Or journalist Fiona MacGregor

Email: fionamacgregor@hotmail.co.uk

Mobile number: +44(0)7415 450517

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