

Activities after School Hours

My aunt left, but our home received newcomers. Our family was growing year after year. Before I moved to Phnom Penh in 1964, I had two sisters, Vanny, who was born in 1952, and Sithan, in 1954, and four brothers: Vannak, in 1956, Naroeun, in 1959, Vuthean, in 1962, and Vutheun, in 1964. Two other little brothers were born after I left the village: Vuthea, in 1966, and Sophear, in 1970. During those years, we were growing up surrounded by our best friends, cats and dogs (a dozen in all). In some years, my father had transformed our residence into a real farm as he raised, in addition, a cow or a horse not for work, but certainly for the natural fertilizers he needed for his garden. We also raised some chickens and ducks. A fence like the one in the front did not limit the compound behind the house, but it was surrounded by bushes and a score of bamboo and palm trees, providing shelter to a variety of birds, such as crows, sparrows, and turtle-doves. We used to go around the palm trees to collect fallen, ripe fruits for my mother to make palm cakes or palm jellies. We could not climb the palm trees, as they

were tall, up to 20 m or more. On one of the tallest, a couple of storks made their nest.

One morning, I found on the ground not only the two or three ripe palm fruits as usual but also a baby stork crying desperately with unheard sounds, probably because of repeated long efforts to cry. The baby made no move, and I took him home. So we also raised a stork among our best friends, except that the stork was fed with fish. Day after day and month after month, the stork became friendly to us, like the dogs that followed us everywhere when we were walking or welcomed us when we were coming home from school. The stork had lived with us until the day he was able to fly on his own to find his liberty.

For some period of time, we also raised a female monkey. In addition to the usual cries of dying pigs every morning, the monkey woke our family up from the early hours. We did not keep her in a cage, but at night she was attached with a 2m-long chain to one of the two supporting wooden columns of a hammock on the veranda. Every morning, the monkey jumped endlessly from one extremity to the other or just moved the supporting elements of the hammock to

make unbearable noises, to the point where we woke up and shouted, telling her to stop. During the daytime, we released her to enjoy her freedom. The monkey lived in harmony with the other animals. She made friends, especially with dogs. Usually, after lunch, when many adults took a siesta, the monkey spent her time with dogs or cats, finding or catching fleas or other insects, or cleaning their fur.

One day, one of our dogs gave birth to five babies. The monkey loved the puppies very much. She spent a lot of time caring for and playing with them. A few days later, while my parents were taking their usual nap after a noon meal, I was doing some homework in my room next to my parents'. I heard loud, uninterrupted barking from a group of dogs. It was so intense that I had to stop working and rush to see what was happening. From my room window, I could already see the movement of two or three dogs running around a large tamarind tree, 20 m behind our kitchen. When I arrived, the three dogs continued barking, especially the mother that had given birth a few days ago. They were jumping, trying to climb up to the upper part of the tree. Over there, on one of the middle

branches, the monkey was sitting quietly, with one hand holding carefully a puppy about a week old and the other searching for fleas for it. The puppy was in a comfortable hand but attempted timidly to cry from time to time. To convince the monkey to bring the puppy back to its mother, I managed to get from the kitchen a banana, show it to her, call her by every name that came out of my mind (we did give names to our dogs and cats, but not to other animals) and promise to give her the banana as a reward if my appeal were to be heard. The monkey's first response was grimacing, with funny movements in her mouth and eyes. She repeated the same gesture each time I talked to her. Finally, after almost half an hour, the monkey decided to climb down slowly, holding it carefully as always, and placing it on the ground, to the great relief and happiness of his mother. A few months later, we decided to donate the monkey to a pagoda in a neighbouring village. We believed she would find peace and freedom with the Buddhist monks in the pagoda and in the forest nearby.

During my childhood, I liked playing very much, as being a teacher, a Buddhist monk, or sometimes a king or chief of state,

with other children. I liked to play any role that required others to pay respect. I used to imitate the chief of state, then Prince Sihanouk (former king of Cambodia), because the prince had dominated our whole lives since Cambodia became independent in November 1953. During my childhood, he came to the village twice. Many times a day, we heard his improvised, hour-long speeches on the radio. At the time, the Cambodian people venerated him as a god.

I also used to make my own film using my own technique. In fact, we had no projector. I used a looking glass to shimmer the light of a candle or a burning oil lamp in a dark room. On the glass, I put different forms on paper according to the stories I was telling. Through the gleam, the forms would reflect their shadows on the screen, which was usually the wall of the room. The forms could be animals, men, women, or objects. I could move the forms up and down, left and right, or slow and fast so that the shadows would be in motion. Jokes or exaggerated comments often accompanied the shadows I made on the spot to entertain, especially my younger sisters and brothers. I became the elder when my two brothers left

to further their studies in Phnom Penh, after they had completed their years of primary school in the village.

The life of our villagers was amazing with the arrival of electricity. It was in the early years of the 1960s when a local businessman took the initiative to invest in an electricity business in Snay Pol. A first 15-20 KVA generator was running to provide electricity only for lighting, from 5 a.m. to 6 a.m. and from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., and not for any other kind of consumption. Later, the businessman upgraded the power to 30 KVA. Our family subscribed to a fluorescent lamp of 0.30 m, for which we paid about USD 1 a month. With one lamp, we could only provide enough light for the main room, which was arranged as a lounge and as my father's office. The light could also penetrate other rooms, as the lamp was placed up to the roof, high over the cupboards. Our house had no ceiling. But the lighting intensity was not sufficient in those rooms. So, to do my homework at night, I had to move to the main room, using my father's desk. Many times, I fell asleep until the next morning. To avoid this kind of inconvenience, one day, I managed to get an extra light by myself. I just bought a bulb lamp from a

Chinese shop and connected it to the power supply line, using not the electric wire but the ordinary one I found available in the house. My parents never questioned my ingenuity, and I had no sense of electrocution. For many weeks, I had gotten extra lighting without paying. I thought I was doing what others did. But they did it properly. I used the electricity free of charge for many weeks until the day I noticed that the exposed end of the connecting wire was reddening and catching fire. I was very frightened that this might have set fire to my ancestor's house. I did not tell my parents about the incident, which I managed to end quickly and quietly.