

My Childhood and My Father's Works

I grew up surrounded by my two parents, two elder brothers, Chhoeun and Sinoeun, my maternal grandmother, and my aunt, Samedy, my mother's youngest sister. My paternal grandmother, Hu Or, died a year after my eldest brother, Chhoeun, was born. We lived in the same big house, but unlike my grandparents, my parents did not have a maid, a cook, or a driver. The light oxcart was already outmoded. We were entering into an era of bicycles and motorcycles. My mother took care of the household, assisted by one or two of my father's nieces, depending on the needs. Those cousins came from my father's village and might have been staying with us for one or two years. One cousin who helped take care of me during my childhood was Chhrouk, with whom I had no memory, as I was too small to know her well. But my mother told me some years later that Chhrouk was attending her three final-year classes at the primary school of our village. She spent her spare time from school helping carry me from one place to another or entertaining me by playing or singing. After primary school,

cousin Chhrouk attended the national health-care school and became a professional midwife. She married a businessman and probably died under the Khmer Rouge, as we had no sight of her afterward. While my mother was busy feeding me with her natural milk and taking care of my two brothers, as well as doing other household work, including cooking, my father was dividing his time between working at home and travelling. He was absent from home many days a month, as he had to attend the courthouse in the provincial capital, Prey Veng, and travel to other districts to implement the court judgments. The province was divided into ten administrative districts, and there were only three bailiffs for the whole provincial territory. So the distribution of work implied that three districts, namely Pearang, Sithor Kandal, and Kanchrieach, fell under my father's jurisdiction. As a bailiff, he was not paid a fixed salary but in honoraria. Therefore, our family had no fixed income.

In those days, my father could not afford to buy a new motorbike. Most of the time, he used a second-hand one. Often his motorbike broke down on the road in the middle of the forest or the rice fields, forcing him to walk the machine for many kilometres until

he reached a repair shop. Sometimes, he came home late, walking his motorbike along. Many times, he had complained about using second-hand equipment. He never had a chance to enjoy a brand-new one. The best he could do was complain less; his second-hand French-made motorbike called “Mobilette,” which he kept in use until 1970, even though Japanese-made motorbikes had invaded our village since the middle of the 1960s.

My father hired an aide who knew how to read and write to help him deliver court citations to the parties, the plaintiff and the defendant. He paid his aide by the day. To implement the court judgments, he always needed assistance from the local authorities, mainly the police. Most of the cases dealt with divorce and debts, which led to the removal of properties. In some cases, my father had to hire workers to help dismantle an entire house so it could be put up for sale. Sometimes, he had to confiscate buffalo or cows from their owners so that the debts in the litigation could be settled. In all cases, the presence of the police officers was unavoidable. My father’s job was a risky one, as some losing parties might use violence against him in response to his actions. Thanks to his

permanent contacts with the authorities, he became one of the few notables in the village.

At home, he used to work like an attorney at law, giving legal consultation or helping a plaintiff prepare his case. He received his clients in the main room of the house, decorated with two giant wild-cow heads and a large glass door behind his desk. Prey Veng Province was rated as one of the places with many cases in court. Most of my father's clients were peasants. They generally travelled by bicycle from different regions of the three districts, whether to have a legal consultation or to present the court judgment for implementation. While travelling, male clients did not yet wear pants, but only wore a krama, just covering their underpants, because wearing pants would get dirty with the dust or mud they could encounter on the road. The pants (in general, a piece of pyjamas made with smooth material in black called "Khor Lanh") must be clean and ready to be worn at any meeting with important people. Usually, when a client arrived at our house's front door, he placed his bike against the fence. He began to change his clothes by removing the krama, to replace it with the "Khor Lanh" that he

had managed to bring along, and fastening it to the bicycle handlebar. Once he felt he had a smart appearance, he entered the house. This was a sign of high consideration or politeness that peasants wanted to show to important district officials. Eventually, this respectful gesture could be accompanied by some coconuts, jackfruit, bananas, or other fruits as a gift.

My father would spend the rest of his spare time gardening and planting fruit trees, mostly coconut, mango, and jack trees, on a plot of land he had just bought next to the existing backyard. We had no running water for either consumption or agricultural work. People needed to dig a well or a pond to obtain or keep water. Our family had a medium-sized pond, 50 m from the house, inherited from my grandfather. We used a dozen big jars to keep rainwater for daily consumption until the next rainy season. When the rainwater ran short, we hired a coolie to carry water from a well in a neighbouring house, 200 m away. I learned some time later that not many people would be eager to be hired as our coolies, fearing being called “convicted prisoners.” As in the past during my grandfather’s time, the district jail official, a friend of the family, used

to send those prisoners to work in our house, especially to carry water.