

My First Day at School and Our Respect for Teachers

When I reached the age of 6, I managed to get my enrollment in school. There was no pre-school or nursery school in the village. Children would be admitted to grade one only at the age of 7. Many feared school, and their first day in school was generally dramatic, with crying and tears. The decision on when I should go to school belonged to my aunt, Samedy, who was teaching the superior class¹ at the only district elementary school. She was an attractive, beautiful, and young lady, a model of the village. Like my two brothers, I was excited at 6 about the idea of attending school. But my parents preferred to send me to school only after my 7th birthday. One day, Aunty was washing her clothes in the backyard; I went next to her, showing my right hand behind my head to touch my left ear.

I shouted to her, "Eh, Eh, Aunty, my arm is long enough, and I can touch my ear now." The rule of the time for a child was that

¹ It is equivalent to Grade Six.

he had to wait until he had grown big enough for his right arm to reach his left ear when placed over his head, to be sent to school. So, the rule was to put the arm over, not around, behind the head like what I did. My aunt looked at me, smiling, and she said, "Do it again." I repeated the same movement. She nodded her head again, smiling, and said, "You're kidding. But okay, tomorrow, you go to school with me." The next day, early in the morning, she put me on the back seat of her bicycle and brought me to school.

I was so proud to attend the 1st day of school, accompanied by the most beautiful lady in the village.

I enjoyed my years in primary school. By the 4th grade, we started to learn French, and from the 6th grade, almost all of our homework was in French. Knowing French was a sign of being "intellectual." To be regarded as intellectual, many Cambodians spoke Khmer mixed with a few words of French. Our tradition gave much respect to teachers. Teachers were considered the second parents in our society. By order, the teacher was placed third behind the Buddha and both parents, the father and the mother, to whom we had to pay most respect. Any artist before performing his art

must first pay homage to his teacher, whether physical or spiritual. A schoolteacher enjoyed the same status vis-à-vis his student. The tradition helped him tremendously in his job, as schoolboys or schoolgirls had to listen to and obey what the teacher said. Even though our teachers often employed violent methods that were not very pedagogical for teaching, in every classroom, three or four rotten or wooden whips or sticks hung on the wall or lay on the teacher's desk, ready to be used to hit any bad student who dared not remember his lessons. Some teachers were so mad at us, little human creatures who were so afraid to the point where we would avoid them in the street or in public places. But students kept for life the memory of the teaching benefits they received from their teachers.

One year later, my aunt Samedy got married to a customs officer, a native of the lower village. I did not know how they knew each other, as the officer was working in Phnom Penh. Immediately after the wedding, she moved out and went to live with her husband in the capital. Since my parents' wedding, the tradition had evolved. There was no need for the groom to work in probation anymore.

Once both parties agreed, the wedding could take place at any moment. However, the tradition still recommended that families consult an astrologer on the auspicious wedding days. The bride was not obliged to stay in the shade, as my mother had done more than a decade ago. Despite some changes, the tradition remained the same for the three-day wedding ceremony. A few days before D-Day, we were very busy with the preparations. A dozen of ladies, group by group, were busy making special, traditional cakes or delicacies. Workers were coming into the courtyard to erect a huge tent decorated with coconut branches and leaves. The tent would host a banquet for about a hundred guests. Another smaller tent was also installed. It would be used as a lodge for the groom during the ceremony.

From the lodge, musicians who could be comedians and singers as well would perform their art for the whole ceremony, playing integral Cambodian traditional music and singing popular and folkloric songs. In the backyard, they dug a dozen holes for stoves on which they would place the cooking pots so that the chef could prepare the feast. At the age of 7, I was amazed at the sight

of that enormous preparation. While I was looking at those workers undertaking their jobs, one question came to mind. Why, in the village, did no one think to create a permanent big hall, fully decorated and equipped with sufficient chairs and tables to accommodate guests, a hall that we could hire for that kind of ceremony? I thought, "It would be a good business." I did not realize that such a hall had already existed in some hotels in Phnom Penh.