

The Civilization of Villagers

The Lower Snay Pol borders a small river or stream called "Stung Snay Pol," where some families can make their living by fishing. The village was also known for good Cambodian traditional noodles, "Num Banh Tiock." The noodles are made with only rice flour, no egg, and are consumed with fish soup prepared with citronella ingredients. Snay Pol noodles were so famous that important people would come from different cities to buy and eat them. Two or three families lived off the selling of this traditional noodle, earning enough money to send their children to further their studies in the capital, Phnom Penh. Other families made their living as rice or tobacco retailers. They bought rice in a 100 kg bag from two rice mills in the village and sold it, kg by kg, in other villages along the Mekong River, 40 to 50 km from home. Most men would begin their daily work early in the morning, between 4 and 5 a.m. carrying the 100 kg bag of rice on the back seat of their bicycles and spending their time selling rice from village to village. From the Mekong villages, some bought many kg of tobacco to sell it in retail

at home. They returned home around 2 p.m. to find their pretty wives waiting with a smile and some preparation, including a silk sarong (sarong is a kind of robe, in cotton or in silk, commonly used by the Chams as their daily clothes; non-peasant Cambodians wear a sarong as pyjama when staying home) and a perfumed soap for a relaxing bath.

The people living in that part of the village had the same lifestyle as any city dweller, in a “modernised” style. In fact, those people enjoyed dancing, playing music, and practising collective sports: soccer or volleyball. At the Cambodian New Year festival in mid-April of every year, they would spend the three nights in the street, dancing the traditional Ram Vong (dance in circle) (Cambodians celebrate the New Year for three days) using a drum, a guitar, or a mandolin (depending on which one they found available) and an accordion as musical instruments.

The village was also home to most of the district officials. The privileged ones took their daily breakfast at the only coffee shop that existed in the village, before going to work. The breakfast normally consisted of a single cup of black coffee or coffee with milk and/or a

bowl of Chinese noodles. No ordinary people or peasants could afford to take that kind of breakfast regularly. Only some schoolteachers and some district officials did. One of them, working as the district accountant, ran an indoor traditional and popular theatre called "Lakon Bassac" (a kind of Beijing opera in which actors play their roles in different personages, talking and singing). The troupe was composed of dozens of actors, musicians, and workers. Every day, between 3 and 4 p.m., some actors dressed as the personage of the moment, according to the role they would play later, accompanied by the noisy sounds of a big drum, showed up on the main street to announce the night's performance. They took an ox cart or horse cart to proceed across the village. A few years later, assigned actors would show up in a two-wheeled vehicle towed by a motorbike to advertise their show. From 6:00 p.m., we can hear noisy, uninterrupted, and repeated sounds of big drums from the theatre that kept the whole village alert for the upcoming art event while the theatre officials were selling entrance tickets.

The 1st class ticket costs about USD 0.30, giving rights to the 1st rank chair next to the stage. The lowest class ticket costs about

USD 0.03, giving access to the last stair, almost 3 m high against the wall. The sounds of the drums were so exciting and created a crazy temptation that many children of my generation could not resist, insisting that our parents bring us to see the show or find our own way inside the theatre building, which was made of bamboo and covered with thatch. The simplest way to attend the show for free was to sneak in through any hole found in the wall. Each time before the troupe performed a new drama or comedy, the producer would add new acts and assign roles to each actor or actress to play different personages. There was no manuscript. Once they received an assigned role, actors/actresses would improvise based on their experience and knowledge of art. This role attribution took place most often on Sunday mornings. Some children, including myself, came to listen to the discussion from beginning to end until the preferred actor/actress was free, so that we could talk to him/her in private. The life of an artist was no better than that of an ordinary villager. The most popular star of the troupe earned far less than the schoolteacher. In general, the Cambodian Buddhist culture favours monkhood rather than modern life. The theatre was the only

entertainment we had in the village. Later on, in the mid-1960s, TV took its place, and little by little our theatre disappeared.

Like in other Cambodian villages, Buddhism was prosperous in Snay Pol. The Pagoda was the centre of social activities. Important events took place there. People went either to Snay Pol Pagoda in the upper part of the village or to Rokar Pagoda in a neighbouring village. My grandmother and my parents went to Rokar Pagoda, whose chief monk was a close friend of the family. Real Buddhists who practised the religion, especially elderly people, went to the pagoda once a week on Buddha Day to give offerings, mainly food, to Buddhist monks and receive from them the five or eight Buddhist precepts called "Sila." On that day, they abstained from eating after noon. In the afternoon, they would spend time praying or listening to various Buddhist teachings recited by Buddhist monks. But for children, Buddhism was a very simple religion as taught by our parents: "In heaven, one angel is watching us and keeping records of all our actions. "Depending on our deeds, whether good or bad, as confirmed by the record, we will go to

heaven or hell after we die.” “Past good deeds help us in the present, while bad ones make our lives difficult.”