

The Daily Life of Villagers

Snay Pol was divided into two parts: Upper Snay Pol (Snay Pol Loeu) and Lower Snay Pol (Snay Pol Krom). People living in the upper village were mainly peasants. Their main occupation was rice farming. Early in the morning, they started their work in the rice field before the sun had turned on the heat. During the season of heavy work, peasants used to turn to one another for help. Very often, groups of farmers, or sometimes an entire village, were mobilised to provide the workforce for the family, which needed it during ploughing, planting, or harvest time. In turn, the assisted family would take part in the next mobilisation to help other families, following the timetable agreed upon by the farmers themselves. Generally, the atmosphere of this collective and voluntary work was joyful. Men, women, boys, and girls spontaneously exchanged jokes, improvised songs, or sang various verses of poetry to forget their fatigue. They used the occasion to engage in talent competitions. After their farming work, most of the men spent their spare time climbing the palm trees to collect their juice.

The juice, when still fresh, can be sold as is or made into palm sugar or palm wine. Palm wine was very popular. It was not expensive and could replace Western beer for many people. Others would seek work in the more prosperous Lower Snay Pol as carpenters or as simple construction workers. Women either helped their husbands make palm sugar or plaited traditional mats made from dried palm leaves. For sure, palm trees provided many economic advantages for those poor farmers who worked so hard to earn not much, compared with their fellow villagers in other parts of the village. Many of their houses were mostly made of bamboo, with roofs covered with thatch. Only a few were made of wood and covered at the top by tiles. The Cambodian farmers' houses were, in general, built elevated so that the ground could be used as a cow shed. The two parts of the village, the upper and the lower, were separated by a distance of about one kilometre. But at that time of my childhood, it seemed far away to me.

The difference in living conditions also appeared striking. In the lower part of the village, the houses were mainly made of wood. Even some were made of brick. Many business people of Chinese

origin and civil servants, mostly schoolteachers, lived there. The lower part was also a marketplace where people from neighbouring villages brought in their agricultural products for sale. Every day, almost at a fixed time, around 4 a.m., Horrifying cries of dying pigs woke up the village, as the animals had just received knife shots to their necks administered by the three Chinese butchers of the village. The way the butchers killed pigs provided fresh blood that they could sell after boiling it. The butcher sold not only pig meat but also other internal parts of the animal. From 5 a.m., the main road leading to the market became busy. The first people came either on foot, by bicycle, or by motorbike, carrying goods for sale. They came to prepare their display, which was usually put on a kind of bamboo bed called "Kre."¹ The goods varied from vegetables to chickens, fish, and meats (beef and pork), and all kinds of cakes or fruits. Only consumable goods were on sale at the marketplace. The other goods, including clothing and home or field equipment, were sold by Chinese businesspeople along the main street. The

¹ Kre or Kreh ក្រែ ក្រែ is the Khmer name for a kind of bed made from bamboo or wood.

marketplace was open-air. We could easily recognize peasants in black clothes and their Krama (a traditional cotton scarf made locally, marked with many small interspersed blue or black and red squares) (the Khmer Rouge had used black pyjamas and Krama as their uniform).

The Krama can be used in many ways. It can replace pants or pyjamas when staying home. It can be used to clean sweat under a hot sun or to pack anything found unexpectedly. The Krama can be worn around the head or the neck. My folks never used a Krama outside the home, as it was a sign of peasantry. And peasantry was not well respected by any city dweller at that time. Yet, one could find the lazy as well as the hardest workers among the peasants. Some came to the market to sell the products they had cultivated in their family garden next to the house, or to sell live chickens they had raised in their spare time, away from the rice-farming work. All-season products were coconuts, bamboo shoots, or sweet potatoes. Others came to sell the products they had just collected in the bushes or fished in the river, given by Mother Nature. In the rainy season, live frogs could also be found for sale in the market.

