

The Ieng Family

My birthplace was in the middle of the two parts of Snay Pol, where there were only a dozen houses surrounded by rice fields. Our family house was built in the first decade of the 20th century. It was made entirely of wood and covered with ancient tiles. It was among a few big houses of the village. Its round columns were in smooth brown wood. The walls were also wooden and were constructed carefully so that not a single fixing nail could be seen. The principal house was added at the front by a veranda and at the back by a kitchen. Inside, cupboards carved with traditional decorative figures separated large rooms. The house belonged to my maternal grandfather, Yin Uch, who was a notable in the village, as he served year after year in many administrative functions: chief of the commune, tax officer, chief of an administrative centre, member of the consultative assembly of the Kingdom, and finally a bailiff. I did not know him because he died when I was still a small baby.

Even living in a village like Snay Pol, my grandfather took an aristocratic way of life. He had a cook, a maid, and a driver who drove a light oxcart, the fast one. He was married to the daughter of another notable family in the district, my grandmother, Oung Kou. Through their marriage, they had seven children: five girls and two boys. My mother, Sokhar, was the third eldest of the seven. All attended school, but not all the girls had completed primary school. Only one of my four aunts, Samedy, got a primary school certificate and became a schoolteacher. My two uncles studied further and obtained proper positions in the civil service. Parents at that time did not want to send their daughters to school. Some preferred to keep them at home so they could learn household duties in preparation for their future role as a good wife. Others might fear that sending girls to school would be out of control, since they could not know how their daughters behaved outside the home. My mother did not finish primary school, but she can read and write basic Cambodian correctly. She was raised under the protection of tradition.

As teenagers, girls had to stay in the shade, cut off from the rays of the sun. In every movement outside, young ladies must be

accompanied. Girls could hardly talk to boys. At that time, parents arranged their children's marriages. The future couple did not need to know each other beforehand. Normally, the boy's family asked for the girl's hand. If the girl's parents accepted, the boy's family would give a present or gift in gold or money, rice, or other commodities, in accordance with the conditions agreed upon during the negotiations. In addition to the present, the groom candidate must spend some time on probation, working for the girl's family. The duration of probation generally lasts for one year. During this period of probation, if the girl's parents were not satisfied with the performance of the groom, they could refuse, at any moment, the hand of their daughter. While reversing their decision, they could still keep all the presents or gifts they had received. It was under that strict tradition that my parents were married. It was the opposite of the 1960s, when Chinese shop owners married their daughters to Cambodian boys.

My father, Ieng Muth, came from a smaller village in a neighbouring commune bordering the small river "Tonle Tauch." He originated from a farming family of Grandfather Kong Ieng and

Grandmother Hu Or: a family of six children, with two girls and four boys. My father was the fourth and youngest boy in the family. Except for the two girls, all received Buddhist education as they entered monkhood at an early age. Between the ages of 13 and 15, they became novice Buddhist monks. They would live in the pagoda, learning Buddhist teachings, Cambodian literature, calculus, as well as vocational training such as carpentry, art, painting, or traditional medicine, until the age of 18. Between 18 and 21, the novices can either leave their monkhood or continue as more mature ones, called "Bhikku." As ordinary boys, they would come back home and stay with their parents, helping them with farming work. Any former novice monk was called "Chee." At 21, some Chee would reenter the monkhood and become "Bhikku." Others would definitely leave the monastic life, get married, and found families. But a Bhikkhu might later decide to quit monkhood at any moment or continue it until the end of their life. My father and his brothers were all Bhikkhus. One of his elder brothers, Ieng Bun, lived as a Buddhist monk until he died in 1974. After some years, my father and his two other brothers renounced the life of Bhikku. Any former

Bhikku was called "Banditt," the scholar, or commonly called "Anteeth."

At 28, my father left the monkhood and began to work as a farmer, helping my grandmother, who became a widow after my grandfather died. When the time came to get married, he was 30 years old, an old boy to marry. My mother was 18. The two families arranged the marriage. My father did not know my mother, and vice versa. My father's family did pay a high price in terms of gifts, as their situation was quite different from that of my mother's family. In addition, before the wedding took place, my father had to prove to his future parents-in-law every skill he had. He had to work full time, 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and stand ready for any mission 24 hours a day. During his one-year probation, he not only had to work hard, especially in the rice fields, but he also had no right to talk to or see his future wife. Finally, my father passed the examination successfully. The wedding took place in 1945.

The probation was a good experience for my father, as, in the end, he gained confidence and trust from his father-in-law. Immediately after the marriage, my grandfather trained him to

become his successor as a bailiff. The bailiff in Cambodia was an independent court officer whose responsibilities included implementing court judgments or sentences, especially in civil litigation, as well as maintaining order in the courtroom. The office could be transmitted from father to son or sold. The function of bailiff was later confirmed, through a nationwide examination, by a committee presided over by the minister of justice. Just a year before I was born, my father inherited the office of bailiff from my maternal grandfather. The latter died a few months after my birth.

In Cambodia, we bear the family name first and the given name immediately after it. The family name is established either by the name of the grandfather or the name of the father. My father used his father's name as the family name, Ieng, so his full name became Ieng Muth. I was told that Grandfather Ieng was a man of many professions. When he was young, he learned the martial arts and specialised in using a stick or cane. In the late years of the nineteenth century, one of the young Ieng's uncles was a chief of the commune and was a master of martial arts.

As a master of martial arts, he was constantly sought by competitors who travelled from faraway villages to test their skill against his, keeping him very busy and his life full of deadly fighting. So the uncle decided to set a rule prohibiting his relatives from learning any martial art. But for those who dared to violate the rule, the only condition was to measure their skill against the commune chief, and if they beat him, they would be allowed to stay in the commune. Those violators would be punished with exile if they failed to beat the chief. My grandfather failed many times in the contest, and each time he was defeated, he was forced to leave the village for several years. Finally, he beat his uncle after he met a female master in her thirties who had trained him until he was able to jump up to two or three meters high. Since that time of victory over his uncle, Ieng was authorised to live in the village named Mesor Prachan until the end of his life. I was also told that his good and skilful experience in martial arts once saved his life from a tiger attack in the forest next to the village. Three months after the attack, he successfully avenged the tiger by killing the animal after a deadly fight lasting several hours. I saw the dried skin of the tiger, which was exhibited on the wall of the kudi (monk house) of my uncle,

the senior Buddhist monk, Ieng Bun, in a Phnom Penh pagoda, Saravone Decho, in the 1960s. Maybe it was for the same reason that my grandfather never taught, nor allowed his children, including my father, to be taught, the martial arts. However, martial arts skills once brought my grandfather to the Royal Palace, where he served as a Maha Thlek (royal servant) for a while. In the later years of his life, he worked as the master of ceremonies in the pagoda of his village. At that time, the pagoda owned a racing boat, with my grandfather as captain of the rowers' team. As is practised today, boat racing was a very popular sport, and the whole village supported the team. The captain normally trains his teammates but does not participate in rowing. He sits in the boat in front of his colleagues and gives signals for a regular or accelerated rowing rhythm so the team rows in the same movement. Spectators might see the captain dancing each time he makes a gesture to his teammates, using his oar up and down, fast and slow. As a master of ceremonies in a pagoda, commonly called "Achar," or the teacher, my grandfather was one of the respected figures in the village.

My parents had eleven children, with nine boys and two girls. I was the third in the family. My brothers and sisters were raised in accordance with the traditions and customs of the village. I was born as a premature baby. In my case, my mother had only a seven-month pregnancy. Each time my mother gave birth to her child, she was under the care of the same old lady in her sixties, named Grandmother Ka, the only midwife in the village. The midwife performed her duties in an ancestral way that had been perpetuated in our society, from generation to generation.