

Travelling from My Village to the City

In the 1960s, the road from Snay Pol to Prey Veng was still worse and suffered from seasonal heavy flooding. We normally used the road in the dry season, which lasts from November to May. Two buses, one painted red and the other blue, owned by two competing Vietnamese families, shuttled between the village and the provincial capital. The 30 km journey took at least three to four hours, as the buses made many stopovers to pick up more passengers and goods, including live chickens, ducks, or pigs, vegetables, or other commodities. Along the road, endless rice fields, marked by thousands of palm trees, separated a few villages. During the journey, passengers were sometimes asked to leave their seats and walk over several craters or waterways so the bus could move. Usually, when it passed through each village, some small children, naked or half-naked, ran behind it, as though running in a fierce 100-metre race, under the rain of sandy dust spread by the bus wheels. Those small creatures always enjoyed the attempt to catch the bus in motion. Almost every time, they were

covered from top to bottom in white dust. The lucky ones enjoyed a few minutes of free transportation service, clinging to the first bare irons they found available at the rear of the vehicle, while the others laughed happily.

The road was generally bumpy and was also used by ox carts, bicycles, or motorbikes. The road to Phnom Penh was no different from a pathway and was not usable by cars. It was petite but easier for bike riders, as it passed through more villages where they could buy food or refreshments when needed. It crossed over a river called Tonle Tauch (Small River) and some other watercourses or streams, which were spanned by flimsy bridges made of bamboo or wood that could hardly support the weight of an ordinary car. This road passed through a long forest and a flat land and led up to the Mekong River, in a district of a neighbouring province named Kandal, where travellers would take a ferry or commercial boat if they were to continue the trip to the capital city. In the rainy season, both roads were abandoned for three or four months (from August to November) as the whole region was inundated. During that period, people would travel by boat. The same two or three

businessmen ran the fluvial transportation business every year. The boats carrying passengers and goods took half a day or a full day to reach Phnom Penh, depending on the season. The journey was sometimes pleasant, as we could take our lunch on board in the middle of an immense water reservoir, giving the impression of entering a real ocean. In September and October, the water level was so high that we could not distinguish the surface from the sky. In some remote areas, the water rose to the roofs of houses or almost completely submerged the few palm trees we could see. While we were travelling, hundreds of birds of various species and colours flew over us or swam nearby. Fish were also abundant. When the water went down, in some small rivers, we could see some unwise fish jumping out of the water whenever any boat passed.

At that time, I had no sense of ecology. When the water lowered further, the boat would move slowly, following limited waterways obstructed by many branches of trees crossing over the boat passage. In my village, people generally had both bicycles and individual or family boats so they could move in every season.

Others considered those who could afford to possess both a motorbike and a boat as rich fellows. This was the conventional standard of living at the time. My parents owned both means of transportation, although their boat had no engine. Later on in the 1960s, this standard of “to be called rich” was upgraded to “having a motorbike, a TV set, a motorised boat, and living in a wooden house under a roof covered by tiles”.