

Cambodia Provincial Cities : Visit to **Kampong Thom** and **Siem Reap**, October 11-12, 2006

(with a big group of community people from Lao, Thailand and other parts of Cambodia)
Tom's rough notes

On the national highway up to Kampong Thom :

Living with the yearly cycle of floods : The road winds along the flat farmland along the Tonle Sap River. In this time of year, the rainy season, it seems like the whole country is flooded – water shimmering everywhere. But it's not a crisis at all, part of the natural yearly cycle – it brings lots of benefits. People seem to have found all kinds of ways to live with the floods. Cambodians seem to live with the flooding – for almost half the year, a good deal of Cambodia's surface is under water, and this is not considered a curse, but a blessing, since the floods bring fertility, fish, nutrients for vegetable and rice crops, etc. And people have learned to accommodate this large scale coming-and-going of water with stilt houses, water buffaloes, roads raised up on dikes and a whole range of rituals and practices which make good use of all that water. But in the great modern way,



letting this natural cycle be is unthinkable – Cambodia's floods must now be controlled and put to profit by man, the more so as the country urbanizes.

- **Small stands along the highway selling oranges, lemons, mangoes.**
- **Trucks-full of village people one trips home** – must be as many as 50 people (with all their bags and bundles and animals and kids) crammed into one big, open-bedded truck, all with their **straw hats on or kramaas tied around their heads to keep off the fierce sun.**
- **Wooden houses all along the way**, built up on tall stilts,

with rain-catcher roofs and stairways that are arranged mostly with two turns, and odd numbers of steps on each flight (*to keep out bad spirits, which are apparently confused by turns and odd-numbers of steps!*).

- **Smoked fish :** Somsak says that for four months of the year, when the great Tonle Sap river floods so much surrounding land and changes direction, people come from other places to catch all kinds of fish, dry them in the sun and then smoke them over wooden fires, to sell from little thatched stands along the road. We stop to buy some – Somsak says they can be kept without a fridge for a long time, are good fried or in soups. They are sold in strips, arranged in beautiful patterns on bamboo skewers, and sold by the set, not by weight or number.
- **National highways are also local roads full of local life :** This busy highway is also very much a local road, with school children in crisp blue and white uniforms, on foot or on bicycles, returning home from school, women spreading grain out to dry in the dusty shoulders of the road, farmers carrying stuff, vendors, families on scooters carrying racks of live chickens tied by their ankles to poles, pony carts carrying wood, furniture, school kids.
- **CPP Party signs everywhere** – in every village and town we pass through, there are CPP offices and signboards all over.



- **Delicious lunch at a simple restaurant in Kampong Thom Town :** *Sumlau Ka Kong* (a vegetable and fish dish with tumeric), fried smoked fish from the Tonle Sap River, the Khmer omelette made with salty fish, and the delicious Khmer rice, etc.
- **The land along this road is beautiful beyond words!** Shimmering green rice fields, stilt houses with their red-winged roofs, roads filled with people, glimpses of men casting their nets into water along the way, the slanting honey-colored light, lotus and lilies in ponds. Water buffalo with their syncopated gait, fly-swatting ears and great tragic eyes. Then the sweet, ginger-colored cows with pale noses and undersides. Vast fields of iridescent green, liberally dotted with toddy palms, which stand spikey and tall in this emphatically horizontal landscape.

Visit to Somnak Village (Stone-carving village)
Krokak Commune, Sartuk District, Kampong Thom Province



Just started a community savings group here four months ago (in July 2006), with support from the Ministry of Culture and UPDF. Somsak and Wut brought a group of villagers to Phnom Penh to visit other poor communities and see how the savings system works. Came back and immediately set up a savings group here. Now, the savings are small, but Somsak says they have a good system and good discipline! So far, there are **17 households members** in the saving group, mostly from the more prosperous stone-carving-expert families. Now they are encouraging the hired laborers to start saving.

- **Project to upgrade their stone-carving traditions :** This village has been the target of a Culture Ministry project to improve living standards and incomes by upgrading their traditional stone-carving crafts. The village had been involved in stone-carving for a long time, since there is a famous hill with good stone just 10 kms away. But the ancient traditions of fine stone carving had been lost, and back then, villagers were mostly making gravel, kitchen grinders and cutting rough stone blocks for buildings - nothing too fancy. So in 1985, the Ministry of Culture sent people from Banteay Meanchey and PNH to come encourage the people to revive the village's fine stone-carving artisans, and make stone statues to sell, replicas of famous Khmer statues, Buddha images, Jayavaraman images, and also to take on custom statue making nagas and dieties and Buddhas on order, to make the whole thing more professional. A group of children and young people in the village were sent to Phnom Penh to learn to carve stone, behind the Royal Palace.
- **Now, there are 10 families in the village who are expert stone carvers**, and each family employs a lot of villagers and outsiders to help carve statues and ornaments. Each family works separately, and earns money mostly from orders from private customers. They have some statues and small souvenir-sized carvings for sale along the road, but not much income from this. The stone carving is not collective. We learn that sometimes they do share customers, though, when one family is too busy with orders, they will pass on an order to another family. Also, when very large statues are ordered (2-3 meters tall), they also work together.
- **In the future, they would like to build a nice stone-carving shop in the village** which will feature their stone carvings and statues, for passing tourists.
- **Not everyone does stone carving here :** there are also farmers, laborers.



- ***There is a Royal decree protecting the mountain where all this stone comes from***, 10 kms away, which is jointly controlled by the Environment Ministry, the Cultural Ministry, the Forests Ministry and the Ministry of Industry and Energy. You have to get permission to quarry stone from this mountain. Now, the villagers at Somnak Village negotiate together to get permission to use the stone.



Story of the village :

Long ago, the king and his entourage stayed in this village, on a tour of the kingdom, and while he was in the village, his son, the prince became ill and died. The King and Queen were so sad, that the village came to be known by the name of Koh Kaw, which means remorse or sadness. To relieve his loss, a revered monk later advised the King to have a stone statue carved here, in the likeness of his son, the lost prince, which he did. And from that time, the village became known as Somnak, which means statue, and came to be a famous place of stone-carvers who could capture the purity of their human subjects so well that their likenesses in stone could relieve the sadness of loss.

Historic Monuments in Kampong Thom Province :

- ***A province littered with ancient ruins*** : Before the Angkor period (12 Century AD), there was a civilization in this area (550 – 820 AD) called ***Sumbo Prekoop*** (check this!). The whole province is scattered with ancient monuments, much older than the Angkor Wat, but not so hot on the tourist trail. But lots of students come to the province to explore these ancient sites.
- ***There are 283 ancient temples*** in the province, built in the "Sumboo Prekoop" style, 44 of which are in very good condition.
- ***30 kilometers outside the provincial town of Kampong Thom***, there is a big cluster of temples and ruins (name?) which is a World Heritage Site, in which Visal's wife Thiery, is working on a project to both restore the monuments and to revive the 7 traditional villages that exist within the historic area. Now, UPDF is getting involved and helping to set up savings groups in these villages and help the preservation teams to develop a plan for how to incorporate the villages in the tourism development plans (including handicraft production, etc.). Hard to get there, the road is very bad.

A surprising partnership between the province's poor communities and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts :



Mr. Mao Sovandy, is the Director of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, Kampong Thom Province. He has been a very energetic ally in the spreading out of savings and credit process in the province. He's a kind of big-shot in the provincial branch of the Culture Ministry, but he seems like a villager – very friendly and direct and wearing dirty clothes and old scuffed up sandals! You would never know he's a government official, you'd think he's from one of the slum communities! Because of him, the Culture Ministry has become the key partner to the development of the community process in this province.

Visit to the Provincial Museum : which Mr. Sovandy is just getting started, with

a few pots and shards and stone fragments.

Kampong Thom Poor Development Fund started with seed money from small donations from the Ministry of Culture staff. Mr. Sovandy encouraged his professional staff in the ministry to save 500 Riels every day, to help set up a fund to help the poor communities in the city. They started in August 2006, and have saved so far 700,000 Riels (about \$250). Members of the youth and children's groups (also made up mostly of kids from the poor settlements) save 100 Riels every 3 days. This little fund is already being used, and members of the savings groups in two slum settlements have taken



loans from the fund!

The ministry supports these savings groups, and in most cases encouraged the communities to start them in the first place!

The Ministry has also helped set up the children's group, the youth group and the "green communities" group. When we visit the in-process museum, we are treated to a classical dance performance by the children's group, traditional costumes and all! (Monkey versus buffalo)



Mr. Mao Sovandy speaks : He brought a group of people from poor communities in Kampong Thom Province to Phnom Penh to see the UPDF and all the upgrading projects and to see what communities are doing there to form networks, start community welfare, link their savings and credit groups to the fund, sangkat process, etc. He says this was VERY powerful for the people to see how much extremely poor communities, with similar problems of land tenure and housing and poverty can do if they work together. He says that the good relationship between the organized poor communities and the local authorities, as well as good leadership, can do a lot to solve these problems.

Plans to start a new community development fund in Kampong Thom Province next year, with a new MOU between UPDF, ACHR and the Ministry of Culture, etc.

1. Visit to Phum Dak Chomeas Community, Kampong Thom Provincial Town



This is an old, shady, run-down urban poor squatter community of 146 households in Kampong Thom city, near the banks of the river. People here work as construction workers, market and street vendors, laborers.

Land Tenure : They all say this is their land – they moved here in 1980, but have no papers giving them legal title to the land. It was an

old village even before Pol Pot. There is a rumor that they will eventually be given land title, but only according to a National Government Plan, which has its own time-table that nobody knows about.

23 families are in the savings group, which was started 23 months ago by Mr. Sovandy, with support from the Culture Ministry. Their total savings so far is 401,000 Riels (\$135).





We get a report from the woman who is the village chief here. A woman from Lao asks why they save, and she looks confused, points to Mr. Sovandy and says "Because he told us to!" (lots of laughter). She went on to say they save to help each other and to strengthen the unity in their community. They have plans to open a "savings box" after January 2007, and will start giving loans. Somsak says it's all very new here, and they are *learning by doing*. The loans will be limited to a ceiling of 40,000 Riels (\$10).

Challenge from the Lao team : "We are much poorer than you are, but we save 2,500 Riels every month! Even the rich families in our villages save and join in the savings groups as a way of helping out the poorer members of the village."

River full of fish : Along the river side of the settlement, many people are dipping beautiful 4-corner nets, fixed to a bamboo cross structure, into the water, and bringing it back up FULL of fish – mostly tiny little silver fish, just one or two inches long, which they tip into a bucket. Then they sun-dry them and use them to fry or add to soups and curried.



Network building in action : It is amazing to watch the power of this going around and visiting other poor communities and comparing notes on savings and credit, upgrading, land tenure, etc. This can only happen when people get in a bus and actually go visit each other, see how the others live, see what's the same and what's different. Then, the challenging each other in a friendly way, making friends, taking copious notes, inviting each other to visit, etc.



2. Visit to Suvan Macha Community, Kampong Thom Provincial Town



There are 27 families saving in this small, river-side squatter community of fishermen, laborers, vendors and cattle raisers. They save 3,000 Riels (US\$ 75 cents) per month.

Land Tenure : This is public land along the river – people came here and settled in 1979, immediately after Pol Pot.

Savings in Kampong Thom is very new : Somsak says compared to other provincial cities in Cambodia, the savings

process in this city is very new. The savings process they started themselves, and then through the links with other cities in Cambodia, they are gradually strengthening and refining and expanding the process. Use the other cities network to support the process. *Lots of exchange of mobile phone numbers!*

Lots of exchange of details about savings and loan rules here, with the Lao, Thai and Cambodian visitors furiously taking notes and asking questions!



3. Visit to Old Market Community (Psar Cha), Kampong Thom Provincial Town



27 families saving in this squatter settlement, also near the river.

Savings group started in June 2006. So far, they have total savings of 340,000 Riels (\$85) – *announced with great pride!*

This community has taken income generation loans from the special fund set up by the Culture Ministry staff: one family gets a loan of 50,000 Riels, for which they must repay daily 1,100 Riels.

Most people here sell stuff at the market nearby, which closes at 18:30.

Most people do their savings in the evenings, when people come back from the market and have their day's earnings in their pocket.

Now, trying to develop a community development fund at provincial level – maybe this little fund started by the Mr. Sovandy and his Culture Ministry staff could be the seed?



Poor Communities in Siem Reap Town

- ***This town is a far cry from Kampong Thom!*** A bustling, fast-developing, tourist mecca with all the more heavy pressures of money.
- ***Most inner-city informal communities have already been evicted and dispersed.*** No resettlement process at all, no support, no compensation to buy alternative land, no partnership with the municipality at all. Just disappeared.
- ***The community process here began about 3 years ago***, with support from UPDF and Phnom Penh communities.
- ***Lots of evictions and eviction threats here***, where the development pressure on urban land is hotting up, as hotels, shops, restaurants and tourism-related building goes wild.
- ***Mostly very small, isolated communities here*** : Somsak says that most of the urban poor in Siem Reap are living in very small, somewhat isolated little communities like Komroo, located in small bits of leftover land – no big settlements as in PNH or other provincial cities.
- ***First city-wide settlement survey done by the community people themselves, in 2004***, with support from Phnom Penh. **(GET THESE FIGURES!)**
- ***There are more than 12 informal communities in Siem Reap now.*** (?)

1. Visit to Komroo Community, Siem Reap Town

This is a tiny roadside squatter community of only 13 families. Most are very poor market vendors or have low-level jobs within the tourism sector. A lot of the children earn a little extra for their families by collecting recyclable waste.

A lovely dinner in the community : We arrive in the community in the late evening, after the long drive from Phnom Penh. The community has made a delicious full dinner for our group of 30 or 40 people, with many different curries, soups, vegetable dishes and rice! We have to eat in shifts, though, in two of the adjacent houses, where there is not room for everyone. Somsak said he'd told the people the group was too big to feed, but the people in Komroo insisted on cooking this feast.



Mr. Subin is the community leader here, a tiny, delicately-built man with an elfin face, and a six-year old son who is an exact miniature replica of the father. Subin has his own business as a guide and tourist tuk-tuk hire, taking people around the city and around Angkor Wat in his tuk-tuk.

Land tenure : They occupy a narrow strip of government land along a small inside lane, in a high-pressure area of temples, posh restaurants and hotels in the center of Siem Reap. The land immediately behind the community belongs to a rich hotel owner, who has complained to the provincial governor many times about this illegal

settlement. The local authority has been trying to evict them for a long time, but they're holding on. They want to rebuild their community on the same land, but the local authority won't allow, wants to evict.

Layout of community : The 13 houses are laid out in line, each plot being about 5 meters wide and 6 meters deep, with the compound wall of a posh hotel at the back, and the 5-meter lane at the front.

This is one of the last informal communities remaining in the city center : Most other informal settlements have been long pushed out by now, where the land is so valuable.

Savings : They have been saving for 2-3 years, and have now 1 million Riels (US\$350) in collective saving. All households are members.



Poor living conditions before, with flooding and lack of toilets : Before, the community experienced flooding every year, in which the houses and road would stand in a half-meter of dirty water for weeks. Also, there were no toilets, so people had to go to the toilet in open spaces nearby. Now, there are fewer and fewer open spaces, so no place to go.



Already completed several upgrading projects : Komroo is the first community in Siem Reap to undertake upgrading pilot projects. They have completed several upgrading projects here over the last 2-3 years, with support from UPDF, including 2 common toilets, drainage improvements, road improvement, tree-planting (banana and neem), pulling some houses back that were encroaching on the lane, and building a lovely dark-green-painted bamboo fence along all the newly-straightened house fronts. People jointly maintain these two common toilets, which are kept spotlessly clean.

All these upgrading projects cost only \$1,600 total – for everything!



Had to work at night, because the local government didn't allow : The people at Komroo had to work on these upgrading projects at night, because the local government didn't agree to their plans to improve the settlement.

Home improvement : After the upgrading projects began, people began individually making improvements to their houses.

Very active youth group : The youth group here has started a free school, which they run themselves, giving English and Khmer instruction to poor small kids in the community and from nearby – extra tuition classes and classes for those who don't go to school. The English instruction is understood to be helpful in getting work in the tourism industry – if you can speak good English, you can get a job as a tour guide, a driver, a hotel or restaurant worker.

We meet two enthusiastic teenage brothers, **Samnang and Sinat Bunhorn**, who are both volunteer teachers in this free school, which they helped to start.



2. Visit to Satrai Kreikor Community, Siem Reap Town



This is another tiny squatter settlement of only 8 families, just 100 meters down the road from Komroo. We only briefly walk through this settlement and then leave, to spend a couple of hours at Angkor Wat, before driving back to Phnom Penh.