The Bunong

The Caretakers of Cambodia's Sacred Forests

"We must tell Cambodians about who we are. We should produce books, TV programs and movies, carried by our own voices. Then the Khmers will see how we really live." - Mane Yun. Busra, Mondulkiri.

"I captured four wild elephants when I was a young man. As a farmer I have followed the Bunong way all my life. My home is Cambodia."
- Moe Chan

"Sok-sabay," the old man greets visitors to his village. "Weh-lang", he continues with a wry smile. "Bonjour", he finally announces, as he puts his hands together in greeting.

Moe Chan is probably in his 80s. He is a Bunong, and an elder in the village of Pau Trom. Moe Chan is not sure how old he is exactly, as his papers were lost during the Pol Pot Regime.

The old Bunong man has followed his traditional subsistence lifestyle most of his life. He proudly proclaims, "I captured four wild elephants when I was a young man. As a farmer I have followed the Bunong way all my life. My home is Cambodia."

One of Moe Chan's earliest memories was the appearance of the French in his village, deep in the jungles of Mondulkiri, in the 1940s.

"The French occupiers told me they had come to stay for a 150 years. I laughed. I did not think they would stay in Cambodia. Sixteen years later, and they were gone. My country was independent once more."

Today Moe Chan greets his guests in Khmer, his own language, Bunong and, when appropriate, in French. Like many other Cambodians, the Bunong indigenous community is only too happy their country is at peace.

Moe Chan, who has lived through Cambodia's most turbulent recent history, hopes that his community will be able to contribute to Cambodia's current renaissance.

He knows the stakes are high – the Bunong and other indigenous peoples have been the traditional caretakers of the forests and natural resources of Mondulkiri for centuries. The vast jungles that cover much of the province are a living contribution to Cambodia's natural wealth and form some of the planet's most unique ecosystems, even supporting populations of wild Asian elephants.

But with improving infrastructure and a steadily growing economy, Cambodia's incredibly rich and diverse wilderness areas and its inhabitants face new challenges.

Population expansion and development is affecting the country's unique biodiversity and cultural heritage. Potentially, it could cause the loss of some of the country's most valuable resources.

Nowhere are these changes more apparent than in the remote province of Mondulkiri.

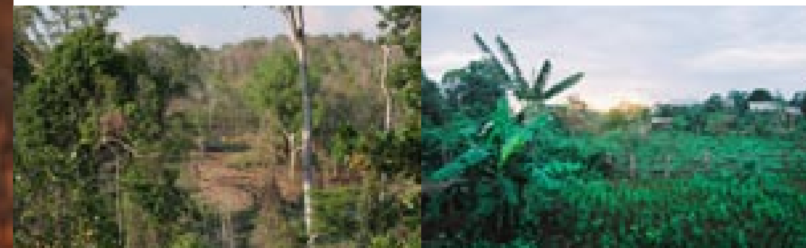
The Bunong are subsistence farmers living in small village communities in the forests of Mondulkiri. Traditionally, everything the Bunong need to survive comes from the forest and the modest fields the Bunong plant near their villages.

Chok Marel, the grandson of Bunong elder Moe Chan, likes to lead visitors to his field, and demonstrate his community's agricultural practices, "We call our fields "meel". Like my father and my grandfather before me, I grow sweet potatoes, mango, banana, pineapple, cassava, eggplant, chilli, jackfruit and rattan. We also grow a bit of cotton and tobacco".

Most Bunong families practice swidden or shifting cultivation as their main form of agriculture.
Forest is cleared and burned to establish agricultural land which is cultivated with hill rice, intercropped with a wide variety of vegetables. In the past, new forest was cleared and previously farmed fields were left fallow until the forest cover regrew, the soil regained its fertility and the plots could be used again.

Today, Bunong people no longer clear new forest to make "meel". Almost every household is aware that it is forbidden by Cambodian law to cut new forest. Normally, the Bunong return to their old fields, which they left fallow for five to nine years and use the same fields for three to five years, depending on the soil quality.

Swidden agriculture comes with its share of controversy, but in the forests of Mondulkiri, where man and nature have formed a centuries old alliance and have achieved a degree of balance, this traditional planting cycle has maintained forest cover.



The Bunong Spirit Forests

Aside from subsistence agriculture, the Bunong engage in small scale resource exploitation in the forest, regulated by an ancient and simple form of forest management.

According to Bunong belief (shared with other indigenous peoples throughout Southeast Asia), some actions in the forest are governed by religious rules that keep man and nature in balance, avoiding widespread habitat destruction.

Chok Marel explains, "The Bunong believe that nature is populated by spirits, both good and bad, and that these must be obeyed and appeased. No spirits are more powerful than those of the Spirit Forests."

These Spirit Forests are often located close to the Bunong villages. Despite the deference with which he describes these sacred areas, Chok Marel makes no secret of their location and is happy to show visitors what his people feel compelled to protect. Chok Marel recalls the wisdom handed down from his parents, "Bunong villages are surrounded by Spirit Forests. My village has three Spirit Forests. We never cut a single tree in these areas."

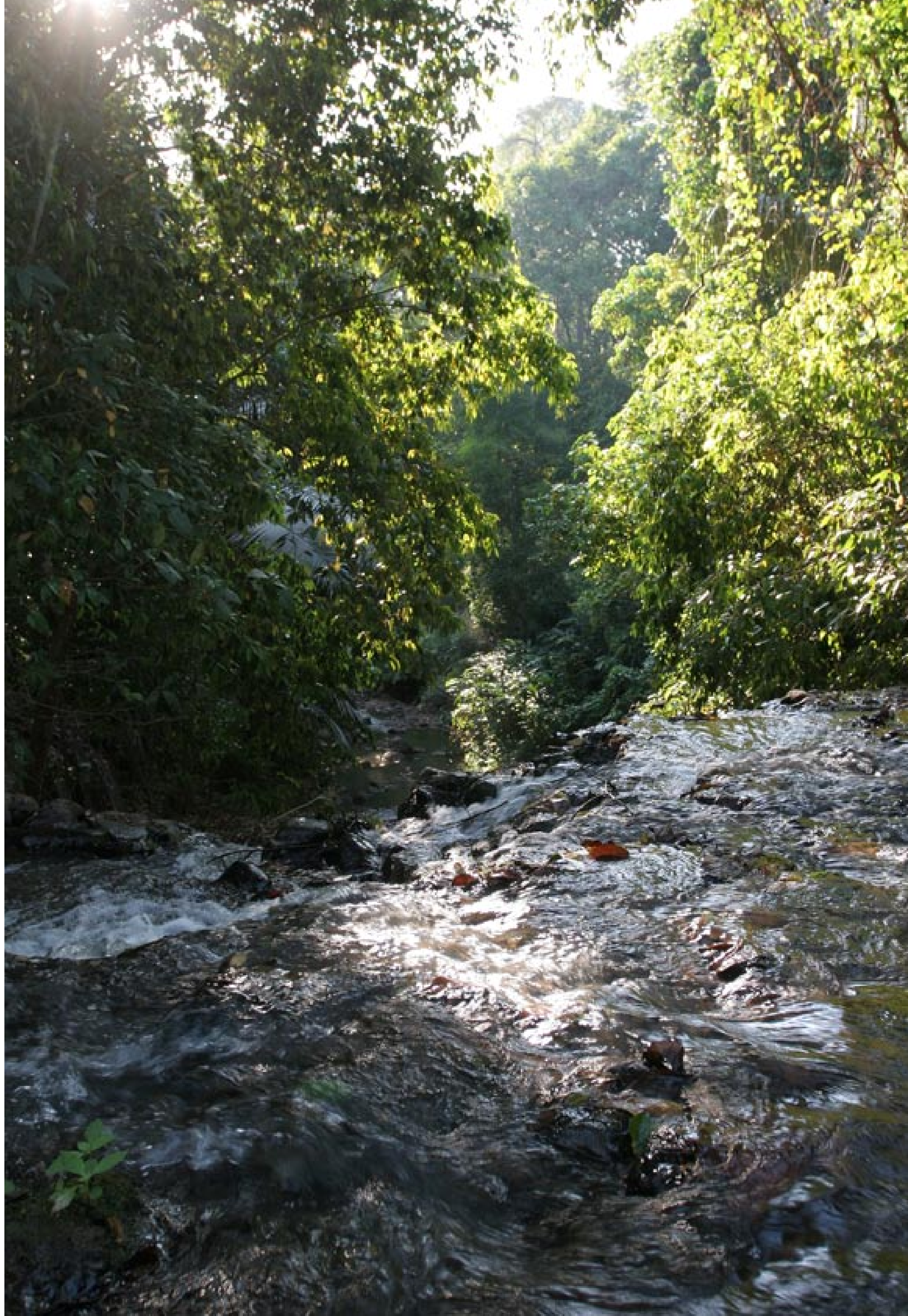
The young man follows a narrow path through dry brush out of his village. Soon the trail leads into light evergreen forest. It's pleasantly cool under the huge canopies. Bird song is audible; the sound of a small river breaks the silence of the grasslands around the village.

Chok Marel steps into the stream and wades through the shallow water, until he reaches a rocky ledge. A small waterfall tumbles into a pool of clear water below.

"This is where the Spirit Forest begins. There are no trails in. We never enter here and we never take anything. The Bunong believe that if the forests are cut down, the spirits will cause great misfortune amongst those who live in the forest as well as those who do the cutting. We are all at risk from disease if we cut the forest and some of us will die."

Spirit Forests are usually stretches of very dense evergreen forest. A waterfall, a small hillock or a giant tree often signify the location of such an area.

Biodiversity tends to be high in Spirit Forests.



Conservation through belief

The close symbiosis between man and nature is remarkable and extends to other forest areas as well. Burial grounds for example, are not to be logged or otherwise exploited.

The Bunong belief system is in itself a locally adapted code of behavior – an efficient form of responsible resource management refined by hundreds of years of first hand experience. It is a system based on respect – the Bunong realize that a healthy forest is essential to their cultural survival. It is part of their identity and part of Cambodia's spiritual and natural heritage.

When asked who owns the forest, the Bunong answer that the forest is owned by everyone. They lay no claim of individual land tenure, but feel collectively connected to the forest.

The Bunong truly believe that the forest belongs to the spirits, and that everyone should have access to it. They do not consider land as a commodity. Use, management and transfer rights are only defined for individual resources and products. Access to the resource – the forest – is obtained through sacrifices to the spirits. This egalitarian attitude makes them vulnerable to land grabbing, a common problem in Cambodia.

Pluk Mal, a 63 year old Bunong from Laoka, explains, "The forest has already changed a great deal since I was a little boy. In those days, we used to walk three or four kilometers to our resin trees. It was dangerous, because there were so many animals then, including tigers and elephants. So we stayed close to the village. The next village was more than 40 kilometers away. I remember seeing many animals throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Then, during the war and the Pol Pot years, soldiers killed and ate all the animals in the forest. After I came back to my village in 1980, there was hardly anything left alive in the forest. The last time I saw a wild elephant was in 1994."

Like his fellow Bunong, Pluk Mal depends on collecting non-timber forest products to subsidize his livelihood. On his walks, Pluk Mal, accompanied by his son, collects forest vegetables, wild fruit and honey as well as bamboo or rattan for house construction and liquid tree resin, which he sells to traders in Sen Monorom.

Clearly, the long held belief amongst the Bunong in sacred, untouchable forest areas and the restricted use of forest resources has been a significant asset to Mondulkiri's biodiversity and should play a major role in the future of the conservation of Mondulkiri's forests.

Religious practices of the Bunong

Southeast Asia is home to millions of so-called indigenous peoples. Nomadic or sedentary, most of these groups live in small self-governed village communities and practice subsistence farming.

Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, are all multi-ethnic societies with significant indigenous minorities. Speaking their own languages and following their own religious and cultural traditions, these groups have populated the remote mountainous wilderness areas of the region for millennia. Trade between indigenous peoples has always been a feature of life in South East Asia.

The majority of Cambodians are Khmer (about 90%). It is estimated that Cambodia's indigenous people comprise about one percent of the country's total population. Approximately 60% of people in Mondulkiri province belong to an indigenous group. Most of them are Bunong (54%), followed by Stieng (3%), Kreung (1%), Kraowl (1%) and Tampuan (1%). Ethnic Khmers make up 35%, Vietnamese 2% and Cham 3% of the population in Mondulkiri.

Most Bunong, like other hill tribe communities in the region, practice animism, the belief in natural spirits combined with ancestor worship. The older generation carries out more ceremonies, respects more taboos and knows more about the Bunong culture than younger Bunong.

As village elder Moe Chan recounts his version of the Bunong's Myth of Origin, the story of how the Bunong came into existence, to his family, his grandson Chok Marel is astounded – he is hearing the story for the first time.

"Greengran lived below the earth. He gave a box of soil with seven worms and tree seeds to Jan, who created the world.

Bong and Rong were brother and sister and Jan told them to get married. After much discussion, they agreed and amidst thunder and lightning, they were betrothed to one another. The couple made a sacrifice to calm the forces of nature and begat one child, which they also called Jan.

The baby scattered the soil and the worms and seeds and mountains and sea and everything else on earth grew from this, except the really large trees. Finally, Jan took more seeds from Greenspan and created the really big trees. Then he proceeded to create animals, just two of each species.

Moe Chan laughs at his spellbound listeners, and continues with an expression of embarrassed amusement, “Prokong Tro Traluk laid the woman on the road. Another man, Ro-Un then rose from below the earth, lay down with the woman and all the Bunong, it is said, originate from this union.”

Grandson Chok Marel is determined to pass this tale on to his own grandchildren. Although aspects of this legend may appear outlandish and strange, the story shares many features with other myths of its kind, including stories from Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos as well as stories from the Bible’s Old Testament.

While the Bunong’s collective past is fractured by recent conflict and relocation, some animist beliefs and customs are upheld by almost every family and virtually every aspect of Bunong life is influenced by spiritual beliefs.

What is more, Buddhism in Cambodia has strong roots in animist traditions, and some Bunong, especially those married to Khmers, have started practicing Buddhism.

In recent years, a small but growing number of Bunong have also converted to Christianity. One reason cited is poverty, as families do not have the money or livestock to carry out the ceremonies prescribed by their old traditions. Also, a perception has been fostered that they will have better lives if they convert. It has been mentioned that Bunong who convert to Christianity often abandon their belief in spirits, often cut down their Spirit Forest and consequently lose the conservation ethos at the heart of their culture.

Community life at the heart of the Bunong

Just as important as respect for the spirits is village solidarity amongst the Bunong. Yat and Ngam, two village elders, are sitting on the veranda of Yat’s house in the village Putang, beneath a poster of King Sihanouk. Yat is tuning up his guong, a string instrument made from a hollowed-out gourd with a sturdy bamboo neck and half a dozen steel wires attached, unique to the Bunong. Yat knows songs from all over the region.

“During the Pol Pot years, I was taken to a commune near the Lao border, where I learned to sing Mor Lam (Lao folk music style). I could not use the guong there. But nowadays I mostly sing Bunong and Khmer songs.”

Because it is dry season, some of Putang’s inhabitants are not working out in the fields and have gathered at Yat’s house. Women, children and a few elders sit in a tight circle, while Shamai, a 40 year old Bunong woman starts into song, accompanied by Yat on his guong. The songs of the Bunong celebrate self-reliance and virtue.

Robbery and laziness are mocked in song. Along the banister of Yat’s house, a row of wine jars stand lined up. A single long plastic straw is used to drink and true connoisseurs sip from several clay jars in a row.

As the sun sets over the village, other men and women break into song. Although most of the songs are about Bunong culture, some are topical and deal with historical issues, such as the Pol Pot years.

The event is very much a communal experience. While village elders Yat and Ngam clearly command respect, they are just part of the group.

The strength of the community spirit is not just measured by good neighbourly relations. During the busiest times of the agricultural cycle when people have a lot of work like clearing old agricultural plots and planting or harvesting rice, villagers assist and help each other.

In times of food shortage, villagers sometimes borrow rice or money from their relatives and go to the forest to search for resin, rattan, fruit, vegetables and, sometimes, to hunt.

Solidarity runs deep in Bunong culture and crime is still uncommon within the community.

“What is the point of an easy road to market when you have nothing to sell?”

- Moe Chan

Mane Yun is about to become the first Bunong lawyer – ever.

Only a small number of Bunong have been able to access higher education - during a brief period of education during the French and Sihanouk eras and just recently. As the education system in Cambodia is recovering in larger cities and still has some way to go in the country side, making the leap out of Mondulkiri is an option only a few Bunong undertake.

The 25-year old Mane recalls, "Above all, I have to thank my mother and my Khmer school director in Sen Monorom, to prove to me and my classmates and teachers that Bunong can make good academic students. It gave me the self-confidence to train and work as a teacher for both Khmers and Bunong. I managed to complete my education in Law. But I am no longer the only one; there are hundreds of Bunong studying in the provinces and about fifteen Bunong now go to university in Phnom Penh."

Mane Yun feels it is high time that Bunong partook in mainstream Cambodian society, in order to change the perception amongst many ordinary Khmers that the Bunong are inept.

"It can be frustrating, "Mane Yun explains, "Some Khmers believe that Bunong have tails or kill themselves falling out of trees when they are old. On television we are often represented as villains."

The young lawyer also recounts a shocking misperception, "I have heard stories about how the Bunong invite a new friend to their home and kill and then cook their daughter in honour of their guest."

Mane Yun dispels such myths, by the mere fact that she is already highly educated and engaging in such discussions. Her voice is getting stronger, as she advocates the rights of indigenous peoples throughout Asia and assists the United Nations in sensitive local empowerment discussions.

The rediscovery of Bunong culture

The sustainable management of the country's unique resources and the contributions of its indigenous people are not at the forefront of current affairs in the kingdom at the moment.

The cultural role of the Bunong is often overlooked. Knowledge about the Bunong in Cambodia is sparse on all fronts. Ask the average Cambodian, have a look in school text books or scour historical documents, and no coherent body of knowledge of the Bunong emerges.

Huud An is 75 years old. She is typical of the women of her generation – her life perfectly mirrors the Bunong's experiences during the second half of the 20th century.

Huud An speaks virtually no Khmer but two different Bunong languages – old Bunong and the Bunong used by everyone today. The younger Bunong don't understand when Huud An speaks in the language she remembers from her childhood.

Huud An recalls her isolated youth, "I lived near a river when I was a little girl, deep in the forest. I saw the French a few times but they never spoke to the Bunong. I had no contact at all with Khmer people until King Sihanouk's soldiers came one day and told us to stop wearing our clothes and speak Khmer. Later, we had to keep moving because the Americans were bombing Mondulkiri. After that, Pol Pot's army took us to Koh Nhek. That was terrible, because I could not make sacrifices to the spirits. We were not allowed to pray. But since then, contacts with Khmers have been friendly." The current dearth of information on the Bunong is not surprising. The voices of people like Huud An and Moe Chan are not heard in the new Cambodia.

The Mondulkiri of the past, even the very recent past, was a land where different villagers seldom met, because distances were too great and infrastructure hardly existed. Even today, just two people per square kilometer live in the province. Trade between Khmers and Bunong is documented back to the 4th Century, but in the days before motorized transport, the Khmer rarely met the Bunong.

The indigenous people remained in the shadows of the trees, acknowledged but barely considered, throughout Khmer history. By the middle of the 20th century, the Bunong still lived deep in the jungle and while Cambodia was transitioning to independence, life in the forest remained virtually unchanged.

King Sihanouk's assimilation campaign and the Khmer Rouge changed all that but did little to foster understanding amongst Cambodians. Only in the last decade or so have some Bunong become part of Khmer daily life and their cash economy.

Huud An noticed the changes in recent years, "After we returned from Koh Nhek, we had more contact with people in Sen Monorom. I grew banana, pineapple and pumpkin on my chamkar and we would walk 20 kilometers to the market, sell our produce, sleep outdoors and walk back the next day,"

A common Cambodian heritage

In general, there is much that the Khmers and the minorities share – part of a common history and culture. Even some marriage conventions are similar.

Like many Cambodians, Huud An had an arranged marriage. Her future husband's family had to go and ask her parents for permission several times before a ceremony could be arranged.

"My parents introduced me to my husband while I was working on our field. After an offer from my husband's family, they decided on the match and there was a big festival when 50 couples from many villages all got married at the same time and then started their fields the next morning."
As village elder Yat mentioned, the songs likely to be played at a Bunong marriage would be both of Bunong and Khmer origin.

The Bunong appear mysterious, even foreign, while in fact they have been contributing to the Khmer nation for centuries – quietly, modestly, on the country's geographical and cultural margins.

Clearly, the Bunong are affected by Khmer culture and the future of the Bunong lies within the cultural perimeters of Cambodia's heritage. But the forest remains the Bunong's primary source of income as well as cultural and spiritual orientation and lies at the very heart of Bunong identity.

This, in physical terms, is the greatest difference between the Bunong and their neighbors – the Bunong cannot continue their lifestyle without forest.

The village elder Moe Chan knows that the Bunong must become part of Cambodia's economic and cultural heartbeat as never before, "Life has become easier – with motorbikes we can get our produce to the market quicker. But we are worried about the forests being cut down, as they provide us with everything we need. What is the point of an easy road to market when you have nothing to sell?"

The young lawyer Mane Yun now dedicates her energies to inform the Cambodian people about the true nature of the Bunong– their neighbours. "We must tell Cambodians about who we are. We should produce books, TV programs and movies, carried by our own voices. Then the Khmers will see how we really live.

Liquid Resin – The Bunong's decreasing cash source

In recent years, the tapping and sale of liquid tree resin has provided the Bunong with modest access to the cash economy. Many Bunong buy salt, prahok, fish and clothes. The increasing demand for money has made resin scarcer. Pluk Mal, a 63 year old Bunong from Laoka, has to walk 15 kilometers to reach his trees.

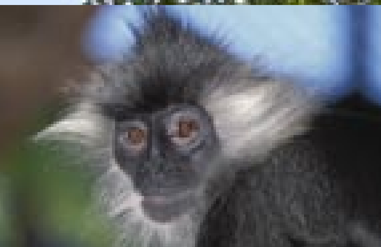
"When I was young, we collected the resin to make torches. We never thought about selling it. In those days, money was very rare. I occasionally had a coin, but really, we lived without it. But since 1993, the Khmers have been interested in purchasing the resin. In those days, I had just four trees, a few kilometers from my house. Now I own 300 trees and it takes me a week just to reach a few of them."

The Bunong consider liquid resin trees their personal properties and respect those of others. Each Bunong knows which trees are theirs.

But because they don't feel that they own the land the trees stand on, the Bunong are easy prey for investors and property developers who have recently poured into the region. They have little chance of receiving compensation for any lost resin trees on land cleared by agricultural companies and concessions.

The resin the two men gather in a week of long walks and hard labor pays no more than 17$US (68,000 Riel). It will have to suffice for the family's financial needs (Pluk Mal has seven children) for the next month.

With increased mobility, Pluk Mal can sell some of the excess produce from their fields at the market in Sen Monorom to make up for the increasingly arduous collection of resin. In the dry season, Pluk Mal makes the trip regularly, a 20 km walk. "If we have a good yield, I can sell some chilli, beans, cucumbers and aubergine in Sen Monorom."



The Bunong and the Asian elephant

Central to Bunong culture is the elephant. Cambodia is one of the last countries in Southeast Asia that retains a sizeable population of wild and domestic elephants.

The Bunong have always shared their lives with elephants, which are treated somewhat like members of the family. If an elephant gets sick or is injured, the Bunong will perform a ceremony and it is taboo to eat elephant meat. Prior to the Pol Pot years, almost every village had some elephants and the number of elephants owned by a family indicated their wealth and social status.

Moe Chan, the village elder from Pautrom, used to be an elephant catcher, "When I was young, we used to ride all the way to Vietnam to buy musical instruments. We used to catch a wild elephant with three or four domestic elephants. But the tradition died out a long time ago. The last elephant trainer who knew how to teach domestic elephants how to hunt and capture a wild elephant, died a long time ago. And I am one of the last catchers left."

When the Khmer Rouge came to power and forced the Bunong to move to Koh Nhek District in the north of Mondulkiri, many elephants were killed by the communists, set free or sold by the Bunong. By the time the Bunong returned to their villages in the 1980s, the number of wild elephants had declined sharply. Furthermore, since conservation efforts were introduced in the mid-1990s, it is forbidden to capture them.

Today, it is thought that the Bunong own no more than 100 domestic elephants. Some Bunong believe that having a baby elephant makes the spirits angry, others perceive a baby elephant as good luck and a marriage ceremony for the elephants is arranged. Nevertheless, elephants rarely get opportunity to breed and are likely to disappear from the villages of Mondulkiri in the next twenty years.

Moe Chan is realistic, "The Bunong have always used elephants for transport of forest product, rice or to visit relatives and I guess the motorbike will do that in the future."

He smiles sadly, "But of course the motorbike cannot go everywhere in the forest."

The remaining pachyderms owned by the Bunong are most likely to find employment in Mondulkiri's burgeoning tourist industry.

Cambodia's crossroads – Cultural diversity and natural resources

The Bunong appreciate Cambodia's struggle for development and conservation and would like to be part of it.

Cambodia, for the first time in recent decades, has started to achieve sustained economic growth. As a result of uncontrolled speculating, the country is currently facing environmental and social challenges that could deny the nation of Cambodia the unique opportunity to safeguard and maintain some of the world's biodiversity hotspots. Mondulkiri is one of them.

The Bunong are an integral part of Mondulkiri culture, along with the rolling grasslands, the magnificent jungles and some of Cambodia's last remaining wild elephants and tigers. Clearly, the Bunong's relationship to their environment and the forest shows that the two are so intimately connected, that one needs the other to survive.

Today the province is at a crossroads. Initial optimism regarding resource exploitation could be misplaced - it is unlikely that waves of settlers moving east and the widespread logging and burning of grasslands to make room for monocultures will benefit the people of Mondulkiri in the long run. It is more likely that outsiders, especially foreign investors, will make a concerted effort to squeeze short term profit from the land. It is up to all Cambodians to manage this development. The Bunong alone do not have the power to do so.

Cambodian land law states that the Bunong collectively own their land. Any challenge to this ownership spells future resource impoverishment for the entire country.

While the Bunong have adapted, for the most part, to the law – they have discontinued capturing elephants from the wild, and are doing their best to protect their Spirit Forests. Developers have taken far less notice of legal restrictions.

75 year old Huud An from Putang remembers that her parents told her that the forest belonged to everyone, "These days things are very confusing. When I was little girl, we could take from the forest what we needed. Now outsiders come and try to buy the land from us. But it is not for us to sell the land."

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The future of Cambodia's natural heritage

Investors have been offering some Bunong families modest amounts of cash to give up the land they have been farming for centuries. Cambodia's land law of 2001 makes such sales invalid and illegal.

Cambodia already has legal safeguards against land exploitation, yet in practice, these are often ignored. Large scale economic concessions are given to foreign companies who promise short term gains, but are likely to deliver a long term loss of environment and culture.

In neighbouring Thailand, such mistakes were made, when primary forest was cut in order to make room for monocultures. Today Thailand laments its loss of forest and the country's wild animals are cornered in a few small national parks.

Cambodia's wilderness areas, managed by local government and local people could far surpass their neighbors' protected areas as repositories of some of the world's most unique animal and plant species.

The Bunong are experiencing a cultural shift towards modern Cambodia. They would like to play a larger part in the market economy. With improved health services and the influx of outsiders, the population of Mondulkiri, both Bunong and Khmer, is likely to increase in the next few years and put further strains on the forest.

Inclusive conservation management, involving both local people and government agencies, is essential, if Cambodia is to save one of its greatest assets – the Bunong tradition.

Pluk Mal from Laoka unflinchingly describes his community's potential future, "We are worried that outsiders will come and take our land and push us deeper into the forest. What's more, we are losing our religion and culture in the face of rapid development. On the other hand, we want to learn to speak Khmer and learn to read and write. The Bunong need education to empower themselves and help protect Mondulkiri."

The young lawyer Mane Yun echoes his words, "The Bunong need to better inform themselves about their own culture, to learn about the value of their traditional lifestyle and to be able to represent themselves effectively amongst Cambodians. That way we can continue to help protect the forests of Mondulkiri."