

# First They Killed My Father

## A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers

### By Loung Ung

#### **Cambodian Culture**

##### *Architecture*

The architectural jewel of Cambodia is located in Angkor, the capital of the Khmer Kingdom from the ninth century. Built in the first half of the twelfth century, it is the largest religious building in the world, and the most famous temple (wat) in Cambodia.

Angor Wat is the Khmer's attempt to represent the universe in architectural form. The temple is surrounded by a moat over 200 yards wide. Its five towers are meant to resemble Mt. Meru, the home of the gods.

Today, a combination of neglect, structural weakness and the invasion of strangling trees, threaten the survival of the temple.

Possible assignments:

Discuss architectural materials used in building the temple

Compare Angor Wat to another famous religious examples of architecture

##### *Religion*

Most Cambodians today practice Theravada Buddhism. The ultimate goal of Theravada Buddhism is nirvana or extinction of all desire and suffering to reach the final stage of reincarnation. By feeding monks, giving donations to temples and regular worship at the local wat, Buddhists hope to acquire sufficient merit to reduce the number of rebirths.

Every Buddhist male is expected to become a monk for a short period in his life--usually between the time he finishes school and starts a career or marries. The monks shave their heads, wear yellow robes, bare the right shoulder and go barefoot. They take vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience. They depend on the kindness of others for their food and clothing.

##### *Literature*

"The Khmer word, aksarsastra, generally defined as "literature," comes from the base, aksar, meaning letter or script. In addition to what we would think of as literature, the study of texts, the word also has the connotation of the study of writing, of "letters." Thus studies of aksarsastra generally begin with the study of Khmer stone inscriptions. The earliest of these were written between the 16th and 19th century."

However, the stylized language, along with the use of complex rhyme schemes and archaic language makes these works difficult to read. Many of the texts were memorized by professional storytellers who would travel around giving performances.

During a renaissance of classical Khmer literature in the mid 20th century, scholars began to collect and study and then publish some of the best known Khmer works. Although the advent of printing enabled production of a large amount of classical literature, buying books, even attending school, was available to only a very limited portion of the population. Radio was a major factor in disseminating the stories across the country.

Reuang Preng, folktales, have been told for centuries. Some of the stories may have been written as early as the fifteenth century on palm leaf and then recopied, but were not generally written until the early 20th century. These stories were usually committed to memory by storytellers. A collaboration of French and Buddhists collected the stories and published them between 1967 and 1971. These folktales show how clever animals-particularly monkeys and hares-can outwit slower, more powerful animals like elephants and crocodiles. The tales, Tmenh Chey is the most famous, show adventurers surviving hardship and humiliation by using their wits.

Most of Cambodia's literature is tied in with Buddhism or myth and legend. The first novels written in prose appeared in the late 1930's, with many of the works published as series in newspapers. Between 1950 and 1975 approximately 1,000 novels were published.

Possible Assignments:

Discuss the similarities/differences between Khmer folktales and those of other countries.

Compare/contrast Khmer folktales concerning clever animals with tales of clever animals in US literature.

### ***Dance***

Cambodian dance follows a thousand year old tradition, drawn originally from Indian models, and has always been associated with the royal palace. Dances depict scenes from Cambodian folklore and from Indian myths like the Ramayana.

In classical Cambodian dance, women, dressed in brightly colored costumes with elaborate headdresses, perform slow, graceful movements accompanied by a percussion ensemble known as the pinpeat. These pinpeat include drums, gongs, and bamboo xylophones.

### ***Music***

Cambodian music has a long tradition. The bas-reliefs on some of the monuments in the Angkor region depict musicians and apsara holding instruments similar to Khmer instruments of today. Traditionally, music accompanied a performance which had religious significance.

Pin peat is a musical ensemble which is played at religious and entertainment functions.

After the war Khmers in America developed a pop industry which was later exported back to Cambodia, where it is extremely popular.

In 2001, Prach Ly, a Cambodian-American who left Cambodia when he was four years old, made a CD of Cambodian rap, titled *The Khmer Rouge*. He did it, he states in an article, because, "I had aunts and uncles who were killed. My parents almost died, too, and they remind me of that every day."

Possible Assignments:

Research pinpeat instruments and compare to US instruments.

How did Khmer music begin?

What are the earliest references to Khmer music?

What is the difference between early music and contemporary music?

### *Art*

The civilization of the ancient Khmer in Cambodia is renowned for its extraordinary art and architecture of the sixth to the sixteenth centuries. The three chief periods of Khmer civilization are defined as pre-Angkor (before the 9th century), Angkor (9th-15th century) and post-Angkor (after the Thai invasion in 1431). The Khmer empire created one of the world's most glorious traditions of sculpture and architecture. The hundreds of Hindu and Buddhist temples constructed at Angkor and throughout Cambodia reflect the strong influence of the culture and religions of India.

Today, Cambodian artists who have lived abroad often absorb both Asian and Western influences. Artists, such as Monirith Chhea and Emmanuel Nhean express the pain of the killing fields in their contemporary work, while other artists, like Narath Tan and Svay Pithoubandith continue in the traditional Khmer style.

Possible Assignments:

Research biographies of Cambodian artists working in the US and in Cambodia.

Discuss the various styles of Khmer art.