



Life Before Expulsion

Community History from Vietnamese
Minorities in Kampong Chhnang

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Cover photo: Key respondent Le Thann Yen
All photos by Kristina Chhim

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Acknowledgement

With this publication we wish to create a more differentiated understanding about the ethnic Vietnamese minorities living in Cambodia. It is important to understand their diversity and the origins of the different groups that live in Cambodia today.

This report evolved over the course of one year and involved extensive discussions among the team as well as field work. We would like to express our deep gratitude to our consultant Dr. Kristina Chhim who has provided extensive capacity building to our team and has provided guidance on this sensitive topic. We also wish to thank our colleagues and volunteers who put a lot of enthusiasm into this process and who underwent significant personal changes throughout the process.

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I. Introduction

Ethnic Vietnamese communities have lived in Cambodia throughout contemporary history and the histories of the countries are closely intertwined. Nowadays, Vietnamese are one of the largest minority groups in Cambodia. However, the population group remains understudied and little public information about them is available. This has led to the fact that rumors and myths that are sometimes captured for political purposes circulate among Cambodian society. The national election in July 2013 saw much public debate about the place of the country's Vietnamese minority. Any discussion needs to start with a proper differentiation, as 'The Vietnamese' in Cambodia are not one monolithic group, but comprise a range of sub-groups with very diverse backgrounds – long-term residents who were born in Cambodia, recent immigrants seeking economic opportunities, investors and business people, illegal migrants, and different types of border traders.

Cambodians have a range of associations with 'the Vietnamese'. Some think of Vietnamese food they like to eat like *Phó* or *Samlar Machu Yuon*. Others mention technical skills in carpentry and other constructions. They buy Vietnamese products and the Cambodian economy benefits from Vietnamese investment. Many Cambodians have Vietnamese ancestors in their own family trees or have family and friends who married Vietnamese. On a more negative note, Khmers often associate prostitution and illegal immigration when thinking of Vietnamese. In addition, Vietnamese migrants and especially investors have been blamed for stealing and exploiting Cambodian land and resources. Historically, the Vietnamese "crocodile" is perceived as a threat. In the 17th and 18th century increasing waves of Vietnamese settlers migrated to Kampuchea Krom and gradually "vietnamized" the area. By the end of the 1700s, the Mekong Delta was inhabited by a majority of Vietnamese and the area was unified with the rest of Vietnam in 1802. Memories of this territorial loss are deeply engraved in the minds of many Cambodians and continue to spur fears of territorial invasion and foreign dominance.

Several waves of immigration into today's Cambodia can be identified. Some of the Vietnamese families in the Kampong Chhnang communities have come in the 19th century during French colonial times, some even before that. Different regimes have tried to contain or have embraced Vietnamese immigration. After independence, persecution peaked during the Khmer Rouge regime when the entire ethnic Vietnamese community was expelled or eradicated. Some of these groups survived in refugee camps in southern Vietnam and returned to Cambodia after the genocide. Estimates of the number of new and returning immigrants became a major politicized subject and therefore vary greatly. The existing literature does not provide a reliable assessment of the various claims, but median estimates range from 300,000 to 500,000.¹ Since their return to Cambodia in the early 1980s, many of the former refugees have been treated as immigrants by the authorities regardless of their previous legal status and their potential eligibility for naturalization. The precarious legal situation of this particular group puts them at the margins of Cambodian society and has aggravated their social and economic integration.

Like in other parts of the world, borders have shifted throughout history. Despite their fluidity, they are important markers of identities that occasionally cause resentment and hostility between groups. The aim of this Oral History project is to shed light into the migration histories and living conditions of two Vietnamese communities in Kampong Chhnang. The research seeks to understand how the minority communities emerged and evolved in Cambodia and what their living conditions were before their expulsion.

Kdei Karuna has started establishing contact with these communities in December 2012, when a group of NGOs working on transitional justice in the context of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal,

¹ Nguyen/Sperfeldt (2012)

went to visit them together with their lawyers to assess further needs. Some of the villagers participate as Civil Parties in the trials against the former Khmer Rouge leaders and seek justice for the suffering inflicted on them. Trying to find further information about these groups, Kdei Karuna realized that very little information is available and decided to contribute to filling this gap by collecting data on the origins of the minority group.

With this Oral History project, Kdei Karuna seeks to explore the memoryscapes of this marginalized group – the intersection between memories and the space that surrounds them. Most of our interviewees displayed a strong spiritual connection to their perceived homeland on the riverbanks of the Tonlé Sap. Their families have inhabited these areas for several generations. History based on orally transmitted memories plays an important role in rural areas where older people are often illiterate and the main means of communication remains verbal. By collecting personal accounts and drawing from diverse viewpoints, the project contributes to a historical account that incorporates the life stories of the affected individuals beyond officiated interpretations of historical facts. This approach can awaken historical empathy and allow for a change in perspectives, an important prerequisite for social integration and reconciliation.

During four field trips between November 2013 and March 2014, Kdei Karuna has conducted life story interviews with 33 respondents aged between 49 and 83. During the trips, the research team stayed in the villages for several days and took part in the communities' everyday life. The team delved into the past of our narrators, explored the stories that were passed down from their parents and grandparents and discovered what life was like before their total expulsion in 1975.



Kandal village in rainy season

II. Living with the Water

At the end of the 1880s, the French had succeeded to make Southern Vietnam (Cochinchina) a French colony and central and northern Vietnam (Annam and Tonkin) protectorates. In Cambodia which became a French protectorate in 1863, they failed to suppress the uprising in 1885/86. They were forced to negotiate with King Norodom and to accept the continued role of the royal family and thus had much less effective control in the country's administration, at least temporarily.² Cambodia was relatively peaceful and provided abundant resources. It was only sparsely populated and promised to be a tempting alternative for those who were badly affected by political turmoil and social unrest in Vietnam.³

The villages were usually populated by different ethnic groups including Khmer, Chinese and Cham. According to our respondents, the first Vietnamese settlers came to the area in the late 19th century. Counting back the ages and birth dates of Chang Yang Long's⁴ mother (around 1928) and grandmother (around 1882), for example, they must have come between 1870 and 1880. Similarly, both of Do Yang Lam's parents were born in Peam Talea. His great-grandfather was born in Vietnam and came to Cambodia as a young adult by boat along the river until he reached the mouth of Talea stream where he finally settled. Do Yang Lam is not sure what year this was but counting back from the ages of his parents and grandparents it must have been before 1900. According to other family members, Do Yang Lam's great-grandfather tried to escape fighting in his native area in Vietnam, probably linked to the destructive aftermaths of battles against the French colonialists who were about to consolidate their military and political dominance in Vietnam. Pham Yang Thoeng believes that his family settled in Brâlai Meas since his great-grandfather came to Cambodia in the era of the 'black tongue'.⁵ He assumes that this was shortly before the French established the protectorate over Cambodia, maybe towards the end of the 1850s.

For the first generation, like the ancestors of Do Yang Lam from Peam Talea, it seemed easy to settle the land along the river banks. There was plenty of land in Cambodia. Vast areas were still covered by thick forest. Pressure on land seems to have increased after Cambodia's national independence in 1953 and the following economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s. Le Thann Yen remembers that the forest in the hinterland of Chong Koh village was increasingly cleared for agriculture in the early 1950s. Local authorities started to allocate parcels to Khmer people who cultivated vegetables in the dry season.

Most narrators were not born in Kandal or Chong Koh villages where they settled after their return to Cambodia in the 1980s. Many used to live in and around Brâlai Meas before 1975. The area is located northwest of Kampong Chhnang town. Today, Brâlai Meas as well as Anlong Snao, Tón Tey and Sâmraong near the Neang Kângrei Mountain are Khmer settlements. Peam Talea, a little village, west of Kampong Hauv at the mouth of the Talea stream does not exist anymore and was never resettled.

Until today, they retain a strong spiritual connection to their places of origin. Most interviewees told us that they take every effort to visit the graves of their parents and grandparents located in these villages as often as possible. Similarly to how Khmer worship their ancestors during Pchum Ben, the annual ancestral ceremony Cheng Meng is of particular

² Logevall (2001:7-9); Osborne (1997:224-226)

³ The French naval bombardments of the country's harbors and ports and the area south of Saigon between 1857 and 1859/60 destroyed most of the rice stock being stored there, causing the outbreak of a famine among the population that cost thousands of lives. (Joginder, 1985:175-176; Fuchs, 1987:93)

⁴ Please refer to Annex II for a list of key respondents. Some respondents have agreed to use their real names. Others prefer to be anonymous, so we use pseudonyms.

⁵ Unfortunately we were not able to find out what this means. Considering Pham Yang Thoeng's year of birth in 1930 and counting back from his father's and grandfathers' dates of birth and death, it was probably toward the end of the 1850s.

importance to the Vietnamese. Today, the villages are almost entirely inhabited by Khmer people.



Grave from 1938 in Sâmraong village

We embarked on a journey into the past with some of the elders from Kandal and Chong Koh village and explored their memories, traditions and historical places. We came across some remnants of the time such as the gate of an old Vietnamese pagoda at the foot of the Neang Kangrei Mountain and old graves, the oldest one dating back to 1938. The elders vividly recalled stories from their childhoods and the life in the villages before 1975. They described their native villages and the families' struggles to make a living and pay their regular immigration fee.

a. Homeland and community life

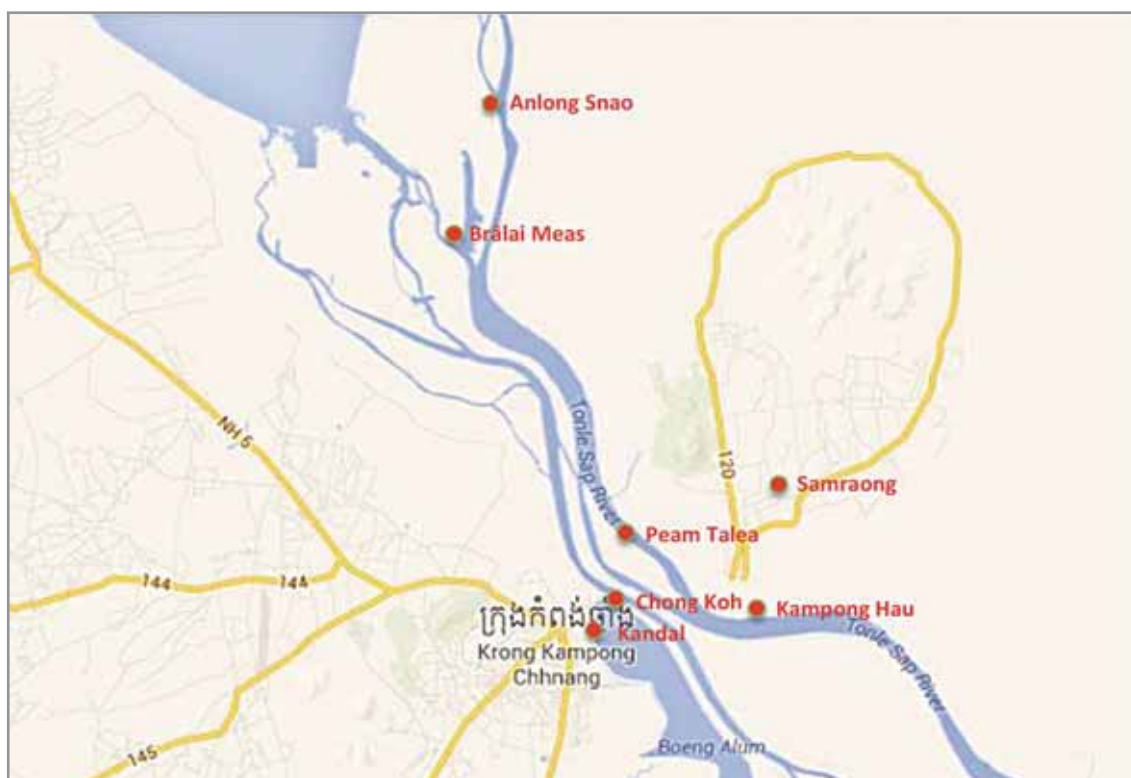
Brâlai Meas is located along the Tonlé Sap River, about 20 km or two hours by motorboat northwest of Kampong Chhnang town. In the past, the village spanned both sides of the river - the larger part with an old pagoda and a busy market and a smaller settlement on the east bank where most of the Vietnamese families lived. During rainy season, the village was usually completely flooded.

Virtually nothing of the east bank settlement remains today. The area is used to grow beans and other vegetables. Only the remains of a Neak Ta shrine on a little hill and some old trees are still there. Grandfather Le Yang E showed us the place and remembered that people regularly went to this shrine make offerings and pray for good health and successful business. Unlike the high stilt houses in the surrounding, the hill never flooded, even during rainy season. Two long rows of Vietnamese stilt houses stretched along about 2 km of the shore of the Tonlé Sap. Le Yang E estimates that more than 100 families - most of them Vietnamese fishermen - lived here along with around 20 Khmer families.⁶ At the end of the 1960s, the total

⁶ Estimates of the number of families in the villages are those by our respondents and not official statistics.

population of Brâlai Meas probably amounted to nearly 1,000 families, including several hundred Khmer households living on the other side of the river.

Chang Yang Arng, now living in Kandal village, was also born in Brâlai Meas in 1942. He estimates that about 400 families lived on the east bank of Brâlai Meas. All of his uncles and aunts lived in Brâlai Meas as well. His father's father owned a stilt house on the east bank, where most of the Vietnamese families in Brâlai Meas lived and used to sell fish at the market on the other side.



Approximate locations of respondent's native and current villages in Kampong Chhnang province
Source: Google Maps

Pham Yang Thoeng currently lives in Chong Koh village. His grandfather had a house on the east bank in Brâlai Meas and he and his parents lived in a floating house next to it. Like most other houses, the roof was made from leaves and frequently needed to be repaired to bear up against rough weather conditions.

Grandfather Ho Yang Baer from Kandal village was born in 1939. He recounts that Vietnamese, Chinese and Khmer families lived in separate parts of Brâlai Meas. The Vietnamese mainly on the east bank, while Chinese and Khmer lived on the other side around the market and the pagoda. However, ethnicity did not seem to play an important role at the time and all groups reportedly had frequent contact and interaction. Personal relationships and trade and barter connections were more important than ethnic origin. The Chinese were particularly popular as tailors; the Vietnamese were mostly fishermen and sold their catches at the market. Le Yang E remembers that in 1958 or 1959, he went to a tailor shop near the market for the first time. The young Chinese tailor took only about one or two Riel per piece.

Brâlai Meas was a very bustling settlement with a relatively big market. When Pham Yang Thoeng was a young boy, he often accompanied his grandfather and later his father to the market to sell fish and pythons they caught in the surrounding flooded forests. In the early 1940s, the forest around Brâlai Meas was still thick. Rowing quietly through the labyrinth of trees, he observed wild animals and birds. It was not difficult to catch snakes. Pham Yang

Thoeng's grandfather caught the smaller ones by hand. For the bigger ones, sometimes weighing up to 10 kg, they needed a short spear. Especially Chinese people had a keen interest in buying pythons at the market. 74 years old Yang Tao⁷ remembers that many Chinese in Brâlai Meas spoke Vietnamese which facilitated communication. Many of them came from mixed families and were half Chinese and half Vietnamese, according to Pham Yang Thoeng.

The market in Brâlai Meas was of central importance to the surrounding villages along the Tonlé Sap River. People mostly came by rowboat in the early morning to sell their products such as fish, vegetables and other food or to buy what they needed for their families. In the 1960s, there were only very few motorboats. People occasionally rented one or used it to tow their rowboats.

Many shops selling household goods and cloth, like the one of Ho Yang Baer's family, were open all day until late. Most of them were owned by Chinese people. Only a few Vietnamese lived in Brâlai Meas center around the market. They were usually small-scale merchants. Chang Yang Arng's mother's parents, for example, retailed goods from Kampong Chhnang at Brâlai Meas market, similar to Ho Yang Baer's family. However, most Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas were fishermen and lived on the other side of the river.

Looking at the area where the Vietnamese settlement was once located, Le Yang E remembers that a Vietnamese traditional healer with a long beard cured people with traditional medicine in his house near the hill. He was often consulted by the Vietnamese fishermen as many of them could not afford to pay for a public doctor in the center. There was also a traditional Vietnamese midwife who took care of the pregnant women on the east bank. Pham Yang Thoeng did not remember any public hospital in the center. In the 1940s, times were hard and the midwife sometimes had to wrap the newborns in water hyacinth leaves instead of proper clothes.



View of Brâlai Meas from the east bank

⁷ Pseudonym

Anlong Snao where grandfathers Goyen Yang Thann and Yang Tao were born was located north of Brâlai Meas, next to Anlong Kanhchoh village. The village was about 300 m from the river, surrounded by forest and dotted with lakes and vast fish stocks.

In the 1960s, there was a ferry connecting the village to Brâlai Meas, but many villagers used their rowboats to get there which took about two hours. The village had no market. People sold food and other bits such as cakes, noodle soup and coffee from their boats or from home, especially in the morning. For other purchases such as household goods or clothes they had to go to Brâlai Meas market.

Apart from the Vietnamese community some Khmer and Chinese families also lived in Anlong Snao. They were merchants and never went fishing or into the forest. Some Chinese were money lenders. The Khmers lived in houses along the river on land which they used for growing vegetables in the dry season. The Vietnamese mainly lived on floating houses, like Goyen Yang Thann with his family.

When Goyen Yang Thann was a young boy, at the end of the 1950s, Anlong Snao was a small village and did not have a pagoda or school. Few Vietnamese children attended school in neighboring Anlong Kanhchoh some kilometers away from Anlong Snao. Most of our narrators, like Goyen Yang Thann, had to help their family earning a living since their early childhood and did not attend school.

Like in Brâlai Meas, there was a small hill in Anlong Snao with a shrine for the local Neak Ta. Goyen Yang Thann remembers that his family frequently went there by boat to pray for successful business and bring offerings.

Tón Tey is another former Vietnamese floating village, about 5 km from Brâlai Meas. Nguyen Thy Cher who was born in 1953, remembers that when she was about 14 years old, around 40 or 50 Vietnamese families and maybe 15 to 20 Khmer families lived in Tón Tey. In rainy season, when the river flooded the whole area, Nguyen Thy Cher's family moved their houseboat deeper into the forest to be protected against storms. To move the house through the forest, two family members tied the house to a big tree with a long rope. The others pulled the house bit by bit along the rope until they reached the tree. The others then tied the rope to another tree until they reached the location of choice, sometimes up to 5 km from the shore. Nguyen Thy Cher remembers the river held vast fish stocks. They did not have to go far to catch enough fish. For her it was an easy and comfortable time, the forest was big and offered enough food. Fewer regulations applied and people did not have to compete. When the water started receding Nguyen Thy Cher's family slowly moved back to their original place in Tón Tey.

Like in Anlong Snao, there was no market in Tón Tey. Some people sold little things but usually villagers rowed to Brâlai Meas market when they needed supplies. Some villagers even went to Kampong Chhnang market by ferry which took almost three hours. Nguyen Thy Cher remembers that it cost about 10 to 15 Riel one way.

Some smaller Vietnamese settlements were located east of Brâlai Meas such as Chong Koh, Dey Dâl, Somraong or Peam Talea villages.

Peam Talea village, where Do Yang Oun, Do Yang Lam and Yang Pho⁸ were born, was located where the Talea stream flows into the Tonlé Sap after passing the foot of Neang Kângrei Mountain. Today this area is completely deserted. Nothing reminds us of the lively settlement that Peam Talea used to be. We came across two graves, one from 1974 and another much older one which was completely dilapidated and therefore impossible to identify. Nowadays, the area is used for agriculture by Khmer people in the dry season. Do Yang Oun was born in Peam Talea in 1964. In his early childhood, the village was surrounded by forest. His family

⁸ Pseudonym

lived in a stilt house along the Talea stream. His father was one of the few people who cultivated the land during dry season. From his house Do Yang Oun had a good view on the Neang Kângrei Mountain in the North. In between, there was a big lake that expanded with the seasons. 61 years old Do Yang Lam also remembers that in the rainy season much of the land was flooded. The lake never completely dried up. Peam Talea village was almost entirely Vietnamese; only two Khmer families and one Chinese family lived there along with more than 200 Vietnamese families.

In **Sâmraong** village, 15 to 20 Vietnamese families lived in the direct vicinity of a pagoda at the foot of Neang Kângrei Mountain around 3 km north of Peam Talea on the other side of the lake. The pagoda was run by Vietnamese monks. Next to it was a Pali school with at times more than 200 students. According to Chang Yang Long, Sâmraong village was home to about 200 families, most of them Khmer. Both, Vietnamese and Khmer families lived in stilt houses on land because of the regular flooding. Only the pagoda was located high enough and spared from flooding. Chang Yang Long's older sister, Chang Thinhang, recalls that in their childhood they often played with the neighbors' children – no matter which ethnicity. They were fluent in both languages. The only difference was that the Vietnamese families were fishermen, while the Khmer families grew vegetable and rice. There was no market in Sâmraong village and when people wanted to buy pork, for instance, they had to go to Kampong Boeung village, more than 6 km away, near the district town of Kampong Leng. There was also a ferry to Kampong Chhnang town or to Kampong Chen.



Presumably the remains of the Vietnamese pagoda in Sâmraong village

Chong Koh village is a floating village in Phsar Chhnang commune and used to be one of the largest Vietnamese settlements in the past only one kilometer from Kampong Chhnang town. The village still exists today but is much smaller than before 1975. Le Thann Yen was born there in the early 1930s. He says that in the 1960s and 1970s, up to 1000 Vietnamese families lived in floating houses in Chong Koh. Many of them, like Le Thann Yen's family, apparently came during French colonial time. They were all fishermen.

The village had no market and people had to row to Kampong Chhnang town which was only 20 minutes away by boat. During rainy season, the whole village moved their houses to the flooded areas along the expanding river. They tied ropes to wooden stakes they had rammed into the ground and slowly pulled the house along the rope. When the water receded, they gradually returned to their initial spots along the shore.

b. Making a living – Fishing, Agriculture and Labor

Most of our narrators did not go to school, only Yang Tao mentioned that he learnt Vietnamese writing at a private school in Brâlai Meas. Some others attended some basic lessons but generally focused on learning their parents' profession and contributing to the daily subsistence as much as they can.

Do Yang Oun remembers that he started helping his brothers fishing at the age of six or seven by emptying the leaking water from the boat. In the 1930s, when Le Thann Yen was about five or six years old, he started accompanying his parents and helped to cook rice or to collect the fish from the net. At the age of eleven, Yang Tao started going to the market to help his mother selling vegetables. One or two years later, he started to go fishing with his grandfather in the family's fishing lot. Yang Yi⁹ and Ngoyen Yang Tav helped their fathers rowing the fishing boat, when they were in their early teens. Most people did not have a motorboat at the time and had to row all the way to reach the fishing spots. In the 1950s and 1960s, Ngoyen Yang Tav's family used five fishing boats. The ten-person family had a decent living and faced little hardship.

The first time Le Thann Yen saw a motorboat was around 1942/43 when he was about ten years old. Le Thann Yen and his friends closely investigated the unknown object. The boys were all excited when the owner invited them for a ride. In the 1950s, more and more villagers in Chong Koh were able to afford motorboats and they became part of everyday life.

Despite the hard work, going fishing with the adults was an exciting experience for our narrators. Pham Yang Thoeng vividly remembers how he played and went swimming with the neighbors' kids. At the age of 16 or 18, they usually had to contribute to the family's livelihood, like Chang Thi Nhang who regularly accompanied her mother through the villages to sell fish sauce and cooked fish.

Life was not always easy for many Vietnamese fisher families, especially in the 1960s and early 1970s. According to Tay Yang Treng, a considerable number of families in his village had difficulties to maintain a stable living standard throughout the year. In some months, especially during the fish spawning season, when fishing in many locations was restricted, villagers could not afford to buy rice but had to eat corn or a mix of rice and corn. As Yang Tao told us, most families in Anlong Snao village were rather poor, only few were better off or even rich.

Weather was a critical factor for the fisher communities' livelihood. During rainy season, the greatly expanded Tonlé Sap Lake was often rough and stormy. 76 years old grandfather Yang Chov¹⁰ from Dei Dâll village said that although his house was built on 4 m high stilts, the water was sometimes so high that his house got flooded. To prevent the house from flipping over, the family took out some floorboards to avoid that the water pushes up the whole house.

Some interviewees remembered heavy storms that lasted several days. Treng Yang Kay from Kampong Hauv vividly recalled that in 1952, the river was alarmingly churning for a few days. Their floating house swayed heavily. As the water continued to rise his father took 6 years old

⁹ Pseudonym

¹⁰ Pseudonym

Treng Yang Kay to a house on land. The waves were so powerful that when trying to enter land Treng Yang Kay's father fell down and injured his knee. Tay Yang Treng is from Dei Dâll village, on an island near Kampong Hauv. He was seven years old when the heavy storm hit the village. The wind lashed the rain through the village and nobody dared to go out fishing. Some boats were damaged by the waves, some drowned or flipped over. The strong floods almost lifted up the stilt houses from their polls and some of the smaller floating houses collapsed into the water.

A decade later, there was another heavy storm in the year of the dragon or 'the year of big water' [*chhnam toeuk thom*], sometime in the early 1960s. Pham Yang Thoeng was already over 30 years old. Like many other houses in the village, his floating house in Brâlai Meas was completely destroyed by the waves. Pham Yang Thoeng and his family took the fishing boats and rowed deep into the forest to wait in the shadow of the trees until the storm calmed down. Most villagers fled into the forest to escape the extreme waves. Most houses were damaged or destroyed. Yang Yi was about 20 years old and remembers the storm very well because her family raised fish under their floating house and all the fish escaped because of the waves. Some of the neighboring floating houses flipped over. Rain and thunderstorms struck the village for several days. The sky was dark. Yang Yi remembers that for two or three days, everyone was just praying to survive and for a quick end of the storm.

Most of the Vietnamese were fishermen. Some were able to catch enough fish to be able to sell the surplus at the market. Others did not have the means and had to sell their labor to fishing lot owners. Today, the living conditions in the communities are similar to those of their ancestors. Many children do not attend school and most families almost entirely rely on fishing for their livelihood.



Boat construction

Fishing

60 years old Goyen Yang Thann from Anlong Snao village remembers how it highly depended on weather conditions how much fish could be caught in a day. One day, they made dozens of

kg of fish within just a few hours. The next day all fish had suddenly disappeared and the family had to move to a new spot.

Fish was rather cheap at the time. For Goyen Yang Thann's family, it was difficult to make enough money to make a living. At the end of the 1960s, 1 kg of the most popular type of fish was only 7 to 8 Kak [*10 Kak was 1 Riel*]; other fish was even cheaper. Le Yang E from Chong Koh village also remembers that the family often went out fishing quite far from his village into the open water. Le Yang E from Brâlai Meas remembers how they went out fishing for several days and caught around 30 to 40 kg, sometimes even up to 50. The best time was when the moon was waxing. Afterwards, they sold the fish at the market in Kampong Chhnang town.

Fishing at these times was profitable except between June and October. During the fish spawning season, fishers were restricted to the immediate surroundings of their village and were barely able to meet their daily needs. Le Thann Yen recalls how he and his fellows secretly went to the prohibited places and were caught by the water police who reprimanded but luckily released them.

To achieve the best result with a fishing poll, it was important to know what kind of baits is best for different types of fish. This knowledge was usually passed down from generation to generation. Goyen Yang Thann learned these skills from his grandfather and other experienced fishermen.

Yang Ley¹¹ recalls that in the 1950s and 1960s her family lived from small-scale fishing in the surroundings of Brâlai Meas. They had only two very small boats. It was easy to roam the flooded forest but the boats were not suitable to go fishing in open waters. During rainy season, the Tonlé Sap River was sometimes very stormy and Yang Ley's family was always afraid that the big waves will destroy their little boats. Middlemen came regularly to her house to buy the fish they caught but they did not make a fortune with it. The money they made was just enough to buy rice, vegetable and small everyday goods.

Fishing Lots

Goyen Yang Thann's family was poor; they lived on a small boat at the river bank. Other families had relatively big houses on land, like Yang Tao's family. During Lon Nol time, at the age of 17-18, Goyen Yang Thann started to work for others, rowing fishing boats. When the wife of a fisherman had just given birth, for instance, or had to take care for an infant at home, some families lacked labor force and therefore hired others to help out. Goyen Yang Thann had a monthly salary of about 250 to 300 Riel. Sometimes he went out for several days to go fishing in Chhnok Trou, Boribor district or even in Kampong Luong, Krâkor district of Pursat province. He took cooking pots, a clay stove and 3 to 4 kg of rice with him to prepare his food on the way.

71 years old Chang Yang Arng remembers that his father, who was born in Brâlai Meas in 1916, worked for a fishing lot owner in Chalai village in Kampong Leng district. As his workplace was quite far, the father took the family with him and they lived on a floating house provided by the fishing lot owner. It was a relatively big business, 50 to 60 people were employed to run the lots. Once a year during the high season between November and January, the lot owner organized a boat trip to Phnom Penh to sell fish at the market. When Chang Yang Arng was 18 years old, he also started working for the owner. It was hard work but Chang Yang Arng appreciated that apart from the monthly salary, the employer provided accommodation and food to the workers. He liked his yearly trips to Phnom Penh; it was a good opportunity to relax in a different environment and see something new. They usually stayed there up to three months. Whenever they had time, Chang Yang Arng together with two or three other workers went to Kandal Market or to the Old Market near the riverside. At the time, in the early 1960s,

¹¹ Pseudonym

the markets were by far not as big as they are today. Only a few cars were on the streets. People used cyclos for transportation, some had motorbikes. Still, most people could not afford transportation and had to walk. Before going home, Chang Yang Arng usually bought some cakes and bread for his little brothers and sisters in Kampong Chhnang. Chang Yang Arng worked in this fishing lot for 15 years until he was expelled from Cambodia in 1975.

Two of our respondents were from wealthier families. Yang Tao's grandfather owned a fishing lot near Peam Talea. In the early 1950s, when Yang Tao was 12 or 13 years old, he often accompanied his grandfather. Yang Tao's family lived in Anlong Snao village, Brâlai Meas commune, in a large house on land. The house was built by Yang Tao's grandparents after they got married, maybe around 1915. Yang Tao's father was born there around 1918 but unfortunately died early.

At the time, the area was still covered with forest. The family cleared the trees behind their house and used it to grow vegetables. Later on, they rented out the land to others. This income significantly added to their quality of life. Their main source of income was the fishing lot and selling fish in Phnom Penh.

Ho Yang Baer's family was also better off. His father, who was born in Brâlai Meas around 1890, owned a fishing lot that Ho Yang Baer says he bought from the state. His father died unexpectedly in his mid-50s which left his mother alone with him. All his brothers and sisters were already married and lived in their own houses. After this, Ho Yang Baer's mother sold the fishing lot and successfully opened a business at Brâlai Meas market.

Yang Tao and Ho Yang Baer, however, seemed to be exceptions among our respondents. All others reported less comfortable living conditions, even though they did not report any extreme hardships, such as starvation, until 1975.

Land use

In the early 1940s, the shore was still covered with forest. According to Le Thann Yen, people started clearing the land for agriculture in the early 1950s. Nowadays the whole forest is gone. Only one big tree still reminds Le Thann Yen and other elderly Chong Koh villagers of the thick forest of the past. The land that the river released during dry season was traditionally used for agricultural activities as the mud provided very fertile soil.

Some of our respondents' grandparents were still living in stilt houses on land, not in floating houses. In the dry season, they used their gardens to grow vegetables. Pham Yang Thoeng's grandfather, born in Brâlai Meas at the end of 19th century, cultivated corn and beans and owned almost one hectare of land. Cultivating land and using vacant space for private everyday needs was much easier at the time. No certificates were needed and there was less competition over land. Pham Yang Thoeng said, his grandfather used the land around his house but never had an official title for it.

76 years old Yang Chov¹² from Dey Dâll village grew up in a house on land that was constructed long before he was born in 1937. When he was about 13 years old, around 1950, his family was able to extend it to suit the growing number of family members. He, too, said that at that time no special permission from local authorities was necessary as long as people had the means to construct their house.

With an increasing population, the following generations gradually moved to floating houses on the river, like Pham Yang Thoeng's father did towards the end of the 1920s. Similarly, Chang Yang Arng's father moved from land to a floating house after he got married at the end of the 1930s. Only some families, like Yang Tao's, continued to rent out or cultivate the land they had owned for up to three generations until they were forced to leave Cambodia in 1975. Other families abandoned it over the years or did not make use of it.

¹² Pseudonym

Other sources of income

Most families were originally fishermen but some started complementing their income from other sources. Although Chang Thi Nhang's and Chang Yang Long's house was on land, their family did not use it for agriculture. Their grandfather had worked for a fishing lot owner since the 1920/30s. Their father was a carpenter, thus both were often away from home. Their mother, who was born in Sâmraong village in 1928, produced fish sauce and cooked fish [*trey khâ*] which she bartered for rice, vegetables or sugar in neighboring villages. In the mid-1960s, the children accompanied their mother through the villages to trade the fish sauce. One bottle could be bartered for 2 kg of rice. Tay Yang Treng's family was a traditional fisher family and occasionally produced fish paste. When he got married he decided to focus on producing fish paste again. The Khmers who were not used to go fishing were happy to get fish products from the Vietnamese while the Vietnamese were happy to get food they were not able to produce.



Floating shop

Some families kept pigs, chicken or ducks at home and resold them when the rainy season began. Yang Tao recalls how his family kept chicken and ducks under their house, mainly for their own consumption. They sold pigs to a Chinese middleman who distributed it at Brâlai Meas market for around 300 Riel per pig.

Pham Yang Thoeng's grandfather used to take him to catch pythons in the rainy season to sell them at Brâlai Meas market. They went into the forest with their boat in the early morning. He quickly learned how to catch snakes. Sometimes they caught four snakes a day. They also caught young wild birds, like heron or teal, and fed them at home until they were big enough to be eaten. Despite memories of hardship, Pham Yang Thoeng recalls that life was generally easy and pleasant for him even though the family did not have much money.

c. Immigration and Registration

Every Vietnamese over the age of 18 had to pay an annual immigration fee called 'Langtai', no matter if they and their parents were born in Cambodia. This often put a heavy burden on the families. As Grandfather Treng Yang Kay remembers, only people over 60 were exempted from the fee.

This fee was introduced during French colonial time, probably around 1945/46 when the Japanese were defeated and the French returned to take back their colony. Treng Yang Kay said that his parents were already paying 'Langtai' when he was born which was in 1946. Chang Yang Arng similarly remembers that in 1945 people paid 'Langtai' but it is not clear when exactly it was introduced.

When he turned 18 years, around 1947/48, Pham Yang Thoeng was obliged to pay an annual fee of 300 Riel. Over the years, the fee was constantly raised. Le Thann Yen remembers that he was put on a registration list when he was 16 (this was in 1947) and started paying 450 Riel when he turned 18 years old in 1949. In the 1950s and in the 1960s the amount had increased to 700 Riel plus additional fees of 50 Riel for water and electricity. Many interviewees reported that they were not connected to the electricity grid and water supply but had to pay anyway. If people failed to pay their immigration fees, they were arrested by the police and had to pay double the amount.

All Vietnamese parents were obliged to register the birth of a child at the latest two years before the child turned 18. Do Yang Lam recalls that with the registration the family received a document similar to a birth certificate. As soon as this person was 18 years old and paid 'Langtai' the amount and date was noted on a receipt attached to this paper. The document included a picture and thumbprint of the individual and was needed to proof one's identity during controls by police and local authorities.

For many families it was not easy to afford 750 Riel per person every year. Children often continued to live with their parents after they had reached the age of 18 for many years until they got married and founded their own families. This meant that, over the years, the family budget got increasingly under pressure. 65 years old Yang Sam¹³ from Chong Koh village started to pay 'Langtai' in mid-1960s. Do Yang Lam estimated 750 Riel in the end of the 1960s equals 1 Mio Riel (or 250 USD) today which is a considerable amount for these poor families. Immediately after his family paid the annual fees, they had to start saving money for the next year. Most families already struggled to make a living and feed their children and could not afford these extra costs.

Le Yang E had to raise the amount for him and his wife by himself which caused him a lot of trouble every year. He usually paid his fee first as he was much more exposed to potential controls. He often paid late for his wife as they struggled to earn a living. Sometimes local authorities showed up to check and Le Yang E's wife had to 'disappear'. She hastily left the house and only came back when the authorities were gone. Yang Ley, who had to start paying 'Langtai' in 1965, always hid in the water hyacinths when the police showed up. Neighbors would tell them that she already passed away. Her family was too poor to afford the fees for all family members. Yam Sam's family also did not always pay 'Langtai'. He never dared to go to the market to sell the fish fearing to be caught by officials. Later on, when Yam Sam was working, his aging parents had to hide from the authorities as they could not afford the fee. Do Yang Lam's mother was once arrested by police because she could not manage to pay. She spent almost one month in prison until a new regulation allegedly did not require women to pay anymore.

Chang Yang Arng was also arrested by the police. Fortunately, his father borrowed money from his employer so that he could be released the same day. To reimburse the money, Chang

¹³ Pseudonym

Yang Arng had to start working for the fishing lot owner. From then on, his employer took care of the immigration fees.

In addition to the permanent stress of raising sufficient money to pay 'Langtai', everyone had to register with the provincial administration, in this case in Kampong Chhnang town. For some, like those from Brâlai Meas, it was a day-long 'bureaucratic' journey. Treng Yang Kay remembers that the authority in charge was located in the police station at the Kampong Chhnang port.

After the coup d'état by Lon Nol in 1970 paying the immigration fee of 'Langtai' ceased. Now, they had to pay fishing tax according to the number of boats and the size of the nets they used. 56 years old Yang Ty ¹⁴remembered that families were allowed to have nets up to 100 meter wide. The tax was to be paid with the water police. Do Yang Lam remembers that his family paid fishing tax for every season around 100 Riel while large-scale fishing business owners had to pay considerably more.

III. Recounting historical events

The Vietnamese were not spared from being affected by the skirmishes and power struggles that determined Cambodian politics after World War II. In addition to historically troubled relationships, Vietnamese military activities on Cambodian soil during the 1960s and the early 1970s reinforced resentment against Vietnamese settlers who repeatedly became the target of violent attacks and racist assaults. This hostility culminated in their deportation after the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975.

A lot of our interviewees shared memories from the 1960s and early 1970s. Some of the oldest even recalled events in the early 1950s in the context of Cambodia's struggle for national independence or events in relation to the Japanese occupation of Cambodia during World War II from 1942 to 1945.



Interview with Le Thann Yen and Le Yang E in Brâlai Meas village

¹⁴ Pseudonym

When reading this, we have to keep in mind that - except Pham Yang Thoeng and Le Thann Yen who were about 19 or 20 years old - all our respondents were still teens or children. They certainly did not fully comprehend the context and entire dimension of what was going on in these troubled times and rely on their parents interpretations. These are oral accounts by individuals and cannot be regarded as proven historical facts.

a. The struggle for national independence

83 years old Pham Yang Thoeng was highly impressed by Japanese troops who suddenly appeared in Brâlai Meas. He was a young boy of 12 or 13 years. The Japanese soldiers in their white uniforms took over the barracks of the formerly French garrison and helicopters were circling over the villages. The news of the arrival of the Japanese quickly spread in the villages. Pham Yang Thoeng and some other boys were very curious and wanted to see what was happening. The garrison was located near the pagoda. Pham Yang Thoeng saw the Japanese soldiers only from a distance; he never saw them directly interacting with the villagers.

Times became more difficult during the Japanese occupation. Food and clothes became so expensive that Pham Yang Thoeng's family could not afford to buy fabric and tailor a shirt or trousers. Pham Yang Thoeng had to wear a frock made from sack cloth. Only after the French returned, maybe around 1946/47, did he get a new suit made from cotton.

Yang Ley¹⁵ and Yang Tao have also heard from their parents that cotton was very scarce in Brâlai Meas and most people were wearing sack clothes during that time. Most of the year, people had to eat corn since they could not afford to buy rice, especially right before harvest season when stocks became scarcer.

Ho Yang Baer was born just before the Japanese entered Brâlai Meas. He does not have any memories himself, but heard from his mother that it was indeed a hard time. To prevent spreading cholera in Brâlai Meas which could affect the Japanese garrison, the Japanese went from house to house to vaccinate everyone.

Le Thann Yen from Chong Koh was eleven years old when the Japanese arrived. Together with his friends, he took a boat to go look for them. They were curious what Japanese people looked like. Eventually, they spotted three soldiers who were taking a rest and preparing their lunch in the shade of a big tree at Kampong Chhnang port. Le Thann Yen was disappointed that they looked so similar to Khmer people. Only their skin was brighter and their language different. When the boys tried to move closer, the soldiers got nervous and shooed them away.

The oldest of our respondents remembers how during the last years of French colonial rule in the late 1940s, times got increasingly troubled. Anti-French resistance had significantly increased in the Tonlé Sap area. The French military was not only stationed in Kampong Chhnang town but also had a garrison in Brâlai Meas.

When he was about 18 or 19 years old, around 1950 or 1951, Le Thann Yen frequently saw French people carrying rifles in Kampong Chhnang town. Khmer and Vietnamese police officers were also working for the French, but they did not work together. The Vietnamese, who spoke fluent French, were directly subordinated to the French and had little interaction with Khmer police officers. Vietnamese police officers sometimes came to Chong Koh for security checks, often accompanied by some Frenchmen.

Our respondents believe that they suspected that Vietminh troops were hiding in the area and had made contact with some of the Vietnamese fishermen along the river to win clandestine anti-French supporters. The Vietminh were founded in 1941 by the North Vietnamese communists to liberate Vietnam from foreign domination. Their nationalist cause found

¹⁵ Pseudonym

widespread support among large sections of society including patriotic intellectuals. When the French came back in 1946 to retake its Indochinese colony from the defeated Japanese, war broke out in Vietnam.¹⁶ The Vietminh were firmly determined to fight militarily for Vietnam's independence. Later, they realized that their anti-colonial struggle would be much more successful if the two other countries joined. Therefore, they increasingly supported and closely cooperated with anti-French forces in Cambodia and Laos. Very soon the Vietminh established strongholds in Takeo and Kampot, the Cambodian provinces bordering Cochinchina and tried to form an alliance with the 'Free Cambodia Movement' led by Khmers.¹⁷ In the early 1950s, they expanded into other provinces to support the development of a united, nationwide resistance movement against the French.

For our respondents this was a confusing situation. Some Vietnamese still sided with the French while others supported the Khmer struggle for national independence and the fight against the French. Le Thann Yen remembers that he occasionally heard battle sounds from afar. People said the French were fighting the Vietminh. Fortunately, the violence never reached his village. The only time where the village directly encountered some of their soldiers was when they showed up in the village at night to ask for food. They looked very exhausted. Following this, a couple of villagers regularly prepared food and went to hide it for them in the forest. Yang Tao also recounts how he saw a lot of battleships when he was about 12 or 13 years old. He did not know whether they were French or Vietminh.

Several respondents like Pham Yang Thoeng, Ho Yang Baer or Chang Yang Arng remember that around 1951/52 another group called Khmer Issarak was hiding in the forest. The movement was formed in 1946 with the aim to liberate Cambodia from French colonial rule and operated in many parts of the country. Some groups are reported to have loosely cooperated with the Vietminh; others like those in Kampong Chhnang apparently did not. Even though the Khmer communists supported by the Vietminh announced a "United Issarak Front" [*samakum khmer issarak*] in 1950¹⁸, the North-West Issarak committee seems to have been an independent organization.¹⁹ In Kratie, Issarak forces also split from the front into smaller groups which prompted the Vietminh to take their own initiatives.²⁰ In 1951, Issarak forces in Kampong Speu and Kandal even intensified their skirmishes against the Vietminh instead of joining forces to fight the French.²¹

Meanwhile, the war in Indochina had drastically intensified and reached an international level. Up to 80% of the funds of the French came from the US. The Chinese helped Vietnam to turn the Vietminh into an effective military force.²² The Khmer Issarak themselves were divided and, while absorbed by the main actors or in opposition to them, lost more and more its characteristic of a coherent national movement. The Khmer Issarak groups that were not part of the Vietminh guided resistance fell into isolation and especially since 1952 further disintegrated.

The Issarak group in Kampong Chhnang province might have been such a splinter. Yang Tao who was about 13 at that time remembers that people in his village said that they had clashed several times with Vietminh troops, "they couldn't get along and sometimes even killed each other".²³

¹⁶ Logevall (2001:12-13)

¹⁷ Chandler (1991:28)

¹⁸ Kiernan (1985:79-80); Chandler (1991:47-50)

¹⁹ Kiernan (1985:79-80)

²⁰ Kiernan (1985:77)

²¹ Kiernan (1985:75-76)

²² Chandler (1991:47)

²³ Yang Tao transcript, p.11

Pham Yang Thoeng who was about 20 years old said the French were hunting them but were never able to catch anyone. It was believed that the group hiding in the forest near Brâlai Meas consisted of around 15 to 20 people. They all wore belts across their chests.



Interview with Pham Yang Thoeng in Chong Koh village

According to the memories of our respondents the Issarak occasionally came out of their hideouts in groups of five or six to collect food and other necessary goods. It was extremely hard to survive in the forest without regular supply. The insurgents rarely had money and depended on the goodwill of villagers to get what they needed. Sometimes, they resorted to violence to obtain their supplies.

Ho Yang Baer was 12-13 years old. He remembers that villagers in Brâlai Meas feared the Issarak a lot. They showed up in the villages, raided the market or robbed people, and allegedly even grabbed pretty girls and raped them. Ho Yang Baer's shop was looted as well. "They took all our clothes and everything else they could grab."²⁴ His mother was already old, around 60 years, and could not do anything to prevent it. Sometimes they would order food but disappear without paying. Ho Yang Baer claimed that some Issarak had rifles so that villagers including his mother did not dare to offer any resistance. Chang Yang Arng, who was about nine or ten years old, remembers that they carried long knives on their waist - impressive for the boy but also very frightening. Fortunately, said Chang Yang Arng, they never killed anybody; they just tried to get what they needed.

Pham Yang Thoeng explained that the Khmer Issarak mainly targeted rich people. One day, his father was caught. "Everyone in the boat was made to come on land where we had to lay down on the belly, face down. Then they inspected us and the boat very thoroughly and took

²⁴ Ho Yang Baer transcript 1st interview, p.4

away everything we had." After they realized that there was nothing to steal "they chased us back into the boat and let us row home."²⁵

Yang Tao has the most terrible memories of the Khmer Issarak. He was about 12 or 13 years old when his grandfather was kidnapped and taken to the forest while working at his fishing lot near Peam Talea. The Issarak informed his family that they have to pay a ransom of 60,000 Riels within ten days if they wanted to have him back alive. This was an exorbitant amount of money for a fisherman at the time.²⁶

Yang Tao's family started panicking and immediately tried to organize the money. They had to ask for an advance payment of 30,000 Riel which they usually earned by selling fish in Phnom Penh and borrowed the other 30,000 Riel from the contractor. Luckily, after two nerve-racking days, Yang Tao's grandfather was released in exchange for the money.

It seems, however, that after 1952 these kinds of raids ceased in Kampong Chhnang, or at least around Brâlai Meas, while fighting between the French and Vietminh continuously intensified. From our interviews, it did not become clear, what happened in Kampong Chhnang in 1953 and 1954. In other parts of the country, Khmer Issarak troops publicly defected to the government while at national level King Sihanouk forced the French through his diplomatic 'Royal Crusade' to enter official negotiations. In November 1953, power was solemnly handed over to the King during a military parade of departing French troops in Phnom Penh.²⁷ Our respondents did not remember any similar official ceremonies in Kampong Chhnang town. Le Thann Yen generally explained that there was a French-Vietnamese agreement that obligated the French to leave Cambodia once and for all. Chang Yang Long for example was too young to remember but heard from his father that King Sihanouk first collaborated with the French. Feeling increasingly betrayed, the King started his own struggle, alongside the Vietminh, until Cambodia gained independence in 1953. Yang Tao is convinced that the decisive factor that ended the French colonial rule in Indochina was their disastrous defeat at Dien Bien Phu (in May 1954). With regard to their villages, neither Le Thann Yen from Chong Koh nor Yang Tao from Anlong Snao remembers that there were significant changes after the departure of the French. The Vietminh also withdrew from the area and the situation normalized.

b. The Sihanouk Era - Sangkum Reastr Niyum

After 1954, life in the villages of our respondents returned to normal and Brâlai Meas market was busy again. Ho Yang Baer, who was about 15 or 16 years old at the time, and his mother continued to buy cloth at the market and resell it in Brâlai Meas. He does not remember any official celebration on the occasion of national independence, neither in Brâlai Meas nor in Kampong Chhnang town.

Towards the end of 1955, the first signs of disturbance occurred. The atmosphere at the market was somewhat tense and Ho Yang Baer heard Khmer people talking about the upcoming elections, the first ones in independent Cambodia. People from Brâlai Meas had to vote in Kampong Chhnang town. Ho Yang Baer did not understand why his family was not invited like all others. He did not feel different and— like many Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas — was proud of the great achievements of King Sihanouk, particularly since the armed conflict ceased and peace finally set in.

In October 1954, the Cambodian government defeated the last rebels. Many of them defected. A nationwide referendum held in early 1955 revealed the population's support for

²⁵ Pham Yang Thoeng transcription 1st interview, p.17 and 2nd interview, p.3

²⁶ Do Yang Lam estimated that the amount of 750 Riels for 'Langtai' in the past would equal 1 Mio Riels today (or 250 USD), so 60,000 Riel would be equal to 20,000 USD today.

²⁷ Chandler (1993:184-186); Kiernan (1985:131-132)

King Sihanouk. Shortly after, he abdicated the throne to be able to play a greater political role in the country's future. He founded a national political movement, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, which competed against other parties in the elections in September 1955.²⁸

Ho Yang Baer was fluent in Khmer, had Khmer friends and was used to interact with his Khmer customers. He did not feel isolated from society and thus was disappointed that Vietnamese who were born in Cambodia and had lived in Brâlai Meas for decades were not eligible to vote like all others.

Le Thann Yen was already over 20 years old at that time. He was born in Cambodia, just like his father. Fluent in Khmer, he felt more Cambodian than Vietnamese. The only thing that made him different was his mother tongue and some traditions that were passed down from his ancestors. However, these never clashed with those of the Khmers. Nevertheless, he did not have formal resident rights and therefore was not allowed to vote. Le Thann Yen already wondered about the question of nationality during French rule. He did not understand why he had to pay an immigration fee even though he and his parents were born in Cambodia and never immigrated. Although, after 1954, the possibility of naturalization existed, Le Thann Yen abandoned his wish to get Cambodian nationality. In September 1954, a law determining the requirements and procedures for naturalization was passed; in November the government adopted the new law on nationality.²⁹

As Le Thann Yen recalls, ethnicity did not play much of a role during the French era. No one cared if people were Khmer, Vietnamese or Cham. After independence, however, like many other Vietnamese in his village, he felt a constant demand from society to be grateful for being allowed to live in Cambodia despite his Vietnamese descent. He never responded to any offenses and preferred to ignore it even though he often felt insulted and treated unjustly.

Ho Yang Baer also stopped thinking about the issue and accepted that voting remained restricted to Khmers. Thus, he also did not care much about the election results. His mother stopped selling cloth during election time. She feared trouble for their business and warned her son not to go to the market.

Chang Yang Arng believed that only the Vietnamese fishermen in Kampong Chhnang were excluded from voting, whereas the Vietnamese living in Phnom Penh were allowed to participate in elections. That was what he was told by some Vietnamese workers from Chroy Chângvar when selling fish in Phnom Penh for his employer. Chang Yang Arng must have referred to the elections in 1962 and 1966 because he did not start to work until 1960. It is still possible that some Vietnamese, especially those living in urban areas like Phnom Penh, had the right to vote in the 1955 and 1958 elections based on the new laws that allowed them to get citizenship.

It seems that many Vietnamese villagers in Kampong Chhnang were not aware of the new possibility to apply for naturalization or consider it a sensitive issue and therefore do not want to make any statement about the issue. Pham Yang Thoeng, who was in his early 20s, did not even remember the elections at all. He never thought about the question of nationality. It seems that only few considered applying for Cambodian citizenship. As long as they paid 'Langtai' everything seemed fine for them. Financial constraints could have added to their reluctance to officially apply. Le Thann Yen was the only one among our respondents who talked a little bit more about it.

In the 1960s, life in the Tonlé Sap region seemed to have moved on peacefully as Yang Ley explained. She only remembers one unpleasant incident that happened to her family in the mid-1950s. Her father was involved in an accident of a small boat with three Khmer soldiers. He was ordered to row them to the garrison in Brâlai Meas but in the middle of the river the

²⁸ Chandler (1991:74-76); Thion (1982:271)

²⁹ Nguyen/Sperfeldt (2012:12)

boat started to drown. The soldiers panicked accusing Yang Ley's father of intending to kill them. He was put in prison for three days and had to compensate for the damage.

One of the relatively few details that our respondents remembered about the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period was a historical event some years after the first elections. It was when King Suramarith, Prince Sihanouk's father, died in April 1960. Chang Yang Arng reported that the commune chief informed villagers and ordered everyone to wear mourning dresses and ribbons in public. When police spotted people not dressed appropriately at the market in Brâlai Meas or Kampong Chhnang, they were fined 50 Riel. The village chief asked all villagers to hoist national flags in front of their houses so that Yang Tao's family had to go to Brâlai Meas market to buy one for 25 Riel.

Pham Yang Thoeng was already at the end of his 20s but does not remember the death of Prince Sihanouk's father. This might be due to the fact that he went out fishing or to the forest quite early in the morning and only rarely passed the market in Brâlai Meas. Yang Ley, who was 13 at that time, said that she heard this news from others only sometime after it happened. She does not remember any official orders to mourn.

Chang Yang Arng was in Phnom Penh selling fish together with others from Brâlai Meas at the time. The funeral ceremonies took seven days. He was not allowed to participate in the celebrations but saw many people wearing mourning ribbons at Kandal market. National flags were run up along the streets. When he arrived in Phnom Penh, some soldiers came up to him and asked why he did not wear a ribbon. They fined him 25 Riel. Later on, Chang Yang Arng heard from his co-workers that soldiers checked every house in Phnom Penh and punished everyone who did not wear the mourning dresses and ribbons.

In the following years, our respondents did not recall any major events in their villages. There were national elections in 1962 and 1966 but since Vietnamese were not allowed to participate they did not care about it.

Most of our respondents were not aware that authorities have conducted a population census in 1960 or 1961. Only Yang Tao dimly recalled some official counting but he was not sure what year this was. He estimated that he was about 20 years old, which would have been around 1959. The village chief went from house to house and noted down the number of people. Again, no one really paid attention to such kind of occurrences. Administrative measures did not matter much to the communities and were considered a Khmer affair – as Ho Yang Baer put it, "If you wanted to live here you stayed here, if you wanted to go there you went there"³⁰. The only important administrative act was to pay 'Langtai'. It is also possible that the enumerators sent by the government did not reach the floating villages and just relied on the 'Langtai' lists of local authorities.

The 1960s were usually a time of fundamental personal change for our respondents as they got married and founded their families. Le Yang E for example remembers joyfully that he married at the age of 22, which was around 1963. He continued to live with his parents for two more years and then moved in with his wife. His parents only gave him a small boat as a dowry so that he can make a living by fishing. In 1966, his first child was born, Yang Tao got married in 1965 when he was 26 years old; his wife was 19 years old. They were both from Brâlai Meas commune. The beginning was hard for both because Yang Tao only received little money from his family to pay for the wedding ceremony. Yang Tao left the comfortable house of his grandfather and started to live on a fisher boat. Pham Yang Thoeng got married at the age of around 35 in the mid-1960s. He married late since he did not have enough money. His wife was about 21 years old and from Tón Tey village. After one year, Pham Yang Thoeng had his first child. In total, his wife gave birth to 15 children; eleven of them are still alive. Le Thann Yen married similarly late, around 1968 when he was already about 38 years old. As the family's main breadwinner he was taking care of his aging parents and five other siblings

³⁰ Ho Yang Baer transcript 2nd interview, p.11

throughout the 1960s. Even after he married and had two children, he stayed with his parents until they died.

Some of our respondents like Ngoyen Thy Cher or Do Yang Oun were still children but similarly remembered their childhood during the 1960s as a relatively pleasant time without major disturbances. Although families were often poor in terms of money, our respondents do not remember any serious food shortage or conflict and feuds with other communities.

c. Lon Nol Regime – The Khmer Rouge on the Rise

With the coup d'état by General Lon Nol that ousted King Sihanouk in 1970, things started to change drastically for our respondents. The attacks on Sihanouk focused primarily on his alleged pro-Vietnamese stand. At the end of the 1960s, he had secretly allowed the North-Vietnamese army to use Cambodian territory along the eastern border to Vietnam for their battles against the US troops in South Vietnam.³¹ Very soon, the verbal propaganda against Vietnamese communities turned into physical abuse and attacks all over Cambodia. Riots broke out and quickly escalated in and near Phnom Penh when police and soldiers joined these attacks on the grounds that the Vietnamese were allied with the communists. Thousands of Vietnamese were killed.³²

About ten days after the coup, Yang Tao was one of the first ones in Brâlai Meas to get the news from someone who was in Phnom Penh at the time. The man fled the capital in panic after turmoil broke out and Lon Nol soldiers started shooting around. Soldiers had fired at him. He told Yang Tao how he threw himself down to the ground and stopped breathing when soldiers checked on him. Obviously assuming that he was dead, the soldiers moved on and the man left Phnom Penh immediately and escaped to Brâlai Meas. Yang Yi³³ from Dey Dâll village told us that he and his mother were also in Phnom Penh at the time. They witnessed the sudden outbreak of violence and the killing of Vietnamese by Lon Nol soldiers and immediately fled to the border.

Hearing this news from Phnom Penh and fearing that the situation might equally escalate in Brâlai Meas, Yang Tao and some other families went to hide in the forest. The security situation quickly deteriorated. While the coup was welcomed among educated Cambodians in Phnom Penh and the army, pro-Sihanouk riots broke out in rural areas. Thousands of Cambodians followed Sihanouk's call from exile in China to join the armed resistance of the Cambodian liberation front, supported by North Vietnam, alongside North Vietnamese communists and the Khmer Rouge who had launched their own 'armed struggle' already at the end of the 1960s.³⁴

Our respondents vividly remember the fighting between Lon Nol troops and resistance forces hidden in the forest of Brâlai Meas and elsewhere along the Tonlé Sap River. Treng Yang Kay who lived in Kampong Hauv close to Kampong Leng recounts that he first encountered the Khmer Rouge in 1970. They were hiding in the forest while Lon Nol soldiers, also called White Khmer [*Khmer Sâr*], tried to combat them from 'outside'. Do Yang Oun from Peam Talea was seven or eight years old. He remembers hearing the shelling in 1971 and 1972, like huge thunderstorms. The district town of Kampong Leng, maybe six or seven kilometers away from Peam Talea, was a specific target because Khmer Rouge forces were hiding in its mountainous hinterland and regularly attacked Kampong Chhnang town from there. Do Yang Oun's village

³¹ Shawcross (1993:113)

³² Amer (1994:216); Chandler (1993:204-205); Ironically, many of these Vietnamese in Phnom Penh were Catholic and antagonistic to the Vietnamese communists. Thu-huong (1992:65)

³³ Pseudonym

³⁴ Chandler (1993:202, 205); Chandler (1991:174-177)

also got more and more affected. The Khmer Rouge operated unimpeded in most of the area and frequently entered the surrounding villages.

Chang Yang Arng remembers that after Lon Nol took power, local authorities in Brâlai Meas took pictures of all Vietnamese families - one copy was left with the family and one copy kept with the authorities. Chang Yang Arng believes this was a desperate measure of the Lon Nol regime to prevent young Vietnamese men from secretly joining the Vietcong³⁵. The local Lon Nol administration assumed that Vietnamese troops had trespassed into Cambodia to support the Khmer Rouge in their fight against Lon Nol and threatened villagers that the parents will be put in prison if their children joined the movement.

One of Chang Yang Arng's friends had disclosed that he will join the resistance in the forest to escape a possible arrest by the new regime. Chang Yang Arng was severely worried since the Lon Nol regime suddenly stirred up anti-Vietnamese sentiments and did not want Vietnamese to make a living in Cambodia. Whenever someone was suspected of being sympathetic to the resistance, Lon Nol soldiers would immediately arrest him. This had considerable consequences for our respondents. As Chang Yang Arng remembers, Khmer soldiers deployed in the garrison in Brâlai Meas became more and more hostile towards the Vietnamese and started to harass them on every occasion. Around 1972 or 1973, the village and the commune chiefs publicly used anti-Vietnamese rhetoric which reinforced resentment among the Khmer population in Brâlai Meas. Just showing up at the market was often met with hostile reactions.

Although it was said that the Vietcong supported the Khmer Rouge in fighting against the Lon Nol regime, Chang Yang Arng heard that there were increasing frictions and clashes between both. This may have contributed to the anti-Vietnamese resentments of many Khmers who felt extremely threatened by the presence of the Vietnamese military in their country. In addition, Lon Nol soldiers were unable to control the situation. By the end of 1972, the Lon Nol administration only controlled Phnom Penh, a few provincial capitals like Kampong Chhnang, and much of Battambang. The rest of the country was either in communist hands or in total chaos.³⁶

As Le Thann Yen remembers, the authorities in Kampong Chhnang organized paramilitary groups called 'Svay Tránh' to defend the villages against the Khmer Rouge. Their members were selected by the local authorities from respective villages. They never included Vietnamese even when the majority of the population in the concerned villages was Vietnamese. Le Thann Yen assumes that authorities did not trust them or feared that Vietnamese Svay Tranh could clash with Khmers. Svay Tránh wore military uniforms and carried arms. According to Le Thann Yen's, they often clashed with Khmer Rouge soldiers and exchanged gunfire from their boats on the Tonlé Sap.

After 1970, hardship for the Vietnamese communities increased not only because of the warfare that made fishing extremely perilous but also because the Lon Nol administration suspected Vietnamese of providing the Khmer Rouge with rice and medicine and thus treated them with ruthlessness. Lon Nol soldiers often provoked trouble and confiscated fish when the Vietnamese just returned from fishing. They also used spies to monitor any possible connections with resistance fighters. The Khmer Rouge knew about it and tried to track those people down to kill them. Le Thann Yen remembers that one night around 10 pm the Khmer

³⁵ Vietcong was the popular name of the military guerillas of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF), founded in 1960. This front was a broad-based organization led by the communists but designed to rally all those disaffected by the Ngo Dinh Diem administration. (Logevall, 2001:38). With the intensification of the Vietnam War in 1965 through direct American involvement the NLF needed their sanctuaries on Cambodian territory more than ever and, in trying to escape the US B-52 raids starting in March 1969, penetrated even deeper into Cambodia. Chandler (1991:184); Shawcross (1993:113); (Thu-huong, 1992:65) These bases also served the Khmer Rouge for their resistance against Lon Nol. (Kiernan, 1985:308)

³⁶ Chandler (1993:207)

Rouge entered his village and captured an alleged spy. It seemed harmless in the beginning; the person was invited to their boat to be questioned. Once the person was in the boat, they tied him up and left – probably to take him for interrogation by higher ranking cadres. The person never returned. According to Le Thann Yen this became a frequent method of the Khmer Rouge. They arrested villagers at night to interrogate them. They marked people with a string. Black strings meant the person was released without being interrogated. Blue strings meant he needed to be interrogated. A red string usually meant that the person will be killed after interrogation.

Yang Tao also had a very difficult time. He felt squeezed between the fronts - on the one hand he provided food to Vietcong fighters who regularly turned up at night every one or two months, on the other hand he was ordered by Lon Nol marines to cook for them. It was dangerous to collaborate with resistance fighters and people who did were usually arrested. This is why some people joined the resistance movement. Le Thann Yen stated that several people in his village volunteered. Others stayed in the village and supported the resistance by providing food for the Vietcong and Khmer Rouge who usually came in the middle of the night. The Svay Tranh were not aware of this or maybe simply ignored it.

As Chang Yang Arng recounts, Lon Nol soldiers were so furious about their inability to defeat the resistance forces or to even capture a single Vietcong fighter that they stormed into Vietnamese villages to grab young men. They were led to the river bank and Lon Nol soldiers forced them to wear fake Vietcong uniforms. After, they killed one by one claiming that the Vietcong had now successfully been eliminated from the area. Chang Yang Arng fled to the forest with his family.

Yang Ley frequently heard the sounds of the battlefield. Lon Nol soldiers repeatedly came to her village not far from Brâlai Meas, sometimes wildly shooting around to push back resistance fighters into their hideouts in the forest. In addition, Svay Trânh often came for controls but mostly used them to harass Vietnamese villagers rather than ensuring their safety. One day the Svay Trânh clashed with Vietcong soldiers in the vicinity of Yang Leng's village. The whole village fled into the forest. After gunfire ceased, people slowly came back. Life was harder than ever. She had 3 children and constantly feared for their lives. One of her uncles joined the Vietcong troops nearby and she felt compelled to support him as much as she could. At night, he often showed up in the village to get food for him and his combatants. From time to time, other villagers contributed food as well, sometimes even pork. In return, resistance fighters warned the villagers before major attacks so that they were prepared and able to take preventive measures.

Most of the Vietcong left the area in 1972/73, when more and more Khmer Rouge appeared and intensely campaigned for new recruits. Yang Tao remembers how young men, sometimes even whole families, were pressed into resistance. One day, he observed how a villager was caught by some Khmer Rouge soldiers and carried away into the forest. Fighting had intensified and had made the whole area around Brâlai Meas extremely insecure.

The Tonlé Sap area saw major clashes between Lon Nol troops and the Vietcong and Khmer Rouge. Our respondents reported that more and more battleships were deployed in the area. Le Yann Thann recalls that sometimes 30 or 40 boats left the port with 10 to 20 people. When they returned after several days, the crew had usually diminished to only three or four. Le Thann Yen prayed for the war to end soon. Police and soldiers tried to calm down the population and promised that the issue would be resolved soon; but the fighting continued.

According to the accounts of our respondents there must have been a major frontline in the Tonlé Sap area. Kampong Chhnang town was still under control of the Lon Nol administration, while the river bank on the other side and its hinterland with the Neang Kângrei Mountains was in the hands of the resistance. Do Yang Oun reported that from 1972 or 1973 on, the Khmer Rouge fully controlled Peam Talea village. The Khmer Rouge usually evacuated the village before starting attacks and ordered them to hide in the forest.

Many of our respondents remember the air raids in 1973 as one of the most terrible times. In the first half of that year, the United States managed to defer the communist victory by conducting heavy bombing campaigns on Cambodia. During these massive attacks, more than one hundred thousand tons of bombs were dropped on Cambodia, more than three times the amount dropped on Japan in the late stages of World War II.³⁷

Villagers had no choice but to flee into the forest without any preparation or supplies. Even worse, when they came back they found their houses completely destroyed; sometimes the whole village was ablaze. Do Yang Oun and Do Yang Lam remember that after one of these raids Peam Talea and the pagoda in Sâmraong were razed to the ground.

The same happened to Yang Ley in Baku village near Brâlai Meas. The bombing was so massive and frequent that she decided to stay in the forest for more than two months. Her house was burnt down and many villagers killed. People said that these were American planes supporting Lon Nol in destroying Vietcong and Khmer Rouge strongholds. Yang Ley struggled to survive in the forest, especially with her small children. Hoping to find relief, the family went to Brâlai Meas village.

Le Yang E has similar experiences. He and his family fled to the forest where they hid in the bushes to escape the air raids. As Chang Yang Arng has put it, "You only needed to raise your head and the American planes would immediately shoot you down."³⁸ Like many others from Brâlai Meas, Yang Ty³⁹ spent almost three months in the forest. When he returned to his village his house was only slightly damaged.

Despite ongoing fighting in the surrounding areas, people tried to resume life in the villages. Chang Yang Arng remembers that after 1974, Khmer Rouge soldiers frequently patrolled in Brâlai Meas. They cut off the main supply ways including the national road. However, Ho Yang Baer who was around 35 years old at that time told us that there was no problem to commute between Brâlai Meas and Kampong Chhnang town although the areas were under the control of different forces. Ho Yang Baer's business of selling cloth and other goods went well, probably even better than before.

The war dragged on for another year and a half until the Khmer Rouge finally took over Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975 and now officially governed the country. Ho Yang Baer remembers that Khmer Rouge troops marched into Brâlai Meas in the afternoon and hoisted a white flag. Lon Nol soldiers or Svay Trânh did not make a stand. Yang Tao said that about two days before Khmer New Year, the Lon Nol soldiers in Brâlai Meas laid down their arms and put them into the pagoda. Shortly after, the Khmer Rouge seized the weapons.

Several days before the Khmer Rouge evicted everyone, Chang Yang Arng wanted to escape the Khmer Rouge. However, they controlled the whole area and there was no place to go to. He heard rumors that villagers who tried to escape from the Khmer Rouge zones were caught and executed.

The Khmer Rouge ordered all inhabitants to leave Brâlai Meas immediately. Ho Yang Baer was totally caught by surprise. Scared to death, he followed the order, as did everyone else in his neighborhood. Both Vietnamese and Khmer were forced to get into their boats. The boats were tied together and towed away by the Khmer Rouge. Ho Yang Baer did not dare to ask where they were going; Lon Nol soldiers and Svay Trânh members were taken separately. Forced to leave Brâlai Meas without any explanation, no one was allowed to take any belongings. Chang Yang Arng observed how people who had loaded their boats with supplies were killed on the spot.

³⁷ Chandler (1993:207); Chandler (1991:225)

³⁸ Chang Yang Arng transcript, p. 4, 2nd interview

³⁹ Pseudonym

In Peam Talea, the Khmer Rouge told villagers that the village was threatened by renewed bomb attacks and that people would be evacuated for a couple of days. Paralyzed and scared, people followed the order without questioning.

People in Chong Koh village were also told that American bombings were underway and that they needed to leave the area, as Le Thann Yen remembers. 'Angkar' would take all villagers to a safe place, the Khmer Rouge said, and it will only be for two or three days.

Soon, our respondents realized that this journey was intended to force them out of their homes and the land they had inhabited for generations. It is estimated that around 150,000 to 170,000 were forced out of the country between April and October 1975.⁴⁰ The number of the remaining ethnic Vietnamese after this mass departure ranged between 20,000 and 30,000.⁴¹ All of the remaining ethnic Vietnamese were systematically killed during the Khmer Rouge regime.⁴² By the end of 1978, the Vietnamese minority had completely disappeared from Cambodia.

⁴⁰ According to information cited by Amer (1994), Vietnam requested, in 1978, assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to manage the 341,400 refugees who had arrived from Cambodia since 1975, among them about 170,300 ethnic Vietnamese.

⁴¹ As stated in Kiernan (1996) and Amer (1994), respectively.

⁴² Tableau (2009: 47-48)

Epilogue

This collection of personal accounts is the very first step in our effort of trying to deal with an issue that is highly emotional and surrounded by rumors, stereotypes and myths in Cambodian society. We hope that the insights into the lives of this specific sub-group of Vietnamese in Cambodia can raise awareness on the fact that 'The Vietnamese' are not a homogenous or monolithic group. They differ in terms of livelihood, migration history, cultural practices and their sense of identity. Reflecting the past of one of these groups may contribute to a more differentiated and less stigmatizing understanding of Vietnamese living in Cambodia and to reducing the latent anxiety towards 'the others', specifically towards Vietnamese, within Khmer society.

Indeed, addressing inter-ethnic questions related to the Vietnamese in Cambodia was a challenging endeavor for the research team and will certainly remain to be a difficult task for those who seek to ease tensions between the different ethnic groups. The research team solely consisted of Khmers. For some, the experience of working with Vietnamese groups was challenging and a life-changing experience. It helped them to reflect on and overcome their personal stereotypes and emotions. For some it was at times offending that respondents claimed ownership to the land their grandparents or parents had inhabited and complained that Khmer people have taken it away after the Khmer Rouge time. The general understanding in Khmer society is that all the land in Cambodia is Khmer territory and cannot be possessed by foreigners, which is also stipulated in the Cambodian constitution. However, our respondents certainly did not want to claim the land of their grandparents as Vietnamese territory. Rather, they expressed a deep feeling and strong sense of belonging to Cambodia and the land their families have lived on for several generations. Most of them speak fluent Khmer and identify as part of Cambodian society, even though they do not have citizenship which impedes their integration.

To deal with such sometimes very personal issues the research team underwent comprehensive training before going to the field. They have not only become familiar with the 'technical' knowledge of how to conduct qualitative research, especially qualitative in-depth interviews in contrast to quantitative surveys. An important part of the training was to become aware of the possible divergence between uncomfortable personal emotions, often based on unfounded anxieties, and researching objective facts and information. This discrepancy can have devastating consequences for the research results when not properly addressed. Our research intends to question common stereotypes and prejudices and aims at providing data that sheds light into the reality of the lives of these groups. Researchers have to become conscious about their own emotions before starting their fact finding process.

Based on the training and under the supervision of a Historian with extensive research experience in Cambodia, the team overcame many challenges in the field, including finding the right and 'real' questions. They were often positively surprised by the warm welcome of many of the respondents and their willingness to endure several rounds of interviews of up to two, sometimes even three hours. Not to mention the hospitality and the delicious food some of them prepared for the team.

Another challenge was dealing with the personal memories of the narrators. The accounts we have collected in this report are mainly based on what our respondents recall. However, memories are not static and change according to the flow of time and the frame of a person's mind at the point of recollection. It is not unusual that asking the same question may generate different aspects of memory at different times. This is also connected to the different degree of importance that people may attach to the respective event which leaves behind a stronger or weaker, in any case a unique and personal impression, in each of them. Some clearly remember specific events and easily access their memories while for others, memories of the same event have blurred and faded and are thus hard to recall.

We have tried to embed these memories into historical explanations and found that many exciting details of the respondent's accounts correspond to the general historical record. Of course, it is still only a beginning and knowing more about this group and its history requires further research, also on an academic level.

Given the starting points of this pilot project, the report is a description of oral accounts without deeper analysis or explanation. In the next phase, we intend to dig deeper and go beyond the purely narrative level. For the next step and with the experience we have gained by now, we would like to look at questions of social relationships and to go into deeper analysis of the specific ethnic identity of this group.

For now we hope, however, to have contributed at least some new insights into the life stories of a group of long-term residents who were born in Cambodia and whose families have been living here for up to five generations. It might also be an invitation to everyone, especially to academics, to pick up some pieces and explore them further.

The only conclusion we would like to draw here is that, based on all these indications and memories of our respondents, this group of Vietnamese has been part of Cambodian society for a long time and needs to be viewed from a different perspective than Khmer society generally does at the moment.

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Annex I - Timeline of Historical Events

French Protectorate (Colonial rule lasting 90 years)

- **1863** - Cambodia becomes a protectorate of France.
- **1941- 1945** - Japanese occupation during World War II.
- **1946** - France re-imposes its protectorate. A new constitution permits Cambodians to form political parties. Communist guerrillas begin an armed campaign against the French.

Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1953- 1969)

- **1953** - Cambodia wins independence from France.
- **1955** - Sihanouk abdicates to pursue a political career.
- **1960** - Sihanouk's father dies. Sihanouk becomes head of state.
- **1965** - Sihanouk breaks off relations with the US and allows North Vietnamese guerrillas to set up bases in Cambodia in pursuance of their campaign against the US-backed government in South Vietnam.
- **1969** - The US begins a secret bombing campaign against North Vietnamese forces on Cambodian soil.

Lon Nol Period / Khmer Republic (1970-1975)

- **1970** - Prime Minister Lon Nol overthrows Sihanouk in coup/ the army to fight the North Vietnamese in Cambodia. Sihanouk - in exile in China - forms a guerrilla movement/ Over next few years the Cambodian army loses territory against the North Vietnamese and communist Khmer Rouge guerrillas.
- **1975** - Lon Nol is overthrown as the Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot occupy Phnom Penh/ Khmer Rouge forces entered Phnom Penh in 1975 after a months-long siege.

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