

*The Bell Remains Silent*, a lost chapter by Gordon Conochie from:  
*A Tiger Rules the Mountain – Cambodia's Pursuit of Democracy*

## The Bell Remains Silent

In Cambodia, the official language is Khmer, or as Cambodians call it *Khmai*. In Khmai, the word for Cambodia is '*Kampuchea*' although some people use the informal phrase *srok Khmai* meaning 'country of the Khmer', referring to the ethnic group. Cambodia is not just the country of Khmer people though. In Cambodia's north-eastern provinces especially, there are many indigenous ethnicities. Interestingly though, Cambodians generally use being Khmer and being Cambodian to mean the same thing. When I asked people if there was a difference, I was looked at in puzzled fashion. Most would realise after thinking about it that yes there was a difference but that nobody had ever thought about it before, which was clear from the fact that the Cambodian national identity card has Khmer as the nationality rather than Cambodian.

Two of Cambodia's north-eastern provinces are Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri meaning 'Mountains of Gems' and 'Centre of Mountains' respectively. Both are known for their dense hardwood forests, rich land, variable climate and valuable minerals. They are also home to many of the indigenous people that are Cambodian but not Khmer. The 20<sup>th</sup> century had passed both provinces by with tribes hunting, gathering and farming on the lands they had always lived on. There are photos from the 1993 election of one man arriving at a polling station riding his

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elephant, hopping down in order to vote<sup>1</sup>. These indigenous people were awakened in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the chaos of chainsaws, trucks and diggers ripping up their forests and pillaging their land.

People in these two provinces have suffered more than most from the selling of land on long-term leases to foreign companies, who log all the timber and plant rows and rows of rubber trees. In 2014, I was riding a motorbike on reddish-brown clay-dirt roads watching a setting sun turn crimson. I was dazed by a mix of colours that Mark Rothko would have envied. My colleagues took video after video on their phone of scarred lands where mighty forests once stood. Posted on Facebook, their friends back in Phnom Penh were shocked. What had happened to their country?

In 2010, a South Korean company called Mega First purchased a right to study the viability of an Economic Land Concession on 9900 hectares in Mondolkiri province. Indigenous Bunong people used this land for subsistence farming and foraging, and at first the company only built an office and accommodation. However, in 2014, without legal

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<sup>1</sup> Ting-Toomey, S. (2010, May 13). Theory Reflections: Face-Negotiation Theory. National Association of Foreign Student Advisers. Retrieved from: <https://www.nafsa.org/professional-resources/browse-by-interest/face-negotiation-facework>

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documentation allowing a transition to actually developing a Concession, Mega First began to flatten the forests and clear the land<sup>2</sup>.

I met three Bunong men from Dak Dam village, which was severely affected. Walking into the house owned by one of them, I immediately noticed the pots hanging in size order in the small cooking area on my right. On my left was a simple table, plastic chairs and a wooden day bed. The proper bed was at the back of the room, on a slightly raised platform in the far left-hand corner next to a beautiful wooden dining table and chairs. To the right of that was the only internal room, which was more like a large walk-in-cupboard covered by a colourful drape where clothes were kept and people got changed. On the back wall behind the bed was an open shutter through which you could see forest and sky, looking like a framed picture of a beautiful landscape. It also let light into what immediately struck me as one of the nicest houses I had ever been in.

I sat down, as invited, with two of the men at the simple table near the open front door, which was the only other source of light in this house without electricity. One man wore a washed-out beige jacket that made him look like a TV detective from the 1970s and the other, wearing an Adidas tracksuit, sat with his arms crossed, leaning backwards as if to avoid my questions flying at him. The man wearing Adidas had been to

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<sup>2</sup> Dak Dam villagers, Author’s interview No. 207

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Japan for three months on a scholarship to study “technology”, which everybody found hilarious given that even electricity was scarce in Dak Dam and it was unclear in what language anybody taught him given his lack of Japanese and English. The third man owned the house and wore a traditional *krama* around his waist (a sarong that comes down to the knees) and a lightly coloured checked shirt on top. Taller and more assured than the other two, he stood beside the day bed enjoying a cigarette while we talked. His wife, who doubtlessly created this perfect home, sat in the doorway, silent on the edges, watching a small pig trot past the door, quickly followed by four little piglets.

Ten, maybe even five years previously, they explained that the community could roam free, going to the mountain tops at the start of every year to pray for happiness and good life<sup>3</sup>. The man wearing a beige jacket quietly told me that they could rotate where they farmed to maintain the forest’s health, protecting certain areas as ‘spirit lands’. I asked how long Bunong people had lived on the land, and there were some quizzical laughs; for them time had never existed without them living on this land.

When Mega First began to tear their forest apart., the three men joined dozens of others wanting to speak with Mega First about the Spirit Lands of their ancestors, where their rotating farms were and what land

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<sup>3</sup> Dak Dam villagers, Author’s interview No. 207

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the community held communally. Angry protests, involving these men and Molotov cocktails, broke out forcing Mega First to pause and give back 2000 hectares. The hectares were never mapped out however, and villagers found that some of the returned land was beyond salvation for farming. As soon as protestors turned their backs, the company returned to flattening the forests<sup>4</sup>.

The villagers had no confidence in the government which they believed hadn’t done anything for them so far. The man who wore a beige jacket accused Mondolkiri’s Member of Parliament of “sitting there and saying nothing. And he is Bunong as well!” They felt that indigenous people are included in government to keep indigenous people quiet rather than promote their interests. I asked if the provincial government was any better and the man wearing Adidas blurted out a laugh. The provincial government had drafted an agreement with Mega First assigning ownership and land usage and then pressed villagers to sign it to say they were part of the meeting.

The three men were all in their thirties and I asked them what older members of the community thought. The man smoking said that it was not just old people who were unhappy, “Everybody feels trapped. Wherever we go, we feel trapped by people who own land. We go one

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<sup>4</sup> Dak Dam villagers, Author’s interview No. 207

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place and somebody shouts ‘My land!’ and we go over there and somebody else shouts ‘My land!’”<sup>5</sup>

In the future, they know the forest will not be theirs. The Smoker asked me to imagine uninvited guests coming to my place and disrespecting my house. How would I feel losing everything?

Having less forest means that the Bunong people can no longer rotate or grow a variety of crops to subsist on. Most people now grow a few crops, such as coffee, passion fruit, avocados, bananas or cassava, to sell to traders who come by once a week<sup>6</sup>. The same mud road that took me to the village was also bringing modernity, and the man smoking said that “people are running” to catch it. The man wearing Adidas complained that “before, people had the forest and that was it” but now people had this new feeling of want<sup>7</sup>.

Having heard Khmer Cambodians in Phnom Penh insinuate indigenous people from Mondolkiri as backward and objects of curiosity, I asked the men if they thought that the government respected people in Mondolkiri. The eyes of the man wearing Adidas bulged in disbelief again. The Smoker smiled at me wryly, his eyes never leaving mine, and spoke measuredly. “They look down on us.”<sup>8</sup> The man wearing Adidas

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<sup>5</sup> Dak Dam villagers, Author’s interview No. 208

<sup>6</sup> Dak Dam villagers, Author’s interview No. 207

<sup>7</sup> Dak Dam villagers, Author’s interview No. 208

<sup>8</sup> Sreyleak, Author’s interview No. 0118

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chimed in that it was clear they had no respect, otherwise government wouldn’t take land and refuse to find a solution<sup>9</sup>.

Before meeting these three men, I met Dak Dam’s Commune Council Chief, who is Bunong and a member of the CPP. He was angry when Mega First started to clear the forest and asked the District and Provincial Governors to stop the clearing but encountered a wall of obstruction. He confirmed that Mega First was acting illegally as maps drafted by the government had not been approved. A quiet man, he told me the villagers “will struggle until the company goes away.”<sup>10</sup> The Commune Chief left me feeling that it may be the Bunong’s way of life that will fade away first. There is a bell in the middle of the village. In the past when it would be rung, everybody would quickly congregate to jointly farm, hunt, gather and commemorate, but over time, fewer people would go when the bell rang. They were busy trying to farm for themselves on reduced land. Now, the bell remains silent.

My friend, Midy, and I left the three men at the nicest house I had ever seen as the sun was setting. We knew that we would have to drive back in the dark, without roadside lights, but hoped to reach the tarmac road before all light had gone. As we were leaving, Midy, relieved himself

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<sup>9</sup> Dak Dam villagers, Author’s interview No. 208

<sup>10</sup> Dak Dam villagers, Author’s interview No. 207

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near a tree at the side of the road, joking that he hoped it wasn’t Spirit Land and cause us bad luck.

About two kilometres out of the village, and still on the mud road, Midy’s motorbike started sliding uncontrollably with a flat back tyre. With no option, we headed back to the village and found the village’s mechanic who changed the tyre for us. Now 7pm and completely dark, we hopped on Midy’s motorbike, which he had borrowed from a friend, and found the headlight did not work. With no other option, I sat behind him with my phone held outstretched in front of us with its torch on peering through the rain.

Our travails meant that I was hours late to meet with Yun Mane, former Executive Director of the Cambodian Indigenous People’s Organisation. Despite the rest of Mondolkiri being asleep, Mane sat in her dimly lit, closed restaurant waiting for me. When I arrived, her brother Naron and Bunhieng Hean, who succeeded her as Executive Director, unexpectedly emerged from the shadows to sit either side of her.

I introduced myself and what I was hoping to talk with them about. They all nodded silently, making it feel like a clandestine meeting. There was a pause during which Mane met my eyes and then asked what I was hoping to do with what their information. I said that I wanted to write a



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report, still nervous to admit that I was trying to write as something grand as a book.

“Just do for that?” Mane asked with unconcealed disappointment. This was not the first time that I felt like a thief, giving false hope and playing on it to take a life story, sometimes putting people in danger, just so that I could write a book<sup>11</sup>.

Mane, a small, married woman with children in her late forties, had worked for fifteen years to promote and preserve indigenous culture. She was often told by government that things need to change because of a growing population and for economic development, but she saw these as hollow excuses for mass deforestation caused by “the hunger of The Party.” Like many Cambodians, Mane referred to the CPP simply as “The Party”.

Mane said that it was clearly not about economic development for the people when only “Khmer people will benefit, especially those in the party. And indigenous people will only lose.” She believes that Government acts in the interest of their own power and wealth, while indigenous people just want to have enough to live their life. Mane was “hopeless about governance in Cambodia”, not just the leaders, but the whole system of government.

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<sup>11</sup> This entire section is from Yun Mane & Indigenous Leaders, Author’s interview No. 117 unless otherwise noted.

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Bunhieng gave up a well-paid job at Oxfam for the poorly paid and more stressful job of Executive Director of the Cambodian Indigenous People's Organisation. In his thirties, with a round, moon-shaped face, he thinks that politicians only get involved if there is benefit to them or "the system". Even indigenous people in government, he experienced, "serve their party to keep their position and provide wealth for the family". Naron, Mane's brother, called the CPP culture "a philosophy of party and benefit."

Mane fears that after exhausting Sihanoukville's natural resources, China will target Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri next. "Look at goldmining!" she exclaimed, "Can't ever begin to think how much taken from Mondolkiri." I asked if it annoyed them that natural resources from indigenous land were not benefitting indigenous people. Mane, without waiting for others to share their thoughts, responded firmly that "indigenous people do not own all of these. These are State-owned. Owned for the nation so the whole nation should benefit but at the moment that is not what is happening. The nation is not benefitting. They are being sold for a few people to benefit."

Mane said it was easy for the Government to ignore indigenous people because "there is no benefit. They know that indigenous people are not that interested in politics or understand elections, so they have no fear of losing votes." Bunhieng's village still has no electricity despite

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being near a town because the CPP knows the villagers will vote for them anyway.

Mane was also unhappy with the CNRP and other parties who were not doing enough to understand indigenous concerns. “Sam Rainsy came up and pointed to an area and said ‘look, no forest!’ He looked stupid because it was never a place of forest anyway. It just embarrasses such politicians and doesn’t help indigenous people.”

I asked if the creation of The Cambodian Indigenous People’s Democratic Party could make a difference, to which Bunhieng responded sceptically. Mane found some optimism though. “After 2013, the CPP made many changes because they were scared of losing votes. They made a big campaign and this showed that if you can challenge them at the ballot box they will change.”

Mane believes that there is some goodwill amongst Cambodians for indigenous people, but they are silent and passive, stricken by fear and the experience of the Khmer Rouge. She bemoans the lack of media coverage since the demise of *Radio Free Asia*, *The Cambodia Daily* and *The Phnom Penh Post*, making it easier for the CPP to “not think about us much” even “with the company at our door”.

Hours past a normal bedtime, I solemnly thanked them for their time and apologised for arriving late. Exhausted from having no choice

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but to continue their struggle while knowing there is little hope of success, Mane graciously tried to comfort me, “No, it has been good to let our stress out.”

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