

Paddling on the Tonle Sap Lake

By Antonio Graceffo

Chong Kines is a small fishing village built on the Tonle Sap Lake, not far from Siem Reap. On the periphery of the lake there are a few traditional Khmer houses, on stilts. But most of the houses are floating on the water. The homes range from elaborate rafts and barges to simple, covered fishing boats. Apart from the fact that the 6,000 villagers use small rowboats to do their shopping and make their daily rounds, most lived a normal, Khmer lifestyle, the same as in any landlocked village. There are schools, shops, restaurants, temples, and even a hospital, all built on boats.



In Chong Kines, my guides, Samban, Thavrin, and I rented a powerboat to take us approximately 12 nautical Km across the lake, to the bird sanctuary. By the time we began this boat trip we were several long, hectic days into our adventure tour of Cambodia. We were all exhausted, and just wanted to sleep on the boat. Summoning up all of my internal reserves of power, I fought off the fatigue and in an adrenaline burst of optimism asked Samban if there was an interesting story or some ancient legend associated with the lake. Samban was half dosing. But through the thick fog of sleep he answered.

“Yes, there is.”

With alacrity I opened my notebook and prepared to write the story. I waited a long time, finally, I decided that Samban thought I was asking a yes or no question.

“Thank you.” I said. “This will make good reading for the folks at home.” Even fulltime professional travelers can get tired of traveling.

The views along the river were breathtaking. The blue water spread out like an ocean reaching all the way to the horizon. The sun had only risen a half-hour before, and splashes of gold bobbed upon the wind driven waves. Fishermen toiled, bringing in their nets, among a virtual jungle of greenery, which floated on the surface of the water.



Our first stop was at the wildlife conservation office, which was a houseboat, next to a floating restaurant. The office was merely an empty wooden shell built upon a floating barge. There were two occupants in the dank enclosure, neither of which seemed particularly knowledgeable or happy to see us. The older one was clearly in charge, and the younger one was clearly in the dark, not that the older one knew anything, but he was clearly in charge. We asked what birds we could see in the sanctuary, and they took us to a wall chart, which looked like a 1960s era public school poster from the United States. Most of the birds were large, aquatic fowl with long necks and bills suitable for fishing. Inexplicably, the bird poster, which was dog-eared and falling down, was hanging beside a picture of the Yokohama Bridge.

“Golden Monarch, Admiral Bird, Oriental Darter” said the older one, reading off the names. The poster was in English, so, I could have read it myself, but I humored him. The only bird whose name I recognized was stork. And now, I would finally get to ask the question that had plagued me since childhood. “Where do babies come from?”

“Silver Darter, Asian Turn, Eastern Woodland Cock” At first I thought he had answered my question. But then I realized that he was ignoring me, and just continued reading the chart. Of course, it was my own fault that he was so fixated on reading the chart. When we arrived we told him I was a writer, not a reader. Remembering that I was burning sponsor dollars for this opportunity to write a story, I snapped back into business mode.

“And which of these birds will I see when we go into the sanctuary?” I asked.

“Silver Backed King Fisher, Shuttle Cock, Passenger Pigeon, Do Do Bird” I was too busy writing the names, to notice.

“Do Do Bird! But they are extinct. I think you are just babbling the names of birds.” I told him. Then, I looked at the list again. “Some of these aren’t even birds.”

“Pteradactyle, Ominous Nipitus, Sanctimonious” When he switched to Latin I washed my hands of the guy.

“Samban, try and get some information out of this guy or I will have to resort to more unpleasant measures.” I warned. Samban was a true peacemaker. Khmers have an uncanny ability to pretend not to see what is going on in front of them, if by doing so they can help someone else to save face or help to avoid conflict. Admittedly I am too hard on people in Asia, and just a tad bit judgmental. But that is the luxury I have, being from Brooklyn, being Italian, being big and strong, and knowing that when the book is finished I would leave. But for my translators life was never so simple. Saving face was such an incredibly important aspect of Khmer society. A man would much rather die than lose face. So, looked at from another angle, causing another person to lose face was akin to murder. Saving face constantly frustrates my work. Fifty percent of the Khmer population is under the age of 25. So, by way of statistics, at thirty-eight, I am probably older than 70% of the population. This means that I am in the position of higher authority in the Khmer hierarchy. Where this becomes difficult is when I don’t know something, and I ask a Khmer for help. Since a younger person can never admit that he knows something that an older person doesn’t, they may just play dumb, and say they don’t know. Or they may not answer at all. Assuming that they didn’t hear me, I will repeat the question louder. This frightens a younger person, and he retreats even more. Finally, I find myself screaming and becoming threatening. And of course, once you do that in Khmer society, you may have destroyed that relationship forever. At the very least, you aren’t going to get the information you needed.

I have been on tours where the guide refused to go first because I was older. But since I didn’t know the way, we kept getting lost. At every fork in the path I would ask, “Do we need to go left or right?” And the answer would always be “Up to you”. Before I could speak Khmer it was even worse. I would go in a restaurant with my assistant, my driver, and my translator and they would want me to order for everyone. I didn’t know the Khmer dishes. I couldn’t read the menu. And I couldn’t communicate with the waitress. Still, they would insist that I should order. “Please order something!” I begged, handing them the menu. “We are not hungry” they answered.

When a Khmer person asks me a question, they will never accept “I don’t know”, as an answer. In Khmer society, an older person would never admit to a younger person that there is anything he doesn’t know. One of my students brought me some kind of Asian tropical fruit and asked me what it was called in English. “I don’t know” I answered. “We don’t have this fruit in Brooklyn.”

“No, teacher, I mean what is the English name?” She said, repeating the question. “I don’t know the English name of this fruit” I answered, getting a bit angry. “I have never seen one of these before.”

“Yes” She said. But in Khmer, yes is just a polite particle. It doesn’t signal agreement. “And how is it called in English?” “I DON’T KNOW!!” I shouted. “We don’t have this fruit in Brooklyn. Probably we don’t have this fruit anywhere in America. In fact, I would bet money that there isn’t even an English word for this fruit.”

The student backed down, not because she finally accepted that I didn't know. Once you get angry, the Khmers understand your emotion, but stop listening to what you say. Since the Khmer goal is always to make peace, they will always stop questioning you at that point. But don't be fooled into believing that anything has been resolved.

"You are busy now." She said, walking back to her seat. "Maybe you can tell me tomorrow."

"I won't know tomorrow either." I began, but then I dropped it.

Because I speak Khmer now, translators are more or less obligated to let me try on my own, and fail. And even when they see that I am hopelessly failing to communicate, they still can't jump in and save me, or I will lose face. So, I have to beg them fifty times to help me. And even then, although they have been watching and listening, they can't just jump in where I left off. They have to ask me a thousand questions about what exactly I want to ask, before translating.

It was the same thing here. When I had given up on this conversation and turned the mike over to Samban, he went through an entire interrogation before he would begin translating. "What did you want to ask him? What did you want to know? Why are you asking?" The pre-interview questioning went on so long I wondered if he had completely missed the point of the last five days we had spent together. Did I really need to start right from the beginning and say, "Samban, my name is Antonio. And I am here doing a book about adventure tours in Cambodia. Now, I need you to ask this momo what birds I will see if I go in the sanctuary."

In easy, comfortable Khmer, Samban asked the man which of these birds would be present in the sanctuary. The man answered. Then he answered again. Then Samban repeated the question. Then the man babbled. Thirty minutes later, Samban was ready to translate the answer. I eagerly gripped my pen.

"None" Samban announced.

N-O-N-E I dutifully wrote in my book.

Samban followed with a completely incomprehensible explanation as to why I couldn't see any birds. If the answer was because it was too late in the day or it was the wrong season, I wasn't sure. And actually, I didn't care. I had heard no once. I didn't see any point in wasting more time here.

"If there are no birds in the sanctuary, and no expert to tell us about the birds, I see no point in going." I told Samban. "I could learn more from a book back in the hotel."

"Yes." He repeated, and to my horror, he translated.

The old guy and the young guy had a long discussion. Then the young guy riffled through a disorganized jumble of crates in the corner of the room, and came back with a mildewed bird watchers book, which was missing its cover. They held up the moldy old book as if it were the Bible. The old man cracked it open and thumbed through the English pages, as incomprehensible to him as Latin, Greek or Hebrew to a novice Catholic. A small boy ran through the village announcing "The book! The Book!" Villagers herded their children in doors. Priests prepared sacrifices. There was so much ceremony tied in with the opening of the book, that I was reminded

of the cult in the film, Return to the Planet of the Apes, which worshipped an unexploded nuclear warhead.

“This book is all we have.” Said the old man, with gravity. “Yes, it is.” I agreed. And all you’ll ever have. I wanted to add.

“You can look at it here, but the precious words can never leave this shack.” Pronounced the old man. A hush fell over the assembled crowd of worshipers. I had been given a great honor. Or had I? Perhaps he meant that once I had looked at the book I would not be allowed to leave. I declined, thanking the man profusely. I placed my hands in the prayer position, high up on my forehead, and backed out of the room in supplication, but also, a little on guard.

Our trip to the floating village had gotten off to an inauspicious start. But the life of the aquatic villagers was fascinating. Near the wild life office there was a temple, a school, and a hospital, all floating on the water. Outside the school was a sign saying that it had been provided by UNICEF.

All of the houses had a TV and an antenna, although most had no power -lines. Two girls selling food allowed guests to board their canoe and eat breakfast. Whole families floated by in small rowboats. Even young baby girls already had pierced ears. People went to and fro, crossing the street and running errands just as they would in any other village. All the while, they were careful not to damage the water hyacinths, which covered the surface of the lake. Samban told me that they ate the flowers in salad. The stems were dried and woven to make hammocks.



On the porch of a houseboat, two medical technicians played music on a loudspeaker to attract people to come and be vaccinated. Women holding small children sat politely on the floor in Khmer fashion, with their knees together and legs out to the side. The medics explained that babies and mothers were being vaccinated for polio, small pocks, and other diseases on a regular cycle. In addition to the usual host of childhood illnesses, children living on the lake were particularly susceptible to diarrhea due to a lack of hygiene. Apparently, the villagers were drinking the lake water, which they also used for bathing, toilet, cooking, and washing dirty dishes. The health

problems increased in the dry season when the water level became lower and the concentration of contaminants increased. "In the dry season," explained the female technician, "the water is low, muddy, and full of dead fish. "Some people are afraid of the vaccination." She explained. "They go to Kru Khmer." She said, meaning the traditional healers. "They have many stories of ghosts. When they are sick or have a sore throat they go to the traditional healer who mixes potions and medicines for them to drink."

Although there were obvious problems with hygiene, the villagers looked noticeably healthier and heavier than poor provincial farmers. We guessed there were two reasons for this. First, they were probably getting much more protein than farmers because of the easy access to fish. And second, they were sitting all day in their boats and weren't burning calories by walking around. Some farmers live very far from their land and have to walk as much as two hours at the start and finish of each very long work day.

A big boatload of tourists came through the village. Suddenly, several small boats paddled like mad, looking like ants swarming on an elephant, selling food and other goods to the foreign visitors.

The woman from the health service asked why I had come. We told her that I was writing a book. She smiled politely, but it was possible that she had never owned a book, much less read one. Even among educated urban Khmers, reading is just not a common pastime. In the provinces, illiteracy is extremely high. I always wondered what these people thought of me when I said I was a writer. In university English classes where I would ask thirty students to write as many occupations as they could think of in five minutes, writer came up less frequently than astronaut.

My Khmer friends have told me that most people think I have a very strange job. I am inclined to agree. Back where we started, we turned in our powerboat and took a walk around the village, visiting boat-builders. All of the boats were made of wood, and it was amazing how few power tools we saw at each open-air workshop. A master-shipwright. Named Kut, squatted in the keel an 8m boat, using a primitive ax and plane to shape the ribs. He said that he could build an entire boat in just one month. He bought the wood from a vendor and was paid by the owner to build the boat.

After the woodwork was completed, he would use tree resin, applied dry, to make the boat waterproof. Kut used an oily rag on a stick to wipe down his tools and keep them rust-free. He sharpened the blades on a wet-stone. Kut had learned boat-building from his father, who had learned from his father, and so on, for generations. Unlike the aquatic villagers, Kut and his family lived in a ktom, a kind of thatched bamboo hut on stilts. Neither a fisherman nor a farmer, Kut's fulltime profession was boat building. This particular boat was going to be a fishing boat.

Curious men and children from the village had gathered around to see the strange foreigner climbing around an unfinished boat, carrying a camera and notebook.

"Do you work alone?: I asked Kut, a man of few words. He was extremely focused on his work, and went about it with a practiced meticulousness. You just knew that Kut would never leave an end undone. He reminded me very much of the practical men of the maritime states back in my own country. He could just as easily have been a Maine shipwright as a Khmer.

"Don't you see Jieng, my assistant?" He asked, pointing at a less-intelligent looking man loafing at the side of the boat.

“But he doesn’t look like he’s working.” I joked, in Khmer, breaking the ice. The villagers all laughed, Jieng most of all. The smiles on their faces said that it was fine with them if I stayed to finish my story. Kut laughed too, but then immediately went back to his work. He was an intense man.



But then, that was why he commanded such a high price. He told us that he was charging \$1,000 to build this boat. In a country, where the average income is only \$26 per month, this was an absolute fortune.

I asked Kut if he was going to teach his four children to earn money by building boats, as he had done.

“Of course not!”he said, without even a moment’s reflection. “Building boats is hard work.” Instead, Kut sent his children to school, and hoped that they would find some other way to make a living.

A group of boys, returning from spear fishing, ran past us laughing. They were obviously excited to show their mothers the food they had caught.

A hundred meters further along the beach we found a master boat-maker with his three-man crew building a 13 m long racing boat for the dragon races during the Water Festival. Surprisingly he said that he only needed two weeks to build a boat. This master had a slightly different story than

the first. His father had been a farmer, but he had learned boat building from his uncle, whose family for generations had been boat builders. His home was in Banyan Bong Province, and he only came to Chong Kines Village temporarily. When the boat was finished, he would return home. He said that, he was contracted by the owner, who would sell this boat for \$1,000. Occasionally, however, he would buy his own wood, make the boat himself, and sell it for his own account.

We decided the only way to really experience the village was to swap our powerboat for a rowing boat. For three dollars we rented a local longboat. It was similar to a dugout canoe, and could be paddled by two men facing forward. Trying to be as conscious as possible about the various kinds of boats I saw on the lake, I hadn’t seen any western style rowboats, where you row facing backwards. All of the craft were small, practical, seaworthy boats, which were slow, simple and reliable. Similar to the truck like lifeboats we had when I was a merchant seaman, I believed that the majority of these boats would continue to float even if completely swamped.

There were some very long, narrow, shallow draft canoes with nearly non-existent gunnels, which were propelled by a single rower, standing in the prow, using a long, pole shaped oar. Apart from big floating cages used to breed fish, we didn’t see any rafts. The only boats I saw with fixed oarlocks required the rower to stand, and crisscross the oar handles as he went.

Several of the boats were driven by a large steering oar in the stern. Once again, speed was not a priority. But reliability was, as most Khmers, even many river and lake dwellers, cannot swim. The newspapers often have reports of fishermen who drowned when they fell out of their boat only meters from the nearest landfall. Fred, a SCUBA instructor I met from the United States, said that he was considering starting an NGO to teach swimming to water dwellers.

The most unusual boat I saw was a round basket-boat, which I believe is more common in Indonesia. The basket is just large enough for one person to sit in and is controlled by a single oar, which is free, not fixed in a lock. Having read the laughable accounts of foreigners failing to master this type of boat, I was inclined that you had to be born to one, to do anything other than rotate in a stationary circle.

“Do you know how to do a boat?” Asked Thavrin, a bit uneasy.

“No idea.” I answered. truthfully. “How about you?”

“I know how to swim.” He said, not instilling confidence in me.

A fourteen year old boy, living on the lake, brought the canoe alongside our power boat. I hated him for the ease with which he handled a boat. “I know more about the stock market than you.” I told him, to even out the playing field.



Gingerly, I stepped into the canoe, careful to keep my center of gravity low.

“Are you sure you are supposed to be hugging the seat like that?” I asked Thavrin.

“Do you know how to do a boat?” Asked Thavrin, a bit uneasy.

“No idea.” I answered truthfully. “How about you?”

“I know how to swim.” He said, not instilling confidence in me.

“Of course! I am a professional.”

“But face down, how will you row?”

“Who made you captain, Gilligan?” I asked. I said a quick prayer to my ancestors, all of whom had thrown up in New York Harbor after the long crossing from Sicily. Then, carefully, I pulled myself up to a precarious sitting position.

“Are you all right?” Asked Tharvin. I wasn’t sure if he was more worried about me or himself.

“This boat ain’t gonna row itself. Get in.” I commanded. I raised my voice, but it threw my balance off, and I felt the canoe turning over. Quickly, using my tongue, I pushed my chewing gum over to the other side of my mouth to balance out the weight.

Thavrin stepped into the boat, but either forgot, or had never been taught, to crouch down. He was standing as tall as the Statue of Liberty, and nearly capsized us. He leapt back onto the bigger boat, like he had been electrocuted.

“Maybe I should leave my camera and notebook here in the village.” I said.

“Maybe we should pay someone to go with us.” Suggested Thavrin. This was a much more practical suggestion, since without a notebook and camera there would be no story. In the end, we hired the powerboat driver to sit in the prow and lead us. With his help, we stayed more or less stable. Once again, I envied the ability these people had with boats. Our driver, Rith, using only a

small square piece of scrap lumber he had found, was able to steer the boat, as Thavrin and I struggled with the oars. The scrap wood was only slightly larger than his hand, and yet he achieved more pull than we did. Now, more mobile Thavrin and I could visit people more effectively.

As we passed by the village houseboats, children laughed, surprised to see the two tourists paddling a boat. Rith was twenty-four years old, but not yet married. He didn’t own the powerboat, he simply worked as a driver, and didn’t have enough money to support a family.

Many of the houseboats were a drab, weathered gray color. But, the floating shops were often colorful affairs, designed to attract buyers. Women squatted on the backs of floating restaurants, washing the dishes in the river. Since much of provincial Cambodia doesn’t have electricity, people rely on rechargeable batteries for lighting at night. In every village, there is always one family with a generator, who makes a living by charging the batteries for people. Here on the lake, the battery charger family lived in a huge, colorful houseboat with a restaurant attached. Apparently charging batteries was a good business. They seemed to be the richest family

on the lake.

We came upon a bright blue houseboat, covered in what, at a glance, looked like Chinese Buddhist illustrations. But, on closer inspection, it turned out to be a Catholic Church. One of the observations my friend, Steven Crook, made in his book about Taiwan, Keeping up with the War Gods, was that in Asia, Catholic churches normally blended in, looking like Buddhist temples, where as protestant churches, particularly ones from American missions, tended to look like modular office units.

Literature we found inside the church said that it was part of a Jesuit Mission. If I were ever a priest I would want to be a Jesuit. With fifteen years of education and training, they are like God's Green Berets.

The altar was very low and had an incense pot, the same as in a Buddhist temple. There were no pews. Most likely, the prisoners sat on the floor as they would in a Buddhist ceremony, with their knees together, out to the side of their body. Instead of hanging on the wall, the crucifix stood on the altar. Made of clay, the styling could just as easily have come from one of the temples at Angkor Wat. Once again, we saw the mix of old and new religions so common in Cambodia. At the same time, this demonstrated the Catholic mission's goal of blending in. On a pegboard hung photos of the Christmas party, which read Buon Noel in both French and Khmer. The Christmas pageant had apparently consisted of children, in traditional clothing, doing Apsara dancing, in front of the nativity, wearing Santa

The only aspect of the church, which clashed with the bright blue Buddhist feel, was the paintings of the Stations of the Cross. There was nothing Asian about them. In fact, they were typical to the Latin masses of my youth. Christ was depicted as handsome man, with strong features, shoulder length hair, and a beard. Obviously he was designed to appeal to a post Vatican younger generation who opposed American involvement in the Vietnam War.

The Buddhists and Hindus are right in their belief that life is a circle, or that life is a series of small circles, which all eventually lead back to place where they started. Like the analogies section of an intelligence test, however, the connections were not always easy to spot. Many of my experiences in Indochina seemed to lead back to my country's involvement in the war here.

The church caretaker came to greet us. Speaking Khmer, I asked him several questions about the church, most of which he couldn't answer. Often in Cambodia I found that because of the color of my skin, people make the assumption that I am speaking English. So, they tune me completely out, assuming they won't understand what I am saying. If I continue to speak Khmer to them, they just freeze like a deer in headlights, or point at their ears and shake their heads, as if to say that they don't understand. To shake them out of their trance, I will say something shocking or insulting in Khmer. Usually I just ask them, "Are you Vietnamese?" They immediately snap out of it, and say "Of course I am not Vietnamese. I am Khmer." Most Khmers hate the Vietnamese. "Ok, then we can continue in Khmer language." And then seventy percent of the time, after this exchange, we can communicate normally. Occasionally, they go back to saying they don't understand me although they obviously did since we had an exchange.

Anyway I tried my tactic on the caretaker. After the fifth or so time that he failed to answer my questions I shouted at him.

"What are you, Vietnamese?"

“Yes” He answered.

I felt like the overbearing self-absorbed idiot that I am. He went and got his son, a fourteen-year old boy, who was born in Cambodia and could translate for us. Through the boy, we learned that there were about sixty parishioners, nearly all of whom were Vietnamese. I had read that the Catholic Church, like Latin script, and the French language, had made greater headway in Vietnam than in Cambodia. And, here was proof. I had also read that many of the Catholics had supported the Americans in the war and were thus forced to flee Vietnam. Some of them settled in Cambodia.

Later, looking up the percentages of various religions in Cambodia, I found that the majority of Catholics in Cambodia were either foreigners, particularly French, or Vietnamese. This particular floating church was opened in 2000. According to the caretaker most of the families had come here in 1985.

In Cambodia, the Vietnamese are one of the poorest ethnic groups. And, here at the lake it didn't look like anyone was getting rich. I wondered just how bad things must have been in Vietnam to make people want to move to Cambodia and live in abject poverty. Maybe the caretaker was wondering the same thing about me.

A boatload of river police told us that we had to turn back. According to them, it was illegal for foreigners to paddle a canoe in Cambodia. Just to spite them I planned to drink and drive when I got back to Phnom Penh, as there was no prohibition against that.

Contact the author at: antonio_graceffo@hotmail.com

You can reach Long Leng of Phnom Penh Tours at ppentourism@camnet.com.kh

All of Antonio's books are available at: www.Amazon.com

