

Interview of Aek Chhan

A: Interviewer Heng Sochivy

B: Interviewee Aek Chhan

Summary of the Interview

Aek Chhan was born in Damnak Pring village, Kampong Cham province. In this simple interview, she shares stories from her family history and recounts several difficult experiences she has gone through from childhood to the present.

A: Hello! Today I have the chance to interview you, I am a volunteer for a project of Brigham Young University in America.

B: I see.

A: Yes, and the purpose of this project is to help compile the history of the Cambodian people. This interview is for you to review your history so that your children and descendants can know about it. So, to begin, do you allow me to interview you?

B: If you need to interview, go ahead. I am very poor, and I don't make enough money, I suffer a lot.

A: Yes, and what's your name?

B: Chhan.

A: Oh—

B: Grandma Chhan.

A: Grandma Chhan. And is that the name that is on your ID?

B: I don't have an ID.

A: But is that correct? You don't have an ID, you've never gotten one?

B: I had one before, but it was all stolen!

A: Oh really?

B: I see.

A: What is your full name, including your family name?

B: My family name is Aek, Aek Chhan.

A: I see. And do you have a nickname?

B: The only nickname I have is Chhan Chhan, they call me Chhan Chhan.

A: I see. And what meaning does that name have for you?

B: I don't know what meaning it has.

A: Was it your parents that gave it to you?

B: Yes.

A: How old are you currently?

B: 64 years old.

A: Do you remember what year you were born?

B: I've forgotten, I don't know what year, I don't know.

A: You don't remember the day or month either?

B: I don't know, I don't remember.

A: What about the Khmer year?

B: I have no idea.

A: What about the zodiac year? The rat, ox, tiger, rabbit—

B: Um, the year of the goat!

A: I see. The year of the goat!

B: Yes.

A: And where were you born, where is your hometown?

B: I was born in Damnak Pring [village], Moha Leaph commune, Kaoh Thonthoeng [Kaoh Sotin] district, Kampong Cham province.

A: I see. And were you there in your hometown for a while, did you just move here?

B: I couldn't count the years I was there!

A: So a long time?

B: Yes.

A: And how many years have you been here?

B: I've been here for 18 years already.

A: Could you tell us your current address, where you are living right now?

B: Here?

A: Yes.

B: When it rains, I sleep in the school.

A: Um—

B: At night if it isn't raining, I sleep right here.

A: Yes, but where are you living right now, like the specific address?

B: I'm at Damnak Pring village.

A: No, I mean right here, where you are currently, your current address, you know?

B: There isn't a specific address. There is no name for this place.

A: I see.

B: I just beg for alms here.

A: So we are at Wat Koh, and you have been here for a long time. What about your siblings, how are they? Do they keep in touch with you nowadays?

B: My siblings are all in Kampong Cham.

A: How many siblings do you have?

B: One of my siblings is dead—uh, two of them have died. I only have two left, three including me. [Inaudible]

A: Um—

B: But things are getting better for them, not like me, it's really hard for me. After I had a child get married, she brought her kids to me because her husband left her for another wife, and she had three children. I've looked after them ever since they were small until now that they are bigger. I want them to go to school. The monks saw that one of the kids was suffering too much so they ordained him as a monk and brought him into the temple. Another child went to school and has learned up to the 7th grade already in the countryside. The relatives look after them and send money every month.

A: I see.

B: They also make food for that child!

A: What are your siblings' names?

B: Mung.

A: It's only you two?

B: Mung and Yan, only us three.

A: So including you, there are three of you!

B: Yes.

A: How many girls and boys?

B: Two girls and one boy—

A: I see. So—

B: Uh, some have died—there were two girls and two boys, but some of them have died already.

A: Which child are you?

B: Sorry?

A: Which child are you in the family?

B: I'm the second child.

A: I see. And what stories can you remember from when you were young with your siblings?

B: I don't remember any, they went their way, and I went mine. When we were together, my mother took care of us, I remember that she was the one who raised us.

A: Was that your biological mother?

B: Yes, it was my biological mother.

A: Only your biological mother took care of you?

B: Yes, she was the one who took care of us.

A: What are your parents' names?

B: Father was named Than and mother was named Chon.

A: I see. Are they still alive today?

B: They died a long time ago. They were relocated to Battambang and were beaten and killed there [during the Khmer Rouge].

A: Both your mother and father?

B: Yes.

A: Oh, I'm so sorry! So, were you relocated altogether?

B: I didn't go with them, because at that time I was working as a vegetable planter. I was doing that. I was a young child then, but they said I was a young woman and they sent me to the vegetable fields. I didn't go with my parents, I didn't even know that they had left. Only after they had gone, the village leader brought a letter for me to see, it had their fingerprints on it. Honestly, they didn't know how to read or write. It wasn't [a letter from my parents], the ones who wrote it were the ones that forced them to go.

A: Oh. I see. And did you see your parents die?

B: They died in Battambang, I didn't know about it, at that time I was here.

A: You only heard it from someone?

B: They told me, some people who went with them came back and told me.

A: Oh—

B: My older sibling Pisey was the one who went.

A: I see.

B: That older sibling was one of them that was relocated with [my parents], and was the one who came back and told me that my mom and dad died.

A: So you must have been devastated when you heard that!

B: I was, but I didn't know what to do. I ran to ask the village leader, and he said my parents were somewhere and said that they wrote [a letter] to me, but in all reality, my parents didn't know how to write.

A: Oh. What do you know about your parents from before that time? What did they do for a living?

B: [My father] was a home builder.

A: I see. What about your mother?

B: My mother didn't do anything, she was always busy or sick.

A: Oh, she stayed at home! So, your father built homes—did he learn from other [construction workers], or was he self-taught?

B: He learned from others.

A: I see.

B: But when he did construction, he did it in the temples. Once, he made a mistake and fell which caused a lot of swelling. When he fell, it was because [inaudible]. He stopped doing that work when the Pol Pot era began.

A: I see, yes.

B: And he was a construction worker, but he was in debt, he had a lot of debt.

A: Oh—

B: I suffered so much! I had to work as a seamstress, we made Kramas!

A: I see.

B: When I was hired to be a seamstress, I took out some money first. I gave them money because they required a fee from us. Back then I was 13, but I put that aside so I could help my parents have peace of mind. I was hired as a seamstress to make money and pay them so [the brokers] wouldn't come yell at [my parents].

A: Oh—

B: When I saw them struggling too much, the two of them couldn't accomplish it on their own. They called us to go work in the field, and all I had was an old bike and we would go, not in any sort of hurry. We went to go transplant rice seedlings and came back [very tired]. It was miserable!

A: Oh—

B: It has been very difficult to endure life up to now!

A: I see. So, were your grandparents knowledgeable back then?

B: All of my grandparents have been dead for a long time.

A: Were you alive to know them?

B: I was not.

A: What are their names—on both your father's and mother's sides?

B: I only know my father's side, I don't know any on my mother's side.

A: I see. What are their names on your father's side?

B: Their names are Grandma Chheang and Grandpa Aek.

A: Yes. So, what do you remember about your grandparents—what were they like, and

what kind of people were they?

B: When my grandmother was alive, she took me to live with her, because she saw my mother struggling, not having anything to eat, so she took me in. I only went back when I was grown up a bit. It was miserable!

A: So you've gone through a lot in your life.

B: It has always been difficult, I've seen it all. I've seen someone fall off of a bridge. I went to go sell things at Ou Reang, and my father fell off a bridge that night and almost died!

A: Oh my!

B: I've seen it all, it's been miserable!

A: How did that happen?

B: Sorry?

A: At that time, why did that happen?

B: When my grandma and I went to go selling at Ou Reang, my father went when it was night—it was at 3 o'clock in the morning.

A: It was too dark?

B: It was 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, it was too dark. The bridge wasn't climbable, he lost his balance and fell backward to the bottom of the bridge. He had good luck—an angel helped save him!

A: Was he all right?

B: He was all right. They told my grandmother that there had been a few people who had died from falling off that bridge, they told us that!

A: Oh—

B: And at that time, we only had about 2000 riel with us.

A: Was that bridge very tall?

B: It wasn't very tall, but the ground underneath was very deep.

A: Was it a wooden bridge?

B: It was stone! That bridge was [a stone bridge].

A: It was stone and slippery, and he fell?

B: It was stone, but it was slippery and he fell off. He fell and he didn't move or get up. And I was weak, it took us a while to get down to him.

A: I see. Were you riding bikes at that time?

B: Yes. We were riding bikes.

A: You were able to climb that even when you were weak?

B: It was very hard. I had to help take care of my parents since I was 13, all I knew was hard work.

A: So, what kind of work have you done since you were a child?

B: When I was young, I was a Krama seamstress. When I had children and grandchildren and my husband died, it was so hard again. I would harvest vegetables from the fields and exchange them for rice, maybe four or five cans of [rice]. I would bring that back and make it for my kids to eat every day. My neighbors were rich, they saw me suffering, and the people who lived next to me saw my suffering.

A: I see. So—

B: They lived next to me and saw me suffering and went and bought me 50 kilograms of rice.

A: Yes,

B: They gave me 50 kilograms of rice to eat and also money. I had never seen paper money, [I thought to myself,] what is a 10000 riel bill? Even so, they gave me 30000 riel and they did good deeds for us, they carried water and they helped my whole family, even my mother and father!

A: Yes,

B: My life has been so hard!

A: And so at that time—

B: So up to now it's just been too difficult. On holy days, I would go and wash dishes at the temple and give food to the monks, even though they know I'm extremely poor.

A: I see.

B: [I cleaned] all the dishes and the spoons the monks gave to me, cleaned it all until I was done.

A: Oh—

B: I've been miserable, that's all I've known is suffering. I've seen it all, my life has been very hard.

A: I see. And during the hardest times, what sort of things did you do to help ease your burdens?

B: I didn't know what to do. When I was suffering intensely, my older sibling-in-law saw my difficult situation and gave me an old bike, he would let me ride the bike and take him to grind flour and sell it.

A: Oh—

B: We went to sell it, and they would set it on one side of the bike, or on the top and would tie it to the bike. It was a precarious ride to where they sold it!

A: Where did they sell it?

B: They went to Tuol Trea, or thereabouts.

A: Oh—

B: Very, very far!

A: I see.

B: All we did was ride the bike and go sell.

A: And you've stopped doing that, right?

B: Yes?

A: You recently stopped doing that sort of work, right?

B: Yes!

A: So which markets do you sell at nowadays?

B: Up until now, I've struggled too much. Even though I eat, I'm never full and even when I was working for wages and sold mortars, it wasn't enough for me, it isn't possible anymore. I requested a ticket to go to Phnom Penh from the village leader, and they said they would give it to me. But when it came time to go, they didn't give it to me. When they didn't allow me to go, the village vice president said to go ahead, and that he sign the forms for me. The village vice president signed for me, and I came here, I've been here up until the present day. I had never been to Phnom Penh before or knew how it was. I saw them hurrying around busily in front of the Royal Palace, and I asked them what they were doing. They said that they were distributing gifts and donations, so they had put me here, and because I had wanted to go and ask for aid from them. They were all one group together, and I was all alone. They were all people who came from Prey Veng, and I was alone with my one child who had crippled hands and feet and couldn't walk anywhere.

A: How many children do you have?

B: Three.

A: How many girls and how many boys?

B: I have one girl, who is dead. I also have another girl who is still alive, and also my crippled child. My crippled child is dead. That's why I say I've suffered so much!

A: So how many are alive?

B: There's only one left alive today.

A: A girl?

B: One girl.

A: Is she disabled?

B: I've had 3 children.

A: And there's nothing wrong with her?

B: She's not disabled.

A: Where is she now?

B: Nowadays, I had her go to be a wage worker washing dishes for others.

A: Oh—

B: I gave her away there, and she's going to school.

A: Oh, is she in Phnom Penh, your daughter?

B: Yes. She washes dishes for people in Orussey.

A: Oh, does she come visit?

B: She comes back at 12.

A: 12 at night?

B: Yes! It's so hard, she only gets 130 dollars a month.

A: And so you're with your daughter every day?

B: Yes, me and my daughter, us two.

A: Any grandchildren?

B: Grandchildren—there are two or three of us that get together, that is, children and grandchildren.

A: Yes,

B: One of my kids became a monk over there at the pagoda, I've forgotten the name [of the pagoda].

A: Oh?

B: The monks took them to become a monk.

A: But before you said you only have one child left.

B: I said I only have one child left, but I'm talking about my grandchild.

A: Oh. How many grandchildren do you have?

B: I have 3 grandchildren.

A: So, there are two here, and one of them is a monk?

B: One of them goes to school here and another studies at home.

A: I see.

B: Yes, that one learns at home and the other was taken by the monks to become a monk.

A: I see.

B: Yes.

A: So now that you have only one child left, what plans do you have for her?

B: I don't know, I don't have any plans for her. Things are difficult for me every day.

A: Oh, you've had quite the life full of sadness—

B: And I'm in quite a lot of debt, to tell you the truth. I am in a lot of debt. I haven't paid it all off, it's about a million—130 [dollars] left. I don't have the money to give them, and they are asking for it.

A: Who are you in debt to?

B: I can't really make money. If I could, I would and I would pay them back.

A: Yes,

B: They come to my house and take my money, I count it out and they take it.

A: Oh—

B: I'm in debt to them, I went to vote, and just made it back.

A: I see.

B: I came from my house, and I still don't have enough money to pay them back.

A: Do you think that there is any other way you could make money to make a living or have your child help you—?

B: What else could I do? I'm already old and very busy, and my leg is injured in a motorcycle accident. A motorcycle crashed into my side, and I don't have any money to get it looked at, not even a dollar.

A: So what grade did you study to in school?

B: Me? When I started learning?

A: Yes.

B: I learned until the 4th grade.

A: 4th grade?

B: I learned a bit of French but have forgotten it all, I was the oldest in my grade and I stopped learning.

A: Oh. So—

B: My grandmother had me go to school, but other than her, no one [encouraged me to learn], not even my mom. My grandmother had me go to school when she was looking after me. When I was with and helped my grandmother, she always had me go learn at school.

A: So why did you stop learning in 4th grade?

B: I was the oldest child in the grade, and I [wasn't good at learning French]. I was afraid I wouldn't pass, and I was embarrassed, so I stopped.

A: So, you never learned how to read or write French?

B: Nope.

A: What about Khmer? Can you read and write?

B: I know how to write a bit.

A: Oh. I see. And where did you go to school at that time?

B: I went to school at Damnak Pring.

A: What was the name of the school?

B: Damnak Pring school.

A: I see. And at that time, did you have any good friends?

B: All my friends got married. They were all rich, and they all went and got married at Poi Pet and other places.

A: I see. And your friends at Poi Pet, what were their names?

B: Marim.

A: I see.

B: Another's name is Sithan.

A: I see.

B: They've all gone to Poi Pet.

A: Are you still in touch with them?

B: Sorry?

A: Do you still talk to them?

B: Nope, they left a long time ago.

A: So they've been away for a long time—

B: Yes.

A: All the way from way back when! And when you were in school, did you ever have a dream of becoming something?

B: I didn't know what to do, because in school I would pass tests [in a certain subject], but my grandma didn't let me go learn that subject. And there were some people that threw rocks about this size, they told me to study that subject, but my grandmother said that she wouldn't let me do it!

A: I see. So when you were a kid, you didn't have any dreams of becoming something when you grew up?

B: No, I didn't want to become anything.

A: Oh, so when you were a kid, what games did you like to play?

B: I didn't play any games besides "Flick the Rubber Band!" [Laughs]

A: Yes,

B: Every day we'd play jump rope and that rubber band game.

A: And you—

B: It was so much fun!

A: I see. Did you like anything besides the game where you would flick the rubber band?

B: I didn't play anything besides that.

A: I see. So what kind of food do you like to eat?

B: It's very hard for me, nowadays everything I eat is unappetizing. Before, I liked stir-fried

beef with long beans.

A: I see.

B: Stir-fries and also Kuyteav!

A: Yes,

B: Yes.

A: So that's all you liked eating, just stir fry?

B: Yes!

A: That's your favorite food? [Laughs]

B: Now that I'm old, I just crave seaweed soup, it's tasty to me—seaweed soup and chab chhay soup.

A: I see. And what about music, do you like to listen to that?

B: Yes, ever since I was young I have!

A: Is that so? What sorts of songs do you like listening to?

B: I'm not sure what songs, I just listen [to anything]. [Laughs]

A: I see. And do you have a favorite singer that you listen to and support?

B: I don't know who sang what, but I like listening to old songs by Sinn Sisamouth and Huoy Meas.

A: I see.

B: I just listen [to anything].

A: Yes, I see.

B: But nowadays, I don't listen as much.

A: So you don't really listen now, I understand.

B: I listen to old songs, the current songs I don't really listen to.

A: I see. So how do you think your life has changed since you were young to now?

B: It hasn't changed, it's been like this ever since the beginning, I liked eating stir fry and soup, and now I like eating other things.

A: Yes, but what about your life? Like, what experiences have you had that have changed through the years? What have you learned from marriage and having kids, all the way to now? Has not a lot changed?

B: Nothing has changed, I have lived day-to-day, struggling for a living, not feeling well.

A: And when were you married?

B: Yes?

A: Do you remember when you were married?

B: I've forgotten.

A: Was it after the Lon Nol era?

B: It was a long time ago.

A: Was it before or after the Pol Pot era?

B: Before.

A: Before Pol Pot?

B: Yes!

A: So how old were you when you got married?

B: I was 18.

A: I see. Did you get married then out of love, or was it arranged by your parents?

B: My parents arranged it.

A: Did you receive a dowry?

B: Yes, just like nowadays!

A: Yes, So how did you meet your husband, or did you meet him when you got married? Were you in love with him at that time?

B: No, they brought him here.

A: Oh, they brought him?

B: Yes!

A: So you had never met each other before?

B: We had never met each other.

A: So how many years had you been married before having kids?

B: 2 years.

A: 2 years? And so you had 3 kids but some have passed away from disease. And now—

B: They died, one died because of a crippled leg, she fell in some water and drowned and we didn't see her. We found her under a monkeypod tree!

A: Oh, I'm so sorry!

B: She was in [the water], she had just barely died.

A: Oh—

B: It was so hard with me and my kids, and when she died we didn't dare to go to their mother's house [meaning the house of her mother-in-law]. After that point, we never went!

A: Uh, they were your own kids, weren't they?

B: Their mother—like, my husband's mother.

A: Oh, your mother-in-law?

B: I didn't want to go visit, I had never gone before.

A: Oh—

B: Not at all. I had resolved to raise my kids on my own.

A: So she had—oh, generally speaking, you used to send your kids for her to watch?

B: When I went to go to work, I didn't leave them there.

A: I see.

B: And one was disabled.

A: Oh, so what experiences have you undergone in your life that were so hard that you can't forget them?

B: Depression, struggles, starvation, sometimes I didn't have any rice to eat.

A: Oh—

B: It was so hard, I've been through it all.

A: Yes, and when your life was the hardest, what did you think to do, or want to do? What did you do to help?

B: I just wanted to find an organization to help me out. I was in way too much debt. I went to an Indian organization for help, but when they heard I lived too far away, they didn't come to help.

A: Oh—

B: They didn't come, they were afraid they couldn't make it there. They heard that I was too poor. They heard I was too far and they were afraid they couldn't go. I went to a French organization for help, and they also couldn't help.

A: So do you think that there was anything you could have done besides going to others for help to improve your livelihood?

B: I didn't know what to do, working with my own hands didn't work. If I sit for a while, I start to get dizzy.

A: Oh.

B: Every day, I just endure it. Some say that if I gain some weight and drink enough water I'll get better. I'm constantly sick, I've never felt well.

A: I see.

B: I'm doing barely well enough to eat.

A: Yes, So do you have any good stories from your life? Any stories that make you happy?

B: Sorry?

A: Any stories that you remember, that make you happy?

B: I don't have any happy stories, I've always suffered, and my life has always been hard.

A: Oh.

B: From my youth to my old age I have suffered, there have been no happy times.

A: I see. And are you a Buddhist?

B: I am, some of us know how to recite the Dharma Sutra, and some of us don't].

A: I see.

B: We go to learn with them and whatnot.

A: Yes, So as a Buddhist, what influence has Buddhism had on your life?

B: They taught me the alphabet and the Dharma, they gave me books, and we went and learned together.

A: Yes, I see!

B: I didn't know what to do.

A: Hmm.

B: I struggled.

A: I see. And is your whole family Buddhist, do they all believe in Buddhism?

B: Yes!

A: And why do you believe in Buddhism?

B: I don't know why, [laughs] just because of the good deeds and holidays and [the concept] of sin.

A: So you just believe?

B: I just believe with them and for myself.

A: Oh. I see. So, to finish, do you have any advice you would like to pass on to your kids and the next generation?

B: I don't have anything to say. Only that they should go to school so that they don't have a hard life, and so that they will have work to do—so that things will be easier for them.

A: Yes, that's right!

B: When you know how to work, then you have become mature.

A: Yes.

B: You can get a job if you can read, you can go anywhere. If you don't do this, then your life will be hard, believe me!

A: Yes.

B: My kids went to school, but one of my daughters didn't go at all, she was looking after my crippled daughter, and she never went to school—she couldn't abandon her younger sister.

A: Yes, So how do you want them to live, or what other things would you like to say to them, to the next generation?

B: I don't have anything to pass on. [Laughs]

A: That's it?

B: Yes! That's it.

A: Yes, to finish up, thank you for—

B: It has been so hard.

A: Yes. So, to finish up, thank you for letting me interview you today. So, they would like to post the audio recording of your interview on the university's website. Do you give them permission to do that?

B: No worries! [Laughs] If I was interviewed and they didn't put it up, what was it for?

A: That's right, so you approve?

B: Yes!

A: Yes, so thank you, I wish your whole family to be blessed and have happiness, including your grandkids!

B: Yes!

A: I hope they have good health and have a great New Year's, and that they can help your family like you do, as well as have new ideas for jobs they can do to earn a living.

B: Yes!

A: Yes. Thank you so much for today.

Interview translated by Ethan Arkell and edited by Thomas Barrett.