

Interview of Kem Visal

A: Interviewer: Leng Pheakdey

B: Interviewee: Kem Visal

Summary of the Interview

Kem Visal was born in 1970 in Kampong Trabek district, Prey Veng province. In this interview, she shares what it was like to grow up as a child in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge, having been taken in by extended family members. She also shares a poignant story of struggling to provide for her daughter after a rough divorce with her husband. Despite her struggles, she exhibits remarkable resilience and describes finding solace in converting to Christianity.

A: So, there is a university and they have a project to interview families of members to understand more about them. So, may I please ask you some questions about your life, since you were young until you grew up? And we also want to take a recording, record what you say, and the university will send your interview back to you for you to listen. Afterwards, they will put it on their website. You will let me do the interview?

B: Yes, I agree.

A: Yes, what is your name? Your full name?

B: My full name is Kem Visal, but my nickname is Penh Koemsan.

A: Do you know how to write Khmer or speak Khmer?

B: I can speak and write Khmer.

A: Do you know any other language other than Khmer?

B: I've learned, but I don't know much, I don't have money.

A: What language did you learn?

B: As a child, I learned French and after that time, I studied English, but I learned just a little, not a lot, as I don't have the money to study.

A: Where were you born? What village, what district?

B: Born in Kampong Trabek district, Prey Veng province.

A: And in the countryside or in the city?

B: In Kampong Trabek and in the district near Kole School.

A: So in the countryside?

B: Yes! In the countryside.

A: Right now, how old are you?

B: I am 48 or 49 years old.

A: And in what year were you born?

B: 1970.

A: 1970, and you don't remember the day or month?

B: The 5th day of the 5th month, actually it's not really clear, but that's what they put when I started learning because of parents at that time. They didn't tell me clearly and they don't remember either, when we entered the Pol Pot era, we didn't remember the day or month.

A: No worries. In what year did you get married?

B: 1970, uh—1990.

A: Your grandparents were the ones that organized it, right?

B: The parents arranged it.

A: Tell me a little bit about the family when you first met your husband.

B: When I first met him, we had never seen each other before. It came from his mom's side, she liked me at that time, so she told her son that there was a girl she liked. I worked as a teacher outside of his house. After that, she liked me, she told her son to come and spy on me. To that point, he liked me and told his mother that he was satisfied. And I did not know his character well and I did not know his appearance yet. I just saw him from afar and I wasn't satisfied because I saw him keeping his hair long. And at that time, I wasn't satisfied.

A: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

B: I have ten siblings.

A: How many brothers and how many sisters?

B: Two brothers, and eight sisters. I am the third child.

A: And could you tell us a little bit about all your siblings, what memories do you have about them?

B: Of all my ten siblings, I remember that there is one that has passed away already because they were hung. Yeah, one was hung, after the youngest and I still have one older brother, who is the second born. And one more older sibling, she has neuropathy—the first born. And now, she's all right, and she takes medicine every month. And for all my younger siblings, they're all right. They are happy, just like normal, no problems there.

A: Do you know when your father and mother were born? Do you remember?

B: When they got married?

A: Their birth!

B: When they were born? I don't know what day they were born because I've never thought of asking. If you ask about the time they were born, I know that my mother used to say that she was [...] since 14 years old. She always said that. For my father, he never said anything.

A: So, for right now, how old is your mom?

B: She is older than 60 years, maybe 66 or 67, because I only know the Khmer year. She is the year of the Rooster, but I don't know how to count Khmer years, I don't know her actual age. She's the year of the Rooster in Khmer years, but I don't know which year that is, I just

don't know.

A: And for your Dad?

B: For my Dad, when he passed away, he was 60 years old.

A: Ok, now I would like to ask about your grandfather and grandmother. Do you remember what they used to do? When they were living, do you have anything you remember?

B: My grandpa—I don't know very clearly, because I was born and was very tiny, maybe in the year '73. The district I was born in was Kampong Trabaek, but my hometown was in Ba Phnum, in Ba Phnum district. During the conflict, in '73, they fought each other in Kampong Trabaek but at that time, I didn't know. The Vietnamese, they came in to help a lot. At that time, my mother brought me to Ba Phnum to escape, to escape the water, the rivers, and marsh. She brought two of her children, one of my younger siblings and myself, she brought by the hand. I was still small when I came. And I saw my grandfather, he was old already. I saw that he couldn't do anything, but he had children. My uncle, when I was tiny, he used to watch a lot of buffalo. He had a lot of buffalo, maybe more than ten heads, and he only watched buffalos. My uncle, his name was Hor, he would watch his buffalo to the mountain. We still have his two daughters left—my aunt and Iy Oun, and Iy Hat were at the house. And my other uncle, I don't know where he went, like, with his cousins that are far away in Preah Sdach District. And I saw my Uncle Hor and my aunt, the both of them, and my grandfather, he was at the house because he was old, he was 70 years old then.

A: Do you know where your mother and father were born?

B: My father and mother—in truth, my mother was born in Kali. They were born in Kali District, and Ba Phnum district—that is, Kali village, Ba Phnum district, Prey Veng province.

A: And your father?

B: My Dad was born in Chheu Kach, in Ba Phnum, and Ba Phnum district in person, and Prey Veng province too.

A: And for your grandfather and grandmother, do you know where they were born too?

B: My grandfather on my Dad's side, I don't know exactly where he was born, but I've only ever seen him in Ba Phnum district. He—my grandfather and grandmother affirmed their relationship and he was in Ba Phnum district, his house was in Ba Phnum. He still watched his grandkids. And my father got a wife, went to marry my mother. I've heard him say that after he was married, he went to live with my mother in Kali village. He didn't stay at Chheu Kach any longer. Ba Phnum district, they called it Chheu Kach village.

A: Which schools did you learn at?

B: It was after the Pol Pot generation when I was still young, 7 or 8 years old. I learned in the Pol Pot era, I studied in their classes until the fourth grade, when I was more than 10 years old. After 10 years old, I didn't—honestly, I did not learn, after 10 years old, I didn't—honestly, I did not learn. My aunt, she had her family, named Aunt Oun. She loved me, and she took me to go with her, I went to stay in Chheu Kach. I went to Chheu Kach, and her husband was an artist. To that time, she brought me and I didn't learn. And there, they didn't yet learn. After then, she moved to the province and had me stay in Chheu Kach, I ran

from the bombing.

A: The Pol Pot era?

B: Not the Pol Pot generation, this was after the Pol Pot generation already.

A: The state of Cambodia?

B: Yes! The state of Cambodia, but the generation of—

A: Did that generation have Pol Pot?

B: Yes! Pol Pot was still fleeing to the mountain—they were hiding themselves there. And after a while, they fired on us once. And then, I split my clothes, I was still young—just older than 10 years when they shelled us. By then, I was finished with that, and my aunt took me to be in the province, she also had me start second grade.

A: Elementary school, right?

B: The primary school in that province, and to that point in time—

A: What is the name of that school? Your elementary school?

B: They call it Knong Elementary School. Knong Elementary School is close to the District Public Office—wait, it's close to the Ministry of Education building. They call it Knong Elementary School—in that provincial town, they call it Knong Elementary School. And I still learned there, maybe until second or third grade, and after that, I also wasn't well and I moved houses. I moved back to my hometown, ran back to my mother. I wasn't with my aunt, my uncle who came from Phnom Penh, his name was Phan. It was because he split from my grandfather, and he didn't know where to go. He also had a wife, who was a cousin, and he came to ask me to live with him more. I went with him, and he took me to go watch his children. Then, I told him that I would help watch the children, but to let me study. I asked him to let me study, and after that he allowed me to go and learn. I learned in Phnom Penh, at the school of Wat Koh.

A: Elementary or Junior High School?

B: Just Elementary School, Wat Koh Elementary School. At that time, I took brought my younger cousin, to come to learn every day. I never rode a cycle—rickshaw, I didn't have money. After that point, I learned in third and fourth grade there, then my uncle took me back to my hometown, back to home. I also went back to be with my aunt, to be back with my aunt. What's more, I also entered to learn in the province, I entered and learned until seventh grade. In that generation, they took the seventh grade to test for the diploma, and I tested and passed. I was in need, I didn't have anything to eat at all, and I didn't have any money to spend. And they were mad at us—rice, they didn't want us to eat as well. After that, I was destitute, but I still went and learned until I took the test and passed. I tested and passed, and I applied to be a teacher as well. I applied to be a teacher after I tested and passed.

A: So, you tested and passed junior high school, and afterwards you tested to be what kind of teacher?

B: I took a school exam, and then I tested to start teaching, and applied for two places, one in an elementary school, and a middle school that month. They used to call it middle school,

but now they call it—

A: Junior high school?

B: Yes! The Junior High School—after that, I tested and passed both tests. After passing both, my mother said, “take the Junior High, you will be happy. Cast away the elementary school.” After that, I learned for three years, they call it seven plus three. Until then, I learned. After learning, I learned until I was skilled, and the teacher let me take the test. Tested for twenty-seven months, not fully three years. They had me learn for twenty-seven months, I tested and passed more, tested and passed. The teacher let me pass and after that, my mother told me, “You continue to learn until you are complete, it is not necessary to leave yet.” And after that, I continued to learn for the full 3 years until it was complete, and I left. I started working as a teacher outside of my mother-in-law’s home, and I came to my mother, she prepared the marriage.

A: So, as you used to work, did you only work as a teacher?

B: I did a lot, not that I only used to be a teacher, but at first, I was a teacher.

A: And afterwards?

B: And after that, I stopped when I got married, I stopped. I stopped and I went to—they call it the Thai Border, I took my husband, he led me there. I got married, and after only 3 months, my husband took me to the Thai border, to Nong Chan. Once we went to Nong Chan, he said, “wait for me to go to America” —uh, he wanted to bring each of us to America, all of us. After that, we didn’t [...] to come back to Cambodia, we [...] to give up going. And to that point in time, I went there and still was a teacher. But at that time, I was allowed to work wherever as well, but I was a teacher.

A: So, ever since you were young until you grew up, how have you seen your life be different?

B: During my life, since I was small I was poor, but now that we’ve grown up we know how to find work. To work, and receive wages, to have money to spend, and the difficulty has been lessened. Back then, I didn’t think that—I didn’t know there was a God too. I also didn’t know how I should respect God too, I didn’t really know. And I just saw my mother and father go to the pagoda, my Aunt and Uncle went to the pagoda, and I only know how to follow them. I didn’t know what to do, or how to do anything to get to God, I didn’t know. And I didn’t yet know how to ask what God was, or what to ask if there was a God. And our lived at that time was difficult. And I only knew how to live, to do whatever, to look for work, just like them. So, it was different from when I was small, we didn’t have money and now we have money because we can work. Since I was young, we didn’t know how to work, we watched other’s children, and worked around the house. They never gave us wages, not even giving us clothes that they never cut for us. Since youth until now, we can find money and we can buy clothes for ourselves.

A: And what kind of food do you like to eat?

B: I only like Khmer food. I just like Samlar brahaoer vegetable soup, and Samlar kako soup. Because in the Pol Pot generation, I didn’t have anything to eat. I never had anything to eat, I only ate rice porridge for children, they didn’t want us to eat. They said that us children

were big already, and they had us eat rice like the old people, but only a little less than older people. So, Samlar kako and Samlar brahaoer soup is what I like the best of all.

A: And then, who did you learn to cook that food from?

B: I've known how to cook ever since I was 10 years old. And because I was with my uncle, and with my aunt, they had me go to the market to buy food and buy other stuff. They said that for this kind of soup, you need this and that—for example, for Samlar machu [sour soup], you need to buy sour ingredients, buy rice patty herb, morning glory, and buy other things, and you have sour soup. And for Samlar kako, they told me the ingredients, the ingredients included lemongrass, there was galangal, lime leaf, turmeric. So, they told me all that, I know because of them. And they trained and taught me how to do it, they had me do it when they got busy. They told me to do it, they would tell me, until now they only know how to tell me to make the food. I've known how until now, ever since I was 10 years old. It was because they used me until I knew it all, I would see them do it and I would know how to do it.

A: Now, can you please tell me some of the most difficult times in your life, and ask how you can get through it?

B: It was most difficult for me when I left my family. At that time, I was naive. My husband wanted to leave me, he just asked me and that's it. And I remember that he asked, and after that I didn't say anything. I went to help harvest my mother's rice—I went to help harvest my mother's rice and my mother suddenly said, "Leave each other?" and I wondered why leave each other? After that, my mother said, "Don't leave" and I didn't say anything too. I went and met him again, my child was still small, I met him again. He said to part from each other, he said it three times, to which I said, "if you want to leave, then leave." I also arranged with the subdistrict Sangkat according to the commune, and I requested of their village that we could leave each other. So their village leader did the arbitration, after that, they didn't consent. After they didn't consent, I told the village leader to write up the paper, and I would go to take my fingerprint. Then, they wrote up the fingerprint paper, they wrote up the fingerprint paper for me, and I went to give my fingerprint. After the fingerprint, they said—they began to tease loudly, and I said, "What are you teasing about? You speak so much!" And after that was over, I broke away from my husband. My child was still small, 4 years old, it had just learned to walk. Then, it was so hard! I brought my child to the province. My Aunt told me to take my child to be with her—the Aunt I used to be with in that province. After that, I put my child in the basket of my bike, in front of everyone on the road, so that everyone saw that we were so destitute. I put my child in the bike basket like a monkey. After that time, I endeavored to bike until I reached the province, which was 30 kilometers away. I biked all of one morning until the evening had come. Then, I strove to leave and look for work by myself, to send to my child with my Aunt, and send to my mother. Sometimes I brought my child and put it here, sometimes put it there. My child was destitute. After that time, I would find some money and I sent some to them. After that, I pitied my child so much. I stopped working and took my child to be with, took my child to be with [me]. I remembered work, I remembered work so I took my child to a rent a house they were at, I would lock my child in a room and go to work. I pitied my child, my child was over 10 years old, turned on the light, knew the house, knew how to use the lock. And if not, I was scared that it would follow and try to find me, on the road, I was

scared it would be hit by a car. Until one day, it told me that some days when I—I pity my child—I didn't lock the door it walked, saw me go down a road. It followed me on that road and looked for me but didn't see me. It just sat down and cried. I pity my child. We were so destitute, I looked for money and couldn't find anything. I couldn't find any money for my child for a long time, which is why I know the direction to find God. At that time, I looked for God, I looked in every direction. I remember that my grandfather, he burned incense—oh, he didn't burn incense but he went to the pagoda. And I saw them burn incense, and I only know how to follow them, I just followed them. I went here and didn't see [God], I went there and also didn't see [God], I went and sought [God] forever. And after that time, there was a day that God inspired me, for me to look for a church. I looked but could not find. I didn't know where to look, I only saw the Buddhist Church. I was also there for longer, still with the Buddhist church for all of ten years, from the year 2000 until the year 2010, when God inspired my thoughts again, which is why I went out and found it.

A: So, what makes you the happiest in life? When you got married, or had children or what? Could you tell us?

B: When I was the happiest, well, I wasn't always happy. I was only happy once I found God, I felt very happy, when I sought God and finally found Him, I was happy. I know that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the true church, and I am happy. I felt happy because I had the Book of Mormon and what's more is that I know the book of doctrines. Beforehand, I never knew about the gospel of Christ, I only knew how to follow and burn incense uselessly. At that time, I didn't yet know God, but after that point, I finally knew Him and it made me so happy. My feelings are that I felt like jumping and flying. So, that is why I spoke with—that I went to proselyte. I am happy when I talk about Him, about God—which is why I am so happy in my heart. I don't want to work or do anything for money anymore, I am happy because I don't have money. Right now, I am so happy because I know the gospel of God. I strive to do, and respect the Gospel of God, and that's it. I don't want anything more, whatever I have, whatever I can find, whatever I eat, and that's it, I am the happiest in my life. It is because I know God, that's it. And the Gospel, I read in the Liahona, and I also feel good. Whatever I need to do to have my family have joy in our lives, I also help to train and show my children, what they need to do to be happy in their family, in their lives with the world, how to have happiness and whatnot too. And like, what they should not do to cause suffering, not to care about money, and to strive to do whatever. And so, my life has happiness, and that's it.

A: And when you helped the missionaries share their message, in what ways did you do it?

B: I hadn't met them at first, like I said. I had never met the missionaries at all. And I also never know the Book of Mormon or the Holy Bible, never knew that too. I was still Buddhist. It was after the time I searched, that God inspired me, and I wondered "I know that there is a God in heaven. So, why is it that I still don't know the reason He gave me that inspiration to have me look for the church that was the biggest in the whole world?" And I looked, and I saw that I only heard others talk about the Church of Jesus Christ. To that time, I investigated more for the first time, they said it was bad. And after all that, I wasn't satisfied too. I didn't follow them, and I looked by myself every day until I found our church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When I entered, I felt happy that once, and I was fully satisfied, so I went to the Sisters and she asked me—she said, "Have you learned

with the Elders and Sisters yet, or no? And I said that “I don’t know, I don’t know, because I had come with just two people, mother and my child. I don’t know, and I came alone. I didn’t come with anyone. And I had never met the Elders and Sisters. When I went to meet with her, she said, “Oh it okay! Wait for 5 o’clock and you can meet with us.” After then, I learned with the Sisters once. And after that, she gave me the Book of Mormon, I was with my child—I always learned with my child.

A: And up until now, you have become a member of how many years?

B: Now, it is already 2016—I’ve been a member for six years now, we were baptized in 2010.

A: So, thank you so much for the interview and your eloquent words. So, very last, will you allow us to send this interview through your voice and take a few photos, and let them take it to paste on the website of Brigham Young University?

B: Yes!

A: You agree?

B: Of course!

A: Thank you very much!

Interview translated by Thomas Barrett.