

Interview of Reth Vannak

A: Interviewer: Nhem Sokunthea

B: Interviewee: Reth Vannak

Interview Summary

Reth Vannak was born in 1985 in Preaek Lieb village, Kandal province. In this interview, he recounts childhood stories and his family history, including a story of his mother reuniting with his soldier father after he was presumed dead. Despite encountering many life difficulties, Reth Vannak has achieved success as a proficient mechanic and expresses his devotion to his marriage and family.

A: Thank you for allowing me to interview you today. My name is Nhem Sokunthea, and I will be interviewing you today. What is your full name?

B: My name is Reth Vannak.

A: Yes, I am interviewing on August 16, 2016. This interview has been organized by Brigham Young University, in America. The university has a program to interview the people of Cambodia in order to record their stories and histories, so that your descendants and future generations can know about your story. Would you allow me to post this interview on the University's website?

B: Yes, you can.

A: Great. The website is titled www.cambodianoralhistoryproject.byu.edu. Let's start the interview! Can you tell me your full name again?

B: My name is Reth Vannak.

A: Do you have any nicknames?

B: I'm also called Nak.

A: Nak. And what is your birthday?

B: I was born in '85.

A: Nineteen what? 1985?

B: Yes, 1985.

A: Do you remember what month you were born in?

B: I've forgotten.

A: You can't remember?

B: Yes.

A: Okay. And where were you born?

B: I was born in Preaek Lieb.

A: In Preaek Lieb?

B: In Phnom Penh.

A: What commune?

B: I don't know the commune—

A: What district is it?

B: Uh, they just call it Preaek Lieb village.

A: In Kandal province?

B: Kandal province, yes. Kandal province.

A: Okay. Do you remember what lunar year you were born in?

B: I was born in the year of the tiger.

A: The year of the Tiger. And how many siblings do you have?

B: I have two sisters and two brothers.

A: Okay. And what child are you?

B: I am the oldest.

A: The oldest—

B: Yes.

A: And are all your siblings still alive, or how are they now?

B: They are all still alive.

A: And where are they?

B: They are in Kampong Som; I am in Kampong Cham.

A: Right.

B: We're far away from each other.

A: Yes, very far.

B: Yes.

A: What is your father's name?

B: My stepfather is named Phorn, and my biological father was Thy.

A: Thy? Thy what?

B: His last name was—I forgot his family name because I've separated from him since I was young.

A: So you don't know his last name?

B: Yeah.

A: Okay. And do you remember what year your father was born?

B: I don't really remember because of how long we've been separated—

A: Do you remember about when it was?

B: If I had to guess, he would be about 35 now.

A: Who's 35?

B: My biological father.

A: But you're 31—how is he 35?

B: Because my stepfather.

A: Your stepfather?

B: Yes.

A: Oh. What about your biological father?

B: My dad had me when he was still young. He's maybe in his forties.

A: So about 45 or 46 or so?

B: Yes, probably about 40.

A: Do you remember where your biological father was born? Not your stepfather, your real father—where is he?

B: My biological father is in Phnom Penh.

A: In Phnom Penh?

B: Yes. He is in Borey Keyla.

A: Okay, in Borey Keyla.

B: Yes, he has a house there.

A: Okay.

B: I've gone and visited him there once.

A: Okay. What about his hometown? Where is that?

B: He's from Prey Veng.

A: Prey Veng?

B: Yes.

A: So, do you remember anything of your biological father? How did he show love, how did he take care of his family? What kind of character did he have?

B: He loves me—

A: Right.

B: He's taken me from Prek Leap to stay with him at a market, what was it called—? They call it Malup Tapang.

A: Yes.

B: They still make small houses there. And so he's taken me there before. He helped me

learn both in Cambodian and English.

A: Right.

B: And I have a sister named Van Nida.

A: Right.

B: Who is a famous singer.

A: Oh, right. And what about your mother, what is her name?

B: My mother's name is Sen.

A: Sen. What's her family name?

B: It's Yun Sen.

A: Yun Sen. Do you remember the year she was born?

B: I don't remember exactly; I've never asked her.

A: Okay, how old is she now?

B: She is a little over 40.

A: How many years over 40?

B: 42 or 43 now.

A: Your biological mother—?

B: Yes.

A: How is that? You are about 31—it doesn't make sense that she would be 42 or 43—

B: Yes, I was just guessing, maybe she's about 50. I don't know her exact age.

A: Okay, you don't remember too much about her age—

B: She looks like she's still young!

A: But in fact, she's probably over 50?

B: I've never asked her; I'm far from her right now.

A: Okay, and what lunar year was she?

B: She was born in the year of the Pig.

A: What about your father, when was he born?

B: He was born in the year of the Tiger too.

A: The year of the tiger, okay.

B: Yes.

A: Where is your mother's hometown?

B: In Kampong Som.

A: Kampong Som, she was born in Kampong Som right?

B: No, she was born here in Praek Leap.

A: She was born here in Praek Leap too?

B: Yes, in Kandal province.

A: Why did she go to Kampong Som?

B: After she separated from her husband, she went over to Kampong Som, and she worked peeling crabs and shrimp.

A: Right.

B: But now things are getting better for her.

A: Right.

B: She isn't working any more, she relies more on her new husband now.

A: Okay, he works to take care of [her]?

B: Yes.

A: Can you describe how your life was when you lived with your mother?

B: My birth mother, right?

A: Yes, what memories do you have of living with her?

B: When I lived with her—when I was little, it was difficult.

A: Why's that?

B: We were pretty poor. We didn't have quite enough to eat; we didn't have enough of anything like some other people did.

A: Right.

B: And when my parents fought, I wasn't able to go to school.

A: Oh—

B: Yes. I had to work to help pay for things, to fix their life's problems.

A: Did you have to help raise your siblings too?

B: Yes, I took care of them and helped raise them.

A: And what about your grandparents on your father's side? What were their names?

B: Oh, I only remember my grandmother's name. Her name was Phan.

A: On your father's side, right?

B: Yes.

A: Okay. Is she still alive or has she passed away?

B: She is still alive, Grandma Phan. But my grandfather has passed away already. When I went and visited my father the other day I forgot to ask about their names, because my parents separated when I was very young—when my mom was six months pregnant with me.

A: Oh.

B: —they had already separated.

A: Okay. And how old is your grandmother now?

B: My grandmother—I don't really know. But I'd guess maybe 70 or older, from what she looks like.

A: And do you remember where your grandmother was born?

B: Right now, she is in—in Phnom Penh it's called—

A: But where was she was born—?

B: Her birthplace—

A: What district was she born in?

B: She's from Prey Veng.

A: In Prey Veng then?

B: Yes.

A: Okay. And do you remember what lunar year she was born in? What animal was she?

B: I've never asked her. I've only met her for a little bit at a time.

A: So when you've been able to meet her, what memories have you had with her, from your childhood until now?

B: I remember when I met her—when my father took me to live with him for a while, she would make me eat. Like she would force-feed me, when I was very young. She was always busy buying and selling chicken eggs for her business.

A: Okay.

B: The only person left at home was my aunt Phat. She once saw that my leg was infected, and so she took me to her home and cleaned it for me. She loved me and understood what I was going through.

A: Okay. And your grandfather, you don't remember anything about him, right?

B: Yes.

A: And that's on your father's side, right?

B: Yes.

A: What about the mother's side, do you remember the names of your grandparents?

B: Yes, I know them.

A: What were their names?

B: My grandfather's name is Reth. He has died already.

A: Okay.

B: Only my grandma Chheab is left.

A: On your mother's side, right?

B: No, on my stepfather's side.

A: What about your biological father?

B: My biological father—I told you earlier. Her name was Phan.

A: Phan. And your grandfather?

B: My grandfather is dead, I've forgotten his name.

A: Okay.

B: He died a long time ago.

A: And what about your mother's side?

B: That was on my father's side—

A: No, I mean what about on your mother's side?

B: On my mother's side, my grandfather's name is Chhum.

A: And your grandmother?

B: Her name was Sorn.

A: Grandma Sorn?

B: Yes.

A: Do you remember when they were born?

B: I don't really remember—I was born in a different time.

A: Okay.

B: I've never asked my mother.

A: That's okay. So do you remember where they were born—their hometown?

B: Their birthplace was here in Kandal province. They worked as lottery sellers.

A: Had they done that for a long time then?

B: Yes.

A: Oh—

B: He was one of the first ones. In the beginning it was only him.

A: Do you know how old your grandpa is?

B: My grandpa, I don't know. I've never met him.

A: What about your grandma, what year is she?

B: He died before I was born.

A: Right.

B: Yes. I don't know.

A: You don't know for both of them, right?

B: Yes.

A: Okay. And what memories do you have with your grandparents on your mother's side?

B: I remember that when I was very small, they would always call me to come eat.

A: Okay.

B: They loved me. They would never eat everything and would always save some food for me to have.

A: Okay.

B: They loved me the most of any of their grandkids!

A: The most special? [Laughs]

B: Yes, but they scolded me the most. [Laughs]

A: The most loved have to be scolded the most, right?

B: Yes! [Laughs]

A: Have your parents or your grandparents ever gone to live in a foreign country?

B: No, they've always been in Cambodia.

A: Okay. Let's talk about your studies. What grade have you learned to?

B: I've only been able to learn a little bit in school; only until the first grade. When I was about to go to the second grade, my mother decided to move to a different place.

A: Oh—

B: Before, she was in Tuol Prek village, in Kampong Cham province. When she moved, I decided to move away too, and went to find my dad.

A: Okay.

B: I made it to Kampong Som—no, I went to Koh Kong.

A: That's far.

B: Yes. I went to Koh Kong and started working and stopped my education. I worked on the boats there to make some money to help him.

A: Oh—

B: He was very poor.

A: When you were studying in the first grade, what school did you go to?

B: I learned at the Tuol Prek Village School.

A: Okay.

B: —in Kampong Cham province.

A: Have you learned any languages other than Cambodian?

B: I've learned before, but I can't use it. I don't remember it very well.

A: Okay.

B: I've only been able to learn a little.

A: Yeah. And have you ever farmed before?

B: I have before yes.

A: Did you plant rice, vegetables, fruit?

B: At one time I went with my brother-in-law in Memot and worked hard on a farm, they farmed cassava that were half an arm's length long.

A: Oh, and did you get a lot of produce?

B: Not very much. Most of the time other people would come and ask for cassava and purchase large quantities for 500,000 or 600,000 riel. We just planted it and when they saw it growing well they bought and took it.

A: And about your married life, when were you married?

B: In 2011.

A: What month?

B: February.

A: And where were you married?

B: In Tuol Prek village, Kampong Cham province, near Prey Chorr.

A: Okay. And was your marriage arranged by your parents, or did you marry your wife because you knew and loved her beforehand?

B: It was arranged by my parents.

A: Okay. So where did you first meet Vet? [His Wife]

B: We first met when my parents were in Toul Prek. We went to school with each other, and when we were young, we played together, and got to know each other.

A: And so you knew each other since you were young?

B: Yes. When I left, I went to Kampong Som, and met her again.

A: Oh—

B: And when I came back, we began to love each other—

A: And then were married.

B: Yes.

A: Yes. And did you give a dowry to her side of the family?

B: Yes, they were given a dowry.

A: Yes. That is the tradition in Cambodia. So, in comparison from your life in the past to the present, how is your life different? Was it easier or more difficult back then?

B: Before it was difficult; now it still is but just less.

A: Less now. Could you describe more about it?

B: Now I have a lot more knowledge. When I was single, I learned how to fix machines working for other people. And so I've used that experience now to open up my own shop.

A: Right.

B: I repair machines, motorcycles—

A: Right.

B: All kinds of machines.

A: Yes, and so you know how to do all of that?

B: Yes, I can fix gas engines and diesel engines—

A: Right.

B: I can fix motorcycles.

A: Okay!

B: I know how to do a lot of things.

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

B: Me?

A: Right.

B: I used to really like beef—

A: Okay.

B: Beef, like in a stir fry with tomatoes.

A: So you like that one the most?

B: Yes.

A: And do you know how to cook?

B: I do yes.

A: Who taught you how to cook?

B: I just watched my parents, and after I asked some questions, I could do it.

A: You didn't learn from your wife, right?

B: [Laughs] My wife also knows how to cook.

A: And when you're free, what do you like to do the most?

B: When I'm free, I like to do different things, like fixing broken things. I like to repair things.

A: You like to repair things then?

B: Right. I enjoy doing that kind of thing.

A: And when you have time off work, like when you go travel with your wife, what places do you like to go to the most?

B: Most of the time I like to be by the seaside.

A: Right.

B: And if not, I like to go by the river and by gardens.

A: Fun!

B: Yes.

A: Do you like to listen to music?

B: Yes, I do.

A: What artist do you like to listen to the most?

B: I love Preab Sovath.

A: Oh, he has a beautiful voice.

B: Yes, he does.

A: And do you know how to sing?

B: Me?

A: Yes.

B: I can sing a little, yes.

A: A little?

B: Yes.

A: What about musical instruments; do you know how to play any?

B: I don't know how to play any, but I love them.

A: Oh, you love them but haven't learned any?

B: If I went to school to learn how to play, I wouldn't have enough money to live.

A: Ah.

B: Because I have a wife and a family, I don't have enough money to. If I was still single, I could.

A: Okay. In our country we are aware of Pol Pot, and the wars that took place, right?

B: Yes.

A: And so have your parents or family ever told you about that time?

B: They've told me, yes.

A: What did they tell you?

B: They said that the time of Pol Pot was very difficult.

A: Yes.

B: They did not have enough to eat—sometimes all they would have is one bowl of porridge for their family. It wasn't enough.

A: Yes.

B: They told me that sometimes they would plant potatoes so that he could eat them later, but if they caught you, you would be in trouble.

A: Oh. And do you have many relatives on your mother or father's side that survived?

B: Yes, there were many.

A: That escaped the war?

B: Yes.

A: Right, so do you remember what your mother did after the Pol Pot [era] ended?

B: After Pol Pot ended, she sold rice cakes and corn, that kind of thing.

A: Okay.

B: She sold in Phnom Penh.

A: Okay. Do you remember when your parent were married? Which year?

B: I don't remember, no.

A: You don't remember? That's okay.

B: Yes.

A: In your life, is there a time that you've had that you can never forget? That you'll always remember?

B: I don't remember any.

A: Something that you remember the most? An event in your heart that you can never forget?

B: Yes. I only remember that when I got older and came of age, I never saw my father—

A: Right.

B: We were very poor.

A: Right.

B: Yeah. Sometimes he went to Kampong Som, and I would stay with my aunts or uncles, or with my grandfather, I was born while my grandfather was still alive, but my grandmother had died already. It was very hard for me. I felt like there was no one near me I could rely on. And my father was far away; he didn't know any news and couldn't come. At the time, he was a soldier. I never saw him at home, once they broadcasted over the radio, this is what my mother said—

A: Right.

B: One day we heard them broadcast over the radio that my father, Chon Vuthy, had died, and wouldn't be coming back. After five or six years of waiting, heartbroken, she eventually

went with some other women she knew to go work in Kampong Som.

A: Right.

B: Whenever she had a little extra money and time she would come and visit my grandparents—just her father, because her mother had already passed away by then.

A: Okay.

B: When she would come, she would bring trinkets or gifts for us, and we were so happy to see each other again.

A: Oh—

B: When I heard that my father had died—

A: Yes.

B: I didn't know what to do. I was still young and didn't really know much. About 4 or 5 years later my father came to visit us.

A: Ah! So, he hadn't died?

B: No, he hadn't died.

A: And so what had happened?

B: My biological father, when he came, my mother was so disappointed. My mother felt that—because he hadn't died—

A: So why'd they say he died?

B: Um, but when he came to visit, he brought his new wife with him.

A: Oh! And he still came!

B: When he came, he talked with her—he tried to joke around with my mother. My grandpa heard, and he told my mother that it wasn't necessary to take him back if he was still alive and hadn't come back before, and because he had taken a new wife already, so it wasn't necessary to take him back.

A: And at the time had your mother remarried?

B: My mother hadn't yet, no.

A: No? Oh dear.

B: No. He remarried before my mother. And so my mother became very offended.

A: Right.

B: She kept working and eventually met my stepfather.

A: Oh. He cut off all his feelings towards his wife and children.

B: Yes.

A: And so for you, after you were married to your wife, Vet, how many children did you have?

B: I have one already, and another on the way.

A: Okay, so you have one already and your wife is pregnant with another?

B: Yes, she is 5 months pregnant.

A: Girl or boy?

B: A boy.

A: A boy?

B: Yes.

A: Oh, alternating is good! So, you have one girl and one boy. That's cool! And what is your daughter's name again?

B: My daughter's name is Lisa.

A: Lisa—why Lisa?

B: Her name on the official records is Vatey—Vannak Vatey.

A: Okay. And you don't have any adopted children, do you?

B: No, I haven't.

A: And do you have a name for your baby boy yet?

B: No, not yet.

A: Not yet?

B: I haven't dared to [choose] yet.

A: Okay. And about your wife—what is her name again?

B: Her name is Vet.

A: What is her family name?

B: Phen, Phen Savet.

A: And what is she like?

B: Before I fell in love with her, she was gentle and calm. She didn't get angry easily; she was modest and respectful. When she sees another man, she doesn't glance at him out of the corners of her eyes to look. She keeps to herself.

A: Right.

B: She doesn't like to fool around.

A: She's faithful to you.

B: Yes.

A: Okay. And what do you and your wife do for work?

B: Right now, I've opened a repair shop—I repair diesel and gas engines, and also motorcycles.

A: And how is business?

B: It comes a little bit at a time.

A: Is it fairly busy?

B: Yes, it's going rather well.

A: And do you have any plans for your wife to go to school?

B: I think by the end of the year she'll be able to go.

A: Okay! And why do you want her to go study?

B: I want her to be well educated.

A: And how do you think the education now is?

B: I think that studying and education can help our country to grow and learn.

A: Right, it will help our country grow—

B: Yes, it will help us to be better off.

A: What do you do to help your family be happy and have peace?

B: We have to provide for them and support them so that they can learn.

A: Right.

B: Yes. We have to clothe them—

A: Yes.

B: And we have to earn enough money—it doesn't have to be too much, but we have to have a consistent income.

A: Right.

B: That's how we can be happy.

A: Yes, that's good.

B: Also by avoiding quarrels and fights.

A: Yes. And our families aren't always happy and healthy right?

B: Yes, sometimes we are sick or hurt—

A: Right. When you have those problems, how do you solve them?

B: We have to save enough money that if our children or if I become sick, we will have enough to take care of them or take them to get care.

A: Yes. So what meaning does your family have in your life?

B: My family?

A: Yes.

B: Their meaning?

A: Like, do you love your family?

B: Yes, I love them.

A: And can you imagine living without them?

B: No, I can't! [Laughs]

A: No? [Laughs]

B: No, I can't.

A: No matter how mean your wife is right?

B: Yes.

A: Right! Do you have any advice or experience that you'd like to share with the next generation?

B: Yes, according to my experience, we must have a lot of knowledge so that we know how to do a lot of things.

A: Right.

B: It doesn't matter what kind knowledge; we need to take it in. Cambodian, English, technical skills—

A: Yes.

B: Other kinds of things, we need to know a lot.

A: That's great.

B: Yes. Those things are never wrong.

A: Yes. Okay, this is my last question I have for you. Because this interview is being recorded for your descendants and others to listen to, what advice do you have to give to them? How do you want them to live their lives, and what do you want them to avoid?

B: I want them to learn deeply in their studies, and not to fall into bad things like drugs—I don't want them to even want to try or know about that.

A: Right.

B: Because all of that has no benefit and is useless.

A: Right.

B: Yes!

A: It makes lives miserable, right?

B: Right. It makes us forget about our parents—it makes us lose our connection to others in society.

A: Right.

B: We have to walk far away from it, and not even want to know about it.

A: Yes.

B: We have to say "no" to drugs. [Laughs]

A: That's great. What else should they avoid besides drugs?

B: Things like alcohol, they should never drink that at all.

A: Okay.

B: Yes.

A: If we drink, we'll not only become sick but also be put in a difficult situation financially.

B: Yes.

A: We'll have a very hard time. I would like to thank you very much for the chance to interview you today. This interview I will post on the website that I mentioned above, and your future descendants will be able to access and listen to it. Thank you so much!

Translated by Devon Crane and edited by Thomas Barrett.