

Interview of Keuv Bunno

A: Interviewer: Wesley Crump

B: Interviewee: Keuv Bunno

Summary of the Interview

Keuv Bunno, 65, of Chamkar Samraong Pir, Battambang province, was born in 1952 and is the youngest of seven children. In this interview, he shares his unique family history and recounts several remarkable stories of surviving during the Khmer Rouge era. He describes defying the regime to marry his chosen wife in 1978, as well as the extreme measures he took to support his loved ones.

A: Okay, today is January 28, 2017. My name is Wesley Crump, and I'm here to interview—

B: Bunno.

A: Bunno. To start, there is a university in America that is doing a project to find out more about the life experiences of the Cambodian people and their families. So, I'm here and will ask a few questions about your life and all the experiences in your life. And I'd like to ask, do I have your permission to record your voice and post this interview on BYU's website?

B: Yes, no problem— [In English] No problem!

A: Yes, so let's begin, can I please know your full name?

B: My full name is Keuv Bunno. I am 65 years old, and I live in Chamkar Samraong Pir [Village Two], Chamkar Samraong district, Battambang city, Battambang province.

A: Okay! And ever since you were young until now, have you ever had a nickname?

B: I've never had a nickname, I only have this name, and I will until I die.

A: You've only had this name? Oh! [Chuckles] And where were you born?

B: I was born in Stoung district in Kampong Thom province.

A: And how old are you now?

B: 65 years old this new year.

A: Do you remember what year you were born?

B: I was born on September 29, 1952.

A: What about the Khmer year? Like, what animal?

B: Oh! The year of the snake.

A: Do you remember what date you got married?

B: Oh! You aren't going to ask about going to school?

A: I'll also ask about going to school, but—

B: I was married in 1978, at the beginning of 1978 during the Khmer Rouge.

A: I see. So it was during the Khmer Rouge. Who arranged the marriage, or did you and your spouse choose each other?

B: We didn't have anyone—the Khmer Rouge soldiers didn't force us. The place I lived; they allowed us to choose. I chose my wife, yes.

A: I see. So, do you remember the first time you saw her?

B: I do, it was in 1976. She was a cook for the Khmer Rouge soldiers and the young people in camps who carried dirt. I was a cattle cart driver. I drove food and rations to where she was, and when I saw her, I did a double take. I went and asked my nephew, I asked him, "Who is that girl?" She was at my aunt's house, two houses down from mine—there was a house in between ours. But back then, that house was vacant, nobody was living there because we used to sleep in the forests and in the fields.

A: I see.

B: And I told my nephew, "I'm going to marry that girl as soon as I can." It's like what they say—it was love at first sight. Yes! I proposed and on the first try, we got engaged [with the permission of] her aunt and uncle. Nowadays, they live in Belgium, but they're getting old and losing their memory. Yes. And she was a professor—her aunt—and taught in Phnom Penh. I went to meet her and [felt] very immature. She asked me a lot of questions.

A: Yes.

B: Yes, so then she took all my answers and told her daughter, my future wife. At that time, she didn't want a husband or anything. And she was one of those people who ate but was never full. She was skinny, very skinny. She didn't have enough food to eat, and I didn't either. So, she wasn't happy, she didn't want a husband and she was angry. Her aunt asked her about it, and she was mad. After we were married, she told me that she was mad. I don't know by what accident she [changed her mind], but after a while she began to think, "Oh!" She had lost—she didn't have any parents, she lived with her aunt and uncle, and they lived for and kept to themselves. At that time, we couldn't go to work, there wasn't anything to eat outside. And she began to miss her father and mother and her siblings here in Battambang. At first, she didn't feel like she wanted a family, but later she changed her mind and agreed to marry me, which was a blessing for me. [Laughs]

A: Right!

B: She agreed, and when we went to ask for permission, they wouldn't let us get married because they considered her to be part of the Dap Prampi Mesa [March 17th] group. The Dap Prampi Mesa group was a group of all the people that the Khmer Rouge evacuated from Phnom Penh [on March 17th, 1975]. She was going to a college in Phnom Penh, and I was also going to school in Phnom Penh. They said I was a part of the community because my father was a member of the community, but they said that my wife was an outsider, a new person. They didn't like outsiders just like how many Khmer people [nowadays] don't like the Vietnamese people. They didn't like all the new people. They were planning to take them all and kill them.

A: Oh!

B: They were going to kill them all, so she decided to agree to marry me. After she agreed,

we went to ask for permission and they wouldn't let us get married, they wouldn't let us for a year. After a year, they still wouldn't let us, so my father told me that if they wouldn't let us get married then I should get engaged to someone else. I didn't want to be in the country anymore, there wasn't anything out there. Country people know nearly everyone—it's like they say, they know everyone and their family history perfectly. After that, I told him no, and that if I couldn't marry her, then I didn't want to take anyone else. The next year, we asked them again, and I lied to them. I lied to the village leader. That village leader was powerful back then, he decided whether we should live or die. That village leader used to live with my aunt. He didn't even know how to read or write; he even wrote his name incorrectly. [Laughs] I said, "Why won't you give me permission to marry my wife? I've been in love with her ever since I was in Phnom Penh." To be truthful, that's what I lied to them about. "Why are you splitting us up?" That's all I said I said to him, and he replied, "Wait and see, let us think about it first." After that, they called me to do a background check for marriage.

A: Right away, huh!

B: Yeah. Marriage wasn't a complicated affair back in the Pol Pot era. They didn't allow us to do it at home. They had a place to do it back then, there were 78 couples! All you had to do was stand up and verbally commit, every couple did, one at a time. You would stand up and demonstrate your respect for the commune and village leaders. They had us come and testify like you do in court, in front of the commune and village leaders. [Laughs] We had to commit to living by the policies of the Angkar [Khmer Rouge]. I decided to do what they required; I went along with everything so I could have a wife. If I didn't do that, I wouldn't know what to do. And at that time there was a big focus on agriculture and having a good harvest. We were supposed to have three tons of rice per hectare—three thousand kilos. I just committed to do whatever the Khmer Rouge told me to do. Honestly, nobody wanted to live in that stupid regime, but if we resisted them, they would take and kill us the very same day.

A: Right.

B: And after that, there was a big flood that drowned all the fields that were being harvested, you had to ride a boat. My wife didn't know how to swim! [Laughs] So that year the water flooded the fields; there was so much! The rice was able to grow, and we took boats around and harvested the rice and gathered it together. The rice that year grew a lot, not like anything nowadays! It grew so much. My wife and I worked apart from each other the whole time. When she was a young woman, when she had a family, they had us go to different groups of young men and young women [to work]. It's like at church, you go to different places according to your age. My wife harvested rice, and I drove a cow trailer—I transported supplies. If they had me harvest rice and carry dirt, I would have died. I didn't have enough to eat; I had no strength. It was miserable, so miserable. One of [my relatives] who lives in America nowadays was in that same village, they had to pull up rice seedlings to be transplanted. I saw them and pitied them, and no one could help each other. The only thing we could do was share food we would steal with our loved ones. We didn't do that with basic acquaintances and friends, it was everyone for themselves. And at that time, if they caught us stealing or anything, they would take us to be killed. But I was the best at stealing.

A: What did you steal?

B: Palm juice. Palm juice from the trees I'd climb at night—the palm juice they'd use to make palm sugar. I would climb up the trees and drink the juice, I did that for a few days. I never climbed the same tree to get it. If I did, they would catch me, and I'd be in danger. I did a lot of risky things back then.

A: Did you climb by yourself, or did you have a group?

B: No! I climbed by myself at midnight. If I climbed during the early evening, then the water wouldn't come out. I brought the water back, and they made fermented sugar palm juice. [Laughs] They would drink it until they were drunk. Then they would play games, they'd play a game where they'd keep drinking from the wine pitcher until they were the last one standing—they would do that with the fermented palm juice. I have so many stories like that from the Khmer Rouge; I could tell them for three days and still have more.

A: Yes, what else did you steal?

B: I stole chickens. I stole chickens from a Khmer Rouge officer's house. My house was close to his, about 20 or 30 meters away. [Laughs] His fence was sturdy, but I was still able to get away with it, I was a savage! [Both Laugh] I was so skilled at stealing. But if you're stealing, don't go with two people, that's dangerous. I did that once, and they caught my partner, but I got away. [Laughs] After that, I went by myself. I was never scared of ghosts or anything. I was never scared—not even of crocodiles. I would go into the water no matter what time it was.

A: Did you ever encounter a crocodile?

B: I didn't. If I did, I would've been devoured! [Both Laugh] Back then, there was a lot of fish, they were plentiful! We would wear fishing nets—nets that were old and worn out. I stole those nets, too. I put the net in the water immediately. After I did that, I didn't sleep much at night. I took the fish I caught and gutted them, then started a fire and smoked the fish for a long time. After they were smoked—they had me deliver rations and food [at the time], and they had taken my wife, before we were married, to plant potatoes north of here. So, when I went to deliver my goods, I took the smoked fish and delivered it to her. Whatever I had I would give to her because I was in love with her.

A: Yes.

B: How could I give it to others to eat? And I didn't dare keep it for myself, because they would see me breaking the rules and kill me. The rules were very strict. If you broke one rule, you wouldn't be able to escape, if you were in love with someone before. And they—the Khmer soldiers—if they saw good-looking people, they would schedule an interview with the person and they would rape them. They'd rape them until they were exhausted and had no more will or desire, and then they would kill them to get rid of the evidence. So I just brought this and that to her, I would make turtle soup and bring her the turtle or some fish. They had me deliver my goods and I would bring dried fish; I just stole whatever they had that I could take. I didn't dare to steal too much.

A: Just a little—

B: I would only steal one fish, which at the time could be traded for a chi of gold. A can of

salt was worth two chi. After that, my wife fell in love with me. [Both Chuckle] Actually, when she was still a student, there was an Air Force pilot who tried to propose to her, but her father wouldn't allow it. And for me, all I could climb was a palm tree and make palm sugar. [Laughs] Nowadays, I joke with her and say, "During the Khmer Rouge I took care of you, and now you take care of me!" She's always working, she works and I just stay and home and walk around and drink alcohol. That's it, my life. [Laughs]

A: Now I'd like to ask about—

B: Oh, you ask me a question and I'll answer for ten minutes!

A: That's okay! That's good, thank you, say a lot. The more you say, the better. I'd like to ask about your siblings; how many siblings do you have?

B: Me?

A: Yes.

B: There are seven of us.

A: Seven of you all, and which child are you?

B: I am the seventh child.

A: The seventh, you're the youngest?

B: Yes.

A: Do you remember all their names?

B: I remember them all.

A: Could you tell me their names and ages?

B: Oh! Age—

A: If you don't remember their ages, that's okay. If you only remember their names—

B: My oldest sister's name is Kouy Koykey, she died when she was about—she died when the Vietnamese entered [Cambodia], and for her age, she'd be around 70 years old or more. And my second sibling, he died in 1969 in the Russian hospital from disease. And my third sibling, she died in the forest. The Khmer Rouge relocated her to live in the forest, and at that time there wasn't any medicine. She was sick and got sent to a bad area and died. Her husband was killed by the Khmer soldiers. And my fourth sibling, she is Elder Oeng's mother [or Elder Oem, the interviewee's pronunciation is unclear]. She died about 3 years ago.

A: Yes.

B: She died in Kampong Thom. My fifth sibling was a pilot, he died in a crash when he was learning how to fly. He died in Battambang on July 27, 1972. In that year, I tested for my diploma, when my brother died. If he had lived to see the Khmer Rouge, he probably wouldn't have survived. But my brother wasn't small like me, he had a larger build and was very stylish. My sixth sibling is a teacher in Kampong Thom, my sibling isn't working anymore, my sibling retired. And then there is me, that's it.

A: What about your parents, what is your father's name?

B: Kouy Oeu. My mother's name was Thlan Koeman. They've both passed away. My mother died in the jungle during the Khmer Rouge sometime between 1972 and '73.

A: And do you know how old she was when she died?

B: My mother was about—I want to say around 70-something years old. But for my father, he died in 1986, he died of sickness. They sent him to the north as well, but he returned to the village. And my mother died of old age, she was often sick, and she didn't have any medicine and died in the forest. And the forest wasn't near the house! They relocated us, if you think about it, to nearly 80 kilometers from the village into the forest. And the forest had tigers! It was right next to the border of Preah Vihear province. When I drove the cow cart in the evening, sometimes there were tigers that crossed the road in front of me. Sometimes in the night when you lit a fire, a tiger would come and steal one of the cows and eat it. But nowadays, they've all run to Thailand, the tigers. You can see them in the zoos in Thailand. And the mountains are full of tigers, there are a lot of other animals in Thailand.

A: And do you remember what year your parents were born?

B: What year—? My father was in 19—how many? Look, he died in 1986 when he was 81 years old, so from that—

A: 1905!

B: That's probably right. And my mother, she was in 19—I'm not sure.

A: That's alright, if you don't remember that's alright. What about your grandparents, do you remember their names?

B: I remember! I've recorded my family history already.

A: I see.

B: My grandfather's name was Kouy Braeng. He was 81 when he died too. But my grandmother's name—her name was Huoy. She died before my grandfather. I knew one of my grandfathers; he loved me because I was his youngest grandchild, but I was the biggest troublemaker. [Laughs] He was very wealthy. When I went to school, I stole some of his money. I never stole a lot, though. Two riel was a lot back then, and he had a lot of new bills. A new bill could be exchanged at the bank. His money was [later] taken to the pagoda and donated to the monks. I would take two or three bills—and the next day I would take more. As long as I didn't have money to spend, I took more. And he knew that money was disappearing, it was a bad thing to do.

A: It was! [Laughs]

B: My grandfather died in 1970. He was a rich man—my grandfather—he was a rich man! Everyone in his village knew him, that he was skilled. He transported rice to be sold in Vietnam every day, to Ho Chi Minh. He would transport it through the river. And everything in his house was purchased, it was all French-made. At that time, the French controlled Cambodia. Everything, from the pillows to the metal safe that held all his possessions every day. He would store everything in there at the time. That safe—it took eight people to try

and lift it and they couldn't manage. When they put it up in their house, eventually it caused the house to collapse.

A: What about your mother's side?

B: On my mother's side, they live in Baray district, Kampong Thom province as well. But they are far away from here, maybe 100 kilometers away.

A: What are their names?

B: Their name was Thlan—my grandfather's name was Thlan. And his last name—I'm not sure what his last name is. I only know my uncle's last name. Maybe it's Thea Thlan. And my grandmother on my mother's side was named Grandma Thao. She passed away, but I'm not sure what year. My grandfather died at around 70 years old or a little older, because at the time I would go to meet him every year, and my mother would have me bring him money. In Khmer culture, during the almsgiving ceremonies, we take money to our parents. Nowadays, the kids are poor, so during the almsgiving ceremonies, their parents don't get anything. And their children still don't have anything. That's why Elder Oeng sent 50 dollars over yesterday to send his mother to the clinic, but that still wasn't enough [to cover her expenses].

A: So I'd like to ask about your parents again. Where was your father born?

B: My father?

A: Yes. Your father.

B: He was born in Stoung district, Kampong Thom province.

A: And what about your mother?

B: My mother was born in—honestly, she was born in Kien Svay. I have a lot of relatives in Kien Svay. But the father on my mother's side—my grandfather—my mother's father, you know? He worked on a boat, and they always criticized him, they would say that one day one of his kids would fall in the water and drown. And my mother only had three siblings [including herself]. So, he bought some land in Baray, Kampong Thom province. He bought the land and built a home there and stopped working on the waterfront, he was afraid that one of his kids would drown. So as far as I know, she was born in—according to what I know, because I never asked her—she was born in Kien Svay. [I say that] because when I was small, I would go visit my relatives in Kien Svay—when I was small.

A: Very good, thank you. Now I'd like to ask, in your life, what has been the time when you were happiest?

B: [Laughs] The happiest? The happiest time was in the year—it was when I came of age [Khmer term meaning that he began to understand what was going on] in 1970. At that time, there wasn't a war yet. But in '70 there was a coup, a coup that dethroned King. Marshal Lon Nol dethroned Sihanouk. But it was all a plan of Sihanouk's, there wasn't a plan that—nobody dared—if Sihanouk commanded that something should happen, it would happen. Sihanouk did this, according to what little I know. From that time on, I went to school in Phnom Penh in 1970. There were no schools in the provinces. Then Vietnam entered and a war started. Those who could flee to Phnom Penh went to school there, and

those who couldn't were enlisted as soldiers in the Khmer Rouge. So I fled and went to school in Phnom Penh. If I stayed, I would have died. So I went to study in Phnom Penh.

A: What grade did you get to?

B: I got to the last grade. That year, I was supposed to take the test and receive my high school diploma. But I didn't take the test because the bombing raids became too heavy, and in 1975 we were relieved [of the bombing, when Phnom Penh fell]. My wife received her diploma a year before me because I failed a grade.

A: Right.

B: She never failed. She graduated and went on to the university in Phnom Penh, but she didn't even learn for a full year before she was evacuated back to the provinces. They walked all the way from Phnom Penh to [a place] beyond Kampong Thom. They made the journey on foot, and they didn't even have any shoes to wear either. It was miserable, walking! They walked and didn't have anything they could bring; they only had the clothes they were wearing. And there was so little food, and when there was no more food, what were they supposed to do? And her uncle and aunt, they had a little gold they brought with them, and they traded it for some food so they could survive another day. What good had learning done for her? She didn't have anything. Sometimes her aunt had her eat something, sometimes they were hungry, but they went without food, sometimes they didn't have anything [to eat].

A: This is maybe my last question. I'd like to ask if there is anything you'd like to tell your kids and grandkids in the future—like any words of advice. Is there anything you'd like to tell them?

B: Oh! I'd like to advise them to get an education, that's it. Study hard so that you can have a good job. My daughter almost graduated, but she didn't take the final test. She also had a husband, but they got divorced and Kim Hak—my daughter, they got divorced. They got divorced without having a reason at all. So, my daughter is suffering the most, I pity her. So, I'd like to urge my grandkids to study hard—study hard so that they can have a job and help their mothers recover. Yes. Nowadays my standard of living is good from the outside looking in—they say that I'm still well off, but I don't have money coming in. I used to raise quail, and I had plenty of money to spend. But now, it's not profitable to raise quail, so I raise chickens.

A: Yes.

B: At the beginning of this Chinese New Year, I pocketed about 100 dollars worth of chickens. But the wedding—they sent me a wedding invitation for the 30th [of this month] for Phary. And Phary—they asked me to stand in for the parents on the bachelor's side—for Chin Phary. And last night there was a wedding here, just west of Elder Long's house. On the 6th, there was another wedding here, and there was another on the 9th—where was it? On the 10th, Ming Pheap got married. There are four invitations left. And in March, I'm not sure how many more there were. The smallest wedding consisting of the hand-tying ceremony costs 50,000 [riel], so I sold my chickens for about 20,000 to 30,000 riel and all six wedding canopies were used. [...] And their mother didn't have any money either, she doesn't have any income. If she stayed it wouldn't be a problem, but she's been poor for

almost a year now.

A: Yes, So, for today that's all I have. If you have anything else you want to add, you can. If you don't, that's okay too!

B: That's good, I've said too much already.

A: So to finish, I want to make sure that we can post the recording of this interview on BYU's website, can we do that?

B: Yes, no problem.

B: Okay, thanks a lot!

B: Let them know that I have left the Pol Pot era behind.

A: Yes.

Partially translated by Hans Nilsson and Zachary Olsen from 2017 to 2020. Retranslated and edited by Ethan Arkell and Thomas Barrett in January 2024.