

Interview of Touch Sophorn

A: Interviewer: Matt Boyd

B: Interviewee: Touch Sophorn

Summary of the Interview

Touch Sophorn, born in 1975 in Rung Chrey village, Battambang province, is the fourth of six siblings. In this interview, he provides insight into his diverse life journey, starting from his humble beginnings in a rural village to navigating life in Thai refugee camps. He also shares some of his more personal experiences, including his conversion to Christianity and subsequent service as a full-time missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Touching on themes of family history and faith, Sophorn offers a remarkable account of resilience and finding meaning in adversity.

A: My name is Matt Boyd and what is your name?

B: My name is Touch Sophorn.

A: That's your real name, right?

B: Yes, Touch Sophorn.

A: Today is the 26th of February 2016. And we are interviewing today at the Service Center in Phnom Penh. To start, how old are you?

B: I'm 40 years old.

A: And what is your date of birth?

B: I was born on June 5th, 1975.

A: So, you're almost 41 then?

B: I'm almost 41.

A: And what are your parent's names?

B: My father's name is Tek Kuch, and my mother's name is Kang Yan.

A: And where are they from? What is their hometown?

B: Their hometown is in Battambang.

A: Both of them?

B: Yes, both of them.

A: And do you remember how old they are, or when they were born?

B: My father is almost 80 years old—78 right now. My mother has passed away already. She died when I was studying at BYU Hawaii, so I don't know how old she is, I haven't kept up too well with that.

A: How old was she when she died?

B: When she died, she was 60, or a little over 60 or so.

A: Okay. And so your hometown is in Battambang too?

B: Yes, in Battambang as well.

A: In the city or the countryside?

B: In the countryside.

A: Ok. And do you remember which village or commune?

B: Oh yes, I remember. It is called Rung Chrey village, Rung Chrey commune, Thma Koul district, Battambang province.

A: Okay. And were your parents born in the same place, or—?

B: Yes, the same place.

A: Okay great. And do you remember the names of your grandfather and grandmother?

B: My grandparents? The name of my grandpa on my mother's side is Grandfather Kang. My grandmother, I don't know her name, but on my father's side, my grandmother's name is Grandmother Vong. She came from Kampuchea Krom. In actuality, my father wasn't born in Cambodia, he was born in Vietnam. [Laughs]

A: Is that right?

B: Yes, he was born in Vietnam. His parents, Grandmother Vong and her husband (at the time my father was only one year old) came to visit Cambodia. But all his property and his house were still in Lower Cambodia. They came to visit some family here, just planning to stay for 7 days. After they got here, my grandpa, who was actually Vietnamese, caught a skin disease—

A: Right—

B: And the disease he caught gave him boils all over his skin, and when he got here to Cambodia he died. When he died, my grandmother decided not to go back to Vietnam, but to stay in Cambodia.

A: Ah.

B: And then she remarried here. So my father wasn't actually born in Cambodia! [Laughs]

A: Oh!

B: He was born in Vietnam, but when his father died, my grandmother didn't go back. And so from then on they have all stayed in Cambodia.

A: Oh, okay.

B: So that has been our families' good history! [Laughs]

A: So, does he know Cambodian as well, or just Vietnamese?

B: My father, after he had grown up here for a year, became a monk.

A: Ah.

B: So he learned Pali, and he learned literature. So he knew Cambodian. He never learned Vietnamese though.

A: Oh okay.

B: But I could understand my grandma when she spoke, when she was first learning.

A: Right.

B: She spoke with a heavy accent, and not very clearly. She spoke Vietnamese—

A: Right.

B: But she didn't speak Cambodian very well.

A: Okay, so your grandparents knew Vietnamese, but didn't know Cambodian very well then?

B: My grandmother came first, and she knew a bit because she was from Lower Cambodia—

A: Oh okay.

B: But my grandfather was Vietnamese.

A: Ah okay. So you know Cambodian, as well as Vietnamese then--

B: No. I tried to learn Vietnamese for 3 years, but I could never speak it! [Laughs] Look, you can see my Vietnamese book behind you! [Points and chuckles] So I tried really hard! I tried to learn it.

A: And what about English? Do you know it as well?

B: My English is decent, yes.

A: Do you know any other languages?

B: Um, not really. I wouldn't say I know any others. When I say I know a language, I mean that I can both speak it and write it.

A: Oh okay.

B: That's when I'd say I know it.

A: Okay.

B: So just Cambodian and English.

A: Okay that's great. So you grew up in Battambang province?

B: Yes, in Battambang.

A: So do you remember any stories—like about how your way of life was, or what kind of experience you had growing up in Battambang?

B: We were pretty poor, because my family were farmers. They worked in the farms and fields. And so when I was 14 or 15 years old, I felt a desire to leave my hometown. I didn't want to be a farmer, mainly because my feet hurt! My toenails had broken, and the water began to eat away at my feet.

A: Right—

B: because I worked in the flooded rice fields every day, watching the cows and water

buffalo. And so I told my mother that I was leaving the country, and that I was going to live in the refugee camps in Thailand. And my mother said, "How can you go, if you've never lived away from your parents?" She was afraid of me missing home and that sort of thing. But I didn't care, and so I said goodbye to her and left. And so I went to the refugee camp for 4 or 5 years, until there was a large repatriation back to Cambodia, and that was when I returned.

A: And you said you went to Thailand, right?

B: I went to the camps in Thailand, yes.

A: Ah okay. And so you know Thai too then?

B: When I was there, I knew it.

A: Oh okay.

B: But now, I've forgotten a lot. But if I went back to Thailand for a few months, I would be able speak it again, you know?

A: Right.

B: When I was in Thailand, I studied the Thai language until the 5th grade. But I've forgotten most of it, because I never use it.

A: Oh, okay.

B: And so I'm trying to read the scriptures in Thai, right now, to remember it—

A: Oh, okay.

B: To not let myself forget.

A: Okay. And when you were in Thailand, what was life like?

B: Oh, it was miserable. [Laughs] It was extremely miserable. Why? Because when we were there, we waited for them to give us rice to eat. We had to wait for our rice, and for fish. And the fish that they gave us was salty. And so when they gave us fish, we had to soak it in water for a day and a night until the salt would leave the fish. But even after that it was still salty! We fried that fish in oil. And the rice they gave us, we had to pour water over it, because if we left it dry, it would be too salty. The water would help absorb some, and it wouldn't be as salty. And so in the camp my health was not very good; I was always sick because we couldn't eat enough.

A: Right.

B: They would only give us a tiny bit at a time. And for water, every day they would only give us a bucket full. Just a bucket! And so we would wash our clothes in it, wash ourselves in it, and have to drink from that same bucket! [Laughs] So, the life in the camps was not good. Not for me. It was miserable. But I do think it was an experience that I can rely on in my life, you know? I learned not to rely on my parents, but instead on my own self.

A: So, if you were to compare your life in Thailand and your life in Battambang before you left, how would you say they were different?

B: They were very different! In Battambang we did farm, but we also had a lot of food to

eat. We also had plenty of water to use, because we had a creek, a small stream right beside us. And it was also my mother who was the one making all the food, right? When I went to the camp, I did everything myself, there wasn't anyone to do it for me. So Battambang was much easier to live in.

A: Ok. And how about your childhood there? Did you have many friends, or a lot of siblings that you spent time and played games with?

B: In my childhood—I had many friends, but they were all from my same village; there was nobody from other villages or areas around us. Uh, there were some friends from school, people that we learned with. Most of the time we played games, but it was the type of game where we threw things at each other. We picked up stones or clumps of dirt, and we would fight each other. [Laughs] So the games we played were dangerous, but we liked to play that way. [Laughs] We also liked to play hide-and-seek, but in the water! [Laughs] We would go under the water—

A: Ah.

B: And try to chase and catch each other. [laughs]

A: Were there any leeches?

B: Oh, there were tons of leeches, [Laughs] but we weren't afraid of them.

A: And so your parents, they were rice farmers—did they grow any vegetables too?

B: Yes, we did! We grew cucumbers, we grew cabbage, and we planted watermelon too, which was separate—

A: Oh, okay.

B: We planted in a—

A: Garden?

B: We had our fields, and we had a separate garden too.

A: Oh okay.

B: And so in the garden we grew cabbage, and we planted cucumbers, pumpkin, and cauliflower to sell. Some of it we sold, some we ate.

A: In the past I've heard that at one time they didn't use money, but exchanged food instead—

B: Uh, when the Vietnamese—when Pol Pot left the country.

A: Yes.

B: In around 1982, '81, '82, and '83 or so, we were still trading in rice. I can still remember that. We still used rice or even sometimes gold to trade. After about '85 or so they started to use money. The currency was five tenths of a riel, a tenth of a riel, that kind of currency.

A: Right.

B: And so by then they had started to use money already. They still allowed us to trade in rice like before, but after a while that stopped.

A: Right.

B: They stopped using rice, and just used money instead.

A: Oh—

B: So after a while it was only money being used.

A: And you were born in 1975, right? I would like to ask about the time of Pol Pot. Can you remember anything from that time?

B: I can remember a little. I remember that I was at home with my older brother. And so from day to day we didn't do anything, we just ran and played. My mother, my father, my older siblings—all of them had gone to work. And my older sister, I never saw her.

A: Ah.

B: It was months between when I saw her. And my brother I never saw either. For my mother, it was only early in the night before she would arrive home. I never saw my father either—he would only come home once a week. Only once a week because he was a fisherman—

A: Ah.

B: During the time of Pol Pot—

A: Right.

B: He was a fisherman while my mother was a worker in the rice fields. It was just me and my older brother at home. And I remember a good story, that I want to share. At the time we had gone to the cafeteria to eat. [During the time of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodians were only allowed to eat in communal dining halls, or cafeterias.] And when we got there, we were starving. And when saw some bowls of rice we immediately started eating it. [Some officials] came and they started yelling at us. They slapped the table and said, "No! You can't eat that!" And I said, "Why not?" They said that those bowls were for the workers. When I asked what I was supposed to eat instead, they gave me rice porridge, which was very diluted with water. And that's what we ate. They said that we weren't working, that we were still kids.

A: Right.

B: And that's what I remember [laughs] from the time of Pol Pot.

A: And so, they didn't make you work because you were so young?

B: The kids couldn't do any work because they were only one or two years old. They couldn't work.

A: Oh.

B: They made us stay with the elderly, so that they could take care of us.

A: Right.

B: But once you turned ten, they started to make you work- to join what they called the "children's unit."

A: Okay. So how many siblings do you have?

B: Six, including myself.

A: Okay.

B: So my oldest sibling was a sister. After her I have two older brothers, and two younger brothers. I'm the middle child.

A: Okay. And do you remember any fun times you had with them, or any difficult times you had with them?

B: Most of the time it was fun, more fun than difficult. Normally in families there's always some contention, but most of the time we were very happy with each other.

A: Yes.

B: Because we worked on the rice fields all together.

A: Right.

B: We had a lot of arguments, because sometimes my brother was being lazy, or sometimes I was being lazy and he would yell at me. And so that kind of thing would always happen.

A: Oh okay. And so your grandfather was a farmer, but did he have any other skills? Like did he build houses or anything?

B: Uh yes, he knew how to build houses and he also knew how to make beds.

A: Ah.

B: He knew how to farm, and he knew some trades as well. He also made plows, for using in the fields.

A: Okay.

B: He made plows to plow the fields. He also worked in the pagoda as an assistant to the monks. [A layman who acts as liaison between the Buddhist clergy and the lay people.]

A: Okay.

B: He worked at Louk Pagoda.

A: Okay. And he taught all his skills to you right?

B: No, I never learned any trades from him.

A: Ah.

B: He showed me how to do things, and I would watch him do it. I helped him—if he needed something he would ask us to help him.

A: And are you still close to him?

B: Yes, I'm still close to him.

A: Okay.

B: I'm close with my father.

A: Okay that's great. And how about your mother? Did she have any skills other than harvesting rice?

B: Yes she did. Besides that, she also made [rice] pastries—

A: Oh, okay.

B: She made what they called “galan,” which is sticky rice—

A: Oh!

B: That they pack in bamboo.

A: Oh, I've had that before. It's good.

B: Yes. She made that and sold it.

A: And did you ever learn how to make it from her?

B: I know how to make it yes. Before I even went and sold it too. I also would go and cut bamboo, for her to pack it in.

A: Right.

B: And I would help her pack the rice in the bamboo.

A: Ah—

B: We took the rice and we packed it into the bamboo, and I would make the fire so that we could cook them.

A: Okay.

B: I helped her make it.

A: Sticky rice, right?

B: Yes.

A: And did you buy it from others or grow it yourself?

B: Uh, most of the time we would keep it for ourselves, and the beans we bought. The ‘galan’ had to have black and red beans mixed in.

A: Oh I see.

B: Yes.

A: That sounds delicious.

B: Yes.

A: Okay. And so did your mother ever make any very special foods that you miss?

B: Most of the time my mom would make samlar brahaur soup [made of lemon grass, smoked fish, and vegetables] for us to eat. She said that I liked to eat samlar brahaur soup and samlar machu soup [made with tamarind].

A: Ah—

B: And so my mother made that for me a lot.

A: That's great. And so you went to Thailand, and stayed for 5 years?

B: Yes.

A: Okay. And when you began to work, what did you start out doing?

B: It was only when I came back to Cambodia that I started working.

A: Okay.

B: Over there I studied.

A: Okay.

B: Yes. I worked when I came back.

A: So where did you work first?

B: I worked with ADRA, an organization with the Seventh Day Adventists.

A: Oh—

B: I was responsible for agronomy, dealing with planting and seeds and such.

A: Right.

B: And so I worked with them—

A: Ah-

B: In Siem Reap.

A: Okay. And you got that job because you had already worked on a farm?

B: No, they asked me to work as an interpreter.

A: Okay.

B: They wanted me to translate some of the more technical terms for the workers and farmers. I worked with a lot with Australians.

A: Okay. And how many years did you work there?

B: I only worked there for maybe half a year.

A: Okay.

B: And afterward I came back to my hometown again, and then went to Phnom Penh.

A: Okay. And what did you do in Phnom Penh? Did you go to school or work?

B: In Phnom Penh I continued my education again, and I also worked. I worked for an organization by the name of Marnell. I worked as a teacher, teaching English—the very basics of it, like “A B C” to disabled people.

A: Okay.

B: To those disabled.

A: And at the time you already knew a little bit of English, right?

B: Uh, I already knew a little bit of English because I learned in the camps—in Thailand.

A: Hmm okay. And so when you were learning, what subject did you study?

B: I learned English.

A: Okay.

B: I studied higher level English, at ACE, the Australian Center for Education.

A: Okay.

B: I learned more there.

A: And after that, what did you do?

B: After working at Marnell for a little while, I applied to go on a mission. And I was called to serve in the Sacramento, California mission. That's where I served.

A: And so did you join the church in Siem Reap or in Phnom Penh?

B: In Phnom Penh.

A: In what year?

B: Uh—I was baptized in 1988.

A: Okay.

B: March 22nd.

A: In '88?

B: Yes, in 1988.

A: I thought that the Church entered the country in around '94?

B: Oh! Sorry. 1998.

A: Ah.

B: 1998, not '88.

A: Ah, gotcha.

B: Right.

A: And you served in Sacramento, right?

B: Right.

A: And how was your mission?

B: My mission—so I had never been to America. The MTC [Missionary Training Center]—let me share a little about the MTC.

A: Sure.

B: At the beginning, I thought they wanted to kill me. [Laughs] Because, I had never been to America! And in Cambodia, I ate rice three times a day. Rice!

A: Oh, okay.

B: And for other food we have lots of things.

A: Oh, okay.

B: We have soups, we have fish, that kind of thing. And when I got to the MTC, they had burgers, they had cereal, [laughs] they had pancakes, all this foreign food! And so I thought, "They actually want to kill me!" And so in the MTC I was sick quite a bit.

A: Ah, I see.

B: And I had to use the restroom quite a bit. But after a while I was good. And on my neck I had a lot of what they call 'boah' [pimples or abscesses]. And there were a lot! Five or six at a time.

A: Hmm.

B: They gave me lots of vaccinations, but nothing could fix it.

A: Okay.

B: On my mission I had so many of them. I don't know why, maybe because of the weather or the food—I must have had a reaction. [Laughs] I must have had an allergy or something.

A: Ah.

B: Yeah. And when I left for my actual mission, I thought that working and serving in the Church was actually harder than the time of Pol Pot. Harder than the time of Pol Pot, you know? [Laughs] That's what I thought—

A: Right.

B: Because I rode a bike, and they made us walk and knock doors, and some people would curse at us and chase us away from their house. But, after a while, I got used to it. I learned how to have a lot more faith on my mission. I also stopped caring about other things, I just thought about preaching the Lord's Gospel.

A: I remember, maybe a year and a half ago, that you spoke in the international branch about the story of your patriarchal blessing.

B: Yes.

A: Could you share that story again?

B: Oh, my patriarchal blessing huh?

A: Right.

B: Ah the patriarchal blessing. That story is exciting, isn't it? Well, at that time I received a phone call from my mission president, Robert J. Grow. He called me in so I could receive my patriarchal blessing. And so, I went to meet him, and he said that before we went to get the blessing we needed to eat first, because it was lunchtime. And so, he asked me, "Elder Touch, where do you want to eat?" And I told him I wanted to go eat at Burger King. [Laughs] And when we had gotten there, he asked me what I wanted to eat. And so I ordered a double—

A: A whopper?

B: No, it wasn't a whopper, it was a double pounder like this! [Gestures]

A: [Laughs]

B: And I ordered a root beer too! I ate until I was full. After I was full we went to go get my patriarchal blessing. After about ten minutes of him speaking, I stopped knowing what was happening around myself. I started to doze off! My mission president had told me that when I heard "Amen" I should say "Amen" too. And so when I heard "Amen" I woke up! I had no idea what he said besides that! Afterwards, when they sent me the Patriarchal Blessing, I started to read it, and I started to understand. But when I was actually receiving it, I was asleep! And so that was the experience I had when I received my Patriarchal Blessing. [Laughs]

A: I forgot to ask before, but do you remember anything about your grandparents that you can share? Do you remember much of them?

B: I don't remember. I can't remember any experiences I had with them.

A: Okay, that's okay. I want to ask you about an experience or a story that you were the happiest. What time in your life was that?

B: Being sealed to my wife. It was a time that made me extremely excited, from the night before, all the way until the sealing. I knew that it was an amazing opportunity for me. It was a feeling of excitement that came straight from my heart. Other good times have only been moments of laughter and fun, but this was something that came straight from my heart, and it made me so excited.

A: And what about the most difficult experiences in your life?

B: The time that was the most difficult for me was when I learned to live by myself. In the camps, in Thailand. That was the most difficult time of my life.

A: Why?

B: Because everything was new. I had to learn to live by myself, without relying on others.

A: Ah.

B: So, I had to do everything to stay alive.

A: Did you also miss your parents?

B: Yes, I missed them too. So, it was a difficult time. Especially when I was traveling in the forest for three months. Before getting to the camps, we had to travel in the forests for three months first. And so we slept under the trees. And sometimes it would rain during the night, we were wet and cold, and there were mosquitoes. And sometimes there were leeches underneath the leaves—

A: Oh dear—

B: And they could jump at you. They knew how to jump! And so, I would say that that time was a very difficult one for me.

A: Okay. Is there anything else you would like to share in this interview? For your descendants, those who will live 500 years from now, what would you like them to know about your life?

B: I just have one thing I'd like to say, which is that [you] must have endurance in life. Without endurance and without patience, our lives lack goodness. I always praise things from nature to large buildings, to electricity. When storms arise, when the sky turns gloomy and rain pours down, I always praise those things. But a clear sky, not so much. A clear sky may be pretty, with the sun shining, it's true, but I don't praise a clear sky much. Yet, when faced with gloom, we can become even more beautiful than before. Our lives are much the same. Overcoming hardships, acquiring knowledge, and finding purposeful work to do—all those things make our lives better, and even more magnificent.

A: If there's anything else you'd like to add, you can add it now, but if not, that's all I have.

B: That's all I have as well.

A: Okay. Then thank you for joining us today.

B: Thank you.

Translated by Devon Crane and edited by Thomas Barrett.