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# RI BULLETIN

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## A POWERFUL VOICE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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### Preserving Phnong Culture

The traditional life of the Phnong, the hill people who live off what they grow and gather in the deep forests along the border between Cambodia and Vietnam, faces threats from modernization, land development and tourism. It is time to start designing and building a cultural center to preserve the Phnong's rapidly disappearing language, living patterns and knowledge of the forest.

A committee of Phnong supported by Refugees International is working to construct a Phnong Cultural Center in Sen Monorom in Cambodia's Monduliri province. "My people need to preserve their unique culture from generation to generation so that other people can understand and learn from the Phnong," Mane Yun, a young Phnong law student, explains. The provincial government has agreed to provide land for the center. "Phnong culture should be preserved," says a local government leader. Yun's group has applied for a World Bank loan to help build the cultural center.

Some of the more unique aspects of Phnong life are changing fast. The Phnong language, which is spoken but not written, is being replaced by Khmer, Cambodia's lingua franca. A linguist at International Cooperation Cambodia, a non-profit agency that is working to preserve the Phnong language and legends, speculates that the Phnong language could be extinct in 50 years. ICC has recorded 150 hours of Phnong stories and begun to issue some of them in attractive Khmer pamphlets, so they can be read and understood by others. ICC says it will make the recordings available to the cultural center.

The Phnong's traditional use of elephants to clear forests and for transport is declining as the value of elephants increases. Many Phnong, who are often short of both food and money, sold their elephants to companies in Siem Reap, where they are used transport tourists around the temples of Angkor Wat. As a child Mane Yun rode her elephant into Vietnam to bring back food and herbal medicine, but she sold her elephant several years ago.

Traditional Phnong dwellings, low, windowless houses with graceful thatched roofs, are still common in Monduliri, but they are beginning to give way to more permanent Cambodian style houses built of wood. In many villages, tin roofed Cambodian houses, built on stilts so they are above rainy season mud, stand next the traditional bamboo and grass Phnong huts.

For centuries, the Phnong have lived a semi-nomadic life, moving between village and distant farm plots carved out of the forest. Before selecting a forest plot to clear, the Phnong sleep on the prospective farm

for a night to determine if the place is right. A good dream is propitious; a bad dream means they move on. Omens, dreams, disease and death can also cause the Phnong to abandon their houses or their villages. Christianity is beginning to replace traditional animist beliefs, and as it does villages are building churches and becoming more permanent. Some Phnong are struggling to integrate their traditional rituals, which include ancestor worship, into Christianity. “One thing that is very important is the beliefs of the Phnong, the ritual,” says a government official in Sen Monorom. “Once they change—the way of life, the ritual—the culture will disappear.”

A program to build schools in Phnong villages is also changing the semi-nomadic life; government and private agencies won’t build a school unless villagers commit to remain close to the school. And, of course, education, which is desperately needed, will accelerate the linguistic transition to Khmer from Phnong.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Phnong culture is their vast knowledge of the forest, on which they depend for herbal medicines, food and material, such as honey and resin, which they collect for sale. The Phnong have never been able to grow enough food to feed themselves; therefore, they supplement their food with what they can gather in the forest for consumption or sale. The work is difficult. It can take one or two days to fill a traditional basket that Phnong carry on their backs with food and herbs that bring the equivalent of \$1 in the local market.

Fortunately, programs are already underway to preserve Phnong handicrafts. With support from RI, Cambodian Family Development Services is running a micro-loan program to help Phnong women set up weaving cooperatives to make traditional Phnong scarves and bags (currently available through RI at [www.refugeesinternational.org](http://www.refugeesinternational.org)). The cooperatives generate small amounts of income and help women pass weaving skills down to their daughters.

The indigenous Phnong culture is unique but fragile. As development of Monduliri province accelerates, the Phnong will face threats to their land, their agricultural patterns, their practice of letting their cattle and buffalo wander freely, and their hunter-gather traditions. The people will survive because development is bringing more work opportunities, and education is preparing the children for a changing, more modern life. But the Phnong’s rituals, folklore and vast knowledge of the forest need to be preserved as development accelerates. A Phnong Cultural Center would both celebrate and protect the traditions of the indigenous people in eastern Cambodia.

### **Refugees International recommends that:**

- The World Bank approve the application to fund work on the Phnong Cultural Center.
- Phnong leaders begin to meet to determine what they want the center to contain.
- Provincial government authorities work closely with the board of the PCC to build the facility as soon as possible.
- The Cambodian government accelerate implementation of a new land law designed, in part, to protect the land of indigenous people.
- Religious, development and education agencies in Monduliri begin to make cultural preservation a part of their work.
- Botanists, ornithologists and others work with the Phnong to capture, preserve and learn from their deep knowledge of the forests.

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*RI president Ken Bacon and development associate Ghazal Vaghedi returned from Cambodia in November.*