



The Bunong of Cambodia

Maintaining Identity in a Changing World

The Bunong people of Cambodia are a people under siege. One of several hill tribe groups that inhabit the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam border highlands, the Bunong (also referred to as the Phnong) lead a precarious existence in their traditional forest homeland in the highlands of eastern Cambodia. Survivors of the wars that ravaged Southeast Asia in the 1970s, the Bunong today face new internal and outside forces that threaten their continued existence.

But the Bunong are not without friends. Refugees International (RI), a 28-year-old organization that provides effective solutions to refugee crises, has worked assiduously in recent years on behalf of the Bunong. Lionel Rosenblatt, Refugees International's President Emeritus, became aware of the Bunong's plight when he found members of the group going home in a UN convoy in 1999. The Bunong and other indigenous groups were among the last of 250,000 refugees returning to their homes in Cambodia and they received far less assistance from the UN than those who had been repatriated earlier when the budget had been more generous.

With advice from the Bunong and Rosenblatt's guidance, Refugees International has focused attention on specific areas that can help the Bunong maintain their ethnic identity while adapting to the realities of the 21st century. These areas include education, health care, the promotion of traditional handicrafts, and helping the Bunong find their own political voice. RI has also played a major role in resurrecting traditional Bunong weaving.

Refugees International, in partnership with Cambodia Corps Inc., supports a high school for orphaned Bunong youth in Cambodia's Mondulkiri province. A handful of graduates of the school are now in college in Phnom Penh.

RI has also urged the Royal Cambodian government, the United Nations, and other international aid organizations to help stem the hijacking of Bunong land by outsiders and to create a system for respecting Bunong property rights and cultural identity.



Supporting a Tradition of Weaving

The Bunong population is small, roughly 30,000. Small-scale, slash-and-burn farming provides families with bare necessities. Health care and education are basic at best. Bunong people remain socially isolated from the larger Cambodian society. They worship forest spirits. They speak an indigenous language that until four years ago could not be written since it lacked its own alphabet.

Culture is fragile. Traditions at the heart of a society's way of life can quickly fade if not continually nurtured.

Such is the case with the Bunong weavers in Cambodia's Mondulkiri province. Pummeled by a generation of war, the collective memory of this small, ethnic minority began to blur. Non-essential activity, such as weaving, fell by the wayside as displaced families, many living in refugee camps, struggled to survive.

Peace has returned to Cambodia's eastern highlands and the Bunong are resurrecting their weaving skills. A small number of older women are back at their looms, creating multicolored scarves, skirts, trousers, blankets and shoulder bags in time-honored tribal patterns. They're also teaching their craft to young Bunong women.

Refugees International (RI) has been instrumental in this weaving revival. After helping Bunong families relocate from camps to their

native villages, RI responded to requests for help in restarting the textile craft by supplying a number of “backstrap” looms. Using one of these small portable looms, a weaver sits on the ground with one end of the loom in her lap and the other hooked over her outstretched feet, holding the fabric taut. This seemingly simple process can produce surprisingly complex textile patterns.

Refugees International has fostered Bunong weaving in other ways that has sharply increased demand for Bunong textiles, and produced significant new income for Bunong communities. RI helped weavers obtain microloans, and create weaving cooperatives. It helped introduce more sophisticated yarns. It financed a trip that allowed a group of Bunong weavers to visit weavers and markets in neighboring Thailand and Laos. And it helped convince the Smithsonian Institution to include a delegation of Bunong weavers in the 2007 Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. A sample of Bunong handicrafts is even available online.

It’s a stunning, and welcome, change for the Bunong weaving community. In former days, woven textiles seldom left a village. Women who produced woven goods bartered them for food or livestock from other community members. Later, woven items would appear in local markets, earning small amounts of cash for the weaver.

Now, Bunong weavers in remote villages are benefiting from efficiencies of supply, production and marketing, concepts and methods that were unfathomable just a few years ago.

Learn more:
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Mane Yun — An Energetic Voice for the People

Young people like Mane Yun are the future of the Bunong. The eldest daughter in a family of six children and an absent father, Mane (pronounced mah-NAY) left elementary school to provide for her family in her native village in Mondulkiri province. A combination of grit and ambition allowed her to resume schooling and eventually take a teaching job near her home.

A natural leader, Mane caught the eye of then Refugees International President Lionel Rosenblatt, when they met by chance along the road in Mondulkiri in 2001. RI arranged to underwrite Mane's college expenses at the University of Phnom Penh where she became the first Bunong to graduate. Now, having just graduated from Cambodia's Royal University of Law and Economics, Mane is the first of her people to have attended law school. In addition to her law courses, Mane works at the Phnom Penh office of the United Nations Development Program. She is also on constant call as a liaison and advocate for the Bunong people with a variety of international and Cambodian development organizations.

The summer of 2007 marks Mane's second visit to the United States. She arrives as a member of the five-nation Mekong Basin delegation to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. In 2004, she spoke with a variety of officials and groups about issues confronting the Bunong during a six-week trip sponsored by Refugees International.

Mane memorably describes growing up in a culturally-isolated Bunong village as the life of "a frog in a well." She's broken free of that confined environment, emerging as an effective and energetic voice for her people. Her infectious personality and winning smile, coupled with her personal success story, continue to win new friends for the Bunong people.

