



From advocacy to aesthetics: A Cambodian Case Study

Susanna Coghlan

AAA Cambodia Ltd.

scoghlan@gmail.com

Abstract: Using *In the Land of the Elephants* by Srey Bandol (Reyum Publishing, 2003) as a case study, this paper will examine the gradual transition of publishing for children in Cambodia, from books in which the message takes precedence over the form, to the publication of stories in which aesthetics and content work in unison to inspire children to ask questions about the societies and people portrayed in them.

Key words: Cambodia, Khmer, publishing, aesthetics, minorities.

This paper will examine the representation of one of Cambodia's minority communities through the book *In the Land of the Elephants* by the Khmer artist, Srey Bandol.

Cambodia is considered to be largely homogenous. Most of the population is known as ethnic Khmer, mixed in with this are Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cham Muslim. A small percentage of the population belongs to other ethnically distinct tribes, mainly congregated in the northern and eastern regions of the country. Most of these tribes are linguistically and culturally distinct from ethnic Khmers. Many of these tribes have lived for generations in near isolation due to their location in areas difficult to access by road or land.

The narrative in this book depicts the transition made by one community, from living "as their ancestors lived" to adopting the modern conveniences valued in twenty first century Cambodia.

In the Land of the Elephants is also a minority among Cambodian children's books for two reasons, the first being the high production standards employed, and the second is that it is a book in which there are no clear 'right' nor 'wrong' behaviors.

Publishing in Cambodia has been slow to recover following a prohibition of the production of all art forms under the Khmer Rouge regime (1974-1979). There has been, however, a significant increase in publishing for young people during the past seven years, primarily in picture books with overtly educational or moral content, largely as result of a few NGOs striving to produce quality children's books in Khmer and other languages. Themes of tolerance, cooperation, conflict resolution and reconciliation are common.

While these books play an important role in helping to teach children about critical issues such as HIV and health protection and in promoting understanding and tolerance in a post conflict society, the prescriptive elements of the story frequently take precedence over the quality of the narrative and the aesthetic values.



These books do not call into question where these challenges in society come from, nor why they continue to exist. Often the exemplary behavior of a respected member of the community inhabited by the main characters of the book provides guidance to bring others back to the ‘right path’. There is a resolution of the issue and harmony and understanding between all members of the community is restored. Where a minority is depicted (as an individual or a group) members usually are finally accepted or absorbed into the majority.

In reality, as we know, acceptance does not always happen and absorption is not always successful nor desirable. The ‘right path’ is not always easy to see.

Beginning in a time now passed, this is the story of a young boy and his elephant who venture into the forest with his tribe only to become separated from the group. Using twenty-four beautiful double page spreads, Srey Bandol skillfully interweaves an exploration of some of the challenges facing minority tribal communities in modern Cambodia with the story of a boy who becomes lost in the forest. The narrative, told in pictures and words, sees the protagonist struggle to find his way as he wanders alone with his elephant. The path he must follow is overgrown (literally), dangerous, and does not lead to an easy resolution of his situation.

While the book is clearly a reflection on the increasing distance between traditional lifestyles and the modern world, with both the benefits and threats that this brings, Srey Bandol’s rendition of this theme is delicate and unobtrusive throughout. In this book equal value has been placed on the aesthetics of the book, and on the story it has to tell.

Using *In the Land of the Elephants* by Srey Bandol (Reyum Publishing, 2003) as a case study, this paper examines the gradual transition in publishing for children in Cambodia, from books in which the message takes precedence over the form, to the publication of stories in which aesthetics and content work in unison to inspire children to ask questions about the societies and the people portrayed in them.

The book opens to a scene of people in a village in Rattankiri province, a densely forested area in the North East of the country, where “people lived as their ancestors had always lived” (Srey Bandol, 2003: 1). The opening pages of the book tell a story of a stable pastoral life with people working in the fields during the day and gathering together in the evenings for ceremonies conducted through dance and song. The people fish in their traditional ways, pick fruit in the forest, and hunt for animals to eat as meat. Some animals, including elephants, are also used for work.

The traditional customs and lifestyles shown in these pages are increasingly at risk as land is appropriated for industrial agriculture and commercial development. There is another threat, however, to the traditional lifestyles, languages, and customs of Cambodia’s tribal minorities which comes from members of the tribes themselves.

In researching this paper, I came across an article published by Inter Press Service News Agency. In this article journalist Robert Carmichael examines the fate of one of



Cambodia's oldest languages, S'aoch. Spoken fluently by just ten (10) people in a small village in southern Cambodia, none of whom use it in daily conversation, the prospects for the survival of the S'aoch language are grim. The article quotes linguist Dr Jean-Michel Filippi who has studied the S'aoch language for a decade. Dr Filippi raises an problematic question: "Does the minority want to protect and save its own culture?" (CARMICHAEL, 2010).

Filippi says the impoverished S'aoch now aspire to the lifestyles enjoyed by their relatively wealthy Khmer neighbours, who have fields, motorbikes and houses. They have pinned their hopes for economic prosperity on adopting the language and lifestyles of the majority Khmer population. Survival of a language and of traditional customs depends on the people who practice them. "When you are put in a position of economic inferiority", comments Dr Filippi, "You tend to reject your own culture".

Although *In the Land of the Elephants* does not directly address these issues, implicit in the book is a subtle exploration of the situation facing the people it portrays. At the end of the story, when the boy and his elephant emerge from the forest in a modern Cambodian village, they find that the traditional lifestyles of the tribe have been superseded by their desire for modern conveniences.

But let us return our attention to the story ...

The tribe decides that more elephants are needed and plan an elephant hunt in the jungle. A young boy is selected to join the hunters for his first hunting expedition.

During the hunt, a violent storm strikes, bringing torrents of rain, lightning and the deafening boom of thunder, the elephant hunters are scattered in the forest. After searching unsuccessfully for the boy, the other hunters return to their village to perform a ceremony for his safe return.

The boy and his elephant are left behind, lost in the forest. The story follows their wanderings, confused and alone, and at risk from the wild jungle animals. Srey Bandol's delicate pencil illustrations create the densely foliated forest of interlocking tree trunks and twisting vines, evoking the confusion felt by the boy and his beast as they wander alone and unsure of themselves.

Eventually they come to a flowing waterfall where they find the entrance to a cave. The opening is too small for the elephant so the boy enters alone. A set of stone steps lead him down into the darkness of the fissure. Along the path, he is watched by crocodiles, flocks of bats and vultures. These creatures, associated with danger and death, can be read as representing the death of the traditional ways of hunting, fishing, and living which he has



come to know. To embrace modern culture and lifestyles, we must forgo something of the old.

The boy ventures on until deep in the recesses of the cave he meets an old monk. The boy spends what seems like many days with the monk, talking and meditating. Finally, the monk tells the boy it is time for him to return and leads him down a short passage way where he almost immediately finds himself at the mouth of the cave. His elephant is there waiting for him. The boy realizes that he now knows how to get back to his home and sets off with the elephant.

On arriving in the village, the boy finds it to be a different place than the one he left. The houses are “tied together by wires” (electrical cables) and there were “odd shaped animals with wheels that made strange sounds and moved very fast” (motorbikes). The people are wearing “peculiar coverings” and giggle and point at the boy when they see how little he is wearing (Srey Bandol, 2003: 43).

Strangest of all, however, is that no-one recognizes him. The village he left was a place where everyone knew each other and their lives were in unison. Here, he is a stranger. One old man eventually comes forward who does remember elders in the village telling a story about a young elephant hunter who was lost on the hunt and never returned to the village.

It is the people of the boy’s village who laugh at him when he arrives. Which brings us back again to Dr Filippi’s question “Does the minority want to protect and save its own culture?”.

Riding on his elephant and dressed in tribal coverings, the boy and his beast have no value for the people of the village. The community living here shows no signs of accepting the boy, nor does he wish to assimilate. Finding themselves to be strangers in the land that had once been their home, the boy and the elephant decide to return to the forest which “through their wanderings, had come to feel familiar to them...” (Srey Bandol, 2003: 45). The jungle is no longer a place of confusion and danger for the boy. Now, instead, the village is an unfamiliar place, filled with machines and ways of living that he does not understand.

In this book, the ‘right path’ lies neither in the old nor the new. To continue the old ways of living, the boy must turn away from the community who has embraced the new. Many minority groups and tribes face a similar challenge. Do they hold onto to old ways and customs, however much the world around them changes? Or do they turn to using new conveniences which can make tasks easier and offer more opportunities, but also threaten the preservation of traditional customs, and traditional ways of interacting and living together as a community?

Through his sympathetic and sensitive exploration of these questions, Srey Bandol has created a book which will challenge readers to discuss, to question, and to examine the issues it raises, and above all to engage with the world it portrays. *In the Land of the*



Elephants will not direct readers to the ‘right path’, but it might help to equip them with some of the tools they will need to navigate their own journey.

**BOOKS:**

SREY, Bandol (2003), *In the Land of the Elephants*, Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing.

ARTICLES ON INTERNET:

CARMICHAEL, Robert (2010), “Minority Languages Face Extinction” [online], *Inter Press Service News Agency*, [[http:// ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=49958](http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=49958)] consulted on July 4th, 2010.

