

SONN MOENG

Traditional music and the sound of the Khmer language are among Sonn Moeng's favorite childhood memories. They remind him of a homeland and a way of life devastated by war. Today, he lives in an adopted country, surrounded by a language he does not speak and struggles to understand a culture that is not his own.

Sonn Moeng was born in Kampot, Cambodia in 1928, during the era of French rule. The youngest child of a farming family, he grew up speaking Khmer and practicing the Buddhist religion. Unlike younger Cambodian refugees who grew up during the terror of the Khmer Rouge, Sonn's early memories are of a peaceful Cambodia—a world in which his parents harvested their crops and where he was schooled in the teachings of Buddha at the village pagoda.

But while Sonn's young life was not directly marked by terror, it not free from sorrow. By the time Sonn was six, he had lost both his mother and his father. Without his parents, Sonn felt alone and relied on his siblings for advice and support.

The Buddhist religion and way of life had a significant impact on Sonn's life, particularly when he was growing up and as a young adult. He recalls that he often sought the advice of the chief abbot on questions about moral living and doing good works. Around the age of 15, Sonn began thinking about adulthood and preparing for the future. He frequently visited the pagoda to honor the Buddhist monks and bring them food or alms on holy days. His neighbors began to notice these behavioral changes and soon began to regard him as an adult.

As a young adult, Sonn took on more responsibility and duties. He worked alongside his brother in the fields, learned traditional music from a

trained musician, and later became an accomplished barber. With these various skills and occupations he hoped to make a good living.

The Khmer Rouge and the war they brought changed the course of Sonn's life. In April 1975, communists gained control of Cambodia and soon set out to restructure the nation into an agrarian society. They forced the evacuation of cities and relocated former residents in primitive villages to labor in the fields. Hunger and malnutrition were common as villagers were often fed only rice or watery rice soup. When the Vietnamese liberated Cambodia in late 1978, an estimated 3 million Cambodians had perished. But even under the Vietnamese, Cambodia faced continued years of communist rule.

In 1983, Sonn fled to a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border. For two years, he waited, suspended between the country he had left behind and an uncertain future in a country that was not his homeland. During his time in Thailand, Sonn converted to Christianity. For him, the decision was bittersweet—he had found hope in his new faith, but in choosing to convert, he relinquished yet another piece of the world he had known.

Sonn came to the United States on October 30, 1991. After a temporary stay in Petaluma, he settled in Stockton, where he has lived ever since. Today, Sonn continues to identify strongly with the Cambodian community because of the language it preserves. For him, the language of his homeland is a fragile thread connecting him to his past.

When asked what wisdom he would pass on to the next generation, Sonn says he would encourage them to pursue higher education, something he was denied the chance to do. Though Sonn treasures the memories of the past, he sees the opportunities this new world holds for the next generation.

Interviewer: Vaughn Lee

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Ethnic Group: Cambodian American

Generation: Elder