THE SHORT STORIES OF CAMBODIAN POPULAR TRADITION

The modern short story, complete in itself and commenting directly or indirectly on the society of the time, never became established as a literary genre in Cambodia as it did in neighbouring South East Asian countries.[1] Magazines in the last few decades sometimes serialised novels or novelettes and frequently published poems but the short story still meant for Cambodians the traditional legend or fairy tale. This first article in the present collection begins, then, where story-telling in all countries began, with the folklore. Let us go back in time and imagine these tales being told by a grandfather to a grandchild, as they sat on the verandah, or by a village elder to his neighbours as they relaxed in the cool dark of the evening.

The folk-tales are the equal of the modern short story in providing comment on the society for which they were created. But what was this society and to what distant century may these tales be dated? Jean Przyluski suggested (Martini & Bernard 1946:7) that the study of Cambodian folklore would throw light on Khmer culture before it was affected by Indian or Chinese influence. Certainly many tales are concerned with hunting and trapping animals and there often arises that important question of whether there will be any 'luck' for supper, a hint, perhaps, of a way of life which preceded the agricultural state? For the most part, however, the folklore shows us a Khmer community which busily cultivated the Mekong plain. The frequent appearances in the stories of spirits *anak tā* always associated with a specific locality such as a strangely-shaped tree-trunk or huge rock, also indicate the settled state. Yet this could well be in pre-historic times, since animist beliefs preceded the arrival in mainland South East Asia in the early centuries of this era of Brahmanism and Buddhism (Mus 1933:373). It is possible, therefore, that some elements of the folk-tales as we know them now may predate the Christian Era.

The folklore places us at close quarters with the Cambodian natural environment. We become acquainted with wild animals so well understood by the Khmers, particularly with those which threaten man and those which he tames. There is the forest, never far away, to which expeditions are made to trap elephants, find building wood, or slash and burn a clearing of cultivation. We are made aware of the border of the Tonle to which father and son may go for a few months to grow rice and make a little profit from the surplus against hard times. The Cambodians may have lived in such a world as this before outside cultures influenced them. However, there are many tales in which an established monarch figures. The presence of royalty brings with it the society of astrologers and mandarins, judges and generals, and here we recognise the influence of

India and China. No precise historical period is indicated – for what folk-tale gives its king a real name? – but we are in an Indianised state with the Hindu divinities, the king's court, the Buddhist monkhood and the law.

The story, then, may have as its back-cloth the timeless scene of the Cambodian countryside or the complex web of an organised kingdom; the hero may stay near home, weaving baskets or raising turtles, he may go by boat to China and seek his fortune or he may rise, step by step, to become king. Whatever the outcome of the tale, we usually begin in a village with the peasant in his little wooden house on stilts. Time and time again, the characteristic features of our hero's house are brought vividly to our notice. Under it, his wife's lover may hide at night hearing the secrets which he tells her. Inside it is a jar for salted vegetables which, when empty, is big enough for a man to hide in. We feel closely involved with our peasant hero as he strives against life's odds, accepting defeat with Buddhist resignation; in his gullibility he is constantly cheated by the wily adventurers whom he meets in the forest or passing through his village.

I shall introduce the stories by giving a description of ten major groups of tales with a brief reference to one or two incidents in each one. Some of these are composed of a series of episodes concerning one or two major characters; one is a well-known collection of stories of a type. I have tried to include the more popular stories and, in order to be as representative of the whole corpus as possible, have added two groups, animal tales and etiological tales, which are not traditionally regarded as specific collections or sets by the Cambodians themselves.

Ā khvāk' Ā khvin (The blind man and the cripple)[2], is a series of episodes about two run-away slaves, each episode making a complete story.[3] The cripple, carried on the shoulders of the blind man, directs his footsteps. After many adventures, in most of which they are the losers, they save a princess from being eaten by an ogre, are cured of their blindness and lameness (by hitting each on the eyes and limbs respectively as they fight about some gold!) and become first and second kings in the land of the princess. In one of their little adventures as they journey along they are tricked into buying a node of 'honey' which turns out to be excrement!

Ā Ḷev[4] is the story of a horrid boy who is greedy for good food. So greedy is he that he tells his father, who is living at some distance from home at the time, that his mother has died and his mother that his father has died, just so as to enjoy two servings of funeral delicacies! He later persuades each separately to marry someone 'very much like the previous spouse' and thus engineers their re-marriage – and a wedding feast for himself. From his later life, which ends with his being a wealthy and respected member of the community, I will relate one incident. He and his father, walking along the road, see some Cham merchants approaching, laden with valuable merchandise. 'Run across the fields', he says to his father, 'someone is chasing you.' His father does so. Ā Ḷev calls to the merchants, 'That man is chasing after a deer with a broken leg. Help him to chase it and we'll share the deer.' All the Chams drop their precious goods and run after his father, while Ā Ḷev proceeds home with their merchandise!

Thmenh Chey (*Dhmeñ Jăy* or *Dhanañjăy*[5]) is a story known also in Burma and Thailand.[6] Thmenh Chey is a poor boy who rises, first to be the servant of a rich man, then to attend upon the king and finally to be the most eminent man in the land. All this he does by his wits and in particular by outwitting his current master in verbal adroitness. When he becomes the servant of the rich man, for example, and has to follow behind the litter which takes his master to wait upon the king each day, the first time he arrives late 'because', his excuse goes, 'I didn't want to drop anything'. 'Next time, be quicker', says the rich man. Next day he arrives on time but without the rich man's betel; he dropped it but did not delay to pick it up. 'Next time, pick up anything which has fallen to the ground', says the foolish rich man. And next day Thmenh Chey arrives with horsedung which he saw drop to the ground! Later, when Thmenh Chey is the king's servant, he saves the country from the Chinese. They have sent a delegation of wise men to Cambodia and, unless someone there is able to answer three riddles, they will take over the country. Thmenh Chey has constantly infuriated the king by beating him in every battle of wits but now the king relies on him to save the situation. And this he does because when, in unwonted despair, he throws himself into the river, he hears the answers being discussed in a Chinese junk.

Judge Hare (*subhā dansāy*) is also a character who has a counterpart in other South East Asian countries; he is found in Laos and Vietnam and there are parallels between his adventures and those of the Malay *Pelanduk**. (Martini & Bernard 1946:8). Judge Hare stories fall into two categories: those in which this enterprising animal escapes death by a hair's breadth and those in which, as the judge, he solves law-cases between animals or men or both, making the right person win by irregular methods, usually by giving the guilty party a dose of his own medicine.[7] Often a play on words or an argument which depends on clever wording is involved. Here is a paraphrase of one story. A man is about to lose his fiancée for the sake of whose hand he has endured the ordeal of soaking in water for three nights in succession. Jokingly he had stretched out his hand as if to feel the warmth of a fire on a distant mountain. The girl's parents said this was cheating and he now has to pay costs in the form of a meal for Judge Parrot and the parents. Judge Hare solves his problem by making him present the food without seasoning, putting the seasoning at the side of the dish. 'What on earth is in this stew?' asks Judge Parrot. 'It tastes of nothing.' Judge Hare then points out that the warmth of that fire could no more affect the young man's hand than the seasoning could affect the taste of the stew.[8]

Mr. Whittling Knife[9] (*cau kaṃpit pandoḥ*) and his brother are given advice by the abbot as they leave the monastery where they have been educated. His brother goes, as bidden, to China where he becomes rich. Mr. Whittling Knife, destined to become the ruler of two kingdoms, is told

* A *pelanduk* is a mouse-deer (*Tragulus kancil*, ~ *javanicus* ~ *pygmaeus*, etc.) found in Malaysian forests. The Malays regard it as a symbol of wisdom and intelligence whence it assumes the title role in a cycle of folk-tales, the Malay *cerita pelanduk* (Winstedt 1958:11-19). (Ed.)

to observe three maxims: not to fall asleep when others on guard do so; to keep an eye on his mother-in-law; and not to talk in bed. He visits his brother in China and has an adventurous return journey, arriving home to his faithless wife with valuable, magic possessions. A well-known incident in the story takes place when he disobeys one of the maxims and talks to his wife in bed, telling her that he has hidden his treasures at the foot of the wooden steps leading up to the house. When her lover, who has overheard this, has stolen the goods, Mr. Whittling Knife accuses the steps, taking them to court, and thus attracts the attention of the king. The king helps him to find the culprit who, they feel sure, is the wife's lover, as follows. He gives Mr. Whittling Knife a fine sarong for him to present to his wife to wear at a feast. She, as they anticipate, gives it to her lover, who wears it and is easily discovered.

Kong the Brave[10] (*Gaṅ' Ĥān*) is, in fact, a shameless coward who gains a reputation for bravery when his two wives kill a tiger while he hides in a tree. He deals the dead tiger a few blows with a stick. 'Hm. You'll hit it when it's dead', say his wives. 'Women couldn't kill a tiger', says Kong the Brave. 'Obviously I must have killed it.' He thus begins a rumour of his own courage which he has to maintain. We find him later, sitting terrified on his elephant, having been commanded by the king to lead a battle charge; he accidentally jabs his elephant with his lance, it rushes towards the enemy, and once again he appears brave!

Satra keng kantrai[11] (*Sātrā kṅ kantraî*) is a collection of legal tales known also in Laos, Thailand and Burma. In each case the dispute cannot be solved by a mere judge and has to be referred to the king. His judgements are wise and fair. When two women claim to be the mother of one child, for example, he settles the case very much as Solomon did.[12] There is a great deal of repetition in the form of the stories, several, for example, being about two people meeting on a narrow road or bridge and neither being willing to give way. In one of these cases the king awards to the man whose house was on fire in preference to the man who was going home because his mother had died![13] Another case involves an umbrella which the owner had allowed another man to share on the way home. The latter carried it and, at the parting of the ways, would not give it up. The king's solution was to tear the umbrella in half, give half to each and send them home. He then ordered someone to follow them and listen as they spoke to their wives about it. Thus he discovered the real owner and made the other man give him a new umbrella.[14]

The story of the *Four bald men*[15] (*manuss daṃmaek kpāl puon nāk'*) tells how they traverse the land looking for a wife – and some hair. In one episode of their story they find five turtles and want to divide them amongst themselves. However they do it, they always have one left over. A rather brighter individual comes along and offers to do it for them. He sits on one, shares out the rest perfectly and keeps the one on which he is sitting. It was suggested by Przyluski (Martini & Bernard 1946: 9) that this story may go back to a polyandrous society since the four bald men do in the end share a wife. From the way the tale is told nowadays, however, it