The Floating World

Persecuted on land, members of Cambodia’s ethnic Vietnamese minority take shelter in improvised villages spread across the surface of the Mekong River’s waterways.

By Ben Mauk

Photographs by Andrea Frazzetta
best handymen living among the boat people in Chong Khoi was named Taing Hoarth. Most days, Hoarth woke up at 5 a.m. and brought a bowl of noodle soup from a passing sampan, the same genre of wandering bodegas from which his wife, Vo Thi Vo, sold vegetables house to house to house. When she left for the day, around 6, Hoarth rolled up their floor mat and got to work.

Chong Khoi is one of hundreds of floating villages, comprising tens of thousands of families, on the Tonle Sap River and the lake of the same name in Cambodia. Dangers on a floating village multiply in the rainy season. When I first visited, in late July, there was always something for Hoarth to do: repairing storm damage in a wall of thatched patch, clearing the water hyacinths that collected along the upriver porch. Sometimes the house had to be towed closer to the receding shoreline so that storms or the waves of passing ships would not capsize it. Every few months, he got his ancient air compressor working and swam beneath the house, a rubber hose between his teeth, to refill the cement jars that kept the whole thing afloat. He was skilled at physo.

The afternoon of my arrival, Hoarth was squatting over an old butane camp stove, scraping at a rusted gas valve. Rust was the common enemy on the water. Someone had thrown the stove away, but he thought he could fix it to sell on his next trip onto the lake. His long wooden moccasins against the house, covered in tar paper and heavy with cargo, carried him to floating villages as far as 90 miles away. “I know Tonle Sap like my hand,” he said. There was Prek Tor, a remote village where every family, rich or poor, had a wooden cage for raising crabs. And Khol Tot, where fish farmers lived in clustered homes on the open water, risking the daily storms to catch with tangles with nets up to half a mile long. Hoarth visited them all. He was sometimes on the lake for a month at a stretch, selling pots and stoves, sleeping rough under the long-tail’s planked roof.

But he always came back to Chong Khoi, his home of several years, where the villagers live on cabin-size boats and junks arranged in tidy rows orthogonal to either shore. In the space between houses, some families raise carp and catfish in bamboo cages or keep floating gardens of potions pepper and papaya trees. Other villages are labyrinthine extensions of nearby shore towns, with broad Venetian canals and twisting alleysways, floating temples, churches, schoolrooms and oil-black ice factories. Chong Khoi is relatively small, and shrinking—Cambodian authorities would like it to disappear entirely—but it lies a mile from the heart of Kampóng Chhnag, the large provincial capital, and as Hoarth worked, a steady fleet of peddlers took their boats to and from it.

While Hoarth picked at the stove with a screwdriver, a neighbor lay in a hammock, watching him work. The neighbor, like Hoarth and everyone else in the village, was ethnically Vietnamese, and he had a Vietnamese name, Vieng Yang Nang. But most of the time he was by name, which means “lucky” in Khmer. The language of Cambodia’s ethnic minorities. Both men kept two names on the water—one Khmer, one Vietnamese—and switched between them freely. They felt at home in both worlds, although they weren’t always accepted in the first. In Cambodia, where the concepts of nationality and ethnicity are inextricable, members of the ethnic Vietnamese minority are known as sam, a ubiquitous slur that is sometimes translated as “savage.”

I sat on the floor listening to Samrang and Hoarth review their situation from earlier in the day. That morning we had visited the school and the Vietnamese pagoda, stilted buildings near the fish market where Chong Khoi once stood. Local officials evicted the village in 2013, forcing residents to move more than a mile downstream, and both buildings were now hard to access. Such evictions are frequent in the area, and sometimes lead to other trouble. After Hoarth asked the authorities to help with costs relat-

The Mekong River’s lower basin is vast, encompassing parts of Myanmar and Thailand, virtually all of Laos and Cambodia and parts of southern Vietnam, where, after a 1,500-mile journey across five national borders, the mother of rivers divaricates into a complex delta network and drains into the South China Sea. Tonle Sap Lake sits roughly in the middle of this lush expanse. On a map, it appears like a crooked blue finger extending from the Mekong near Phnom Penh. But it is more often described as Cambodia’s heart, both for its rhythmic flood pulse and the sustaining role it plays in the country’s economy and food supply.

Tonle Sap is unique hydrologically as one of the most fertile ecosystems on the planet. For half the year, the Tonle Sap River flows southeast from the lake to Phnom Penh. But during the rainy season, the swollen Mekong forces the Tonle Sap to flow in reverse, and the lake engorges to as much as six times its dry-season expanse, two miles of pimple when over the following decade, we have drawn fishers alike to its doubly salted, nutrient-rich seas. Kels, frogs, shrimp and fish proliferate with tropical abandon, particularly in the second tertiary where, viewed from Phnom Penh, the river appears to fray into dozens of blue fibers before broadening itself back open water.

The boats of Tonle Sap and Cambodia, which divides the Mekong Delta, has occurred more times than nearly any other in Asia. The people living on either side have been in contact for at least a thousand years for uninterrupted exchanges of goods and labor that for the last four centuries has been marked by bold Vietnamese expansion. In the 1930s, a Cambodian king married a Vietnamese princess and allowed the Vietnamese to settle permanently. Those eventually annexed the region, cutting off Cambodia’s access to the South China Sea and stranding many Khmer people inside Vietnam, where they had lived in the country for centuries, they were Cambodia’s hereditary enemy. After 1970 coup, they became the targets of pogroms and massacres.

The Tonle Sap is the world’s largest barrier lake, and the Mekong is the longest river. The Tonle Sap connects the Mekong to the South China Sea, and it is said that the Mekong’s water level is always lower than the Tonle Sap’s. This creates a unique hydrological system, where the Mekong river flows into the Tonle Sap during the dry season and back into the Mekong during the rainy season. This system is crucial for the livelihoods of the fishing communities that rely on the Tonle Sap for their food and income.

Cambodia’s borders were formalized when the country became a colonial protec-

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best handyman living among the boat people in Chong Kho was named Taing Hoarth. Most days, Hoarth woke up at 5 a.m. and bought a bowl of noodle soup from a passing sampang, the same genre of wandering bodega from which his wife, Yv Thil Voich, sold vegetables houseboat to houseboat. When she left for the day, around 6, Hoarth rolled up their floor mat and got to work. Chong Kho is one of hundreds of floating villages, comprising tens of thousands of families, on the Tonle Sap River and the lake of the same name in Cambodia. Dangers on a floating village multiply in the rainy season. When I first visited, in late July, there was always something for Hoarth to do: repairing storm damage in a wall of slashed planks, clearing the water hyacinths that collected along the upriver porch. Sometimes the house had to be towed closer to the receding shoreline so that storms or the waves of passing ships wouldn’t capsize it. Every few months, he got his ancient air compressor working and swam beneath the house, a rubber hose between his teeth, to refill the cement jars that kept the whole thing buoyant. He was an expert of pylons.

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Hoarth and Sanmang agreed that you can’t fight evictions on the water. Floating settlements are technically illegal, and the Vietnamese in particlar are powerless against such orders. “The poor will become poorer,” Sanmang said. Hoarth said nothing, except the pile of net flaks that he strapped into a knohole in the floor. He set a can of butane into the stove’s empty chamber and pressed the pilot button. A bull’s-eye of blue flame appeared. We laughed. A few houses away, a woman sang love songs on a karaoke system powered by a car battery. The Mekong River’s lower basin is vast, encompassing parts of Myanmar and Thailand, virtually all of Laos and Cambodia and parts of southern Vietnam, where, after a 4,000-mile journey across five national borders, the river of rivers diverts into a complex delta network and drains into the South China Sea. Tonle Sap Lake sits roughly in the middle of this lush expanse. On a map, it appears as a crooked blue finger extending from the Mekong near Phnom Penh. But it is more often described as Cambodia’s heart, both for its rhythmic flood pulse and the sustaining role it plays in the country’s economy and food supply.

Tonle Sap uniquely hedges Cambodia from most of the fertile ecosystems on the planet. For half the year, the Tonle Sap River flows southeast from the lake to Phnom Penh. But during the rainy season, the swollen Mekong forces the Tonle Sap to flow in reverse, and the lake engorges to as much as six times its dry-season expanse, two million of which are fishable. Over the millennia, the fish have drawn farmers alike to its doubly silted, nutrient-rich shoals. Kels, frogs, shrimp and fish proliferate with tropical abandon, particularly in the second bottleneck where, viewed from Phnom Penh, the river appears to fray into dozens of silver-blue fibers before broadening itself back into open water. The inhabitants of Tonle Sap and Cambodia, which divides the Mekong Delta, has occasioned more battles than nearly any other in Asia. The people living on either side have been in contact for at least a thousand years, driven by uninterrupted exchange of goods and labor that for the last four centuries has been marked by bold Vietnamese expansion. In the 1840s, a Cambodian king married a Vietnamese princess and allowed the Vietnamese to settle permanently among the Kinh. Phnom Penh eventually annexed the region, cutting off Cambodia’s access to the South China Sea and strangling many Khmer people inside Vietnam, where they had lived in the country for centuries, they were Cambodia’s hereditary enemy. After a 1970 coup, they became the targets of pogroms and massacres, adding to the chaos of that decade, which began with civil war and a brutal United States bombing campaign and ended with occupation by the Vietnamese Army. In the interim, during the five-year reign of the Khmer Rouge, millions died from execution, starvation and disease.

Since 1979, the ruling Cambodian People’s Party, or CPP (with the former Khmer Rouge commander Hun Sen at its head), has kept the ethnic Vietnamese in a state of limbo, informally granting and revoking rights depending on local political climates. The CPP’s opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, or CNRP, is more consistently xenophobic, attempting to expel the Vietnamese invaders and reclaim “Lower Cambodia.” The party’s former leader, Sam Rainsy, once proposed to “send the pale immigrants back,” and before the 2013 national elections he claimed that “if we don’t rescue our nation, four or five years more is too late.” Cambodia will be full of Vietnamese; we will become slaves of Vietnam.”

Human Rights Watch has described the traditional Cambodian hatred of the ethnic Vietnamese as “almost pathological.” It is strongest in the cities, particularly in Phnom Penh, where it is hard to differentiate between observable corruption and baselineーless. There are legitimate grievances about illegal logging and fishing by Vietnamese companies, but some people also insist that the Vietnamese are to blame for the spread of AIDS, or that Pol Pot was a Vietnamese spy sent to annihilate the Khmer race. The

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hated is vernacular. Cambodians undergoing gastrointestinal distress say their stomachs are “sticky in Vietnames." And the short, pricky tree whose nettles deliver a daylong rash, and which is known to invade a region and quickly overrun it, is the ba lau sau: the Vietnamese birch.

It’s tempting to view the floating villages, where the highest concentration of ethnic Vietnamese live, as a consequence of politically waterborne lives. In truth, the villagers’ history is long and obscure, and no one knows when the first one appeared in Cambodia. The French naturalist Henri Mouhot—who “discovered” Angkor Wat in the 1850s, although it had never been lost to local lore—found in Phnom Penh a floating population of 50,000, more than twice as many as lived on land. He described one village of Khmer and Vietnamese merchants just outside the capital.

[Toward the southern extremity of the city, we passed a floating town, composed of more than 500 boats, most of them large-size. They serve as an entrepot for some merchants, and residences for others. All their boats are a part of the city’s jumble. The portion I have kept, that, in case of alarm, they may be ready to take flight at a moment’s warning.

There is also the collective memory, rarely transcribed, of the floating villagers themselves, who corroborate Mouhot’s intuition that theirs is a lifelong home over generations to mitigate against the bad harvests, marauding bandits and unfriendly rulers to which minority Vietnamese remain especially vulnerable. Some told me that they had owned land in the early years of independence and that they had lived on the water only seasonally until the land was taken away. Others said they had always lived on boats. Some identified strongly as Cambodians, while others found the question of national allegiance absurd. “We just live on the water, where it’s easy to catch fish,” a monk in Kampong Chhnang told me.

Hoarith could count on at least four generations of ancestors around Tosei Sap. Born at the mouth of the lake, he was when Khmer Rouge roughened into Phnom Penh. His family was captured and sent to a labor camp in the mountains. After four months at the camp—where, he said, “they tried to kill at least 10,000 Vietnamese families a day”—the soldiers loaded the prisoners onto ferries to be deported “back” to Vietnam. Hoarith had never been to Vietnam. He didn’t know where Vietnam was. He asked his grandmother, but she didn’t know either. The ferry to the border took five days. Anyone who died was thrown overboard.

Around 150,000 ethnic Vietnamese were expelled from the country in one day, joining the three-fourths of the “new nation” exiles progammed under the ultranationalist Khmer Republic. The Vietnamese were both regimes’ preferred scapegoats, igniting a vicious war between the Cambodian and Vietnamese, whole. Those who survived the journey were traded to Vietnam for salt and rice and lived out the disastrous 1979s on farms in the countryside. Those who stayed in Cambodia were killed in the streets and homes. They were laughed alongside 90,000 Chum and as many as 100,000 Khmer civilians who were condemned for the crime of having “Khmer bodies and Vietnamese minds.”

When Chum was driven Phnom Penh in 1979 and installed the puppet government that would later become the CPP, hun-dred thousands of civilians followed. Many were refugees returning home, but others were immigrants, and their presence revived the same fears of assimilation the Khmer Rouge had stoked. Hoarith and his family resettled in the village where he was born. He had to clean up river water, and Hoarith bought bags of bean pudding from the last sampan of the evening: a dessert cruiser stung with colored lights. We listened to the boats roaring up and down the channel. The boats had been decked out with kids in rickety boats with car engines for night races. Each motor’s thrust cleared the all of the insect’s chatter. It was one in a series of brief pockets of silliness that Cambodia explained how his brother had died last year when a night rager collided with his fishing boat. His parents were both at work. The water has its dangers, including those common to Cambodian infant death, accidents and drowning. Most children under 5 die of accidental injuries, including drowning, falling, being stuck by improvised devices—the grime in my saw was an empty motor-oil bottle tied to a length of rope wound around an infant’s neck—and when they’re not being drowned, they are being drowned by the Sea of Cambodia, the嫂orthern end of the Gulf of Thailand.

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In an effort to define the natives that had faced the expulsion party, the state also began the process of formalizing the status of ethnic Vietnamese in foreign relations. Last year, the Ministry of Foreign Af-

SAMANG, WHOM I MEET ON THE SHORE OF THE COMMEMORATIVE BLOOMS

Photograph by Andrea Fraser/Institute, For The New York Times

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neat my rat, a few alternative floorboards permitted a view of the river between the legs: the brownish, unobstructed stretch of water that bathed in diaphanous pink flowers. Every few seconds, a green light affixed to a roof beam illuminated the room as a warning to nighttime fishermen, whose boats I drowsily mistrusted for low-flying helicopters.
It's tempting to view the floating villages, where the highest concentration of ethnic Vietnamese live, as a consequence of politically waterborne lives. In truth, the villages' history is long and obscure, and no one knows when the first one appeared in Cambodia. The French naturalist Henri Mouhot — who "discovered" Angkor Wat in the 1860s, although it had never been lost to locals — found in Phnom Penh a floating population of 20,000, more than twice as many as lived on land. He described one village of Khmer and Vietnamese merchants just outside the capital.

[Toward the southern extremity of the city, we passed a floating town, composed of more than 500 boats, most of them of large size. They serve as an entrepot for some merchants, and residences for others. All their trifles, a part of their property, is here kept, that, in case of alarm, they may be ready to take flight at a moment's warning.

There is also the collective memory, rarely transcribed, of the floating villagers themselves, who corredate Mouhot's intuition that theirs is a lifestyle honed over generations to mitigate against the hard battles are often shared with unfriendly villagers to whom minority Vietnamese remain especially vulnerable. Some told me that they had owned land in the early years of independence and that they had lived on the water only seasonally until the land was taken away. Others said they had always lived on boats. Some identified strongly as Cambodians, while others found the question of national allegiance absurd. "We just live on the water, where it's easy to catch fish," a monk in Kampong Chhnang told us. "We live everywhere.

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Around 150,000 ethnic Vietnamese were expelled from the country in a single act, joining the tide of the 9 million displaced by Pol Pot's purges under the ultranationalist Khmer Rouge. The Vietnamese were both regimes' preferred scapegoats, "infectious" and "undesirable" to all Khmer and Cambodians, whole. Those who survived the journey were traded to Vietnam for salt and rice and lived out the disastrous 1978 war on farms in the countryside. Those who stayed in Cambodia were largely driven to the gloomy cities in a hark of river water and lived out the disasters in farms on the countryside. The Vietnamese were raped, murdered, and extorted by the Khmer Rouge, and many of them were picked up by the Vietnamese Army through Phnom Penh in 1978 and 1979, and installed the puppet government that would later become the CPP, hun- dreds of thousands of civilians followed. Many were refugees returning home, but others were immigrants, and their presence revived the same fears of assimilation the Khmer Rouge had stoked. Hoarirth and his family resettled in the village where he was born. It was still dangerous. In 1996, during a last gasp of Khmer Rouge resistance, soldiers warred into Chlong Tros, a village in the middle of the night with RPGs and AK-47s. The village was dividing. The village divided on whether the Vietnamese lived in the village and the Vietnamese were divided in the village. "Our children are not issued birth certificates, precipitating a generational cycle of de facto statelessness."

"Thirty years ago, none of this mattered," Christoper Sperling, a research fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., told me. "No Cambodians had papers. There was no state presence. But the moment the state starts registering people, suddenly it matters." The expansion of services, especially those tied to Vietnamese citizenship in Cambodia, told me. "No Cambodians had papers. There was no state presence. But the moment the state starts registering people, suddenly it matters."

There is a tradition of rural pluralism in Cambodia that belies its recent history of racial violence. Most of the floating villages I saw were peaceful meanders of Vietnamese, Khmer, and even Chinese and many of the people I met, including Hoarirth, were the product of mixed Khmer and Vietnamese marriages. But everyone seemed to agree that floating villages were traditionally Vietnamese by way of life, enlarged out of economic necessity to include other groups. Today the homes on stilts that jut into the water are made of fish protein, rice, and sugar—ingredients that are found nowhere else in Cambodia. As rice is in Vietnam, sugar is in Cambodia.

At nightfall, a fearful nautical storm, the river's current disrupted. The villagers told me stories of the station. Stories of the station. Stories of the station. Stories of the station. Stories of the station. Stories of the station.

It was in one of these brief pockets of stillness that Sangourn explained how his brother had died last year when a night-racer collided with his fishing boat. His brother was flown to a hospital that was too far away. His parents were both at work. The river has its dangers, including incidents that are most common cause of fatal death, accidents and drowning. Most children under the age of 16 fall off their bicycles or are pulled into the water by their pets. Sangourn told me of one "my wife's grandmother's". She had been once a large vegetable village near my mat, a few guardrails also for the view of the river between the levees of the river. Sangourn told me of one "my wife's grandmother's". She had been once a large vegetable village near my mat, a few guardrails also for the view of the river between the levees of the river.

Photograph by Andrea Jespersen/Institute, For The New York Times

The New York Times Magazine
here. The stone lay between two converging strands of river. In a few days it would be underwater.

Beyond the cemetery, behind a field of flax flowers, we found a floating shack in the shadow of a ruined salted house. A group of children waved from the window. Their father was in the harvesting field, stomping through the pea that came up to his shin, planting beans. He remembered the Vietnamese who used to live here, the land as well as the water. There was even a Vietnamese temple—a 20-year-old, he said—in a village not far from here. Sannuang didn’t know the village, but he decided to go look for it. The farmer warned that we would find no Vietnamese living there. “After the Khmer Rouge,” he added, “they were afraid to come back.”

We followed the farmer’s directions down a narrow stream that meandered for an hour past overgrown rice fields from whose branches hung the teardrop nests of tropical birds. Around noon we reached the village, which was called Sannuang. There was a dirt road where sickly cows commuted with the bovine infinite beneath silted houses frozen in mid-collapse. Children played in the tall grass. Neang Kangrei Mountain loomed overhead and between the village and the mountain stood an incongruously opulent temple. Its gate was red and gold, framing the mountain’s broad green slope. At the entrance stood a banner pillar, which connects heaven and earth in Buddhist cosmology. The pillar was square, in the Vietnamese style. Two muo warrior stood on either side of the temple, 12 feet tall, pressing their swords into the earth.

We found an old monk in a hammock outside his hut. He woke up as we approached. Like the bean farmer, he remembered the Vietnamese. They had used this land for centuries, he said. Behind the monk’s house were two brightly painted tombs, whose caretakers traveled from Ho Chi Minh City every March to sweep them. A group of men had come up the road as we were talking, now they approached us. The loudest, Uy Poum, boasted to me that he helped to convert the abandoned pagoda 5 years ago, exchanging the Vietnamese gods for Khmer ones. “I built this pagoda,” he said. It had been abandoned for 20 years by then, ever since the Khmer Rouge had moved the whole town to a camp at the foot of the mountain. Some Vietnamese were taken there, and that was the end of their time in the village. “But they weren’t killed,” he added. “They went to Vietnam.”

Another man, Ek Srean, disagreed. Many were killed, he said. “I was an eyewitness. I saw the bones. I saw the bones in the pit.” “There were bones,” a third said, “but we don’t know if they were Khmer or Vietnamese.”

The men fought over the fate of the Vietnamese for a while. Sannuang and I listened and ate some boiled peanuts we bought in the market that morning. Conversations about the Khmer Rouge can have a dreamlike quality in Cambodia, drifting back and forth over the same gruesome territory—the crude methods of murder, the pitiful ration of rice and broth—while trading in rumors, jades and legends. Facts are overwritten and memories change mid-sentence. A story is told that contradicts the one preceding it, and both are accepted as passing glimpses of a historical truth too immense to view head-on. After some cajoling, Poum admitted that Vietnamese may have been killed in the camp, “But we didn’t know,” he added. “Then he seemed to change his mind.” The Vietnamese never came to the commune where we were.

We moved on to the question of whether a Vietnamese could ever become Cambodian. As usual, the word “Khmer” was used to denote both ethnicity and nationality. One man in the group put forth a tentative theory. “It depends on their desires. If they want to become Khmer or not. If they give up their Vietnamese nationality, they become Khmer.”

Srean again had a different opinion. “They can hold the documents, but they cannot become Khmer. The Vietnamese are still Vietnamese.” He shook his head and was quiet for a while. “Unless the king signs.”

This generated murmurs of approval. We had forgotten the king’s signature. According to Cambodian law, Prince Sihanouk’s son, Norodom Sihanouk, is the final arbiter of Cambodian citizenship. All applicants for naturalization must meet the personal standards of character. None of us knew whether this had ever actually happened. But the men at least agreed that it might, and that the Vietnamese had lived among Cambodians for generations without any trouble. “Vietnamese and Khmer married each other in this village,” Poum said. “But not anymore.”

“They were expelled,” another said with finality. “And those who decided to stay were all killed. If they had white skin like a Vietnamese, like that”— he pointed at me—“not at Sannuang, who was keeping his distance—‘they would be killed. I saw it.’

The man seemed to know what he was talking about. Most soldiers and even senior political leaders who served in the Khmer Rouge melted smoothly back into village life after its demise, sometimes rejoining the very communities where they had once worked as executioners. It is rare for anyone to admit such things. The subject was raised in a useful way. The man who had spoken thought for a moment, then asked to revise his story. “Well, I didn’t see it exactly,” he said. “I heard about it. But someone who had light skin like you would definitely be killed.”

I spent the next few weeks traveling through floating villages on Tonle Sap Lake and visiting endures of ethnic Vietnamese along the Cambodia-Vietnam border. In one border town, I watched a woman use an old landmine cup as a chopping block. It had been planted in her yard during the Indochina wars and proved itself a dual. In Chhnom Tou, I watched Khmer and Vietnamese neighbors play roving midnight games of cat beneath flickering generator light, throwing handfuls of cash into the pot, and everywhere I was the object of extreme village hospitality that knows no...
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The men fought over the fate of the Vietnamese for a while. Srean and I listened and ate some boiled peanuts we bought in the market that morning. Conversations about the Khmer Rouge can have a dreamlike quality in Cambodia, drifting back and forth over the same gruesome territory — the crude methods of murder, the pitiful ratios of rise and broth — while trailing in rumors, jokes and legends. Facts are overwritten; memories change mid-sentence. A story is told that contradicts the one preceding it, and both are accepted as passing glimpses of a historical truth too immense to view head-on. After some cajoling, Poun admitted that Vietnamese may have been killed in the camps, “But we don’t know,” he added. Then he seemed to change his mind. “The Vietnamese never came to the commune where we were.”

We moved on to the question of whether a Vietnamese could ever become Cambodian. As usual, the word “Khmer” was used to denote both ethnicity and nationality. One man in the group put forth a tentative theory. “It depends on their desires. If they want to become Khmer or not. If they give up their Vietnamese nationality, they become Khmer.”

Srean again held a different opinion. “They can hold the documents, but they cannot become Khmer. The Vietnamese are still Vietnamese.” He shook his head and was quiet for a while. “Unless the king signs.”

This generated murrums of approval. We had forgotten the king’s signature. According to Cambodian law, Prince Sihanouk’s son, Norodom Sihanouk, is the final arbiter of Cambodian citizenship. All applicants for naturalization must meet his personal standards of character. None of us knew whether this had ever actually happened. But the men at least agreed that it might, and that the Vietnamese had lived among Cambodians for generations without any trouble. “Vietnamese and Khmer married each other in this very village,” Poun said. “But not anymore.”

“They were expelled,” another said with finality. “And those who decided to stay were all killed. If they had white skin like a Vietnamese, like that” — he pointed at me — “not at Samrang, who was keeping his distance — they would be killed. I saw it.”

The man seemed to know what he was talking about. Most soldiers and even senior political leaders who served in the Khmer Rouge melted smoothly back into village life after its demise, sometimes rejoining the very communities where they had once worked as executioners. It is rare for anyone to admit such things. The subject was raised in a tasteful way. The man who had spoken thought for a moment, then asked to revise his story. “Well, I didn’t see it exactly,” he said. “I heard about it. But someone who had light skin like you would definitely be killed.”

I spent the next few weeks traveling through floating villages on Tonle Sap Lake and visiting enclaves of ethnic Vietnamese along the Cambodia-Vietnam border. In one border town, I watched a woman use an old landmine cup as a chopping block. It had been planted in her yard during the Indochina wars and proved itself a dud. In Chhnok Tru, I watched Khmer and Vietnamese neighbors play routing midnight games of cat and mouse flitting generator light, throwing handfuls of cash into the pot, and everywhere I was the object of extreme village hospitality that knew no...
Most ethnic Vietnamese in the country continue to feel that they are Cambodians of Vietnamese origin. They refuse to give up hope that someday their Cambodian identity will be accepted in the country they call home. Instead, with somewhere between 400,000 and one million members, according to independent scholars, and virtually no international calls for Cambodia to uphold its own nationality laws, they are arguably one of the largest and least-supported stateless populations in the world. The ethnic Vietnamese have taken to hiding their documents from the police currently sweeping the country. It's not the first time this kind of thing has happened to them. At the Vietnamese pagoda in Kampong Chhnang, a diminutive 80-year-old seamstress. Only monks and laypeople are meant to be alive at the pagoda, but she didn't have any family—her children died before her eyes in a Khmer Rouge labor camp—so the monks took special interest in her. According to her identification papers, she shuffled to her room and came back holding a small packet wrapped in twine. "You're lucky," she said as she smiled. "I've never let anyone look at these before." She began spreading an astonishing half-century's worth of documents across the table. There were cards from Siem Reap's Cambodia along with decades' worth of residency permits from Vietnam, to which she was twice deported. So long as she never showed them to anyone, the documents could never be invalidated or purged. They were her private legal self, a reparation of identities both Vietnamese and Cambodian. She would not give them up. "I'll keep these documents with me until I die," she said, and then I'll take them to the grave with me.

The monks on the floating pagoda in Kampong Luong were preparing for the ceremony of the drowned, arranging yellow orchids and four-olive leafs beneath a Buddha framed in flashing lights. A rented pavilion had been floated over and stocked with chairs. Young volunteers scattered 101 and marigons on a table and all morning-long pilgrims from Phnom Penh arrived to give money to the poor and receive blessings. It was August, and the air was torpid. Drowning is a bad death, the temple laymen explained. The souls of the drowned become water ghosts—monk souls in Klmer—causing shipwrecks and pulling swimmers under by their legs. The ceremony cools the spirits out of the water so that they may find their way to the next life or proceed to the heavenly realm. The ceremony continued with a late-afternoon dowsing. The children of supplicants made a game of leaping through the deluge onto an empty fish barge moored to the pagoda, then back again with fearless precision. The second phase began. The ritualists, chanting before the head monk tossed holy water over the crowd and called for the deceased. If, as on this day, the rain slowed, then the water was stopped. The temple emptied into the ferries and sampans outside. At the front of the largest ferry, a monk rang a finger-cymbal to wake the drowned, and the boats slipped into the open lake. There was no moon. The water was black. Wells of distant lightning soundlessly flooded the clouds red. Along the sides of the ferries and the gunwales of each boat, families placed paper offerings, floating flowers and candles. The water was touched by a burning candle, such that the lake became a field of bobbing orange stars. All was still, save for the families who bade parting, singing into gourd bowls, because they're Vietnamese, she said. "They think it's all a conspiracy by Vietnamese to swamp up Cambodia."
Most ethnic Vietnamese in the country continue to feel that they are Cambodians of Vietnamese origin. They refuse to give up hope that someday their Cambodian identity will be accepted in the country they call home. Instead, with somewhere between 40,000 and one million members, according to independent scholars, and virtually no international calls for Cambodia to uphold its own national identity, they are arguably one of the largest and least-supported stateless populations in the world. The ethnic Vietnamese have taken to hiding their documents from the police currently sweeping the country. It’s not the first time this kind of thing has happened to them. At the Vietnamese pagoda in Kampong Cham, they met a diminutive 80-year-old seamstress. Only monks and laypeople are meant to live at the pagoda, but she didn’t have any family — her children died before her eyes in a Khmer Rouge labor camp — so the monks took pity on her and allowed her to continue to live at the pagoda. She had an identification card, but no one ever looked at these cards before. She began spreading an astonishing half-century’s worth of documents across the table. There were many cards from Sihanouk’s Cambodia alongside decades’ worth of residency permits from Vietnam, to which she was twice married. So long as she never showed them to anyone, the documents could never be invalidated or purged. They were her private legal self, a reversion of identities both Vietnamese and Cambodian. She would not let them up. “I’ll keep these documents with me until I die,” she said, “and then I’ll take them to the grave with me.”

The monks on the floating pagoda in Kampong Loung were preparing for the ceremony of the drowned, arranging yellow orchids and four-ovolks below a Buddha framed in lighting lights. A rented pavilion had been floated over and stocked with chairs. Young volunteers scattered red and green on a table, and all morning long pilgrims from Phnom Penh arrived to give money to the poor and receive blessings. It was August, and the air was torpid. Drowning is a bad death, the temple laymen explained. The souls of the drowned become water ghosts — doch khuoi in Khmer — causing shipswrecks and pulling swimmers under by their legs. The ceremony cools the spirits out of the water so that they may find their way to the next life or proceed to the heavenly plane.

The ceremony began with a late-afternoon procession. The children of supplicants made a game of leaping through the deluge onto an empty fish barge moored to the pagoda, then back again with fearless precision. The second phase began. The monks gathered chanting before the head monk tossed holy water over the crowd and called for the doors to open. As if on cue, the rain slowed, then stopped. The temple emptied into the ferries and sampans outside. At the front of the largest ferry, a monk rang a finger-cymbal to wake the drowned, and the boats slipped onto the open lake. There was no moon. The water was black. Wets of distant lightning soundlessly flamed the clouds red. Along the sides of the ferries and the gunwales of each boat, families placed paper offerings and flowers for their lost relatives. Each was topped by a burning candle, such that the lake became a field of bobbing orange stars. All was still, save for the families who boated past, singing into gonoles, because they’re nearly spelled over with children. Some of the paper boats flared up in a flash and sank.

Beyond the scope that runs along Chong Koh, a new market complex was under construction, with it came red bricks and cement foundations cradled with silted ponds. Once the market was finished, the villagers in Chong Koh would be evicted again, ahead of floating communities across the province. Officials said the villagers were illegal and environmentally toxic. Their residents were squeezed onto marshy land cleared of farmland grants, far from their fishponds and fish cages.

Neither Hurthir or Samnang wanted to move. “I can’t speak out,” Samnang said as we sat drinking coffee in his house. “They claim to give us a choice. But we have no right to buy any other land, so really it’s no choice at all.”

We paddled next door, where Hurthir was too consumed by boat repair to worry about any new evictions. Last week he had chopped three feet off the back of his longtail. No transmission was spread out before him like a ganged pitted.

As he worked, Hurthir’s thoughts often went back to his prison cell and to the spot of cold floor next to the toilet where he had slept. “I never discriminate against anyone, Vietnamese or Khmer,” he said. “But I was treated so badly” if he were granted Khmer citizenship, he said, all would be forgiven. “My parents were born here, and I was born here,” he said. “I have that right.”

There was nothing to say. Samnang found a hatchet to sharpen on the shore over the past week. He turned to his work. A rubber, slick with oil, slid from his hand. It bounced against the floor and off the side of the house before he caught it over the water, his hat in surprise.

The first people to leave Chong Koh want by night as soon as the new immigration cards were announced in 2014. Since then, at least a thousand have shoved off to other provinces or sold their houses and hitched to Vietnam, part of a growing exodus all over Cambodia. In village after village, the immigration police and council leaders said the same thing: “The Vietnamese are leaving.”

In a pinch, Hurthir thought he might be able to live with his wife’s relatives in Vietnam. Better was the lake. On the open lake it was more dangerous, but he would be close to his ancestors, and the authorities there weren’t as strict. The boat people had figured out how to manage them, as they managed the squalls and the waves. They knew how not to challenge the weather but survive it, how was it put. That was the trick. You had to plan for the storm before the clouds opened up.

Photograph by Andrea Rouzette, Institute, for The New York Times