

Mondulkiri and Ministry



Thompson Family

We live in hilly Mondulkiri province which until this year was isolated from the rest of low land Cambodia by bad roads. Our small township is populated by a mixture of low land ethnic Khmer people, Vietnamese, and the local tribal Bunong people. Our immediate neighbours are generally involved in either civil service, business, running shops, labouring in construction, or herding cattle on the edge of town.

We work primarily with Bunong farmers in villages various distances from the township, and with national NGO workers based in town. We use the Khmer (national) language in all our work as it is the only common language for all these people, but it does produce a language and acceptance barrier with the less educated farmers, particularly women and children who are uncomfortable using the national language. Recent attempts to learn the Bunong language have been met by many friendly smiles in the villages and long speeches that so far we understand little of.

Many of the Bunong have become Christians in the last two decades so that the population in Mondulkiri is about 10% (at least nominally) Christian as apposed to the national average of less than 1%. These Christians generally live in separate villages from their animistic relatives because they cannot involve themselves in the animal sacrifices and spirit worship generally practised, so they are pushed away for fear of bringing bad luck to the village. Most of the Christian groups are united under the KEC (Khmer Evangelical Church). In recent years the government has actively promoted Buddhism in the villages. We work both with Christians and non-Christians.



Baptisms in the local river.



We are involved in the community in quite a number of ways. Currently, we are engaged in agricultural research and development. This is used to address immediate problems farmers are facing - new crop pests, seed storage problems, as well as longer term issues - land management technologies that allow a switch from swidden agriculture to long term sustainable agriculture, and new opportunities - high value fruit trees, improved chicken and pig raising.

Our rented house and yard in town currently look like a farm yard. The tree nursery is full to overflowing with young fruit trees awaiting distribution in the villages. Under the house stands a small feed mill we have put together and are testing and demonstrating to interested community groups. Piles of different farm produce await milling and mixing into experimental feed rations based on local produce. Several different pens of chickens and rabbits are spread around the yard testing experimental diets and disease control techniques, assessing imported strains of stock, and providing breeding stock. People regularly come to our gate to buy breeding stock, vet medicines or vaccines they can't source elsewhere, to have their female rabbits bred with our imported buck, or simply to see our big chickens that they have heard about.



Hammer Mill

On the edge of town the KEC churches own a piece of land on which they hope to build a central meeting place for theological training and church group get togethers. We have established a long term fruit tree trial on the site and are partnering with the KEC leaders to help in the sites overall development, in particular, to develop it as an agricultural resource centre and demonstration farm.

Much further away we rent a Bunong field as a site for initial testing of new crop varieties and new cropping techniques. This site is next to one of the Christian villages, but was chosen as it is in one of the much more difficult farming environments. Varieties and techniques that prove to be advantageous on this site are then promoted in villages of that district, often through our "model farmers", friends that we have made in various villages who are more open to trying new things than most people.



Much of what we have learnt about agricultural problems through talking with the farmers, observation, and field trials, is being incorporated into a series of Agriculture lessons that Ken has been working on with ICC's Bunong literacy project. These lessons introduce and build on basic science principles with practical and locally relevant ideas on how to care for the land, reduce losses, and increase and diversify production, providing information on a wide range of crops and animals. While the focus has been on producing these lessons in Bunong to give a practical component to ICC's village literacy classes, Ken is also working on a Khmer version that will be used in various other projects around the country. One frustration in this sort of work is language limitations for conveying concepts, and the constant tension between making the lessons easily comprehensible for all and conforming to literary standards.



For the five years we have spent in Mondulkiri we have been members of the small local church "Zion". Much of this time has been spent trying to come to grips with Khmer spiritual (therefore high and literary) language. Other than participating in the Sunday service and some small roles in training worship leaders, musicians and those having a go at preaching, our language and other commitments have limited us. The last two years Ally has been running the Sunday school. This has grown from one or two children coming and being taught irregularly, to at least a dozen children regularly involved in a variety of attractive activities. It is difficult to find leaders who see children's ministry as something worth while investing energy in. This year Ken has been preaching once per month.



Christmas Service

Recently the church leadership decided that Zion should move from being a Khmer language service to mostly Bunong language, which we have encouraged, but it will, at least for a time, leave us once again on the fringe in terms of participating in, and understanding, the worship.

Through our network of friends we are also often called upon to make full use of our limited medical knowledge. Medical services are so poor, uncaring and corrupt that people often come to us in emergencies. General family health issues, such as treating worm infestation, ear infection, nutritional problems, maternal and infant health issues are so poorly understood

at village level that we have many opportunities to help people significantly. This year we have taken the opportunity to talk to church groups about nutrition, especially for women and children, and spoken out against the traditional food taboo's followed by pregnant and lactating women that are so detrimental to their health. We hope that our Christian friends can be more receptive to this challenge to tradition as we encourage them to embrace all the freedoms they have in Christ.



We face several difficult tensions. We see ourselves as people involved primarily in caring ministries that show Christ's concern for people in their difficulties. In a culture where most people are looking for patrons who will do everything for them and foot the bill, we have to balance the impulse to put things right ourselves, with encouraging and training people to make use of their own resources and the systems that are already in place. Yet so often things like government services or NGO services don't function as they should, doctors are dishonest or ill-trained and people are so uncaring of each other that we feel compelled to step in.

The Bunong people are experiencing a very rapid transition from their tribal primitive existence of just a few years ago into the modern cash society filled with motorbikes, cars, TV, mobile phones and modern medicine. It is difficult to stand by and watch them make poor decisions about what things to embrace and what to reject. It is also difficult to watch a corrupt government take away the land and forest which they depend on and know so well. As the government pushes forward with unbridled development of Modulhiri province, we have to bite our tongues and do what little we can to help people cope with these rapid changes.