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Pnong: A Cambodian Tribal People

“The bananas fell and killed the dog. Momat ate the dog!” I glanced up into Chyam’s beautiful face. She loved her husband. For the past few days she’d been faithfully caring for him in the provincial hospital. Yet she was sure that medicine and doctors weren’t enough to heal her husband. The sickness that clung to him was more than malaria or tuberculosis. He was dying because he ate the dog the bananas killed. “What do we do?” her eyes pleaded.

Suddenly all my years of being a Christian spun by me. My mind raced through the four years of theology I’d championed through. I had once felt prepared to begin ministry, but I couldn’t think of anything I’d ever learned or experienced that dealt with Momat’s situation. I knew dogs weren’t clean meat, but it didn’t seem the right time to bring up Leviticus 11. My mind raced with how to find a cure, but I didn’t know enough about medicine. And perhaps Chyam was right about medicine being useless. I sensed that evil spirits were involved. I knew God was big enough to chase them away, but how could I explain that to these people? Momat had eaten the dog the bananas killed.

In the spring of 2002, my wife and I moved into the hill country of Cambodia along the Vietnamese border. Mondulkiri is Cambodia’s largest province yet it is the least populated and considered to be one of the most remote provinces in the country. We arrived in the rainy season and the roads into the province were nearly impassable. Most villages throughout the province could only be accessed by foot, oxcart, or elephant. Yet we immediately began searching for the Pnong people.

The Pnong live in villages throughout the forested province of Mondulkiri along the border. For centuries they have maintained a subsistence economy based on swidden agriculture and the gathering of local resources from the surrounding forests. They are a semi-nomadic people and rely on the natural resources surrounding them. Traditionally, everything they

need to survive comes from the forest and their upland rice fields near their villages. The swidden or shifting cultivation includes clearing a section of the forest and then burning the trees. On the newly cleared land the Pnong grow a form of hill rice, interspersed with a wide variety of vegetables and fruits. The surplus food from their fields usually provides them with nourishment for nearly half of the year. Hundreds of Pnong women walk to the provincial center each day carrying their back pack baskets to sell produce in the market. Though the sellers rarely pay them enough, the woman are able to use the money to purchase salt, MSG, sugar, clothes, fishing line, flashlights, and other necessities. If their rice harvest is good, they will have rice for at least seven months. Then they depend on what they can find in the forest.

We found it hard to even find the Pnong at first. The clusters of thatched dwellings are easy enough to locate, but the villagers are often gone. Many are deep in the jungles sleeping in their field huts. Others are hunting, fishing, or collecting supplies in the forest. Still others are walking to and from town. One day we arrived in a village and greeted the few people who came out of their huts with the only Pnong words we knew, *jit han*. Though most Pnong know some of the Khmer language, in their homes they speak only the Pnong language. Of those that can speak Khmer, very few can read or write. We repeated the Pnong words over and over to the curious, though somewhat confused villagers who stood in a semi-circle staring at us with no response. After several more discouraging attempts in other villages, we finally found out that *jit han* means “Where are you going?” and had to laugh with our new acquaintances. We spent the next few months learning the words for chicken, duck, and dog. Anything we could see or touch was easy to learn about through pantomime, but we longed to know how to express the feelings of our heart. And we sensed that we had not yet entered the real Pnong world. Then a young man invited us to follow him into the jungle—to see his parents’ rice field.

Suddenly we were in another realm. Everything was new and we were the students sitting at the feet of our teachers. For there in the field hut we met an old man and woman, Koin and Yau. Most of the Pnong people didn’t know what to do with us. They seemed to enjoy staring and laughing at our funny skin, hair, and clothes. But Yau and Koin felt sorry for us. They exclaimed, “What? You don’t even know what a fish basket is or how to plant rice? Didn’t your parents teach you anything?” They invited us to come back often and learn the basics of survival. “Because you sure need help,” they assured us. And with that we began a friendship that led Yau and Koin to eventually refer to us as their own children. I will never forget their generosity and patience with us. For over two years they spent nearly every day teaching us to weave baskets, work the fields, fish in

the stream, shoot a crossbow, and prepare pumpkin leaf soup. But as we worked on survival skills, Yau began to show us a hidden world.

"Don't talk about him out loud," Yau warned us, lowering her voice to a whisper one afternoon. She was squatting by the cooking fire in the field hut. "If we don't give him chicken liver and blood we won't have a rice crop." Without warning she violently twisted the little stock of rice she'd been holding. "He may kill us." The hut fell silent and I wondered if I had asked one too many questions. I glanced up at her and she held a finger to her lips then looked away and out through the low doorway. Who was she talking about? Why was she so scared?

Another day we asked Yau about the spirit poles at both entrances to their field hut. The odd knobs at the top had shaved bamboo on the sides like hair. She said, "They are called 'their heads,'" pointing to her own head. We asked what they were for. "To make it watch the house, to make it watch the people, make it watch the rice, make it watch the animals, make it watch the food in the field." We asked, "Does *it* watch over the jungle or the water?" Yau shook her head and gave us a look of pity. "Of course not but if it doesn't watch, they will come from the jungles. People will get sick and the rice and vegetables in the field will die." My wife and I looked at each other in confusion. What was *it*? Who were *they*?

"I dug up the termites," Yau explained one morning as we stood looking down at the fresh hole in her field hut. "The soul-eating sorcerer came a few nights ago and was scratching," she pointed to the woven bamboo wall of the field hut. She illustrated by curling her fingers into claws and moaning scary ghost sounds. The grandkids scurried away in all directions before she continued. "Koin's throat began to swell and it spread down his arm. He could hardly breathe. At first I thought of the termites, but Koin was still sick after I dug them up. Then I realized the soul-eating sorcerer was angry with me for delivering Liu's baby." I pictured Yau, the midwife, going to poor Liu's hut in the night. Liu was an impoverished widow with three tiny girls. I looked back at Yau. "Liu didn't have a pig, of course, so without the purification, my husband and I had sin. The same soul-eating sorcerer who killed Liu's husband was now killing mine. I told Liu she had to find a pig for sacrifice. She had to borrow one, but when we finally killed it and placed the blood on Koin, his swelling immediately whet down." What was a soul-eating sorcerer and why the termites?

I spent months sorting through the information I'd gleaned with Koin and Yau. I invited a Christian Pnong man to my home to help me understand. Slowly I began to see the world through the eyes of the Pnong. And slowly I began to understand the unseen world Yau had been showing me.

If you were to tell the Pnong that God loves them, they would imme-

diately think you're talking about the spirit of the rice. It may bring blessings of abundant harvests, but the word *love* wouldn't seem to fit. If you told the Pnong that God's Son, Jesus, had come to save them from their sins, they would wonder how the rice had given birth to a son. The rest of the sentence wouldn't make sense at all. Sin, to the Pnong, is a blemish we receive when a spiritual law is broken. Sin can come from touching a woman who has just had a miscarriage. Sin is speaking the name of your father-in-law or touching your sister-in-law. It can be spread from one home to the next through a visitor staying in your home. The cause of sin is much less important to the Pnong than the cure. A blood sacrifice, from the death of a tiny chick or a piglet can purify from most sin. Serious sin, like having twins that are a boy and a girl, require the blood of a chicken, duck, dog, pig, cow, and water buffalo if you can afford it. To the Pnong, there is no good news in the words *God loves you* or *Jesus came to save you from your sins*.

Evangelistic Challenges

Though Cambodia has several versions of the Christian Bible and hundreds of Christian organizations working in the country, the indigenous people of the highlands remain mostly untouched by the gospel. Why? There are several main reasons. First, for decades the highlands have been geographically cut off by poor roads and bad weather. Second, the multiple tribes of indigenous people each speak separate, unique languages. Third, the indigenous people are animists, in contrast to the national Buddhist religion. Fourth, the Khmer have traditionally looked down on the minority people and don't respect their unique culture. Fifth, the indigenous people are oral communicators in nature and have a difficult time relating to the literate Western cultures that are involved in bringing change to their part of the world.

Geographic Challenges

For centuries the Pnong and other indigenous hill-tribe people have lived and worked deep in the jungles of Cambodia separated from the rest of the country by hundreds of miles of wilderness. Roads to the capital city, linking the Pnong to the rest of the world, didn't even exist. The rainy season lasts half of the year with rivers and streams overflowing their courses and trails and roads often being washed away. Thus the Pnong continued their lives the way they'd always known with very little interaction with outsiders. Those wishing to share the gospel with the Pnong have had to first find a way to get to them. But that is changing now with new roads. This year the government completed a new paved road from the capital city of Phnom Penh to the provincial capital of Mondulhiri.

Language Challenges

There are at least eight separate languages used in the highlands of Cambodia, besides a number of dialects, spoken by separate and unique tribal people. Most villagers speak some Khmer, the national language, but very few speak it well enough to call it their own. Even fewer can read and write the national language. Some wishing to share the gospel with the indigenous people have started language schools, to help them learn the national language. Others have chosen to invest the time and energy in learning an indigenous language well enough to speak at a heart level with the people, which may take years. Reaching more than one group at a time is nearly impossible without starting all over.

Religious Challenges

Buddhism is the national religion of Cambodia. Yet the highlanders practice animism, the belief in natural spirits combined with ancestor worship. While the lowland people frequent the Buddhist temples, filled with the bright orange-clad monks, chanting their memorized prayers, the hill people focus on the vast array of spiritual forces surrounding them in nature. Every animist group has a unique code of spiritual rules they believe and follow. Understanding the deep, often hidden spiritual beliefs of the people is of paramount importance when trying to discuss religion with them. Otherwise well intended words may mean something completely unintended by the missionary.

Challenges of Discrimination

The Pnong, about 30,000 people, are the largest ethnic group of the highland people. Collectively the highlanders number about 100,000 throughout the northeast of the country. But they are by far a minority in the country. The Khmer have traditionally looked down on the tribal people. Even the word Pnong has become a derogatory term meaning savage or cannibal. Even the Khmer Bible translates *barbarian* in Colossians 3:11 as *Pnong*. Many stories have circulated in the lowlands about who the Pnong really are. Some say that they have tails like monkeys. One story says that the Pnong will sometimes kill and cook their own daughters in honor of a guest visiting their home. Many Khmer feel that the Pnong are uncivilized, dirty, and incredibly ignorant. Even among the Christian Khmer there are a lot of negative attitudes towards the indigenous people. Very few Khmer will “lower themselves” to learn the Pnong language or seek to understand its unique culture and religion. Without this knowledge they can never be effective evangelists to the Pnong.

Challenges Associated with an Oral Culture

The indigenous people of Cambodia traditionally have not had a written language. They have relied upon the elders, the shamans, and the storytellers to remind them of important information. Questions about the spiritual code of law are answered by the elders. The shamans are a bridge between villagers and spirits and show the people what is required of them by the spiritual powers around them. The storytellers remind them of their history and important values by telling the old folk tales. Oral cultures think differently than literate cultures. They rely on relationships with people to give them the information they need. And they are completely unprepared to use and unwilling to trust inanimate objects, such as books, to give them new life-changing information.

Sharing Good News

My wife and I have been struggling with these issues for over nine years now. We arrived with the plan of telling the Pnong people about God and watching the Good News flash from church to church, village to village as people accepted God as their Savior and asked for baptism. Today there are still no baptisms; there are no churches. We left many comforts to live in the Pnong world. We have prayed and prayed. And we have pressed forward believing that God was leading us. The results have been unexpected, even surprising. We see God at work in a way we may never have noticed before. He's touching people at the heart level. We've done four simple things: (1) learned the heart language and culture, (2) loved the people with no strings attached, (3) become oral-minded in our involvement with the Pnong, and (4) been patient (the hardest of all). And God is using that to do great things.

Learn the Heart Language and Culture

I'm not a natural linguist. Learning a language doesn't come easy for me. I don't relish the humiliation of trying to say a word over and over with the whole village laughing at me. Yet I have found learning the Pnong language to be one of the most important ways of sharing the Good News with them. It forced me to become their student and to give them the opportunity to teach me. The process was long and hard and gave us time to grow and bond. The years of learning to understand the words and wrap my tongue around them gave my mind time to grow. Their words come from within the heart of their culture. And in the process of learning to speak their words, I began to see the world through their eyes. My own worldview began to change and I saw a God big enough to express Good News to the Pnong—Good News that was their very own. But, I had to understand it first before I could express it to them.

Good News for the Pnong is not that God loves them or that Jesus died to save them from their sins. Good News for the Pnong is simply that Chief God is bigger than the soul-eating-sorcerer. Heads turn when I say that. People ask for more. They can't believe it and immediately ask me to tell them stories of this God. My Pnong mother and father asked me many questions about Chief God during our times together in the field hut. And when my Pnong father became so sick people thought he would die, Koin asked me to come close to him. "Will you talk with Chief God for me? I want him to chase away the soul-eating-sorcerer who is eating me at this moment." As I prayed, Koin's eyes followed my lips. Then he looked around us and asked, "Is he gone?" But before I could answer I could see his eyes dancing. He smiled at me and squeezed my hand. Yau stood there watching in awe. Koin slept peacefully after that and died a short time later.

The family invited me to mourn for him around his body in their inner circle, as one of the children. Other family and friends waited outside the hut. Together we cried. I was angry at God for letting my Pnong father die. I had prayed publicly for his healing and God chose to let him die. And now I waited for a miracle. Would he raise Koin back to life? But God was performing another type of miracle as I cried. For that night the villagers told Yau to move her hut. "The soul-eating-sorcerer will certainly return for you," they said. "You must move your hut to a new location where he can't find you." But Yau was firm in her answer. "I will not move my hut; I have asked Chief God to protect me and I believe he will."

Every night after, the villagers watched in amazement as Yau slept in peace. "Chief God is protecting me," she told them. But one night she heard scratching on the outside walls of her hut. Then she heard the moans of a soul-eating sorcerer. He had returned for blood. But without fear she called out into the darkness, "What are you doing out there? You have no right here. I have entered Chief God. Now you go away." In the same instant the scratching stopped and the sorcerer was gone – never to return.

Share Love Freely

God never commanded books to go to the ends of the earth with his Gospel. Books can never accomplish Jesus' greatest command: love each other. That must be done within a relationship. Over the past nine years among the Pnong I've often felt driven to accomplish more. We developed an eight-book series of simple Bible stories, printed in the new Pnong writing system. The hours we've spent on the project are unimaginable. We plan to record the books digitally when they are complete so everyone can hear the stories and learn to retell them. We've also developed an oral Bible story project by working with a Pnong story-teller and recording

the Bible stories with all the flare, rhythm, and rhyme of a true oral story. Again, the hours spent on the project are beyond imagination. The projects are exciting and I believe God called us here for these projects. Yet time and time again God reminds me that the projects are not the most important part of why he called me here. I'm here to share his heart within relationships. I'm here to love.

The nights I spent in Koin's hut holding his hand as he screamed in pain were hard. I had so many other things I wanted to be doing. But I sensed that nothing was more important than being with him during those moments. I accompanied him to the capital city where the doctors told us he had prostate cancer and would soon die. I held him there. I translated the words of the doctor for him. And I cried with him. Yau was watching. She looked at me and said, "Chief God sent you here from America, didn't he. He must be such a wonderful God. He loves us enough to send you here now." I was humbled by her words. And once again I was reminded that loving freely is the most important part of my job.

I started the article about the man who ate the dog that the bananas killed. Momat is Koin's second son. Of all the siblings, Momat looks the most like his father. He has the same quiet personality and the same twinkle in his eye. Our eyes met there in the hospital. I knew he'd been listening to the stories I'd told his father. And I saw there the same hope, the same certainty, the same faith I'd seen in Koin's. And there in that hospital room I said, "Some sicknesses can't be cured with medicine. But Chief God sees clearly what causes us pain. He knows all spirits of evil for he once created them. And he knows and loves each of us and longs to help us if we'll let him." Then looking down again into Momat's eyes I said, "Let's talk with him now?"

I have offered to pray many times with my friends. Everyone nods in agreement, but not until then had I seen such hunger, such a yearning to communicate with Chief God, and such sincere belief. Momat and Chyam, have been watching Chief God at work in their lives for years. As Koin grew sick and slowly died, they had watched us love him. They had listened to us share about our experiences with Chief God and how much he's blessed our lives. They watched their step-mother chase away powerful soul-eating sorcerers in the night with the name of Chief God. And all along they've silently grown to know him, trust him, and believe in him.

After a simple prayer I reminded them that they could also talk with Chief God at any time. A smile tickled the corners of Momat's mouth the way Koin's once had and his eyes twinkled. I knew he was experiencing the presence of his Creator.

Use Oral Methods

“They know all the thrilling stories.” Rote was saying. “Can you bring us the stories of the elders next time you come?” The fire snapped and a spark rose in a wisp of smoke. I hesitated to look back at Rote because I didn’t want her to see my disappointment or confusion. We’d worked so hard to write the Bible stories in the Pnong language.

I glanced down at my photocopied Bible stories. “If only the people could understand how important *this* book is,” I thought to myself. “These elders seem to have them wrapped around their little finger. Everything they say the people believe without question.” But then I thought of Maat, the precious little old man who first introduced me to the other villagers as “our child.” That was shortly after I arrived in the village. He’d seemed so interested in me. He was so excited that I was learning to speak the Pnong language. From that moment on he’d made it his duty to teach me about the Pnong world with all its intricacies. “This is a piece of chicken liver that I’m placing on the spirit pole,” he explained to me out in his rice field. “This offering and this blood will assure us of a good rice harvest this year.” I listened and took notes, but I didn’t understand. At harvest time he took me up into a rice storage loft where I was surprised to find the other village elders gathered for a sacrifice. “This offering of chicken meat, rice wine, and a new *kramah* (head scarf) will assure us of another good harvest next year,” he explained. He smiled up at me as the elders began chanting together around a small cup of blood mixed with rice wine. I watched and listened, but I didn’t understand. A million memories filled my mind of Maat carefully teaching me Pnong ways. Then I thought of Jyaar and all his lessons about life. And then Koin, my Pnong father, came to mind. In his own quiet way, he too was constantly trying to teach me. I tried to learn, but I’d never understood what these giants of men were doing for me. They were teaching me within a relationship. Suddenly I began to comprehend what Rote was saying. I glanced back down at the photocopied Bible stories. I was offering truth on written paper—an object used for wrapping a cigarette in. Rote was looking for truth from *someone* who knows—a living person, an expert in knowledge—instead of dried up paper.

The Pnong are oral people. They don’t store knowledge in books or on their laptop. We may go to the library to find information, or surf the web; but the Pnong will go to an elder. Oral societies store their information in oral literature, in myths, legends, poems, songs, and genealogies. And the elders are the ones who have all of this oral literature stored away in their heads, for they are experts in knowledge. The elders themselves are the libraries of information to the people. But they are far more than a brainless computer or a stack of paper. The villagers come to the elders for guid-

ance or knowledge and the elders respond with care and affection. Truth is passed from one to another within a relationship. An elder who can tell the ancient stories and recite genealogies becomes more of a counselor and friend than a reference. That's what Rote was trying to express to me.

I'm not really sure what happened, there in that hut, but when Rote looked back at me the conversation changed. We no longer talked about books. Instead we talked about Chief God. Yau, Rote's sister, and my Pnong mother, began to share her story, once again, of how Chief God protected her the night the soul-eating sorcerer visited. Then I smiled and began to tell my own story of knowing and loving Chief God. And knowledge flowed from one to another within a relationship.

I've had in my mind somehow that my Pnong friends would learn to read and write. Then they would ask for our Bible story books. Within the stories they would find God and long to serve him. They would start little schools and teach others to read and write. Pretty soon they'd be having Sabbath School. Isn't that how all the mission stories go? But I am from a literate culture. Oral societies are different. They're not familiar with interacting with inanimate objects, like books. Does this make them primitive? Will they need to evolve and mature into a literate society? I'm afraid such evolutionary thoughts are a way to place me and my literate society above the Pnong and all other oral cultures like them. But, they are not lower in any way, but they are different. I'm beginning to realize it's me who needs to be transformed. I'm entering their oral society. They already have a beautiful way of learning and growing and passing along truth and knowledge about life—a way of warm relationships instead of cold objects. They have much to teach us about sharing truth, if we would be willing to listen.

So what do we do with our Bible Story books? I feel quite certain that these beautiful books will bless the Pnong people for many years to come. Their world is quickly changing and the younger ones are attending school in droves. Our books will assist them in learning to read. The books will help them learn of their Creator, their Savior, their Friend. But Rote's words to me remind me that we can never rely on our books to spread the Good News message. God did not command books to go to the ends of the earth. Books can never accomplish Jesus' greatest command: Love each other. That must be done by us and by people like you.

Be Patient

We find God using oral methods with the Israelites century after century. He started very easy. The main rule that he kept stressing was, "I am the LORD your God. . . . You shall have no other gods before me" (Deut 5:6-7 NIV). He presented a simple law, but it was hard for the Isra-

elites to fully grasp. They couldn't grasp the concept that he was their only God and that by worshiping other gods they would enslave themselves to supernatural forces of evil. But God slowly encouraged them, nurtured them, and patiently led them.

God continued working with them over the next 1,400 years in some incredibly oral ways as he tried to show them glimpses of his heart that they had missed while trembling before him at Mt. Sinai. He made a walking stick sprout. He made water gush out of a rock. He asked Moses to create a bronze serpent to place above the people on a pole so they could look up and be saved. He spoke through many different people as history unfolded. Some of them spoke the message from God in beautiful songs. Others tried to capture the message in poetry. A few actually dramatized it before the people for months or even years at a time. And then, in an act far beyond all comprehension, God's Son came to this earth to play out a drama of life, of death, of separation, of love, and of eternal victory.

The Pnong are very similar to the Old Testament Israelites. They haven't heard the stories of a Creator God all of their life. But they have seen and witnessed a plethora of other spirits at work and are quite familiar with how that system works. We must be very careful about presenting too much "naked" information, expecting them to understand, and change their lives. God did speak with the Israelites, outlining his laws. But that wasn't terribly effective at first. He lit up a mountain in explosive fire and thundered a message so clear they begged him to be silent. He even used his finger to carve out the laws in stone so they could read them if they forgot. But words didn't do much to change their worldview at first and their actions showed clearly they still did not fully understand what God was talking about.

In the same way, "naked" words will do little to change the worldview of the Pnong, or groups like them. They will need time, just as the Israelites did. If we expect them to become Christians with a full understanding of the New Testament in a few short years, we may be attempting a pace they can't follow. If even God spent nearly 4,000 years helping the people of the Old Testament understand the meaning of his sacrifice, then I think we should plan on *patience* as we work with indigenous people groups. I think we need to start at the same place he did. "God is God. Serve him only." If the Pnong hear the simple Bible stories from a trusted friend, they will remember them. They will learn who God is and that he is the only true God. They have the benefit of learning from other people's experiences throughout history and can grow faster than the Israelites did. Little by little, as they hear stories of everyday life in Old Testament history, as they ponder what might come next, as they try to make sense of everything based on their own worldview, as they subconsciously com-

pare and contrast, as they observe how God works in a silly family from America, a new and wonderful picture will arise before them by an Artist sketching them into the panorama. They will find that they have been in the picture all along and that the Artist has been painting their life from the beginning.



Braden Pewitt and his wife Johanna have worked with the Pnong in Cambodia since 2000 as church planters supported by Adventist Frontier Missions.