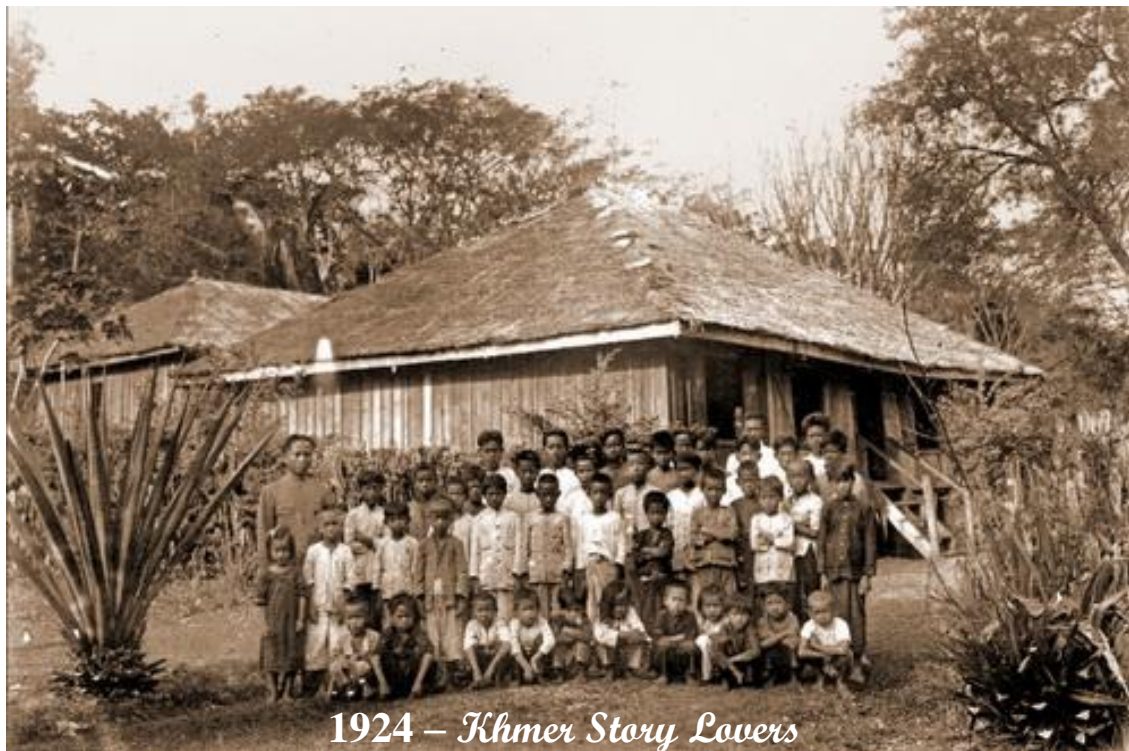


EDUCATION

Public School System

Traditional education in Cambodia was handled by the local wat, and the bonzes were the teachers. The students were almost entirely young boys, and the education was limited to memorizing Buddhist chants in Pali.

During the period of the French protectorate, an educational system based on the French model was



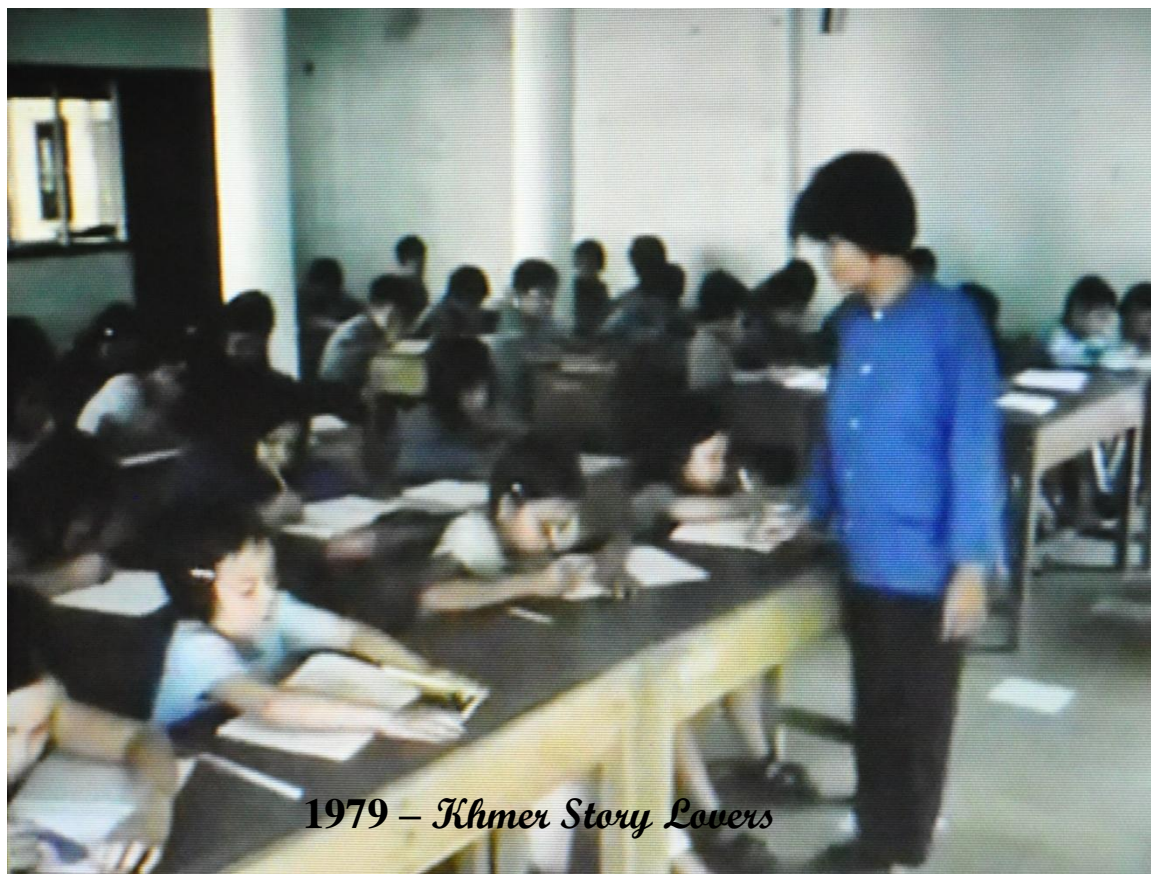
1924 – *Khmer Story Lovers*

was divided into primary, secondary, higher, and specialized levels. Public education was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, which exercised full control over the entire system; it established syllabi, hired and paid teachers, provided supplies, and inspected schools. An inspector of primary education, who had considerable authority, was assigned to each province. Cultural committees under the Ministry of Education were responsible for "enriching the Cambodian language."

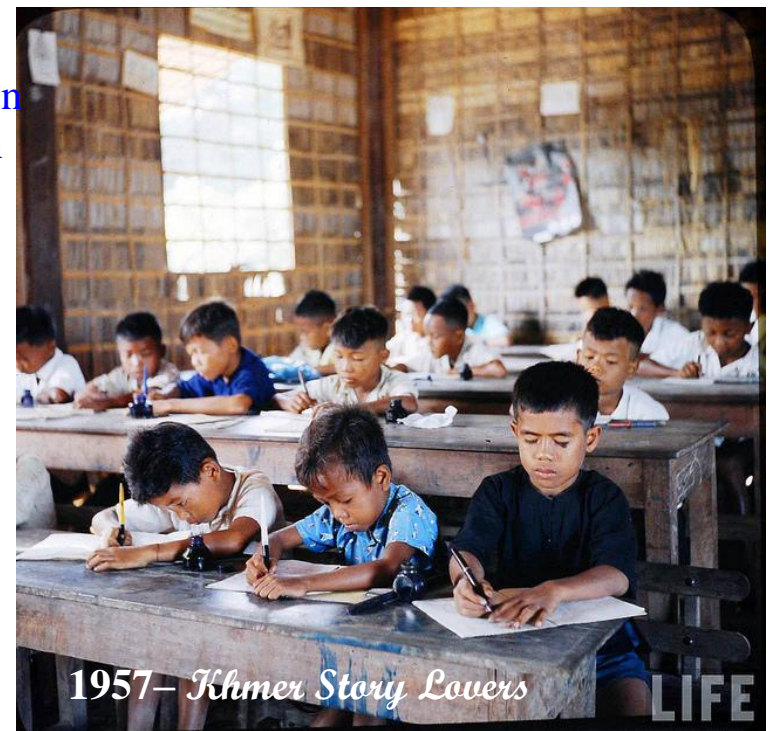
inaugurated alongside the traditional system. Initially, the French neglected education in Cambodia. Only seven high school students graduated in 1931, and only 50,000 to 60,000 children were enrolled in primary school in 1936. In the year immediately following independence, the number of students rapidly increased. Vickery suggests that education of any kind was considered an "absolute good" by all Cambodians and that this attitude eventually created a large group of unemployed or underemployed graduates by the late 1960s.

From the early twentieth century until 1975, the system of mass education operated on the French model. The educational system

Primary education, divided into two cycles of three years each, was carried out in state-run and temple-run schools. Successful completion of a final state examination led to the award of a certificate after each cycle. The primary education curriculum consisted of arithmetic, history, ethics, civics, drafting, geography, hygiene, language, and science. In addition, the curriculum included physical education and manual work. French language instruction began in the second year. Khmer was the language of instruction in the first cycle, but French was used in the second cycle and thereafter. By the early 1970s, Khmer was used more widely in primary education.



1979 – *Khmer Story Lovers*



1957– *Khmer Story Lovers*

and, following their final year, they could take a similar examination for the second baccalaureate. The Cambodian secondary curriculum was similar to that found in France.

In the 1980s, primary school ran from the first to the fourth grade. Theoretically one primary school served each village. Secondary education also was divided into two cycles, one of four years taught at a college, followed by one of three years taught at a lycée. Upon completion of the first cycle, students could take a state examination. Successful candidates received a secondary diploma. Upon completion of the first two years of the second cycle, students could take a state examination for the first baccalaureate,

Beginning in 1967, the last three years of secondary school were split up into three sections according to major subjects--letters, mathematics and technology; agriculture; and biology. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the country emphasized a technical education. In the PRK, secondary education was reduced to six years.

Higher education lagged well behind primary and secondary education, until the late 1950s. The only facility in the country for higher education before the 1960s was the National Institute of Legal, Political, and Economic Studies, which trained civil servants. In the late 1950s, it had about 250 students. Wealthy Cambodians and those who had government scholarships sought university-level education abroad.

Students attended schools in France, but after independence increasing numbers enrolled at universities in the United States, Canada, China, the Soviet Union, and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). By 1970 universities with a total enrollment of nearly 9,000 students served Cambodia. The largest, the University of Phnom Penh, had nearly 4,570 male students and more than 730 female students in eight departments--letters and humanities, science and technology, law and economics, medicine, pharmacy, commercial science, teacher training, and higher teacher training. Universities operated in the provinces of Kampong Cham, Takev, Batdambang; and in Phnom Penh, the University of Agricultural Sciences and the University of Fine Arts offered training. The increased fighting following the 1970 coup closed the three provincial universities. During the Khmer Rouge regime, education was dealt a severe setback, and the great strides made in literacy and in education during the two decades following independence were obliterated systematically. Schools were closed, and educated people and teachers were subjected to, at the least, suspicion and harsh treatment and, at the worst, execution. At the beginning of the 1970s, more than 20,000 teachers lived in Cambodia; only about 5,000 of the teachers remained 10 years later. Soviet sources report that 90 percent of all teachers were killed under the Khmer Rouge regime. Only 50 of the 725 university instructors, 207 of the 2,300 secondary school teachers, and 2,717 of the 21,311 primary school teachers survived. The meager educational fare was centered on precepts of the Khmer revolution; young people were rigidly indoctrinated, but literacy was neglected, and an entire generation of Cambodian children grew up illiterate. After the Khmer Rouge were driven from power, the educational system had to be re-created from almost nothing. Illiteracy had climbed to more than 40 percent, and most young people under the age of 14 lacked any basic education.



Neth Yang school for girls
in Battambang

Photo: RUFA Library (c.1965)

Education began making a slow comeback, following the establishment of the PRK. In 1986 the following main institutions of higher education were reported in the PRK: the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy (reopened in 1980 with a six-year course of study); the Chamcar Daung Faculty of Agriculture (opened in 1985); the Kampuchea-USSR Friendship Technical Institute (which includes technical and engineering curricula), the Institute of Languages (Vietnamese, German, Russian, and Spanish are taught); the Institute of Commerce, the Center for Pedagogical Education (formed in 1979); the Normal Advanced School; and the School of Fine Arts. Writing about the educational system under the PRK, Vickery states, "Both the government and the people have demonstrated enthusiasm for education The list of subjects covered is little different from that of prewar years. There is perhaps more time devoted to Khmer language and literature than before the war and, until the 1984-85 school year, at least, no foreign language instruction." He notes that the secondary school syllabus calls for four hours of foreign language instruction per week in either Russian, German, or Vietnamese but that there were no teachers available.



Martin describes the educational system in the PRK as based very closely on the Vietnamese model, pointing out that even the terms for primary and secondary education have been changed into direct translations of the Vietnamese terms. Under the PRK regime, according to Martin, the primary cycle had four instead of six classes, the first level of secondary education had three instead of four classes, and the second level of secondary education had three classes. Martin writes that not every young person could go to school because schooling both in towns and in the countryside required enrolment fees. Civil servants pay 25 riels per month to send a child to

school, and others pay up to 150 riels per month. Once again, according to Martin, "Access to tertiary studies is reserved for children whose parents work for the regime and have demonstrated proof of their loyalty to the regime." She writes that, from the primary level on, the contents of all textbooks except for alphabet books was politically oriented and dealt "more specifically with Vietnam." From the beginning of the secondary cycle, Vietnamese language study was compulsory.

My Education Experiences from 1979 to 1989

I started primary school in September 1979 and finished high school in June 1989. I failed entrance examinations to start university twice in 1989 and 1990, but managed to succeed in 1991.

For my ten years of schooling from primary to high schools, I studied at Bak Took School in Phnom Penh, and the school never asked for any tuition fees from students. Occasionally there were some appeals for voluntary contributions from parents for the renovation of the school. The students often took private tutoring classes, offered by the teachers, for various subjects such as Maths, Khmer Studies, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology. These classes were not compulsory and cost from 25 riels up to 100 riels per month per subject. In my experience, no teachers were trying to fail students on the basis that they did not attend private tutoring. At high school, I did not go to tutoring classes for Khmer Studies and Biology, like most of my friends did; however, my marks in those two subjects were still quite high.

The claims that **from the primary level on, the contents of all textbooks except for alphabet books was politically oriented and dealt "more specifically with Vietnam." From the beginning of the secondary cycle, Vietnamese language study was compulsory...** are not completely true based on my own schooling experiences. All teaching instructions were done in Khmer. Many of my teachers were working so hard to raise our knowledge and understanding of our Khmer language. I never forget these teachers: Neak Krou **Thach Saloam** (Grade 2) who encouraged us to create our own sentences (in writing) using variety of words; Loke Krou **Phok Tuon** (Grade 4) who showed great enthusiasm and appreciation in the use of beautiful, powerful Khmer words in writing and encouraged us to do so too; Loke Krou **Thoun An** (Grades 5 and 7) who taught us to write powerful compositions and to appreciate Khmer poetry; and Neak Krou **Meas Moly** (Grade 7) who taught us Khmer grammar and made me appreciate the use of our Khmer language in a proper, beautiful, noble way. It was true that some subjects, like history, geography and politics, were packed with the socialism/communism ideology (praising the revolution and condemning the monarchy and capitalism) and the promotion of solidarity with the Vietnamese (and Laotians). However, the more science-related subjects such as Maths, Biology, Physics,... etc. had nothing to do with political propagandas nor the Vietnamese. At high school, we were assigned to take Vietnamese or Russian for a foreign language subject. I chose to study Russian, which I later regretted. Had I chosen Vietnamese, I would have been able to make good use of it now.

Suksiri Bounchan

Buddhist Education

Before the French organized a Western-style educational system, the Buddhist wat, with monks as teachers, provided the only formal education in Cambodia. The monks traditionally regarded their main educational function as the teaching of Buddhist doctrine and history and the importance of gaining merit. Other subjects were regarded as secondary. At the wat schools, young boys--girls were not allowed to study in these institutions--were taught to read and to write Khmer, and they were instructed in the rudiments of Buddhism. In 1933 a secondary school system for novice monks was created within the Buddhist religious system. Many wat schools had so-called Pali schools that provided three years of elementary education from which the student could compete for entrance into the Buddhist lycées. Graduates of these lycées could sit for the entrance examination to the Buddhist University in Phnom Penh. The curriculum of the Buddhist schools consisted of the study of Pali, of Buddhist doctrine, and of Khmer, along with mathematics, Cambodian history and geography, science, hygiene, civics, and agriculture. Buddhist instruction was under the authority of the Ministry of Religion.

Nearly 600 Buddhist primary schools, with an enrolment of more than 10,000 novices and with 800 monks as instructors, existed in 1962. The Preah Suramarit Buddhist Lycée--a four-year institution in Phnom Penh founded in 1955--included courses in Pali, in Sanskrit, and in Khmer, as well as in many modern disciplines. In 1962 the student body numbered 680. The school's graduates could continue their studies in the Preah Sihanouk Raj Buddhist University created in 1959. The university offered three cycles of instruction; the doctoral degree was awarded after successful completion of the third cycle. In 1962 there were 107 students enrolled in the Buddhist University. By the 1969-70 academic year, more than 27,000 students were attending Buddhist religious elementary schools, 1,328 students were at Buddhist lycées, and 176 students were enrolled at the Buddhist University.

The Buddhist Institute was a research institution formed in 1930 from the Royal Library. The institute contained a library, record and photograph collections, and a museum. Several commissions were part of the institute. A folklore commission published collections of Cambodian folktales, a Tripitaka Commission completed a translation of the Buddhist canon into Khmer, and a dictionary commission produced a definitive two-volume dictionary of Khmer. No information was available in 1987 regarding the fate of the temple schools, but it is doubtful that they were revived after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Private Education

For a portion of the urban population in Cambodia, private education was important in the years before the communist takeover. Some private schools were operated by ethnic or religious minorities--Chinese, Vietnamese, European, Roman Catholic, and Muslim--so that children could study their own language, culture, or religion. Other schools provided education to indigenous children who could not gain admission to a public school. Attendance at some of the private schools, especially those in Phnom Penh, conferred a certain amount of prestige on the student and on the student's family.

The private educational system included Chinese-language schools, Vietnamese-language (often Roman Catholic) schools, French-language schools, English-language schools, and Khmerlanguage schools. Enrollment in private primary schools rose from 32,000 in the early 1960s to about 53,500 in 1970, although enrollment in private secondary schools dropped from about 19,000 to fewer than 8,700 for the same period. In 1962 there were 195 Chinese schools, 40 Khmer schools, 15 Vietnamese schools, and 14 French schools operating in Cambodia. Private secondary education was represented by several high schools, notably the Lycée Descartes in Phnom Penh.

All of the Vietnamese schools in Phnom Penh and some of the Chinese schools there were closed by government decree in 1970. There was no information available in 1987 that would have indicated the presence of any private schools in the PRK, although there was some private instruction, especially in foreign languages.