

The “One and Only” Ms Roern Heng



Heng is one of a kind. Frequently she answers a question with a smile and simple gesture of holding up a finger, saying “**just one**” or “**the only one!**” And so she is, just one of a kind.

Heng is from the Indigenous Bunong People, ancient forestry/mountainous dwellers of remote Mondulkiri province in Cambodia. Once they had the province to themselves; pursued traditional lives in their own unique culture, but the politics of the 1970s caught up with them. They were forced to move and join large-scale rice-production units by the Khmer Rouge where many were killed or died through hard labour; starvation and disease. The survivors were able to return home in 1979 and resume traditional lives, but since and especially in the last 10 years, the province has opened up to large-scale agro-industrial and mineral development. It has displaced many Bunong families and taken away their previous unfettered access to the hills and mountains.

Heng is the daughter of two survivors, born in 1986, and “**the only child, just one!**” Both her mother and father died in the early 1990s, leaving her as an orphan “**just one**” in the family, a small girl, on her own. Her grandparents took her in and then in 1996 a kind Khmer family who were able to support her to go to school. Unfortunately she contracted an eye-disease, so now she has “**just one**” good eye. The other needs treatment maybe unavailable in Cambodia. Heng then moved in to the ASPECA orphanage and stayed on at school until attaining Grade 11. Then she had to leave. Although children in Cambodia often start school and stay on in classes older than peers, her school felt, that at 22, Heng, and the “**only one of her age**” in the class would be too old. Heng recently married but does not have children yet.

Heng had met Mr Bill Herod who was assisting authorities with her boarding school. He was also encouraging new enterprises for Bunong people to make better living. Bill invited Heng to join his group. Heng showed an early aptitude for the design of traditional handicraft weaving products. She took on the role of visiting villages to encourage production for sale of clothes, blankets and other products based on traditional Bunong designs. However, this raised the first challenge for her. If they were to succeed their customers would want a range of consistent quality products. So she attended training.

Heng with Ms Pru Da, aged 27 single, one of the seamstresses of the “Busra Handicraft Group”¹



“Heng’s world could not be further from those of prominent Business Schools but she would pass one of their common exercises to assess who are leaders or followers? Heng, without realizing it or making a fuss, is a natural leader, and with the confidence to be assertive when needed. For example she encountered a sick man needing hospitalization. His family lacked Khmer speaking skills to talk to health-workers or the means to stay with him in hospital - who organized all for them? Who even arranged to obtain blood donations for transfusions? And when a health worker needed cajoling she told him “**Hey, this man is sick. He came here for your help. Now help him!**” Well done, Heng!

Heng’s Busra Weavers’ Self-Help Group now has 24 members, “**only one**” man. Ten are married, each with four or five children. All the others are single. For all, handicraft work

¹ Busra, located in Pichrada District, Mondulkiri is best known for its great waterfall visited by tourists. Most of the traders selling souvenirs are not Bunong and most of their wares are goods from Vietnam. The village has a population of 450 almost all Bunong.

is either their only way of making an income, or a very important supplement to go with farming or occasional hired work. Most of Busra's Bunong people have lost land to development concessions, and this has badly-affected their once self-sufficient way of living off the land. So the US\$40 -50 each member can make in a good month is a big difference in a family's ability to keep itself.

Heng has the vision and motivation to make handicrafts more profitable, as well as to maintain Bunong Culture, and showcase it to an outside world. She does not want to see their spoken-only language, traditions, and characteristics lost. Although she is resisting the temptations of modernity, the developed world and its materialism, Heng is prepared to see what ideas can be brought in to Mondulkiri. Early in 2011, Heng joined an exchange visit to Kon Kleng community organization in Banteay Meanchey. There she saw how successful self-help collective activity can be. Kon Kleng has been able to build up its own cow-bank and agricultural production so well that they have even improved their own schools, health-centres and roads.

Heng has already accomplished the first stage in her plan to develop the Busra Handicraft Group in her main capacity as a Programme Officer and acquiring proficiency in Khmer, English, and Computing. The group now has its own small workshop, rented, and two donated sewing machines. They would like two more, to build a larger workshop and display room, and a sales stall for tourists at the Busra waterfall. They already sell products at Bill's centre in Sen Monorom, the provincial capital, and sometimes in Phnom Penh or at exhibitions. Heng's proudest moment was when her group won second prize at a recent Creative Industries event in Phnom Penh. *"We lost out to our friends in Rattanakiri by "just one" point!* They use natural dyes from the forests. Now we want to learn to do the same".

Heng's ambitions do not stop at a new workshop and centre for her Busra group. She fully supports the idea of a dedicated Indigenous Person's Market Place in Sen Monorom, where Bunong traders are sure of their own stalls and buyers know that they can obtain genuine Bunong products, not ones that are imported but passed off as from Mondulkiri. She also supports the Mondulkiri Resource and Documentation Centre recently opened to conserve and portray traditional cultural knowledge.



Heng realizes though that in today's world, it is necessary to use modern technology to advocate for issues, including promoting and protecting Bunong Culture. Similar skills are needed for community development work in villages, with new concepts, as people can be reluctant to embrace new ideas such as a self-help handicraft group. Unless they find ways to keep communities intact, people will leave, and the culture will be lost. To this end, Heng has joined the province's team of correspondents for the Ministry of Information to help produce broadcasts. How many others were selected and trained? "Fourteen!". How many Bunong? Five! How many women? *"Just one, me!"*

Pru Da and other seamstresses Khlek Yat (36, widow, 3 sons) and Mroch Chamy (22 single) with Soeng Uk who has helped train in self-help group formation and small-business management. The scarves worn and the basket Heng is holding are Busra group products.