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MOST PEOPLE BELIEVE IN PSYCHIC ABILITIES EVEN IF THEY DON'T ACTUALLY USE THEM...MY WITCH CAN MAKE PEOPLE HATE OR LOVE EACH OTHER - AND EVEN KILL”



“Look into my eye, don't look around the eye - are you feeling lazy yet?” Fan of fortune-telling, Grandfather Floating Rock a.k.a. Long Bora. LOUISE WHITE



Long Bora takes matters into his own hands. LOUISE WHITE



While Lord Buddha has his devotees eating out of the palm of his. LOUISE WHITE

FORTUNES AND GLORY

BY JOEL QUENBY WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY OU MOM

Never ask three Khmers to pose together for a photograph. Cambodians believe the person in the centre of the trio is thus cursed to a premature death - bringing ghastly literal meaning to the phrase “cut out the middleman”.

From miraculous animals to mystical pendants, via lucky numbers, magical totems and voodoo tattoos, most Cambodians are fanatically superstitious. The culture is riddled with folk illogic.

Meach Ponn, 75, a former professor for the National Buddhist Institute, says fortune-tellers were plying their trade here over two millennia ago. “When the Buddha was born in 623BC, his parents invited eight Brahman fortune-tellers to predict his son's future,” he told *Asia Life*.

These days, most Khmers (96.4 percent, says the CIA) are Buddhists. With karma set to decide their fates, many of them regularly flock to check their astral accounts.

Thus the cultural landscape is ripe for all manner of fortune-tellers, soothsayers, witch doctors, astrologers, numerologists, mediums, mystics, clairvoyants, psychics and quacks. Cambodia's fortunes market is indeed a lucrative industry.

“Most people believe in it [the ability to see the future] - even if they don't actually use it,” says Phap Sina, a 27-year-old project assistant for NGO Active Help Cambodia.

Khmers consult fortune-tellers for advice on business, building, buying and investments, marital compatibility, relationships and disputes, specifying

timings to the luckiest minute - gamblers even seek advice on lottery numbers.

On the flipside lurk darker, more esoteric prescriptions. Phap Sina wears a lucky pendant to guard against harmful spells. He says his “witch can make people hate or love each other - or even kill”

Curiouser and curiouser - especially as I'm about to have my first fortune-telling session. I'd like to offer an open mind, but that's probably wishful thinking. Firstly, I worship at the altar of science. Secondly, where I'm from, the word “superstition” is used pejoratively, referring to unempirical “old wives’ tales”. Thirdly, I'm a cynical journalist, who has studied “cold reading” - a technique used by false prophets conflating sleight of hand, cheap wordplay, and basic intuition.

I'm hardly the most receptive subject. However, I am genuinely intrigued, so that would have to suffice.

In Phnom Penh, tellers set up booths - decorated with cabalistic diagrams of palms, astronomical wheels and zodiac symbols - in public squares, markets or malls. Others stalk the riverside or temple grounds with a folding table or groundsheet, ready to unpack incense, candles and cards from a briefcase.

I reckon I'm onto a winner with “Grandfather Floating Stone”, mystic correspondent for *The Moon Magazine* and Apsara TV's *Seey Sour Sdey Pordermean* (*Happiness News*), until the show was dropped due to lack of sponsorship (wonder if he saw that one coming?)

Lest anyone forget his spell in the limelight, Grandpa Floating Stone displays his media credentials on a bright yellow banner in the terraced shop-house from which he operates. Trading on his famous pseudonym - coined after a rock he claims to have found bobbing buoyantly on Oudong Mountain - is good for business. The artist formerly known as Long Bora says he gets 20-30 clients a day.

Maybe so; he was out when I arrived, but quickly returned when summoned, by telephone not telepathy, duly noted. The “grandfather” (who, aged 31, is three years my junior) beckoned me to a table set by a sprawling, multi-faith shrine featuring statues of Buddha, Brahma and Chinese deities.

My nerves were jangling slightly by now. Long Bora had a lazy eye. It gave him an otherworldly air; surely a selling point in his line of work. I was asked to shuffle then split a deck of cards and pick a couple. Long Bora then asked for the Chinese zodiac sign of my birth year (the dragon).

Long Bora studied some charts and began reciting his reading, adopting the dispassionate monotone used by Buddhist monks during worship - their ceremonial drone. Phap Sina translated: “Previously, you were confused about all the troubles and stress. You've got too much to think about.”

“True - but haven't we all? More shuffling and droning.

“You have been planning to ask me

something, but you're not sure if you will yet.” Right again; I had been considering probing the dubious sage for information. But then, as a hesitant foreigner, doubt was probably pouring from my every pore. A strange pinging noise sounded. Long Bora consulted a touchscreen phone.

“Your recent bad luck has finished. You will be thinking and planning until the end of the year. Though you've accomplished some things, real success will come early next year.”

AS A HESITANT, FOREIGNER, TANGIBLE DOUBT WAS PROBABLY POURING FROM MY EVERY PORE

That sounded like a stab at what someone my age might want to hear. The touchscreen re-emerged. Long Bora kept his call short, which was good of him, then resumed fishing for clues about my career. Did I ever consult overseas business partners? “Well, maybe, sort of; I guess.”

This fuelled the Big Reveal. I would have success in one of two fields: “NGO work or import-export.”

Held blown it. Long Bora asked if there was anything else he could do for me. I knew there

wasn't, but asked for some nominal relationship advice. For this, he used Chinese chiromancy - palmistry - to back up further platitudes.

“When it's good, it's really good, but it can suddenly turn very bad, often over something small that shouldn't cause a big problem, but still does.”

That describes just about every relationship ever. But then sneaky “Barnum statements” (after celebrated hoaxer PT Barnum) are designed to sound specific - while actually applying to most people, most of the time.

Southeast Asian cultures traditionally frown on emotional disclosure - even within family units. “Readings offer a rare chance to reflect and confide,” wrote Philip Cornwell-Smith in *Very Thai*. Tellers' warnings “uphold the idea of karma, and their upbeat advice urges calm, sociable behaviour”.

Long Bora indeed recommended patience as a romantic virtue. I began to consider the value of emotional counselling in a nation reeling from civil genocide - with just 20 practising psychiatrists, according to *Lonely Planet*.

Most tellers don't charge outright. They accept donations. Phap Sina had earlier suggested three to five dollars: “It depends on how much you believe and how happy you are.” That sounded reasonable, so I asked Grandpa Floating Stone for his best price on two sanctified keepsakes: a handkerchief and a belt.

I registered shock and embarrassment on Phap Sina's face. “He says US\$70...I did not expect anything like that much.”

Friday 13 November **PHNOM PENH FOLLIES** THE SHOW MUST GO ON! DJ Iliest (MC Hip-Hop Lounge) DJ Dr. School (US Dance Music Tokyo) DJ Nico (MC Techno Metahouse)

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