Post Weekend

SEEKING CLUES TO AN ELEPHANTINE MYSTERY

Elephants have long had a sizeable role in Cambodian culture – as labourers, war beasts and symbols of authority – but how they came to be domesticated is still hazy HISTORY / P.6

CULTURE

RISE OF THE 'TROLLS'

Meet the young internet humourists continuing a legacy of pointed – and often downright mean – social criticism in Cambodia CULTURE / P.4-5

CULTURAL COMEDY

Cambodian-Vietnamese newcomer to standup (and Phnom Penh) Lune Dee will takes to the stage tonight as part of an all-female night of laughs

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Culture

Cambodian satire in the age of Facebook and 'trolls'

As a new generation in a long line of sarcastic, often scatological, and usually partisan humourists, Cambodia's social-media satirists play to the crowd

According to knowyourmeme.com, the 'trollface' character was created by a Californian artist for an online 'rage comic' in 2008 and meant to repres

AUDREY WILSON AND VANDY MUONG
Post Weekend

Today's young Cambodian satirists don't sign names to their work. They stamp it with a 'rage comic' logo, post it on Facebook and wait for the likes to roll in.

That is, if they call themselves satirists at all. They prefer 'troll': Troll Khmer, Troll Second-Hand, Troll Best-Friend. These pages have blossomed over the last two years, with cohorts of meme-making commentators behind them. The formula is simple: find a photo, add a comment, repost. Their 'like' counts now rival some celebrities and politicians.

Sopheap* leads a team of three on his Facebook page, Troll Khmer. He dresses sharply, speaks quietly and insists on anonymity. "We have 300,000 people who like our page," he said in an interview this week. "We have to keep it interesting."

Many of the pages' posts are nonsensical, use base humour or are downright mean. One quotes a simple saying in Khmer: "Some people have no *songsa* [sweetheart] – perhaps it is because of destiny …" A "rage comic" interrupts. "No, it's because of your face," it says.

In others, the memes satirise society in the Cambodian tradition: laced with double meaning, and at times blurring the line between politics and poking fun. Take, for example, a post from City Hall on rubbish in the city with an added "solution": track down the litterers one-by-one, and fine them. "What is a mountain of trash worth?" it asks sarcastically.

"We post about daily life. If it is a critical thing, we criticise it to make it better," Sopheap explained.

Reproducible humour

Sopheap, 24, created Troll Khmer in 2011, inspired by pages he had seen from other countries. His was one of the first in Cambodia, he said. Now he faces plenty of competition. There are dozens of general-humour troll pages, and now some with specific locales: a province or a university campus, for example.

Vireak* broke away from Sopheap's page three years ago to focus on making videos with his friend Sokchea*. Their page, Troll Khmer Tinfy – named after a Khmer nickname for Chinese actor Stephen Chow – now has more likes.

Their three-minute videos, which often dub over Chow's voice, tackle "social issues", they explained this week. One mocks the government ban on smoking shisha; another calls out a song with a misogynistic title later censored by the Ministry of Culture.

The duo do draw lines. They discussed posting a photo of social-media maven and political activist Thy Sovantha commenting on her weight, but figured that it could be insulting to other women. "Before we post, we always think of the side effects," Sokchea said earnestly.

Other pages have not been so shy. Troll Second-Hand, another popular account, posted the photo of Sovantha and added a crude insult. ("I've never even met her, and now she's fat," the caption reads.)

The page is known for its more political bent, said Sopheap. It has "trolled" photos of a handful of other figures, including Grassroots Democracy Party leader Kem Ley, student activist Srey Chamrouen and even Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Satirists Sopheap, Vireak and Sokchea all refrain from posting photos of specific individuals and echo the same refrain: a stance firmly in "the middle".

When contacted via Facebook, the one-man moderator of the Troll Second-Hand page also denied having a political position. "I don't align with any party," he wrote. "I just want people to see what this society is."

But his posts are at the very least targeted at mocking individuals. In one, Chamroeun's face is compared to a camel's. In another, a recent photo of the premier distributing water in a drought-stricken area is scrawled over with text. "The solution: one bottle for each person," it reads.

Kounila Keo, a blogger and social-media expert, pointed out that this sort of satire "snuck in" after the 2013 election. She thinks its brand of humour is ripe for shares – but maybe not for change.

"This sort of thing goes viral really fast because it's funny, and treats serious issues in a light-hearted way," she said via email this week. "It doesn't really call for action."

> I don't align with any party. I just want people to see what this society is
>
> **ANONYMOUS** / TROLL SECOND-HAND PAGE MODERATOR

Case of the missing cartoonists

Cambodia's social-media satirists join a long line of humourists poking fun at the Kingdom's ills.

Satire has been central to visual culture in Cambodia for at least 200 years, according to Sarah Jones Dickens, an art historian at Duke University in the US whose research focuses on the Kingdom. It can also be performative, she pointed out: in theatre, on television, at weddings. A group of writers has even formed a satire-focused collaborative, Khmer Critics.

But one place that Cambodian satire has stalled is in newsprint. Two decades ago, with a greater diversity of opposition newspapers, cartoons proliferated, according to *Hun Sen's Cambodia* author Sebastian Strangio. They were often explicitly partisan. Simple visuals carry a special power, he explained, and one that is now more likely to get a cartoonist sued in Cambodia.

Michael Hayes, the co-founder of the *Post*, this week recalled publishing just two cartoons during his tenure. In the early 1990s, he said, cartoons were crude, even racist. In some newspapers, few figures were untouchable.

"Some of the Khmer-language press ran very biting cartoons. One I remem-

Cambodia's most famous cartoonist, Ung Bun Heang, lived in Australia from 1980 until his death in 2014. **JIM GERRAND**

ent the facial expression of an internet troll. **SCOTT HOWES**

Ung Bun Heang's cartoons pulled no punches. **SUPPLIED**

Cambodian 'troll' memes have taken aim at protest leaders who over-report participant numbers (top), token drought relief efforts (bottom left) and single people (bottom right). **SUPPLIED**

ber depicted [first lady] Bun Rany where she had the body of a pig, was wearing a Vietnamese conical hat and draped in jewelry," Hayes wrote in an email. "I believe the editor of that paper was later assassinated."

Perhaps the most famous Cambodian cartoonist was the exiled Ung Bun Heang, who immigrated to Australia in 1980 as a refugee. Drawing for Khmer-language newspapers abroad and later online under the pen name "Sacrava", he pulled no punches – not for Hun Sen, and not even for the king. "My pen is a missile, and it can blow up," he once told Australian filmmaker Jim Gerrand.

Some of Bun Heang's cartoons have racist overtones – he was preoccupied with the Vietnamese occupation – but he had a unique talent, and one that was deployed with a political impulse: to caricature the ruling party and corruption, to support the opposition and to reflect, quite scathingly, on preventable tragedies.

The cartoonist continued to draw until his death in 2014. His most powerful drawings were always skillfully rendered critiques that poked fun at all characters, like the cartoons he drew during the 2013 election.

Back in the Kingdom, cartoonists like Im Sokha or Sen Samondara worked – quite prolifically – for many papers at once, as well as for NGOs. Their satire was often commissioned by partisan overseers.

Samondara once drew political figures for *Cambodge Soir*. Now, he illustrates books about deforestation. "Newspapers don't have pictures that criticise the government anymore," he said this week. "Now cartoonists draw for video games."

There are no cartoonists trained in journalism courses in the Kingdom, although classes do touch on freedom of speech – and protection. "People are still interested in cartoons, but there are fewer people now that can draw: it requires a talent and skill that hasn't been taught," said Moeun Chhean Nariddh, a lecturer at RUPP's Department of Media and Communication.

In Strangio's eyes, the ruling party's consolidation of the press has simply squelched out cartoons. "The mainstream press in Cambodia is straitjacketed by a political consensus which leaves little room for satirical impulse," he said.

The mask of anonymity

And so critical humour takes to the internet, under a guise of anonymity.

For some of those doing the trolling, hidden identity becomes a part of the joke: Vireak and Sokchea wore their trademark masks – which appear in their videos – to an interview with *Post Weekend*. It also helps facilitate the notion that this brand of satire, which crowdsources images, is by and for the people.

But it is also rooted in an element of caution. Many sites that publish memes and news, like KI-Media – which once ran cartoons – are based safely abroad. In Cambodia, lawsuits remain a threat.

An early version of the Kingdom's controversial draft cybercrime law included jail terms for online content that was "deemed damaging to the moral and cultural values of the society", including depictions that could only have historical precedent, like "copulation between humans and animals". (The provision, article 28, did not appear in the most recent draft obtained by the *Post*, though it could be added back in upon an Interior Ministry review.)

Some of the page moderators have now met in person, according to Sopheap, for two training sessions on the law. It's the reason that many don't criticise individuals. "If we post about just one public figure, it can be a defamation case," said Sokchea.

But for now, observers like Kounila see little risk. "Cambodian citizens should have the right to make fun of the stuff they live through every day," she said.

As for their legacy, Sebastian Strangio noted that meme pages could be a modern update to political cartoons. "What you're seeing online is a fairly crude but widespread expression of that impulse [to poke fun at people in power]," he said. "It's certainly provided a space for this sort of commentary that no longer exists in Cambodian media."

But trends move fast. Video makers Vireak and Sokchea are considering independent projects. Sopheap, of the original Troll Khmer, is thinking of branching out to something more straightforward. He's already aggregating news, and hosting it on another site. "I want to be like Fresh News," he said. "I'm designing an app." ■

**Names have been changed to protect identities.*

The Kingdom's first cartoonists

The tradition of satirical cartoons in the Kingdom dates back to at least the birth of the Khmer-language press. *Nagara Vatta*, the first Cambodian newspaper, was founded in 1936 – though it only stayed afloat for six years.

Cartoons ran in publications under the patronage of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in the mid-1950s and 1960s, according to John Marston, an anthropologist who compiled a history of cartoonists in Cambodia in the late 1990s. "[Cartoons] were favoured as a means of voicing criticism because they could be interpreted in more than one way," Marston notes.

Many of the early cartoons, which critiqued everything from gossip to international affairs, were in line with Sihanouk's politics. But the work of some of the artists, like Huy Hem and Nhek Dim, displayed a certain independent wit, later inspiring cartoonists like Ung Bun Heang. Greater freedom for political cartoonists emerged, briefly, in the early 1970s – when state policy was more easily criticised. Unfortunately, few print copies of these newspapers, much less their cartoons, survived the chaos of war. (Even Dickens, of Duke University, hasn't been able to track any copies down during her extensive research.)

With the return of mainstream newspapers in the 1980s, most artists returned to the whims of their patrons, and to drawing party lines.