Boys and girls fall into small clutches—some play *reak*¹ and *bikom*,² some sing in the trees, others sprawl in the shade.

When the sun streaks across the horizon, the birds disperse and fly in ordered flocks to their nests and the herders lead their cattle home.

When darkness settles upon the plain insects, geckoes, and frogs rock this kingdom. A million stars drop everywhere, and farmers fall asleep in peace.

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE (1952)

I. Motivation

During my childhood the country was in chaos.

It was the war of liberation and the Viet Minh infiltrated.

The French colonialists chained innocent Khmers

while Khmers killed Khmers.

It was desperate— I looked at the sky, it was high. Because I was a farm child I didn't understand anything.

Often I felt miserable— I was feeling compassion for my people;

they had no leaders.

¹reak: a children's game, similar to chess, which is played primarily by boys.

²bikom: another children's game, resembling jacks, played almost exclusively by girls.

The Khmers lived in shame.

proud, glorious

They'd lost human dignity.

They were once noble,

but they had lost everything.

They were living insecurely,

waiting for death.

They lost their independence;

they lived in anxiety and fear,

day in and day out.

They lost unity.

They farmed the land;

they made a living

but there was never enough to eat.

I lived in agony

feeling compassion for my people

at the thundering time.

Khmers were half-nude-

they were shivering like chickens. They had no money to pay taxes,

they had no land on which to grow rice.

I could not stand it;

my commitment compelled me,

forced my will

to pronounce this oath

begging God to guide my way

with these sacred vows

which I relate to you now:

II. Pronouncement

"If I am a rake

let me not survive.

If I'm just a weight on the earth

let me drop dead.

Let me sink with the sun

if I'm noncommittal

to this land of Kok Thlok.

"I shall never betray you

Oh my Motherland!

I was born from your womb,

and I shall pay my debts

to the shade under which I've rested, the shade of the thlok tree,

under which Gautama1 had once sat.

"But if my lot is

to lead a life of deprivation

may my body

be swallowed up by Mother Earth

before I've grown up.

Do not let me suffer

from seeing my people slain."

Then I burned three sticks of incense. Facing the Father of Life
I raised both my hands over my head, praying to God
crying out for the Truth
before the revolving ember.

I cried out for the Truth:

always mistreated

Who has cursed this little nation?"

"Why are my people living in a broken homeland."

I cried out for

Peace for my people.

THE LOSS OF MY TWINS

Deep one night in October '76 when the moon had fully waxed, it was cold to the bone; that's when my wife's labor pains began.

I searched for a bed, but that was wishful thinking;
I felt so helpless. Two midwives materialized—
one squatted above her abdomen and pushed,
the other reached up my wife's womb and ripped the babies out.

¹Gautama: Buddha's family name. Legend has it that when Buddha was travelling through ancient Cambodia, which, at the time, was uninhabited, he stopped and sat in the shade of the thlok tree for his noon repast, which consisted of food from Heaven (the thlok is a fruit tree which bears fruit resembling kiwi fruit—but this is not what He was eating). While Buddha was eating, a big lizard came down the tree and begged for food. Since the lizard could not talk, it merely gestured with its forked tongue. Buddha gave the lizard some of the magical food and said that the future inhabitants of the land would always, like the forked tongue of the lizard, have two sides to everything which came their way; for example, they would never bathe in pure water—it would always be mixed with mud, they would never live in houses—there would always be some sort of shack attached, they would always wear some sort of peasant garment along with their highest fashions. (He was referring here specifically to the krama, the traditional coarsely-woven checkered scarf which serves many purposes.)