

ADVENTURES WITH THE BARNES

Episode Nº 3



Kim lets us in on a secret and uncovers the big cultural importance of a small grain.

In the last edition of 'Adventures with the Barnes', I shared my joy in discovering that I could cook cakes in a rice cooker. Well it's confession time...

After living in Cambodia for nine months, I don't actually know how to cook rice in a rice cooker! Sounds so silly, but it's true. I was always taught that one cup of rice and one and half cups of water in the rice cooker will give you perfect rice every time. Well, in Cambodia, that is not the case! Here cooking rice is an art not a science.

Navigating a new culture is full of so many interesting twists and turns. Learning language doesn't just help you communicate, but it helps you understand the values and emphasis of a culture. In Khmer there is one word that describes so many emotions. Happy, excited, fun, content, fulfilled and almost all positive feelings are frequently summed up in one word, 'Sabay'.

The flip side is true though when talking about rice. In Khmer there are different words for rice in its stages of growth, harvest and cooking. 'Rice time' is used to describe the nap that you take in the middle of the day and greetings often include the question, 'Have you eaten rice?'.

Rice is a central part of life in Khmer culture, and a day without rice is a day you don't eat.

So when I turn to the English translations of the Bible I am confronted by the fact that there is not a single scripture that talks about rice. 'Give us this day our daily bread' was prayed by Jesus in a culture where fresh bread was made every day and considered old as soon as it was no longer warm.

To the Khmer people a prayer that would make sense to them is, 'Give us this day our daily rice'. Could Jesus also be the 'Rice of Life'? Can communion in Cambodia be sharing a bowl of rice together instead of breaking bread?

So why can't I cook perfect rice in Cambodia? In the West we love prescriptive instructions. We love our Thermomixers telling us to mix for eight seconds at speed three, we love our recipe books that tell us to add 125g of butter to 55g of sugar and cook for 15 minutes.

Cooking rice in Cambodia is not like that. There is no measuring tool except for 'knowing' the right amount of water to put in the pot. This amount changes depending on the season (hot or wet), the type of rice, and how long after cooking you want to eat it. It's a skill I am learning and relearning as I live here.

It's the same with learning how to share Jesus in this culture. Slowly, slowly we are learning cultural values, core beliefs and to lay aside our own prescriptive methods in order to share life in a way that makes sense here.