

## REGULAR ROLE FOR A SUPERSTAR

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> FILM C7



## IT PUNCHES BACK TWICE AS HARD

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> GAME REVIEW C7



## READY FOR THE LONG HAUL

Proper shut-eye need not be left up in the air

> TRAVEL C6



# Given a fighting chance

The Khmer Rouge regime almost destroyed the ancient Cambodian combat system of bokator. One grandmaster has made it his mission to ensure that it survives

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Engravings of Khmer warriors sparring at the Bayon temple at Angkor Wat (above).

Grandmaster San Kim Sean closes his eyes and takes a sharp breath before recalling how he survived the hell that Cambodia was plunged into during the Pol Pot-led Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979. In that time, almost a quarter of the country's population perished.

"You don't say you do martial arts, you don't say you went to school, you don't say you wear glasses. You'll get killed within one minute," he says. "You have to keep quiet, do what they want, follow their rules and just say yes.

Never say no. They will kill you. It was a very terrible time."

The grandmaster sits on a stool in the centre of his academy in Siem Reap, a basic set-up with a tin roof, whirling ceiling fans, training mats, battered wooden benches and a stash of ageing wooden weapons propped up in a corner. He grows animated as he talks about his lifelong passion for the traditional Cambodian martial art, whose name translates as "pounding of the lion".

"Bokator belongs to our great-grandfathers, masters and kings," says the 73-year-old, who started learning the martial art at the age of 13.

Steeped in history, bokator is

believed to have been developed up to 2,000 years ago. Evidence of its widespread use can be found in etchings on the walls and other religious monuments of Cambodia's 12th-century Angkor Wat temple complex.

"Angkor Wat was created to protect the country and the Khmer empire," San Kim Sean says. "They built up a strong army that used bokator."

There is evidence that the martial art's inception predates the Angkor era. It is believed villagers, farmers and people living deep in the mountains and jungle developed its more than 10,000 techniques that employ knee and elbow strikes, shin kicks, ground fighting, submission mastery, and weapons as a way of survival.

"The techniques used in bokator are animal style," San Kim Sean says. "People living in the countryside needed to survive, they needed food and to protect themselves from predators, so they copied the animals. They would follow a monkey up a tree to find fruit or watch a bird getting fish from the water."

He adds that bokator is not just a form of fighting, but a lifestyle that encompasses spirituality, meditation, healthy eating and maintaining a strong mind.

Born in Phnom Penh, San Kim Sean started learning bokator at the age of 13 from his uncle and other masters in the Cambodian capital. Wanting to improve his skills and become the best, he travelled across the country to learn from grandmasters who lived in remote areas.

"It's not like at school where you can go and get a book to study," he says. "And there were no bokator schools then like today. You learned orally from masters in the mountains, and these techniques have been passed on from generation to generation."

But the ancient martial art dwindled over the generations, leaving the Khmer Rouge to almost kill it off. After 1979, when the regime was overthrown, San Kim Sean fled to the US where he

lived for almost 20 years, teaching bokator to Cambodian refugees. In 1995, he returned to his homeland with one mission: to bring back bokator.

His first task was to track down the surviving bokator masters, which was no mean feat. "It was a very difficult task," he says. "I did not have much money and had to spend everything I had going deep into the provinces to try and find them. The old generation who survived, they keep quiet. They would not admit they used to be bokator masters. They saw a lot of people being killed so they were afraid to tell the truth."

By 2003, he had persuaded masters living in five provinces to start teaching bokator to the next generation. "If we don't do this, then when we die, bokator dies with us," he says. "Why does the world know about karate, kung fu or Muay Thai, but not bokator? This is what I want to change."

He adds that while regional sports such as Muay Thai (Thai boxing) are famous, their origins come from bokator. This is because the Khmer empire covered vast swathes of Southeast Asia, including large parts of Thailand, during its peak in the 12th and 13th centuries. "Bokator is the original," he says with pride.

In April 2004, the various bokator masters gathered in Phnom Penh for the first bokator congress, with grandmaster San Kim Sean founding the Cambodia



10,000

There are more than this many moves in the bokator repertoire

ing down knowledge. In a race against time, he is sketching every move he knows – he says he has mastered all of the more than 10,000 bokator techniques which, together with his lifelong devotion to bokator, has earned him the title of grandmaster – to preserve them for the future.

To date he has drawn 3,000 techniques, with the 100 moves needed to gain the first level of white krama published in a book, *Kun Bokator White Krama*, that was released last year. "I am old and getting close to returning home," he says. "When I die, what do I do with all this knowledge? I take the 10,000 moves with me? I don't need them where I'm going. I have to make sure they are passed on to the next generation, but time is running out. It is almost too late."

The grandmaster is at the centre of the documentary *Surviving Bokator*, which premiered at the Cambodian International Film Festival in March. He acknowledges there is still a long way to go before bokator is elevated to the status of karate or Thai boxing, but he has high hopes for the future.

"From the younger generation to the older generation in Cambodia, there was a time when no one said bokator," he says. "Now people are talking about it, more people are interested and wanting to learn. I have a lot of hope that my lifelong dream of bokator being known around the world will come true."

Other steps in the right direction have seen the government moot the idea of introducing bokator to the school curriculum. The Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and the country's police officers will also receive training in the martial art. This month also saw the submission of a bid to include bokator on the official sporting discipline list for the 2023 Southeast Asian Games in Phnom Penh.

"I don't have long left in this life," says San Kim Sean, who has been training his son Reach Norkor, 22, in the martial art since the boy was seven years old. "But the time I do have left will be devoted to making sure bokator survives well after I am gone and thrives in the future."



San Kim Sean works out at his outdoor academy in Siem Reap. Photos: Alamy, Enric Catala

**I have a lot of hope that my lifelong dream of bokator being known around the world will come true**

SAN KIM SEAN, GRANDMASTER

Bokator Foundation and the Cambodia Bokator Academy. In 2009, he applied for bokator to become a member of the World Organisation of Martial Arts. The bid was accepted in 2010, with a Cambodian team travelling to South Korea later that year to compete in a traditional martial

arts competition with more than 10 countries. The team ranked second.

They have competed in a string of international events since then, securing a number of first- and second-place finishes and helping to raise bokator's profile on the global stage. "I am very proud of our students and our culture, and so proud of my country," San Kim Sean says.

After years of working with the government and the National Olympic Committee of Cambodia, a bid has also been submitted to Unesco, the United Nations cultural organisation, for bokator to be listed as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. If successful, it will join Cambodian ballet, shadow puppet theatre, *teanh prot* – a Cambodian-style tug-of-war game – and the musical tradition of *chapei dang veng*.

"We hope to hear back this year," San Kim Sean says. "If this happens, then I know I can die very happy."

In his drive to revive the sport, San Kim Sean has decided to break the tradition of orally pass-