

When science and the spirits meet

By PETER SAINSBURY

LAURENT Pordie does not look like an academic. His long dreadlocks and casual attire seem more indicative of a back packer than a scientist. But as soon as he speaks there is no doubt about his profession. His passion for his work is infectious.

He and his wife have been working in northern Cambodia with hill tribe communities. Pordie is a pharmacist specializing in ethnic medicines while Muriel is involved in environmental education. They have set up Nomad — a non-profit organization based in France to promote the use of natural resources.

Pordie has just finished his latest three-month research project in Mondulkiri, studying the medicine of the Phnong with the help of *Medicins du Monde*. Before that he spent about a year in Ratanakiri on the same quest.

For the moment his work in Cambodia is finished. He is to present his research findings at a conference in India and then he and Muriel will move on to other work. But they hope to return to Cambodia because their experiences here have been far removed from a straightforward study of the properties of medicinal herbs.

Pordie's first task was to update the first western study of the plants of the region which was done more than 50 years ago — local healers have their own universal cataloging system based on the healing properties of plants.

He then looked to the local traditional healers for more information, but he says they wanted to be sure he was sincerely interested. One healer said to him: "I need to know your insides first, then I will show you some of my magic."

The concept of the magic in the healing interested Pordie. He says as a scientist he knew that some of the plants had medically useful compounds in them; some, for example, were anti-malarial. But he also discovered that their efficiency was enhanced by rituals. "Ceremonies increase the power of the plants." Pordie is open to the reasons for this phenomenon.

He also had an experience with a young traditional healer who locals say came by her gifts through possession by spirits. He says the 17-year-old woman used a plant called protiel for treating pregnant women during labor. Protiel is very toxic and Pordie says he saw a person who had been given it unwittingly die after a short illness. However in the hands of the young woman he says protiel was a useful and safe medicine. He says she could not explain how she knew how to use it or grow it. She told Pordie that "it just happened".

As a scientist Pordie is aware of the basis of many herbal cures but he says the influence of magic or spirituality in the healing process needs more study.

He says his experiences with the traditional healers — their perception, skills and forest craft — tells him his studies have not even scratched the surface of the hill tribes' traditional medicine.