

Oral History in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge  
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History of Genocide- Cambodia  
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The importance of oral history in a culture is contingent on a variety of cultural and non-cultural variables. Modern society has both exalted oral history through the means of personal narratives and diminished oral history on the grounds of seemingly factitious accounts. In a culture where written history has been destroyed by war, oral history typically will replace the written history that was lost. This is the phenomenon that was seen in Cambodia after the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge destroyed the countries written history as well as part of their sense of identity. In April, 1975 a communist regime known as the Khmer Rouge or the Communist Party of Kampchea (CPK) took over Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> After taking over the capital city of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge instantly emptied all cities and forced the people to move to villages to become re-educated with their Khmer roots of labor and farming.<sup>2</sup> The idol of this regime was the poor farmer who has been abandoned by his rich, city dwelling, counter-parts in Cambodia. During this time, the people who had moved from the city were classified as “new” people, while the people who were poor farmers previous to the revolution were classified as “base” people. Although the Khmer Rouge’s goal was a society with only one class, two classes instantly emerged.

Within three and a half years, the Khmer Rouge had been responsible for the deaths of 1.7<sup>3</sup> to over three million<sup>4</sup> of the prewar population of roughly seven million people. The victims of this auto-genocide were primarily killed by malnutrition, overwork, and mistreated disease. It is estimated that over 200,000 or more victims had been put to death without trial,

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Short, *Pol Pot, Anatomy of a Nightmare* (New York: Henry Holt and Company), 225.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime, Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Judy Ledgerwood, “Death, Shattered Families, and Living as Widows in Cambodia”, *The Plight and Fate of Women During and Following Genocide*: 67.

<sup>4</sup> *An Introduction to The Khmer Rouge Trials*, third edition, 1.

these victims were classified as “class enemies”.<sup>5</sup> Those who survived this horrific chapter of their country’s history are left with the memories of the CPK and the emptiness they feel due to the loss of their loved ones and part of themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Thirty years after this atrocity occurred, the United Nations started working with the Cambodian government to put the surviving leaders of the CPK on trial. This tribunal, known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, is greatly due to the efforts of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam). Although DC-Cam has been working on these cases extensively, they have also been working on an educational outreach project. DC-Cam has noticed that children of survivors of the Khmer Rouge often do not believe the stories that their parents tell them. This lack of belief is causing disconnect between surviving parents and their children. This disconnect is so extreme that it may alter the way oral history is transmitted and may end the stories of those who were fortunate enough to survive the Khmer Rouge Regime.

To date, the Khmer Rouge Regime is not permitted to be taught in classrooms around Cambodia. This leaves the knowledge of the Khmer Rouge Regime and all the struggles surrounding it to be taught by those who survived the Regime or by an individual independently seeking information through external sources. The Cambodian government has recently passed a referendum allowing DC-Cam to distribute books to high school students. These books will be included in the 2010 curriculum and will teach the students the horrors of the Khmer Rouge Regime. DC-Cam is currently training 3,000 high school teachers on the best methods of introducing and teaching the Khmer Rouge to Cambodia’s youth.<sup>7</sup> DC-Cam hopes that this

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<sup>5</sup> David Chandler, Voices from S21, Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press): vii.

<sup>6</sup> Loung Ung, First They Killed My Father, a Daughter of Cambodia Remembers (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Harper Perennial): 233.

<sup>7</sup> DC-Cam employee, face to face interview, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

education will prevent such atrocities from happening again, in both Cambodia and the rest of the world. This long-awaited education will undoubtedly be beneficial for generations to come; however, two or three generations have passed through the educational system since the horror of the Khmer Rouge and were not offered this formal education on their countries dark past. These second and third generation survivors of the Khmer Rouge may be the most important link to their parent's stories and the proceeding generations.

In June, 2009, a fellow student and I traveled to Cambodia to interview second and third generation survivors to see the full impact of oral history on the Cambodian society. During this time, we were able to interview 40 college students at the University of Phnom Penh. The interviews typically lasted between 15-30 minutes. All questions were open ended with the opportunity to exclude any question that the participant either did not feel comfortable answering or did not understand. Since these interviews were informal and strictly on a volunteer basis, questions were left unanswered. Although we may not have been able to gather all the information that we initially hoped to attain, we were able to see the relevance of each question as it either was or was not answered. The questions were based primarily on the Khmer Rouge and the accounts these students had heard through their parents, grandparents, teachers, or through their own personal conquests to understand the Khmer Rouge.

While conducting the interviews, there was a pattern of constancy within the answers of the questions. The majority of students explained that their parents were the first ones who told them about the Khmer Rouge. Many students explained that they had been briefly told about the Khmer Rouge as children, especially when they were doing something wrong. For example, if they were refusing to eat food that they did not care for as a child, their parents would reprimand them by saying that they would have never been able to live through the Khmer Rouge, because

during the Regime, people consumed anything that they could. Participants recall their parents explaining how they had to eat rats, leaves, and food that was typically reserved for cattle, such as rotten fish heads. The participants explained that it was hard to believe their parents had to go through such struggles. Many participants admitted to not believing their parent's stories. It was hard for most participants to imagine such a cruel time when Khmer people were killing their fellow country men. Post-genocidal children struggle with the concept of absolute control. They wonder how the Khmer Rouge could do such a thing to their country. They also questioned the validity of their parent's stories because they were certain that there would be an uprising against such a horrific regime. During their childhood, some thought the Khmer Rouge was just a fairy tale, such as Santa Clause or the Easter Bunny; they believed it was a factitious story created to make children behave and obey their parents.

Another emerging trend was the age at which participants recalled first being exposed to their relative's stories of the Khmer Rouge. Of the participants whose parents were the first adults to tell them about the Khmer Rouge, the majority of them explained that they were initially told of the Regime while they were ten or eleven years old. It is argued that the transition of a child into a new phase of their lives may trigger their parent's memories of their childhood at that age.<sup>8</sup> For some of the surviving parents, the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia when they were a mere ten or eleven years old.<sup>9</sup> This may be why parents started telling their children about the Regime while their children were at that age.

Oral history undoubtedly plays an important role in any culture that is trying to heal from a dark past. Often, survivors of totalitarian regime try to bridge what they consider their "two

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<sup>8</sup> Edwina S. Uehara, Martha Farris, Paula T. Morelli, and Anthony Ishisaka, "Eloquent Chaos' In the Oral Discourse of Killing Fields Survivors: An Exploration of Atrocity and Narrativization", *Culture Medicine and Psychiatry*, 25 (2001): 33

<sup>9</sup> Edwina S. Uehara, Martha Farris, Paula T. Morelli, and Anthony Ishisaka, 39.

worlds” through personal narratives of their lives.<sup>10</sup> Their first world is the world which they endured through the Regime. Survivors of the Khmer Rouge had been forced into slave labor, and many had either been beaten or tortured. Even those fortunate enough to avoid such negative reprimands had to witness the extreme brutality. Being exposed to this brutality spins the body into a state of unfamiliarity since common notions of the world and self are instantly diminished.<sup>11</sup> The second world that survivors know is the world that they are currently living in. The return to normalcy in such situations is a never ending road with emotional obstacles along the way. Personal narratives are a way to bridge these two worlds. Through narratives, people are able to enact their experiences, thus accepting what has happened and moving in the direction of healing the two sides into one whole.<sup>12</sup> Narratives have been shown to be a potent force in mediating personal disruption, and pursuing continuity in order to make sense of the world. In the case of many Cambodians, the disruption was caused by the Khmer Rouge.<sup>13</sup>

Many survivors of the Khmer Rouge use narratives as a form of sharing their story with their children. Unfortunately, the growing trend is that second and third generations find it difficult to believe their parent’s stories. This may be the case because of the way the narrative is told. Narratives of such extreme brutality are often told in bits and pieces; it is extremely rare for such narratives to be chronologically sound. It is argued that when survivors of an atrocity experience extreme conditions, it is difficult for those memories to be transformed into a neutral narrative.<sup>14</sup> Since the narratives are lacking chronological order, survivors often only talk about their story when they are presented with stimulus that reminds them of the past. Such stimulus

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<sup>10</sup>Gay Becker, Yewoubdar Beyene, and Pauline Ken, “Memory, Trauma, and Embodied Distress: The Management of Disruption in the Stories of Cambodians in Exile”, *Ethos* 23, (2000): 321.

<sup>11</sup> Gay Becker, Yewoubdar Beyene, and Pauline Ken, 321.

<sup>12</sup> Gay Becker, Yewoubdar Beyene, and Pauline Ken, 322.

<sup>13</sup> Gay Becker, Yewoubdar Beyene, and Pauline Ken, 333.

<sup>14</sup>Edwina S. Uehara, Martha Farris, Paula T. Morelli, and Anthony Ishisaka, 37

can be something as impactful as the day Cambodia was liberated, or something as simple as eating certain types of food. This sporadic account of oral history makes it hard for the children of the survivors to understand exactly what their parents endured, and often forms disconnect between the surviving parents and their post-genocidal children.

It is interesting to note that our research found many participants went to explore and understand the Khmer Rouge through external forms, such as visiting the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. A number of participants explained that they were not able to fully understand, and thus not able to believe, their parent's stories until they went to Toul Sleng. Toul Sleng and similar museums serve as a catalyst of belief for post-genocidal Cambodians. The participants explained that it was hard to believe the stories when they were told orally through narratives, but when they were able to see photos of the atrocities it made it easier to believe. Some participants also explained that their parent's stories of the Khmer Rouge did not interest them but visiting Toul Sleng sparked their interest of their country's past.

Toul Sleng was initially opened to show international guests the horrors and torture committed by the Khmer Rouge against their own people.<sup>15</sup> At first, the center was not open to the public, only international guests were allowed to visit the museum. The Museum opened to the public on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1980, and 32,000 guests visited within the first week.<sup>16</sup> Mai Lam, a Vietnamese specialist on research battles and war crimes, who helped organize Toul Sleng, emphasized that the museum was created to be a very literal sense of evidence of the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge.<sup>17</sup> This direct evidence has shown to be beneficial not only to

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<sup>15</sup>Judy Ledgerwood, "The Cambodian Toul Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative" *Museum Anthropology*, 21, (1997):88

<sup>16</sup> Ledgerwood, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Ledgerwood, 88.

foreigners, as its initial design intended, but also to proceeding generations who are trying to make sense of the genocide and the stories surrounding their culture's dark past.

While the Khmer Rouge was in power, they closed down all cities and requested a return from all their international students. During this time, they killed intellectuals and military cadre from the previous regime in hopes of destroying any opposition to the movement.<sup>18</sup> This tactic may have been successful in the eyes of the Khmer Rouge leaders; however, the consequences are still seen today. While asking the participants what they felt had been lost because of the Regime, many answered that they had lost all intellectuals. Due to this loss, the students feel that their educational system is still being rebuilt. Many participants also explained that they felt their country is not as unified as before. They felt that since the Khmer Rouge killed all intellectuals, the country has little knowledge and is not able to expand on the knowledge that they have.

Even more interesting than the previous findings was the apparent lack of interest that the students displayed for their country's past. When we first approached the students about our research topic, many were thrilled to help but explained that they did not know much about the Khmer Rouge. Students claimed that only lawyers and historians studied the Khmer Rouge; the majority of the students we interviewed studied English, so they were not familiar with the topic. Realizing that the students were not interested in the subject was disheartening in a sense. After speaking with many students, however, they explained that focusing on the past would not be beneficial for Cambodia today. Instead, they believed they should focus on the future and on rebuilding their country.

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<sup>18</sup> Kiernan, 155

Becker, Beyene, and Ken argue that forgetting this event is unthinkable. That remembering, in a sense, collectively empowers the Khmer people as they remember their cultural traditions and all who were lost.<sup>19</sup> Although the students we interviewed may not have been academically inclined towards the Khmer Rouge Regime, they seemed to strongly agree with this statement. All participants except one explained that they do not, and do not know of anyone, who tries to forget the events of the Khmer Rouge. Many participants explained that no one wants to forget about the Khmer Rouge because it is part of Cambodia's history. Participants explained that they do not want to forget what happened because they do not want such atrocities to happen again. Yet others say that they do not want to forget, but since they did not experience the Regime they do not take it seriously. A minority of participants referenced psychological pain and dysfunction for being the reason of remembrance, while a large number believe that remembering the Khmer Rouge is essential for building on their countries current economic condition.

The idea of remembrance among this group of participants coincides with the ideas of remembrance found in other studies. Both Becker and colleagues<sup>20</sup> and Uehara and colleagues<sup>21</sup> found that all their participants wanted to remember what happened, but found it difficult to formulate their narrative in a chronologically sound matter. Many scholars have demonstrated that the experience of such events, such as torture, is impossible to put into words. Some even suggest that torture may destroy language.<sup>22</sup> If this is the case, the oral transmission of history may be an impossible task to continue for generations to come.

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<sup>19</sup> Becker, Beyene and Ken, 341.

<sup>20</sup> Becker, Beyene and Ken, 340.

<sup>21</sup> Uehara, Farris, Morelli and Ishisaka, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Chandler, 111.

When asked if participants will share the stories of the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge with their own children, and if so, how, participant's answers varied dramatically. Many of our participants explained that they will not tell their own children about the Khmer Rouge unless their children ask them. Their reasoning for this, they explained, is that they did not experience the atrocities so it would be difficult to relay the information to later generations. Others explained that they will tell their children about the struggles that their parents went through because it is history and they deserve to know. On the other side, many participants explained that they will tell their children all they know, take them to the museums, and encourage their children to learn as much about the Khmer Rouge as they can. These participants explained that it is important to be educated on their topic in order to prevent such atrocities from occurring in the future. They believe that the lessons of the past can serve as a catalyst for improvement in the future.

With that, we asked participants if they knew of any other atrocities similar to the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge. Very few participants were able to answer that question; of those who could, most referenced the Holocaust and Hitler. It was rare for a participant to bring up the current conflict happening to their neighboring country Burma, and very few participants mentioned the ongoing genocide occurring in Darfur, Sudan. It would be unjust to say that the lack of knowledge on these atrocities is due to the student's paucity of interest. Rather, it may be inferred that this paucity of knowledge is due to the underdeveloped education centralizing around the Khmer Rouge and such regimes.

Since the educational system is lagging, it seems as though a spark needs to occur in order to light the ignition of curiosity and understanding of the Khmer Rouge. This spark may very well be the current effort of the United Nations and the Cambodian government to put the

leaders of the Khmer Rouge on trial. While interviewing the students, many explained that the trial was a good thing; that the trial, even though the demise of the Regime was 30 years ago, brings a sense of healing to the country. On the other side of the argument, many students believe that the trial is long overdue and that the United Nations and the Cambodian Government should be putting the millions of dollars being spent towards building Cambodia's current economy. Many of these students argue that there is corruption within the ranks of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia and a majority of the money is being hoarded for personal gain. The students are also dissatisfied with the tribunals because they are only trying a select few individuals. The participants explained that there are members of the Khmer Rouge who are currently holding important government positions.

Whether the students believe that the tribunals are beneficial or not, everyone can agree that the tribunals are now at least bringing light to Cambodia's dark past by initiating conversation of the Khmer Rouge among the people. It is possible to conceive that encouraging this sort of open discussion of the Regime among the people may bring a new level of meaning and importance of oral history among the Khmer people. This, along with the new educational movement brought about by DC-Cam, may bring a better understanding of the Khmer Rouge Regime as well as a motive to share the country's history in order to prevent such atrocities from happening again, both within Cambodia and internationally. It is fair to say that there is a new movement in Cambodia today. Thirty years after the genocide, Khmer people are trying to come to terms with their dark past. Education and justice will help this movement; hopefully, through the use of personal narratives, the struggles and extreme horrors faced by the survivors of the Khmer Rouge will never be forgotten and will implement change.

For me, visiting Cambodia was a life-altering experience. My initial interest in genocide and mass atrocities began when I was first introduced to the subject in high school. In Illinois, it is mandated that genocide has to be taught to all students; my first exposure to this horrific side of humanity was in high school when we were introduced to the Holocaust. It was not until I took Dr. JD Bowers' History of Genocide class that I realized I could pursue this interest academically. This class taught me that I could impact the world I live in by having a greater understanding of such atrocities and the actions society needs to take in order to prevent these tragedies. Dr. Bowers' class introduced me to the genocide that occurred in Cambodia; previous to his class, I had only heard of the Khmer Rouge and did not fully understand the impact of the Regime. The Cambodian genocide is unique in that it is classified as an "auto-genocide". Other genocides were committed by one group of people in aim to destroy a different group: the Holocaust aimed to destroy the Jewish population, the Hutus in Rwanda aimed to destroy the Tutsis. The genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge, however, was aimed to destroy their own people, the people of Cambodia.

Reading books and articles can never compare to having a first hand experience in a culture. Thanks to the Undergraduate Special Opportunities in Artistry and Research (USOAR) and the Enhance Your Education (EYE) Grant, a fellow student Ryan Beebe and I, were able to apply what we had learned in the classroom to independent research conducted in Cambodia.

Within a period of two weeks, I witnessed humanity's worst side. The horrific images and places that I was exposed seem unrealistic to an individual unless they see it first hand. I visited the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum where I saw the beds and rooms where over 14,000

people were tortured and murdered.<sup>23</sup> After seeing the torture devices used, I saw the pictures of the men, women, and children who were systematically tortured and put to death without trial within the grounds that I was standing on. Since I place a great emphasis on education, the most eerie experience while at the museum was seeing the torture beds and instruments lying right in front of a chalk board. Previous to the genocide, Toul Sleng was a high school. It was impossible for me to comprehend that at one point a place could be dedicated to improvement, change, and education, then drastically be turned into a hell on Earth. Toul Sleng was the home for both the improvement and the demise of society. Being exposed to such a place initiated a variety of emotions within me including sorrow, fear, anger and numbness.

Along with Toul Sleng, I visited one of the killing fields, Choeung Ek. Choeung Ek held the beauty of Cambodia's country side, but it also housed a mass execution site with resulting mass graves. The stillness of the land is difficult to imagine without experiencing it. Some of the graves were fenced off and explained how many people were buried there and in what condition their bodies were found. Others were just holes in the ground with a sign posted next to the site, "please do not walk on mass graves". Being in such a place brought the reality of the genocide to life for me. While reading about such atrocities it is difficult to imagine the full extent of the tragedy. Death tolls numbering in the millions are difficult to comprehend. Rather, people can feel greater empathy towards individual deaths because it is easier to relate to. It is hard to imagine that those millions of people who were killed were someone's mother, father, sister, brother, friend, etc. Being able to visit the site of these killings made me feel the sobering reality of humanity's worst side.

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<sup>23</sup> Chandler.

Within the same two weeks of witnessing and learning about humanities darkest side, I was also able to witness the incredible resilience and genuine sincerity of the Cambodian people. Cambodia is truly a place like none other. It is hard to imagine that a people who have been so devastated by war and genocide could continue a “normal” life. The Cambodian people have excelled the notion of normalcy and have begun rebuilding their country. Survivors of the genocide who had lost everything are now living happy lives. This sense of resilience baffled me at first. I could not imagine living through such an event and later living a happy life. The Cambodian people, however, see living through the Khmer Rouge as a measurement of strength. Although they do not question the strength of those who lost their lives in the Regime, they see themselves as surviving for a reason. One man we met (who preferred to remain anonymous) was one of five to survive a prison during the Regime when he was five years old. While telling us the narrative of his hardships during the Regime, he remained smiling. This man now runs a non-profit organization which helps disabled Cambodians conduct technological work for international organizations. It is a true story of living through hell on Earth yet still having the resilience, courage, and hope, to change the world.

Cambodia is often referred to as the Country who is always smiling. This seemed a bit ironic to me when learning about the Country’s past; I now understand exactly why Cambodia is frequently referred to as that. The people of Cambodia were all so genuine and eager to help us. In Cambodia, we stuck out as foreigners. Instead of simply ignoring us, the people were eager to know why we were in Cambodia and if they could help us in anyway. This sense of sincerity was foreign to me at first, because back in the United States there are few people who are that interested and willing to help others at any given moment. In Cambodia, there were very few

people who were not interested and willing to help people. This sense of community was incredible to be apart of, even though I only experienced it for a short period of time.

Having the opportunity to conduct research first hand was also an incredible learning experience. Since this was my first time conducting independent research, I was able to witness the intensity of the process. I greatly enjoyed being able to formulate different questions and see the relevance of each question while they were being answered. I was able to feel the frustrations of the doing research but also the sense of accomplishment once we met our goal. It was also a very unique experience in that I was able to relate with college students who lived on the other side of the world. It was incredible that we could be talking about the Khmer Rouge one minute, then complaining about doing homework and taking tests the next.

Along with conducting research we were able to visit the countryside and experience a variety of new things. Every minute in Cambodia was an adventure. Not only did we learn about the Khmer Rouge but also about the people and the culture. We were introduced to the basics of their land and the food. It was incredible to see people eating things that I could never imagine, such as spiders and snakes. The norms of their culture were outside of my element to say the least, but I found it easy to adjust. For example, everything in Cambodia is a bargain; at first, I felt guilty bargaining with people but after a couple of day I would like to think that I became pretty good at it! It was amazing to travel around the country and see the difference in the lives of those who live in the city and those who live in the country. Although there were obvious differences in wealth, the Cambodian spirit of generosity and sincerity was seen throughout the whole country.

We also had the rare opportunity to see Kang Keck Ieu, or Duch, on trial at the ECCC Tribunal. Duch was in charge of Toul Sleng, the torture prison that we visited. It was a sobering yet an exciting experience to see the man who had been responsible for so many deaths be put on trial. The crimes that were committed by Duch are unthinkable; it was frightening to hear him openly admit to the horrors that he had been responsible for. Seeing this man on trial brought about a sense of reassurances to me that the world is starting to acknowledge these crimes and punish those who are responsible for them. It was also an extraordinary experience to be able to see how the United Nation's Tribunals are run. I have never been in a court room before, let alone one of such importance; seeing the justice system in action made me feel hopeful for the future of Cambodia.

Being able to conduct this research has reaffirmed the goals that I have for my academic career. I had the idea that I wanted to go into Clinical Psychology to research trauma. Previous to this opportunity, I had only been able to work in a research lab and help conduct another individual's research. It was an incredible experience to be able to formulate my own hypothesis and find answers to my own questions. Having this experience made me realize that I truly desire a career in research that will able me to apply my knowledge towards helping others. This experience has also reaffirmed my goals of conducting research internationally. Previous to this opportunity, I had reservations about traveling abroad. After spending time in Cambodia, I realized that I can be away from home; I truly loved every minute of the adventure. This experience was truly amazing and I am incredibly grateful for having the opportunity.