

The Epoch Times

Images of Hope and Resilience for the Khmer People

Shahrzad Noorbaloochi

July 12, 2010

Pov Sinoun, a middle-aged Khmer Kraom woman, witnessed her entire family be murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Today, in addition to her job cooking for young monks, she travels from village to village trying to better understand her civil rights and hopes to use it to seek justice. (Justin H. Min., Access to Justice Asia) Cambodia has become synonymous with the Killing Fields and Khmer Rouge prisons, so much so that tuk-tuk drivers in Phnom Penh offer visitors a day of genocide tourism, says Vinita Ramani.

Ramani is co-founder and director of Access to Justice Asia (AJA), a non-profit, non-funded organization that seeks to give voice to Asia's "forgotten survivors."

AJA uses art-based community development to help communities tell their stories through their own voices. Their latest project—the Justice, Art, and Memory project—takes on the plight of the Khmer Kraom community, a community devastated by the Khmer Rouge, one that is all but forgotten. Through the medium of documentary photography, the group's team of photographers hopes to "offer these communities a different way of perceiving themselves."

The Forgotten Khmer Kraom

While Security Prison 21 and the Killing Fields are now tourist hotspots, some 30 years ago, these sites were the center for the systematic murder of tens of thousands of people at the hands of Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch, the notorious commandant of S-21.

The Khmer Rouge, an ultra-Maoist group organized by Pol Pot in the jungles of Cambodia, was established with the ostensive aim of setting up a "utopian" rural society in the 1960s. By 1970, the group had accumulated enough momentum to initiate an insurgency against the Cambodian government with the help of Vietnamese troops.

What ensued was a mass killing of intellectuals, skilled workers, anyone owning "modern technology" such as eyeglasses and wristwatches, and of ethnic minorities, including the Khmer Kraom.

Today, the United Nations-backed Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia are holding a tribunal against five former leaders of the Khmer Rouge, known as Case 002.

The Khmer Kraom's accounts were excluded from the trials, despite the fact that the Khmer Rouge eradicated nearly 80 percent of their community. The decision to keep out the Kraom's accounts was made because of, what some have called, a technicality.

"Historically, the Khmers of the lower Mekong delta region—called the Khmer Kraom ... have been a marginalized minority group due to their geographical, historical, and cultural ties to both Cambodia and Vietnam," said Ramani.

"Their inter-related identity also made the Khmer Kraom community a prime target during the Khmer Rouge who referred to them as traitors with 'two minds' or 'Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds.'"

Redemption and Resilience

Kroem Ken, 85, a Khmer Kraom woman living in Andoung Kien Village located in Takeo province, discusses her everyday life and Khmer Kraom culture. Despite her age, she continues to sell noodles at a food stand to make a living. (Rothany Srun, Access to Justice Asia Summer Intern) AJA's team has been working on the Tribunal, attempting to help the Kraom people be heard. "After half a year of vacillation, the [Tribunal's] prosecutors have finally accepted our story-based data and audio-visual reports," said Ramani. On June 13, she said that they admitted that the Khmer Kraom had been "mistakenly neglected thus far, and that they would do their best to ensure that the voices of the Khmer Kraom victims would be heard in court."

Through their efforts, 15 Khmer Kraom individuals were recognized as "civil parties" and were admitted to the trials with rights to "support the prosecution" of the Khmer Rouge leaders on trial and to request collective reparations.

According to Ramani, the real story of the Kraom, one that has never been told, is one of resilience and hope. Ramani says the photographs aim to tell a deeper story, moving away from stories of killing and victimization towards those of memory (Jnaana), survival (Jiiva), and renewal (Punarvana).

"Very few 'victims' are allowed to exist beyond victimhood. They are rarely seen as survivors who have emerged from conflict and wish to share both stories of trauma and stories of continuity and hope, and who often have a sense of humor and an indefatigable spirit for life," says Ramani.