

**Constructive Cambodian
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For those grieving over Reach Sambath, carrying on his accomplishments might be the greatest contribution we can make toward ensuring that the impact of his work is not forgotten, write Tharum Bun & Colin Meyn

In a country dominated by infamous legacies, often tied to the Khmer Rouge or various other failed and nefarious institutions in the countries recent past, the media in Cambodia tends to turn out attention to the darker parts of our society and we unknowingly ignore the courageous and relentless individuals who are standing in the light and moving the country forward.

Reach Sambath, who died on May 11, 2011, was one of those people making the country brighter, not only with his uplifting personality, but by committing himself to ongoing efforts to bring the crimes of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge out of the shadows.

Reach Sambath was an unfailingly honest man of many contradictions: he was the optimistic face of a criminal tribunal dealing with some of the worst crimes in modern human history, he was a journalism professor to bloggers some days and a spokesperson travelling around the country, by car and foot, to connect rural Cambodia to the trials that he hoped would deliver justice to a country in desperately short supply and, finally, in his death, he is remembered as a survivor.

Those who knew and loved Reach Sambath will remember him as a hero, but the point of his work was never to promote his story; it was to spread facts and information about issues critical to Cambodian society. First through agriculture, then journalism and, all along, in the pursuit of justice for Cambodian people.

It is fitting that he spearheaded the outreach effort for the only successful prosecution of anyone for crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge. It is also telling that, as the face of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, he helped ensure that Kaing Guek Eav's story remained in the spotlight and that, despite being the optimistic and empathetic story-teller, he stayed in the shadow.

As a pioneer of independent journalism in the Kingdom, one might predict that Reach Sambath is much celebrated among the writers, reporters and scholars currently walking down the trail he blazed, but that would be an assumption. Phnom Penh is not widely known as a city of heroes, and if the web is any indication, Duch's role as leader of the S-21 prison will get much more screen-time than Reach Sambath, as the man who delivered

justice to his doorstep, in the retelling of Cambodia's history by future generations.

As a sort of digital collective consciousness, or the closest thing humans have developed thus far, Wikipedia's compiled information about Reach Sambath and Duch is symbolic of the tendency in Cambodia to write about the bad guys in the country's recurring narrative of tragedy.

Apart from outlining the atrocities he oversaw as the head of the Khmer Rouge's most notorious prison, the biography of Duch on Wikipedia goes into his life before and after he served under Pol Pot, for many years as math teacher at a rural high school and a born-again Christian. This information has been on Wikipedia since early 2004, about half a decade before Reach Sambath had any presence on the internet's super encyclopedia whatsoever.

The lives of both men can teach us many lessons about ourselves and our past, but it seems a shame that Cambodian content creators, both online and through conventional media outlets, tend to be blinded to the successes happening in the country in their efforts to expose the wrongs that have been acted upon the Kingdom.

To properly pay tribute to the contribution that Reach Sambath has made to Cambodian society, efforts to produce a comprehensive biography and a compilation of his most important written work should begin immediately (these things should have been done years ago).

The cooperation in these efforts has already begun on Wikipedia, where there is a push for friends and colleagues in the development community to add anecdotes, information, or published work by Reach Sambath to the page. Perhaps once the sources start coming together on Wikipedia, new ideas will emerge for how to distribute this material to a wider audience in Cambodia.

The self-made man not only recovered from the death of his family at the hands of the Khmer Rouge as a child, he flourished. Reach Sambath was a vanguard in journalism after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, and public affairs chief for an institution of unparalleled importance to he and many fellow Cambodians who refused to give up on justice.

His professional legacy will be carried on in his words, and in the careers and contributions made by more than 100 journalism students as they join media organisations, NGOs and private companies to shape the messages that will define how Cambodia is perceived in the years to come.

In an interview with Asia Sentinel in 2006, Reach Sambath predicted that the legacy of the court of the court would be as an educating institution. "People will know about what happened from this," he said.

As the man in charge of actually spreading the messages coming out of the court, there is

little doubt that the guilty verdict against Duch, and the opportunity to share the message of justice with countrymen who had been waiting for thirty years, was the pinnacle of his professional accomplishments.

For their part, the judges and prosecutors at the KRT have more influence than anyone on the fate of the court, and the legitimacy of the legacy it leaves behind. While Case 003 is the centre of the current controversy, a failure to reconcile their differences in a civil way will jeopardise the work of thousands of people in getting the court this far, and let down millions who learned through Reach Sambath that the courts were Cambodia's chance to bring justice to the men and women killed so many of her people.