

Khmer Rouge Survivor's Tale Helps Cambodia Confront Its Brutal Past

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It took her 33 years to put pen to paper and write the screenplay that would change everything. But for [Khmer Rouge](#) survivor Khauv Sotheary, producing a film about her mother's experience of the brutal period instead of her own has allowed the 47-year-old professor to understand her family's past even more profoundly.

[Lost Loves](#) is [Cambodia](#)'s first feature film about the Khmer Rouge for more than 20 years, and coincides with a [key hearing](#) at the UN-backed war crimes court. This is the first time in 30 years that the regime has been discussed so much and so openly. And that, experts say, proves that Cambodia is truly on the road to reconciliation.

"We've grown up far from the story [of the regime] because so much time has passed, but the memory – of the pain, the starvation, the separation – is always there," says a soft-spoken Sotheary from a cafe in her native Phnom Penh. "Even though we live in peace now and have food on the table, we have to keep this story alive. We have to communicate it."

Lost Loves focuses on Sotheary's mother, who lost seven members of her family – including her father, husband and four children – during the hardline communist regime of 1975-79, which killed about 2 million people. With its all-Cambodian cast and crew, including Sotheary as the protagonist, the film premiered in 2010 at the Cambodian international film festival to a riveted audience, and last week finally appeared in city cinemas. Critics have called it "groundbreaking" and "beautiful".

Relying heavily on traditional Cambodian drama, the film depicts everyday life under the Khmer Rouge in striking but emotionally provocative ways. In one scene, Amara, stripped of her "capitalist" identity and clad in revolutionary, communist black, drags a fellow farmer to hospital as she suffers a miscarriage from overwork in the rice paddies, her blood staining the emerald grasses where they eat, sleep and toil.

"This is the only way to really bring the story to the people here," explains director Chhay Bora, 49, who lost two brothers at the hands of the regime and says that a documentary would have had a less profound effect. "A docu-drama actually brings you to the experience by making you feel like you're in it. You become emotionally engaged."

Sotheary – who survived the regime despite chronic malnutrition and a permanent state of despair – says she commends her mother for her "strength and resolve to survive what she did".

"As a mother now, I don't know if I'd have the same strength," she adds.

Bora and Sotheary – both university professors – chose Cambodia's youth as the film's target audience and have provided discounted tickets to schools and universities to encourage students to watch it. The couple aim to screen the film in provinces beyond the capital. "Children need to see history with their eyes to understand what they read," says Bora. "A film like this helps them understand their textbooks better."

The film-makers are aided, in part, by a recent movement to teach the history of the genocide to students and the public at Cambodia's most famous torture prison, S-21, or Tuol Sleng (whose former director, Kaing Guek Eav, known as Comrade Duch, was [convicted of war crimes in 2010](#) and sentenced to 35 years in prison). Organised by the country's leading Khmer Rouge research group, the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam), the bi-weekly lectures discuss the rise and fall of a government that considered education a disease of the elite and converted many of the country's schools into prisons and warehouses.

While the genocide is required teaching from grades nine to 12 in Cambodia, many students doubt the extent of the atrocities committed and some teachers are loth to address the issue in class, "in part because they don't understand the period and how to integrate it into the curriculum", says oral historian and S-21 lecturer Farina So.

"Many parents and grandparents don't like to discuss what happened, because it is such a painful and sensitive issue," she says. "But if we don't talk about it at home, and we don't talk about it in our communities, how can kids understand the history? This is about solace, about reconciling the past with the present and future."

DC-Cam has trained some 3,000 teachers to approach the genocide, partly through its independently funded guidebooks that encourage teachers to ask students questions such as "What would life be like today if money and free markets were abolished?" and "How has the regime affected life in Cambodia today?".

But the organisation knows it has an uphill battle on its hands. "I believe some of what you say happened, but not everything," says high school student Luy Srey Mech, 17, at a recent S-21 lecture. "My great-grandparents were killed during the revolution, but it was a long time ago. I guess now that I see these pictures, these videos, I start to understand it a little more."

Youk Chhang, a leading researcher on the Khmer Rouge, says it would be easy to get discouraged by such seemingly disaffected youth – but that would be a great mistake.

"Genocide is very difficult to express in words. Forcing or expecting people to 'believe' it happened is unfair and perhaps too obsessed with the past," he says, noting that the most important development to come out of this newfound dialogue is "the communication itself".

"This dialogue that we are seeing today did not exist 15 years ago," he says. "The tribunal has finally put the Khmer Rouge into the public sphere, creating a public debate that is

nationwide. Everywhere there is shared joy, suspicion, sorrow, hope. It's the single issue that has encouraged a culture of dialogue that has not yet existed in Cambodian society – and that means that the debate on the ground is more constructive than the debate in the court. People are finally defining and reflecting on the meaning of justice and the notion of reconciliation."

For Sotheary and her mother, that reconciliation could not come soon enough.