

Cambodia remembers its fallen Muslims

Julie Masis

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PHNOM PENH - In September 1975, 2,000 or so Cambodian Muslims picked up their swords and machetes and for several days fought off heavily armed Khmer Rouge soldiers at the village of Svay Khleang. The rebellion was sparked during the holy month of Ramadan in response to Khmer Rouge attempts to arrest Muslims for praying at their local mosque.

The rebellion was defeated but won't soon be forgotten: a museum that will preserve the stories of Muslim survivors of the Khmer Rouge's genocidal reign of terror from 1975-79 is scheduled to open at the Mabarak mosque outside Phnom Penh later this year. Between 100,000 and 400,000 Cham Muslims died under the Khmer Rouge regime, according to figures provided by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, either from murder, starvation or disease. Most of the country's mosques were destroyed or desecrated during the Khmer Rouge's radical attempt to create a communist utopia.

After the Khmer Rouge put down the Svay Khleang rebellion, the village's women were separated from the men and the revolt's leaders were sent to prison. Other villagers were deported to live in forested areas where many eventually died from malaria or starvation.

The persecution of Muslims remains an understudied aspect of Cambodia's genocide experience - where as many as two million people perished - but the extent of that suffering is now coming to academic light. According to the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DCC), Muslims who were forcibly relocated from their communities died at a higher rate than any other ethnic or religious group.

Cambodia's population is predominantly Buddhist; Muslims currently make up around 2% of the population, according to official statistics. While Cambodia's Muslims are no longer systematically persecuted, as they were under the atheist Khmer Rouge, they remain largely segregated from the Buddhist majority and are under-represented in the country's universities and bureaucracy.

The DCC has collected 500 interviews with Cambodian Muslims about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge, testimonies that will be accessible at the new memorial museum, according to Farina So, the project's oral history leader. The museum will feature Cambodia's first genocide-related exhibit inside a mosque and will be housed in a former Islamic school that was converted to a communal cafeteria under the Khmer Rouge.

The memorial's creation coincides with the ongoing legal proceedings at the United Nations-sponsored Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), where former top Khmer Rouge leaders are currently on trial for their alleged roles in genocide.

In July, the ECCC convicted former Khmer Rouge prison warden, Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, for war crimes and crimes against humanity and sentenced him to 35 years in prison. His sentence was commuted to 19 years in compensation for the time he was ruled to have been illegally detained by a military court.

The ECCC's proceedings have brought back bitter memories among the regime's Muslim survivors. Him Soh, a Muslim survivor who lost seven family members including his parents and siblings during the Khmer Rouge period, recalls how soldiers murdered Muslim community leaders and deported Cham Muslims to other provinces where they were forced to integrate into ethnic Khmer villages.

"The Khmer Rouge did not allow Muslims to pray in the mosque or at home," he said. "They spied to see if a person prayed and if the person prayed they were taken away and killed."

The Khmer Rouge also forced Muslim girls to cut their hair and made men shave their beards – deliberate affronts to Muslim culture. Nor did they allow Chams to cover their heads or wear traditional Muslim clothes. The Koran was confiscated and in certain instances the pages were used for toilet paper, Soh said.

Chi Sleh, a 75-year-old survivor, was imprisoned twice during the Khmer Rouge regime but lived to tell his tale after a sympathetic Khmer Rouge soldier helped him. Sleh said he had to watch as soldiers destroyed the mosque in his home village, which he says the Khmer Rouge razed for scrap metal. "Some mosques were destroyed; others were used to store rice," he recalls.

Because of Cambodia's history of Cham-led rebellions, the Khmer Rouge were particularly suspicious of Muslim populations. "The Khmer Rouge viewed the Cham people as an internal enemy," So said. "Some people were asked if they were Cham and if they were Cham, they were killed. Some survived by hiding their identity."

The Mabarak mosque aims to promote understanding about Cham culture. The new memorial museum will be housed in a mosque built in 1963, one of the oldest Islamic shrines in the country to survive the Khmer Rouge's demolition campaign. It was bombed and damaged in 1973 during the war between the Khmer Rouge and the government's army. The building's bullet-scarred walls still bear witness to that conflict.

The memorial will contain a collection of artifacts, including Cambodian-language Korans which were buried for safekeeping during Khmer Rouge purges, as well as the swords the Chams used during their rebellion. On the lighter side, the exhibitions will introduce visitors to Cham culture and languages, as well as other minority groups which

suffered under the Khmer Rouge.

Many of Cambodia's Muslims are descendants of the Cham, an ethnic group which once boasted a far-reaching kingdom known as Champa that included territory in today's central and southern Vietnam. The kingdom was defeated by the Vietnamese in the early 1700s and many Chams fled to areas of modern day Cambodia, including the province now known as Kampong Cham.

Julie Masis is a Cambodia-based journalist.