

**Building Democracy in Cambodia through Legal Education
Witnessing Justice 30 Years Later**

Kavet People: The Struggle and Rehabilitation

April 3-5, 2013

1. Introduction

Quite recently, DC-Cam reached out to the Kavet community in the Santepheap commune to examine through a series of public village forums how different ethnic minority groups have conveyed the history of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) to their children and whether they are informed of the ongoing legal proceedings of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). The Kavet people mostly live in the commune of Siem Pang district within the Stung Treng province, and geographically represent one of the really far-flung communities, which took DC-Cam's team a day-long drive to get there.



The public village forum is being conducted inside the commune hall of Santepheap on April 4th, 2013.

In addition to the forums, subsequent interviews were conducted with Kavet people to trace their origin and background throughout the socio-political turbulence of the past. More specifically the interviews covered their partial role in war and the Khmer Rouge (KR) revolution, and explored the extent to which Kavet people suffered as individuals or as a community. Furthermore, DC-Cam recorded Kavet respondent's personal preference for sharing their experiences under the KR regime with their children. DC-Cam closely examined each respondents' perspectives of how they perceived education, namely on DK history, and whether it has guided and shaped younger generations to bring progress and prosperity to their ethnic group. To link with this, the last part will explore the challenges the Kavet people interviewed have faced and the possible solutions they suggest to surmount these challenges.

2. The Brief Background of Kavet People

Santepheap (literally translated as "Peace") community located along the river bank of Sekong, has since become home to the Kavet people. Long time ago, Kavet people settled in the O-Ta-Ngov area which is very close to the Cambodia-Lao border. Due to their geographical closeness, Poert Hean, a Kavet and former KR soldier, posited Kavet people in Cambodia have a strong relationship with many Kavets in the Laos province of Athpeu. Mr. Blor Cheu believed Kavet people could be considered as the aboriginal of Khmer people. The Kavet peoples relied on farming and other forestry products for a living. With regard to

their past daily living, food was usually equally distributed among the Kavet people. They used bamboo shot to cook rice and soup. In an interview with one of the oldest and most knowledgeable persons, Cheu, 71, of the Santepheap commune within the Siem Pang district of the Stung Treng province, he argued Kavet people live mostly in the Santepheap



A road behind a Kavet man is known as "Ho Chi Minh's trail" through which the late Pol Pot, PM of DK regime, trespassed to Vietnam. According to Prof. David Chandler's paper, "In 1965, he [Pol Pot] was summoned to Hanoi for consultation. Probably, connected with the intensifying conflict in South Vietnam. He traveled north for several months, largely on foot, happy that the North Vietnam had recognized him as secretary of the Cambodian party...When Pol Pot reached Hanoi, he presented the program his opposite number, the secretary of the Vietnamese Workers' Party, Le Duan, who told him bluntly that the Cambodian program was unsatisfactory because it ignored the international aspects and obligation of Communism in general and the Cambodian revolution in particular..."

http://www.d.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/pdf/GENOCIDE_EDUCATION_IN_CAMBODIA_DAVID_CHANDLER_for_University_Lecturer_Training.pdf

commune, while others in the Ratanak Kiri province. They co-existed with other ethnic groups such as Jaray, Brao, Tumpuon, Phnong, Stieng, Kachak and others. Cheu remarked outsiders could distinguish Kavet from other ethnic minorities by the Kavet language which uses no written script. In a similar vein, Ms Moeung Sum, 70, suggested Kavet can be differentiated from other groups by their cultural traditions and practices. Primarily, Kavet wear unique clothing. Mr. Doeng Chhem, 50, of Kavet origin, agreed with Cheu and Sum, however added a Kavet person could be identified physically by their small body.

Moreover, the Kavet have distinct cultural practices such as having their face tattooed to mark their age of maturity, and cutting their teeth in half, believed to prevent animals from destroying the gravesites of deceased Kavets. Furthermore, Kavet people prior to entering a jungle (with the intent on creating a new village) organize a ceremony to ask their ancestors to identify plausible community sites. Kavet dedicated offerings to their ancestors in exchange (e.g. buffalo). Once a site was chosen, they built huts typically in close

proximity to each other. They then cleared the land for farming in accordance with the following unique tradition.

Kavet people have four different Gods. First, *God of "Fire Extinguishing"* called for Kavet to clear wooded areas for farming by burning down the trees. Second, they organized a ceremony dedicated to the *God of Potato* before they grew a crop (e.g. potato) on the cleared land. The two ceremonies were held to advance agricultural work and to ask their ancestors for high yields and to prevent the possible destruction of crops by birds. It took months before they organized a third ceremony for the *God of Cabbage*. Mr. Cheu said when the Cabbage blossomed, the ceremony started. The last event, the ceremony for *God of Rice (Ambok)*, was conducted annually. Consuming wine and other agricultural yields for five days, all four ceremonies were to pray for their God's protection of crops from being destroyed by wild animals and also to pray for good health of all Kavet people. Kavet people ceased all farming activity during the five-day event.

Kavet People in War and Revolution



A Kavet woman at Teak Team village, Santeapheap commune

War and revolution changed the way of life of Kavet people. Their struggle did not produce any substantial benefit for them and their ethnicity. Kavet people were forcefully conscripted into the Khmer Rouge revolution without any prior training. Mr. Blors Cheu said Kavet people were mobilized to join the subsequent wars against French colonialism and the US waging war in Vietnam and Khmer Rouge revolution. Similarly, Mr. Cheu and Mr. Baing Chreh, 60, a commune chief, remarked

Kavet people were used as a core force to assist many senior KR revolutionaries such as Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, Son Sen, Nuon Chea, and others. For example, when Pol Pot and his associates embarked on their shared journey to Vietnam, they trespassed onto the Ho Chi Minh trail, located in the Santepheap commune more than ten kilometers deep in the jungle. Mr. Chreh joined the KR revolution and fought the revolutionary war to capture the Siem Pang district in July 1970 and moved to Stung Treng provincial town.

When coming to power, Kavet people were transferred to many places such as Phnom Penh, and Kampong Thom. During the revolution, some Kavet people (such as Peak Thaong Phan, 81, former deputy chief of region 104's economic sector, and Thornh Nou San, deceased, chief of region 104's military) were promoted to higher positions. After the revolution, Phan was demoted to an ordinary person, but was still able to survive the regime. Purges of Kavet people were a direct consequence of their alleged involvement with Vietnam. Informants emphasized many Kavet people were executed on the charge of having a Khmer body with a Vietnamese mind. Two witnesses claimed they observed such killings. Mr. Poeut Hean, a former KR soldier, affirms numerous killings of Kavet persons were carried out for this reason. Many victims were tied to the back, clubbed to death and pushed into pits. Few were covered in salt and restrained under the sun's light until death. Mr. Doeng Chhem offers an incompatible viewpoint, stating KR cadres often beat up Kavet victims or shot them dead on the charge of them being lazy. Ms. Moeung Sum, whose husband was killed by the KR, grew frustrated with the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime,

that's why she and others fled to Laos when Vietnamese troops came in January 1979. The bitter history of Kavet victimization will never vanish from their community's minds and souls. They took it as an unforgettable lesson for their ethnic group and used their first-hand experience to educate their children.

3. The KR History and ECCC

In a series of interviews with Kavet men and women, the process of discussing KR history among their children and neighbors and adjudicating on the accountability of senior KR leaders at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) were important components to get them educated about what happened to their parents and how to prevent this atrocity from happening again.

With regard to KR history, topics of discussion include overwork, starvation, and execution. Ms. Moeung Sum, Mr. Poeut Hean, and Mr. Baing Chreh observed the terms "believe" or "not believe" were their prompt reactions to that history. Mr. Chreh gave an example. When senior Kavet speak of the onerous work conditions and the abolition of currencies during the KR regime, children tended to wonder why there was no currency and how they made a living. Like others, the Kavet people treated it as a challenge. That's one of the great challenges for approximately forty Kavet people (mostly women) and ten school children to meet up at DC-Cam's Public Village Forum held on April 4th, 2013 to find a solution to the story telling process.

Speaking at the Forum inside the commune's office, Mr. Blors Cheu began by merely reminding the present younger generation to explore more about KR history and hold in mind a long rather than short educational vision. He employed a phrase to demonstrate how Kavet people could remember the persecution endured by his people under the Khmer Rouge. It reads: "at war time, the country needs the brave person; at peace time, the country needs the intellectual; but Kavet enjoys no opportunity; KR regime killed Kavet on charge of being Vietnamese." What he implied was to encourage the current and next generations of Kavet people to use their shared history of oppression to cultivate a better future. They need to go to school to obtain the knowledge to avoid being exploited and marginalized. In addition to Mr. Cheu's recommendations to improve educational offering on DK history, Mr. Chreh suggested DK history be properly documented. It is maintained here more research regarding the atrocities perpetrated against the Kavet ethnic group is needed for publishing an edited book for distribution to their communities.



Santepheap Commune Hall near Sekong's river bank

Most participants firmly believed the ECCC has so far served as a decisive factor for holding accountable the KR regime for the deaths of numerous people. Since the inception

of ECCC few cases have been tried. Case 001 against Kaing Guek Eav alias Duch, former chief of Tuol Sleng prison or S-21, concluded with a life imprisonment verdict. Case 002 is set to proceed against Nuon Chea, former KR ideologue, and Khieu Samphan, former Head of State, after the death of one accused Ieng Sary, former Deputy Prime Minister in charge of Foreign Affairs, and the provisional release of Ieng Thirith, former Minister of Social Actions.

Reactions to the Forum

Mr. Poeut Hean, 48, of Santepheap Commune.

"Holding such a meeting and distributing KR-related materials are important to remind our children about the difficulty that their older generation has experienced."

Ms. Ba Din, 46, and Ms. Moeung Sum, 70, of Santepheap commune.

"Such a forum should continue as the people could know and understand a lot rather than reading materials because the people can read very little except the commune officials and school children who can read some. The forum provides a good space to let the children learn about KR history and take part in future prevention of genocide."

Ms. Cha Malichan, 46, of Santeapheap commune.

"The forum is important to tell the children about the KR regime and the war that they did not go through. The forum should continue to safeguard against forgetting."



Less than a year ago, the Kavet man and woman pictured here with their seven-month-old baby were declared by their parents and senior Kavet members a couple. The decision was made before the baby's birth. Because of poorness, they delayed an official marriage. On April 4, 2013, they got married, when the couple was able to buy/produce about fifty cups of wine and pork to organize a party for their neighbors and relatives.

Mr. Cheu Khamla, 30, of Santeapheap commune.

"The forum should bring along films to match it with the discussion. It should also discuss the physical evidence such as dams, prison sites, and mass graves to capture a better understanding among the children. Media should also play a key role in conveying further messages about KR atrocities to each villager including Kavet people."

Hin Sarin, fifth grader, of Santeapheap commune.

"I take little notice of the history but give priority to make a living. It's good to have the forum to draw my attention to the unforgettable and bitter history that my parents have gone through. The outreach activities should expand more for ethnic minority groups like this as most

of them are illiterate."

Chreh Saroeum, fifth grader, of Santepheap commune.

"My parents often tell me about KR history. I believe in what they describe because dams serve as physical evidence in his commune. The forum is important as it's drawn the attention of younger generations and made the unbelievable believable. If possible, teachers should allocate more time to tell their students and discuss this issue."

5. The Challenges for Kavet Community

During the forum, respondents perceived an improper educational system in their community as an obstacle to engage their youth in any fruitful discussion on DK history and also the ongoing work at the ECCC. The problem is further confounded by Kavet youth paying little attention to their public school studies. Mr. Chreh observed most youth engage in unlimited entertainment such as dancing, drinking, and driving motorbikes for pleasure.



Kavet people seep rice wine to congratulate the newly wed couple on April 4th, 2013.

Rather than following Mr. Cheu's words of having a long rather than short educational vision most youths are of the mindset that know matter how hard they studied, they would only obtain low wage employment such as being an assistant. Mr. Chreh commented, youth sometimes claim they have food to eat, so there is no need to study. It's a pessimistic view that many in the Kavet community do not value.

Instead, Mr. Chreh believed youth need to take the initiative to seek-out and pursue education. Speaking in the forum, a youth complained that teachers could not conduct daily classes within a far-flung community. Only after a period of teaching, teachers preferred to transfer to other places. In addressing this issue, the forum participants remedied that the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) select teachers from nearby communities and offer work-based incentives to retain teaching staff and to motivate them to perform their duty properly. Mr. Cheu argued parents must accept partial blame for not influencing their children to become educated instead encouraging them to work to support their family. Elevating the standard of living among the villagers is the primary element requiring substantial help from the Cambodian government. There have been three notable appeals to improve the Kavet people's quality of life.

First, they appealed to the government to restore the three dams (O-Rornong, O-Samrong, and O-Tale), which are the legacy of the KR regime. Doing so would enable the people to benefit from year-round agriculture.

Second, they need to get technical assistance, especially from the Ministry of Agriculture, to instruct them how to increase annual yields. When the economics of each family improve, they will be capable to send their children to schools.

Third, Kavet people recently interviewed by DC-Cam and the team of Public Village Forum strongly insisted the surrounding forest be systematically protected and preserved as it greatly benefited them as an ethnic group and the entire population. Spiritually, the Kavet people likened the forest to a God. They believed deforestation angered their ancestors to incite drought or flooding. Economically, they can collect resin and other forestry products in a sustainable manner to improve their living. The grave concern of some commentators concerns illegal logging. Illegal logging has been destroying the socio-economic fabric of

Kavet people, and today forestry supplies continue to dwindle. Kavet people have sought-out protection from local authorities but in vain. Kavet people have appealed directly to the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) to help protect it. A Kavet man of approximately 40 years old raised a rhetorical question of what Kavet people's future would be if the forest vanished.

The amelioration of access issues to education (e.g. lack of access to teachers) would help further reduce poverty among the Kavet people this and next generation. Only after a higher level of literacy, DK history including Kavet traditions and customs could also be well-documented and studied.

6. Conclusion

Kavet feelings of being exploited and oppressed during the war and revolution are captured in the words of Mr. Cheu: "at war time, the country needs the brave person; at peace time, the country needs the intellectual; but Kavet enjoys no opportunity; KR regime killed Kavet on charge of being Vietnamese." Senior community members reiterate this history to youth encouraging them to learn the lessons of their struggle, with this knowledge they should be motivated to rehabilitate their communities.

Participants in DC-Cam's *Public Village Forum* emphasized the importance of passing on DK history to their children in a private setting or in shared public space, like the forum. Nonetheless, impediments to education persist. For instance, there is a primary school, but it functions poorly. Teachers keep transferring from their teaching post in Santepheap commune, thus leaving students hopeless, isolated, and doubtful. Many dropped out with low literacy. Though appeals have been made to the government to assist the Kavet community to institute a public school and provide technical assistance to improve their living condition; the Kavets calls for help continue.

In regard to the trial at the ECCC, most Kavet people take very little interest in it. Interviewees claimed that it's extremely rare to hear any serious discussion about the legal proceedings against former KR leaders, although some of them have already had the chance to observe actual court-hearings in-person at the ECCC. Media access is also very limited in their community. As demonstrated by their reactions to the forum, both senior people and school children implore similar forums be conducted for other ethnic minority groups like DC-Cam has done for the Kavet community.

Appendix: Doeng Lik

Mr. Lik, a Kavet, 50 years old, was born in Au Ta Ngol area, specifically the Kiri Vongsa commune within the Siem Pang district in the province of Stung Treng. The area he speaks of is known as a National ASEAN Free Trade Agreement Area. Kavet, in stark contrast to other minority groups including Hsak, Lun, Smang, Sngel, prefer living in mountainous areas conducive to their farming of paddies, potatoes, eggplants, and others crops, and hunting wild animals. There are shared linkages between the traditions of these aforementioned groups and Kavet. They put their faith in Brahmanism, and Animism. Trading is forbidden in the area and people live in solidarity without any violent quarrels, but in cases of dispute, the disparate parties will seek help from a group of elder people to arbitrate the problem. Hence, the one found accountable for the mistake is punished by forfeiting wine and meat only. Since their ancestors, Kavets have shared a relationship with

other ethnic minorities living on the mountain because they were afraid of being mistreated by others such as Khmer or Laos. Nowadays, neither group is afraid anymore as Cambodia is governed by peace and enforced by proper laws.

98 percent of Kavet people in Lik's community know very little about the Khmer language because they live on the opposite of the Se San River and rarely have contact with Khmer speaking peoples. They are firmly conserving tradition, custom, and belief. Customarily, they celebrate with a festival before commencing farming and after collecting their ideal crop yield they listen to the crying sounds of their animals.

The marriage ceremony is prepared by collecting people to suck wine from a jar together with accompanying sounds of music gracing the ambiance of the occasion.

From the past until now, Kavet people are distinguished from others by their dark-yellow cornea and a faithful attitude. Currently, Kavet people have been extending contact with Khmer, Laos and Cham persons. Kavet people rarely argue with each-other but may become irate with outsiders who travel into their community. Lik expressed he wants to preserve their customs, traditions, language and religion because they are living peacefully in their community. It is his hope, that in Teak Team, a school teaching both Khmer and Kavet languages will be established for the next generation of Kavets.

During the Vietnamese war with America, Lik was a young child living on the mountain. His mother told him a Vietnamese leader asked his father to lead the Kavet people to fight against America. Sadly, he died in 1970 during the war. War brought hardship to Kavet people. The unceasing American bombardment on his mountain culminated in great losses to the far-flung Kavet community. Moreover, people in his community were made by the Vietnamese to transport foodstuff, bullets, and to guide the way for Vietnamese armies because they knew the geography of the area well.



Typical house of Kavet people in Santepheap commune

Many Kavet perished during that time. After the war with America was over, Kavet people were called to live in flat areas with other ethnic groups by then Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The Kavet refused to abandon their ancestral land and feared being conscripted as soldiers.

In 1975, Khmer Rouge took control of Teak Team. All people including Lik were forcefully mobilized to take

residence in cooperatives. Men, Lik included, were trained to use weapons and conscripted into the Khmer Rouge Revolutionary Army. Khmer Rouge's primary reason for forcing Kavet people to become soldiers was the KR believed illiterate people did not think, therefore had no mercy, and would commit murder without hesitation in any circumstance. Lik was later assigned to fight North Vietnam.

During the Khmer Rouge regime, Kavet ethnics were gathered to live together in a mobile work unit. The unit was forced to dig canals, build dikes, and complete many other arduous work projects. Though they worked hard, food rations were not enough for many to maintain life. Lik recounted his community was controlled by a vicious leader, Ta Vong,

and he killed people brutally with no mercy just like the situation of Khmer Krom people. Lik's younger brother was killed in war. Later on, when government soldiers were liberating the country, Kavet people fled to Laos for their life. After the war was over, the Cambodian government appealed for the repatriation of people who had fled to Laos during wartime, and upon their return, were subsequently given land, in which they are living currently. Kavet people faced manifold hardships developing their community, for everything was completely destroyed by war.

Lik had once attended a hearing in the ECCC, and noted he follows the legal proceedings by listening on a radio. In his opinion, he does not think the top Khmer Rouge leaders intended to kill people and he does not want the ECCC to continue anymore because he fears retaliation will bring about another war, which he holds may happen once again. Lik requested of the tribunal to release the Khmer Rouge leaders and allow them to die by their sins. In his community, only half of the young children believe what they were told by their parents.

Currently, they are facing hardship, largely poverty, and known lying from their village chief. In addition to this, Kavet are attempting to stall plans on a pagoda being built in Teak Team.

Lik continues to appeal the varying levels of government not to eliminate his people's traditions and customs because he's satisfied with his current life which is full of solidarity and peace. Most importantly, he requests for the protection of his communities forest because the forest is a crucial part of the Kavet ethnic minority's survival.

Photos from the Forum:

http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/Photos/2013/Public_Village_Forum_in_Sante_pheap_Commune_Siem-Pang_District_Stung-Treng_Province/index.html

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