

# “Responding to Genocide”

by Ashley Cooper  
University of Massachusetts Lowell  
Department of Cultural Studies

*“A society cannot heal itself if it does not have an accurate account of its own history,”  
(Documentation Center of Cambodia).*

On April 17, 1975, Cambodians greeted the Khmer Rouge in the streets of Phnom Penh with cheering and excitement. Cambodians foresaw a brighter future under the leadership of this new government. What they received, however, was a brutal genocide that ravaged the lives and spirits of every remaining Cambodian citizen and killed more than twenty percent of their population. In less than four years, the leaders of the Democratic Kampuchea purged Cambodia of much more than its monks, its intellectuals, and its Muslim Chams; the DK purged the Cambodian survivor’s trust in the goodness of mankind and each other. Since the genocide officially ended in 1979, survivors have been reeling in their private hells of nightmares with little hope of closure or healing. The responses of their own broken down nation and the world at large has left the majority of survivors in a limbo between past and present that the Documentation Center of Cambodia and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia have begun to alleviate.

The various political players acting in response to the Cambodian genocide did little to initiate the immediate healing process of the survivors. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia began in December 1978, driving the Khmer Rouge (CPK) out and occupying Phnom Penh by January 7, 1979.[1] The People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) came into power backed by the Vietnamese government and army. Though the PRK claimed to be seeking the liberation of the oppressed Cambodians, it in fact aggravated divisions through out the 1980s and inflamed civil and border disputes with competing factions.[2] Politically, PRK portrayed the genocide through the lenses of Vietnamese heroes, wholly neglecting the needs of the Genocide’s survivors.

On January 8, 1979, Vietnamese photojournalists discovered the site of Tuol Sleng, the premier torture camp of the Cambodian Genocide that witnessed the interrogation, torture, and murder of at least fourteen thousand men and women.[3] Tuol Sleng, also referred to as S-21, was shut down as the Vietnamese sensed “the historical importance and the propaganda value of their discovery”; it was reopened by the end of the month to journalists from socialist countries in celebration of the installation of PRK.[4] Contrasting the horrific violence of the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) era with the “open” invitation of foreigners into PRK, the Vietnamese presented themselves as sympathetic

liberators in order to establish their presence as not only legitimate, but wholly welcome and necessary. By doing so, the PRK hoped to win the United Nations seat that continued to be held by the Khmer Rouge leadership for years to come.

In March 1979, Vietnamese colonel Mai Lam was put in charge of organizing and archiving the thousands of prison documents that had been left behind in Tuol Sleng and of turning Tuol Sleng into a genocide memorial. In her essay, Burcu Munyas says, “genocide memorialization refers to a society’s public display of its interpretation of the genocide,”[5] but this was not the Cambodian society’s interpretation as Mai Lam attempted to make people believe with Cambodian puppet curator and S-21 survivor Ung Pech. Tuol Sleng features all of the brutality and terror that it encompassed, but with little contextual information, making it into what Nancy Scheper-Hughes calls a “pornography of violence [which] subverts empathetic viewing.”[6] Instead of educating the Cambodian population about the atrocities they suffered and memorializing the victims respectfully, Mai Lam recreated their fear and terror by portraying the skulls, torture tools, and blood stains left behind by their murdered country men. The PRK kept alive the overwhelming terror Cambodian citizens felt towards the Khmer Rouge in their memorialization of their suffering in another attempt to legitimize their authority in the eyes of the populace.

Though the PRK claimed they were honoring the dead and protecting the living, they neglected to respect the cultural customs of Cambodia and, in effect, reinforced what Richard Rechtman labels the CPK’s rhetoric of extermination.[7] In Cambodia, it is customary to cremate the deceased so that they may reenter to the Buddhist cycle of rebirth; this liberation is denied when a person suffers a violent death and is not given proper rites. Rechtman explains the “survivor’s paradox” as the victims’ “interiorization” of this rhetoric and the hesitance to abandon their kin without a symbolic resting place. As a result, the dead continue to haunt the living as *khmocs*, or evil spirits.[8] The display of so many murdered in Tuol Sleng, in addition to the millions lost in mass graves, keeps these spirits roaming the countryside and torturing the daily lives and nightly dreams of survivors and the generations that follow.

Further cementing the present with the past, the Vietnamese implemented “Hate Day” on April 17, the anniversary of the Khmer Rouge’s evacuation of Phnom Penh. “Hate Day” translates in Khmer as “The Day to Remain Tied in Anger” and featured anti-Pol Pot demonstrations for school children, PRK officials’ condemnation of the DK, and survivor speeches about their horrific experiences.[9] Again, this propaganda did little to alleviate pain or find understanding, but instead opened existing wounds to pour salt on them and inflame antagonistic hatred. Fortunately, since the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991, the day evolved to become a day for remembrance for survivors and their families and serve as a time for healing.[10]

The Vietnamese may have forced the KR out temporarily, but their presence remained strong within Cambodian borders. International governments chose sides and civil war

raged to displace an additional half million Cambodians. During the CPK reign, about eighty percent of school teachers were murdered and nearly ninety percent of the country's schools had been destroyed; the education system had to be organized from scratch.[11] Political propaganda from both the CPK and PRK infiltrated education and "all sides manipulated history to instill in youth hatred of 'the other' as whomever and however each side defined it." [12] This ranks as perhaps one of the worst political responses to the Genocide which had already eliminated the intellectual and educated individuals in the first round of purges in 1975. Children were rarely taught to read and write and instead were trained to hate the enemy and fear invasion, perpetrating not only ignorance, fear and violence, but also poverty. After this, text books cycled through a steady deletion and reinsertion of historical information as its respective government manipulated facts as it saw fit, sometimes deleting the genocide altogether to encourage reconciliation.[13]

Even today's teachers, who sometimes have no more than a third grade education, are so poorly paid they demand bribes from their students at the start of each school day and sell the answers to exams. As a result of their families' poverty, only 11.5 percent of children who begin school (which is only seventy-five percent of all children) continue on to high school; diplomas are rarely respected as academic achievements.[14] Instead of rebuilding a society, political propaganda and internal corruption further degraded it and continue to hinder Cambodian individuals from establishing and maintaining any sort of personal identity or collective memory.

On the other hand, Tuol Sleng, Santebal- another torture camp, and the enormous volumes of documents found there and elsewhere catalyzed a commendable historical response to the Cambodian Genocide. The unearthing and documentation of historically accurate information is an integral part of survivor healing, validating the experience of the victims and affirming their innocence. From the beginning, PRK encouraged the academic study of the archival information found at Tuol Sleng and Santebal. Of course, their motivation in doing so was to earn legitimacy in the eyes of the international community as the saviors and leaders of Cambodia. David Hawk, a human rights activist, "assembled a daunting collection of materials from Tuol Sleng that provided ample evidence of the extrajudicial crimes of the DK regime" in the 1980s and, from 1991 through 1993, Cornell University created two sets of microfilms which cover 210 reels of film containing every confession found there.[15]

A very encouraging historical response has been the Cambodian Genocide Project's creation of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) which works to accurately document the history of Cambodia. Its objective is to educate the Cambodian population in order to propagate healing. DC-Cam works with two objectives to serve memory and justice, stating that "a society cannot know itself if it does not have an accurate memory of its own history." [16] In March 2007, the group's team leader Kamboly Dy completed [A History of Democratic Kampuchea](#) which the Cambodian Ministry of Education has officially approved as the historical text to be implemented in

public schools. This, of course, is a huge step in the process of establishing a collective memory and a future for Cambodia's children.

The undeterred documentation and international protection of prisoner confessions and history of Democratic Kampuchea has kept the truth of this period from disappearing. This scholarly commitment, which has catalogued approximately 155,000 pages of KR documents and six-thousand photographs,[17] aids in the healing of survivors who wish to see this period recognized for the horrific genocide that it was. For survivors, sharing their history not only affirms their own suffering, but also pays homage to the victims who were killed at the hands of the CPK. DC-Cam is a not-for-profit "independent and nonpartisan institute in Cambodia [that] disseminate[s] information on the Khmer Rouge regime based on impartial inquiry" and is operated entirely by Cambodians and aided by scholars of Europe, Asia, and the United States.[18] DC-Cam's integrity is greatly respected in the international community and at home which increases the reputability and validity of the information it presents.

Historical documentation also plays the most important role in what many genocide victims see as the most important condition for reconciliation: legal justice and punitive proceedings. The archive at Santebal "is considered the most valuable find of any set of documents from the DK period [which] record the regime's military and security activities throughout the country and may well connect individual top leaders to specific crimes." [19] In his interviews with survivors of the Rwandan Genocide, Kasaija Phillip Apuuli found that survivors saw punishment of the perpetrators as the most important means of establishing reconciliation.[20] These victims wanted the top authorities in charge during the genocides to ask for forgiveness, to be punished, and to be forgiven by the survivors themselves, as opposed to a government institution.[21]

In August 1979, the PRK conducted the trial of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, CPK's , prime minister and deputy prime minister for foreign affairs respectively. The PRK invited international lawyers, journalists, and dignitaries to sit in on and participate in the criminal proceedings. The five-day trial, which tried the defendants *in absentia*, included the testimonies of twenty-two victims and forty pages of well documented evidence that attested to the atrocities that the Khmer Rouge inflicted upon the Khmer people. Unfortunately for the Khmers, the United States and China refused to recognize the trials as anything more than a Vietnamese show to gain UN political support. While the trials systematically and elaborately proved the guilt of the KR leadership in crimes against humanity and genocide, the world acquitted them and essentially discredited the stories of the victims. During the CPK reign, the suffering and murders of the Khmer people were largely ignored by the international community due to a heavy veil of secrecy maintained by the CPK leadership. However, when the truth was uncovered but invariably unpunished due to greater political agendas, the Khmer people were left in pain and despair, undoubtedly losing faith in the judicial and government systems that were supposed to protect and defend them.

In October 2010, Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch and warden of Tuol Sleng, was brought to trial and found guilty for crimes against humanity and war crimes by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). Certainly a step in the right direction, the delay of legal proceedings nonetheless directly delayed the healing of Cambodian Genocide survivors. A culture of silent obedience, Cambodian survivors had been stuck between past and present for over thirty years knowing that their persecutors were living freely while they languished in nightmares, terror, civil war, and refugee camps. Even Duch's trial proved wanting and left many Cambodians unsatisfied with a mere 35 year imprisonment sentence, including time already served, which was then brought under reconsideration for an extended life sentence. The chamber issued no ruling on the domestic charges because of a failure to reach a supermajority decision on the expiration of the statute of limitations[22] which seems like a trivial and small minded approach considering the political dissent that waged throughout that twenty year period. Despite their initial reaction, the ECCC detailed its decision for the victims who began accepting the trial "as a meaningful step forward for their, and the nation's healing." [23]

Over 30,000 Cambodians attended at least a portion of the proceedings in person while the public radio and television broadcasting of the trial and hearing reached millions of Cambodians to successfully break through a national silence to begin an open dialogue between Cambodians about their shared experiences.[24] Most importantly, however, was that Duch's trial confirmed beyond all reasonable doubt that the atrocities of the KR actually did occur to the extent that they did, he took responsibility as an authority, he apologized for his crimes against humanity, and he confirmed the existence of the KR hierarchy and specific persons and their roles in the Cambodian genocide. Duch was the first authority figure to do so, creating an opportunity for affirmation and the most important step towards survivor healing.

In the case against Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, and Ieng Thirith- all members of the Khmer Rouge senior leadership- there are 3,993 civil party applicants that will be represented as a group. The Victim Support Section (VSS) has a "mandate to provide general information to victims (especially civil parties), assist and support civil parties in attending proceedings, undertake outreach activities [...] and to provide non-judicial remedies for victims" and there are steps being taken to provide greater reparations for victims.[25] However delayed, the legal responses by the ECCC provided the greatest leaps for survivor healing.

Literature, along with advocacy, is perhaps the only channel through which survivors actively seek their own healing. It is through the act of writing that many authors and poets begin to sort out and affirm their experiences. When nothing was being done in their defense, a few Cambodian writers took to the pen in order to bear witness to the atrocities inflicted on their people and affirm their innocence. Poets such as Ok Kork, Trung Huy Kim and Sath Bunrith share their pain and burden with their readers, acting as a conduit for their people and also asking for responses from other victims.[26]

Poetry written in the Cambodian meter and language serves to preserve the cultural literary tradition that was severely threatened with the purge of the genocides.

In their poetry, most authors are not merely seeking to establish the facts of the genocide, but are seeking the recognition of their human suffering. In “Cambodian People’s Lament,” Sath Bunrith speaks for his ancestors, “they should be pitied/ And deeply mourned,” in attempt to pay homage and respect to his lost countrymen and perhaps lay their souls to rest. These poets more importantly address the survivors who remain. Bunrith uses his poetry to advocate for his country, “Our people have suffered and suffered again/ Now it is the Vietnamese/ Who come to rob our country [...] Is there a place/ Where they can take shelter/ For even a short while? [...] the relief money for education/ is not enough.”[27] Through advocacy, victims find empowerment and purpose and attend to not only their own healing, but the healing of others.

Ok Kork developed a strong poetic voice that looks not only to work through his own pain to reach healing and understanding, but reaches out to other survivors. He is bearing witness to the loss of life, tradition, and hope, but he is also calling out to his country men to take responsibility; he is attempting to push life and vigor back into those who have been silenced, “The Cambodian nightmare must be stopped!/ We must put an end to this wickedness/ That is running over our children.”[28] Ok Kork uses his poetry as a way to grieve, cycling through many of the processes in print. He says, “I’m telling this story/Out of a rage/That never relents,”[29] and he expresses a deep emotion that refuses to be silenced by political intimidation. Ok Kork calls out for a shared grief, telling other survivors that they are not alone, that he feels their pain and they deserve to be angry. Towards the end of the poem, he appeals to this countrymen to speak for their lost ones, “You must try/ To help me think this through [...] Don’t let what has happened/ Just pass unnoticed/ By our brothers and sisters./ Please write it down/ So it can be told.” The victim is not writing solely for his own benefit, but to record what the pain of the Cambodians means in the hearts and souls of human beings. He invites other survivors to add to his lines, to join him in an open conversation that will allow the Khmer people to develop a collective narrative, something which no culture can survive without.

Loung Ung, author of “First They Killed My Father”, intimated in an email with George Chigas that it was through the act of writing and advocacy that she began healing. She wrote, “being an activist has healed me more than all my work with therapists and counselors. As an activist, I’m no longer invisible, weak, alone, powerless or voiceless. I think you understand the POWER in action against injustice. The KR tried to take my power, my voice and it took me years to find it again.” In her book, she was able to express through vivid imagery and open expression the personal story of her family and her own suffering. Loung Ung provided faces and hearts, aspirations and fears for the Genocide’s statistics and facts; she was able to reach a place of shared humanity on an international level. While the Khmer Institute saw her account decidedly fictitious and harmful to the historical accuracy of Cambodia’s genocide[30] Loung Ung found healing

through her testimony and provided a voice for those who could not raise their own. The Khmer Institute undoubtedly has a responsibility to portray the facts accurately and by responding to literary works they uphold their said duty. However, by sensationalizing their own response to her account and offering contradictory facts, the Khmer Institute not only discredits Luong Ung's account, but also the literature that they themselves deem credible. It is important that they remain unemotional and stay true to their mission in order for their credibility and the stories they support to remain in tact. Otherwise, the Khmer Institute threatens to detract from the healing of those they are attempting to help.

In order for a survivor to heal, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. It is important that the political, historical, legal, and literary responses to crimes against humanity are taken seriously by the domestic and international communities. While political dissention remains in Cambodia, the obedient silence that pervaded the lives of survivors has been broken. The story of the Cambodian Genocide has been historically recorded in accurate details and preserved in the archives of international libraries so that it can never rightfully be denied, and it has been expounded by the personal voices of survivors in preserving not only their own stories, but those of the nearly two million Cambodians killed. What is most important now is that the expediency of the legal proceedings and punishment of the remaining top officials for their crimes against humanity so that survivors may live in a world where evil is not tolerated.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Apuuli, Kasaija Phillip, "Journal of Genocide Research (Mar2009, Vol. 11 Issue 1)

Brinkley, J.. "Cambodia's Curse." *Foreign Affairs* 88.2 (2009): 111-122. ABI/INFORM Global, ProQuest. Web.

Chandler, David, Chandler, David, Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison (University of California Press, Ltd)

Chigas, George, Cambodia's Lament. Review of Asian Literature, 1991

Chigas, George, Class Lecture notes: "The Evidence" 2010

DC-Cam webpage dccam.org

Decision on the Defence Preliminary Objection Concerning the Statute of Limitations of Domestic Crimes, July 26, 2010 at [http://www.eccc.gov.kh/english/cabinet/courtDoc/637/20100726\\_Preliminary\\_Objection\\_Case\\_001\\_ENG\\_PUBLIC.pdf](http://www.eccc.gov.kh/english/cabinet/courtDoc/637/20100726_Preliminary_Objection_Case_001_ENG_PUBLIC.pdf)

Hor, Soneath, Sody Lay & Grantham Quinn, "First They Killed Her Sister: A Definitive

Analysis” at <http://www.khmcrinstitute.org/>  
Munya, Burcu, “Journal of Genocide Research” (Sep2008, Vol. 10 Issue 3)

Open Society Justice Initiative, “Recent Developments at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia: September 2010 Update” p. 2 at  
[http://www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/focus/international\\_justice/articles\\_publications/sub\\_listing](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/focus/international_justice/articles_publications/sub_listing)

Rechtman, Richard. "The Survivor's Paradox: Psychological Consequences of the Khmer Rouge Rhetoric of Extermination." *Anthropology & Medicine* 13.1 (2006): 1-11. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCO. Web. 10 Nov. 2010.

[1] Chandler, David, Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison (University of California Press, Ltd) p. 1

[2] Munyas, Burcu, “Journal of Genocide Research” (Sep2008, Vol. 10 Issue 3) p. 424

[3] Chandler, David, Chandler, David, Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison (University of California Press, Ltd) p. 6

[4] Ibid, p. 4

[5] Munyas, Burcu, “Journal of Genocide Research” (Sep2008, Vol. 10 Issue 3) p. 430

[6] Ibid.

[7] As referenced in Richard Rechtman’s article "The Survivor's Paradox: Psychological Consequences of the Khmer Rouge Rhetoric of Extermination." This refers to the language mass murderers use in order to dehumanize their victims and link the fate of survivors with “only that of dead bodies,” (p. 3)

[8] Ibid, p. 9.

[9] Chandler, David, Chandler, David, Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison (University of California Press, Ltd) p. 10

[10] Munya, Burcu, “Journal of Genocide Research” (Sep2008, Vol. 10 Issue 3) p. 431

[11] Brinkley, J.. “Cambodia’s Curse.” *Foreign Affairs* 88.2 (2009): 111-122. ABI/INFORM Global, ProQuest. Web.

[12] Munya, Burcu, “Journal of Genocide Research” (Sep2008, Vol. 10 Issue 3) p. 424

[13] Ibid.



- [14] Brinkley, J.. "Cambodia's Curse." *Foreign Affairs* 88.2 (2009): 111-122. ABI/INFORM Global, ProQuest. Web.
- [15] Chandler, David, Chandler, David, Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison (University of California Press, Ltd) p. 11
- [16] DC-Cam home page (dccam.org)
- [17] Ibid.
- [18] DC-Cam home page (dccam.org)
- [19] Chigas, George, Class Lecture notes: "The Evidence" 2010. p. 8
- [20] Apuuli, Kasaija Phillip, "Journal of Genocide Research; (Mar2009, Vol. 11 Issue 1) p. 130
- [21] Apuuli, Kasaija Phillip, "Journal of Genocide Research; (Mar2009, Vol. 11 Issue 1) p. 134
- [22] Decision on the Defence Preliminary Objection Concerning the Statute of Limitations of Domestic Crimes, July 26, 2010 at [http://www.eccc.gov.kh/english/cabinet/courtDoc/637/20100726 Preliminary Objecti on Case 001 ENG PUBLIC.pdf](http://www.eccc.gov.kh/english/cabinet/courtDoc/637/20100726_Preliminary_Objection_on_Case_001_ENG_PUBLIC.pdf)
- [23] Open Society Justice Initiative, "Recent Developments at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia: September 2010 Update" p. 2 at [http://www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/focus/international justice/articles publication s/sub\\_listing](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/focus/international_justice/articles_publication s/sub_listing)
- [24] Ibid, pp.1&7
- [25] Ibid, pp. 10,12&14
- [26] Chigas, George, Cambodia's Lament. Review of Asian Literature, 1991.
- [27] Bunrith, Sath, "Cambodian People's Lament" pp. 55-61.
- [28] Kork, Ok, "It's Time We Knew Ourselves," p. 27.
- [29] Kork, Ok, "Could We Ever Forget?" p. 41.
- [30] Hor, Soneath, Sody Lay & Grantham Quinn, "First They Killed Her Sister: A Definitive Analysis" at <http://www.khmcrinstitute.org/>