

ANLONG VENG PEACE CENTER

Reflecting Ideologies and Identities through Visit to Anlong Veng

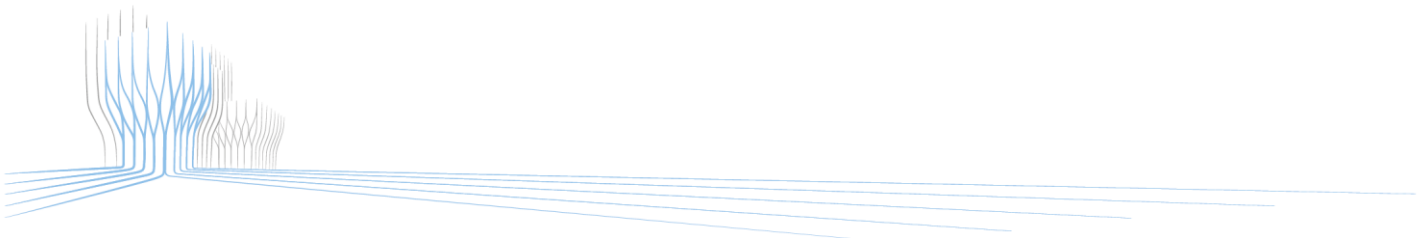
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Introduction



Group photos after a day-long presentation at a community learning center

Khmer Rouge's (KR) ideologies - conceived of as being one of the most mighty tools to fan the fire of its revolution from the early stage to its triumph - to some





extents persist, which caught the attention of students joining/participating in the Anlong Veng Peace Tour on July 19-22, 2016. The twelve students from Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) and Anlong Veng High School have found the hearts and souls of some former KR members/villagers permeated with these ideologies until today. Despite the undeniable dark side of the history, KR's ideology in Anlong Veng is not always discouraging given that it emphasized the importance of the history of the Khmer Empire during which so many finest temples had dotted its entire territory.

The July peace tour was organized in the hope of intensifying our bold efforts to minimize the sense of isolation, discrimination and prejudice against former KR members. Thus, each participant was carefully recruited through our consistent pre-tour surveys that will be examined in the below section. During the peace tour, the participants were thus under an intense one-day seminar, entailing a series of presentations and discussions. The presentations touched upon the history of KR in brief and of Anlong Veng community in a greater detail. Some key concepts of violence, peace, empathy, and reconciliation were explained in a lecture form followed by a discussion with references to Cambodia's historical contexts. As a part of the peace tour's goals to engage the participants in an inter-generational dialogue, they were provided with some key hints on how to do an empathetic listening. That was followed by a seminar-style discussion on how to produce their own questionnaires when talking to the local people. This session turned out to be fruitful as all of the participants had the opportunity to listen to the narratives of guest speakers during the training. The following sections examine the participants' prior views and knowledge that were used for their selection, the inter-generational dialogue with former KR members, and their reflections on the entire peace tour program.

Prior Perceptions on Khmer Rouge

Many youths reiterated their rare communication with former KR members, viewing Anlong Veng's inhabitants as communist hard-liners who were well indoctrinated to steadfastly follow the revolutionary guidelines of the KR. This resonates with the general prejudices many youths have against former KR members. It's evident that due to the participants' selection, their immediate reactions were that they felt scared of the KR members as they played their part in the past atrocities of the KR regime causing the death of 1.7 million people due to overwork, disease,

malnutrition and execution. Even worse, one participant described KR as “evil, brutal, intolerant and inhumane,” reasoning that “they killed their own people, they had no brain, and they had no Khmer blood.” Two participants believed that KR members were brainwashed to be extremists. The participants’ common view was that the KR identities were undeniably inseparable from the atrocious acts they committed. However, some of the participants made no prior judgement of the events, and instead viewed the peace tour to Anlong Veng as a valuable opportunity to understand any perceived motives that drove KR to the extremism.



A series of presentations for students

While blames were largely placed upon the KR rank and file, two participants shifted the emphasis to top echelons’ responsibilities and culpabilities and also drew ire at those behind the KR’s genocide. The pre-survey has shown that: “anger is directed at the senior KR leaders because they had the intention of letting the people die of unnatural causes.” It added that the command responsibility was largely to be blamed, even if the behind-

the-scene architects of the KR’s atrocities should be revealed. These participants assumed that more information on this would be significant in helping to explain the true nature of the KR’s tainted identity. Given the participant’s prior conceptions toward the KR, it’s vital to take into account their prompt feedbacks concerning their direct communication with the local villagers, many of whom were former KR members.

Inter-generational Dialogue: Ideology and Identity

As part of our key objectives to promote an inter-generational dialogue with and to understand the ideologies and identities of former KR members/supporters/followers, each participant had the opportunity to visit two villages of Anlong Veng district. They met in person with the local villagers and listened to their definitions of ideology and identity in relation to the KR.

As observed, the local villagers have warmly welcomed our participants at their respective homes and even voluntarily agreed to be interviewed about their personal experiences. In the course of the interviews, the participants mainly focused on the very first year that the interviewees joined, either voluntarily or forcefully, the revolution. Most of the interviews touched upon the chronological order of events that depicted the entire life of the interviewees.

Specifically, the participants sought to understand the local villagers' opinions on how to define ideology and identity regarding the KR history. In an interview



Students paying attention to a narrative by a local villager

with Sam Noeun, 45, of Anlong Veng district, ideology was defined as “a collection of ideas that make the people believe in it and follow it unconditionally.” In 1973, Noeun had no alternative but to join the revolution. His refusal would have caused trouble for his entire family, especially for his parents. As a soldier, he was sent to the frontline and served in the KR ranks until 1998 when Anlong Veng was reintegrated into the national folk. More or less, Noeun believed that ideology did play its vital role in propping up popular support for KR's cause. Noeun underlined that the regime's ideology was incorporated into the school curriculum and spread out through

propaganda campaigns and arts performances to cultivate the children's sense of patriotism. Prak Morn, who joined the KR revolution at the age of 14, agreed with Noeun's comments, but regarded this as the sense of extremism that enticed the people to join forces with the KR in the jungle. Noeun of Anlong Veng district said that it was this ideology that inspired her to sacrifice her life to the cause of the revolution. Morn, now 62, even admitted that the KR's ideology has influenced her thoughts in the

meantime. Chun Sophat, now 57, of Anlong Veng district believes that Morn's remark is undeniably true. Sophat, who served as a medic until early 1990s, reiterated that even though twenty years have gone by (starting from 1998), the support of the KR has not yet diminished. She thinks that ideology played a central role in this as the KR members were indoctrinated in the need to study their/Khmers



A local villager narrating her personal story through the KR period (1975-1979) and civil war (1979-1998)

history and geography which included to know and defend the territorial integrity unconditionally. In contrast, Sim Seng, now 64, of Anlong Veng district said she was forcefully conscripted into the KR army. As a soldier, she compared her life to a scarecrow. She said: "I don't know who I was and what I was doing. What I knew was to follow the superiors' order. It was like that I did not know my identity." The participants viewed these opinions as a good learning point, given that their understanding about KR's ideology has so far been missing/limited.

Reflecting the Dialogue

The participants found it very educational and experimental as their common feedbacks to the face-to-face dialogue with local villagers, most of whom were former KR members, have shown. They could hear the narratives directly from the villagers and reaffirm some corners of KR history. However, the extent to which they have learnt from the dialogue remained limited due to the fact that the local villagers were reluctant to speak out the entire truth. Both Chea Sovath, 21, and Pech Samnang, 23, third year student of Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) wrote that: “what I am most impressed is that the people are still afraid



Students visiting Ta Mok's museum

of revealing the truth. I could not realize whether they are pressurized or KR's ideology still held great sway over their thinking.” Ly Vouchnai, 24, from the same university, observed that the interviewee was partially open to the dialogue. Resonating with the first two students, Sot Soeun, 23, from the same university, recalled that: “I interview a man, whose wife sit nearby. He gives me some illogical narratives. He even tries to avoid addressing my questions directly. His wife always helps provide the answer.” Unlike Soeun, Vong Reaksa, 22, student of International Relations at a private university, depicts his interview as open and straightforward. Most participants found the dialogue important to observe the likelihood and daily life of the villagers. This might enable them to better understand their conducts that are, if only in part, influenced by the ideologies.

Conclusion

The KR's ideology and identity represented the most complex system of thoughts among the KR members, as the peace tour participants have observed. The



history has shown that KR ideology could gather the popular support for its movement's motives and later on facilitated the rule of the country in a dictatorial fashion. As a result, nearly two million lives have perished and the country was in disarray. KR ideology's ensuing influences and effects, as Noeun, Sophat, and Seng have revealed, are never easy to diminish. This is because the same ideology helped to fan the fire of patriotism and served as grounds for the core principle of territorial integrity which every citizen had to follow during KR rule (1975-1979). Many ex-KR soldiers, who were recruited to fight against Thailand's claim over the Preah Vihear temple in 2008 and the subsequent years, demonstrated their courage and readiness to sacrifice their life to defend the nation until today. Scholars even argued if the identity really changed from KR's ideology and today's patriotism.

The participants found it satisfactory that they could hear direct narratives of the villagers and get a glimpse of the explanations regarding KR's ideology and its impacts on their current daily life. Few participants, however, voiced their discontent with the reluctance and the minimum of openness in the story telling process. At the very least, the twelve participants succeeded in collecting twelve stories that they used for the monthly magazine "Searching for the Truth" and the local newspaper "Reaksmey Kampuchea." Those articles have reached out to a wider audience, both nationally and internationally.

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Donor: Robert Bosch Stiftung

Appendix I: List of the participants

No	Name	Age	Sex	University	Year
1	Vong Saoun	21	F	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	Year 3
2	Chea Sovath	21	F	RUPP	Year 3
3	So Thach	21	F	RUPP	Year 3
4	Ly Vuochnai	22	F	RUPP	Year 3
5	Pech Samnang	23	M	RUPP	Year 3
6	Sot Soeun	23	M	RUPP	Year 3



7	Kunavuth Kanhchana	19	F	RUPP	Year 2
8	Hun Keolydeth	20	F	RUPP	Year 2
9	Vong Chanreaksa	22	M	RUPP	Year 2
10	Thong Palina	22	F	RUPP	Year 3
11	Heng Kimlong	22	F	RUPP	Year 3
12	Sam Chanmony	22	F	RUPP	Year3