

DISCUSSION PAPER VI

History from Below: Recording Cham Muslims' Experiences under Democratic Kampuchea

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"Every old man that dies is a library that burns"
—African Proverb¹

Introduction

This paper focuses the process of conducting oral history of the Cham Muslim community; the way in which people tell stories, project activities, and challenges of the process. This paper depends not so much on the completeness or accurateness of memory, but rather on what people remember and what meanings they give to their memories. The memories of Cham Muslim survivors are constructed and reconstructed through the passage of time and their relationship to society.

Recording Cambodia's Cham Muslim oral history under Democratic Kampuchea (DK) came about for two reasons. Firstly, it is to promote the history from the below—from the people who experienced it, with special focus on marginalized group or those usually hidden from the national narrative. Secondly, it seeks to understand memory and its presentation of the community in a post-conflict society. The rationale is that although the official histories of the DK era is important in its own right, the "untold stories" of marginalized groups such as Cham Muslims help to elucidate the larger

¹ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 2005, p. ix.

truth of human experiences through its representation and interpretation of social relations, which develop across time.

Memory and narrative are interconnected. Narrative is the construct of memory and narratives in turn, help to maintain memories. Only through telling one's story can the memory be reconstructed and preserved. Further, the memories the narrators use to construct their stories are influenced by factors such as the interviewer's technique, the narrator's method of recalling their story, the listener-narrator relationships, and the surrounding environment. Thus oral histories reflect both the narrator's past and present relationships with persons and society.

Oral history is an important tool for building a more complete history of DK and developing Cham scholarship. Oral history can help to reformulate Cham identity and contribute to nation-building. As Alessandro Portelli, an oral history scholar, declares, the interview can enhance the authority and self-awareness of the narrator in recalling loss and regaining identity.² By hearing stories, it also increases our empathy towards the narrator. In addition, by revealing the truth- the narrator's truth, it may also help survivors feel a sense of closure, something that is conducive for reconciliation.

I. Background of Oral History and Project Implementation

Oral history is a discipline, methodology, and product. Oral history concerns human behavior and the way in which people deal with the past. It is a multi-disciplinary subject that draws upon different intellectual disciplines—including sociology, anthropology, psychology, and linguistics—to better understand the narratives of memory. As a methodology, oral history was first founded by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in the 1940s. Nevins recorded accounts of elite white men during World War II. Later on in the 1950s, it was developed by Paul Thomson, who recorded interviews with working class and people in the United Kingdom. In his research, the narrator was considered a living history, a repository of stories, events, and facts. Since then, oral history became widespread, spreading to scholars of various disciplines. As a product, oral history is a recorded interview or dialogue about past experiences or events that can be published or unpublished. Apart from scholars, it is also employed by museum curators, artists or media professionals to produce public histories that combine sound, image, and text.

A. From Questionnaires to Oral Interviews

DC-Cam launched the Cham Oral History project in 2005 with the consensus of Cham Muslim religious leaders and women. The project sought to document the experiences of Cham Muslim community under the Khmer Rouge regime. The project

² Alessandro Portelli. *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, p. 4.

serves several purposes. It promotes discussion and dialogue about DK history and contributes to Cham scholarship through verbal and written accounts of Cham Muslim survivors, and enhances the rights of women in public space through oral history program and outreach activities. The overall objectives are to preserve memory of the Cham Muslim community, to promote truth, justice, genocide education, and reconciliation, as well as enhance women's participation and roles in decision making.

From the outset in 2005, DC-Cam convened a meeting with 100 religious leaders who represent Cham Muslim community in Cambodia at its office in Phnom Penh. Three subsequent meetings with the rest of community religious leaders and women were also organized with respect to the oral history plan. All supported Cham documentation project and promised to provide further assistance. Thirty copies of questionnaire were distributed to each representative in order for them to give out to their members to fill out. About 140 survey completed were collected. Some are completely filled out, while some are truncated.

I relied on the list of hakim and mosques across the country that I acquired from the Highest Council for Islamic Religious Affairs in Cambodia (Mufti) when I conducted my fieldwork. This familiarized me with geographical locations where mosques and Cham Muslims are situated. Various methods were used to approach women. First, I conducted interviews with some women who joined the oral history meeting at the DC-Cam and other provinces in 2004, and then asked them to introduce other informants to me. Also, I asked hakim to recommend Cham Muslims who were able to share their stories.

Between 2004 and 2009, DC-Cam's project team conducted 500 interviews with Cham Muslim community members, including hakim (Islamic judges) and religious teachers, ordinary Cham Muslim people, women, and youth, among whom 386 interviews were transcribed into 9732 pages (103 interviews or 2659 pages were conducted and transcribed by me). I conducted 50 interviews with female Cham Muslim survivors and 53 interviews with male community leaders. These women shared with me old photos and other artifacts such as swords, plates, tray, old Kitab (Islamic religious books).etc they managed to preserve during the KR regime.

Prior to the field work, I was trained in research methods and acquired the skills to do research and interviews at the Summer Institute of Columbia Oral History Research Office.³ The knowledge and skill that I gained from the Summer Institute and ongoing training by Professor Ronald Grele, former president of American Oral History Association, and other well-known professors, enriched me with methods and approaches of doing oral history. Being aware of working with Khmer Rouge survivors, I attended training on primary and secondary trauma and self care strategy

³ <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/oral/about.html>

lectures by Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO), a leading NGO working in the field of psychology and mental problems among Cambodian people.

For this project, I used both a semi-structured and unstructured interview format, including topical outline, because these allow flexibility during the interview process. The former allows me to focus on particular subjects, but leaves room for my participants to provide particular meaning.⁴ The latter allows open-ended questions and empowers women to speak in their own voices broadly so the in-depth interview was achieved.⁵ In another version, with both formats, dynamic view and flexibility are constituted to embrace change that occurs during the interview. It is very important not to underestimate any change occurring in the fieldwork. Flexibility is the most important task. Although I approach my interviewees with the interview guide, in some cases, the interview shifted a bit from some specific topics because I made it more flexible and convenient for my interviewees to broadly express their thoughts. Some Cham Muslims started with the Khmer Rouge atrocities. Some talked about their life stories starting from their childhood to the present day, while others preferred recalling their missing family members at the beginning.

The interviews varied in length and carried unique focuses, and lasted from one hour to five hours. The average one is about two hours. All interviews were conducted in Khmer language, the official Cambodian language. All interviewees were provided with interviewer's background, the project, topics that I am interested in exploring in the work, and the importance of their participation in the project.

Oral history editing methods and ethnographic coding were used to code interview transcripts, field notes, and documents. The combined approach seeks to enrich historical scholarship with human experiences. Oral history, as scholars assert, is a modern research for preserving knowledge of historical events.⁶ First, I used editing methods to extract and refine interviewer's words from narrators, as Jones puts it, "blended voices,"⁷ in order to get pure narratives. As such, the conversion of verbatim transcript to a published manuscript is rigorous which requires careful listening and editing. Furthermore, Robert Emerson et al. provide a very insightful account on coding field notes, transcripts, and documents, ranging from asking questions to

⁴ Charlotte Bruck, "Qualitative Research methodology" *Journal of Family Therapy*. Blackwell Publishing. no. 27, 2005, p. 240.

⁵ Valerie Leigh Yow. *Recording Oral History*. 2005. pp. 8-11.

⁶ Willa K. Baum. *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977. p. 5.

⁷ Rebecca Jones. "Blended Voices: Crafting a Narrative from Oral History Interviews." *The Oral History Review*. Vol 31, no. 1 (Jan. 1, 2005), pp. 23-42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3675529>

selecting themes, and interpreting the emergence themes.⁸ This can be the coding of consistency and inconsistency of all interview transcripts and field notes.⁹

Most of the interviews were transcribed and filed in accordance with the DC-Cam cataloguing system with photos, field notes, and informant's contacts in locked cabinet. Some of the interviews have been written as stories and published in *Searching for the Truth* and other publications. These archives are available for public use which benefits researchers for their research purpose and reporter for their assignments, and other interested groups.

B. Connecting Youth with their Parents and Old Generation

The next program contributes to making oral history is essay contest. The purpose of the program is to engage youth with the project and strengthen their connection with their parents through oral history dialogue as well as promotes youth's writing. This program allows Cham Muslim youth to learn how to collect oral histories by starting from their parents and learning the lesson.

In March 2007, DC-Cam's Cham Muslim Oral History project invited 100 Cham Muslim youth from across the country to participate in an educational program consisting of visits to several genocide commemoration sites and the ECCC courtroom. The majority of these students were university students, whose age are above 18 years old. During the event, interviews were conducted to assess their views on the Khmer Rouge regime and other related issues such as genocide prevention and approach toward fostering reconciliation in Cambodia.

At Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center (also known as Choeung Ek Killing Fields), students saw visual reminders of the atrocities committed under the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) government. These included thousands of prisoners' photographs, images of mass graves, stained jail cells, and torture devices. The Oral History project leader gave an instruction and guideline to do oral history with their parents and answered every question the students had. In an effort to connect Cham youth to their parents, students were asked to interview one parent (either mother or father) about their experiences during the genocide and write about it in an essay. In the essay, students are also encouraged to express their own views on the KR regime. Sincerity, creativity, along with practical criterion of style and language were used to select the top ten essays. Each student/candidate was handed an informational package including a copy of *Searching for the Truth* magazine, an instruction and guideline of doing oral history,

⁸ Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. The University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 146-168.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 146-47.

a pen, an a notebook. The interviewing instructions and guidelines for students is included in the appendix.

After the first announcement and subsequent friendly reminders, Forty seven essays were submitted in the writing context, twenty-six from female students and twenty-one from male students of Kratie, Kampong Cham, Pursat, Kandal, Kampong Thom, Kampong Chhnang, and Kampot provinces and Phnom Penh, in which their essays were sent via local community leaders, religious teacher, their families and youth themselves.¹⁰ The top ten essays were selected according to the following criteria: (1) Sincerity, (2) style and language, (3) coherence of ideas and viewpoints on the Khmer Rouge, (4) creativity and thoughtfulness, and (5) grammar and spelling. In April 2008, the writers of the winning essays were given a special award in a small ceremony. A few essays were published in Searching for the Truth.

It is generally accepted that women (mothers) are the most effective ones who have passed their own experience or family experience onto their children because they are close to their kids. This is also found in the essays collected. Most of Cham essayists said they learn about the KR regime and family's experience from their mothers. Their fathers do not have good amount of time to share their experience with their kids. Taking on a role of a teller, women repeatedly tell their anecdotes and educate their children to be economical and do good.

The stories presented in the essays contain many parallels. The students wrote about large-scale evacuations and relocations, difficult working conditions, constant fear, scarcity of food, struggles to practice Islam, strains on family relationships, and executions. Beyond the experience of their parents, many students also wrote about their ideas of what constituted justice for the crimes of the Khmer Rouge and how genocide could be prevented in the future. To answer this, it is important to reflect through two samplings below:

Mr. Soth Naseath had a difficult time getting his mother to speak about her life during the genocide. After several attempts, his mother began to talk and also cry. As her tears flowed, she slowly started to describe her experiences to her son. Soth wrote:

In the end, I was able to encourage my mother to tell me in her own words what happened. Tears kept falling down her face and I greatly pitied her. I was also quite frustrated because I could not comprehend her enormous degree of pain. In the end,

¹⁰ Farina So, "Promoting Genocide Education and Reconciliation through Oral History: The Case of Cham Muslim Youth in Cambodia." Go to http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Public_Info/Promoting_Genocide_Education_and_Reconciliation_through_Oral_History.pdf

she agreed to disclose her past because she believed that teaching her children about the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge is important.

Soth's mother was arrested and put in jail during that period. Her alleged "crime" stemmed from her escape to the other side of a river in an attempt to find some food because she was starving. She was caught and immediately taken to prison without questioning. In prison, she was handcuffed and only given watery rice soup two times per day. She was also forced to do a variety of physically exhausting labor that she deemed unbearable. According to Soth's mother, dead bodies were transported out of the prison everyday. She believed that her turn would soon come. Several months later however, she was released from prison after the village chief testified that she was innocent.

Another student, Yakin, chose to write about her father's account. She said that: "it is hard to forget horrible experiences when you have experienced them directly yourself." Her father lost his entire family members to the genocide. Today he lives in the same village with the man who killed his brother. She believes that only through time passage and Islamic teachings could she help to mitigate his anger and suffering. She writes, He has never told us about this person, but I know that he is suffering inside. I hope that time and happiness in our family will help to relieve his pain. Perhaps it is better if this person comes forward and confesses in front of my father (maaf) because Islam teaches us to forgive those to admit their guilt. As for me, if I knew that person I might be angry with them at first, but later things would continue living a miserable life.¹¹

The essays also focused on the concepts of justice and reconciliation. Some youth defined justice as honesty and impartiality while others related it to equality before the law. Once justice is achieved, according to some, the journey toward reconciliation can begin. Others thought that once apologies were made, forgiveness would be possible and reconciliation between victim and perpetrator would also occur.

The writing competition reveals the importance of the oral history approach in two major ways: education and relationship building. As students listen to their parents tell them about the atrocious conditions under the Khmer Rouge regime, they do not only learn about the experiences of their parents, but they are also gaining a better understanding of their parent. Some of the students commented that writing down their parent's experiences was an important exercise for them because it gave them a greater appreciation of the difficulties of that era and a greater appreciation of their parents as well. One student from Kampong Thom province said, "prior to the writing

¹¹ She is now a mother of one child and used to become a volunteer for DC-Cam because of her father account and her curiosity about the Khmer Rouge regime.

contest, my parents had told me very little about what they experienced. Afterward, I realized how incredible their experiences were.” Tahir of Kampot province admits that he became more interested in the KR after he got involved in our program. It prompts him to search for KR documents and other related publications about the regime anywhere he reaches. At one point, he saw a few copies of “Searching for the Truth” magazine at one small surao (a small mosque) and picked them to read. The magazine resonates with his parent’s story and the essay writing. He kept asking for more documents to read to expand his knowledge. He said, “I want more documents to read because it is important to know why they kill people?” Through negotiation and dialogue between parent and child, a learning environment is created at home. Oral history becomes the vehicle which helps to connect the survivor generation with today’s youth. This connection is of great benefit in Cambodian society today.

This program has encountered some challenges from the beginning till the end because it is a new program. Most of the challenges point to time constraints and youth’s techniques in interviewing their parents, and the decision of the committee in selecting the top ten essays. But we overcame this through support and frequently answered youth’s questions. The team kept encouraging them to continue, not to give up, despite difficulties. We asked them to record their parent’s interviews through any kinds of recording materials or go visit them during their vacation. Also we extend more time to get their parents to talk and allow youth more time to write. In evaluating their stories, we include the most important parts and recognize all their hard work, but in order to promote their writing, we selected the top ten to be models.

Artifacts collection, Survivor’s stories and Cultural Preservation

Another way to promote memory of the community is through cultural preservation and memorial objects. Oral history project started to collect objects known as artifacts from the Cham Muslim community since 2005. The collection is important for several reasons: First, it rediscovers the truth; second, it triggers people’s memory to tell story with regard to the object; and third, it educates younger generation about the regime through the collected and displayed objects. Principally, one object has one story and that helps people reveal more stories and information.

The team has collected 2 plates, 2 swords, one tray, one old kitab and some old photos, and will continue to collect more. The sword was used for exhibition in Sweden and one collected survivor’s story was displayed in Sweden in 2006. In addition to the collected objects above, the team also collected about 100 survivors’ stories between 2004 and 2008. The stories are about their experience during the regime and the legacy of the KR.

Furthermore, cultural preservation and education, part of Oral History project, seeks to preserve old buildings and architectural remaining in Cham Muslim community,

including mosque, surao, Islamic school, tomb, former KR dining hall, and so forth will be preserved. Recently, the team selected two Cham Muslim communities as models for other communities in Cambodia to promote education, culture, and history in the communities to better their understanding on the KR and other subjects. The plan is put forward and will be implemented early next year.

II. Oral history as Genre and Interpretation

A. Interview Characteristic

Oral history interview is not only about story or account of narrator, but also embeds art of telling the narrator wishes to insert. As Portelli put it, oral history is a genre and genres in oral history because narrator expresses his/her own story using his/her specific language, but some time, mixed language, accent, and speed. Some Cham Muslim narrators speak Khmer with little Cham, while some Chvea narrator speak Khmer with little bahasa. For example, a Cham Muslim woman of Pursat province said when she found it hard to speak about emotional anecdotes, she used her Cham language to describe that part, which reflects her identity.

Some eloquently talk about their stories which are convincing. Some who talk about sad stories would even make people cry. Some even ask interviewer whether their narrative is acceptable. I remember a woman asked me at the beginning of her interview whether her speed is okay and her voice is acceptable. This notion signifies the art of story telling the interviewee would prefer.

In addition to this, layers of memory are also considered as part of genre. This refers to memory of multiple events throughout the passage of time. Memory, as previously stated, is important for people to recall their stories. But it is noticed that memory of the KR regime is influenced by memory of subsequent regimes, by which also affects the way people recall their story. Human memory is constructed and reconstructed as time goes by and is transformed as such. Nonetheless, this is not anomalous to everyone else living in one culture or another. And the question of whether or not people have pure memory of the KR regime is trivial. Most interviewees possess this kind of memory and narrate their story connecting with other subsequent events. Memory of trauma, however, I mean huge trauma such as the KR regime, is strongly remembered and embeds in people's heart, but sometimes hard to recall as it would bring about painful moment. And this requires time and encouragement to dig it out. Nonetheless, once they understand the power of their story, they start to talk more. Thus, narrative is drawn from many components from the art of telling to object and interviewer's technique.

B. Interpretation

Further, the interview is intended for a multi-faceted interpretation or consists of interpretive element of narrator. Interpretation embeds meaning making which

include facts and opinion about what happened and how the events impacted the lives of people. In another version, scholars see this as an effort of narrator in making sense of his/her own story. Oral historians provide that through interviews members of community have inscribed their experiences on the historical record and offered their own interpretation of history.

It is important to look at how interviewer perceives interviewee's narrative. The way in which interviewer understands and makes sense of narrator's story depends on both narrative and observation. First, understanding jargons and story of the interviewees inserts in his/her narrative; and second, understanding non-verbal actions are expressed in the course of the interview. It is noticeable that interviewee tries to connect his/her story with others. This meant that they not only talk about themselves alone but about others too—what they see and feel about others in the same event. Cham Muslim women usually talk about others but deep in their personal experience. Interviewees provide more how the event impacted them than why the event took place. Therefore, narrative embeds art of telling and multiple layers of memory are called into narrative, but the most salient one is memory of the KR and interviewee's interpretation.

III. Truth-Seeking Process or Truth Commission: Why Telling a Story is Important?

Does Recalling Trauma Become itself Re-traumatized?

While the answer to the first question is "Yes," the second question is still debatable. Generally, survivors, particularly victims of tragedy, are encouraged to speak out to reveal personal experience and reclaim the truth as to what they witness, how they respond to the event and how the event impacts them. Oral historians acknowledge that to some degree recalling traumatic experience brings along pain and emotions, but also a relief to narrator. Some interviewees shed tears or weep while narrating their emotional story, yet they provide that after all this moment, they feel an ease.

For instance, Sos Pheah, female religious teacher of Kampong Thom province, said that she usually seeks relief through her narrative while she shed her tears. This, however, happens easily unless there is an empathic listener to truly listen and acknowledge narrator's suffering. Because by not seriously listening and being flexible with interviewee's attitude meant it can re-traumatize interviewee. The narrator feels guilty or fear of denial when telling her past experience. Timah of Kandal province emphasizes that what she narrates is the truth as she lost her younger brother at Tuol Sleng prison during the KR time. She has called for a witness of her grievance and loss of her brother and her own suffering. However, she does not wish to hear any sign of denial from her listener. Likewise, a Khmer Krom woman who lost 19 family members to the KR recalled her story with overwhelmed emotions. Even though she feels guilty when revealing her truth, she still moves on with her emotional sounds to educate young generation about what happened.

But what happens if people do not speak out at all? During the KR time, freedom of speech was forbidden. People were not allowed to express their inner feelings. They were victimized by this policy having no possession on their destiny. Thus, speaking out would go against this fantasy and get out of victimization. Equally important, it is to document their experience for educational purpose about the KR period.

Oral history serves multiple functions. In certain projects, one of the very functions is to play a role in truth seeking process by soliciting oral testimonies from both victims and perpetrators. For instance, in South African Truth and Reconciliation commission oral testimonies were collected to serve as evidence in the process. By revealing the larger truth, it may bring healing to people. Further the collection of oral histories is an avenue of remaking a history of one nation, which seeks to understand social, political, religious, economic, cultural, and educational destruction and the reconstruction of the nation.

We, as oral historians, cannot rely on official records or public history alone to understand human experiences in a larger setting. In this regard, oral history is important element in documenting human rights abuses under a specific regime, for example DK. The project team also helps Cham Muslim file the complaints with the ECCC's Victim Support Section. Their oral testimonies and complaints are forwarded to the ECCC for both Cases 001 and 002. Thus, allowing people, including minority groups, to speak out and express their voices of an abusive regime is a foundation of Human Rights and Democracy.

In short, oral history is an approach in truth commission and documentation project to discover the truth from below, despite some challenges. This is a way of preserving memory and healing wounds at some levels. People are usually encouraged to speak out in order to regain their identity and educate young generations about traumatic event.

A. Oral History and Post-Violence Recovery

By examining the ongoing legacy of the past within the family and society, oral history creates a greater awareness of the need for transitional justice to acknowledge victims' dignity, building the rule of law, and establishing peaceful communities. Transitional justice refers to "a response to systematic policies and widespread violations of human rights"¹² that aims at dealing with past atrocities by bringing democracy, human right, and reparations for the victims. One of the core elements of transitional justice is gender equity or gender justice. Analyses of how this minority group's experience the KR regime contributes to finding the larger truth. This enables us to pursue reasonable justice for people from below.¹³

¹² <http://www.ictj.org/en/tj/> retrieved May 10, 2010. Retrieved May 10, 2010.

¹³ <http://www.ictj.org/en/tj/> retrieved May 10, 2010. Retrieved May 10 2010.

Asked what kind of justice, Cham Muslims provide that they need both retributive, which is possible through the ECCC, and restorative justice, various forms of reparation, to remedy what they have lost. They give the reason that it is rational that the KR leaders put on trial because it is in accordance with Islamic law. In Islam, Halimah emphasizes, “those who commit good receive good result, and those who commit bad will receive bad result.”¹⁴ I found this compatible with Buddhism’s law of karma. In addition, the most pursuing goal that women need from the tribunal is not only justice, but also truth about why did they [the KR] kill people.

As for moral justice, they refer to reparation. None of them mentioned financial compensation. Rather, they want mosques repaired or built, public and religious schools in their community, clinic and health care services, and free-of-charge health care clinics. They acknowledge that all of these cannot resurrect their lost loved ones or are not equivalent to what they lost, but they said that at least these may make them feel a relief.

To supplement the judicial and moral mechanism, they also emphasize that the KR history education and memory preservation are of great significance. In this regard, DC-Cam, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport, is working to fill in this gap. While this will become a formal genocide education,¹⁵ oral history project will be branded as an informal KR history education.¹⁶ This project has laid a concrete foundation for preserving the stories of hundreds of surviving Cham Muslims.

The recorded oral accounts of Cham Muslims’ experience under the KR is essential for the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) to support its genocide charge against the KR.¹⁷ In other words, while written evidence is limited, oral history may become an important piece of evidentiary information that adds weight to existing documents in a legal proceeding.¹⁸

¹⁴ She said that the KR committed big mistake that cannot be forgiven. She also wanted to bring lower KR cadre to face justice too because they were the ones who made her suffered.

¹⁵ See http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/Genocide_Education.htm

¹⁶ See http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Public_Info/Promoting_Genocide_Education_and_Reconciliation_through_Oral_History.pdf

¹⁷ The ECCC co-investigating judges charged the four surviving senior Khmer Rouge leaders: Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Ieng Thirith, and Khieu Samphan with genocide against the Vietnamese and Cham Muslims in December 2010. See <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2009121730288/National-news/genocide-charges-laid-at-krt.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.eccc.gov.kh/english/default.aspx>

IV. Impacts, Lesson learnt, and Challenges

Working with survivors of genocide, I have been struck by resilience and courage of many interviewees for revealing their true stories, and some other people who start to talk after they understand the power of their stories. These people try to move from victims to survivors and play a role as care takers of their children. They believe that educating their children through their narrative is a good way to teach them about the genocide. I also have observed that young people seek to learn about the KR regime and how their parents survived. Some youth turn their inappropriate behavior to be good children and become more grateful to their parents. Naseath confesses that through his essay, he committed to be a grateful child and not causing their parents worried about him anymore. The effort in assembling community and collective memory is a sign of recovery and remembering.

The community members support the project and send their reactions and requests to the team. Some of family tracing announcement requests have been submitted and published in Searching for the Truth, DC-Cam's monthly magazine. This helps us assess people's involvement in the project and their understanding on the KR regime. In addition, media coverage is a means of delivering message from Cham Muslim community and a possible means for evaluation.

We acknowledge that the effort in bringing the voices of Cham Muslim women, religious leaders, youth, and other ordinary Cham people to be incorporated in the entire history is both important and challenging. The latter owes to the issue of credible memory and accuracy in oral sources?

Oral sources have different credibility. Most written documents (meeting minutes, reports, etc.) depend on orality, but the credibility historians value seems to be judged based on time the orality is recorded. Whereas oral historians value it based on how essential the story is and sense making. Therefore, Portelli argues, "The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge. There are no 'false' oral sources. Once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria of philosophical criticism and factual verification which are required by all types of sources anyway, the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that 'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true' and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts."¹⁹

Narrators' voices contribute to building a more complete history and understanding human experience, and reformulating ethnic and social identity, and from that survivors can connect with each other. It is essential to make religious leaders, especially those from the conservative group to recognize women's suffering and

¹⁹ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds). *The Oral History Reader*, p. 37.

rights in revealing their story. Some religious leaders still have narrowed perceptions on women's involvement in the project and public space, though. Hence, continued effort is needed to get more women involved in the project and discuss their story widely with community leaders, next generation, and other people. Empowering women to speak out and making them confident in their work through oral interviews, discussion, and other outreach activities to achieve the goal.

Another theme we need to take note is cultural sensitivity. Working with minority groups, like Cham Muslim community, cultural awareness is important. Foremost is the daily prayer time, one of five obligatory tasks for Muslims. Many Cham Muslim interviewees are punctual on their prayer, so it is wise to pause the interview and let them pray. Then continue the interview after they are done with their ritual obligation. Second is jargon. Informants always use their language and words with which they are familiar. For the outsiders it is wise to probe their jargons and other words the interviewer is not clear. For instance, *chai* meant "dynasty" *Po* meant "god or goddess" *nabi*, "Prophet" "God's messenger," and other terms they use in their locales.

Conclusion

Oral history has both strengths and limitations. Some historians have argued that it is risky to use memory as a historical source because memory is fragmented. However, "memory" could be also reconstructed. They question oral sources such as interviews and narratives, stressing the issue of credibility and subjectivity. Also, they point out that the relationship between the interviewee and interviewer can affect what is remembered and narrated, and the interpretation and representation of people's lives may be affected by the subjectivity of the researcher/ interviewer. Further, oral history cannot tell us everything that happened and how it happened.²⁰ But we consider this as the uniqueness of oral history which helps us understand human experience and ways of how people cope with the past. The gap can be lessened through technique and rigorous implementation in conducting oral history.

Cham Muslims' narratives of their lives under the KR regime reflect fragmented, contested, and conflicted memories. Women could not recall full events and forgot some dates; sometimes they could not tell their stories in chronological order. Given the emotional pain one might experience when recalling traumatic experiences, women find it hard to recall because they fear of "reliving the past"²¹ or of "re-experiencing" it.²² To some extent, recalling the loss of family members makes

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 1-5.

²¹ Urvashi Butalia. *The Other Side of Silence*, 18.

²² Felman and Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, 67.

narrators feel guilty due to the choices they made – meaning that they question whether a particular choice caused the death of family members.

Apparently, each narrative becomes a very important piece of information for history – a tool to search for truth, justice, a way of preserving memory and educating the next generation. As Elizabeth Tonkin puts it, “[T]o tell a story is to take arms against the threat of time...the telling of a story preserves the teller from oblivion.”²³ These powerful stories are never completed and reconstructed through the passage of time. In other words, they are told over and over again in their community. Tonkin explains, “The present we live in is built from past events.”²⁴ The past is represented by people’s present thoughts and acts. KR atrocities left huge wounds. The memories of Cambodian survivors have been shaped and reshaped by their experiences of massive trauma and loss. “The massive trauma,” according to Antonius C.G.M Robben, “is more than the sum total of individual suffering because it ruptures social bonds, destroys group identity, undermines a sense of community, and entails cultural disorientation when taken-for-granted meanings become obsolete.”²⁵

Like other people, Cham Muslims still have many questions about why and how the Khmer Rouge killed people. Many are still searching for disappeared family members. Other Cham Muslim women are waiting to hear from their missing family members. Some Cham Muslim women still hope that missing family members are alive. For example, in Phnom Penh, Sarifah, 84, is still waiting for her two sons who disappeared during the regime and were never heard from them again. She hopes that they are still alive. She looks at their photos, which she managed to save from the KR. Her memory of her lost sons is reflected in the photos while narrating her story.

As a researcher and a member of what Susan Kaiser calls the “post-memory of terror generation,”²⁶ I believe that it is important to hear the stories of Cham Muslim survivors. I have noticed that these interviewees need an “empathic” listener to bear witness of their acts of remembering and the repossession of their losses and recognize their own suffering. Hence the role of listener is very important to make the narrator feel that they are not alone to bear their suffering, but at least they have

²³ Quoted in Elizabeth Tonkin. *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History*. (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1992), 3.

²⁴ Elizabeth Tonkin. *Narrating Our Pasts*, 9.

²⁵ Antonius C.G.M Robben, “How Traumatized Societies Remembers. The Aftermath of Argentina’s Dirty War” *Cultural Critique*. 59 (Winter 2005): 125.

²⁶ Susan Kaiser. *Postmemories of Terror: A New Generation Copes with the Legacy of the “Dirty War.”* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 2.

someone to bear witness of their suffering and to ease their pain. So the listener/interviewer takes responsibility to bear witness to the story that the narrator may not be able to carry alone, and this makes "repossession of the act of witnessing" possible. As Felman puts it, "this joint responsibility is the source of the reemerging truth."²⁷

Despite difficulties, Cham Muslims have resilience in coping with the past. We all need to maintain this important notion. These people have been trying to heal their wounds in various ways ranging from religious to non-religious. By encouraging them to talk and by listening carefully to their stories as well as letting them know the power of their stories, we may help them break the silence and their memories may escape distortion and oblivion. Therefore, effort needs to continue to educate younger generation for memory, educational and genocide prevention purposes, and building a stronger democracy in Cambodia.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

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Appendix

Instruction and Guideline for Oral History Dialogue:

A. Candidate's Demographic Information

- 1) Name, age, gender
- 2) Date of birth and Place of birth
- 3) Occupation, affiliation
- 4) Contact information

B. Informant's Information

- 1) Name, age, gender
- 2) Date of birth and Place of birth
- 3) Occupation
- 4) Contact Information

C. Approaching the informants and Questions

a. How to Approach your Informant?

- 1) Select either a father or a mother or one relative of your choice for your individual writing and encourage them to speak out
- 2) Before you begin your interview, please discuss general information and the power of story.
- 3) Be cautious about any trauma and emotional reaction occur you might encounter during the course of interview. Try to cope with it and help yourself (be sensitive, pause, and show your empathy).

D. Questions

a. For your informant

- 1) Please share with me your experience during the KR from the time you were evacuated to and daily life during the regime.
- 2) What is the most important event you encountered and what is your salient memory?
- 3) Have you heard about the Khmer Rouge tribunal?
- 4) Do you think the trial can deliver justice to you? Why?
- 5) What else should be done to help you heal?
- 6) What do you want to teach young generation about the regime?

b. For you

- 1) What is your reaction to the narrative?
- 2) How do you describe the KR regime?
- 3) What is justice meant to you?
- 4) What is reconciliation meant to you?
- 5) In your opinion, what are the ways to prevent genocide?
- 6) What is the importance of the ECCC?
- 7) What is your general opinion about this project?