

Reclaiming Cambodian History: The Case of the Documentation Center of Cambodia

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I. Introduction

In 1876, G. Janneau, a French scholar based in Saigon, published *Preah Ko* (Sacred Cow) and *Preah Keo* (Sacred Precious Stone), which narrates the tale of two statues located in the Khmer capital city of Lovek (pronounced Lung Vek), “a city so large that no horse could gallop around it.”¹ Inside the two “bellies” of the *Preah Ko and Preah Keo*, there were sacred books of solid gold that contained information from which the Khmer could study formulae or “learn about anything in the world.” According to the story, the Siamese King coveted the Khmer statues, and raised an army in 1594 to fight the Khmers for possession of these books of knowledge.² After relentless battles between the Siamese and the Khmer, the Siamese general ordered that their cannons be loaded with silver coins, which would be fired into the impenetrable barrier of bamboo forest that surrounded the Khmer capital city. As the general predicted, residents of Lovek greedily rushed into the forest to gather the coins, chopping down all the bamboo and destroying the city’s protective shield. When the Siamese army returned, they sacked Lovek and captured the sacred books. According to Janneau's recounting, the Siamese “were able to take the books which were hidden there and study their contents. For *this* reason they have become superior in

¹ Chandler, David. 1979. Folk Memories of the Decline of Angkor in Nineteenth-Century Cambodia: The Legend of the Leper King. *Journal of the Siam Society* 67.

² Now present day Thailand.

knowledge to the Cambodians, and for this reason the Cambodians are ignorant, and lack people to do what is necessary, unlike other countries” (emphasis added). Although once a story, *Preah Ko Preah Keo* has transformed into a ubiquitous legend in present day-Cambodia.³

While no one is sure if the legend existed in the Cambodian consciousness prior to Janneau’s publication,⁴ the French colonial regime propagated the story as part of its larger colonial discourse, which viewed Cambodians as “degenerate, barbaric, and savage” and in need of “saving.” The French repeatedly told Cambodians they were a “vanquished race” and used the legend to reinforce all that was lost and all that Khmers needed to gain. *Preah Ko Preah Keo* was still entrenched in the collective mindset twenty years after the French left Cambodia in 1954: In 1971, the prime minister of Cambodia even drew upon the legend to explain Cambodia’s diminished regional hegemony to the US ambassador. As Catherine Diamond recounted in her essay “Emptying the Sea,” the story presents a “fascinating self-portrayal of Cambodia’s sense of inferiority toward Thailand as well as the perception that the Thais stole Cambodian cultural patrimony; the greed of the people who betray their benefactors and bring destruction upon themselves; the impotence of the king; and the savior in the form of a cow that is linked to the sacred Nandi cow of the Brahmanic religion depicted at Angkor.”⁵

While Diamond may be correct, the story

³ This story is virtually told in all ele

⁴ Email with preeminent scholar Da

⁵ Catherine Diamond, “Emptying the *Journal*, 20: 2, (2003)147-178.



Banteay Chhmar Temple, constructed during the reign of Jayavarman VII in the 12th century, Banteay Meanchey province. Photo by Youk Chhang. (2008). Caption by Dacil Keo.

also demonstrates how colonialist tropes have continued to affect present-day Cambodian discourse, knowledge, and collective/self-perception, a continuation of colonialism albeit in different guises. But at the same time, the legend also visualizes the larger Cambodian phenomenon of erasure of *knowing* its past history: While the tale literally recounts “the sacred books of knowledge” leaving the land and never returning, the story’s origin, like so much of Cambodian history, is unknown. Four hundred years of “dark ages” shadow over the time between the Angkorian era and the Pol Pot era.⁶ As Southeast Asian historian Ben Kiernan states in “Recovering History and Justice in Cambodia” (2004) “Time and again, officials abandoned archives. Rulers erased rivals from the record. International leaders denied Cambodia’s history or blocked its documentation.”⁷ Despite half a millennium of civil conflict, including a recent history marred by three foreign occupations, seven regime changes, oppression and genocide, recent efforts in Cambodia strive to “Reclaim[sic] History”⁸ and account for its past.

This paper maps out of one those efforts in Cambodia through analyzing one archival site, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), located in Phnom

⁶ According to Dr. David Chandler, the preeminent Southeast Asian historian, Cambodian history is very difficult to study because no one knows what occurred prior to the Angkorian era as well as after the Angkorian era. Chandler states “No one knows for certain how long people have lived in what is now Cambodia, where they came from, or what languages they spoke before writing was introduced, using an Indian-style alphabet, around the third century Carbon-14 dates from a cave at Leaang Spean in northwestern Cambodia, however, suggest that people who knew how to make pots lived in the cave as early as 4200 BC.” After the Khmer empire declined in 1454, the period is the “least-recorded period of Cambodian history,” (77) and much scholarly literature rests on Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese archival sources precisely because the Khmer archives were either destroyed, never made, or cannot be found. Chandler, David. 2000. *A History of Cambodia*. Boulder: Westview.

⁷ Kiernan traces the past history of Cambodia, which he believes “presented the Khmer people from weighing their experiences in historical perspective.” He writes “Hindu, Buddhist, royalist, republican, colonial, and communist regimes came and went. Five relocations of the Khmer capital in as many centuries preceded the three foreign occupations and seven regime changes of the past sixty years alone....Later royal attempts to chronicle Cambodia’s fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were, as Michael Vickery has shown, ‘composed artificially’ from Thai court chronicles for lack of Khmer sources. Cambodian events stayed in shadow.”

⁸ “Reclaiming History” is the title of the Working Group on Genocide Education in Preah Vihear and will be discussed later in this essay.

Penh, Cambodia. As the largest repository of Khmer Rouge materials and documents, DC-Cam has made significant strides in recording, preserving, and sharing knowledge about the Khmer Rouge regime to promote both memory and justice. Currently holding over one million documents 6,000 photographs, and innumerable oral and visual testimonies in its archive, DC-Cam plays a pivotal role in shaping individual and collective memory of as well as history about the Khmer Rouge period. This paper will start from the premise that, like all archives, the DC-Cam archive is a site that is “always already” a product of power and authority.⁹ Yet the site is concomitantly a “space of translation” so the “subaltern” *can* speak. The latter distinction is crucial within the context of DC-Cam as a discussion on power and knowledge will only go so far to analyze an archival site emanating from traumatic circumstance.¹⁰

II. History of Khmer Rouge

Before delving into the history of the DC-Cam archive, it is first necessary to give an overview of the history DC-Cam holds. The Khmer Rouge genocide is pressed between a half millennium of intermittent civil conflict, ethnic violence, foreign invasion, colonialism, massive bombing campaigns, and imperialism. These tumultuous histories coupled with the recent-day prevalence of corruption, poverty, HIV, prostitution, land grabbing, human trafficking, and domestic, sexual, and physical violence continue to perpetuate the cycle of psychological violence on a culture “always already” rooted in traumatic circumstance.ⁱ

⁹ See T. Ballantyne, “Archive, discipline, state: Power and knowledge in South Asian historiography. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 3(2), 87-105. He quotes “...[documents] used by the historians of South Asians are not simply documents that allow us to access the colonial past, but rather were constitutive of the multiple inequalities of that past.” The Khmer Rouge not only has the powers of colonialism, but likewise the KR documents are also products of intrinsic power relations. Interestingly, the DC-Cam archive also meets the standards and is a part of the “International Standard for Describing Institutions with Archival Holdings.”

¹⁰ Many thanks to Dr. Kristine Stiles for pointing this out to me.

The Khmer Rouge was a communist regime inspired by Marxism and Leninism and had been fighting a civil war with the Cambodian government throughout the early 1970s. It also had origins linked to the Indochinese Communist Party. By 1973, the Khmer Rouge controlled 85% of the country, and on April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge finally captured the capital city Phnom Penh.¹¹ Most Cambodians rallied in the streets and welcomed the Khmer Rouge, perceiving their victory as an end to Cambodia's civil wars and US imperialism. However, over the next three days, the Khmer Rouge commanded and inevitably coerced all citizens to leave their homes and go to the countryside. Thousands died during the evacuation owing to exhaustion and many more were executed.¹²

For the next three years, eight months, and twenty-one days, the Khmer Rouge worked to transform Cambodia into an agrarian utopia as part of their "Four Year Plan." All people were put into forced labor camps, given inadequate food, and made to work twelve to fourteen hour days in the fields under the torrid sun. Concomitantly, the Khmer Rouge abolished currency, religion, education, and familial structure and executed perceived enemies of the state, which included, but was not limited to, doctors, teachers, lawyers, Buddhist monks, and anyone associated with the previous Lon Nol government.

While the Khmer Rouge carried out genocidal campaigns inside Cambodia, they were simultaneously involved in a raging war along the borders with Vietnam, which intensified in 1977. The Khmer Rouge captured and arrested male and female Vietnamese citizens and soldiers in Vietnam, along the border, and in Cambodia and sent them to Tuol Sleng to be executed, along with other 14,000 Khmer Rouge cadres they suspected as betrayers to the party. Finally, in January 1979, an estimated 150,000 Vietnamese troops successfully invaded

¹¹ Khamboly Dy, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*, p.12.

Cambodia, ousted the Khmer Rouge from power, and occupied the country until 1990. By the time the Khmer Rouge fell from power in early 1979, an estimated 1.7 million people—one quarter of Cambodia’s population—had died from disease, exhaustion, starvation, and execution. No one in Cambodia was left untouched by a genocide that killed almost one-fourth of the entire population.

After Vietnamese troops toppled the Khmer Rouge in January of 1979, Vietnam controlled Cambodia until 1989. From 1992 to 1995, the United Nations oversaw Cambodia’s first elections under UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) in 1993. Since 1993, Cambodia has continued to hold elections and has worked to rebuild its government institutions, economy, education system, and tourism industry.

Even though the Khmer Rouge was officially ousted in 1979, they continued to terrorize Cambodians both literally and psychologically. Retreating to the rural areas of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge continued to pursue their campaigns, fighting with soldiers alongside the borders and in the Cambodian military, breaking into people’s homes, throwing grenades into markets, and killing scores of Cambodians. The Khmer Rouge leaders finally defected to the Cambodian People’s Party in 1997, the governmental party still in control today.

III. Overview of DC-Cam Archive

One critical element in postwar nation building that was noticeably absent was the lack of legal accountability of Khmer Rouge leaders. Those who were responsible for the genocide of an estimated 1.4 to 2.2 million people have lived together with those who

¹² Cambodia Tribunal Monitor website: <http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/khmer-rouge-chronology.html>.

survived the regime.¹³ Many leaders, such as Pol Pot, died peacefully in his home, with no justice rendered. But there is some hope for change. In February 2006, a mixed international tribunal under the supervision of the United Nations was established to bring those leaders who are still alive to justice. The current genocide tribunal is monumental in history: Not only is it the first hybrid tribunal of its kind, but it also has potential to bring Khmer Rouge leaders to trial for crimes committed.

As much academic literature already emphasizes, the archive emanates power and steers politics, history, and memory.¹⁴ The sheer number of visitors who frequent DC-Cam demonstrates its importance in present day Cambodian life and the role that the center plays in helping regain and form identity. In 2009 alone, over 1800 individuals visited the archive center to conduct research, learn more about the Khmer Rouge, and trace family members who were “lost” after the regime.¹⁵ Concomitantly, DC-Cam conducts a number of outreach projects, mounted several visual exhibitions in both Phnom Penh and the provinces,

¹³ This number is an estimate but is based off a report on demographics prepared for the ECCC. See http://www.eccc.gov.kh/english/cabinet/courtDoc/741/D140_1_1_Public_Redacted_EN.PDF

¹⁴ For instance, scholars, such as Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, trace the archive’s role in the formation of knowledge, history, collective memory, and national identity as well as the power relations embedded in the archive itself. Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook state in “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” (2002) that archives “wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies.” Cook, Joan M. Schwartz and Terry. 2002. Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory. *Archival Science* 2: 1-19. A brief look at DC-Cam’s history reveals the role of power and politics, most notably the United States, to create and support the Cambodian archive. The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) was founded in Phnom Penh, Cambodia after the 103rd Congress of the United States passed the Cambodian Genocide Justice Act in 1994 as part the “Foreign Relations Authorization Act 2333” The Act committed the United States to collect data on crimes of genocide, look into the possibility of an international or national tribunal to bring Khmer Rouge leaders to justice, establish a State Department Office to oversee the project, and permit activities to be carried out through an independent contractor. The latter provided monetary funds to Yale University’s Cambodian Genocide Program (CGP), which was headed by historian Ben Kiernan, to “conduct research, training, and documentation on the Khmer Rouge regime.” A former Khmer Rouge survivor Youk Chhang worked under Kiernan as the only “in-house” researcher in Cambodia.... In 1997, Chhang broke from the CGP in 1997 and established DC-Cam in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, serving as the Executive Director since its inception. Schwartz writes, “archives are established by the powerful to protect or enhance their position in society.” The legislation from which DC-Cam was born confirms Schwartz’s observations.

¹⁵ DC-Cam Annual Report 2009 <http://www.dccam.org/About/Annual/Annual.htm>

conducted oral history projects, produced many films, led Cambodian student tours to Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, and studied and documented the psychological effects of the Khmer Rouge. Through its own publishing house, DC-Cam distributes a monthly magazine *Searching for the Truth*, which contains survivor stories, academic articles, information relating to the ECCC, and other pertinent information on justice. Furthermore, DC-Cam has published and written over 20 books relating to testimonies of guards and prisoners of S-21, the persecution and rebellion of Cham Muslims, and the lives of victims of the Khmer Rouge.¹⁶ In total, the Center does not passively expect the Cambodians to seek out the archive's information (as many Cambodians do not have the means to travel to Phnom Penh), but rather actively pursues outreach efforts through its Center's staff, whom are constantly in the villages of Cambodia distributing material and speaking with survivors.¹⁷

Perhaps most monumentally, the DC-Cam Archive has already played a role in the establishment of the international tribunals¹⁸, the joint United Nations and Cambodian court to try former senior Khmer Rouge leaders who are still alive. A memorandum from the United Nations, A/59/432 dated October 12, 2004 admittedly acknowledges DC-Cam's

¹⁶ Documentation Center of Cambodia website: <http://www.dccam.org/Publication/Monographs/Monographs.htm>.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive list of all of DC-Cam's project visit <http://www.dccam.org/Projects/> as there are too many to list here. In my time spent as a researcher at DC-Cam, there was never a day in the office where one team (usually about 5-10 staff members) was not out in the field.

¹⁸ See Thomas Hammerberg, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on Human Rights in Cambodia, "Cambodia: Presentation to the UN Commission on Human Rights," 22 April 1999. He writes: "With the blessing of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General appointed a Group of Expert to evaluate the existing evidence in order to determine the nature of the crimes committed by Khmer Rouge leaders and to explore legal options for bring them to justice before an international or national jurisdiction. Last February, the Group reported that sufficient evidence did exist to justify legal proceedings against Khmer Rouge leaders." On November 14, 1998, The Group of Experts visits Cambodia and makes a specific trip to DC-Cam to assess the evidence at the center. They also meet with government officials and visit the National Archives and Tuol Sleng Archives. Three months later in February 18, 1999, the Group recommends the creation of a tribunal in "The Report of the Group of Experts for Cambodia pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 52/135." I highly suspect that the DC-Cam Archive played a large role in the Group's decision seeing that their decision was reached three months after their visit—a trial cannot occur without evidence. For a detailed timeline see <http://www.dccam.org/Archives/Chronology/Chronology.htm>

significance in the ongoing tribunals. The Memo reads:

It is expected that the Chambers will rely heavily on documentary evidence. Some 200,000 pages of documentary evidence are expected to be examined. The *bulk* of that documentation is held by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, an NGO dedicated to research and preservation of documentation on crimes perpetrated during the period of Democratic Kampuchea (my emphasis).¹⁹

Likewise, the DC-Cam archive also plays a major role in explaining the tribunal and its verdicts to a population, “making sense” of more dense legal terminology.²⁰

Recognizing DC-Cam as a forum to facilitate discussion of the voices of the “subaltern” is crucial to Cambodia, and must not be ignored. Even though power structures continue to exert its influences on the archival site, knowledge, and memory, the country and its citizens continue to grapple with and work through enormous traumas of colonialism, conflict, and genocide.²¹

IV. Veil of Silence

Prior to the establishment of the DC-Cam archive, many survivors did not talk about the Khmer Rouge. This section will briefly describe the silence that pervaded the government, the international community, and the survivors throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and the veil of silence that has been lifted through the outreach efforts of DC-Cam.

Between 1991, when Cambodia gained autonomy from Vietnam, and before DC-Cam was founded, the Cambodian government pursued national policies of “forced amnesia”

¹⁹ United Nations, A/59/432 dated October 12, 2004

²⁰ See DC-Cam’s exhibition on the Duch Verdict: Khmer Rouge Case Trial 001.

²¹ Some ethnocentric critics would argue that “not all [Cambodians] want to speak” about the Khmer Rouge, and I would agree with them. While I am not privileging speaking over silence for all Cambodians, I am suggesting that many survivors who wanted to speak in the past felt they could not speak. This is a crucial distinction as the DC-Cam archive and outreach projects do foster a “safe” place for those who do want to speak to be heard.

regarding the Khmer Rouge.²² Prime Minister Hun Sen enjoined people at a press conference in 1998 and encouraged all Cambodians to “dig a hole and bury the past in it.” For the Prime Minister, who was a former lower level Khmer Rouge soldier, forgetting was the best way to move on from and reconcile with Cambodia’s “dark past.” And that is what Cambodia did: Prior to the advent of DC-Cam, television, newspapers, and other media seldom revisited the Khmer Rouge period.

Yet, Hun Sen’s government was not the only government that supported policies of forced amnesia. Rather, the international community had already spent the last twenty years in silence about the Khmer Rouge regime. Not only did the UN General Assembly in 1989 decline to recognize Khmer Rouge perpetrators but they also barely mentioned “the universally condemned policies and practices of recent past.”²³ Even during the UN peace keeping elections in Cambodia in 1991-1993, the UN declared that Pol Pot would “enjoy the same rights, freedoms, and opportunities to participate in the electoral process” as others.

The government’s policies of “forced silencing” are not the only reasons why many Cambodians’ did not speak about their pasts. Rather, “silencing” is entrenched in the Cambodian psyche. As a country deeply rooted in Theravada Buddhism, many Cambodians believe that suffering is a result of past bad karma and that pain must be internalized in order to reach Enlightenment. As a result, many Cambodian Khmer Rouge survivors direct their blame inward and rather than “loosing face” chose silencing over speaking. Devon Hinton, a psychiatrist at Harvard University who specializes in Cambodian refugee trauma, identifies several somatic phrases Cambodians use to express the desire to “store away the

²² David Chandler, Chandler, David. 2008. Cambodia Deals with Its Past: Collective Demonisation and Induced Amnesia. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 9, no. 2-3: 355-369.

²³ Kiernan, 3.

memory of events” that anger or upset them.²⁴ According to Hinton, Cambodians “sometimes say that a person takes such anger (or a grudge) and ‘hides it in the body’ (*leak tuk knong klourn*), puts (or keeps) it in the head’ (*tuk knong khuor kball*) or ‘buries (or hides it) in the heart’ (*bangkop/leak knong chett*).²⁵ However, as Hinton explains Cambodians may try to repress their anger, but they never forget.²⁶

Additionally, Dr. Chhim, Director of the Transcultural Psychology Organization in Phnom Penh, Cambodia noted that survival mechanisms Cambodians learned from the Khmer Rouge regime permeate into today’s Cambodian society. Chhim, pointing to the concept of *dam doem koh*, or “keep your mouth shut,” said that Cambodians became “mute” in order to survive. While silence was internalized during the Khmer Rouge, it also affected the culture after the Khmer Rouge, especially when one considers that the Cambodian genocide did not for the most part kill along ethnic or religious lines. Rather, they killed each other in a massive and complex patricide, matricide, fratricide, sororicide, infanticide, uxoricide, and siblicide. Khatharya Um, a professor of political science at the University of California at Berkeley, states that “auto-genocide is particularly disorientating because the perpetrators “look like you; they are you.”²⁷

The innocent smiles, wide-eyed curiosity, and general openness are still there. But at a deeper level lie the scars. The distrust is unconcealed. It is often in the perfected manner of evading questions, and in the eyes -- eyes that betray the loss of innocence. They have seen too many horrors, lived too many horrors. Khmers have said of this innocence: “like freshly

²⁴ Hinton, Devon, Khin Um, and Phalnarith Ba. 2001. A Unique Panic-Disorder Presentation among Khmer Refugees: The Sore Neck Syndrome. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 25, no. 1: 297-316.

²⁵ Similarly, another Siem Reap prison survivor speaks of “*pel dael roeung chop kor chop hoeuy*,” or (when the story is finished, we always forget it), which Cambodian translator Laska Sophal explains is an aspect in Cambodian culture where Cambodians never want to remind themselves of the bad stories or experiences.

²⁶ Lim, Hinton’s former researcher and a former soldier, recalls “Cambodians never forget—they remember things forever.”

²⁷ Khathayra Um, “Refractions from Home: Exile, Memory, and Diasporic Longing,” *Expressions of Cambodia*.

worsted cotton; once tarnished, it can never be completely bleached.²⁸

Chath Piersath, a Cambodian-American artist who has relocated back to Cambodia, visually represents the problem of silence, and likewise the lack of trust, in Cambodian society in paintings that depict intricate systems of lines connecting Cambodians to one another. Piersath explained that these lifelines symbolize his desire, yet inability, for victims and perpetrators “to feel safe about retelling their story.”²⁹ Piersath, who was a child during the Khmer Rouge, concluded, “I want to build hope. I don’t want Cambodians to feel afraid to talk.”³⁰ These aspects of silencing and fear become more compelling in light of the fact that perpetrators and victims live side-by-side in the villages, and as a result, many Cambodians are afraid to speak about the Khmer Rouge to strangers and even in their own family.³¹

The government’s policies of forced amnesia coupled with a culture “always already” rooted in silencing summons a situation where the “subaltern” did not want to speak, felt like they could not speak, or were speaking but they were not being heard. Sum Rithy, a former prisoner in “Thom Prison” in Siem Reap, Cambodia, exemplifies the latter case. On June 17, 1979, Rithy filed a complaint about his experiences during the Khmer Rouge to the 1979 “People’s Revolutionary Tribunal,” a court the new Vietnamese-backed government established to try Pol Pot and Ieng Sary for crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge.

²⁸ Khathayra Um, “Refractions from Home: Exile, Memory, and Diasporic Longing,” *Expressions of Cambodia* (2002) New Haven: Yale Univ Press.

²⁹ Chath Piersath interview with the author, Phnom Penh, November 24, 2007.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ During my interviews with survivors of the Khmer Rouge, I have come across many instances where Cambodians stop speaking. For instance, I spent many days at Phana’s house, a fifty-five year old Cambodian woman and Khmer Rouge survivor. We developed a strong relationship with each other—her son was one of my dear friends in Cambodia. When, after almost a year of knowing her, she began telling me about the Khmer Rouge, but stopped short when she was explaining her experiences with the Khmer Rouge perpetrators and the

Hailed as a “show trial” the PRT lasted one week and convicted Pol Pot and Ieng Saray *in absentia* of genocide. Rithy even acknowledges that the court did not validate his claims, candidly stating, “even with the 1979 court, they did not *hear* the complaint that I sent to them” (my emphasis).³² For the next twenty-five years, Rithy rarely talked at all about his experiences until a staff member, Sophearith Chhoung, at DC-Cam approached him in 2003 while collecting data for a study on trauma in Cambodia. It was then Rithy began again to testify, speaking, painting, and writing about his experiences. But this time he was heard.

DC-Cam serves an important role in enabling Cambodians to reclaim their history and know their pasts. The documents contained within the DC-Cam archive bear witness to the tragic events that have befallen Cambodia, allowing them to seek their own reconciliation and speak about their pasts. As it opens a door for speech to ensue, it does so through legitimating crimes committed as the 600,000 documents it contains “proves” genocide did occur. This is precisely one of the most important aspects—in any society—emanating from trauma: to legitimate and bear witness to past traumas precisely because the victim did not fully bear witness to the events herself as trauma is precisely an experience that dismantles one’s capacity to witness, remember, know, and assimilate the traumatic experience in a normal cognitive function.

As psychiatrists Cohen and Kinston argue in “Trauma and Repression,” (1985) “such events are lived through but not experienced as part of the self that is, as elements suitable for the wish-organized construction and maintenance of an effective personality. If survived and whether it occurs first during infancy, childhood, or adulthood, the traumatic state

role of King Sihanouk. I didn’t press her to go further out of respect. She may have stopped speaking because the story was too hard or she did not want to disrespect the former King.

³² Interview with Sum Rithy and other Siem Reap Prisoners with the author. 2009.

results in *an absence of structure* and representable experience in a region of the self...(emphasis added)"³³ DC-Cam provides this structure, this construction for memory to ensue. As Michael S. Roth states, "History becomes that place to which one turns for continuity, stability, and the possibility of acting in a meaningful, that is, in a non arbitrary way. Without nature or a god to guide us, a *sens de l'histoire* can legitimate an identity as well as program for change."³⁴ This is a crucial aspect to remember in societies that come out of massive traumatic experience. In the case of Cambodia, with a historical legacy that is unknown and already with gaps, a reconstruction of a history to stand in for that which is absent is even more imperative.



Classical dance: Master Chea Samy adjusting the neck position of her student. Master Chea is credited with reviving Khmer classical dance in Cambodia after the fall of The Khmer Rouge. At age six, she trained in classical dance at the Royal Palace and at 30 she was a teacher for the Royal Palace dance troop. At age 56, Master Chea endured hard labor like most Cambodians when the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975. Master Chea survived the period by hiding her identity as a palace dancer. She was one of the few dancer masters to survive. She passed away in 1994 and the age of 75, leaving behind a powerful legacy. Caption by Dacil Keo. Source: Documentation Center of Cambodia Archives.

The next section will explore DC-Cam's Genocide Education Project, looking not necessarily to the power structures involved, but rather the ways the establishment of a history enables testimony to ensue.

Genocide Education: A Case Study

³³ Quoted in Dor Laub and S Lee "Thanatos and Massive Psychic Trauma: The Impact of the Death Instinct on Knowing, Remembering and Forgetting," *Journal of American Psychiatry* 2003 Spring 51(2): 433-64.

³⁴ Roth, Michael S. 1995. *The Ironist's Cage*. New York Columbia Univ. Press.

In April 2009, DC-Cam signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Cambodian Ministry of Education. The document grants DC-Cam with the sole rights to train history, morality, and literature teachers and university professors on Democratic Kampuchea history; improve teaching skills and knowledge base of the history of Democratic Kampuchea; ensure the effectiveness of the training process; and perhaps most importantly, integrate Khamboly Dy's textbook and Teacher Guidebook into Cambodian schools grades nine through twelve as well as all universities.³⁵ By 2013, all Cambodian schools and universities will teach history on the Khmer Rouge, using their self-published book *A History of Democratic Kampuchea*, authored by Khamboly Dy, a staff member at DC-Cam. Of course, this textbook, like the DC-Cam archive, will have massive implications in shaping collective and individual memory of the period, and it is already doing so.³⁶ Yet in a country in which this history is not known and not even believed,³⁷ there are serious benefits in the education project despite the

³⁵ http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/Genocide_Education.htm The document is written in Khmer, but the document was translated to me in Summer 2009 in order to author a Final Consultant Report on the first stage of the Genocide Education Project. The English translation can be found on page 2. See Sarah Jones Dickens, "Report on National Teacher Training for Lower and Upper Secondary Schools of Cambodia June 29, 2009 to July 7, 2009" http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/Report_on_National_Teacher_Training.htm

³⁶ See Sarah Jones Dickens, "Final Project Report on Provincial Teacher Training" www.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/Report_on_Provincial_Training.htm and Genocide Education Project The Teaching of "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)" December 2010. Training for University Professors across Cambodia. The Cambodian government tasked DC-Cam with the responsibilities to train both high school (1,700 high school) and professor of history until 2013.

In "Collective Memory from a Psychological Perspective" (2009), Alin Coman et. al. offer a psychological perspective on how conversations transform individual isolated memories into collective memories. In an attempt to fill a void in psychologically literature on collective memory, Coman et al. analyzed empirical data collected from small groups on the role of "selective remembering," "induced forgetting," "social contagion," and "memory implantation" on individual memory. Of particular interest in the essay were the effects of "taboo" subjects on collective memory. They write, "Community members will come to remember—and forget—the world in comparable ways, even if what they individually remember involved different experiences. Their personal memories of war, albeit, by necessity, different memories, will come to resemble each other." This is important to note as history privileges certain information over others and will undoubtedly screen or ward off memories that do not fit its bill as it concomitantly will reinforce those that do.

³⁷ Following suit with the "forced amnesia" the prime minister handed down, Cambodian school curriculum also followed. In current high school textbooks, there are only two lines written about the sanguinary regime in a ninth grade history textbook from 1991, which is still in use today. No university courses currently offer history about this period. As history tells the schoolchildren:

power structures, the privileging of certain memories over others, and the neo-colonial influences of such histories encompassed in the project.

While no conclusive evidence or reports have been documented, it is likely that the Cambodian education will legitimate survivors' traumas. Currently two lines are dedicated to the regime in high school textbooks, and as a result, many present-day Cambodian students either believe the claims against the Khmer Rouge are either blown out of proportion or are altogether false. Som Borath, a Cambodian history teacher in Bantaey Meanchey, commented in 2010 "a [previous] student [of mine] who was born in 1979 didn't even believe that the Khmer Rouge was true." Not only do comments such as these speak to a hole in the educational system, but also speak to the children's denial of their parents' traumas, which is a pervasive problem in Cambodia today. According to Cambodian psychiatrist Dr. Chhim, as a result of *not believing*, the children delegitimize their parents' experiences, further perpetuating the cycle of trauma albeit in different means.³⁸

Not only does a constructed history afford survivors legitimization of the past, but it also delineates a framework through which survivors can form their own testimony. Maurice Halbwachs in *Collective Memory* emphasizes the importance of collective memory in sustaining individual memory. Halbwachs states, "the individual memory, in order to corroborate and make precise and even to cover the gaps in its remembrances, relies upon, relocates itself within, momentarily merges with, the collective memory."³⁹ The Genocide

From April 25 to April 27, 1975, the Khmer Rouge leaders held a special general assembly in order to form a new Constitution and renamed the country 'Democratic Kampuchea'. A new government of the DK, led by Pol Pot, came into existence, following which the massacre of Khmer citizens began.

³⁸ Interview with Dr. Chhim and the author. October 29, 2009.

³⁹ Halbwachs, 51.

Education Project afforded survivors with this “collective memory” through the textbook. For instance, throughout a teacher training process in November–December 2009, teachers would share their own pasts when they conducted mock lessons to their peers, augmenting the lesson plan through interjecting their own experiences as it related to the textbook. Furthermore, the Genocide Education Project allowed survivors to testify in a safe place and to each other. This was especially crucial given the veil of silence coupled with the insurmountable fear that pervades Cambodian society. Often times, survivors would testify to each other, unmasked, volunteering their experiences to the collective group.⁴⁰ As Dori Laub writes, “The victims of oppression, slavery, and torture are not merely seeking visibility and recognition, but they are also seeking witnesses to horror beyond recognition.”⁴¹ The Project provided these survivors with the collective memory and the group-as-witness, arguably crucial elements for individual recovery and reconciliation.

⁴⁰ There were a few other events worth noting. First, Khamboly Dy, the author of the textbook, asked volunteers to come up to the board and write down their memories of the Khmer Rouge as part of a “mock lesson” plan. Teachers who volunteered came up to the board and one-by-one wrote down a memory from the Khmer Rouge to their collective witness, the classroom. It was a powerful session of testimony; the room was silent as some, if not many, Cambodian teachers intently watched their peers. Throughout many history lessons, teachers often interrupted their teaching of the historical narrative with experiences from their own traumatic pasts. For instance, in the Battambang regional training center in which I attended, Neang Yin, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge, explained to participants regarding the Four Year plan and then interjected her own moving testimony to the group.

Second, the teachers as part of their mock lesson plans were also asked to write a poem or a song about honoring the spirit of the dead. Two women out of the forty teachers volunteered to share their poem aloud. Nguon Sophal, a teacher from Battambang, sang her poem *The Spirit of the Heart of Khmer After January 7, 1979* to the group. Again, the room was silent as she sang:

All Khmer children, male and female, please remember this real history.
The Khmer people used to live in so much pain, so much suffering, which cannot be stated into words
The Khmers fell into the pits, the deep valleys because of the betrayer
Pol Pot followed totalitarianism and made the Khmer race almost extinct
On January 7, the front is gone, emerging with glory, we joined each other, solidarity, we got together, in solidarity
We combined our energy and liberated the land
Cambodian people, male and female, were free from all suffering, thanks to the front
We cannot forget January 7; we have greatest indebtedness and gratitude
We are strongly determined to unite together as one and rebuild our country.
So that the country will never have a tragedy like that again
and we can build a country of freedom and happiness for every human.

At the same time, the DC-Cam education project is not only providing a forum for survivors to speak, but also to know their own pasts. Many Khmer Rouge survivors either cannot remember their experiences fully or do not have knowledge about the Khmer Rouge outside their personal and relatives' experiences. A teacher's comment underscores this crucial aspect of the training. She was around twenty years old during the Khmer Rouge regime, but did not, until this day, know the severity of people's experiences in different regions other than hers. After reading the textbook and going through the training process, the woman realized that much of her experiences of starvation and family members' executions were an everyday occurrence. From her conversation with me, the training was crucial to contextualize her own history and also let her know that she was not alone with her suffering. She is quoted as saying, "There is one part in the book that talks about the torture, and it talks about starvation and this is what I experienced. The arrest of my father, my sister, to be killed is also mentioned in the book. That is part of my experience. The starvation that is what happened to my two children. I can relate to it." I suspect that many more provincial trainees had similar experiences to this woman in Battambang.⁴²

This last issue raises questions about the importance of history in a society experiencing massive trauma.⁴³ In "Nietzsche, la genealogie, l'histoire," Foucault believes that for history to be "effective" it must be a history without absolutes, is unstable and introduces

⁴¹ Laub, 45.

⁴² These sentiments were not only part of the Battambang teacher training group, but were present in all regions. One trainee from Kandal province thanked DC-Cam staff and the national trainers for teaching him history. He said: "It has helped me learn more. For example, I was only aware of a few prisons. Because of DC-Cam documents, I have learned there were nearly 200 prisons during the Khmer Rouge." One female trainee stated that she only knew a little bit about the Khmer Rouge experience, but she "now knows a lot more about the Khmer Rouge, their policies, and their ideologies. I was older than 20, probably 24 when the Khmer Rouge existed. Now with this training, I can put the story together."

⁴³ Many thanks to Dr. Kristine Stiles for pointing this out to me in numerous discussions and classroom settings.

"discontinuity into our very being."⁴⁴ According to Foucault, this "effective history" is one "systematic[ally] dissociate our identity" so that we "undermine the very foundation to know ourselves." Foucault believes this is important for a few reasons, one of which "is to destroy the knowing subject by uncovering the hidden vicissitudes of the will to truth."⁴⁵ Yet in a "culture of trauma" or in a place where massive trauma resides, such as in Cambodia, this type of history Foucault calls for may not only be "ineffective" but also dangerous to the survivor. As trauma is precisely an event of "not knowing" it is one that concomitantly requires a reaffirmation or reconstitution of "historical reality."⁴⁶

Preah Vihear Temple, located in Northern Cambodia. Photo by Heng Sinith. (2008).

Conclusion

In the 9th century, Khmer King Yasovarman built the temple site known as Preah Vihear currently located in the northwestern corner of Cambodia bordering Thailand.

Situated on top of an 1800-foot hill in the Dangrek mountains, the current peripheral site was once central to and centered in the Khmer kingdom as it was built to house a shrine dedicated to the Hindu gods. But like the books of knowledge in Lovek, recounted in the

⁴⁴ As quoted in Roth, 79.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ LaCapra, Dominick. 1994. *Representing the Holocaust, History, Theory, Trauma*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. As one teacher said to the group in July 2008, "I've waited 30 years for education about this period."

introduction, foreign forces robbed Cambodia of Preah Vihear after the demise of the Angkor Empire as the Siamese army took and sacked the temple complex.

While Cambodia will never be able to get back the “mythical” and intangible books wrapped in gold that contained all the knowledge in the world, they can —and have— reclaimed their temple site. But doing so wasn’t easy. In the early 1960s, after receiving independence from France, the Cambodians sought to reclaim their temple from Thailand. The process ended following a bitter legal dispute at The Hague, which awarded the Cambodians with Preah Vihear. In 1979 following the Khmer Rouge genocide, thousands of Cambodian refugees poured into Thailand. Four months later, Thailand, wanting no more responsibility for these “degenerate” and “barbaric” people, told the United States, France, and Australia to come and “take their pick.” After the “litter” of 1200 was chosen, the remaining refugees were loaded once again in a bus and taken to Preah Vihear. In a sickening recourse, the Thai troops forced an approximate 42,000 off the 1800-foot cliff to their deaths after surviving and living through four years of “living hell.” Since then, Thailand has built roads to the site, claiming it as their own. In the early 2000s, the Cambodian government, back on its feet, began to pave a road to reach Phnom Preah Vihear, and in 2008, UNESCO awarded Cambodia as the sole bearer to the world heritage site. Cambodians ran into the streets. Vendors sold Preah Vihear memorabilia. National pride was high as Cambodia took strides to get back what was lost. On December 25, 2010, over 200 teachers trained in “core” programming in 2009 will reconvene at Phnom Preah Vihear, as part of the Ministry of Education and DC-Cam’s working group entitled **“Reclaiming Cambodian History.”** Of course, power and politics are all involved in the archive, but the discussion can go further than what a post-structuralism discourse affords as the history emanating from power is also one that concomitantly helps one testify to and

work through its past: As 200 teachers travel along the newly paved Cambodian road to see the temple that they can now claim as their own, they too will mount an invisible flag on their own histories, and begin to steer their country in the course to reclaim and to know its own past.

End.
