

# មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

## Love and Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime

By: Sok-Kheang Ly  
September 19, 2007

“During the Khmer Rouge regime, some youths chose to serve in the army rather than obeying Angkar’s orders to marry a woman they did not like,” said Mr. Yin Kap of Kampong Trach district, Kampot province.

The Khmer Rouge regime brutally governed Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 under the non-democratic state of Democratic Kampuchea (DK). Their rule left approximately one fourth of the population dead from systematic starvation, overwork, disease, and execution. They prohibited many economic, religious, and social institutions and tightly controlled the remaining few they kept. Love and marriage were among those controlled by the regime. Displays of affection were punishable moral offenses and marriages were arranged by *Angkar*.<sup>1</sup> This meant that *Angkar* chose whom you would marry; it did not matter if you did not like the person or had never met them.

There have been two conflicting views about marriage during the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime. Some believe that people were forced to marry while a minority viewed it as their destiny. Relying upon the traditional concept of *kou prenh* or “destined mate,” the latter group believed that it was their destiny to marry their spouse, even under the arrangement of KR cadres. In general however, marriage ceremonies (which were not ceremonious in the least) during the Khmer Rouge period were not moments of happiness and joy. Dressed in the usual black pajama-like clothing, couples were married in groups without any of the traditions and customs typical of Cambodian marriages.



Villagers watch the film, *Behind the Walls of S-21: Oral Histories from Tuol Sleng Prison*.

After a long drive through a red dusty gravel road, DC-Cam’s Film and Public Information Room (PIR) teams finally reached a village chief’s house in Kampong Trach district, Kampot province. The purpose of their visit was to show two documentary films produced by DC-Cam, “The Khmer Rouge Rice Fields: The Story of Rape Survivor Tang Kim” (2004) and “Behind the Walls of S-21: Oral Histories from Tuol Sleng Prison” (2007).

Sitting under the shade of bamboo trees and blue tents, the village chiefs of Kampoul Meas village and Snam Ko village welcomed DC-Cam staff as they spoke to a crowd of approximately 160 villagers. The staff briefed the villagers on DC-Cam’s work and projects and talked about the importance of film screenings in encouraging people to speak out about moral offenses and related matters that took place under the KR regime.

<sup>1</sup> Angkar is a Khmer word which translates into, “organization.” During the KR regime, this term came to mean a number of things including the KR top leaders, organization, and even Pol Pot himself.

The PIR team has been screening the film, “The Khmer Rouge Rice Fields: The Story of Rape Survivor Tang Kim” all across Cambodia for the past several years. With the release of the second film by DC-Cam in February of 2007, the team began showing both films. The purpose of these film screenings is to generate dialogue on the sensitive topic of male-female relationships during the KR regime, and in particular cases of sexual violence such as rape. Insights about marriage and what the KR considered “moral offenses” came from both the discussions after the film screenings and the interviews conducted by Ms. Sin Sothida and Ms. Hin Sotheany of the Film Team.

Kim Houn, 65 years old, said that she has never heard about forced marriages when living under the KR regime. She did however acknowledge that moral offenses took place in her cooperative. She recalled that a couple named Ping and Sorn were found guilty of having an affair without *Angkar*’s consent. Realizing that they would be sentenced to death, they fled to Vietnam.



**Villagers watch the film, *The Khmer Rouge Rice Fields: The Story of Rape Survivor Tang Kim*.**

Kung Huon, 59 years old, revealed that his brother Kung Muoy was executed on charges of sexual misconduct with a 17 April woman who worked in the kitchen. Huon regretted that *Angkar* had not arranged a marriage for his brother before the “sexual misconduct” took place.

There is no doubt that the KR regime’s “moral offense” was a euphemism for “sexual abuse,” a serious crime punishable by death under DK policy. Chum Meas, 52 years old, explained what qualified as a moral offense. An offense could stem from something as ordinary as friendly communication between man and woman. In cases of “sexual misconduct,” the consequence could be severe punishment.

Some villagers knew about instances of forced marriage. Ben Khchang, 80 years old, asserted that *Angkar* was in control of who married whom. The arranged couple could not say no to *Angkar* or else they could be killed. Fifty-five year old Pang Houn, a former soldier, further emphasized that refusal meant death, as in the case of his friend’s brother who was executed because of his objection to marriage. Houn himself was approached several times by KR cadres about getting married. One night, a young messenger told him to go to the communal kitchen to see a cook. A unit chief then asked him whether or not he agreed to marry the cook. His response was, “it is up to Brother [the unit chief].”

Chan Sokh, 71 years old, also spoke about mass marriages arranged by *Angkar*. A KR cadre would address the new couples by saying that they should show *Angkar* deep gratitude because they did not spend any money to celebrate the wedding. The couples then had to stand up and announce, “I voluntarily accept him [or her] forever.”

Chan Sok strongly opposed marriage arranged by *Angkar*. She pointed out that in traditional Cambodian weddings, couples paid respect their ancestors and honored guests were warmly welcomed at a reception. In contrast, the KR brought together couples who did not love each other or did not know each other and married them without following any wedding traditions. Forced marriages also caused a lot of frustration as some tried to avoid it. Yin Kap, 64 years old, remarked that “During the Khmer Rouge regime, some youths chose to serve in the army rather than obeying Angkar’s orders to marry a woman they did not like.”

Certainly forced marriage was generally seen as unacceptable; nonetheless some couples remained together after the KR regime. Pang Houn, the former soldier, disclosed his personal story and the concept of *kou kam* (meaning “bad karmic mate” or a mate/spouse that causes you suffering or hardships):

“...in 1979, after the Vietnamese fully defeated the Pol Pot regime in Kampot province, I sought breaking up with my wife many times. But she refused, pleading with me to continue living with her as a family. It was due to her love and honesty that I agreed to stay with her until today. I believe that she is my *kou kam*; I accept my *kou kam*.”