

**Exhibition on Forced Transfer
Banteay Meanchey & Battambang Museums**

Field visit to Museums

Date: December 24, 2013

This was my first trip to Banteay Meanchey Museum (hereafter “BMM”) and Battambang Museum (hereafter “BM”). The goal was to see the physical space available for DC-Cam’s Exhibition on Forced Transfer (hereafter “FT exhibition”), meet with the Directors and determine how many panels we can exhibit at any given time at both Museums.

Banteay Meanchey Museum

The Space

The space that has been allotted for the FT exhibition at BMM is one of two small sized rooms in a white building that stands just across from the main Museum building.

Despite its size (approximately 3m x 3m, or 9.3ft x 9.3ft), we will be able to put six panels up at *any one time* in the room. There is sufficient floor space for us to include one or two mobile stands, but not more.

Though the BMM space for the FT exhibition is small, there is a sizeable garden just outside the small building and the Museum has acquired a large plot of rectangular land, which runs behind the main building. Teachers and students could use the small garden to hold short discussions after a visit to the BMM. It needs some basic maintenance. The large plot of land, which abuts the main building, will be used to build a large hall. With the resources, that space could be used in dynamic and creative ways: to hold roving exhibitions, talks, events, film screenings (projection) etc.

The Exhibition

At the moment, we have insufficient data on villages in BM province and on civil party narratives (hereafter “CP narratives”) specifically relating to people who were forcibly transferred to BM or taken from BM and transferred to other provinces. We will be doing the necessary research and scans of court documents to get the information we need in the first week of January 2014.

I would propose the following, which we can discuss:

Panel 1: Station stop history (by former KR soldier situated at the stop)

Panel 2: CP narrative / station stop (FT from BM to other provinces: details on which station they boarded and where they disembarked)

Panel 3: **Photo** of train station or village (archival)

Panel 4: CP narrative (FT from other provinces to BM province: details on which station they boarded to come to BM and where they disembarked)

Panel 5: History of memorials, monuments, burial or work sites near stations / stops

Panel 6: **Photo** of prison sites / dam / burial sites

If this is too much textual content, we can also aim for 3 text panels and 3 photograph panels.

Battambang

Kamping Pouy Dam

We visited Kamping Pouy dam in Battambang province before proceeding to the BM. There is a government ministry board at the dam site stating that there will be further developments to generate hydro-electric power at the dam by 2015. But there is no further information on the history of the dam itself. If the team had not told me, I would not know, for example, that the dam had been built during the KR period by people forcibly transferred to the province, as was the case with numerous other dams and irrigation sites across the country; that Chinese engineers played an instrumental role in its construction; that over 10,000 people perished building it; that this was part of the larger goal the KR had to significantly increase rice production in the province, to export it to the People's Republic of China (PRC). These are critical details. In the future, if funding is available and the relevant ministerial authorities approve, it would be good to erect a memorial signboard which shows that Kamping Pouy is a site of great historical importance for Cambodia.

At any rate, information about the dam, along with an archival photograph and a current colour photograph of the dam site should be included in the BM FT exhibition.

The Space

The BM is an impressive structure and it sits on a relatively large plot of land that is prominently situated in Battambang city, not very far from a large pagoda (Wat Damrey Sa) and the tourism office. It consists of the main museum building with two relatively new wings (North & South).

We waited over two hours for the Director of BM to return from Phnom Penh. Though we were initially under the impression that we would be able to use an empty section of the South Wing, upon his arrival, the Director told us that we would be allotted the front-facing half of the North Wing. Speaking strictly in terms of where this is situated, the location is great. Visitors entering the main museum building won't have to go far to enter the FT exhibition section of the North Wing (see attached floor plan map).

At 7m x 6m, with large white walls and high ceilings, the space itself is impressive. But we have two problems to contend with:

1. All the artefacts currently on display in the North Wing will have to be moved by DC-Cam (moving costs).
2. There is a large hole in the roof of the NE corner of the North Wing, where our FT exhibition will be situated. The hole is at least 1m x 1m large. This is not a superficial hole. There is a visible gap in the actual roof of the museum, made of corrugated metal. Rain will easily seep through during the rainy season. This means the actual structural roofing will have to be fixed to close the gap, the ceiling will then have to be waterproofed to ensure even minor leaks or drips will not damage the ceiling and the ceiling will then have to be re-painted.

The Director has been asked to provide a quotation for the cost of these repairs. This is an additional cost that was not a part of the budget.

My impression is that there is no way for us to negotiate for space in the South Wing. Even if the Director relented and gave us the other section of the North Wing, we would not want to invite high profile visitors (donors, ECCC and government officials, media, universities) or even residents and CPs to an exhibition space that has a gaping hole in the roof of one section. It would seem unprofessional.

So this problem will have to be dealt with, unless we can make a persuasive argument to be given the empty portion of the South Wing.

Additional Building – Possible Uses in tandem with Exhibition

There is another hexagonal building sitting adjacent to the main museum that is currently in a state of relative disuse and disrepair. If it can be cleaned up and even maintained minimally (i.e. are there funds at the ministerial level to pay cleaners to do this?) it has the potential to be a great venue for museum-related activities.

For example, teachers can bring Cambodian students to the Museum and then use this building to hold discussion sessions. In the future, there can be more cross-border and cross-cultural classroom sessions (Cambodian students with Burmese, Thai, Singaporean students etc., which can happen after a visit to the pagoda and the dam site as an integrated learning day).

There are at least 4-5 mobile pin-boards in this building. They can be used for interactive classes, for students to pin write-ups of their thoughts on the exhibition, or how they define or understand the word 'healing'.

Exhibits

As it stands, we have space for approximately 12-13 panels. Given the significance of Battambang during the KR period, the panels could focus on the following (for the first round of the FT exhibition). This is in no particular order:

Text:

1. CP narrative (FT to Battambang from another province: information about train stop where CP boarded or disembarked train)
2. CP narrative on life at the village where train stop is situated
3. CP narrative (FT from Battambang to other provinces: information about train stop where they boarded or disembarked from train)
4. KR soldier narrative of conditions at specific train stop in Battambang province.
5. Museum history (the Museum was turned into a prison during KR period. Artefacts were kept in storage by KR).
6. Kamping Pouy dam history
7. Folk stories on the train ride on Northern Line (FT from south to north).

Photographs:

8. Station / village
9. Kamping Pouy Dam
10. People at rice-growing cooperatives
11. Prison (museum)
12. KR soldiers who managed the station stops

Again, if this is too much textual information, we can aim for 5 panels of text and 7 panels of photographs. We have a lot of space at BM. So it would be good to have at least 3 CP narratives at *any given time* for the FT exhibition. When we run out of CP narratives, we can rotate more photographs and provincial / village / train stop histories, or KR soldier narratives, folk stories and KR history in general.

We also have space here to show the archival video of evacuation by trains. I didn't see plug points or electrical outlets, but we can find out from the staff if any are available and what the electricity costs are for running the video.

There is also a greater need at BM to prepare a simple leaflet in English for foreign visitors, as this Museum does draw tourists from abroad.

General thoughts on Exhibits in both Museums

All labels for all panels in both exhibitions should be bilingual (or tri-lingual: Khmer-English-French).

I would recommend that at any given time, at least 50% of the exhibition should be devoted to CP narratives, with former KR soldiers providing us with a narrative history of the train stop, or the village where the train stop was situated. In essence, the exhibition would focus on forced transfers and the conditions surrounding the forced transfers.

The community has requested that we address broader themes such as: how did the KR come to power? Why did the KR kill? How and why starvation became a nation-wide problem during the DK regime etc.

I believe the many DC-Cam initiatives, including the genocide education project, outreach trips, school textbooks and even short lectures by teachers who take students on field trips to the Museum can address these broader themes. We can also include these sorts of facts on panels to be displayed at a later date (i.e. when exhibits are rotated).

The greatest impact for these exhibitions will come from two elements: the inclusion of CP and former KR soldier narratives on forced transfer and from showing how trains were used to implement the policy of FT across the country. This is unprecedented and therefore, should be given priority.

Many have also requested that we refrain from displaying graphic and gruesome photographs from the period. So presumably, we are aiming to find archival photographs of villages, train stations, KR soldiers working at these stops, cooperatives run by the KR near these stops,

people working in the areas where they disembarked or were forcibly transferred to, prison sites (exterior), dams that were being built at that time etc.

We discussed the fact that many visitors (both from the provinces and from elsewhere) aren't aware that a site they frequently visit or use now was, at one time, used as a detention or execution site during the KR period. For example, a museum becomes a prison and then becomes a museum again.

There is value in showing this at the museums. It creates an associative mode of thought so that people better appreciate the history of the places they visit. It would certainly be important for the collective memory of the community.

There might be some use in juxtaposing an archival photograph with a current photograph in colour of a site, e.g. a dam, school, pagoda or museum. ("Then" & "Now"). It also takes away the stereotype that museums are always and only about the archival materials and links the past to the present in a simple, yet impactful way.

Visitors / Raising Awareness / Tourism

Both the BMM and BM have enough grounds to enable visitors to see the exhibitions and linger for discussions, on-site teaching sessions and other forms of interaction. It would be useful to institute the practice of collecting simple feedback from visitors (either orally conveyed by visitors to the staff who can record it, or written in a museum notebook). This will be valuable for us as we rotate content periodically and look for creative ways to continue engaging visitors, tour agencies, tour guides etc.

In BM, at least three separate groups (couples / family) visited when we were there (one Khmer family, two foreign visitor groups). A French-Vietnamese family came and saw the whole exhibition. They had come from Siem Reap and were on their way to Thailand. Battambang was on the way for them. They said the city's French colonial buildings and a general interest in Asian artefacts brought them to the Museum.

Importantly, the Tourism office in Battambang city told them not to go to the Museum, stating that it was closed. It was the monks at Wat Damrey Sa (pagoda) who told them to go to the Museum. It is ironic that the monks are currently doing a better job of encouraging visitors to the museum than the Tourism office.

These sorts of things need to be rectified going forward, so that the Tourism office communicates with the BM staff to ensure schools, residents of the city, Cambodians from other provinces and foreign visitors do visit the Museum.

The activities for school students and teachers could also involve the staff at the Museum. At the moment, they seem both frustrated and under-motivated as they are not sufficiently compensated for their work there and do not have much of a role to play at the Museum. With such activities, which can tie in with other DC-Cam initiatives and with the opening of the Forced Transfer exhibition, the staff and teachers would interact further. One hopes that this might provide the community a greater sense of ownership of the exhibition, the museum and the memories documented in these spaces.

Healing can arise from actively engaging with the stories, which the Museum can provide.

BATTAMBANG MUSEUM



