

**Building Democracy in Cambodia through Legal Education  
Witnessing Justice 30 Years Later**

**Reflecting KR Regime Through Banteay Chhmar Temple's Collapse**

May 8-10, 2014

**Introduction**

The structural integrity of Banteay Chhmar temple under the Khmer Rouge regime was raised during DC-Cam's Public Village Forum. Even though the forum's main objective was to update the villagers about the ongoing legal process at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) and KR history (1975-1979), the focal point of the



*Public Village Forum inside Prasat Banteay Chhmar pagoda (May 9, 2014)*

discussion became largely about the villagers' regret and dissatisfaction with the near total collapse of the temple. Over a hundred villagers, including Buddhist monks and clergies, students, local authorities, and policemen attended the forum inside Prasat Banteay Chhmar Monastery located right in front of Banteay Chhmar Temple. Some speakers at the forum tried to relate their life experience during the KR regime to the memory of the temple's past and present condition. This report will highlight the speakers at the forum by comparing and contrasting their views with other villagers who attended. Their general opinions will be selected to exhibit their thoughts and suggestions to the topic of discussion as well as the forum itself.

**The Forum: Banteay Chhmar Temple in Ruin**

On the morning of May 9, 2014, Banteay Chhmar commune hosted a forum involving one hundred participants in the discussion on the condition of Banteay Chhmar Temple

before, during and after the KR regime. Mr. Ith Phean, 71, former commune chief of Banteay Chhmar, Banteay Meanchey Province, spoke to the participants at the forum and told them that the temple was well protected and preserved during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum era led by then Prince Norodom Sihanouk. His narrative traced back to the 1960s when many guards were sent in there to protect the temple. Strenuous efforts were made to retrieve artifacts and store inside Banteay Chhmar Pagoda. Some artifacts were sent to Phnom Penh for proper preservation. Mr. Ith said the maintenance of the temple was assisted by French experts. However, after Lon Nol's coup on March 18, 1970, Mr. Ith said the stealing of those artifacts from the pagoda and selling it in the black market in the neighboring countries were unabatedly carried out. Mr. Ith said he was a guard of the warehouse to store those artifacts. He remembered that five artifacts were stolen from the warehouse. He said that the sale of those artifacts went to Thailand. However, it was hard for the team to evaluate and cross-check his claims with others informants about the extent to which the looting of artifacts took place.



*Most parts of Banteay Chhmar Temple collapsed or in the process of collapse (May 9, 2014)*

Two prominent KR survivors provided a somewhat contradictory account of the temple's status during the KR period. Mr. Ith, who suffers from tremor due to old age, argued that he remembered day-and-night downpour of rains in early years of the KR rule (1976-77) in which he argues led to the collapse of the temple during the night. Asked why the temple collapsed only at night he could not provide an answer. Mr. Ith pointed out to the participants that those who were children at the time that were assigned to work to produce fertilizers inside the temple's compound would be able to provide a more accurate account because adults were not allowed to go near or enter the compound. Mr. Ith said his 13-year-old son, Phean Mang, was among the hundreds of children in cooperative and worked to produce fertilizers. Only a few soldiers guarded the children. When asked if there were anyone digging or excavating the temple at night Mr. Ith said, "no."

However, after the forum, the PVF team made further investigations into his claims about the temple's

collapse. The team found a child survivor Ms. So Sinang, who worked inside the temple's compound and a former KR village chief Mr. Boran Chhaom. Ms. So, 42, of Banteay Chhmar commune, said that she did not see any collapse of the temple during the regime. She said she was 9 years old at the time. She was separated from her parents and was assigned to produce fertilizers there. She worked day and night within the compound of the temple.

There were many children working in the the compound, at least in the hundreds. The children had no proper shelters from the rain. Even though she worked in the compound, she was not allowed inside the temple. However, sometimes she sneaked into the temple to find fruits to eat. She said she witnessed no sign of the temple collapsing.

Mr. Boran Chhaom, former chief of Banteay Chhmar Khang Kaet Village during the KR regime, could not confirm any of the claims made. Mr. Chhaom, however, emphasized that the towers of the temple had collapsed before the KR came to power in 1975. Later, he clearly recalled that the KR paid no attention to the temple and had no plans to preserve, renovate or destroy it as the KR's priority was to build the country through agriculture. But Mr. Chhaom reiterated that the KR did cut down trees inside the temple in order to make place for corn fields and other agricultural farms. When asked if any of KR leaders made a site visit to the temple, he said he had no knowledge on it.

However the contradictory informations may be, three of the informants, including Ms. Sun Vin and her daughter Ms. Smuon Sopheak, insisted that the temple's near total destruction took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s during Cambodia's civil war (1979-1998). The sound of the temple's collapse was well remembered because the looting of artifacts from the temple reached its peak at the time. Its foundation were systematically



*A participant narrates her own experience during the KR regime and the history of Banteay Chhmar temple (May 9, 2014)*

dug up and searched for buried artifacts, which were claimed to be sold in the black market to neighboring countries, especially Thailand. At this point, Mr. Ith confidently reiterated that the thieves did not dig up at random, but knew in advance about the places they targeted. As a result, the latest collapse took place early this year (around March 2014) when more than two hundred of sand stones fell.

As a former commune chief, Mr. Ith did not make report to the government on the condition of the temple. He was afraid of being reprimanded or arrested. Mr. Ith told the participants in the forum that four of his villagers were arrested for approaching the site of the temple, but he negotiated for their release. However, he did not deny that there were some people in the nearby villages who were hired to dig up and take those artifacts. At the end of his talk each participant, especially students, expressed their deep regret for the temple collapse in which they put the blame on human-made destructions.

### **Reactions to the Forum**

After more than two hours of heated discussion, selected partipaticants were asked about their thoughts and suggestions.



**Mr. Beang Sophal**, 69, of Banteay Chhma Commue, Banteay Meanchey Province, said the discussion on the destruction of the temple was good. It allowed the students to understand the destruction caused by human activities and, to a lesser extent, natural disaster. However, Mr. Beang said the forum was not able provide a clearer picture of the entire commune history to the villagers, especially the younger generation. When Lon Nol regime came to power, artifacts started to vanish. In 1984-85, he served as a soldier of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Anti-PRK soldiers began to cause more destruction. Mr. Beang had nothing else to express his great regret for the loss. To him, the temple is a priceless artifact that was left behind by the Khmer ancestors that should be preserved. The core problem was that business people sees the temple's monetary values . Poverty wrongly inspired perpetrators to steal and sell for currency. He made an analogy of "killing mother and destroying heritage" and said that wrongdoers will be doomed to failure and death.



*One of the finest bas-relief sculptures on the wall of Banteay Chhmar Temple (May 9, 2014)*

the digger she would have been killed. Ms. Sun remembered that most of the temple's bas-relief sculptures depicted the daily life of Khmers. She concluded that the forum was significant in which helped link the KR regime's attitude towards the heritage site to the periods that saw the the destruction of the temple.

**Ms. Smuon Sopheak**, 39, of Banteay Chhmar Commune, reaffirmed that the villagers knew of the stealing of artifacts as the civil war continued unabatedly. When asked why the temple kept falling down at nights, she said that there might have been ongoing diggings at the temple. She is saddened and recalled hearing soft sound of traditional music coming out from the temple. Ms. Smuon said the thieves destroyed the nation's heritage for the sake of money and recognized how hard it is for the nation to progress.

**Khauy Serei Khvan**, 16, eventh grader from Banteay Chhmar High School, said she was satisfied with the forum. Hearing the history of the KR regime and the temple was important for her general knowledge. She is saddened for the loss of the artifacts and the temple's collapse. Khauy would like to see the reconstruction and preservation of the temple to attract tourists.

**Ms. Sun Vin**, 64, of Banteay Chhmar Commune, Banteay Meanchey Province said she is sad to see the temple's dilapidated condition. She heard the sound of the collapsing of the temple and said the rain downpour caused the collapse in the early 1990s during the night in which she believed was due to people digging up for artifacts. Ms. Sun said she once witnessed thieves digging. If she was found by

**Prim Snar**, 20, eleventh grader from Banteay Chhmar High School, said the forum allowed the KR survivors to share their stories with the younger generation. It was a platform that helped them to get a sense of relief. Regarding the temple, she felt sorry to learn about the priceless temple and its destruction. She would also like to see a renovation of the temple in which the lost artifacts should be relocated and returned.

**Kay Sonita**, twelve grader of Banteay Chhmar High School, said she was happy and proud for having the chance to participate in the forum. The forum gave her a chance to learn about the KR history and link it with the contemporary issue, i.e. Banteay Chhmar Temple. Her father was former chief of the children unit used to narrate the KR history to her. She was saddened about the temple's destruction that took place during the civil war. Because of the illegal digging the temple faced constant collapse, with the latest collapse took place in March, 2014.

### **Conclusion**



A collapsed part of Banteay Chhmar Temple is reinforced by wood structure (May 9, 2014)

The discussion at the PVF was a touching issue for the villagers in Banteay Chhmar Commune. The forum gave the villagers the opportunity to use the KR history as a reflection point. With the participants' narratives and post-forum interviews, the temple is still left at the mercy of nature. According to the informants, the KR regime only cut down trees nearby and around the temple to clear land for

agriculture. During the course of the civil war, the temple faced constant destruction and looting. Its walls often collapse. The question of who to blame for the fall of the temple can not be easily answered, nor should an entity be singled out and blamed. The development is tragic as the temple is near to full collapse.

The follow-up trip is important to ensure the effectiveness of the forum. This informal discussions on the KR history should be supplemented by an active formal integration of this history in classrooms. Through this channel, people can use it as a focal point to examine other relevant issues to their locality such as Banteay Chhmar Temple.

### **APPENDIX I: Photos of the Forum**

[http://www.d.dccam.org/Projects/Living\\_Doc/Photos/2014/Public\\_Village\\_Forum\\_in\\_Banteay\\_Meanchey\\_Province\\_on\\_May\\_08-10\\_2014/index.html](http://www.d.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/Photos/2014/Public_Village_Forum_in_Banteay_Meanchey_Province_on_May_08-10_2014/index.html)

### **APPENDIX II: Short documentary film about Banteay Chhmar temple**

**by Makara Ouch**

<http://vimeo.com/95105865>

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**Funded by Office of Global Programs, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), U.S. Department of State.**