

Promoting Genocide Education and Reconciliation through Oral History: the Case of Cham Muslim Youth in Cambodia¹

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the Phnom Penh's central icon, the Independence Monument, 100 Cham Muslim youths pose together for a group photo. This was their last stop on a program organized by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), a non-profit research center committed to documenting Khmer Rouge atrocities. Earlier stops on the program were the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center, the ECCC² courtroom, and DC-Cam's public information room. As part of the Cham Muslim Oral History Project, students on the program were encouraged to participate in a writing contest. Students were asked to write the experiences of a parent during Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979), when the Khmer Rouge were in power and killed an estimated two million people. This paper summarizes and analyzes the 47 essays submitted in this contest. It also recommends oral history as tool for not only educating the youth about genocide, but also as a way to foster closer ties between parent and child and promote healing and reconciliation in Cambodia.

Background: Genocide Education and Essay Contest

In March 2007³, DC-Cam's Cham Muslim Oral History project invited 100 Cham 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. During the event, surveys were conducted to assess their views on the Khmer Rouge regime other related issues such as genocide prevention and methods of achieving reconciliation in Cambodia.



Cham Muslim youth pose in front of Independence Monument, March 2007. Photo: Dacil Q. Keo

¹ I would like to thank Dacil Keo for her assistance in reviewing and editing this paper.

² Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, a "hybrid" court set up by the United Nations and the Cambodian government to prosecute senior Khmer Rouge leaders and those most responsible for crimes committed during the era of Democratic Kampuchea from April 1975 to January 1979. The tribunal also goes by its informal name, Khmer Rouge tribunal.

³ Dacil Keo, "Cham Muslim Students and Law Students Tour: Learning about Genocide and the ECCC", *Documentation Center of Cambodia*. http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/ChamYouthandLawStudentReport.pdf (accessed January 15, 2008)

At the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center (also known as the Choeung Ek Killing Fields), students saw the visual reminders of the atrocities committed under the Democratic Kampuchea government. These included thousands of prisoner photographs, images of mass graves, stained jail cells, and torture devices.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is located on the very premise that was the microcosm of the terror, brutality, and paranoia that characterized Democratic Kampuchea. Formerly a high school in the 1960s, the Tuol Sleng site was turned into the highest level security prison by Khmer Rouge leaders in 1975. An estimated 16,000 prisoners entered the prison where they were forced to confess their “crimes” and ultimately executed in a nearby field. The nearby field was known as *Choeung Ek*, or crow’s feet. The Choeung Ek field is now a memorial for the executed prisoners. A tall white monument was built near the entrance; incense sticks are supplied at the foot of the monument for visitors to burn as they say prayers for the souls of victims.

At the genocide museum and genocide memorial, Oral History project staffs conducted surveys and interviews with the students. An announcement of the essay contest was also made by the project’s team leader. In an effort to connect Cham youth to their parents, students were asked to interview a parent about their experiences during the genocide and write about it in an essay. In the essay, students should also include their own views on the Khmer Rouge regime. Sincerity, creativity, along with practical criteria of style and language were used to select the top ten essays.

After the Genocide

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, many survivors lost family members. Traumatized, demoralized, and left to grieve for a loved one, some had feelings of revenge. Over time and under the guidance of the Qur’an, these feelings dissipated. Although the Qur’an does allow for retribution, forgiveness is preferred because it would constitute a blessing by Allah.

Some Cham families decided to leave Cambodia as the result of the political instability and dire economic conditions that enveloped the nation after the genocide ended in 1979. Such families have migrated to Malaysia, France, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, or Japan.⁴ As for those families which remained in Cambodia, some return to live in their home villages prior to the genocide while others relocated to other villages. El Yakin’s father obtained a high government post in Takeo and was even promoted to be governor of Takeo province. His father decided to resign from his post however and return to Kilometer 7 in Phnom Penh to reunite with his family. El’s father reasoned that after everything that he had been through, reunion with family and harmony were the most important things in life.

The matter of legal prosecution of atrocities committed under the Khmer Rouge is currently underway at the ECCC. A handful of former Khmer Rouge leaders have been arrested and detained in detention facilities located behind the 600-seat ECCC courtroom. They are charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity, but none have been clearly charged

⁴ Cham Muslim Students. "one of the 47 Essays about their parents' experiences under Democratic Kampuchea," Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007.

with crimes of genocide. Some scholars and lawyers (outside the ECCC) have made a case of genocide in regards to the Cham population, which constitute not only a distinct ethnic group but also religious group.

DC-Cam interviews with hundreds of survivors reveal that the Khmer Rouge did specifically target members of ethnic minorities for abusive treatment and execution. Muktar Rohany, a university student, wrote that Toloars Tikah's family and many other Cham families in Kampong Cham province were killed based on ethnic grounds. Toloars Tikah said, "the Khmer Rouge just wanted to eliminate Cham Muslims, even though we are innocent. I was one among my family who escaped the killings because I hid my identity. I was then relocated to other place."

Under the overall policy of prohibition of religion during Democratic Kampuchea, following the five pillars of Islam could result in punishment or execution for Chams. Muhammad Aly recalls his punishment for praying. Born in Kampong Cham province, Aly continued praying during the installment of the new regime in 1975 until one day a Khmer Rouge cadre saw him and warned him to stop. The Khmer Rouge then "reeducated" him by making him transport large amounts of earth. Afterward, they told him that if he was caught praying again, he would be executed.

The general policy of separating members of family into work units (such as the children's mobile unit or the women's mobile unit) was also devastating for Chams because traditionally, they live collectively in Cham communities. Many Chams were also forced to eat pork and other unhalal (unlawful) foods. Many mosques, like pagodas, were turned into stables, reeducation camps, and storage. In Toloars Faisha's essay, she writes "...the Khmer Rouge built communal halls and turned mosques into pig pens or a storage space for grains and other foods; they even stored *prahok* (a fermented fish dish) in former places of worship."⁵

Cham children were deprived of religious teachings during those four years; religious teachings that are considered fundamental to their spiritual growth. Instead, many were indoctrinated with Khmer Rouge ideology which emphasized collective agricultural egalitarianism and self-reliance. In the first ever textbook on the Khmer Rouge regime, author Dy Khamboly describes what children were taught at that time:

In Democratic Kampuchea, there were no formal schools. Instead children were sent to study under trees or people's houses. While children were taught their ABCs, most of their education was devoted to political instruction. Young children were routinely taken from their homes and made to attend indoctrination sessions so they could serve as soldiers, bodyguards, or messengers.⁶

After the fall of the Democratic Kampuchea, many villages were abandoned including Koh Phal village which essentially uninhabited.⁷ Haji Muftar, *imam khet* of Kampong Cham

⁵ Toloars Faisha is a third year student of Norton University. She wrote 17-page essay of her parents' experience under Democratic Kampuchea and her views towards the regime.

⁶ Khamboly Dy, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* (Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007), 35. This textbook is intended for high school students and it has been officially accepted by Prime Minister Hun Sen and Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports as a reference book for teachers in 2007.

⁷ Osman Ysa, *The Cham Rebellion: Survivors' Stories from the villages* (Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2006), 53. The village of Koh Phal is located on an island in the Mekong River in Kroch Chhmar district of

province claims that six villages in Kampong Siem district, Kampong Cham province were abandoned after the Khmer Rouge collapsed and that most of the villagers were killed or had died during the regime.⁸

Despite the enormity of all these challenges, Chams have worked hard to reincorporate religion and traditional customs back into their communities after the genocide. Over three hundred mosques have been built across Cambodia since the fall of the Democratic Kampuchea government and plans are currently underway for the construction of more mosques.⁹ Also the number of people go to haj increase year by year, and in year 2008, there were over 300 Cham Muslims went to conduct pilgrimage in Mecca and Madina, in Arab Saudi.¹⁰

Higher Education and Cham Youth

In 1992, the university enrollment rate for Chams was quite low; only a dozen were enrolled at the University of Medicine and Economics according to H.E. Dr. H.J. Sos Mousine.¹¹ In 1999, the figure increased to approximately 200 as the result of scholarships given by H.E. Ahmad Yahya,¹² a member of Cambodia's National Assembly. In 2001 however, funding for these scholarships was cut off leaving many students without the financial resources to continue their education after the second year of college. Consequently, some students dropped out of school. Those that were able to financially sustain themselves did graduate and received their degrees. For all of the students, including those that were unable to continue after the cessation of funding, the opportunity to attend college did initiate a dialogue between parent and child about the importance of education.

The Cambodian Islamic Youth Association, an NGO, has also been a driving force in the promotion of education by providing scholarships for English courses at the high school and college level. In 2005, the NGO received financial support through joint efforts between donors such as the U.S. Embassy, World Education, Australians, UNAIDs, and educational institutions such as Phnom Penh International University, Australian Cultural Centre, and the International Computer School (ICS). This collaboration has helped 250 students to attend college and 57 to attend short term programs at the college level by early 2008. Currently, there are hundreds of Cham youth who are enrolled in college, some of which are from the countryside.¹³

Kampong Cham province. Prior to the Democratic Kampuchea regime, Koh Phal held 1,864 residents. After the regime fell and the surviving residents came back home, it held only 183 people.

⁸ Those villages are Chamkar Samsib, Kokor, Koh Rokar, Koh Prak, Ro-Ang, and Khvav. The families in the six villages totaled 2320 in 1970, and there were only 110 families left after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea.

⁹ Farina So, "Website Development: Building Bridges Between the Cham Muslim in Cambodian and the Rest of the World," *Documentation Center of Cambodia*,

http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Public_Info/Building_Bridges_Between.htm (accessed January 15 2008).

¹⁰ Seth Muhammad Sis (Officer of Khmerization office, Department of Pedagogical Research, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports), in discussion with the author, 25 January 2008.

¹¹ H.E. DR. HJ. Sos Mousine (Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Rural Development), in discussion with the author, 25 January, 2008.

¹² H.E. Ahmad Yahya, in discussion with the author, 25 January, 2008.

¹³ H.E. Hap Umaly, in discussion with the author, 25 January, 2008.

Scholarships have also been available for Cham youth to study abroad in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Netherlands, the United States, and in Arab states. There are hundreds of students pursuing a bachelor's degree in Indonesia under the Islamic Development Bank Foundation. With support from the Almanar Foundation and other Islamic organizations, hundreds of students are obtaining professional training or a bachelor's degree in business in Malaysia.¹⁴

While there appears to be a rise in the number of Cham youths enrolled in college, the greater majority of them are not. One significant factor is poverty, a problem that their Khmer counterparts also face. Another factor is constraints related to their family situation. Sometimes a Cham girl in the sixth or seventh grade will drop out of school under pressure by her parents to either pursue Islamic education or find a job to help support the family¹⁵. Although the aforementioned organizations work hard to alleviate these and other social and financial constraints, the problem of access to higher education still looms large in the Cham community.

Summary of Essay Contest

Forty-seven essays were submitted in the writing contest, twenty-six from female students and twenty-one from male students. The top ten essays were selected according to the following criteria: (1) style and language, (2) coherence of ideas and viewpoints on the Khmer Rouge, (3) creativity and thoughtfulness, and (4) grammar and spelling. In April of 2008, the writers of the winning essays will be given a special award in a small ceremony. All essays will be published in DC-Cam's magazine, *Searching for the Truth*.

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 experiences 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.



Soth Naseath¹⁶ had a difficult time getting his mother to speak about her life during the genocide. After several attempts to

At the Cheung Ek Genocide Memorial Center, Ms. So explains the writing competition to the group of 100 Cham Muslim students, March 2007. Photo: Dacil Q. Keo

¹⁴ Seth Muhammad Sis (Officer of Khmerization office, Department of Pedagogical Research, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports), in discussion with the author, 25 January 2008.

¹⁵ Farina So, "Education for Cham Muslim Women in Cambodia," *Documentation Center of Cambodia*, http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Public_Info/ChamMuslimLeaders/Cham_Muslim_Leaders.htm (accessed January 15 2008).

¹⁶ Soth Naseath is a graduate of Phnom Penh International University in Management. His mother is Khmer and his father is Cham.

get his mother to talk, she began to 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 was could not comprehend her enormous degree of pain. In the end, she agreed to disclose her past because she believed that teaching her children about the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge is important.”

Soth’s mom was arrested and put in jail during that period. Her “crime” was escaping 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 Son’s mom, 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.

Von Navy¹⁷ wrote an essay titled, “My Parents are also Victims.” In her essay, she describes the dramatic death of her older sister. In the final minutes of her life, Von’s older sister lay in her mother’s arms and whispered, “Mother, I am very hungry.” Starvation was a constant theme in many of the essays.

For Cham youth, information about the genocide comes from various sources including teachers, parents, neighbors, and scholarly-oriented magazines. The information coming from some of these sources may be limited in scope and therefore many youth will look to other sources to verify one source and/or to obtain a more complete understanding of what happened. In general however, much of their information about Democratic Kampuchea comes from parents, relatives, and neighbors because it is not formally taught in schools and few relevant reading materials are available. One dominant way in which they learn about the genocide is during mealtime. Parents will often tell their children how little they had to eat under the Khmer Rouge, that they starved, and that many people died of starvation. As a result the children learn much about difficult life conditions, but hardly anything about the political, economic, or military issues relevant to that era (something that many parents know little about themselves).

Math Tahir, a young NGO volunteer based in Kampot province, wanted more information on Democratic Kampuchea. He has not only visited the mosque located in another village, but often contacts DC-Cam for Khmer Rouge related publications. Math explains that, “When you listen to survivor’s stories for the first time, it seems fictional or like a folktale, but when you learn more about what happened from other people and other sources, you realize that what they are telling you is the truth.”

In regards to genocide prevention, the Cham students came up with several methods. One rather simple, but significant way is remembrance; that is to keep alive the history of what took place by educating all Cambodians about what happened and creating spaces for

¹⁷ Von Navy is a junior at Western University majoring in English. Her parents are from Angkor Ban village, Kampong Cham province.

remembrance. They believe that if the genocide is preserved in both one's memory and in history, this will prevent it from happening again. Having solid morals and respect for others was also mentioned in the essays. Others suggested that there should be more exhibitions about the Khmer Rouge regime so that information about this era is more accessible to the public. Lastly, some stressed that tolerance and forgiveness are necessary and should be practiced in the family unit, so that they can radiate outwards in society.

The essays also spoke about the concepts of justice and reconciliation. Some defined justice as honesty and impartiality while others related it to equality before the law. Once justice is achieved, according to some, the journey towards reconciliation can begin. Others thought that once apologies were and forgiveness followed, reconciliation between victim and perpetrator would occur. One female student wrote however, "It is hard to forget horrible experiences when you have experienced them directly yourself." The student's father lost his entire family the genocide. Today her father lives in the same village the man who killed his brother; her father does not have peace. The student believes that only time and Islamic teachings will 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 the 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 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 become normal again because the event took place so long ago and I certainly wouldn't want to continue living a miserable life.



Cham Muslim youth and law students at the ECCC courtroom, March 2007. Photo: Dacil Q. Keo

Cham youth, like many people in Cambodia, receive news of the ECCC through the radio, newspapers, television, and select magazines which feature articles about the tribunal. Overall, Cham youth seem to support the hybrid nature of the tribunal, remarking that having the involvement of the United Nations will help to ensure that justice is properly attained. The process of justice is not one that courts partake alone however; Cham youth believe that it is also important for Cambodians to learn about the history of Democratic Kampuchea, attend the trial proceedings, and if possible come forward as witnesses. During a meeting at the ECCC

courtroom last year, many of them asked tribunal officials about the structure, cases, and processes of the ECCC.

Oral History in a Human Rights Context

Oral history can function in many fields and serve many purposes. It can be used in journalism, literature, business, anthropology, sociology, art history, and human rights. In the

field of human rights, it can be a tool for documenting atrocities.¹⁸ For example, truth commissions often times use the oral history approach in truth seeking. Victims are given the opportunity to tell their stories; they are given voices. Once these stories have been collected, an investigation can follow and possibly the adjudication of a human rights abuse case.

Oral history gives voice to those whose voice is little heard and empowers people to record their personal experiences. According to Oral History Society,¹⁹ oral history enables people who have been hidden from history to be heard, and for those interested in their past to record personal experiences and those of their families and communities.

The stories people tell can be a mixture of facts and opinions that is expressed in their own terms. Some people are not able to remember all aspects of an event, especially with the passing of time, and thus their stories may be fragmented or illogical. This does not negate their stories however, for each survivor has his or her own truth which is real to them. As more stories are documented, a collective experience and collective memories are created. It's agreed by oral historian Valerie Raleigh Yow on power of oral history. She commented in her book²⁰ that, "although there is no research that helps us to make quick and definitive on accuracy of memory that can be used as evidence, there are criteria, however, that can enable us evaluate oral history evidence."

The writing competition reveals the importance of the oral history approach in two main ways: education and relationship building. As students listen to their parents tell them about the atrocious conditions under the Khmer Rouge regime, they 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 contest, my parents had told me very little about what they experienced. Afterward, I realized how incredible their experiences were." Through negotiation and dialogue between parent and child, a learning environment is created in the home. Oral history becomes the vehicle which helps to connect the survivor generation with today's youth; a connection that is needed in Cambodian society today.

Conclusion

One challenge of moving forward in a nation traumatized by violent conflict and massive human rights atrocities is the treatment of the past. The past cannot be forgotten in the buried memories of survivors and undisclosed documents. All members in the new society must work together to share, preserve, and understand the past, no matter how tragic it may be. Oral history is one way in which the past can be treated in a manner which is conducive to

¹⁸ Columbia University Oral History Research Office, "Telling the World: Oral History, Struggles for Justice and Human Rights Dialogues." The above paragraph is derived from a discussion among the fellows and faculty members at Columbia University Oral History Research Office, June 2007. I was one of the fellows engaging in the discussion about the importance of Oral history and Oral history as an interdisciplinary subject. For further reading, go to <http://usearch.cc.columbia.edu/query.htmlqtOralHistoryResearchOffice>.

¹⁹ Oral History Society, "Oral History Practical Advice: Getting Started." <http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice> (accessed January 28, 2008)

²⁰ Valerie Raleigh Yow. *Recording Oral History*. (California: Rowman's Little field Publishers, Inc. 2005), 36.

healing the country. By having Cham youth ask their parents to speak about their everyday experiences during Democratic Kampuchea, they not only gain knowledge about that era but also about where their parents are coming from. As the parents share their stories with their children, the bond between parent and child deepens. Some parents have commented that they are happy in knowing that their children are interested in their stories. Others even say that they feel a release and letting of sorts, as they narrate their stories to their children.

While I promote the use of oral history in the context of informal genocide education, other approaches can be employed as well. Students can take part in activities such as art competitions, dramas, musical performances, and other creative lines- all centered on the themes relating to the Khmer Rouge, as informal means of learning about their parent's and their nation's past. Visits to museums and other places containing information about Democratic Kampuchea are also beneficial. Such exercises encourage the discussion of genocide in Cambodia and thus contribute to reconciliation process in the country.

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