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**THE ANLONG VENG PEACE CENTER**

**Between rhetoric and reality – Peace and Development in Anlong Veng**

By Sarah Hammerl  
September 15 – 18, 2016

Day 1, 15 September 2016: Tracing Ta Mok's legacy in Anlong Veng

The 7<sup>th</sup> Peace Tour to Anlong Veng brought to discussion at times difficult relationship between reconciliation, peace and development. After a long trip that took us into the expanses of Cambodia's countryside, the students of Khmer literature from the Royal University of Phnom Penh were happy to finally step out of the bus and take a closer look where our driver Mr. Long Aun had taken us.

Knowing that Anlong Veng was one of the most critical strongholds of the Khmer Rouge guerilla movement until 1998 and hearing the words High School and Ta Mok, I asked a student about the history behind the building in front of us – thinking already about another torture prison like the infamous Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh. The student could only speculate and suggested it was used as a grain silo during General Ta Mok's military rule of Mountain 1003 (which included Anlong Veng district), the man who overthrew *Brother Number One* Pol Pot and led the Khmer Rouge movement until its demise 1998. We both were later corrected and it turned out that the high school we visited had never served as a grain silo but was used according to its original purpose: a high school constructed by Ta Mok in 1993. Similar was our next stop: the former Ta Mok Hospital (today Anlong Veng Hospital) which he built in 1994 among many other construction projects such as bridges, dams and other buildings in Anlong Veng.



*Students attending a series of presentation at the Learning Center for Sustainable Development*

After these more neutral sites we headed to Ta Mok's former Lakeside Houses, where the interior walls were decorated with paintings of Preah Village and Angkor Wat temples. In stark contrast to the idyllic setting of the four houses in front of the Lake and to the paintings bearing witness to the illustrious past of the region stood two iron cages – used for those who would upset Ta Mok and subsequently lose their status as human beings. It was this scene that epitomized what Dr. Sok-Kheang explained to me earlier as the two main historical reference points for Cambodian's identity: Angkor and Angkar. While Angkor was the capital city of the Khmer Empire and has been probably the biggest city at the time globally, Angkar (khmer: organization) was the term the Khmer Rouge used for referring to the impersonal party executive of Democratic

Kampuchea (DK) - armed with omnipotence and infallibility. While the former symbolizes for most Khmer the strength and prosperity of their ancestors and stimulates a sense of patriotism, the latter represents Khmer Rouge's rule by terror ideology where all Cambodians had to submit themselves to the Party line regarding every aspect of life; a time where humans became mere beings.

As to stress this point even further we were shown next the burial place of Hon Sen, long- term revolutionary associate of Pol Pot, and his ten family members. They were killed by orders of Pol Pot in 1997 in the course of his paranoia of defecting KR leaders. On our way to Ta Mok's second residence in the jungle of the Dangrek Mountains close to the Thai Border we passed Pol Pot's cremation site where a sign is the only hint that this is the death place of one of the most murderous leaders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ta Mok's second residency is located on top of the Dangrek Mountain on one of its peaks and offered us a stunning view of the region with its declining but still dense jungle and green fields. A few meters away from the main house we enter the former meeting room of high Khmer Rouge leaders such as Ta Mok, Pol Pot and others. It is at this venue that DC-CAM established the Anlong Veng Peace Center in 2015. The Center works towards the promotion of memory, peace and reconciliation. The aim is to create an informative and educational hub that will engage the local community, students and researchers, and other visitors in an inter-



*A student interviewing a villager*

cultural and inter-generational dialogue about Cambodia's devastating past and means for reconciliation as well as strategies to prevent similar conflicts in the future. Besides the Peace Tours, the Center is in the process of training tour guides of the history of Anlong Veng, organizing exhibitions focusing on the 30-year conflict in the region and seeks to establish a research hub on current challenges the community of Anlong Veng faces such as land grabbing, lodging and human rights abuses. The goals seem ambitious given the poor infrastructure, limited livelihood and at times difficult relationship between the people of Anlong Veng and the rest of Cambodia.

Walking around these sites while having no guide nor detailed previous knowledge of the region was actually intended by Dr. Ly Sok-Kheang, Director of the Anlong Veng Peace Center (AV-PC). Dr. Sok-Kheang's idea was to merely expose the students to these sites first, before discussing their meaning and impact for Anlong Veng community then and now at a later stage. Most of the students had never been to Anlong Veng before, while some originated from districts nearby but still never had the chance to visit the sites. When asked how he selects the students for his Peace Tours, Dr. Sok-Kheang replied that based on the pre-surveys they conduct at the universities he likes to choose participants who either have a rather negative image of Anlong Veng and its inhabitants

or commented on it in some other way. The students – mainly from Phnom Penh – will then team up with local youths living or originating from Anlong Veng and pursue the Peace Tour together. Through this procedure he wishes to maximize the effects the tour will have on the participants and encourage discussion on and confrontation with prejudices on both sides.



*A student interviewing local villagers*

The students seemed interested in the sites and took many pictures despite the long journey we already had behind us. One student even started to take notes after driving out of the outskirts of Phnom Penh, eager to record his thoughts every step of the way. This trip's participants all going to be future teachers, waiting to return to their home provinces once completed university in Phnom Penh.

While still on the bus the boys told me that they all come from farmer families and that they value being able to provide for oneself - a characteristic they share with most of Anlong Veng's villagers.

Before we finally got to our guesthouse and were ready to sleep, each student should write down what they thought when they first heard about Anlong Veng district and compare this to what their impression was when they finally arrived and visited the sites. One student told me that according to her previous knowledge the villagers were former Khmer Rouge cadres and supported the movement until its end. To her understanding, they treated people in cruel and inhumane ways and did not show any mercy while killing them. She feared that the villagers might harm her if she would make any mistake regarding her gesture or facial expression when interacting with them, which would expose her as having prejudice against them. These narratives shed light on the persistent logic of retaliation – or *cum* – which underlay most of the political rhetoric in Cambodia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and triggered a circle of violence that shapes Cambodia until today.

#### Day 2, 16 September 2016: Principles in Practice – What means reconciliation?

The second day started with presentations about the Khmer Rouge movement's history and approaches for peace and reconciliation. Dr. Sok-Kheang opened the lecture by re-asserting the tour's mission of building and fostering peace despite touching upon themes and causes of violence and war. He hopes the tours will lead to a lasting network among the students and the villagers of Anlong Veng, encouraging the students to join DC-CAMS efforts as volunteers in the future.

While talking about the reasons for Khmer Rouge's popularity in the region and beyond, the students subsequently started to ask questions about the role of the king during that time, the ongoing war in the country after 1979, as well as about education, health care and religion under Ta Mok's rule in the region. This clearly showed the interest the students took from visiting former Ta Mok high school and hospital the previous day. Since official historical records barely exist and DC-CAM is still in the process of



*A student taking photo with a local villager*

assembling the several documents and personal accounts, there exists only vague information regarding these issues. Nevertheless, it is assumed that the hospital was mainly used to treat the soldiers stationed in the area, while schooling as well as the practice of Buddhism was later allowed for the broader public in the district.

Following the historical summary, a former Khmer Rouge female cadre talked about her individual experience during the KR ruling. The students were evidently happy to have the chance to get a first-hand perspective on the life under Ta Mok and warmly greeted her. While she did not physically suffer from the regime and supported much of its personnel, she would describe herself as a victim of the movement. As Dr. Sok-Kheang discussed with me at an earlier time when visiting *Choeung Ek* (Killing Fields), the line between victim and perpetrator during DK became extremely blurry, as for example most of the victims of the notorious *Tuol Sleng*

prison were in fact Khmer Rouge cadres that lost their life due to growing paranoia of treason inside *Angkar*. It is for this reason that DC-CAM usually avoids these terms and speaks of survivors of the regime instead. Nevertheless, it is more than a mere conceptually distinction, given that for ECCC proceedings as well as for questions of forgiveness and justice there will remain a constant debate around the terms. This debate reflects also the complicated relationship between the concepts of truth, history, narratives and individual accounts of the past in Cambodia today. As became apparent in the next day's interviews, perspectives of perpetrators as well as of victims form together the bases for reconciliation. Accepting that talking about any past event might have a retro-perspective bias and that truth can be claimed from different angles lies at the heart of this discussion.

Linked to the woman's personal account, Dr. Sok-Kheang asked then the students to reflect in teams on ways of reconciliation for Cambodia. Nondiscrimination, equal rights and mutual respect were the first ideas brought up as a response to the task. When the discussion risked remaining too much on an abstract level, Dr. Sok-Kheang moved the students to think about reconciliation in the scenario of having their own families killed by Khmer Rouge cadres. Regardless, most of the student's answers focused on how to control feelings of vengeance (*cum*) and on means to deprive hate-inciting ideologies of their breeding ground. This resonates with their interest in the root causes of Khmer

Rouge popular support and gives a glimpse on the sometimes emotionally-detached relationship this young generation has with its past.

For example, two students suggested that Cambodians should study the causes of the war and the KR movement in order to move on and establish 'something new' that would form an alternative and eventually substitute the negative past. In the same line, others stated that peace without justice seems naïve, and that – given the inequality in Cambodian society today - there is a strong need for developmental and structural reforms so that every part of society can recover and become resilient. Still others stressed the importance of unity between Cambodians, which could be rested upon having the same religion (Buddhism) and the same race (Khmer). Many agreed with Buddhism bearing the possibility to unite Cambodians as well as to determine the values for society; namely tolerance, love and generosity.

### Day 3, 17 September 2016: Interviewing former Khmer Rouge cadres and tree planting

On the next day, the students were to apply what they had learned the previous day – walk up to villagers in Anlong Veng and engage in a conversation with them about their lives under the Khmer Rouge. At first, the students were very shy to leave the car and walk up to random houses. But after the first ones volunteered and left the car, the others became more comfortable, also because they saw that they were openly welcomed by most villagers.



*Students planting trees around The Anlong Veng Peace Center*

The two interviews I could observe went quiet well. The students were greeted by two elder women who turned out to be former Khmer Rouge cadres. One of the woman used to work in the mobile unit, but was sent back to work in the rice fields later. During the interview, the student asked the woman if the Khmer Rouge really killed so many people. The woman responded that she could not believe that these things had happened since in her experience people lived at peace with equal rights and were free from oppression under the regime. In contrast, the other woman started to cry when she recalled the harsh living conditions and human loss during Khmer Rouge's rule. I did not wish to interrupt in this moment and so I am not able to comment on the student's direct verbal reaction to this incident. However, I was wondering if the students were sensitized and felt sufficiently equipped to deal with these kinds of events during the interviews. The duration of the interviews (45 minutes) nevertheless

showed that the students were able to engage the villagers into a conversation and kept them talking.

When the interviews came to an end, the students handed out the textbook “A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)” to the women and took a look at it together. In general, some students conducted insightful interviews, while others were worried that they could not get “good answers” to their prepared questions. In one case this was due to the fact that the interviewee only moved to Anlong Veng recently and had no former connection to Anlong Veng. In other instances, the interviewees were either not open to talk about KR or were unclear in their responses. In summary, the students enjoyed this practical task, although at some point seemed to forget that the interviews themselves were means to establish contact with Anlong Veng villagers to obtain the chance of an inter-generational dialogue. For this, it should not matter too much if the interviewee is giving “good”, “correct” or “relevant” answers, since the goal is not to



*Students taking group photo at the Learning Center for Sustainable Development*

hear an expert testimony about life under Khmer Rouge but rather to have a conversation and seek to understand the incomprehensible. It is a challenge as much for the interviewer as it is for the interviewee, and it seemed that the expectations of some students were not matching with the reality on the ground.

The rest of the day was spent at the Peace Center, where the students planted around 100 trees. According to Dr. Sok-Kheang, land grabbing and illegal logging present great problems in Anlong Veng as well as in many other regions of Cambodia and thus peace cannot be separated from environmental issues. This resonates with the proposals the students made on reconciliation mechanisms the other day and emphasises the approach of sustainable peace the Peace Center pursues. Whereas tree planting as a

symbol of peace is common in many countries around the globe, it actually impacts the livelihood of the Anlong Veng community directly and presents an opportunity to generate income in the future.

Day 4, 18 September 2016: Angkor and Angkar

After leaving Anlong Veng Saturday night we went to see the Wat Thmei Pagoda the next day, which is the site of the former killing fields in Siem Reap. The students first took a walk around the information boards on Khmer Rouge history in Siem Reap, encircling a stupa containing the bones and skulls of Khmer Rouge’s victims. Serving as a site of reflection on the cruelty of the regime, the students were then asked to fill out the post-tour evaluation forms before heading to our final destination: Angkor Wat. As mentioned before, Angkor and Angkar are both part of Cambodian’s past, and it was good to have them both included in the Peace Tour on the same day. For some, especially for the younger generation that was born after the mass executions, next to feelings of disbelief, horror and loss another feeling sets in. As Dr. Sok-Kheang put it, Angkar comes to portray the low point of Khmer *civilization*, of Khmer *society*.

Dealing with the past – not limited to an individual level but as a society at large – implies to critically examine what happened and why, which eventually runs counter the narratives used to foster national identity, patriotism and national pride. It can also lead to a feeling of responsibility that is directed towards the future. When one student for example stated that discrimination was one of the characteristics of Khmer Rouge rule and consequently nondiscrimination should pave the way for reconciliation, Dr. Sok-Kheang added the question “Well, do you discriminate in your daily life?”. To deal with one’s violent past also means taking apart the events piece by piece, analyzing the conditions and contexts under which they occurred; a process which can reveal patterns not absent from today’s society.

This is epitomized in the question “How was this possible?” which cannot be explained away by pointing to some of the highest leaders of the movement either currently trialed by the ECCC or already dead. Historical narratives are always selective, and every society tends to emphasise glorious achievements, brave innovations, or morally outstanding engagement rather than their “low points”. But it is the “low points” that could actually serve best as an antipol to who we want to become.

**Team:** Ly Sok-Kheang, Tuon Layhul, Long Aun, and Sarah Hammerl.

**Donor:** Robert Bosch Stiftung

**Appendix I:** List of the participants

No	Name	Age	Sex	School	Level
1	Veng Vanny	24	M	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	Year 4
2	Suon Sopheak	20	M	RUPP	Year 3
3	Heng Ie	21	F	RUPP	Year 3
4	Tean Thorng	24	M	RUPP	Year 3
5	Sim Sok Heng	22	F	RUPP	Year 3
6	Ros Chanthol	22	M	RUPP	Year 3

7	Roath Sok Len	22	F	RUPP	Year 3
8	Nem Nom	22	M	RUPP	Year 3
9	Phal Mei	20	F	RUPP	Year 3
10	Lay Sokun	22	M	RUPP	Year 3
11	Charya	18	M	Anlong Veng High School	Grade 12
12	Phearak	18	M	Anlong Veng High School	Grade 12