

Hate to Remember...and Remember to Hate

by Adam Saltsman

In its quest for justice and the possibility of reconciliation, the upcoming Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) has a weightier task on its hands than it might think. The questions, “How will a Cambodian public and its younger generation regard the act of defending former Khmer Rouge leaders?” and “How will they regard an acquittal?” might seem to be only a matter of legal education for a population that has never experienced fair trial procedures, but given the long history of vilification of the Khmer Rouge at the hands of the Cambodian government (of which this tribunal risks becoming another step), it is important to recognize that in order to impart onto Cambodians the sense that they have been served true justice at last, the landscape of public memory in this country about the Khmer Rouge movement must first be reshaped.

Decades of official ritual denunciations of the Khmer Rouge have not only politicized public commemoration by severely restricting “safe spaces” for survivors to remember their experiences and losses, but as the denunciations monopolize public consciousness, they also transform the image of what was actually a diverse and complicated movement into a demonic monolith. This is not to say that the Khmer Rouge should be praised, but that this imagery marginalizes the thousands of child soldiers that were abducted into their ranks, other groups who joined the movement after 1979, and those who have been faced with trying to live in integrated communities after the war. No other day of historical commemoration both exemplifies the reification of the Khmer Rouge and emphasizes the need to broaden public conception of their movement more than May 20th, the National Day of Hatred.

From the moment the Vietnamese army marched into Phnom Penh with a small contingent of Khmer Rouge defectors, removing the government of Democratic Kampuchea from absolute power in 1979, they were faced with the task of masking their occupation behind a continued theme of liberation. Within weeks, they had converted the Khmer Rouge security prison, Toul Sleng, into a museum of genocide displaying hundreds of skulls unearthed from a nearby killing field. During the ten years that the Vietnamese occupied Cambodia as they supported their new state, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), their violent conflict with the remaining Khmer Rouge forces demanded a pervasive propaganda campaign to help pacify the Cambodian people, who have historically harbored anti-Vietnamese sentiments and who were enduring yet another socialist experiment. Out of their efforts to both glorify themselves and polarize what they defined as the “Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique” of the Khmer Rouge, the PRK modeled propaganda to constantly remind Cambodians of the pain they suffered under the Democratic Kampuchea regime. Throughout the 1980’s, for example, “the radio played lugubrious music punctuated by crying to recall the horrors of the Khmer Rouge; theatrical productions reminded audiences of the massacres [by the Khmer Rouge] in detail.”

In this spirit, as the remaining forces of the Khmer Rouge and the PRK waged an increasingly vicious political war on one another with both sides portraying the other into homogeneous sub-human beings, the National Day of Hatred was established and first celebrated on May 20, 1984. The PRK’s press agency issued a statement referring to May 20, 1975 as “the day when the blood and life of more than three million innocent Kampucheans was shed and destroyed, when the tears of the surviving Kampucheans started flowing up to the present.” Though the PRK asserted privately that this day could “be profitable in two ways: on the side of politics and on the side of psychology,” indicating that they did give some thought to notions of mental health for a traumatized population, there is no doubt that this holiday was formed with the intention of exploiting Cambodian suffering in order to further mythologize the Khmer Rouge as “mysterious and still-threatening figures” looming in the shadows everywhere.

Since its inception and through the 1990's, on the National Day of Hatred, "officials and schoolchildren...were summoned to ceremonies at which they heard speeches and burned paper effigies of Pol Pot." Such activities were designed to isolate and condemn those factions of the Khmer Rouge movement that did not immediately defect in 1979 or subsequent years. It is important to recognize here that this holiday contributed to what was already an extremely violent and generalized attitude toward the Khmer Rouge. 1979 and the early 1980's were marked by thousands of extrajudicial, state sponsored killings of Khmer Rouge cadre by the "Vietnamese military and officials of the incoming Cambodian regime," as well as grassroots revenge killings that were often crude mob butcherings. One Cambodian remarked that, "even the Vietnamese soldiers shook their heads as [the mob] used axes instead of guns." By building on this momentum of suffering and anger, it was not difficult in the 1980's to marginalize any dissenting view that there might be Khmer Rouge cadre who

were not out to slaughter all Cambodians, who were not outright guilty of genocide, or who were attempting to reconcile with former enemies.

But this holiday has not only been about denunciation. The National Day of Hatred is one of the only chances Cambodians have had over the years to speak publicly about their experience living under Democratic Kampuchea. Even religious outlets remained largely unavailable for independent meetings during the 1980's as Buddhism, after its destruction at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, was revived by the PRK as a tightly state-supervised endeavor. On the Day of National Hatred at one Khmer Buddhist temple, Wat Kokos, surrounded by blood stains, bones, and human cages—remnants from the Democratic Kampuchea regime's conversion of the temple into a prison and killing site—"every year people read speeches and wept as they described their suffering under the Khmer Rouge." While there is no doubt that survivors of mass atrocity eager to discuss their experience should have the venue to do so, the National Day of Hatred provided a space for the venting of sadness and anger that was confined by the day's belligerent goals and political agenda.

Though the National Day of Hatred has incrementally decreased in significance with each major defection of Khmer Rouge combatants, it is still formally observed every year with theatrical reenactments of suffering and Khmer Rouge crimes. On May 20th, 2006, "actors dressed in the all-black uniform of Pol Pot's revolutionary army [and] armed with...wooden poles, reenacted scenes of torture and execution against prisoners whose arms were bound behind their backs." Similarly, the dominant Cambodian People's Party (an incarnate of the PRK), which has made celebration of the holiday a mandatory activity every year, still floods its television channels with programs and the movie, "The Killing Fields" during election time to distance itself from the political parties that were during the 1980's allied with the Khmer Rouge. Cambodian Senate and Cambodian People's Party (CPP) President Chea Sim recently stressed the importance of reminding "the public of the 'brutal killing of Pol Pot's regime and remember[ing] to be grateful to the December 2nd Front,'" in reference to the band of Khmer Rouge defectors (including him) that invaded with the Vietnamese and remained in power ever since. In part, he said, this is to "'educate and campaign' so that the public 'understands our achievements that have been led by the CPP.'"

Denunciation, memory, relief, and venting have been fused through this holiday and often go hand in hand in contemporary public discussions regarding the Khmer Rouge Tribunal and history. The pattern of ongoing essentialism is a testament to the legacy of this official public commemoration. Many Cambodians express that their hope for the ECCC is to see the Khmer Rouge punished. While Cambodians from the older generation, in at least some instances, tend to more quickly recognize that

not all Khmer Rouge combatants were evil at heart, that many Khmer Rouge combatants, especially children, were in fact forced into their roles, alarmingly it is the youth who more virulently condemn the whole movement. This makes sense, however, when one considers that the younger generation's only encounter with the Democratic Kampuchea regime has been through horror stories, biased and extremely limited school textbooks, and ritual denunciations such as the National Day of Hatred.

The point here is not to suggest that the Khmer Rouge deserve a break, but rather to show that a trial which boasts its primary functions as bringing the Khmer Rouge to justice and setting an example of a fair trial in a nation with no rule of law needs to revamp its outreach programs to face this challenge. In order to ensure that whatever fair results do come from the tribunal are not lost on the Cambodian people, precedents set by three decades of events such as the National Day of Hatred must be broken on the village level through independent grassroots public discussion. Only this will re-appropriate the space for public memory that is still occupied by violence and propaganda.

NOTES:

- i. See for example Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979-1989: The Revolution After Pol Pot*, Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2003.
- ii. Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation-Building*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 218.
- iii. See Elizabeth Becker, "Kampuchea in 1983: Further from Peace," in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, No. 1, A Survey of Asia in 1983: Part I. (Jan, 1984), p. 37-48.
- iv. Paul Anderson, "Thousands rally for Day of Hatred," *United Press International*, May 21, 1984.
- v. "Minutes concerning the working meeting of the Permanent Committee of the National Council of the KUFCDM," No. 1100-83:KRS, Phnom Penh, 3 August 1983.
- vi. May Ebihara, "Memories of the Pol Pot Era in a Cambodian Village," in *Ledgerwood, Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, DeKalb: Southeast Asia Publications, p. 104
- vii. *ibid.*
- viii. Craig Etcheson, *Reconciliation in Cambodia: Theory and Practice*, Craig Etcheson, 2004.
- ix. Author's interviews with survivors in Takeo and Kandal provinces, October 8th and 22nd, 2006.
- x. See Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*, Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2005.
- xi. Lor Chandara, "Festival of the Dead Remembers Torture Victims of KR," *Cambodia Daily*, September 25, 2000.
- xii. Yun Samean, "'Day of Hate' Ceremony Held at Choeng Ek," *Cambodia Daily*, May 22nd, 2006.
- xiii. Kim Chan, "Apsara TV Airs KR Fare as a Reminder," *The Cambodia Daily*, July 18th, 2003.
- xiv. Yun Samean, "CPP's Solidarity Front Called Upon to Protect KR Victim Memorials," *The Cambodia Daily*, January 5th, 2007.
- xv. See transcript from ICfC dialogue conducted in rural Cambodian village, August 13th, 2006 as well as the dialogue conducted on October 22, 2006. Although many villagers did outright condemn the Khmer Rouge as they advocated for a quick trial for the regime, it is important to note here that there was a diversity of opinions expressed regarding the Khmer Rouge. Some participants asserted the need to try only leaders, while others suggested all those Khmer Rouge who committed crimes from the top to the lower levels of authority should be punished. Some participants shared stories of acts of revenge they witnessed while others described events where Khmer Rouge cadre considered relatively benevolent were protected by those villagers living under their authority against angry mobs in early 1979.
- xvi. See Bircu Munyas, "Genocide on the Minds of Cambodian Youth," Master's thesis at the Krok Institute, Notre Dame University, 2005.