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**VISUALISING KHMER ROUGE HISTORY AND MEMORY: CONFIGURING PUBLIC HISTORY
IN CAMBODIA SINCE 1979**

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In memory of
Mary Sweeny Deinhart

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ASEAN- Association of Southeast Asian Nations
***CGDK**- Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea
CGDB- Cambodian Genocide Databases designed by Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program
CGP- Cambodian Genocide Program, Yale University
CORKR- Campaign to Oppose the Return of the Khmer Rouge
***CPK**- Communist Party of Kampuchea
CPP- Cambodian People's Party
CTS- Common Type System
DC-Cam- Documentation Centre of Cambodia
***DK**- Democratic Kampuchea
ECCC- Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (also referred to as 'The Court')
GIS- Geographic Information System
IDÉC- Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques
KUFNS- Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation
PAS- Public Affairs Section (ECCC)
PAVN- People's Army of Việt Nam
***PDK**- Party of Democratic Kampuchea
PRK- People's Republic of Kampuchea
PRT- People's Revolutionary Tribunal
PTSD- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
S-21- code name of Tuol Sleng prison
SOC- State of Cambodia
SRV- Socialist Republic of Vietnam
UN- United Nations
UNICEF- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNTAC- United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
USIS- United States Information Service
***= another name/ form/ political party of the Khmer Rouge**

List of Khmer Terms (Romanized) with English Translations

aksa- writing or script

aksarsastra- literature

Angkar- The Organisation

bak- breaking

baksbat- ‘broken courage’, literally translated as the permanent breaking of the body or spirit. Clinical diagnosis is akin to PTSD. Also used to express the collective responses to trauma as well as cultural behaviours.

bor-veas-chea-chgnay- wishing the traumatic event would go away.

chbap- didactic codes that provide advice for daily living. Composed in verses and meant to be chanted.

kamtech- to destroy and erase all trace: to reduce to dust. It is also a DK ideological mandate to crush the enemies of *Angkar*.

khmauch chhau- uncooked ghosts

kob yobal- idea is buried

koh- mute

kon Khmer- Khmer film

krama- traditional scarf worn by Khmer

lakhaoun sbaek- shadow puppet plays

lkhon hluong- ‘theatre of the king’

neak ta- land spirits

prolai pouch-sas- genocide

reang-charl- to resolve to cease doing anything

reung preng- folktales

samsāra - the cycle of rebirth

samăy- modern, or ‘of the era’

samăy a-Pol Pot- the Pol Pot era

sangha- the Buddhist community including the monks, nuns, and anyone who follows the teachings of the Buddha.

Santebal- the Khmer Rouge secret police. Literally translated as ‘keeper of the peace’

sathearn- ‘public,’ which more literally translates to ‘general’ or ‘common’

selapak samtaem-

selapak samăy- modern art

silpah commonly transcribed as *selapak*- art

silpakar- artist

sleuk rith- palm leaf manuscripts

snarm- a scar from a wound that leaves an indelible mark on the body. Can also be translated as ‘traces’

srah grāp paek- bomb pond

Tuol Sleng- ‘the hillock of the sleng tree’ of which the fruit is poisonous

Historical Timeline

802-1431	The Angkorean Period
1181-1220 Chhmar	Creation of Jayavarman VII era bas-reliefs at the Bayon and at Banteay Chhmar
1296-97	Chinese envoy Zhou Daguan visits Cambodia and writes a detailed account of everyday life at Angkor
1863-1953	French Protectorate of Indochina period
1887	George Groslier is born in Phnom Penh
1909	Cinema is introduced to Cambodia
1917	George Groslier begins documenting rural Cambodian artistic practices with the support of François Marius Baudoin, the <i>résident supérieur au Cambodge</i>
1920s	Education reform initiatives by the French Protectorate are put in place to modernise the Buddhist education system in Cambodia
1925	The assassination of French <i>Résident</i> of Kompong Chhnang, Félix Louis Bardez, the event that marked the Cambodian peasant class's entrance into the historical record
June 14, 1927	<i>Résident Supérieur au Cambodge</i> proclaims <i>l'Ordonance royale No. 40</i> , giving the <i>Service des arts cambodgiens</i> control over the management of the Cambodian Royal Dance troupe
1927-1930	George Groslier photographs the Cambodian Royal Court Dancers
1936	The <i>Nagara Vatta</i> (Angkor Wat), the first Khmer language newspaper is founded and first published
1941-1945	The Japanese Occupation
1941-1955	First reign of Norodom Sihanouk
1942	Cambodian filmmaker Ly Bun Yim is born in Kampong Cham
November 9, 1953	Cambodian independence from France
1954	The United States Information Service (USIS) begins making documentaries and using film for the purposes of public engagement, education, and Cold War propaganda aimed at converting Cambodia to join the US anti-communist movement. USIS also introduces the 'cinécar'
1955	Sihanouk abdicates crown to become prime minister

1955-1970	Sihanouk rules Cambodia as prime minister
1956-57	USIS hosts The American Festival, which includes the exhibition 'Life in America.' Cambodian filmmaker Ly Bun Yim wins first prize in a photography contest hosted by the USIS
1960	Sun Bun Ly's film, <i>Karpear Promjarai Sray Durakot</i> ('Protect the Poor Virgin Girl') becomes the first commercially produced Cambodian film, marking the beginning of the country's 'golden age' of cinema that spanned the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s
1963	The Municipal Apartments in Phnom Penh, better known as The White Building, designed by Cambodian architect Lu Ban Hap and Russian architect Vladimir Bodiensky is inaugurated
1965-1973	United States bombing campaign on Cambodia
1967-1975	Cambodian Civil War between the Khmer Republic and the Khmer Rouge
March 18, 1970	U.S. backed coup d'état removes Prince Sihanouk as prime minister
1970- 1975	Lon Nol/Khmer Republic period
February 6, 1975	Khmer Rouge rocket strikes Ecole Wat Phnom, killing 14 children
April 13, 1975 Cambodia	Operation Eagle Pull is put in place to evacuate U.S. citizens from
April 17, 1975	Khmer Rouge invade Phnom Penh and Cambodia becomes Democratic Kampuchea
April 17, 1975- January 7, 1979	Democratic Kampuchea period
September 1976	Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) reveals himself as Brother Number One, leader of the Communist Party of Kampuchea
December 25, 1978	People's Army of Việt Nam (PAVN) and the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS) invade Cambodia
January 7, 1979	Democratic Kampuchea falls, and the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) is established; the day becomes officially known as Victory Over Genocide Day/ Nation Day
1979-1989	People's Republic of Kampuchea period
January 8, 1979	Vietnamese discovery of Tuol Sleng (S-21)
July 15, 1979	Decree Law No. 1 passed, establishing the People's Revolutionary Tribunal

August 1979	The People's Revolutionary Tribunal, the world's first genocide trial is held; Pol Pot and Ieng Sary are tried and convicted of genocide in absentia
September 1979	Vote at the United Nations General Assembly allows the Communist Party of Kampuchea to be the first government-in-exile to be recognised by the UN
1979-1989	China provides 80-100 million dollars to support Khmer Rouge fight against the PRK
1980	Vandy Rattana is born in Phnom Penh
April 17, 1980	The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is inaugurated
July 13, 1980	The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum opens to the public
1981	Communist Party of Kampuchea dissolves and becomes Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK)
May 20, 1984	PRK launches first 'National Day of Hatred' to commemorate the beginning of mass killings under Democratic Kampuchea. Today it is known as National Day of Remembrance
1985	Rithy Panh is accepted into the <i>Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques</i> (Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies, or IDÉC)
1986	PRK national education reform
1987	Cambodian filmmaker Kavich Neang is born in Phnom Penh
1988	Vietnamese troops withdraw from Cambodia Filmmaker Kavich Neang is born Construction of the Choeung Ek Memorial begins
1989	The State of Cambodia is established Rithy Panh releases his first documentary, <i>Site II</i>
October 23, 1991	Signing of the Paris Peace Agreements
November 1991	Sihanouk re-assumes his position as the 'supreme patron of the <i>sangha</i> '
1993	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) University of Phnom Penh re-opens for the first time since DK regime
1994	Yale forms the Cambodian Genocide Studies Program (CGP)

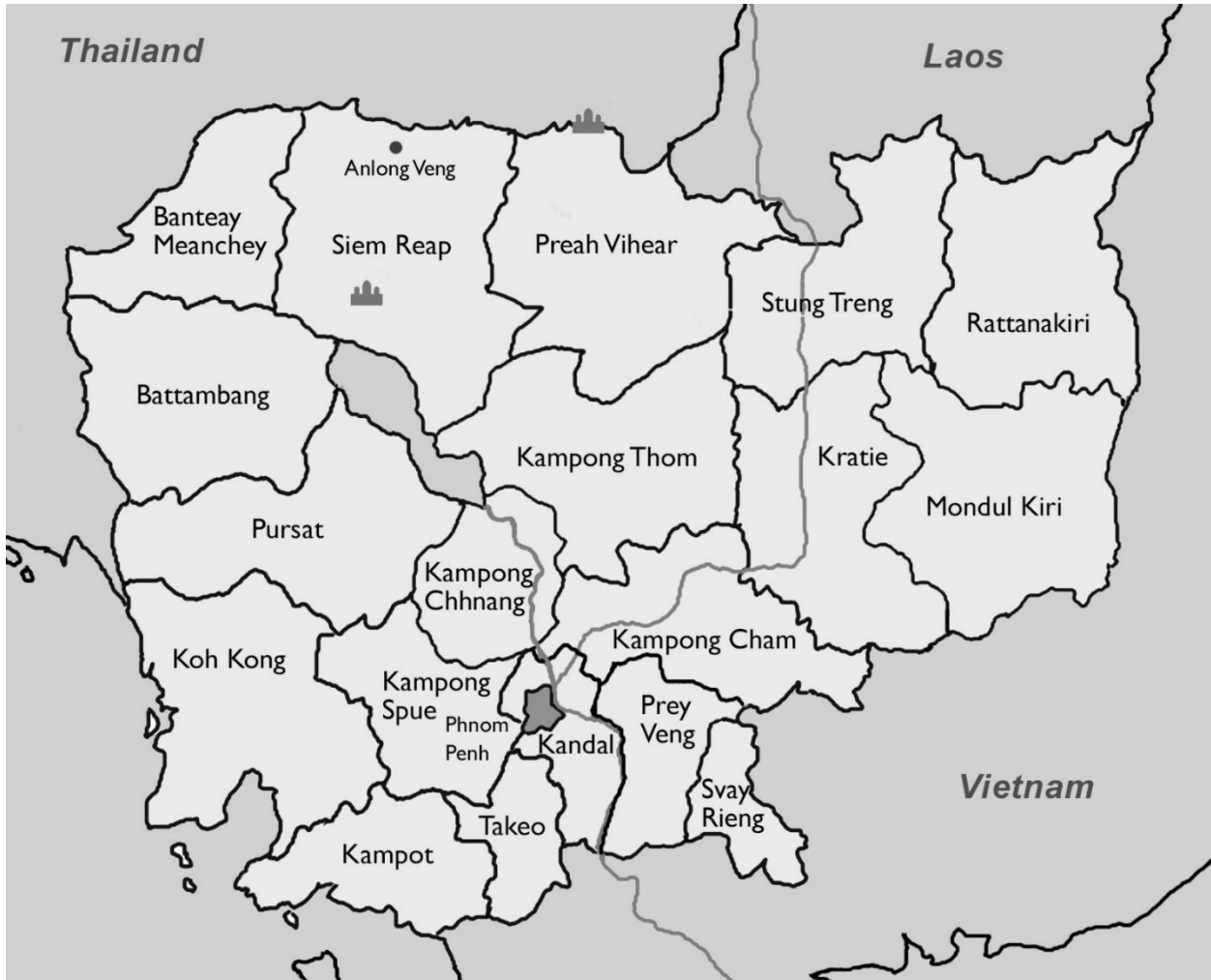
	Rithy Panh makes his debut at the Cannes Film Festival with his film, <i>Neak Sre (Rice People)</i>
1995	The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) is founded with the help of Yale's CGP DC-Cam and CGP gain permission to digitise Tuol Sleng archives
1995-2007	'Mapping the Killing Fields Project' (DC-Cam with international funding and support)
1996	Americans Douglas Niven and Christopher Riley of the Photo Archive Group, obtain the rights to 100 negatives from the S-21 photographic archive and sell copies of the prisoner photographs to international cultural institutions, including the New York Museum of Modern Art. They also publish the photography book, <i>The Killing Fields</i> S-21 photographer Nhem En defects from the Khmer Rouge, claiming to have been the chief photographer at S-21 Rithy Panh's documentary <i>Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy</i> is released
1997	DC-Cam becomes a self-sustaining, Cambodian operated NGO Cambodian Genocide Database is released (DC-Cam and Yale)
May 15- September 30, 1997	Exhibition Photographs from S-21: 1975-1979 at the New York Museum of Modern Art
June 21, 1997	Hun Sen and First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh request the assistance of U.S. and international community in establishing a Khmer Rouge tribunal
July- September 1997	Hun Sen launches a coup against First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh
1998	Rithy Panh receives his first <i>Un certain regard</i> at Cannes with the film <i>Un soir apres la guerre (One Evening After the War)</i>
April 15, 1998	Pol Pot dies in Anlong Veng, Cambodia
December 5, 1998	The last of the Khmer Rouge surrender
2003	Cambodian Ministry of Tourism makes plan to capitalise on Anlong Veng, the former Khmer Rouge stronghold Rithy Panh's documentary, <i>S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine</i> is released

2004	Cambodia enters the World Trade Organisation
2005	The Choeung Ek Killing Fields are leased to JC Royal, who began capitalising on the site Vandy Rattana withdraws from law school and photographs his first series, <i>Looking In</i>
December 2006	The Bophana Audio-visual Resource Center opens in Phnom Penh (Rithy Panh and Ieu Pannakar)
2006-2020	The Bophana Centre collects, preserves, catalogues, and digitises 142 audio-visual collections connected to Cambodian history, totalling in 2,317 videos, 1,436 audio archives, 216 series of photographs (each of them containing between 20 and 100 photos), and 444 books
2007	The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) becomes operational <i>A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)</i> textbook is published and distributed to national schools (DC-Cam and Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport) Vandy Rattana becomes a founding member of the experimental art collective, Stiev Selapak (Art Rebels). The collective also opens the gallery space Sa Sa Art Gallery
2008	Vandy Rattana photographs the series <i>Fire of the Year</i> and <i>The First High Rise</i>
2009	Case 001 against Kaing Guek Eav (alias Duch) begins Vandy Rattana photographs and films <i>Bomb Ponds</i> and <i>The Khmer Rouge Tribunal</i>
2010	Vandy Rattana and Stiev Selapak open Sa Sa Art Projects, an experimental art space, in the historic Municipal Apartments, locally known as 'The White Building' Khmer filmmaker, Kavich Neang is trained in filmmaking by Rithy Panh and the Bophana Centre
July 26, 2010	Duch is convicted of crimes against humanity and grave breaches of the 1949 Geneva conventions
2011	ECCC Case 002 against Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan begins

	George Groslier’s glass plate negatives of the Cambodian Royal Court Dancers —re-discovered in the late 2000s in the basement of the National Museum— are digitised and begin to be exhibited internationally
	Rithy Panh’s documentary <i>Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell</i> is released
2013	Rithy Panh’s film <i>The Missing Picture</i> is released and receives <i>Un certain regard</i> at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival
2015	Anlong Veng Peace Centre opens (DC-Cam in partnership with the Ministry of Tourism)
	Vandy Rattana releases his first short film, <i>MONOLOGUE</i>
April 19, 2016	Seng Lytheng, former Khmer Rouge photographer and nephew of Pol Pot, gives his testimony as part of ECCC Case 002
April 20, 2016	Former S-21 photographer Nhem En, gives his testimony as part of ECCC Case 002
May 2016	Rithy Ranh’s film <i>Exile</i> is released
September 15-16 2016	Noem Oem, the former chief photographer of S-21, gives his testimony as part of ECCC Case 002
July 2017	The White Building is demolished
2018	Rithy Panh’s film <i>Graves Without a Name</i> is released
	Vandy Rattana releases <i>Funeral</i> , the second film of his <i>MONOLOGUE</i> trilogy
November 16, 2018	Reading of the disposition of ECCC Case 002/02 against Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan
2019	Vandy Rattana releases the third film of his <i>MONOLOGUE</i> trilogy, <i>...far away, over there, the ocean</i>
	Kavich Neang’s documentary film about The White Building’s residents, <i>Last Night I Saw You Smiling</i> is released
June 20, 2020	Koh Thma Documentation Center opens (DC-Cam in partnership with the Ministry of Defence)
July 27, 2020	The Prey Veng Documentation Center and Genocide Research and Education in Cambodia (DC-Cam in partnership with Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport)

- August 2020 Revised, second edition of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* is published (DC-Cam, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, and support from International organisations)
- September 21, 2020 Inauguration of the Queen Mother Library and Sleuk Rith Institution (DC-Cam in partnership with the royal family)
- January 29, 2021 Tuol Sleng digital archive is launched and made accessible online (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, UNESCO, Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, and Korea International Cooperation Agency)
- April 9, 2021 The media outlet, *Vice*, publishes colourised and digitally manipulated photographs of S-21 prisoners by Irish colourist, Matt Loughrey
- 2021 Kavich Neang completes the filming of *Bodeng Sar* (White Building)
- September 2021 25-year-old Chhun Piseth becomes the first Cambodian to win the Orizzonti Award for Best Actor at *La 78. Biennale di Venezia, La Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica*
- October 5, 2021 Cambodian filmmaker and legendary film director, Ly Bun Yim, dies

Map of Cambodia



* Mick Yates, Provincial Map of Cambodia, *Mick Yates Photography*, [Cambodia – History | Yatesweb](#), (accessed October 29 2021).

Map of Phnom Penh



** Map of Phnom Penh City Centre, Novnis, [Maps for Phnom Penh and Siem Reap \(novnis.com\)](http://Maps for Phnom Penh and Siem Reap (novnis.com)), (accessed October 29, 2021).

INTRODUCTION

*'It rarely happens that a historian can look back over the recent past of any contemporary society with the feeling that a curtain has been rung down on the play and that what happened up to that time may be studied without regard to what is going on at present or what may happen in the future. Such is the way Cambodia appears.'*¹ - Michael Vickery

The 'opening scene' of Khmer Rouge historiography is often set in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, on the 17th of April 1975, when after a three-and-a-half-month siege, the communist insurgents, better known as the Khmer Rouge, infiltrated and captured the city from the U.S.-backed Khmer Republic, a move that effectively ended five years of bloody civil war (Figure I.1). The Khmer Rouge invasion of Cambodia's capital had been ominously and imminently foretold by the United States' military air evacuation of U.S. citizens (Operation Eagle Pull) just five days before.

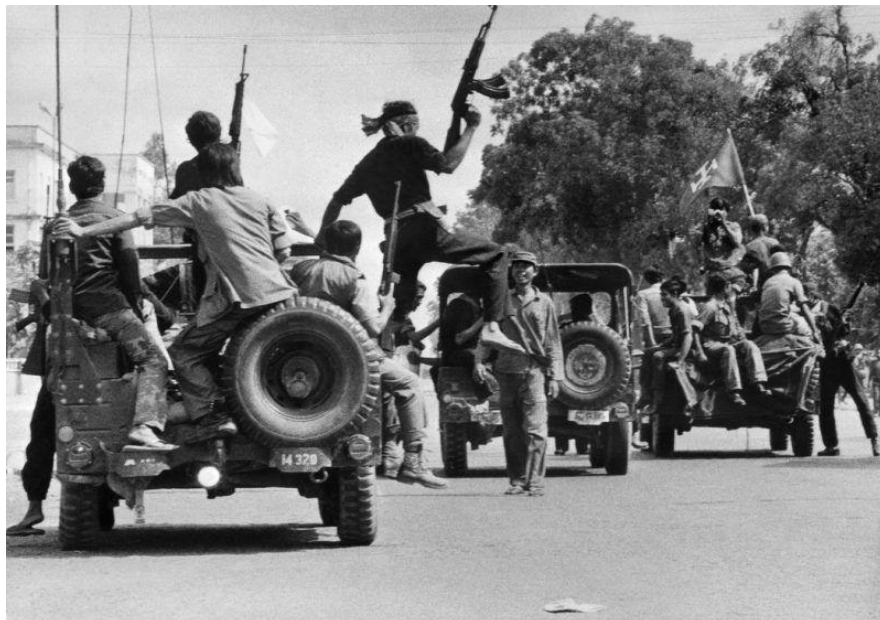


Figure I.1: Sven-Erik Sjöberg, 'Khmer Rouge guerrillas moving into Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, before forcibly emptying the city of its 2 million residents,' Agence France Presse. Image sourced from 'Let the Khmer Rouge Record Show,' *Revista de Prensa*, August 27, 2014.

¹ Michael Vickery, 'Looking Back at Cambodia, 1942-76,' in *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea, 1942-1981*, ed. Ben Kiernan and Chantou Boua (London, UK: Zed Press, 1982), pp. 89-113, [vickery1976looking.pdf](http://michaelvickery.org/vickery1976looking.pdf) (michaelvickery.org) 89.

As the Khmer Rouge insurgents made their way into the city on April 17th, they were met with no resistance. Optimistic that a new regime would at long last bring the nation peace, many of Phnom Penh's residents poured into the streets to greet the young revolutionaries (Figure I.2), whilst 'white flags and banners sprouted everywhere.'² Even the leaders of the Khmer Republic, who once vowed 'to fight until the last drop of blood,' recognised that a final stand would be futile, and instead raised white flags on the masts of government gunboats in the Mekong and Tonlé Sap rivers, as well as the armoured government personnel carriers.³



Figure I.2: Sven-Erik Sjöberg, 'The young Khmer Rouge guerrilla soldiers enter Phnom Penh on April 17th, 1975,' Agence France Presse / Getty Images. Image sourced from 'Why It Took So Long for the World to See How Phnom Penh Fell,' *Time*, April 17, 2015.

² 'The Last Days of Phnom Penh,' *Time Magazine*, April 28, 1975, pp. 18-20, Page 23 - April 28, 1975, Vol. 105, No. 17 - The Vault - TIME, 18.

³ 'The Last Days of Phnom Penh,' *Time*, 18.

Within hours of their arrival in the nation's capital however, the communist revolutionaries instigated 'torturous upheaval,'⁴ as they began a systematised evacuation of the city's 2 million residents. Civilians were forced from their homes at gunpoint, the hospital was emptied of its employees and patients, and Vann Molyvann's modern architectural masterpiece, Olympic Stadium, became the execution grounds for officials of the Khmer Republic who had surrendered to the new regime.⁵ Through bullhorns, Khmer Rouge guerrillas ordered the people of Phnom Penh (Figures I.3 and I.4):

'Take as little as you can! You will not need your city belongings! You will be able to return in three days! No one can stay here! The city must be clean and empty! The U.S. will bomb the city! Leave and stay in the country for a few days! Leave now!'⁶



Figure I.3: 'The Khmer Rouge forced millions of Cambodians out of the city and into the countryside,' Getty Images. Image sourced from 'Vietnam's forgotten Cambodian war,' *BBC News*, September 14, 2014.

⁴ 'Long March from Phnom Penh,' *Time Magazine*, May 19, 1975, pp. 26-28, Page 35 - May 19, 1975, Vol. 105, No. 21 - The Vault - TIME.

⁵ Denis D. Gray, 'Cambodia Marks Khmer Rouge Fall,' *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 7, 2009, Cambodia marks Khmer Rouge fall - The San Diego Union-Tribune (sandiegouniontribune.com).

⁶ Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 22.



Figure I.4: 'A Khmer Rouge soldier waves his pistol and orders store owners to abandon their shops in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, as communist forces take over the capital in April 1975,' Associated Press, April 17, 1975. Image sourced from 'Horrors of Khmer Rouge captured in powerful graphic novel that's gripping but never gruesome,' *South China Morning Post*, February 21, 2020.



Figure I.5: 'Cambodians walk with their belongings as they leave Phnom Penh after Khmer Rouge commanders ordered the city's entire population to evacuate,' AFP/AKP, April 17, 1975. Image sourced from 'Capital to Ghost Town: 40 Years After Phnom Penh Evacuation,' *Khmer Times*, April 16, 2015.

The alleged three-day relocation of the city's population was in fact, a subterfuge. A forced mass exodus— a death march— of Phnom Penh's residents into the countryside was underway (Figure I.5). Meanwhile, the newly proclaimed Democratic Kampuchea, secretly led by Saloth Sar (*nom de guerre* Pol Pot) and the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), concealed itself from the rest of the world behind a curtain of anonymity and silence.⁷ Between April 1975 and January 1979, Pol Pot and the Communist Party of Kampuchea would attempt to forge a 'Super Great Leap Forward,'⁸ but instead, would only succeed in transforming Cambodia into a communist agrarian dystopia through 'crash "agriculturalization,"' and 'crash collectivization.'⁹ In the three years, eight months, and twenty days the Khmer Rouge were in power, an estimated 2 million Cambodians —nearly one quarter of the nation's population— perished as a result of starvation, disease, hard labour, 'elimination,' and murder.

In 1977, as the country spiralled into further turmoil, veteran Khmer Rouge cadre were beginning to flee to Vietnam in order to escape the CPK's severe domestic policies, which had spawned extreme paranoia that resulted in mass purges of Khmer Rouge officials. Meanwhile, the endless border skirmishes instigated by the Khmer Rouge against

⁷ Lily Rothman, 'Why It Took So Long for the World to See How Phnom Penh Fell,' *Time Magazine*, April 17, 2015, [Fall of Phnom Penh in 1975: Why It Took So Long to Learn What Happened | Time](#).

⁸ Democratic Kampuchea selectively modelled itself after China's Great Leap Forward, with a vision to correct and surpass Mao Tse Tung's plan. Ben Kiernan, 'External and Indigenous Sources of Khmer Rouge Ideology,' in *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*, ed. Sophie Quinn-Judge and Odd Arne Westad (London, UK: Routledge, 2006), [The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, \(routledge.com\)](#).

⁹ Kiernan, 'External and Indigenous Sources,' *The Third Indochina War*.

Cambodia's 'hereditary enemy,'¹⁰ (Việt Nam) had escalated to warfare. On the 25th of December 1978, the People's Army of Việt Nam (PAVN) and the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS, a Cambodian government-in-exile comprised of Cambodian communists and Khmer Rouge cadre defectors), launched a full-scale invasion into Democratic Kampuchea (DK), with forces of more than 100,000 men. After nearly two weeks of intense fighting against the Revolutionary Army of Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge), the capital city of Phnom Penh fell, and the Communist Party of Kampuchea toppled on the 7th of January 1979 (Figure I.6).



Figure I.6: 'Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Armed Forces and Vietnamese soldiers move into Phnom Penh to liberate the capital on January 7, 1979,' Agence France Presse. Image sourced from 'Always Remember January 7,' *The Phnom Penh Post*, January 7, 2015.

¹⁰ In 1973, as the CPK continued to wage war against the Khmer Republic, they also launched a campaign to drive the Vietnamese communists from Cambodia. Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, version Google Books (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 530.

The PAVN/KUFNS liberation of Cambodia from a ‘genocidal regime,’ on the 7th of January 1979 is usually the final scene of the ‘play,’ at which point the curtain is rung on Khmer Rouge history, thus causing the period of 1975-1979 to become temporally fractured and disconnected from its place on the historical continuum. To the world, the period of 1975-1979 in Cambodia has come to be known simply as the ‘Cambodian Genocide,’ whilst Cambodians themselves often use the phrase, ‘*samăy a-Pol Pot*,’ or, ‘the Pol Pot era.’ In this thesis however, the 7th of January 1979 serves as the opening scene to a narrative that configures the ‘Khmer Rouge period’ on a longer trajectory of historical temporality, which pre-dates the 17th of April 1975 and extends all the way into the present day. More specifically, the 7th of January 1979— the date which marks the forging of a new, post-genocide and post-Democratic Kampuchea (DK) nation-state— is the point of departure for the cultivation of ‘public history’ in Cambodia, whilst the CPK period of rule and the events that led to the regime’s ascent to power, set the stage, and provide the historical context for *how* and *why* public history developed in Cambodia after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea.

This is an opportune place to briefly interject with an explanation regarding the authorial decision to chiefly refer to the time between the 17th of April 1975 and the 7th of January 1979 as ‘Democratic Kampuchea,’ or ‘DK’ throughout this scholarly work. Although the intended readership and publics are likely more familiar with the terms ‘Khmer Rouge period,’ or the ‘Khmer Rouge regime’ (meaning ‘Red Khmer’), which are phrases still liberally used in reference to the period of the Cambodian Genocide by popular media, they

are insufficient as periodising terms for a few reasons. Coined by Norodom Sihanouk in the 1960s, the ‘Khmer Rouge,’ originated as a political epithet specifically for the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) and the party’s revolutionary ideology. Almost immediately after its coinage, news media, popular culture, and scholarly research began appropriating the Communist *sobriquet* ‘Khmer Rouge,’ as ‘a short-hand for systematic cruelty and horror on an enormous scale,’¹¹ that took place between April 17th 1975 and January 7th 1979. The complexity of Cambodian politics, in particular the fact that the ‘Khmer Rouge’ and its leaders persisted in threatening the nation under one acronym and political ideology or another after Democratic Kampuchea toppled (as Chapter 1 shall lay out in greater detail), causes confusion for readers who are trying to become acquainted with Cambodia’s contemporary historico-political landscape. Referring to 1975-1979 as the ‘Khmer Rouge period/regime,’ could lead readers to assume that the Khmer Rouge ceased to exist after PAVN/KUFNS forces liberated Cambodia, although this was not the case. Further, identifying 1975-1979 as the ‘Khmer Rouge period’ would undoubtedly result in needless ambiguity, and leave readers questioning, *what is the ‘Khmer Rouge’?*¹² *What can or should be, constituted as the ‘Khmer Rouge period’? And is it appropriate to periodise the occurrence of genocide using a term that implies Communist ideology was the root cause of the horrors that occurred on a national scale?*

¹¹ Adam Taylor, ‘Why the World Should Not Forget Khmer Rouge and the Killing Fields of Cambodia,’ *The Washington Post*, August 7, 2014, [Why the world should not forget Khmer Rouge and the killing fields of Cambodia - The Washington Post](#).

¹² Emma Ota, ‘Vandy Rattana – Speaking of Something More,’ Tokyo Art Beat, September 30, 2015, [Vandy Rattana – Speaking of Something More | Tokyo Art Beat](#).

Whilst the choice to distinguish the 17th of April 1975 to the 7th of January 1979 as the Democratic Kampuchea, or DK period –the official name of the Cambodian nation-state when the CPK was in power– was made to alleviate unnecessary confusion for readers, it is also a strategy for addressing the above questions, which continue to challenge researchers of contemporary Cambodian history. Meanwhile, this thesis makes an effort to use ‘Khmer Rouge’ to connote not an isolated period of time, or even a homogenous ideology, but rather a group of people consisting of original CPK members, revolutionaries, guerrilla soldiers, aggressors, and followers of CPK leaders who either waged war, committed, or partook in, acts of violence against people in Cambodia and Việt Nam any time between the 1960s (when Communist revolutionaries began their insurgency of the Cambodian countryside), and 1998 (when the last of the Khmer Rouge guerrillas surrendered to the Royal Government of Cambodia).

Since periodisation is a point of contention in this thesis, it may at first appear incongruous to associate the formation of Cambodian public history with a specific point in the nation’s history, i.e. 1979, when the CPK fell from power. After considerable reflection however, it seemed essential to underscore how the years of Democratic Kampuchea and the CPK regime’s downfall together precipitated unprecedented political and sociocultural changes that altered how the state constructed and disseminated a national past, as well as the ways in which all social groups within Cambodian society related to and engaged with, their history and cultural heritage. Initially, this doctoral project set out to bridge the gap between historical research and public history by asking how existing public history

methods and approaches might expand the commemorative landscape of the DK period and connect it to the wider historiographic trajectory of the Khmer Rouge. However, it soon became apparent that these parameters had to be re-thought as they were mired in the flawed premise that public history— a new field that, has so far predominantly developed from Western pedagogies and circumstances— has a one-size-fits-all framework and single definition that are transferable and applicable to any given region and historical context. This meant that the disproportionate representations of ‘East’ and ‘West,’ or alternatively, the ‘Global North’s’ epistemological dominance in international public history,¹³ would have only been superficially addressed. Although the preliminary research question expanded the geopolitical scope of the field to Southeast Asia— one of the many regions in the Global South that persists as an empty void on the map of international public history networks (Figures I.7 and I.8)— the scholarship would have remained dependent upon Euro-American knowledge systems to describe, measure, and understand the idea and purpose of public history in Cambodia. Such an observation provoked the question of whether the structure of the dissertation’s line of inquiry was at risk of falling into the paradoxical trap of neo-colonialism that it set out to avoid.

¹³ Catalina Muñoz, ‘Locally Grounded Practices, Global Conversations,’ *International Public History* 4, no. 2 (January 2021): pp. 139-142, [Locally Grounded Practices, Global Conversations \(degruyter.com\)](https://degruyter.com), 141.



Figure I.7: Screenshot of ‘Public History University Programs,’ an ongoing interactive google mapping project, courtesy of the International Federation for Public History, accessed January 12, 2022.

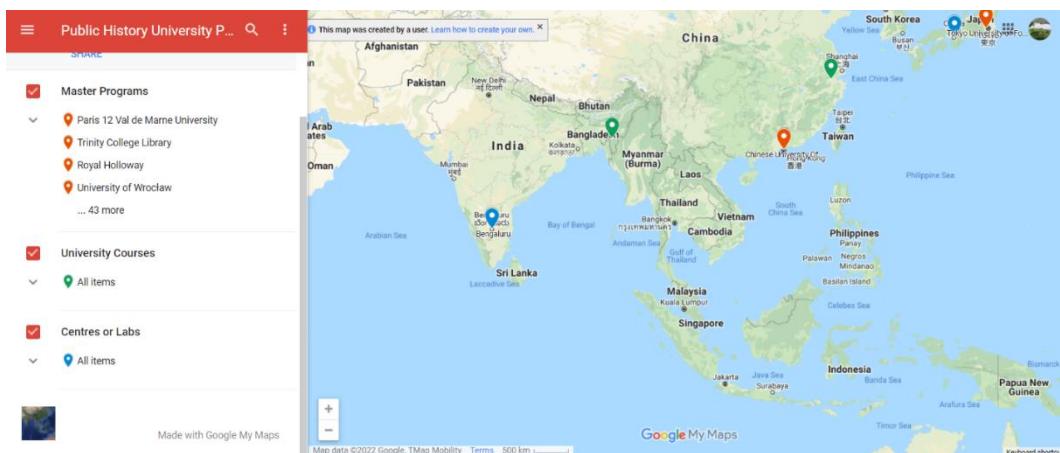


Figure I.8: Screenshot of the same map as Figure I., focusing on the regions of South Asia, Asia, and Southeast Asia.

This consideration was posed as a mode of critical reflexivity, an exercise which helped reimagine public history’s discourse beyond established Western models, as well as to rethink historical research’s purpose and function within the thesis. Consequently, the research question was adjusted to ask how pre-DK and DK experiences affected the formation and development of a ‘public history’ in Cambodia. Within this framework,

historical research became a tool and primary method of inquiry for configuring the formation and development of public history as it uniquely exists in Cambodia. More importantly, the refined line of investigation averted the mere application of public history methods and instead incited the opportunity to reflect on the question of what public history *is* and what it *does* in a Cambodian-Khmer¹⁴ context. What emerged through the process of historical research was not a single definition of public history, but a montage of various forms, practices, and philosophies deriving from indigenous knowledge systems and cultural traditions.

Because of the linguistic ‘disjunction’¹⁵ that frequently accompanies the process of translating from English to Khmer and vice versa, the thesis has chosen to maintain the usage of the English term ‘public history’ rather than offer a Khmer neologism. After an insightful conversation with Youk Chhang, the Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), it became clear that focusing on a cultural translation of public history in *lieu* of attempting a linguistic translation would be a more productive and insightful approach. Chhang explained that simply using the literal Khmer translation of ‘public’ (*sathearn*) is problematic because its English nuances and connotations would be lost; the word *sathearn* in certain circumstances, can connote ‘general’ or ‘common,’ and for Khmer

¹⁴ ‘Cambodia,’ refers to the modern nation-state, ‘Cambodians’ is used to describe the ethnically diverse inhabitants of the state, whilst ‘Khmer’ is the ethnic group that makes up the majority of the population in Cambodia. ‘Khmer’ is also the spoken language in Cambodia.

¹⁵ Pamela N. Corey and Ashley Thompson, ‘From the Editors,’ *UDAYA: Journal of Khmer Studies*, no. 12 (2014): pp. 1-4, (PDF) [Note from the Editors \(Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies 12 \(2014\), Special issue on modern and contemporary Cambodian art and aesthetics\) | Pamela N Corey and ashley thompson - Academia.edu](#), 3.

language speakers, it might bring to mind a ‘flea market or a shopping mall.’¹⁶ However, other contexts and indirect translations of ‘public’ into Khmer can suggest phrases such as ‘collective,’ ‘us,’ or ‘civic,’ which are words that are strongly associated with the Khmer concept of art (*silpah*, more commonly transcribed as *selapak*, the latter being the spelling that this thesis has decided to use). As such, beginning in Chapter 3, *selapak* becomes a vehicle for which to synthesise and culturally translate ‘grassroots’ Cambodian-Khmer public history practices in a way that is comprehensible to international publics.

Before doing so, the contents of Chapters 1 and 2 work to provide the necessary historical context and background knowledge on the implementation and development of ‘state-sanctioned’ public history after Democratic Kampuchea. Chapter 1 situates state-sanctioned public history’s trajectory alongside Cambodia’s tumultuous nation-state development (from 1979 to 2018), contentious foreign relations, and the emergence of key historiographic debates surrounding the DK period and the Khmer Rouge. Expanding on these findings, Chapter 2 surveys the various state-sanctioned and internationally funded public history initiatives that contribute to the historicization and memorialisation of the Khmer Rouge. Divided into four sections (Transitional Justice; National Commemoration and International Tourism; Archives, Education, and Outreach; Digital (Public) History), the survey critically examines the politics and authorial intentions that determine which publics

¹⁶ Author interview with Youk Chhang, Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia on May 24, 2021.

are included and left out of the processes of remembrance, history-making, and memorialisation.

As the reader progresses through the first two chapters, it shall become apparent that public history in Cambodia is orally and visually driven. For this reason, and because many international readers may be unfamiliar with the content that is covered in the narrative, a substantial number of images are incorporated into the body of the thesis, which supplement the descriptive text of Cambodia's public history landscape. Moreover, understanding Cambodian public history as being highly visual facilitates the transition into the objectives of Chapters 3, 4, and 5, which work together to historicise the cultivation of what this thesis terms, a 'grassroots public history movement' in post-DK Cambodia. Chapter 3 uses historical research methods combined with cultural translations of *selapak* (art) and *silpakar* (artist) to configure the post-DK 'revitalisation of the Cambodian arts' as a 'grassroots public history movement,' and the role of the post-DK *silpakar* as a 'public historian,' or 'public history practitioner.' Photography and film are subsequently identified as the defining media of Cambodia's 'public history movement,' and the chapter concludes with an overview of the foundational reasons for examining the trajectory of the 'revitalisation of Cambodian arts' through the lens of camera media in Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 4 identifies the inaccuracies within the historiography of Cambodian camera media and the problems regarding their international reception, which have led to the 'revitalisation of the Cambodian arts' being misrepresented in international contemporary art circuits as a singular historical moment in which contemporary

Cambodian *silpakar*—particularly photographers and filmmakers— ‘emerged from out of nowhere.’¹⁷ The chapter is structured as a narrative that chronologically charts the history of the various functions of camera media and analyses the implications of the changes in those functions brought on first by colonialism, then the Democratic Kampuchea, and in subsequent years, international perspectives wrought in a neo-colonial *mentalité*. Peppering this comprehensive historical account are historiographic discussions that intersect methods in public history with photography theory and film theory. These dialogues are intended to deepen the reader’s understanding of key sociohistorical patterns and continuities associated with Cambodian camera media that traversed colonialism, Democratic Kampuchea, and contemporary international (mis)appropriations of Cambodian photography and film. The chapter concludes with the section, ‘Photography on Trial,’ a narrative that emerged from transitional justice proceedings between 2011 and 2016, which offers a new and more complicated perspective of the photography produced under Democratic Kampuchea.

The fifth and final chapter of the thesis amalgamates and applies the findings of the previous chapters to synthesise a narrative of the ‘revitalisation of the Cambodian arts’ as a multi, trans, and intergenerational, ‘grassroots public history movement’ that began in the years after Democratic Kampuchea and continues into the present day. Adopting Marianne Hirsch’s model of survivor memory and postmemory, the narrative is told through

¹⁷ Zhuang Wubin, ‘Out of Nowhere: Contemporary Cambodian Photography,’ *Art Monthly Australia*, December 2009, pp. 5-8.

the biographies and oeuvres of Rithy Panh (a survivor of DK) and Vandy Rattana (of the postmemory generation), who are two of the most prominent and influential *silpakar* of camera media in contemporary Cambodia. By giving due attention to the continuities in generational acts of agency, creation, and transmission, the chapter offers a glimpse into the complexity of rebuilding social frameworks for the collective memory in the wake of genocide.

Although there are many high calibre research projects which have utilised the history and memory of Democratic Kampuchea as case studies in the application of established methods and practices that fall under the umbrella of international public history, there are no synthesised historical accounts of public history in Cambodia. This thesis is therefore foundational in the sense that it provides the first overview of the formation and development of a Cambodian public history. It is also perhaps the first attempt to historicise the field in the greater region of Southeast Asia. In this capacity, the scholarship put forth in these pages successfully decentres ‘the West’ as a locus for the field’s conceptualisation, advancement, and progress. Given these challenges and objectives, it was necessary to paint with a broad brush whilst staying within the parameters of the nation, and cover what may seem like a highly ambitious time range of contemporary Cambodian history. Consequently, there are many facets of this research that require more detailed attention and further expansion through additional studies. As a work of public history in itself, this thesis was written not with the intention of being a definitive guide to public history in Cambodia, but rather, with the hope that it will serve as a springboard for

future research and discussion on public history in Cambodia, Southeast Asia, and the collective Global South.

CHAPTER 1

Situating Public History in Contemporary Post-Transition Cambodia

Although the field has yet to be nationally institutionalised, public history is an inherent feature of contemporary Cambodian historical and political practices. As a formative, or perhaps ‘*the* formative baseline’ in Cambodia’s recent past,¹ the history of the Khmer Rouge is both foundational to, and synonymous with, the development of the nation-state and public history in Cambodia.² While the overall concern of the research lies in the investigation of public history as it pertains to Khmer Rouge memory and historiography, this chapter situates public history in contemporary Cambodia as an extension of the post-Democratic Kampuchean (DK) and post-transition periods of the Cambodian nation-state, and as a practice that evolved alongside developments in Khmer Rouge historiography between 1979 and the present.

An inquiry into the development of public history in relation to the Khmer Rouge’s historiographic trajectory may help to theorise how specific methods and approaches of public history can alleviate the disparities between state-official, international, and grassroots historical initiatives in Cambodia, whilst adding depth to international reception and understanding of the Khmer Rouge. Such an approach offers the preliminary context

¹ Pamela Corey, ‘The Conditions for Contemporary Art in Post-Transition Cambodia,’ *Asia Art Archive*, presentation at Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry, Museum of Modern Art, NY, April 21 2013, digital film/recording, 01:55, accessed October 3, 2020, [Collections | Search | Panel I: The Conditions for Contemporary Art in Post-Transition Cambodia | Asia Art Archive \(aaa.org.hk\)](#).

² Paul Ashton and Alex Trapeznik, eds., *What Is Public History Globally?: Working with the Past in the Present*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), ‘Introduction,’ paragraph 4, location 285, Kindle.

that is needed for Chapter 2's survey of various state-sanctioned and internationally supported public history forms and practices in Cambodia.

The conditions under which Cambodian and Khmer Rouge-specific public histories are situated in this chapter, are referred to as *contemporary post-transition*, that is, public history as it exists in Cambodia today. The term 'post-transition' is used to refer to 'the experiences that were dependent on the changes initiated by the transition,' from the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) to the provisional government of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC, 1992-1993), including the 'processes of globalisation and neoliberalism.'³ In the context of this research, the term *contemporary post-transition* functions to distinguish contemporary public history sources and practices that developed in response to the political, economic, cultural, and societal shifts and negotiations that were spawned by the Paris Agreements of 1991 and the UNTAC period, from the public history sources and practices in the years immediately following DK under the Vietnamese-backed PRK government.

This chapter posits that the development of the Cambodian nation-state played a crucial role in underwriting the evolution of Cambodian public history by orienting public reception through investments in politically-driven cultural institutions.⁴ Within this framework, the history of the Khmer Rouge and its primary historiographic debates are re-configured through a comparative analysis of two 'top-down public history' sources that

³ Corey, 'The Conditions', *Asia Art Archive*, 01:58.

⁴ Ashton and Trapeznik, 'Introduction,' *What Is Public History Globally?*, paragraph 3, location 293-312.

exemplify PRK and contemporary post-transition public histories, respectively: the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes, and the 16th of November 2018 disposition of Case 002/02 in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. The two are contextualised as ‘top-down public history’ sources because they emanate voices of authority that dominated the two distinctive phases of nation-state development and because both continue to inform the international public’s historical understanding of Khmer Rouge history. When combined into a single analysis, the Tuol Sleng Museum and Case 002/02 form a microcosm that illustrates the tri-partitive basis of understanding that is needed for re-configuring the history of the Khmer Rouge and propelling the historiography forward— namely, trauma recovery, the changing objectives of history from 1979 to the present, and the public reception of Khmer Rouge history. Whilst each are distinctive processes, the analysis of the Tuol Sleng Museum and Case 002/02 demonstrate how the two state narratives converge at key moments, as well as how their evolutions are both parallel to and dependent upon one another. More importantly however, the analysis provides insight as to why historical understanding must not be solely informed by what is deemed ‘state-official public history’ discourse.

Prerequisites that are required for an analysis that effectively situates public history in contemporary post-transition Cambodia include understanding the DK era as an historical trauma, a demonstrated working knowledge of the specific cultural response to and interpretation of trauma in Cambodia, trauma’s impact on historiography, and the need for

historical acknowledgement of DK's *pastness* in future research.⁵ As Boreth Ly, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge and scholar of Cambodian art and visual studies points out, 'the term "trauma" is overused in describing the experience of devastation and its affects and effects, especially as inscribed on the bodies and psyches of both the survivors and the perpetrators of the Khmer Rouge, as well as the subsequent generations of Cambodians.'⁶ Trauma's over-usage thus deems it necessary to clarify how the term *trauma* will be utilised throughout the course of this research.

To an extent, the general definition of trauma is suitable for the objectives of this research, which uses *trauma* to describe 'what happens when an incommensurable element enters and disturbs' the individual and collective psychic and/or corporeal spaces.⁷ The DK period is represented in an historical context as a moment of 'rupture and discontinuity.'⁸ The trauma that was experienced on a cultural level marks 'a break' in the broader trajectory of Cambodian history and 'linear historical temporality,'⁹ thereby engraining current historical understanding as a manifestation of trauma.

The term trauma is also used in this research in conjunction with 'response,' 'recovery,' and 'healing.' When understanding cultural responses to trauma and trauma

⁵ Alon Confino, 'A World Without Jews: Interpreting the Holocaust,' *German History* 27, no. 4 (2009): 531, [World Without Jews: Interpreting the Holocaust* | German History | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#).

⁶ Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide*, version Kindle (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2020), 33.

⁷ Gregory Bistoien, *Trauma, Ethics and the Political Beyond PTSD: The Dislocations of the Real* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), [Trauma, Ethics and the Political beyond PTSD | SpringerLink](#), 2.

⁸ Patrizia Violi, *Landscapes of Memory, Trauma, Space, History*, ed. Katia Pizzi, trans. Alistair McEwan, vol. 7, *Cultural Memories* (Pieterlen: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag Der Wissenschaften, 2017), 64.

⁹ Violi, *Landscapes of Memory*, 64.

recovery, particularly in a non-Western context such as Cambodia, it is essential to acknowledge that 'Western psychiatric knowledge about trauma cannot simply be regarded as neutral, objective, or universally valid,' as it would risk 'a form of neo-colonialism, in which local knowledge systems are measured against a foreign standard.'¹⁰ Given this, utilising the term trauma to describe the atrocities that took place in the period of Democratic Kampuchea means being receptive to the idea that the ways in which people respond to and interpret trauma are largely shaped by culture.¹¹ Survivors of DK often use the words 'broken' and 'shattered' to describe their experiences of trauma in its aftermath.¹² A uniquely Cambodian idiom of distress is called *baksbat*, meaning 'broken courage,' literally translated as the permanent breaking of the body or spirit.¹³ Its clinical diagnosis is akin to PTSD (although with certain underlying differences) and is used to describe 'the psychological responses to the severely traumatic events experienced by Cambodian people in the past decades.'¹⁴ *Baksbat* is also used to express the collective responses to trauma as well as cultural behaviours. Sotheara Chhim, a DK survivor and psychiatrist, summarises the symptoms of *baksbat* that he observed in case studies:

'The first sign of *baksbat* is *phay-khlach* (fear-fear), related directly to the shocking events that they experienced. This *phay-khlach* reaction leads the person who experienced the events to become *reang-charl* (to resolve to cease doing anything; Sath and Chhit 2001), *khlach ro-arh* (being fearful or feeling dread, and wishing never to experience the event ever again), and *bor-veas-chea-chgnay* (wishing the traumatic event would go away). Many

¹⁰ Bistoën, *Trauma, Ethics and the Political*, 23.

¹¹ Bistoën, *Trauma, Ethics and the Political*, 23.

¹² Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 37.

¹³ Sotheara Chhim, 'Baksbat (Broken Courage): A Trauma-Based Cultural Syndrome in Cambodia,' *Medical Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2013): pp. 160-173 [Baksbat \(Broken Courage\): A Trauma-Based Cultural Syndrome in Cambodia: Medical Anthropology: Vol 32, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891013113500000), 165.

¹⁴ Chhim, 'Baksbat (Broken Courage),' *Medical Anthropology*, 161-162.

reported a loss of courage and an inability to confront others. Most were afraid to disclose their identity to anyone or talk to others about what they had experienced (*dam-doeum-kor*, planting the *kapok* tree or mute tree; Ebihara, Mortland, and Ledgerwood 1994:82), and some pretended to be dumb or deaf: “Say nothing, hear nothing and understand nothing” (Yathai 1987:63). They also felt unable to speak about their fears (*kob yobal*—idea is buried) and experienced this as a kind of fear about fear (or double fear).¹⁵

The significance of *baksbat* in the context of this research is that its symptoms have been made manifest in the historicization process. Archivist, Michelle Caswell, provides the foundational observation that, ‘until very recently, it was taboo in Cambodia to discuss the Khmer Rouge. The regime was conspicuously absent from classrooms, and parents rarely discussed their experiences with their children,’ and in the last decade, it was foreign tourists that made up the majority of visitors to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.¹⁶ In this chapter’s analysis, the cultural silence and absence of dialogue in relation to Khmer Rouge history are not only indicative of symptoms of *baksbat*, but also of trauma being utilised as an instrument of politics, which is made apparent through post-DK government propaganda, international intervention efforts, and litigation processes.

These political dimensions are reflected in Khmer Rouge historiography, which transversely associates trauma recovery with the cultural ‘ability to draw the right lessons’ from the historical trauma.¹⁷ An argument of this chapter is that such an association and application of trauma within historiography create the false perception that trauma itself is *the* productive dimension to history. During the PRK and contemporary post-transition

¹⁵ Chhim, ‘Baksbat (Broken Courage),’ *Medical Anthropology*, 163.

¹⁶ Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 97.

¹⁷ Bistoën, *Trauma, Ethics, and the Political*, 123.

public history eras for example, the trauma of genocide was and continues to be, central to shaping and attempting to understand Khmer Rouge history. Throughout the four-decade trajectory of Khmer Rouge historiography, genocide has functioned as the *fabula*, while trauma was the overarching focaliser.¹⁸ Although the PRK and contemporary post-transition narratives shared the same *fabula* and focaliser, it becomes clear through analysis that the two periods of governance perceived, interpreted, and projected the trauma of genocide using different guises that did not necessarily reflect or align with those of historical events and the Cambodian culture.

Contrary to Khmer Rouge historiographies wherein trauma is the focal point of the narrative, this research posits that the opposite should be the case: trauma is what ‘shatters the fantasmic window through which we ordinarily perceive reality and ourselves,’ effectively immobilising the process of history when it becomes the focal point. It is therefore more useful to conceptualise history not as a source of knowledge wherein meaning and lessons from trauma can be drawn, but rather a discourse that has the potential to contribute to the overall process of trauma healing and recovery, which

¹⁸ Miek Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). See pages 5, 10, and 145-49. In narrative theory, the *narrative* is defined as a cultural phenomenon and a text, ‘in which an agent or a subject conveys to an addressee a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof,’ 5. The *fabula* is the ‘colouring’ of a series of events that are caused or experienced by actors within the narrative, 5, while the *focaliser* is the subject of *focalisation*, or a point from which the narratological elements are viewed, 149. Meanwhile, the *focalisation* is the relationship between the subject and the object, 149.

includes giving survivors agency to ‘define, conceptualise, and articulate their experiences of trauma within and outside the space of the nation,’ and national historical constructs.¹⁹

Developing such a discourse with an historical perspective requires a re-configuration of Khmer Rouge historiography; one that is inclusive of vernacular cultural history, idioms, religious traditions, and unofficial memories, which are ‘reservoir(s) of resources’²⁰ that can be utilised to increase public understanding of Khmer Rouge history and strengthen the social bonds that are inherent to the survivors’ feeling of a sense of community.²¹ As the analysis demonstrates, largely absent in the realm of national and politically-driven public history where intense debates that shape the historiography take place, are platforms that give survivors the power and agency to determine the direction of historiography and trauma recovery. In other words, vernacular memory and cultural history have been left in the peripheries of historiography and international public understanding, which have tended to favour sensationalised and politically driven rhetoric.

This is the point at which historical research may be activated into a form of public history. For historical research of the Khmer Rouge to effectively function as public history in Cambodia, it not only must include sources that exist outside the official narrative and give voice to survivors but allow those very sources and voices to help shape and configure the historiography. Although the Tuol Sleng Museum and the Extraordinary Chambers in

¹⁹ Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 35.

²⁰ Bistoën, *Trauma, Ethics, and the Political*, 48.

²¹ Bistoën, *Trauma, Ethics, and the Political*, 24-25.

the Courts of Cambodia were founded on different motives, both are products of politics controlling the national memory and historical narrative.²² To counter the authoritative and politicised historical narratives of the Tuol Sleng Museum and Case 002/02, and the absence of democratised sources— or, sources that allow survivors the ‘freedom to relate to the past in their own ways— in this first chapter, vernacular cultural history and idioms such as *baksbat*, are incorporated and explained, as they assist in the reading and analyses of public history in Cambodia. However, this chapter is primarily concerned with gaining insight into the ‘top-down’ public history discourse that was cultivated through ‘master narratives’ in order to determine how subsequent chapters of this dissertation may best contribute to the further advancement of Khmer Rouge historiography through the utilisation of unofficial public history sources.

Similar to Holocaust discourse, DK historiography’s intense preoccupation with the trauma of genocide has led to the DK era becoming not only an integral part of Cambodian, Khmer, and Southeast Asian history, ‘but also a central moral event in human history.’²³ While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to anticipate how future Khmer Rouge historiographic trends will diverge from what has become a stagnant narrative of trauma, it is important to note that such progression is largely dependent upon reaching a consensus for a focaliser that replaces trauma. This occurs when there is recognition of historical

²² Mark Donnelly ‘Public History in Britain: Re-Possessing the Past’, in Paul Ashton and Alex Trapeznik, eds., *What Is Public History Globally?: Working with the Past in the Present*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), Chapter 2, location 829.

²³ Confino, ‘A World Without Jews,’ *German History*, 531.

pastness, which may be defined as a neutral historical perspective that acknowledges the ‘foundational aspect’ of, in this case, the Khmer Rouge, without making the trauma itself ‘a unique, central point of [Cambodian] history.’²⁴ It must be clearly iterated that recognising the *pastness* of the Khmer Rouge and DK by no means equates to forgetting or diminishing the extent of trauma that was inflicted, nor is it simply a result of the passing of over four decades since the fall of DK.²⁵ *Pastness* is an historiographic occurrence that takes place after a period of ‘intense public and professional preoccupation(s)’ with the atrocities of the regime.²⁶

Khmer Rouge historiography is still in the phase of ‘intense public and professional preoccupation,’ as it continues to grapple with the magnitude of the trauma of genocide, particularly how the word *genocide* (*prolai pouch-sas* in Khmer) is used to describe and isolate the atrocities of the DK regime. Like the survivors who are described as having *baksbat*, the trauma of DK has come to embody a break in Cambodian historiography. Both the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes and Case 002/02 are products and stimuli of a global preoccupation with genocide, which has allowed Cambodia’s history to become a point of reference alongside other contemporary cases of mass atrocity such as Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and East Timor, which together help to inform the general structure of genocide studies. Simultaneously, Khmer Rouge history is also demonstrative of the array of highly charged usages of the word *genocide* that are unique to the Cambodian experience, which

²⁴ Confino, ‘A World Without Jews,’ *German History*, 532.

²⁵ Confino, ‘A World Without Jews,’ *German History*, 531.

²⁶ Confino, ‘A World Without Jews,’ *German History*, 531.

have consequently led to the further historical *bak*²⁷ (breaking) of the DK period from the broader trajectory of Cambodian history as well as genocide studies.



Figure 1.1: Clay Gilliland, *Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum*, 2013, digital image, Flickr. Creative Commons License (CC BY-SA 2.0), [Creative Commons — Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic — CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/).

The origins of this Khmer Rouge-specific *bak* in contemporary Cambodian historiographic consciousness may be traced back to The Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes (Figure 1.1) and its monumentalising of genocide as the genesis narrative of the PRK state. The site is what Pierre Nora would refer to as an *acceleration of history*, a ‘rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good...’ therefore rupturing the equilibrium of historical continuity.²⁸ What is meant by this is that Tuol Sleng immediately transformed what was an ongoing series of cultural traumas into a fractured historical past,

²⁷ Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 36.

²⁸ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,’ *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7, [Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire | Representations | University of California Press \(ucpress.edu\)](https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/representations).

isolating the atrocities of DK as unrelated to and distinctive from Cambodian/Khmer historical experiences of the past, present, and future.

Anthropologist, Judy Ledgerwood, poignantly iterates in her analysis of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum that ‘in the rhetoric of [its] ruin...[Tuol Sleng] seem(s) not merely to gesture toward past events but to suggest’ that it is a fragment of events, ‘inviting us to mistake the debris of history for history itself.’²⁹ This is particularly resonating in the museum’s propagandistic curation by the People’s Republic of Kampuchea; the site was explicitly designed for visitors to absorb and disseminate a history of genocide based on *snarm* (‘meaning a scar from a wound that leaves an indelible mark on the body.’ *Snarm* can also be translated as ‘traces’).³⁰ In other words, the museum and its archives are the visible scars of violent events, mere traces of a legacy of the DK regime rather than historical accounts. But what exactly is that legacy? Is it genocide as the museum’s name implies? If so, what is the historical context of that genocide?

These are questions that went unasked and unanswered in Tuol Sleng during the PRK phase of public history. For this reason, the analysis reads the museum as *un milieu de mémoire*;³¹ an historical testament to Cambodia’s national development and the initial characteristics through which state-authorized Cambodian public history was born: the

²⁹ James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), quoted by Judy Ledgerwood, in ‘The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative,’ *Museum Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (1997): 89, [The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative - Ledgerwood - 1997 - Museum Anthropology - Wiley Online Library](#).

³⁰ Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 19.

³¹ See Nora’s discernment between *les lieux de mémoire* (sites of history) and *milieu de mémoire* (real environments of memory). Nora, ‘Between Memory and History,’ 7.

construction of a new national identity, political legitimisation, propaganda, and evidence and proof for crimes of genocide.



Figure 1.2: Ho Van Tay and Dinh Fong, Vietnamese rescuing children found at Tuol Sleng on January 19, 1979, film still, Documentation Center of Cambodia.

Despite its ambiguity, the term *genocide* was almost immediately applied to the atrocities of DK by the People's Republic of Kampuchea. On the 25th of January 1979, a mere two weeks after Vietnamese photojournalists discovered the secret prison and torture headquarters of *Santebal* (the Khmer Rouge secret police, literally translated as

‘keeper of the peace’), *Tuol Sleng*³² (‘the hillock of the sleng tree’ code name S-21), the newly established PRK invited journalists from socialist countries to be the first witnesses of the Cambodian genocide.³³ Michelle Caswell emphasises that the Vietnamese army was aware of the significance of the prison and its documents as evidence that could be used to ‘hold the Khmer Rouge accountable.’³⁴ Upon their discovery of Tuol Sleng on the 8th of January 1979, the two Vietnamese photojournalists and a film crew used both film and photography to document the scene, which included 5 crying children on the brink of starvation (Figure 1.2), recently slain and tortured corpses that were bloated, rotting, and chained to bedframes, and ‘large, fat chickens’ that feasted on the maggots inside the corpses (Figure 1.3-1.4).³⁵



Figures 1.3: Ho Van Tay and Dinh Fong, Vietnamese discovery of Tuol Sleng on January 10, 1979, images from the Documentation Center of Cambodia, accessed December 30, 2021.

³² Before the Khmer Rouge seized Phnom Penh, the Tuol Sleng was the site of a high school called Tuol Svey Prey (Khmer for ‘the hillock of the wild mango’). Tuol Sleng is translated from Khmer as ‘the hillock of the sleng tree’ (the fruit of which is poisonous). Ledgerwood, ‘The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum,’ *Museum Anthropology*, 83.

³³ James Tyner, Savina Sirik, and Samuel Henkin, ‘Violence and the Dialectics of Landscape: Memorialization in Cambodia,’ *Geographical Review* 104, no. 3 (July 2014): 284, [Violence and the Dialectics of Landscape: Memorialization in Cambodia: Geographical Review: Vol 104, No 3 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1111/gere.12144).

³⁴ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 64.

³⁵ See excerpts of the original footage shot upon the discovery of S-21 in a short documentary that features one of the Vietnamese photojournalists. Ho Van Tay, in *The First Witness* (Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2019), [Films \(dccam.org\)](https://www.dccam.org/films).



Figures 1.4: Ho Van Tay and Dinh Fong, Vietnamese discovery of Tuol Sleng on January 10, 1979, images from the Documentation Center of Cambodia, accessed December 30, 2021.

Just months after the discovery of Tuol Sleng on the 15th of July 1979, the PRK passed Decree Law No. 1, which established the People’s Revolutionary Tribunal (PRT) ‘to try the Pol Pot – Ieng Sary Clique for the Crime of Genocide’.³⁶ It is worth noting here that since 1950, Cambodia had been a contracting party of the Genocide Convention, but it had not been incorporated into the country’s Penal Code prior to 1975.³⁷ Article 1 of Decree Law no. 1 of the PRT provided a definition of genocide that accurately described the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, but was inconsistent with the definition of genocide that is laid out in Article II of the Genocide Convention.³⁸

³⁶ Tom Fawthrop and Helen Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide?: Elusive Justice and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 41, [Getting Away with Genocide?: Elusive Justice and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal: Onesearch Service for University of Guam \(ebscohost.com\)](https://www.ebscohost.com).

³⁷ Frank Selbmann, ‘The 1979 Trial of the People’s Revolutionary Tribunal and Implications for ECCC,’ in *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia Assessing Their Contribution to International Criminal Law*, ed. Simon M. Meisenberg and Ignaz Stegmüller (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), 91.

³⁸ Selbmann, ‘The 1979 Trial,’ *The Extraordinary Chambers*, 91.

'Planned mass killing of innocent people, forced evacuation of the population from cities and villages, concentration of the population and forcing them to work in physically and morally exhausting conditions, abolition of religion, destruction of economic and cultural structures and of family and social relations.'³⁹

To use David Chandler's words, 'in many respects [the trial] was a farce,'⁴⁰ or at least, that is how it was perceived at the time by most Western countries and media outlets, which dismissed the PRT as nothing more than a show trial and neither attempted to study the evidence, nor monitor the trial proceedings.⁴¹ Indeed there were aspects of the process that undermined the tribunal's credibility, including the decision to indict only two leaders (Pol Pot and Ieng Sary) instead of all top members of the CPK, not raising legal challenges attached to the term genocide, and a predetermined agenda and verdict. Additionally, a defence lawyer for Pol Pot and Ieng Sary condemned the two defendants as 'criminally insane monsters' who should have the death penalty.⁴²

One month later, the world's first genocide trial was held in Phnom Penh's Chaktomuk Theatre and the two leaders of the Communist Party of Kampuchea- Pol Pot and Ieng Sary- were tried in absentia (Figures 1.5 and 1.6).⁴³ While the trial may have shed some light on valuable evidence of the DK regime and the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK, the party that controlled Democratic Kampuchea) found at Tuol Sleng, according to

³⁹ Selbmann, 'The 1979 Trial,' *The Extraordinary Chambers*, 91.

⁴⁰ David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 2008), 280.

⁴¹ Fawthrop and Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide?*, 47.

⁴² Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 238.

⁴³ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 238.

Sebastian Strangio, the trial's length and verdicts were set in advance, and in a matter of one week, the trial concluded by condemning the two men to death.



Figure 1.5: The People's Revolutionary Tribunal in Phnom Penh in 1979, Photograph, Documentation Centre of Cambodia, accessed December 30, 2021. eccc.gov.kh



Figure 1.6: Testimony at The People's Revolutionary Tribunal which tried Pol Pot and Ieng Sary for genocide in 1979, Documentation Center of Cambodia, accessed December 30, 2021. ushmm.org

Soon after the conclusion of the People's Revolutionary Tribunal, the PRK began work on turning the former high school-turned-prison torture centre into a museum, under the supervision of Vietnamese colonel Mai Lam, who was known for creating the Museum of American War Crimes in Ho Chi Minh City.⁴⁴ As a way to appeal to Western sympathies, Mai Lam and the PRK were eager to draw comparisons of DK and Tuol Sleng, with Nazi Germany and, in the words of Serge Thion, the 'sinister charisma' of Auschwitz.⁴⁵ During the early 1980s, Mai Lam travelled to countries such as Germany, Russia, France, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, researching Holocaust museums and exhibits⁴⁶ in efforts to cast DK as a fascist regime similar to Hitler's Germany... as he was aware that 'it was important for the Vietnamese to argue that what happened in Cambodia under Democratic Kampuchea, and particularly at S-21, was genocide, resembling the Holocaust in World War II, rather than the assassinations of political enemies...'⁴⁷ With his training in legal studies, museology, and knowledge of the Khmer language, Mai Lam transformed the compound and the prison's extensive photographic records into the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes. The museum was inaugurated on the 17th of April 1980 (the anniversary of the capturing of

⁴⁴ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 64.

⁴⁵ David P. Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 5.

⁴⁶ Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 89.

⁴⁷ David P. Chandler, 'Tuol Sleng and S-21', in *Searching for the Truth, Tuol Sleng and S-21* (google.com).

Phnom Penh by Khmer Rouge forces)⁴⁸, and officially opened to the public on the 13th of July 1980.⁴⁹

The rapidity in which the PRK created and opened the museum underscores the political urgency that existed to assert a national narrative that would effectively legitimise Vietnam's military action against Democratic Kampuchea as well as the PRK's subsequent control over Cambodia,⁵⁰ which itself was made up of Khmer Rouge cadre defectors and further supported by the military of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). Countries including the United States and China, viewed Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia as an aggressive invasion of what they believed to be a sovereign state. In response, the PRK utilised Tuol Sleng to narrate and prove Vietnam's actions as humanitarian, saving the Cambodian people from a genocidal regime.⁵¹ For the Khmer Rouge defectors in the PRK, a 'master narrative' of genocide served as an opportunity to not only separate themselves from the heinous crimes committed at S-21, but also to blame the 'handful of sadistic genocidal traitors,' for the deliberate extermination of three million fellow countrymen,⁵² whilst 'keeping the door open for future defections.'⁵³ At the same time, the utilisation of the term *genocide* was an important strategy for the PRK as a communist regime to ensure

⁴⁸ Helen Jarvis, 'Powerful Remains: the Continuing Presence of Victims of the Khmer Rouge Regime in Today's Cambodia,' *Human Remains and Violence: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1, no. 2 (2015): pp. 36-55, [Powerful remains: the continuing presence of victims of the Khmer Rouge regime in today's Cambodia in: Human Remains and Violence: An Interdisciplinary Journal Volume 1 Issue 2 \(2015\) \(manchesteropenhive.com\)](#), 5.

⁴⁹ Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 88.

⁵⁰ Tyner, et al., 'Violence and the Dialectic of Landscape', *Geographical Review*, 284.

⁵¹ Tyner, et al., 'Violence and the Dialectic of Landscape', *Geographical Review*, 284.

⁵² Three million was the number that the museum stated. Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 82.

⁵³ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 239.

that communist ideologies weren't tainted by DK atrocities.⁵⁴ Additionally, a genocidal narrative was a way for former cadres to justify their alliance with Vietnam, the 'hereditary enemy'⁵⁵ of the CPK.⁵⁶ Thus, from these political circumstances, was born the first phase of the formation of a national public history in Cambodia.

An important objective of the museum as a form of public history was to disseminate the narrative of genocide to the masses. To foster this, the museum began with opening its doors to the general public on Sundays and reserving weekdays for organised visits by foreign and local groups.⁵⁷ According to Judy Ledgerwood's citation of data from the 1980 Ministry of Culture, Information and Propaganda report, 32,000 guests visited Tuol Sleng the first week it became open to the public, and between July and October 1980, the museum saw over 320,000 visitors: 11,000 foreigners and 309,000 Khmer.⁵⁸ As part of a visa requirement to enter the PRK, foreign nationals were expected to visit Tuol Sleng in order to become 'witnesses of genocide' and disseminate the PRK's master narrative upon return to their home country.⁵⁹

The original curation style of the museum reflected minimal intervention and provided foreign visitors an atmosphere where they could imagine exactly how the space functioned as a prison and torture centre. The 'authentic' experience was further

⁵⁴ Lesley-Rozen, 'Memory at the site', in *Remembering Genocide*, 134.

⁵⁵ Ben Kiernan, 'People Heng in Against Pol Pot', *Nation Review*, (Melbourne) April 5 1979, in crimes again 285. Pol Pot radio statement from 5th January 1979.

⁵⁶ Violi, *Landscapes of Memory*, 151-2.

⁵⁷ Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 88.

⁵⁸ Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 88.

⁵⁹ Lesley-Rozen, 'Memory at the site', *Remembering Genocide*, 137.

embedded by the stench that lingered in the compound for the first year the museum was open, along with the faded blood stains on the tiled floors that went unwashed until 2010.⁶⁰ Although it was a poignant and graphic experience that left foreign visitors faced with evidence and proof of ‘what really happened’⁶¹ (genocide), the museum was, in the words of James Tyner, ‘devoid of history.’⁶²

Patrizia Violi underscores that ‘Tuol Sleng is not a museum to make people know and understand, it is a museum intended to make people feel.’⁶³ For the Cambodians who attended the museum, many came with the purpose of searching through the display of prisoner identification photographs in hopes of being able to identify missing relatives, but they were also searching for an explanation for the atrocities they personally had experienced.⁶⁴ Yet, all that could be gathered through an experience of Tuol Sleng were mere traces, *snarm*, of just one of many aspects of DK violence, a reflection of the PRK’s aim to provide a Manichean framework in a propaganda campaign to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of the Khmer people.⁶⁵

The design of the museum encouraged visitors to circumambulate clockwise through the four main buildings-A, B, C, D (Figure 1.7) ⁶⁶- echoing the performative movements of Buddhist monks during funerary practices. Visitors would first encounter the

⁶⁰ Tyner, et al., ‘Violence and the Dialectic of Landscape’, *Geographical Review*, 285.

⁶¹ Ledgerwood, ‘The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum’, *Museum Anthropology*, 89.

⁶² Tyner, et al., ‘Violence and the Dialectic of Landscape’, *Geographical Review*, 286.

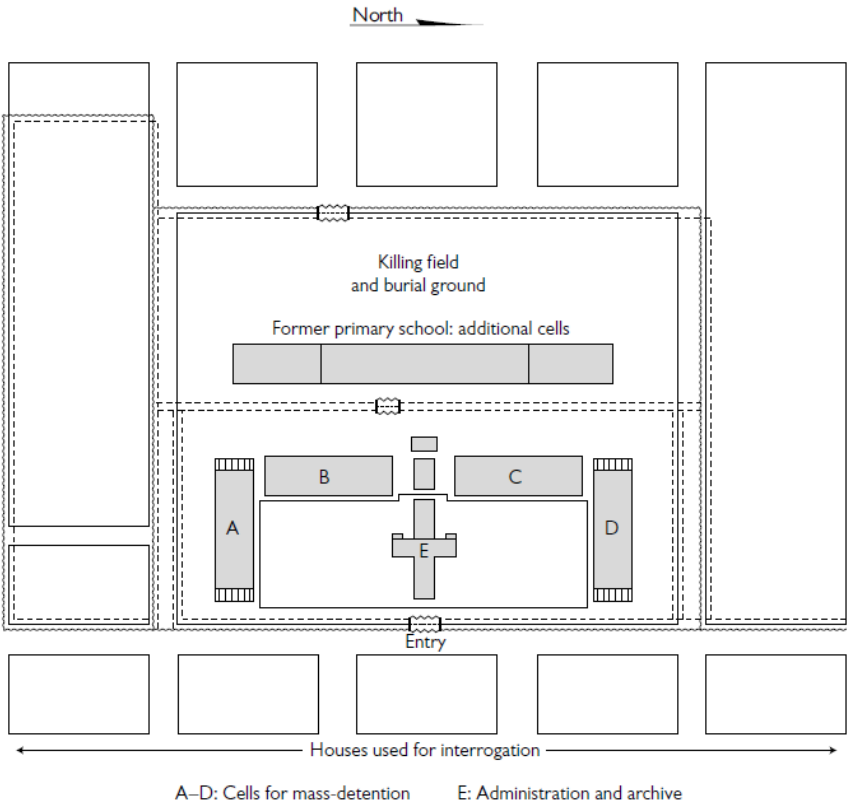
⁶³ Violi, *Landscapes of Memory*, 157.

⁶⁴ Ledgerwood, ‘The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum’, *Museum Anthropology*, 90.

⁶⁵ Ledgerwood, ‘The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum’, *Museum Anthropology*, 91.

⁶⁶ Ledgerwood, ‘The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum’, *Museum Anthropology*, 83.

graves of the 14 prisoners whose remains were discovered by the Vietnamese photojournalists on the 8th of January 1979, before entering Building A, which contained the rooms in which the 14 victims were found (refer to Figures 1.3 and 1.4). The space remained virtually untouched; the metal bedframes where the corpses once laid still occupied the same rooms along with the instruments of torture, while the blood of the victims was left to fade into the tile floors. The only alteration was the adding of a grainy photograph to each room, which displayed how the corpses were found in the torture rooms on the 8th of January 1979 (Figure 1.8).



Tuol Sleng Prison (S-21).

Figure 1.7: David Chandler, *Blueprint of Tuol Sleng Prison*, in *Voices From S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*, by David P. Chandler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), PS1, accessed December 30, 2021.



Figure 1.8: Satoshi Takahashi, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, (LightRocket: Getty Images, 2017), from 'Cambodia genocide: Khmer Rouge prison chief Comrade Duch dies,' *BBC News*.

Next, the visitors made their way through Building B, the walls of which were covered with photographs of those slain at S-21 (Figure 1.9). Most of the photographs were bureaucratic record-style prisoner identification photographs, while others were images of prisoners undergoing torture, or who were already killed. The prisoner identification photographs that were displayed came with no indication of who the individuals were or why they had been killed. Years of activation, re-activation, appropriation, and re-appropriation, of the Tuol Sleng prisoner identification photographs have resulted in the archive developing as an entity of public history that is separate from the museum. This research therefore deems it more useful to consider the Tuol Sleng archive as a contributor to the photographic record in Cambodia, which requires its own study in the fourth chapter of this research.



Figure 1.9: Carol A. Mortland, *Photographs of people killed at Tuol Sleng on display in building 2*, in 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 21, no. 1 (1997), 87.

As visitors absorbed the photographs without context on the first floor of Building B, there was meanwhile a trove of prison documents on its second floor that went uncatalogued and exposed to the elements throughout the 1980s.⁶⁷ The vast collection consisted of photographic negatives, arrest logbooks, written confessions, and daily lists of prisoners that the prison staff failed to destroy before fleeing Phnom Penh.⁶⁸ Milovan Djilas remarks that 'the way prisons are run and the way inmates are treated gives us a faithful picture of society, especially the ideas and methods of those who dominate society.'⁶⁹ As the documents were transformed into archives (to be discussed in chapter 2), historical

⁶⁷ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 66.

⁶⁸ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 66.

⁶⁹ Quote by Milovan Djilas. Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, 13.

research was undertaken that offered ideological insights into the CPK, also known as *Angkar*, or ‘the Organisation’. David Chandler’s 2008 book, *Voices From S-21* is a monographic study that is exclusively devoted to this line of investigation. It is worth noting here that Chandler’s and several other scholars’ research into the archives effectively problematised the ethics of the Cambodian genocide and the PRK’s historical construction as such, as the archives dispelled the binary semantic axis of good and evil, which formed the foundation of the PRK’s narrative that was echoed in the curation of the Tuol Sleng Museum. Research of the records would eventually reveal that approximately 12,273 individuals were imprisoned at Tuol Sleng between 1975 and 1979. Like those who constituted the PRK, 5,609 of Tuol Sleng prisoners were soldiers of the Revolutionary Army of Kampuchea, and another 4,371 were CPK cadres.⁷⁰ This means that more than 80 percent of Tuol Sleng detainees ‘had at some point supported or worked with the Khmer Rouge regime.’⁷¹

After Building B, visitors enter Building C, which provided a glimpse into the imprisonment conditions at S-21. Spaces that functioned as classrooms prior to the revolution had been transformed into holding areas. Individual cells were built from brick and were used to hold the ‘more important prisoners,’ (Figure 1.10) while those who were

⁷⁰ Case 002/01, Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (Closing Order 2010), [D427Eng.pdf \(eccc.gov.kh\)](#).

⁷¹ Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 20.

deemed as less important prisoners were shackled together as well as to the floor in long rows in the former classrooms.⁷²



Figure 1.10: Clay Gilliland, *Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum*, 2013, digital image, Flickr, accessed December 30, 2021. Creative Commons License (CC BY-SA 2.0), [Creative Commons — Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic — CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

The last building visitors were meant to walk through was Building D, the only space in which secondary sources and interpretive text were provided. The text and secondary sources worked hard to concentrate and direct the Cambodian people's anger by echoing the narrative of the PRT: blaming the 'Pol Pot clique,' namely, Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Nuon Chea, and Khieu Samphan⁷³ for genocide and citing their total responsibility for 3 million deaths that occurred between the 17th of April 1975 and the 6th of January 1979.⁷⁴ As David

⁷² Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 84.

⁷³ Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 91.

⁷⁴ 3 million was the number cited by the PRK. Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 91.

Chandler points out, as much as the Manichean framework may have made for poor history, it was an all-around more comfortable approach towards a master narrative;⁷⁵ neither visitors nor the PRK had to face the complex questions at the centre of DK history or seek their answers through investigating Marxist-Leninist and CPK ideologies as possible contributors to the large scale, layered, and varied violence that took place under the regime.

The first room of Building D contained a map that illustrated the population movements after Phnom Penh was evacuated by DK on the 17th of April 1975. Also contained in the room was the chair in which prisoners were seated as they had their documentation photograph taken. The photographs that were exhibited in the room were those the PRK had identified as the perpetrators of S-21: the administrators, the interrogators, cooks, and their families.⁷⁶ In the next room were socialist-realist paintings that vividly illustrated the torture of prisoners in the Tuol Sleng compound and buildings, rendered by one of the few people to survive Tuol Sleng, artist, Vann Nath (Figure 1.11). Pamela Corey reflects that during the DK regime, it was Vann Nath's ability to paint that spared his life and his 'imprisonment was a form of coerced artistic labour, as he was directed by the regime to paint portraits of Pol Pot and other leaders.' When DK fell, the PRK subsequently tasked Vann Nath with rendering episodes of imprisonment and torture for the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes.

⁷⁵ Chandler, *Voices From S-21*, 9.

⁷⁶ Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 85.



Figure 1.11: 'Paintings by human rights icon and artist, Vann Nath depicting how torture devices were used hang on the walls of Tuol Sleng Prison in Phnom Penh, Cambodia,' 2011, VOA.

After making their way through the room that exhibited Vann Nath's paintings, visitors entered the final room of Building 4, where they encountered the largest single exhibit of the museum and the climax of the museum tour, which, as David Chandler observed, was 'so grotesque' that it increased the distance between visitors and the prison's authenticity.⁷⁷ Installed on a wall was an arrangement of 320 human skulls in the shape of the Cambodian territory (Figures 1. 12-1.14), its rivers and lakes distinguished with paint that was the colour of 'blood-red'⁷⁸ (note: the map was removed in 2003 and replaced with a scaled, backlit photographic version, Figures 1.15).⁷⁹ According to the information that Judy Ledgerwood gathered from the Ministry of Culture, Information and Propaganda

⁷⁷ Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, 144.

⁷⁸ Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 85.

⁷⁹ Alex Hinton, 'Truth, Representation, and the Politics of Memory After Genocide,' in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Moral Order in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 76.

report of 1980, the map's skulls had been exhumed from 'killing fields' of every Cambodian province.⁸⁰ On the wall adjacent to the 'map of skulls' was its key, which indicated the percentage of persons killed under Democratic Kampuchea according to province.⁸¹

In the context of public history, the overall significance of Mai Lam's map of skulls is that it visualised and instilled within the public that genocide was both a shared and national experience. By extension, the map aided in transforming the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes into a national monument that stood as a symbol that was intended to embody the DK experiences of all Khmers, not just the victims of S-21. The map's visualisation of the Cambodian territory emphasised the finite national boundaries, beyond which were other nations, i.e. the more powerful and rival nations, Vietnam and Thailand, where the national experiences were different.⁸² Meanwhile, the material that comprised the map (human skulls and bones), symbolised the shared national memory out of which the new Cambodian nation was born; genocide. It was the experience of genocide wherein Khmer exterminated other Khmer, that the PRK exploited in order to legitimise themselves and their Vietnamese backers, to Cambodians as heroes that saved the Khmer people from further self-destruction.

⁸⁰ Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 91.

⁸¹ Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, 91.

⁸² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised (London: Verso, 2006), 7.

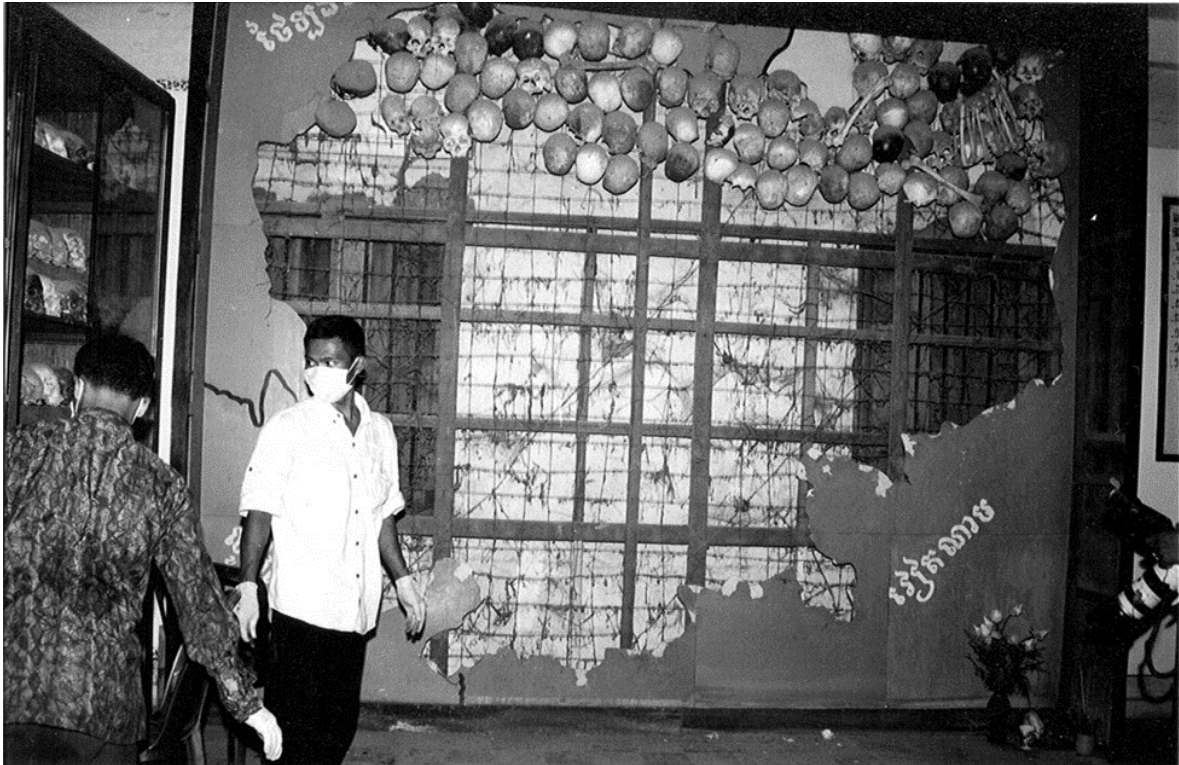


Figure 1.12: Mai Lam, A map of Cambodia being constructed using the remains of the victims at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, 1982, Documentation Center of Cambodia Archives. Image sourced from *The Asia Foundation*, June 29, 2016.



Figure 1.13: Donovan Govan, Tuol Sleng's Map of Skulls, 1997, 35mm film, WikiCommons, Creative Commons License (CC BY-SA 3.0 [Creative Commons — Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported — CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)).



Figure 1.14: A map of Cambodia made with 300 human skulls in Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Indochina Tours, accessed December 30, 2021.



Figure 1.15: Shelby Doyle, *Skull Map*, 2008, Flickr.

Perhaps what is more controversial and detrimental than initially encountering the map's grotesque representation of genocide is the fact that the map was not a Cambodian, but rather a Vietnamese/ politicised perception of DK trauma that was imposed upon the Khmer people to internalise as their national memory and identity. As will be discussed in the contemporary post-transition phase of public history, imposing the historical *bak* or *snarm* as the foundation for a new national identity eventually caused divisiveness within the nation, but not before the skulls were transformed into being one of the 'strongest and most enduring' visualisations associated with the Khmer Rouge regime.⁸³ Although the graphic portrayal of the Cambodian territory was intended to justify Vietnam's intervention as a humanitarian mission that liberated the Khmer people from a seemingly 'endless

⁸³ Jarvis, 'Powerful remains', *Human Remains and Violence*, 47.

horror,' upon its installation, the map at once became a source of international political contention. It may be argued that together, these factors inadvertently helped pave a self-conscious and static future of trauma recovery that has spanned the trajectory of the Museum and various post-DK regimes that assumed power up into the present day.

It must be remembered that Tuol Sleng and its map of skulls were attempting to shape a national identity and memory for the new Cambodian nation-state against the backdrop of international Cold War and post-Vietnam War politics. The United States, China, and ASEAN countries were vehemently anti-Vietnamese and their legitimising the PRK would have equated to supporting Vietnam, which was simply out of the question. In short, 'any enemy of Vietnam (in this case, the Khmer Rouge) was an ally,' to the U.S., China, and ASEAN nations.⁸⁴ Official responses from these countries included denouncing Tuol Sleng as either an exaggeration or fabrication, which propped up the Khmer Rouge-government-in-exile's accusations that S-21 was entirely fabricated by the Vietnamese and that the curators brought the map's human remains into Cambodia from Vietnam.⁸⁵

Despite how Tuol Sleng was, and continues to be, used as a central and formative primary source for constructing the narrative of the trauma of genocide— as will be made clear by the analysis of Case 002/02— it was not the only public history source to be produced at that time, which contributed to Khmer Rouge historiographic development and

⁸⁴ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 77.

⁸⁵ Rachel Hughes, 'Nationalism and Memory at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes, Phnom Penh, Cambodia,' in *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts*, ed. Katherine Hodgkin and Susanna Radstone (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 179.

the debate of genocide. Nor, as the analysis has so far shown, was Tuol Sleng necessarily the most comprehensive for gaining historical insight.

To better contextualise Khmer Rouge historiography and explain the transition from PRK era public history to contemporary post-transition public history require the further consideration of international politics and Khmer Rouge events that were contemporaneous to the PRK's development of the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes.

The consequences of the PRK's political ostracization extended beyond scepticism over Tuol Sleng and the origins of the skulls that comprised the emotionally distressing map. The Cold War and post-Vietnam War political conditions meant that Vietnam's involvement in Cambodia prevented essential, life-saving humanitarian aid from arriving into the territory, which by extension, prolonged the country's period of reconstruction. This left victims of DK who remained in PRK territory to continue to suffer from starvation and malnutrition, which were exacerbated by famine and drought in 1979.⁸⁶ Further, because of Cambodia's diplomatic embargo, the UN was prevented from providing development aid directly to the PRK.⁸⁷ Other than Vietnam and the Soviet Union, only organisations with emergency mandates such as UNICEF and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees were able to eventually assist in reconstruction operations within the PRK.⁸⁸ Sir Robert Jackson, the UN representative who was designated to coordinate the relief effort in Cambodia,

⁸⁶ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 27.

⁸⁷ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 27.

⁸⁸ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 27.

stated that ‘no humanitarian operation in this century has been so totally and continuously influenced by political factors.’⁸⁹ The outcome led to a high concentration of international relief efforts taking place in the makeshift refugee camps that formed a long arc stretching across the lawless Thai-Cambodian border, where approximately 300,000 Kampuchean refugees eventually settled.⁹⁰

Although the international aid that was provided to the refugee camps in Thailand undoubtedly saved lives, it also enabled various PRK resistance factions to strengthen.⁹¹ Most detrimental to the PRK were the remnants of Khmer Rouge forces, which, through what was deemed as the ‘Refugee Business,’⁹² began to receive aid from Thailand and China, with the tacit support of the United States. The ‘Refugee Business’ was bolstered by the continued recognition of the CPK from powerful nations, namely China and the United States, who saw it as a small price to pay to maintain their ‘more important alliances,’ in the geopolitical sphere.⁹³

⁸⁹ Sir Robert Jackson, Preface to *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea*, by Eva Mysiwiiec, version PDF (Oxford: Oxfam, 1988), accessed October 3, 2020, [Punishing the Poor: The international isolation of Kampuchea \(openrepository.com\)](#), iii.

⁹⁰ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 27.

⁹¹ Philip Witte, ‘The Refugees Now: Fed, Rested, Ready to Return to War,’ *The Washington Post*, accessed September 26, 2020, [The Refugees Now: Fed, Rested, Ready To Return to War - The Washington Post](#).

⁹² Michael Vickery discusses how ‘the refugee operations [were] big business with very profitable spin-offs,’ in Michael Vickery, ‘Refugee Politics: The Khmer Camp System in Thailand,’ in *Revival: the Cambodian Agony*, ed. David A. Ablin and Marlowe Hood (Routledge, 1990), 293-331.

⁹³ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 281.

At the September 1979 United Nations General Assembly, with a vote of 71-35 (34 abstentions)⁹⁴, the CPK became the first-ever government-in-exile to be recognised by the UN as a legitimate governing body.⁹⁵ However, to satisfy the anti-communist sentiments of Cold War politics, the CPK dissolved in 1981 and became the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), a capitalist formation that exchanged DK-Maoist ideology for an extreme version of nationalism that was severely anti-Vietnamese.⁹⁶ As David Chandler points out, no non-communists were given responsible positions in the coalition, but Pol Pot and Ieng Sary remained the leaders.⁹⁷ To summarise, in one guise or another, the Khmer Rouge would be officially recognised and hold Cambodia's seat at the UN General Assembly until 1991.⁹⁸

By the end of 1979, approximately 100,000 Khmer Rouge soldiers had made their way into the refugee camps that had been set up along Cambodia's border with Thailand.⁹⁹ It was not long before the realpolitik benefited the remnants of Khmer Rouge forces, who before long, were operating their own camps on the Thai-Cambodian border.¹⁰⁰ Between 1979 and 1980, the Thai military government restored DK soldiers to health and provided them with food and clothing, whilst also helping to funnel arms and ammunition that were

⁹⁴ Ramses Amer, 'The United Nations and Kampuchea: The Issue of Representation and Its Implications,' *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 22, no. 3 (1990): accessed October 3, 2020, [Full article: The United Nations and Kampuchea: The issue of representation and its implications \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com), 53.

⁹⁵ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 26.

⁹⁶ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 28.

⁹⁷ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* 283.

⁹⁸ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 26.

⁹⁹ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 25.

¹⁰⁰ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 27.

provided by China.¹⁰¹ In addition to military supplies, each year between 1979 and 1989, the Chinese government provided 80-100 million dollars in funds to support Pol Pot's fight against the PRK.¹⁰² By 1982, the remnants of the Khmer Rouge once again became a relatively threatening military force.¹⁰³ Meanwhile, dependents of DK soldiers were taken care of by various agencies of the United Nations.¹⁰⁴

Between 1982 and 1983 the PRK, with the help of SRV troops, drove Khmer Rouge forces back into Thailand. The PRK then had tens of thousands of workers lay mines along the border, which not only resulted in the Khmer Rouge losing their bases on the Thai border, but also led to thousands of PRK worker deaths caused by disease and landmine detonations. With their bases gone, the Khmer Rouge forces—which by 1986 were estimated to be 30,000—had split into small groups that were scattered across the country.¹⁰⁵ In 1987, Ben Kiernan observed how the Khmer Rouge had become even more active in 1986 as they continued to 'slaughter peasants and travellers in many areas,' although it no longer appeared to matter whether their victims had a role in supporting the Vietnamese occupation.¹⁰⁶ Militarily speaking, the remainder of the 1980s can be summarised as a stalemate between the PRK and SRV forces and the Khmer Rouge, which came to be referenced as the second Cambodian Civil War.

¹⁰¹ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 28.

¹⁰² Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 26.

¹⁰³ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 281.

¹⁰⁴ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 281-2.

¹⁰⁵ Ben Kiernan, 'Son Sen: Blood on His Hands,' *Sun-Herald Sydney*, September 22, 1985, in Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia*, 324.

¹⁰⁶ Kiernan 'Son Sen,' *Sun-Herald Sydney*, 324.

By October 1979, out of political and practical necessity, the PRK had to limit their concern for accountability of past crimes by DK, as they were in the wake of restoring the battered economy whilst continuing to fight a civil war in the midst of a famine.¹⁰⁷ During this time, the Thai refugee camps became sites where another facet of Cambodian public history began to take shape. Historians of Cambodia, most notably Ben Kiernan, Michael Vickery, and David Chandler, focused their efforts on documenting events, collecting historical accounts, and compiling data from what are often considered unconventional primary sources in the context of traditional historical studies: oral histories of ordinary people who, in this case, directly experienced the atrocities of the DK regime. Through their research efforts, historians discovered that ‘the most reliable source about the plight of the vast, predominantly peasant, working class in Kampuchea [during DK], was working class refugees,’ many of whom were now concentrated in the Thai-Cambodian border camps.¹⁰⁸

In *A History of Cambodia*, David Chandler highlights that historically, vernacular voices, i.e. the working class, peasants, rice farmers, and rural populations, were absent from the Cambodian historical record and narrative until the 1920s.¹⁰⁹ Even then, the presence of vernacular history may be described as minimal, at best. Therefore, the emphasis historians were placing on the oral histories of refugees at the onset of post-DK Cambodia denotes a drastic shift towards making efforts to flatten the hierarchy within

¹⁰⁷ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 27, 239.

¹⁰⁸ Ben Kiernan, ‘Statement,’ *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 11, no. 4 (October 1979), in Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia*, 209.

¹⁰⁹ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 194.

Cambodian historiography and historical practices. Not unlike the PRK however, historians and foreign correspondents were met with dilemmas posed by Cold War, post-Vietnam War, and refugee camp political conditions. In an article for *The Bulletin for Concerned Asian Scholars*, historian Ben Kiernan described the challenges he faced as he conducted research for his PhD in 1979:

Thai officials allowed only pro-Western researchers to interview refugees systematically and without the constraining presence of authorities, and these people paid little to no attention to gathering evidence from peasants and workers. So, it was difficult for a non-specialist, or even a specialist lacking resources and suitable political connections, to track the real direction of the Kampuchean revolution as far as the vast majority of the country's people were concerned.¹¹⁰

Despite these barriers, oral history field work findings, along with intelligence and journalist correspondence, offered substantial evidence that went against two major debates that arose from the narratives of Cold War and post-Vietnam War international politics. First, intelligence reports were 'surprised' to find that there appeared to be popular support for the new Vietnamese backed government.¹¹¹ Intelligence attributed this startling discovery to the traditional ethnic prejudices that Khmer tended to have toward the Vietnamese (which were played up by the CPK).¹¹² However, Kiernan's oral history research supported these intelligence reports. Several of his interviewees stated that the 'Pol Pot regime was so harsh and cruel that people welcomed the Vietnamese forces.'¹¹³ These findings did not align with China's, the United States', and Thailand's anti-Vietnamese

¹¹⁰ Kiernan, 'Statement', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, in *Genocide and Resistance*, 209.

¹¹¹ Kiernan, 'People Heng in Against Pol Pot,' *Nation Review* (Melbourne), in *Genocide and Resistance*, 286.

¹¹² Kiernan, 'People Heng in Against Pol Pot,' *Nation Review* (Melbourne), in *Genocide and Resistance*, 286.

¹¹³ Kiernan, 'People Heng in Against Pol Pot,' *Nation Review* (Melbourne), in *Genocide and Resistance*, 287.

sentiments and condemnation of Vietnam's infiltration into Democratic Kampuchea, but rather supported the PRK's assertion that Vietnam's actions were humanitarian.

Second, the research, journalism, and intelligence findings all indicated that Pol Pot's troops not only perpetuated mass murder between 17th April 1975 and 6th January 1979, but had done so prior to 1975 and were 'still employing brutality and terror against the population'¹¹⁴ (this remained the case until 1998). In *A History of Cambodia*, David Chandler describes how racially driven violence took place before DK was in power, and the committing of atrocities was not limited to the Khmer Rouge. For example, after the 1970 *coup d'état* of Norodom Sihanouk, Lon Nol's army massacred hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians, believing they were Vietnamese Communist allies.¹¹⁵ And, as early as 1972, the Khmer Rouge began their killing in secret; once the North Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge massacred Cambodians returning from North Vietnam after a ceasefire had been declared between Vietnam and the United States.¹¹⁶

After interviewing refugees, Bangkok's *Nation Review* concisely explained the post-DK violence, as cited by Ben Kiernan:

'The refugees say that Vietnamese and new government troops came into their villages, treated the people well, and held elections for local leaders, but then pulled out. In some cases the Pol Pot forces returned, and killed those who had co-operated with the new regime, the refugees say.'¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Quote by *Nation Review*. Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia*, 286.

¹¹⁵ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 251.

¹¹⁶ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 252-3.

¹¹⁷ Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 286.

Put simply, utilising refugees as primary sources problematised the PRK's perpetuation of the Tuol Sleng narrative, which restricted DK atrocities to the time period that the regime was in power. At the very least, research that was inclusive of vernacular sources proved that the PRK's Tuol Sleng narrative was failing to capture and account for the violence that preceded the 17th of April 1975 as well as the ongoing crimes and terrorisation by Khmer Rouge forces.

Refugee sources also offered the starting point for scholarly contextualisation of Khmer Rouge crimes as *genocide*. The association of Khmer Rouge crimes with the term 'genocide' in historical research can be traced back to as early as 1980,¹¹⁸ indicating that its development within scholarly discourse ran parallel to, but separate from, the PRK's usage of the term. Ben Kiernan's historical research, much of which was based on the oral histories of refugees, was at the forefront of historical research's contribution to applying the term 'genocide' to the 'slaughtering'¹¹⁹ done by the Khmer Rouge. That year, a Dutch journal entitled the *Vietnam Bulletin* re-published a 1979 article by Kiernan, re-titling it 'Genocide in the Eastern Zone.'¹²⁰ However, Kiernan himself notes that at the time, he 'still knew little of the regime's persecution of Cambodia's ethnic minorities, and did not yet comprehend the Khmer Rouge crimes as genocide.'¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 204.

¹¹⁹ Ben Kiernan, 'Kampuchea: Why the Slaughter?' *Nation Review* (Melbourne), January 1980, in *Genocide and Resistance*, 211.

¹²⁰ Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 204.

¹²¹ Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 203.

It was not until later in 1980, when he worked with international lawyer, Gregory H. Stanton, that Kiernan became acquainted with the legal definition of genocide and began to cite the term and understand that *genocide* was more applicable to Khmer Rouge crimes against religious groups and ethnic minorities (he cites the Vietnamese and Cham) than to crimes designated politically or geographically (such as the research he conducted on the Eastern Zone).¹²² Historical research efforts to correlate the oral history of refugees and archival evidence of S-21 with the internationally recognised legal definition of genocide, served as the key that eventually helped shift the public history narrative from ‘genocide’ as PRK propaganda for national memory and identity, to ‘genocide’ as a means for obtaining accountability, truth, and justice in the international court of law.

Stanton and Kiernan began building a case to bring to either the International Court of Justice or an international tribunal, correlating historical research evidence and findings with the definition of genocide as it was outlined in Article II of the 1948 Genocide Convention:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

¹²² Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 204.

e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.¹²³

Using the parameters of the Genocide Convention of 1948, Kiernan drew the following conclusions:

The convention applies to the Khmer Rouge regime's persecution and slaughter of three categories of their Cambodian victims. These are: "religious groups," such as Cambodia's Buddhist monks; "ethnic or racial groups," such as the country's Cham and Vietnamese minorities, and at least one "part" of the majority Khmer "national" group – the eastern Khmer population from the provinces near Vietnam (and possibly the Khmer urban population too). All were targeted for destruction "as such," and are therefore cases of attempted genocide by the Khmer Rouge.¹²⁴

Stanton's and Kiernan's efforts for legal justice with a focus on the crime of genocide remained outside of DK historiography until the dissolution of Cold War political biases in the 1990s and would not come to fruition until the disposition of ECCC Case 002/02 in 2018. Within the circle of international historians however, a debate emerged about whether the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge fit the description of genocide. Kiernan's peers, historians Michael Vickery and David Chandler (who was Kiernan's PhD supervisor), offered what Kiernan states as the most 'defensible intellectual basis,' for categorising 'the regime's crimes as other than genocidal.'¹²⁵ Vickery's argument was that 'nationalism, populism and peasantism really won out over communism.'¹²⁶ Contrastingly, Chandler blamed the large-scale violence of DK as being 'the purest and most thoroughgoing Marxist-Leninist revolution.'¹²⁷ Though perhaps Vickery's and Chandler's

¹²³ 'United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect,' United Nations (United Nations), accessed August 16, 2020, [United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect](#).

¹²⁴ Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 204.

¹²⁵ Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 204.

¹²⁶ Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 227.

¹²⁷ Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 228.

defences were suitable historiographic debates, they did not hold legal substance that would lobby international action or justice as communism, nationalism, peasantism, and populism, are not crimes that are punishable in the international court of law.

Adding to the complexity of the debate was the coining of the term *autogenocide*,¹²⁸ the killing of members of one's own race, which Kiernan explains is covered in the 1948 Genocide Convention.¹²⁹ Chandler however, argued that racist motives were low on the CPK's agenda, although he made an exception for the systematic killing of the Vietnamese residents of Cambodia and the Muslim Cham minority group.¹³⁰ Thus, for historians such as Chandler and Vickery, the broader term *crimes against humanity* was deemed to be more suitable.¹³¹ For the objectives of achieving legal accountability and justice for Khmer Rouge atrocities, *crimes against humanity* was problematic because it had not yet been codified in a dedicated treaty of international law, unlike genocide and war crimes (this is still the case today) and it was only in 1998 that the Rome Statute of International Criminal Court established a consensus among the international community under Article 7, meaning that

¹²⁸ Nalini Vittal, 'Tribulation before Trial in Cambodia: Confronting Autogenocide,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 3 (2001): 199-203, [Tribulation before Trial in Cambodia: Confronting Autogenocide on JSTOR](#). Accessed January 25, 2022. Author notes the earliest recorded use of the term autogenocide in the context of Khmer Rouge atrocities was in March 1979, by Chairman Boudhiba of a UN sub-commission who stated that Cambodians had seen 'nothing less than autogenocide...the most serious that had occurred anywhere in the world since Nazism,' [Sub Commission 1979].

¹²⁹ Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 217.

¹³⁰ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 260.

¹³¹ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 260.

it was less conceivable to attain justice and accountability if the crimes were classified as ‘crimes against humanity’ rather than ‘genocide’.¹³²

Historians’ preoccupation over how to technically classify DK crimes— whether they are ‘genocide’ or ‘crimes against humanity’— may be further problematised because it did not begin to address the chronological or hierarchical debates over the extent of accountability. The consensus was that large-scale and varied crimes of violence had undoubtedly been committed, resulting in severe cultural trauma and the deaths of what was then estimated to be between one and three million people. However, the questions of whether to include atrocities committed outside the historical framework of 1975-1979 and if anyone beyond the CPK leaders should be held accountable, were not in the scope of the historians’ debate that ultimately helped to begin the international litigation process.

The turning point of public history in Cambodia was neither a conclusion to the genocide debate (which only became more complex as time went on), nor the end of the

¹³² Rome Statute Article 7: For the purpose of this Statute, ‘crime against humanity’ means any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack: a. Murder; b. Extermination; c. Enslavement; d. Deportation or forcible transfer of population; e. Imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law; f. Torture;

g. Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity h. Persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender as defined in paragraph 3, or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law, in connection with any act referred to in this paragraph or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court; i. Enforced disappearance of persons; j. The crime of apartheid;

k. Other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health. 2. For the purpose of paragraph 1: ‘Attack directed against any civilian population’ means a course of conduct involving the multiple commission of acts referred to in paragraph 1 against any civilian population, pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy to commit such attack.

‘United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect,’ accessed August 18, 2020, [United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect](#).

Khmer Rouge (which did not occur until 1998, first with the death of Pol Pot in April and then the official surrender of remaining Khmer Rouge guerrillas to Hun Sen's government that December¹³³). Nor was it necessarily the departure of Vietnamese troops in 1988 and the dissolution of the PRK, which became the State of Cambodia (SOC) in 1989. Instead, the progression into contemporary post-transition public history can be traced to the signing of the Paris Agreements on the 23rd of October 1991 (Figure 1.16 and 1.17), which historians note, coincided with the end of the Cold War.¹³⁴



Figure 1.16: *Paris Peace Agreements*, Signatory Parties signing the Paris Peace Agreements on October 23, 1991. Image sourced from 'Embassies in Cambodia reaffirm commitment to the Paris Peace Agreements,' *Khmer Times*, October 23, 2020.

¹³³ Ker Munthit, 'Last of Khmer Rouge Surrenders,' *AP NEWS*, December 5, 1998, [Last of Khmer Rouge Surrenders | AP News](#).

¹³⁴ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 287.



Figure 1.17: *Paris Peace Agreements*, Signatory Parties signing the Paris Peace Agreements on October 23, 1991. Image sourced from 'Cambodia Marks 29th Anniversary Of Paris Peace Agreement,' *AKP Phnom Penh*, October 23, 2020.

While PRK era public history was distinguishable by themes of legitimisation, propaganda, and gathering evidence and proof of genocidal acts committed by the Communist Party of Kampuchea, contemporary post-transition public history in Cambodia is characterised by the political aims of obtaining truth, justice, and reconciliation for the genocide. Far from being synonymous, and as will be observed, often contradictory in the context of the Cambodian nation-state, justice and reconciliation were at times, pursued as being simultaneously achievable goals in Cambodia's contemporary post-transition public history movement.

The Paris Agreements of 1991 may be understood as the first attempt at ‘reconciliation,’ although without an underlying aim of justice. The treaty was the point at which various opposing political objectives (both national and international) and the decisively distinctive narratives surrounding DK that formed during the PRK, were forced to converge in an official effort to pave Cambodia’s future of trauma recovery through a combination of a politics of memory and the negotiation of history. The purpose of briefly assessing the Paris Agreements and the UNTAC period is twofold. It is to both underscore that Khmer Rouge history and the atrocities did not end with the fall of DK in 1979, as well as to interrogate how international attempts at ‘reconciliation’ may have initiated, or, at least, reinforced *baksbat* within Cambodia’s political structure, which historically has been simplified as an institutionalised culture of impunity. Swedish Ambassador Thomas Hammarberg complicated the traditional narrative of Cambodian political impunity by taking into consideration that neither political authority nor prior service in the Khmer Rouge meant being immune to the experience or symptoms of trauma:

‘Decision-makers, almost without exception, had emotional and painful memories of the Democratic Kampuchea period in the seventies. King Sihanouk had tried to reason with the Khmer Rouge, been humiliated and even had family members killed. Hun Sen and several of his CPP colleagues had joined the Khmer Rouge movement, and had later defected to the Vietnamese side. Several of them had also lost family members. It is important to recognise this dimension...’¹³⁵

By continuing to legitimise the Khmer Rouge and not acknowledging genocide or crimes against humanity, the Paris Agreements and the transitional government validated the

¹³⁵ Thomas Hammarberg, ‘Special Insert: Efforts to Establish a Tribunal against KR Leaders,’ *Phnom Penh Post*, September 14, 2001, [Special Insert: Efforts to establish a tribunal against KR leaders: | Phnom Penh Post](#).

Cambodian politicisation of the *baksbat* symptom, *kob yobal*, (to bury the idea), which was manifested as the political choice to pursue ‘national reconciliation’ over justice.

The initial convergence between Cambodia and the international community that occurred under the Paris Agreements demonstrated how ‘political pressure is the greatest threat to honest inquiry,’¹³⁶ a notion that immediately came to pervade the essence of contemporary post-transition public history. Essentially, the Paris Agreements of 1991 was an illusion of reconciliation, peace, unity, neutrality, and efforts to end Cambodia’s civil war between the four Cambodian factions (Figure 1.18). It gave the appearance of the long awaited moment of international aid for Cambodia’s reconstruction and the end of Cold War politics that allowed the Khmer Rouge to reap the benefits of international political legitimacy and military aid, which Ben Kiernan markedly referred to as ‘an international scandal, a political dance on a million graves.’¹³⁷ The unfortunate reality was that the Paris Agreements was a continuation of the saga, arising from the scheming of international superpowers that no longer benefitted from sponsoring Cambodia’s proxy war.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Ben Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 237.

¹³⁷ Ben Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance*, 215.

¹³⁸ Craig Etcheson, *Extraordinary Justice: Law, Politics, and the Khmer Rouge Tribunals* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019), 47.



Figure 1.18: 'Leaders of Cambodian factions join hands at a press conference after reaching an agreement to end the Cambodian war, September 10, 1990, Jakarta. From Left: Hun Sen, Norodom Ranariddh, Khieu Samphan and FLNPK leader Son Sann. Image Sourced from 'Paris Peace Accords' Legacy in Cambodia is Mixed and Politically Contentious as 30th Anniversary Nears,' VOA, September 3, 2021.

In 1990, human rights activists anticipated an international peace agreement on the horizon and formed the Campaign to Oppose the Return of the Khmer Rouge (CORKR), which had the clear objective of preventing the Khmer Rouge from being allowed to take part in any official peace agreement.¹³⁹ CORKR also advocated for the termination of military assistance to Khmer Rouge guerrillas provided by the Thai, ending Cambodia's trade

¹³⁹ Etcheson, *Extraordinary Justice*, 47.

embargo, offering further humanitarian aid to the country, and confronting the problem of landmines.¹⁴⁰

Helen Jarvis explains that CORKR's most successful project was the Cambodian Genocide Justice Act, which was first initiated in 1991, but failed to be passed by the United States Congress twice, because government members were wary of an investigation that had the potential to reveal incriminating evidence related to the United States' bombing of Cambodia between 1965 and 1973.¹⁴¹ It was only after the UNTAC period, in 1994, that the act was eventually passed by US Congress, making it 'the policy of the United States to support efforts to bring to justice members of the Khmer Rouge for their crimes against humanity committed in Cambodia between April 17, 1975 and January 7, 1979.'¹⁴² By limiting the investigation to the period of 1975-1979, the act eliminated the possibility of indicting former US National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who was responsible for expanding the US bombing in Cambodia under President Richard Nixon- an alleged violation of international law.¹⁴³

Much to the dismay of members of CORKR, which came to include experts Ben Kiernan, Gregory Stanton, and Craig Etcheson, the Paris Agreements not only involved the Khmer Rouge/ the Party of Democratic Kampuchea (PDK), but also ultimately benefitted them; under the terms of the treaty, the Khmer Rouge were now equal to the other factions,

¹⁴⁰ Fawthrop and Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide?*, 110.

¹⁴¹ Fawthrop and Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide?*, 110.

¹⁴² Cambodian Genocide Justice Act 22 U.S.C. 2656, PART D, SECTION 572. POLICY, [The Digital Archive of Cambodia Holocaust Survivors - Cambodian Genocide Justice Act \(cybercambodia.com\)](http://www.cybercambodia.com).

¹⁴³ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 79.

able to remain in the political arena without forsaking their military options, and all perpetrators —including Pol Pot— could enjoy the ‘same rights, freedoms, and opportunities to take part in the electoral process.’¹⁴⁴

Adding to the controversy of the agreement was that it entirely evaded any mention of genocide, crimes against humanity, mass murder, execution, or forced labour.¹⁴⁵ Michelle Caswell notes that instead, the Paris Agreements euphemistically referenced DK atrocities as ‘policies and practices of the past [which] shall never be allowed to return,’ as a way of placating the international superpowers that had continued to support the Khmer Rouge after the fall of DK.¹⁴⁶ Craig Etcheson explains more blatantly that China gave the ultimatum that if Vietnam wished to renew relations, any mention of a Cambodian ‘genocide’ must hence forth be dropped from the agreement.¹⁴⁷

Beginning in 1992, upon the signatures of representatives from the four Cambodian factions and representatives from eighteen other countries, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) took temporary control over the governing of Cambodia with three main objectives: demobilising factional militaries, providing administrative supervision to SOC ministries, and ensuring the holding of ‘free and fair elections.’¹⁴⁸ For

¹⁴⁴ Ben Kiernan, ‘The Cambodian Crisis, 1990–1992: The UN Plan, the Khmer Rouge, and the State of Cambodia,’ *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 24, no. 2 (1992): pp. 3-23, [Full article: The Cambodian crisis, 1990–1992: The UN plan, the Khmer Rouge, and the State of Cambodia \(tandfonline.com\)](#). Paris Conference on Cambodia, ‘Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict,’ text adopted by the Coordination Committee on 21 Oct, 1991, annex 3, section 3, [Cambodia Peace Agreement \(peaceagreements.org\)](#).

¹⁴⁵ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 78.

¹⁴⁶ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 78.

¹⁴⁷ Etcheson, *Extraordinary Justice*, 50.

¹⁴⁸ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 55.

the PRK, now the SOC, the Paris Agreements of 1991 did not simply mean being unseated from power; they also were required to demobilise 70 percent of their troops— the very troops that Cambodians had depended on to keep Khmer Rouge forces in check.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, because Soviet and Eastern bloc aid (which accounted for four-fifths of the SOC government budget) had run out in 1990, the SOC was limited in terms of options and had little choice but to comply with the terms put forth by the UN and Perm-five nations.¹⁵⁰

To summarise, the Paris Agreements of 1991 and the UNTAC period were pre-destined to fail because they were not foundationally designed for the true sake of reconciliation or restoring peace in Cambodia. As the treaty included 4 different Cambodian factions, its success would have required the impossible task of uniting Prince Norodom Sihanouk, SOC Prime Minister Hun Sen, and PDK leader Pol Pot, who were each being pulled in different directions due to their individualised objectives of gaining political control. Instead, both the treaty and the provisional government served as exit strategies for the foreign powers that financed the proxy war. In addition, the plan to implement a democracy was almost certain to fail as it bore little resemblance to Cambodian governing and political traditions. The reality that 'Cambodia had no history of democratic government or popular sovereignty,'¹⁵¹ was a cultural barrier that was further compounded by the fact that the majority of UNTAC personnel were foreign, and thus had little knowledge of and experience with the Cambodian culture. These factors cultivated a widespread sense of resentment for

¹⁴⁹ Kiernan, 'The Cambodian Crisis', *Bulletin for Concerned Asian Scholars*, 16.

¹⁵⁰ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 51.

¹⁵¹ Strangio, *Hun Sen* 43, 48.

the foreign presence amongst Cambodians.¹⁵² Finally, the UNTAC period ultimately came to resemble the corrupt 'Refugee Business' of the Thai-Cambodian border camps that perpetuated the threat of the Khmer Rouge. Despite over 2 billion dollars¹⁵³ having ultimately been invested into the operation, by the time UNTAC pulled out of Cambodia at the end of 1993, it was more than apparent that little of that money went toward long-term reconstruction solutions, including alleviating the suffering and poverty experienced by the majority of Cambodia's people.¹⁵⁴

Undoubtedly at the centre of the failures of the Paris Agreements and UNTAC were the continued recognition and propping up of the PDK as a legitimate political faction in conjunction with the UN's and Perm-five nations' lack of foresight to know that the Khmer Rouge were incapable of upholding any peace agreement. In February of 1992, Pol Pot said that 'the contents of the [Paris] Agreements are to our advantage,' because the treaty constrained Hun Sen and the SOC.¹⁵⁵ Pol Pot added that 'if the Agreements are incorrectly implemented, we are dead, but if they are correctly implemented then we will win.'¹⁵⁶ However, as Ben Kiernan documented, not even two weeks after the signing of the Paris Agreements, the Khmer Rouge broke the terms of the treaty when they attacked a village and killed 60 men, women, and children.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 53.

¹⁵³ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 93.

¹⁵⁴ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 93.

¹⁵⁵ Pol Pot, minutes of speech, 'Clarification of Certain Principled Views to Act as the Basis of Our Views and Stance', February 6 1992, cited in MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, in *Cambodia Confounds the Peacemakers: 1979-1998* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 143.

¹⁵⁶ Pol Pot, minutes of speech, 'Clarification,' 143.

¹⁵⁷ Kiernan, 'The Cambodian Crisis', *Bulletin for Concerned Asian Scholars*, 6.

Other Khmer Rouge attacks in 1993 echoed the racially driven murders of 1970s DK: on the 10th of March, the Khmer Rouge attacked a floating village on the Tonlé Sap lake in Siem Reap and killed 33 unarmed Vietnamese fisher-people, more than a dozen of whom were children.¹⁵⁸ In the 6 months preceding the 1993 elections, the Khmer Rouge killed nearly 200 Vietnamese and forced another 20,000 to flee from Cambodia into Vietnam.¹⁵⁹ Meanwhile, UNTAC offered no response to the killings or aid to the Vietnamese community. The other Cambodian factions displayed a symptom of *baksbat* known as *reang-charl* (to resolve to cease doing anything) and took the stance to ‘say nothing, hear nothing, and understand nothing.’¹⁶⁰ Sebastian Strangio poignantly states that the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia ‘were sacrificed in a vain attempt to keep the [UNTAC] mission on the rails.’¹⁶¹ In short, the slaughtering by the Khmer Rouge, including that of ethnic minorities, continued throughout most of the 90s. Although the closing of the short-lived UNTAC period may have weakened the PDK faction through what was declared a ‘free and fair,’ election process (Figure 1.19), the Khmer Rouge essentially remained intact and undefeated.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 57.

¹⁵⁹ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, citing Jay Jordens, ‘Persecution of Cambodia’s Ethnic Vietnamese Communities during and since the UNTAC Period,’ in *Propaganda, Politics, and Violence in Cambodia: Democratic Transition Under United Nations Peace-Keeping*, ed. Steven R. Heder (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 139.

¹⁶⁰ Chhim, ‘Baksbat (Broken Courage),’ *Medical Anthropology*, 163.

¹⁶¹ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 57.

¹⁶² Judy Ledgerwood, ‘UN Peacekeeping Missions: Lessons from Cambodia,’ *Asia Pacific Issues*, March 1994, [UN Peacekeeping Missions: The Lessons from Cambodia \(Asia Pacific Issues\) \(dtic.mil\)](#), 4.



Figure 1.19: Paula Bronstein, UNTAC Polling Station, 1993. Image sourced from 'In 1993, the UN tried to bring democracy to Cambodia. Is that dream dead?' *BBC News*, July 18, 2018.

In the years that followed the UNTAC period, Cambodian society remained politically tumultuous and fragile,¹⁶³ its new coalition government akin to a 'political Frankenstein,' wherein there were two prime ministers, and the control over ministries was divided between three different parties.¹⁶⁴ Meanwhile, the international interference in Cambodian national affairs from the fall of DK, through the Paris Accords, and then the UNTAC period, left Second Prime Minister Hun Sen, (who remains in power to this day and is now the soul prime minister) with a distrust for Western constructs of human rights and democracy. He viewed the established international canons imposed upon Cambodia as Western double

¹⁶³ David Scheffer, 'The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia,' *International Criminal Law*, ed. M. Cherif Bassiouni (Leiden, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 2008), 219.

¹⁶⁴ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 63.

standards that did little more than serve as markers of convenience for foreign stakeholders.¹⁶⁵

Hun Sen himself is representative of a national and political pendulum, and as his political ideology became further entrenched in autocracy as time went on, his dichotomous actions began to have a lasting effect on the direction of state-sanctioned, post-transition public history practices and Khmer Rouge historiography. Throughout the 1990s, he continued with the PRK's initiative of reintegrating Khmer Rouge defectors into Cambodian society. The amnesty policy, along with having Hun Sen as Second Prime Minister, who himself was a former DK cadre, meant that the Khmer Rouge had already become part of the very fabric of the new government and politics, which held a great deal of control over constructing Cambodia's national memory and response to the recent historical traumas.

In a letter to the United States Secretary General, dated the 21st of June 1997, Hun Sen and First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh, requested the assistance of the US and the international community in 'bringing to justice those persons responsible for the genocide and crimes against humanity during the rule of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979.'¹⁶⁶ Two weeks later however, Hun Sen formed a *coup* and violently overthrew First Prime Minister, Prince Norodom Ranariddh.¹⁶⁷ By 1998, Hun Sen had full government control, and his priorities reverted to achieving national 'reconciliation' over justice. He

¹⁶⁵ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 49.

¹⁶⁶ DC-Cam, Chronology of Khmer Rouge Tribunal, January 4, 2012, DC-Cam Chronology.pdf (cambodiatribunal.org).

¹⁶⁷ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 241.

utilised the need to reconcile with the past as a reason for continuing to extend the amnesty policy to thousands of Khmer Rouge soldiers and mid-level cadre.¹⁶⁸



Figure 1.20: David van der Veen, 'Hun Sen and Ieng Sary shaking hands October 22, 1996,' Image sourced from 'Necessary Scapegoats? The Making of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal,' *The New York Review*, July 23, 2012.

Although the amnesty policy was never extended to Pol Pot, or Ta Mok (a CPK leader also known as 'the Butcher'), it was extended to other members of 'Pol Pot's Genocidal clique,' the first one being DK Foreign Minister Ieng Sary (who was sentenced to death

¹⁶⁸ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 240.

alongside Pol Pot in the 1979 PRT tribunal) in 1996 (Figure 1.20).¹⁶⁹ Two years later, on the 26th of December 1998, the amnesty policy was once again extended and granted to two other members of the clique; DK Head of State Khieu Samphan, and Brother Number Two, Nuon Chea, both of whom were given ‘VIP treatment’¹⁷⁰ upon their return to Cambodia. Countering the request he made to the United States Secretary General in 1997, Hun Sen implored that Cambodia should welcome the men ‘with bouquets of flowers, not with prisons and handcuffs,’ all the while assuring that he still believed there should be justice, and promising that no perpetrator would be spared.¹⁷¹

Despite his vow, Hun Sen’s supplementation for truth and justice with reconciliation has remained constant up to the present day. He consistently argued that the establishment of a tribunal would threaten the country’s peace and reignite civil war.¹⁷² Undoubtedly he wished to limit the extent of investigations by an international court into prominent members of the Cambodian government (including himself) who were former DK cadre (another example being Chea Sim-President of the CPP, who was party secretary of a sector in the Eastern Zone that was destroyed by purges between 1977 and 1978. There was also Heng Samrin, President during the PRK period, who was the former commander of the

¹⁶⁹ Seth Mydans, ‘Cambodian Leader Resists Punishing Top Khmer Rouge,’ *The New York Times*, December 29, 1998, [CAMBODIAN LEADER RESISTS PUNISHING TOP KHMER ROUGE - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/29/cambodian-leader-resists-punishing-top-khmer-rouge).

¹⁷⁰ Fawthrop and Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide?*, 132.

¹⁷¹ Mydans, ‘Cambodian Leader Resists,’ *The New York Times*.

¹⁷² Hannah Ellis Peterson, ‘Khmer Rouge Leaders Found Guilty of Genocide in Cambodia’s “Nuremberg Moment”’, *The Guardian*, November 16, 2018, [Khmer Rouge leaders found guilty of genocide in Cambodia’s ‘Nuremberg’ moment | Khmer Rouge | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/16/khmer-rouge-leaders-found-guilty-of-genocide-in-cambodia).

Eastern Zone's Fourth Division, which allegedly massacred Vietnamese civilians during border skirmishes in 1977¹⁷³).

Hun Sen stated on record to reporters that, 'we [Cambodia] should dig a hole and bury the past and look ahead to the 21st century with a clean slate.'¹⁷⁴ It is difficult to say whether this statement is rooted in the *baksbat* symptoms of *kob yobal* (bury the idea), and *bor-veas-chea-chgnay* (wishing the traumatic event would go away), or if it derived from Hun Sen's desire to self-protect and preserve his authoritative rule, or a combination thereof. In any case, the statement is another example of *bak*, as it evokes the desire for separation or a break from the historical past. The irony of Hun Sen's words is that with the amnesty policy and because so many former Khmer Rouge members held positions in the new government, it was impossible to tell where the trauma of the 'past' ended and the new nation-state began.

As Hun Sen's authority became more consolidated, his determination to have control over the establishment of a Khmer Rouge tribunal and limit international involvement in the process tightened. Meanwhile, research that was supported by the Cambodian Genocide Justice Act had begun to materialise; Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program (CGP, formed in 1994), headed by Ben Kiernan, won a US Department of State public tender in 1995 to carry out research, documentation, and to provide Cambodians with professional legal training. The funding led to the establishment of the

¹⁷³ Strangio, *Hun Sen*, 241.

¹⁷⁴ Mydans, 'Cambodian Leader Resists' *The New York Times*.

Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam, constituted in 1995) and legal training for Cambodian government officials and judges in preparation for a Khmer Rouge tribunal.¹⁷⁵

Additionally, the UN had responded to Hun Sen's and Prince Norodom Ranariddh's 1997 request by beginning to establish a system, charges, and legal procedures for a Khmer Rouge tribunal.¹⁷⁶ Hun Sen's distrust for international policies along with Cambodia's recent historical experiences with the international community indicated to him a likelihood that national reconciliation by way of justice through international litigation would be incommensurably tangled with ulterior international political demands. As such, determining the structure of a tribunal essentially became a power struggle between the UN and the Cambodian government, as Hun Sen called into question 'whether Cambodia should be cooperating with the U.N. or the U.N. should be cooperating with Cambodia.'¹⁷⁷

It took years of disputing, negotiating, and renegotiating before an agreement was finally reached in terms of how the international community would be allowed to 'assist and participate in,' the tribunal.¹⁷⁸ Often described as a hybrid court, the ECCC is perhaps better understood as a domestic court 'with international participation and assistance.'¹⁷⁹ It stands out as being the first model to combine national and international expertise and jurisprudence under domestic procedural law during trial proceedings.¹⁸⁰ The subject

¹⁷⁵ Fawthrop and Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide?*, 111.

¹⁷⁶ 'About ECC,' accessed January 19, 2022, [About ECCC | Drupal](#).

¹⁷⁷ As cited by David Scheffer, 'The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia,' in *International Criminal Law*, Bassiouni, M. C. (2008) Vol. 3rd ed. Brill | Nijhoff, 228.

¹⁷⁸ [About ECCC | Drupal](#).

¹⁷⁹ Helen Jarvis, 'Trials and Tribulations: The Long Quest for Justice for the Cambodian Genocide,' in *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia Assessing Their Contribution to International Criminal Law*, ed. Simon M. Meisenberg and Ignaz Stegmüller (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), 13.

¹⁸⁰ Jarvis, 'Trials and Tribulations,' *The Extraordinary Chambers*, 21.

matter jurisdiction of the court includes crimes that fall under Cambodia's 1956 Penal Code, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948, Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, The Hague Convention of 1954, and the Vienna Convention of 1961.¹⁸¹ As a way of addressing the problematic amnesty policy practiced by the PRK and Hun Sen, Article 40 new of ECCC Law was established, which states:

'The Royal Government of Cambodia shall not request an amnesty or pardon for any persons who may be investigated for or convicted of crimes referred to in Articles 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 of this law. The scope of any amnesty or pardon that may have been granted prior to the enactment of this Law is a matter to be decided by the Extraordinary Chambers.'¹⁸²

In 2006, The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) began operations and became fully functional in 2007 (Figure 1.21). Twelve years passed between the tribunal's inception in 1997 to the beginning of the first trial in 2009. By this time, the national purpose for having a tribunal had come into question. Unlike the 1990s, when national momentum for a tribunal was cultivated by the possibility of capturing Pol Pot as

¹⁸¹ Jarvis, 'Trials and Tribulations,' *The Extraordinary Chambers*, 21-22. Jarvis specifies that 'the ECCC's subject matter jurisdiction is limited to:

- the following offences under Cambodia's 1956 Penal Code:
 - Homicide (Articles 501, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507 and 508)
 - Torture (Article 500)
 - Religious Persecution (Articles 209 and 210)
- the crime of genocide as defined in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948
- crimes against humanity
- grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949
- destruction of cultural property during armed conflict pursuant to The Hague Convention of 1954
- crimes against internationally protected persons pursuant to the Vienna Convention of 1961.'

¹⁸² *Law on the Establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers, with inclusion of amendments as promulgated on 27 October 2004 (NS/RKM/1004/006)*, Chapter XII, Article 40 new, accessed December 30, 2021, [NS/RKM/0801/12 \(eccc.gov.kh\)](http://NS/RKM/0801/12 (eccc.gov.kh)), 15.

well as the witnessing of successful genocide tribunals in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the reasons for the Cambodian government and public to demand justice in the 2000s were less obvious. Pol Pot, who was never captured, had been dead for nearly a decade, the Khmer Rouge was no longer a national threat (Hun Sen attributed this to the amnesty policy), and Hun Sen's warning of a civil war should a tribunal be established, hung in the air.



Figure 1.21: *The court building for the ECCC.* Image sourced from the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Cambodia, accessed December 30, 2021.

A Cambodian journalist, Moeun Chhea Nariddh, eloquently underscored the ECCC's significance to the Cambodian people as being a potential symbol, or, a cornerstone, to the end of national political impunity.¹⁸³ Analysing the structure of the ECCC is beyond the scope

¹⁸³ Fawthrop and Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide?*, 135.

of this thesis. However, it is important to iterate that since the court's inception, its internal structure had been 'plagued by allegations of corruption and political interference,'¹⁸⁴ that allowed the culture of impunity to continue.

Despite such allegations, David Scheffer, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Expert for United Nations Assistance to the Khmer Rouge Trials, argued that the court's ability to meet international standards of due process would be dependent upon the extent of the Chambers', co-prosecutors', co-investigating judges', and defences' abilities to draw upon the substantial jurisprudence that had emerged since 1993. In other words, Scheffer believed that the ECCC's effectiveness in delivering a sense of justice to the Cambodian public should not be determined until the completion of all trials. Between 2007 and 2018, the ECCC held just three trials: Case 001/01, Case 002/01, and Case 002/02. Together the trials required more than 300 million dollars in operational costs to convict just three defendants.¹⁸⁵

Although there are two other cases within the court that have not made it to trial, it has long been speculated that the disposition of Case 002/02 on the 16th of November 2018, may have marked the end of trials within the ECCC. The ECCC's 14th of August 2020 order to seal and archive Case File 004/2 supports such speculation. Therefore, the 'landmark' disposition of Case 002/02 —which convicted Nuon Chea, (also known as

¹⁸⁴ Lesley-Rozen, 'Memory at the site', *Remembering Genocide*, 138.

¹⁸⁵ Eli Meixler, 'Why a Genocide Verdict in Cambodia Could Be the Last of Its Kind,' *Time*, 30 November 2018 [Cambodia: Genocide Ruling May Be Khmer Rouge Tribunal's Last | Time](#).

Brother Number Two), and DK Head of State, Khieu Samphan,¹⁸⁶ of genocide and crimes against humanity— is an appropriate source to reflect on the legacy of the ECCC and the effects of transitional justice within Khmer Rouge historiography and contemporary post-transition public history.

When observing the scope of ECCC jurisdiction, it becomes clear how litigation has allowed for the emergence of historical patterns and specific characteristics to become further concretised within Khmer Rouge historiography as a result of decades of political negotiations of history. For example, the ECCC describes itself as a special court within the Cambodian judicial system that was established to ‘bring to trial senior leaders of Democratic Kampuchea and those who were most responsible for the crimes and serious violations of Cambodian penal law, international humanitarian law and custom, and international conventions recognized by Cambodia, during the period between 17 April 1975 to 6 January 1979.’¹⁸⁷

The ECCC’s hierarchical and politicised decision-making surrounding what would and would not be included in state-official and international narratives, offer a sense of permanence to the DK historical period being represented as *bak*, or *snarm*, despite the fact that, as this chapter has demonstrated, the Khmer Rouge is part of a broader historical and ideological continuum that extends beyond the periodisation of the 17th of April 1975 to the 6th of January 1979. Yet, this highly constrained period came to be politically marked as an

¹⁸⁶ Because of the amnesty policy, both men were living in freedom until 1998 when the Thai government handed them back to Cambodia.

¹⁸⁷ ‘About Us,’ United Nations Assistance to the Khmer Rouge Trials, July 8, 2013, [About us | United Nations Assistance to the Khmer Rouge Trials \(unakrt-online.org\)](http://unakrt-online.org).

isolated period of genocide and a defining moment in Cambodia's history for the very reason that it suited the objectives of numerous stakeholders, from DK defector leaders of the PRK, modern pre-DK Cambodian regimes that also committed racially driven atrocities prior to the 17th of April 1975, foreign nations such as China, Thailand, and the United States, who supported DK and the Khmer Rouge (either tacitly or overtly), to the current, self-protecting autocratic government under the leadership of Hun Sen.

Additionally, by only being able to try and convict senior most leaders, the ECCC perpetuated the vagueness of the PRT and Tuol Sleng narratives, which limited the responsibility of atrocities to 'Pol Pot's genocidal clique'. This aspect of jurisdiction underscores the negotiation of history between the Cambodian government and the international community, specifically their aim of finding a common approach for simultaneously achieving reconciliation (Hun Sen's objective) and justice (the narrative of the UN). The result of negotiations was that the three high-profile ECCC convictions came to serve as a genericised form of reconciliation and legal justice for the estimated 1.7 million deaths and the millions of other crimes experienced by surviving victims, many of which were committed by mid-level Khmer Rouge cadre.

Even still, Case 002/02's disposition is significant in Khmer Rouge historiographic development not simply because it was the first time that any of the atrocities committed during DK were ruled as genocide (*prolai pouch-sas* in Khmer) as defined under international law, but more importantly because the disposition confronted, albeit imperfectly, the legacy of DK whilst aiming to determine the scope of the genocide. The

disposition found Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, the last two surviving senior leaders of the CPK, guilty of genocide, with the following specifications:

Nuon Chea: PURSUANT TO Articles 4 and 29 (new) of the ECCC Law, genocide by killing members of the Vietnamese and Cham groups.

*Khieu Samphan: - PURSUANT TO Articles 4 and 29 (new) of the ECCC Law, genocide by killing members of the Vietnamese group.*¹⁸⁸

Though the rulings of genocide for both defendants were significant, the ambiguity surrounding the legal interpretation of genocide in addition to the court's restrictive application and inadequate explanation of the term, meant that the genocide debate that had long preoccupied historians remained unsettled. As Judge You Ottara stated in a separate opinion following the disposition of Case 002/02, 'the resulting approach which the Trial Chamber has necessarily followed [in determining specific DK crimes as genocide] is much too narrow,' and it 'risks implying an overly formalistic, and entirely unrealistic, approach to the definition and identification of genocides.'¹⁸⁹

Together, Case 002/02's genocide conviction and Judge You Ottara's separate opinion laid the groundwork for further speculation over the relationship between genocide, the dimensions of justice, litigation's capacity to officially historicise crimes as genocide, and the atrocities that were committed during DK. Specifically, because the ruling restricted the term genocide to describe the crimes committed by Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan against the Vietnamese and Cham minority groups only, it failed to address the

¹⁸⁸ *Case 002/02*, Co-Prosecutor v Nuon (Chea) and Khieu (Samphan), Summary of judgment, Case no 002/19-09-2007/ECCC/TC, ICL 1886 (ECCC 2018), 16th November 2018, Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia [ECCC], 2230-1, [Case 002_02 Judgment \(full\).pdf - Google Drive](#).

¹⁸⁹ *Case 002/02*, 'Judgement,' 2234.

full scope of CPK atrocities that were experienced on both cultural and national levels. Judge You Ottara argued that it would have been both feasible and appropriate for the court to address the genocidal aspects of Nuon Chea's and Khieu Samphan's crimes against the Cambodian national group, 'which may have been targeted for myriad reasons – e.g. political, economic, social, cultural reasons, in the name of societal purification more broadly.'¹⁹⁰

The years of investigations, trials, and deliberations have allowed Khmer Rouge history to settle into the peripheries of international publics. When the ECCC's genocide ruling was finally delivered after eighteen months of deliberation however, it reinvigorated the international public's attention for the Khmer Rouge by calling upon their humanitarian obligation to bear witness to genocide.¹⁹¹ Case 002/02 was transformed into an historical event wherein both national and international public opinions and receptions, however briefly, intersected and interacted with one another through a dialogue that once again sensationalised the trauma of genocide.

Since the first ECCC trial began in 2009, the Khmer Rouge tribunals had continued the PRK pattern of drawing comparisons between Democratic Kampuchea and the Holocaust as a way of drawing the attention of the international public. Because Case 002/02 offered the international public a sense of finality to Khmer Rouge historiographic development, it was labelled as 'Cambodia's Nuremberg Moment', first by David Scheffer

¹⁹⁰ *Case 002/02, 'Judgement,'* 2235.

¹⁹¹ Lesley-Rozen, 'Memory at the site', *Remembering Genocide*, 146.

and then the international media.¹⁹² Like the Holocaust, justice was the overseer for the historical lesson of ‘never again,’ which came to pervade the Cambodian Genocide.

While at first glance international and contemporary Cambodian post-transition public history together seem to provide a sense of finality to Khmer Rouge historiography through the lens of truth and justice, it is illusory. For the international community who did not directly experience or inherit the trauma, or *baksbat*, of the atrocities committed under DK, bearing witness to landmark achievements toward accountability is perhaps enough of a prerogative to close the book on Khmer Rouge historical inquiry. Yet, this chapter has demonstrated that even the most foundational components of Khmer Rouge historiography are the results of negotiations rooted in the politics of nation-state development in the aftermath of trauma in addition to Cambodia’s fraught relationship with the international community. It is therefore more accurate and productive to contextualise the completion of Case 002/02 and the ECCC as catalysts to Khmer Rouge historiographic development towards the context of *pastness*. It is from this point wherein political pressure has eased, that there is ample opportunity to break from the restrictive inquiries of justice and reconciliation in order to develop a historical dialogue that is receptive to trauma recovery and representative of the plethora of victim and survivor experiences under DK. Whether such a platform contextualises these experiences as genocide, shall be up to survivors.

¹⁹² Ellis Peterson, ‘Khmer Rouge Leaders Found Guilty,’ *The Guardian*.

CHAPTER 2

Surveying the Politics of Public History in Cambodia

The saliency of utilising the first chapter to orient Cambodian public history's evolution alongside Khmer Rouge historiographic development and the re-building of the Cambodian nation-state is that it provided insight into the ever-evolving national and international political circumstances that transformed Khmer Rouge history and memory into instruments and representations of power. State official public history's existence in Cambodia is consequently dependent upon initiatives adhering to and operating within the parameters set through a combination of state and political agendas in terms of what, why, and by whom the past is remembered. With the multifaceted political dynamics having been established, it is now possible to examine the evolving functions of public history in Cambodia, and how those functions have been and continue to be, determined by political stakeholders and foreign interventions.

This survey of various state-sanctioned, and internationally funded public history and memory activism projects in Cambodia and the politics behind their formation, marks the beginning of the thesis's adaptation of the methods employed by Joan M. Schwartz in her essay, 'The Archival Garden: Photographic Plantings, Interpretive Choices, and Alternative Narratives,' from *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions, Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels*. Schwartz's research is itself an adaptation of Samuels's idea of the 'documentation strategy' as laid out in her 1986 *American Archivist* article, 'Who Controls the Past.' In her essay, Schwartz compellingly argues that archival

photographs must be recontextualised outside of our usual understanding of them as nouns, which limits historical inquiry to questions relating to what images are *of* and *about*. She instead advocates for thinking of photographs as transitive verbs for the reason that they *do* things. This, Schwartz explains, expands the range of inquiry to encompass what images were created to do and how their function and meaning inevitably change ‘across temporal and spatial, discursive and institutional boundaries— so that we may better document the way society itself has been documented.’¹

Whilst successive chapters are direct in their applications of Schwartz’s method, in that photographic archives are the primary sources examined and contextualised as transitive verbs, this chapter is more liberal in its mode of adaptation. Instead of photographs, public history shall be the subject of reconfiguration from a noun to a transitive verb. In this capacity, the term public history becomes, ‘in itself, a mode of inquiry,’ that escapes the narrow inquest for historical ‘truth,’ by alternatively examining the function of history and its evolving potential for inciting meaning, remembrance, and forgetting, in the context of post-genocide and post-transition Cambodia.² Because it is the intention of the survey to exceed the task of simply describing what various public history and memory initiatives are representative of, what their narratives are about, and what messages they are intended to convey, each state-official public history initiative that is

¹ Joan M. Schwartz, ‘The Archival Garden: Photographic Plantings, Interpretive Choices, and Alternative Narratives,’ in *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions: Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels*, ed. Terry Cook (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011), pp. 69-110, 105.

² Schwartz, ‘The Archival Garden,’ *Controlling the Past*, 105.

surveyed is conceived as a record, or public history ‘planting,’ which together, constitute the cumulative archival ‘garden,’ of public history in Cambodia. Furthermore, each ‘planting’ serves as a portal, providing unique insights into the *mentalité* of the regime that produced it and the publics which consumed it.³ As such, the purposes and meanings of these public history ‘plantings’ are understood as being subject to change, whilst new functions and implications accumulate and attach themselves to the ‘plantings’ in response to the social, cultural, political, and economic factors that shape the historical memory preoccupations of subsequent epochs.

In addition to prompting the identification of the evolutionary functions of different public history initiatives, a series of relational questions are brought to the fore, including, ‘how does public history correlate with issues of transitional justice and democratisation?’⁴ what are the authorial (both original and appropriated) intentions attached to a given public history project/ institution? How do those intentions determine a public- i.e., who is included and who is left out of the processes of remembrance, history-making, memorialisation, and bearing witness? In what ways have Khmer Rouge memory and historiography been limited to the trajectory of narratives imposed by state regimes and Cambodia’s international relations? And is it possible to negotiate the functions of state-sanctioned and internationally sponsored forms of public history to be representative of

³ Schwartz, ‘The Archival Garden,’ *Controlling the Past*, 77.

⁴ Eva-Clarita Pettai, ‘Historians, Public History, and Transitional Justice: Baltic Experiences,’ *International Public History* 3, no. 2 (December 18, 2020): pp. 1-14, [Historians, Public History, and Transitional Justice: Baltic Experiences \(degruyter.com\)](https://www.degruyter.com/doc/10.1515/iph-2020-0011/html), 1.

and beneficial to, the social needs and experiences of Cambodian post-genocide civil society?

The chosen lines of inquiry and application of method together underscore that the conditions which give rise to public history and its functions vary depending upon national, regional, and cultural circumstances, which transversely supports the argument that there can be no singular model or solution to the globalised inquiry of what constitutes a ‘public history movement,’ or ‘national public history.’ Further, surveying public history in Cambodia at a national level is not an exercise in attempting to fit Cambodia into the international framework of public history, nor is it meant to serve as an exhaustive index of projects about the history and memory of the Khmer Rouge. Instead, the survey structure aims to explore the multiplicity of ways in which Khmer Rouge history raises questions regarding the globality of different modes of historical communication, dissemination, and reception. Finally, charting the trajectory of the politics of public history pertaining to the Khmer Rouge considers the interconnected relationships between historiographic development, memorialisation, and the emergence of a politically induced cultural amnesia, and their impact upon the formation of publics,⁵ and cultivation of public knowledge. As shall become apparent, the extremity of Khmer Rouge history and memory, and the implications of their historical communication and dissemination, result in a case

⁵ David Dean distinguishes the existence of multiple groups within a general public by using the word *publics*. He states that using the term ‘*publics* rather than *the public* compels us to be more nuanced in our analyses of historical representations and also when we come to talk about agency in public history,’ which are the primary concerns of this chapter. David M. Dean, ‘Introduction,’ in *A Companion to Public History* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 1-11, [A Companion to Public History | Wiley Online Books](#), 4.

study that challenges researchers and public historians alike to shift their understanding of public history to being an inherent component of historical research that combines efforts in memory activism, as opposed to thinking of public history, memory studies, and historical research as distinct approaches and separate entities that occupy opposite ends of a spectrum.⁶

Picking up where the first chapter left off, the first section of the survey discusses transitional justice as a producer of public history and the role that the Extraordinary Chamber in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) had in diversifying the ‘garden,’ of public history in Cambodia. This is followed by a section entitled ‘National Commemoration and International Tourism,’ which aims to disentangle the assignment of commemorative sites as museum-ified international tourist attractions from the political agendas that characterise the same sites as national monuments of the genocide. Then the section ‘Archives, Education, and Outreach,’ offers a glimpse into how the trajectory of Cambodian public history shifted from a single narrative to a ‘garden’ of diverse public history ‘plantings.’⁷ The final part of the survey interrogates how the history-making and historical research processes in Cambodia were affected by the ‘digital turn.’ It at once discerns digital history from digital public history whilst explaining how early digital history and digital public history projects relating to Khmer Rouge history have contributed to expanding the potential of genocide research and the boundaries in terms of what history can *do* as a field.

⁶ Pettai, ‘Historians, Public History, and Transitional Justice,’ *International Public History*.

⁷ Schwartz, ‘The Archival Garden,’ *Controlling the Past*, 69-110.

Transitional Justice

*What was part of customary international law as of 1975?*⁸ This is the substantive and preambulatory inquiry that defined the scope of all historical investigations and landmark legal decisions of the ECCC since its establishment in 2006 up to the most recent (and likely the final) trial disposition in 2018. In this capacity, the ECCC was responsible only for identifying and applying the law as it stood in 1975; any advancements made in international criminal law since 1975 were omitted from the ECCC's jurisprudence. Thus, at initial glance, the question of *what was part of customary international law as of 1975?*⁹ incites confusion as to the Court's overall purpose, as well as scepticism about whom the legal process and outcome were ultimately intended to benefit. After all, the ECCC operated not in pre-DK 1975 Cambodia, but in a 21st century post-genocide nation that was rebuilding after three decades of civil war. Moreover, since 1975, and certainly by the time the ECCC was established, international criminal law and justice had developed on numerous fronts; the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (1993-2017), the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (1994-2015), the Special Panels for Serious Crimes for East Timor (2000-2006), the Special Court for Sierra Leone (2002-2013), and the establishment of the International Criminal Court in 2002, each set precedents that contributed to the development and crystallisation of modern international criminal justice.

⁸ Elinor Fry and Elies Van Sliedregt, 'Targeted Groups, Rape, and Dolus Eventualis: Assessing the ECCC's Contributions to Substantive International Criminal Law,' *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, May 31, 2020, pp. 701-721, Targeted Groups, Rape, and Dolus Eventualis: Assessing the ECCC's Contributions to Substantive International Criminal Law by Elinor Fry, Elies van Sliedregt :: SSRN, 701.

⁹ Fry and Van Sliedregt, 'Targeted Groups, Rape, and Dolus Eventualis,' *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 701.

In the trajectory of international criminal law history, the ECCC is positively framed as ‘providing a rare window into the substantive international criminal law of the 1970s,’ and serving as ‘a crucial steppingstone that did not previously exist between 1940s Nuremberg, modern-day ad hoc tribunals and the establishment of the International Criminal Court.’¹⁰ Thus, legal historians argue that the ECCC has helped to ‘gauge the developments of customary international law,’¹¹ and clarify ‘the state of International Humanitarian Law prior to 1975-1979.’¹² But as the concern here is to understand how the ECCC was a producer of public history for the contemporary society in which it operated and continues to have an impact upon, it seems prudent to take a more critical stance by inquiring into what, and how much, may have been sacrificed to fill this chronological and theoretical void in legal history. Put more vehemently, did the ECCC forego the occasion to offer constituents and the international public (particularly the Cambodian diaspora, among which are survivors of DK), a more innovative and progressive legal interpretation of Khmer Rouge history in its decision to prioritise contributing to international legal history?

Recalling Chapter 1’s account of the circumstances that led to the formation of the ECCC, transitional justice in Cambodia only began to come to fruition in 2006 after a 27-year delay. Laying the foundation for the establishment of the Court was not the will of the

¹⁰ Fry and Van Sliedregt, ‘Targeted Groups, Rape, and Dolus Eventualis,’ *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 702.

¹¹ Fry and Van Sliedregt, ‘Targeted Groups, Rape, and Dolus Eventualis,’ *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 721.

¹² Chang-ho Chung, ‘Forward,’ in *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia Assessing Their Contribution to International Criminal Law*, ed. Simon M. Meisenberg and Ignaz Stegmüller (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), pp. vii-viii, [The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia | SpringerLink](#), vii.

Cambodian people, but the conflicting agendas of Cambodia's ruling party (Hun Sen and the Cambodian People's Party, or the CPP) and the United Nations' international legal community. To appease Prime Minister Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge cadre who wanted to protect mid and lower ranking soldiers from indictment, preferred national reconciliation over justice, and prioritised amnesty for the CPK's top perpetrators, the ECCC was configured to operate in cooperation with the UN, yet function outside the UN's International Criminal Court. The result was a hybrid court that incorporated both national and international expertise and jurisprudence, with trial proceedings operating under the jurisdiction of domestic courts and 'largely under domestic procedural law.'¹³ On the one hand, it may be argued that this tactic 'strengthened the national justice system and its capacity,' to uphold international Humanitarian Law.¹⁴ It also set precedents for future prosecutions of similarly historic crimes in Cambodia as well other countries.¹⁵ In addition, as the only international tribunal to have ever been established thus far in the Asia-Pacific region, the ECCC's institutional presence offered a productive starting point for eventually establishing an Asian-Pacific Court of Human Rights, for which there is a growing need due to the corruption and human rights abuses accompanying the region's rapid economic

¹³ Helen Jarvis, 'Trials and Tribulations: The Long Quest for Justice for the Cambodian Genocide,' in *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia Assessing Their Contribution to International Criminal Law*, ed. Simon M. Meisenberg and Ignaz Stegmüller (The Hague, NL: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), pp. 13-44, 21.

¹⁴ Chung, 'Forward,' vii.

¹⁵ Russell Hopkins, 'The Case 002/01 Trial Judgement: A Stepping Stone from Nuremberg to the Present?,' in *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia Assessing Their Contribution to International Criminal Law*, ed. Simon M. Meisenberg and Ignaz Stegmüller (The Hague, NL: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), pp. 181-201, 201.

development, population growth, and diverse political leadership.¹⁶ On the other hand however, few would dispute that Cambodian national and the UN international political actors designed the Court's mandates and scope of substantive inquiry to ensure that their own needs and agendas were met.

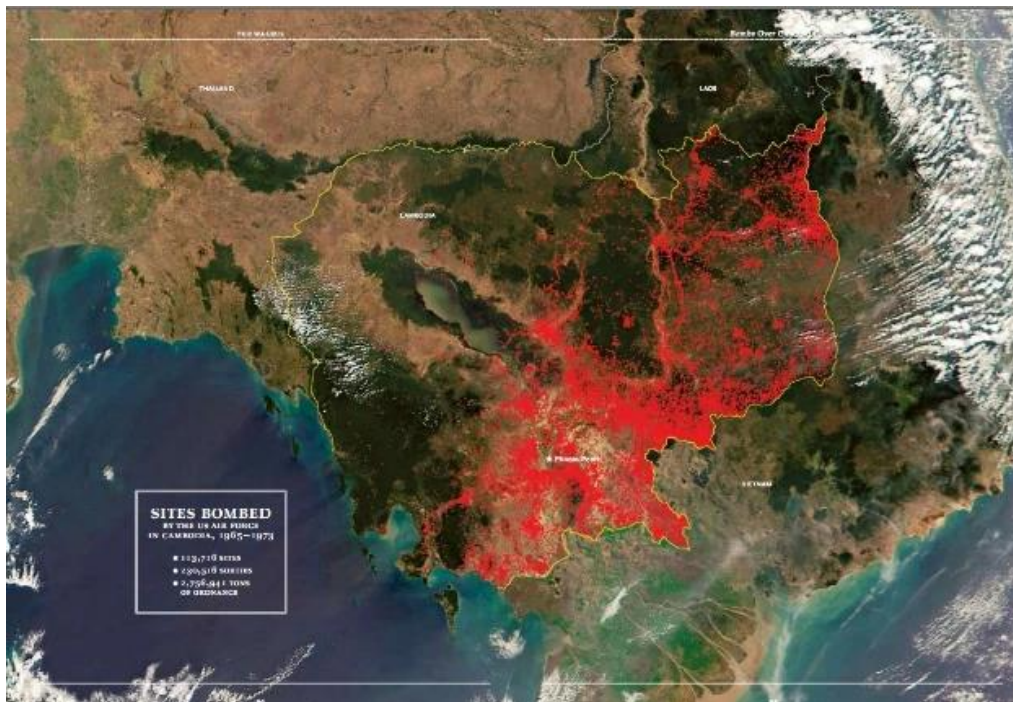


Figure 2.1: Taylor Owen, Sites Bombed by the US Air Force in Cambodia, 1965-1973, *The Walrus*, October 12, 2006.

Consider for instance, the actions taken by the United States government—specifically the US carpet bombing of Cambodia— a strategy that aimed to flush out the Việt Cộng on the Ho Chi Minh Trail between 1965 and 1973 (Figure 2.1). Although the trial

¹⁶ Chang-ho Chung, 'The Emerging Asian-Pacific Court of Human Rights in the Context of State and Non-State Liability,' *Harvard International Law Journal* 57 (2016): pp. 44-47, [The Emerging Asian-Pacific Court of Human Rights in the Context of State and Non-State Liability \(harvardilj.org\)](http://www.harvardilj.org), 44-5.

findings of Case 002/02 acknowledged how this event was a catalyst for bringing the Khmer Rouge to power,¹⁷ had it not been for the parameters that limited the Court's investigation to the period between 1975 and 1979, high-ranking US government officials (namely Henry Kissinger), would have been at risk of being indicted under international criminal law.

Then there is the matter of the ECCC's regressive interpretations of crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge under both national and international law, which were direct results of the Court not accounting for any jurisprudential developments after 1975. To begin, although Cambodian negotiators in the ECCC fought to have national substantive law included within ECCC jurisdiction, the defence effectively retaliated by challenging the statute of limitations of the 1956 Cambodian Penal Code, arguing that the code's validity would be affected if it were to be applied 'today to offences committed during 1975-1979.'¹⁸ The Trial Chamber neither reached an agreement nor a super-majority, which translated to the ECCC being unable to try the accused for national crimes in the prosecution in Case 001 against Kaing Guek Eav (*nom de guerre*, Duch). After a decision was reached on the *Defence Preliminary Objection Concerning the Statute of limitations of Domestic Crimes*

¹⁷ In Case 002/01 the Trial Judgement found that the carpet bombing of rural Cambodia (targeting North Vietnamese troops), by the United States between 1969 and 1973 not only took a 'devastating' toll on the Cambodian countryside by terrorising and traumatising the rural population and killing what the Court estimated to be tens of thousands of people,¹⁷ but also heightened the level of paranoia amidst the ongoing crisis of the Cambodian civil war. Additionally, the Trial Chamber found that the engagement of combat activity by the US was supposed to entirely cease after December 1970, but the bombings by the US military continued until August 1973. In response to the years of bombings, Khmer Rouge policies during the civil war became radicalised, rural Cambodians grew 'angry and suspicious of outsiders'¹⁷ and many were driven to take refuge in the city of Phnom Penh. *Case 002/01*, 'Trial Judgement,' § 155, August 7, 2014, [Trial Chamber Judgement Case 002/01](#). ENG (eccc.gov.kh).

¹⁸ Jarvis, 'Trials and Tribulations,' *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia* 26-7.

by the Trial Chamber in Case 001, Duch was only convicted for international crimes.¹⁹ Then in Case 002, the accused, Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, were not indicted for national crimes 'given the multiple legal problems arising from the charges brought based on national criminal legislation.'²⁰ Thus, 'the Co-Investigating Judges deemed it preferable to accord such acts the highest legal classification, namely crimes against humanity or grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949.'²¹

The handling of the crime of rape in Case 001 and 002 exemplifies how applying international law as it stood in 1975 amounted to detrimentally regressive decisions and interpretations that continue to directly affect contemporary Cambodian society. In Case 001, the Supreme Court Chamber ruled and subsequently held that 'rape as a crime against humanity, was not included in the 1950 Nuremberg Principles,' and that 'by 1975 and through 1979, no international treaty or convention was adopted which prohibited rape as a crime against humanity.'²² What is more, although the Co-Investigating Judges found that rape did indeed occur in security centres, including S-21 where Duch was the warden, the crimes could not be linked to the accused (in both Case 001 and Case 002) as 'there was no evidence to support a finding that the CPK leaders used rape as a policy in [their] security centres.'²³ In Case 002 however, Co-Prosecutors used a strategy that had proved effective

¹⁹ Jarvis, 'Trials and Tribulations,' *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, 26-7.

²⁰ Jarvis, 'Trials and Tribulations,' *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, 26-7.

²¹ Jarvis, 'Trials and Tribulations,' *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, 27.

²² *Case 001*, 'Appeal Judgement,' February 3, 2012, § 176,

[Microsoft Word - Case 001 Appeal Judgement MASTER 9 April 12pm clean FINAL - corrections 12 April 10am CLEAN \(eccc.gov.kh\)](http://www.eccc.gov.kh).

²³ Fry and Van Sliedregt, 'Targeted Groups, Rape, and Dolus Eventualis,' *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 712.

in the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL). In *Brima et. al.*, the SCSL ‘formally recognized forced marriage as a crime against humanity under the category of “other inhumane act.”’²⁴ The ECCC Co-Prosecutors of Case 002 used the CPK’s policy of forced marriage as the foundation for the argument that ‘by imposing the consummation of forced marriages, the perpetrators committed a physical invasion of a sexual nature against a victim in coercive circumstances in which the consent of the victim was absent.’²⁵ The regulation of marriage (Figure 2.2) was an order issued by the upper echelon of the CPK and enforced by the lower levels. The Trial Chamber found that after the wedding ceremonies, newly-weds were forced to sleep in assigned locations, where Khmer Rouge soldiers monitored couples to ensure marriages were consummated. In other words, both men and women were forced to have sexual intercourse and in some cases were forced to do so at gunpoint. With this evidence, Co-prosecutors made the argument that under these circumstances, both men and women were victims of rape. However, the Trial Chamber found that the Co-Prosecutors’ definition of rape went ‘beyond the understanding of [the crime] as [it stood in] 1975,’ and instead applied the definition that was contemporaneous to the period of the crimes (1975-1979). This definition of rape provided by the Trial Chamber in the Judgement of Case 002, required an act of penetration of:

²⁴ Fry and Van Sliedregt, ‘Targeted Groups, Rape, and Dolus Eventualis,’ *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 711.

See also ‘Judgment,’ *Brima et al.* (‘AFRC’) (SCSL-04-16-T), TC II, 20 June 2007, §§ 697, 701-17, 1069-1260, [AFRC Trial Judgement \(rscsl.org\)](http://www.rscsl.org).

Finally, see Centre for Women, Peace + Security, ‘*Brima, Kamara, and Kanu Case*,’ accessed December 22, 2021, [Brima, Kamara and Kanu Case | Tackling Violence against Women \(lse.ac.uk\)](http://www.lse.ac.uk).

²⁵ *Case 002 ‘Closing Order*,’ September 15, 2010, 352, §1431, [D427Eng.pdf \(eccc.gov.kh\)](http://www.eccc.gov.kh).

‘(a) the vagina or anus of the victim by the penis of the perpetrator or any other object used by the perpetrator; or (b) the mouth of the victim by the penis of the perpetrator; where such sexual penetration occurs without the consent of the victim.’

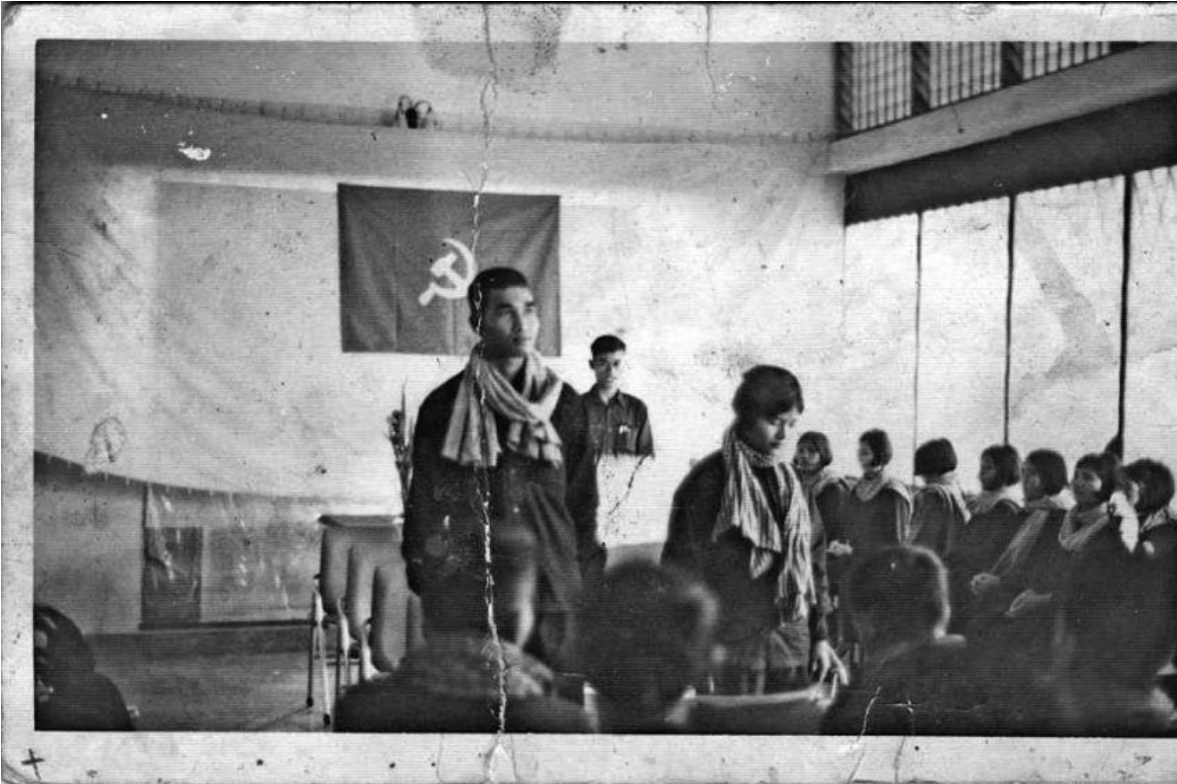


Figure 2.2: ‘A wedding photo from the Khmer Rouge period shows the head of the re-education centre at Prey Sar, then known as S-24, (left) marrying an official at S-24,’ Documentation Center of Cambodia Archives. Images sourced from *The Phnom Penh Post*, October 17, 2017.

According to this definition, only women could be victims of rape in the context of forced marriage. Although the Trial Chamber acknowledged that ‘men were subjected to sexual violence that was contrary to human dignity,’ it did not consider the sexual violence committed against men to ‘constitute the crime against humanity of other inhumane acts

through sexual violence.’²⁶ It may therefore be concluded that by applying a dated, narrow, and highly gendered definition of rape, the ECCC failed to acknowledge the physical, emotional, and psychological harm and suffering experienced by half of the victims of forced marriage. In addition, all victims of rape (regardless of gender) outside the context of forced marriage, remained unheard and unacknowledged by the ECCC for the reason that the Court never made a rule on rape outside the context of forced marriage,’ on the basis that ‘during the period 1975-1979, rape did not exist as a ‘stand-alone crime against humanity.’²⁷

The ECCC’s scope, definition, and ruling of genocide is yet another example of how the legal justice system failed to comprehensively address and historicise specific crimes. Although the ECCC’s problematic application of the term genocide was detailed in the previous chapter, it is worth re-emphasizing how the Court not only chose a narrow legal perspective of the crime, but also rejected a Civil Party request to expand the charge of genocide to include ‘places other than the limited border areas,’ and minority groups that were the focus of the original investigation.²⁸ In addition to this Civil Party request, Civil Party lawyers also submitted an appeal to appoint an expert examiner to determine ‘whether the charge of genocide against the Khmer national group [would be] justifiable.’²⁹

²⁶ *Case 002/02 ‘Trial Judgement,’* November 16, 2018, § 731, § 3701, [Case 002_02 Judgment \(full\).pdf - Google Drive](#).

²⁷ *Case 002, ‘Decision on Ieng Sary’s Appeal Against Closing Order, Ieng Sary,’* D427/1/30, PTC, April 11, 2011, §§ 384–396, [D427_2_15_EN_0.pdf \(eccc.gov.kh\)](#).

²⁸ Jarvis, ‘Trials and Tribulations,’ *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, 26-7.

²⁹ Jarvis, ‘Trials and Tribulations,’ *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, 27-8.

participatory rights and the opportunity to ‘seek collective and moral reparations.’³³ Until the ECCC, there had been no instance of granting victims Civil Party status in an international court setting. To clarify, Civil Party status ‘grants victims— at least theoretically— the right to participate in the proceedings as a formal party with broad participatory rights similar to those of the defence and the prosecution,’³⁴ and is a feature found in many domestic court contexts. Under Rule 23 of the ECCC’s Internal Rules, Civil Party status was granted, which:

permitted victims to ‘a.) Participate in criminal proceedings against those responsible for crimes within the jurisdiction of the ECCC by supporting the prosecution; and b) Allow Victims to seek collective and moral reparations.’³⁵

Although the presence of Civil Party status underscores an effort on the part of the Court to ensure adequate representation for survivors and victims, there were numerous factors synchronously working together to effectively deter victims from participating under Civil Party status. This was especially true in Case 001, when only 94 people applied for Civil Party status and just 76 people ultimately came to be recognised as such by the ECCC Supreme Court Chamber.³⁶ Ultimately, reparations for Case 001 against Duch were

³³ *ECCC Internal Rules*, June 12, Rule no. 23, N°..... (eccc.gov.kh).

See also Elisa Hoven, ‘Civil Party Participation in Trials of Mass Crimes: A Qualitative Study at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia,’ *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 12, no. 1 (2014): pp. 81-107, [Civil Party Participation in Trials of Mass Crimes | Journal of International Criminal Justice | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#), 81-2.

³⁴ Ignaz Stegmiller, ‘Legal Developments of Civil Party Participation at the ECCC,’ in *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia Assessing Their Contribution to International Criminal Law*, ed. Simon M. Meisenberg and Ignaz Stegmiller (The Hague, NL: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), pp. 535-550, 535.

³⁵ *ECCC Internal Rules*, Rule no. 23.

³⁶ Phuong N. Pham et al., ‘Perspectives on Memory, Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Cambodia’s Post-Khmer Rouge Society,’ *International Review of the Red Cross* 101, no. 910 (2019): pp. 125-149, [Perspectives on memory, forgiveness and reconciliation in Cambodia’s post-Khmer Rouge society | International Review of the Red Cross | Cambridge Core](#), 134.

limited to a public listing of the 'names of all accepted civil parties and the name of any family member who died at S-21 prison, and...a compilation of all statements of apology made by Duch.'³⁷ The specific factors working against Civil Party applicants in Case 001 broadly included: a complex application form and taxing bureaucratic procedures; the Court's decision to limit the focus of the case to only crimes that were committed at a single crime site (S-21); and rules and regulations for Civil Parties not being implemented until almost the time of the filing of the Closing Order.³⁸ In the Trial Judgement of Case 001, the group known as 'Civil Party Group 1,'

'requested the Chamber to clearly delineate its framework for the enforcement and implementation of any reparations awards, and to further mandate the Victims Unit to undertake wider consultation on how reparations are to be approached in the Cambodian context.'³⁹

A great deal of credit must be given to Civil Party Group 1 and the numerous NGOs affiliated with the ECCC for ensuring that the Victims' Support Unit and Civil Party status were features not entirely abandoned by the Court in Case 002. In fact, grassroots initiatives are almost entirely responsible for activating the 'victim turn' within the ECCC; Civil Party Group 1's petition for a more active and clearly defined Victims Unit, combined with impressive outreach initiatives orchestrated by various NGOs, meant that drastic improvements were made in time to alter the trajectory of the public's role in Case 002.

³⁷ Heather Ryan and Laura McGrew, 'Performance and Perception: The Impact of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia,' ed. Kelly Askin and David Berry (Open Society Foundations, 2016), [OSJI-Performance and Perception-US-02-11-2016.indd \(justiceinitiative.org\)](#), 40-1.

³⁸ Jarvis, 'Trials and Tribulations,' *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, 33.

³⁹ *Case 001*, 'Trial Judgement,' July 26, 2010, § 655, [Microsoft Word - New PDF ENG.doc \(eccc.gov.kh\)](#).

The number of Civil Party applicants went from the 94 in Case 001 to 3,988 in Case 002.⁴⁰

While initially the Co-Investigating Judges recognised only 50% of those applicants, upon appeal 3,867— close to 100%— were ultimately granted Civil Party status.⁴¹ To accommodate the high volume of Civil Party members, the ECCC revised the Civil Parties Rule to reflect:

‘at the trial stage and beyond shall comprise a single, consolidated group, whose interests are represented by the Civil Party Lead Co-Lawyers...Civil Party Lead Co-Lawyers shall file a single claim for collective and moral reparations.’⁴²

In addition to a drastic increase in participation, reparations became varied and bore a great deal more significance compared to Case 001. The reparations ranged from remembrance and memorialisation to victim rehabilitation, education, and documentation,⁴³ thus transforming history— particularly the aspects of history that remained inadequately addressed and contextualised after the trials—into public history, wherein people (namely victims, survivors, and inheritors of the historical traumas), become empowered social agents who have a presence in the historical record and a role in shaping and interpreting history.⁴⁴ Thus, while the ECCC’s legal decisions, historical

⁴⁰ According to the ECCC webpage for Case 002/02, ‘during the trial, the Chamber heard the testimony of 185 individuals, including 114 witnesses, 63 Civil Parties and eight experts.’ *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, ‘Case 002/02,’ accessed February 28, 2021, [Case 002/02 | Drupal \(ecc.gov.kh\)](https://www.eccc.gov.kh/case/002/02).

Jarvis, ‘Trials and Tribulations,’ *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, 33.

⁴¹ Jarvis, ‘Trials and Tribulations,’ *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, 33.

⁴² ‘Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia Internal Rules (Rev.5),’ Rules 12^{ter} and 23(3) and 23^{ter} ECCC Internal Rules (Rev. 5), adopted on 9 February 2009 and amended on 9 February 2010, 22, [Microsoft Word - FINAL Internal Rules Revision5 09-10-10ENG.doc \(ecc.gov.kh\)](https://www.eccc.gov.kh/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Microsoft-Word-FINAL-Internal-Rules-Revision5-09-10-10ENG.doc).

⁴³ Jarvis, ‘Trials and Tribulations,’ 34.

⁴⁴ Roddy Brett and Vincent Druliolle, ‘The Politics of Victimhood in Post-Conflict Societies: Comparative and Analytical Perspectives,’ in *The Politics of Victimhood in Post-Conflict Societies: Comparative and Analytical Perspectives*, ed. Vincent Druliolle and Roddy Brett (Cham, AG: Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 1-22, 2.

interpretations, and overall scope of the crimes committed during DK were at best limited and at worst regressive, the Court's transference of its historical agency to NGOs and the Cambodian people through reparations initiatives must ultimately be understood as a progressive outcome and legacy. In other words, as a producer of public history, the ECCC was limited on numerous fronts. However, by granting reparations that gave funding and resources to grassroots projects and the maintaining of Cambodian operated NGO infrastructures, the ECCC helped alter the nation's public history landscape from one that was entirely comprised of national and international political narratives, to a more balanced topography of representation, which today contains both official narratives and complex grassroots dialogues.

National Commemoration and International Tourism

Until the effectuation of a transitional justice system, Cambodian public history and the DK commemorative landscapes were defined and determined by two groups: national politicians and international tourists. Since the PRK's liberation of Cambodia in January 1979, politics and tourism have become almost indiscernible extensions of one another. Two sites in particular— the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre— exemplify how DK commemorative spaces have been assigned to dually function as national memorials (specifically monuments to the dead and the genocide) and places of international tourism. While the dual role of Tuol Sleng may already be understood to a certain extent due to Chapter 1's discussion, Choeung Ek requires a brief historical introduction.

Located approximately 10 kilometres south of Tuol Sleng, Choeung Ek was originally an orchard, part of which was used as a Chinese cemetery. Under DK, it became an execution ground and mass grave site for the thousands of victims who were imprisoned at Tuol Sleng. Shortly after Mai Lam transformed Tuol Sleng into the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, he proceeded to curate Choeung Ek as a national monument to the Cambodian genocide. Today, it is only second to Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh's tourism draw. On certain occasions, Choeung Ek, like Tuol Sleng, is used as a site for harnessing national political memory and official remembrance of the genocide. This section seeks to discern between Tuol Sleng's and Choeung Ek's dual functions as museums that historicise DK for international tourists, and national monuments of the state by interweaving their four-decade trajectory of museumification with an examination of the political agendas and state commemorative practices that transformed them into contested spaces.

Central to this mission is the understanding how 'memory and history, far from being synonymous...' are often in 'fundamental opposition.'⁴⁵ For example, victims and survivors of genocide and their relations, are bound to commemorative spaces without temporal continuities, while international publics without direct experience of, or connection to, a genocidal past seek and depend upon, the mediation and (re)presentation of the past.⁴⁶ The first group 'installs remembrance within the sacred,'⁴⁷ and the second

⁴⁵ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire,' *Representations* 26 (1989): pp. 7-24, [Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire | Representations | University of California Press \(ucpress.edu\)](https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/representations), 8.

⁴⁶ Nora, 'Between Memory and History,' *Representations*, 8.

⁴⁷ Nora, 'Between Memory and History,' *Representations*, 9.

group 'is only able to conceive the relative.'⁴⁸ In other words, commemorative sites are places of memory, or *lieux de mémoire* for victims, survivors, and their families; *un tourisme de mémoire* and the international public's requirement for mediation and historical reconstruction, transform the very same sites into realms of history, or, *lieux d'histoire*.⁴⁹ Reinforcing the dissonance between memory and history are the curatorial strategies of the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide and the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre, which bring to the fore issues that arise when attempting to simultaneously accommodate both. There are numerous semiotic studies that extensively re-trace the international visitor experiences to be had at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. These studies are highly valuable as they offer insight into how tourists — particularly Western tourists— receive and interpret the sites' curatorial strategies. At Tuol Sleng, visitors often focus on how 'the absence of a suitable explanatory apparatus makes the museum devoid of the interpretive intertext that alone can make a museum intelligible.'⁵⁰ Choeung Ek has 'even less to see, hear, and read' throughout the visitor path, which after certain 'improvements,' were made, acquired an unsettling aesthetic that is reminiscent of a 'mini golf course,'⁵¹ (Figure 2.3).

⁴⁸ Nora, 'Between Memory and History,' *Representations*, 9.

⁴⁹ Nora, 'Between Memory and History,' *Representations*, 19.

⁵⁰ Patrizia Violi, *Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Space, History*, ed. Katia Pizzi, trans. Alistair McEwan, vol. 7 (Oxford: Pieterlen: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag Der Wissenschaften, 2017), 157.

⁵¹ H. E. Sawyer, *I Am the Dark Tourist: Travels to the Darkest Sites on Earth* (London, UK: Headpress, 2018), [Am The Dark Tourist : Travels to the Darkest Sites on Earth: Onesearch Service for University of Guam \(ebscohost.com\)](#), 153.



Figure 2.3: Baron Reznik, 'Choeung Ek Mass Graves,' The Aisle Seat Please, July 16, 2014, digital image. Creative Commons Licence (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0), [Creative Commons — Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International — CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#).

Perhaps of greatest importance regarding the semiotic studies of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, is that they reveal how the international public is trained to see the voids and absences —the things that are not there— and at once ‘turn away from what is in fact present in forms of commemoration they do not recognise.’⁵² By extension, these semiotic analyses exemplify how Western emphasis on the lack in commemorative spaces supersedes the ‘critique of tourists’ inability to perceive ‘what might actually be represented’ in unfamiliar forms.⁵³ In this sense, perceived absences are manifestations of

⁵² Ashley Thompson, ‘Forgetting to Remember, Again: On Curatorial Practice and “Cambodian Art” in the Wake of Genocide,’ *Diacritics* 41, no. 2 (2013): pp. 82-109, [Project MUSE - Forgetting to Remember, Again: On Curatorial Practice and “Cambodian Art” in the Wake of Genocide \(jhu.edu\)](#), 88.

⁵³ Thompson, ‘Forgetting to Remember, Again,’ *Diacritics*, 83.

the neo-colonial framework embedded within the minds and expectations of the international public. As such, the objective of enriching the tourist experience should not be to fill the perceived absences of historical or commemorative qualities with encyclopaedic devices, but rather to reimagine the colonial/neo-colonial conceptions and expectations that international visitors have for Cambodia's commemorative landscape of genocide.

Doing so requires interrogating the roles of museums and memorials, the relationship between the two, and how they are used as forms of commemoration at the local level as well as at national sites. In their function as national memorials, Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek incorporate varying degrees of colonial and indigenous museographic practices. However, briefly distinguishing between national sites such as Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek from 'local' sites, reveals a critical dichotomy; in national spaces, Cambodian cultural and religious memorialisation processes undergo museumification and are grafted onto curatorial strategies that thematise Western concepts of genocide, trauma, violence, and suffering. Contrastingly, religious commemorative forms are demonstrative of how indigenous concepts of museumification are inherent to Theravada Buddhist commemorative traditions, the widely practiced religious system that is 'instrumental in forging a memory of those who died,' during DK.⁵⁴ For instance, Ashley Thompson describes

⁵⁴ Anne Yvonne Guillou, 'An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide: The Dead of the Mass Graves and the Land Guardian Spirits [Neak Ta],' *South East Asia Research* 20, no. 2 (2012): pp. 207-226, [An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide: The Dead of the Mass Graves and the Land Guardian Spirits \[Neak ta\]: South East Asia Research: Vol 20, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](#), 209.

how a termite hill⁵⁵ that had grown above a pile of DK era bones at the Roka Kaong pagoda (located approximately 40 kilometres north of Phnom Penh), was venerated as if it were a statue of the Buddha. Thompson explains that,

‘the sacred nature of this particular site of living, growing earth was significantly enhanced as, like a reliquary or Buddhist statue, it incorporated remains of the deceased. This spontaneous assimilation of the Khmer Rouge dead with the Buddha-image-as-reliquary, facilitated by the artistic staging, gave the dead new life as they were symbolically reincorporated into the samsara, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth...’⁵⁶

In the 1980s, a government order required pagodas to be the resting place of the DK era human remains that were gathered by members of the community (Figure 2.4). Pagodas were also required to build ‘museums’ (*sāramandīr*), to house and display the remains. At some point, a cement structure was built to replace the bamboo-thatched shelter that initially housed the termite hill and the remains that it rested upon (Figure 2.5). Every year, there is a ceremony at the site, honouring the unknown dead. Indeed, one can note a similarity between secular museums and pagoda sites, where ‘curiosity cabinets abound, manuscripts are conserved, and statues are displayed.’⁵⁷ But in contrast to the newly constructed and elaborate architecture that comprises the rest of Roka Kaong’s pagoda grounds, the *sāramandīr* appears neglected. When Thompson asked the lay community of the Roka Kaong pagoda about the structure, they attributed its deteriorating condition to a lack of funds. Thompson’s research, however, offers another, more nuanced interpretation of its apparent neglect; as the termite hill grew, the ‘museographical

⁵⁵ In Cambodian Buddhist-animist culture, termite hills are sacred and highly venerated. See Thompson, ‘Forgetting to Remember, Again,’ in *Diacritics*.

⁵⁶ Thompson, ‘Forgetting to Remember, Again,’ *Diacritics*, 89.

⁵⁷ Thompson, ‘Forgetting to Remember, Again,’ *Diacritics*, 90.

efficaciousness,' that was assigned to the man-made *sāramandīr* structure in turn, gradually disappeared and naturally assimilated into Buddhist-animist religious landscape. As such, one may regard 'a certain state of disrepair...as a traditional Cambodian Buddhist mode of curating religious memorials,' and *sāramandīr*.⁵⁸



Figure 2.4: Mai Lam, 'Survivors stand next to remains of victims,' 1982, *Documentation Center of Cambodia Archives*, (accessed October 30, 2021).

⁵⁸ Thompson, 'Forgetting to Remember, Again,' *Diacritics*, 92-3.



Figure 2.5: Julie M. Fleischman, 'Wat Roka Kaong memorial in Kandal,' in 'Remains of Khmer Rouge Violence: The Materiality of Bones as Scientific Evidence and affective Agents of Memory,' (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2017), figure 61, 164.



Figure 2.6: Julie M. Fleischman, 'Wat Samrong Knong memorial in Battambang,' in 'Remains of Khmer Rouge Violence: The Materiality of Bones as Scientific Evidence and affective Agents of Memory,' (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2017), figure 55, 161.

Figure 2.7: Fleischman, 'Wat Kiri Bopharahm memorial in Kampong Cham,' figure 56, 161.

Pagoda memorials, in various states of repair, exist throughout Cambodia (Figures 2.6 and 2.7). In contrast, the preservation efforts in places of national commemoration (Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek) evoke a sense of asymmetric acculturation⁵⁹, that ultimately satisfies the expectations of international audiences, who often have the clear objectives of seeking to encounter a history of DK, ‘put faces to the bones,’ and convey reverence for those directly affected by the genocide.⁶⁰ The apparent absences that international tourists perceive at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek are in actuality, telling of the asymmetrical representation, or, the reducing of, the dialectics of Cambodian cultural remembrance, and the commemorative elements that incite victims, survivors, and their families, to ‘install remembrance within the sacred.’⁶¹ As Patrizia Violi notes, Tuol Sleng is suggestive of a ‘confluence of diverse forms of memorialization...that graft different cultural elements onto it.’⁶² Building on this observation, perhaps Tuol Sleng is more accurately described as a confluence of different elements of museographic practices, which appropriate Khmer Buddhist religious forms of memorialisation into mere objects of the museum that merely serve as props for the *tourisme de mémoire* .

⁵⁹ Paweł Cywiński, ‘Tourist Neo-Colonialism as an Indication of the Future of Islands: The Example of Borobodur (Central Java),’ *Miscellanea Geographica* 19, no. 2 (January 2015): pp. 21-24, [Tourist Neo-colonialism as an Indication of the Future of Islands. The Example of Borobodur \(Central Java\) \(sciendocom\)](http://sciendocom.com), 22.

⁶⁰ Rachel Bethany Hughes, ‘Fielding Genocide: Post-1979 Cambodia and the Geopolitics of Memory’ (PhD thesis, 2006), [Fielding genocide: post-1979 Cambodia and the geopolitics of memory \(unimelb.edu.au\)](http://unimelb.edu.au), 182, 191.

⁶¹ Nora, ‘Between Memory and History,’ *Representations*, 9.

⁶² Violi, *Landscapes of Memory*, 160.

Ashley Thompson's assessment of the memorial stupa that stands inside Building D of Tuol Sleng, supports this notion (Figure 2.8). Centred in the final room of Building D is a recently installed gold-painted stupa, which is flanked on either side by remains encased in glass display boxes. As an architectural form itself, a stupa is not typically found indoors⁶³ and, to use Thompson's words, in this context, the stupa 'is hauntingly contained like another museum display, as if it were yet another one of the dead, delivered the ultimate blow by the very process of museumification.'⁶⁴ On the far side of the same room are cases that display rows of skulls, which once comprised Mai Lam's map of Cambodia. As previously stated, now, a backlit photograph of the original map of skulls hangs in its stead (refer to Figures 1.12-1.15).



Figure 2.8: Anne Laure Porée, gold painted stupa in Building D, in 'Tuol Sleng, l'Histoire Inachevée d'Un Musée Mémoire,' *Moussons*, no. 30 (2017):pp. 153-183, figure 2.

⁶³ Thompson, 'Forgetting to Remember, Again,' *Diacritics*, 92.

⁶⁴ Thompson, 'Forgetting to Remember, Again,' *Diacritics*, 92.



Figure 2.9: Tripwears, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum courtyard memorial stupa, February 3, 2018.

Another example of the static objectification of the stupa is the memorial that stands in Tuol Sleng's courtyard (Figure 2.9). Patrizia Violi remarks that she is 'unable to assess the weight of the importance that the altar may have for a Cambodian visitor,'⁶⁵ while 'The Dark Tourist,' H.E. Sawyer, only briefly mentions it as a 'stupa (a domed memorial shrine) to the victims of Democratic Kampuchea,' in the same sentence wherein he begins a more detailed description of the souvenir shop that occupies space in the same courtyard.⁶⁶ Though the stupas may be part of the very fabric of the museum, their significance occupies the peripheries of the museum's narrative and what the international

⁶⁵ Violi, *Landscapes of Memory*, 160.

⁶⁶ Sawyer, *I Am the Dark Tourist*, 142.

public is trained to see; tourists are aware of the presence of the stupas but are unable to incorporate their significance into the museographic narrative of genocide that is otherwise conveyed through the explicit curation of and obvious references to, torture and death. Much of this may have to do with the fact that both stupas at Tuol Sleng were installed years after the museum opened and the PRK dissolved (this is discussed in more detail later in this section). The aesthetics, placement, and presentation of the stupas do not immediately correspond with their environment and surrounding objects (as mentioned, one is inside and the other in the same courtyard as the museum souvenir shop). This arguably suggests to international publics that it is not necessary to conceive how the perceived absences of historical representations ‘might actually be represented,’ by forms that are unfamiliar to them.⁶⁷

Violi’s crucial observation that was quoted in the first chapter is at this point worthy of reiteration: ‘Tuol Sleng is not a museum to make people know and understand, it is a museum intended to make people feel.’⁶⁸ This is also applicable to the Choeung Ek genocidal Centre. Alongside the emotive presentation of torture, violence, and death, are Tuol Sleng’s and Choeung Ek’s true, and oft overlooked historical significance, which is not the presumed history of the Khmer Rouge, but rather of the tension that comes with contemporary nation-state formation in the wake of genocide.⁶⁹ More specifically, the religious symbols of memorialisation, the preservation of bones, and the way they are curated, serve as

⁶⁷ Thompson, ‘Forgetting to Remember, Again,’ *Diacritics*, 83.

⁶⁸ Violi, *Landscapes of Memory*, 157.

⁶⁹ Thompson, ‘Forgetting to Remember, Again,’ *Diacritics*, 85.

documentation of the progression of a debate that emerged from the state being 'caught between looking back to the past as a repository of values before contact with Euro-American imperialism [before the genocidal regime] and looking forward to a future in the historical surge toward which the new nation fuses with the wave of an epoch.'⁷⁰

This history is told through the construction and curation of three stupas as sites of national memory: the Choeung Ek Memorial (c. 1988), the gold stupa in Building D of Tuol Sleng (c. 2002), and the Tuol Sleng courtyard stupa (c. 2015). Observing the curatorial strategies of these three stupas, considering their stakeholders, and interrogating the circumstances under which they were built, make clear that the trajectory of Cambodian national genocide memorials has evolved from overtly displaying the unique horrors of DK atrocities, towards an abstract and culturally vague aesthetic that attempts to fuse the Cambodian national memory of the Khmer Rouge with the contemporary global epoch that is identifiable by its proliferations of genocide remembrance.

In 1988, Buddhist practices and symbols were reassimilated into Cambodian national politics. The first major instance of this was the construction of Choeung Ek's memorial 'stupa' that same year. It is worth emphasising that, under DK, institutional Buddhism had been virtually eliminated; monasteries were destroyed, monks were forcibly disrobed, and only a small number of members of the *sangha* were known to have survived

⁷⁰ John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 20.

the regime.⁷¹ During the PRK era, Buddhism experienced a partial restoration, though as Anne Guillou states, the religion was 'barely tolerated'⁷² under the PRK. Ian Harris notes that the suppression of religion was generally 'in line with the socialist (PRK) emphasis on rationality, science, and the dignity of work.'⁷³ By 1988, the PRK's dissolution was all but imminent, and in its weakened state, the government made final efforts to remain in the political arena by seeking popular appeal through initiatives that lifted the restrictions it had made on Buddhism.⁷⁴ As such, Choeung Ek at once went from a site of exhumed mass graves with a simple wooden memorial structure that housed the remains (Figure 2.10), to being the main staging area for a politics of memory and the dialectics of politically induced amnesia.

⁷¹ Ian Harris, 'Buddhist Sangha Groupings in Cambodia,' *Buddhist Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2001): pp. 73-106, 74.

⁷² Guillou, 'An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide,' *South East Asia Research*, 213.

⁷³ Harris, 'Buddhist Sangha,' *Buddhist Studies Review*, 74.

⁷⁴ Thompson, 'Forgetting to Remember, Again,' *Diacritics*, 93.

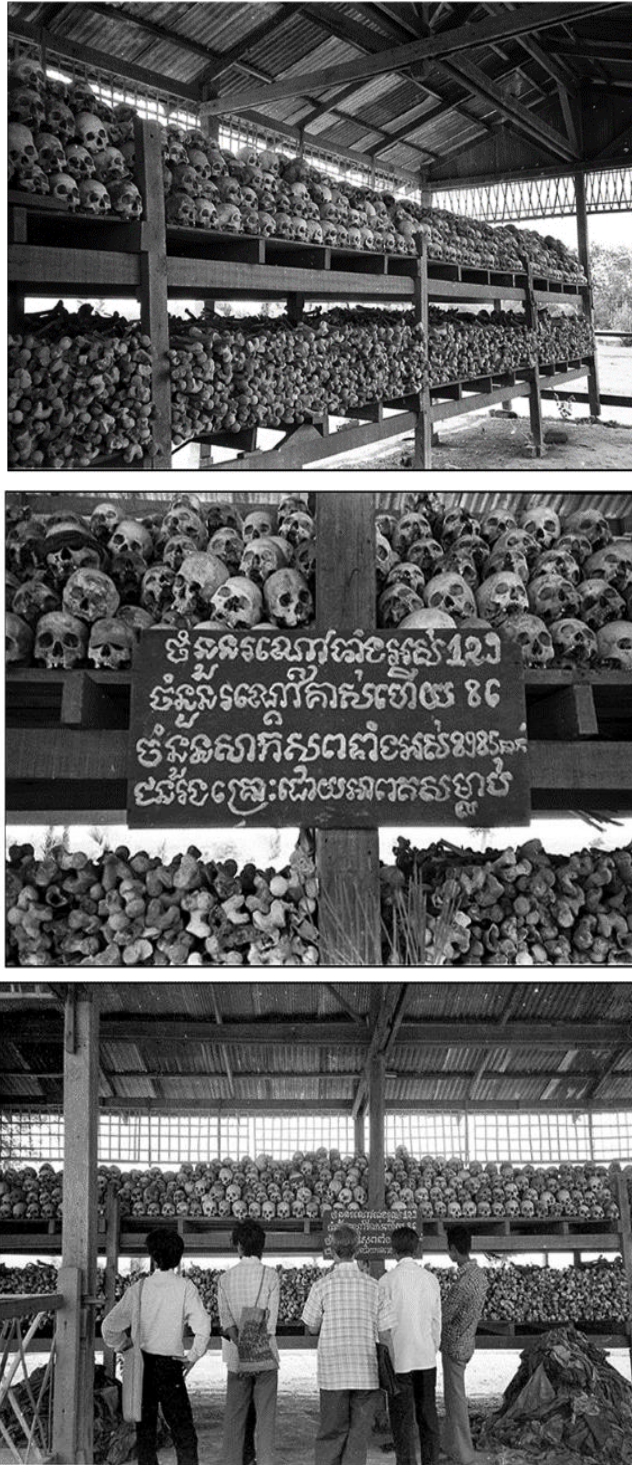


Figure 2.10: 'Photographs of the original wooden memorial at Choeunf Ek,' date unknown but were likely taken in the early to mid-1980s, *Tuol Sleng Archives*. Images sourced from *Massacres: Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology Approaches*, by Cheryl P. Anderson, Debra L. Martin, and Clark Spencer Larsen, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018), figure 8.2, 124.

Nearly a decade after finishing his work at Tuol Sleng in 1979, Mai Lam was once again called upon for his curatorial and preservation expertise to oversee the construction of the ‘stupa’ at Choeng Ek.⁷⁵ Similar to Mai Lam’s map of skulls at Tuol Sleng, the Choeng Ek Memorial is, as Rachel Hughes concludes, ‘disturbing to both Cambodians and non-Cambodians, if in different ways.’⁷⁶ Designed by Cambodian architect Lim Ourk (Figure 2.11) and approved by the Phnom Penh municipal board, the memorial vaguely echoes traditional Buddhist stupas and is at once, self-contradicting in its function as a national monument (Figure 2.12).

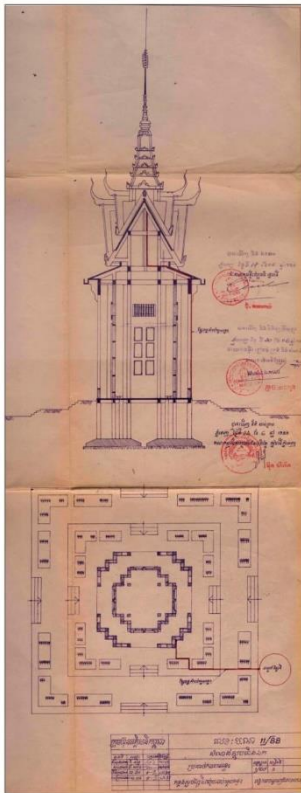


Figure 2.11: ‘The original blueprint of the Choeng Ek memorial by architect Lim Ourk. Image courtesy of the Documentation Center of Cambodia and sourced from Julie M. Fleischman, ‘Remains of Khmer Rouge Violence: The Materiality of Bones as Scientific Evidence and affective Agents of Memory,’ (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2017), figure 8, 64.

⁷⁵ Rachel Hughes, ‘Memory and Sovereignty in Post-1979 Cambodia: Choeng Ek and Local Genocide Memorials,’ *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda: New Perspectives*, 2006, pp. 257-280, [Memory and Sovereignty in Post-1979 Cambodia: Choeng Ek and Local Gen \(taylorfrancis.com\)](http://www.taylorfrancis.com), 271.

⁷⁶ Hughes, ‘Memory and Sovereignty,’ *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda*, 274.



Figure 2.12: 'Construction of the Choeung Ek memorial,' 1988. Image courtesy of the Documentation Center of Cambodia and sourced from Julie M. Fleischman, 'Remains of Khmer Rouge Violence: The Materiality of Bones as Scientific Evidence and affective Agents of Memory,' (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2017), figure 9, 65.



Figure 2.13: 'Choeung Ek memorial stupa architecture compared with the Royal Palace.' Image of Choeung Ek: Harold Hoyer, March 4, 2010, Wikimedia Commons, [Creative Commons — Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic — CC BY-SA 2.0](#). Image of Royal Palace: Marcin Konsek, February 17, 2016, Wikimedia Commons, [Creative Commons — Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International — CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

The top half of the structure is a direct architectural reference to the Royal Palace, which may be seen as an attempt by the PRK to forge a genealogical connection with King Norodom Sihanouk's Buddhist pre-war government⁷⁷— a time that nostalgists label as a golden period in modern Cambodian history (Figure 2.13). Additionally, the roof contains symbols that are inherent to Buddhist pagodas; a long pillar reaches to the sky, which represents the *axis mundi*, and is bolstered by the five ringed tiers that symbolise the levels of Mount Meru, the base of which is flanked by 'sky tassels' that are meant to ward off unwanted spirits that might fall from the heavens.⁷⁸ The four corners of the roof are guarded by the traditional *naga*. Meanwhile, the lower half of the sixty-two-metre memorial visually, architecturally, and functionally, breaks with traditional stupa form and purpose. A long glass rectangular vestibule that is visible on all four sides, is symmetrically framed by heavy, redented white stone walls (the colour symbolising death and decay).⁷⁹ Encased within the glass vestibule are some 8,000 skeletal remains that were discovered *in situ* and exhumed in the early 1980s. Organised and labelled according to bone type, gender, and in some instances, cause of death⁸⁰, the 17 layers of displayed bones were chemically treated, preserved, and neatly exhibited. Layer upon layer of skulls peer out of all four sides of the vestibule (Figure 2.14), transforming the stupa into a curiosity cabinet that at once undermines the sacredness of a stupa as well as the individual memory of DK victims in

⁷⁷ Thompson, 'Forgetting to Remember, Again,' *Diacritics*, 93.

⁷⁸ Hughes, 'Memory and Sovereignty,' *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda*, 275.

⁷⁹ Hughes, 'Memory and Sovereignty,' *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda*, 274-5.

⁸⁰ Cheryl Lawther, Rachel Killean, and Lauren Dempster, 'Whose Voices Are Heard? Victimhood and Dark Tourism in Cambodia,' *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019, pp. 1-74, [Whose Voices are Heard? Victimhood and Dark Tourism in Cambodia.](#) by Cheryl Lawther, Rachel Killean, Lauren Dempster :: SSRN, 19.

order to meet the objective of commemorating the Vietnamese-backed PRK as liberators of the Khmer people.



Figure 2.14: Mithun Divakaren, 'skulls encased in the glass vestibule of the Choeung Ek memorial stupa,' *Mithin on the Net*, May 11, 2018.

Although the display of human remains is cross-culturally a topic of contention, what most international publics likely do not have knowledge of when they encounter the Choeung Ek Memorial, is that such display of human remains is not only disturbing, but ‘antithetical to Khmer religious practice.’⁸¹ Once again, it is useful to reference local religious traditions and indigenous forms of memorialisation to understand how the Choeung Ek display is problematic. To begin, the building of a stupa is traditionally a merit-based act for the living that simultaneously instils remembrance of the dead.⁸² In traditional Buddhist practice, the stupa houses the cremated remains of a single individual, usually an affluent person, or someone well-known within the community.⁸³ After ‘a lengthy funerary practice of...ritually mediated contact with the body of the deceased,’ the cremated remains are placed into an urn or relic, which is then encased within the relic chamber of the stupa.⁸⁴ It should be noted here that traditional Cambodian Buddhist practice does not necessitate cremation for all deaths- however, cremation is ideal, if not particularly urgent for those who die ‘bad deaths,’ as their souls are believed to have the potential to cause harm to the living.⁸⁵ It is further believed that the ritual of cremation helps to transition the spirits or ghosts into the cycle of *samsāra* (rebirth).

⁸¹ James A. Tyner, Gabriela Brindis Alvarez, and Alex R. Colucci, ‘Memory and the Everyday Landscape of Violence in Post-Genocide Cambodia,’ *Social & Cultural Geography* 13, no. 8 (October 31, 2012): pp. 853-871, [Memory and the everyday landscape of violence in post-genocide Cambodia: Social & Cultural Geography: Vol 13, No 8 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1080/14487892.2012.708888), 8.

⁸² Hughes, ‘Memory and Sovereignty,’ *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda*, 273.

⁸³ Hughes, ‘Memory and Sovereignty,’ *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda*, 275.

⁸⁴ Hughes, ‘Memory and Sovereignty,’ *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda* 275.

⁸⁵ Guillou, ‘An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide,’ *Buddhist Studies Review*, 222.

The consideration of traditional Cambodian-Buddhist funerary practices underscores that the design of the Choeung Ek 'stupa' broke religious convention by preserving, housing, and prominently displaying, the un-cremated remains of thousands of anonymous individuals who died 'inauspicious,' or 'bad' deaths,⁸⁶ for the politically driven purposes of providing evidence and proof of genocide to non-Cambodian publics. According to Rachel Hughes:

'This tension is openly recognised by architect Lim Ourk, who wants the uncremated remains to directly convey to visitors the horror of Cambodians' experiences under Pol Pot. The memorial does not attempt to symbolically redeem the dead, as in other memorial traditions.'⁸⁷

It may be argued that the decision of the architect, as well as Mai Lam and the PRK to compromise religious commemorative practices, was a manoeuvre that immediately alienated Cambodians from the memorial. Many Cambodians believed that until the remains were given proper funerary rites, the *neak ta* (land spirits or ghosts) were bound to the place of their death, unable to enter the cycle of *samsāra*. As such, Choeung Ek was where many *khmauch chhau* (uncooked ghosts),⁸⁸ or *neak ta* dwelled, making it a highly dangerous place where sickness or misfortune could befall the living.⁸⁹ Other Cambodians saw the choice to display the un-cremated remains of those who died violent deaths as an offence that is 'tantamount to a second violence...'⁹⁰ An additional factor that contributed

⁸⁶ Hughes, 'Memory and Sovereignty,' *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda*, 275.

⁸⁷ Hughes, 'Memory and Sovereignty,' *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda*, 276.

⁸⁸ Guillou, 'An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide,' *Buddhist Studies Review*, 222.

⁸⁹ Hughes, 'Memory and Sovereignty,' *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda*, 276.

⁹⁰ Hughes, 'Memory and Sovereignty,' *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda*, 275.

to the Cambodian sense of alienation was the fact that in the presence of the explicit display of anonymous skeletal fragments *en masse*, which provided a shock-factor for international tourists, were the poignant absences that were especially apparent to survivors; the lives, individual identities, memories, and stories of the estimated 1.7 to 2 million killed under the Khmer Rouge, which Choeung Ek's narrative of genocide failed to convey.

Out of this alienation from the two main sites of national memory of DK, sprung a politicised national debate. In the 1990s the question emerged of what should be done with the human remains of Khmer Rouge victims and the mass graves that dotted the nation's landscape. It was King Norodom Sihanouk's re-assumption as 'the supreme patron of the *sangha*,'⁹¹ in 1991 that provided a platform for the argument of adhering to Khmer Buddhist religious practices when commemorating the dead. Throughout the early 1990s, the King advocated for the performance of a national ceremony and requested that the government allow the remains at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek to be incinerated and housed in a memorial stupa at the nearby Wat Botum. He also advocated for the permanent closure of both Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek.⁹² Aligning with Buddhist meritorious practices, the King offered 10,000 dollars for the cremation ceremony and an additional 10,000 dollars to go towards the construction of the stupa.⁹³ In the context of Theravada Buddhism, the project would

⁹¹ Rachel Hughes, 'Nationalism and Memory at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes, Phnom Penh, Cambodia,' *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, 2003, pp. 187-204, [Nationalism and memory at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes, Ph \(taylorfrancis.com\)](http://www.taylorfrancis.com), 185.

⁹² Hughes, 'Fielding Genocide,' 145.

⁹³ Heather A. Peters, 'Cambodian History Through Cambodian Museums,' *Expedition Magazine*, 1995, pp. 52-62, [Expedition Magazine - Penn Museum](http://www.pennmuseum.org), 61.

have 'reif[ied] tradition' and offered the victims and the Cambodian nation the chance at re-birth.⁹⁴

The opposing secular perspective argued that the King's idea to incinerate the remains was equivalent to destroying evidence; they believed that the remains should be preserved for both future generations and the process of legal justice.⁹⁵ In 1994, King Sihanouk abruptly dropped his request in response to the Central Committee of the CPP's assertion that the 'majority of Cambodia's population disagreed with cremating the bones' and wished to keep them 'as witness to the Khmer Rouge Crimes.'⁹⁶ As the 1990s progressed, and the Khmer Rouge guerrilla army continued to wage war, Tuol Sleng's map of skulls and Choeung Ek's display of human remains in the 'stupa,' though horrifying, came to serve as necessary reminders of yet another absence: legal justice.

In 2001 Hun Sen announced he was willing to hold a referendum on what to do with the remains but stipulated that this would only be done after the conclusion of a Khmer Rouge tribunal. The following year, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts made efforts to appease Buddhist traditionalists by granting the Tuol Sleng museum director permission to ceremoniously dismantle the map of skulls and renovate the room in Building D where it hung. The 300 skulls and bones which made up the map were reverently placed in glass encasements and displayed in the same room, while the map was replaced by a backlit coloured-photograph version.

⁹⁴ Thompson, 'Forgetting to Remember, Again,' *Diacritics*, 91.

⁹⁵ Thompson, 'Forgetting to Remember, Again,' *Diacritics*, 91-2.

⁹⁶ Peters, 'Cambodian History,' *Expedition Magazine*, 61.

The previously mentioned gold stupa in Building D, which stands in the centre of the room, flanked by the display of skulls, cost 1,400 dollars to construct⁹⁷ and was installed neither to replace nor displace the remains that once made up the map of skulls.⁹⁸ Instead, the sacred purpose of the stupa underwent the process of museumification upon its installation. Literally and figuratively, its hollow and reduced form has come to symbolise the state's acknowledgement of the crimes against religious funerary practices that come with the continued preservation and display of human remains, namely, commemorating the DK period as well as commemorating the characteristics that are inherent to the Khmer Rouge, i.e. injustice, trauma, violence, anonymity, and elimination.⁹⁹

As the most recent example of the museumification of the stupa form at a national site of commemoration, the monument in the courtyard of Tuol Sleng articulates how the memorialisation of the past is never stagnant, but 'constantly selected, filtered, and restructured in terms set by the questions and necessities of the present.'¹⁰⁰ Although the courtyard stupa is similar to the Choeung Ek Memorial and the stupa inside Building D in that it is a monument that confronts the question of 'how to memorialise a genocide,'¹⁰¹ it also was built out of the contemporary concern of passing on the memory of genocide to the younger and future generations of Cambodians. This concern converged with

⁹⁷ The Cambodia Daily, 'Tuol Sleng's Skull Map to Come Down, Be Replaced by Stupa,' *The Cambodia Daily*, March 9, 2002, [Tuol Sleng's Skull Map to Come Down, be Replaced by Stupa - The Cambodia Daily](#).

⁹⁸ Thompson, 'Forgetting to Remember, Again,' *Diacritics*, 92.

⁹⁹ Thompson, 'Forgetting to Remember, Again,' *Diacritics*, 92-3.

¹⁰⁰ Paolo Jedlowski, 'Memory and Sociology, Themes and Issues,' *Time & Society* 10, no. 1 (2001): pp. 29-44, [Memory and Sociology: Themes and Issues - Paolo Jedlowski, 2001 \(sagepub.com\)](#), 30.

¹⁰¹ Hughes, 'Memory and Sovereignty,' *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda*, 274.

international dialogues of Holocaust reparations and the theme of ‘never forget,’ which was immediately underscored by the fact that the stupa, costing a total of around 80,000, dollars¹⁰² was funded by the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)/GIZ. The initiative arose out of a partnership between the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia’s ¹⁰³ Victim’s Support Section, which, with partial funding from a grant from the German government between 2009 and 2015, ¹⁰⁴ was mandated to ‘develop non-judicial programs and measures addressing the broader interests of victims of the Khmer Rouge.’¹⁰⁵ According to the ECCC, ‘The Memorial is dedicated to and erected in memory of all victims of the Democratic Kampuchea regime, especially to the at least 12,272¹⁰⁶ victims who were unlawfully detained at S-21 prison, a Phnom Penh security centre during the Democratic Kampuchea regime from 1975 to 1979, where they were subjected to inhumane conditions, forced labour and torture, and eventually killed at the execution site of Choeung Ek, or the labour camp of Prey Sar (S-24).’¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Aun Pheap and Maria Paula Brito, ‘At Unveiling of S-21 Stupa, Ambassador Calls on Youth,’ *The Cambodia Daily*, March 27, 2015, [At Unveiling of S-21 Stupa, Ambassador Calls on Youth - The Cambodia Daily](#).

¹⁰³ The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, ‘Inauguration of the Memorial to Victims of the Democratic Kampuchea Regime at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum,’ *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, accessed December 22, 2021, [Inauguration of the Memorial to Victims of the Democratic Kampuchea Regime at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum | Drupal \(eccc.gov.kh\)](#).

¹⁰⁴ Jarvis, ‘Trials and Tribulations,’ *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, 32-3.

¹⁰⁵ The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, ‘ECCC and Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts to Sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to Establish a Memorial in Tuol Sleng Museum,’ *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, accessed December 22, 2021, [ECCC and Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts to sign a Memorandum of Understanding \(MoU\) to establish a Memorial in Tuol Sleng Museum | Drupal](#).

¹⁰⁶ Many sources still cite the S-21 death toll as 14,000 and just seven survivors. Research by DC-Cam has concluded that this highly cited number is incorrect and that a more accurate number is 12,273, which was the official statistic presented to the ECCC. The number of seven survivors is also considered wrong; DC-Cam records indicate that there were at least 179 people to have survived S-21. Tyner et al, speculate that ‘the number of seven survivors was promoted by the Vietnamese to parallel the 7th day of January—the “day of victory.”’ Tyner, Alvarez, and Colucci, ‘Memory and the Everyday Landscape,’ *Social & Cultural Geography*, 16.

¹⁰⁷ The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia ‘Inauguration of the Memorial to Victims of the Democratic Kampuchea Regime at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum,’ *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts*



Figure 2.15: Karen Foley Photography, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum courtyard memorial to victims of S-21, March 5, 2019, iStock by Getty Images.

Inscribed on the stupa is the phrase, ‘never will we forget the crimes committed during the Democratic Kampuchea regime,’ which is accompanied by plaques inscribed with the names of the 12,380¹⁰⁸ known prisoners of S-21 that surround the stupa (Figures 2.15

of Cambodia, accessed December 22, 2021, [Inauguration of the Memorial to Victims of the Democratic Kampuchea Regime at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum | Drupal \(eccc.gov.kh\)](https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/inauguration-of-the-memorial-to-victims-of-the-democratic-kampuchea-regime-at-tuol-sleng-genocide-museum).

¹⁰⁸ Kong Sothananarith, ‘Memorial Stupa Inaugurated at Former Khmer Rouge Torture Center,’ *VOA* (March 26, 2015), [Memorial Stupa Inaugurated at Former Khmer Rouge Torture Center \(voacambodia.com\)](https://www.voacambodia.com/news/memorial-stupa-inaugurated-at-former-khmer-rouge-torture-center-201503260101).

and 2.16). Recalling the statistic provided in Chapter 1, which noted that approximately 80 percent of S-21 prisoners ‘had at some point supported or worked with the Khmer Rouge regime,’¹⁰⁹ one cannot help but acknowledge how the inscriptions of individual names further problematises the hierarchy of remembrance. Only 20% of S-21 victims fall strictly into the category of victim and their names and memories are not distinguished from those of the 80% who may (or may not) have partaken in, or been leaders of, acts of atrocity before they themselves were deemed enemies of the revolution.¹¹⁰ Moreover, by selecting to remember the 12,380 individuals who were imprisoned at Tuol Sleng, the history and memory of genocide are once again spatially and temporally circumscribed, meaning that the experiences of survivors and the rest of the estimated 1.7 million victims become ever closer to being entirely forgotten. As such, the selection of Tuol Sleng for the site of the memorial further solidifies the Cambodian government’s self-serving practice of tactical forgetting. In other words, the selective commemoration atrocities and binding DK history to nationally sanctioned sites, limits historical inquiry to a politics of memory and historicity to the international publics’ humanitarian obligation to bear witness, neither of which do anything to inform people about Democratic Kampuchea or the genocide.¹¹¹ As for being *lieux de memoire*, for survivors, the everyday function of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek always ‘were, and remain *international sites*’ that identify the occurrence of genocide, yet displace

¹⁰⁹ Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide*, version Kindle (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2020), 20.

¹¹⁰ Sothananarith, ‘Memorial Stupa Inaugurated,’ *VOA*.

¹¹¹ Tyner, Alvarez, and Colucci, ‘Memory and the Everyday Landscape,’ *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10.

countless memories that comprise the ‘grassroots’ history of the DK period¹¹² in favour of satiating audiences who either seek images and experiences of spectacularism, or an opportunity to perform the perceived moral duty of retrospectively remembering history.¹¹³



Figure 2.16: Lee Karen Stow, ‘Memorial to the victims built in the centre of the courtyard, surrounded by the former prison buildings, accessed December 22, 2021, [Remembering the Killing Fields of Cambodia – Remember Me. The Changing Face of Memorialisation \(wordpress.com\)](#).

Thus, the role of Tuol Sleng and Choeng Ek as sites of international tourism must be further specified as sites of ‘dark tourism’ which is ‘a global phenomenon, though manifested in diverse ways in various parts of the world.’¹¹⁴ The term ‘dark tourism’ is

¹¹² Hughes, ‘Fielding Genocide,’ 230.

¹¹³ Philip R. Stone, ‘Preface,’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism Studies*, ed. Philip R. Stone et al. (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. vii-x, viii.

¹¹⁴ Erik Cohen, ‘Thanatourism: A Comparative Approach,’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism Studies*, ed. Philip R. Stone et al. (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 157-171, 157.

frequently used to reference places with violent histories, or difficult heritage. Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek fall within the parameters of this definition through their explicit displays of human remains and utilisation of text and imagery that reference torture and violence. Meanwhile, the 'sensationalist media,' infamously apply the term in such a way that evokes its association with amoral tourism practices.¹¹⁵ In the context of this section however, the term 'dark tourism' is consciously used to denote the added layer of responsibility that sites of difficult heritage have to 'capture contemporary (re)presentations of the Significant Other dead within economic paradigms of business supply and consumer demand.'¹¹⁶ Dark tourism becomes problematic when it conflicts with, or reduces the histories, meanings, and identities that are central and specific to the responsibilities placed on sites of difficult heritage, which include meeting political needs, maintaining historicity, sensitively communicating difficult history, as well as serving the collective memory.

In Cambodia's case, accompanying the infiltration of the dark tourism industry into post-genocide, post-transition society, there were diffused neo-colonial notions that determined the moral values being placed on DK history and memory, how the Khmer Rouge atrocities were to be interpreted by the international public, and the ontological perceptions of death being cast upon the two sites. Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek are specific examples of how these added dimensions and international projections emerged because of a manufactured *tourisme de mémoire* experience that stemmed from ambiguities in site

¹¹⁵ Stone, 'Preface,' *The Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism Studies* vii.

¹¹⁶ Stone, 'Preface,' *The Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism Studies* vii.

curation. Consequently, tourists become unknowingly entangled with the moral and ethical issues that accompany Khmer Rouge 'spaces of death...that have political [and] historical significance...that continue to impact upon the living'¹¹⁷

Before solutions can be posed to address these specific challenges, it is first necessary to identify the factors and the stakeholders that paved the way for dark tourism's success in Cambodia. This emphasises how the continued existence of sites as *lieux de memoire* has become oxymoronically dependent on 'tourist neo-colonialism'¹¹⁸ strategies that capitalise on the act of remembrance and the spectacularisation of death.

Tuol Sleng's and Choeung Ek's existences as sites of political propaganda for the Vietnamese and PRK to 'win the hearts and minds of the Khmer people,' and gain international aid by appealing to Western sympathies, marked the beginning of a long trajectory of sensationalist projections onto the atrocities that occurred within the sites during the DK period. These objectives were solidified by the PRK's inauguration of two state-sanctioned holidays: Victory Over Genocide Day, also known as Nation Day on the 7th of January, and National Day of Remembrance (formerly known as Hatred Day, Day of Anger, Day of Tying Anger, and Day of Maintaining Anger) on the 20th of May. Respectively initiated as overt political approaches for the remembrance of liberation from a genocidal regime, and the perpetuation of 'anti-Khmer Rouge sentiment,' Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek,

¹¹⁷ Philip R. Stone, 'Dark Tourism in an Age of "Spectacular Death,"' in *The Palgrave Handbook of Dark Tourism Studies*, ed. Philip R. Stone et al. (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 189-210, 192.

¹¹⁸ Cywiński, 'Tourist Neo-Colonialism,' *Miscellanea Geographica*, 21.

anchored the PRK master narrative, which consequently limited the spatial parameters of commemoration and memorialisation and laid the 'dialectical foundation for post-Democratic Kampuchean state-craft and contemporary Cambodian genocide remembrance.'¹¹⁹ After the PRK, successive Cambodian governments and foreign relations would eventually transform processes of remembrance into strategies of 'tactical forgetting,'¹²⁰ as well as strategized acts of remembering, thus limiting culpability to senior leaders of the CPK and protecting government officials who were formerly Khmer Rouge from being investigated. In 1991 upon the Paris Peace Agreements, national observations of Day of Anger were stopped altogether, although it was still commemorated at the provincial level before being officially reinstated in 1999.¹²¹ Whereas Victory over Genocide Day has been consistently and predominantly tied to Olympic Stadium in Phnom Penh (Figures 2.17 and 2.18), Choeung Ek has been the primary —albeit sporadic— site for the controversial political holiday, Day of Anger (Figures 2.19 and 2.20). Over the years, actors have begun to use the grounds of Choeung Ek on the Day of Anger to re-enact the violence that was experienced under the Khmer Rouge (Figures 2.21 and 2.22), which may be considered a static, and compulsive repetition of trauma that is counter-productive to the process of healing.

¹¹⁹ Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 52.

¹²⁰ Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 51.

¹²¹ John Vink, "'Hatred Day'...or is it 'Anger Day'?" John Vink Magnum Photos RSS, May 21, 2012, [© John Vink / Magnum Photos](#) » 'Hatred Day'... or is it 'Anger Day'?



Figure 2.17: VNA, 'Cambodian people take part in a celebration of the victory over the genocidal regime held in Phnom Penh on January 25, 1979,' *Vietnam Times*, 'Vietnam-Cambodia joint victory over Khmer Rouge genocidal regime marked,' January 4, 2021.



Figure 2.18: Heng Chivoan, 'Performers rehearse for Monday's 40th commemoration of January 7's Victory Day at Olympic Stadium on Saturday, January 7, 2019, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 'Capital to mark 40th Victory Day,' January 7, 2019.

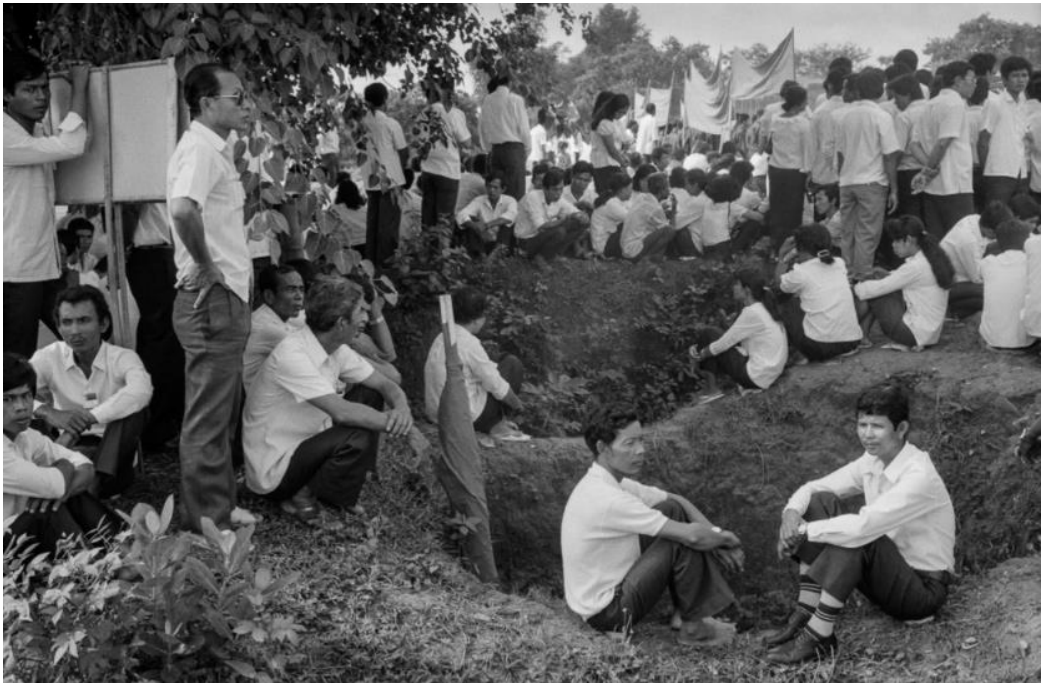


Figure 2.19: John Vink, “Hatred Day,” Commemoration by the ruling CPP (Cambodian People’s Party) at the Killing Fields’ memorial of Choeung Ek, May 20, 1989, digital file, johnvink.com.



Figure 2.20: John Vink, CPP ‘Hatred Day’ commemoration at Choeung Ek, May 20, 1989, digital file, accessed December 22, 2021, johnvink.com.



Figure 2.21: John Vink, 'Actors impersonating Khmer Rouge soldiers during "Hatred Day" or "Anger Day" celebrations by the ruling CPP (Cambodia People's Party) at the Killing Fields memorial of Choeung Ek,' May 20, 2012. Image sourced from johnvink.com.



Figure 2.22: Actors from the Royal University of Fine Arts re-enact the Khmer Rouge killings at Choeung Ek on National Day of Remembrance, May 20. Top left: Reuters, sourced from *BBC News*, 2019. Top right: AP Photo/Heng Sinith, Day of Anger 2014, sourced from *VOA*. Bottom left and right: AFP/Getty, sourced from *BBC News*, 2019.

The political dissolution of the PRK in 1989 marked the end of communism and the unofficial beginning of the transitional period in Cambodia. Cathy Schlund-Vials characterises the signing of the Paris Agreements in 1991 as the singular catalytic event that both activated and encouraged a policy of amnesia toward DK history.¹²² This in turn led to the tumultuous and politically uncertain atmosphere that came to define 1990s Cambodia. Under these political circumstances, Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek became political battlegrounds wherein various national leaders and factions vied for control over DK history and the direction of national memory. Competing narratives included liberation, human rights, reconciliation, and justice. In summary, it was a combination of international political avoidance of the atrocities (which were made manifest in the Paris Agreements), the enabling of the Khmer Rouge, and the Cambodian government's drastic efforts for national reconciliation throughout the 1990s, that culminated into a discourse of 'dialectical remembrance,' which opened the gates of opportunity for international tourism to become the channel of influence that it is today.

Among the evidence for DK historical events that occurred outside Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek entering the peripheries of national and international consciousness¹²³ is the highly noticeable shift in trends of visitor demographics. Until 1993, visitors to both sites primarily consisted of Cambodians (Figure 2.23) and tourists from communist countries, including nearby Vietnam and Laos, as well as the Soviet Union, Poland, and Hungary.¹²⁴ In

¹²² Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 51.

¹²³ Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 51.

¹²⁴ Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 33.

line with Cambodia's departure from communism to embrace a market economy that greatly relied on foreign capital, after 1993 the primary visitor demographics of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek no longer included Cambodian nationals; instead they were mainly comprised of Japanese, French, German, South Korean, U.S., and Taiwanese nationals.¹²⁵ Cambodia's designation as a tourist destination (Figure 2.24) was a signification of the country's successful re-entrance into the global economy. However, the absence of Cambodian nationals at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek after 1993 is indicative of how state-official and free-market responsibilities of sites of atrocity took precedence over the accommodation of varying sociocultural and religious memorialisation practices, and in some ways, further reduced the priority of displaying sensitivity towards the trauma experienced by DK victims and survivors.



Figure 2.23: John Vink, 'Students waiting to enter the Tuol Sleng museum during rainy season, 1989, digital file, johnvink.com.

¹²⁵ Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 33.



Figure 2.24: 'International tourists in the courtyard of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum,' *Tourism of Cambodia*, accessed December 22, 2021.

However, the high economic value of tourism in Cambodia must not be discounted. Since 1993, international tourist rates have steadily risen, with 2004 seeing a more than 50% increase from the 701,014 tourists that entered the country the previous year.¹²⁶ In 2019, Cambodia once again set a record number when 6,610,592 international tourists visited, which was a 6.6% increase from 2018.¹²⁷ The subcategory of dark tourism is an important economic component to the country's overall tourism industry, however, its financial profitability is essentially impossible to measure as there is understandably a stigma associated with capitalising on DK atrocities, making it 'largely unspeakable in the

¹²⁶ Ministry of Tourism, 'Tourism Statistics Report Year 2019,' accessed January 15, 2022, [Cambodia: Tourism Statistics Report \(seishiron.com\)](#), 2.

¹²⁷ Ministry of Tourism, 'Tourism Statistics Report Year 2019,' 2.

formal corridors of government.’¹²⁸ In contrast with the PRK, which made excursions to Tuol Sleng and Choeng Ek mandatory for foreign visitors, the Royal Government of Cambodia’s Ministry of Tourism does little to promote the Tuol Sleng and Choeng Ek to foreign tourists. In recent years, the Ministry of Tourism has developed the strategy of marketing Cambodia as ‘the Kingdom of Wonder,’¹²⁹ which leaves little room for promoting genocide awareness or evoking the idea that, behind the façade promoting the nation’s rich exoticism, lies a society still recovering from a period of genocide and horror.

Tuol Sleng’s and Choeng Ek’s reputations as ‘must see’ sites were cultivated over time by internationally accredited travel guides such as Lonely Planet and National Geographic, travel review sites like TripAdvisor, and exclusive posts written in independent travel blogs.¹³⁰ To provide a sense of the contemporary significance and international popularity of Tuol Sleng and Choeng Ek as sites of dark tourism, both locations received TripAdvisor’s 2020 Traveller’s Choice Award. Even more telling is their TripAdvisor ranking: Choeng Ek is ranked number one on TripAdvisor’s list of one hundred thirty-two things to do in Phnom Penh, while Tuol Sleng holds the number two spot.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, which charges non-Cambodian adult and adolescent visitors

¹²⁸ Hughes, ‘Fielding Genocide,’ 171.

¹²⁹ Tourism Cambodia, ‘Ministry of Tourism, Cambodia - Official Website - Holidays,’ accessed February 28, 2021, [Ministry of Tourism, Cambodia - Official Website - Holidays \(tourismcambodia.org\)](http://tourismcambodia.org).

¹³⁰ Rami K. Isaac and Erdinç Çakmak, ‘Understanding the Motivations and Emotions of Visitors at Tuol Sleng Genocide Prison Museum (S-21) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia,’ *International Journal of Tourism Cities* 2, no. 3 (August 2016): pp. 232-247, [Understanding the motivations and emotions of visitors at Tuol Sleng Genocide Prison Museum \(S-21\) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia | Emerald Insight](#), 237-9.

admission fees of 5.00 and 3.00 dollars respectively and Cambodian nationals may enter the museum free of charge.¹³¹ Visitors may also purchase an audio guide, which is priced at 3.00 dollars for non-Cambodian citizens and 1.00 dollar for Cambodian citizens.¹³² According to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum website, additional funding for the museum comes from the Civil Peace Service of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.¹³³

Partners of the museum include UNESCO, the Okinawa Museum, German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) by way of the Civil Peace Service of GIZ Cambodia, Cambodia Living Arts, The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, and the Australian audio-tour company, Narrowcasters.¹³⁴ The capacity and type of partnerships that Tuol Sleng has established with the organisations are not specified on Tuol Sleng's website. However, as Rachel Hughes notes, due to decades of 'low levels of economic growth and poor infrastructure, Cambodia's state institutions' —including the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts— 'have limited efficacy'.¹³⁵ Before Tuol Sleng's establishment of various partnerships, this translated to no maintenance funding. Judy Ledgerwood's description of the state of Tuol Sleng by 1997 underscores the importance of international partnership development for the museum:

¹³¹ 'Home Page,' Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, accessed February 28, 2021, [Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum](#).

¹³² Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, 'Home Page.'

¹³³ 'Credits,' Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, accessed December 22, 2021, [Credits – Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum](#).

¹³⁴ 'Support Us,' Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, accessed December 22, 2021, [Support Us – Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum](#).

¹³⁵ Hughes, 'Fielding Genocide,' 172.

'The government provides no funds for its maintenance. Contributions from the box are used to supplement the meager salaries of the administration and staff. Over the years they have sold parts of the front walls, and the rolled barbed wire is gone. The housing across the south end of the complex has been fenced off, privatized, repaired, and, in some cases, sold. The wall has been knocked down right up to the corner where the name of the museum is displayed. No funds are available for electricity so the complex is usually dark, and the air-conditioner provided to help preserve the documents sits idle.'¹³⁶

Although partnerships have made great strides in alleviating some of the maintenance and rapid deterioration issues, a caveat of affiliating with prominent and globally influential organisations such as the BMZ/GIZ and UNESCO, was having to align Tuol Sleng's mission and values with their philosophies of: providing humanitarian aid through peace-building,¹³⁷ dispelling hate and intolerance,¹³⁸ and shaping globalization¹³⁹ through the promotion of democracy,¹⁴⁰ cultural diversity,¹⁴¹ and 'reaffirm[ing] the humanist missions of education, science and culture.'¹⁴² Meanwhile, the partnership with a Japanese museum, funding from the German government, and a relationship with the ECCC, are telling of Tuol Sleng's important role as a site of evidence that disseminates the narrative of the need for international justice. The involvement of Germany and Japan at Tuol Sleng is particularly noteworthy as it offers the two former Axis Power countries an international

¹³⁶ Judy Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative,' *Museum Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (1997): pp. 82-98, [The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative - Ledgerwood - 1997 - Museum Anthropology - Wiley Online Library](#), 95.

¹³⁷ 'UNESCO in Brief - Mission and Mandate,' UNESCO, February 15, 2021, [UNESCO in brief - Mission and Mandate | UNESCO](#).

BMZ Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 'Why Do We Need Development Policy?,' Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, February 22, 2017, [Ministry | BMZ](#).

¹³⁸ 'UNESCO in Brief - Mission and Mandate.'

¹³⁹ BMZ 'Why Do We Need Development Policy?'

¹⁴⁰ 'UNESCO in Brief - Mission and Mandate,' and BMZ 'Why Do We Need Development Policy?'

¹⁴¹ 'UNESCO in Brief - Mission and Mandate.'

¹⁴² 'UNESCO in Brief - Mission and Mandate.'

platform for demonstrating their post-Second World War moral commitments to aiding in the efforts of genocide justice and nation-building in post-conflict societies. Whilst this affirms a connection with Tuol Sleng atrocities and the Shoah message of ‘never again,’ it also shows a correlation between partner/donor influence and the decisive 1993 shift in visitor demographics, when Japanese and German nationals began to be listed as having among the highest visitor rates for Tuol Sleng.

Foreign involvement at Choeung Ek is less transparent and significantly more controversial than at Tuol Sleng, thereby posing different challenges that were brought upon Cambodia by the dark tourism industry. As the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum began using foreign partnerships to cultivate the narrative of ‘never again’ to engage with and meet the expectations of the moral and humanitarian-motivated international tourists, Choeung Ek’s affiliations and dark tourism development strategies tell the Cambodian story of impunity wherein ‘decisions seem to be dictated by money and political expediency.’¹⁴³

In 2005, the Royal Government of Cambodia entered a contract that explicitly turned the Khmer Rouge deathscape into a source of capital for private foreign investors; the Council of Ministers leased the site of Choeung Ek to the Japanese company known as JC Royal. The lease gave the foreign company the exclusive right to develop and manage the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre for 30 years and directly profit from the site’s tourist

¹⁴³ Seth Mydans, ‘Cambodia Profits From Killing Fields and Other Symbols,’ *The New York Times* (The New York Times, November 6, 2005), [Cambodia Profits From Killing Fields and Other Symbols - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/asia/06cambodia.html).

revenue. A condition was that JC Royal would pay the Phnom Penh Municipality 15,000 dollars each year for the first five years of the contract 'with the fees rising 10 percent every five years until the end of the 30-year contract.'¹⁴⁴ Upon JC Royal's takeover of the management of the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre, admission fees were raised from .50 cents to 3.00 dollars for international tourists,¹⁴⁵ while Cambodians, who had not previously been charged admission, were now required to pay 500 riel.¹⁴⁶ The admission fee for non-Cambodian citizens has since increased; a ticket now costs 6.00 dollars, which includes an audio guide.¹⁴⁷ *New York Times* journalist Seth Mydans, stated in his article 'Cambodia Profits From Killing Fields and Other Symbols,' that with the increase in admission prices, JC Royal 'stands eventually to earn about 18,000 dollars a month in entrance fees.'¹⁴⁸ Profits from tourism are then funnelled to a fund that is 'half owned by Cambodian government officials.'¹⁴⁹

A study by Queen's University Belfast noted that JC Royal 'claims to have established a non-profit organization to manage the site,'¹⁵⁰ while an article in the *Japan Times* stated that a portion of the revenue made from Choeung Ek would go to 'providing scholarships for underprivileged Cambodian students,'¹⁵¹ through the non-profit body known as the Sun

¹⁴⁴ Puy Kea, "'Privatized' Killing Fields Site Tries to Quiet Critics,' *The Japan Times*, January 13, 2006, ['Privatized' Killing Fields site tries to quiet critics | The Japan Times](#).

¹⁴⁵ Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 62.

¹⁴⁶ Kuch Naren, 'Official Linked To Choeung Ek Tourism Deal,' *The Cambodia Daily*, November 15, 2013, [Official Linked To Choeung Ek Tourism Deal - The Cambodia Daily](#).

¹⁴⁷ Sawyer, *I Am the Dark Tourist*, 151.

¹⁴⁸ Mydans, 'Cambodia Profits From Killing Fields,' *The New York Times*.

¹⁴⁹ Mydans, 'Cambodia Profits From Killing Fields,' *The New York Times*.

¹⁵⁰ Lawther, Killean, and Dempster, 'Whose Voices Are Heard?' 19.

¹⁵¹ Kea, "'Privatized' Killing Fields Site,' *The Japan Times*.

Fund.¹⁵² Tourists are made aware of how 'revenue from the admission fee is used for developing, conserving, the Cener [sic] and sponsoring poor and talented students.'¹⁵³ Regardless of the non-profit component, the deal between the Cambodian government and JC Royal was born out of a conflict of interest; one of the members of the Council of Ministers (specifically the Cabinet Chief), who helped draw up the contract, was also a chairman on JC Royal's board of directors.¹⁵⁴ Cathy Schlund-Vials cites statistics from research by *Radio Netherlands Worldwide*, that are no longer available to directly reference, but are worth noting as they offer a snapshot of Choeung Ek tourism and revenue in the years immediately after JC Royal began its management tenancy. Between 2006 and 2007, the centre 'generated between 621,936 dollars in ticket sales,' and the 2009 visitor profiles that were gathered indicated that only 20,000 of the estimated 220,000 visitors were Cambodian; the rest were international tourists.¹⁵⁵

Youk Chhang, the renowned executive director of the Documentation Centre for Cambodia (DC-Cam), bitterly confirmed that the Phnom Penh Municipality's agreement with JC Royal was 'commercialising the memories,' of the Khmer Rouge period.¹⁵⁶ He called the venture a 'bad example,' and stated that Cambodia 'should not let other nationalities manage our own bitter memory.'¹⁵⁷ Neang Say, the general manager of Choeung Ek also

¹⁵² Kuch Naren, 'Official Linked To Choeung Ek Tourism Deal,' *The Cambodia Daily*, November 15, 2013, [Official Linked To Choeung Ek Tourism Deal - The Cambodia Daily](#).

¹⁵³ Signage at Choeung Ek admission counter, as found in, Sawyer, *I Am the Dark Tourist*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Naren, 'Official Linked,' *The Cambodia Daily*.

¹⁵⁵ Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 63.

¹⁵⁶ Mydans, 'Cambodia Profits From Killing Fields,' *The New York Times*.

¹⁵⁷ Naren, 'Official Linked,' *The Cambodia Daily*.

accused the lease as a strategy that capitalised on the death and atrocities committed under DK, stating that, ‘the current leaders take benefits from those people who were killed violently.’¹⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the Council of Minister’s Cabinet Chief who was also a member of JC Royal’s board of directors, said that the company’s director, Koji Yamamoto, simply ‘noticed that Choeung Ek killing fields was not developed, which is why he decided to get into this project. To construct a video showroom and fences...in order to attract more tourists to visit this killing field.’¹⁵⁹

In addition to the ethical issues that accompany a venture that capitalises on the killing fields, the sole objective of driving more tourists into Choeung Ek raises the obvious problem of the site’s risk of inevitably becoming a completely secularised *tourisme de mémoire* that is dependent on temporal elements to mediate its meaning¹⁶⁰ to an uninformed international public. What is more, as seemingly straightforward as Yamamoto’s motives were for managing the site, they —along with Tuol Sleng’s approach of adjusting the narrative of the atrocities to be universally legible— exemplify the more elusive and precarious issue of grafting¹⁶¹ globalised curatorial texts onto representations of indigenous cultural representations and national memorialisation practices; the inherent value of sites of history, heritage, and memory are diminished. This prompts the open-ended question of, is it possible to decentre international tourism’s role in disseminating

¹⁵⁸ Naren, ‘Official Linked,’ *The Cambodia Daily*.

¹⁵⁹ Naren, ‘Official Linked,’ *The Cambodia Daily*.

¹⁶⁰ Nora, ‘Between Memory and History,’ *Representations*, 9.

¹⁶¹ Violi, *Landscapes of Memory*, 160.

Khmer Rouge history? Or perhaps a more productive question is, is it possible to enrich the international public's understanding of the Khmer Rouge and the DK period without making history devoid of meaning, and memory a static and compulsive representation for victims, survivors, and their families?

Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek pose immense challenges to these questions as they are sites that represent the history of 'spectacular' death and violence that occurred under DK. Most survivor experiences and victim deaths happened outside the realm of 'spectacular' and represent the 'everydayness of violence' that took place in Cambodia before 1975 and well into the 1990s. Historians and scholars of memory studies and memorialization have underscored the importance of expanding the commemorative landscape, or 'bringing to light those as-yet-unmarked sites,' to convey a history of the Khmer Rouge that is revealed in the everyday violence carried out by perpetrators and experienced by victims and survivors in the years preceding 1975 and beyond 1979.¹⁶² By the early 2000s 19,733 mass graves, 196 prisons, and 81 memorials constructed by survivors of the DK regime, had been identified throughout Cambodia and mapped by DC-Cam.¹⁶³ Additionally, historians and social geographers were underway in analysing how peripheralized, and virtually unknown sites such as the Kampong Chhnang Airfield and the Koh Sla Dam, challenge the historical narrative of Democratic Kampuchea as well as the Cambodian genocide more broadly.¹⁶⁴ In

¹⁶² Tyner, Alvarez, and Colucci, 'Memory and the Everyday Landscape,' *Social & Cultural Geography*, 11.

¹⁶³ DC-Cam, 'Khmer Rouge Crime Sites,' *Documentation Center of Cambodia*, accessed February 28, 2021, [The Killing Fields \(dccam.org\)](http://www.dccam.org).

¹⁶⁴ Tyner, Alvarez, and Colucci, 'Memory and the Everyday Landscape,' *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12.

the words of Tyner et. al, 'there are literally hundreds of potential [DK era] sites that hold significance in the everyday lives of everyday Cambodians.'¹⁶⁵ While it may be a given that the study of public history means broadening the knowledge of and access to history, a less obvious concern is how effectively doing so requires thinking beyond research output and asking how, why, and for whom, is the historical landscape being expanded.

Despite a plethora of opportunities to invest in the preservation of social memories and advancing of historical knowledge of the Khmer Rouge period, the literal expansion of the historical and commemorative landscape of the DK period inevitably involves cooperation with the Cambodian government, which until recently had a trajectory of (not) investing in DK historical sites in compliance with state's agenda to 'dig a hole and bury the past' whilst somehow finding a way to profit from international tourism, even if doing so meant cultivating history that debased the memory of everyday violence under DK.¹⁶⁶ The government-backed project proposal for the district of Anlong Veng, which one media outlet termed, 'the Disneyland of death,'¹⁶⁷ is perhaps the most noteworthy and alarming illustration.

¹⁶⁵ Tyner, Alvarez, and Colucci, 'Memory and the Everyday Landscape,' *Social & Cultural Geography*, 5

¹⁶⁶ Youk Chhang, as quoted in Jan McGirk, 'Cambodian Fury at Pol Pot "Theme Park",' *The Independent* (Independent Digital News and Media, October 10, 2013), [Cambodian fury at Pol Pot 'theme park' | The Independent | The Independent](#).

¹⁶⁷ 'Cambodians Divided over Pol Pot Theme Park,' *The Age* (September 3, 2003), [Cambodians divided over Pol Pot theme park \(theage.com.au\)](#).

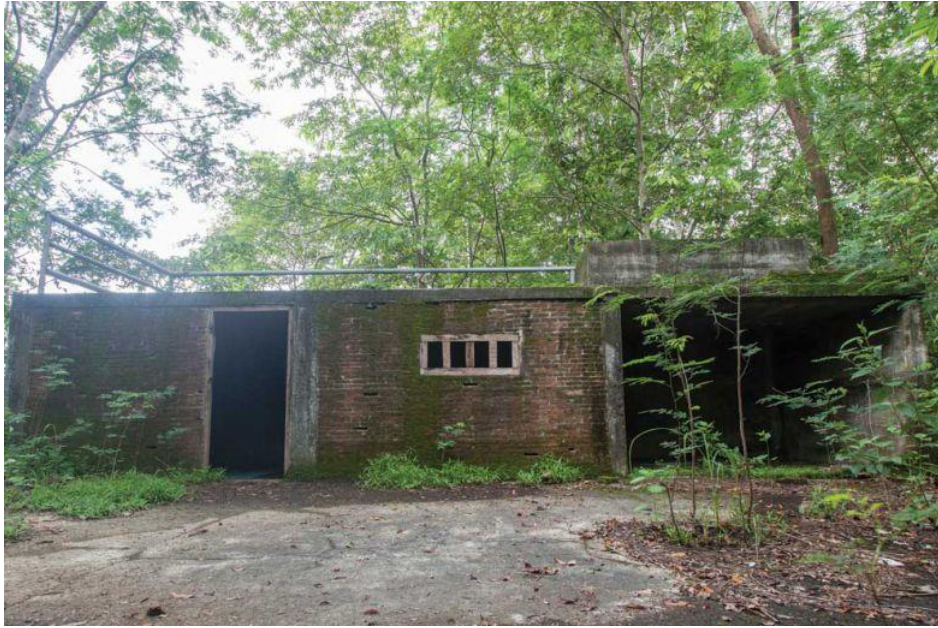


Figure 2.25: Kimberly McCosker, 'Pol Pot's mountain headquarters are being slowly reclaimed by the jungle,' August 8, 2015, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 'Dark tourism in Anlong Veng'.



Figure 2.26: 'Mural of Angkor Wat and Preah Vihear inside Ta Mok's house,' *AFAR*, accessed December 22, 2021.



Figure 2.27: Tang Chhin Sothy, Cambodian tourists looking out from the former Khmer Rouge commander Ta Mok's house in the Anlong Veng district in Oddar Mean Chey province,' February 17, 2016, via AFP/Getty Images.



Figure 2.28: Heng Sinith, 'Incense stick holders stand at the cremation site of the late Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot in Anlong Veng, a former Khmer Rouge stronghold, about 305 kilometres (190 miles) north of Phnom Penh, April 11, 2008, VOA.



Figure 2.29: Kimberly McCosker, 'Anlong Veng's Tourism Information Office,' August 8, 2015, The Phnom Penh Post, 'Dark tourism in Anlong Veng, [Dark tourism in Anlong Veng | Phnom Penh Post](#).

From 2003 until 2015, Cambodia's Ministry of Tourism had plans to transform the remote district of Anlong Veng —the last of the Khmer Rouge strongholds located near the Thai border and where Pol Pot, Ta Mok, and other CPK leaders lived between 1993 and 1998— into a theme park that would cater to international tourists. In 2003, the Ministry of Tourism set the objective of attracting tens of thousands of international tourists annually to Anlong Veng, with a plan to completely restore (with the help of the carpenters who originally built the sites in 1993) all ruined sites of historical significance, which totaled to nearly forty structures including luxurious homes, bunkers, and offices of former

Khmer Rouge leaders, in addition to Pol Pot's Olympic-sized swimming pool (Figures 2.25-2.29). The plans also involved making Pol Pot's cremation site easily accessible, training and employing former members of the Khmer Rouge as tour guides (including Pol Pot's former cook and housekeeper),¹⁶⁸ paving a new access road into the village from Siem Reap, clearing the area of landmines,¹⁶⁹ and building a museum complex complete with high-tech videos that would convey 'the inner workings of the Khmer Rouge.'¹⁷⁰

Although the government claimed that the historical significance of the Anlong Veng project was to 'remind' people about the 'evil regime,' the remarks made by Minister of Tourism, Thong Khon, are indicative of how the Cambodian government was immediately willing to overwrite and dismiss the historical experiences of victims and survivors by granting a former Khmer Rouge stronghold authority over the historical narrative. 'Only the Khmer Rouge themselves truly know what Pol Pot and Ta Mok were like to live with,' said Thong Khon. 'They can tell the *true* story of the genocide regime and how things worked inside.'¹⁷¹

These remarks and the initial project proposal were made in 2003, a time when the ECCC had yet to be established and it was uncertain whether justice of any kind would ever transpire. In response to the Ministry of Tourism's proposal, Youk Chhang, the director of

¹⁶⁸ 'Cambodians Divided,' *The Age*.

¹⁶⁹ 'Cambodians Divided,' *The Age*.

¹⁷⁰ Thomas Crampton, 'Rough Road to a Theme Park / Tourism among Land Mines : Cambodia to Restore Khmer Rouge Sites,' *The New York Times* (August 21, 2003), [Rough road to a theme park / Tourism among land mines : Cambodia to restore Khmer Rouge sites - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/21/world/asia/21cambodia.html).

¹⁷¹ Emphasis is mine. Crampton, 'Rough Road to a Theme Park,' *The New York Times*.

DC-Cam, posed the critical observation that the Anlong Veng project was an asymmetric representation of history that showed no respect to victims. He also highlighted the problem of commodifying the historical sites of DK leaders at a time when Khmer Rouge were still living among survivors (Anlong Veng being a prime example) and no one had been charged for a single crime.¹⁷² At best, transforming Anlong Veng's history into a commodity would not have helped the government's efforts towards national reconciliation and 'reintegration,' during a crucial period of rebuilding. At worst, the proposed project and decision to tell the history of CPK leaders' 'post-regime achievements,' would have further polarized the history of Anlong Veng and its people from the experiences of Khmer Rouge victims and survivors, thus preventing the successful geographic movement and societal integration of former Khmer Rouge who lived in the district. From an economic standpoint, the project's success would have been entirely based on capital brought in from foreign tourism, which would have meant that the foundation of the district's economy would not have been self-sustaining or beneficial to the community in the long-term.

¹⁷² 'Cambodians Divided,' *The Age*.

Fortunately, DC-Cam became a major stakeholder in Anlong Veng’s transformation, which significantly altered the objective of the project and complicated its historical narrative. In 2015 the Ministry of Tourism collaborated with DC-Cam and established the Anlong Veng Peace Centre (Figures 2.30 And 2.31). Rather than museify, commodify, and profit from, an authoritative narrative of Anlong Veng’s role as a Khmer Rouge stronghold and the community’s experiences of polarization and discrimination, the new initiative sought to use the district’s difficult history as a platform for ‘mutually reinforcing aims of Peace, Education, and Sustainable Tourism.’¹⁷³



Figure 2.30: Sun Narin, ‘The Anlong Veng Peace Center is located on Dangrek Mountain and was established by D-Cam in 2015, Anlong Veng, Oddar Meanchey Province,’ April 26, 2017, *VOA Khmer*, ‘Dispute Over Support for Iconic Khmer Rouge Site Prompts Funding Rethink.’

¹⁷³ ‘Anlong Veng Peace Center,’ D-Cam, accessed December 22, 2021, [ANLONG VENG PEACE CENTER \(dccam.org\)](https://www.dccam.org/).



Figure 2.31: Julia Mayer, 'Anlong Veng Peace Centre today,' February 10, 2017, Asia & the Pacific Policy Society, 'Reconciliation and remembrance in the Khmer Rouge's last stronghold.'

A resonating aspect of the ongoing project is the multivalent ways in which it actively seeks to expand the commemorative geography of the Khmer Rouge not to an international public, but to people who were directly impacted by the genocide, with the overall objective of offering 'sustainable approaches to achieving reconciliation and peace in Cambodia and the region.'¹⁷⁴ Thus, the project simultaneously underscores the importance of providing a space wherein numerous historical experiences can be heard, as well as an environment that validates and sensitively contextualises differing memories of a shared difficult history.

¹⁷⁴ DC-Cam, 'Anlong Veng Peace Center.'

Strategies of the project include an educational curriculum that combines peace studies with genocide studies, developing a dialogue between former Khmer Rouge and younger generations through oral history, discussions between survivors and former cadre, and using individual stories from the community to ‘help foster the most basic components of conflict transformation and civic skills.’¹⁷⁵

For Cambodia, the significance of the transformation of the Anlong Veng project is that it was a decisive victory that not only destabilised the government’s authority over national memory, but also dark tourism’s role in shaping the commemorative landscape of the Khmer Rouge. At the same time, the Anlong Veng Peace Centre is demonstrative of how community-based public history of the Khmer Rouge can all at once contribute to historical research of the Khmer Rouge and the building of sustainable, long-term national progress, reconciliation, and cultural healing. To offer another example, along with establishing the centre, DC-Cam started an (ongoing) historical research project called ‘Women’s Rights Training in Anlong Veng,’ which examines the history of the women who served in the Khmer Rouge during the civil war between 1979 and 1998. The project proposal explains that since 1998, these women of Anlong Veng have become ‘victims of social marginalisation and status,’ and in some cases, have suffered from domestic violence.¹⁷⁶ DC-Cam is taking the historical research on these women a step further through a community outreach effort that is inclusive of training and mentorship programmes that

¹⁷⁵ DC-Cam, ‘Anlong Veng Peace Center.’

¹⁷⁶ ‘Women Rights Training in Anlong Veng,’ DC-Cam, accessed December 22, 2021, [Women Rights Training in Anlong Veng \(dccam.org\)](https://www.dccam.org/).

are based on improving ‘their livelihoods, understanding of their rights, and their access to services.’¹⁷⁷

Anlong Veng Peace Centre’s combination of historical research with community outreach underscores the importance of re-configuring *history* as a transitive verb rather than conceiving it as noun.¹⁷⁸ Imagining history as a transferrable action emphasises the importance of conducting historical research in such a way that interrogates and challenges the authority of traditional historical frameworks and their construction by agents of authority. Allowing the stakeholders who are social agents, i.e., survivors, to determine the meaning of difficult history expands the commemorative landscape whilst reaffirming that simply memorialising genocide and merely providing an encyclopaedic narrative of a genocide, are static forms of historical preservation and transmission that in themselves are not enough. Rather, it is the act of interpreting history and identifying meaningful reasons to engage with the past— both of which must be guided by the agency of affected communities and social groups— that help transform historical research into a method of public engagement and source of community level empowerment.

Archives, Education, and Outreach

The Anlong Veng Peace Centre is but one example how the trajectory of Cambodia’s public history shifted from a singular, politically, and economically driven historical

¹⁷⁷ DC-Cam, ‘Women Rights Training.’

¹⁷⁸ Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 3.

narrative, to what Joan M. Schwartz might refer to as, a 'garden' of diverse public history 'plantings,' upon Cambodia's entrance into the era of transitional justice.¹⁷⁹ These public history 'plantings' together comprise a garden of multiple voices, groups, historical sources, methods of mediation, and narratives. Despite the continued necessity to orchestrate negotiations of historical narratives with the state and international stakeholders, archival, education, and outreach initiatives have collectively made the greatest strides in terms of narrative diversification, accessibility, inclusivity, and engagement. DC-Cam has been a pivotal mediator, or 'gardener,' that has nurtured archives, education, and outreach as public history 'plantings,' in Cambodia. As a gardener of public history, DC-Cam goes beyond the initial tasks of archiving and producing historical research by encouraging communities and social groups to become directly 'involved in the process of historical investigation, interpretation, presentation and protection.'¹⁸⁰ In doing so, individuals and community groups themselves become gardeners of public history whilst history becomes a mode of civic engagement and responsibility. Taking Schwartz's garden analogy one step further, processes of historical research effectively become a gardening tool for replanting and restoring the cultural elements that DK sought to eradicate from Cambodian culture, particularly human rights, justice, and an accessible education system rooted in cultivating knowledge through literacy, civic engagement, and research.

¹⁷⁹ Schwartz, 'The Archival Garden,' *Controlling the Past*.

¹⁸⁰ Faye Sayer, *Public History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 199.

Since it became a self-sustaining, Cambodian-operated and staffed NGO in 1997, DC-Cam has maintained the official support of the Royal Government of Cambodia, the United States, and a number of other institutions and foreign governments.¹⁸¹ Attaining NGO status and continually receiving financial donations from numerous international governments required DC-Cam to fulfil the requirement of being ‘built on an uncompromisingly firm and transparent foundation...with no trace of corrupt practices that are endemic to the region’ (the conflict of interest that the Cambodian government has with JC Royal’s management of Choeung Ek would be an example of ‘corrupt practices’).¹⁸² Because DC-Cam operates its finances with a high level of transparency, it has been able to cultivate a solid network and extend its influence through its support of numerous public history projects and grassroots initiatives that contribute to the organisation’s broader missions of ‘memory’, ‘justice’, ‘healing’, ‘peace’, and ‘development’.¹⁸³ These themes are proving to be highly sustainable forms of public history ‘plantings’ in Cambodia because they aim to go beyond the limits of international criminal law and justice through mediating the processes of healing and reconciliation at the community level. In doing so, DC-Cam has been able to utilise history in a way that helps social groups and communities work through the oft-opposing emotions that accompany reconciliation, including hatred and forgiveness, and revenge and peace.¹⁸⁴ Meanwhile, the geographic and temporal

¹⁸¹ ‘Donors,’ DC-Cam, accessed February 28, 2021, [Donors \(dccam.org\)](http://dccam.org).

¹⁸² ‘Documentation and Democracy,’ DC-Cam, accessed December 22, 2021, [DOCUMENTATION AND DEMOCRACY \(dccam.org\)](http://dccam.org).

¹⁸³ ‘Home Page,’ DC-Cam, accessed December 22, 2021, [Home \(dccam.org\)](http://dccam.org).

¹⁸⁴ Pham et al., ‘Perspectives on Memory, Forgiveness and Reconciliation,’ *International Review of the Red Cross*, 126.

decentring of the Khmer Rouge have become extensions of DC-Cam's work in community healing and reconciliation.

Today, DC-Cam holds the title for being 'the world's largest repository of printed documents and other original documentary materials relating to the DK regime.'¹⁸⁵ Critical to the long-term and far-reaching influence of DC-Cam as an 'independent Cambodian-run nongovernmental organisation,'¹⁸⁶ was its early success in negotiating with and gaining the support of key financial and political stakeholders, namely the United States government and the Cambodian political party in power. However, the timing of the negotiations is a factor that should not be underestimated when considering the many feats that DC-Cam has made throughout its nearly three decades of existence.

As explained in the first chapter, DC-Cam was established in 1995 and emerged from a shift in US policy (that included officially withdrawing support of the Khmer Rouge), which came after international Cold War biases had somewhat diffused. Considering the trajectory of Cambodia's national politics —especially in the 1990s when the Khmer Rouge were still in possession of strongholds and Hun Sen maintained public support for the creation of a tribunal— DC-Cam's choice to immediately seize the window of opportunity to negotiate with the Cambodian government and the ruling party was equally, if not more important for establishing itself as an institution that would help determine the direction of Khmer Rouge history and memory on both a national and global scale.

¹⁸⁵ 'Khmer Rouge Archives,' DC-Cam, accessed February 28, 2021, [Archives \(dccam.org\)](https://www.dccam.org).

¹⁸⁶ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 77.

DC-Cam began with the ambitions of gathering and cataloguing existing evidence of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, which included the 50,000 pages of documents from the *Santebal* archive at Tuol Sleng.¹⁸⁷ In an agreement that was negotiated between DC-Cam staff and ‘the highest levels of the Cambodian government and the ruling party,’ DC-Cam obtained authorisation to ‘go anywhere in Cambodia, including government offices, and to seize any item it deemed relevant to its investigation.’¹⁸⁸ As a result, DC-Cam not only came into the possession of the *Santebal* files of Tuol Sleng, but thousands of other records that sat deteriorating in abandoned warehouses, former Khmer Rouge offices, and homes located in all parts of the country,¹⁸⁹ in addition to the few Khmer Rouge records in the possession of the National Archives. One may pause to consider how gathering and archiving historical records are responsibilities that would ordinarily fall within the jurisdiction of the National Archives. The fact that it was not the National Archives that came to oversee these tasks is worth mentioning as it articulates how the loss of specialised skill, historical knowledge, and cultural resources (direct consequences of DK) were strong motives for DC-Cam (who had the support and funding) to use historical research to engage with communities in the processes of healing and obtaining justice. As Michelle Caswell and Helen Jarvis explain, the National Archives were struggling to recover after decades of civil war; its collection was in disarray, the site was literally used as a pigsty by the Khmer Rouge, and of the forty staff members who worked at the library and archives prior to April 1975,

¹⁸⁷ Ben Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia: Documentation, Denial, and Justice in Cambodia and East Timor* (New Brunswick: Routledge, 2008), xvii.

¹⁸⁸ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 81-2.

¹⁸⁹ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 81.

only two returned after 1979.¹⁹⁰ Like other institutional bodies that fall under the jurisdiction of the Cambodian government, the National Archives remain underfunded to this day.¹⁹¹ In the 1990s however, these factors translated to the National Archives 'not having the resources, expertise, or political directive to undertake new collections.'¹⁹² What is more, public access to Khmer Rouge records housed in the National Archives is only obtainable with government permission, i.e. manoeuvring through endless red tape and corrupt government bureaucracy.¹⁹³

When it comes to conducting academic research on the Khmer Rouge, DC-Cam has essentially alleviated the need for researchers to go through the hassle of obtaining government permission to access the records housed in the national archives. Through the years DC-Cam catalogued all of the records and made them available in its databases.¹⁹⁴ Today, Cambodians and foreign researchers alike are welcome to visit DC-Cam's 'public information room' located in their modern offices in the heart of Phnom Penh.¹⁹⁵ For security concerns archival access is more restricted, but requests to do research in the

¹⁹⁰ The National Library and the National Archives made up the same department until 1986. Helen Jarvis, 'The National Library of Cambodia: Surviving for Seventy Years,' *Libraries and Culture* 30, no. 4 (1995): pp. 391-408, [The National Library of Cambodia: Surviving for Seventy Years on JSTOR](#), 392.

See also, Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 83.

¹⁹¹ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 83.

¹⁹² Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 83.

¹⁹³ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 83.

¹⁹⁴ The National Archives are primarily used for research on the French colonial period. Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 83.

¹⁹⁵ Michelle Caswell, 'Rethinking Inalienability: Trusting Nongovernmental Archives in Transitional Societies,' *The American Archivist* 76, no. 1 (2013): pp. 113-134, [Rethinking Inalienability: Trusting Nongovernmental Archives in Transitional Societies | The American Archivist \(allenpress.com\)](#), 121.

archives can be made directly to its director Youk Chhang, and there are resources available for use in the ‘public information room.’¹⁹⁶

Recognising the public access disparity between Phnom Penh (where DK history has been centralised, from national commemorative sites to the location of DC-Cam archives and the ECCC, all of which are located in Phnom Penh) and rural Cambodia (which notoriously lacks resources and remains in the peripheries of state-official remembrance), DC-Cam has a track record of prioritising outreach initiatives and realising archive expansion strategies that provide rural Cambodians with opportunities to engage with Khmer Rouge commemoration and the work of the ECCC. Between 2006 and 2007, DC-Cam operated its ‘Living Documents Project,’ in which three-day ‘educational tours,’ were organised.¹⁹⁷ The project offered villagers, community leaders, and students, transportation to Phnom Penh, where they were given guided tours of Tuol Sleng, Choeung Ek, and the ECCC courtrooms.¹⁹⁸ In total, there were approximately 6,000 participants and 500 visitors per month, with a 90% rate of participation (the tours were by invitation).¹⁹⁹ DC-Cam cited the importance of the project as being something that helped raise public knowledge of Khmer Rouge history, which in turn may increase the likelihood that a.) survivors would begin to ‘speak about their personal stories’; and b.) people would take an interest in participating in the justice

¹⁹⁶ Outside of the offices of DC-Cam, there is only the label ‘Public Information Room.’ Caswell notes that this is for security reasons. Caswell, ‘Rethinking Inalienability,’ 121 and 133.

¹⁹⁷ Ly Sok Kheang, *DC-Cam’s Education Tours How Participants Feel about the ECCC, Justice, and Reconciliation* accessed February 28, 2021, [Microsoft Word - DC-Cam’s Education Tour.doc \(dccam.org\)](#), 1.

¹⁹⁸ Ly, *DC-Cam’s Education*, 1.

¹⁹⁹ Ly, *DC-Cam’s Education*, 1.

process.²⁰⁰ For many participants, it was their first time visiting Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, which raises the fascinating question, for which there may never be an explicit answer: Were participants in the Living Documents Project interpreting their visit as an act of ‘bearing witness to internationalised spaces located on Cambodian soil,’ or did they identify their visit as an ‘engagement with national symbols of collective memory and suffering’?²⁰¹



Figure 2.32: Officials from the Ministry of Defence at the Koh Thma Documentation Center, June 2020. Image courtesy of Koh Thma Documentation Center.

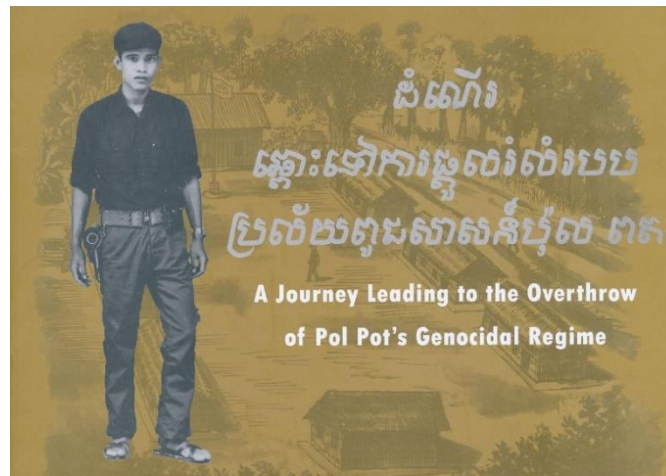


Figure 2.33: Exhibition of Hun Sen’s role in overthrowing the Khmer Rouge at the Koh Thma Documentation Center, June 2020. Image courtesy of Koh Thma Documentation Center.

²⁰⁰ Ly, *DC-Cam’s Education*, 8.

²⁰¹ Elena Lesley-Rozen, ‘Memory at the Site: Witnessing, education and the repurposing of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek in Cambodia,’ in *Remembering Genocide*, ed. Nigel Eltringham and Pam Maclean (London, UK: Routledge, 2014), pp. 131-151, 149.

In recent years, DC-Cam made plans to expand its archival collections and make outreach initiatives and historical resources pertaining to the Khmer Rouge more accessible to Cambodians. There now exists a series of museums operated by DC-Cam, which together form a microcosm ‘of democratic exchange,’ that helps to ‘inform ways [Cambodians] engage with each other,’ and their history outside of mediated environments.²⁰² The Anlong Veng Peace Centre’s opening in 2015 marked the first of a series seven of new centres. In 2020, there was a surge of Khmer Rouge history related projects including three satellite ‘documentation centres’ which opened despite the global health crisis of COVID-19.²⁰³ On the 20th of June 2020, DC-Cam, in collaboration with the Ministry of Defence, opened the Koh Thma Documentation Center —a photographic museum— to commemorate the 43rd anniversary of Hun Sen’s ‘journey to liberation,’²⁰⁴ (Figures 2.32 and 2.33). One month later on the 27th of July 2020 in Takeo Province, the Prey Veng Documentation Center and Genocide Research and Education in Cambodia opened, this time in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (Figure 2.34), as a hub for research and awareness.²⁰⁵ The Queen Mother Library and Sleuk Rith Institution is the most recent centre to have

²⁰² Liz Ševčenko, ‘Public Histories for Human Rights: Sites of Conscience and the Guantánamo Public Memory Project,’ in *Oxford Handbook of Public History*, ed. James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton (S.l.: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 142-162, 148. Efforts were made to also cite Ševčenko’s forthcoming book, *Public*

History for a Post-Truth Era: Fighting Denial through Memory Movements, (Routledge, 2022), however the request made to the publishing house for an advanced reader copy was denied.

²⁰³ Youk Chhang, ‘OPINION: In the Midst of a Global Pandemic, the Memory of Khmer Rouge Survivors Is a Reminder of Our Moral Obligations,’ *VOA*, April 17, 2020, [OPINION: In the Midst of a Global Pandemic, the Memory of Khmer Rouge Survivors Is a Reminder of Our Moral Obligations \(voacambodia.com\)](https://www.voacambodia.com/story/opinion-in-the-midst-of-a-global-pandemic-the-memory-of-khmer-rouge-survivors-is-a-reminder-of-our-moral-obligations/2020-04-17).

²⁰⁴ Rinith Taing, ‘Premier’s Journey to Liberation Honoured with Photo Museum,’ *Khmer Times*, June 19, 2020, [Premier’s journey to liberation honoured with photo museum - Khmer Times \(khmertimeskh.com\)](https://www.khmertimeskh.com/premier-journey-to-liberation-honoured-with-photo-museum/).

²⁰⁵ Khouth Sophak Chakrya, ‘A Khmer Rouge Reference Repository Opens in Takeo,’ *The Phnom Penh Post*, July 27, 2020, [A Khmer Rouge reference repository opens in Takeo | Phnom Penh Post](https://www.phnompenhpost.com/khmer-rouge-reference-repository-opens-takeo).

opened (Figures 2.35 and 2.36). Inaugurated by the Queen Mother Norodom Monineath Sihanouk on the 21st of September 2020, the library was ‘dedicated to the legacy of the Queen and all women in Cambodia.’²⁰⁶ With the establishment of these new documentation centres, particularly the Koh Thma Documentation Centre and the Queen Mother Library, which commemorate political figures, DC-Cam plays a critical role in ensuring that political involvement and legacy-making, do not transform public history and historical resources into either explicit forms of propaganda or forms of historical narrative control.

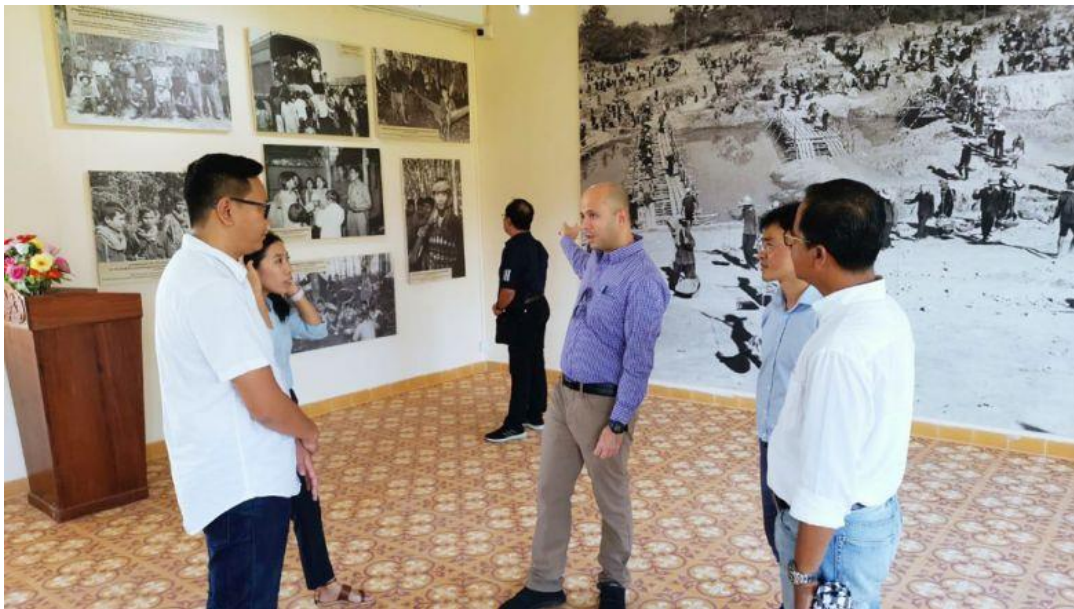


Figure 2.34: Ly Kok-Chhay/DC-Cam, ‘A DC-Cam team visiting a research office in Prey Veng province, *The Phnom Penh Post*, August 2020.

²⁰⁶ Kuch Nithatevy, ‘The Queen Mother Library Receives Royal Inauguration,’ *Khmer Times*, September 22, 2020, [The Queen Mother Library receives royal inauguration - Khmer Times \(khmertimeskh.com\)](https://www.khmertimeskh.com).



Figure 2.35: 'Queen Mother Norodom Monineath Sihanouk attended the opening of the library on Monday,' *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 21, 2020.



Figure 2.36: Makara Ouch, Sleuk Rith Institute architectural photography. Image courtesy of the Sleuk Rith Institute.

Formal education was another component of Cambodian culture that was nearly — if not altogether— extinguished under DK. A poignant reality is that the majority of Cambodian teachers, particularly professors of higher education, were massacred during DK. As a result, educational rebuilding was largely dependent on Soviet, Vietnamese, and East German professors, and preparing students for foreign higher education in Vietnam, the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries.²⁰⁷ Whilst there was work being done to rebuild schools and train teachers under the PRK throughout the 1980s, ‘the school system was almost non-existent.’²⁰⁸ As with national commemorative sites such as Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, education was a channel through which the PRK cultivated a master narrative,²⁰⁹ legitimacy, nation-state identity, and propaganda of a ‘particular political imaginary...to solidify domestic support.’²¹⁰

According to the highly informative study on education and textbooks under the PRK conducted by Hagai et al., after the 1986 PRK educational reform, history curriculum in primary education only occupied 0.8% of the total study time.²¹¹ While Hagai et al. attribute this low percentage to a reluctance of the education system to teach the nation’s recent

²⁰⁷ Hagai et al. cite only 87 out of 1,000 instructors survived the DK period. Saori Hagai et al., ‘Ideologies Inside Textbooks: Vietnamization and Re-Khmerization of Political Education in Cambodia during the 1980s,’ in *(Re)Constructing Memory: Education, Identity, and Conflict*, ed. Michelle J. Bellino and James H. Williams (Rotterdam, NL: Sense, 2017), pp. 49-73, 55.

²⁰⁸ Pham et al., ‘Perspectives on Memory, Forgiveness and Reconciliation,’ *International Review of the Red Cross*, 135.

²⁰⁹ ‘Analyses of school history contents, from the perspective of the history discipline or from the history education point of view, reveal their close resemblance to “official narratives” that aim at historically legitimising the present and future political agenda.’ Mario Carretero, ‘Imagining the Nation throughout School History Master Narratives,’ in *Public History and School: International Perspectives*, ed. Marko Demantowsky (Berlin, DE: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), pp. 97-108, 97.

²¹⁰ Hagai et al., ‘Ideologies Inside Textbooks,’ *(Re)Constructing Memory*, 49.

²¹¹ Hagai et al., ‘Ideologies Inside Textbooks,’ *(Re)Constructing Memory*, 57.

history of genocide to students,²¹² it may also have been related to the gradual weakening of the PRK government that was described earlier in the survey. Regardless, history in the context of primary education was not always a low priority during the PRK, as is demonstrated by a 1979 third-grade level Khmer language textbook which offers insight into how DK history was immediately incorporated as a form of PRK propaganda, into Cambodia's general education framework.²¹³ History made up 12 of the 72 lessons throughout the textbook and was discussed in the themes of: the question of what happened under DK, the socialist revolution of the PRK, and 'a description of the country (farming, fishing, and culture).'²¹⁴ Rather than historically contextualise the events of the Khmer Rouge, lessons pertaining to Khmer Rouge history detailed murder, execution, and torture through vivid texts and illustrations, thus instilling an anti-Khmer Rouge and pro-communist Vietnamese /PRK ideology within young students.²¹⁵

The major shift in remembrance of the DK era occurred in 1993 under UNTAC. The onset of political amnesia was echoed in the elimination of Khmer Rouge history from the

²¹² Hagai et al., 'Ideologies Inside Textbooks,' *(Re)Constructing Memory*, 53.

²¹³ The textbook was published and issued in 1979, immediately after the fall of DK. Hagai et al., 'Ideologies Inside Textbooks,' *(Re)Constructing Memory*, 60-4.

²¹⁴ Hagai et al., 'Ideologies Inside Textbooks,' *(Re)Constructing Memory*, 61.

²¹⁵ Examples of the lessons on Khmer Rouge history include: "Murder of Chainy's Family by Pol Pot and Ieng Sary" (Lesson 1), "Pol Pot and Ieng Sary Committed Homicide" (Lesson 4), "Toul Sleng Execution Site" (Lesson 7), "Torture at the Toul Sleng Execution Site" (Lesson 10), "Medical Treatment of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary" (Lesson 13), "Criticize Pol Pot" (Lesson 26), and "3 Million People Killed by Pol Pot and Ieng Sary" (Lesson 65). Hagai et al., 'Ideologies Inside Textbooks,' *(Re)Constructing Memory*, 61, 64.

school curriculum.²¹⁶ In a ninth-grade textbook that was prepared by the Royal Government of Cambodia and published in 2000, DK history was reduced to a single paragraph:

‘Democratic Kampuchea

From April 25 to April 27, 1975, the Khmer Rouge leaders held a special general assembly in order to form a new Constitution and renamed the country "Democratic Kampuchea". A new government of the DK, led by Pol Pot, came into existence, following which the massacre of Khmer citizens began.’²¹⁷

It was not until 2010 ²¹⁸ that Khmer Rouge history re-emerged in Cambodian national educational curricula, much of which is due to DC-Cam’s initiative. The ECCC becoming fully operational in 2007 arguably marked the turning point that helped remove the stigma associated with openly talking about DK, for it was at this time that survivors started to come forward and testify in ECCC Case 001. In the same year, DC-Cam collaborated with the Ministry of Education and began distributing the textbook, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*, written by researcher, Khamboly Dy, and historians David Chandler and Wynne Cougill (Figure 2.37). The book was approved to be ‘used as supplementary discussion material [for teachers] and as a base to write a history lesson for high school students,’ by the Government Working Commission.²¹⁹ The textbook release ultimately became part of a broader education and outreach initiative by DC-Cam and the

²¹⁶ Pham et al., ‘Perspectives on Memory, Forgiveness and Reconciliation,’ *International Review of the Red Cross*, 135, 140.

²¹⁷ Ministry of Education Youth and Sports of the Royal Government of Cambodia, *Social Studies Textbook*, trans. Bun Sou Sour (Ministry of Education Youth and Sports of the Royal Government of Cambodia, 2000), accessed January 15, 2022, [Documentation Center of Cambodia \(DC-Cam\) \(dccam.org\)](http://Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) (dccam.org)).

²¹⁸ Pham et al., ‘Perspectives on Memory, Forgiveness and Reconciliation,’ *International Review of the Red Cross*, 135.

²¹⁹ Dy, Chandler, and Cougill, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*, First (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007), [pp1-84 \(amazonaws.com\)](http://pp1-84 (amazonaws.com)).

Ministry of Education that aimed to make ‘Genocide Education’ part of the national secondary education curriculum.²²⁰

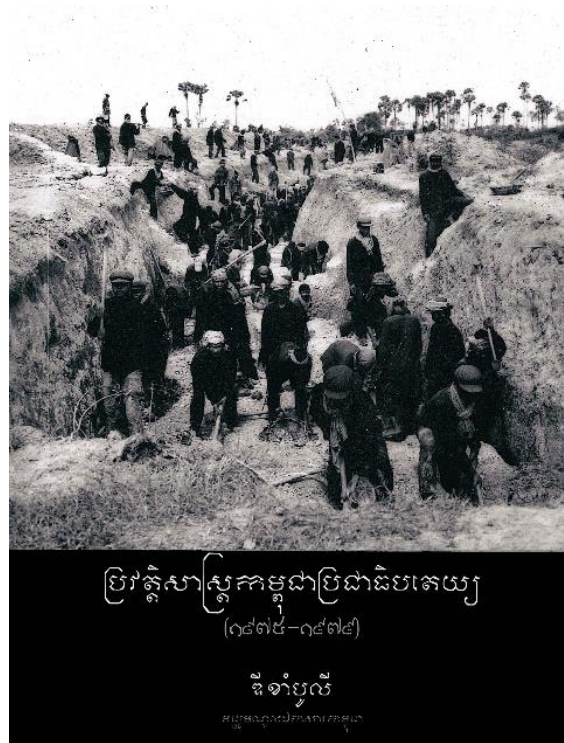


Figure 2.37: Textbook cover of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* Khmer version, DC-Cam, accessed December 23, 2021.

In a paper analysing the challenges of teaching genocide in Cambodia, one of the school textbook authors, Khamboly Dy, asserts that the project was the first substantial effort to introduce genocide education in Cambodia.²²¹ Though the textbook was a major feat in the sense that it abolished the state-authorised induced amnesia that was perpetuated by the absence of DK history in national curricula, the Genocide Research and

²²⁰ Khamboly Dy, ‘Teaching Genocide in Cambodia: Challenges, Analyses, and Recommendations,’ *Human Rights Education in Asian Schools*, pp. 129-147, accessed February 28, 2021, [hreas-12-12-cambodia.pdf](https://www.hreas-12-12-cambodia.pdf) ([hurights.or.jp](https://www.hurights.or.jp)), 137.

²²¹ Dy, ‘Teaching Genocide in Cambodia,’ *Human Rights Education in Asian Schools*, 137.

Education project is no less a political negotiation of history²²² than were the agreements that established the ECCC, or Tuol Sleng's shift towards a more universal narrative of genocide. At the same time, the Genocide Research and Education project demonstrates how re-establishing national education, particularly a history curriculum after a long period of mass destruction and violence, risks becoming a platform that allows 'dangerous power to be domesticated in the service of the community.'²²³ In this case, the 'dangerous power' is the government practice of packaging their version of history to seemingly be without political biases.²²⁴ The heavy role of the Cambodian government in the first edition of the textbook project perhaps may be attributed to the fact that there were fewer international financial stakeholders; it was an undertaking confined to government and DC-Cam resources. Thus, funding was limited, and it was decided to first 'target the remote communities where the material can have the most impact.'²²⁵ Moreover, because of the government's heavy involvement, religion, politics, and morality were overtly interwoven into the project. In many instances large, state-official ceremonies organised by the Ministry

²²² Meanwhile, in the workshops facilitated by DC-Cam, teachers were 'exposed to a wide range of narratives covering perpetrator, victim, bystander, and "upstander" experiences.' Tep Meng Khean, Youk Chhang, and Dacil Q. Keo, eds., *Teacher's Guidebook: The Teaching of "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)"*, trans. Khamboly Dy, Pheng Pong Rasy, and Prak Keo Dara (Phnom Penh, KH: e Documentation Center of Cambodia and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2009), [inside \(dccam.org\)](https://www.dccam.org). 'Teacher Training' DC-Cam (DC-Cam and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport), [Teacher Training \(dccam.org\)](https://www.dccam.org).

²²³ Alexandra Kent and David Chandler, 'Introduction,' in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David Chandler (Copenhagen, DK: NIAS Press, 2008), pp. 1-15, [People of Virtue : Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia T...: Onesearch Service for University of Guam \(ebSCOhost.com\)](https://www.onesearch.com), 2.

²²⁴ Excerpt from interview with Khamboly Dy, *Genocide Education Training, Genocide Education Training*, 2015, [Genocide Education Training - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...), 01:44.

²²⁵ DC-Cam 'History Book Distribution' DC-Cam (DC-Cam and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport) accessed February 25, 2021, [History Book Distribution \(dccam.org\)](https://www.dccam.org).

of Education, Youth and Culture accompanied textbook distribution at schools located throughout the nation (Figure 2.38). These state-sponsored ceremonies in themselves are noteworthy for the reason that they are key historical moments in which official memory is both ritually and formally transmitted.²²⁶ Conversely, they also serve as government attempts 'to recover moral order after violent conflict both in relation to indigenous values and experience, and as embedded in social relations and history,'²²⁷ as means to prevent genocide.



Figure 2.38: 'Textbook distributions presided over by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, which began in June 2009,' *DC-Cam*, accessed December 23, 2021.

Negotiations of history between DC-Cam and the Royal Government of Cambodia are particularly apparent in the Teacher's Guidebook, which contains more politically charged statements and viewpoints than the textbook itself. For example, the highlighted quote at the beginning of the book, 'teaching children about the Khmer Rouge regime

²²⁶ Alex Hinton, 'Truth, Representation and the Politics of Memory After Genocide,' in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David Chandler (Copenhagen, DK: NIAS Press, 2008), pp. 62-84, [People of Virtue : Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia T...: Onesearch Service for University of Guam \(ebscohost.com\)](https://www.ebscohost.com), 62.

²²⁷ Kent and Chandler, 'Introduction,' *People of Virtue*, 2.

means teaching students the difference between good and evil and how to forgive. Broken societies must know their past in order to rebuild for their future.’²²⁸ It can be surmised that the government is still unwilling to remove the Manichean framework from the historical narrative of DK. However, rather than limiting the ‘evil’ to describe the highest members of the CPK, the Royal Government of Cambodia is now applying the concept of ‘evil’ to the overall period of time the regime was in power (thus placing the blame on the nation), and contrasting it with the current, ‘good’ regime (Hun Sen and the CPP) that is seeking reconciliation and forgiveness. Adding emphasis to the quote is a photograph of former S-21 head prison guard, Him Huy and S-21 child survivor, Norng Chan Phal, together passing out copies of the textbook to students (Figure 2.39). Interestingly, on the publication information page of the Teacher’s Guidebook, it is stated that the views expressed in the book ‘do not reflect the position of the Documentation Center of Cambodia.’²²⁹ As this disclaimer is not replicated in the textbook, it may be speculated that the politically charged and propagandised contents of the *Teacher Guidebook* were part of the negotiation terms that were reached for DC-Cam to receive the government funds needed to print and distribute the textbook nationwide.

²²⁸ Tep Meng Khean, Youk Chhang, and Dacil Q. Keo, eds., *Teacher's Guidebook: The Teaching of "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)"*, trans. Khamboly Dy, Pheng Pong Rasy, and Prak Keo Dara (Phnom Penh, KH: The Documentation Center of Cambodia and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2009), [inside \(dccam.org\)](http://inside(dccam.org)) 4.

²²⁹ Khean, Chhang, and Keo, eds., *Teacher's Guidebook*, 3.



Figure 2.39: Heng Sinith, 'Former S-21 head prison guard, Him Huy (in the blue shirt) and S-21 child survivor, Norng Chan Phal (in the white shirt right behind Huy) who lost his parents at S-21, distributing *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* to students,' October 9, 2009, DC-Cam Archives. Image sourced from *Teacher's Guidebook: The Teaching of "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)"*, 4.

In August 2020, the second edition of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* was released. Accompanying the new international funding (from Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, the Civil Peace Service, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), were subtle, yet significant narrative changes.²³⁰ The original content and structure of the first edition were largely left alone, however, the

²³⁰ Khamboly Dy et al., *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*, 2nd ed. (Phnom Penh, KH: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2020), [DK History EN 2-edition FA 14-AUG-2020.pdf \(amazonaws.com\)](#).

new content sought to provide a global context on the impact of the Cambodian Genocide. The second edition featured three additional authors and five additional chapters that incorporated lessons in post-genocide justice: the establishment of the ECCC (without the mention of political tensions between Cambodia and the international community), the Court's decisions on Cases 001 and 002, and information on Cases 003 and 004. In the final two chapters, which were among those added to the second edition, were the written apologies of Duch and selected contemporary personal stories, memories, and accounts of survivors and the families of DK victims. In these final chapters of the new edition, it is possible to observe how DC-Cam's involvement in the project ensured another instance of historical mediation that came with a lasting benefit. Whilst the project satisfied the government's agenda to push for national reconciliation, it also was able to replace the Manichean framework of good and evil with individual perspectives and memories that interpret DK history as not one narrative, but a 'wide range of narratives covering perpetrator, victim, bystander, and "upstander" experiences.'²³¹

Eliminating state influence in relation to the creation and dissemination of history is an impossible task, particularly in scenarios where the government feels compelled to limit the influence of NGOs such as DC-Cam. DC-Cam's collaborative efforts with the government, though perhaps not free of political association and undertones, offer a much-needed check-and-balance system. Therefore, having government and non-government

²³¹ 'Teacher Training,' DC-Cam, accessed December 22, 2021, [Teacher Training \(dccam.org\)](https://www.dccam.org/teacher-training).

groups working on a united front to mediate and facilitate history is one solution to prevent state-official agendas from transforming history into messages of propaganda.

Digital (Public) History

Another thriving 'planting,' in Cambodia's public history 'garden' is digital (public) history. Although the category of digital history could be categorised as an offshoot of archives, education, and outreach, the task of discerning the difference between digital history and digital public history merits separate treatment, as does the objective of describing how the 'digital turn' has transformed the history-making and historical research processes. The experience of genocide makes the 'digital turn,' digital history, and digital public history particularly germane topics within the broader discussion of public history in Cambodia as they have provided a number of solutions to the challenges that are inherently associated with genocide research, including synthesising and sharing the copious amounts of data, unknown variables, and disparate information.

Consider how a history of DK often begins with the overwhelming statistic of 1.7 to 2 million people (nearly one quarter of Cambodia's population) killed in the three years, eight months, and twenty days that the regime was in power between 1975 and 1979. Also consider how the DK regime is itself historically recognised for its production of meticulous, bureaucratic-style prison records that convey a process of systematic torture, mass

murder,²³² and the 'day-to-day machinations of a genocidal regime.'²³³ By extension, DK's 'bureaucracy of death,'²³⁴ is made visible by the records it produced at S-21, which was subsequently transformed into an archive comprising the thousands of prisoner identification photographs that are collectively displayed in the museum's permanent exhibition as well as 4,186 confessions, and 6,578 prisoner biographies. In addition to Tuol Sleng's archive, there is DC-Cam, which has archived approximately one million pages of records, 60,000 photographs from the Khmer Rouge period, documentation of more than 20,000 mass grave sites and 196 DK prisons, along with 260 documentary films recorded during and immediately after the genocide, and 50,000 recorded interviews of perpetrators and survivors of DK, which were conducted by DC-Cam staff.²³⁵

When it comes to understanding how the 'digital turn' impacted historical research and the production of public history pertaining to DK, it is useful to consider DC-Cam's trajectory as unfolding parallel with advances made in digital technology. DC-Cam's establishment in 1994 was a watershed moment in which huge amounts of data were gathered from primary and secondary sources, which required archiving, assessment, and analysis.²³⁶ As DC-Cam was establishing its archive, the worldwide web was becoming

²³² Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 26.

²³³ James Tyner et al., 'Emerging Data Sources and the Study of Genocide: A Preliminary Analysis of Prison Data from S-21 Security-Center, Cambodia,' *GeoJournal* 81, no. 6 (August 2016): pp. 907-918, [Emerging data sources and the study of genocide: a preliminary analysis of prison data from S-21 security-center, Cambodia | SpringerLink](#), 909.

²³⁴ David Hawk, 'Tuol Sleng Extermination Centre,' *Index on Censorship* 15, no. 1 (1986): pp. 25-31, [Tuol Sleng Extermination Centre - David Hawk, 1986 \(sagepub.com\)](#), 25.

²³⁵ Tyner et al., 'Emerging Data Sources,' *GeoJournal*, 909.

²³⁶ Tyner et al., 'Emerging Data Sources,' *GeoJournal*, 909.

commonplace in many parts of the world and digital humanities was beginning to gradually emerge as both a field of study and scholarly activity. Burdick et al. note that ‘in the late 1990s, projects began to appear that harnessed the digital to create visualizations, geospatial representations, simulated spaces, and network analyses of complex systems.’²³⁷ This can be seen in DC-Cam’s approach to mapping sites of atrocity in addition to archival development. Both activities incorporated new technology with the capability of harvesting big data, and prioritised an organisational mission that heightened historians’ attention to epistemological and methodological questions surrounding archives and the implications of creating a digital collection, such as: ‘What are our sources?, Where do our sources come from?, and, What impact does the structure of an archive have on our historical understanding?’²³⁸

In other words, DC-Cam was established in time to embrace the ‘digital turn’²³⁹ that was being experienced on an international scale. Their immediate embracing of the ‘digital turn’ marked a point in which public history in Cambodia converged with international public history pursuits and queries taking shape within academic discourse. Among the significant changes that the ‘digital turn’ brought to history was immobilizing living memory

²³⁷ Anne Burdick et al., *Digital Humanities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), [Digital Humanities: Onesearch Service for University of Guam \(ebscohost.com\)](#), 9.

²³⁸ Arguing with Digital History working group, ‘Digital History and Argument,’ white paper, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (November 13, 2017): [Digital History & Argument White Paper – Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media \(rrchnm.org\)](#), 7.

²³⁹ This ‘digital’ turn was notably occurring in developed countries at a much faster rate. Internet access in Cambodia was virtually non-existent in 1995 and did not become commonplace there until 2018. Serge Noiret, ‘Digital Public History,’ in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David M. Dean, 1st ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018), pp. 111-124, 111.

and preserving it in systems of information where it is stored for future consultation, thus further allowing memory to become an object of fixation and scrutiny for historians.²⁴⁰ Resultantly, DC-Cam's early contributions to digital history, namely the process of exteriorizing memory by preserving the stories of victims and the living memories of DK survivors, must be given due credit for helping to expand the potential of genocide research as well as 'what history is and can do, as a field.'²⁴¹ However, as Jacques Le Goff observed, this 'process of exteriorisation,' which was subsequently accelerated by the proliferations of the 'digital turn,' also posed challenges for historical studies, including the risk of entirely transforming the historical field into a mere arena for the 'politics of what we in the present want posterity to remember.'²⁴² Now, with the plethora of digital archives and databases capable of storing vast amounts of information, historical studies must continue to contend with 'memory in expansion,'²⁴³ which has undoubtedly further entrenched historical research into being primarily concerned with *what* to remember instead of *how* to remember. The pitfalls that accompany memory's preservation is its potential to be excessively privileged as well as losing sight of the idea that memory 'is the raw material of history.'²⁴⁴ As digital archives and databases become more enriched and central to the practice of history, historians and public historians of all topics are constantly met with the

²⁴⁰ Patrick H. Hutton, 'Review: History and Memory by Jacques Le Goff, Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman: Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust by Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Jeffrey Mehlman,' *History and Theory* 33, no. 1 (February 1994): pp. 95-107, [Document \(jstor.org\)](#).

²⁴¹ 'Digital History and Argument,' Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, 1.

²⁴² Hutton, 'Review: History and Memory,' *History and Theory*, 100.

²⁴³ Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 84.

²⁴⁴ Le Goff, *History and Memory*, xi-xii.

challenge of seeking new ways to remain grounded in objectivity and the scientific study of history whilst avoiding approaches that naively 'identify history with memory.'²⁴⁵

Histories such as Democratic Kampuchea and the Holocaust are perhaps further compounded by Le Goff's observation as they occupy the nebulous space between memory and history. Just as 'a history of the Nazi crime which does not integrate memory - or rather, diverse memories - and which fail[s] to account for the transformation of memories [is] a poor history,'²⁴⁶ a history of Democratic Kampuchea that does not acknowledge the 'existential awareness of reality that living memory confides,' is failing to preserve 'the knowledge of the historical truth.'²⁴⁷ In 1994, when DC-Cam first set out to collect evidence of the crimes committed when the CPK was in power, the most pressing concern was the 'fight against the disappearance - or, worse yet, the debasement -of memory.'²⁴⁸ DC-Cam and international scholars first converged upon an immediate shared goal that was not historical analysis, but rather memory action²⁴⁹ in the form of preserving living memory's rapidly elapsing tenure and its protection against being overwritten by former Khmer Rouge who sought to minimize, or altogether erase the truth of lived experiences under DK.²⁵⁰ As DC-Cam began growing its repository, the staff became increasingly concerned for the safety of the archives. Out of fear that former Khmer Rouge would go so far as to destroy

²⁴⁵ Le Goff, *History and Memory*, xi-xii.

²⁴⁶ Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xxiii.

²⁴⁷ Hutton, 'Review: History and Memory,' *History and Theory*, 104.

²⁴⁸ Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory*, 57.

²⁴⁹ Ševčenko, 'Public Histories for Human Rights,' in *Oxford Handbook of Public History*, 153.

²⁵⁰ Hutton, 'Review: History and Memory,' *History and Theory*, 103-105.

the repository to protect themselves from incrimination, the location of DC-Cam was initially not disclosed to the public.²⁵¹ This security risk to the archives underscored the urgency to make copies of the collection and have them stored outside of Cambodia in the event that DC-Cam's location and security were compromised.

Yale's ongoing involvement with DC-Cam through its Cambodian Genocide Program (CGP) attracted 'complementary' international government funding and university research support from Australia and the Netherlands,²⁵² a factor that made it possible to create a visionary solution to DC-Cam's unique predicament and the CGP's objective of making the archives and data accessible to Cambodian refugees and human rights workers worldwide.²⁵³ Youk Chhang- DC-Cam Director, Ben Kiernan- Khmer Rouge scholar, genocide justice advocate, and founder of Yale's CGP, Craig Etcheson- program manager for CGP and later Lead Investigator for the Office of Co-Prosecutors, Helen Jarvis and colleague Nereida Cross-database experts from University of New South Wales Sydney (Jarvis would eventually serve as the ECCC's Head of Victims Support Section from 2007 to 2010), and Paul Conway- head of the Preservation Department at Yale University, comprised the team of experts responsible for digitising DC-Cam's records and creating online databases. In

²⁵¹ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 84.

²⁵² Cambodian Genocide Program, 'Introduction to the Cambodian Genocide Databases,' Yale University, Introduction to the Cambodian Genocide Databases Genocide Studies Program, accessed February 28, 2021, [Introduction to the Cambodian Genocide Databases | Genocide Studies Program \(yale.edu\)](https://www.yale.edu/genocide-studies-program/introduction-to-the-cambodian-genocide-databases).

²⁵³ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 84.

1997, a preliminary form of the Cambodian Genocide Databases (CGDB) was released, which was followed by 'larger... supplementary releases' in 1998 and 2001.²⁵⁴

To use the words of Paul Conway, the CGDB project was 'a decade ahead of its time.'²⁵⁵ Although the first release was more or less Tuol Sleng- centric, over the course of the three releases, four separate databases were created: bibliographic, biographic, photographic, and geographic. Additionally, where it was possible, the database correlated disparate biographic and testimonial information with S-21 prisoner identification photographs, thus allowing the records to be 'read in new' and sometimes more complete, ways.²⁵⁶ In the context of archival studies, genocide studies, and public history, the collaborative CGDB project was innovative because it anticipated computers and the internet as emerging tools that would make information widely accessible. By extension it prefigured 'the social networking concept that archives were only just starting to implement for participatory archival description more than a decade later.'²⁵⁷

In an historical context, the CGDB project is of consequence because it is an early example of the distinguishment between digital history and digital *public* history. Serge Noiret explains that differentiating the two is crucial, for although there are many historians who use digital tools as part of their historical research, digital public history demonstrates

²⁵⁴ 'Introduction to the Cambodian Genocide Databases,' Yale University.

²⁵⁵ Quote was from a phone interview between Conway and Caswell dated 21 October 2010.

Paul Conway, as quoted in Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 87.

²⁵⁶ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 87.

²⁵⁷ Now there are two separate, searchable databases; the original CGDB, which is located on the Yale CGP website, and one on the Tuol Sleng website. The Tuol Sleng database is more user-friendly than the CGP database, which is now outdated. Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 87.

a core concern of reaching audiences through digital material.²⁵⁸ Additionally, digital history projects developed for ‘audiences other than academics,’ are tasked with presenting ‘arguments in forms that meet the needs of public audiences and stakeholders.’²⁵⁹ For today’s public historian, being able to reach a public outside academia by utilising digital tools and social media is a standard skill, but in the mid and late 1990s, when the CGDB was being developed, it took considerable foresight to understand how the emerging technology could effectively be used to first create history and then mediate it and engage with a defined online public. Remarkably, the developers of the CGDB project ‘always had in mind making information available widely inside and outside of Cambodia and were aware of the (only then emerging) power of computers and the internet.’²⁶⁰ The DC-Cam and CGP database projects ‘Mapping the Killing Fields’ and the ‘Tuol Sleng Image Database’ were innovative as both digital history projects and digital public history projects.

An issue that befalls the data of both the Tuol Sleng Archives and the Mapping the Killing Fields project is the fact that they are incomplete datasets. Their partiality meant that data alone could not offer theories, context, or historical explanation. Consequently, any database that was created had to be inclusive of qualitative assessment for the untrained public.²⁶¹ Further, as Tyner et al. point out, without proper presentation, scholars and publics could easily get lost in the sheer volume of data and be distracted from reading the

²⁵⁸ Noiret, ‘Digital Public History,’ *A Companion to Public History*, 113.

²⁵⁹ ‘Digital History and Argument,’ Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, 8.

²⁶⁰ Helen Jarvis, as quoted by Michelle Caswell. Quote was from an email interview between Jarvis and Caswell. Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 87.

²⁶¹ Tyner et al., ‘Emerging Data Sources,’ *GeoJournal*, 909.

‘usable’ data.²⁶² Because these databases were meant to be publicly accessible, DC-Cam and the CGP were posed with the challenge of finding a way to convey the ‘nature of how [DK] records were compiled and collated.’ This included managing their inherent incompleteness, offering a database that at once made data searchable, correlated disparate data, highlighted ‘usable’ data, and gave users the necessary structure and context through qualitative data, and ensuring that the database was a valuable resource for publics and researchers alike.

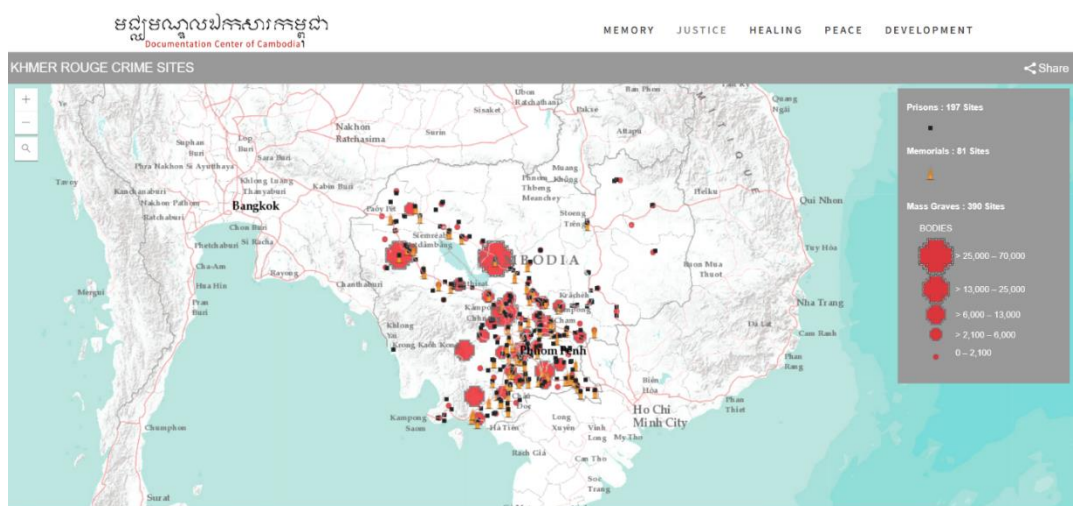


Figure 2.40: Screenshot of ‘Mapping the Killing Fields’ interactive map, accessed December 23, 2021.

With funding from the Royal Netherlands Government and United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL),²⁶³ ‘Mapping the

²⁶² Tyner et al., ‘Emerging Data Sources,’ *Geojournal*, 909, 913.

²⁶³ ‘Mapping the Killing Fields,’ DC-Cam, accessed February 28, 2021, [Documentation Center of Cambodia \(DC-Cam\) \(dccam.org\)](http://Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) (dccam.org)).

Killing Fields’ began in 1995 and went on for twelve years.²⁶⁴ Over the course of ten years, using global satellite position mapping combined with fieldwork and crowd-sourcing strategies,²⁶⁵ the project identified ‘19,733 mass burial pits (in 390 clusters), 197 prisons that operated during the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) period, and 81 memorials constructed by survivors of the DK regime,’ located throughout the country (Figure 2.40).²⁶⁶ Because ‘Mapping the Killing Fields’ utilised geographic studies and Geographic Information System (GIS) technologies,²⁶⁷ the project outcome was cross-disciplinary. The geospatial techniques and ‘geo-computational technologies help[ed] manage massive amounts of data from multiple sources, thereby providing a much needed spatial analysis of historical’ events and mass atrocities of the Khmer Rouge.²⁶⁸ Remote sensing technologies such as ground-penetrating radar, side-scanning, and satellite imagery, were attempted, though without much success due to the project’s budgetary constraints.²⁶⁹ Although the data collection process ended upon the formal closure of the project in 2004, the data continued to be entered into a Geographic Information System (GIS) for another two years with continued assistance from the CGP.²⁷⁰ The final product was a user-friendly ‘searchable,

²⁶⁴ ‘Mapping Project: 1995-Present,’ DC-Cam, accessed February 28, 2021, [Documentation Center of Cambodia \(DC-Cam\) \(dccam.org\)](http://Documentation.Center.of.Cambodia.(DC-Cam).(dccam.org)).

²⁶⁵ DC-Cam noted that ‘the initial information on the locations of these sites was generally obtained through interviews with villagers; sometimes readers of DC-Cam’s monthly magazine would also write to inform us of a prison or other site.’ DC-Cam, ‘Mapping the Killing Fields.’

²⁶⁶ DC-Cam, ‘Mapping the Killing Fields.’

²⁶⁷ DC-Cam, ‘Mapping Project.’ See also, Cambodian Genocide Project, Geographic Database (CGEO) , Yale University, accessed December 22, 2021, [Geographic Database \(CGEO\) | Genocide Studies Program \(yale.edu\)](http://Geographic.Database.(CGEO).|Genocide.Studies.Program.(yale.edu)).

²⁶⁸ Tyner et al., ‘Emerging Data Sources,’ *GeoJournal*, 909.

²⁶⁹ Craig Etcheson, *After the Killing Fields: Lessons From the Cambodian Genocide* (S.L.: Texas Tech Univ Press, 2006), [After the Killing Fields - Google Books](https://books.google.com/books?id=...), 59.

²⁷⁰ DC-Cam, ‘Mapping Project.’

interactive database of maps, satellite images, and detailed information on 130,000 locations across Cambodia,²⁷¹ that allow researchers and the public to choose the parameters of data visualisation depending on their needs and queries.

1995 also marked the point when an agreement was reached between DC-Cam and the Tuol Sleng Museum, which permitted DC-Cam and the CGP to digitise the prisoner identification photographs. The Tuol Sleng Photographic Database Common Type System (CTS) contains more than 5,000 digitised photographs of Tuol Sleng victims. Upon the project's completion, most of the people photographed in prisoner identification images remained unidentified. It was hoped that digitising and making the photographs publicly accessible online would result in the positive identification of victims. In this aspect the project was an early form of online public outreach; it relied on specific publics including DK survivors, family members, or friends of victims, to reunite disparate information (the S-21 victim biographies with the prisoner identification photographs) through the victim identification process.

Unfortunately, the Tuol Sleng CTS database was not widely used for its intended purpose;²⁷² the digitization and online database components ultimately brought to the fore

²⁷¹ Cambodian Genocide Project, Geographic Database (CGEO), Yale University.

²⁷² It was, however, an important resource for historical and legal research. Helen Jarvis explained the databases' (Tuol Sleng archives and Mapping the Killing Fields) significance in the context of the ECCC: 'Unquestionably our documentation work provided not only great support for the arguments for the tribunal, but much of the evidence that was examined by the U.N. Group of Experts in 1998, whose mandate included assessing whether there was sufficient evidence to pursue the case, and of course much of the evidence [DC-Cam collected] has been placed subsequently in the case files at the ECCC [Tribunal] and presented in court.' Quote is from an email interview conducted by Michelle Caswell on July 24, 2011, as written in, Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 89, 188.

the major technological and access inequalities that existed (and to a degree, continue to exist) between First World and Developing nations. In 2001, only 0.1% of the Cambodian population had access to the internet.²⁷³ Very little had changed by 2012, when just 5% of the population was recorded as having internet.²⁷⁴ It was only in 2020 that most (69.5% of the population)²⁷⁵ Cambodians had internet. Now however, the CGDB databases (which remain accessible via Yale University's Genocide Studies Program website) are outdated and most of the features are not up to current user-friendly standards.

With a slight majority of Cambodians now having internet access, it is fitting that on the 29th of January 2021, the Tuol Sleng Museum, in partnership with UNESCO and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, and funding from the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), launched a digital project that brought the museum's archives into the 21st century. The three-year project digitised:

'60,000 documents, almost half a million pages, including photographs, biographies of detainees, notebooks, propaganda magazines, forced confessions and other written materials. All the information contained in the documents, amounting to over 4 million data elements,' which were compiled in an online database that has been made accessible in both Khmer and English, 'to family members, researchers and the general public through the website.'²⁷⁶

²⁷³ 'Cambodia Internet Users,' Internet Live Stats, accessed February 28, 2021, [Cambodia Internet Users \(internetlivestats.com\)](http://internetlivestats.com).

²⁷⁴ Internet Live Stats, 'Cambodia Internet Users.'

²⁷⁵ 'Asia Internet Stats by Country and 2020 Population Statistics,' *Internet World Stats*, accessed February 28, 2021, [Asia Internet Stats by Country and 2021 Population Statistics \(internetworldstats.com\)](http://internetworldstats.com).

²⁷⁶ 'UNESCO and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum Launch a Digital Database to Access the Largest Archive of the Khmer Rouge Regime's Prison System,' *UNESCO*, February 9, 2021, [UNESCO and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum launch a digital database to access the largest archive of the Khmer Rouge regime's prison system](https://www.unesco.org/en/press-releases/2021/02/unesco-and-tuol-sleng-genocide-museum-launch-digital-database).

As an international public history project, the new Tuol Sleng Museum digital archive makes a case for adopting a global perspective of the Cambodian Genocide and reinforces the value of investing in long-term restorative and developmental strategies. It at once: highlights the universality of international standards in preservation and conservation; considers the long-term impact and future of the archives by the investment in a sustainable preservation facility; demonstrates a belief in equal accessibility to education in professional skills through the training in preservation and conservation that was provided to museum staff; exemplifies a successful collaboration between an international organisation, the Cambodian state, and a Cambodian heritage site; adds much needed context to the museum whilst engaging both the Cambodian and international public through two on-site multimedia spaces that allow visitors of the museum to ‘scroll through the digitised documents and learn more about the importance of the archives.’²⁷⁷

In its role as a second-generation Cambodian digital public history project, the Tuol Sleng digital archive project stands out for the way in which it directly addresses numerous aspects of best practice whilst confronting the longstanding issues specific to Cambodian public history- namely balancing the principle of providing open access to resources of historical and humanitarian value with the ethical considerations of respecting the dignity of the victims and protecting living persons’ rights to privacy.²⁷⁸ Until the database’s launch, an overarching theme in Cambodian public history —which this survey has attempted to

²⁷⁷ UNESCO, ‘UNESCO and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.’

²⁷⁸ ‘Archives,’ Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, published January 29, 2021, [Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum – Archives](#).

make apparent— was victim dignity and survivor rights being overshadowed and in many cases entirely compromised, by state propaganda, national commemoration and reconciliation, international public engagement, and transitional justice.

The database prioritises the safeguarding of victim dignity and survivor privacy by designating sources as being either ‘unrestricted’ or ‘restricted’ for online viewing. In a webpage dedicated to the topic of document access, the project makes clear why and which sources were classified as ‘unrestricted’ and ‘restricted,’ in addition to providing instructions for specific publics (such as researchers) who wish to gain online access to restricted documents.²⁷⁹ Visitors to the database website are met with a disclaimer stating:

‘The information contained in many of these documents was extracted under torture, or under threat of torture. In consequence, any opinions or statements expressed therein should be treated with the utmost discretion, should not be accepted as fact, and would be inadmissible as evidence in a court of law under the Convention Against Torture. Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum cannot be held liable for the use of or reliance on the opinions, findings and data in these documents.’²⁸⁰

This disclaimer achieves yet another milestone in Cambodian public history; it discourages the longstanding practice of associating the idea of historical truth with records produced by the DK regime. By taking the precaution of including the disclaimer, the project is actively working to ensure ethical public engagement with historical research and document interpretation.

²⁷⁹ Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, ‘Archives.’ See also PDF of the Access Policy: [20200922120602211.pdf \(tuolsleng.gov.kh\)](#).

²⁸⁰ ‘Disclaimer,’ Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, accessed December 22, 2021, [Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum – Archives](#).

The early digitisation projects conducted by DC-Cam made the invaluable contributions of preserving at-risk archives, bringing international awareness to the crimes committed during the DK regime, and were pioneers in digital public history practices. Thus, they set a standard for Cambodian digital public history early on. A brief analysis of the second-generation digital public history in Cambodia shows positive advancements in prioritising current and future historical research practices that display sensitivity to victims' and survivors' rights.

In contrast to these progressions, digital history connected to big data also continues to confound and implicate an important task within public history and the broader field of genocide studies, which is the 'search for the individual.'²⁸¹ While the raw statistics and big data highlighted in these digital public history projects are powerful in the sense that they convey the mass scales of suffering, death, and atrocities, they also sanitise and generalise the historical experience, and effectively function as barriers in the public historian's 'search for the individual.'²⁸²

Conclusion

Although the partitioned sections and individual case studies that comprised this survey gesture towards separate and neatly categorised public history 'plantings,' Cambodia's 'garden' of state-sanctioned public history is perhaps best described as an

²⁸¹ Rachel Donadio, 'Preserving the Ghastly Inventory of Auschwitz,' (*The New York Times*, April 15, 2015), [Preserving the Ghastly Inventory of Auschwitz - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/15/us/politics/preserving-the-ghastly-inventory-of-auschwitz.html).

²⁸² Donadio, 'Preserving the Ghastly Inventory,' *The New York Times*.

interconnected system wherein the roots of the public history ‘plantings,’ along with the stakeholders and institutions — i.e., the gardeners— that tend to them, form a complexly imbricated, interconnected, and interdependent network. Adding to this intricacy are the ways in which international public history practices have been grafted onto national DK memorials and forms of commemoration that are in keeping with the ongoing global trend of universalising narratives of genocide. Yet beyond the borders of this carefully trimmed ‘garden,’ of internationally supported and state-sanctioned public history, lies a marginalised, organic topography of DK commemorative and memorialisation practices that have been shaped by social groups and communities, as was briefly touched upon in this chapter through the discussion of the termite hill at Wat Roka Kaong and the construction of *sāramandīr* at pagodas throughout Cambodia. The successive chapters of this thesis are departures from the well-defined landscape architecture of official public history in Cambodia in the sense that they begin to chart the vast, peripheralized terrain of local and indigenous public history practices. However, the ‘garden’ of state-sanctioned public history shall remain a necessary and central component to the overall objective of capturing and synthesizing the diverse range of Cambodian public history practices in addition to developing an understanding of the various ways in which national and international political agendas affect the formation and development of a grassroots public history movement.

CHAPTER 3

Cultural Translations: *Selapak* as (Public) History

Up to this point in the thesis, public history in Cambodia as it relates to the history of the Khmer Rouge and Democratic Kampuchea has been primarily established and examined through a combination of international knowledge systems, state-official memorialisation practices, and external evaluative standards for measuring progress in national post-genocide reconstruction. Chapter 2's survey of various state-sanctioned and internationally-supported public history projects alluded to how the landscapes of memory and history of the Cambodian Genocide were predominantly visual. The previous chapter also made clear how the indigenous visual language and visuality's centrality within Cambodian culture had become at once marginalised and distorted by Western concepts, international models, and globalised narratives of genocide that were grafted onto visual primary resources, in particular, the sites of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. Consequently, the untrained gazes of international publics not only peripheralize unfamiliar semiosis but are blind to the indigenous visual narratives and are altogether disengaged from the opportunity to become visually literate in the Cambodian culture. Utilising historical research whilst touching on methods of visual literacy, this chapter aims to illustrate how a grassroots public history has already formed, exists, and is being practiced in Cambodia, by Cambodians at the community level, within a framework unique unto itself that has yet to enter official public history discourse- that is, until now.

Undertaking the process of identifying public history's organic existence in Cambodia with the presumption that it directly translates into the Euro-American practice of history or the existing Western framework of public history, would inevitably be slipping into a neo-colonial discourse and contribute to the further marginalisation of knowledge systems that are indigenous to and essential for, understanding Cambodian history. Conversely, it would become immediately apparent that such an approach is akin to trying to fit a square peg into a round hole; it simply does not fit. Therefore, this chapter establishes the foundational premise that successive chapters are built upon, which is, the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts—a multi and intergenerational process that began in the 1990s and continues into the present day—is Cambodia's own version of a 'public history movement,' wherein film and photography have become the defining media. Doing so involves elucidating as to why the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts became a locus for the convergence of history and public discourse. As such, this discussion serves as a prelude that offers cultural translations of both public history and *selapak* (an ancient Khmer word derived from Sanskrit, meaning 'art'), first through an overview of historical studies' place within Cambodian culture and history, primary resources for historical research in Cambodia, and the specific challenges of the Cambodian education system that illustrate why the field of public history must not be limited to its development within academia. This is followed by an analysis that distinguishes *selapak* from the international framework of 'art' and the identity of *silpakar* (artist) from Euro-American conceptualisations of the 'artist.' A profile of the *silpakar* in contemporary Cambodia is

subsequently formed in tandem with a description of the conditions that distinguish the post-genocide revitalisation of Cambodian arts as a community-oriented public history movement. This discussion is framed utilising a 1917 colonial survey of Khmer artisans and artisanal practices of the Cambodian countryside, a source that is held in the National Archives of Cambodia and are unavailable via digital access. As consultation with the original documents was impossible at the time of this research due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ingrid Muan's PhD dissertation submitted to Columbia University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in 2001 is referenced for all aspects related to the survey. Her analysis of the survey enriches the primary resource and is the element that provides a basis for this chapter's contextualisation of the Cambodian artist, or *silpakar*, as a 'public historian.' Finally, the chapter concludes by noting the foundational reasons for employing camera media (both film and photography) as the focal point for the remainder of the thesis.

Historical Background

It is a common misconception within the Western public history movement that public history was intended to be a clean break from traditional historical practices or an attempt to reinvent the wheel.¹ The position some historians take however, is that public history in the West has existed for hundreds of years; Paul Knevel cites 15th century Italian humanists Bruni and Guicciardini, as the first 'modern' European public historians who used

¹ Thomas Cauvin, 'New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History,' *magazén* 2, no. 1 (June 2021): pp. 12-44, [New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History \(unive.it\)](#), 29-32.

'history to show their fellow burghers important civic duties and the merits of the city-state they were living in.'² Regardless of one's position on classifying Bruni and Guicciardini as public historians, Knevel convincingly articulates that public history, though a new field, is configured from old, and thus far, primarily Western practices, wherein qualitative research is dominated by language and the written word. Knevel's point also underscores the conflicting truth —as far as this thesis goes— that the field of public history was created in response to Western circumstances, namely, the professionalisation of history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which resulted in a need to re-examine the history-making process in many Western countries.³ To summarise, academia's monopolisation over the historical profession had irrevocably altered and narrowed the modes of history's dissemination, and in turn, the seemingly inherent connection that had long existed between historical practices and the public sphere was all but apparent. In this sense, the movement of public history that emerged in the 1970s beginning with the United States was, in the purest sense, nothing more and nothing less, than an effort to reunite the practice of history with its public and civic sensibilities in a way that was responsive to and could be made amendable depending upon, cultural circumstances and the contemporary needs of societies specific to the West.

As shall become clear over the course of this chapter's discussion, the study of history and the need for its reconfiguration into 'public history' in Cambodia take on

² Paul Knevel, 'Public History: The European Reception of an American Idea?,' *Levend Erfgoed: Vakblad Voor Public Folklore & Public History* 6, no. 2 (2009): pp. 4-8, [LE_0209_los.pdf \(albertvanderzeijden.nl\)](#), 7.

³ Cauvin, 'New Field, Old Practices,' *magazén*, 29.

different forms and characteristics than the above description of the Western countries that initiated and became involved with, the 21st century international public history movement in its beginning stages. In fact, a cultural lineage of historical studies (in the Euro-American sense of the concept) in Cambodia does not exist, and no individual Khmer ‘historians’ emerged until the 20th century. In the prosaic words of Rithy Panh, ‘everything’s uncertain in the rich earth of the rice fields, where bones can bleach white in a year. For such peasants as those, there was no civil status and no history; there was nothing but the tallying of hours and animals.’⁴ When it comes to reconstructing a ‘Cambodian’ history from before the Angkorean period (roughly 802-1431 C.E.) until the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1863, *selapak* is a primary resource for historical studies, mainly in the form of temples, statues, poetry, traditional performing arts, and architectural bas-reliefs⁵ that read almost like film stills and photographic sequences. The 13th century Jayavarman VII era (1181-1220 C.E.) bas-reliefs at the Bayon and at Banteay Chhmar (Figure 3.1 and 3.2) are particularly noteworthy examples, for rather than following the usual canon of depicting scenes from literary works like the *Ramayana*, they illustrate everyday domestic life and narrate historical events, including religious processions and battles between the Khmer, Cham, and Siamese kingdoms, thus offering historical insight into everyday life during Angkor— an aspect that is absent in *aksa* (writing or script) sources.⁶

⁴ Rithy Panh and Christophe Bataille, *The Elimination: A Survivor of the Khmer Rouge Confronts His Past and the Commandant of the Killing Fields*, trans. John Cullen (New York, NY: Other Press, 2012), 58.

⁵ David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 2008), 36-9, 74.

⁶ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 79.



Figure 3.1: Lakshmi Sharath, 'Detail of a bas relief at the Bayon Temple, Angkor, Siem Reap depicting scenes of everyday life,' *Travel with Lakshmi*, accessed December 24, 2021.



Figure 3.2: Mike Aquino, 'Detail of a bas relief depicting Cham soldiers retreating from Khmer army at the Banteay Chhmar Temple in Thma Puok District in Banteay Meanchey,' *Southeast Asia Time Traveler*, 2017.



Figure 3.3: 'Nagara Vatta Newspaper dated 2 February 1937,' accessed December 24, 2021. Image sourced from SCRBD.

In addition, there are a few shortcomings associated with an historical approach that primarily relies on *aksa* to construct a history of Cambodia. Written records are limited to Khmer royal chronicles, meticulously dated temple inscriptions, legal codes, religious texts, poetry in Khmer and Sanskrit, Khmer and Theravada Buddhist versions of the epics the *Ramayana* and the *Reamker* (the Cambodian epic based on the *Ramayana*).⁷ Moreover,

⁷ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 36-9.

textual records produced by Khmers such as those from the Angkorean period, were productions of the royal and elite classes; therefore these sources present a skewed perspective of Cambodian society that entirely omits the rural population from the historical record.⁸ A written record known to provide the most detail about everyday life at Angkor comes not from indigenous Khmer *aksa*, but rather from the memoir of Chinese envoy, Zhou Daguan, who visited Cambodia for several months in 1296-7.⁹ Interestingly, historian David Chandler uses the analogy of a newsreel, or a home video to describe Zhou's account of Angkor, explaining how our historical 'appetites are whetted for the feature film [Zhou] might have made had he known (or cared) about the gaps that have persisted ever since in the historical record.'¹⁰ For historical insight into the rural, middle class, and peasant populations, these gaps in the *aksa* are better described as voids, which did not begin to be filled until the 20th century. In 1917 for instance, George Groslier¹¹ began to document how the Cambodian arts were being practiced by rural artisans,¹² and in 1925 the assassination of French *Résident* of Kompong Chhnang, Félix Louis Bardez, marked the peasant class's

⁸ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 36.

⁹ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 83.

¹⁰ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 83.

¹¹ George Groslier was a 'state scholar,' historian, ethnographer, architect, photographer, artist, curator, and the first French person born in Cambodia. He is best known for his research on Khmer arts and antiquities, in addition to designing and founding the Ecole des arts cambodgiens (School of Cambodian Arts) and the Musée Albert Sarraut (known today as the National Museum of Cambodia). He also served as the director of the Museum for nearly three decades. Ingrid Muan cites Groslier's research as having 'provided the intellectual bases on which definitions of art and artistic identity- as well as institutional structures in which to develop and maintain such definitions – were constructed for colonial Cambodia.' Ingrid Muan, 'Citing Angkor: The "Cambodian Arts" in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000,' (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2001), 19.

¹² Ingrid Muan, 'Citing Angkor: The "Cambodian Arts" in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000,' (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2001).

entrance into the historical record.¹³ Of course, the obvious issue is, these accounts reflect the strong biases of Cambodia's French overseers. In summary, historical discourse remained predominantly one-sided from the French perspective until 1936, when the *Nagara Vatta* (Angkor Wat), the first Khmer language newspaper (Figure 3.3), was founded and served as one of the main facilitators of 'Cambodian self-awareness.'¹⁴

This self-awareness was limited to Cambodia's 'new elite,' concentrated in Phnom Penh who had made it at least part way through the French education system, which prioritised literacy and included the study of history.¹⁵ For Cambodia's rural (and majority) population, literacy was almost exclusively tied to the study of religious texts, whilst education remained under the auspice of the *sangha* from the Angkorean era well into the period of the French Protectorate. As such, education took place in *wats*, teaching was done by Buddhist monks (or male volunteers who were members of the *sangha*)¹⁶ (Figures 3.4 and 3.5), and the opportunity to learn was exclusively for boys. Based on 18th and 19th century accounts analysed by Peter Gyallay-Pap, the *wat* education was measured by the moral knowledge it instilled within students; the curriculum included 'reading and writing in Khmer, principles of Buddhism, rules of propriety, some arithmetic, and various manual arts,' which were modes for 'developing moral character and transmitting the cultural

¹³ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 191-194.

¹⁴ David Chandler identifies the three channels of Cambodian self-awareness that emerged in the 1930s as: Lycée Sisowath, the Institut Bouddhique, and the newspaper *Nagara Vatta*. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 199.

¹⁵ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 200.

¹⁶ Sideth S. Dy, 'Strategies and Policies for Basic Education in Cambodia: Historical Perspectives,' *International Education Journal* 5, no. 1 (2004): pp. 90-97, [Microsoft Word - v5n1.doc \(ed.gov\)](#), 92.

heritage.¹⁷ Mainly rooted in oral culture that was tasked with upholding traditional values and instilling morality within students, fostering literacy was not necessarily the priority of the indigenous education system. Instead, religious texts were learned through recitation and memorisation; some researchers even suggest that despite reading and writing in Khmer being included in the curriculum, 'illiteracy was widespread,'¹⁸ among the boys who attended *wat* schools. Furthermore, Judy Ledgerwood points out that 'while the body of Buddhist religious literature is extensive, unless a man remained in the monkhood beyond the brief stay common to most young men, his exposure [was] limited to the memorization of a few oft-repeated prayers.'¹⁹ In short, the indigenous education system and the (lack of) emphasis placed on literacy skills neither served as means for students of the *wat* schools to study and record history, nor are they ideal benchmarks for gauging how different levels and facets of Cambodian society engaged with their history and cultural heritage on a daily basis.

¹⁷ Peter Gyallay-Pap, 'Reclaiming a Shattered Past: Education for the Displaced Khmer in Thailand,' *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2, no. 2 (1989): pp. 257-275, [Reclaiming a Shattered Past: Education for the Displaced Khmer in Thailand | Journal of Refugee Studies | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#), 258.

¹⁸ Jacques Nepote and Khing Hoc Dy, 'Literature and Society in Modern Cambodia,' in *Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political and Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Tham Seung Chee (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981), pp. 56-81.

English translated quote provided in Thomas Clayton, 'Restriction or Resistance? French Colonial Educational Development in Cambodia,' *Education, Policy, and Analysis Archives*, December 1, 1995, pp. 1-14, [pkpadmin,+vol3i19 \(4\).pdf](#), 2.

¹⁹ Judy Ledgerwood, 'Cambodian Literature,' Department of Anthropology (Northern Illinois University), accessed August 5, 2021, [Cambodian Literature \(niu.edu\)](#).

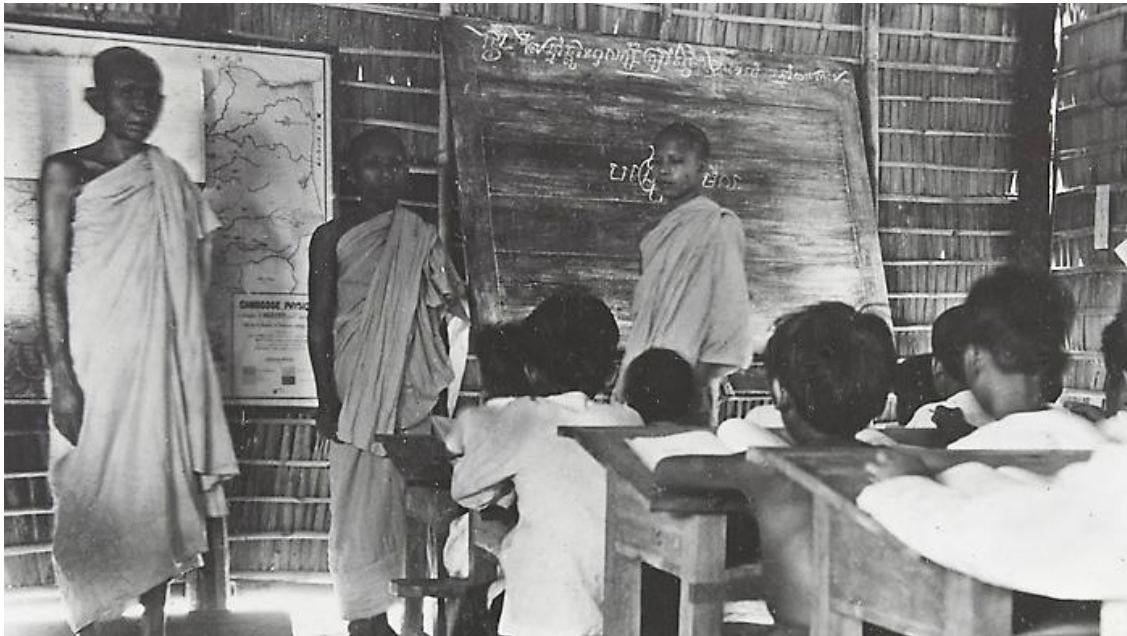


Figure 3.4 'A school session in Phnom Penh,' accessed May 24, 2022. Image sourced from Hong Kong Free Press.



Figure 3.5 'School examination in Phnom Penh,' accessed May 24, 2022. Image sourced from Hong Kong Free Press.

Thus, for a more inclusive understanding (particularly one that is not elitist, gender exclusive, or limited to the age group that attended *wat* school) of how history and cultural heritage were historically transmitted within communities, *selapak* —particularly *Ikhaon* (theatre, performance)- and the oral traditions of Khmer *aksarsastra* (literature), must not be underestimated as potential primary resources and foundations for a grassroots public history. It is also more fruitful to re-channel emphasis placed on written literacy and instead configure Cambodian culture as one that is highly visually literate.²⁰ For example, while most Khmer would not have been literate in the sense of the written word, they would have learned and come to know classical literary works such as the *Reamker* by attending village festivals, the monastery theatre, and celebrations in which professional storytellers were called to give performances of the text. These storytellers set *aksarsastra* to memory from *sleuk rith* (palm leaf) manuscripts (Figure 3.6) and then travelled around, performing at community events. Other examples of literary forms that were memorised and passed through *Ikhaon* and oral traditions from one generation to the next are *Reung Preng* (folktales) and *chbap* (didactic codes that provided advice for daily living, composed in verses, and meant to be chanted). Although some of the more popular folk tales were

²⁰ In 1969, the founder of the international Visual Literacy Association, John Debes, summarised visual literacy as: ‘...a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication.’ ‘What Is Visual Literacy?’, *Visual Literacy Today*, accessed December 24, 2021, [What is Visual Literacy? – Visual Literacy Today](#).

written on *sleuk rith* as early as the 15th century, most remained unwritten until the 20th century.²¹



Figure 3.6: Taking Rinith, 'A sleuk rith manuscript bearing sacred Buddhist text at Manuscripts du Cambodge (FEMC), *Khmer Times*, June 7, 2019.

Aside from taking into account how Cambodian and Euro-American historical studies differentiate in terms of primary sources and formal historical practices, contextualising 'public history' as an outgrowth of institutionalised education- as it commonly is in the Euro-American framework- is problematic because 'from an historical point of view, education in Cambodia [has been] characterised by a sequence of ruptures,'²² since the 1920s when the French Protectorate devised a series of reform initiatives. Despite

²¹ Ledgerwood, 'Cambodian Literature,' Northern Illinois University.

²² Jean-Michel Filippi, 'Cambodia's Turbulent Educational History,' *The Phnom Penh Post*, June 17, 2011, [Cambodia's turbulent educational history | Phnom Penh Post](#).

France exercising control in Cambodia since 1863, French investment in the Cambodian education system remained minimal and ineffective until more than 6 decades into their rule. This meant that until the 1920s, the Buddhist style of education in Cambodia had essentially remained unchanged since the 13th century.²³ It may be surmised that lack of involvement by the French was a conscious strategy to consolidate and maintain power;²⁴ according to Penny Edwards, this speculation is supported by the fact that ‘throughout the Protectorate, attempts to reform education were tempered by the concern that, while Buddhist education was unscientific and thus incapable of training Cambodians to participate fully in the colonial economy, it was in the temples that Cambodians acquired the “piety” and “honesty” widely attributed to them in colonial accounts.’²⁵ At the same time France decided to take a more active role and invest in reforming Cambodia’s education system —as they had already done in Vietnam, where the French-style scientific study of history was designed and implemented to emphasize ‘the reality of Indochina, its history, structure, and services’²⁶— many rural areas in Cambodia actively opposed and resisted French education reform by continuing to send their sons to traditional *wat* schools.²⁷ Despite this resistance, the French managed to integrate elements of the French schooling system into the traditional Cambodian *wat* education structure to some degree

²³ This is the opinion of numerous scholars from David Chandler and Ben Kiernan, to Penny Edwards and Sideth Dy. Sideth S. Dy, ‘Strategies and Policies for Basic Education in Cambodia: Historical Perspectives,’ *International Education Journal* 5, no. 1 (2004): pp. 90-97, [Microsoft Word - v5n1.doc \(ed.gov\)](#), 92.

²⁴ Dy, ‘Strategies and Policies,’ *International Education Journal*, 92.

²⁵ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation; 1850-1945* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 177.

²⁶ Christopher E. Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina* (Copenhagen, DK: NIAS Publishing, 2012), 36.

²⁷ Clayton, ‘Restriction or Resistance?’ *Education, Policy, and Analysis Archives*, 1-2.

by the 1930s through a number of reform initiatives including access to education for girls, establishing *écoles d'application* to train monks in the French methods of education, printing new Khmer language school manuals, and devising ways to encourage enrolment in the renovated pagoda schools that began to appear in 1931.²⁸ By 1935, 500 'modern' *wat* schools had been established throughout the country,²⁹ and in 1939, there were a total of 908.³⁰

During the Japanese occupation of Cambodia in the Second World War, the French both increased their hold on provincial education and attempted to accelerate their efforts of integrating their 'modern' education strategies with Cambodian traditions in hopes of gaining the loyalty of Khmers.³¹ Ironically, the privileged, elite Cambodian secondary school students attending French-style *écoles* (with a curriculum that included history) were learning about 'the history and grandeur of France's Third Republic,' whilst 'witnessing first-hand the deterioration, and humiliation, of French sovereignty throughout Indochina.'³² Another noteworthy irony of the legacy of Japan's occupation in Cambodia was the emergence of a Cambodian nationalist movement that drew on the glory of Angkor, a construct that had originally been imagined by French historians.³³

²⁸ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 178.

²⁹ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 179.

³⁰ Clayton, 'Restriction or Resistance?' *Education, Policy, and Analysis Archives*, 10.

³¹ David M. Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis: Education, Development, and the State in Cambodia, 1953-1998* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 26.

³² Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 26.

³³ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 26.



Figure 3.7: Howard Sochurek (Time & Life Pictures/ Getty), King Norodom Sihanouk, *The Guardian*, accessed December 29, 2021.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk (Figure 3.7) laid claim upon this nationalist movement and used it to propel further changes to the education system when Cambodia gained independence in 1953. Sihanouk, who was still attending high school at a French lycée in southern Vietnam when he was initially crowned King of Cambodia in 1941, saw Cambodia's independence as an opportunity to build 'a prosperous nation-state through educational development.'³⁴ The colonial era education reforms served as stepping stones for Sihanouk's post-independence priorities, which were to make primary education compulsory for all, increase educational opportunities from primary education all the way to the university level, and address the widespread illiteracy among the adult rural

³⁴ Dy, 'Strategies and Policies,' *International Education Journal*, 94.

population.³⁵ In the first volume of *The Encyclopedia of Education* published in 1971, the state of Cambodian education up to 1950 was compared to what Sihanouk was (and was not) able to accomplish from Cambodia's independence until the end of the 1960s:

'By the late 1960s, more than one million children enrolled in primary education as compared with about 0.6 million in 1960 and 0.13 in 1950. From 1950 to 1965 the number of females enrolled at the primary level grew from 9 per cent to 39 per cent. The number of teachers and schools has expanded commensurately from 1950 to 1964. Although primary enrolment rate increased, the illiteracy rate was estimated 50 per cent in 1953 for a population of 3.7 million and at 55 per cent for a population of 6.2 in 1966.'³⁶

In addition to enrolment increases at the primary school level, the Royal University of Phnom Penh underwent an expansion and Takeo-Kampot and Battambang universities were built.³⁷ By 1966, 7,360 students were enrolled in Cambodia's universities.³⁸ In as early as 1964 however, it became apparent that tertiary enrolment numbers were inflated whilst the rapid expansion of institutions without the proper infrastructure had become indicative of a situation wherein 'educational demand outweighed supply'.³⁹

'Cambodia found itself faced with too many pupils and students in crowded schools, taught by too few teachers who were inadequately prepared for their task. They used teaching approaches and methods which were copied from schools in France and which were intended to impart knowledge necessary for administrative assistants to French colonial civil servants.'⁴⁰

³⁵ Dy, 'Strategies and Policies,' *International Education Journal*, 94.

³⁶ Lee C. Deighton, ed., 'Cambodia,' in *The Encyclopedia of Education*, vol. 1 (Creswell-Collier Educational Corporation, 1971), pp. 578-584, 579.

³⁷ Filippi, 'Cambodia's Turbulent Educational History,' *The Phnom Penh Post*.

³⁸ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 50.

³⁹ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 39.

⁴⁰ Hans Cornelis Blaise, 'The Strategy and Process of Institution Building: A Case Study in Cambodia,' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1964), p. 107. Excerpt quoted from David M. Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis: Education, Development, and the State in Cambodia, 1953-1998* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 38.

The hasty institutional expansion, blind application of a colonial system that was inconducive to the socioeconomic needs of a newly independent Cambodia, and the publics' growing attraction to pursuing higher education, were directly linked to the popular belief that education was the portal to modernity and rapid upward social mobility that would lead degree holders to modern, lucrative careers in the civil service sector. To borrow Jean-Claude Pomonti's and Serge Thion's observation, 'Cet... [a] frapp[é] l'entreprise agricole d'insécurité et [a] pouss[é] les paysans à donner à leurs fils une éducation qui leur permet d'entrer dans l'administration...'⁴¹ In short, both the 'modern' French-style curriculum and the traditional foundations of the education system were in fact not only inconducive, but paradoxical to the socioeconomic needs of the country. For instance, 80 percent of the economy was still supported by agriculture, yet more and more peasants were abandoning a life of farming to pursue an education in the hopes of entering society's middle class as civil servants, a sector that had quickly reached its maximum capacity by the early 1960s.⁴² It is also worth noting, that apart from the Royal University of Fine Arts, there was a general absence of art institutions, which leaves room to speculate whether the educational crisis could have been countered to some degree had the state invested in sponsoring formal artistic training.⁴³

⁴¹ Jean-Claude Pomonti and Serge Thion, *Des Courtisanes Aux Partisans: Essai Sur La Crise Cambodgienne* (Gallimard, 1971), 34.

⁴² Filippi, 'Cambodia's Turbulent Educational History,' *The Phnom Penh Post*.

⁴³ There was also the School of Cambodian Arts est. 1917, but it did not become a degree conferring university until 1965.

Because Cambodia's educational crisis was reflective of its status as a developing nation and essentially, a contemporaneous inversion of the Euro-American university crisis of having too many historians and too few academic positions (which led to the formation of the public history field in the West), there is little use in drawing any comparison between the two events. In addition, the trajectory of Cambodia's educational crisis was interrupted by the diplomatic *coup d'état* of Prince Sihanouk by General Lon Nol in March 1970, an event that subsequently unleashed civil war and drew Cambodia into the Vietnam War. Although it was the DK regime that was ultimately responsible for the complete decimation of Cambodia's education system, the Sihanouk, Lon Nol, and Khmer Rouge regimes all engaged in the same destructive practices of employing education reform as a vehicle to assert legitimacy as well as a battleground to gain the loyalty of the people.⁴⁴ In fact, during the height of Sihanouk's use of education to shape a nationalist ideology and rapid modernization, the teaching profession became a front for subversive communist activities for several future high ranking CPK members, including Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), Ieng Sary, and their wives, Khieu Ponnary and Khieu Thirith, as well as Son Sen and Khieu Samphan.⁴⁵ Other communists also became teachers after being unable to attain employment in the civil service.⁴⁶ Rather than explicitly disclosing their political positions however, these communist teachers subtly conveyed messages of government corruption and social inequality in their lessons by acting as models of behavior for their students.⁴⁷ On the

⁴⁴ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 32-3

⁴⁵ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 60-2.

⁴⁶ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 61.

⁴⁷ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 43.

receiving end of such tutelage were vulnerable young students who were uniquely positioned to experience and witness the divides between the rich and poor, whilst facing the reality that despite succeeding in the institutionalized education that emblemized the cracked veneer of the country's modernity, they would likely be denied a place in helping to build Sihanouk's modern Cambodia.⁴⁸

Then, under Lon Nol, national education became at once an ideological and a literal battleground between the Khmer Republic and the Khmer Rouge. Despite both sides attempting to 'win the hearts and minds' of students by promising different strategies to achieve (but both failed to deliver upon) 'equity, access, relevance, and qualitative improvements,' education reform never manifested during this period and instead remained in the confines of 'inflated rhetoric.'⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the existing education system began to rapidly deteriorate as a result of the civil war. A combination of cuts made to educational funding by the Lon Nol government, the Khmer Rouge gaining control of parts of the countryside, and the United States' devastating bombing campaign, meant that many schools in rural Cambodia were either destroyed or forced to close by 1972. Subsequently, any school buildings left standing were taken over by Khmer Rouge and Khmer Republic soldiers and converted into barracks, prisons, and munitions warehouses.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 62.

⁴⁹ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 68.

⁵⁰ David M. Ayres, 'The Khmer Rouge and Education: Beyond the Discourse of Destruction,' *History of Education* 28, no. 2 (1999): pp. 205-218, [The Khmer Rouge and education: beyond the discourse of destruction: History of Education: Vol 28, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](#), 206.

As the bombing by the United States continued into 1973, refugees from the affected rural provinces flooded into Phnom Penh, whilst many former teachers left their posts to join the ranks of the Khmer Rouge.⁵¹ Meanwhile the education system in the 'liberated zones' (the areas under the control of the Khmer Rouge) varied depending on the beliefs of those who were in charge of the regions, but generally followed the process of dismantling the existing education system and replacing it with schools that 'boasted a curriculum dealing with revolutionary discipline, social classes in Cambodian society, revolutionary hate, and collectivism.'⁵² This education was exclusively for Khmer Rouge cadre, who upon graduating, were assigned 'educative roles' designed to raise 'class-consciousness' among the peasants in the villages that were being liberated.⁵³ Transversely in Phnom Penh, the covert operations of communist teachers and the student protests that had begun under Sihanouk's rule (in response to the inadequacies of modern education and government treatment of students), culminated into a movement of teachers and students rejecting the Khmer Republic regime and fleeing Phnom Penh to join the revolutionaries in the liberated zones.⁵⁴ In the few months leading up to the fall of Phnom Penh in April 1975, the Khmer Rouge were firing Chinese-made rockets into the city on a daily basis.⁵⁵ Any schools that had managed to remain in operation throughout nearly 5 years of civil war, closed in response to one of the rockets striking a classroom of the primary school, Ecole

⁵¹ Dy, 'Strategies and Policies,' *International Education Journal*, 95.

⁵² Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 86.

⁵³ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 86.

⁵⁴ Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 91.

⁵⁵ 'Rocket Kills 14 Children In Cambodian Classroom,' *The New York Times*, February 7, 1975, p. 2, [Rocket Kills 14 Children In Cambodian Classroom - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/1975/02/07/us/rocket-kills-14-children-in-cambodian-classroom.html).

Wat Phnom, on the 6th of February, which killed 14 children and left 25 more wounded (Figure 3.8).⁵⁶ When DK seized power just 10 weeks later, the CPK's priority to dismantle the French-influenced education system bolstered by the old regimes, was essentially complete.



Figure 3.8: 'Cambodia School Attacked 1975, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. A Cambodian child screams in pain while being led from a schoolhouse in Phnom Penh after a Khmer Rouge rocket attack. The rocket exploded in a tree shading private elementary school and the force of the blast sent a lethal shower of jagged metal, construction material and glass through a classroom beneath the tree. Police said nine children were killed and more than 30 were wounded,' *Shutterstock*, accessed December 29, 2021.

The lengths DK went to in order to eliminate the remnants of French colonial influence within the country's pre-revolutionary educational infrastructure is often misconstrued in historiography as an abolishment of all forms of schooling and education

⁵⁶ 'Rocket Kills 14 Children in Cambodian Classroom,' *The New York Times*.

under the regime— a myth that is easily supported by the transformation of the lycée, Chau Ponhea Yat, into S-21 (Tuol Sleng), the National Archives' transformation into a literal pigsty, and the targeted killings of the educated, the intellectuals, former teachers, and eventually even the CPK's own secretary of state for education.⁵⁷ However, a Ministry of Education did exist under DK,⁵⁸ as did a haphazardly assembled education system used to cultivate revolutionary ideology and indoctrinate children. In the regime's Four Year Plan, released in 1976, there was also a plan to implement a national education system which CPK leaders believed could support the Party's priorities to combat illiteracy and build 'socialism in the specific bases, especially the cooperatives, factories, and military units.'⁵⁹ Included in the planned curriculum was the teaching of history, specifically a history of 'the revolutionary struggle of the people, the revolutionary struggle for the nation, the revolutionary struggle for democracy, the revolutionary struggle for socialist revolution, and the struggle to build socialism.'⁶⁰ Had such an education system been implemented, it would have been limited to people chosen by the Party based on whether their backgrounds 'adhere[d] to the revolutionary movement and [whether they had] the quality to grasp the

⁵⁷ The secretary of state for education was Chau Seng, who was interrogated, tortured, and murdered at S-21. Others who shared that fate include DK minister of information Hu Nim, and former teacher and CPK secretary of the North, Koy Thuon. Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, 108.

⁵⁸ Ayres, 'The Khmer Rouge and Education,' *History of Education*.

⁵⁹ The Four-Year Plan was originally written in Khmer and was composed between March and August 1976 but was never published. The Communist Party of Kampuchea, 'Document 3: The Party's Four -Year Plan to Build Socialism in All Fields, Part III: The Fields of Culture, Literature, Art, Technology, Science, Education of the People, Propaganda and Information,' in *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976-1977*, trans. and eds. David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1988), pp. 113-115, 113-4.

⁶⁰ The Communist Party of Kampuchea, 'Document 3,' in *Pol Pot Plans the Future*, 113-4.

Party's educational line...'⁶¹ These plans failed to materialise. As such, a more comprehensive summary of education under DK is, the Party's socioeconomic plans for attaining self-reliance, its preoccupation with eliminating internal enemies, and resolute determination to abolish dissent, took precedence over social development via educational reform. In turn, the consequences of human loss under the regime, which according to statistics gathered by the PRK's Ministry of Education in 1984 culminated into 75% of teachers, 96% of higher education students and 67% of primary and secondary school pupils being murdered by the regime,⁶² came to overshadow the historical patterns of destruction within institutionalised education over the course of the colonial era and 3 state regimes and how they collectively led to a decimated system by the time DK fell in 1979.

The series of educational ruptures continues to reverberate in Cambodia's contemporary education system, which highlights the issue of depending on academic institutions to foster public history. To reiterate, traditional, pre-colonial education under the auspice of the *sangha* was not a venue for the teaching and practice of 'history' and 'historical research.' Then, upon the French Protectorate's introduction of a history curriculum, the study of history at once became an effective instrument for imposing state ideology and asserting political legitimacy utilised by all regimes from Cambodian independence up to the present day. With Cambodian academia continually monopolised

⁶¹ The Communist Party of Kampuchea, 'Document 3,' in *Pol Pot Plans the Future*, 114.

⁶² Some scholars speculate that these statistics, which came from the People's Republic of Kampuchea Ministry of Education, are exaggerated, however this research does not take a position on this, for regardless, the loss of human life and devastation of infrastructures was too immense to be measurable.

by politics, any implementation of a public history curriculum would result in ‘accenting a narrow, vision of the [public] historian that is limited to,’ researchers or university professors whose practices may be tarnished by political agendas.⁶³

Ultimately, configuring public history in Cambodia cannot be done without taking into consideration how, after the fall of DK, the issue of political regimes steering the agendas of academic institutions was subsequently compounded by the Khmer Rouge having completely devastated every facet of the nation’s social, religious, and political structures including the education system. As Chapter 2 already highlighted, a combination of staggering human loss and the destruction of infrastructures meant all levels of formal education within the country were essentially non-existent until the 1990s. And, from 1979 until the re-opening of the University of Phnom Penh, which happened against incredible odds in 1993,⁶⁴ the facilitation of tertiary education was predominantly dependent on funding from the Soviet Union (until 1989) and the assistance of both Soviet and Vietnamese professors in preparing Cambodians to attend schools in Vietnam and Eastern bloc countries.⁶⁵ The DK legacy of nearly total destruction of education persists today in the

⁶³ Ronald J. Grele, ‘Whose Public? Whose History? What Is the Goal of a Public Historian?’, *The Public Historian* 3, no. 1 (1981): pp. 40-48, [Whose Public? Whose History? What Is the Goal of a Public Historian? | The Public Historian | University of California Press \(ucpress.edu\)](#), 41.

⁶⁴ Luigi Tomasi, ‘The History of Sociology in Cambodia: Why Sociology Was Introduced In Pol Pot’s Former Country,’ *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, no. 1 (2000): pp. 153-169, [The History of Sociology in Cambodia: Why Sociology was Introduced in Pol Pot’s Former Country in: Asian Journal of Social Science Volume 28 Issue 1 \(2000\) \(brill.com\)](#), 162.

⁶⁵ See Chapter 2’s section ‘Archives, Education, and Outreach,’ and Saori Hagai et al., ‘Ideologies Inside Textbooks: Vietnamization and Re-Khmerization of Political Education in Cambodia during the 1980s,’ in *(Re)Constructing Memory: Education, Identity, and Conflict*, ed. Michelle J. Bellino and James H. Williams (Rotterdam, NL: Sense, 2017), pp. 49-73, 55.

guise of a shaky and limiting higher education infrastructure and a public education system infected with corruption down to the primary school classroom level, wherein poorly paid teachers accept 'tips' from their students in exchange for better marks on exams or extra tutoring time.⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, those who are most affected by the system continue to be the rural communities and urban youth from disadvantaged demographics, which comprise around 30% of the nation's population.⁶⁷ Whilst about 10% of these children do not have access to education at all,⁶⁸ most do not attend school on a regular basis. From institutional politics and corruption, to knowledge level and compromised teacher ethics, there was understandably a lack of faith and a certain amount of distrust that had developed 'towards state-sponsored educational institutions.'⁶⁹ This atmosphere, along with the limited options for institutional artistic training within Cambodia, prompted a certain group of *silpakar* known as *silpakar damnoep* (modern artist who does not have formal or institutional training), to become increasingly admired at the community level.

This begs the question, under such devastating circumstances that have far-reaching and long-term consequences, should not grassroots contributions to historiography and memory transmission taking place within Cambodia be, at the *very least*, considered of equal potential value as those contributions made by privileged academic historians

⁶⁶ Sebastian Strangio, *Hun Sen's Cambodia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 145-6.

⁶⁷ 'Children of Cambodia,' *Humanium*, April 3, 2019, [Children of Cambodia - Humanium](#).

⁶⁸ Jennifer Philipp, 'Improving Education for Children in Cambodia,' The Borgen Project, accessed December 23, 2021, [Improving Education for Children in Cambodia - The Borgen Project](#).

⁶⁹ Pamela Nguyen Corey, 'The Artist in the City: Contemporary Art as Urban Intervention in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and Phnom Penh, Cambodia,' (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2015), 156-7.

studying the Khmer Rouge within universities and the education systems of other countries? And what of engaging with, advocating for, and educating the publics that were and still are, directly affected by the genocide— tasks that go beyond historical research and are most meaningfully undertaken outside an ivory tower system, specifically within local communities? In the wake of genocide, traditional historical research that simply contextualises events past, remains ignorant of the social agency occurring at the community level, and fails to manifest in alternative forms (such as facilitating societal development, cultural and institutional rebuilding, trauma recovery, memory preservation and transmission, social activism, or restorative justice) is inadequate; history must somehow grasp what remains the most sensitive aspect of the history of the Cambodian genocide, which is... ‘the Khmer Rouge is NOT about the past... How can it be about the past, when we have at least five million survivors of the Khmer Rouge [who] are still alive today?’⁷⁰

From *Selapak* to Public History

A principal reason for choosing to examine public history from the vantage points of ‘the revitalisation of Cambodian arts’ (from the 1990s to the present day) and the contemporary Cambodian *silpakar* is that the characteristics synonymous with public history and *selapak* are deeply rooted in cultural practices that neither begin nor end with

⁷⁰ Youk Chhang quoted by Sopheng Cheang, in ‘Altered Photos of Cambodian Torture Victims Stir Controversy,’ *Associated Press*, April 12, 2021, [Altered photos of Cambodian torture victims stir controversy | AP News](#).

the history and historicization of the Khmer Rouge. Instead, the tradition of *selapak* and the role of the *silpakar* have been made further significant by the societal need to reconfigure history as a *transitive verb* and the historian as an actionable and viable public resource in post-genocide communities. And, as mentioned earlier, *selapak* is a valuable primary resource in the study of Cambodian history as it provides insight into historical inquiries that cannot be attained through the study of *aksa*. More substantially however, *selapak* serves as a basis for understanding Cambodia's visual language and history as a visually literate culture. As such, the 'revitalisation of the Cambodian arts' offers insight into the long-existing, community-based practices, and culturally specific traditions that comprise the framework of the collective memory.

If the emergence of public history in Cambodia is placed on a trajectory of cause and effect, as it often is in a Euro-American context wherein the professionalisation of history was the cause of a 'public history movement' and the formation of a 'new field based on old practices'⁷¹ of civic sensibilities, then logically, the Cambodian arts assuming the responsibilities of historical research, production, and dissemination after DK may be perceived as a direct effect of the genocide. Equally important was the way in which the 'revitalisation of the Cambodian arts' became a platform for community-driven historical dialogue that was independent of the same state influence and political motivations that oversaw the nation education system.

⁷¹ Cauvin, 'New Field, Old Practices,' *magazén*, 14.

A definition from the 1974 high school textbook, *Areythoar Khmer (Khmer Civilization)* (Figure 3.7), is a useful point of reference for orienting the discussion. ‘Art,’ or *silpah*- more commonly transcribed as *selapak*:

‘means any kind of work or skill that is made by hand and that is *artful* [*dael mǎn silp*], which is to say, which makes people feel desirous and interested, and want to look and want to listen. Art has a very broad meaning, and there are many kinds of art ...’⁷²



Figure 3.9: Cover of *Areythoar Khmer (Khmer Civilization)*, 1974 high school textbook, 3rd edition, by Mrs. Troeung Ngea, *LuxNews*, March 11, 2014.

⁷² Original text: Troeung Ngea, *Areythoar Khmer (Khmer Civilization)*, 3rd ed., school textbook, 1974, 71. Translated from Khmer to English by Roger Nelson, in ‘Terminologies of “Modern” and “Contemporary” “Art” in Southeast Asia’s Vernacular Languages: Khmer,’ *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia 2*, no. 2 (October 2018): pp. 177-185, [Project MUSE - Terminologies of "Modern" and "Contemporary" "Art" in Southeast Asia's Vernacular Languages: Indonesian, Javanese, Khmer, Lao, Malay, Myanmar/Burmese, Tagalog/Filipino, Thai and Vietnamese \(jhu.edu\)](https://www.projectmuse.com/doc/terminologies-of-modern-and-contemporary-art-in-southeast-asias-vernacular-languages-indonesian-javanese-khmer-lao-malay-myanmar-burmese-tagalog/filipino-thai-and-vietnamese/), 178.

This description provides the basis for translating the rich, localised concept of *selapak*, the historically multidimensional identity of the *silpakar*, and the way in which the two evolved together in response to the needs of Cambodia's post-genocide society. The terms 'public history,' 'public historian' and 'public history practitioner' are suggested as mediative terms for the translation task because they are considerate of the social relevancy *selapak* has in Cambodia whilst emphasising how the historical research dimensions that pulse through post-genocide Cambodian artistic practices are what distinguish the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts from the traditional framework of *selapak*. Furthermore, the idea of translating the revitalisation of Cambodian arts as a 'public history movement' is in the spirit of experimentation. When contextualised as a movement, the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts evokes an ongoing intergenerational process, a sense of plurality that matches the traditional role of the *silpakar*, and an openness to building (rather than simply applying) an all-encompassing identity that is amendable. Additionally, the subjectivity of public history allows space for the cultural processes of negotiating what foreign elements to use and how to incorporate them as long-existing local and indigenous traditions continue to be reimagined for the needs of a modern Cambodia.⁷³

Cultural translations of the concept of *selapak* and the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts as public history require an initial understanding of the degree of difference

⁷³ Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950's and 1960's* (Phnom Penh, KH: Reyum, 2001), viii.

between the Western framework of ‘art’ and identity of the ‘artist,’ and that of *selapak* and *silpakar*.⁷⁴ These distinctions are especially useful for Chapter 5, which is written with the assumption that the reader understands how ‘art’ and ‘artist’ are not used in the international sense of the terms, but instead are applied as being interchangeable with the Khmer concepts of *selapak* and *silpakar*. The decision to refrain from utilising the international frameworks for the terms ‘art’ and ‘artist,’ stem from the awareness that they are fraught with (neo)colonial implications and Euro-American projections that neither encompass all that Cambodian post-genocide arts and artists *are* and *do*, nor do they reflect the cultural complexity of the *silpakar* identity

The initial task of distinguishing *selapak* and *silpakar* from the international frameworks of ‘art’ and ‘artist’ requires turning to a 1917 colonial survey of Khmer artisans and artisanal practices of the Cambodian countryside, formulated by George Groslier and *Résident Supérieur* François Marius Baudoin⁷⁵ and carried out by *ChaufaiKhet*⁷⁶ as well as

⁷⁴ Khmer terms for ‘artist’ include: *silpakar*, សិល្បករ; *nâk silpa*, អ្នកសិល្បៈ; and *jāng silpa*, ជាងសិល្បៈ, which means ‘artisan’ or ‘art worker.’ These terms can refer to any sort of artist, from a dancer or a musician, to a sculptor, painter, architect, or literary writer. Nelson, “Terminologies of “Modern” and “Contemporary”” *Southeast of Now*, 180.

⁷⁵ François Marius Baudoin served as the *Résident supérieur*, (Resident Superior, RSC) of Cambodia between 1914-1927.

⁷⁶ *ChaufaiKhet* was the top *Cambodian* authority of a province and they reported to a French *Résident*- a provincial governor. Although it was not until 1921 that Cambodian provincial administration was definitively established under the authority of French *Résident* in a way that ‘perfectly aligned with the limits of the Residents’ jurisdiction,’ *Résident* had been ‘advising’ and ‘monitoring’ the Khmer provincial governors since 1897.

Mathieu Guérin, ‘Khmer Peasants and Land Access in Kompong Thom Province in the 1930s,’ *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43, no. 3 (October 2012): pp. 441-462, [Khmer peasants and land access in Kompong Thom Province in the 1930s | Journal of Southeast Asian Studies | Cambridge Core](#), 443.

French officials in charge of governing the provincial geographic areas.⁷⁷ The survey is of value in the context of this chapter because it details how the Euro-American and colonial conceptualisation of the ‘artist’ as a full-time creator who made work ‘with the goal of selling,’ and whose practice could be coherently, aesthetically, and categorically labelled, were dissonant with and inconducive to the Khmer cultural framework of *selapak* and identification of *silpakar*.



Figure 3.10: George Groslier, Khmer artisan making a mask for Ikhon, accessed May 24, 2022. Image sourced from Gabrielle Abbe, ‘Decadence and Revival’ in Cambodian Arts and the Role of George Groslier (1887–1945),’ in: Falser, M. (eds) *Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission. Transcultural Research – Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context*, (Springer: Switzerland, 2015).

⁷⁷ Muan notes that some of the survey documents are in Khmer and some are in French, and she provides English translations in her dissertation. When providing English translations of quotes from the survey, I cite information such as file number, collection, date, and description as detailed by Muan. National Archives of Cambodia is subsequently referred to as ‘NAC.’ The survey comes from the NAC Résident Supérieur au Cambodge collection (from here on denoted as RSC). July 13, 1917 *note postale* from the RSC to all the Résidents of Cambodia, which is accompanied by Groslier’s survey questions [#8126 (RSC)]. Also see the July 13, 1917 *note postale* in NAC#1141 (RSC) and NAC#8126 (RSC) and NAC#15200 (RSC) for survey responses. Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 38-48.

In her scholarly interpretation of the survey responses, Ingrid Muan explains that, with the exception of the elite group of artisans employed full-time by the Royal Palace (whom Groslier termed ‘privileged slaves’ because they were fed, housed, and protected by the Palace in exchange for their skills), the identity of a Khmer artist, or artisan (Figure 3.10) —particularly at the provincial village level— became such ‘only when the social milieu required it.’⁷⁸ On these irregular occasions, such as preparations for a festival, the repainting of a building, the making of clothes, or the construction of a nearby *wat*, villagers made things as artisans, but not necessarily out of a dependency to earn a living. Moreover, artisans worked less out of concern for artistic quality or aesthetic pleasure of an individual object, and more for the purpose of executing products that would have a ‘presence and use,’ within the broader community and ‘particular social context.’⁷⁹ When the community did not need their specialised labour, the artisans held other jobs that allowed them to earn livings that were compatible with the immediate needs of the community, such as farming or selling goods. Resultantly, the identities inscribed to many of the artisans in the survey did not correspond with a specialised artistic skill such as a ‘painter,’ ‘weaver,’ or ‘sculptor,’ because artisans only practiced their skillsets when they were “‘rented” to do so.’⁸⁰ This dismayed Groslier and Baudoin, who perceived the fluidity of the village-level artisan vocational identity as an abandonment of a full-time artistic ‘profession.’⁸¹ Interestingly, according to Muan’s analysis, most of the artisanal vocations were given the description of

⁷⁸ Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 38, 43.

⁷⁹ Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 43.

⁸⁰ Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 42-3.

⁸¹ Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 43.

‘hand labourer’ by *Chaufaikhet* and French officials who also frequently labelled the work of artisans in their geographic area as ‘ordinary,’ or ‘unskilled.’⁸² Another typical response regarding the skill level of provincial artisans was that they ‘knew how to make various types of things, but not so beautifully.’⁸³ Because the practices of artisans did not fit the imposed colonial framework for what constituted an ‘artist’ or artisanal vocation, the survey responses were able to be manipulated and interpreted by the French in such a way that confirmed Groslier’s belief that the Cambodian arts were being slowly abandoned and suffering from decay and decline.



Figure 3.11: Lakhon Khol Mask dance battle of Reamker. A scene fighting between Rama and Ravana performed in the courtyard of the Silver Pagoda, Phnom Penh 1900s-1920s, accessed May 24, 2022. Image sourced from Wikipedia.

Groslier’s and Baudoin’s survey, though biased to reflect their pre-determined fatalistic projection of the Cambodian arts as being in a state of abandonment, nevertheless accentuates how, in the history of Khmer culture, art production was ‘a contribution shown

⁸² Survey response dated August 24, 1917. Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 43-4.

⁸³ Response dated 24, August 1917, National Archives of Cambodia #15200, RSC collection. Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 43-4.

on the occasion of the brilliant celebrations of the community rather than the practice of a real profession.⁸⁴ Much more than that though, for the Cambodian *silpakar*, ‘working with the masses [was] the highest calling,’ and this remains the case in contemporary society.⁸⁵ It may be argued that the veneration of *silpakar* working with the masses is inherently linked to ‘the spirit of Khmer culture,’ which reveres the ‘ensemble,’ and stems from the belief that ‘the individual worker is not part of the cultural participation unless working with the masses.’⁸⁶ Historically, this translated to a hierarchy in the traditional arts wherein *Ikhaun* (traditional performing arts such as dance and theatre) (Figure 3.11), and *selapak samtaen* (a literal translation is ‘art of performance/ expression/ acting⁸⁷), were the artistic forms predominantly revered by publics.⁸⁸ Reverence was also held for artisanal practices that served religious and political powers, a prime example being the monumental sculptural legacy of Angkor.⁸⁹ As previously stated, although *selapak* encompasses a range of artistic practices from painting and architecture to dance, theatre, music, and literature, the vernacular use of the word is reflective of traditional performance’s place at the top of the hierarchy in Cambodian art as well as the cultural significance that is placed on art made

⁸⁴ Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 46.

⁸⁵ Zhuang Wubin, ‘Out of Nowhere: Documentary Photography from Cambodia,’ *Asian Art Newspaper*, January 2010, pp. 17-18, 17.

⁸⁶ Former Minister of Culture, Chheng Pong quoted by Erin Gleeson, ‘Sa Sa Gallery’s ‘Art Rebels’ Forge New Creative Paths,’ *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 19, 2009, [Sa Sa Gallery’s ‘Art Rebels’ forge new creative paths | Phnom Penh Post](#).

⁸⁷ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 422.

⁸⁸ Pamela N. Corey, ‘The “First” Cambodian Contemporary Artist,’ *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies*, no. 12 (2014): pp. 61-94, [06_A_Pamela_N_Corey_Udaya12_A.pdf \(yosothor.org\)](#), 73.

⁸⁹ Ankush Arora, ‘Erin Gleeson’s New Exhibition Reflects on the Synergy between Cambodia’s Turbulent History and Its Art,’ *Firstpost*, January 20, 2020, [Erin Gleeson’s new exhibition reflects on the synergy between Cambodia’s turbulent history and its art-Living News , Firstpost](#).

as part of an ensemble; often when people use *selapak* in Cambodia today, they are referring to performing arts.⁹⁰

The enduring reverence for the performative elements of *selapak* is perhaps linked to the traditional artistic sensibility of ‘working with the masses,’ which instantly transformed spectatorship from a passive condition to ‘an active, civic capability,’⁹¹ that galvanized people within the community to exercise visual literacy as a form of critical public participation that was essential to the artistic process and outcome.⁹² Subsequently, not only may *selapak* in the traditional sense be seen an inversion of the Euro-American aestheticist notion of *l’art pour l’art*, but it may also explain the pervading societal attitude in Cambodia ‘that if art cannot be understood and appreciated by the majority, then it is ineffective and self-serving.’⁹³

The belief that art must be made for the masses became problematic and even detrimental to the revitalisation of Cambodian arts, particularly after the PRK and since the establishment of UNTAC; the political, societal, and economic conditions created an atmosphere for artists and artistic practices that was reminiscent of the colonial era, which brought forth a fatalistic language that mirrored Groslier’s insistence that the traditional

⁹⁰ In an excerpt taken from the catalogue of the 2005 exhibition *Visual Arts Open* in Phnom Penh, artist-curators Sopheap Pich and Linda Saphan, explain the vernacular use of the word *silpah*. Corey, ‘The “First”’, *UDAYA*, 77.

⁹¹ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, ‘Photography and Public Culture,’ in *Photography and Its Publics*, ed. Melissa Miles and Edward Welch (Routledge, 2020), pp. 19-29, 27.

⁹² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 19-29.

⁹³ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 150.

Cambodian arts required urgent saving. To summarise, UNTAC opened the floodgates for NGOs, which instilled a neo-colonial culture through the introduction of ‘imported “international” models of development and reconciliation,’⁹⁴ which in turn, had the adverse effect of condemning Cambodia’s economy and reconstruction process into an inescapable cycle of dependency on foreign aid. The Cambodian arts were no exception as many of these NGOs had missions that largely focused on rescuing Cambodia’s cultural heritage through the development and funding of the arts; art that fit neatly within ethno-national categories or accommodated an externally constructed vision of ‘authentic Cambodian culture,’ and could satiate the desires of the global art market (so, mainly dance and traditional performing arts, then later ‘trauma art’ that played to the ‘external demands that Cambodians assume responsibility for the Khmer Rouge as both a historico-political event and traumatic experience’⁹⁵) were favoured over individual artists’ desires to enter into ‘new’ and alternative art practices, including conceptual, experimental, and research-based art.⁹⁶ In short, the initial stages of the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts were characterised by ‘the [individual *silpakar*] desire to produce and sustain a living off experimental work,’ which ‘outpace[ed] the local understanding and market for such work.’⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 150.

⁹⁵ Ashley Thompson, ‘Mnemotechnical Politics: Rithy Panh’s Cinematic Archive and the Return of Cambodia’s Past,’ *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, eds. Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 225.

⁹⁶ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 151.

⁹⁷ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 374.

Additionally, the NGO culture set in motion a trend where art exhibitions that showcased Cambodia's non-performing arts and took place in Western-style gallery settings, were devised by foreign art professionals, and solely curated for the NGO population. In fact, it was only in the mid-2000s that curated art exhibitions in Cambodia began to provide Khmer translations of the English curatorial text,⁹⁸ meaning until then, the foreign concepts embedded in Cambodian art, were neither legible nor accessible to the Cambodian public.⁹⁹ As such, Cambodian public conceptualisations of *selapak* remained bound to a rigid colonial framework that was further stifled by the cultural tendency to solely venerate the 'traditional,' arguably because it was legible.

Playing out against the backdrop of this neo-colonial NGO culture that exercised dominance over the Cambodian arts, were the tumultuous nation-state politics described in Chapter 1. As Hun Sen's government became more dictatorial and filled increasingly with former Khmer Rouge, censorship, political repression, public surveillance by the state, a failure to communicate the 'truth' on the part of the government as well as its push for Cambodians to 'dig a hole and bury the past,' together inhibited critical public discourse from taking shape and deterred open individual critical thinking and inquiry, especially when it came to the nation's recent history. The response that was prevalent among the

⁹⁸ Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 154.

⁹⁹ Boreth Ly, 'Of Trans(national) Subjects and Translation: The Art and Body Language of Sopheap Pich,' in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, ed. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asian Program Publications, 2012), pp. 117-129, 126.

generations of survivors was silence, or *dam-doeum-kor*, a symptom of *baksbat*.¹⁰⁰ This was compounded by trauma's manifestation as a literal and metaphorical devastation of individual vision¹⁰¹ and a damaged cultural visibility caused by experiencing life under a genocidal regime that, as Chapter 4 shall illustrate, had consciously used sight and visibility as ultimate forms of power and control over its people.

Whilst the act of partaking in the NGO neo-colonial systems had prevented artists from 'engag[ing] with more experimental and conceptual forms of artistic production,'¹⁰² it also became a form of complicity in the state's efforts to silence survivors, 'bury the past,' and eliminate all forms of dissent. These circumstances, on top of what at the time (in the 1990s and early 2000s) was a nearly complete absence of documentation and discussion of Cambodia's civil war and genocide, meant that a lack of historical consciousness among those born after DK, had become endemic, thus preventing publics from utilising their visual literacy as acts of civic engagement. What is more, the absence of due process and a sparse historical record of the crimes committed by DK meant there was an insufficient number of traces from which later generations could form a collective historical understanding that might prevent the same atrocities from occurring again.¹⁰³ *Silpakar* who survived DK were

¹⁰⁰ Sothea Chhim, 'Baksbat (Broken Courage): A Trauma-Based Cultural Syndrome in Cambodia,' *Medical Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2013): pp. 160-173, [Baksbat \(Broken Courage\): A Trauma-Based Cultural Syndrome in Cambodia: Medical Anthropology: Vol 32, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](#), 165.

¹⁰¹ Boreth Ly, 'Devastated Vision(s): The Khmer Rouge Scopic Regime in Cambodia,' *Art Journal* 62, no. 1 (2003): pp. 66-81, [Devastated Vision\(s\): The Khmer Rouge Scopic Regime in Cambodia: Art Journal: Vol 62, No 1 \(tandfonline.com\)](#), 73.

¹⁰² Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 149.

¹⁰³ Jay Winter, 'Chapter 12: Controversies and Conclusions,' in *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 275-290, 275.

highly aware of how justice and the formation of preventive historical understanding hinged on their efforts to not just recollect, but engage with their own memories and those of their generation (survivors and perpetrators alike) as invaluable historical testimonies and evidence that needed to be recorded. The processes of *silpakar* collecting and archiving memories are best described as ephemeral performative acts that ‘defer or defy the slipping away of the faces, the names, the forms of those who suffer[ed] and die[d]...’ When recorded and filtered through artistic interpretation, these testimonies went from the intangible realm of private memory within the individual psyche, to outward visual representations —public history—¹⁰⁴ ‘fit for the historical archive,’¹⁰⁵ and the repository of admissible evidence¹⁰⁶ for future juridical proceedings.

The turning point that incited the action of younger generations of *silpakar* was a series of contemporary issues that sprung from Cambodia’s entrance into the global economy, namely urban development propelled by global investments and land laws that favoured opaque government transactions and the business ventures of corrupt officials. This string of events resulted in breaches of human rights, mass evictions, dispossession, and displacement, along with the destruction of natural resources, land-grabbing, environmental concerns, loss of architectural and urban heritage, and of course, inflated

¹⁰⁴ David LaRocca, ‘Memory Translation: Rithy Panh’s Provocations to the Primacy and Virtues of the Documentary Sound/Image Index,’ in *The Cinema of Rithy Panh: Everything Has a Soul*, ed. Leslie Barnes and Joseph Mai (Rutgers University Press, 2021), pp. 188-201, 190.

¹⁰⁵ David LaRocca, ‘Memory Translation,’ *The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, 197.

¹⁰⁶ Renee Jeffery, ‘The Role of the Arts in Cambodia’s Transitional Justice Process,’ *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 34, no. 3 (December 2020): pp. 335-358, [The Role of the Arts in Cambodia’s Transitional Justice Process | SpringerLink](#).

real estate. In turn, these repercussions culminated to trigger discontented social groups to erupt in public protests and demonstrations, marking the occurrence of what many considered to be a national phenomenon: the emergence of a public sphere.¹⁰⁷

Silpakar who had come of age in the midst of the unrest that continued after the fall of DK began with the initial desire to document, record, and archive these contemporary historical events. When examined collectively, the works by artists such as Vandy Rattana, Kim Hak, Khvay Samnang, Vuth Lyno, and Lim Sokchanlina, (Figures 3.12-3.16) read like a 'collective family album' that documents the Cambodian experience during the 'urgent moments of historical transition.'¹⁰⁸ Reaffirming this analogy is the fact that photography was the predominant medium of choice (particularly photojournalism with its powerful cinematic aesthetics) as it served as a form of protest against the larger absence of historical records and the government's attempts to silence the population. Yet the deceiving neutrality and impartiality of photography's aestheticism and the way in which photographic images could easily be translated to 'art,' served as a layer of protection that prevented both the images from being 'too legible' by authorities and the *silpakar*'s critical-commentary-through-documentation from being labelled political, which was 'a widespread fear amongst cultural actors...based on...stories [of] journalists, activists,

¹⁰⁷ A well-known example is *Boeung Kok* Lake in Tuol Kork the north part of Phnom Penh. Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 347.

¹⁰⁸ Marianne Hirsch, *Generation of Postmemory Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 232.

dissidents, and lovers who [had] gone missing, [had] been maimed, or killed in suspicious circumstances.’¹⁰⁹



Figure 3.12: Vandy Rattana, *Boeung Kok Eviction* series, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist's website.

¹⁰⁹ Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 418.



Figure 3.13: Kim Hak, *Left Behind* series, 2017, documenting the White Building eviction in Phnom Penh. Image courtesy of the artist's webpage.



Figure 3.14: Khvay Samnang, *Human Nature* series, 2010-11, anonymous portraits of White Building residents. Image courtesy of The White Building webpage.



Figure 3.15: Vuth Lyno, *Thoamada* series, 2011, contributing to the ‘public understanding of LGBTQs in Cambodia by exploring individual and collective identities among Cambodian gay and bisexual men.’ Image courtesy of the artist’s webpage.



Figure 3.16: Lim Sokchanlina, *My Motorbike and Me*, 2008, a critical commentary on the problems Cambodia is experiencing as a result of ‘new forms of globalization,’ CREATIVETIMEREPORTS, April 15, 2013.

By the late 2000s, the profiles of Cambodian artists were being appropriated for reception on international platforms and their works began to be collected by renowned museums and featured (and awarded) at prominent film festivals, international biennials, as well as triennials. With their seemingly sudden debut into the global art scene and participation in international frameworks, Cambodian artists were mistakenly perceived by international audiences as having emerged from ‘out of nowhere,’ while their artistic renderings that were deeply embedded with critical social and historical significance were reduced to a symbolic ‘nascent status,’ through international rhetoric that cited the Cambodian arts as reborn.¹¹⁰ All at once, the motives and efforts of multiple generations that had helped secure the Cambodian arts its autonomy —including those of pre-DK— were simplified to a narrative that favoured a miraculous ‘rebirth.’

Although clearing up this misconception has been a priority amongst academics for the past decade, the discourse produced thus far has, in several aspects, missed the mark. First, most discussions have kept the notion of the contemporary *silpakar* tied to international criteria for ‘artist,’ and perpetuated a fixation on sketching an art-historical/philosophical understanding of the meaning of ‘contemporary.’ In addition, scholarship has tended to take a narrowed approach historicising ‘contemporary Cambodian art’; too much time has been dedicated to the subjective tasks of selecting artists who embody the internationally constructed notion of ‘contemporary,’ and deciding which of their works are discussed as ‘art.’ The reality is that the title ‘contemporary artist’ in Cambodia is simply a

¹¹⁰ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 162.

form of self-identification based on ‘a purely subjective notion in line with beliefs about artistic freedom and positioning within a certain chronology.’¹¹¹ As such, these frameworks that have dominated academic discussions on Cambodian art inadvertently limit our understanding of what the contemporary *silpakar* does, who qualifies as a *silpakar*, and the extent of continuity inscribed within contemporary artistic practices. For instance, on the one hand, Pamela Corey properly argues that the revitalisation of Cambodian arts must not be dismissed as a singular historical moment, which terms such as ‘rebirth’ and ‘emergence,’ undoubtedly suggest. On the other hand, she condenses the ‘archival impulse...[and] the documentary dimension,’ of contemporary Cambodian artistic practice as a ‘trend’ that instigated a ‘new artistic consciousness’ in the 2000s,¹¹² rather than examining the broader historical trajectory of camera media in Cambodia. Indeed, these were trends in international contemporary ‘high art;’ it was in 2004 that Hal Foster identified the ‘archival impulse’ in international contemporary art practices. Although contemporaneous with one another, neither the use of photography nor the documentary and archival dimensions in contemporary Cambodian art were necessarily in step with these emerging international trends. In fact, it is essential to understand these practices as vital cultural continuities that have histories which extend back to pre-DK and have endured the devastation of vision under the Khmer Rouge. However, doing so requires a comprehensive understanding of how colonial film and photography, Khmer cinema, pre-DK

¹¹¹ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 350.

¹¹² Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 351.

photojournalism, and post-DK photographic and video arts, and *selapak* in general, are interconnected, which is the broader purpose of Chapters 4 and 5.

It is worth pointing out that as continuities, archival and documentary practices alone are not what distinguish the revitalisation of Cambodian arts as a public history movement with a distinct trajectory from traditional *selapak*. Rather, the revitalisation of Cambodian arts may be distinguished as a public history movement by the cognizant decision on the part of *silpakar* to interweave vocational skillsets of the historian with the social responsibilities and obligations that accompany the production of *selapak*. The *silpakar* of post-genocide Cambodia thus distinguish themselves as public historians, or public history practitioners, by alternatively employing the highly venerated element of performance alongside archival methods and documentary skills as means for achieving the greater objective of embedding historical consciousness within the awakened Cambodian public sphere through the transference of history-making skillsets and historical knowledge. Specific incidences of the contemporary *silpakar* as ‘public historian,’ shall be thoroughly examined in Chapter 5. For now however, it is important to acknowledge how the social process of the *silpakar* engaging with the public sphere and transferring their knowledge primarily through a combination of oral and visual means are first and foremost, performative acts through which they assert their social and civic responsibilities.

Why Camera Media

The idea of *selapak* as being a civic responsibility exercised by the *silpakar* brings us to the foundational reasons for employing camera media (both film and photography) as focal points for the discussions in the subsequent chapters. First, camera media bridge the new and different needs of the post-genocide social milieu (including ‘the search for the individual’ after genocide, regaining cultural visibility as a form of civic participation, and overcoming *baksbat*) with the reverence for the traditional performing arts and the ensemble. The language of performance in contemporary Cambodian art is slightly altered to the extent that the idea of performing arts —*selapak samtaem*— becomes blurred with processes of social engagement and ‘aesthetic tactics of protest.’¹¹³ As contemporary Cambodian artists tend to be primarily concerned with how their work contributes to the creation of records and documentation, there is often little emphasis placed on the ephemerality of performance. The camera is therefore essential to many *silpakar* because it is able to instantly capture and document a performative interaction or experience (whether staged or spontaneous), whilst the image that is produced (whether still or moving) allows the ‘documentation to extend beyond its function as a record of the performance,’¹¹⁴ by being a performative event itself, which continues to unfold upon every visual encounter. Moreover, while the initial performative event is exclusive to only those who are present in the moment, its reproduction via being captured in the form of a still or

¹¹³ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 422.

¹¹⁴ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 413.

moving image encourages a more democratised form of participation by opening the opportunity to participate via spectatorship to a potentially infinite number of publics. In this sense, the permanence of the image 'designates an ensemble of diverse actions... [including] production, distribution, exchange, and consumption...'¹¹⁵, which instils a flexible notion of authorship that transforms spectators into co-authors, whose visual reading of the images become essential components in the trajectory of the photographic or filmic performance.

Second, as 'no one is the sole signatory to event of photography,'¹¹⁶ the post-DK *silpakar* who consciously produce and appropriate photographic and filmic records to transform artistic practices into projects that may be considered public history, images function as metaphorical contracts between themselves, immediate participants (those depicted within the image, who may be survivors, perpetrators, or victims of genocide), the state, and all publics that encounter their work. The idea that *silpakar* who were (and are) active in the revitalisation of Cambodian arts utilise images as contracts is a fitting and highly significant juxtaposition to the forcible circumstances under which the S-21 prisoner identification photographs were taken, and the numerous instances which have seen a selection of the images grossly misappropriated and unethically disseminated (as will be discussed in Chapter 4).

¹¹⁵ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 82.

¹¹⁶ Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, version Kindle, trans. Louise Bethlehem (London: Verso, 2015), 17.

Rithy Panh's documentary *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), which shall be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5, serves as a prime example for how images function as contracts for immediate participants, specifically the perpetrators who agreed to be filmed. The conditions for the collaboration were underscored before filming began in which Panh explained:

'I told them that I was not a prosecutor and that my movie was not a tribunal. That if they came to the shoot at peace, they would leave at peace. That talking could help them feel better about themselves. But, that said, where the victims and their families are concerned, my work would not cleanse criminals of crimes committed.'¹¹⁷

Under these terms, Panh absolves himself (the filmmaker) of the role of a judge, allowing the camera to become 'a safety net, a support that leads' perpetrators to open up, which arguably results in 'the emergence of a larger truth.'¹¹⁸

A *silpakar's* decision to emphasise filmic and photographic projects as 'art' or 'cinema' also creates an unspoken agreement between the artist and the Cambodian authorities. Aesthetics as well as claiming art for art's sake, take on the poetic functions of preventing work from becoming overt acts of dissent that would draw the attention of the government, whilst specific venues such as Cambodian artist-run 'white cube' gallery spaces transform into stages that provide the dual benefit of legitimising individual Cambodian artists and their work in the international art scene¹¹⁹ and operating as a venue for covert critical artistic expression wherein publics can engage safely in critical dialogue 'freed from

¹¹⁷ Rithy Panh as quoted in Christian Delage, *Caught on Camera: Film in the Courtroom from the Nuremberg Trials to the Trials of the Khmer Rouge*, trans. Ralph Schoolcraft and Mary Byrd Kelly (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 231.

¹¹⁸ Delage, *Caught on Camera*, 233.

¹¹⁹ Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 374.

the form of the State.’¹²⁰ By extension, the display of images also serves as a contract for publics; *silpakar* demonstrate an acute awareness that, despite how filmic and photographic images have the ability to evoke a moral response within viewers, the images alone do not have the power to rectify ‘opinions, prejudices, fantasies, [or] misinformation.’¹²¹ As such, *silpakar* are responsible for providing proper context and a fitting narrative that allow images to be critically viewed in such a way that circumvents the suspicions of the state, yet are still able to go ‘beyond guilt and compassion- outside of the merely psychological framework of empathy, of “regarding the pain of others’- on the basis of civic duty and the mutual trust of those who are governed [by the photograph].’¹²² In short, if the images were displayed in any other manner or if critical discourse took the form of traditional historical research with a more overt political agenda, images and narratives would either risk government censorship and prevent publics from safely participating via critical visual literacy, or require self-censorship on the part of the artist to the extent the project would be rendered ‘mute.’

Lastly, and of no less importance, just as the *silpakar* and the public historian exceed any one definition, so too does photography.¹²³ The genre defying and ambiguous nature of camera media at once converges with and compliments the longstanding challenge of correlating the vocation of individual *silpakar* with a single skillset. A main concern of this

¹²⁰ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 84.

¹²¹ Hariman and Lucaites, ‘Photography and Public Culture,’ *Photography and Its Publics*, 22.

¹²² ‘Regarding the pain of others’ is in reference to Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* 84-5.

¹²³ Hariman and Lucaites, ‘Photography and Public Culture,’ *Photography and Its Publics*, 19.

chapter has been underscoring the history of civic responsibility on the part of the *silpakar* and how it required them to adapt and expand their skillsets in response to the needs of their communities. With the camera apparatus as the focal point in Chapter 4, it is possible to illustrate how, when examining *selapak* from the age of the revitalisation of Cambodian arts, what one chooses to label *selapak* -be it 'art' or 'documentary'- 'is not really the point.'¹²⁴ Instead, the saliency lies in the resolute determination of the *silpakar* to continue to find ways for their work to have presence and use in a given time and place despite political, social, and economic obstacles. In post-genocide Cambodia, these obstacles brought on the need to cultivate historical knowledge and agency in the Cambodian public sphere, thus requiring the role of the historian to be adopted as an extension of the artist, a feat which serves as a testament to the remarkable resilience and adaptable nature of the contemporary *silpakar*.

¹²⁴ Zhuang, 'Out of Nowhere: Documentary Photography from Cambodia,' *Asian Art Newspaper*, 17.

CHAPTER 4

Intersecting the History of Cambodian Film and Photography with Methods in Public History

*'How can we find them? Where are they? How can we find these faces?'*¹

For the historian of genocide, whose 'search for the individual'² is implicated by the inherent association of historical research with the essentialising elements of chronology and narrative, using photographic images as sources, in certain instances, may appear counterintuitive; whilst the historian is frequently concerned with conveying the 'objective time of the world',³ the medium and theory of photography stand in opposition to this task by exposing the blurred relation between what is seen, known, remembered, and imagined. The materiality of the photographic image distorts understandings of chronological time with the illusion of 'the frozen moment'⁴ or 'slice of time'⁵ from the past, which ruptures into the viewers' present thoughts and experiences. If a historian were to examine the S-21 prisoner identification photographic archive⁶ in isolation for example, they would find not

¹ Rithy Panh, *Graves Without a Name*, (2018; New York, NY: Catherine Dussart Production; Anuheap Production, 2020), iTunes digital file, 27:27/ 1:28:02

² Rachel Donadio, 'Preserving the Ghastly Inventory of Auschwitz,' (*The New York Times*, April 15, 2015), [Preserving the Ghastly Inventory of Auschwitz - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/15/arts/photography/preserving-the-ghastly-inventory-of-auschwitz.html).

³ Damian Sutton, *Photography, Cinema, Memory: The Crystal Image of Time* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 35.

⁴ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 2.

⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, version Kindle (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 18.

⁶ Instead of providing examples of prisoner identification photographs, I have chosen to follow Thy Phu's recent example in 'Afterimages of S-21: Distant and Proximate Spectatorship and the Legacies of Cold War Human Rights,' a chapter in *Photography and Its Publics*; I shall refer readers to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum's online database. Whilst Thy Phu cites her reason for excluding the images from the chapter as the controversy over the ownership over the photographs, I must add the most recent gross misappropriation and dehumanisation of certain S-21 photographs by photography colourist, Matt Loughrey and the media outlet *Vice* in an article published on the 9th of April 2021, which has underscored the urgent necessity to refrain from reproducing and reactivating the photographs when possible. I therefore kindly direct readers to the following link: [Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum – Archives](https://www.tuol-sleng-genocide-museum.org/archives) .

elements of historical chronology or narrative, but ‘explosive bursts of isolated events’ of trauma, or *bak*, that ‘reveal neither the events that occurred before, nor after the flash of the camera.’⁷ Because the ‘photographs themselves cannot explain anything,’ historians are left to grapple with contextualising the ‘ghostly traces,’ or *snarm*,⁸ that ‘supply a token presence’ of the dead along with ‘inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.’⁹

Meanwhile, the publics’ ‘search for the individual’¹⁰ within genocidal histories equates to something different than that of the historian. For the public that has survived genocide, it means the search for evidence, justice, and to find out what happened to loved ones who disappeared. Their search almost always ends with the absence of *snarm*, or the material trace, particularly in the form of the photographic record. Contrastingly, international publics are drawn to the illusions created by the aesthetics of the ‘frozen moment’ in time rendered by the ghostly last photographs of S-21 victims. Often compelled by the desire to put ‘faces to the bones,’¹¹ of the estimated 1.7 to 2 million people killed under Democratic Kampuchea, the direct and frontal gazes in the photographs beckon interpretation, trigger narrative impulses, and incite what is known and what is imagined about victims of the Cambodian Genocide to become intertwined and blended within the

⁷ Corin Sweeney Deinhart ‘Re-Visualising Khmer Rouge Memory Through the Lens of Contemporary Cambodian Photography,’ (M.Phil thesis, 2016), 19.

⁸ Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide*, version Kindle, ed. David Chandler and Rita Smith Kipp (Honolulu , HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2020), 19.

⁹ Sontag, *On Photography*, 8, 24.

¹⁰ Donadio, ‘Preserving the Ghastly Inventory,’ *The New York Times*.

¹¹ Rachel Bethany Hughes, ‘Fielding Genocide: Post-1979 Cambodia and the Geopolitics of Memory’ (PhD thesis, 2006), [Fielding genocide: post-1979 Cambodia and the geopolitics of memory \(unimelb.edu.au\)](https://unimelb.edu.au), 191.

mind of the viewer, thus furthering the illusion that the experience of gazing at a still image of the past is a form of bearing witness to an historic atrocity, whilst each photographic portrait of S-21 victims seems to serve as ‘a building-block in a longer story.’¹²

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s when the S-21 photographs began to be prominently displayed in venues throughout the world, the international curatorial strategies of minimalism and claiming ‘neutrality’ were utilised to display the photographs of S-21. In employing these strategies, curators depended on the illusion created by the photographic medium to evoke within viewers the instinctive and involuntary emotional response¹³ to the pathos¹⁴ conveyed in the individual expressions of the photographed subjects - i.e. the victims- along with the knowledge ‘that everyone in [the] images died a brutal death.’¹⁵ Because these exhibitions were often Western audiences’ first encounters with the S-21 photographs, the lack of context meant viewers were guided only by the prevailing sense that the photographs had the ability to ‘speak for themselves,’¹⁶ and that, from reverent observation of the frozen moment in time captured in the photographs, victims of atrocity and genocide would emerge ‘from the anonymity of mass murder and [become] individuals again.’¹⁷

¹² Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 2-4.

¹³ Thierry De Duve, ‘Art in the Face of Radical Evil,’ *October* 125 (2008): pp. 3-23, [Art in the Face of Radical Evil | October | MIT Press](#), 20.

¹⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, 15-16.

¹⁵ Lindsay French, ‘Exhibiting Terror,’ in *Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights*, ed. Mark Philip Bradley and Patrice Petro (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 131-155, 135.

¹⁶ French, ‘Exhibiting Terror,’ *Truth Claims*, 137.

¹⁷ De Duve, ‘Art in the Face of Radical Evil,’ *October*, 22.

Of course, historical research refutes this belief and provides evidence to the contrary. Upon being processed, each prisoner was assigned a number by one of the prison's photographers.¹⁸ The numbers were pinned or taped to prisoners' clothing and prominently displayed in the bureaucratic-style identification photographs. Contrary to longstanding popular belief, the numbers that were pinned to the prisoners neither referenced their identity, nor date of entry. Rather, as if to further deny prisoners their humanity- and history their identities- the assigned numbers were often not unique and were recycled to correspond to an unfixed numeric system that depended on individual photographers' preference for record-keeping.¹⁹ Some of the photographers for example, used the numbers to denote how many prisoners they photographed in a day, and if there was a damaged photo, they knew which prisoner photograph(s) needed to be retaken. Or, if the photographer needed to cut the roll of film because a print needed to be expedited, they would know which photograph was needed and where to make the cut in the film roll.²⁰ In this sense, the numbers serve(d) as an identification of the photographer.²¹ These details only came to the surface as recently as 2016, during the trial proceedings for Case 002/02 and thus were never included in exhibitions displaying the S-21 photographs. While Tuol Sleng's exhibition uses the photographs to convey the brutality experienced by victims,

¹⁸ The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC (TRANSCRIPT OF TRIAL PROCEEDINGS PUBLIC Case File N° 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC January 27, 2017, Microsoft Word - TR002_20160915_EN_FINAL (eccc.gov.kh), 42. From here on referred to by its file number.

¹⁹ ECCC, Transcript of Trial Proceedings, Case File N° 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, 42.

²⁰ ECCC, Transcript of Trial Proceedings, Case File N° 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, 41-2.

²¹ In 1978, the system changed and became streamlined and two photographs were taken of prisoners: a frontal portrait and a profile portrait. Their date of entry and name were displayed at the foreground of the photographs. ECCC, Transcript of Trial Proceedings, Case File N° 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, 42-5.

the international photography curations facilitated a 'selective unseeing'²² of the history attached to the photographs to the extent that if 'anything about the circumstances' of these peoples' deaths,' were explained, it was simply 'that they were killed by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian Communists.'²³

As an historical reading and contextualisation of the S-21 photographic archive leads to the confounding truth that the identification photographs paradoxically dehumanise prisoners and obliterate their individual identities, it also begs the question of whose identities are likely to be revealed in the photographic search for the individual? This is an overarching inquiry that links the historical developments of camera media that occurred before, during and after, the Khmer Rouge, and are also discussed in this chapter as they relate to the historicization and public reception of the S-21 photographs.

With the 'search for the individual' forming a crossroads that diverges with historians', and the publics' differing perspectives on photography as the medium *par excellence* to 'speak for itself' and represent the 'truth' and 'reality', the question at the fore becomes: is it possible to use photography as a resource that reunites historians' and publics' interests in transcending the overwhelming statistics of genocide and gaining insight into the individual experiences, histories, and memories of those who lived under the Khmer Rouge? It is seeking this point of congruence that distinguishes the objective of

²² Thy Phu, 'Afterimages of S-21: Distant and Proximate Spectatorship and the Legacies of Cold War Human Rights,' in *Photography and Its Publics*, ed. Melissa Miles and Edward Welch, 1st ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2020), pp. 147-166, [Photography and Its Publics | Melissa Miles, Edward Welch | Taylor & F \(taylorfrancis.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1080/17513758.2020.1811111), 150.

²³ French, 'Exhibiting Terror,' *Truth Claims*, 140.

a public historian. Alternatively put, the public historian recognises that regardless of whether historical research prioritises photography as a primary source for studying and narrating history and individual experiences, photographic images (in this case the S-21 photographs) in all their vulnerability, have been, and continue to be, the most widely encountered, circulated, reappropriated, and oft misappropriated, sources associated with contemporary history.²⁴

In fact, much of the academic discussion and debate surrounding the S-21 photographic archive pertain to the various ways in which its photographs have been re-used outside the walls of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. For example, a great deal of scholarship has been produced about the highly controversial 1997 New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition, *Photographs From S-21: 1975-1979*. While such scholarship has brought to the fore the longstanding and far-reaching consequences that resulted from specific reuses in the history of the photographs, the focus has largely remained in the disciplinary realms of archival studies, transitional justice, photography, visual arts, and art history, leaving the historian with the task of discerning how historical research fits into the equation. When considering the various re-activations of the S-21 prisoner identification photographs, it is not surprising that the onus, along with major debates and discussions, have been largely along these disciplinary lines that leave historians in a practitioner's no man's land.

²⁴ Deinhart, 'Re-Visualising Khmer Rouge Memory,' 19.

In their initial state, the S-21 photographic negatives and prints existed as both images and objects, and their historical intelligibility was then subsequently entwined with their collective appropriation into an archive, which itself is defined as an ‘institutionalised site of mediation between the sociohistorical process and the narrative about that process.’²⁵ Moreover, the Tuol Sleng photographic archive uniquely exemplifies how the archival *process* is not only influenced by historical factors, but also a variety of social and political implications, which Chapters 1 and 2 have aimed to convey through the particular examples of the ECCC, DC-Cam, and the Tuol Sleng Museum.²⁶ In turn, the social and political factors of archiving are the principal elements that hold the ultimate power in legitimising records as historical evidence.²⁷ As Christian Delage explains, ‘it is not the historian who first and foremost institutes the historicity of the collected archive (be they written or audio-visual) and determines their truth value. Rather, it is in a public venue, the court [the ECCC]...’²⁸ Beginning in the 1990s, the activation of certain new publics brought the ‘evidentiary value’ of the S-21 photographs into question;²⁹ as will be discussed later, internationally renowned photography festivals and art institutions controversially acquired a selection of the images (namely the aforementioned exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art). With exposure to a broad range of new international publics, the

²⁵ Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 61-2.

²⁶ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 62.

²⁷ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 62.

²⁸ Christian Delage, *Caught on Camera: Film in the Courtroom from the Nuremberg Trials to the Trials of the Khmer Rouge*, trans. Ralph Schoolcraft and Mary Byrd Kelly (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 1.

²⁸ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 74.

²⁹ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 74.

prioritisation of the photographs' aesthetics over their evidentiary significance consequently undermined the attempts made 'to frame them as historical and legal records.'³⁰ From that point, the existence of the S-21 prisoner identification portraits as atrocity photographs, or *genocidal images*,³¹ was forced to serve as a fault line in the ever-shifting and all-too-limiting, boundary between photography as an art and non-art.³²

Because the S-21 images are of the photographic medium, they continue to be restricted to and determined by, the binaries that plague general photography discourse, which as Giovanni Fiorentino explains, 'soffre la rigidità dei raggruppamenti disciplinari, l'unico punto di vista del valutatore, le gabbie strutturate dell'Accademia, le riviste inserite in aree scientifiche circoscritte e puntualmente delimitate.'³³ These discursive objectives subsequently cut and divide the breadth of photography discourse into reductive categories that perpetuate various hierarchies, wherein the efficacy of photographs as both images and objects are restricted to opposing, aesthetic frameworks, including artistic versus vernacular, photojournalism versus high art, and cinematic versus documentary, to name a few. Zhuang Wubin emphasises that the confines of how photography tends to be discussed leads to inaccurate assumptions, such as 'photojournalism is inferior to contemporary photography, or... contemporary photography can only come at a more advanced stage,

³⁰ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 75.

³¹ De Duve, 'Art in the Face of Radical Evil,' *October*, 15.

³² De Duve, 'Art in the Face of Radical Evil,' *October*, 6.

³³ Giovanni Fiorentino, 'Public History e Fotografia: Una Sfida Complessa,' *Rivista Di Studi Fotografia*, no. 5 (2017): pp. 64-81, [Public History e fotografia: una sfida complessa | Rivista di studi di fotografia. Journal of Studies in Photography \(fupress.net\)](#), 67.

and that it is presumably some higher form of photography that only certain people can aspire to.’³⁴

For historians who incorporate the photographic medium into research about genocide and mass atrocities, these binary frameworks prove to be especially more inhibiting than insightful, as their application inevitably means assigning Western narrative biases, or international criteria³⁵ that have the potential to peripheralize the unique cultural conditions that accompany the identified region or nation’s historical internalisation of photography. In Cambodia’s instance, placing camera media practices within Western vernacular, artistic, and aesthetic discourses add further ambiguity because such frameworks do not account for how ‘contemporary’ in the artistic context in Cambodia is a ‘multivalent concept’ that is conversely ‘expressed by various forms of terminology implying a categorical range of artistic practices.’³⁶ Distinguishing between these complex nuances and weighing in on the historicization of ‘contemporary art’ in Cambodia are exercises that are beyond the scope of this research. However, it must be said that ‘when discussing Cambodian art, [or *selapak*,] specifically art that involves [camera media], the Tuol Sleng

³⁴ Zhuang Wubin, ‘Cambodia,’ in *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, first edition, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), pp. 243-269, 243.

³⁵ Pamela N. Corey ‘The “First” Cambodian Contemporary Artist,’ *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies*, 12, 2014, 62.

³⁶ There is the English term “contemporary art”, សិល្បៈសម័យ *silpa samăy* (modern art, connoting an institutional formation), សិល្បករទំនើប *silpakar damnoep* (modern artist, connoting non-institutional formation), សិល្បៈសហសម័យ *silpa sahasamăy* (loosely understood as art of the new millennium), as well as the French phrase, *l’art contemporain*, used by artists who trained at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) and abroad in the Soviet- Eastern bloc in the 1980s and 1990s. Corey ‘The “First” Cambodian,’ 62.

portraits are an essential point of reference...³⁷ despite not being works of art themselves. This is an underlying element that will be brought up again and clarified in this chapter.

One of the consequences of applying international frameworks with implicit narrative biases to Cambodian camera practices and media (be they artistic or vernacular) has been that the connection between photography and film - or cinema - as they relate to the historicization of the Khmer Rouge, have not been fully realised. To counter the research tendency to separately analyse the two media, this chapter establishes a history that examines the convergence of Cambodian photography and film based on their shared 'interplay between the technical and the social,'³⁸ while Chapter 5's analysis of the works of Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana provide the unique cultural contexts and insights for bringing the two practices together under a single discourse.

Breaking free of the numerous international constraints that are placed on photography and camera media in general require more than simply asking what images are *of* and what they are *about*. Of central concern is examining what they were created to *do*, along with asking 'how their material nature has been altered [through re-appropriations and re-activations] and in the process, how the relationships embedded in them have changed, why, and to what end.'³⁹ Addressing these questions is the first step in successfully using camera media as resources for establishing a more specific and congruent

³⁷ Deinhart, 'Re-Visualising Khmer Rouge Memory,' 20.

³⁸ David Company, *Photography and Cinema* (London, UK: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2012), 11.

³⁹ Joan M. Schwartz, 'The Archival Garden: Photographic Plantings, Interpretive Choices, and Alternative Narratives,' in *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions, Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2011), pp. 69-110, 105.

meaning for ‘the search for the individual’ that can be shared between historians and various publics. More importantly, it confronts the ‘need to widen the focus of discussion beyond emotional connections (or lack of) between the photographed subject and the [targeted] audience,’ by considering the multivalent forms of participation associated with camera ‘activities and events’ that involve the image maker, subjects, curators, viewers, and circulators of the images.⁴⁰

This approach can be understood as an exercise in identifying the intersections of camera media with practices in public history, which is not to be confused with contextualising camera media *as* public history per se (this task shall be undertaken in Chapter 5). Rather, similar to understanding public history as a field of study that was conceived with an intention to transform *history* from a noun to a verb that, in some shape or form, places the public at the centre of historical inquiry, filmic and photographic images are thought of moving forward as transitive verbs,⁴¹ that through circulation, reappropriation and reception, have ‘significant implications for how the public is defined.’⁴² Furthermore, beginning with the premise that films and photographs *do* things, regardless of which genres, comparisons, and aesthetic categorisations creators, curators, and viewers choose to impose upon them, provides the common denominator that ethically

⁴⁰ Melissa Miles, ‘Introduction: Photography’s Publics,’ in *Photography and Its Publics*, eds. Melissa Miles and Edward Welch, 1st ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1-16, 5-7.

⁴¹ Schwartz, ‘The Archival Garden,’ *Controlling the Past*, 105.

⁴² Miles, ‘Introduction: Photography’s Publics,’ *Photography and Its Publics*, 2.

allows for the S-21 photographs to be assessed alongside an array of camera images that defy categorisation⁴³ and help form narratives of Khmer Rouge history and memory.

Therefore, an objective for the remainder of the chapter is to answer the question: what is the evolution of camera media as transitive verbs, or as *doers*, and what kinds of publics were activated by camera images and subsequent appropriations in the process?

When considering this trajectory it is interesting to observe how the consequences of the numerous reappropriations of the S-21 photographic archive mirror those that have come from historicising the DK period as ‘Year Zero.’⁴⁴ Similar to the way past historiography on the Khmer Rouge tended to dislocate the DK period as *the* moment of rupture and discontinuity in the greater scope of contemporary Cambodian history and linear temporality, the S-21 photographs became the ‘implicit baseline,’⁴⁵ in the history of Cambodian photography, particularly for Western curators and art writers who used the point of DK trauma that was manifested in the S-21 photographs to establish a narrative that satisfied ‘the usual historiography in Southeast Asia,’ wherein camera technology was transplanted from the West, passively adopted by the people of the region, and then in

⁴³ Nora A. Taylor, ‘Introduction’ in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, eds. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), pp. 1-13, 5.

⁴⁴ The terms ‘Year Zero’ and ‘Year One’ were not used by the Khmer Rouge. However, the word *kamtech*, which Kaing Guek Eav (Duch) defined as ‘to destroy and erase all trace: to reduce to dust,’ appears in documents that are part of the Tuol Sleng archive. Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide*, version Kindle, ed. David Chandler and Rita Smith Kipp (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2020), 17, 19.

David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 2008), [A History of Cambodia: Onesearch Service for University of Guam \(ebscohost.com\)](#), Chapter 11 notes, 332.

⁴⁵ Corey ‘The “First” Cambodian,’ *UDAYA*, 62.

Cambodia's circumstances, developed linearly from the genocidal images of S-21, to photojournalism, and finally to a superior contemporary art form.⁴⁶ In his curatorial text for the first PhotoPhnomPenh festival in 2008, Christian Caujolle - 'one of the most solvent photo curators in the French-speaking world' - remarked how photography with any cultural and creative dimension was 'virtually absent from Phnom Penh,' until the 2000s.⁴⁷ He then reduced 1990s camera practices in Cambodia to the simplistic statement that 'it was at Tuol Sleng, with its unbearable portraits that one saw Cambodian photography...'⁴⁸

Reinforcing Caujolle's account of Cambodian photographic practices were the sensationalised curatorial environments in which publics likely first encountered the frozen moments captured in the S-21 photographs, whose formats were altered to function as visual metaphors for historical trauma, or *bak*, 'in which time is splintered, fractured, and blown apart.'⁴⁹ Even within the walls of Tuol Sleng- where the photographs were first taken and then attached to individual prisoner files- they have been distorted from their original

⁴⁶ Zhuang 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 243.

⁴⁷ Christian Caujolle quoted by Zhuang 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 243.

I requested the catalogue from PhotoPhnomPenh by Christian Caujolle but never received a response. Original quote from Les Éditions du Mékong and French Cultural Centre, *PhotoPhnomPenh*, exh. cat. (Phnom Penh: Les Éditions du Mékong and French Cultural Centre, 2008), 7.

However, I was able to find an article written in 2008 by Christian Caujolle about the opening week of PPP, which reflects a similar perspective and exemplifies Caujolle's tendency to quickly reduce the Cambodian visual arts as 'largely lacking a tradition...and training.' Christian Caujolle, 'Photo Phnom Penh Festival, In Cambodia,' *ZoneZero*, 2008, [Photo Phnom Penh Festival, in Cambodia \(zonezero.com\)](http://zonezero.com).

⁴⁸ Christian Caujolle quoted by Zhuang, 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 243.

⁴⁹ Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 4.

format by being enlarged and then displayed as a collective that, like trauma, disturbs and overwhelms viewers' psychic and corporeal spaces (Figure 4.1).⁵⁰



Figure 4.1: Christian Haugen, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum gallery of prisoner photographs, March 28, 2009, digital image. Image sourced from Flickr Commons, Creative Commons License (CC BY 2.0), [Creative Commons — Attribution 2.0 Generic — CC BY 2.0](#).

Because presentations of the S-21 photographs 'operate largely on the plane of sensation and emotion,'⁵¹ conveyed in the humanity of the victims' expressions, it is no wonder that the images have been designated by curators and publics as the point of

⁵⁰ Gregory Bistoien, *Trauma, Ethics and the Political Beyond PTSD: The Dislocations of the Real* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), [Trauma, Ethics and the Political beyond PTSD | SpringerLink](#), 2.

⁵¹ Lior Zylberman and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, 'Reflections on the Significance of Images in Genocide Studies: Some Methodological Considerations,' *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 12, no. 2 (2018): pp. 1-17, ["Introduction to the Special Issue" by Lior Zylberman and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca \(usf.edu\)](#), 2.

rupture and ‘a convenient starting point’⁵² in the history of Cambodian camera media. These designations have transversely supported the false belief that the moments of trauma captured in the expressions of victims and the aesthetics of the photographs are *the* productive dimensions to the archive’s historicity and that the foundation of photography in Cambodia itself is a mere combination of legacies of trauma and colonial discourse.⁵³ However, a more accurate assessment is: it is not the photographs themselves that are ruptures; rather, through a combination of the two decades of turmoil that spanned the 1970s and 1980s, and the now more than forty years of the S-21 images undergoing numerous reappropriations, it is the ‘development —and our understanding—’ of Cambodian camera practices that have become ruptured.⁵⁴ This observation not only invites an opportunity to re-think the history of camera media in Cambodia on a continuum, but it also moves away from the ‘victimizing paradigm,’ which in turn, allows for a more productive reading of atrocity images like the S-21 photographs, as transitive verbs, making it possible to ‘interpret the specific, and different, story that lies behind individual episodes of mass violence.’⁵⁵

⁵² Zhuang ‘A Matter of Context: Writing About Cambodian Photography Today’ (presentation, Contemporary Art in Cambodia, A Historical Inquiry, Museum of Modern Art New York, NY, April 21, 2013), [Collections | Search | Panel II: A Matter of Context: Writing about Cambodian Photography Today | Asia Art Archive \(aaa.org.hk\)](#), 03:23.

⁵³ Pamela N. Corey, ‘Situating Contemporary Art in Cambodia,’ *Cornell University Southeast Asian Bulletin*, 2014, pp. 23-26, [\(PDF\) Situating Contemporary Art in Cambodia | Pamela N Corey - Academia.edu](#), 24.

⁵⁴ Zhuang ‘Cambodia,’ *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 244.

⁵⁵ Patrizia Violi, *Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Space, History*, ed. Katia Pizzi, trans. Alistair McEwan, vol. 7 (Oxford: Pieterlen: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag Der Wissenschaften, 2017), 3.

The initial cultural transfer of camera media from Europe to Cambodia and the publics that were cultivated in the process are historical elements that should not be dismissed as unrelated to the Khmer Rouge's usage of photography and film, nor to how Cambodians use the media today to document and preserve individual and collective memories of the Khmer Rouge. Since its transfer to Cambodia, the camera has served as a primary instrument 'used by the collective memory to [select and] reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of society.'⁵⁶ Although both film and photography were conditioned, regulated, and even controlled under French colonial rule until Cambodia's independence in 1953, their eventual transfers were 'based on flows and needs constituted at the site.'⁵⁷ Moreover, despite the constraints brought on by colonial influence, it must be remembered that Cambodia 'had [its] own needs and developmental dynamics for the transfers they assimilated and transformed.'⁵⁸ Out of the Cambodian transformation of camera media was born a trajectory of images through which a sense of cultural 'identity is perpetuated.'⁵⁹

Colonial Photography

During the early part of the 20th century, photography in Cambodia was intimately linked with the French colonial missions spurred by George Groslier and supported by Cambodia's *Résident Supérieur*, François Marius Baudoin, to 'rescue' and preserve the 'art'

⁵⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 40.

⁵⁷ John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 12.

⁵⁸ Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, 12.

⁵⁹ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 47.

of the ‘Cambodian people;’⁶⁰ Cambodian arts and traditions that were ‘steeped in an ethnographical aesthetic,’⁶¹ which they identified as having suffered a ‘slow agony’ of ‘degeneration’⁶² due to the ‘turmoil’ of ‘Western civilisation installing itself.’⁶³ Groslier used the medium of photography to document the Cambodian arts and cultural traditions and ‘bring to life those crafts [of the Angkorean tradition] which have already disappeared.’⁶⁴ In this capacity, Groslier’s photographs today are representative of the complex interplay between photography as a vernacular skill rooted in documentation, and an artistic practice concerned with aesthetics.

A striking example is Groslier’s photographs of the Cambodian Royal Court Dancers (*Ikhaon hluong*, the ‘theatre of the king’),⁶⁵ dating to somewhere in the period between 1927 and 1930 (Figures 4.2-4.7). The archive of images is an early example of the meeting of photography and filmic characteristics in a Cambodian (albeit colonial) context. As *Ikhaon hluong* is an art form of performance through movement and theatrics, it at first seems that the medium of film might have been better suited to capture the vibrancy and essence of

⁶⁰ Ingrid Muan, ‘Citing Angkor: The “Cambodian Arts” in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000,’ (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2001), 28.

⁶¹ Ingrid Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 30.

⁶² Phrases used by RSC François Marius Baudoin in his speech for the inauguration of the Musée Albert Sarraut and the accompanying School, which took place on the 13th of April 1920. I was unable to locate a digital copy. Translated quotations cited in Ingrid Muan, ‘Citing Angkor: The “Cambodian Arts” in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000,’ (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2001), 20. Original text: François Marius Baudoin, *Inauguration* (pamphlet, NMC library), p.2.

⁶³ Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 20-2.

⁶⁴ Quotations translated and cited from Muan, ‘Citing Angkor,’ 20-2. Original text is in French and no digital copy is available: George Groslier, ‘Etude sur la psychologie de l’artisan cambodgien,’ *Arts et Archeologies khmers*, vol.I, parts I and II, 128.

⁶⁵ Suppya Hélène Nut, ‘The Glass Plate Negatives of the Cambodian Royal Dancers: Contested Memories,’ *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies*, December 2014, pp. 41-59, [05_A_SuppyaHeleneNut_Udaya12_A.pdf](https://yosothor.org) (yosothor.org), 41.

the choreographic movements. But Groslier was not attracted to the ephemerality of time associated with film, nor was he necessarily concerned with producing imagery for the purpose of entertaining the masses, *en masse*. The photographs were made with the precise intentions of rescuing, preserving, and immortalizing, the art of the royal court dance and ‘to present it with all its vibrancy and regained vitality to those who, caught in today’s times, would have forever deplored its loss.’⁶⁶



Figure 4.2: George Groslier, photographic documentation of Cambodian Royal Court Dancers (*Ikhaon hluong*, the ‘theatre of the king’), 1927, copyright National Museum of Cambodia, digital images made with the support of UNESCO and the French Institute. Image sourced from ‘The Glass Plate Negatives of the Cambodian Royal Dancers: Contested Memories,’ *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies*, December 2014, pp. 41-59.

⁶⁶ Quote by George Groslier dated 1928 as cited by Michelle Vachon, ‘Exhibition of Khmer Classical Dance Photos Opens in New York,’ *The Cambodia Daily*, April 1, 2013, [Exhibition of Khmer Classical Dance Photos Opens in New York - The Cambodia Daily](#).

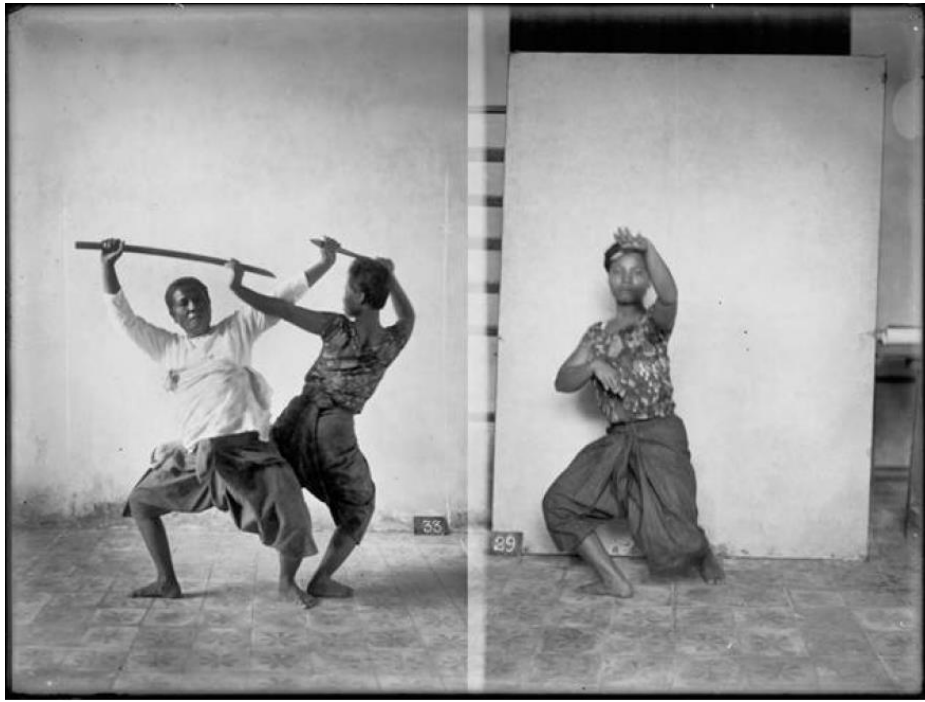


Figure 4.3: George Groslier, *Cambodian Royal Court Dancers* 1927, copyright National Museum of Cambodia, digital images made with the support of UNESCO and the French Institute. Image sourced from *UDAYA*, 'The Glass Plate Negatives of the Cambodian Royal Dancers.'



Figure 4.4: George Groslier, *Cambodian Royal Court Dancers* 1927, copyright National Museum of Cambodia, digital images made with the support of UNESCO and the French Institute. Image sourced from *UDAYA*, 'The Glass Plate Negatives of the Cambodian Royal Dancers.'



Figure 4.5: George Groslier, *Cambodian Royal Court Dancers 1927*, copyright National Museum of Cambodia, digital images made with the support of UNESCO and the French Institute. Image sourced from *UDAYA*, 'The Glass Plate Negatives of the Cambodian Royal Dancers.'



Figure 4.6: George Groslier, *Cambodian Royal Court Dancers 1927*, copyright National Museum of Cambodia, digital images made with the support of UNESCO and the French Institute. Image sourced from *UDAYA*, 'The Glass Plate Negatives of the Cambodian Royal Dancers.'



Figure 4.7: George Groslier, Cambodian Royal Court Dancers 1927, copyright National Museum of Cambodia, digital images made with the support of UNESCO and the French Institute. Image sourced from *UDAYA*, 'The Glass Plate Negatives of the Cambodian Royal Dancers.'

Using an approach similar to the chronophotography⁶⁷ technique, Groslier alternately posed members of the royal dance troupe who were dressed in unadorned rehearsal costumes, singularly and in pairs, either in front of a plain wall of the studio, or with a panel board in the background. With 'precise and meticulous' photographic technique, he captured key moments in the pre-animated positions and compositions made by the dancers.⁶⁸ Stopping time for the purpose of recording every detail of each pose was

⁶⁷ A chronophotograph is defined as 'a photograph or a series of photographs of a moving object taken to record and exhibit successive phases of the object's motion.' Company, *Photography and Cinema*, 22.

⁶⁸ Nut, 'The Glass Plate Negatives,' *UDAYA*, 45.

undoubtedly the reason behind Groslier's choice of medium, but collectively, and when displayed in sequence, the archive of photographs references the motion of film, the ephemerality of time, and the record of performance. As will be discussed here and in Chapter 5, this dynamic between film and photography takes on significance for contemporary Cambodian photographers, filmmakers, and artists who confront the collective and individual histories and memories of the Khmer Rouge as well as the challenges of doing so with little photographic records and *snarm*.

In a conversation with Southeast Asian photography researcher, Zhuang Wubin, art curator Erin Gleeson, suggested that Groslier's photographs of the royal court dancers should be perceived as a 'counter archive' to the S-21 photographs. In terms of how they visually operate, the two archives could not be more different; Groslier's portraits capture the vibrancy and vitality of the human body, and when observed in sequence, the photographs narrate choreographed movements. Contrastingly, the 'mute' (*koh*)⁶⁹ photographs of S-21 prisoners reveal the opaqueness of the photographic medium. Even when observed as a collective, it is impossible to discern what is going on in the S-21 photographs without more information.

It cannot be denied that Groslier's original intentions of rescuing and immortalising the Cambodian arts and traditions through photography were rooted in his fatalistic

⁶⁹ Boreth Ly, 'Of Performance and the Persistent Temporality of Trauma: Memory, Art, and Visions,' *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16, no. 1 (2008): pp. 109-130, [Of Performance and the Persistent Temporality of Trauma: Memory, Art, and Visions | positions | Duke University Press \(dukeupress.edu\)](https://doi.org/10.1215/08937245-00000118), 118.

colonial *mentalité* which was rooted in the belief that Western culture was contaminating the indigenous Khmer culture's 'unchanging artistic identity.'⁷⁰ However, there is undoubtedly truth in Groslier's assertion that the photographic record immortalises, for even after a photographic event has passed and the people involved are gone, the material picture remains.⁷¹

More than eight decades after their creation, the photographs of the court dancers made by George Groslier resurfaced with renewed meaning when the 450 surviving glass plate negatives were themselves 'discovered' and 'rescued' after having been neglected and stored in the National Museum's basement until the late 2000s and then exhibited to international publics beginning in 2011.⁷² Because so many archives were destroyed and damaged upon the Khmer Rouge's evacuation of Phnom Penh in 1975, not to mention that the photographic portrait itself fundamentally represents a 'bourgeois concept of subjectivity [and] selfhood,'⁷³ —two things that the CPK sought to eliminate during DK— it is remarkable that the glass plate negatives survived the destruction of the regime. Their survival and Groslier's 'immortalizing' of the royal court dance is made further poignant by

⁷⁰ Muan, 'Citing Angkor,' 28.

⁷¹ Sontag, *On Photography*, 11.

⁷² Since their rediscovery, the glass plate negatives have undergone restoration, cataloguing, digitisation, and research in a collaboration between the National Museum, l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), the French Institute, and UNESCO. Nut, 'The Glass Plate Negatives,' 41.

⁷³ Rick Crownshaw, 'Photography and Memory in Holocaust Museums,' *Mortality* 12, no. 2 (2007): pp. 176-192, [Photography and memory in Holocaust museums: Mortality: Vol 12, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](http://www.tandfonline.com), 184.

the fact that just ten percent of the artists that made up the royal dance troupe survived DK; the majority of its members died of starvation, disease, malnutrition, or murder.⁷⁴

Countering Groslier's motives, the CPK's systematic creation of the S-21 photographs was both directly and ironically associated with the policy of *kamtech*, which DK survivor and Cambodian filmmaker, Rithy Panh, explains, means to 'destroy and erase all trace: to *reduce to dust*. Let nothing remain, no trace of life, no trace of death. Let the death itself be erased.'⁷⁵ Boreth Ly elaborates that *kamtech* was not just a policy, but 'an ideological mandate...to crush any enemies of *Angkar*, thus leaving no traces of their identity, nor any memory of them.'⁷⁶ Therefore, the act of taking a photograph of an S-21 prisoner was a step in the process of the erasure of the victim's memory and identity. The irony lies in the sense that although the Tuol Sleng archives were created with the intention of eventually being destroyed,⁷⁷ the Khmer Rouge still thought the event of turning their enemies into dust was worth photographing in the first place. Adding to the irony is that the CPK chose to document the imprisonment of their enemies in the form of the photograph, the materiality of which- as already mentioned- confers 'a kind of immortality,'⁷⁸ upon the very people they wished to erase.

⁷⁴ Suppya Hélène Nut, 'The Royal Ballet of Cambodia: From ritual to a national identity,' *The Asia Dialogue* (blog) (University of Nottingham Asia Research Institute, January 9, 2019), [The Royal Ballet of Cambodia: From ritual to a national identity – Asia Dialogue \(theasiadialogue.com\)](https://theasiadialogue.com).

⁷⁵ Rithy Panh and Christophe Bataille, *The Elimination: A Survivor of the Khmer Rouge Confronts His Past and the Commandant of the Killing Fields*, trans. John Cullen (New York, NY: Other Press, 2012), 103.

⁷⁶ Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 17-8.

⁷⁷ Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 17.

⁷⁸ Sontag, *On Photography*, 10.

Despite how the portraits of the royal dance troupe counter the S-21 photographs in contemporary understandings, they, along with examples of early 20th century colonial picture postcards of Khmers and members of the royal family, also help shed light upon the oppressive social and relational patterns of 'othering' in colonial camera media, which the Khmer Rouge radically adopted and transformed into exercises of total social control and violent state surveillance. After DK, the colonial patterns of othering re-emerged in international presentations and receptions of the S-21 photographs. Susan Sontag makes the claim that photography is an assertion of 'a social rite, a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power.' In this context, the camera operator, or similarly, the oppressive governing body in control over camera media, holds the power to 'delimit photography's publics'⁷⁹ and can turn the people seen from the perspective of the camera lens 'into objects that can be symbolically possessed.'⁸⁰

Once again, Groslier's photographs of the Royal Court Dance troupe are useful illustrations. On June 14, 1927, *Résident supérieur au Cambodge* proclaimed *l'Ordonance royale No. 40*, giving the *Service des arts cambodgiens* (of which, Groslier was the director) control over the management of the Cambodian Royal Dance troupe.⁸¹ Though the Protectorate's control was short-lived, with the troupe officially returning under the auspice of the royal palace on June 13, 1930, it was in this time period that Groslier took the

⁷⁹ Phu, 'Afterimages of S-21,' *Photography and Its Publics*, 149.

⁸⁰ Sontag, *On Photography*, 14.

⁸¹ Sasagawa Hideo, 'Post/Colonial Discourses on the Cambodian Court Dance,' *Southeast Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (March 2005): pp. 418-441, [420403.pdf \(kyoto-seas.org\)](https://www.kyoto-seas.org/420403.pdf), 427.

photographs- and when the French Protectorate had the intention of displaying the Royal Court Dance troupe at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris.⁸² The act of photographing the dance troupe was therefore a component in the French Empire's broader surveillance of their colonial assets and further justification for Cambodia's control with the purpose of fulfilling their 'magnificent role'⁸³ of preserving 'Angkor for the world.'⁸⁴ Under the French Protectorate, it was, Penny Edwards explains, the 'business' and responsibility of Cambodians 'to be observed, not to observe...'⁸⁵ for placing the camera in the hands of Cambodians was arguably to rupture the indigenous Khmer culture's 'authentic' attributes and 'natural' artistic evolution.⁸⁶ Ingrid Muan asserts that this preservation of 'authentic Cambodian art' was the French Empire's response against their own anxiety over preserving and guarding the perceived superior status of modern French art and culture.⁸⁷

The picture postcard was the most common French colonial usage of photography to retain on their colonized subjects their 'function of ornament to the grand European view,' (Figure 4.8)⁸⁸ Among the most popular postcards were portraits of King Sisowath (Figures 4.9 and 4.10).⁸⁹ A form of propaganda, the postcards were circulated internationally during the first half of the twentieth century —the peak of France's colonial

⁸² Zhuang 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 244.

⁸³ Muan, 'Citing Angkor,' 34.

⁸⁴ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation ; 1850-1945* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 151.

⁸⁵ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 151.

⁸⁶ Muan, 'Citing Angkor,' 34.

⁸⁷ Muan, 'Citing Angkor,' 20-2.

⁸⁸ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 152.

⁸⁹ Zhuang 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 246.

rule in Cambodia— and were intended to advertise the exoticized French vision of the Cambodian protectorate in order to help ‘perpetuate the myth that...[France] discovered this great Khmer civilization...and it was the French mission to restore it,’ to its former Angkorean glory.⁹⁰ Joel Montague, a collector and historian of the French colonial picture postcards of Cambodia, asserts that these photographs are often overlooked by historians today because though ‘pretty,’ they do not reflect ‘historical fact’ or the ‘real’ Cambodia.⁹¹ While this observation by historians is certainly true, it has meant that much of the historical insights into the French colonial *mentalité* that the postcards and their circulation have to offer in relation to contemporary Cambodian socio-cultural negotiations of camera media- specifically photography- as artistic practices, in addition to the ways international publics continue to contextualize, misappropriate, and perceive the S-21 prisoner identification photographs as part of the broader trajectory of Cambodian photography and *selapak*, remain under researched. However, there are two notable examples involving the S-21 photographs that convey how the colonial desire to *rescue* and symbolically possess ‘the other’ through photography, continue to permeate into contemporary international frameworks of Cambodian art and photography discourse, ultimately distorting -and frequently side lining- more progressive historical lines of inquiry relating to the Khmer Rouge and the S-21 photographs.

⁹⁰ Joel Montague in an interview with Phelim Kyne, ‘Constructing Colonial Cambodia,’ *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 17, 2000, [Constructing colonial Cambodia | Phnom Penh Post](#).

⁹¹ Montague with Phelim Kyne, in ‘Constructing Colonial Cambodia,’ *The Phnom Penh Post*.

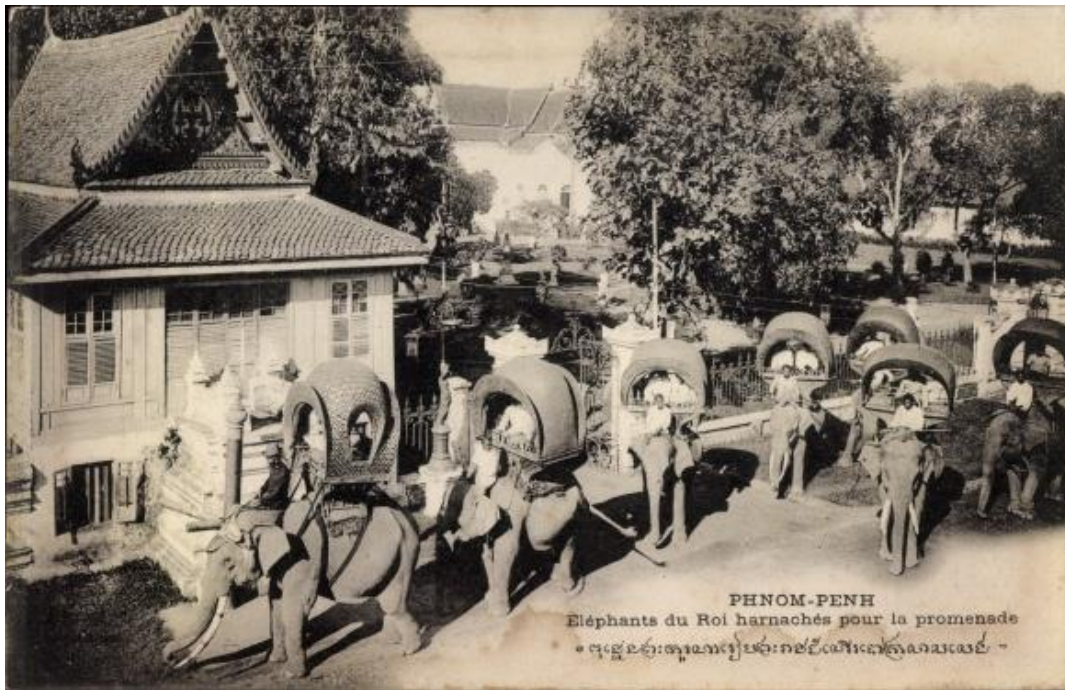


Figure 4.8: Vintage picture postcard, The King's elephants in Phnom Penh, accessed December 30, 2021. [History of Elephants in Cambodia | Ancient Adventures Cambodia \(wordpress.com\)](https://www.ancientadventures.com/history-of-elephants-in-cambodia/).



Figure 4.9: Vintage postcard of King Sisowath, April 1904, Getty Images. Figure 4.10: Vintage postcard of King Sisowath ca. 1910.

The first instance occurred in the 1990s when two American photojournalists, Douglas Niven, and Christopher Riley, formed the non-profit organisation, The Photo Archive Group, which initially worked with Cornell University in a large-scale preservation project involving the S-21 photographs. The controversy arose when Niven and Riley approached the Cambodian government⁹² and asked for rights to a selection of S-21 photographs that were not a part of the Cornell University preservation project in exchange for the Photo Archive Group's preservation efforts.⁹³ Of the approximately 6,000 S-21 prisoner identification photographs known to exist, The Photo Archive Group hand-selected 100 negatives for ownership rights based on 'photographic quality, historical value and'...had the objective of presenting 'an accurate cross section of Tuol Sleng,'⁹⁴ which one historian has likened with the Nazi practice of selecting who among the concentration camp prisoners were to live and die.⁹⁵ Indeed, the photograph selection process undertaken by Niven and Riley raises numerous ethical concerns, for regardless of what their selection criterium was based on (be it aesthetic or historical), it was a metaphorical imposition wherein the lives of some photographs were saved, or rather, granted the opportunity to become iconic representations of the Cambodian Genocide, whilst the portraits of prisoners

⁹² Rachel Hughes, 'The Abject Artefacts of Memory: Photographs from Cambodia's Genocide,' *Media, Culture & Society* 25, no. 1 (2003): pp. 23-44, [The abject artefacts of memory: photographs from Cambodia's genocide - Rachel Hughes, 2003 \(sagepub.com\)](#), 29.

⁹³ French, 'Exhibiting Terror,' *Truth Claims*, 133.

⁹⁴ Initial project proposal by The Photo Archive Group that is unpublished. Quotes are cited from Hughes, 'The Abject Artefacts of Memory,' *Media, Culture & Society*, 37-8.

⁹⁵ Paul Williams, 'Witnessing Genocide: Vigilance and Remembrance at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek,' *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 2 (January 2004): pp. 234-254, [Witnessing Genocide: Vigilance and Remembrance at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek | Holocaust and Genocide Studies | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#), 245.

that were not selected were condemned to another death, or, a selective unseeing and therefore remaining unknown and in the peripheries of international public awareness.

According to Rachel Hughes's consultation of the unpublished Photo Archive Group project proposal, no mention was made of the granting of rights to the photographs, and Niven and Riley constructed the perception of Cambodia's custodianship over the images as being 'neglected,' 'endangered,' and 'threatened by a volatile political situation.'⁹⁶ Steeping The Photo Archive Group's copyright ownership of the selected photographs into further controversy was Niven and Riley's decision to make the portfolio of images available to institutions at a price, thus effectively transforming photographs of atrocity with what they claimed as 'an unknown authorship,' into commodified neo-colonial spoils of "'exotic" temporal, geographical and cultural origin.'⁹⁷ Lindsay French cites that the exhibition fee the Photo Archive Group decided on, was kept low so as to encourage small galleries and community museums to display the photographs.⁹⁸ The goal, Christopher Riley explained, 'was to get the pictures out into the world, to enable more people to see them, and perhaps be inclined to learn something more about Cambodia.'⁹⁹ This desire eventually led to the photos being 'trafficked'¹⁰⁰ as artistic commodities in the international photography and

⁹⁶ Hughes, 'The Abject Artefacts of Memory,' *Media, Culture & Society*, 29-30.

⁹⁷ Hughes, 'The Abject Artefacts of Memory,' *Media, Culture & Society*, 36.

⁹⁸ French, 'Exhibiting Terror,' *Truth Claims*, 134.

⁹⁹ Christopher Riley as quoted in French, 'Exhibiting Terror,' *Truth Claims*, 134.

¹⁰⁰ Aside from MoMA, selections of the 100 photographs copyrighted by Niven and Riley were exhibited in several renowned museums including the Ansel Adams Center for Photography in San Francisco, the Photographic Resource Center in Boston, the Museum of Design in Zurich, the Museet for Photokunst in Odense, Denmark, the Australian Center for Photography in Sydney, and the Recontres Internationales de la Photographie in Arles, France. French, 'Exhibiting Terror,' *Truth Claims*, 134.

high art markets, first in 1996 with the publication of 78 of the prints in a 150 dollars (current retail price), 9x12 inch casebound art-photography book published by the company Twin Palms and entitled *The Killing Fields* (Figure 4.11), and then a display of 22 of the selected photographs by the New York Museum of Modern Art, who in turn, chose 8 to purchase for its collection. Michelle Caswell notes that despite a significant amount of public outcry over the sale of the prints, Niven and Riley also managed to sell images to the Los Angeles County Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. According to Youk Chhang, the two photographers also attempted to sell copies to DC-Cam.¹⁰¹

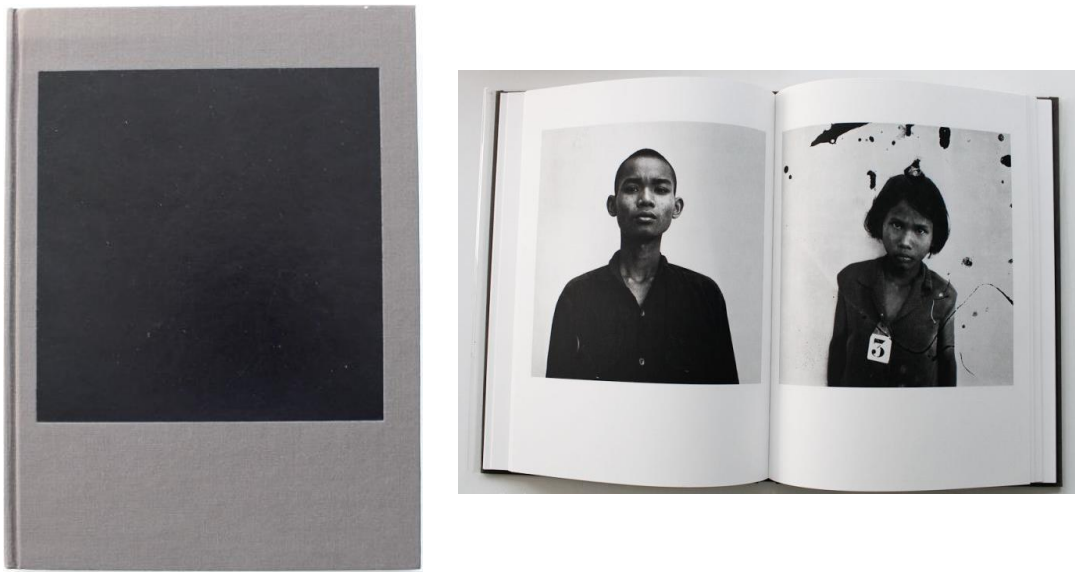


Figure 4.11: Cover and inside detail of *The Killing Fields* by Douglas Niven and Christopher Riley, 1996, 9x12 inch casebound photography book, Twin Palms Publishers. Image sourced from [Killing Fields by Chris Riley / Douglas Niven \(amstelbooks.com\)](http://KillingFieldsbyChrisRiley/DouglasNiven/amstelbooks.com).

The 1997 MoMA exhibition, *Photographs from S-21: 1975-1979* (Figures 4.12. and 4.13), offered a paragraph-long text about Cambodian history from 1975 to 1979. Most of

¹⁰¹ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 75.

the exhibit's brief explanatory text however, was dedicated to facilitating a narrow explanation of the restoration process, which credited The Photo Archive Group with restoring all 6,000 negatives:

'The Khmer Rouge fell from power in 1979 and S-21 was converted into the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide. Six thousand negatives remained and were cleaned, catalogued and printed by the Photo Archive Group, a nonprofit organisation founded by Americans Chris Riley and Doug Niven in 1993. When they saw the original 6 x 6 cm negatives in an old cabinet at the museum, they recognised that these powerful images warranted viewing by a larger audience. One hundred negatives were selected for the final printing; many of which are reproduced and published in booked form in *The Killing Fields* in 1996.'¹⁰²



Figure 4.12: Thomas Griesel, 'Installation view of the exhibition "Photographs from S-21: 1975-1979,"' May 15, 1997-October 7, 1997, *Museum of Modern Art, New York Photographic Archive*, accessed December 30, 2021.

¹⁰² Adrienne Williams, *Photographs from S-21: 1975-1979* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1997), *Photographs from S-21, 1975-1979* (moma.org), 3-4.



Figure 4.13: Thomas Griesel, 'Installation view of the exhibition "Photographs from S-21: 1975-1979,"' inside Gallery 3, May 15, 1997-October 7, 1997, *Museum of Modern Art, New York Photographic Archive*, accessed December 30, 2021.

In its neglect to mention that the restoration and preservation processes involved a number of institutions, organisations, and individuals (as discussed in more detail in Chapter 2), MoMA instilled within exhibition attendees a sense that Niven and Riley had discovered the negatives. Even more, the text made no qualms about attributing The Photo Archive Group's recognition of the value of the photographs to their rescue from the fate of decaying away in a rusty cabinet. Although Tuol Sleng's storage of the negatives prior to the preservation and restoration project was unobjectively below standards, MoMA's crediting The Photo Archive Group with the discovery of the negatives and shedding light on their

humanitarian value was an overt disregard for the initial discovery and display of the photographs by the Vietnamese nearly twenty years earlier. MoMA's statement that Niven and Riley 'recognised that these powerful images warranted viewing by a larger audience,' is ironic considering Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, along with their displays of photographs and human remains, had by 1997 'long been considered centres of "typical evidences" in Cambodia.'¹⁰³

In 2003, Rachel Hughes assigned the public knowledge of the S-21 prisoner identification photographs as being 'inextricably linked to the activities of the Photo Archive Group.'¹⁰⁴ Now, more than two decades in retrospect, it is clear that the actions of The Photo Archive Group are part of a longer trajectory of misappropriation and misconstrued international public perceptions that are originally rooted in colonial *mentalité* which extend into the present day. In April 2021, as writing for this chapter was being undertaken, a gross misappropriation of a selection of S-21 photographs occurred, sparking an international scandal. This contemporary incident may be historically contextualised as a 'moment of colonial reckoning,' in the field of international public history, raising the important questions of whose narrative constructs continue to be given privilege within interpretative spaces and why.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Hughes, 'The Abject Artefacts of Memory,' *Media, Culture & Society*, 35.

¹⁰⁴ Hughes, 'The Abject Artefacts of Memory,' *Media, Culture & Society*, 32.

¹⁰⁵ Amy Lonetree, 'Decolonizing Museums, Memorials, and Monuments,' *The Public Historian* 43, no. 4 (January 2021): pp. 21-27, [Decolonizing Museums, Memorials, and Monuments | The Public Historian | University of California Press \(ucpress.edu\)](https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/the-public-historian).

On the 9th of April 2021, the popular online media outlet *Vice*, published an interview with Irish photographic colourist and digital manipulator, Matt Loughrey, along with a handful of S-21 photographs he had digitally modified.¹⁰⁶ Loughrey's business, called My Colorful Past, claims to bridge 'a gap between history and art' through the colourisation and enhancement of historical photographs.¹⁰⁷ Each of the S-21 photographs featured in the *Vice* article contained alterations of varying degrees, although in the article, both Loughrey and *Vice* cited colourisation as being the extent of the 'restoration.' In truth, Loughrey had gone beyond colourisation in the majority of the photographs by doctoring victims' expressions so that they appeared to be smiling. Then in the *Vice* interview, he falsely stated that the smiles of the victims were authentic to the original photographs, adding that he observed how women were more likely than men to be smiling in their S-21 mug shot. This statement was among several inaccurate presumptions, some of which include:

'I think a lot of it has to do with nervousness...Also-and I'm making an educated guess- whoever was taking the photographs and who was present in the room might have spoken differently to the women than they did the men.

'I can tell that the children weren't fully aware.

'Some of the women were exceptionally nervous. And some of the men, well, their images just *speak for themselves*.'¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ The article was removed from the internet on the 11th of April 2021. Quotes were taken directly from the article before its removal. However, the quotes are not available for reference except through screenshots taken by the author. In keeping with the decision to not visually reference the S-21 photographs out of respect for the victims and to avoid perpetuating their misappropriation, no figures of the altered photographs are included for direct reference in the thesis. If the reader would like to see examples of the altered images please refer to: 'Victimised again: Colourised altered images of "smiling" S-21 prisoners condemned,' *Khmer Times*, April 12, 2021, [Victimised again: Colourised altered images of 'smiling' S-21 prisoners condemned - Khmer Times \(khmertimeskh.com\)](https://www.khmertimeskh.com/victimised-again-colourised-altered-images-of-smiling-s-21-prisoners-condemned/).

¹⁰⁷ See My Colorful Past's official website: [Portfolio | My Colorful Past](https://www.mycolorfulpast.com/).

¹⁰⁸ Emphasis mine.

Considering the discussion of this chapter thus far, these direct quotes illustrate how Loughrey's presentation of DK history through photographic images is fundamentally misguided. As Michael Kimmelman stated in response to the MoMA exhibition in 1997, 'no matter how closely we look at a photograph, it stays mute: this is...a basic fact about photography.'¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, rather than basing his assertions on historical research, Loughrey wrongfully projected his own imagination, speculations, and fantasies about the photographs and placed the burden of narrating the entire history of S-21 and the Khmer Rouge onto historical photographic records, which he extensively altered to the point that the images could be considered falsified documents of history. In addition, what made his statements exceptionally precarious is that they served as the historical basis for publics who were reading the article and may have had little to no prior knowledge about the Khmer Rouge, S-21, and Democratic Kampuchea. As *Vice* did not include the original photographs, for anyone who had never encountered the mug shots before the *Vice* publication would have perhaps inferred and trusted that Loughrey conducted historical research on the S-21 archives, received the necessary permission to undertake his project, and simply added colour to the original black and white images.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Kimmelman, 'Poignant Faces of the Soon-to-Be-Dead,' *The New York Times*, June 20, 1997, sec. C, pp. 1-23, [Poignant Faces of the Soon-to-Be-Dead - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/20/arts/20faces.html).



KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA

NATION RELIGION KING

MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND FINE ARTS

Announcement

Reference: Vice website titled These People Were Arrested by the Khmer Rouge and Never Seen Again dated on 09 April 2021.

Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts is informing that recently, an Irish photographer Matt Loughney posted some photos of victims of the former Khmer Rouge prison S-21 through the Vice website. The photos had been colorized and also edited in part, mainly by altering the expression in the faces to make the victims appear to be smiling.

MCFA does not accept this kind of manipulation, and considers this work of Matt Loughney to seriously affect the dignity of the victims, the reality of Cambodia's history, and in violation of the rights of the Museum as the lawful owners and custodians of these photographs.

MCFA would like to inform the public that it has never been in communication with Mr.Loughney and that all use of archives from the Museum (including these photographs as well as millions of pages of paper documents) must comply with Cambodia's 2005 Archives Act and the terms of use of material from the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum archives.

MCFA would like to take this opportunity to call Matt Loughney and Vice to remove these images from their media. We urge researchers, artists and the public not to manipulate any historical source to respect the victims.

MCFA will consider to take legal action (both national and international), if Matt Loughney does not comply with the above request.

Phnom Penh, 11 April 2021



Address : 227, Preah Norodom Blvd, Khan Chamcar Mom,
Phnom Penh, Kingdom of Cambodia,

Tel : 023 218 148, E-mail : info@mcf.gov.kh,
www.mcf.gov.kh,

Figure 4.14: Announcement by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in relation to altered S-21 images, April 11, 2021, *Twitter*.

Another grave error Loughrey made in the interview was stating that he was in contact with and ‘talking to the museum about making these photos accessible to everybody.’ His words in the interview gave readers the false impression that he had established a relationship with the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (the official custodians of the S-21 photographic archive), and that the Museum had granted Loughrey permission to colourise and publish the photos. However, on the 11th of April, two days after *Vice* published the interview and photographs, Cambodia’s Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts released an official statement confirming that the photographs were altered beyond colourisation and that Loughrey had never been in contact with either the Museum or the Ministry (Figure 4.14). The statement then condemned Loughrey’s alterations and *Vice*’s online publication, ending with a call for the article’s removal. As news of the altered photographs and the *Vice* article spread, the Cambodian and Cambodian diaspora communities across the globe immediately responded by creating and circulating an online petition demanding the removal of the publication as well as apologies from Loughrey and *Vice*. In response, *Vice* took down the article on the 11th of April and issued an apology statement in both English and Khmer on the 16th.

Although the doctored images alone were worthy of the international uproar that ensued as media outlets around the world covered the scandal, it is the collective, internationalised neo-colonial mentality represented by the deceitful, unethical addition of smiles to the victims of S-21 that requires further consideration. In the subheading of the article, *Vice* explained that Loughrey’s colourisation of the S-21 photographs was intended

to ‘humanise the tragedy.’ It can be surmised that Loughrey believed his skills alone would save Cambodia from the black and white images of what he perceived as a distant, unrelatable past and simultaneously rescue the photographs and their history from oblivion. A startling observation is how Loughrey’s notion to assign himself the role of a saviour was almost indistinguishable from Niven and Riley’s assertions about the very same photographs more than twenty years before. Niven described the ‘discovery’ of the negatives by explaining, ‘we pulled out some of the negatives and held them up to the light. In that initial moment, we knew we had to print them.’¹¹⁰ Riley’s version supplied even more credit to the Photo Archive Group: ‘As photographers, finding this material and recognising we could do something [with them] with our training, there was never a question of why. It was like *this has to be done*.’¹¹¹ Similarly, Loughrey described how the more images he saw, the more he ‘thought, well, this [‘humanisation’ through digital manipulation] has to be done. *This just has to be done*...’¹¹²

Perhaps Loughrey’s attempt to ‘humanise’ the tragedy of genocide by colourising and altering the authentic expressions of photographed subjects would have been written in the footnotes of history as an ignorant attempt made by a Western, white male, to symbolically rescue victims of genocide from their violent reality and the hostile gaze of

¹¹⁰ Douglas Niven, ‘Secrets of S-21: Legacy of a Cambodian Prison,’ *BBC*, as quoted by Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 71.

¹¹¹ Christopher Riley, ‘Secrets of S-21: Legacy of a Cambodian Prison,’ as quoted by Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 71.

¹¹² The *Vice* article has since been removed. Quote from a screenshot of the article taken by me. Emphasis is mine.

their perpetrators, were it not for the fact that it was entangled with other highly problematic motives. Like Niven and Riley who commodified the photographs under the guise of the non-profit Photo Archive Group, Loughrey's 'rescue' was a transaction devised for his own professional as well as financial benefit. Unlike the Photo Archive Group however, My Colorful Past is a for-profit business; on My Colorful Past's website and Instagram, Loughrey clearly denotes fixed-rate prices for the various services he offers and conducted on the S-21 photographs. Every Instagram post showcases his work, and several captions contain phrases such as 'Realism and relatability for €49'; "'A service with a smile" is available and it's something often requested. For €49 your family photographs restored, colored authentically and with great care'; 'You too can see your family photographs brought to life with vivid realism'; 'Available now, X-Oculi [starting at €99] brings about motion with realism, combined with restoration and color it makes for an experience like no other- this is your past brought to life.'¹¹³ Although the two S-21 photographs Loughrey featured on My Colorful Past's Instagram account (which were taken down two weeks after the *Vice* publication) did not include prices in the caption and were instead used to publicise the *Vice* article and the non-existent commission by Tuol Sleng and families of the photographed victims, Loughrey was potentially still profiting from genocidal images that he had neither the right nor permission to use. To this end, the photographs became

¹¹³ See My Colorful Past's Instagram page: [Photo & Film Restoration \(@my_colorful_past\) • Instagram photos and videos](#).

commodities in My Colorful Past's extensive public portfolio that served as examples to Loughrey's professional skills and services.

Ultimately, Loughrey's lack of transparency in relation to the extent which the photographs were modified, not only bolstered the argument made by historians that the process of colourising photographs is a falsification of history and the historical record, it also effectively reinforced how the added smiles erased the singular element of humanity that a record which visually documents the 'actual confrontation between victims and killers,'¹¹⁴ could possibly offer: the original, authentic expressions of victims captured in the moments their photographs were taken. Consequently, the *Vice* and Loughrey scandal is likely to remain at the forefront of discussions on the ethics of making public history about the Khmer Rouge using the S-21 photographs.

From Niven and Riley's copyright ownership of 100 of the S-21 photographs, to MoMA's controversial exhibition, and finally Matt Loughrey's colourisation project as featured by *Vice*, a question at the fore is, who has the right to determine and shape the historical memories of genocide? None of these instances brought publics closer to the identities and lives of the individuals who are depicted in the photographs, nor was there an apparent concern over the rights of victims and survivors of genocide. In truth, even more distance was created between viewers and photographed victims because the narratives were centred around the 'discoveries' and 'rescuers,' while the faces of the

¹¹⁴ Kimmelman, 'Poignant Faces,' *The New York Times*.

victims of S-21 remained anonymous. In MoMA's exhibition for example, despite Niven and Riley having supplied the museum with five of the photographed victims' names, the only information displayed for all 22 photographs in the exhibition read, 'Photographer unknown. Untitled. 1975-1979. Gelatin-silver print. 14x11.'¹¹⁵

Moving to the present, 24 years after MoMA's exhibition, Loughrey's approach demonstrated another overt disregard for victims' and survivors' rights; he provided identities and biographies to some victims' photographs, but not to others, whose photographs he simply labelled as 'an unknown woman smiles,' and 'an unknown woman shows signs of injury,' despite claiming that he had permission and requests to alter individual photographs from victims' families (which would have meant that the identities of the victims were in fact, *known*). One of the mugshots Loughrey provided details about was of a man named Khva Leang, a former teacher and a Khmer Rouge sympathiser who is remembered by his surviving brother as an idealist who 'wanted to look for someone who can care for the people. To give people fairness.'¹¹⁶ But Loughrey incorrectly misidentified Khva Leang as 'Bora' and the caption below his photograph simply read 'Bora, frozen in time glancing to his right for unknown reasons.'¹¹⁷ Loughrey claimed to have been commissioned by 'Bora's' family to colourise his photograph (Khva Leang's photograph was one of the few that was seemingly unaltered beyond colourisation). Two days after the article was

¹¹⁵ Williams, *Photographs from S-21: 1975-1979*, 6.

¹¹⁶ Senyit Chim in Alastair McCready and Andrew Haffner, 'Photoshopping History: The True Story behind the Smirking Man of Tuol Sleng,' *Southeast Asia Globe*, April 12, 2021, [Photoshopping history: The true story behind the smirking man of Tuol Sleng \(southeastasiaglobe.com\)](https://southeastasiaglobe.com/photoshopping-history-the-true-story-behind-the-smirking-man-of-tuol-sleng/).

¹¹⁷ McCready and Haffner, 'Photoshopping History,' *Southeast Asia Globe*.

published, Senyit Chim, who lives in San Diego, California, was surprised to see his brother Khva Leang's portrait being circulated online by people worldwide. Making the encounter more upsetting to Leang's brother and other surviving family members was the fact that 'every detail about him, even down to his name, was incorrect.'¹¹⁸ Loughrey described 'Bora' as 'a simple farmer' who had been electrocuted and set on fire, citing the details of 'Bora' as having come from his son, who requested My Colourful Past's services.

In this regard, the *Vice* article raised the possibility of a surviving son of Khva Leang, but Senyit Chim and his two other siblings confirmed that it was highly improbable that Khva Leang and his wife (who was also killed during DK) had any children that survived the regime. The couple 'had one child and perhaps a second before the end...' but as far as everyone knew, the children were also killed. Details of their deaths, including Leang's, were unknown to the surviving family. Thus, hearing about Leang's violent death and what he went through at S-21, whether true and verifiable or not, was undoubtedly immensely distressing to the confirmed surviving family members, none of whom either gave Loughrey permission to use Khva Leang's photograph, or ever requested My Colourful Past's alteration services.

In an interview with *Southeast Asia Globe* published the day after the *Vice* article was taken down, Senyit Chim explained, 'I was disappointed that they gave the wrong

¹¹⁸ McCready and Haffner, 'Photoshopping History,' *Southeast Asia Globe*.

information, so I wrote to Lydia [my daughter] that I wish they would know the real information about this brother...My brother number three.'¹¹⁹

Reflecting on what may be termed patterns of 'selective unseeing'¹²⁰ in the now 42-year history of international presentation of the S-21 photographs, the trajectory conveys how the publics' perception of individual victims and survivors of the Cambodian Genocide have been limited to narrative constructs of a globalised neo-colonial culture disguised as 'intervention' and 'representational' politics. In turn, the immense amount individual and collective suffering of survivors and victims have been continually decontextualised for the purpose of showcasing an aestheticized universal narrative of 'man's inhumanity to man.'¹²¹ The examples of The Photo Archive Group, MoMA, *Vice*, and Matt Loughrey, therefore effectively underscore the ongoing need for historians to examine how their production of history, and historical narration utilizing photography, might retain strains of colonial thought-processes that overshadow, and perhaps entirely omit, narratives of victims and survivors through the favouring of perspectives that lend 'a certain heroism' to obtaining control over and possession of, photographic records, as if images of victims are exotic colonial spoils of an ideologically distant cultural history.

¹¹⁹ Chim in McCready and Haffner, 'Photoshopping History,' *Southeast Asia Globe*.

¹²⁰ Phu, 'Afterimages of S-21,' *Photography and Its Publics*, 150.

¹²¹ French, 'Exhibiting Terror,' *Truth Claims*, 140.

Colonial Cinema and *kon Khmer*



Figure 4.15: gnomeandi, *Ikhaon sbaek* or, Khmer shadow puppet theatre, April 13, 2011, Shutterstock.



Figure 4.16: Movie poster for the first international film festival in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, November 1968, in *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, by Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan (Phnom Penh: reyum Publishing, 2001), 141.

Colonial influence over the perpetuation of Khmer identity through cinema initially appears less overt than photography. Perhaps a reason for this is that cinema history, unlike photography, is often spectator-positioned and assessed for the experience of entertainment, movement, narrative, and performance. Additionally, cinema is traditionally made for the masses, consumed by masses, and frequently experienced *en masse*. Thus, in many instances, the *production* of both publics and cultural identity through cinema are simply evaluated based on mass social *consumption*.¹²² As Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan explain, 'if we think of cinema as a form of telling stories on a lighted screen to an assembled audience, then...Cambodia has a long tradition of such projected narratives in its shadow puppet plays, or *Ikhaon sbaek*,' (Figure 4.15)¹²³ In fact, the shadow puppet plays are so like cinema that another name for them is 'Khmer film,' or, *kon Khmer* (Figure 4.16).¹²⁴ To this end, film technology and the social history of its spectatorship fit seamlessly within Cambodian constructs of cultural identity. Therefore, it was a subtle way in which colonisers (France and later in the 1950s, the United States) attempted to win 'the hearts and minds' of the Khmer people (Figures 4.17 and 4.18).¹²⁵ It was not until the late 1940s,

¹²² Miriam Hansen, 'Alexander Kluge, Cinema and the Public Sphere: The Construction Site of Counter-History,' *Discourse* 6 (1983): pp. 53-74, [Alexander Kluge, Cinema and the Public Sphere: The Construction Site of Counter-History on JSTOR](#), 53.

¹²³ The *Lakhaoun sbaek* tradition predates the Angkorean period. For a brief synopsis see: [Sbek Thom, Khmer shadow theatre - intangible heritage - Culture Sector - UNESCO](#).

Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950's and 1960's* (Phnom Penh, KH: Reyum, 2001), 143.

¹²⁴ Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 143.

¹²⁵ Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 341-2.

starting with the young King Sihanouk, that Cambodians themselves began experimenting with cinema technology.¹²⁶



Figure 4.17: The Cinematographic Mission of the Government of Indochina, 1917-18 *Revue Indochinoise*, March 1919, in *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, by Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan (Phnom Penh: reyum Publishing, 2001), 143.

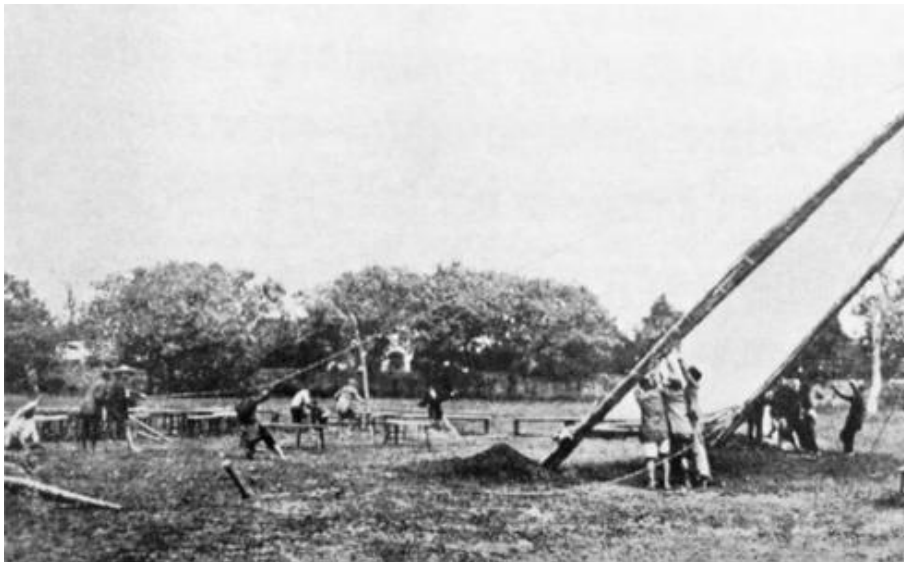


Figure 4.18: Raising the screen that was used to show films as part of the Cinematographic Mission of the Government of Indochina, *Revue Indochinoise*, March 1919, in *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, by Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan (Phnom Penh: reyum Publishing, 2001), 143.

¹²⁶ Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 143.

This transition into the discussion of film and its transfer from colonial overseers to the Cambodian culture is an opportune moment to emphasise the difference between an 'audience' and a 'public.' A mass audience and spectatorship does not always produce a public. In the words of Thy Phu, 'for a public to emerge, there must be some sense of mutual recognition, dialogue and debate.'¹²⁷ Although Cambodians had started going to the movies as early as 1909, where they would view mainly French, but also a handful of American films that were imported under the French Protectorate, the engaged Cambodian public was limited to intellectual groups that spoke French. Cambodian filmmaker, Ly Bun Yim, reasons that 'the ordinary working people couldn't understand French and didn't want to learn it, so why should they go and see French films?'¹²⁸

In 1951, while still under the French Protectorate, the Ministry of Information established the Office of Film and upon Cambodian independence, its charge was transferred to Cambodian authorities. It was from this point that a variety of foreign films began to be circulated and viewed within Cambodia. During this time, the Office of Film increased the number of Indian, Chinese, and Thai films entering Cambodia, with Indian films (that had live Khmer language translation¹²⁹) gaining the most popularity among Cambodian moviegoers because their legendary and supernatural thematic elements could be related to those found in Cambodian folklore and religious traditions.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Phu, 'Afterimages of S-21,' *Photography and Its Publics*, 151.

¹²⁸ Ly Bun Yim interview with *Reyum*, Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 186.

¹²⁹ Yvon Hem in an interview with *Reyum*, Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 167.

¹³⁰ Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 145.

Around the same time beginning in 1954, the United States Information Service (USIS) began making documentaries and using film for the purposes of public engagement, education, and Cold War propaganda aimed at converting Cambodia to join the US anti-communist movement. The USIS not only had ‘cinecars’ (Figure 4.19) that travelled to villages throughout the country showing films depicting American life, education, health, and foreign affairs, but they also trained Cambodians to operate, maintain, and repair equipment and teach skills necessary for filmmaking —i.e. camera operation, editing, and sound technology— in order to include Khmer language films as part of their mobile film operation (Figure 4.20). By 1958, the film section of the USIS included thirty-two Cambodian staff and just one American director. In that year alone, they produced four documentaries, twelve training shows, and twenty-six newsreels, all of which were in Khmer.



Figure 4.19: USIS Cinecar, 1958, *US National Archives*, RG286 CAM-58-06, in *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, by Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan (Phnom Penh: reyum Publishing, 2001), 146.



Figure 4.20: USIS sponsored course on film projector maintenance, 1957, in *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, by Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan (Phnom Penh: reyum Publishing, 2001), 147.

While the United States may have had a hand in cultivating engaged publics and transferring skillsets in camera media, it cannot be overstressed that their activities in Cambodia and the greater region of Southeast Asia were primarily carried out for self-serving purposes, with the international context of the Cold War being the main concern.¹³¹ Genuine interest in long-term local and regional success beyond the scope of keeping Cambodia and its neighbouring countries from falling under communist influence was not a motive for the US's engagement in the region, which they simply referred to as

¹³¹ Telegram from the Embassy in Cambodia to the Commander in Chief, Pacific, (Stump) Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, East Asian Security; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XXI - Office of the Historian. See also 'Letter From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson to the Ambassador in Cambodia (McClintock)', Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, East Asian Security; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XXI - Office of the Historian.

'Indochina.' Nonetheless, it was the activities of the United States that led to another meeting of photography and film, although this time rather than a coloniser controlling the camera, it was a young Cambodian who would soon become 'Cambodia's premiere filmmaker'¹³² in the heyday of Cambodian cinema.

In an eight-week period between late 1956 and early 1957, the USIS hosted a series of performances, events, and exhibitions throughout Cambodia that were part of an event called the 'American Festival,'¹³³ (Figure 4.21) which was formulated in response to Cambodia's increasing engagement with Communist China, the Soviet Union, and eastern-bloc countries. Two photography exhibitions were included in the festival, with one showcasing "'prize winning American photographs" including a "collection of outstanding photographs taken in Cambodia" by USIS photographers,' and the other (called 'Life in America') displaying photographs of life in the United States, so that Cambodians could take 'an imaginary trip to a great friendly nation in the West,' (Figure 4.22).¹³⁴ A competition that was part of the former exhibition, encouraged Cambodian students to submit entries that took after the American photographs of Cambodia displayed in the exhibit.¹³⁵ In a conversation with Ingrid Muan in 2000, Ly Bun Yim, who was a student at the Lycée

¹³² Zhuang 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 246.

¹³³ Muan, 'Citing Angkor,' 240-4.

¹³⁴ Muan, 'Citing Angkor,' 244.

¹³⁵ Muan, 'Citing Angkor,' 244.

Sihanouk in Kampong Cham in 1956,¹³⁶ recalled the competition as the reason he began taking pictures.¹³⁷

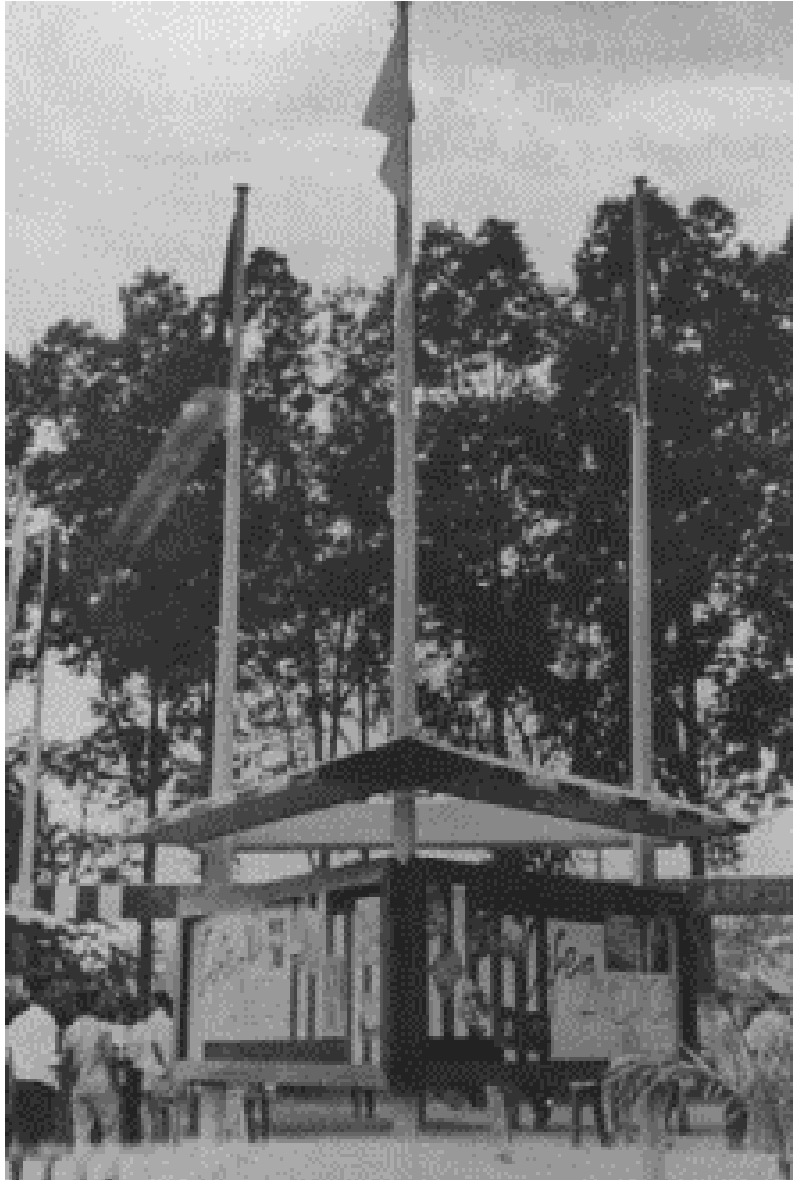


Figure 4.21: The American Festival, 1956-7, *Free World*, volume 6, #11. Image sourced from 'States of Panic: Procedures of the Present in 1950s Cambodia,' *UDAYA Journal of Khmer Studies* 6 (2005): pp. 57-68, 61.

¹³⁶ Ly Bun Yim interview with *Reyum*, Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 177.

¹³⁷ Muan, 'Citing Angkor,' 243.



Figure 4.22: 'Life in America' exhibition, 1956-7, *Free World*, volume 6, #11. Image sourced from 'States of Panic: Procedures of the Present in 1950s Cambodia,' *UDAYA Journal of Khmer Studies* 6 (2005): pp. 57-68, 61.

Borrowing a camera from his teacher at the Lycée Sihanouk, Ly Bun Yim 'took two or three pictures and sent them to the United States,' and one of his photographs- a boy wearing a *krama* and smoking a leaf cigarette while riding a cow- won first prize in the competition.¹³⁸ He then began taking photographs of rural Kampong Cham and selling prints in a friend's bookshop, which was frequented by foreign tourists. Ly Bun Yim's photography skills were entirely self-taught. He learned how to develop his own film using a French manual, invented his own photo enlarger (the enlargers that were for sale were expensive) using 'a toilet bowl made out of shiny porcelain,' and figured out a way to make

¹³⁸ Ly Bun Yim interview with *Reyum*, Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 177.

colour prints of his photographs.¹³⁹ A few years later in 1960, Ly Bun Yim saw the film by Sun Bun Ly, *Karpear Promjarai Sray Durakot* ('Protect the Poor Virgin Girl'), which is regarded as the first commercially produced Cambodian film and marked the beginning of the country's 'golden age' of cinema that spanned the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. Ly Bun Yim recalls, 'it was 1960. Many people went to see the movie [*Karpear Promjarai Sray Durakot*]. They showed it at the Phnom Penh Movie Theater...When I saw lots of people going to see that movie, I went to see it too. I thought that his first film didn't have anything really fantastic in it that I couldn't do myself.'¹⁴⁰ With that, Ly Bun Yim sold the family pharmacy, used 10-20% of the profits to travel to Hong Kong, where he purchased a 16mm movie camera and colour film.¹⁴¹ He taught himself how to film and opened a production company called *Runteas Pich* (Flash Diamond Pictures). Later he became the first filmmaker to make a movie based on a 'traditional story.'¹⁴²

While Ly Bun Yim was among numerous premiere Cambodian filmmakers of his era, his work stands out as especially significant for this research because, as Zhuang Wubin summarises, his 'ingenuity as a photographer remained relevant,' as a filmmaker-¹⁴³ a trait that continues to reverberate in contemporary Cambodian art, photography, performance, and filmmaking, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 5's discussion on Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana. One of the few examples to survive the Khmer Rouge period that showcases how

¹³⁹ Ly Bun Yim interview with *Reyum*, Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 177-8.

¹⁴⁰ Ly Bun Yim interview with *Reyum*, Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 179.

¹⁴¹ Ly Bun Yim interview with *Reyum*, Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 179.

¹⁴² Ly Bun Yim interview with *Reyum*, Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 179.

¹⁴³ Zhuang 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 246.

Ly Bun Yim unified film and photography in the movie poster for his popular film, *An Euil Srei An* ('Khmers After Angkor') (Figure 4.23). Photographic portraits of the characters that were created from film stills make up a dense collage. The character stills Ly Bun Yim chose, depict dynamic and exaggerated expressions that perfectly come together to narrate highlights from the movie whilst still emitting the sense of anticipation that draws audiences to the cinema.¹⁴⁴



Figure 4.23: Cinema poster for *An Euil Srei An* ('Khmers After Angkor') by Ly Bun Yim, *reyum* database. Image sourced from 'Playing with Powers: the Politics of Art in Newly Independent Cambodia,' *UDAYA Journal of Khmer Studies* 6 (2005): pp. 41-56, 51.

¹⁴⁴ Zhuang 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 246.

As Ly Bun Yim was making and producing Khmer cinema, contemporary artist, Leang Seckon, was a young child living in Prey Veng province, an area that borders Vietnam that was heavily bombed by the United States. Born in 1974,¹⁴⁵ Leang Seckon considers himself as ‘the first true Cambodian contemporary artist,’ a self-proclamation that has gained some accreditation by art historians because of his Cambodian artistic training at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) and the way his work directly references experiences that are unique to Cambodia.¹⁴⁶ Leang’s artistic practice is both innovative and wide-ranging and includes plastic arts, mixed media collage, painting, large installation, activism, and performance. Like Ly Bun Yim, Leang demonstrates a certain ingenuity through his array of self-taught technical skills and ability to mix traditional elements and allegories with contemporary thought and practice. When viewing Leang’s collages, which incorporate layers of found objects, magazine images, photographs, advertisements, as well as his own drawing and painting, one cannot help but notice the strong visual resemblance to Ly Bun Yim’s hypnotic organisation of disparate film stills that come together to draw viewers in and guide their eyes through a carefully constructed narrative.

Though neither a photographer nor filmmaker, Leang’s mixed media paintings and collages read like highlights of a film reel. In the same way that Ly Bun Yim’s *An Euil Srei An* movie poster uses photographic still portraits from the film to form a compressed narrative, Leang incorporates iconic photographs and portraits from history and Cambodian pop

¹⁴⁵ There is a discrepancy regarding Leang Seckon’s year of birth. Half of the biographies cite it as 1974 while the other half cite 1970.

¹⁴⁶ Corey ‘The “First” Cambodian,’ *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 66-7.

culture as if they are stills highlighting scenes from a film reel and each collage represents a different movie- or rather- historical narrative that is also often wrapped in the artist's personal experiences and memories. The titles of collages reflect the historical theme or event that is narrated through the chronological flow of images, some notable examples being, *American War in Vietnam, Bombs Dropped in Cambodia, Khmer Rouge* (Figure 4.24), *Four Generations of Political Propaganda* (Figure 4.25), and *Phnom Penh-Beijing Relationships* (Figure 4.26), all of which were displayed together in his most recent solo exhibition with Rossi & Rossi in 2017, which was entitled *When Head and Body Unite*.



Figure 4.24: Leang Seckon, *American War in Vietnam. Bombs Dropped in Cambodia. Khmer Rouge*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 50x65 cm (19.7 x 25.6 in.) Rossi & Rossi London/ Hong Kong, accessed December 30, 2021.



Figure 4.25: Leang Seckon, *Four Generations of Political Propaganda*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 40 x 60 in. (114.3 x 152.4 cm) Rossi & Rossi London/ Hong Kong, accessed December 30, 2021.



Figure 4.26: Leang Seckon, *Phnom Penh-Beijing Relationships*, mixed media on canvas 44 x 60 cm. (17.3 x 23.6 in.), Rossi & Rossi London/ Hong Kong, accessed December 30, 2021.

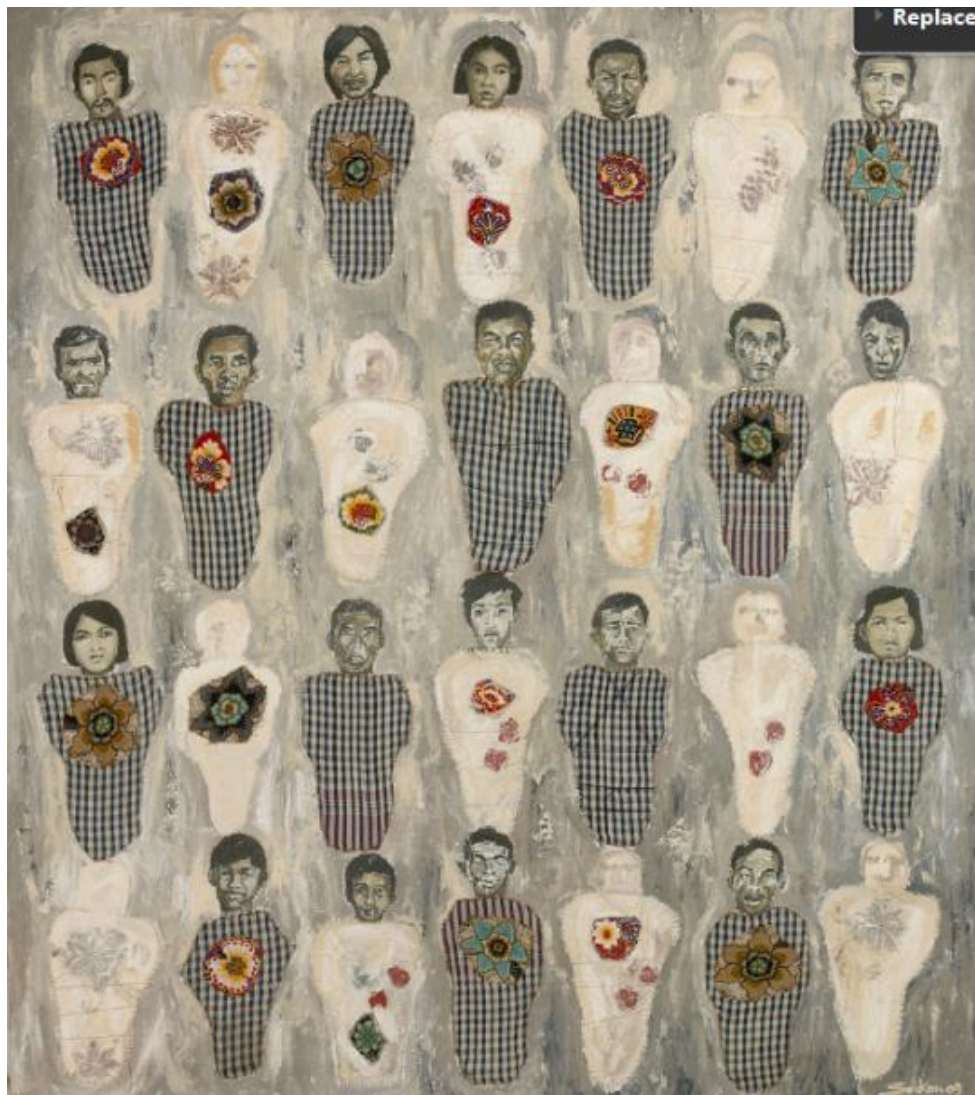


Figure 4.27: Leang Seckon, *Stuck-In-The-Mud Skirt*, 2009, 150 x 130 cm. Rossi & Rossi London/ Hong Kong. Image sourced from 'The "First" Cambodian Contemporary Artist,' *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies*, no. 12 (2014): pp. 61-94, Figure 1, 66.

Among the recurring iconic photographic images in Leang Seckon's work are appropriations of S-21 portraits. In the numerous works by Leang that appropriate the S-21 photographs, the faces of photographed victims take on new meaning as they become incorporated with other symbols and motifs into broader social narratives and

commentaries. For example, as an artist who is also an activist,¹⁴⁷ Leang has articulated criticism towards Cambodian trauma being exploited through exhibitions, specifically the Tuol Sleng prisoner photographs and the skulls encased in the glass display cabinets in Building D of the Museum. In a 2011 interview with Pamela Corey, Leang explained that while the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum might be an important tool for educating an international audience about the horrors that were experienced under DK, it has little use for Cambodians, who do not wish to be immersed in literal constitutions of their worst memories that incite a reliving of their trauma.¹⁴⁸ To articulate his belief that displaying human remains in a glass museum case is sacrilegious and that the bones should be either cremated or given a proper Buddhist burial so the souls can be put to rest, Leang painted *Stuck- In- The- Mud Skirt* (Figure 4.27). The mixed media painting is a bird's eye perspective of twenty-eight figures in four rows of seven. While some victims appear faceless, others have painted representations of S-21 portraits whose expressions have been altered to appear smiling and serene. The altered expressions of the S-21 victims Leang thoughtfully painted are stark contrasts to Matt Loughrey's deceiving forgeries. By moving away from using the photographic medium and not directly altering the photographic records themselves, *Stuck- In- The- Mud Skirt* remediates the prisoner identification photographs to incite publics to reflect on the 'presence of absence'¹⁴⁹ and the effects of abjectly showcasing trauma and bearing witness to mass atrocity, particularly their impact on the

¹⁴⁷ Corey 'The "First" Cambodian,' *UDAYA*, 88.

¹⁴⁸ Corey 'The "First" Cambodian,' *UDAYA*, 67.

¹⁴⁹ Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 21-2.

memorialisation of victims and survivor healing. Leang describes how he envisions the victims being stuck, having no freedom and unable to move; 'stuck everything. This is what I mean.'¹⁵⁰ He explains that the smiling expressions he painted are meant to represent 'the hope that the souls can be at peace and soar above the ground, floating away to a better place.'¹⁵¹ To convey the sense of restraint Leang envisions, none of the figures have bodies, which are represented as being wrapped in textile patterns that reference the scarves worn 'in the Pol Pot Time.'¹⁵² As if to offer a sense of individual identity to the faceless and anonymous victims, Leang assigned each figure a unique floral motif, which he layered on top of the scarf textures.

As a consequence of being born at the time of the US bombings and experiencing childhood under the Khmer Rouge, Leang Seckon's work serves as both a critical narration of history and 'a means of personal healing.'¹⁵³ The two have manifested in his search for collective cultural healing that is demonstrated by his 'strong urge to talk about [his] generation and learn about the previous one,' all the while engaging 'with this new generation.'¹⁵⁴ Perhaps nothing demonstrates this better than the way Leang's various visual artistic practices are collectively showcased. In three solo exhibitions with Rossi & Rossi between 2010 and 2017, Leang's collages, installations, paintings, and performances

¹⁵⁰ Anne Elizabeth Moore, 'The Personal Is Political: Q&A With Leang Seckon, Cambodian Freedom Artist (2),' *Truthout* (Truthout, April 30, 2010), [The Personal Is Political: Q&A With Leang Seckon, Cambodian Freedom Artist \(2\) \(truthout.org\)](https://www.truthout.org/article/personal-is-political-q-a-with-leang-seckon-cambodian-freedom-artist-2).

¹⁵¹ Corey 'The "First" Cambodian,' *UDAYA*, 67.

¹⁵² Moore, 'The Personal Is Political,' *Truthout*.

¹⁵³ Corey 'The "First" Cambodian,' *UDAYA*, 67.

¹⁵⁴ Leang Seckon in an interview with Naima Morelli, 'Leang Seckon: The Buffalo Boy Who Became King,' *COBO Social*, January 25, 2019, [Leang Seckon: The Buffalo Boy Who Became King | COBO Social](https://www.cobo-social.com/leang-seckon-the-buffalo-boy-who-became-king).

have come together to demonstrate how innovatively uniting different kinds of imagery and showcasing them together, make it possible for the artist to confront his desire to effectively draw audiences in and subsequently engage with them as distinctive publics. What is more, Leang uses the element of performance without necessarily being concerned over its documentation (either through photography or film), so, much like the lost movies of Cambodia's golden age of cinema, without the first-hand experience of witnessing the performance, publics must rely on Leang's material traces of narratives left behind by his collages and paintings to try to imagine the ephemeral component of the exhibition.

Cambodian Photography and the 'Golden Age' of Cinema

When all that remains are traces, it is difficult to conceptualise the extent of loss in terms of visual culture that was deliberately incurred by DK (and would have likely otherwise survived), until being presented with these statistics that pervade the period known as the 'heyday' of Cambodian cinema:

'De 1960 à 1975, le Cambodge produit près de quatre cents films et Phnom Penh compte plus de trente cinémas. Le 17 avril 1975, les Khmers Rouges prennent de Phnom Penh. Le cinéma est interdit, les salles sont fermées et les bobines de films laissées à l'abandon. Comptant parmi les nombreux «ennemis du peuple», la plupart des cinéastes et acteurs sont tués.¹⁵⁵

Of the estimated four hundred Cambodian films to have been made between 1960 and 1975, very few were salvageable after DK (many were destroyed while others deteriorated beyond the point of restoration). Ly Bun Yim explains, 'J'ai perdu ces films sans

¹⁵⁵ Davy Chou, *Le Sommeil D'or* (Bophana Productions, Araucania Films, Vucky Films, Studio 37, 2012), [UniversCiné - Le meilleur du ciné indé en VOD \(universcine.com\)](https://universcine.com), 03:43/1:36:19.

pouvoir les montrer. C'est très regrettable.'¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, in the years leading up to the Khmer Rouge's takeover of Phnom Penh, making movies and attending the cinema became bold forms of public resistance against Khmer Rouge violence and propaganda; 'symboles d'une société pervertie, les cinémas ont été la cible de grenades pendant la guerre civile (1970-75) (Figure 4.28).'¹⁵⁷ Ly Bun Yim describes himself as being at the forefront of filmmakers and movie theatre owners who successfully fought against the Lon Nol Government's attempts to close all places of entertainment as early as 1973-4:



Figure 4.28: Khmer Republic soldiers observing the people gathered outside the cinema. 'Cinemas were often targeted during the period of conflict between Lon Nol [(the Khmer Republic)] and the Khmer Rouge,' 1970-1975, 'The Golden Age of Cambodia's Silver Screen,' *Khmer Times*, accessed December 30, 2021.

¹⁵⁶ Chou, *Le Sommeil D'or*, 01:01:39.

¹⁵⁷ Chou, *Le Sommeil D'or*, 56:27.

qu'aucun cinéma ne fermerait. Mais tous les clubs étaient fermés. Tous les propriétaires de salles de cinéma étaient heureux! Nous avons pu projeter des films jusqu'en 1975, jusqu'à ce que les Khmers rouges soient vraiment proches. Là, nous avons été alarmés. Lorsque nous avons jugé la situation critique, nous avons décidé de les fermer, mais personne ne nous y a obligés. Nous avons résisté jusqu'à la fin.'¹⁵⁸

The public also resisted by continuing to attend the cinema until the closure of all Phnom Penh movie houses in 1975. In a conversation that was recorded in Davy Chou's documentary *Le Sommeil d'or*, two Cambodian 'cinephiles,' Ouk Silayouth and Lim Vong Thavy, recall attending the cinema in the turbulent years leading up to the Khmer Rouge invasion of Phnom Penh:

Ouk Silayouth: *Quand la guerre a éclaté, il y avait des explosions partout. Mais j'ai tellement aimé le cinéma que j'y suis allé quand même.*

Lim Vong Thavy: *Moi aussi.*¹⁵⁹

At the same time the people in Phnom Penh were resisting the Khmer Rouge by attending the cinema at great personal risk, a handful of Cambodian photographers armed with nothing except their cameras and little to no photojournalistic training, travelled the war ravaged countryside to document the increasing upheaval in the hopes of convincing other countries to intervene and save Cambodia from the impending total Khmer Rouge takeover (Figure 4.29).¹⁶⁰ Former actors, teachers, and travel guides, found employment at Western regional and international news agencies that had begun to prohibit their international photographers from leading journalists into the field because it was deemed

¹⁵⁸ Chou, *Le Sommeil D'or*, 58:11.

¹⁵⁹ Chou, *Le Sommeil D'or*, 26:18.

¹⁶⁰ Zhuang, 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 247.

too dangerous;¹⁶¹ after the Lon Nol Government overthrew Norodom Sihanouk in 1970, twenty-one international journalists went missing in Cambodia between April 4th and May 31st and another five were killed over the course of the remainder of the year.¹⁶² Cambodia became the ‘first modern conflict where almost every journalist, photographer, television correspondent, and cameraman’ that had the misfortune of falling into enemy hands (the Khmer Rouge), was killed.¹⁶³



Figure 4.29: Sou Vichith, Photographer, Tea Kim Heang, aka ‘Moonface,’ is helped to safety by a Cambodian government soldier and the photographer Sun Heang along Route 4,’ 1971, *Gamma*. Image sourced from ‘Journalists return to Cambodia to remember friends,’ *The Phnom Penh Post*, February 13, 2013.

¹⁶¹ Jon Swain, ‘Sideshow- The War in Cambodia,’ in *Requiem: By the Photographers Who Died in Vietnam and Indochina*, ed. Tim Page and Horst Faas (New York, NY: Random House, 1997), 278.

¹⁶² Youk Chhang, email newsletter, ‘CAMBODIAN WAR: 1970 -1975 A First and Last Reunion of a Unique Band of Brothers & Sisters,’ Phnom Penh: Google Groups, March 22, 2010, [CAMBODIAN WAR: 1970 -1975 A First and Last Reunion of a Unique Band of Brothers & Sisters \(google.com\)](http://www.google.com).

¹⁶³ Swain, ‘Sideshow,’ *Requiem*, 276.

In a 1985 television interview with Rai-tv, Italian journalist, Tiziano Terzani, explained the precarious conditions that he and his colleagues found themselves in prior to the Khmer Rouge takeover of Cambodia:

'Fare il giornalista in questa guerra era rischioso. Era rischioso perché in primo luogo non sapevi mai dov'era il fronte. Sei andato su una strada e potresti cadere in un'imboscata perché la giungla era il grande mistero e in questa giungla c'erano i Khmer rossi un po' ovunque. E ogni giornalista aveva questa incredibile curiosità di vederli. Vederli vivi, vederli in funzione e non vederli come cadaveri lungo la strada. Durante questa guerra avevamo già perso trentatré colleghi; alcuni che avevano tentato di andare ai Khmer rossi e non erano mai tornati; alcuni che avevano subito un'imboscata. Anch'io avevo provato ad andare con un amico e solo all'ultimo momento avevo deciso che non ne avevo voglia. Non è mai tornato.'¹⁶⁴

As the demand for Cambodian photojournalists rose, other less dangerous jobs offering a steady income were becoming scarce. Meanwhile, news agencies were keen to continue covering the conflict and they found that Cambodian photojournalists took the same risks as their international counterparts but at much lower pay rates. Similar to their international peers who had led the coverage of events in Cambodia until 1970, Cambodian photojournalists covering the civil war between the Khmer Republic (Lon Nol's government) and Cambodian communists (the Khmer Rouge) took the risk of being captured and killed by the Khmer Rouge. In the turbulent years leading up to the DK regime, an estimated four Cambodian media workers were killed by the Khmer Rouge. Then under DK, they were a subgroup presumably labelled and targeted as an enemy of the regime, for by the time the Khmer Rouge fell in January 1979, an estimated 20 Cambodian photojournalists were

¹⁶⁴ Tiziano Terzani, *Fantasmî: Dispacci Dalla Cambogia*, version Kindle (Milano: Longanesi & C, 2008), Location 1148.

Tiziano Terzani, Viaggio nella follia Cambogiana, (1985; Rai-tv, Fondazione Giorgio Perlasca, 2012), L'inizio della follia dei khmer rossi in Cambogia . Tiziano Terzani - YouTube, 0:08/06:59.

missing and presumed dead.¹⁶⁵ Dith Pran, Ou Neakiry, and Chey Sarun (also known as Mao Run)¹⁶⁶, are the only wartime photographers known to have survived the regime. Of the three, Ou Neakiry was the only photojournalist who both remained in Cambodia and continued to photograph the political violence of his country as a photographer for the Associated Press until his retirement at the end of the 1990s.¹⁶⁷

Today, Dith Pran is the most internationally recognised Cambodian photojournalist from the pre-DK era, in large part due to the iconic 1984 British cinematic masterpiece, *The Killing Fields*, which documents the Pulitzer Prize winning reporting he did between 1973 and 1975 alongside partner, American *New York Times* journalist, Sydney Schanberg, before disappearing as a prisoner of *Angkar* shortly after the fall of Phnom Penh. Though *The Killing Fields* raised international awareness of the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge and it powerfully conveyed how the US bombings of Cambodia were partly responsible for the rise of the genocidal regime, the film's overall portrayal of Dith Pran's character was secondary¹⁶⁸ to that of Sydney Schanberg. Moreover, Dith Pran's significance as a photojournalist was entirely omitted, although this may have been due in part to the fact that only three examples of his pre-DK photography are known to survive (Figures 4.30-

¹⁶⁵ *Requiem: By the Photographers Who Died in Vietnam and Indochina*, ed. Tim Page and Horst Faas (New York, NY: Random House, 1997), 314.

¹⁶⁶ Tad Bartimus, 'A Homage to the Photojournalists Lost to Decades of War in Vietnam,' *Southeast Asia Globe*, April 29, 2020, [A homage to the photojournalists lost to decades of war in Vietnam \(southeastasiaglobe.com\)](https://southeastasiaglobe.com).

¹⁶⁷ Denis D. Gray, 'A Future Beckons for "One of the Best,"' *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 7, 1995, [A future beckons for "one of the best" | Phnom Penh Post](https://www.phnompenhpost.com).

¹⁶⁸ David P. Chandler, "'The Killing Fields' and Perceptions of Cambodian History,' *Pacific Affairs* 59, no. 1 (1986): pp. 92-97, [Review: "The Killing Fields" and Perceptions of Cambodian History on JSTOR](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2576000), 93.

4.32).¹⁶⁹ Thus, because any historical assessment on the public impact of Dith Pran's photographic practices prior to his becoming a photojournalist for *The New York Times* in 1980 would be speculative, the film chose instead to focus on his job as a stringer for Sydney Schanberg.



Figure 4.30: Dith Pran, 'A government soldier hurled a grenade at Communist-led insurgents southeast of the capital city of Phnom Penh,' March 1974, *The New York Times*, accessed December 30, 2021.

¹⁶⁹ Zhuang Wubin, 'Out of Nowhere: Documentary Photography from Cambodia,' *Asian Art Newspaper*, January 2010, pp. 17-18, 17.



Figure 4.31: Dith Pran, 'The wife and mother of a government soldier as they learned of the soldier's death in combat southwest of Phnom Penh,' 1974, *The New York Times*, accessed December 30, 2021.

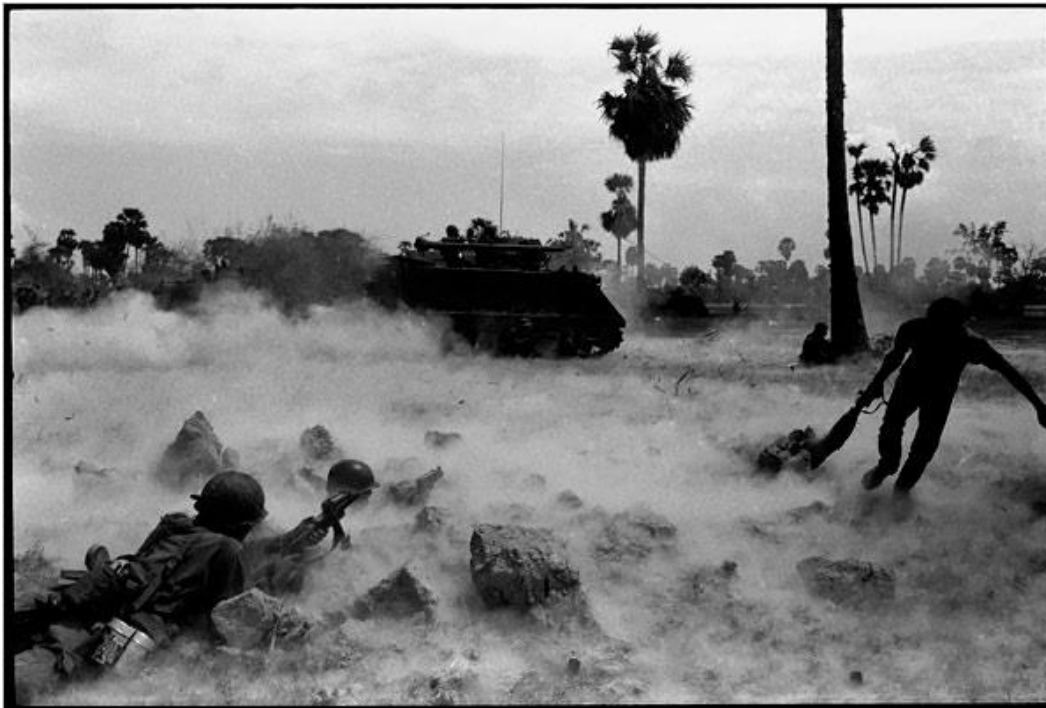


Figure 4.32: Dith Pran, 'Shells being fired at a village northwest of Phnom Penh,' 1974, *The New York Times*, accessed December 30, 2021.

Regardless, from these observations it can be asserted that *The Killing Fields* reflects the times in which it was produced and shown in theatres; the movie was released just five years after the Khmer Rouge fell to the PRK, when survivors and Khmer Rouge cadre were still interred in refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, and there was still no end in sight to the Cold War. Under these circumstances, Dith Pran's secondary importance alongside a Western journalist was, as David Chandler describes, yet another occurrence of Southeast Asian history being displayed as something *happening to* the West in order to cultivate and appeal to, international publics, as it was 'inconceivable that the Vietnamese- or the Cambodians- should be allowed onto the center of their own national stages, competent to make their own decisions and their own (occasionally mismanaged) history...'¹⁷⁰

In other words, *The Killing Fields* followed the trend that was prominent during the Cold War era, which was casting American soldiers and war correspondents as the protagonists in a master narrative of Western victimhood in Indochina.¹⁷¹ While the film may indeed have been a product of the times, it is also essential to take into account how assigning Americans the responsibility of constructing Khmer Rouge history through a Western camera lens was detrimental in the long-term trajectory of DK historiography, as it sacrificed an important opportunity to provide Cambodians the means to conceptualise and give voice to their own historical experiences of trauma, all for the purposes of

¹⁷⁰ Chandler, "'The Killing Fields' and Perceptions,' *Pacific Affairs*, 93.

¹⁷¹ Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 75.

broadening the international awareness of the atrocities that took place in Cambodia and evoking emotional responses (particularly a sense of guilt) from American audiences. Ultimately it is the film's portrayal of Dith Pran as the lone Cambodian journalistic partner in a cast of American and British correspondents that not only marginalised the Cambodian experience, but inadvertently contributed to the erasure of the troupe of Cambodian photojournalists, reporters, and correspondents who defiantly refused to abandon their posts until their forced evacuation into the countryside.

Perhaps nothing attests more to the heroic determination of Cambodian photographers and journalists than the haunting last messages written by reporter Mean Leang, which the Associated Press in Hong Kong received before all communication lines in Phnom Penh went down on the 17th of April 1975. Among those who refused to seek safety, Mean Leang determinedly covered events and transmitted updates until the moment the communication lines were cut; his messages are the last real-time details given about the troupe of Cambodian wartime photographers¹⁷²:

'I alone in Post Office. Losing contact with our guys. Only guy seeing me is Moonface [photojournalist, Tea Kim Heang] at 1300. I have so numerous stories to cover.'

'I feel rather trembling. Do not know how to file out stories. How quiet the streets. Every minute changes. At 1300 local my wife came and saw me here at post office saying that Monatio [Khmer Rouge] threatened my family out of the house. Vichet [possibly photojournalist, Sou Vichith] lost his camera to the black-jacketed guys.'

'May he [*sic*] last cable today and forever.'¹⁷³

¹⁷² Gray, 'A Future Beckons,' *The Phnom Penh Post*.

¹⁷³ 'Some of Last Messages From Encircled Capital,' *The New York Times*, April 18, 1975, p. 15, [TimesMachine: April 18, 1975 - NYTimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/18/archives/some-of-last-messages-from-encircled-capital.html).

Mean Leang was then cut off and never heard from again. British journalist, Jon Swain, who was among those to take refuge in the French embassy with Dith Pran and Sydney Schanberg, surmises that Mean Leang was forced to evacuate into the countryside and recalls last seeing several Cambodian colleagues ‘pushing a Toyota pickup truck loaded with their belongings through a stream of thousands of refugees...as they headed towards the setting sun.’¹⁷⁴ Though not depicted in *The Killing Fields*, Dith Pran was not the sole Cambodian photojournalist forced to leave the French embassy just before the last of the foreign diplomats, correspondents, and refugees were evacuated from Cambodia; former film actor, Tea Kim Heang, also known as ‘Moonface,’ (who was mentioned in Mean Leang’s transmissions to the Associated Press in Hong Kong), and Sou Vichith, were two other photojournalists known to have taken refuge in the embassy.¹⁷⁵ The two men were last seen by Dith Pran when they were all forced to leave the embassy and march into the countryside.¹⁷⁶ Like Mean Leang, the specific fates of Sou Vichith and Tea Kim Heang are unknown.

Aside from the sense of immediacy that is associated with the up-close action shots and cinematic-like compositions, a pervading characteristic that traverses the portfolios of Cambodia’s wartime photographers — from the three surviving pre-DK images by Dith Pran, to the larger body of work that survives by Tea Kim Heang, and the photographs that Ou

¹⁷⁴ Jon Swain, ‘Cambodia awaits rebirth,’ *Jonswain.org* (blog) (The Sunday Times, April 19, 1998), [Cambodia awaits rebirth \(jonswain.org\)](http://jonswain.org).

¹⁷⁵ Chris Fontaine, ‘Requiem,’ *The Phnom Penh Post*, February 27, 1998, [Requiem | Phnom Penh Post](http://www.phnompenhpost.com).

¹⁷⁶ Fontaine, ‘Requiem,’ *The Phnom Penh Post*.

Neakiry continued to capture until his retirement in the late 1990s— is the journalistic urgency to document, combined with a desire to observe and reflect upon the social contexts from which images of violence, devastation, and turmoil, arise (Figures 4.33-4.39). Zhuang Wubin hails photographers Tea Kim Heang ('Moonface') and Thong Veasna for demonstrating persistence and displaying 'the same resourcefulness that informed Ly Bun Yim's photographic and filmmaking practices,' while Ly Eng and Saing Hel are remembered for their courage in speaking out against the oppressive US-backed Lon Nol regime through a combination of text and photography (the two were almost killed by the government for openly conveying their views and then disappeared during DK).¹⁷⁷ Equally important as the powerful cinematic documentary photographs which these photographers produced, is the understanding that their shared desire to both document and reflect was inherited by the likes of numerous contemporary Cambodian photographers and filmmakers such as Rithy Panh, Heng Sinith, Mak Remissa, Vandy Rattana, Kim Hak, and Neak Sophal. Moreover, it is this specific inheritance that is representative of a continuity which transcends the usurpation¹⁷⁸ and devastation¹⁷⁹ of vision that was carried out by the Khmer Rouge.

¹⁷⁷ Zhuang, 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 247.

¹⁷⁸ Deinhart 'Re-Visualising Khmer Rouge Memory,' 21.

¹⁷⁹ Boreth Ly, 'Devastated Vision(s): The Khmer Rouge Scopic Regime in Cambodia,' *Art Journal* 62, no. 1 (2003): pp. 66-81, [Devastated Vision\(s\): The Khmer Rouge Scopic Regime in Cambodia: Art Journal: Vol 62, No 1 \(tandfonline.com\)](#), 70-5.

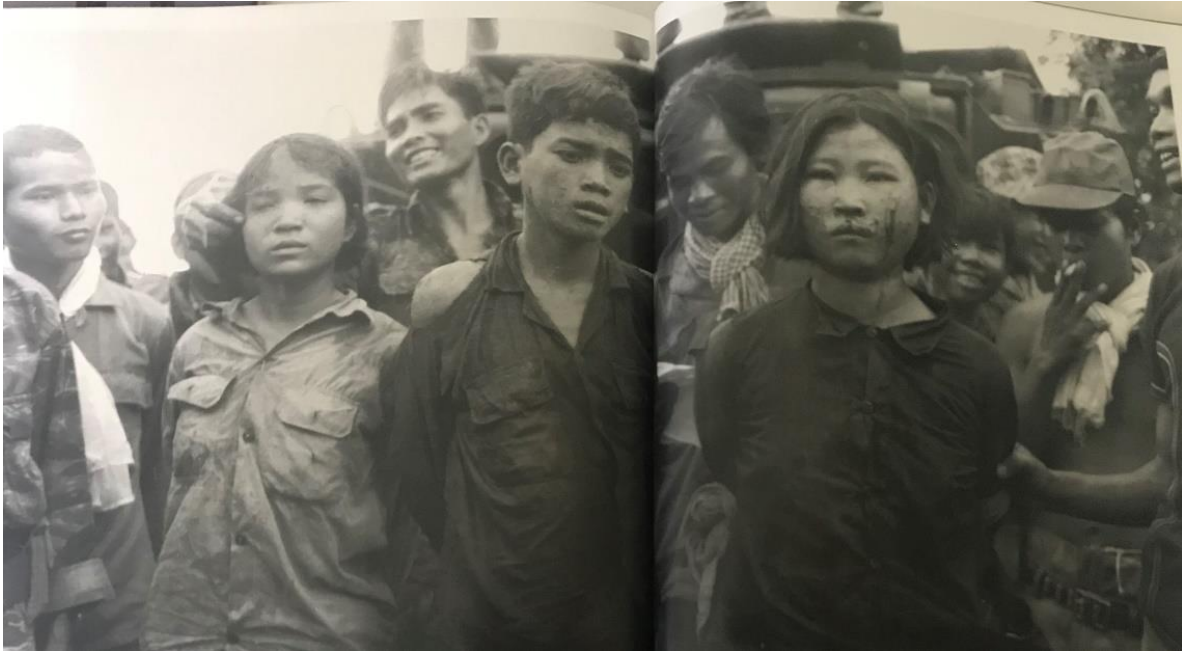


Figure 4.33: Sou Vichith, 'Terrified prisoners are paraded by Cambodian soldiers near Phnom Penh. The prisoners were later stripped, violated, and murdered,' 1974 Gamma, in *Requiem: By the Photographers Who Died in Vietnam and Indochina*, eds. Horst Faas and Tim Page (New York, NY: Random House, 1997), 288-9.

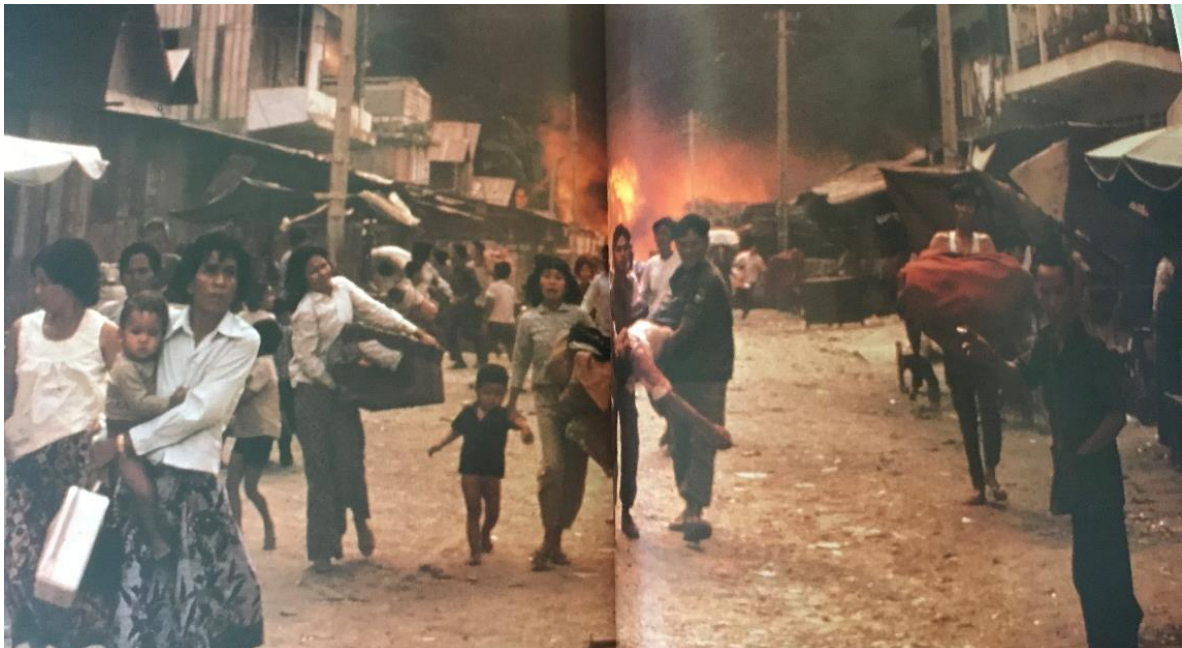


Figure 4.34: Sou Vichith, 'More than a million refugees crowded Phnom Penh from 1974, when the Cambodian capital was under virtual siege and rocket attack by the Khmer Rouge,' 1974, Gamma, in *Requiem*, Faas and Page, 292-3.

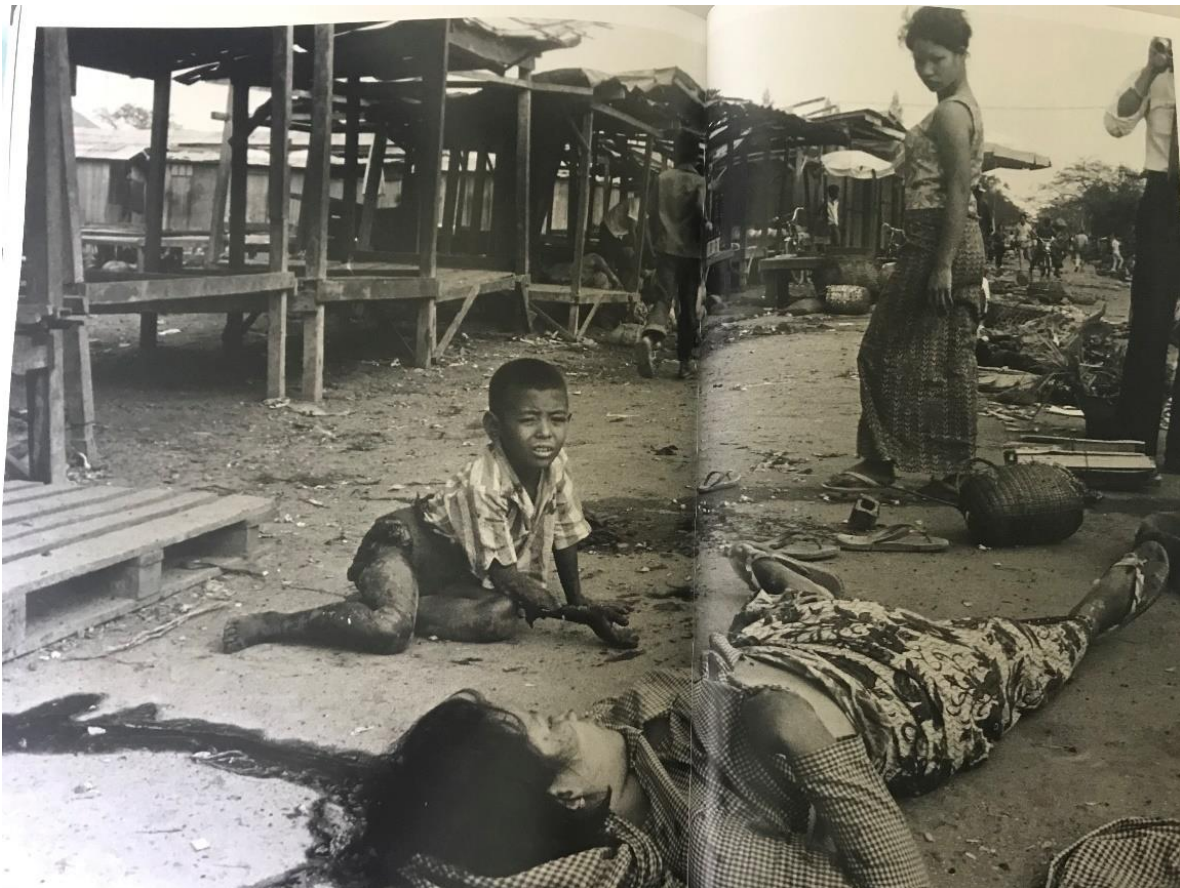


Figure 4.35: Tea Kim Heang, 'After a rocket attack on the Pochentong central market, a boy with severe burns looks at his dead mother,' 1975, Associated Press, in *Requiem*, Faas and Page, 294-5.



Figure 4.36: Tea Kim Heang, 'Cambodian girl with her father's rifle at a marshalling point,' Associated Press, in *Requiem*, Faas and Page, 284. Figure 4.37: Thong Veasna, 'A Cambodian boy travelling with his father who is with a unit of Cambodian government troops,' in *Prek Phnou*, 1975, Associated Press, in *Requiem*, Faas and Page, 285.



Figure 4.38: Tea Kim Heang, 'U.S. Marines evacuated U.S. and other allied embassy personnel by helicopter. The Marines came under Khmer Rouge fire after they were on the ground near the U.S. embassy,' April 13, 1975, Associated Press, in *Requiem*, Faas and Page, 301.

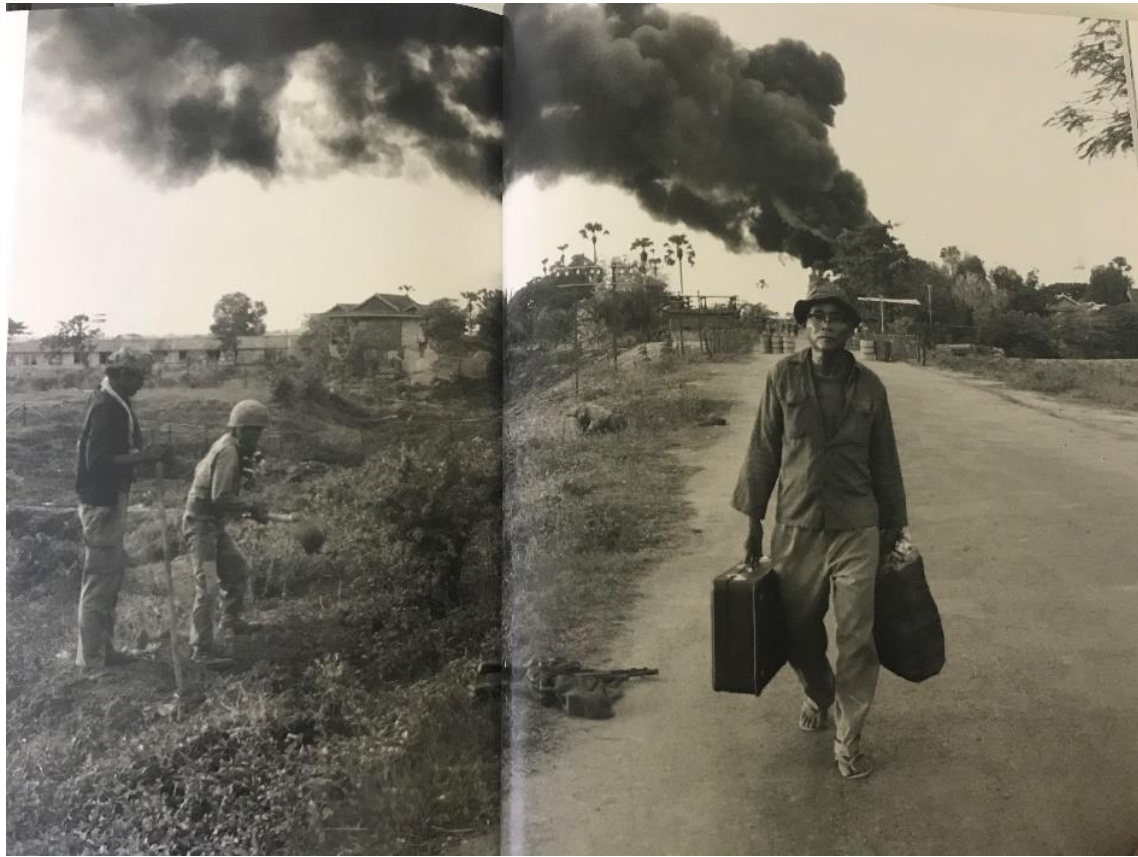


Figure 4.39: Sou Vichith, 'Toward the end of the Cambodian war, almost the total population of the country was left homeless,' 1975 Associated Press, in *Requiem*, Faas and Page, 302-3.

Film and Photography under Democratic Kampuchea

Retracing the social usage of camera media in Cambodia has thus far demonstrated that the camera and camera images- whether moving or still- are social *mechanisms of sight*¹⁸⁰ and *producers* of cultural visions. Because this chapter has examined the history of camera practices and the production of camera images as transitive verbs- specifically as techniques and modes of *seeing*- a trajectory of how Cambodian society sees, and how

¹⁸⁰ Hal Foster, 'Preface,' in *Vision and Visuality: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1988), p. ix-xiv, ix.

various publics (both Cambodian and international) have been 'able, allowed, or made to see'¹⁸¹ Cambodia, have become apparent. Now attention must be turned to the ways in which the Khmer Rouge disrupted Cambodian society's vision and how the regime's visual ideology continues to affect the historicization of the DK period.

As a 'scopic regime,'¹⁸² Democratic Kampuchea consciously exercised and consolidated power through the eradication of sight and vision. In turn, a singular, hierarchical, and essential vision¹⁸³ entirely controlled by DK, was imposed, and expressed in the widely used DK era metaphor, '*Angkar* has the eyes of a pineapple.'¹⁸⁴ Essentially, 'the Organisation'- like a pineapple- 'has eyes that face in all directions,'¹⁸⁵ meaning *Angkar* was all-seeing and aware of everything. In its efforts to become a panoptic regime, *Angkar* literally and metaphorically stripped the sight of individuals, and society, which incites the question of how the regime was able to accomplish this.

As explained, the Khmer Rouge usurped Cambodian society's vision and the cultural ways of seeing that were forged through camera media (even before they had full control

¹⁸¹ Foster, 'Preface,' *Vision and Visuality*, ix.

¹⁸² The term 'scopic regime' was coined by Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (London, UK: MacMillan Press, 1983) and then adopted by: Martin Jay, 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity,' in *Vision and Visuality: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1988), pp. 3-23.

Boreth Ly then applied the term to the Khmer Rouge and DK in 'Devastated Vision(s): The Khmer Rouge Scopic Regime in Cambodia,' *Art Journal* 62, no. 1 (2003): pp. 66-81, [Devastated Vision\(s\): The Khmer Rouge Scopic Regime in Cambodia: Art Journal: Vol 62, No 1 \(tandfonline.com\)](http://www.tandfonline.com).

¹⁸³ Foster, 'Preface,' *Vision and Visuality*, ix.

¹⁸⁴ John Marston, 'Metaphors of the Khmer Rouge,' in *Cambodian Culture Since 1975: Homeland and Exile*, ed. May M. Ebihara, Judy Ledgerwood, and Carol Anne Mortland (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 105-118, 107.

¹⁸⁵ Ly, 'Devastated Vision(s),' *Art Journal*, 72.

over the country), thus eliminating the array of ‘social visualities’¹⁸⁶ produced by the camera and the interactions that accompanied the process of picture-making: photojournalists were stripped and robbed of their cameras, popular movies stopped being produced, archives were destroyed, cinemas were violently attacked, leading to their forced closure by early 1975, being caught in possession of family photographs became incriminating evidence of a ‘bourgeois lifestyle,’ and the nation’s renowned photographers, actors, filmmakers, and cameramen alike, were systematically targeted and murdered. Essentially, ‘the Khmer Rouge wanted to kill intellectuals’ and it reached a point where they killed people who wore glasses... ‘means they were people who read a lot, people who were using their eyes.’¹⁸⁷ DK survivor and contemporary artist, Sopheap Pich, speculates ‘If you’re [the Khmer Rouge] going to kill people with glasses, eventually,’ anyone with so much as the ability to write their name would have been targeted and killed if the Khmer Rouge had not been stopped.¹⁸⁸ Another strategy employed by the Khmer Rouge was preventing the general population from seeing and knowing the individual identities of CPK members; it was not until September 1976- a year and a half after the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia- that CPK members, namely Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), came out from behind the blinding darkness of anonymity and revealed himself as Brother Number One and the leader of DK.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Foster, ‘Preface,’ *Vision and Visuality*, ix.

¹⁸⁷ Hannah Phan, in Robert H. Leiberman, *Angkor Awakens*, (2017; Ithaca, New York: PhotoSynthesis Productions and Ithaca Filmworks), Amazon Prime, [Watch Angkor Awakens | Prime Video \(amazon.com\)](#), 0:46:25/01:24:00.

¹⁸⁸ Sopheap Pich, in Leiberman, *Angkor Awakens*, 0:10:30.

¹⁸⁹ David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 2008), 261.

It is perhaps easy to infer that DK's eradication of the intellectual and visual cultures preceding its rule, translated to the non-existence of camera media and a complete absence of visual culture between 1975 and 1979, with the exception of the S-21 photographs. This misinterpretation has been further guided by the aforementioned sensational and artistic re-appropriations of the S-21 photographs, which have led publics to believe that the mug shots are visual ruptures, or anomalies that emerged from a backwards regime that otherwise lacked visual culture and representation. However, recalling the assessment made earlier in this chapter, it is not the S-21 photographs themselves that are ruptures; in truth, they are part of a larger strategy of CPK camera media production, which when observed as a whole, illustrates the modernity and paranoia of the regime as well as the Party's awareness of how photography and film were instrumental for effectively documenting and promoting their revolutionary ideology.¹⁹⁰ Like Cambodia's colonial predecessors, under DK, photography was a key form of surveillance, film became an essential medium of propaganda, and their usage of the two media demonstrated the ultimate form of control over Cambodian culture and international publics' perceptions of DK life and leadership.

Film was especially important for disseminating an idealised, engineered image of the regime. Official propaganda films were pre-meditated and rehearsed constructions meant to emulate the myth of 'Super Great Leap Forward,' and an agrarian utopia. Equally

¹⁹⁰ Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 101.

important was their dissemination of the *reverse shot*¹⁹¹ of the devastating realities of life under the regime, which frequently depicted mechanised choreographies of an eager peasant workforce that were reinforced through the sounds of revolutionary language and songs (Figure 4.40). The purpose of these films was twofold. First, they were used in attempts to garner aid and support from foreign governments, particularly China. Second, like the USIS cinecar initiative, the films travelled throughout the country and were screened from mobile projectors to indoctrinate the general population with revolutionary ideology.



Figure 4.40: 'Cambodians working on an irrigation project. Dam "January 1st," Chinith River, Kampong Thom Province,' 1976, Documentation Center of Cambodia Archives. Image sourced from *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*, (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007), 2.

¹⁹¹ Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, 'Challenging Old and New Images Representing the Cambodian Genocide: The Missing Picture (Rithy Panh, 2013),' *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 12, no. 2 (2018): pp. 140-164, ["Challenging Old and New Images Representing the Cambodian Genocide" by Vicente Sánchez-Biosca \(usf.edu\)](https://www.usf.edu/genocide-studies-and-prevention/article/challenging-old-and-new-images-representing-the-cambodian-genocide), 142.

Being a Khmer Rouge cameraman for propaganda was essentially a performance in and of itself because it required turning a blind eye. As one former Khmer Rouge cameraman explained:

‘The skinny people, I spotted them. If they were skinny, I did not film on their side. I chose those who I wanted to be in front of the camera, I asked them to pose there for the camera, those who had a beautiful appearance. This is the way we filmed. We directed them for the shooting.’¹⁹²

Almost all footage shot by Khmer Rouge cameramen conformed to the performative acts of selective seeing and unseeing, as the lives of the cameramen depended on making the revolutionary vision of *Angkar* a cinematic reality. However, in the repository of Khmer Rouge propaganda films that have survived, the footage shot by cameraman Ang Sarun, stand out as what filmmaker Rithy Panh interprets as an act of resistance. At first glance, both the quality and the subjects of the footage appear unremarkable, but it is the seemingly average characteristics and amateur ‘errors’ that merit a second look. In one film, the camera slowly pans across a worksite, where people dig trenches and haul dirt from one section of the site to another. When the footage is juxtaposed with the official propaganda films, it is obvious that there is nothing choreographed or rehearsed in Ang Sarun’s footage; the exhaustion of the workers becomes glaringly apparent in their slow and laboured movements and no one smiles or looks at the camera.

With DK’s photographic surveillance came a literal devastation of vision, which occurred when individuals were identified as enemies of *Angkar* and transported to one of

¹⁹² Thorn, a former Khmer Rouge cameraman. ‘Khmer Rouge Propaganda’ in ‘Khmer Rouge Policies and Ideologies,’ *The Khmer Rouge History App*, [App on Khmer Rouge History | Bophana](#).

the estimated 200 ‘security centres.’¹⁹³ Upon arrest, prisoners’ hands were bound behind their backs, eyes blindfolded, and a rope connecting each prisoner was tied to either their wrists or necks (Figures 4.41 and 4.42).¹⁹⁴ At security centre S-21 or, Tuol Sleng, which was unique from the other prisons as it was under the direct control of *Angkar*, photography was systematically used as a form of surveillance on prisoners of high importance, i.e. ‘Khmer Rouge officials, cadres, and soldiers accused of betraying the revolution.’¹⁹⁵ In this context, the predatory nature of the camera lens and the act of taking a photograph are exposed and exploited to reinforce the scopic regime’s omnipresent gaze. Borrowing Susan Sontag’s analogy, ‘just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph [the enemy] is a sublimated murder- a soft murder,’ preceding the actual murder.¹⁹⁶



Figure 4.41: Vann Nath, Prisoners blindfolded and chained to one another, being led into S-21 prison, painting.

Figure 4.42: Vann Nath, ‘Photo set within the prison,’ painting.

¹⁹³ James Tyner, Savina Sirik, and Samuel Henkin, ‘Violence and the Dialectics of Landscape: Memorialization in Cambodia,’ *Geographical Review* 104, no. 3 (July 2014): pp. 277-293, [Violence and the Dialectics of Landscape: Memorialization in Cambodia: Geographical Review: Vol 104, No 3 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1111/gre.12111), 286.

¹⁹⁴ In his paintings, S-21 survivor Vann Nath illustrates the conditions S-21 prisoners were subjected to upon arrest. The village chief of Kraing Lvea described similar scenes he saw at the execution site. Tyner, Sirik, and Henkin, ‘Violence and the Dialectics of Landscape,’ *Geographical Review*, 286.

¹⁹⁵ Tyner, Sirik, and Henkin, ‘Violence and the Dialectics of Landscape,’ *Geographical Review*, 286.

¹⁹⁶ Sontag, *On Photography*, 14.

From details of certain S-21 prisoner identification photographs (including stunned or confused expressions and other prisoners off to the side in the images who remain blindfolded), which have been corroborated with accounts given by prison survivors and Noem Oem, former head of the photographic department at S-21, it is known that prisoners remained blindfolded until they were forced to be subjected to the gaze of the camera and its blinding flash as the photograph was taken.¹⁹⁷ Boreth Ly details that the blindfolds were used to keep prisoners literally in the dark about their location and ultimately, their devastating fate. Further, prisoners were frequently blindfolded upon execution; many skulls found at Choeng Ek for example, still had blindfolds covering the eye cavities (Figure 4.43).¹⁹⁸



Figure 4.43: Roland Neveu, 'A skull, still blindfolded, newly dug up from the Killing Fields of Choeng Ek, 1981. Image sourced from 'Devastated Vision(s): The Khmer Rouge Scopic Regime in Cambodia,' *Art Journal* 62, no. 1 (2003): pp. 66-81, Figure 1, 61.

¹⁹⁷ Noem Oem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 15 September 2016, Trial Chamber – Trial Day 455, The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, Case No. 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, January 27, 2017, [Microsoft Word - TR002_20160915_EN_FINAL \(eccc.gov.kh\)](#), 96.

¹⁹⁸ Ly, 'Devastated Vision(s),' *Art Journal*, 74.

Photography on Trial

Until the 1990s, historical research on the S-21 photographs and DK camera media production in general, had been fragmentedly pieced together from the disparate traces of history left behind by the regime. Then, in 1996, former S-21 photographer, Nhem En, defected from the Khmer Rouge and claimed to be the chief photographer of S-21 and primary author of the prisoner identification photographs in a series of interviews with international journalists. Experts in the field such as David Chandler, Peter Maguire, Nic Dunlop, and Douglas Niven were also among Nhem En's interviewers. From the time of his defection all the way up until the ECCC trial proceedings of Case 002 in 2016, history had continuously (and even sometimes uncritically) recorded Nhem En as the 'chief photographer' of S-21 and heavily relied on his account of photographing victims and daily life at Tuol Sleng.

Nhem En joined the revolution as a child soldier in July 1971, at the age of eleven. After his defection, Nhem En gave the impression that before reaching the age of 16, he became the 'chief photographer' of the S-21 security centre and continues to maintain that the Khmer Rouge chose him along with 141 other children out of a group of 2,000, to be sent to China for 7 months for a camera training course before being transferred to S-21 in

1976.¹⁹⁹ Christopher Riley explained that this aligned with what Douglas Niven imagined and wanted to believe about the S-21 photographs:

‘Niven had always suspected the Tuol Sleng photographers had foreign training. “We’d even thought that a Chinese adviser had helped them get started, as the work they did there was technically very good—good exposures, good processing.”²⁰⁰

According to Nhem En, there were six photographers at S-21 and his account assigned great importance to the group -especially himself- while maintaining (presumably to avoid incrimination) that he was ‘just a photographer’ and a low-ranking cadre.²⁰¹ From the vantage point of Nhem En’s version of history, the regime allowed the S-21 cameramen specific and exclusive access, mobility, and freedom that were otherwise denied to Khmer Rouge members. In his ECCC testimony for Case 002 on the 20th of April 2016, he painted a picture for the Court audience that the CPK almost solely relied on the six photographers of Tuol Sleng for a number of projects, which allowed them to travel all over the country filming and photographing events that put the S-21 photographers in immediate proximity to the leaders of the CPK:

‘When I worked in Tuol Sleng, I was also involved in taking photographs, for instance at Angkor Wat [(Figure 4.43)], of Uncle Pol Pot or Chinese delegations or other delegations from the Communist bloc. Usually, I would be assigned to take photographs of Pol Pot and Son Sen, but I rarely saw Khieu Samphan at the time.’²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ The information comes from Nhem En’s autobiography. Stephanie Benzaquen, ‘From perpetrator to victim and vice-versa? The multiple identities of S-21 photographer Nhem En,’ (paper presented at ‘Representing Perpetrators of Mass Violence,’ University of Utrecht, NL, September 2016), pp. 1-18.

²⁰⁰ Benzaquen, ‘From perpetrator to victim and vice-versa?’ ‘Representing Perpetrators of Mass Violence,’ 2.

²⁰¹ Seth Mydans, ‘Out From Behind a Camera at a Khmer Torture House’ (The New York Times, October 26, 2007), [Out From Behind a Camera at a Khmer Torture House - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/26/asia/26sleng.html).

²⁰² *Session 1 - 20 April 2016 - Case 002/02 - EN/FR (The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, 2016)*, [Session 1 - 20 April 2016 - Case 002/02 - EN/FR | Drupal \(eccc.gov.kh\)](https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/press-releases/2016/04/20160420-session-1-20-april-2016-case-002-02-en-fr), 1:02:10/ 1:03:06.

Later in his testimony, Nhem En described sitting in on CPK leader meetings and taking the photographs. At the same time, he allegedly carried out his responsibilities at Tuol Sleng, which included photographing prisoners, developing the film himself,²⁰³ printing the images, and then hand-delivering the prisoner photographs to his superiors, Kaing Guek Eav and Sous Thy.



Figure 4.44: Group photo of leading Khmer Rouge in front of Angkor Wat; Pol Pot in the center (Kathleen O'Keeffe Collection, Bophana Archive, Phnom Penh), accessed May 25, 2022. Image sourced from Michael Falser, Epilogue: Clearing the Path towards Civilization – 150 Years of 'Saving Angkor,' in *Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission*.

In a detailed conference paper that was given shortly after Nhem En's testimony in Case 002, Stephanie Benzaquen described how since his defection in 1996, Nhem En, always

²⁰³ Mydans, 'Out From Behind a Camera,' *The New York Times*.

a clever opportunist, continually redefined his DK era identity to align with his post-defection career shifts, including becoming the deputy chief of Anlong Veng. Depending on which identity would allow him to climb higher on the socio-political and financial ladders and grant him more fame, Nhem En would identify as ‘child soldier, Khmer Rouge hardliner, repentant guardian of memory, memory entrepreneur, traumatised victim, witness at the trial, and even artist.’²⁰⁴ The multiple identities Nhem En formulated and the occasions wherein his memory proved to be unreliable, are extensive and complex. However, in relation to the history of camera media during DK and the understanding of the S-21 photographs, one of the major issues that arose from Nhem En’s self-proclaimed artistry — which was given stature by the small-scale fame he accumulated from international attention such as MoMA’s *Photographs from S-21:1975-1979* (despite not being credited in the exhibition)— was that he did not hesitate to claim all the credit for photographing the S-21 victims yet was simultaneously unwilling to consider how his role as the ‘chief photographer,’ who had a surprising amount of freedom in an otherwise highly controlled atmosphere, contributed to the crimes against humanity that were committed at S-21. In fact, Steven Okazaki, who extensively interviewed Nhem En and directed the short documentary entitled ‘The Conscience of Nhem En,’ (2008) said:

‘I asked him numerous times: “Did you ever just give these people a sympathetic look as if to say, ‘I’m sorry’,” and he said, “Absolutely not. Why should I?”’²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Benzaquen, ‘From perpetrator to victim and vice-versa?’ *Representing Perpetrators of Mass Violence*, 3.

²⁰⁵ Account by Steven Okazaki, quote from Benzaquen, in ‘From perpetrator to victim and vice-versa?’ *Representing Perpetrators of Mass Violence*, 13.

Then in the documentary when Okazaki repeatedly pressed Nhem En about whether he should share in the responsibility for all that happened at S-21, he responded:

‘The photographer’s job is to take photographs.

‘The world should thank me for my work. If I hadn’t taken those photos...if it weren’t for me, no one would know or care about Cambodia. They are the proof.

‘No, there was no choice. What was the choice? To die? So, they came in all tied up. Was I supposed to free them? As a human being you have a conscience. Would you die for it?’²⁰⁶

Without venturing into a psychoanalysis of Nhem En, it is relevant to point out the question he posed in response to the interrogation of responsibility, as it articulates the idea that humanity is inclusive of acts of inhumanity. Borrowing from Thierry de Duve’s analyses of Nhem En and the S-21 photographs, the uncomfortable, but necessary element to consider is that ‘perhaps humanism’s greatest philosophical inconsistency is to presume that inhuman behaviour excludes some humans from humanity.’²⁰⁷ Or, to put it in the simplest of terms, torturers and perpetrators and everyone in between, are equally as human as victims. As such, to omit the memories and accounts of the perpetrators — regardless of the extent of their acts of inhumanity— is a censorship of history that prevents further understanding of the motives and the mechanisms of genocide. But with the supposed photographer identified and alive to give his unrepentant account, combined with the knowledge that the photographs are visual representations of the murderous,

²⁰⁶ Steven Okazaki, *The Conscience of Nhem En*, (2008; Berkeley, California: Farallon Films), [THE CONSCIENCE OF NHEM EN \(2008\) on Vimeo](#), 17:55/ 25:38.

²⁰⁷ De Duve, ‘Art in the Face of Radical Evil,’ *October*, 16.

scopic gaze of *Angkar* being forced upon victims, the imperative question is, *whose memory is being represented when the photographs are displayed and viewed?*

This question became much more complex when Nhem En's account of Tuol Sleng history and DK era camera practices began to crumble during the ECCC trial proceedings of Cases 001 and 002. A combination of testimonies by S-21 commandant Kaing Guek Eav (alias Duch), Nhem En, and other DK cameramen, brought to the fore how Nhem En's memories²⁰⁸ and accounts of history were not only full of contradictions,²⁰⁹ but from the time of his defection, his recollections seemed to have conveniently changed with every opportunity for personal and financial gain that surfaced from the sensationalised international public interest in the Cambodian Genocide that was spurred by actions of the Photo Archive Group, and Cambodia's ever-shifting socio-political constructs surrounding Khmer Rouge cultural memory, which was detailed in Chapter 2.²¹⁰

Though the person holding the camera is often associated with having immediate and 'more peremptory rights- to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore,' surrounding

²⁰⁸ In an email response dated 20th May 2021 regarding an inquiry I made about the publication date of the article 'The Revolution Will Be Televised,' in *Southeast Asia Globe*, the author of the article, Marc Eberle, elaborated that a 'good example for convoluted memory/ minds is Nhem Eng [sic], the Tuol Sleng, S-21 photographer who similarly makes himself much more important in his role than he probably was.'

²⁰⁹ In an interview with *New York Times* journalist, Seth Mydens, Nhem En described how the prisoners came in blindfolded and he would be the one to untie the cloth, but in his testimony at the ECCC he stated, 'I did not remove the blindfolds. It was the duty of the guards.' Mydens, 'Out from Behind a Camera,' *The New York Times*.

Session 2 - 20 April 2016 - Case 002/02 - EN/FR, 48:03/ 58:59.

²¹⁰ For a more comprehensive examination of the 'multiple identities' and shifting memory of Nhem En, please refer to the conference paper: Benzaquen, 'From perpetrator to victim and vice-versa?' 'Representing Perpetrators of Mass Violence.'

events,²¹¹ in keeping with the regime's scopic vision as described in the metaphor of '*Angkar* has the eyes of a pineapple', DK's strategy was to strictly contain its cameramen to highly specific tasks, responsibilities, and locations so they would not be able to formulate a comprehensive picture of the devastation or understand how their work was contributing to the larger operations of a genocidal regime. This is a detail that emerged in the trial proceedings of ECCC Case 002, specifically the witness testimonies of Noem Oem and Seng Lytheng, who were two Khmer Rouge cameramen during the regime. Though their testimonies overall succeed in disproving Nhem En's version of history, they more importantly lay the groundwork for a new, more accurate historiographic foundation of camera media under DK and the circumstances under which the S-21 photographs were produced. From their specific testimonies, an understanding of how the literal vision of cameramen and what they were permitted to photograph or film, were limited and restricted based on rank as well as assigned locations and responsibilities. This hierarchical structure conveyed within the testimonies reaffirms how DK cameramen were in fact *not* privy to the panoptic vision, which was reserved without exception for only the highest leaders in the CPK. Or metaphorically, like the eyes of a pineapple, every cameraman's lens was an eye that could see only what *Angkar* wanted it to see, and only *Angkar* possessed the scopic vision to simultaneously see from all eyes.

Noem Oem, the real chief photographer of S-21 as identified by the ECCC (Nhem En named Noem Oem as one of his assistants in his testimony), describes limited mobility and

²¹¹ Sontag, *On Photography*, 10.

a precarious atmosphere for the photographers of S-21. According to his testimony, there were six people chosen to be photographers from Division 703, including himself. As a photographer for the division, he was initially tasked with taking portraits of the soldiers before they went into battle. At one point, 3 photographers from the group of six were sent to study in China and the remaining 3, Noem Oem, Srun Song, and Kang Nit, were transferred to S-21 in early 1976 where they remained until the fall of DK.²¹²

When the defence asked Noem Oem if Nhem En ‘went to six zones in the country to take photographs while he was working at S-21,’ he replied that there was no truth to Nhem En’s testimony. ‘As I told you earlier,’ he said to the defence, ‘my team were not allowed to move freely- to move outside S-21.’²¹³ Earlier in his testimony, Noem Oem explained that even in his role as the chief photographer, he needed a special travel permit from S-21 commander Duch, for the task of cycling to the fields of Prey Sar (where people who committed minor offences worked) to retake photographs of the prisoners whose negatives had been damaged.²¹⁴ Nor was he allowed to photograph senior detainees such as Party members and high-ranking officers held at S-21; that task was reserved for a Party member named Sry.²¹⁵ Commenting on Sry, Noem Oem simply said ‘I never went in and out of his

²¹² There were no photographers at S-21 prison prior to the arrival of Noem Oem, Srun Song, and Kang Nit. Noem Oem, ‘Transcript of Trial Proceedings,’ 15 September 2016, Trial Chamber – Trial Day 455, The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, Case No. 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, January 27, 2017, [Microsoft Word - TR002_20160915_EN_FINAL \(eccc.gov.kh\)](#), 17.

²¹³ Noem Oem, ‘Transcript of Trial Proceedings,’ 16 September 2016, Trial Chamber – Trial Day 456, The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, Case No. 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, April 19, 2018, [Microsoft Word - TR002_20160916_EN_FINAL CORR 1 \(eccc.gov.kh\)](#), 38.

²¹⁴ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 16 September 2016, 9.

²¹⁵ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 16 September 2016, 19.

place so I did not know about it. I had my place and he had his. We were not allowed to walk around freely at that time.’²¹⁶

‘Little En,’ or Nhem En, did not arrive at S-21 until mid-1978, approximately 6 months before the Vietnamese liberated Phnom Penh.²¹⁷ Just 16 years old at that time, Nhem En came with a small group of child soldiers, who were transferred to S-21 to learn photography from Noem Oem. In Noem Oem’s memory, the arrival of the child soldiers strangely coincided with the arrest of Nat, the Division 703 commander who had transferred Noem Oem, Srun Song, and Kang Nit to S-21. Noem Oem explained that ‘based on [his] observation when the leader of a network was arrested, then members of the network would be arrested.’ He surmised that because Nat had been their commander and had transferred them to S-21, he and the other two photographers were in danger of being eliminated. And, with their order to teach the children their photography skills:

‘I realized myself that when the children group possessed all the photography skills, then we, the instructors, would be eliminated.’²¹⁸

To save himself, Srun Song, and Kang Nit, from elimination, Noem Oem concluded that the children must not be taught all the skillsets needed to be a photographer. He instructed Srun Song and Kang Nit to *only* teach them how to take photographs of victims. He attributes this decision to their survival up to the day the Vietnamese liberated Phnom Penh.

²¹⁶ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 16 September 2016, 19.

²¹⁷ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 15 September 2016, 20.

²¹⁸ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 15 September 2016, 109.

Although Case 002 proved that Nhem En's story was at best embellished, and at worst almost entirely untrue, his reliability began to be scrutinised as early as Case 001 when Duch's testimony revealed major discrepancies in his story. Specifically, Duch's account raised speculation as to whether there was any truth to Nhem En's story of being trained in China. Duch testified that Nhem En had never trained in China but rather, it had been Pol Pot's nephew, Seng Lytheng, who was sent in 1977.²¹⁹ Affirming Duch's assertion during Case 002, Noem Oem stated that when Nhem En arrived at S-21, 'he could not even insert the film properly into the camera. Although he boasted [after his defection] about his photography in China, how could that happen since he could not even insert the film properly?' More insight was offered by Seng Lytheng's testimony, which was also in 2016 during Case 002. Though Seng Lytheng did not receive special familial treatment from Pol Pot, who did not want his leadership tainted by nepotism, the nephew and uncle must have developed a repour from Seng Lytheng living with Pol Pot in the jungle between 1967 and 1969.²²⁰

It ought to be noted here that Pol Pot was a highly reclusive and notoriously suspicious leader who trusted few. The relationship that developed from the leader and his young nephew living together allowed Seng Lytheng the rare opportunity to gain Pol Pot's trust, which in turn was how he came to first serve as a guard for CPK headquarters and

²¹⁹ Transcript of trial proceedings, April 19, 2016, Trial Chamber– Trial Day 399, The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, Case No. 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, June 6, 2016, [Microsoft Word - TR002_20160419_EN_FINAL \(eccc.gov.kh\)](#), 102..

²²⁰ Thet Sambath, 'Pol Pot's Nephew Recalls Filming KR Leaders,' *The Cambodia Daily*, May 30, 2013, [Pol Pot's Nephew Recalls Filming KR Leaders - The Cambodia Daily](#).

then be granted special access (upon Pol Pot's direct request) to photograph leaders of the CPK. These details alone lead to the conclusion that it was highly unlikely Nhem En's low ranking cadre status would have allowed him the opportunity to be trusted by CPK party members, a factor that was almost certainly necessary to be in immediate proximity to *Angkar* (especially before September 1976 when the leaders of the CPK were still ruling in anonymity). Even with positions that allowed him direct access to the leaders, Seng Lytheng claimed that he 'did not grasp about their important affairs, but...observed how they held meetings quite often.'²²¹ What is more, he explains that 'most of the times [sic] [he] only took photos in Phnom Penh that is during the negotiations or meetings of the delegates,' from China who came to work with Pol Pot.²²² Beyond that, Seng Lytheng describes how separate photography units were assigned to capture the leaders' visits to work sites throughout the country. When pressed on his knowledge of Nhem En's photography taken of the leaders however, Seng Lytheng claimed no recollection of ever being in Nhem En's proximity nor any recognition of him whatsoever.²²³

Another point of clarification offered by Seng Lytheng's testimony was in relation to photographic training of DK cameramen. Although he did indeed train in China for a period in 1977, his photographic training began around 1973 in the jungles of Cambodia:

²²¹ Seng Lytheng, Transcript of trial proceedings, 29 November 2016, Trial Chamber– Trial Day 484, The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, Case No. 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, 3 February 2017, [Microsoft Word - TR002_20161129_EN_FINAL \(eccc.gov.kh\)](#), 13.

²²² Seng, Transcript of trial proceedings, 29 November 2016, 53.

²²³ Seng, Transcript of trial proceedings, 29 November 2016, 62-3.

'I learned <it> in the jungle for about one month. At that time, we did not have any adequate equipment yet. <So, I just learned basic photography skills.>'²²⁴

Noem Oem was never sent to China, but similarly describes humble training circumstances that required learning on the job and a great deal of resourcefulness on the part of the Tuol Sleng photographers. For Noem Oem, 'taking photos was an easy job'; the real challenge was developing the negatives.²²⁵ His testimony in Case 002 is of particular historical interest because it establishes a line of continuity in Cambodian camera media that was not previously known. Noem Oem's account along with Seng Lytheng's, also dispels Douglas Niven's hypothesis that the Cambodian photographers of the DK regime must have only been capable of learning high quality camera skills from foreign training:

'So, at that time, we sought help from the photographers of the older -- of the old regime who were evicted from Phnom Penh to the rural areas. So we asked help from them <to translate the manuals into Khmer so that we could study and practice at the same time>.

At the time <> I was learning <and> I was also practicing [*sic*] <at the same time>. They translated <the manuals> for me and I started to practice it and we achieved a good result. And I also learned how to develop the negatives <and photos> based on my real practice.'

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Who were these individuals —these photographers— from the 'old regime'? Were they the same brave and resourceful photojournalists —Tea Kim Heang, Thong Veasna, Ly Eng, Saing Hel— that despite eventually being killed under the regime, still managed to pass on their enduring and powerful legacy to the contemporary Cambodian photographers, filmmakers, and artists who, in the 1990s, began to emerge from the rubble of war and political violence, against almost all odds? Or could they have been among the renowned

²²⁴ Seng, Transcript of trial proceedings, 29 November 2016, 52.

²²⁵ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 15 September 2016, 83.

²²⁶ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 15 September 2016, 83.

filmmakers and cameramen of Cambodia's golden age of cinema, who ingeniously transformed a medium of colonial propaganda into a public discourse that is inherently Cambodian-Khmer?

In truth, history might never know the identities of the photographers who helped Noem Oem, just as the poignant reality is that some of the individuals photographed at S-21 may never be definitively identified. And much like the traces of an S-21 mug shot, Noem Oem's memory abruptly ends at the climax, without a resolution.

Noem Em took the instructions, which were in English, to the base of Division 703, near Psar Thmei, or Central Market in Phnom Penh, where he asked the commander, Nat (who was later arrested and killed), to help find someone who could teach him film development and simultaneously translate the instructions.²²⁷ He then travelled to and met with the photographer(s) where they were based in Kandal province.²²⁸ After the former photographer(s)/filmmaker(s) completed their task of translating the film development instructions into Khmer, Noem Oem returned to Phnom Penh, where he 'studied the translation and the names of chemicals that [he] had to mix,' for proper film development.²²⁹ Noem Oem said, that before leaving the photographers 'I gave them a bag of rice that I transported from Phnom Penh. But I do not know what happened to that photographer later on after he returned the translated document to me.'²³⁰

²²⁷ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 16 September 2016, 24-5.

²²⁸ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 16 September 2016, 25.

²²⁹ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 16 September 2016, 25.

²³⁰ Noem, Transcript of trial proceedings, 16 September 2016, 24.

Once again, we are left with *snarm*, or traces, in the search for the individual.

But what if Noem Oem is the individual that we – historians and publics- have been searching for? Although his testimony alone may not have altered the outcome of ECCC Case 002, the broader significance is that the memories of his individual experiences as the chief photographer- whether entirely ‘true’ and dispelling of Nhem En’s embellished and self-important memory, or inevitably fragmented and likely flawed due to temporal distance, changed what the S-21 photographs *do* in the context of DK historiography. Or, better still, Noem Oem’s testimony –when visually mediated by the photographs– underscored what the photographs *no longer do*, which is continuing to satiate the involuntary viewer response of imaging the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ strictly through the lenses of the self as rescuer (by way of passively bearing witness), and the other as either a victim or a perpetrator.

Though Noem Oem’s story is experientially unique and offers a rare historical perspective, it also echoes the narratives of countless lower-level Khmer Rouge cadre – some of whom he likely photographed– in the sense that it disrupts any clear distinctions between victim and perpetrator. Indeed, Noem Oem’s recounting of his own personal experience offers the sensation of being caught in between the identities of victim and perpetrator in the most literal sense by way of the S-21 photographs. As such, his testimony equally challenges both historians and publics to implement the ‘postmemory’ model of

'retrospective witnessing by adoption.'²³¹ In other words, the act of viewing the S-21 photographs in conjunction with Noem Oem's testimony becomes a form of *active witnessing* wherein viewers are required to reimagine their past ethical relationships with the photographs by adopting his memories and experiences as their own.²³² As Chapter 5 shall examine in detail, applying the postmemory model to camera imagery is not only an exercise in resisting appropriation and the annihilation 'between the self and other and the otherness of the other,' but perhaps more importantly, it extends Khmer Rouge survivor and trauma identification to subsequent generations, thus creating a powerful intergenerational bond, whilst effectively including less proximate publics in the complexly interconnected dialogues of individual and cultural visibility, history, memory, and identity.²³³

²³¹ Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,' *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): pp. 5-37, [Project MUSE - Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory \(jhu.edu\)](https://www.jhu.edu/~criticism/14.1/14.1-hirsch.html), 10.

²³² Hirsch, 'Surviving Images,' *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 10.

²³³ Hirsch, 'Surviving Images,' *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 11.

CHAPTER 5

Survivor Memory and Postmemory: The Art and Public History of Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana

*'I see nothing. It's so dark. Oh Buddha, I can't see anyone.'*¹

Maurice Halbwach's observation that no collective memory can exist without reference to an existing social framework,² though true, is undeniably and inevitably complicated by the aftereffects intrinsic to a period of genocide, including the rupture of nearly all facets of the social framework and, in the specific case of Cambodia, the acute devastation of cultural visibility that resulted from the literal usurpation of sight, vision, and the assault on people's ability to practice visual literacy as a form of civic participation. As one writer soberly explains, 'the result [of DK] was not only a tragic and enormous loss of life, but a deep and gaping wound in the country's cultural heritage- and artistic future.'³ The amount of healing and recovery that were (and still are) required in the wake of a genocidal regime that had consciously used sight, visibility, and the camera apparatus as ultimate forms of power and control over its people have been unprecedented.

Because the arts were traditionally foundational to Cambodia's sociocultural framework, a great deal of responsibility was subsequently placed on *selapak* and the vocation of the *silpakar* to not only preserve what remained of indigenous artistic traditions (a task which carried over an intensified, post-genocide version of George Groslier's fear

¹ *Graves Without a Name*, directed by Rithy Panh (2018; New York, NY: Catherine Dussart Production; Anuheap Production, 2020), iTunes digital file, 47:58/ 1:55:29.

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 37-42.

³ Diane Amato, 'The Art Scene in Cambodia: More Than a Cultural Revival,' *G Adventures* (blog), February 6, 2017, [The art scene in Cambodia: More than a cultural revival - G Adventures](#).

that the Cambodian arts were in danger of being lost forever), but to also forge a path towards collective healing and civic recovery. In summary, these were daunting missions that imposed the extraordinary challenge of reconstituting the visual arts, and visuality in general, to once again be pillars of Cambodia's social framework.

Preceding chapters have attempted to underscore that the magnitude of such loss and devastation, combined with narratives of the Cambodian genocide being steered by international neo-colonial perceptions, together endorsed an inaccurate notion that the Cambodian arts had experienced a so-called 'rebirth'⁴ in the 2000s and that post-DK *silpakar* and contemporary artistic sensibilities had simply emerged from 'out of nowhere.'⁵ This historicization became closely associated with contemporary artists working in film and photography; as they launched into successful careers and began to be recognised within international art circuits, these *silpakar* were faced with the added responsibility of giving artistic context to post-DK and post-genocide Cambodian camera media production. At the same time, they were having to contend with the Khmer Rouge's enduring stigmatisations of the camera and the photographic image, the S-21 photographic archive's entrance into the international art scene, as well as the selection of S-21 images becoming icons of trauma and the baseline for the historicization of camera media in Cambodia.

⁴ Pamela N. Corey, 'The "First" Cambodian Contemporary Artist,' *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies*, no. 12 (2014): pp. 61-94, [06 A Pamela N Corey Udaya12 A.pdf \(yosothor.org\)](#), 61.

⁵ Zhuang Wubin, 'Out of Nowhere: Contemporary Cambodian Photography,' *Art Monthly Australia*, December 2009, pp. 5-8.

It has already been shown that maintaining focus within the confines of the above-mentioned discourses is an immense disservice to the rich and complex history of Cambodian film and photography that also disregards the autonomy of post-DK Cambodian arts' revitalisation (from the 1990s to the present) and the factors that constitute it as a public history movement. In addition, we know from the previous chapter's examination of the history of photography and film in Cambodia that camera media are ever evolving despite these circumstances and notwithstanding the best efforts of disciplinary historiographers to contain and delimit interpretations of still and moving camera images, which are neither static, nor confinable to streamlined disciplines, processes, or principles.⁶

It is this juncture in the broader cultural understanding of Cambodian camera media that the multi-vocational, interdisciplinary characteristics and social responsibilities of the public historian and the post-DK *silpakar* may be interpreted as being one and the same; through the lenses of *silpakar*, the versatility of camera media have bridged traditions of *selapak* with the various pre-DK social contexts in which still and moving camera images galvanized public participation to meet the needs of post-DK society, which included giving form and visibility to Khmer Rouge history and memory, reinstating spectatorship as a form of civic participation,⁷ and engaging various social groups in the image-making processes by

⁶ Jes Aznar, 'Changing Paradigms,' *POY Asia* (blog), July 23, 2021, [Changing Paradigms by Jes Aznar – Pictures of the Year Asia \(poyasia.org\)](https://poyasia.org).

⁷ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, 'Photography and Public Culture,' in *Photography and Its Publics*, ed. Melissa Miles and Edward Welch (Routledge, 2020), pp. 19-29, See also Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator,' in *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009), pp. 1-24.

calling on individuals to contribute their voices and memories to the historiography of DK and the Khmer Rouge. In other words, drawing upon the adaptability and performativity of film and photography, along with acknowledging the centrality of active spectatorship,⁸ post-DK *silpakar* used the media to re-imagine the communicative boundaries of *selapak* and what film and photography can *do* ⁹ within an artistic context. The *silpakar* did so by giving reference to the multiplicity of social functions that were historically assigned to camera imagery in pre-DK Cambodia and activating both old and new images in ways that responded to the needs of post-DK society. Resultantly, the post-DK *silpakar* re-established a line of continuity within the collective memory, thus making photography and film instrumental in transforming the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts into a public history movement and the responsibility of the historian an extension of the *silpakar*.

Looking through and analysing the lenses of Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana —two of the most prominent and influential *silpakar* of camera media in contemporary Cambodia— this chapter aims to demonstrate the ways in which post-DK camera media practices have broadened the language, vocabulary, and scope, of post-DK Cambodian visual arts and historiography. Of equal importance to this undertaking is emphasising that contrary to popular belief, the expansion of the visual arts' range of influence in post-DK Cambodian culture and its significance as a locus for a public history movement that

⁸ Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator,' *The Emancipated Spectator*, 1-24.

⁹ See Chapter 4's explanation for examining photography and film as transitive verbs.

Joan M. Schwartz, 'The Archival Garden: Photographic Plantings, Interpretive Choices, and Alternative Narratives,' in *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions, Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2011), pp. 69-110.

signified a democratisation of historical communication, was not a singular historical moment akin to a rebirth. Rather, it was a multi, trans, and inter-generational process, hence why bringing the oeuvres of Panh (b. 1964) and Vandy (b. 1980) —who are respectively members of the survivor and postmemory generations (postmemory refers to those who were born in the wake of the Cambodian genocide)¹⁰— is especially useful for this exercise. Marianne Hirsch’s model of postmemory is adopted as a means for articulating how the evolution of camera media, as transitive verbs in the period of the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts, have been dependent upon generational acts of transmission, conscious inheritance of, and reference to, the social framework, and its rupture under Democratic Kampuchea.

As applying the term ‘public history movement,’ to the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts implies collective action and mass participation that sparks change, a shortcoming of a case study that focuses on the oeuvres of just two artists is that it leaves out the many *silpakar* and important cultural voices, especially those of women, who have contributed to the post-DK Cambodian arts’ transformation into a public history movement. However, the decision to proceed with a study that is inclusive of only two artists —both of whom are male— was not made without carefully considering what was trying to be accomplished through a microstudy along with the insights that would be both gained and sacrificed when investing in such a specific approach. The conclusion of the thesis

¹⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), [The Generation of Postmemory : Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust \(ebscohost.com\)](https://www.ebscohost.com), 5.

recognizes the limitations of this final chapter by suggesting ways in which future research in public history might be inclusive of the numerous other *silpakar* existing across genders, generations, geographic boundaries, ethnicities, and artistic media. However, one of the strengths of this chapter's analysis is that it essentialises the performative role of mass audience spectatorship and public participation, which must be present in order to generate a movement. Because the collaborative and outreach initiatives by Panh and Vandy offer opportunities to highlight the formation of publics through active participation and spectatorship whilst loosely tying other artists and voices into the discussion, it became apparent that a chapter dedicated to Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana would also be of value to the overall thesis as a point of reflection on the complex relationship between memory and history as well as art's ability to give visibility and continuity to the collective memory. These considerations are meant to deepen the inquiries at the forefront of the case study, which are: what are the ways in which Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana offer continuity to the collective memory as they address the ruptures of war and genocide? How does their art, activism, and generational perspectives help reconstruct the social framework and contribute to Khmer Rouge and DK historiography? And what are the philosophies, practices, and strategies, that transform Panh's and Vandy's art and historical inquiries into public history?

By giving due attention to specific generational acts of agency, creation, and transmission when exploring these questions, the analysis offers a glimpse into the complexity of rebuilding social frameworks for the collective memory in the wake of

genocide. What is more, as *silpakar* of the survivor and postmemory generations, the individual careers of Panh and Vandy offer vantage points from which it is possible to identify the continuities and discontinuities in practices, the convergences and divergences in their historical knowledge, queries, and criticisms, as well as the shared and differing experiences of fear and anxiety that have motivated their artistic practices from either living through or inheriting the trauma of genocide. In this sense, bringing Panh's and Vandy's oeuvres together forms a comparative study. Simultaneously, a dialogue is created, thus making it possible to avoid a tone that risks slipping into a 'competition over suffering,'¹¹ between generations, whilst the aforementioned markers of comparison inform how generational experiences and perspectives are foundational pillars of inquiry and controls that shape and facilitate *selapak's* contributions to the sociality of Cambodian public history, Khmer Rouge historiography, and historical understanding.

Before delving into the analysis, it is worth providing a brief, explanatory summary of postmemory and the reasons for using generational memory as an instrument for historical interpretation. In Hirsch's words, the term 'postmemory' is particularly associated with traumatic recall¹² and:

'describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before— to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute

¹¹ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 19.

¹² Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 6.

memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.'¹³

This analysis seeks to build on this definition; as shall become apparent, while the stories and images that are transmitted through generations are central to the investigation, so too are the silences of survivors and the absence of images. Like Hirsch's research, postmemory is not utilised here as 'a movement, method, or idea,' or even an 'identity position,' that distinguishes successive generations from survivors of the Cambodian genocide.¹⁴ Instead, the term postmemory is a 'generational structure of transmission embedded in multiple forms of mediation.'¹⁵ In this instance, visual art that primarily utilises film and photography are the mediative forms of generational memory transmission as well as vehicles of continuity. Put simply, applying the structure of postmemory is meant to offset the 'uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture,' that inevitably accompanies the mission of articulating the transmission 'of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience,'¹⁶ between the generation of survivors and postmemory generations- a process in which the moral and psychological burdens of trauma and the symptoms of *baksbat* do not simply diminish.¹⁷ In addition, for postmemory to be an effective component of the analysis, it must be understood that the 'post' in 'postmemory' is not used with the intention of inscribing a disconnect between Panh's

¹³ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 5.

¹⁴ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 35.

¹⁵ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 35.

¹⁶ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 5-6.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, version Google Books (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indian University Press, 1996), [The Longest Shadow - Google Books](#), 8.

(survivor) and Vandy's (postmemory) generations by denoting temporal distance from, or an end to, the trauma of genocide.¹⁸ In fact, the term postmemory is meant to articulate 'the troubling continuity of trauma,' experienced by successive generations.¹⁹ This is especially true in Cambodia's circumstances, for unlike the parameters put forth by Hirsch, wherein postmemory is designated as a 'process that occurs only after conflict,' Cambodian postmemory functioned 'in the perpetuation of conflict,'²⁰ until the late 1990s, with what may be described as traumatic flare-ups occurring throughout its era of reconstruction, which continues into the present day.

It is also important to note the decisive shift in the thematic exploration of memory from the political to the social. Examining memory through an intergenerational dialogue effectively counters Part I's (especially Chapters 1 and 2) focus on the various ways Khmer Rouge and DK memory were at once subjugated to forge a national public history and narrowed to achieve political objectives in post-DK Cambodia. Although memory's thematization into a 'politics of memory,' was certainly necessary for explaining the power structures that determine 'who wants whom to remember what, and why,' it also inevitably relativised collective memory and public history to ideology and omitted the examination

¹⁸ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 5.

¹⁹ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 5.

²⁰ Caroline Dutka, "'What I Didn't Know': Postmemory and the Absence of Narrative in the Aftermath of Bloody Sunday,' *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 20, no. 2 (2016): pp. 80-97, [Project MUSE - "What I Didn't Know": Postmemory and the Absence of Narrative in the Aftermath of Bloody Sunday \(jhu.edu\)](http://ProjectMUSE.org/DocumentID/2500000), 83.

of individual, familial, and socio-cultural modes of memory transmission, which together help make up the spectrum of collective memory.²¹

With that said, the remainder of the thesis is not formulated based on the supposition that it is possible to 'capture the full diversity of collective memory.'²² Rather, the dialogue that is established through the examination of the art and public history of Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana, is merely one example of a vast number of individual and social group realities that separately evolve to form distinctive narratives, yet at times intersect, connect, and amalgamate into a collective memory that then informs the historiographic trajectory.

For Panh and Vandy, the convergence and commingling of their generational memories occur not in the literal sense wherein their career paths and artistry meet *vis-à-vis* collaborations or exhibitions; the two men have carved out prominent profiles for themselves in distinctly defined genres on the international art circuit- Panh in cinema and Vandy in contemporary art. Unfortunately, this has led to academic research across the disciplines of photography, history, contemporary art, film studies, cultural memory, and art history, instilling a notion of mutual exclusivity in their art and careers that are

²¹ Alon Confino, 'Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,' *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (December 1997): pp. 1386-1403, [Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method | The American Historical Review | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#), 1393.

²² Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 219. As quoted by Confino, 'Collective Memory and Cultural History,' *American Historical Review*, 1396.

superficially based on international publics' reception and channels of dissemination.²³ Therefore, bringing the two artists together is an effort to move away from international classification paradigms. Finally, by configuring the careers of Panh and Vandy based upon Chapter 3's examination of the *silpakar* and *selapak* (as opposed to Western definitions of an 'artist' and international artistic frameworks such as cinema and contemporary art), it is possible to reimagine the 'search for the individual,' as both a theme that pervades their oeuvres and an individual journey that they separately undertake and weave into, the evolution of collective memory, which may be charted through how their relationships with history's and memory's representations within still and moving images change over the course of their lives and careers.

Moving through the analysis, it is also worth considering the parallelisms in the ways the two artists engage with the performative elements of camera media, the artistic dependency of engaging with the masses, and the *silpakar*'s social responsibility to ensure the permanence and mass impact of their artistic contributions. With these thoughts in mind, it becomes clear that not only do the public history journeys within Panh's and Vandy's artistic oeuvres narrate intergenerational dynamics, but they form visual microcosms and *records* of the collective memory. In this sense, their individual careers are

²³ Apart from this chapter, Boreth Ly's analysis of Vandy Rattana's photography and video installation series *Bomb Ponds* in his book *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide*, is the only other instance that I have come across in which Rithy Panh's and Vandy Rattana's works were directly compared. See Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide*, version Kindle, eds. David Chandler and Rita Smith Kipp (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), 70-5.

separate, yet parallelly evolving trajectories that are amalgamations of cultural, private individual, generational, religious, and familial, processes of memory preservation, transmission, and reception, that inform the motives and perspectives of survivor and postmemory groups. Congruously, this microcosm of collective memory visually conveys the figurative and amorphous socio-temporal space that DK history occupies in Cambodian culture as well as within the analogous evolution of direct (survivor) memory and postmemory.

Beginning with interweaving the biographies of Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana, we examine the formative experiences that set them on their unique trajectories as *silpakar* and public historians. Then, echoing the ways in which survivor memory and postmemory operate as separate entities that are always in evolution, and at certain points, converge to inform the collective memory, the structure of the analysis of their photography and cinema is delineated by the decisive shifts in how both artists exercise social agency and transmit history and memory through their camera lenses over the span of their careers. The Rithy Panh films utilised are pragmatically construed as two sets of ‘trilogies’; the first trilogy includes *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy* (1996), *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), and *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell*, (2011). These films are examined in tandem with Vandy Rattana’s first internationally recognised photography and video installation series, *Bomb Ponds* (2009). Finally, Panh’s second ‘trilogy’— comprised of the film that marked a turning point in his cinema career, *The Missing Picture* (2013), along with *Exile* (2016), and *Graves Without a Name* (2018)— are examined in conjunction with Vandy’s

artistic transition from using a combination of photography and film to an entirely cinematic approach in the *MONOLOGUE* trilogy, consisting of the short films entitled, *MONOLOGUE* (2015), *Funeral* (2018), and *...far away, over there, the ocean* (2019).

Biographical Histories

Born in Phnom Penh in 1964 to parents who descended from peasant families, Rithy Panh was one of nine children. His father, a former teacher and chief undersecretary to a succession of ministers of education and later a member of the senate, provided the Panh family 'a life of ease,' and knowledge in suburban Phnom Penh.²⁴ But on April 17th, 1975, everything changed; that date, Rithy Panh explains in his memoir, became his 'registration number' and the date of his 'birth into the proletarian revolution.'²⁵ The Khmer Rouge's forced mass exodus of Cambodia's capital into the countryside that day differentiated those from Phnom Penh as 'new people,'- the former regime's bourgeoisie, landowners, capitalists, and intellectuals- who needed to be 're-educated' by the 'old people,'- the once forgotten and now superior peasant class, farmers, and labourers of the countryside- who, under Democratic Kampuchea, were considered the true 'heirs of the great Khmer Empire,' and descendants of the builders of Angkor.²⁶ From April 17th onward, the young Rithy Panh: had 'no more history, no more family, no more emotions, no more thoughts, no more unconscious. Was there a name? Was there an individual? There [was] nothing anymore.'²⁷

²⁴ Rithy Panh and Christophe Bataille, *The Elimination: A Survivor of the Khmer Rouge Confronts His Past and the Commandant of the Killing Fields*, trans. John Cullen (New York, NY: Other Press, 2012), 22.

²⁵ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 23.

²⁶ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 23.

²⁷ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 23.

Forty-three years after Phnom Penh's fall, these experiences of immense loss under DK would lead Panh to say, '*disons que j'étais mort. Oui! Mort.*'²⁸ Today, he continues to grapple with the metaphorical death that accompanies the identity of 'survivor' and someone who lost nearly all immediate kin to the brutality of the Khmer Rouge. His mother and father, three siblings, and numerous members of his extended family, were among the almost two million Cambodians killed in the three years, eight months, and twenty days under Khmer Rouge rule. Of the family members who were in Cambodia at the onset of DK, only Panh and his older sister survived.²⁹ The factor which helped Panh and his sister immigrate from a refugee camp in Mai Rut, Thailand, in 1979 was four brothers living abroad (two of whom were living in France). When the Khmer Rouge came to power, the brothers 'wisely stayed where they were,' which meant that Panh and his sister were permitted to enter France as refugees under the family reunification laws.³⁰

For ten years, Panh refused to return to his home country or even speak Khmer.³¹ It was not until he signed his first documentary (*Site II*) in 1989, that he once again set foot in Cambodia and began directly engaging with and documenting the traumatic history of DK and its aftermath.³² While in France, Panh at first turned to drawing and painting to render

²⁸ English translation: 'We could say I was dead. Yes! Dead.' Rithy Panh, *Graves Without a Name*, 1:06/1:55:29.

²⁹ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 231-3.

³⁰ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 232-3.

³¹ Henry M. Jackson, 'Cambodian Filmmaker Rithy Panh to Visit Seattle next Week,' *Southeast Asia Center University of Washington*, December 1, 2017, [Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh to visit Seattle next week - Southeast Asia Center Southeast Asia Center \(washington.edu\)](http://www.seacenter.org/cambodian-filmmaker-rithy-panh-to-visit-seattle-next-week).

³² 'Rithy Panh,' *Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore*, accessed September 28, 2021, [Rithy Panh - Feltrinelli Editore](http://www.feltrinelli.com/en/author/rithy-panh).

the painful memories and haunting images in his head.³³ He also sought out activities such as woodworking and playing guitar- activities that allowed him to retreat into solitude and silence.³⁴ Similar to the way in which the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts tends to be assigned a nascent status, most biographical accounts of Rithy Panh tend to reduce the beginning of his filmmaking career to something akin to an epiphany; often summarised in a singular historical moment wherein he was at a social event (during his time studying carpentry at a vocational school) and was handed a video camera, which prompted him to become interested enough in the art of filmmaking to apply to, and be accepted by the highly competitive *Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques* (Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies, or IDÉC), in Paris in 1985.³⁵ However, Panh's memories, some of which were recorded in his autobiography *L'élimination* (*The Elimination*), whilst others were visualised and narrated in his multi-award-winning film *The Missing Picture*, serve as historical sources that offer a much more nuanced explanation that directly links his path to filmmaking to both Cambodia's unique social history of camera media, and the rupture of that social framework as a result of civil war and genocide.

In *The Missing Picture*, Panh uses a combination of invented images made from miniature models, clay figurines, and poetry he co-wrote with Chrisophe Bataille (who also

³³ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 5.

³⁴ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 5.

³⁵ Jackson, 'Cambodian Filmmaker Rithy Panh to Visit Seattle next Week,' *Southeast Asia Center University of Washington*.

co-write *The Elimination*) to recount a formative experience of his pre-DK childhood (Figure 5.1):

Mon enfance à moi,
c'étaient les studios de cinéma,
avec un voisin réalisateur.

J'aimais le monde merveilleux
des parures et des coiffes,
des colliers et de l'or.
Le monde des géants,
des contes.
J'aimais ces coulisses
où de belles actrices semblaient danser
pour moi.

Je ramassais des bouts de pellicules,
que je regardais dans des boîtes
avec une petite lumière.

Puis ce monde a été détruit :
les cinémas fermés,
les artistes exécutés,
les chanteurs, les techniciens, les réalisateurs
envoyés aux champs.³⁶

My childhood to me,
it was the movie studios,
with a director neighbour.

I loved the marvellous world
of adornments and headdresses,
of colours and of gold.
The world of giants,
of fairy tales.
I loved it backstage
where the beautiful actresses seemed to dance
for me.

I collected film scraps,
that I watched through boxes
with a small light.

Then this world was destroyed:
the cinemas were closed,
the artists were executed,
The singers, technicians, and directors,
were sent to the fields.

³⁶ English translation is mine. Rithy Panh and Christophe Bataille, *L'image Manquante* (Paris, FR: B. Grasset, 2013), e-book, Kindle, location 196.



Figure 5.1: Rithy Panh, miniature re-creation of a film studio, *The Missing Picture*, (2013; France: Catherine Dussart Production; Strand Releasing), Amazon Prime digital video with colour and sound, screenshot, 35:55.

Further, in *The Elimination*, Panh describes the memory of his father, Panh Law's death and how his mother, who refused to attend the funeral— 'which she found unworthy of her husband and his convictions,'— conjured a 'funeral-in-words,' to suit 'the way she imagined it, the way it should have been, traditional and respectful.'³⁷ After recounting his mother's ability to create such a vivid picture of her husband's funeral with only her words, Panh states:

'I believe my faith in the cinema comes from that day. I believe in the image, even if it's staged, interpreted, worked on. In spite of dictatorship, one can film a true image.'³⁸

As sixteen-year-old Panh was beginning his life as a refugee in Grenoble, France, in 1980, 9,800 kilometres away in Phnom Penh, Vandy Rattana was born.

³⁷ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 99.

³⁸ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 100-1.

Born to parents of DK survivors, Vandy was a child of PRK Cambodia, and then a teenager during the 1990s when the history of the Cambodian genocide was all but absent in the national school curricula. Thus, Vandy's formative years were punctuated by Cambodia's era of silence surrounding DK, the national efforts to 'dig a hole and bury the past,' and the *dam-doeum-kor* and *kob yobal* of survivors, including his parents. Growing up, his family had very little; to Zhuang Wubin, Vandy recalled how 'his father had a few communist magazines in French and a Russian book on Henri Matisse. That was it.'³⁹ As a child, he wanted to become a pianist, but his 'parents said no.'⁴⁰ Becoming a photographer was not his plan, nor was it a realistic career option for anyone in Cambodia at the time, since formal photography education was, (and essentially still is) non-existent within the country.⁴¹ Later, over the course of his career in conversations with interviewers, Vandy would frequently recall a childhood experience that in retrospect, provides a sense of cohesion to what he refers to as his accidental career as a photographer, as well as continuity to the aesthetic qualities in his compositions.

Beginning in the late 1980s, when he was between the ages of eight and nine (around the same time Rithy Panh made his first return to Cambodia to film *Site II*), Vandy's neighbours (whose head of the house was a customs officer)⁴² were among the few families

³⁹ Zhuang Wubin, 'Out of Nowhere: Documentary Photography from Cambodia,' *Asian Art Newspaper*, January 2010, pp. 17-18, 17.

⁴⁰ Leeza Ahmady, 'History of the Future: Leeza Ahmady in Conversation with Svay Sareth and Vandy Rattana,' *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies*, no. 12 (2014): pp. 303-318,

[11 R LEEZA AHMADY Interview Udaya12 A comp.pdf \(yosothor.org\)](#), 304.

⁴¹ Ahmady, 'History of the Future,' *UDAYA*, 304.

⁴² Zhuang, 'Out of Nowhere: Documentary,' *Asian Art Newspaper*, 17.

with the financial means to buy a TV, a VCR, and screen films on a modest-sized television. By this time, Cambodians also started to have access to Vietnamese and Soviet films. Then in the 1990s, the range expanded to include Chinese and Indian movies.⁴³ In one interview, Vandy recalled:

'I spent a tremendous amount of time watching Indian Bollywood films. I would spend from morning until late at night, sometimes until the next morning, watching films. My brother would go around the neighbourhood and call out my name, "Rattana! Where are you?" I would try to stay still, hiding at the neighbour's house. I spent many years watching films at the homes of neighbours...When they had these screenings hundreds of people would gather around to watch. And years later I "graduated" to become the film operator, meaning I was the one who would press "play" on my friend's VCR.'⁴⁴

Vandy's childhood memories recall those of Panh's, but when compared, the two seem to be fractured parallels that mirror one another like alternate realities, divided by both time and the destruction wrought by DK. Panh's memories of spending time with his neighbour director in film studios offer an idyllic and privileged vantage point of the collective memory and sociality of the golden age of Cambodian cinema, the pre-DK cultural significance of film, and its near total annihilation under the Khmer Rouge. In contrast, Vandy's recollections echo a newly independent 1950s Cambodia on the cusp of its filmic heyday yet simultaneously allude to a transitional society struggling to rebuild its near total collapsed social framework with *snarm*- or traces- of its cinematographic heritage. More importantly however, Vandy's memory of cinema as a social event that was accessible to everyone in the social group (i.e., the neighbourhood), indicates that civic and cultural

⁴³ Zhuang, 'Out of Nowhere: Documentary,' *Asian Art Newspaper*, 17.

⁴⁴ Vandy Rattana in Ahmady, 'History of the Future,' *UDAYA*, 304.

participation via visual literacy was existent and taking place at the community level. It is also a memory that offers insight into the mediation of cinema and its ability to transform individual acts of spectatorship into a shared community experience, that in turn, becomes a performative extension of the cinematic event. These cinematic events in the homes of neighbours are thus significant moments of post-DK and post-genocide social history because they were the foundations for and the first glimpses of the rebuilding of a public sphere. Meanwhile, the community's engagement with foreign films and reverence for the performativity of cinema directly referenced the pre-DK social framework, which allowed the experiences of the postmemory generation to connect and intermingle with the collective memory of survivors.

Vandy carried these cinematic images of his childhood with him, later citing that 'when [he] first started photography, all these filmic images came back to [him].'⁴⁵ This is markedly apparent from the very start of his photography practice, which began in 2005 with the intimate analogue and cinematic two-part photography series, *Looking In* (Figures 5.2- 5.4). In this first series of still images, which document the private spaces of his family and neighbourhood friends, one can see how the blurred and grainy texture produced by the Yashica FX7 and 50-millimeter lens that Vandy used is reminiscent of 'a cinematic look,' specifically, cinema that had been copied onto a video cassette and then screened on a home TV set.⁴⁶ As the first series in his now substantial and proficient oeuvre that is

⁴⁵ Zhuang Wubin, 'Cambodia,' in *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, First (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), pp. 243-269, 255.

⁴⁶ Vandy Rattana in an interview with Leeza Ahmady. Ahmady, 'History of the Future,' *UDAYA*, 305.

comprised of both still and moving images, *Looking In* is also noteworthy for its subject matter. Subtle odes to Vandy's personal memories of watching cinema and 'all the time [he] spent watching films,'⁴⁷ the photographs capture the private spaces of family and friends, places that were undoubtedly responsible for cultivating Vandy's ability to exercise visual literacy as an act of civic leadership.



Figure 5.2: Vandy Rattana, *Looking In* series, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 31, 2021).

⁴⁷ Vandy in an interview with Leeza Ahmady, Ahmady, 'History of the Future,' *UDAYA*, 304.



Figure 5.3: Vandy Rattana, *Looking In* series, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.4: Vandy Rattana, *Looking In* series, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).

by individual survivors (which at that point in time remained unaddressed and not properly diagnosed), meant that communities and social groups did not possess the resources or capability to confront the cultural silences and the abject presence of the absences that were direct consequences of the DK experience. The lack of Cambodians' engagement with his films was perhaps for Panh, the moment that led to his self-realisation as a *silpakar*. Recalling Chapter 3's discussion, *silpakar* are members of the community who: 1. Aspire to work with the masses 2. Work as part of an ensemble 3. Exercise vocational fluidity to meet the required needs their community 4. Produce work that has a presence and use 5. Create *selapak* that can be understood and appreciated by the majority. Panh undoubtedly understood that for his films to have an impact and a public within Cambodia, he had to identify how his formal and foreign artistic training might fit within Cambodia's post-DK social context and be compatible with the broader and immediate needs of Cambodian communities.

From the time Panh began filming documentaries in Cambodia in the early 1990s, he became aware 'of the serious plight of his country's audio-visual heritage,'⁵¹ and the ways in which its safeguarding correlated with societal remembrance and healing for existing and future generations. Panh knew that if action was not taken soon to protect and preserve the handful of archives that had managed to survive decades of war and the period of DK, all of Cambodia's audio-visual heritage would be lost to the elements within twenty

⁵¹ 'Our History,' Bophana, accessed December 31, 2021, [Our History | Bophana](#).

years⁵² and with it, a vital form of mediation linking the past with the present and future. With former filmmaker and the then current director of the Film Department at the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, Ieu Pannakar, Panh envisioned founding a place devoted to channelling the 'memories and artistic creations,'⁵³ of Cambodians towards the much-needed preservation of the nation's audio-visual heritage. Such an undertaking required overcoming the main challenges of reinstating public engagement with film and the arts as civic responsibilities, as well as devising a long-term plan of investment in Cambodian civil society. For ten years, Rithy Panh and Ieu Pannakar worked to convince necessary stakeholders within the Cambodian government that archival creation, preservation, and access, were inherent to the assimilation of a national identity.⁵⁴ Finally, in 2006, the Cambodian authorities offered their support by designating a 1960s period building located in the heart of Phnom Penh as the site for the project's realisation.⁵⁵ Within months, the project gained further support from French institutions, which provided 'bilateral cooperation, technical and financial support,' as well as logistical insight for operating archive centres and managing public access.⁵⁶ By the end of that same year, the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center opened to the public (Figure 5.5).

⁵² [Our History | Bophana](#).

⁵³ [Our History | Bophana](#).

⁵⁴ [Our History | Bophana](#).

⁵⁵ [Our History | Bophana](#).

⁵⁶ [Our History | Bophana](#).



Figure 5.5: Vann Channarong, Front exterior of the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, 2020. Image courtesy of the Bophana Center.

It is worth incorporating an overview of the Bophana Centre as a part of Panh’s biographical history because it is an exemplification of how public history became extensions of the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts and the civic role of the *silpakar*. Although it is an NGO, the sense of community embedded within the Bophana Centre’s atmosphere evokes that of a Khmer village wherein Panh, as a *silpakar*, steps outside of his specialised artistic vocation of directing films to execute work that is both compatible with and in response to, the immediate requirements of the social milieu.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ See Chapter 3’s discussion.

When passing through the threshold into the Bophana Centre, one enters the world of Rithy Panh, where art and public history merge with the purpose of providing Cambodians the education, knowledge, and resources needed to assert individual agency in the research, documentation, narration, and dissemination of their own history and heritage (Figures 5.6 and 5.7). The Centre has two foundational pillars- archives and production⁵⁸- which place Cambodian society's creative engagement with its history at the centre of the shared mission to reconstruct the visual framework of cultural memory and heritage.⁵⁹



Figure 5.6: Thomas Cristfoletti, Bophana Center, view of the archival section, May 2017, Room Photo Archives

⁵⁸ 'Bophana: Audiovisual Resource Center Homepage,' Bophana, accessed December 31, 2021, [Bophana | Audiovisual Resource Center](#).

⁵⁹ Vincente Sánchez-Biosca, 'Bophana's Image and Narrative: Tragedy, Accusatory Gaze, and Hidden Treasure,' in *The Cinema of Rithy Panh: Everything Has a Soul*, ed. Leslie Barnes and Joseph Mai (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), pp. 173-187, 185.



Figure 5.7: 'Bophana Center interior.' Image sourced from 'MYPHNOMPENH: Love Soun, Youth Activist,' *The Phnom Penh Post*, October 21, 2016.

Between the time of its opening in 2006 and June 2020, the archive department of the Bophana Centre collected, preserved, catalogued, and digitised 142 audio-visual collections connected to Cambodian history, totalling in '2,317 videos, 1,436 audio archives, 216 series of photographs (each of them containing between 20 and 100 photos), and 444 books.'⁶⁰ Among the collections that are entirely unique to the Bophana Centre is its Khmer Rouge archive, which contains Khmer Rouge propaganda films recovered by the Cambodian Film Commission beginning in 1979, after the fall of DK.⁶¹

Although the Centre boasts a rare and increasingly impressive archival collection, Rithy Panh and Ieu Pannakar had always envisioned the fruits of their labour amounting to

⁶⁰ 'Archives,' Bophana, accessed December 31, 2021, [Archives | Bophana](#).

⁶¹ [Archives | Bophana](#).

much more than a repository for historical material. Driven by the motive that ‘the archive would be dead if no one could see it,’⁶² the Bophana Centre uses the archives to cultivate and encourage visual literacy within communities. First and foremost, all members of the public- Cambodians and international visitors alike- are given free access to the entire digitised collection (Figure 5.8). In addition, an array of outreach and access initiatives are offered to encourage diverse forms of engagement and extend the archive’s radius of influence. These activities are designed to amplify the performative power of images⁶³ whilst helping to facilitate publics’ education in image analysis,⁶⁴ creation, and visual expression. From staffing Cambodians to operate the Centre’s activities and providing vocational training to its archivists, to hosting free weekly cinema screenings for the public (Figure 5.9) and equipping the Centre with the technology that allow publics to explore the archive and conduct research, the Bophana Centre’s archive department is a model for public history that operates on a plane of shared authority. By providing training for and access to all facets of the history-making process to the community, the Centre’s archives department actively destabilises and dismantles the traditional hierarchy of history-making in a way that echoes the Khmer tradition wherein the *silpakar*’s production of *selapak* is contingent on participatory actions of members of the public.

⁶² Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, *Bophana and Memory* (Bophana Productions, 2017), [Bophana and Memory on Vimeo](#), 04:25/09:37.

⁶³ Sánchez-Biosca, ‘Bophana’s Image and Narrative,’ *The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, 181.

⁶⁴ See featured quote by Rithy Panh, ‘About Bophana Center,’ Bophana, accessed December 31, 2021, [About Bophana Center | Bophana](#).



Figure 5.8: The research centre of the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center. Image courtesy of the Bophana Center website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.9 : *Introducing 'The burnt theatre' and New land broken road' at Bophana.* Image courtesy of Folding Concrete, 2019, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.10: Installation art and community engagement at Bophana Center. Image courtesy of Trip Advisor, (accessed December 3, 2021).

In conjunction with being a site for historical research and archival engagement, the archival headquarters is a space for publics to exercise visual literacy and master techniques in imagery analysis in an array of scenarios. Aside from its weekly cinema screenings, the Centre is the host for exhibitions on photography, painting, music, and installation art relating to Cambodian history and memory (Figure 5.10). And, to provide further opportunities for dialogues and ‘understanding of Cambodian history, its culture,

architecture, traditions as well as its current challenges,⁶⁵ the Centre organizes workshops, artist talks, and conferences that correlate with the cinema screenings and exhibitions, which are well-attended by Cambodian and international publics.⁶⁶

Whilst the Bophana Centre's archives department is committed to sharing authority with publics to accomplish the mission of reconstructing Cambodia's memories and visual representations of the past, the production department is dedicated to fostering and diversifying the visual creativity and documentation of present and future generations. As there is an absence of formal training and education for new media in Cambodia, the Bophana Centre 'positions itself as a service provider to Cambodian civil society,'⁶⁷ by offering in-house training for an array of 'careers in filmmaking, broadcasting, and new media.'⁶⁸ The Centre in turn works to ensure the sustainability of its investments by generating income through providing a range of services to individuals and organisations making films in Cambodia, including production, equipment rental, post-production assistance, and the technical skills of those trained by the Bophana Centre.⁶⁹

Panh himself acts as a mentor to the young Cambodian filmmakers trained at the Bophana Centre and frequently contributes to the filmic projects of others as a producer- the most internationally known collaboration being Angelina Jolie's directed adaptation of

⁶⁵ 'Conferences,' Bophana, accessed December 31, 2021, [Conferences | Bophana](#).

⁶⁶ Rachel Hughes, 'Showing Now: The Bophana Audiovisual Resource Centre and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia,' in *Civil Society and Transitional Justice in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Lia Kent, JoAnne Wallis, and Claire Cronin (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019), pp. 107-126, 108.

⁶⁷ Hughes, 'Showing Now,' *Civil Society and Transitional Justice in Asia and the Pacific*, 117.

⁶⁸ See description of the Bophana Center at the bottom of the webpage.

⁶⁹ 'Production Assistance,' Bophana, accessed December 31, 2021, [Production Assistance | Bophana](#).

DK survivor, Luong Ung's memoir *First They Killed My Father* (2017). Several of Panh's mentees have gone on to direct documentaries that examine Cambodian history and memory (with Panh as a producer), which received nominations and awards at highly regarded international film festivals.⁷⁰ The most notable example is Lida Chan's and Guillaume Suon's documentary, *Red Wedding* (2012), which was awarded 'best medium length documentary at the International Documentary Film Festival.'⁷¹

More recently, the Bophana Centre has undertaken production projects that address the disproportionate demographics within Cambodian art and cinema, namely their gendered nature, which when combined with Cambodian culture, automatically lend men more privileges and opportunities for success. For instance, the Bophana Centre has partnered with Oxfam to implement a training program called 'Amplifying Voices of Indigenous Women and Discriminated Groups,' which provides 12 young people, particularly women and people from disenfranchised indigenous communities in specific regions of Cambodia, full scholarships for two years of training in documentary filmmaking at the Bophana Centre.⁷² There is also the 'One Dollar Project,' which 'connects emerging filmmakers' around the globe through the common goal of creating a 'mosaic of portraits' of people all over the world who are 'living with limited resources.'⁷³ The young activist-filmmakers are tasked with using the medium of film not as a mode to speak for the people

⁷⁰ [Production Assistance | Bophana](#).

⁷¹ [Production Assistance | Bophana](#).

⁷² 'Amplifying Voices of Indigenous Women and Discriminated Groups,' Bophana, accessed December 31, 2021, [Amplifying Voices of Indigenous Women and Discriminated Groups | Bophana](#).

⁷³ 'One Dollar,' Bophana, accessed December 31, 2021, [One Dollar | Bophana](#).

whom they are filming, but rather as a platform, or a 'speaking space' that gives the people who are being filmed a voice and the opportunity to speak for themselves.

The projects undertaken by the production department are in short, reiterations of the philosophy that is inherent to Panh's individual artistry and cinematography; mimicking the traditional *Ikhaun*, the aspiration of transforming reality through the art of film is nothing short of a performative act involving an ensemble and the participation of publics through active spectatorship, memory transmission, and historical inquiry. By expanding and diversifying the voices involved in Cambodian documentary filmmaking, the Bophana Centre and Rithy Panh are efficaciously countering the violent functions assigned to camera media under DK (i.e., an exercise of authoritative power, form of surveillance, and an assertion of control over the oppressed) that resulted in the devastation of cultural visibility.

Finally, with Rithy Panh at the helm, the Bophana Centre became a critical mediator between Cambodian publics and the historic events in the nation's journey through transitional justice. In the same year that Panh and Ieu opened the doors to the Bophana Centre (2006), the judges and co-prosecutors were sworn in to the ECCC. The two vastly different organisations formed a connection early on based upon their shared concern of attaining justice for Khmer Rouge victims and survivors. Upon the establishment of a Memorandum of Understanding between the two organizational bodies, the Bophana Centre began lending support in legal outreach activities devised by the Public Affairs Section (PAS) of the ECCC.⁷⁴ The Bophana Centre was among the numerous NGOs to partake

⁷⁴ Hughes, 'Showing Now,' *Civil Society and Transitional Justice in Asia and the Pacific*, 111.

in the Khmer Rouge Study Tours (which were described in more detail in Chapter 2). In exchange for the Bophana Centre's services, which included the study tours paired with an event called Memory Night (a mobile cinema initiative designed to inform and engage Cambodians in the transitional justice process), the PAS offered their assistance to Rithy Panh by helping him obtain access to Duch (the defendant in ECCC Case 001).⁷⁵ The more than 300 hours of interview time that Panh had accrued with Duch thanks to the relationship with the PAS, were the material that comprised his 2011 film *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell*.

When Case 002 against Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan began, the Bophana Centre emerged as a chief collaborator of the ECCC's non-judicial programmes and cultural reparations initiatives spurred by the Court's Victims Support Section. As Chapter 2's section on transitional justice elaborated, the Victims Support Section was inadequately funded and was faced with the glaring reality that full victim participation within the Court system would amount to 'an impossible burden on the court in terms of finances and time.'⁷⁶ Moreover, the forms of justice that the ECCC itself could offer were bound and limited to juridical proceedings, which in turn, narrowed the scope of survivor and Cambodian public participation in the process of attaining legal justice. While the 3,867 Civil Party participants in Case 002 was a feat, especially considering the complex process of applying for Civil Party

⁷⁵ Hughes, 'Showing Now,' *Civil Society and Transitional Justice in Asia and the Pacific*, 117.

⁷⁶ Helen Jarvis, 'Trials and Tribulations: The Long Quest for Justice for the Cambodian Genocide,' in *The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia Assessing Their Contribution to International Criminal Law*, ed. Simon M. Meisenberg and Ignaz Stegmüller (The Hague, NL: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), pp. 13-44, [The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia | SpringerLink](#), 31-2.

status, the number of participants totalled to less than one percent of DK survivors. For Panh and the Bophana Centre, this undoubtedly underscored the question of how creative and more open conceptualisations of, and approaches to, 'justice,' might benefit the estimated five million survivors in Cambodia and Cambodian civil society as a whole.

Panh and the Bophana Centre were involved in several substantial reparations projects that had the broader objective of providing long-term solutions to specific ongoing challenges within civil society that remained unaddressed by the Court, namely the issues of the disconnect between survivors and postmemory generations, the fear of the recurrence of genocide (as a result of postmemory generations not knowing the history), and the Court's limited acknowledgement of crimes experienced by survivors during DK. At the core of all three of the identified societal issues is the relationship between memory and history, which resonates in each of the reparations projects that the Bophana Centre became involved with. Among the projects taken on by Panh and the Bophana Centre that have been made tangible are: the Khmer Rouge History digital app (Figures 5.11 and 5.12), a free learning resource on Khmer Rouge history and civil party experiences under the ECCC, which was approved by the Ministry of Education and is used as a supplementary curriculum resource in Cambodia's national education system; *Phka Sla Krom Angkar*, a collaboration between the Sophiline Arts Ensemble, the Bophana Centre, and the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization; and Acts of Memory, a project that uses film to create dialogues between survivors and the postmemory generation.



Figure 5.11: Promotion image for the Khmer Rouge History App. Image courtesy of the Bophana Center website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.12: Vann Channarong, Khmer Rouge History App learning. Image courtesy of the Bophana Center.



Figure 5.13: Sophiline Shapiro, 'Dancers from the Sophiline Arts Ensemble perform 'Phka Sla Krom Angkar,' 2017. Image courtesy of Sophiline Sapiro and sourced from 'Classical Dance Tells Story of Cambodian Genocide's Forced Marriages,' *NBC News*, May 2017.

In consultation with ECCC civil parties, the project produced a classical dance drama and mobile exhibition aimed at 'sharing the story of forced marriages through the arts, peacebuilding, documentation, and psychological support,'⁷⁷ which was certainly a need in Cambodian civil society as it is estimated that at least half a million⁷⁸ people were victims of forced marriage during the Khmer Rouge. It was a crime that went virtually unacknowledged in Cambodian civil society until the ECCC's ruling of it as such in Case 002.

⁷⁷ *Phka Sla Krom Angkar*, (The Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, 2017), [Phka Sla Krom Angkar | Bophana](#) 02:03/01:22:07.

⁷⁸ Bophana, *Phka Sla Krom Angkar*, 01:26.

The *Phka Sla Krom Angkar* project (Figure 5.13) was thus devised to incite public acknowledgement of the widespread harm and suffering that was incurred by the crime of forced marriage. Although *Phka Sla Krom Angkar* resembled other reparations projects in that it amalgamated ‘public performances, community and intergenerational dialogue, forum theatre and screenings in order to stimulate public discussion,’⁷⁹ it is entirely unique in the sense that it was the only reparations project proposal that sought to address the widespread ‘harm suffered by men and women as a result of forced marriages,’ and gender-based violence. The performance appropriated ‘Cambodia’s most revered art form,’ (classical dance), a visual ‘language usually reserved for the stories of gods...to shine a light on a traumatic experience of [Cambodia’s] history,’⁸⁰ convey the unspeakable, and disseminate an historical experience that, for four decades, had been ‘a source of shame and anguish for so many.’⁸¹ In much the same way as an historian might seek to write an account on the event, the performance was developed using information that was gathered through interviews and consultations with survivors who were victims of forced marriage under the DK regime. The performance leaves viewers to reflect on the open-ended inquiry, *how does the history and legacy of forced marriages during the Khmer Rouge continue to affect gender relations and dynamics in contemporary Cambodian society?*⁸²

⁷⁹ Case 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/TC, ‘Civil Party Lead Co-Lawyers’ Submission Relating to Reparation Projects for Implementation in Case 002/02,’ (2016E352 2 1 EN.PDF (eccc.gov.kh), 10, accessed November 15, 2021.

⁸⁰ Sophiline Shapiro quoted in Kristi Eaton, ‘Classical Dance Tells a Story of Cambodian Genocide’s Forced Marriages,’ *NBC News*, May 4, 2017, [Classical Dance Tells Story of Cambodian Genocide's Forced Marriages \(nbcnews.com\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/classical-dance-tells-story-cambodian-genocides-forced-marriages-ncna101100), accessed November 15, 2021.

⁸¹ Shapiro quoted in Eaton, ‘Classical Dance Tells a Story,’ *NBC News*.

⁸² Eaton, ‘Classical Dance Tells a Story,’ *NBC News*.



Figure 5.14: Promotional image for 'Acts of Memory' Project. Image courtesy of the Bophana Center website (accessed December 3, 2021).

Another noteworthy Bophana Centre reparations project proposal is 'Acts of Memory,' an ongoing project, which has the overarching goal of bridging the disconnect between survivors and postmemory generation members, as is evidenced by the project's slogan, 'learn the past, create the future,'⁸³ and the project's advertising image (Figure 5.14) The project utilises the medium of film to give performative power and agency to individual survivors and members of the postmemory generation. Young students of the postmemory generation are encouraged to develop their general curiosity about the Khmer Rouge into a project driven by historical inquiry. They are first asked to learn about the history of the

⁸³ 'Acts of Memory,' [Acts of Memory | Bophana](#).

Khmer Rouge (via the Khmer Rouge history app), which is followed up with training in filmmaking and conducting oral history interviews so that students may carry out their individual contributions to the 'Acts of Memory' project in the form of films that document interviews conducted with relatives who survived DK.⁸⁴ For survivors, the process of transmitting memories to the next generation allows their experiences to be heard and acknowledged, whilst the filmic documentation and preservation of their transmissions by the Bophana Centre legitimises survivor memory as history and each survivor account as an historical source that helps shape the trajectory of Khmer Rouge historiography.

Vandy Rattana, though of the postmemory generation, came of age before the institutionalisation of the Bophana Centre. In the turbulent 1990s, Cambodia's 30-year civil war with the Khmer Rouge had yet to end, the history of DK was nothing more than a paragraph in school textbooks, and the road to transitional justice was still more than a decade away. For those living through this period, 'the act of remembrance [was] a form of subversion.'⁸⁵ As such, Vandy's experiences as a member of the postmemory generation and journey to becoming a *silpakar* are in contrast to those who came of age in the years after the final surrender of the Khmer Rouge in 1998 and in the era of the Bophana Centre and transitional justice.

⁸⁴ Peter Manning and Sayana Ser, 'Arts, Education, and Reconciliation in Cambodia: Sociological Perspectives,' in *Participatory Arts in International Development*, ed. Paul Cooke and Soria-Donlan Inés (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor et Francis Group, 2020), pp. 144-158, 154.

⁸⁵ 'Vandy Rattana | Profile | HUGO BOSS ASIA ART | Award for Emerging Asian Artists,' *Hugo Boss Asia Art: Award for Emerging Asian Artists 亚洲新锐艺术家大奖 2015, 2015*, [Vandy Rattana | Profile | HUGO BOSS ASIA ART | Award for Emerging Asian Artists](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

In 2003, Vandy decided to pursue his interest in philosophy by enrolling in law studies at Paññāsāstra University in Phnom Penh.⁸⁶ While fulfilling the general education requirements for his degree, Vandy became the pupil of two teachers whose encouragement set him on the path towards a career in photography. The first teacher was American curator, Erin Gleeson who was Vandy's art history instructor for a semester, and who would later become an instrumental curatorial collaborator. Vandy explained:

'[Gleeson] told me that through my writing assignments, she could sense the way I look at things, and she asked me if I would like to take pictures.'⁸⁷

It is at this point where one may begin to notice how Vandy's career as a *silpakar* is an exemplary demonstration of artistic and cultural continuity. Like the great filmmaker Ly Bun Yim more than four decades earlier, a teacher also gave Vandy his first camera. For two years, Vandy remained at Paññāsāstra University, becoming increasingly disillusioned by the overall quality of education he was receiving.⁸⁸ In 2005, he made the decision to withdraw from law studies. With Gleeson's encouragement, the Yashica FX7 analogue camera and 50mm lens given to him by his communications teacher,⁸⁹ and the same self-taught resourcefulness as his predecessors (who include Ly Bun Yim and Cambodia's wartime photographers such as Tea Kim Heang, Sou Vichith, and Thong Veasna),⁹⁰ Vandy set out to pursue photography.

⁸⁶ Vandy in Ahmady, 'History of the Future,' *UDAYA*, 304.

⁸⁷ Vandy in Ahmady, 'History of the Future,' *UDAYA*, 304.

⁸⁸ See Chapter 3's discussion on the education system in Cambodia for an idea of what Vandy's experience may have been like.

⁸⁹ Zhuang Wubin, 'Out of Nowhere: Documentary Photography from Cambodia,' *Asian Art Newspaper*, January 2010, pp. 17-18, 17.

⁹⁰ See Chapter 4's discussion on Cambodia's pre-DK wartime photojournalists.



Figure 5.15: Zhuang Wubin, 'Looking In, 2005-06 installation view,' from *Ruptures and Revival: Cambodian Photography in the Last Decade*. Group exhibition, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, 2012, in *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, by Zhuang Wubin (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), 254.

Whilst Vandy's lack of institutional training is characteristic of *silpakar damnoep* (a modern artist without formal artistic training), his early career experience as a self-taught photographer also bears a natural resemblance to the vocational fluidity of provincial artisans whom Groslier surveyed in 1917. For four years, Vandy worked at Camintel Telecommunications Company as a telephone technician, first to earn money for school, and then whilst gaining photography experience doing freelance assignments.⁹¹ In his spare time, he covered art exhibitions and acquired skills in photojournalism through assignments for magazines and newspapers, including the *Phnom Penh Post*. At the same time, he also

⁹¹ Zhuang Wubin, 'Ruptures and Revival: Cambodian Photography in the Last Decade,' *ZHUANG WUBIN | 庄吴斌 photography | Writing | Southeast Asia + Hk* (blog), August 3, 2012, accessed November 6, 2021.

began developing the series *Looking In*, which was his first exhibition (curated by Erin Gleeson) in 2006 (Figure 5.15), just one year after he began pursuing photography. Interestingly, some of the photographs that comprised the *Looking In* series came from the second and third rolls of film he ever shot.⁹²

It was mentioned earlier that *Looking In* was a two-part series documenting everyday life; one part documented his office at Camintel Telecommunications (Figures 5.16 and 5.17), whilst the other offered intimate glimpses into Vandy's family home and those of his friends (Figure 5.18 and 5.19). Although the latter part of the series was briefly discussed earlier in this section, *Looking In* is worth noting again here not only because it is Vandy's first art photography series, but also because its subject matter (everyday Cambodian life) harkens back to the Khmer cultural tradition (as practiced by provincial artisans in Groslier's survey) wherein the production of art is a performative contribution to, and celebration of, the community, as opposed to being a *silpakar*'s assertion of artistic professionalism.

⁹² Zhuang Wubin, 'Cambodia,' in *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, first edition, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), pp. 243-269, 254.



Figure 5.16: Vandy Rattana, *Looking In My Office* series, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.17: Vandy Rattana, *Looking In My Office* series, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.18: Vandy Rattana, *Looking In* series, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.19: Vandy Rattana, *Looking In* series, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).

It was not until the 2009 series *Bomb Ponds*, that Vandy began to deliberately use historical research in his art to subvert the Cambodian government's efforts in suppressing the development of an historical consciousness within Cambodian publics. Yet even Vandy's earliest works (between 2006 and 2008) are marked by the practice of incorporating skillsets of the historian into the social responsibilities of the *silpakar*, and therefore illustrate how the contemporary, postmemory *silpakar* came to embody the role of the public historian. Much like the Cambodian wartime photojournalists of the 1970s, Vandy was initially driven by the urgency to document the contemporary issues affecting his country, which, as laid out in Chapter 3, included Cambodia's entrance into the global economy, Phnom Penh's rapid urbanisation, the onset of transitional justice, and the NGO monopolisation of Cambodian cultural reconstruction.

International art curators and art historians try to distinguish Vandy's photographic documentation of these historical events from the practice of photojournalism, arguing that Vandy's work achieves the higher status of art because of his ability to 'extend beyond the action-oriented lens of the photojournalist,' through a cinematic aesthetic and 'an imminent promise of narration...much like an allure of anticipation in film plots.'⁹³ Such an argument perfectly exemplifies the previous chapter's argument that confining camera practices to the binary discourse of vernacular versus high art can lead to erroneous conjectures. In this instance, Vandy's photojournalistic practice is overlooked in favour of

⁹³ Pamela Nguyen Corey, 'The Artist in the City: Contemporary Art as Urban Intervention in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and Phnom Penh, Cambodia,' (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2015), 364-5.

the aesthetic qualities that lend credit to classifying his work as 'art.' What is more, assigning a higher aesthetic value to Vandy's photography is dismissive of the function of aesthetics in Cambodian photojournalism and its practical documentary dimension as 'naïve or mindless.'⁹⁴ Chapter 4 underscored how Cambodia's wartime photojournalists masterfully employed the cinematic aesthetic and utilised photography as a tool of narration for the purpose of convincing other countries to intervene and save Cambodia from further destruction. Again, it is important to be mindful in assigning the international classifications and conceptions of art to Vandy's photography because it creates a divide in the history of Cambodian camera media practices when there should be an acknowledgement of continuity in shared characteristics, such as the cinematic quality of compositions, powerful aesthetics that elicit narratives, and the photographer's overwhelming 'desire to observe, reflect, and document.'⁹⁵

What differentiates Vandy from the wartime photojournalists is, in fact, what helps to distinguish him as a 'public historian,' which is neither a matter of difference in technical proficiency nor a question of artistic superiority. The distinction is instead, Vandy's intentional activation of an historical archival dimension within his practice, which evolved into sophisticated lines of historical inquiry as his career progressed. At the start of his career, Vandy set out to 'create a new and open-ended historical record of Cambodia,'⁹⁶ utilising the photographic medium.⁹⁷ He wished to counter the country's absence of

⁹⁴ Zhuang, 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 257.

⁹⁵ Zhuang, 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 247.

⁹⁶ Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 348.

⁹⁷ Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 360.

archives, the silences that grew from state regimes operating on a policy of historical amnesia, as well as the international NGO tropes that reduced Cambodian history to a cliché ‘two-T national allegory,’ (temples and trauma),⁹⁸ or Buddhist monks and the three-Ps (politicians, palaces, and poverty).⁹⁹ Initially, Vandy was focused on promoting a ‘larger cause of truth’¹⁰⁰ and ‘reveal[ing] reality,’¹⁰¹ by capturing everyday Cambodian life through the lens of ‘particular episodes that had been or would likely be glossed over in historical narratives specific to Cambodia.’¹⁰² He was guided by the question ‘*what details make us Cambodian?*’¹⁰³ and the desire to ‘reveal the internal, to archive Cambodia as much as [he could].’ This, he said, ‘is not for me. We have to tell the world who we are.’¹⁰⁴ The broad objective he had of visualising the Cambodian identity reinforced the international art world’s framing of Vandy’s photography as ‘straddling the line between strict photojournalism and artistic practice,’¹⁰⁵ thus ultimately defying categorisation. But Vandy himself made a distinction between his early personal work and the still images he captured for photojournalism assignments by shooting the former with film and the latter primarily

⁹⁸ Zhuang Wubin, ‘Mekong Spring: Cambodian Photography in the Last Decade,’ *Asia Art Archive* (blog), IDEAS | Mekong Spring: Cambodian Photography in the Last Decade | Asia Art Archive (aaa.org.hk), accessed November 6, 2021.

⁹⁹ ‘Vandy Rattana,’ *10 Chancery Lane Gallery, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery | Vandy Rattana*, accessed November 6, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 357.

¹⁰¹ Vandy Rattana in Ahmady, ‘History of the Future,’ *UDAYA*, 308.

¹⁰² Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 360.

¹⁰³ Vandy Rattana in an interview with Zhuang Wubin as recorded in Zhuang, ‘Cambodia,’ *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 254.

¹⁰⁴ Vandy Rattana in an interview with Zhuang Wubin as recorded in Zhuang, ‘Cambodia,’ *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 254.

¹⁰⁵ ‘CV’ Vandy Rattana, *Bio : Vandy Rattana*, accessed December 31, 2021.

in digital format.¹⁰⁶ He also divided his photography practices through mentorship; by 2007 he was co-running an art collective and was separately employed to teach photography to journalism students in the University of Phnom Penh's Department of Media and Communications.¹⁰⁷ Vandy further affirmed the delineation between his personal art and photojournalism assignments by explicitly stating that 'I still claim that my [photojournalism] work is not art. I have a very strict journalistic practice.'¹⁰⁸

However, perhaps because Vandy's broader objective of documenting and creating an historical archive of the 'realities' of everyday life served as the primary purpose for both forms of his photographic practices, the line he personally drew became blurred through artistic appropriation, as is exemplified in his 2008 series *Fire of the Year* (Figures 5.20-5.22).

¹⁰⁶ Zhuang 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 257.

¹⁰⁷ Vandy Rattana in Ahmady, 'History of the Future,' *UDAYA*, 308.

¹⁰⁸ Zhuang 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 257.



Figure 5.20: Vandy Rattana, *Fire of the Year* series, 2008. Images courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.21: Vandy Rattana, *Fire of the Year* series, 2008. Images courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.22: Vandy Rattana, *Fire of the Year* series, 2008. Images courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).

Early one morning, Vandy awoke to the sound of his telephone. It was one of his journalist students:

'He said there's a fire, you have to go there. I went and spent five hours at the site to observe how people were responding to the situation. It was very difficult, because it has become a tradition now in Cambodia that we have to pay like \$2000 or \$3000 for the police or the fire department to come put out a fire. In a way there was beauty in the smoke and people running around, but at the same time I couldn't deny the sadness in taking these pictures.'¹⁰⁹

The fire was in a residential commune called *Dteuk Tlah*, or Clear Water, in the district, *Russey Keo* on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, where an estimated 300 impoverished families lived in poorly structured stilt houses that rested above a polluted and garbage-infested lake.¹¹⁰ Only a handful of the 300 homes were saved, likely belonging to families

¹⁰⁹ Vandy Rattana in Ahmady, 'History of the Future,' *UDAYA*, 308.

¹¹⁰ Tarun Nagesh, 'Highlight: Vandy Rattana "Fire of the Year,"' *Queensland Art | Gallery of Modern Art* (blog), May 21, 2014, [Highlight: Vandy Rattana 'Fire of the Year' - QAGOMA Blog](#), accessed November 6, 2021.

who could afford the payoff price of emergency responders, locally known as ‘the fire police.’¹¹¹ The result of Vandy’s intervention through photography was not just a series of powerful images, but the documentation of an historical event and a critical narration of broader societal issues facing Cambodians. In this instance, the issue was, the lack of infrastructure and resources to support Phnom Penh’s rapid urbanisation, leaving those who could not afford resolutions through channels of corruption and bribery, without any hope.¹¹²

Vandy shot the scene using film and digital formats. At the time however, he could not afford to get the analogue shots developed.¹¹³ Resultantly, *Fire of the Year* took shape through the digital images he captured, which, as mentioned, is how he typically shot his photojournalism assignments. Although Vandy was not on assignment in the two days he captured the devastating scene at *Dteuk Tlah*, his photojournalism instincts and training guided how he recorded the suffering, wreckage, and near-total destruction of the neighbourhood.¹¹⁴ When a curator wanted to show the work as part of a contemporary art exhibit, Vandy declined and offered to instead showcase another series he shot in 2008, *The First High-Rise* (Figures 5.23-5.26), which documents the construction of Phnom Penh’s first skyscraper.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Nagesh, ‘Highlight: Vandy Rattana “Fire of the Year,”’ *Queensland Art | Gallery of Modern Art*.

¹¹² Nagesh, ‘Highlight: Vandy Rattana “Fire of the Year,”’ *Queensland Art | Gallery of Modern Art*.

¹¹³ Zhuang, ‘Cambodia,’ *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 257.

¹¹⁴ Zhuang, ‘Cambodia,’ *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 256.

¹¹⁵ The curator was Biljana Ciric, who wanted to show the series at the Ke Center. Zhuang, ‘Cambodia,’ *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 257.



Figure 5.23: Vandy Rattana, *The First High Rise* series, 2008, photograph shot in 35mm film. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.24: Vandy Rattana, *The First High Rise* series, 2008, photograph shot in 35mm film. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.25: Vandy Rattana, *The First High Rise* series, 2008, photograph shot in 35mm film. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.26: Vandy Rattana, *The First High Rise* series, 2008, photograph shot in 35mm film. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).

Unlike *Fire of the Year*, *The First High-Rise* was shot with black and white 35mm film, thus unambiguously distinguishing it as his personal art.¹¹⁶ The functions of *The First High-Rise* (i.e., what the series of images *do*), also made it more appropriate for display in a contemporary art exhibition; less about the skyscraper being constructed and more of a testament to the ensemble of individuals building it, the series is a perfect example of photography functioning as a performative event and a contract of shared authority between Vandy (the *silpakar* and public historian), and the individuals he captures. From the angles and compositions of the images that make up *The First High-Rise*, there is the sense of roles being reversed. Vandy, the *silpakar*, becomes an active spectator and gives his subjects the performative power. The construction workers have uninhibited access to the site, something which Vandy is not granted. This creates a distance between the photographer and his subjects, and transforms the construction site into a stage, which in turn, denotes a clear separation between the ensemble of ‘performers’ (the workers) and Vandy, who is limited to documenting the event from his perspective as an ‘audience member,’ or spectator. Vandy allows the angle of his lens and the viewfinder’s compositions to be determined by the skilful actions and synchronised, acrobatic-like performative movements of the construction workers as he masterfully dramatizes them using the interplay of light and shadow. One may even note a resemblance between the construction workers and performers of *Ikhaon sbaek* and *Ikhaon hluong* (Figure 5.27). Meanwhile, the

¹¹⁶ ‘Vandy Rattana CV,’ The East Gallery Contemporary Asian Art, accessed December 31, 2021, [Vandy Rattana CV \(theeastgallery.com\)](http://theeastgallery.com).

skeletal framework of the architecture is used by Vandy to visually frame the construction workers and their actions, which by extension, elicits the workers to become the focal point of the historical event, and bestows upon them the power of narrating the history, both in the moments of Vandy capturing the images, and as the photographic records perpetuate the performance through each subsequent visual encounter. In this sense, *The First High-Rise* series is a powerful act of subversion against the violent function of photography under the Khmer Rouge, in a way symbolising the beginning stages of a cultural reclamation of visuality, the camera apparatus, and in particular, the photographic medium.



Figure 5.27: From left to right: *Ikhaon hluong*, *Ikhaon sbaek*, and an image from *The First High Rise* series.

In contrast, *Fire of the Year* was Vandy's photojournalistic perspective and individual commentary of a traumatic event that exposed the vulnerability of a disenfranchised demographic. Therefore, displaying and contextualising the series as 'contemporary art' would have risked exploiting the helplessness, loss, and suffering of the people involved in the disaster. With this as a concern, Vandy continually declined Erin Gleeson's repeated efforts to have him showcase *Fire of the Year* at 10 Chancery Lane as part of an exhibition on contemporary art in Cambodia. Eventually however, Vandy relented to Gleeson's

appeals and *Fire of the Year* went on to be exhibited at 10 Chancery Lane and then as part of the '6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art,' at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art in Australia.¹¹⁷ In response, Vandy stated, 'I felt strange when people wanted to show it. But when they printed the photographs big, I realised maybe I was wrong. Still, I do not want to be opportunistic. This is just two days' work and it is journalistic.'¹¹⁸

Vandy's struggle to negotiate the recontextualization of his individual photographic practices within the 'contemporary Cambodian art' scene and international frameworks underscores how the oppression of Cambodian-Khmer artistic identity and lack of autonomy that defined the Cambodian arts under the French Protectorate had resurfaced in post-genocide Cambodia. It was explained in Chapter 3 that, since UNTAC, international NGOs as well as foreign galleries and curators, held a monopoly on the exhibition spaces (which were predominantly concentrated in Phnom Penh) and were thus determining the conceptual framework for what constituted the 'contemporary' and the 'Cambodian arts,' in much the same way as Groslier and Baudoin had decided which crafts and traditions were historically and 'authentically Khmer.' Presumably, Vandy recognised that even if he were to attain individual artistic autonomy and identity, it would not necessarily address the greater challenges of 'revealing Khmer photographic identity,' and ensuring its long-term, sustainable, and independent, function at both local and international levels.¹¹⁹ Similar to Panh, it was Vandy's leadership in responding to these challenges as a *silpakar* that

¹¹⁷ Zhuang, 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 257.

¹¹⁸ Vandy Rattana quote from an interview with Zhuang Wubin as recorded in, Zhuang, 'Cambodia,' *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 257.

¹¹⁹ Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 372.

ultimately helped make public history part of the very fabric of Cambodian photography and the broader movement of the revitalisation of Cambodian arts.

In 2007, Vandy led a group consisting of himself and six of his peers to form the first Cambodian experimental art collective, *Stiev Selapak*, a name which loosely translates to 'Art Rebels.' The literal translation of *stiev* however, is 'young bull,' and its colloquial usage embodies a masculine identity, and slang words such as 'hooligans, thugs, miscreants, or rebels.'¹²⁰ As such, the name *Stiev Selapak* solidified the subversive mission of the all-male artist collective to forge an autonomous artistic expression at the local level, all the while operating outside foreign NGO discourses and the institutional exclusivity cultivated by RUFA. The collective's formation was also a strategy to alleviate the limitations the artists experienced in their individual practices as a result of the Khmer cultural mentality, which perceived individual artistic expression as being outside the understanding and interests of the masses, and the idea of *l'art pour l'art* as a concept that, as already discussed, was 'ineffective and self-serving.'¹²¹ In such an atmosphere, the lone photographer was 'contrary to the historical artisan practice,'¹²² and the idea of photography as an art form consequently continued to evade Cambodian publics. As a group of individual artists collaborating with each other, *Stiev Selapak* was an innovative reimagination of the

¹²⁰ Adding to the complexity, the term *stiev* came to serve as the closest translation for the French term 'avant-garde,' in post-DK society. In pre-DK Cambodia, the French term 'avant-garde,' would have been used and understood in Cambodia.

¹²¹ See Chapter 3's discussion.

¹²² Erin Gleeson, 'Sa Sa Gallery's 'Art Rebels' Forge New Creative Paths,' *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 19, 2009, [Sa Sa Gallery's 'Art Rebels' forge new creative paths | Phnom Penh Post](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

traditional Khmer artistic practice of working as an ensemble. In referencing this important tradition, the artists sought to demonstrate to the Khmer-Cambodian public that 'individualistic expression [could be] for the masses, too.'¹²³

Initially, *Stiev Selapak* was devised for the simple purpose of supporting the art projects of the founding members. Before long however, the small collective came to be an invaluable resource for local communities, as it 'opened up Khmer mindsets to photography, a world which they [Cambodians, knew] nothing about,'¹²⁴ and helped to awaken an historical consciousness within the masses. First, the collective opened the gallery space Sa Sa Art Gallery in 2007 (Sa is the 's' sound in Khmer and Sa Sa is the acronym for *Stiev Selapak*), which ended up merging with Erin Gleeson's curatorial initiative, Bassac Art Projects, to create SA SA BASSAC. Then in 2010, with Vandy's prompting, the group opened Sa Sa Art Projects, an experimental art space in the vibrant community housed in the dilapidated Municipal Apartments, locally known as The White Building (*Bodeng Sar*), or simply, The Building (*Bodeng*), an historical landmark and vestige of Khmer urban architecture from the 1960s that quintessentially symbolised the height of Cambodian modernism before its eclipse under DK (Figure 5.28-5.30). The decision to make The White Building home to Sa Sa Art Projects was inspired by Vandy's previous involvement in *The Building*, a participatory photography project (supported by and exhibited at the Bophana

¹²³ Gleeson, 'Sa Sa Gallery's 'Art Rebels,'" *The Phnom Penh Post*.

¹²⁴ Vandy Rattana quoted by Corinne Callebaut in 'Cambodian photographers: a new generation is developing for the better,' Ka-set – Information website about Cambodia, October 4, 2009. Link to article is broken. Quote sourced from Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 373.

Centre),¹²⁵ that used The White Building as a focal point for community engagement, outreach, and critical dialogue on photography.¹²⁶ Originally an architectural ‘experiment in applying modern ideas on public housing,’¹²⁷ The White Building seemed to stand as an allegory for *Stiev Selapak*; the enduring presence of the modern architecture was evidence of a society that embraced experimentation, and the building’s repopulation by *silpakar* after the Khmer Rouge (beginning in 1979), was a testament to the enduring and celebrated cultural history of producing *selapak* with, and for, members of the community.¹²⁸



Figure 5.28: Private collection of Vann Molyvann, ‘The White Building in its heyday in the 1960s showing the landscaped communal gardens.’ Image sourced from *The Cambodia Daily*, ‘End of an Era,’ July 28, 2017.

¹²⁵ Robert Turnbull, ‘Cambodians Take Back the Lens,’ *The New York Times*, June 30, 2009, [Cambodians Take Back the Lens - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#), accessed November 18, 2021.

¹²⁶ *The Building* project was an 18-month project facilitated through Maria Stott’s program, *On Photography Cambodia*, with support from the Bophana Centre and UNESCO.

¹²⁷ ‘About The White Building,’ *White Building* (Sa Sa Art Projects and Big Stories Co.), [About | White Building](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

¹²⁸ After the fall of DK, The White Building began to be repopulated by the handful of *silpakar* who survived DK, ‘including classical dancers, master musicians, skilled craftspeople, [and] cultural workers,’ as well as civil servants and street vendors. [About | White Building](#).

It is estimated that at least one-third of residents ‘were once involved with the performing arts.’ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 383.



Figure 5.29: Adolf Scher, 'A rare colour photograph of The White Building in 1969.' Image from the Bophana Center archives, sourced from *The Cambodia Daily*, 'End of an Era,' July 28, 2017.



Figure 5.30: Municipal Apartments or The White Building, circa 1963. Image from the National Archives of Cambodia, the Charles Mayer Collection and sourced from thewhitebuilding.org, accessed December 31, 2021.

Conversely, *Stiev Selapak's* occupancy in The White Building —a place that 'metamorphosed into an organic microcosm of Phnom Penh life'¹²⁹ was a subtle demonstration of resistance that brought to the fore a range of socio-political issues that plagued the recovering post-genocide nation, namely the forced mass evictions and displacement of communities surrounding The White Building that resulted from government deals with land developers. Over the course of the 2000s, these forced evictions increased in frequency and brutality. One *silpakar* of the postmemory generation later described the forced evictions that were occurring in the 2000s as being parallel to the Khmer Rouge's evacuation of Phnom Penh in 1975.¹³⁰ A particularly horrendous eviction,

'saw about 850 families have their homes bulldozed [with all of their belongings still inside] before they were loaded into trucks and driven an hour north or south of the city and dumped in a field – most of them with no access to running water or electricity, many of them without access to shelter or schooling for their children and none of them with access to local markets.'¹³¹

Located in the centre of Phnom Penh where many of the evictions were taking place, The White Building community of more than 2,500 residents was on the fringe of society, 'cloaked in stigma associated with poverty, drugs, sex work, petty crime, dangerous construction and poor sanitation,'¹³² (Figure 5.31). Consequently, The White Building was

¹²⁹ Mark Roy, 'Exhibition Relates History of the Building and Its People,' *The Phnom Penh Post*, June 5, 2009, [Exhibition relates history of The Building and its people | Phnom Penh Post](#), accessed December 31, 2021,.

¹³⁰ Kavich Neang, 'Last Night I Saw You Smiling,' press kit, *Anti-Archive*, 2019, [Inisys_presskit_web.pdf \(antiarchive.com\)](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

¹³¹ This was in reference to Dey Krahom 'the largest and most brutal eviction.' Dey Krahom was a squatting community neighbouring The White Building. Jonathan Louth and Martin Potter, 'Saving the White Building: Storytelling and the Production of Space,' conference paper for *Conference for the IABA Asia-Pacific Chapter, Flinders University, Adelaide*, as part of the proceedings, 'Locating Lives in the Asia-Pacific-Australian Region,' (PDF) [Saving the White Building: Storytelling and the Production of Space \(researchgate.net\)](#), 13.

¹³² [About | White Building](#).

labelled as a slum and place for undesirables by the rest of Phnom Penh's population.¹³³ In addition, the derelict state of The White Building reflected the Cambodian government's indifference to preserving the nation's architectural heritage, whilst the neighbouring areas being sold to developers by the government was a strong indication that The White Building was resting on prime real estate, and its residents were facing an imminent fate of eviction and displacement. As *Stiev Selapak's* appropriation of an apartment for use as an experimental art space (Figures 5.32 and 5.33) was contemporaneous to the evictions taking place within Phnom Penh, it was therefore already apparent that it was simply a matter of time before the government sold the land and evacuated the residents.¹³⁴



Figure 5.31: Sok Chanrado, *White Building*, 2014. Image courtesy of thewhitebuilding.org, 'About the White Building,' accessed December 31, 2021.

¹³³ Louth and Potter, 'Saving the White Building,' *Conference for the IABA Asia-Pacific Chapter*, 6.

¹³⁴ Louth and Potter, 'Saving the White Building,' *Conference for the IABA Asia-Pacific Chapter*, 13.



Figure 5.32 and 5.33: Official Launch of Sa Sa Art Projects and the opening of art exhibition entitled 'Phal' by Kong Channa, May 21, 2010. Image courtesy of Sa Sa Art Projects.

The presence of Sa Sa Art Projects in The White Building was at first met with distrust by the residents, who believed the word 'stiev' was suggestive of 'a radical political agenda.'¹³⁵ Indeed, because *Stiev Selapak* defined 'themselves according to an agenda of radical creativity,' that was experimental in nature, inviting of all publics, and celebrated individualism, 'their own radicalism' ended up causing the group to be relatively marginalised by the community,' in the beginning.¹³⁶ Moreover, residents of The White Building were reluctant to enter and utilise the art space because it received outside publics, which by extension, put the entire building and the community's daily activities on exhibition. At the same time, The White Building's reputation of being a site for illegal activity meant that outside public participation of Sa Sa Art Projects' artist residencies, exhibitions, workshops, and talks, was 'initially slow-going.'¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Louth and Potter, 'Saving the White Building,' *Conference for the IABA Asia-Pacific Chapter*, 18.

¹³⁶ Louth and Potter, 'Saving the White Building,' *Conference for the IABA Asia-Pacific Chapter*, 18.

¹³⁷ Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 384.

After a year, the popularity of Sa Sa Art Projects increased amongst external publics, ranging from ‘art-minded,’ locals to foreign expats.¹³⁸ And, before long, a trusting relationship was also formed between the collective and the building’s residents. In much the same spirit as the Bophana Centre, Sa Sa Art Projects was designed with the intention of ensuring that the creative endeavours of the members of *Stiev Selapak* ultimately had a presence and use within Cambodian society. Consequently, the process of art making was contingent upon community participation and meeting the needs of The White Building residents, which, in broad terms, focused on realising the unique, ‘living history,’¹³⁹ and memory of the building in the hopes of saving it from demolition, whilst forming a cohesive community voice and identity in the face of an uncertain future.

Since Sa Sa Art Projects was neither a for-profit business, nor an NGO, *Stiev Selapak* had more flexibility to adapt and transform their project mission based on the changing requirements of the transient White Building community. This allowed Sa Sa Art Projects to become a forum from which members of the community could safely and effectively protest, share perspectives, and express their socio-political concerns through *selapak*, without fear of government retribution. Additionally, art, in its various incarnations ranging from outreach, education, and documentation, to performance, exhibition, and participation, became a powerful vehicle of agency for The White Building community; the building’s historical significance was contextualised and articulated on the terms of the

¹³⁸ Corey, ‘The Artist in the City,’ 384.

¹³⁹ [About | White Building](#).

community whilst the cultural heritage was visually conveyed and expressed through an amalgamation of memory and performance driven art that was recorded and preserved using audio-visual media.

Most importantly, *selapak* became a means for envisioning and forging a future for the community despite its transient circumstances. Sa Sa Art Projects invested in fostering the critical thinking and creative expressions of the next generation through art education, outreach initiatives, and practical training, resultantly disrupting the social barriers that historically prevented individuals of disadvantaged social groups from having access to opportunities and resources. Among the public history projects established by Sa Sa Art Projects were a digital archive and a physical archive. [Whitebuilding.org](http://whitebuilding.org), an online archive and database, focused on collecting and sharing the 'living history of [the] neighbourhood.'¹⁴⁰ Today, the website is a rich repository of individual and community memories that were documented in the form of audio-visual sources created by *Stiev Selapak*, art and media students, and residents of The White Building (Figure 5.34). The White Building Archive and Library Room (Figure 5.35) was the physical archive located in one of the building's studio spaces, which served as a research space for the public and housed resources and rare material pertaining to the history of the building, the architecture, and the neighbourhood.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ [About | White Building.](#)

¹⁴¹ [About | White Building.](#)



Figure 5.36: 'Village Cinema,' a collaboration between Sa Sa Art Projects, The Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, and Empowering Youth in Cambodia. Screening of Rithy Panh's *The Burnt Theatre* (2005), on the 10th of March 2017, two months before *The Building* was set to be demolished. Image courtesy of Sa Sa Art Projects.

Ultimately, neither *Stiev Selapak* nor the efforts of the residents, cultural organisations, and activists, were able to save *The White Building* from demolition (Figure 5.36). The structure was torn down in 2017, and the community dispersed, with residents receiving compensation based on the square metreage of their apartments.¹⁴² In retrospect, we may perceive *Stiev Selapak's* occupancy of *The White Building* as the key event that precipitated a community-driven public history movement, which has had a ripple effect in altering the history-making process and expanding social history's place and significance within the broad parameters of contemporary Cambodian historiography and historical memory. This ripple effect is perhaps best illustrated by the work of filmmaker and former *White Building* resident, Kavich Neang (b. 1987). It thus seems fitting to conclude this biographical section of Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana with the work of

¹⁴² Kong Meta, 'White Building Negotiations Done: Minister,' *The Phnom Penh Post*, May 15, 2017, [White Building negotiations done: minister | Phnom Penh Post](#).

another *silpakar* (Kavich Neang), as it demonstrates the extent and range of their influence, whilst reaffirming how the revitalisation of the Cambodian arts and its activation of a public history movement are based on a continuum.

As a younger member of the postmemory generation who was a part of the disenfranchised White Building community, Kavich Neang's artistic formation was the result of opportunities that were made accessible to him through the community engagement and public history initiatives of Panh and Vandy. Neang began as a protégée of Rithy Panh, receiving training in filmmaking from the Bophana Centre in 2010.¹⁴³ Panh then produced Neang's 2013 documentary film, *Where I Go*,¹⁴⁴ which deals with the difficult history of the UNTAC peacekeepers and its social consequences in contemporary Cambodia. One year later, Neang, in collaboration with two other young Cambodian filmmakers (Davy Chou and Steve Chen) formed the production company, Anti-Archive, a name intended to 'invite [people] to rethink the relationship of films and filmmakers with the past and history.'¹⁴⁵ Around the same time, he also collaborated with Sa Sa Art Projects on initiatives involving The White Building and its community. Neang was in the midst of writing a fictional film set in The White Building when it was announced that it would soon be demolished. He later recalled:

¹⁴³ Martin Potter, 'Participatory Media in Cambodia: An Exploration of Relational Film, Documentary and Art,' report, *Asialink*, (James Cook University, Melbourne) 2012, [46068-Potter-2012.pdf \(jcu.edu.au\)](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ 'Kavich Neang,' IFFR (International Film Festival Rotterdam), [Kavich Neang | IFFR](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

¹⁴⁵ 'About Us,' *Anti-Archive*, [About Us - ANTI-ARCHIVE \(antiarchive.com\)](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

‘The same reality that pushed out 6,000 residents was the same force that would not allow me to film my narrative there. Reality wouldn’t allow me to finish my fantasy so instead of writing my own fiction, I followed the residents with my camera and helped them write their own [narratives].’¹⁴⁶

The footage Kavich Neang shot in the final weeks of The White Building as his family and friends moved out became the narrative for his internationally acclaimed documentary, *Last Night I Saw You Smiling* (2019), which tells the social history of The White Building through the memories and experiences of those who called the building home. Then in 2021, Neang’s dream of completing a fictional film about The White Building was finally realised. The film, entitled *Bodeng Sar* (White Building), was only Neang’s second feature-length film.¹⁴⁷ It was showcased at *La 78. Biennale di Venezia, La Mostra Internazionale d’Arte Cinematografica* (September 2021) (Figure 5.37). History was then made when the film’s lead actor, 25-year-old, Chhun Piseth, became the first Cambodian to take home the prestigious Orizzonti Award for Best Actor.¹⁴⁸

Although ‘the award for best actor...is an individual honour by nature,’¹⁴⁹ Chhun Piseth, in the true fashion of a *silpakar*, dedicated the award to the entire cast and crew of *Bodeng Sar*. And whilst global publics may perceive the international success of *Bodeng Sar* as having suddenly emerged onto the arena of what is increasingly becoming a globalised popular culture, the film’s achievements are, in reality, the outcome of a sequence of

¹⁴⁶ Kavich Neang, ‘Last Night I Saw You Smiling,’ press kit, ‘Statement of Intent,’ *Anti-Archive*.

¹⁴⁷ Raksmeay Hong, ‘Chhun Piseth Wins Venice Festival “Best Actor” for White Building Role,’ *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 15, 2021, [Chhun Piseth wins Venice festival ‘Best Actor’ for White Building role | Phnom Penh Post](#).

¹⁴⁸ ‘Biennale Cinema 2021: Premi Ufficiali Della 78. Mostra,’ *La Biennale di Venezia*, September 20, 2021, [Biennale Cinema 2021 | Premi ufficiali della 78. Mostra \(labiennale.org\)](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

¹⁴⁹ Hong, ‘Chhun Piseth Wins,’ *The Phnom Penh Post*.

initiatives and intergenerational efforts to restore visual literacy, which culminated to form a movement that has, for the first time, led to a social turn in the Cambodian historical record.

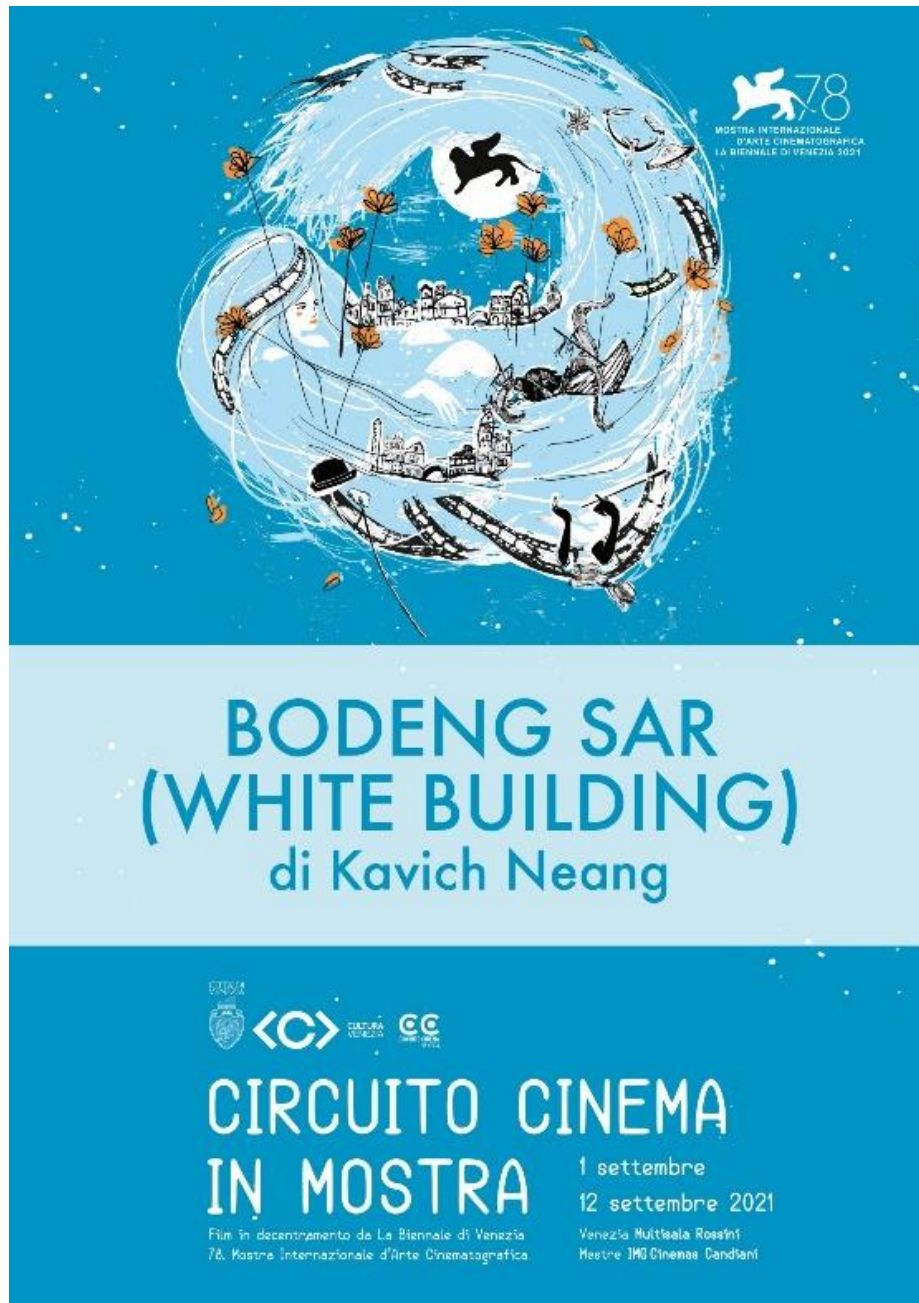


Figure 5.37: White Building movie poster for *La 78. Biennale di Venezia, La Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica*, (accessed December 3, 2021).

Analysis of Oeuvres

Vandy Rattana remained a leading member of *Stiev Selapak* until 2010, a period during which he produced numerous photographic series documenting contemporary Cambodian historical events, such as the previously discussed series *Fire of the Year* and *The First High-Rise*. Other important historically driven photography series he created in this part of his career include, *Preah Vihear* (2008), *Boeung Kak Eviction* (2008), *The Khmer Rouge Trial* (2009), and *Bomb Ponds* (2009). Each of these photographic projects are worthy of further examination and their own analysis, as are the more than 20 films by Rithy Panh. Such a comprehensive undertaking, however, is beyond the scope and focus of this chapter. Rather, the intention of carefully selecting and analysing a shortlist of their oeuvres in tandem with one another is to capture the essence of the evolutions of survivor memory and postmemory at certain ‘points of memory,’ captured by the camera, or, highly ‘specific points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal [autobiographical] remembrance and cultural recall.’¹⁵⁰ As was previously explained, this final section of the chapter is comprised of two sub-sections, ‘The Documentary Phase,’ and ‘The Autobiographical Turn,’ which are delineated by decisive shifts in Panh’s and Vandy’s artistic practices that altered the functions of camera images. In this context, the overarching objective shall be to first identify the various public history strategies that Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana employ in their individual artistic practices and then elaborate on

¹⁵⁰ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 61.

how these strategies transform camera media into productive instruments for representing, transmitting, and working through, traumatic history and memories.

The Documentary Phase

'I want to understand, explain, and remember- in precisely that order,' Panh stated in his memoir.¹⁵¹ It is a process that, in every sense, counters the DK *santebal* mandate to torture, interrogate, and destroy.¹⁵² Similar to the psychological phases of trauma recovery (safety and stabilisation; remembrance and mourning; reconnection and integration), Panh's and Vandy's oeuvres are quests for healing that utilise the themes of understanding, explaining, and remembering to provide structure and coherence to the process of working through symptoms of *baksbat* and the experiences of traumatic, historical pasts that defy all logic and comprehension. But because of their proximity to trauma— Panh a survivor and Vandy an inheritor— their journeys toward healing are neither linear nor conclusive; their works are best described as cyclical. Even within a single film or series, one can observe a cycle of oscillation between efforts to understand, explain, and remember. Panh himself acknowledges how his work is a cycle that repeats itself:

'I make only one film. Only the same film. And I don't mind, you know. I never want to be a film director— I want to be a teacher. But it's my story.'¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 246.

¹⁵² Kaing Guek Eav, aka Duch, in *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell*, directed by Rithy Panh (First Run Features, 2011) digital film.

¹⁵³ Pat Dowell, 'Cambodia's "Missing Pictures" Molded From Director's Own Life,' *NPR*, March 30, 2014, [Cambodia's 'Missing Pictures' Molded From Director's Own Life : NPR](#).

However, it is important to contextualise and distinguish the repetitions seen in Panh's and Vandy's camera images as productive dimensions to the process of working through instead of instruments of fixity that screen the effects of trauma and produce static, 'compulsive repetition[s]'.¹⁵⁴ In other words, it is not the trauma that is repeated, replicated, and re-created through imagery, but rather the memories of traumatic experience, which are themselves 'representations and re-enactments'¹⁵⁵ that create archives and become points of historical investigation, modes of commemoration, and vehicles for exploring personal subjectivity. Rithy Panh's 'S-21 trilogy,' (consisting of the documentary films, *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy* (1996), *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), and *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (2011), and Vandy Rattana's photography series and film installation, *Bomb Ponds* (2009), may both be understood as one full revolution through the cycle of understanding, explaining, and remembering.

Named in reference to the site specificity of the documentaries, the S-21 trilogy is Panh exercising his civic leadership as a *silpakar* by addressing the lack of (and later, insufficient) action taken by the Cambodian government and the international community to seek justice and accountability for the crimes committed during Democratic Kampuchea. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Panh was prompted by the absence of due process to utilise cinema as an alternative for searching for a larger truth. He was also compelled to further document the site of S-21 for posterity; in the 1990s the threat of Tuol Sleng's closure was

¹⁵⁴ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 108.

¹⁵⁵ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 108.

a legitimate concern as various political actors advocated for the permanent shut-down of the museum ‘in the name of reconciliation, to soothe the victims, to liberate their soul[s] so that they could be reborn.’¹⁵⁶ Acting as neither a prosecutor nor judge, Panh anchored his investigation to the site of S-21, where the abundance of archival records and evidence of crimes made it possible to link the CPK’s policy of *kamtech* to the everyday violence and destruction that was practiced throughout Cambodia during Democratic Kampuchea.



Figure 5.38: ‘Huot Bophana,’ digital version of photographic print, record no. PHT_0659_d001_v01, inventory no. 00659, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum Archives, (accessed December 3, 2021). **Figure 5.39:** Rithy Panh, photographs of Bophana and Ly Sitha. *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy*, (1996; France: Catherine Dussart Productions; Institut national de l’audiovisuel France 3), Facebook, digital video with colour and sound, screenshot, 09:10/1:06:38. (accessed December 31, 2021).

The first film of the series, *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy*, is Panh’s ‘search for the individual’ in the sea of victims’ faces rendered in the S-21 prisoner photographs. He focuses on the portrait of Hout Bophana (Figures 5.38 and 5.39) (for whom the Bophana Audiovisual

¹⁵⁶ Quote by Rithy Panh, originally in French and translated to English by Ashley Thompson. The original quote was from ‘la parole filmée. Pour vaincre la terreur,’ in DVD collection, *Le cinéma de Rithy Panh*, (Editions Montparnasse, 2008), p.11. Sourced from Ashley Thompson, ‘Mnemotechnical Politics: Rithy Panh’s Cinematic Archive and the Return of Cambodia’s Past,’ in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, ed. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012), pp. 225-240, 229.

Resource Center was named), a young female prisoner who was transported to S-21 in October 1976 where she was subsequently tortured and then murdered in the killing fields of Choeung Ek on the 18th of March 1977. Combining testimonies from Hout Bophana's surviving relatives with information sourced from the S-21 archives (including letters of correspondence written between Bophana and her husband, which the Khmer Rouge used as evidence to incriminate the couple), Panh reconstructed her harrowing life and retraced her tragic fate. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the film is the way in which Panh was able to recover Bophana's voice, and through her photographs and documented accounts, he gave her the performative power of steering the direction of the film's inquiries about life under the Khmer Rouge and the prisoner experience at S-21.

Further, one may conjecture that it was Bophana who identified the subject of the second documentary in the trilogy, *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (Figure 5.40), which shifts the focus from the search for and memory of, the individual, to the collective trauma and realising the potential of S-21 as *un lieu de mémoire* for survivors as well as future generations. In *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, Panh turns his camera to documenting the retrieval of traumatic memory belonging to S-21 survivors and perpetrators to understand the truth and 'the nature of the crime[s],' committed at S-21. The outcome of the film is not a verdict or a condemnation of the perpetrators, but a reconstructed image of events for which there had previously been no record.

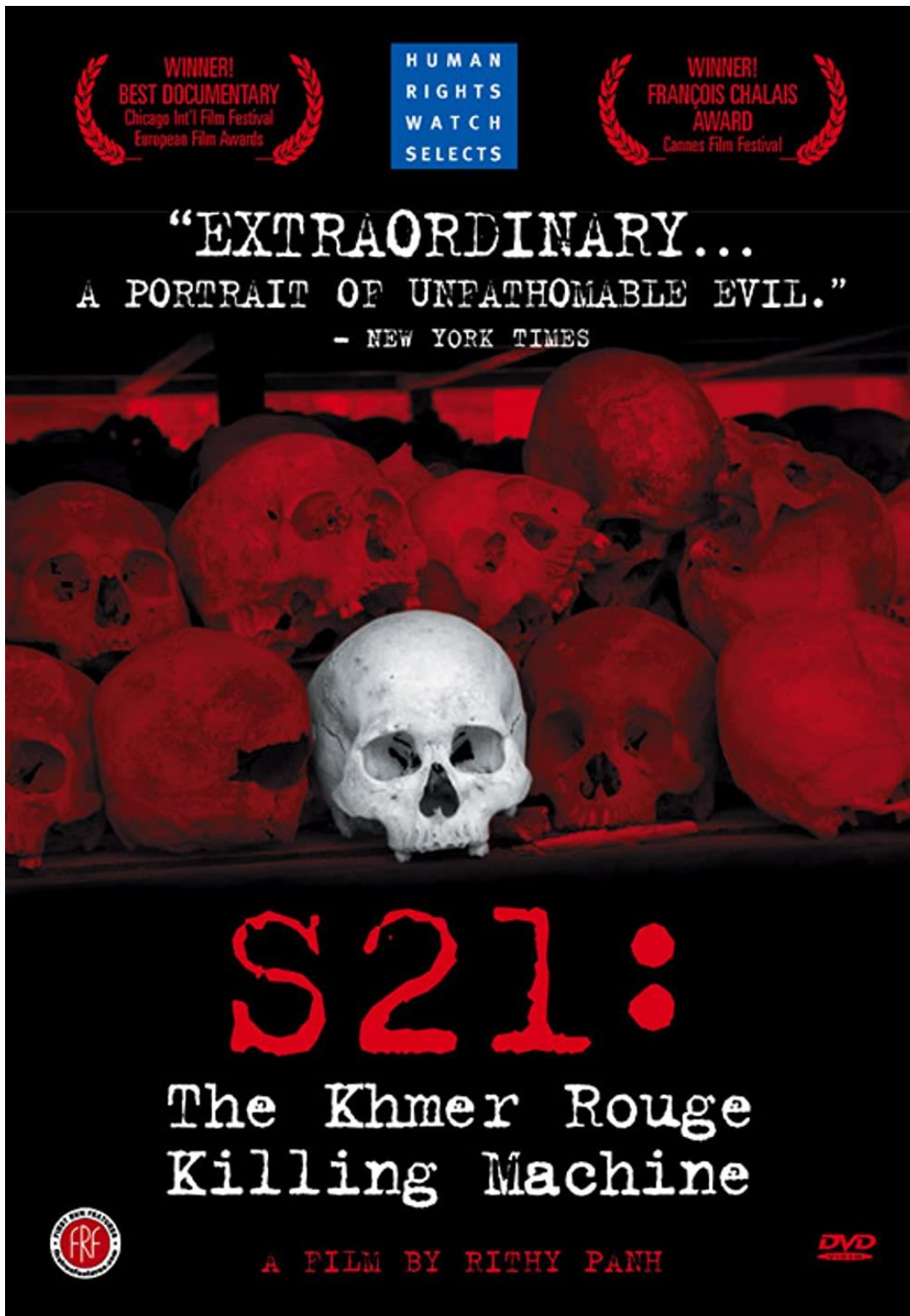


Figure 5.40: DVD cover graphic for *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. Image sourced from IMDb, (accessed December 3, 2021).

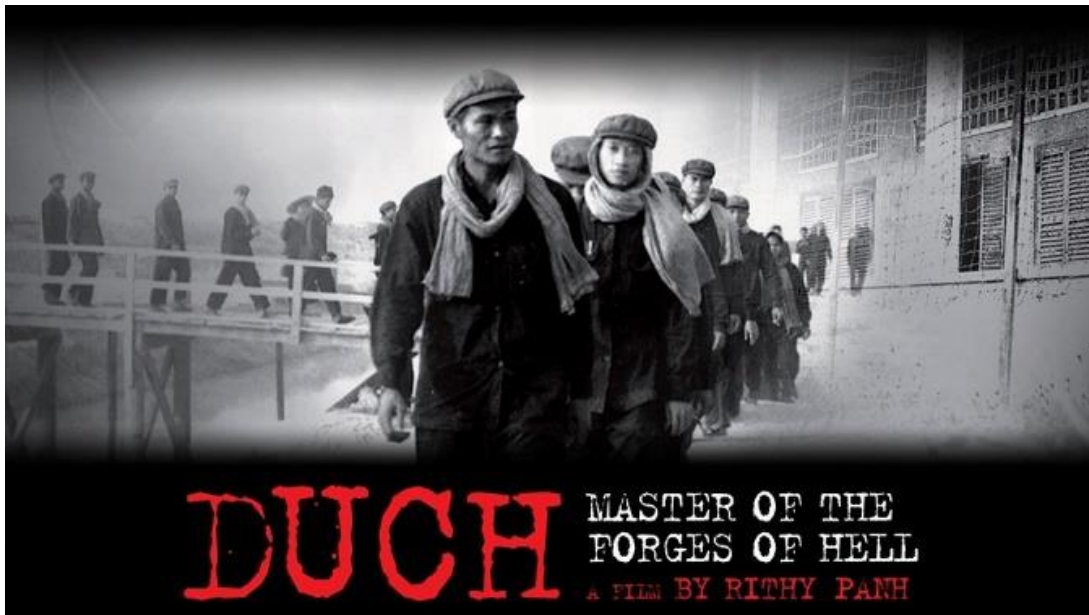


Figure 5.41: Graphic image for *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell*. Image sourced from Kanopy, (accessed December 3, 2021).

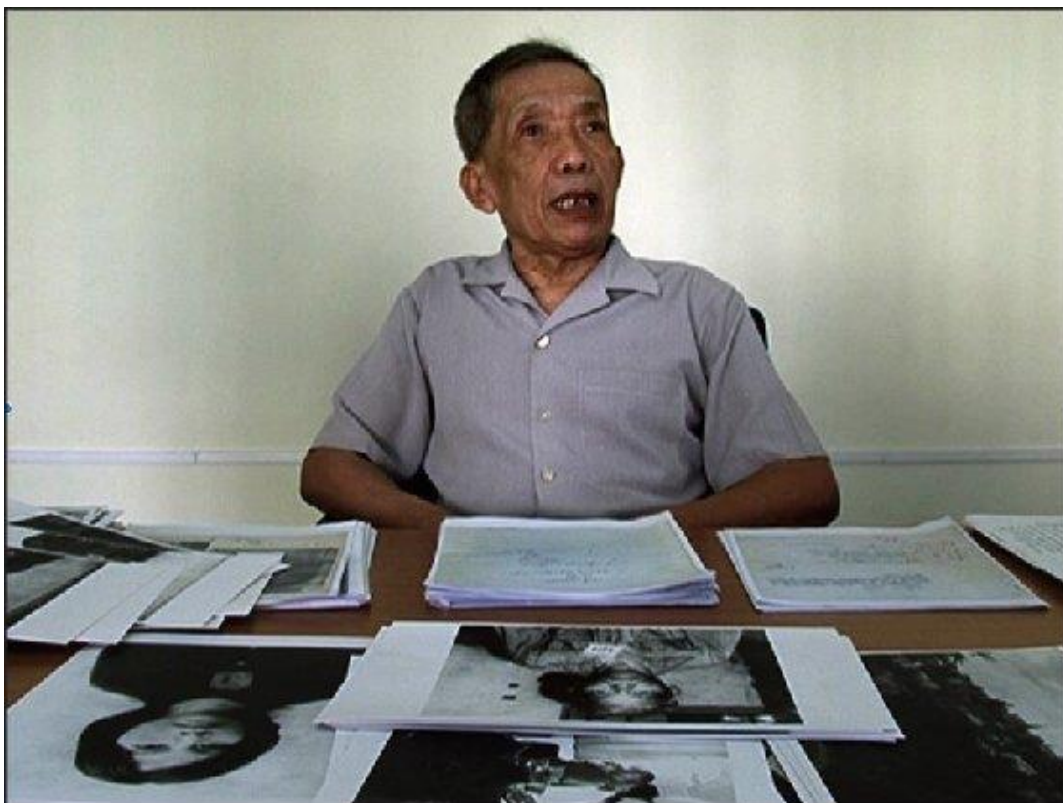


Figure 5.42: Kaing Guek Eav (Duch) with S21 records, Rithy Panh, *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell*, (2011; France: Catherine Dussart Productions). Creative Commons License (CC BY 4.0), [Creative Commons — Attribution 4.0 International — CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The third instalment in the trilogy, *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (Figures 5.41 and 5.42), compensates for the critical perpetrator testimony that was missing in the second film, that of Kaing Guek Eav (*nom de guerre* Duch), the warden of S-21 who was ultimately responsible for the deaths of the approximately 16,000 men, women, and children who entered the prison between 1975 and 1979. In July 2010, six months before the film's release, the ECCC convicted Duch of crimes against humanity, extermination, torture, execution, and enslavement, and issued the highly contested sentence of 35 years instead of the 40 sought by the prosecution. It should be noted, what made the sentence a serious point of contention amongst Cambodian publics was that the Court had considered the prison time Duch already served (11 years) as well as a period in which he was illegally detained, which together, led to Duch's term being reduced to just 19 years. Consequently, there was the real possibility of the 67-year-old living long enough to one day be free to live amongst the rest of humanity. Because it was the first verdict issued by the ECCC, a dissatisfying precedent was set for future ECCC trials, and naturally, Cambodian publics' faith in the transitional justice system waivered as a result. *Duch, The Master of the Forges of Hell* did not have the capability to alter the sentence that was handed down to Duch. However, it did serve as an alternative to the 'fair' trial and prevented Duch— who self-assuredly asserted 'that no one could judge him because no one today could penetrate S-21 to see the individual they claim to judge—' from having the last word. Instead of reconstructing Duch's memory to uncover the 'truth,' or determine the extent of his guilt, the film is a record of the master torturer's 'language of killing,' and zealous nostalgia

untainted by juridical objectivity. Through the power of cinema and filmmaking, Panh grants himself and the Cambodian people the last word and the final judgement of Kaing Guek Eav, the Master of the Forges of Hell.

In 2009, Vandy Rattana attended the ECCC trial proceedings of Kaing Guek Eav and creatively photographed the events from the inhibited perspective of a spectator. The images he captured formed the series, *The Khmer Rouge Tribunal* (Figures 5.43 and 5.44). Although Duch's trial denotes a 'point of memory,' between Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana in terms of subject matter, location, and temporality, the concern here is more about the discourse incited by strategies that go 'beyond indexicality or the information they record.'¹⁵⁷ Alternatively, it is the elements that 'traverse temporal, spatial, and experiential divides,' including the processes of retrieving traumatic memory, working through, and transmitting history by way of memory, that offer the greatest opportunity to form a dialogue between the acts of memory by survivors and postmemory generations. Therefore, instead of turning to Vandy's *Khmer Rouge Tribunal*, due attention must instead be given to his most celebrated work to date, *Bomb Ponds*. As far as the subject matter's relevance to Khmer Rouge historiography goes, one need not look further than Rithy Panh's succinct description of the U.S. bombing of Cambodia: 'The more bombs the American B-52s dropped, the more peasants joined the revolution, and the more territory the Khmer Rouge gained.'¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 62.

¹⁵⁸ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 27.



Figure 5.43: Vandy Rattana, *The Khmer Rouge Trial* series, 2009. Images courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.44: Vandy Rattana, *The Khmer Rouge Trial* series, 2009. Images courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 3, 2021).



Figure 5.45: Jessica Hromas, Vandy Rattana's *Bomb Ponds* Installation view: No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia, October 20, 2013-February 16, 2014, (Asia Society Hong Kong Centre) Google Arts & Culture, (accessed December 3, 2021).

In addition to being Vandy's most well-known project, *Bomb Ponds* is a pivotal work for several reasons. First, it signifies a decisive shift in practice from open-ended archival creation and photographic documentation of contemporary historical events to the formulation of precise research questions and the production of evocative images that critically examine historical events of the past from the postmemory perspective. A series of nine still photographs that are accompanied by a mixed genre film (Figure 5.45), *Bomb Ponds* also denotes a transition from Vandy's early career works that solely employed the photographic medium, to his more recent and mature projects, which almost exclusively explore the art of filmmaking. Finally, *Bomb Ponds* marks the point of crystallisation of Vandy's own historical consciousness and his personal effectuation of postmemory that arguably, had laid dormant as a result of international, national, cultural, and familial silence in the years after DK.

Vandy had been working on another project, a photographic series documenting the rubber plantations of eastern Cambodia when he came across a solitary, ‘big, [and] perfect crater,’¹⁵⁹ filled with water, a feature that appeared unnatural and out of place in the countryside’s landscape of rice fields and rubber plantations (Figure 5.46). Vandy said, ‘I didn’t know what it was. I didn’t know. And suddenly there was a young farmer who turned around and said, “That’s a bomb pond,” [*srah grāp paek*]. And I was like, “What’s happening here?!”’¹⁶⁰



Figure 5.46: Vandy Rattana in Kompong Thom photographing *Bomb Ponds* series, 2009, from ‘Artist Profile: Vandy Rattana’s “Bomb Ponds” Photographs and Video,’ video file, 6:54, YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum (September 19, 2013; New York: Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Initiative, 2016). (accessed December 31, 2021).

¹⁵⁹ Vandy Rattana, *Artist Profile: Vandy Rattana’s “Bomb Ponds” Photographs and Video*, video file, 6:54, YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum (September 19, 2013; New York: Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Initiative, 2016), [Vandy Rattana’s Bomb Ponds Photographs and Video | The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation](#), 00:40/ 06:54.

¹⁶⁰ Vandy, *Artist Profile* YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum, 00:45/06:54.

The deceptively serene pond was in fact one of the indelible traces of violence left upon the Cambodian landscape by the approximate 2.7 million tons of bombs¹⁶¹ that had been dropped between 1965 and 1973 in the United States' secret bombing campaign, which killed between 50,000 and 150,000 Cambodian civilians.¹⁶² During the rainy season, the craters fill with water, which becomes poisonous through contact with the residual chemicals from the bombs.

The sight of *snarm* upon the bucolic landscape, along with the shock of never having learned about this event in his country's history, 'haunted,' Vandy 'for about a year,'¹⁶³ until he acquired enough funding to execute research that amounted to a documentary film project. In late 2009, Vandy travelled the countryside in what were Cambodia's most heavily bombed areas,

'...I went around asking people about the bomb ponds, just simple questions about their experiences at that time, how they escaped the bombing, what kinds of bombshells were used, and the sounds of the bombs, something like that. And that changed my life. Before that I had no idea about Cambodian history, what happened in Indochina, and about the bombing in Indochina, I had no idea about that, so I got many books about history and spent so much time reading, reading, reading. And I found out that history is very important, and I realized that the government of Cambodia tries to shut down the history; they're not willing to share their history with the people. I learned so much about the history of Cambodia. So, the bomb ponds changed my life. That started the point that I think I need to use my photography to protest.'¹⁶⁴

Boreth Ly describes the *Bomb Ponds* photographs as 'over-aestheticized,' by which he means they are beautifully framed and made further alluring by the lush greenery and

¹⁶¹ Ted Owens and Ben Kiernan, 'Bombs Over Cambodia,' *The Walrus*, October 2006, pp. 62-69, [walrus_cambodiabombing_oct06.pdf \(yale.edu\)](#), 63.

¹⁶² Owens and Kiernan, 'Bombs Over Cambodia,' *The Walrus*, 67.

¹⁶³ Vandy, *Artist Profile*, YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum, 02:00/ 06:54.

¹⁶⁴ Corey, 'The Artist in the City,' 369-70.

vibrant colours in the landscape (Figures 5.47-5.49).¹⁶⁵ There is certainly ‘a level of exoticism,’ that Vandy is ‘playing with,’¹⁶⁶ in the compositions, which disguise the traumatic truth and reality of these sublimely beautiful, yet toxic features that have become ‘integrated into the landscape.’¹⁶⁷ By themselves, the photographs generate ‘an expanded aesthetic experience,’¹⁶⁸ that seem to allegorize Cambodia’s silence surrounding the decades of historical traumas. One may contemplate how the visual beauty of the ponds, when contrasted with their literally toxic physicality—which cannot be translated onto the surface of the photographic image— represents the unique trauma experienced by Cambodia’s postmemory generation. Similar to the bomb craters becoming features that visually appear to have integrated into the landscape over time, the widespread dissociation as exemplified by lack of public discourse, the non-existent disclosure on the part of the state and foreign nations (in this instance, the United States), and the absence of memory transmission by survivors, created an illusion of, if not healing, then of leaving the past behind. In reality, the unarticulated experiences of trauma remained incomprehensible and no less noxious for the next generation to inherit. Thus, like the stagnant rainwater held by the craters that, when drunk, is lethal, the activation of postmemory through a raw, unmediated encounter with the *snarm*—traces— of traumatic

¹⁶⁵ Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 71.

¹⁶⁶ June Yap, *Artist Profile*, YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum, 01:29/ 06:54.

¹⁶⁷ Pamela Corey, ‘TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research,’ *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog), December 5, 2017, [Speech, the Still Image, and their Silent Returns in Vandy Rattana’s MONOLOGUE \(2015\) – TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research \(hypotheses.org\)](#), 2.

¹⁶⁸ June Yap, ‘No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia,’ in *Guggenheim UBS Map Global Art Initiative: South and Southeast Asia*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2013), pp. 18-31, 25.

history such as Vandy's experience, is nothing short of re-traumatization. For Vandy, who once 'idealistically felt that photographs could communicate "reality,"'¹⁶⁹ this re-traumatization came to be represented through photographic images, which he describes as extensions of the paralysis he experienced as a result of 'the sudden resurgence of the past...like the feeling of standing in front of a gigantic still, like a mirror.'¹⁷⁰



Figure 5.47 Vandy Rattana, *Rattanakiri II* (Bomb Ponds series), 2009, digital C-print, 90 x 105cm. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 31, 2021).

¹⁶⁹ Vandy in Ahmady, 'History of the Future,' *UDAYA*, 308.

¹⁷⁰ Pamela Corey, 'TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research,' *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog), December 5, 2017, [Speech, the Still Image, and their Silent Returns in Vandy Rattana's MONOLOGUE \(2015\) – TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research \(hypotheses.org\)](#), 3.



Figure 5.48: *Bomb Ponds* series, 2009, digital C-print, 90 x 105cm. Image courtesy of the artist's website, (accessed December 31, 2021).



Figure 5.49: Vandy Rattana, *Takeo (Bomb Ponds series)*, 2009, digital C-print, 90 x 105cm. Image courtesy of the artist's website (accessed December 31, 2021).

It also must not go without noting the similarity in aesthetic function between Vandy's *Bomb Ponds* photographs and the S-21 prisoner photographs. In both instances, the aesthetic power of the photographs carries the potential to deceive viewers who are unfamiliar with the subjects. As such, in the same way that the S-21 photographs require contextualisation, Vandy's still images of the bomb ponds need further narration to function as history. Whilst his artistic recognition of this necessity demonstrates how the *silpakar* is an incarnation of the public historian, Vandy's choice to use film as 'his *specific*

medium to visualise memories of violence and trauma,¹⁷¹ represents a 'point of memory,' in which survivor memory and postmemory converge to inform the collective memory.

Whereas the still image is limited in its ability to 'exceed mere representation,' the alternative texts that accompany the moving image, including performativity, speech, sound (including silence), and narrative structure, transform camera imagery into a 'discourse of representation.'¹⁷² Both the S-21 trilogy and the filmic component of *Bomb Ponds* rely upon the alternative texts attached to the moving image to mediate the 'working through' of the traumatic memories belonging to others. Those memories are subsequently used to construct productive visualisations of the past that break from compulsive repetitions of trauma and offer historical insight. The results are immensely complex and layered narratives that interweave oral history testimony with re-enactment, the individual story with the collective experience, as well as archival films with contemporary footage. Of particular interest are the shared usages and similar orchestrations of site specificity, the 'body archive,' speech, and the dynamic between still and moving images in the S-21 trilogy and *Bomb Ponds*; not only are these public history strategies that offer publics the opportunity to become retrospective witnesses to memories that typically remain unarticulated or private, but they also expand the language and vocabulary of the historian.

¹⁷¹ Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 71.

¹⁷² Yap, 'No Country,' *Guggenheim UBS Map Global Art Initiative*, 29.

Consider, for instance, how ‘physical pain has no voice,’¹⁷³ and its language and communicability often lie beyond speech and the written word. Consequently, physical trauma is frequently not given due attention in historiography. But through the creation and recording of a ‘body archive,’¹⁷⁴ which ‘involves a combination of bodies, gestures, actors, and voices,’¹⁷⁵ a language for physical trauma is constructed, and the medium of film becomes its voice and the source from which a history of trauma may begin to be translated into verbal language. Verbal translation, Boreth Ly argues, is one way to reclaim ‘a culturally specific epistemological means of experiencing and knowing trauma through the body,’ which in turn ‘contributes to the healing of both the damaged psyche and the body.’¹⁷⁶ This is precisely what Vandy and Panh do in the *Bomb Ponds* documentary and the S-21 trilogy.

The narrative of *Bomb Ponds* is facilitated by the traumatic memories of three individuals who survived the years of bombardment by the United States military. Two of the individuals, Noun Veoun from Takeo, and Mi Mut from Mondolkiri, chose to relay their traumatic memories to Vandy and the camera by reliving specific personal experiences of trauma through combinations of body, voice, and gesture. Mi Mut’s account is especially powerful as he brings Vandy and the small film crew to the site where four bombs were

¹⁷³ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3.

¹⁷⁴ Eric Galmard cites Sylvie Rollet’s description of the body-archive, in his article, ‘The Interpellator, the Body-Archive, and the Spectral Observer: Uses of the Archives in Rithy Panh’s S21 Trilogy,’ *Plaridel* 15, no. 1 (2018): pp. 15-28, [The Interpellator, The Body-archive, and The Spectral Observer: Uses of the Archives in Rithy Panh’s S21 Trilogy - Plaridel Journal](#).

¹⁷⁵ Julia Kristeva, ‘The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras,’ *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 102, no. 2 (March 1987), 140.

¹⁷⁶ Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 71.

dropped, which claimed the life of his grandmother. Mi consciously dissociated from this traumatic memory by moving to the mountains so that he could ‘avoid seeing the bomb craters.’¹⁷⁷ As a result, the memory became a rupture and an obstacle that prevented Mi from beginning the process of healing from the trauma.



Figures 5.50: Mi Mut re-enacting the traumatic memory of his grandmother being killed by US bombs, screenshots from ‘Artist Profile: Vandy Rattana’s “Bomb Ponds” Photographs and Video,’ video file, 6:54, YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum (September 19, 2013; New York: Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Initiative, 2016). (accessed December 31, 2021).

In the film, Mi leads the camera into an undistinguishable, overgrown area located off to the side of a dirt road. Upon entering the forested area, he points out the bomb pond that is now hidden by brush and trees. As he begins to tell the story of how his grandmother was killed, Mi identifies and then stands in the exact spot where he and his grandmother

¹⁷⁷ Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 73.

had been four decades earlier. 'This is where my grandmother was killed by the bombs,' Mi says (Figure 5.50).¹⁷⁸ The bomb pond is 'evidence,'¹⁷⁹ he explains. Then, as if reliving the experience, he looks down upon the ground where he and his grandmother had laid and uses speech and the expression of his voice to paint a picture of the experience so that others might see the image that continues to live within his memory. 'My grandmother was bleeding from her ears, nose, and eyes because of the bombs,' Mi says before proceeding to lie face down on the ground, his right arm outstretched to where his grandmother had been (Figure 5.51):

'I ran with grandmother and lay her down here like this. "Grandmother," I kept saying, "Grandmother, please stay calm and don't move." My arm was around my grandmother like this. "Grandmother don't move." But she had passed away.'¹⁸⁰



Figures 5.51: Mi Mut re-enacting the traumatic memory of his grandmother being killed by US bombs, screenshots from 'Artist Profile: Vandy Rattana's "Bomb Ponds" Photographs and Video,' video file, 6:54, YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum (September 19, 2013; New York: Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Initiative, 2016). (accessed December 31, 2021).

¹⁷⁸ Mi Mut, *Artist Profile*, YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum, 04:51/06:54.

¹⁷⁹ Mi Mut, *Artist Profile*, YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum, 04:58/06:54.

¹⁸⁰ Mi Mut, *Artist Profile*, YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum, 05:26-05:45/06:54.

In his re-enactment, Mi begins to weep and says, 'I saw my grandmother die, bleeding all over. I cannot speak anymore.'¹⁸¹ Although Mi Mut may not have achieved complete healing or attained a sense of closure by re-living the horrific and painful memory, the experience allowed him to reassemble a dissociated memory that was previously 'inaccessible through language.'¹⁸² As such, *Bomb Ponds* was a 'point of memory' in which Mi was able to re-integrate the trauma into his consciousness, a process which has the potential to offer some amount of catharsis and relief from the pain that was inscribed onto his body and psyche.



Figure 5.52: Former prison guards and torturers of S-21, Rithy Panh, *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003; France: Institut national de l'audiovisuel; First Run Features). Screenshot sourced from Facebook, digital video with colour and sound, 1:01:49. (accessed December 31, 2021).

¹⁸¹ Ly, *Traces of Trauma*, 73.

¹⁸² Deirdre Boyle, 'Shattering Silence: Traumatic Memory and Reenactment in Rithy Panh's *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*,' *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 50, no. 1-2 (2009): pp. 95-106, [Project MUSE - Shattering Silence: Traumatic Memory and Reenactment in Rithy Panh's <i>S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine</i>](https://www.jhu.edu/~projects/muse/) (jhu.edu), 99.



Figure 5.53: Shot of S-21 at night with former prison guards at their posts, Rithy Panh, *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003; France: Institut national de l'audiovisuel; First Run Features). Screenshot sourced from Facebook, digital video with colour and sound, 57:00. (accessed December 31, 2021).

Alternative to creating a body archive that is exclusive to victims and survivors, which was the primary objective of *Bomb Ponds* and *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy*, Panh's *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* and *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* are examples of site specificity, speech, and corporeal memory being employed as methods of investigation into historical inquiries about perpetrators. In *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, the traumatic memories of S-21 survivors are juxtaposed with memories of perpetrators to examine the questions, *how do you survive absolute horror? How do you become a killer?*¹⁸³ Just as recounting his grandmother's death *in situ* incited Mi Mut in *Bomb Ponds* to reassemble and begin to work through his traumatic memory, Panh's strategy of placing the former S-21 torturers inside Tuol Sleng (Figure 5.52 and 5.53)

¹⁸³ Boyle, 'Shattering Silence,' *Framework: Journal of Cinema and Media*, 96.

amongst the original archives and artefacts, prompted the perpetrators to ‘move beyond re-enactment to relive the past.’¹⁸⁴ This caused the perpetrators’ shield of defence (which was based upon the claim that mid and lower ranking Khmer Rouge had obeyed orders out of fear of being killed), to be lowered, thus allowing layers of repressed memories ‘that cannot be verbalised or rationalised,’¹⁸⁵ to make their way to the surface.



Figure 5.54: Former child prison guard reliving his post duties, *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003; France: Institut national de l'audiovisuel; First Run Features). Screenshot, Facebook, digital video with colour and sound, 57:33, (accessed December 31, 2021).

¹⁸⁴ Boyle, 'Shattering Silence,' *Framework: Journal of Cinema and Media*, 97.

¹⁸⁵ John Kleinen and Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier, 'Archiving the Perpetrator,' in *The Cinema of Rithy Panh: Everything Has a Soul*, ed. Leslie Barnes and Joseph Mai (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), pp. 117-130, 123.



Figure 5.55: Former child prison guard reliving his experience as if talking to prisoners, Rithy Panh, *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003; France: Institut national de l'audiovisuel; First Run Features). Screenshot sourced from Facebook, digital video with colour and sound, 57:53, (accessed December 31, 2021).

One particularly revealing example is a scene in *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* in which Khieu Ches (from here forward addressed by his nickname, Poev), a former S-21 child prison guard, re-lives his daily routine at S-21 (Figures 5.54 and 5.55). The atmosphere created in the beginning of scene establishes the collapse of temporality and affirms that what is to come is not theatrics, but a re-living of the past; Panh shows the prison building at night (Figure 5.53), in near total darkness except for the lights that illuminate the outdoor hallways of the three floors. The camera is set at a distance and off

to the side of the building, which recedes at an angle.¹⁸⁶ As the silhouettes of guards on the second and third floors can be seen pacing the sections of their assigned posts, an intercom blares revolutionary propaganda and songs in the distance. Suddenly, viewers are in the outdoor hallway of the building, where Poeuv is hyper vigilantly patrolling his station. It is immediately apparent that Poeuv is not acting; he is instead repeating and 'mak[ing] the gestures'¹⁸⁷ as if they are reflexes and instincts inherent to his corporeal memory. He has, in almost every sense, lost connection to the present reality. What makes the scene all the more compelling is, through Poeuv's gestures and speech, viewers are transported back in time with him, and it is as if the victims of S-21 re-appear in the empty prison cell that he guards.¹⁸⁸ Along with Poeuv, viewers are 'plunge[d] into the reality...of that period.'¹⁸⁹ Panh offers further insight by explaining,

'Poeuv was 12 or 13 years old when he became a guard at S-21. He was indoctrinated, "educated" to hit the prisoners. When we did the shoot at Tuol Sleng, something clicked into place inside him: like a forgotten automatic mechanism that was suddenly switched on again, he began to repeat the gestures of the past. Poeuv is like a child who has been beaten, and when he re-enacts these gestures, all the pain that has been contained inside him for years submerges him. It is not theatricalisation.'¹⁹⁰

Poeuv's 're-living' scene is a critical 'point of memory,' in Panh's construction of a 'chronology of destruction,'¹⁹¹ which the S-21 trilogy seeks to understand, explain, and

¹⁸⁶ *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, directed by Rithy Panh, (2003: New York, NY), video file, 2:07:35, Facebook, posted by The Bophana Center, April 2021, accessed December 31, 2021, [Facebook Live | Facebook](#), 56:56/2:07:35.

¹⁸⁷ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 91.

¹⁸⁸ The scene is approximately five minutes in length. Poeuv in *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, 56:56-1:01:38/ 2:07:35.

¹⁸⁹ Kleinen and Benzaquen-Gautier, 'Archiving the Perpetrator,' *The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, 124.

¹⁹⁰ Rithy Panh, Interview, 'S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine A Film By Rithy Panh,' *First Run Features*, accessed December 31, 2021, [Microsoft Word - S21 PK.doc \(firstrunfeatures.com\)](#), 6.

¹⁹¹ Kleinen and Benzaquen-Gautier, 'Archiving the Perpetrator,' *The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, 124.

remember. Conclusively, from the search for the individual in *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy*, whose story has ‘come to stand in for Cambodians as a whole,’¹⁹² to the daily torturing at S-21 and the slaughtering of victims in the killing fields of Choeung Ek as conveyed through the speech and gestures of S-21 guards and torturers, and finally to ‘the detailed mechanics of extermination,’¹⁹³ illustrated through the inner psyche of Duch, the S-21 trilogy is an invaluable historical source and a remarkable example of public history. Yet at the same time, each film exceeds the abilities of an ordinary historian by going beyond representation and producing changes in the realities of viewers as well as those re-living traumatic memory.¹⁹⁴

The S-21 trilogy and *Bomb Ponds* succeed as sources of public history because of the ways in which Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana capture individual traumatic memories of others and activate them as ‘points of memory,’ a process that ‘falls outside both survivors’ accounts of loss and the most diligent accounting by lawyers and historians of acts of inhumanity.’¹⁹⁵ As critical narrations of the past that do not seek to place blame, but to understand and explain specific historical contexts through the pain of others, there is little space in the S-21 trilogy and *Bomb Ponds* for the *silpakar* to engage in self-exploration and personal subjectivity. In fact, both Panh and Vandy use the strategy of staying behind the

¹⁹² Thompson, ‘Mnemotechnical Politics,’ *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*, 227.

¹⁹³ Kleinen and Benzaquen-Gautier, ‘Archiving the Perpetrator,’ *The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, 124.

¹⁹⁴ Sánchez-Biosca, ‘Bophana’s Image and Narrative,’ *The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, 175.

¹⁹⁵ Donald Reid, ‘Creating Duch: The Projects of Duch, François Bizot, and Rithy Panh,’ in *The Cinema of Rithy Panh: Everything Has a Soul*, ed. Leslie Barnes and Joseph Mai (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), pp. 131-143, 136.

camera, remaining unseen and unheard in efforts to maintain a certain level of objectivity. However, upon the completion of these historical documentaries, Rithy Panh's and Vandy Rattana's cinematic quests for locating the individual in genocidal history took decisively autobiographical turns, with the primary goals of finding inner peace and working towards personal healing.

After completing *Bomb Ponds*, Vandy poignantly stated, 'I don't have the pretence to change the world, but to understand, just to try to heal myself...'¹⁹⁶ And so, the cycle of understanding, explaining, and remembering repeats.

The Autobiographical Turn

Panh's *The Missing Picture* trilogy (*The Missing Picture* (2013), *Exile* (2016), and *Graves Without a Name* (2018)) and Vandy's *MONOLOGUE* trilogy (*MONOLOGUE* (2015), *Funeral* (2018), and *...far away, over there, the ocean* (2019)), each demonstrate a decisive autobiographical turn in their oeuvres and another cyclical revolution through the processes of understanding, explaining, and most of all, remembering. During the 2010s, cinema, for both *silpakar*, became a poetic surface for narrating and giving visibility to the traumatic memory of their respective generations through personal subjectivity. Again, it is not the intention to provide a comprehensive analysis of each film, but to shed insight upon the evolution of survivor memory and postmemory by examining the progression of the same alternative texts Panh and Vandy utilised in the S-21 films and *Bomb Ponds* (site

¹⁹⁶ Vandy, *Artist Profile* YouTube, posted by Guggenheim Museum, 06:33/06:64.

specificity, speech, the body archive, and the dynamic between still and moving images) that transform personal and cultural traumatic memory into acts of commemoration and public history.

Whilst the S-21 trilogy and *Bomb Ponds* are artistic journeys toward historical understanding, *The Missing Picture* and the *MONOLOGUE* trilogies are best described as introspective, poetic renderings and visualisations of personal grief and trauma that underscore how ‘the invocation to remember...is not the same thing as providing (a public or shared) history.’¹⁹⁷ Yet because Panh’s and Vandy’s autobiographical reminiscences and distinct generational perspectives have been transferred from private memory as it exists within the individual psyche, to ‘the realm of the document,’ (film), they are resultantly indexical points of reference within historiography and the collective memory.¹⁹⁸ What is more, the ‘autobiographical turn’ makes apparent that the personal struggle to commemorate and memorialise the trauma of DK (particularly the dead), is an experience that is shared between survivors and members of the postmemory generation. As such, the commemorative struggle becomes yet another critical ‘point of memory,’ in the dialogue of survivor memory and postmemory, which is manifest in Panh’s and Vandy’s similar usages of alternative cinematic texts throughout their respective trilogies.

¹⁹⁷ David LaRocca, ‘Memory Translation: Rithy Panh’s Provocations to the Primacy and Virtues of the Documentary Sound/Image Index,’ in *The Cinema of Rithy Panh: Everything Has a Soul*, ed. Leslie Barnes and Joseph Mai (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), pp. 188-201, 190.

¹⁹⁸ LaRocca, ‘Memory Translation,’ *The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, 191.

In both trilogies, the cinematic texts of sound, speech, the body, the frequent oscillations between still and moving images, and site specificity, are vehicles that move us— the viewers— through the filmic progression from the mundane, earthly realism and the world we inhabit, to other-worldly surrealism and abstraction. In this sense, the cinematic trilogy stands as a complex metaphor for the intertwined existence of the Cambodian Buddhist-animist birth/rebirth cycle, and the spirit world, where the *neak ta* and the ‘wandering souls’ dwell. Thus, rather than contextualise *The Missing Picture* and *MONOLOGUE* trilogies as cinematic series that simply blend history with fiction or overlook the abstract and surreal components as mere incorporations of Khmer folklore and mythology, it is more effective to regard them as critical narratological elements that restore cultural visibility, ‘offer explanations for historical [trauma], as well as provide a framework through which people make sense of events which have largely been out of their control.’¹⁹⁹ Moreover, as Panh reflects, there is not ‘really a truth in the case of genocide; there’s something much more than the truth...the truth is not enough...’²⁰⁰ The responsibility and function of history therefore, are not to provide historical ‘truth,’ or an historical explanation, but instead, to ask how those impacted by genocide are using the frameworks of cultural history, heritage, and collective memory, to try to recover from, make sense of, and interpret, their own traumatic memory.

¹⁹⁹ Matthew O’Lemmon, ‘Spirit Cults and Buddhist Practice in Kep Province, Cambodia,’ *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 45, no. 1 (February 2014): pp. 25-49, [Spirit cults and Buddhist practice in Kep Province, Cambodia | Journal of Southeast Asian Studies | Cambridge Core](#), 46.

²⁰⁰ Rithy Panh, ‘RITHY PANH on THE MISSING PICTURE | Higher Learning,’ TIFF Originals, December 21, 2015, YouTube video, 38:15, accessed December 31, 2021, [RITHY PANH on THE MISSING PICTURE | Higher Learning - YouTube](#), 07:33/38:15.

From the ancient connection between Buddhist philosophy and animist beliefs comes a world view that is unique to Khmer culture. Specifically, the combined belief in the Buddha Himself, 'ancestor spirits, pagan demons, and the spirits which inhabit the heavens and hells of Buddhist cosmology,'²⁰¹ allow Cambodians access to what Monique Skidmore refers to as 'different levels of reality,' including 'the world of dreams, the world of the ancestors, and the world of the spirits.'²⁰² Panh and Vandy both use these levels of reality to frame the narrative progressions in their trilogies, and to communicate how trauma is an experience that collapses time and space and makes historical objectivity impossible.²⁰³

In *The Missing Picture* and *MONOLOGUE*— the first films of the trilogies— Panh and Vandy establish themselves as the protagonists and identify how visuality is a source of and an antidote to their trauma. Both *silpakar* must contend with what Panh refers to as 'the missing picture,' or 'an unattainable,' and perhaps even an unidentifiable, abstract metaphorical image of the trauma rendered by DK.²⁰⁴ It is the struggle to give visuality and meaning despite this rupture that triggers the artists' melancholia and anxiety, which persist throughout the trilogies. For Panh, making the series of films was a matter of visually

²⁰¹ Monique Skidmore, 'In the Shade of the Bodhi Tree: Dhammayietra and the Re-Awakening of Community in Cambodia,' *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10, no. 1 (1996): pp. 1-32, [IN THE SHADE OF THE BODHI TREE: Dhammayietra and the Re-awakening of Community in Cambodia on JSTOR](#), 11.

²⁰² Skidmore, 'In the Shade of the Bodhi Tree,' *Crossroads*, 11.

²⁰³ Andrea Fam, 'Khmer Artist Vandy Rattana 'Monologue Trilogy',' *Art & Market* (Art & Market, December 13, 2020), [Khmer Artist Vandy Rattana 'Monologue Trilogy' — Art & Market \(artandmarket.net\)](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

²⁰⁴ Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, 'Challenging Old and New Images Representing the Cambodian Genocide: The Missing Picture (Rithy Panh, 2013),' *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 12, no. 2 (October 2018): pp. 140-164, ["Challenging Old and New Images Representing the Cambodian Genocide" by Vicente Sánchez-Biosca \(usf.edu\)](#), 146-7.

reconstructing and depicting ‘the horror that he experienced without turning us, the viewers, into voyeurs, and his work into what Jill Godmilow has called “the pornography of the real.”’²⁰⁵ Vandy’s philosophy surrounding the relationship between historiography and image making on the other hand, shifted in response to his effectuation of postmemory (the making of *Bomb Ponds*). The awakening of his postmemory was an event that undoubtedly made Vandy conscientious of the fact that what is seen and what is true, are often in opposition, and that reality — such as mass graves lying beneath productive agricultural land— ‘seems like fiction, but it is not.’²⁰⁶ Consequently, Vandy came to perceive photographs as mute ‘fictional constructions, abstract and poetic surfaces, histories of their own.’²⁰⁷ Rather than attempt to reconstruct the ‘truth’ of a past which he did not directly experience, Vandy’s *MONOLOGUE* trilogy strives to give voice and context to the inimitable inherited trauma of Cambodia’s postmemory generation; ‘the instability of historicity,’²⁰⁸ which is made manifest in the dichotomy of what is seen and remembered. In short, for both filmmakers, the combination of an autobiographical approach to historical research and image-making transformed *selapak* and meditations on memory into therapeutic exercises for working through trauma. Meanwhile, the performative ritual of progressing into the different levels of reality (the world of dreams, the world of ancestors, and the world of the spirits) allows the dead to ‘inform the living of their current condition

²⁰⁵ Deirdre Boyle, ‘RITHY PANH on THE MISSING PICTURE | Higher Learning,’ TIFF Originals, YouTube, 03:00/38:15.

²⁰⁶ Fam, ‘Khmer Artist Vandy Rattana,’ *Art & Market*.

²⁰⁷ [Bio : Vandy Rattana](#).

²⁰⁸ Sheryl Cheung, ‘Vandy Rattana The Cube Project Space,’ *Artforum*, March 9, 2016, [TheCube Project Space - Artforum International](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

of suffering,²⁰⁹ and the living to mourn the dead and help the wandering souls re-enter the cycle of *samsāra*.

Perhaps the most interesting and notable difference to emerge from Panh's and Vandy's generational perspectives and approaches to working through trauma is the function of the photograph. Beginning with *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy*, Panh has consistently used the medium of cinema to lend performative power to photographs. The photographic portrait of Bophana for instance, 'runs through almost all his films in such a subtle manner that she has reached a kind of subliminal presence.'²¹⁰ Panh's appropriation and use of Bophana's portrait, is thus a vantage point from which to observe the multitude of functions he assigns photographs in his films. From the *S-21* films to *The Missing Picture* trilogy, Bophana's photograph evolves from icon, symbol, and allegory, to an affective image that conjures narratives of Panh's personal experiences of exile and grief for the dead.²¹¹ Then, in the film *Exile*, as if to rescue Bophana from the iconic status she acquired through the *S-21* trilogy, Panh figuratively adopts her as a sister through the act of incorporating her portrait into the montage of photographs that introduce viewers to his family members who perished under DK (Figure 5.56). Particularly in *Exile* and *Graves Without a Name*, the pre-DK era photographs of Panh's family members are repeatedly displayed in various contexts, a gesture which gives the portraits agency in shaping the

²⁰⁹ John Clifford Holt, 'Caring For the Dead Ritually in Cambodia,' *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2017, pp. 3-75, [Pchum Ben: Caring for the Dead Ritually in Cambodia - Hawaii Scholarship \(universitypressscholarship.com\)](http://PchumBen.com), 30.

²¹⁰ Sánchez-Biosca, 'Bophana's Image and Narrative,' *The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, 175.

²¹¹ Sánchez-Biosca, 'Bophana's Image and Narrative,' *The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, 178-9.

films' narratives. In certain instances, the portraits function as *aide-mémoire*, or memory aids, that incite Panh to recall stories from his past. On other occasions, photographs attain the status of relic and function as portals to and from the spirit world, where the souls of the dead are believed to wander. This function is central to the narrative of *Graves Without a Name*, which documents Panh's ceaseless quest to locate the burial sites of his family members. Over the course of the film, Panh partakes in a series of Buddhist and animist rituals, seeking the help of monks, mediums, and elders to communicate with the spirits of his family members. The photographs are 'remnants'²¹² used by the mediums to try and summon the spirits, who with any luck, are located and then use the body, voice, and gestures of the mediums to communicate with the living (Figure 5.57).



Figure 5.56: A portrait of Panh's mother next to a portrait of Bophana, Rithy Panh, *Exil*, (2016; France: Catherine Dussart Productions; Bophana Productions). Screenshot sourced from UniversCiné, digital video with colour and sound, 1:04:43.

²¹² *Graves Without a Name*, 47:50/ 1:55:29.



Figure 5.57: A medium holding Panh's family photographs, trying to contact the spirits of the dead, Rithy Panh, *Graves Without a Name*, (2018; New York, NY: Catherine Dussart Productions; Anuheap Production, 2020). Screenshot sourced from iTunes digital video with colour and sound, 48:13.

Despite the range of functions that Panh has assigned to photographs throughout his filmography, the prevailing precondition of a photographic image's presence and agency in his films is death by genocide. Contrastingly, when Vandy begins to explore the history of his country's genocide, which is the basis of the *MONOLOGUE* trilogy, he abandons the photographic medium and refrains from any visual display of photographs, gestures which allude to the postmemory struggle to find 'the missing picture.' Still, the photograph serves as a primary vehicle that drives *MONOLOGUE*'s narrative. The first film is set in a small rice field at an unspecified region in the northwest part of Cambodia. The only sound throughout the entire film is Vandy's monologue. As Vandy begins to narrate, two tall mango trees immediately become the visual focus. We, the viewers, are soon made aware that the idyllic landscape that is captured in the film is 'another physical and physiological scar, another

silenced aftermath,' of violence.²¹³ Then, when the camera slowly pans across the leaves and branches that hang above, we learn that Vandy's monologue is directed towards the sister he never met, who is buried somewhere beneath the mango trees, along with the remains of their grandmother and 5,000 other Khmer Rouge victims.²¹⁴ We first come to know and imagine Vandy's sister through his description of her photograph and his personal relationship with her image:

'It is extremely hard to try and know you through the photograph. On the picture you're not talking, you're not smiling, you're by no means angry. You look as if you've stopped crying. Who made you cry?,' Vandy's voice laments.²¹⁵

The absence of Vandy's sister's photograph helps to conjure her spectral presence, a visual experience which is made more affective through Vandy's dependency on alternative texts, especially site specificity—knowing he is communicating with his sister on the site of where she is buried— in addition to a combination of still shots and visual effects and the oscillation between speech and silence throughout the film.

²¹³ See link on noted webpage for PDF by Erin Gleeson, 'Vandy Rattana: MONOLOGUE 24/02-17/05/2015,' *Petit Journal Jeu De Paume*, 2015, accessed December 31, 2021, [Vandy Rattana. MONOLOGUE - Jeu de Paume](#), 3.

²¹⁴ Vandy Rattana, *MONOLOGUE*, (2015; Paris, France: Jeu de Paume, Paris ; CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux), Vimeo, locked digital file, [Private video on Vimeo](#).

²¹⁵ Vandy, *MONOLOGUE*, 00:53/19:03.



Figure 5.58 The two mango trees beneath which 5,000 DK victims are buried, including Vandy's sister. Vandy Rattana, *MONOLOGUE*, 2015, single channel HD, screenshot 02:50. Access to film courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.59: An extended shot of the landscape and the opening scene to *Funeral*, Vandy Rattana, *Funeral*, 2018, single channel HD, screenshot, 01:18. Access to film courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.60: Extended shot of the city of Phnom Penh, Vandy Rattana, *...far away, over there, the ocean*, single channel HD, screenshot, 01:53. Access to film courtesy of the artist.

Although Vandy never includes visual references to photographs in his trilogy, 'still portraits,' (extended cinematic shots) of unmarked landscapes of violence, paired with interludes of silence, is a narrative device that is repeated throughout all three films (Figures 5.58-5.60). As a postmemory *silpakar*, this combined aural and visual reference alluding to silence as a sound as well as a space, demonstrates an active process of remembering and a way of communicating the weight of inherited trauma. Alternatively, Panh has been referenced as the *silpakar* and DK survivor who has 'shattered the silence,'²¹⁶ surrounding the Khmer Rouge, but he too, combines extended shots of photographs and portraits of inanimate figures (clay figures, which are specific to *The Missing Picture*) with breaks in his poetic narrative, that together initiate silence. However, Panh's silence as a survivor is

²¹⁶ Boyle, 'Shattering Silence,' *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*.

enveloped in multiple different meanings and purposes, which range from preserving and guarding memory, to articulating ‘the interstice between the need to speak and the inability to express,’ and asserting agency and control in regard to’ the pain incurred from trauma.²¹⁷ In the case of *The Missing Picture*, which utilizes clay forms to reconstruct and give palpability to Panh’s memories, the stillness and silence of the figurines are meant to represent people who have died and events that have passed into memory.²¹⁸ In addition, the clay used to form the figures was from the Cambodian earth, upon which so much blood was shed and beneath which so many are buried, brings to mind ‘the continuity between the lives (and deaths) of the executed and the rather inert, relatively anonymous,’ figures depicted in the film (Figure 5.61).²¹⁹



Figure 5.61: Clay sculptor painting the representation of Panh’s father, Rithy Panh, *The Missing Picture*, (2013; France: Catherine Dussart Productions; Strand Releasing), Amazon Prime digital video with colour and sound, screenshot, 04:22.

²¹⁷ Naomi Frost, ‘Fragmented Histories: Transgenerational Memories of Democratic Kampuchea,’ *Studies in Oral History*, 2020, pp. 28-55, accessed December 31, 2021, [2020_journal_Frost.pdf \(oralhistoryaustralia.org.au\)](#), 37-8.

²¹⁸ Rithy Panh, *The Missing Picture*, (2013; France: Catherine Dussart Production; Strand Releasing), Amazon Prime digital video, 03:30/ 01:36:17.

²¹⁹ LaRocca, ‘Memory Translation,’ *The Cinema of Rithy Panh*, 193.

An equally powerful alternative text that compliments the moments of silence is the use of speech, specifically, the presence of a narrator's voice throughout both Panh's and Vandy's trilogies. Perhaps to delineate each film as another level of reality, the *MONOLOGUE* trilogy uses a different narrator voice for each film. Vandy himself narrates his monologue in the first film, whilst the narrative voices for *Funeral* are multiple and anonymous. Then in *...far away, over there, the ocean*, Vandy allows the two actors in the film to be the sole narrators. In Panh's trilogy, the narrator's voice remains constant; though we are meant to understand the narrator as Panh, the voice belongs to someone else (Randal Douc). For Panh, the decision to have another voice narrate his words exemplifies the aforementioned gap between the survivor's need to speak and the inability to express.

Panh says,

'I don't know why I didn't want to hear my voice- the sound of my own voice- something is missing also [referring to the idea of the missing picture]. The text is me but it's not my voice. Maybe just to keep a distance or, you know there's some words that you cannot say if you [speak them] yourself... [it's] easier sometimes to write [and decide] this word does not belong to me anymore.'²²⁰

Panh also creates more distance between himself and his traumatic memory by using French instead of his native Khmer language. Although Panh's narrative is in French and Vandy's in Khmer, both *silpakar* choose to narrate in the form of poetry and use the first film of their trilogies to establish the poetic meters that prevail in all three films of their trilogies. Whilst the lyrical quality in the narrators' voices and the repetition of poetic

²²⁰ Rithy Panh, 'RITHY PANH ON THE MISSING PICTURE | Higher Learning,' TIFF Originals, YouTube, 20:45/38:15.

meters are vaguely reminiscent of the *bangsukol* chant ²²¹ and bring viewers a sense of cohesion to the disparate narratives that comprise the trilogies, Vandy explains that the structured nature of poetry ‘helps [him] to interpret the world better than a logical perspective would, since what happened in Cambodia was illogical.’²²² Similarly, Panh reveres not just poetry’s organization of speech and its ability to ‘let the viewers see through words,’ but also the ways in which ‘speech can be awakened, amplified [and] supported by,’ the alternative texts that are embedded in cinema.²²³ Therefore, despite the differences in narration and language, speech may be considered a ‘point of memory,’ at which survivor memory and postmemory converge in the collective memory.



Figure 5.62: Vandy Rattana presenting relics from the mango trees where his sister is buried, *MONOLOGUE*, 2015, single channel HD, screenshots, 15:51 and 16:07. Access to film courtesy of the artist.

²²¹ A ceremony that is part of the funeral rites in Theravada Buddhist practices. The word is in reference to the white cloth that is placed over the deceased as well as the ritual of removing the cloth. It is a process that is believed to help souls find rest and transition into the next life.

²²² Quote by Vandy Rattana, in Dana Ter, ‘Cambodia’s Dark Beauty,’ *Taipei Times*, March 6, 2016, [Cambodia’s dark beauty - Taipei Times](#), accessed December 31, 2021.

²²³ Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 72.



Figure 5.63: Rithy Panh placing cleansed stones into small coffins made of paper in preparation for the cremation, Rithy Panh, *Graves Without a Name*, (2018; New York, NY: Catherine Dussart Productions; Anuheap Production, 2020), iTunes digital video with colour and sound, screenshots, 1:46:59 and 1:47:04.

The last 'point of memory' that is worth revisiting in this discussion of *The Missing Picture* and *MONOLOGUE* trilogies is the body archive. Just as the body archive helped translate trauma and facilitate the working through of traumatic memory in the S-21 trilogy and *Bomb Ponds*, *The Missing Picture* and *MONOLOGUE* trilogies focus on the body as an archive and site of trauma. However, the autobiographical, generational, and commemorative components of the trilogies further complicate and expand the idea of the body archive. For instance, there is an affinity to how Panh and Vandy orient and use their own bodies in relation to the camera to express personal traumatic memory. Over the course of *The Missing Picture* trilogy, Panh briefly appears before the camera on numerous occasions. However, these appearances are fragmented, partial, distorted, or indirect. On the occasions in which he fully appears in a film shot, he is always at a distance, or turned away from the camera. Vandy can only be seen in front of the camera in *MONOLOGUE* and, like Panh, his presence is only partial or obscured through distance. Moreover, when present on screen, Panh's and Vandy's bodies are always in juxtaposition with the

'Otherness of the dead.'²²⁴ By extension, the absence of their bodies on film is meant to delineate the realms or, spaces of, the dead that remain beyond the reach of the living. The first film of *MONOLOGUE (MONOLOGUE)* and the last film of *The Missing Picture (Graves Without A Name)* seem to progress as mirror images of one another (Figures 5.62 And 5.63). We see Panh and Vandy performing funerary rituals on the Cambodian landscape, which, scarred by non-memorialized sites of violence and unmarked mass graves, is also a body in trauma. Panh's and Vandy's realisation and documentation of these sites of violence may therefore be perceived as formations of a body archive of the disembodied landscape. Finally, at the same time that the repeated, therapeutic gestures of funerary rituals work to 'placate both the minds of the living and the spirit[s] of the dead,'²²⁵ Panh's and Vandy's substitution for the traditional corporeal relics in Buddhist funerary rituals, create a body archive for the disembodied dead. Panh and Vandy use objects found on or near the landscape where their family members are believed to be buried. Panh uses stones, which he lovingly cleanses in a bowl of water, wraps in white cloth, and then places in a small wooden box. Then, Panh along with monks and a small group of men, perform *bangsukol* before 'cremating' the 'remains.' In *MONOLOGUE*, Vandy can be seen at a distance collecting: a broken piece of bamboo (symbolising the bone of the deceased, which is

²²⁴ 'The Otherness of the dead,' is in reference to Jacques Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*. Raya Morag, 'Rithy Panh, Jean Améry, and the Paradigm of Moral Resentment,' in *The Cinema of Rithy Panh: Everything Has a Soul*, ed. Leslie Barnes and Joseph Mai (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), pp. 144-158, 154.

²²⁵ Inger Agger, 'Calming the Mind: Healing After Mass Atrocity in Cambodia,' *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52, no. 4 (April 2015): pp. 543-560, [Calming the mind: Healing after mass atrocity in Cambodia - Inger Agger, 2015 \(sagepub.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731515585511), 551.

sometimes kept by the deceased person's kin); dry, dusty earth placed in a white cotton shirt (the dirt represents the ashes of the dead and the white shirt a *pansukula*); and a mango branch with small white flowers (symbolising the soul's successful transition into samsara), which he later presents to his parents.²²⁶ Through Panh's and Vandy's mirrored rituals and gestures, the body archives of the living, the landscape, and the disembodied dead, poetically become one.

It therefore seems fitting to conclude this chapter by summarising the complex evolution of Cambodia's survivor and postmemory generations using none other than the words and images of Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana. Once again, as if mirroring one another, the final images of *MONOLOGUE* and *Graves Without a Name* show the sun setting on the Cambodian landscape (Figure 5.64 And 5.65), symbolising death, but also an inevitable rebirth. For Panh, a survivor 'who mistook life for death,'²²⁷ it signifies a rebirth that is compounded by the inevitable return of his past, to which he concludes:

Oh my past, exhausting and faithful every night,
I give you this altar,
this landscape of stones and rivers.
I give you this world without tears,
I give you these pathways,
these rice fields we alone walked,
yesterday and tomorrow.
On these rivers, in these mornings, today,
we'll have to be reborn and say,
among the soothesayers and poets, "yes."
We'll have to say I am alive.²²⁸

²²⁶ Deinhart, 'Re-Visualising Khmer Rouge Memory,' 42-3.

²²⁷ *Graves Without a Name*, 1:53:49/ 1:55:29.

²²⁸ *Graves Without a Name*, 1:50:53/ 1:55:29.

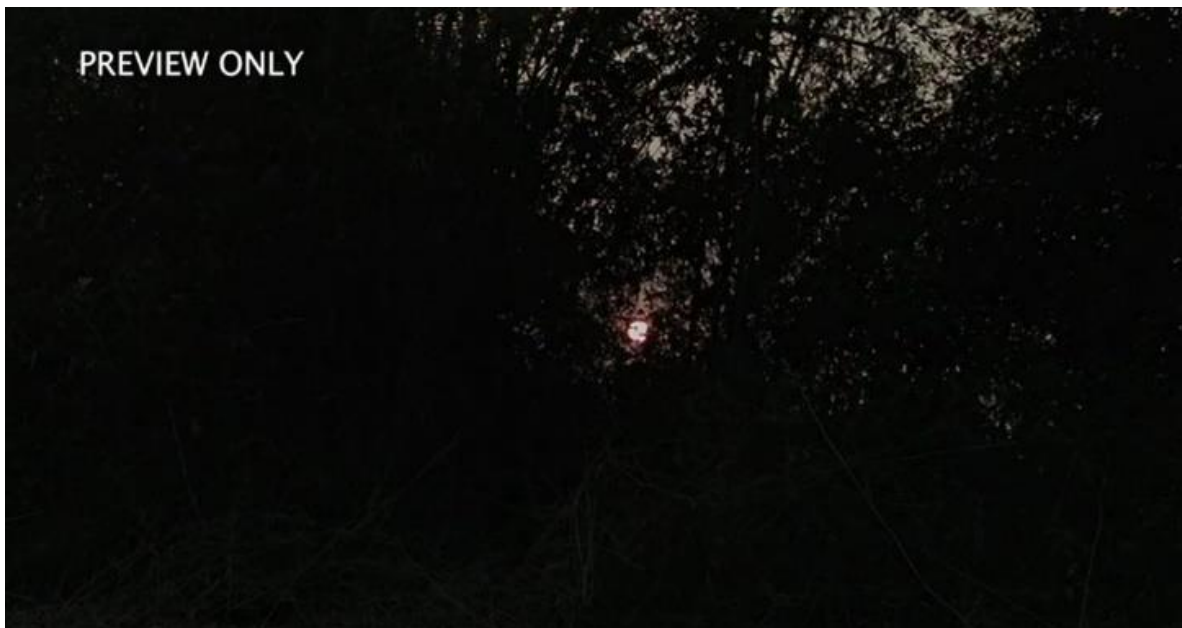


Figure 5.64: Sun setting behind the two mango trees atop the mass grave where Vandy's sister is buried, Vandy Rattana presenting relics from the mango trees where his sister is buried, *MONOLOGUE*, 2015, single channel HD, screenshot, 17:25. Access to film courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.65: Sun setting over the Cambodian landscape, Rithy Panh, *Graves Without a Name*, (2018; New York, NY: Catherine Dussart Productions; Anuheap Production, 2020), iTunes digital video with colour and sound, screenshot, 1:54:15.

In one of the final still images that is shown in *Graves Without a Name* before the film transitions to the final scene, there is a glass sphere placed upon the landscape, reflecting said landscape upside down (Figure 5.66). In the sphere, Panh can be seen walking to and then engaging in prayer with, a solitary tree.



Figure 5.66: Glass sphere reflecting the landscape upside down, *Graves Without a Name*, (2018; New York, NY: Catherine Dussart Productions; Anuheap Production, 2020), iTunes digital video with colour and sound, screenshot, 1:52:21.

As if mirroring Panh's image, the final lines recited in Vandy's *...far away, over there, the ocean* are:

The Landscape is nowhere to be found.
I'm looking at myself, that's it
I'm looking for myself
why am I looking for myself?
Maybe the landscape is the mirror
in which I can see myself through the light particles.
My image in the mirror
has no flavour,
no smell,
no warmth,
rather, it is the pain of wanting
to become something.
I'm always wondering,
if the landscape is an infinite dream...²²⁹

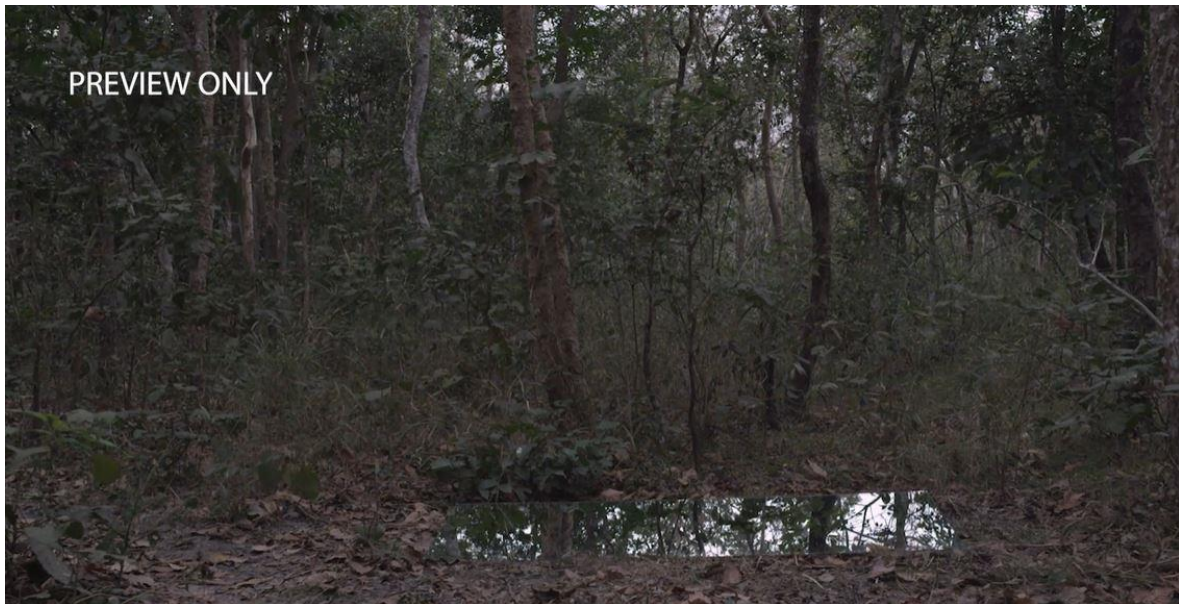


Figure 5.67: Mirror in the landscape, Vandy Rattana, *Funeral*, 2018, single channel HD, screenshot, 43:15. Access to film courtesy of the artist.

²²⁹ Vandy Rattana, *...far away, over there, the ocean*, (2019; Singapore: Singapore Biennale 2019), vimeo, locked digital file, access courtesy of the artist, 29:52/35:09

CONCLUSION

*'Even now, so many decades later... I look back on everything else that happened to us, and I think, how silly of me to see our pain as situated in time, confined to the past, contained within it...Through my frustration, my clenched teeth, I didn't have the words to say those years were never the sole explanation of anything; that I've always considered the genocide to be the source of all our problems and none of them.'*¹

— Anthony Veasna So

The predominantly visual forms of public history and examples of collective memory that have been traced, contextualised, culturally translated, interpreted, and analysed over the course of this scholarship, have sought to produce a foundational account of the formation of public history within a nation and region that have remained within the peripheries of the field of international public history. What has arisen from this combined narrative of Cambodia's state-sanctioned public history 'garden' and the cultivation of an intergenerational 'grassroots' public history 'movement' in the years after Democratic Kampuchea, is neither a single definition of 'public history' nor a discursive account of the collective memory of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Instead, what has emerged may be considered a portrait of public history within and along the national contours of Cambodia, imbricated with rudiments of cultural history and heritage indigenous to the region. In this capacity, the thesis has effectively decentred 'the West' as a locus for the field's conceptualisation, advancement, and progress.

As this scholarly work is merely the first step in establishing a discourse on Cambodian public history and it is also perhaps the first in-depth historicization of the field

¹ Anthony Veasna So, *Afterparties: Stories*, version Kindle (Ecco Press, 2021), 254-5.

within a Southeast Asian context, it was mandatory, for the sake of time and scale, to remain relatively bound to the concepts of nation and national identity. The opportunity that came with focusing on the Cambodian nation as a singular, homogenised entity contained within finite boundaries, was that it was possible to trace and contextualise the trajectory of the state's far-reaching influence on the processes of historical production and dissemination from pre-DK all the way up to the present day. To borrow the words of John Clark, what has been learned in the process is that 'the state does not simply hold the field for cultural activities...the state is everywhere and continuously intervenes in them.'²

Now, after having charted how the 'bounding conditions'³ of public history in Cambodia were ultimately set and determined by the recent history of the nation, particularly the interconnected experiences of colonialism and the genocide under the Khmer Rouge, it is possible to anticipate the ways in which forthcoming research might succeed in building upon the scholarship put forth in these pages. And, as this thesis was ultimately motivated by the desire to contribute to moving the research output in the field of international public history beyond the accumulation of nationally centred case studies,⁴ it seems appropriate that these concluding remarks be left to contemplate how this scholarship may serve as a springboard for future dialogues in forging a 'transnational public history.'

² John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 20.

³ Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, 20.

⁴ David Dean and Andreas Etges, 'What Is (International) Public History?,' *International Public History* 1, no. 1 (January 2018): pp. 1-3, [What Is \(International\) Public History? \(degruyter.com\)](http://degruyter.com), 2.

In general, forthcoming research in public history must be conscious of how maintaining a discourse that is bound to a single, politically imagined geo-body and homogenous imagined community,⁵ inevitably facilitates limitations. How, in this research for instance, did perceiving the Khmer Rouge and the development of public history as national experiences, restrict not only our understanding of history, but our perception and engagement with the consequences precipitated by that history? Let us consider first, the fact that within the nation of Cambodia alone, there are more than 5 million survivors of the Khmer Rouge. DC-Cam has accomplished the incredible feat of recording the stories of approximately 1 million of those survivors. But for DC-Cam's director, Youk Chhang, that means 4 million more individual experiences that have yet to be documented.

Next, we must factor in the ethnic fluidity and cultural porosity of Cambodia and the region of Southeast Asia as a whole. Whilst the Khmer ethnic group are the majority in Cambodia, with Theravada Buddhism being the state religion practiced by 93% of Cambodians,⁶ an array of other ethnic group minorities and religions exist within the boundaries that are authoritatively governed by Hun Sen and the Royal Government of Cambodia— the Vietnamese and Cham Muslim being two examples of minority groups who were explicitly targeted under DK, and who remain in the margins of state remembrance. Consideration must also be given to the fact that the fall of Democratic Kampuchea was a

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised (London: Verso, 2006).

⁶ 'Religion of Cambodia,' Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed January 5, 2022, [Cambodia - Religion | Britannica](#).

catalyst for a mass geographic displacement of peoples that resulted in the formation of a global Cambodian diaspora. Between 1979 and 1981, approximately 630,000 people fled Cambodia, with another 208,000 managing to leave in subsequent years.⁷ These refugees dispersed throughout the world, including neighbouring Vietnam and Thailand, and the more distant continents of North America (the US and Canada), Europe (the majority settled in France), and Australia. For Cambodian diasporas, the *baksbat* from the *samăy a-Pol Pot* (Pol Pot era)⁸ was augmented by the added trauma of exile and ‘linguistic, cultural, physical, and geographic displacement.’⁹ Consequently, these diasporas occupy an amorphous, ‘intersecting space at the crossroads of cultures,’¹⁰ that remains outside the scope of international public history’s preoccupation with the local and national. Finally, we must also consider the postmemory generations within these Cambodian diasporas, who ‘enunciate their cultural, [linguistic] and ethnic identities from multiple geopolitical and temporal spaces,’ and carry in their bodies the inherited ‘aftermath of war, genocide, colonialism.’¹¹ For each of these groups, the ‘nation-state as the lens through which to examine Khmer Rouge history and the configuration of public history inevitably results in

⁷ ‘Cambodia: Migration and Refugees as of December 1987,’ Country Data, accessed January 5, 2022, [Cambodia - Migration and Refugees \(country-data.com\)](http://country-data.com).

⁸ Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), [From the Land of Shadows : War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora \(ebscohost.com\)](http://ebscohost.com).

⁹ Boreth Ly, ‘Of Trans(National) Subjects and Translation: The Art and Body Language of Sopheap Pich,’ in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, ed. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asian Program Publications, 2012), pp. 117-129, 119.

¹⁰ Ly, ‘Of Trans(National) Subjects and Translation,’ *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*, 126.

¹¹ So, *Afterparties: Stories*, 210.

their othering, marginalisation, and exclusion.¹² It is thus imperative that future public history research build upon this scholarship by exploring different ways to ‘subvert the logic of the nation-state as the unit of [historical] representation,’¹³ and configure the multivalent experiences of Khmer Rouge history on a ‘continuous horizon.’¹⁴

As such, let us meditate on what was among the most significant findings of this thesis, which was the cultural translatability of post-DK *selapak* as ‘public history,’ and envision the ‘revitalisation of the Cambodian arts’ as one possible means of situating both Cambodian public history and Khmer Rouge history within a much needed third space that transcends nation and region.¹⁵ Chapter 5’s analysis of the oeuvres and artistic careers of Rithy Panh and Vandy Rattana has provided a starting point for such an undertaking. However, historicising the ‘revitalisation of the Cambodian arts’ as a transnational public history movement requires further extensive research that aims at revealing the ‘immense diversity’ of ‘individual, ethnic, religious, political,’¹⁶ linguistic, gendered, and generational

¹² Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide*, version Kindle, ed. David Chandler and Rita Smith Kipp (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2020), 8.

¹³ June Yap, ‘No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia,’ in *Guggenheim UBS Map Global Art Initiative: South and Southeast Asia*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2013), pp. 18-31, 21.

¹⁴ Yap, ‘No Country,’ *Guggenheim UBS Map Global Art Initiative*, 19.

¹⁵ K. W. Taylor, ‘Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region,’ *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (1998): pp. 949-978, [Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region | The Journal of Asian Studies | Cambridge Core](#).

¹⁶ Nora A. Taylor, ‘Introduction,’ in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, ed. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), pp. 1-13, 2.

memories as well as artistic backgrounds that comprise the Khmer Rouge historical experience.

Regardless of how future researchers choose to build on this scholarship, part of that task inevitably means confronting ‘moments when one narrative is privileged, and another is marginalised.’¹⁷ However, this must not equate to dwelling on the impossibility of our duty and responsibility as public historians to make Khmer Rouge historiography inclusive of all voices. In the words of Youk Chhang, ‘it is not impossible; it is an honour.’

¹⁷ Joan M. Schwartz, ‘The Archival Garden: Photographic Plantings, Interpretive Choices, and Alternative Narratives,’ in *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions: Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels*, ed. Terry Cook (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011), pp. 69-110, 106.

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