CAMBODIA’S HIDDEN SCARS: TRAUMA PSYCHOLOGY IN THE WAKE OF THE KHMER ROUGE

AN EDITED VOLUME ON CAMBODIA’S MENTAL HEALTH

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This book is dedicated to the Victims and Survivors of the Cambodian Genocide.
To the children of Sophany and Sarit Bay:
Sophanouvong (Paul) Bay (1969-1976)
Lilavodey (Pomme) Bay (1974-1975)
Murdered by the Khmer Rouge.
The Khmer Rouge Standing Committee aimed to ensure compliance and eliminate dissent by oppressing the people through psychological dominance. The defilement of Khmer religion, Khmer art, Khmer familiar relations, and the Khmer social class structure undermined deeply-held societal assumptions. The Khmer Rouge also destabilized the mass psychology that was secure in those realities. Cambodia’s psychology was thus altered in damaging and enduring ways. In societies that experience war and genocide, trauma significantly impacts the people’s psychology. The ripple effects of this damage are often incalculable. There are well-established statistics demonstrating a higher prevalence of trauma-related mental health disorders in post-conflict societies. This book considers the mental health implications of the Khmer Rouge era among the Cambodia populace. Specialists in trauma mental health discuss the increased rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depression, among other major mental health disorders, in the country. They also discuss the staggering burden of such a high prevalence of societal mental illness on a post-conflict society. Legal experts discuss the way in which the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia can better accommodate victims and witnesses who are traumatized to avoid re-traumatization and to ensure a meaningful experience with justice. The text also offers a set of recommendations for addressing the widespread mental health issues within the society.

This book engages these issues in three parts. Part I draws on the expertise of several experts on psychology and Cambodia to consider trauma’s effects on human psychology. It offers a statistical and theoretical overview of the mental health consequences at the individual and societal levels, examines the multigenerational effects of severe trauma, and demonstrates the way in which such effects continue to impact the nation and its development. Part II features the work of legal experts as well and explores the interplay between trauma psychology and the ECCC. In particular, it looks at the psychological effects of the work of the Court on participants, witnesses, and civil parties and examines the concept of justice as it relates to trauma psychology. Several submissions are critical of the Court’s reaction to the psychological state of the survivors. Finally, it raises questions about reparations as a form of accountability for the mental health of survivors. Part III examines the resources for interventions and for the treatment of mental suffering in Cambodia. It assesses the public and private mental health system in Cambodia as it relates to the treatment of trauma-related mental health. This is accomplished through a series of inclusive studies extracting the opinions of mental health providers and administrators struggling to meet the incredible need in a complicated and highly burdened system.
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Prof. Van Schaack joined the law faculty from private practice at Morrison & Foerster LLP. As a Senior Associate at “MoFo”, Prof. Van Schaack practiced in the areas of commercial law, intellectual property, international law, and human rights. In particular, she was trial counsel for Romagoza v. Garcia, a human rights case on behalf of three Salvadoran refugees that resulted in a plaintiffs’ award of $54.6 million. She was also on the criminal defense team for John Walker Lindh, the “American Taliban.”

Prior to entering private practice, Prof. Van Schaack was Acting Executive Director and Staff Attorney with The Center for Justice & Accountability, a non-profit law firm in San Francisco dedicated to the representation of victims of torture and other grave human rights abuses. She was also a law clerk with the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

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FRONT COVER PHOTO & CAPTION BY ENG KOK-THAY
Phan Srey Leab Holds a Photo of Family Members Imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge regime

At nine years old, Phan Srey Leab is a quiet and docile girl with piercing eyes. She is a granddaughter of Chan Kim Srung and Sek Sat. As a member of the military, Sek Sat rose quickly through the ranks, first commanding the 18th Company of Region 33 and then the 12th Regiment in 1973. By 1977, Sek Sat was a secretary of Koh Thom district and, by 1978, a secretary of Region 25.

On May 13, 1978, the Khmer Rouge arrested Sek Sat, his wife, and their newborn baby boy. They arrived at Tuol Sleng Prison (S-21) the next day. Forty days later, Sek Sat wrote a sixty-seven-page confession, in which he admitted to traitorous activities dating back to 1965 when he joined the United States Central Intelligence Agency. According to the confession, his main goals were to oppose the monarchy and communism, and to "hide in the revolution to build force."

Documents from Tuol Sleng prison do not indicate whether Chan Kim Srung wrote a confession before she died. The only prison document directly concerning Chan Kim Srung is a short biography and a portrait, taken upon her arrival at S-21, of her carrying her sleeping baby. Her brief biography, obtained by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), indicates that she managed a handicrafts workshop in Region 25 where her husband was chief. This portrait of Chan Kim Srung and her son graces the cover of our book. In the original photo, which is on display at Tuol Sleng Museum, it is possible to see tears dropping from Chan Kim Srung's eyes.

Cham Kim Srung and Sek Sat had three children. At the time of their parents' arrest, Sek Say was eleven and her younger sister, Chreb, was only nine. While the newborn son was imprisoned with Sek Sat and Chan Kim Srung, both of the girls and their aunt were jailed in a low-security prison in Koh Thom district. Chreb & Sek Say escaped with the aid of the Vietnamese in late 1978, but Chreb died of disease before reaching safety. Sek Say survived and moved to Kampong Speu where she remains today in Kong Pisey district.

Sek Say resembles her mother. She has five children, of which Phan Srey Leab is the third. Srey Leab likes to play in the kitchen when she can find a spot of her own. She only manages an average performance at school, but after school, she helps her mother cook, do household chores, and look after her younger sisters. Srey Leab has heard her mother blame their poverty on being orphaned at a young age. The young girl asked once about her grandparents and what had happened to them. Srey Leab listened to their story, but—quiet as she is—she has never again talked about it.
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