

Death of a Cambodian
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In Cambodian life, Vann Nath was an extraordinary figure. As an artist, he survived the full horrors of Pol Pot from behind the gates of the Tuol Sleng torture and extermination centre. In peacetime, he emerged as a great proponent of justice in a nation that was in desperate need of some.

He died Monday, aged 65.

When Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen sought help from the United Nations in establishing the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, the bureaucrats in New York held up the legal process of post-apartheid South Africa as a possible role model. This included a truth and reconciliation commission.

The idea of such a commission was rejected. Behind closed doors, it was argued that Cambodia lacked a leader of the same ilk as a Nelson Mandela. Someone who stood above the politics, was gracious with an overwhelming interest in finding justice for past wrongs, and who would provide a much needed link in resolving the bloody differences of history.

Back then, Vann Nath was already well known. He was one of only seven people who survived Tuol Sleng, or S21, where at least 16,000 people – and probably many more – were processed and killed. He had been jailed there in 1978, where he remained until Pol Pot was ousted by an invading Vietnamese army a year later.

His artistic flair saved him. Vann Nath had been put to work painting portraits of Pol Pot. Inside S21, which also served as headquarters for the dreaded Santebal, or secret police, women were mutilated, their babies taken and killed. Electric shocks and water torture were apparently common. Prisoners were beaten repeatedly, chained to their beds, and in some cases blood was taken from them for use in transfusions for soldiers fighting in the countryside. Eventually, prisoners were taken to the Killing Fields on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, bludgeoned to death and dumped in mass graves.

After Vann Nath was freed, he captured on canvas the haunting images of what he had witnessed, and eventually he would testify against his jailer Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, who is now behind bars. More importantly, it was on the lawns outside the Extraordinary Chambers for the Courts in Cambodia (ECCC) that Vann Nath's presence was felt most. His poise, eloquence and humility were reminiscent of Mandela in the early post-apartheid years.

As one of the three survivors left – alongside Chum Mey and Bou Meng – Vann Nath was always dignified and tireless, mixing with Cambodians and foreigners from all walks of life as the tribunal went about its business.

Chum Mey said Vann Nath's ability to keep records of atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge had made him the most important of men, and his death meant Cambodia had lost an important piece of its history.

Bou Meng added that it was sad Vann Nath had died before seeing completion of the second trial currently underway of the remaining surviving leaders. 'A famous victim has died before seeing justice now. This is what I feel regret about,' he said.

Former Brother Number Two Nuon Chea, one-time head of state Khieu Samphan, former Foreign Minister Ieng Sary and his wife Ieng Thirith are all before the courts on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity.

At Duch's trial, Vann Nath was asked by a judge what he wanted from the trial process. He replied he wanted something real, justice for those who died during Pol Pot's 1975-79 reign of terror.

'I hope that by the end of the tribunal that justice... can be seen by everybody,' he said.

Vann Nath deserves his wish.