

The Cambodian Resilience

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The legacy of the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime left the entire country's foundation devastated, while the people became physically weak and emotionally traumatized owing to the numerous deaths of family members and others. One could imagine how hard it was to cope with such traumatic events while at the same time enduring a shortage of food and other basic needs. But hopelessness and socio-economic pressure has never deterred the Cambodian people from standing up and moving forward. History has shown that Cambodians would strive to regain their physical and psychological strength through such courageous acts as filing the *Ranakse* petition in the early 1980s and engaging in religious practices believed to help them mentally. Also they have never lost hope that one day wrongdoers would be brought to a court of law.

Resilience: A Naturally-Occurring Phenomenon¹



Ms. Kem Vaing, left, and Mr. Houn Kin (fifth from left)

¹ I would like to express my profound thanks to Prof. Roberta R. Greene of University of Texas-Austin for her kind explanation about the term 'resilience' and how it helps post-conflict societies cope with psychological issues.

There is no doubt that some Cambodian people live with, and find it difficult to cope with, the traumatic events. Thus some seek proper treatment from psychiatrists. However, most Cambodians have not turned to any psychological assistance as they have adopted other substitute approaches. So, it would not be appropriate to generalize that psychological counseling is always needed for all Cambodians who experienced emotional trauma related to the DK regime. If that were the case, then as DC-Cam Director Youk Chhang noted, "Every person in Cambodia [would] need a psychologist at home." Dr. Chhim Sotheara of Transcultural Psychological Organization (TPO) also recommended that: "...psychology/psychiatry/mental health is only a small part of a very large and complex paradigm." It is important to note that psychological counseling is more of a Western concept and one of the theoretical and psychotherapeutic frameworks that have still to be presented to the Cambodian people. Although of great significance in some cases, psychological counseling is at times inapplicable in the Cambodian context.



Ms. Hem Sokun (left) and Mr. Touch Srorn (right) filed petitions in the early 1980s.

When it comes to the inner system, Cambodians have often relied upon "human instinct", which should be viewed as one of the potential solutions to enable the Cambodian people to think about and take a most suitable path to cope with their own personal problems. Irrespective of their educational level, they have proven capable, in many ways, to achieve such an instinct up to now. Thus, both insiders and outsiders should not overlook the Cambodians' high resilience. Professor Roberta Greene of University of Texas-Austin explained how resilience helps survivors psychologically. She wrote that: "Because the idea of resilience addresses how people and societies can overcome traumatic events such as genocide, it is highly appropriate to thinking about how Cambodia can move toward its future while not ignoring historical events. Strategies at the personal, interpersonal, socio-cultural, societal levels can be designed to fit the specific culture and needs of the people. It does not require as many professional mental health people as all citizens can be trained to enhance and encourage resilience among the populace." This contextual framework cannot be separated from the traditional way of life and economic development. In this regard, Professor Greene explains that resilience could naturally emerge during or in the aftermath of a specific traumatic event. However, she acknowledges that, "it can be fostered and promoted by designating "helpers" and the use of mutual aid. Hence, the restoration of bonds and emotions among each family and community are a potential catalyst to this mental state." Thus, Professor Greene added that a community project could be developed for the sake of reconciliation and justice.

Reactivating the *Ranakse* Petition

Resilience and human instinct have inspired Cambodians to unite and speak in one voice through the *Ranakse* petition against past atrocities and to alleviate their sense of loss and suffering. This process involved both government officials and the general public in the early 1980s. The 1,898 petitions with 1.1 million thumbprints were designed to let the people narrate the number of people lost in each family or community, condemn the Khmer Rouge (KR) atrocities, and seek international acknowledgement. As decades went by, some petitioners have forgotten what they wrote in 1983. As a local authority in Kampong Chhnang Province, Mr. Touch Srorn was quick to recognize his writing with thumbprints of twenty people. This represents just one case of how the Cambodian people used the *Ranakse* petition, either individual or collective, as a means to address trauma left behind by the KR mass atrocities.



Mr. Houn Kin (left) and Venerable Monk Tep He

Mr. Touch Srorn of Kampong Chhnang Province said no one forced him to sign the petition, but he was inspired by his own personal suffering as seven members of his entire family were lost to the regime. Mr. Srorn, who worked for the commune office, reiterated that twenty of his community members, including Mr. Chhay Pum, had the chance to air their grievances by placing their thumbprint on the petition, which was then sent to the central government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Mr. Chhay stressed that: "I was so excited to hear that the authority enabled us to reveal the number of deaths and suffering that our community has experienced. With the guideline, we were happy to file the petition. Our conscience and remembrance was to convey to those who helped us on this issue. Hopefully, the international community would do justice for us one day." Mr. Chhay's hope became a reality

in June of this year when a team from DC-Cam's Victim Participation Project approached them in Kampong Leng District of Kampong Chhnang Province.

Both recalled how surprised they were to hear that the petition they filed in the early 1980s has been well preserved and brought to them and made it possible for them to participate in the ECCC's judicial process. Actually, Mr. Chhay was not alone in his resolve to never give up hope for justice for the dead. Nevertheless, the ongoing court-hearing against the three KR leaders—Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea and Ieng Sary—have drawn their attention with a certain degree of anxiety and, sometimes, discontent as a long-awaited truth

about the nature of nearly two million death of Cambodian people is yet to be disclosed or explained.

Evidential Hearing

In defending his regime during opening arguments at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), Nuon Chea mainly focused his oral testimony on the period before the DK regime. He then claimed that his regime was just a scapegoat for the charges of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity and that it was not about Khmer killing Khmer, but about Vietnamese killing Khmer. Nuon Chea also placed the blame on some Isarak movement members, who he stated had disguised themselves in black uniforms to kill people. His statesmanship-like speech even called upon youths not to make a wrong judgment about the KR regime, which, he claimed, protected Cambodia from Vietnamese annexation. He also attempted to reframe many historical facts in a way that many DC-Cam invitees disagreed.

Mr. San Sok of Takeo Province commented that Nuon Chea's statement was intended to confuse the audience and make them acknowledge his nationalist standpoint. While Mr. Sok was cautious regarding the veracity of Nuon Chea's struggle, he accepted that there were foreign interferences in our national affairs. Nevertheless, he found it inappropriate to point fingers at foreign countries, low-level KR cadres, late KR leaders, etc. Mr. San Sok



Mr. Houn Kin (in the photo on the left) and Ms. Kem Vaing (in the photo above right) at the ECCC

stated that Nuon Chea's objective was to convey his ideological message in order to confuse and lead students and the younger generation to question how a nationalist like him could be tried in this court. However, the survivors have not been convinced by his attempt to distort the truth. Both Mr. Sok and Mr. Chhay Pum of Kampong Chhnang Province further stressed that we should ask Nuon Chea the question of why nearly two million people died between 1975 and 1979. Nuon Chea has yet to accept this fact. To Mr. Sok, it was extremely weak (*thaok heuy an*) that these KR leaders left the Cambodian people to die en masse.

There are some additional concerns among survivors after listening to Nuon Chea's speech. Ms. Ham Sokun of Kandal Province summed up many survivor's concerns when she said, "Fearing that the younger generation might be confused by these senior leaders' speeches during the trial, I insisted that the true and unbiased history be properly taught in school so as to ensure that the young learn the correct things about that regime to ultimately prevent it from happening again."

Buddhism: Cambodian Folktale and KR Leaders

Never before experienced in Cambodia's history, Article 20 of the DK constitution prohibited the practice of all religions by banning only so-called reactionary religions. In reality, no religion was deemed non-reactionary. In a predominantly Buddhist country like Cambodia, the total prohibition of Buddhism imposed by the DK demonstrated one of the severest suppressions on all aspects of Cambodian life. Mr. Sao Vorn, seventy-two, of Takeo Province viewed this with the notion of "a needle's eye is not as small as the complete prohibition of religion. It made people feel so discontent." The prosecution of the ECCC read in its opening statement on November 21st, 2011, "Persecution of Buddhists is a crime against humanity that affected millions of Cambodians in the 1975-1979 period... And to this day, many suffer from the trauma they experienced as a result of the violent suppression of their religion."²

Notably, Nuon Chea, former Brother Number Two, vehemently opposed any charges that his regime committed genocide by reasoning that most Cambodians are faithful Buddhists. So, is Buddhism a "comfortable shield" for these senior KR leaders? Mr. Vorn, former commune chief during the DK period, made a very consistent argument with Nuon Chea by recalling a Cambodian folktale in which a pure and honest Angkulimea was lured to commit a heinous crime against one thousand people in order to let him live an eternal life. While attempting to kill his mother to add one more figure to reach one thousand, Angkulimea was challenged by a Buddhist monk, who later succeeded in guiding Angkulimea to right his wrong and ordained him as a Buddhist monk.

On the contrary, fifteen other participants raised doubts about Mr. Vorn's argument by posing a rhetorical question, "Were senior KR leaders or/and low-level KR cadres an Angkulimea?" Many people responded

"NO." Mr. Tauch Sorn of Kampong Chhnang Province stressed that Angkulimea was completely different from KR atrocities, in which many of the nearly two million people died violent deaths and that this was too severe to be forgiven. Myriad evidence of the genocide



Villagers walk into ECCC's Court-Room

² Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, Trial Chamber—Hearing Case No. 002/19-09-2007-ECCC/T C, 21/11/2011, pp. 51-52. (E1_13.1_TR002_20111121_Final_EN_Pub.pdf)

is scattered throughout Cambodia. For example, a team of Canadian forensic specialists selected just ten out of many skulls for analysis. Among the ten, two selected instances reveal violent deaths as follows: "1) Cranium of a man, 25 to 45 years old, gunshot wound of entrance in the left frontal convexity with the bullet passing into the brain from right to left and downward on a 45-degree angle...10) Cranium of a woman, 35 to 50 years old. Chopping/hacking wound on the anterior portion of the right parietal convexity (right side of the top of the head)."³

These serious crimes have never left the people's minds after all of the intervening years, although Buddhism is widely practiced and despite the fact that some former KR cadres have become religious. It is evident that Ms. Kem Vaing of Kampong Thom Province still finds it hard to forgive Mr. Huon Kin, who killed Ms. Vaing's husband. Although they have lived in the same commune since the end of the DK period (1975-1979), neither has ever communicated with the other. While both were invited by DC-Cam to join the evidential court-hearing against the three KR leaders—Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary, they were in the same taxi without exchanging any words. Ms. Vaing sat in the rear seat next to venerable monk Tep He, while Mr. Kin, now a clergy at a pagoda, sat in the front seat. Mr. Kin even said he has sacrificed his old age to conduct religious service, assist Buddhist monk Tep He, and pray for those who died during the KR regime.

The venerable monk Tep He explained to the participants that the wrong-doers should be welcomed and forgiven if they have changed their attitude and decided to live a harmonious life. No participants responded to the monk's remarks. However even Angkulimea, who entered the monkhood, was subject to some sort of punishment. The Buddhist novice Angkulimea was stoned while walking in villages in an alms-giving procession. For both religious and state laws always let the wrongdoers take full responsibility for their past acts.

Conclusion

The Cambodian people have spent over three decades dealing with the post-KR situation. Thus, only with high resilience and culture could the Cambodian people move forward from such a devastating history. These are the conditions that help them restore their traditional way of life. This empowers them to take a subsequent approach to relieving their trauma. The *Ranakse* petition is one of the outstanding instances in which the survivors wrote down their losses and suffering in the hope of acknowledgement from the international community. They used their writing to counter the mass atrocities, while the outside world turned a blind eye to their sufferings. A few decades later, those petitions have been well kept. It is, in some ways, a form of respect for their past efforts.

³ Please visit the link: http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Forensic_Study/Forensics_Exhibition.htm

APPENDIX:

Documentation Center of Cambodia

List of People Invited for the ECCC Hearing on December 5, 2011

No	Name	Sex	Story
1	Chhim Han	M	<p>In 1975 he was forcibly relocated from Kampong Chhnang Town to Thma Reap Village, Banteay Preal Commune, Rolea Pha-ie District, Kampong Chhnang Province. During the evacuation, approximately ten KR militiamen arrested and detained him at Ankor Phnum prison. Along with twenty-three other youths, he was accused of being a defector. He was detained and shackled for a month and twelve days.</p> <p>At least one or two prisoners died during the nighttime and were buried inside the prisoner compound. The guards mistreated and tortured the prisoners daily. Prisoners were given one ladle of rice soup to eat, divided into a half-spoon serving in the afternoon and another half-spoon serving in the evening.</p> <p>Fortunately he was later released without any reason. After his release, he served in a transportation unit and his assigned tasks were to transport milled rice and tend cattle.</p>
2	Ham Sokun	F	<p>She wrote the 1983 petition on behalf of Group 11 of Prek Kha-sev Village, Rokar Kha-puos Commune, Sa-ang District, Kandal Province. In late 1977 because of breaking the plowing equipment and allowing cows to eat rice, her husband named Yea Saret was arrested and later killed at Koh Kor. Eight days after her husband's arrest, she was put to work at Koh Ka-sach Tonlea where more than 300 widows were forced to work. At that time, she was three months pregnant and the overwork caused her to abort. In April 1978, she was ordered to remarry an old man. She firmly rejected the concept and luckily</p>

			<p>was able to avoid this fate. In late 1978, she was again ordered to remarry; however, because of the chaos she was again able to escape.</p>
3	Yuos Savoeun	M	<p>Under the KR regime, he was separated from his wife and two children and forcibly relocated from Prey Veng to Prek Sap District, Kratie Province. Over there, regardless of receiving only a small amount of watery rice soup to eat, he was ordered to uproot trees day and night. Sometimes he had to sleep in the mud. Under the regime, he had no contact with his wife and children at all. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, he has never met his wife and children again.</p> <p>In 1977, his elder brother, Prim, was arrested, detained, and killed in Kanh-chriech District, Prey Veng Province. His brother was accused of being part of the Yuon network.</p>
4	Boun Chon	M	<p>After coming to power in 1975, the Khmer Rouge evacuated people in his village and ordered them to uproot trees in the forest. His family members were separated and put to work in different areas. In particular, he was ordered to clear the forest, build rice dykes, plow the paddy fields, build dam, and do other things.</p> <p>In 1976 the KR killed his two siblings, Chan Ra and Pech, because they always wanted to follow his mother. At that time, Chan Ra and Pech were about two or three years old. After stopping his siblings from going to find his mother only two times, Koeun, a former KR unit chief and currently a medical staff in the village, killed them in cold blood. He sometimes meets Koeun in person, but he does not seek revenge.</p> <p>Later, his mother died from disease in a hospital. His cousin (deceased) arrested and killed his father in Sdok Krasa. His father was captured when he came to find his mother. He does not understand why the militiamen, one of whom was Koeun and his cousin, arrested and killed his</p>

father, given the fact that he had committed no wrongdoing.

5 Chhay Pum M In late 1975, he escaped from Prey Pha-chik dam, because he could no longer tolerate the extreme working conditions and such small rations. He had been put to work tirelessly but was not allowed to take a day off when he fell sick. When he was suffering from a high fever, the KR cadres still put him to work. When he asked them for the day off, they accused him of maligning and attempting to destroy Angkar.

Unfortunately, he was captured along the way. The KR militiamen tied his hands to his back and brought him to O Roleap Pis Security Center where he was hanged upside down and beaten for four days and nights. He was accused of being a former Lon Nol colonel and later sent to Banteay Romes labor camp where he was ordered to grow potatoes day and night.

In approximately 1983 or 1984, he helped people in his village write down accounts of all their suffering that happened to them and to their loved ones under the KR in the petition. At that time, a group of civil servants held a meeting, and people asked him to write down what was being talked about. In the 1980s he was a teacher, and he had studied until third grade (in the old regime) before the emergence of the KR regime.

6 Meas Chhauv M His father was taken to be executed by his own nephew, Meas Chhauv's cousin, in Kandal Pagoda. The incident took place in mid-1977. His father's nephew, Vat, served as a unit chief in Svay Tang Village, Chra Neang Commune, Taing Kok District, Kampong Thom Province. The killing took place because his father was accused of being a burrowing enemy (stealing rice for the enemy).

Meas Chhauv suspects that Vat killed his father,

because Vat wanted to seek revenge on his father. His father informed Vat's wife that Vat had raped women. Vat has since died because a tree fell down on him.

Aside from his father, Meas Chhau's younger sibling Siem was executed because of stealing and eating rice alone outside a dining hall. His sibling was shot dead in cold blood when going to transport firewood.

His five daughters all died from starvation under the regime.

7	Tann Sinat	F	She was told by a KR cadre that her sister named Tann Nary who was detained at Office 8 was raped and later killed. Nary's husband was later accused of being Vietnamese and ultimately was executed. Also, her three brothers were arrested, tortured, and later slaughtered.
8	Kae Matt	M	His great-grandmother was burned alive in a charcoal kiln along with ten other people due to the reason that she was too old to be useful for the Angkar. At that time she was around seventy years old living in Krakor District of Pursat Province. His two grandfathers also died from diseases. At that time his family lived in Svay Leu District of Siem Reap Province. In 1976 his father also suffered from disease as well as starvation and soon he died. Approximately five to six months later, his mother and nine-month-old sister also died of starvation.
9	Chuong Phum	F	Chuong Phum is a former Sang prisoner. In (late) 1978 she, along with other women in her unit, was arrested and later detained in Sang Prison. She was interrogated once and forced to do hard labor. The living condition in the prison was horrible. She was there until the Vietnamese arrived.
10	Houn Kin	M	Houn Kin was a base person at Damrei Slap Commune, Kampong Thom Province and was appointed as one of the three militiamen. His direct superior was Bun Sam-ban, chief of the

			cooperative. Houn Kin worked under pressure and if he failed to execute orders, he would be starved and detained. He was the one who took the responsibility for killing Thoun Leap's and Ving's family member named Thoun. Thoun was Ving's husband. Kin confessed the killing of Thoun in a documentary film produced by DC-Cam called <i>Mass Grave Near Pagoda</i> .
11	Thoun Leap	F	During the KR regime, when her father named Thoun was killed by [Ta] Kin, she was at the age of ten. She was not sure about the death of her father. What she knew was that the militiamen called her father from home and took him by an ox-cart. Since then there was no information about him and he never returned. However, her neighbors said that her father was called off and killed by [Ta] Kin. After that, she was moved to Bos Veng forest because of her alleged connection with the Lon Nol regime. The purpose of the KR <i>Angkar</i> was to weaken them and let them die. She is one of the survivor-actors in a documentary film produced by DC-Cam called <i>Mass Grave Near Pagoda</i> .
12	Kem Ving	F	Her husband named Thoun was mobilized to take the Lon Nol side, and on April 1975, her husband was evacuated to Tuol Kreul. Two weeks later, her husband was executed after his past background was discovered. After that Ving was sent to forest. She was so afraid that her family members might be targeted to be killed. She thus suffered from torture and overwork. She is now living in the same village with [Ta] Kin who killed her husband, and she is also one of the survivor-actors in the documentary film produced by DC-Cam called <i>Mass Grave Near Pagoda</i> .
13	Son of Ms. Thoun Leap	M	His grandfather Thoun was killed by [Ta] Kin who is now living in the same village with him. He was told by his parents that [Ta] Kin is the one who takes responsibility for the death of his grandfather Thoun. He is now around ten years old.
14	Venerable	M	He is a KR survivor and is a relative of [Ta] Kin

	monk Nou Yy		who was responsible for the death of Thoun. He entered the monkhood in 2005-06 in Damrei Slab Commune, Kampong Thom Province.
15	Phin Sam-on	M	He is a KR survivor. When he was a child, he was assigned to make fertilizer and build dams and irrigation systems. He remembers that Ny of Damrei Slap Commune was his chief and then was replaced by [Ta] Sok, who gave him a new assignment to raise chickens and pigs. Phin was about to be sent to fight in a war with Vietnam in 1977-1978. He lost an eldest brother Kheam Thoun and other two relatives to the regime.
16	Sao Vorn, alias Pot	M	He joined the KR revolution in 1968 and served as former KR commune chief of Chieng Torng Commune, Tram Kak District, Takeo Province. He used to join a meeting at Phnom Damrei Romeal, Takeo Province, where [Yeay] Chaem was also present as a participant. Ta Mok was the head of the meeting at Phnom Damrei Romeal. In 1975 he was assigned to be the chief of Kampong Svay Commune, Kieng Svay District, Kandal Province. Later on in 1976 he was appointed to be the member of Boeng Kya Commune, Kandal Stoeng District, Kandal Province. He was moved to Boeng Kya because of an immoral offense.
17	Makk Sarin	M	Makk Sarin was a former KR messenger for his uncle named Roeung. Roeung was a former KR who took control of the state warehouse. At that time, Roeung was very close with Vann Rith, chief of state commerce Roeung and Vann Rith were under the control of Khieu Samphan, who was in charge of the state warehouse. Sarin is now Korky Village chief, where [Ta] An who is involved in Case 004 at the ECCC lives.
18	Dy Kim Sorn	M	Dy Kim Sorn was a former teacher for KR cadres' children at the Office S-71 in Boeng Tra Bek. The Office S-71 was under the control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sa Vorn was the chief of the Office S-71. Hor Man Hong was also one of the KR cadres at the Office S-71. He taught Khmer literature there at the Office S-21. Dy Kim Sorn witnessed the KR arrest one student from

			abroad, and ever since the arrest, the student has disappeared.
19	Poul Socheat	M	Poul Socheat and his brother named Soeun joined the KR revolution in 1970. After the 1975 coup, Soeun became the chief of Region 4. In 1975 Socheat was transferred to Phnom Penh to work in Office 87. Office 87 was under the control of Ministry of Education during the KR regime, and Yun Yat, alias At, was the Minister. Socheat was one of the three authors of the KR textbook. The textbook publication had to be approved by Yun Yat.
20	Yem Sam-on	M	Sam-on joined the KR revolution in 1973, and became a KR soldier in Region 35 in early 1975. After the liberation in 1975, he was sent to Kang Keng airport in Kampong Som, assigned to fix the railroad between the provincial towns of Trapeang La-poeu and Kampot. In July 1976, Sam-on was selected to study ship maintenance in Shanghai, China. Ieng Sary took the team to China and told them to study hard. After studying Chinese language for six months, Sam-on began the ship maintenance program at the 405 factory in Shanghai. After his mission to China, Sam-on came back to Cambodia and served as a KR soldier in Division 502.
21	Neak Noeun, alias Chhouk Noeun	M	Noeun was selected to join the KR's 502 Air Force Division in Phnom Penh. Sou Met, [Ta] Lvey and [Ta] Phal made up the division's committee. In September 1976, Noeun was selected to study as a pilot in China. Noeun studied in Halpin City, Kailong Zhang Province near the Soviet Union border. Noeun was in China for five years, and only returned to the Cambodian-Thai border in January 1981.

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Photos by Nhean Socheat, team leader of "Searching for the Truth" magazine.