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Original Paper

Listening to Story: Narratives Shared by Female Khmer Rouge Survivors

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Abstract

Accounts of conflict often ignore the plight of female survivors. In this paper, we explore the history of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge years focusing on the suffering of three females during these years along with their current outlook and support for education in their village. Situated against the history of the three specific time periods: the Khmer Republic Period, the Khmer Rouge Period, and the Vietnamese Period, the words of these women help us understand the personal toll behind numbers and facts. Reported using the Portraiture Approach with a feminist lens, their stories serve as a frame for understanding the female experience in current genocidal regions of the world.

Keywords

rural Cambodia, Khmer Rouge, feminist theory, portraiture approach, survivors

1. The Context: A Country-Wide Concentration Camp

The Pol Pot Regime. This time period has many names ranging from the dreaded *Angkar* (meaning organization) to that which is familiar in the Western mind, the Khmer Rouge. Whatever the name, the horrible events of this time period have left a lasting impression on the citizens of Cambodia. Members of the educated class were systematically hunted down and killed between 1975 and 1979. Children witnessed the execution of fellow villagers. An estimated 1.7 million people disappeared (Mydans, 2007).

We can read the history, but as often is the case of periods of murderous regimes, tragedies of separation, and inhumane legalistic rule, the real history is on the story of the survivors. The lived experiences of individuals illustrate the terror and individual sorrow. We need to hear these stories and consider the impact of all repressive actions. And women's voices too often are silenced. Cambodia is no different.

Thus, in this article, we bring to life, three stories from the Cambodian countryside told by women who experienced the horror of the Khmer Rouge.

1.1 Women Listening to Women

Using the inclusive ideas of feminist researchers who celebrate the everyday life experiences of women, especially the words of Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Deborah Piatelli (2007), "Tapping into lived experience is the key to feminist inquiry and requires innovative practices in developing relationships and building knowledge" (p. 147) frames this study. A feminist perspective allows us to collaborate, use reflexive techniques and work with participants to allow the "knowers" to name themselves, and the structures that influence them (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) write of this as they describe the need to move "beyond the academy's inner circle" and to reach a broader audience so that women and people of color can be heard. Feminist researchers such as Hesse-Biber (2007) say that it is important to look at women of various racial, cultural, and ethnicities who have been neglected by mainstream research, and we must begin with women's lived experiences.

1.2 Portraiture: Stories of Women; Reported By Women

We were guided by the Portraiture Approach (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This became the primary method for analyzing and writing the research, which is appropriate when listening to personal story. It relies on the human experience and as such is particularly meaningful for our work because of its underlying philosophy that the human experience derives meaning from the setting, whether historical, cultural, or social, in which the experience occurs (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The context, along with the main actor, is dynamic as the story unfolds. It is used to combine the empirical with artistry to "…to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 3).

With this, we invite you into the three historical time periods, where we frame the women's stories with an "official" history. The narratives of the three female survivors of the Khmer Rouge era form the basis for the article. It is these stories from the village that need to be remembered as they offer the first-person narrative of what history can only outline. These women share their haunting stories so the world will better understand the infamous dash between the years 1970-1989.

2. Hearing Thunder: The Khmer Republic Period, 1970-1975

> If you hear thunder, don't be in a hurry
> To throw out the rain water you have stored.
>
> Cambodian Proverb (Fisher-Nguyen, 1994, p. 101)

2.1 The Gathering Storm: Historical Overview, 1970-1975

The above proverb illustrates the propensity during this time to throw out all that had been Cambodia, despite the gathering storm. The "thunder" of greed and corruption plagued the Cambodian leader, Lon Nol's ruling regime. The "thunder" of American bombs rained down on Cambodia. The "thunder" of the

Khmer Rouge was organizing and fighting for power. David Chandler (1991) titles a chapter about these years, "Sliding toward Chaos" (p. 192). Thus, in this section we look at these thunderous events and consider how they collided to create the eventual storm of chaos and terror. This begins with the French. Since 1864 the French had ruled Cambodia, calling it a protectorate. In reality, the French officials paid more attention to their other Southeast Asian colony, Vietnam. But, the term protectorate may be an apt description as the French did keep Thailand and Vietnam from encroaching on Cambodia's territory. Except for a brief Cambodian protest in 1884 when the Cambodian king was forced to sign an agreement with the French, which officially made Cambodia a colony, many Cambodians seemed to regard the French as providers of certain benefits including preserving the great Temples of Angkor (Becker, 1998).

It was during World War II that the man who was seemingly everywhere, wearing different masks of power, position, and alliance came to power. He is Norodom Sihanouk, king, prince, prime minister, president, prisoner, film director, and politician. The French crowned the carefree, eighteen-year old Sihanouk king in 1941 and in doing so, passed over a more favored royal. Sihanouk became a master at playing the political game (Becker, 1998). He abdicated the throne, ascended it, and aligned himself with various factions, all to stay in power. He strove to be all things to all Cambodians. Many believed he *was* Cambodia and put their faith in him. To many, he was nearly divine. Chandler (1991) calls him a "gifted and popular politician" but also notes his narcissism and ability to eliminate rivals (p. 5).

During these postwar years, with a young and ambitious king and a French government that was embroiled in a war with Vietnam, a growing movement for independence emerged in Cambodia. Finally French control ended in 1954 but this did not ease tensions with Cambodia's traditional enemy, Vietnam. Vietnamese forces used the Cambodian countryside to transport and hide weapons and troops. This laid the foundation for Cambodia's status as the *Sideshow* (Shawcross, 1981) for what Americans call the Vietnam War and the eventual "secret" U.S. bombing of Cambodia, planned by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. The two first planned these bombings at a breakfast meeting that further escalated in scope while the two dined together at other times, thus earning these bombing missions titles such as Operations Breakfast, Lunch, Dessert, Snack, and Supper (Power, 2002, pp. 91-92). To add to the disarray and likely the Nixon administration's distrust was that Sihanouk had broken his alliance with the U.S. and entered into secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese (Chandler, 1991). Nothing was straightforward when it came to Sihanouk's politics.

Finally, in 1970, Sihanouk, then known as prince, was traveling in France with plans to visit both the Soviet Union and China. He planned to assure the leaders of these countries that he had no intention of altering Cambodia's commitment to neutrality in the Second Indochina War (Becker, 1998, p. 115). But Sihanouk was not the real power in Cambodia anymore, and his policies seemed to change according to his desire to stay in power. Disagreements as to how to deal with the activities of many of the Vietnamese in Cambodia would become a primary reason for Sihanouk's downfall (Etcheson, 1984, p. 76). The prime minister, Lon Nol, and his cabinet, particularly Sirik Matak, a cousin of Prince Sihanouk, were committed to ridding their country of the Vietnamese (Chandler, 1991). These men were in the process of

reversing the Prince's policies and becoming more centrist, possibly with the hope of realigning with the United States against their traditional enemy, Vietnam. But not all of the population saw or even understood this. Prince Sihanouk had the support of the Cambodian peasantry who thought of him as a god-king (Kiernan, 1982a). This confusion laid the groundwork for what was to come. A rumor exemplified the people's concerns. It was said a white crocodile had been sighted (Becker, 1998). To the Cambodian people this meant the country was at a crossroads. This proved to be a powerful omen.

The coup d'etat that followed was a cacophony of opposing and constantly changing "sides" that set the stage for the chaos that was to come. A circle of tanks surrounded government buildings, and soon the absent Prince was ousted (Becker, 1998). Lon Nol, along with Cheng Heng and Sirik Matak, were now in charge of the new Khmer Republic. This new government pledged to get rid of the Vietnamese communists in Cambodia. Likely expecting support from the United States, Lon Nol proceeded with his pledge. He sent poorly armed forces into battle against the Vietnamese, even against civilians who had lived in Cambodia for years (Chandler, 1991). But the Nixon administration was embroiled in its own anti-war crisis at home. When U.S. money did come, it contributed to the "thunder" of corruption. Payrolls were padded, dead soldiers were paid, gas, medicine, and arms were sold to the Vietnamese (Chandler, 1991). But Lon Nol and his government were determined. They even drafted children in an attempt to increase the size of the army (Becker, 1998). Soon the educated population began to understand what was happening to their country. Many saw that the proclamations of Lon Nol and his actions did not always seem to be in harmony. He may have espoused Theravada Buddhism, but his militaristic actions spoke louder than his commitment to its tenets (Harris, 2005). Parts of the population began to raise questions about his intent and about the future direction of the country. This provided fertile ground for the Khmer Rouge, already garnering support in the countryside.

International events added to the gathering storm. Since 1969, "secret" United States bombing raids had been targeting North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia (Shawcross, 1981). Once Lon Nol came to power, the United States increased its raids. These built to a crescendo in 1973. U.S. B-52 bombers raided these supposed sanctuaries, often using poor maps and killing innocent Cambodian civilians in their villages (Becker, 1998, p. 156) rather than the targeted North Vietnamese.

It was in the decay of these bomb blasts that the germ of the Khmer Rouge movement began to grow. Many Cambodians were justifiably angry about these bombings. They blamed not only the United States, but also the Lon Nol government. The "thunder" of the Khmer Rouge seized the opportunity. Its leaders, Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), Ieng Sary, Son Sen and others used this anger to build their support. While Lon Nol fought the North Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge was amassing its own army and supplies in the villages. The party recognized the support Prince Sihanouk enjoyed among the peasants. To them he *was* Cambodia and in a "wise" political move, they convinced the prince to endorse their cause. From his exile in China, he saw this endorsement as a way to return to power. The Prince's pleas to the Cambodian people to resist Lon Nol's government and army added to the growing unrest (Etcheson, 1984). Village by village, communist support grew. Areas were said to be "liberated" (Ayres, 2000), which meant they

were governed by FUNK (National United Front of Kampuchea), a collaboration between the Khmer Rouge Communists and Prince Sihanouk. Gradually, Cambodians turned from their fight with outsiders to their fight with each other.

In 1974, the Khmer Rouge marched toward Phnom Penh. By now, many believed the Khmer Rouge was invincible. Its members had kept on fighting, despite the showers of U.S. bombs (Becker, 1998, p. 157). They portrayed themselves as ousters of all who dared to invade Cambodia. Surrounding the capital, their plan was to cut off the food supply for the population, shell the city, and launch rocket attacks until their final assault (Chandler, 1991, p. 231). Finally, on April 12, 1975, the Khmer Rouge succeeded. Its members entered the city. The population was told to fly white flags from windows (Him, 2000, p. 56). Some cheered. They believed the fighting and suffering was over (Ung, 2006). But they were wrong. The real storm was gathering. Part of the forecast? Car owners were forced to throw away their keys. Cars were pushed to a dump at the city's edge (Pilger & Barnett, 1982, p. 67).

2.2 "Not Clearly to Remember": Life in the Village

Three women expressed interest in sharing their experiences with the first author. We hesitate to call these interviews as they were more like listening sessions, where the words poured forth, words that seemed these experiences were raw in their memories. We sat in the home of one of the women, the circle formation portending the sharing and understanding that was to take place. As we continue to share their words, we use the first person, I, to refer to the first author who spoke with these women.

The woman who owned the house had a shaven head and wore garb indicating she is now a Buddhist nun. She seemed to be the leader and did most of the talking. Occasionally, the other two women shared their thoughts. The three women often supported one another with frequent patting of arms. I was surprised to see this touching in members of the "older" generation.

The women do not offer many details about the time of the "Lon Nols" as they term this period. One woman's husband was a soldier in the Lon Nol army, a fact that would become important as the Khmer Rouge infiltrated the small villages. They indicate that they "not clearly to remember". In the few sentences that were offered about this period, the words happy and friendly were used frequently. One of the women made a point to say the people could talk to each other and help each other. Of the limited remarks that were made about this period, it is striking that the concepts of happiness and helpfulness are described. These feelings stand in contrast to what was to come. The partial word picture that is painted is one of friendly cooperation. It is as if all that happened in the ensuing years erased the specific memories of the happier times. The few words and stories shared about this timeframe make us ponder: Were the events of the next few years so horrific that they erased the recollections of the period before the Khmer Rouge or were these memories less important given all that was to happen? Whatever the reason for the scant memories and stories of this time, we report what was shared, as a part of living history.

3. The Storm: The Khmer Rouge Period, 1975-1979

Glittering red blood blankets the earth
Blood given up to liberate the people:
Blood of workers, peasants, and intellectuals;
Blood of young men, Buddhist monks, and girls.
The blood swirls away, and flows upward, gently, into the sky,
Turning into a red revolutionary flag.

Khmer Rouge propaganda song (Hinton, 2005, p. 84, translated by D. Chandler)

3.1 Red Blood: Historical Overview, 1975-1979

Red blood. This is the Khmer Rouge period. And blood did flow. The country became like a "… giant prison camp in which basic rights and freedoms were severely curtailed in the name of revolution" (Hinton, 2005, p. 1). Kiernan (2002) describes a kidnapped nation (p. 8). That which was called the Democratic Kampuchea was cut off from the rest of the world. The Khmer Rouge proclaimed it was now Year Zero. All that Cambodia knew would end. Life would begin again. We may never know the exact number of people who were executed or died from starvation or disease during these four years (Chandler, 1998). Some say the number dead is 2,746,105 people while other research puts the number at 1.7 million (Mydans, 2007). Even this number is astounding.

What happened when Pol Pot and his brand of Communists turned this country into a concentration camp? The story begins in April 1975 when the Khmer Rouge forced the citizens of Phnom Penh to evacuate the city. Out of fear, people followed the orders of those wearing the trademark black pajamas. The Khmer Rouge soldiers ordered them to hurry and take nothing, claiming the Americans were planning to bomb the city. Given the recent U.S. raids, people believed this reasoning. Few took many possessions. People believed they would return within three days. Thousands never did.

On the roads to the rural villages the first purges began. Soldiers questioned everyone and those who had held positions of power in the Lon Nol government were taken away. This was all done surreptitiously; trucks took men, who were unaware of their journey to death, with the explanation that they were needed elsewhere in the country. Some people, the lucky ones, had been warned or suspected the motivations of the Communists. They knew to hide their past professions and education. The three days stretched into four years as the citizenry was told to go to the villages and rural areas. Other cities were also cleared of people; soon most of Cambodia was living in rural areas. There they built lean-tos and slept on bamboo mats (Becker, 1998, p. 233). Those who had always lived in the villages were known as the "base people", or "old" people while the displaced city population were the "new people" (Kiernan, 2002). This distinction was important in the first years as the Khmer Rouge seemed to target the "new people" for execution. Later, when Pol Pot and his followers seemed to trust no one, the entire population was in danger of being taken away and killed.

People were assigned to endless work brigades. Men, women, and children labored in the rice fields from sun up to sun down. As the months passed, the Khmer Rouge separated families. Children as young as six were routinely taken away from parents and forced to work in children's brigades clearing land or planting rice seedlings (Becker, 1998). This separation of the family was contrary to the kinship that epitomized the family fabric of Cambodian culture and contributed to the growing despair in the country. Kiernan (2002) tells the story of a father, Sum, whose four children, ages eight through fifteen were sent to the work brigades. Sum only saw his children every few months (p. 182). This was the Communists' plan: destroy the familial, social fabric of the country so that all were dependent on the Party. "Family life had to be eliminated" (Becker, 1998, p. 211).

In early 1976, communal meals were instituted. This was a defining dictum as mealtime was revered in Cambodian families. This requirement, along with the Communists insistence that everyone wear black pajamas and cut their hair short, contributed to feelings of fear, loathing, and depression in the population. Him (2000) explains how long hair is valued in the Khmer culture. When her locks fell to the ground she felt a sense of loss (pp. 99-100). These feelings of loss, distrust, and deep sadness added to the power of *Angkar*, the term the Khmer Rouge used for themselves. This word, which the lost population was now forced to use, had an important psychological effect. In the Khmer language, *Angkar* means organization, but as Hinton (2005) explains, the word has a powerful connotation in Cambodia. It refers to a kind of carefully ordered organization that powerfully orders society so that prosperity will occur (p. 127).

Thus, *Angkar* was to be given respect. It was said that *Angkar* had the eyes of a pineapple. The organization was everywhere, seeing everything (Hinton, 2005, pp. 128-129). To add to this metaphor, citizens were encouraged and expected to spy on each other. Those who hid their former professions or education from the soldiers lived in fear that a neighbor would recognize them or that a family member would tell; and they, too, would be taken away.

Today, more than 8000 skulls can be seen at the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek on the outskirts of Phnom Pehn. Fragments of human bones and shreds of clothing testify to the thousands who were blindfolded and often beaten to death here. The Khmer Rouge did beat its citizens. This savagery was often used in an attempt to save money on bullets. Even babies were not spared. The Khmer Rouge would slam even the youngest into a tree (Hinton, 2005). You can walk the dusty dirt of the killing fields and see the black ring on the tree where babies were pounded to death. Look down at your feet. Teeth are scattered as are the rags that served as the clothes of the dead. As I wandered Choeung Ek, I wondered, "Where are the fences to keep the thousands of feet from stepping on the remnants of these souls? Why was I allowed to walk in a place that is a cemetery without graves, a place where the dead were left to decay, where their remains are a testament to the realities of the horrors? Is it so we can see and ponder that this kind of genocide did happen in our world?" The artifacts cry out from the killing fields and the survivors' words are powerful and heart wrenching. They are the narratives of people who stood between two worlds: a walking death and hope for a resurrection.

But these outrageous and murderous acts were not the only cause of death during the Pol Pot years. Starvation and sickness claimed many victims, and this, too, can be blamed on the conditions the Khmer Rouge imposed upon the country. The dawn to dusk non-stop agricultural work requirements meant many citizens labored to their deaths, often with only a few spoonfuls of mushy rice for daily nourishment. Sometimes children fought over this sustenance (Kiernan, 2002, p. 176). Survivors tell stories about the joy of finding food in the strangest of places. Him (2000) describes how she trapped mice at night. She would skin them, gut them, and even tie them to a stick so that every bit of meat would stay on the bones when she roasted the rodents over a fire (p. 187). Szymusiak (1999), too, tells of finding a nest of mice and describes the delicate roasting procedure (p. 172). One young woman in a major Cambodian city had tears in her eyes when she whispered to first author the story of her father's attempt to repay a chicken he stole during the Khmer Rouge era.

3.2 The Coconut Leaf House: Life in the Village

Birth and death are recurring elements in the village women's remembrances of the "Pol Pots" as they call this time period as is the feeling of helplessness. The women describe the Pol Pots appearance in their homes and their demand for motorbikes and other household property. They talk about the inability to refuse these demands and in a whisper, they note that one can "Never say no".

The woman whose husband was a Lon Nol soldier tells of the struggle to find help in delivering her baby. Her husband searched for a doctor or nurse to assist her during this birth, but no medical personnel were available as "everybody is gone out". It is not clear who does finally assist during the birth, but the woman notes that when she was in the hospital, the Pol Pots come to question her. She makes a point to tell me about their black uniforms and caps. They question her and demand to know more information about her husband. But she was aware that admitting her husband's role in the army of Lon Nol is dangerous, so she maintains he is "just a common farmer". During the telling of this part of her story, the woman appears almost apologetic for this lie that was told so long ago, a lie told in an attempt to save her husband. She seems to want to justify her lack of truthfulness to me. I have seen this desire to explain actions or even make amends from other survivors of the Khmer Rouge time. I heard the story of one man who felt a deep need to return food to a family from whom he had stolen a chicken during the Khmer Rouge time. Thirty years later, loaded down with food, he took his own family on the search for the rural family's hut. He presented the bundle of provisions to make amends for his understandable thievery of so long ago.

Thus, almost contritely, this woman describes a situation where the people are questioned about their connections with the Lon Nol government. She tells how her husband was afraid that the Khmer Rouge knew about his past. He feared that his family would be killed if his lie was discovered. So, her husband "raised his hand" and admitted to his service in the Lon Nol army. The Pol Pots responded by telling him that he would be sent to school for training. But she and her husband knew this "does not mean training". They knew he would be killed and a few days later, she did receive the news that he was dead. In the telling of the story, the three women tear and look knowingly at one another. They have shared this; they

have a collective emotional history.

As her story continues, the woman returns, with her small baby, to the village where she now resides. She tells how all the houses had been burned and that she must fashion a home for she and the baby by using a large leaf from a coconut tree. She explains that she sleeps on the ground with another leaf to keep her baby safe from the cold and rain.

When she lives "with the coconut leaf", again the Pol Pots come to her. They ask if she wants to go to school with her husband, but she nods knowingly at me and says that she understands what this means. She asks the Pol Pots for permission to stay in her village. When the men return a few days later, it is with the news that she will be allowed to stay. But they tell her that she will not be able to remain in the coconut leaf house during the day. She must begin taking the small baby with her to the rice fields.

When working in the fields, she tells me that she needs to ask permission to feed her baby. She talks of the warnings of the Pol Pots to "not do too much" with children. She knows she must work or face certain death. This woman sadly talks of her child growing without the help of family and friends, an important communal responsibility in Cambodian culture. Her words, tone, and body language suggests this weighs heavily on her as it is so different from her previous life. The other two women shake their heads and wipe away tears. This is obviously distressing as it is contrary to the familial mores of the village community.

Fortunately, her baby is lucky. It survives. But, other babies are not so fortunate. This woman tearfully describes the story of another mother who also plants in the rice fields. Her baby cries and cries. Finally, the Pol Pot takes the baby and kills it. The child is buried underground, and the mother is warned that she will follow the baby if she does not continue working.

This story is conveyed to me in a prayerful tone. As it is told, the three women speak softly to one another and weep. They "look beyond" as they remember and speak, as if seeing the horrific act in the distance. The women go on to describe other murderous acts. One woman tells of seeing a man tied to a bicycle. A Pol Pot soldier rides the bike and the tied man is forced to "run behind and run and run and run and run and run until cannot run anymore…" The man is then killed.

The women talk of the hunger and constant need for food. They tell of the scant amount of rice that must be shared by all during the communal meals. Some victims try to pocket rice grains during the harvest. But, as the women relate, the "Pol Pot" has a punishment for everything. They describe uncooked rice being put on a stick and forced down the throats of those who try to steal what they harvest. The women are clear: No one can cook or do anything for themselves. All is provided or not provided by the Khmer Rouge. This discussion brings out the most sharing between the women. They are animated and the translator has difficulty keeping up as the women talk over one another. At this point they are noticeably angry, rather than sad.

As if the discussion was a nudge to remember, the one woman who had been somewhat quiet, spoke up. She shared the story of the birth of her baby and the death of her husband. In a hushed tone, she described lying next to her husband. As her baby came out, her husband died. She makes a point to emphasize this

happened “at the same time”. This was repeated over and over to me; each time the phrase seemed to take on a deeper meaning. The women nod along with the translator; and all look into the distance. For a moment, the “telling” part of the interview ceased to be and the little room took on the aura of a spiritual center. The woman brought her hand to her heart, smiled, and all was silent for a moment.

As these women are anxious to make known, they have firsthand knowledge of these horrid events. One woman clearly stated through the translator, “She knows what she saw”. Perhaps this is one reason visitors to the killing fields are allowed such access, including stepping over teeth and clothing: We know what we see.

These women share an explanation for their ability to understand the real intentions of the “Pol Pots” and their lies regarding being taken “for training” or “going to school”. They knew the reality of these phrases, not because they read or heard of these realities, but because they could see these realities in the hearts of the victimizers. Speaking through the translator, one woman confidently declared, “We saw by the eyes, the real action that was in their heart”.

4. The Aftermath: The Vietnamese Period, 1979-1989

On Sunday night I dreamed that I was
Flying to a moon. On the moon I saw the birds.
While I looked the birds were in a tree.
The birds climbed on one tree and one.
The birds were flying, playing on a moon.
“The birds were very happy on a tree at the moon.”
When I saw the birds on the tree at the moon
I wanted to live on the moon.
On a moon is more pleasant than on the world.
On a moon there are many more beautiful trees
than on the world.
While I was sleeping I dreamed easy.
My life was rather successful on a moon.

Yinh Sophean (in Thompson, 1993, p. 539)

4.1 Liberated Yet Confused: Historical Overview, 1979-1989

Liberation yet confusion. These words describe the situation in Cambodia during the ten-year period between the end of the Khmer Rouge regime and the beginning of formalized United Nations peacekeeping missions. But how did we get to this ten-year period of Vietnamese occupation? While much led up to the liberation, let us begin the story on December 25, 1978. This was the day Vietnamese forces took full action. It is sadly amazing that while the rest of the world ignored the genocide, it was Vietnam, whatever its true intentions, that finally acted. As word spread that the Vietnamese were heading toward the capital city, the Khmer Rouge fled to the Thai border. Kiernan (2002) describes how

Khmer Rouge officials crammed into railway cars and that Pol Pot disappeared in a helicopter (p. 451). He tells us that it is likely the last official to abandon the city was the administrator of the infamous Tuol Sleng prison, Kang Keck Ieu (alias Duch). Duch did not have the opportunity to destroy the records of the terror over which he presided, thus providing a grisly corpse of documents for researchers to paint a picture of this prison (Kiernan, 2002, p. 452). The people, the non-leaders, who remained behind, greeted the Vietnamese as liberators (Chandler, 1999, p. 1). The rest of the world, however, saw Vietnam as an aggressor.

In a little over two weeks, the Vietnamese set up a new government. The People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was formed on January 10, 1979. While Cambodian faces led the new government, Vietnam was the real power behind these newly installed officials. Heng Samrin was president and Hun Sen was named foreign minister. In 1984, Sen, a former Khmer Rouge who had defected to Vietnam, was named prime minister (Ayres, 2000, p. 141), a position he holds to this day (C.I.A., 2008). But, despite the new government, the Khmer Rouge was not really gone. They were merely hiding. And the countryside was in chaos. As the Khmer Rouge ran to the jungles and mountains, they had taken with them many civilians. Thousands were murdered near Battambang (about 112 miles from Siem Reap) while others were forced to dig trenches that would become their graves. In a particularly grisly massacre near Siem Reap in 1979, the Khmer Rouge buried peasants up to their necks and set fire to them. Their "crime?" They had gone to communal kitchens to retrieve what had been their eating utensils (Kiernan, 1982b, pp. 376-377). The Khmer Rouge did not abandon power easily.

As is frequently the case with modern Cambodian history, chaos is an accurate word. If a citizen could stay away from the Khmer Rouge hide-outs, they were free to travel. This meant millions of people crisscrossed the country looking for the loved ones from whom they had been forcibly separated (Kiernan, 2002, p. 455). In the ensuing confusion, very little rice was planted and this resulted in terrible famine. These conditions set up mass movement of Cambodian citizens to the Thai border, in hopes of gaining entry to a refugee camp. Almost half of what was left of the Cambodian people were now living on this border, fearful of the return of the Khmer Rouge. While many Cambodians sought food and safety, others believed they might be reunited with relatives who had also sought refuge here. Some saw economic opportunity: the chance to make their fortune in the illegal cross-border trade. Still many others hoped for a new life in a new country (Ayres, 2000, p. 125). Gail Sheehy (1986) writes that her adopted daughter, Mohm, had such a strong desire to escape the refugee camps and settle in a new country that she lied about her age. These camps became the entry point for many to escape to countries such as the United States and Australia, as explained in *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors* (Pran & De Paul, 1997) which contains twenty-nine memoirs of Cambodians of the Diaspora.

As this refugee crisis was occurring, military maneuvers were happening elsewhere in the country. Approximately 200,000 Vietnamese troops occupied the country between 1979 and 1989. Some former representatives and soldiers of the Lon Nol period who had survived the Pol Pot era, now formed an

anti-Communist group, the Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces (KPNLAF). Another group formed by Son Sann, the Khmer People's Liberation Front (KPNLF) proclaimed a commitment to independence. Adding to the cacophony of politicized and perhaps self-promoting groups was Prince Sihanouk. As usual, he seemed to want to throw his support with everyone, somehow hoping that he would emerge as the winner. His organization, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) was cooperating with Khmer Rouge forces. While it is certainly difficult to sort out these various groups and accurately identify the undulating allegiances, it is important to understand there were many "voices" as this variance forms the basis for future issues. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many policymakers and politicians in the United States did not seem to want to recognize what had and was really happening in Cambodia. Becker (1998) sums up this seemingly blind attitude with this observation: "Immediately after the war the American establishment wanted nothing more than to forget the phrase *Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia*" (p. 364). Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos were considered VLCs (very lost causes) by the U.S. political world and by the press corps (Power, 2002, p. 110). Even academe seemed to forget Southeast Asia as Indochinese studies disappeared from most university offerings (Becker, 1998, p. 365). A few politicians, such as Senator Robert Dole, were touched by the troubles of Cambodian refugees and tried to help. Representative Stephen Solarz held Congressional hearings on the problems in Cambodia (Becker, 1998). But, for many, this area was a reminder of failed policies. The fact that the U. S. continued to vote for the seating of Pol Pot's representatives at the United Nations is indicative of the blind eye it had turned to the Khmer Rouge genocide. During this period the superpowers continued to use the region as a pawn in their power chess game. American policymakers saw the Vietnamese invasion as an expansion of the influence of the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia but even after the Soviet Union fell, the U. S., within the structure of the United Nations, continued to draw the Pol Pot regime into negotiations rather than insisting upon a trial for war crimes (MacLeod, 2006).

In 1979, the world community simply ignored the Cambodian genocide. ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) questioned the legitimacy of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. China, according to Ayres (2000), wanted to " 'bleed' Vietnamese resources by promoting a continuation of the Cambodian conflict…" (p. 136). The United Nations, with the support of the United States, condemned Vietnam for invading Cambodia (Becker, 1998). Again, with the support of the United States, in an unbelievable move, the United Nations voted to give Cambodia's seat to the Khmer Rouge (p. 444). Although much of the foreign aid to Vietnam was cut off which had the direct result of hurting the rebuilding of Cambodia, Vietnam continued its fight with the Khmer Rouge. Still the United States seemed to ignore the plight of Cambodians. During the 1980s, children in the United States collected boxes of school supplies for Cambodian children. President Reagan's government banned them from being sent (Mysliwiec, 1988, p. 82).

4.2 The New Sunrise: Life in the Village

The women's faces change when their story about the Pol Pots is finished. They smile and even laugh as we joke about retirement; they ask me when I will retire. They are interested in the future.

There is conversation about being with their friends, being able to go to the ceremonies for new building projects, and the opportunities of education. These are the "doing" parts of life: the freedoms of life they now enjoy, the freedoms that had been ripped from these women under the Khmer Rouge.

One woman talks of working as a teacher despite her simple education. She explains she wanted to share, even her small amount of knowledge with her people. She became a teacher in 1979 and later became the principal of the former village school. In a joyous voice, she tells me that her grandchildren now attend the new school. There is no residue of equating school with death. In this conversation school means hope.

The women describe this present time as being able to "see the new sunrise". Renewal is in their voices as we stand together for the photograph that captures the moment, another one of those sunrise moments; they have been able to share, to cry, and now they smile. They thank me for coming and listening to their stories. As the "lead" woman says, "You will tell others so they will understand".

5. There Is No Conclusion

On April, 15, 1998, Pol Pot died in a small hut just 275 yards from the Thai border. A few Western journalists were allowed to photograph the body before it was cremated. None of his victims ever saw the dead of their dictator and torturer.

Many in Cambodia still wait for the world to respond. They wait for help in rebuilding what was so viciously grabbed from them. They wait to take their place in the global heartbeat. Yet, in the reality of no response, there is hope. As they wait, the spirit that compelled a knowledge-hungry child to peek through boards or the longing that drove a naked child to attend school is alive each morning in Cambodia. Exploded bombshells, from the U.S. secret bombing of Cambodia, now hang as schoolyard bells. As the sun rises on a new day, a child strikes that bomb with a rock. The clang of the simple rock against the peeled layers of the metal announces, "The day is here. Come to class". The three females, matriarchs of their village, nod.

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