

## Conflicting Sites of Memory in Post-Genocide Cambodia

A new road connects the towns of Siem Reap to Along Veng, in northern Cambodia; it now takes less than two hours from the temples of Angkor to reach the last bastion of the Khmer Rouge, in what used to be a dense jungle. It is enough time for my driver, thirty-one-year-old Vann, to tell me the story of his family.

“Every Cambodian family has lost relatives under the Khmer Rouge,” he says. Vann’s mother lost her husband and children in the early years of Pol Pot’s murderous regime. She remarried and gave birth to a new set of children, including Vann. “A total of ten family members died,” he sums up. Later, when Vann was in school, he was required, along with all residents of his village outside Siem Reap, to excavate the killing fields and exhume the bodily remains for cremation. “The smell was horrible,” he recalls. “I see too many bones. It scares me.” For years, Vann avoided the former mass graves. “My children don’t know what happened.”

A Khmer song is playing in the car. “Old music from the 1960s,” he says by means of introduction. “The singer was killed.” We pass Along Veng and continue through the lush countryside and rice fields toward the Thai border. It takes a number of stops and questions, and a few dollars, to find the cremation site of Pol Pot, who was burned hastily in 1998 on a pile of rubbish. It is hidden behind a house, amid high weeds, junk, and garbage. A low wooden fence and a rusty corrugated-metal roof mark the spot. Next to it, a faded blue sign in Khmer and English reads, “Pol Pot was cremated here. Please help preserve this historical site. Ministry of Tourism.”

There are plastic plates for offerings and small jars filled with burnt incense. As I start taking pictures of the site, Vann takes off his sandals, pulls out a lighter, and ignites an incense stick as a tribute to the spirit of the dead. I cannot help but react strongly. “Vann, what are you doing? Pol Pot was responsible for the death of ten family members, and you are paying your respect to him?” Holding the smoking incense between his joined palms, he answers, “I know, but it is a long time ago. It is time to forget.”

This vignette from the summer of 2009 illustrates the divided memory of the genocide perpetrated in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979, under the leadership of Pol Pot. Thirty years after a Marxist dictatorship, the self-proclaimed “Democratic Kampuchea,” caused the death of about 1.5 million people, or a quarter of the population, collective memory inches its way through monuments, commemorations, an international court judging Khmer Rouge cadres, new textbooks, and artistic productions. However, memorialization stands at the center of conflicted interests—the government’s politics of reconciliation, Buddhist beliefs in karma,

economic development, mass tourism opportunities, international law, and national historical narratives.

This essay examines the performance of memory in Cambodia through the lens of various memorials and commemorative practices: the major sites of murder in Phnom Penh (Tuol Sleng prison and Choeng Ek killing fields); local repositories of victims' remains in villages; places associated with the perpetrators such as Pol Pot's cremation site, as well as various holidays connected to the genocide. I look at the boom in memorials, the multiple functions they have to perform, the various populations and interests they serve, the different commemorations and ceremonies, and the resulting tensions. I argue that memorialization efforts take on different shapes and espouse conflicted narratives that serve opposing agendas, in which the memory of the Khmer Rouge's victims is not always the priority.

Many remarkable scholarly works have been written about the Khmer Rouge takeover, the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea, the atrocities committed against civilians in the name of Marxist ideology, and the terrifying human death toll.<sup>1</sup> In the last decade, a growing number of survivors published testimonies and memoirs about their personal suffering, mending their lives after the genocide, or finding peace in exile.<sup>2</sup> Together with documentary films by Cambodian directors who are often survivors themselves, these accounts brought the genocide to a larger international audience.<sup>3</sup>

Cambodia has recently been in the news with the first trial of a Democratic Kampuchea leader under the auspices of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). After the National Assembly passed a law in 2003 establishing an international court for the prosecution of crimes committed under the rule of Democratic Kampuchea, the first warrants against high-ranked leaders were issued in April 2004. The first defendant was Guek Eav Kaing, alias Duch, who was the commander of the Tuol Sleng prison (known as S-21 in the Khmer Rouge code). As such, he was responsible for sending over 14,000 people to their deaths after extended torture and inhumane treatment. Duch's trial, which spanned from 2009 to 2010, was the first opportunity to publicly document the genocidal operations and to memorialize the victims, since numerous civil parties were represented and scores of witnesses testified in memory of the dead. Another four top-ranked officials—Khieu Samphan (alias Hem), Ieng Thirith (alias Phea), Ieng Sary (alias Van), and Nuon Chea, all elderly—have been indicted for crimes against humanity and detained since 2007. They are awaiting trial, provided they do not die first, as did Pol Pot and Ta Mok ("the butcher").

Although these trials have generated new research on the genocide and the remembrance of victims, little has been written about the memorialization efforts, especially in relation to memorial sites and commemorative practices. The articles written by Paul Williams and Judy Ledgerwood espouse an anthropological and museum studies perspective but focus exclusively on the center of the Khmer Rouge killing machine, Tuol Sleng and Choeng Ek.<sup>4</sup> Rachel Hughes is one of the rare scholars to explore local genocide memorials as well, albeit briefly.<sup>5</sup> Here, I examine a variety of memorial sites and commemorative practices, embracing the hyper-local and the transnational, as well as political, economic, and religious motivations.

There are over one hundred memorial sites related to the genocide in Cambodia, from mass graves to urns and ossuaries to public artworks, but most of them are scattered in the provinces and not easily identifiable by foreign visitors. This partially explains why local memorials have not generated much scholarship. However, the main reason that national and international attention turned to Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek lies in the original agenda of these memorials. Both sites were the first “genocide museums” that meant to display the crimes of the Khmer Rouge while primarily fulfilling a political agenda. In other words, Tuol Sleng did not become a tourism destination over time; curatorial and marketing strategies to attract visitors have been essential from its inception.

When 100,000 Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia in January 1979, those who stormed the barricaded compound of Tuol Sleng found dead bodies in shackles, fresh bloodstains on the walls, human bones, torture instruments, photographic archives, and memos left by the Khmer Rouge who had just fled. While the Khmer Rouge were physically eliminating thousands of people and making the identification of human remains impossible, they were meticulously documenting their crimes—mug shots of those imprisoned, tortured, and killed; volumes of “confessions” obtained under pressure; lists of names given under duress—a paradoxical policy of erasure and evidence not unlike that of the Nazis.

The army preserved everything and immediately asked a Vietnamese museum expert, Mai Lam, to turn Tuol Sleng into a museum that would document the crimes of Democratic Kampuchea. Mai Lam was a colonel in the Vietnamese army who had fought in Cambodia during the first Indochina war and had previously organized the Museum of American War Crimes in Ho-Chi-Minh City. He came with experience and with an agenda. The genocide museum opened a year later, in 1980, first to foreign dignitaries and later to the general public.

A former school, Tuol Sleng consists of four three-story concrete buildings around a grassy courtyard planted with palm trees. A wall with an entrance gate surrounds the compound. To the left of the courtyard, next to the hanging pole, are the fourteen tombstones of the dead bodies found by the Vietnamese army. To the right, there is a gift shop selling bootlegged books and DVDs about the genocide, as well as Cambodian arts and crafts; next to it, one can buy cold drinks at a stand. The first building includes the torture rooms, each with a rusty metal bed, some torture instruments such as shackles, and a photograph on the wall that shows the room at the time of its discovery—with a dead body on the bed and blood on the floor. The objects are not protected or cordoned off; there are no signs that prepare the visitor for what is inside. As the *Lonely Planet* guidebook warns, “Tuol Sleng is not for the squeamish.”<sup>6</sup>

The mirror effect of the old photograph in the empty room is unsettling; some visitors move around to capture the same angle as the photograph and compare details. Others find the stains on the pillow, the proximity of death, and the raw photograph repulsive. The shock value is obvious, and so is the staging of objects and pictures. The display of physical horrors clearly served political goals earlier: it helped to justify the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia and its image as liberators from the “genocidal clique” of Pol Pot and others (who were tried and condemned in absentia in 1979)

and to legitimize the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), the new government that had been installed by the Vietnamese. Now it operates as a major tourist attraction that counts on the horror on display to generate substantial income.

In the second wing hundreds of black and white photographs that look like police mug shots are to be found: these were the prisoners of Tuol Sleng, photographed before, during, or after torture. Many faces reflect physical pain, terror, anger, despair, or panic. They now stare at the tourists who try to make sense of what happened. This building also contains thousands of pages of forced confessions obtained under torture or with the false hope that they could ease a prisoner's fate.

The third wing's classrooms were divided with brick walls into minuscule individual cells for important prisoners. The fourth wing includes pictures of the perpetrators and paintings made by survivors, including Vann Nath's depictions of torture scenes. One room is used to display a gigantic map of Cambodia made of skulls and bones, with blood-like streaks representing rivers. "The map is shocking and disturbing, the emotional climax of the tour," wrote Judy Ledgerwood. It was removed in 2002 and replaced by a photograph of the map. However, skulls are still on display at Tuol Sleng, under glass cases. The work of Mai Lam, the map was supposed to describe more than the scope of the crime, as David Chandler wrote: "It was important for the Vietnamese and the PRK to label Democratic Kampuchea a 'fascist' regime, like Nazi Germany, rather than a Communist one, recognized as such by many Communist countries. Finally, it was important for the Vietnamese to argue that what had 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 that at different times had marked the history of the Soviet Union, Communist China, and Vietnam."<sup>7</sup> The post-Khmer Rouge discourse is very similar to that of the German Democratic Republic after World War II. This state aligned itself with the Soviet Union in denouncing the fascist crimes of (West) Germany and siding with the liberators. In the case of Cambodia, the Vietnamese forces and the new DRK government divorced the labels "Communist" or "Socialist" from Democratic Kampuchea, in favor of "Pol Pot's genocidal clique," "traitors of the people," and "fascists," so as to position themselves as liberators, even though they were Communists.

The Tuol Sleng Museum also served to divert national and international attention from the need for justice. Instead of addressing the past, the new regime—the People's Republic of Kampuchea—promoted national "reconciliation," an effective strategy to turn the page and avoid accountability. The reason had to do with the Cambodian political cadres who joined the new government: most of them were former Khmer Rouge officials who participated in or witnessed crimes. Prime Minister Hun Sen is no exception. A former member of the Khmer Rouge elite, he escaped to Vietnam and joined a rebel army. After the Vietnamese takeover in 1979, he was naturally appointed foreign minister; in 1985 he was appointed prime minister, a position he has held ever since. Like many of his fellow ministers, he refers to the Khmer Rouge with great precaution and clear distancing.

Not surprisingly, Hun Sen publicly stated that the United Nations-backed

tribunal on Khmer Rouge atrocities should not prosecute additional suspects besides the five already indicted.<sup>8</sup> “Under these circumstances, it is easy to see why no process resembling ‘denazification’ ever occurred in Cambodia,” Suzannah Linton writes. “None of the reformed Khmer Rouge/CPK who now form the backbone of the Establishment has ever expressed contrition or regret about the past. They have adjusted their memories in ways that many victims find impossible to do. ‘Then was then,’ they seem to be saying, ‘and now is now.’ For many victims of the Khmer Rouge, on the other hand, ‘then’ recurs, traumatically, every day.”<sup>9</sup>

Another reason to understand Tuol Sleng as a promotional tool for post-Khmer Rouge government is confirmed by the types of visitors allowed inside. While the museum did not open to the general public until July 1980, it offered private tours to guests as early as March 1979, barely two months after the Vietnamese discovered dead bodies and fresh blood. The first guests were mostly members of socialist parties from abroad. The rush to turn a death site into a gallery for visitors is another indication that the new leadership had less concern about the memory of victims than about using the site for immediate political purposes. “A 1980 report from the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Propaganda said that the museum was ‘used to show the international guests the cruel torture committed by the traitors of the Khmer people.’”<sup>10</sup> When nationals were allowed to visit on Sunday, thousands came to Tuol Sleng, many to find information about lost relatives.<sup>11</sup>

In the course of time, the number of Cambodian visitors decreased, while statistics for foreign visitors increased. Since 1993 and the establishment of the Kingdom of Cambodia, the prison has seen thousands of tourists from capitalist countries (Australia, Japan, South Korea, United States, France, Germany, etc.). Consequently, it has adapted its offering to mass tourism: a US \$3 entrance fee charged to foreign visitors, guided tours, marketing with travel agents, pamphlets in various languages, bathrooms, a souvenir shop, a food and drink stand, and parking areas. The neighborhood has developed accordingly, with numerous shops selling arts and crafts, rickshaw drivers hailing potential customers, and beggars working for their daily pittance.

The current guestbook in which visitors can write comments shows a uniformity of messages that can be sorted in five categories: feelings of sadness; bewilderment at human evil (“I can’t believe this country had to suffer such a terrible fate”); variations on “never again” and “do not forget”; praise for the exhibit and the learning experience; and positive messages of hope, peace, reconciliation, and love, sometimes with a religious reference.<sup>12</sup> Visitors often mention other regions of the world where human rights are or were violated—Myanmar, Angola, Chile, and others. These stereotypical messages, whether written in English, Spanish, French, Hebrew, Korean, or German, could describe many other sites of terror, from Auschwitz to Kigali to Srebrenica to Buenos Aires. Just as tourism is available to the masses, memory and memorialization are becoming globalized, inspiring the same emotions, standardizing architecture, and curatorial practices, and blurring the uniqueness and specific historical context of each tragedy.

Thirty years after Tuol Sleng became a museum to document, archive, and educate about the Khmer Rouge genocide, it has also become a best seller in the international

tourism industry, but not a memorial for locals who suffered from the Khmer Rouge. It has become a symbol for thanatourism, defined by A.V. Seaton as “traveling to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death.”<sup>13</sup> Thanatourism is a subgenre of tourism, an industry usually dedicated to leisure, time out, and escape. Its goal is to market attractions and pleasurable experiences rather than moral uplift. Marketing a memorial requires a delicate negotiation between staying true to the serious purpose of the memorial and promoting it as an attractive destination that recounts a country’s negative history. Tuol Sleng is still struggling to find a sensitive balance.

The same can be said of the other main site of the Khmer Rouge genocide, the killing fields of Choeung Ek, also discovered by Vietnamese troops and turned into a tourism site by Mai Lam in the early 1980s. Located ten miles southeast of Phnom-Penh, Choeung Ek is described, on the official flyer, as “hell on earth in the 20th century.” A former orchard and Chinese cemetery, Choeung Ek was the main killing field where prisoners from Tuol Sleng were transported to be murdered in 1977–78. When the Vietnamese troops discovered the site, they found about 9,000 bodies in mass graves; many were headless, naked, their hands tied; the separated heads were blindfolded. The skulls and bones showed traces of bullets, knives, and other forms of violence inflicted upon men, women, and children. Babies were thrown against trees and instantly killed.

Choeung Ek opened to the public in 1989, after Lim Ourk was commissioned to build a monumental *stupa* where 8,000 skulls and bones would be preserved. A *stupa*, according to Rachel Hughes, is “a sacred structure that contains the remains of the deceased—especially those of greatly revered individuals—in Buddhist cultures. The construction of *stupa* is a significant activity that produces merit for the living and encourages the remembrance of the dead.”<sup>14</sup> This *stupa* is inspired by Khmer religious motifs, such as the snakes (*naga*) and lions that guard the edifice, and by traditional architecture—the roof and pediments resemble the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. However, contrary to *stupas* in other parts of the country, this one contains the anonymous remains of ordinary people.

Through the glass doors, one can see hundreds of skulls and human bones stacked almost to the top of the sixty-two-meter-high structure. The glass doors are ajar, and the skulls stare at the visitors. Foreign tourists constitute over 90 percent of the total visitors, according to the statistics for 2007 and 2008 released by the administration of the memorial.<sup>15</sup> In line with this statistic, the development and management of the site seem to be entirely geared toward international tourism. The mission statement on the official flyer announces, “Choeung Ek Killing Field became a historical museum for humankind and is one of the most popular attractions for both domestic and foreign tourists in Phnom-Penh.”<sup>16</sup>

The official management policy lists the following goals: “Preserve genocide history . . . ; make Choeung Ek an international symbol of genocide; bring Choeung Ek to the attention of the world; make Choeung Ek a model for conservation.”<sup>17</sup> The means to achieve the goals include improving communication with tourists, generating income by attracting more tourists, finding alternative sources of income aside

from the entrance fee, and developing ties with other tourism sites such as Tuol Sleng. The strategic plan recommends “the progressive enhancement of the facilities so as to increase income by providing resting chairs, a coffee shop, a restaurant, a souvenir and bookshop and toilets; the development of a calendar of special events, information projects, lectures that will eventually attract 1,000 visitors per day.”<sup>18</sup> The notions of remembrance or memory are almost absent from the official document; so are Cambodian nationals, who do not seem worthy of much attention, as opposed to paying international tourists.

This situation may have to do with the 2005 takeover of Choeung Ek by a Japanese corporation, JC Royal, which obtained from the Cambodian government a thirty-year license to operate the site in exchange of an annual \$15,000 fee and the award of a few scholarships to needy Cambodian students. The agreement between the government and the private company created a major controversy; to this day, the profit made from Choeung Ek remains a mystery, as do the operating budget and the number of scholarships allotted.<sup>19</sup> What is clear is that the killing fields are a source of profit whose beneficiaries are neither survivors nor relatives of victims.

Meanwhile, some effort has been spent on beautifying the site—the lawns and flowers are well kept, the tar road and the gate are recent additions—and adding amenities such as toilets, a gift shop, a cafe, as well as an air-conditioned screening room with comfortable chairs where a short documentary about the genocide is shown every half hour. Besides the traditional arts and crafts, books and postcards, the Choeung Ek gift shop also sells the complete Khmer Rouge attire—red checkered scarf, black uniform, rubber sandals—as well as t-shirts that depict the *stupa*, or landmines, or bones over the Cambodian map. According to the management policy, beggars are kept outside the entrance gate so as not to disturb the tourists.

Visitors wander freely in the vast compound that includes excavated pits with signs bearing minimalist descriptions: “mass grave of 166 victims without heads.” There is no trail to follow, no itinerary. Some excavated pits are fenced, other graves are untouched, and people often walk on clothes and bones that stick out of the ground. Nobody pays attention to the rules displayed at the entrance, such as “please dress suitably while remaining at the center,” or “bones and other items in the center are not allowed to take out.” In fact, most foreign visitors wear light summer clothes such as shorts and sleeveless t-shirts; some stand by the *stupa* drinking soda or smoking, while others touch the skulls through the open door.

Next to the *stupa*, there is a small and outdated outdoor exhibition with photographs and didactic panels translated in poor English:

Even in the 20th century, on Kampuchean soil, the clique of Pol Pot criminals had committed a heinous genocidal act. They massacred the population with atrocity in a large scale. It was more cruel than the genocidal act committed by the Hitler fascists, which the world has never met . . .

The method of massacre which the clique of Pol Pot criminals was carried upon the innocent people of Kampuchea cannot be described fully and clearly in words because the invention of this killing method was strangely cruel so it is difficult for us to determine who they are for. They have the human form but

their hearts are demon's hearts. They have got the Khmer face but their activities are purely reactionary. They wanted to transform Kampuchean people into a group of persons without reason or a group who knew and understood nothing, who always bent their heads to carry out Ankar's orders blindly.

The new management has barely updated the narrative, the panels, or the leaflets available on premise, except for the noncredited paragraphs plagiarized from Rachel Hughes's article. Little historical background is given on how the Khmer Rouge came to power, what drove their ideology, how they implemented their genocidal policy, and how they were later defeated.

Not surprisingly, a recent survey among foreign visitors showed that "victims at this site are represented as a vague aggregation of grim experiences. None are individually named, and no victim's biography is recounted . . . The perpetrator is represented as a barbaric 'genocidal clique' without further definition, biography, or images."<sup>20</sup> In spite of the sustained increase in tourists and the additional exposure gained from Duch's trial taking place minutes from Choeung Ek, the management has made minimal improvements to the site.

The high point of Choeung Ek is not didactic but visual—the *stupa* and its stacks of skulls at a hand's reach. Skulls are aestheticized—clean, neatly arranged in a window case—and their endless accumulation turns the victims into statistics. The shock value of this raw display lies both in the proximity of death and in the objectification of human remains, in the tension between the educational agenda of the memorial site and the commodification of genocide. A national debate arose after the discovery of thousands of unidentified and often incomplete dead bodies: Should they be preserved? Cremated? Buried? The government argued in favor of preserving and exhibiting human remains as evidence of the crimes perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, and as a pedagogical resource to educate the Cambodian population. This attitude served the propaganda of the time, which emphasized the crimes of the Khmer Rouge regime so as to affirm the control of the country by the "clean" PRK party.

The king held the opposite view: "Sihanouk and prominent members of the Buddhist order have given quite vocal support to the idea that all the bones of the dead should be gathered together and given a mass incineration in tune with Buddhist values. The resulting ashes would then be enshrined in a national *stupa* envisaged as offering the possibility of rebirth both to the individual victims and the nation as a whole. In February 2004, the King made the following characteristically robust statement on his website: 'What Buddhist man or woman accepts that, instead of incinerating their dead relatives . . . one displays their skulls and their skeletons to please 'voyeurs'?'"<sup>21</sup>

According to Khmer Buddhism, "The souls of persons who die sudden deaths, considered to be untimely deaths, deaths which are not good, will remain around the place where they died. They will not be reborn as is ordinarily the case. Villagers fear these souls very much, fear that the spirits of those who died sudden deaths will haunt

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them or cause good people to fall ill.”<sup>22</sup> Traditionally, people who die suddenly or violently are cremated or buried as quickly as possible, on the site where they died. A violent death is particularly inauspicious; cremation immediately following death allows the spirit to move into the next karmic realm, instead of haunting the place of death forever. However, in the case of mass murder, where bodies were often dismembered, putrefied, impossible to identify, mixed with others in mass graves, and discovered years after the death, many Cambodians faced a religious dilemma and eventually seemed to support the preservation of skulls and human remains. “This support is reinforced by an underlying belief in Buddhist tradition that people can cremate only the remains of their family members. Because virtually no individuals in the country’s killing fields have been identified from their remains, cremation could pose some obstacles in Cambodia.”<sup>23</sup>

If traditional rituals cannot be performed, one can understand that Cambodians have no personal or religious stake in the human remains on display at Choeung Ek. This would also explain the relative lack of interest from Cambodians in Choeung Ek as a memorial. “Both religious relics and bodies in museums are recontextualized human remains, removed from the graveyard or tomb, sites often associated with both literal and metaphorical pollution, into another sacred context where they are preserved for a different function,” Mary Brooks and Claire Rumsey observe. “Museums objectify the bones conceptually for research and display. Whether the motivation is theological or analytical, macabre or morbid, the display of dead bodies is an increasingly contested issue. Displaying bodies can serve as connection of the past with the present, and the dead with the living, offering succor, solace, inspiration, or information, but it also renders them ambivalent, both ‘persons and things.’”<sup>24</sup> The bones in Choeung Ek have lost their spiritual value and elicit only mild interest from locals. They serve a higher purpose as evidence or educational tool than as an improbable vehicle for karmic reincarnation and personal closure. For tourists, the skulls still carry a shock value, but it is sanitized by the transformation of human remains as objects typically on display behind glass.

However, in villages where people were killed and buried on premises, the bones retrieved from local mass graves have kept their spiritual connection. As my driver, Vann, recalled from his youth, the whole community took part in the excavation and transfer of remains into a *stupa*, often near the village’s temple. This participatory act was not always spontaneous and sometimes responded to repeated government calls, which asked “all local authorities at the province and municipal level [to] cooperate with relevant expert institutions in their areas to examine, restore and maintain all existing memorials, and to examine and research other remaining grave sites, so that all such places may be transformed into memorials.”<sup>25</sup> The excavation of pits and transfer of human remains into a *stupa* was not a sheer forensic act; it was a religious ritual that had to be performed by spiritual leaders.

In the years following Democratic Kampuchea, meeting the required quorum of monks to lead such ceremonies became a challenge. Over 60,000 monks had been killed or left Cambodia under Khmer Rouge rule. “Ordination in the early post-Khmer Rouge period proved difficult,” as Ian Harris remarks. “Some took to shaving

their head and wearing white and, in this way, Buddhist ceremonies, particularly those commemorating the dead, were performed.”<sup>26</sup> The responsibility for completing the physical transfer of bones and for the religious rituals fell to laypeople—who were all survivors and mourners. As of 2007, the Documentation Center of Cambodia has identified close to 20,000 mass graves, as well as 81 memorial sites located throughout the country.<sup>27</sup>

One such local memorial stands at Kampong Tralagh, in the Kampot province, southwest of Phnom Penh, not far from the Vietnamese border. Most villagers work in the adjacent rice fields. In the heart of the village is a majestic old pagoda, tall, well kept, and beautifully decorated. Its typical Khmer architecture echoes the Royal Palace and the Choeng Ek *stupa*: the four receding roofs each have an ornate triangular pediment that is guarded by erect snakes. The white, gold, and orange pagoda is surrounded with lush greenery; the area is very quiet, even with workers toiling in rice fields.

A few feet away stands a much more modest edifice—a little house painted white, with a traditional roof and erect snakes. It is small, almost invisible in the shadow of the impressive pagoda. The door is open. The single room is split into two, one side for skulls, one side for bones. Hundreds of bones piled up. If my driver had not asked about it, I would not have known about the village and the bone repository, though there are dozens of them in Cambodia, often built near a pagoda so as to balance good and evil. The local ossuaries were built by villagers who have reclaimed their dead, their history, and their spiritual lives.

Penh Samarn, patriarch monk at the Kroch Seuch pagoda, who initiated the construction of a memorial, combines a spiritual and a practical perspective. “I do not want to lose the evidence, so that people from various places can come to pray and pay homage to the dead. . . . I am thinking of having monks stay there and for people to come and pay homage because some souls of the dead have made their parents or children dream of them, and told them that they are wandering around and have not reincarnated in another world. I want to have monks meditating there so that the souls of the dead will rest in peace. In Buddhism, when someone dies and their mind is still with this world, then their souls wander around.”<sup>28</sup>

Local villagers honor the dead on various occasions, often individually. In Rithy Panh’s film on S-21, in which he interviews former Khmer Rouge criminals, the parents of a former soldier beg him to hold a religious ceremony to chase the evil spirits. “Hold a ceremony so that we never see those men again. Become a new man . . . Tell the truth, then have a ceremony. Make an offering to the dead so that they find peace, so there is no more bad karma in the future. Ask the dead to remove the bad karma.” A communal occasion to commemorate the dead takes place on the Day of the Ancestors, Phachum Benn, a fifteen-day period that falls some time around September and October according to the lunar calendar.

Throughout this period that begins on the first day of the waning moon, people go to the temples and *stupas* with offerings for the spirits of the ancestors. The monks serve as intermediaries between the living and the spirits of the dead; they chant daily prayers that are also broadcast on the radio. On the last day, people bring dozens of Cambodian cakes wrapped in banana leaves and have a ceremony called *bansolkaul*

performed for their ancestors, “in which four monks recite texts while connected by a white cord to an urn containing ashes of ancestors. In this way, merit is transferred to the departed. . . . Most families visit seven *wat* over the festival period to ensure the goodwill of their hungry and restless ancestors.”<sup>29</sup>

For many Cambodians, remembrance of relatives killed under the Khmer Rouge regime takes place on the Festival of the Ancestors and at the local *wat*. A traditional Buddhist holiday, Pchachum Benn took additional significance after the genocide, since it gave people an opportunity to grieve and commemorate the dead even without proper funerary rites. This ancient ritual is widely followed in Cambodia, in contrast to two other holidays established by PRK rule, January 7 and May 20.

January 7, or Victory Day, commemorates the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime and the liberation of Cambodia by the Vietnamese army in 1979. Similarly to the Tuol Sleng exhibit that aimed at denouncing the crimes of the “Pol Pot genocidal clique” and legitimizing the new Cambodian government, the January 7 date is a political holiday that does not commemorate the victims but rather praises the saviors. It consists of a patriotic parade followed by a speech from a top-ranked party official who celebrates national unity, as did Senator Chea Sim in 2004, for the twenty-fifth anniversary:

It was no doubt that our homeland was on the brink of extinction if there was no salvation in a timely manner. The coming into existence of the Kampuchea National Salvation and Solidarity Front, which was the forerunner of the Cambodian People’s Party, on the 2nd December 1978 fully responded to the aspirations of the Cambodian people and peace and justice loving people in the world as a whole. Under the leadership of 2nd December Front, the people throughout Cambodia stood up and united as the greatest national solidarity force coupled with the sincere and timely support from the Vietnamese volunteer army as well as our friends both near and far, had fiercely fought against the Pol Pot genocidal regime.<sup>30</sup>

In 2009, for the thirtieth anniversary, the CPP celebrated the day in an Olympic stadium filled with 50,000 attendees—party members, civil servants, and students from all Cambodian provinces—who gathered to hear slogans and speeches glorifying the party.<sup>31</sup> This commemoration has never caught up with the Cambodian population, for which Vietnam was not only a liberator but an occupier, and the event has remained a day of self-congratulation for the Cambodian People’s Party, which has been in power ever since.

The other holiday instituted by the party is the Day of Anger, or *tivea chang kambheng*. It falls on May 20, the day, Linton writes, when “the Khmer Rouge adopted the ‘cooperative scheme,’ a policy of total agrarian collectivization that transmuted the [Khmer Rouge] from progressive communist revolutionaries to an extremist regime . . . It was the beginning of the people’s starvation . . . It was the day the Khmer Rouge began to kill people by forcing them to accomplish labor-intensive works with little food allowance.”<sup>32</sup> Here is another negative date that is politically motivated and based on the Gregorian calendar; it is not associated with the Khmer calendar or an

existing religious tradition. “This unusual holiday has effectively focused public opinion on the ‘otherness’ of the Khmer Rouge, solidifying popular support for the regime.”<sup>33</sup>

When the commemoration was instituted in 1984, it consisted in public condemnations of Khmer Rouge crimes organized by official institutions—political rallies and speeches, banners and posters bearing slogans, songs and prayers recited in schools, and wreath laying at memorial sites such as Choeung Ek. Survivors were asked to tell their individual stories, and villagers often carried knives, axes, clubs, or placards saying things like “Defeat the Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary clique” or “Remember Life under Pol Pot who tried to destroy the Cambodian Lineage.” These orchestrated activities reinforced the core message of the day: be aware of the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge and be vigilant against their possible return. At the time, Pol Pot and his comrades were still hiding in the jungle near Along Veng, engaging in guerilla warfare against the government.<sup>34</sup>

This official holiday was suspended after the 1991 Paris peace agreement, so as “not to arouse a spirit of revenge.”<sup>35</sup> It was quietly promoted again around 1999 but is not often observed except by faithful party members. A news article from 2008 described the religious ceremony that took place at Choeung Ek in the presence of a few hundred people. The article headline read, “A ‘Day of anger’ less and less attended in Cambodia.”<sup>36</sup> Some Cambodians say that over the years they have shed their anger; others feel less concerned by events that occurred thirty years ago. For the most part, however, May 20 does not constitute a meaningful date, nor is the acting out of hatred an effective way to mourn the victims, fulfill religious obligations vis-à-vis the dead, and find closure. The ceremonies have been too politically charged and have never explicitly acknowledged the responsibility of the state in the genocide. As Vann Nath, the painter who survived Tuol Sleng, argues, “No word of forgiveness, of acknowledging that something wrong was done by the leaders, only ‘reconciliation.’ They don’t even say it was wrong! Why ask for forgiveness if they did nothing wrong?”<sup>37</sup>

These official ceremonies are neither remembering victims nor comforting survivors; they are self-serving spectacles that feed the ambiguous discourse of the government and its manipulation of commemorative performances and memorial sites for political and economic purposes. The post-1979 Cambodian leaders turned Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng into efficient moneymakers benefiting from international tourism. They considered piles of skulls and bones as a sheer commodity that, once publicly exhibited, covered up the involvement of former Khmer Rouge still active in public affairs and enjoying complete impunity. They established artificial commemorations that did not acknowledge the suffering of the Cambodian people, the responsibility of the state in the genocide, or the need for mourning rituals, moral and material reparations, and complete accountability.

Instead, a hungry strategy of profit making has prevailed, to the detriment of human dignity and memory. As Youk Chhang, director of DC-Cam, confided, “there is nothing in Cambodia that is not for sale.”<sup>38</sup> The most recent illustration of this statement is the official announcement that the government had decided to “preserve and develop” Along Veng, the last Khmer Rouge stronghold, and transform the town

and the area into a “historic tourism site for national and international guests to visit and understand the last political leadership of the genocidal regime.”<sup>39</sup> The head of the Along Veng district, Yim Phana, mentioned fourteen sites, among them Pol Pot’s cremation site, Ta Mok’s grave, his former house, an ammunition depot, and other decrepit buildings and abandoned vehicles located in the northern part of the country near the Thai border. A circular from the prime minister dated December 14, 2001, and titled “Circular on Preservation of remains of the victims of the genocide committed during the regime of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1978), and preparation of Anlong Veng to become a region for historical tourism” already announced this agenda.<sup>40</sup>

At the time, a few blue signs in Khmer and English were affixed near Khmer Rouge sites, sometimes indicating a “historic attractive site.” There is still a decrepit shack called the “tourism information office of Along Veng,” where a woman nursing her young children charges US \$2 to foreign visitors. A faded map of the province hangs next to a list of sites divided in four zones: the first around Ta Mok’s house, the second around Pol Pot’s cremation site, the third around the Son Sen’s house, and the fourth around Pol Pot’s and Khieu Samphan’s houses. Among the eight sites I visited in August 2009, none offered any kind of historical description; I relied on my local driver and my *Lonely Planet* (which gave detailed instructions on what to see and how to reach these far-flung ruins).

The sites to be promoted have little interest per se. Ta Mok’s secret house, or the three walls that are still standing, is lost in high grass and covered with graffiti, including “Ta Mok assassin de l’histoire” (Ta Mok, history’s assassin). The last house in which he lived after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea is empty, except for large naive frescoes that depict Cambodian landscapes—Angkor Wat, wild animals in the jungle, the rice fields. The windowless house faces a desolate view of dead trees and muddy swamps, the result of Ta Mok’s flooding of the fields to create an artificial lake. The Khmer Rouge radio command is a rusty truck abandoned in a courtyard. These ruins are neither informative nor moving; the plan to transform them into “attractive” sites of tourism betrays yet another commercial venture rather than the need to preserve and teach history.

Until now, most visitors of these Khmer Rouge relics were Cambodians who felt some nostalgia for the regime (especially in the Along Veng region), pilgrims who believed that a prayer on Pol Pot’s or Ta Mok’s grave would bring good omens, and a handful of tourists.<sup>41</sup> With the construction of the new road, the announcement of the prime minister’s office, the prospect of generating profit, and the commercialization of sites associated with the genocide, one can expect more traffic in this province in the years to come. At the same time, a former Khmer Rouge soldier and photographer, Nhem En, now an elected official of the Along Veng district, is attempting to raise \$300,000 to build a museum to display 2,000 of his own photographs depicting the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea, “so that the world knows why Pol Pot ruled the country and massacred people.”<sup>42</sup> Nhem En’s project encapsulates the larger political situation, in which guiltless former Khmer Rouge enjoy impunity, currently sit on city councils, and use Cambodia’s darkest history to generate personal income.

Cambodians find themselves torn between religious traditions and national politics, between memorialization efforts and economic demands. National memorial sites and holidays have been co-opted by a government in constant quest for legitimacy and forgetful of its past responsibility. Whether in Tuol Sleng, Choeng Ek, or Along Veng, whether on January 7 or May 20, the Cambodian people are left out of the picture. The establishment of the international court allowed for a public and genuine expression of memory, but future trials are uncertain, and the next generations feel less concerned about the past.

In Cambodia, memory and memorialization are not performed in the main sites of murder such as Tuol Sleng and Choeng Ek, and not on official holidays such as January 7 and May 20. It is clear that these government-sponsored memorials serve primarily other purposes—political legitimacy, economic development, and profit-making ventures. They are not directed to locals who have a personal connection to memory but to international travelers who feed the global tourism industry and the national economy. To this end, all strategies are acceptable, even if they involve commodifying skulls, capitalizing on human suffering, promoting sites associated with criminals, and ignoring religious traditions.

In Cambodia, remembrance of the genocide does take place, but quietly, traditionally, and locally—in each village, in each *stupa*, next to the pagoda, on religious holidays. There, human dignity is respected, mourning rituals have meaning, and the spirits of the murdered can eventually find rest.

#### NOTES

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1. See, among others, Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); David Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1999); Craig Etcheson, *After the Killing Fields: Lessons from the Cambodian Genocide* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2005); Alexander L. Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
2. The most famous one is Vann Nath, *A Cambodian Prison Portrait* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1998), which is both a narrative and a visual testimony, since Vann Nath survived S-21 by painting propaganda portraits of Khmer Rouge leaders and later documented what he saw in Tuol Sleng in large and detailed oil paintings depicting scenes of torture and bad treatment. See also David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).
3. For the films, see, for example, *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, DVD, dir. Rithy Panh (New York: First Run Features, 2003); *Survive: In the Heart of the Khmer Rouge Madness*, DVD, dir. Roshane Saidnattar (Neuilly-sur-Seine, France: Morgane Productions, 2009); *New Year Baby*, DVD, dir. Socheata Poev (Vancouver: Broken English Productions, 2006).

4. Paul Williams, "Witnessing Genocide: Vigilance and Remembrance at Tuol Sleng and Choeng Ek," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 234–54; Judy Ledgerwood, "The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative," *Museum Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (1997): 82–98.
5. Rachel Hughes, "Memory and Sovereignty in Post-1979 Cambodia: Choeng Ek and Local Genocide Memorials," in *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda: New Perspectives*, ed. Susan E. Cook (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 257–79. It is worth noting that this article has been almost entirely plagiarized by the Choeng Ek memorial—full paragraphs were pulled and used on the panels of the indoors exhibition and on the official website without ever giving credit to the author or to the book where they were originally published.
6. Nick Ray and Daniel Robinson, *Cambodia* (Footscray, Australia: Lonely Planet, 2008), 85.
7. David Chandler, "Tuol Sleng and S-21," *Searching for the Truth, Magazine of DC-Cam* 18 (June 2001).
8. See, for example, the press release published by Human Rights Watch on July 22, 2009: Human Rights Watch, "Cambodia: Political Pressure Undermining Tribunal," Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/07/22/cambodia-political-pressure-undermining-tribunal> (accessed July 10, 2010).
9. Suzannah Linton, *Reconciliation in Cambodia* (Phnom-Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2004), 12.
10. Ledgerwood, "The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum," 88.
11. Ledgerwood writes that 32,000 Cambodians came the week of July 13, 1980. From January to October 1980, 11,000 foreigners and 309,000 Cambodians visited Tuol Sleng.
12. Note written by Amber Martin, from Perth, Australia, in August 2009, for the long citation.
13. A. V. Seaton, "Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2, no. 4 (1996): 234–44.
14. Hughes, "Memory and Sovereignty," 261.
15. In 2007, there were 13,000 Cambodian and 181,000 foreign visitors; in 2008, 15,000 Cambodians and 195,000 foreigners. See the detail by month from 2005 to 2008 on the official website: "Statistics," Choeng Ek Genocidal Center, <http://www.ckillingfield.com/statistics.htm> (last accessed July 10, 2010).
16. See also "About Choeng Ek," Choeng Ek Genocidal Center, <http://www.ckillingfield.com/aboutchoeungek.htm> (last accessed July 10, 2010).
17. *Management Policy for Choeng Ek Genocide Center*, document in Khmer given by Choeng Ek deputy director Ros Sophearavy on August 12, 2009, and translated into English by Sin Saroeun.
18. Ibid.
19. See, for example, Chhang Bopha, "'Killing Fields': Pas de trace d'aménagement du site après trois ans de gestion privée," *Ka-Set*, May 21, 2008, <http://ka-set.info/actualites/khmers-rouges/cambodge-actualite-khmers-rouges-choeung-ek-killing-fields-memorial-080521.html> (last accessed July 10, 2010).
20. Louis Bickford, *Transforming a Legacy of Genocide: Pedagogy and Tourism at the Killing Fields of Choeng Ek* (New York: International Center for Transitional Justice, 2009), 13.
21. Ian Harris, *Buddhism under Pol Pot* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007), 233

22. Phra Khru Anusaranasasanakiarti and Charles F. Keyes, "Funerary Rites and the Buddhist Meaning of Death: An Interpretative Text from Northern Thailand," *Journal of the Siam Society* 68, no. 1 (January 1980): 1–28.
23. Wynne Cougill, "Remains of the Dead: Buddhist Tradition, Evidence, and Memory," in *Night of the Khmer Rouge: Genocide and Justice in Cambodia*, ed. Jorge Daniel Veneciano and Hinton (Newark: Paul Robeson Gallery, 2007), 32–48.
24. Mary M. Brooks and Claire Rumsey, "The Body in the Museum," in *Human Remains: Guide for Museums and Academic Institutions*, ed. Vicki Cassman, Nancy Odegaard, and Joseph Powell (Lanham, Md.: Altamira Press, 2006), 261.
25. Cited in Cougill, "Remains of the Dead," 40.
26. Ian Harris, "Buddhism in *Extremis*: The Case of Cambodia," in *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth Century Asia*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Cassell, 1999), 54–78.
27. Veneciano and Hinton, eds., *Night of the Khmer Rouge*, 109.
28. Cited in Cougill, "Remains of the Dead," 40.
29. Hughes, "Memory and Sovereignty," 269–70.
30. "Chea Sim's Speech at Cambodian Victory Day Celebration," *Asia-Africa Intelligence Wire*, January 8, 2004, [http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary\\_o286-19930942\\_ITM](http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_o286-19930942_ITM) (last accessed July 10, 2010).
31. Duong Sokha, "Des celebrations du 30e anniversaire du 7 janvier au Cambodge sur un air de louange au PCC," *Ka-Set*, January 7, 2010, <http://ka-set.info/actualites/pouvoirs/cambodge-politique-7-janvier-vietnam-khmers-rouges-liberation-occupation-090107.html> (last accessed July 10, 2010).
32. Linton, *Reconciliation in Cambodia*, 63.
33. Etcheson, *After the Killing Fields*, 150.
34. The choice of a negative date such as May 20 echoes Argentina's commemoration of March 24, based on the 1976 military coup that led to the Dirty War and the policy of forced disappearances. However, the day was appropriated early on by human rights activists as a day of "repudio," or repudiation, and used to advance their agenda—prosecution of criminals, reparations to survivors and relatives, memorialization efforts, and education. In 2006, this date was officialized as a national holiday by the government.
35. Etcheson, *After the Killing Fields*, 150.
36. Chheang Bopha, "Une 'Journée de la haine' de moins en moins suivie au Cambodge," *Ka-Set*, May 20, 2010, <http://ka-set.info/breves/breves/cambodge-actualite-journee-haine-khmers-rouges-choeung-ek-080520.html> (last accessed July 10, 2010).
37. Vann Nath interviewed in Rithy Panh's film *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*.
38. Youk Chhang, personal interview, Phnom Penh, August 10, 2010.
39. Andrew Buncombe, "Cambodia Puts the Cremation Site of Pol Pot on 'Historic' Tourist Trail," *Independent*, March 11, 2010.
40. Hun Sen, "Government Circular on the Preservation of Victim Memorial," Documentation Center of Cambodia, [http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Maps/Victim\\_Memorials.htm](http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Maps/Victim_Memorials.htm) (last accessed July 10, 2010).
41. It is interesting to note that Hitler's Berlin bunker, in which he died, was never marked as such, so as to prevent pilgrimages from Neo-Nazis; the opposite approach seems to prevail at Pol Pot's cremation site.
42. Nhem En, personal interview, Siem Reap, August 13, 2010.