

**BEYOND BLACK UNIFORMS AND WITHERED VICTIMS:  
EXPLORING INDIVIDUAL DECISION-MAKING IN  
DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA, 1975-1979**

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF ARTS (RESEARCH)  
SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES PROGRAMME**

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE**

**2009**

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis represents my first independent research experience, and I owe the ability to carry it through to the talent and diligence of the dedicated faculty of the Southeast Asian Studies Programme and other students embarked upon similar academic journeys. Through their supportive advice and teachings, this period in Singapore and my fieldwork in Cambodia challenged and enriched my previous perspective of this region. My parents played an important role in supporting me through all my projects, from the very beginning. Dr. Erik Kuhonta encouraged me to apply to NUS and advised me to undertake this research in the Southeast Asian Programme. I owe this unforgettable experience to his wisdom.

I feel much indebted to Dr. Natasha Hamilton-Hart for guiding me through confused initial thesis proposals, encouraging the development of my ideas, preventing me from drifting away from my main focus and making this final project possible. I was fortunate enough to benefit from her conscientious professionalism and unflinching intellect. Most of all, I am sincerely grateful for her unwavering trust, which allowed me to push my own limits and continue through doubts and uncertainties.

I thank Professor Reynaldo Iletto, Dr. Goh Beng Lan, Dr. John Miksic and Dr. Kyaw Yin Hlaing for initiating me to the fascinating field of study that Southeast Asian studies represent in its many aspects. I cherished their experience and passion in

broadening my horizons with the pioneers of this field, postcolonialism, archeology and political science of Southeast Asia.

I also want to thank Ms. Tan Lucy and Ms Rohani Sungib for easing through bureaucratic obstacles and paperwork, always in unmatched cheerfulness.

I wish to express my gratitude for the funding and institutional support received since I began this endeavour. In these two years, the generous Research Scholarship provided by the Southeast Asia Studies Program at the National University of Singapore necessary to undertake this thesis, and the Graduate Research Support Scheme enabled my fieldwork in Cambodia.

I cannot thank enough the staff of DC-Cam whose relentless efforts in trying to unearth information about that difficult period of their history provided most of the interviews and facts for this thesis. For a period of three months, their welcoming facilities and professionalism made Phnom Penh feel like home.

Finally, my colleagues of the 'grad room' both inspired me and made this experience as enjoyable as it was enriching. I will always fondly remember how their unique life experiences taught me far beyond academic matters. Special thanks in particular to Chhaya for her genuine interest and frank criticism.

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## **Statement of Original Research**

Unless otherwise specified, I declare that this thesis is an original product of research undertaken at the National University of Singapore under the auspices of the Southeast Asian Studies Program. I accept complete responsibility for the views, analysis and representations I have chosen to present in this study. On the date of submission this thesis comprised of 29,989 words.

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## Summary

This study explores the different choices taken by members of the Cambodian society in the traumatic period of the Khmer Rouge Communist regime between 1975 and 1979. My thesis attempts to contribute to the existing scholarship on that period by amalgamating individual stories into various themes altogether representing the outlines of a common social history. While the repression and suffering were irrefutable, I argue that there were some spaces for decision-making through cooperation, negotiation or resistance to the radical Khmer Rouge government. I chose to survey the whole Cambodian population without segregating their social background; for that reason, the main purpose of this thesis was to demonstrate the range of decisions and the complex relationship between representatives of the state and members of society. My thesis seeks to reveal that many Cambodians demonstrated insightful observations about their situation and a resourcefulness that transcends a simple victim/perpetrator binary.

Divided in six chapters, this thesis discusses the different reactions from Cambodians to certain unilaterally imposed policies from the Khmer Rouge. In Chapter Two, I discuss the different reasons that motivated the Khmer Rouge soldiers to join the revolution and demonstrate the heterogeneity of the organization. In Chapter Three, I survey the necessary cooperative attitudes that were necessary under those circumstances, but nevertheless varied in their manifestations and did not exclude instances of disobedience. Chapter Four examines the seemingly opposite stance of disobedience and resistance against the established order. In Chapter Five, I discuss the Cambodians who

took the decision to flee the Khmer Rouge either internally or externally. Finally, Chapter Six unveils how segregated social groups, including Khmer Rouge soldiers and officials, often recreated market conditions despite the rules against private ownership and the severe punishment associated with a transgression of such rules.

From these different themes, a conclusion arises. These different stories ought to dispel the notion of passivity of Cambodian society during the Khmer Rouge period. Despite clear limitations and very high costs, there were still several spaces for individual choices. Each chapter also addresses the notion that the boundary between the state and society was not that well-defined, and this reality was possible because the state itself had limitations in its discipline and reach within its territory.

## Chapter 1: A Post-Mortem of Cambodia

After almost two years of tensions and sporadic fighting, Vietnam finally decided to terminate the Khmer Rouge<sup>1</sup> regime in Cambodia in December 1978.<sup>2</sup> A few weeks later, this campaign was already over as 100,000 Vietnamese troops, with the support of 20,000 Cambodian refugees, controlled 17 out of 19 provinces in Cambodia.<sup>3</sup> Despite this definitive defeat, the Khmer Rouge lingered as a fighting force for almost two decades of irregular warfare. Great powers like China, the United States, and other Western countries with the assistance of Thailand decided to rebuild the defeated Khmer Rouge organization to ensure that the latter was able to pursue a disrupting fighting role in Cambodia against its new Vietnamese masters.<sup>4</sup>

The scale of the devastation in Cambodia was unfathomable. This devastation was largely the aggregate result of the recent invasion by the Vietnam People's Army, the scorched-earth strategy from the rapidly retreating Khmer Rouge, the previous intense civil war opposing the Khmer Rouge to the pro-American Lon Nol regime from 1970 to 1975, and the simultaneous massive bombing campaign unleashed by the U.S. Air Force during the Second Indochina conflict. Still, the main culprit for the landscape of this devastated country peppered with mounds of bodies and mass graves, half-completed irrigation projects and a non-existent economy, roads full of trans-migrants and cities

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<sup>1</sup> Nayan Chanda, Brother Enemy: The War after the War (New York: Collier Books, 1988)

<sup>2</sup> The term Khmer Rouge refers to the Communist Party of Kampuchea active since the mid-fifties. Prince Sihanouk, head of state between 1954-1970, first coined the phrase. For this research, I will continue using this term to designate the Communist organization for the sake of simplicity. During the regime, the Khmer Rouge often designated themselves as '*Angkar*', literally translated to 'the Organization.'

<sup>3</sup> Rosemary H.T. Keohane, 'Cambodia in the Zero Years: Rudimentary Totalitarianism,' Third World Quarterly, Vol. 14, No.4 (Nov. 1993): 735-748.

<sup>4</sup> John Pilger, 'Return to Year Zero', New Internationalist, issue 242, April 1993.



empty of inhabitants was rather the short-lived Khmer Rouge regime, established officially between April 17<sup>th</sup> 1975 and January 9<sup>th</sup> 1979.<sup>5</sup>

The extensive literature documenting and discussing the Khmer Rouge's rise and withdrawal from power is to a great extent preoccupied with the large casualty figures resulting from the period, with casualties estimated at around two million Cambodians from an initial population of around eight million.<sup>6</sup> The enormous scale of devastation rapidly captured the focus of international media and academia, which attempted to tackle a difficult question: why did *this* happen? The answer came in different packages, depending on the aspect of the Khmer Rouge under scrutiny: the party's history, its ideology, its leaders, its international relations, Cambodia's historical processes, the Indochina War or the perpetrators' cultural rationalizations, to name a few.

The first author to describe and denounce the nature of the Khmer Rouge revolution was Catholic priest François Ponchaud, who witnessed the forced exodus of Phnom Penh in April 1975.<sup>7</sup> While other articles and books on the regime were also published in the seventies, the almost complete closure of the country to foreigners made reliable data collection difficult until the collapse of the regime. Even after the collapse, the humanitarian crisis and the civil war continued to pose a challenge to scholars and journalists attempting to describe and explain the major events of the regime.

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, as most of the countryside was already under Khmer Rouge control from as early as 1972, the date of April 17, 1975 refers to the significant and symbolic capitulation of Phnom Penh. As for the date of January 9, 1979, it was determined with the establishment of the Vietnamese-backed 'People's Republic of Cambodia', although the Khmer Rouge still had *de facto* control over pockets of territory.

<sup>6</sup> The statistics of lives lost to starvation, disease and executions ranged from a low 700,000 to as many as 3.3 million. However, the consensus reached by different methods of calculation hovers at around 2 million. A significant obstacle to these calculations was the fact that the most recent census on population before the Khmer Rouge dated from 1962.

<sup>7</sup> François Ponchaud, Cambodia Year Zero. London : Allen Lane, 1978.

As a result, not including the very political stances on the Cambodian situation, several conflicting hypotheses on the nature of the regime coexisted in the eighties. For instance, Serge Thion<sup>8</sup> described the Khmer Rouge as being unable to control the country after their empowerment, while Michael Vickery<sup>9</sup> qualified the Khmer Rouge revolution as being more peasant-driven than Communist. Ultimately, years of rigorous data collection, archival research and in-depth interviews slowly lifted the veil of the elusive Khmer Rouge and their disastrous reign.

The works of historians David Chandler and Ben Kiernan represent the most widely-accepted descriptions of the regime. Their seminal books on the Khmer Rouge regime – Chandler’s *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* in 1991, and Kiernan’s *The Pol Pot Regime* in 1996 – debunked several contentious hypotheses and made the reality of the Khmer Rouge era more accessible. Those books initially attracted my attention to this topic, and their research provided both the basis for this research and the opportunity to explore other aspects of the regime. Decades of debates and research on the Khmer Rouge apparatus itself yielded a better perspective on the organizations’ leaders and followers:

The prevailing image of the Khmer Rouges as uniformly mindless automatons, bent on destruction, was fundamentally wrong. What the deportees themselves experienced was a mosaic of idealism and butchery, exaltation and horror, compassion and brutality, that defies easy generalisation. That, too, would continue throughout the Khmer Rouge years.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Serge Thion. ‘The Cambodian Idea of Revolution,’ in *Revolution and its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays*, eds. David Chandler et al. Yale University Southeast Asian Studies: New Haven, Conn. 1983: 10-33.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975-1982*, Boston: South End Press, 1984.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Short, 2004, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, Henry Holt and Company: New York: 281.

If students of that period of Cambodian history reached the consensus that a regime described as 'totalitarian' in fact embedded many inconsistencies in its governance, it seems logical that the population under its control was able to display forms of behaviour that defy easy generalization as well. A closer look at published narratives of survivors of the regime suggests that examples of resourcefulness, deduction and decision-making also emerge, weaved between tales of suffering and losses. In many cases, Cambodians commenting on their life under Pol Pot often related with some pride those daring actions, crucial decisions or insightful observations. Hence, incorporating those views is necessary to contribute to a more accurate understanding of the regime. Therefore, this research does not attempt to answer why did so many Cambodians die, but rather: How did Cambodians adapt to, escape from or manipulate the situation under the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979?

To answer this question concretely calls for the elaboration of a social history of this period, which would establish the middle ground between studies of the Democratic Kampuchea state and the myriad of individual stories from survivors of the regime. The writing of a 'social history' in the case of the Khmer Rouge regime requires the delicate and difficult balance between the acknowledgement of the severe abnormal restrictions enforced by this totalitarian state and the presence of instances of free will and decision-making. At the same time, another difficulty lies in describing different individual experiences without generalizing them or sacrificing the humanity of the survivors. While these difficulties are found in the writing of any history, the study of the Khmer Rouge regime requires particular caution because of the traumatic experience and extreme sufferings endured by Cambodians of the time.

While this thesis does not aim to write a social history of the period, I intend to pave the way for such an endeavor by studying this period from a perspective that emphasizes the Khmer Rouge regime as a state-society relationship within certain parameters. More precisely, I juxtapose the mechanisms employed by the Khmer Rouge to enforce ideologically inspired policies with the various ways in which Cambodians responded to the concrete implications of such policies. In doing so, I attempt to grasp the space where Cambodians chose distinctly divergent options in their responses to the violence of the regime. For instance, the proliferation of black markets illustrated how individual needs and resourcefulness nullified the strict Khmer Rouge policies of eliminating private property and any form of economy.

### Methodology and Sources

In order to unearth important patterns, I compiled 129 interviews of Cambodian survivors from various sources: translated interviews from the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), published autobiographies by Cambodian readers of the DC-Cam-based magazine *Searching for the Truth* and other published biographies. I carefully read through these interviews and identified recurrent themes occurring throughout the country during this period. I then regrouped related patterns of behavior into five different sections:

1-Joining the Khmer Rouge apparatus

2-Cooperating with the authorities and obeying the rules of the regime

3-Disobeying/confronting those rules

4-Escaping from the control of the Khmer Rouge within or outside the country

5-Negotiating assets and skills in the parallel black market

These categories were not definite nor mutually exclusive: they merely serve to formulate and emphasize the differences in the actions and decisions taken by Cambodians during the Khmer Rouge period. Some of those actions could and did coexist at the same time, and Cambodians often had little time or information to react to drastic changes in their lives. In the context of the abnormal social relations of this period, when former social status, identity, relationships and possessions were brutally disrupted under the latent threat (and execution) of violence, the paramount preoccupation was survival.

The main source of stories was the Documentation Center of Cambodia, an archive established by Yale University in 1994 and located in Phnom Penh. From the 129 stories, 88 were collected from this source. They were selected on the basis of available English translations, and correspond to most of the interviews published during the eight years of existence of the English edition of *Svèng Rok Kapit: Searching for the Truth*. In order to be selected for this thesis, the interviews or biographies had to be at least two pages in length, as the shorter ones did not provide sufficient information, and also referred to the story or episode of a single individual. I avoided another possible source in the translated interrogation files from prisoners of S-21.<sup>11</sup> These documents presented

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<sup>11</sup> The term 'S-21' refers to the infamous highest level of security prison located in a former high school in Phnom Penh and also known as 'Tuol Sleng.'

detailed aspects of each victim's story, but the method of interrogation under torture and threat of execution seriously undermines the validity of the stories

The documentation center represents the only archive for the Khmer Rouge regime and stores thousands of interviews conducted by either their staff or previous researchers. They subsequently selected a few of these articles for their monthly publication, *Searching for the Truth*, established in 2000. From the 88 stories from DC-Cam, the majority (63) was provided through interviews conducted by their staff. They compiled these interviews with an open-ended question asking the respondents to explain their lives during Democratic Kampuchea.<sup>12</sup> Such methodology often yielded unexpected insights and allowed a broader scope of research than leading and precise questions. The background of the interviewed survivors also offered the most variation from any other source: several former Khmer Rouge personnel and Cambodians from all the different provinces were interviewed; hence, an overview of the data presented a complete picture from different sections of society. The editor of *Searching for the Truth*, Youk Chhang, also gracefully accepted to publish letters from survivors sent to the center, thus providing valuable primary sources. In contrast to interviews, the latter did not require the interpretation of an interviewer. These autobiographies represented the rest of the stories obtained from DC-Cam (25).

DC-Cam, founded by Yale University, thus promotes a perspective emphasizing on the individual role played by the leaders of the Khmer Rouge movement for the

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<sup>12</sup> 'All interviews are structured to begin with very general questions, such as "what happened to you before and during the Pol Pot time?" The DC-Cam field research policy is based firmly upon experience that has demonstrated the importance of avoiding leading questions. We seek to uncover individual responsibility and command responsibility for genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the first elements of these crimes are revealed in the survivors' stories. Our interview methodology attempts to penetrate every possible detail that an interviewee can remember concerning what that person observed in the locale where they were situated during the DK regime.' Excerpt from DC-Cam's Annual Report 2000.

unfolding of the Cambodian genocide, and the necessity to bring these leaders to an international court of justice. This explicit goal of pursuing justice in an international court to prosecute the main leaders of the Khmer Rouge plausibly affected the collection of interviews by its researchers. While this agenda did not seem to directly affect the content of the interviews, the stories often ended with a somewhat superimposed endorsement of international justice from the interviewees. However, the interviewers did not elaborate on the nature of this endorsement, as survivors of the regime seem to disagree on how justice should be (or should have been) pursued.

Furthermore, DC-Cam has also assumed the responsibility for museums commemorating the genocide like *Tuol Sleng* and the *Choeng Ek* site outside Phnom Penh. While DC-Cam has been very active in providing a voice for Cambodians and facilitating research on the Khmer Rouge for jurists and scholars, it is debatable to what extent alternative perspectives or dissonant voices could co-exist within this established framework.

In order to avoid an over-reliance on this sole source, I used biographies and compilations of interviews of Cambodian refugees published in the United States or France. Those biographies provided the remaining 39 stories. Furthermore, their authors' new cultural context compelled them to articulate Cambodian cultural meanings behind some situations for a Western audience.

However, these biographies overrepresented certain sections of Cambodian society. In the biographies published in the United States for instance, the majority of interviewees came from middle-class urban families, while this group actually represented a minority of the population of Cambodia at the time. Furthermore, refugees

accepted in the United States were typically registered from the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in Thailand.<sup>13</sup> This fact resulted in a geographic bias, since most of these refugees came from the nearby province of Battambang, leaving other provinces of Cambodia underrepresented. Most importantly, the stories selected for publication had to correspond to certain objectives of the publisher. In the United States, many publishers selected stories for their 'emotional appeal', thus overwhelmingly published stories from Cambodians who were only children during the regime.<sup>14</sup> This bias had the adverse effect of propagating the belief that Cambodians during the regime were helpless or unaware of the events surrounding them.

Finally, the published biographies from France were important in developing the ideas set forth with this thesis. Unlike most of their compatriots in America, some of these Cambodians previously completed their higher education in France, often in technical fields like engineering. With this background, they had a different perspective on events and provided some articulate opinions about their experiences. French publishers also presented stories of these older men engaging the Khmer Rouge with their insights and knowledge. Therefore, these sources could lead to the opposite misrepresentation of generalizing the ability to outmaneuver the Khmer Rouge. While this represents another bias, such detailed stories offer other valuable insights into an underrepresented section of the Cambodian population, hence contributed to the articulation of this thesis.

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<sup>13</sup> William Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 5.

<sup>14</sup> From David Chandler's Preface to Hour Chea, *Quatre Ans avec les Khmer Rouges*, (Paris: Tchou, 2007).



## Research Limitations

Beside the limitations from its sources, this research also has methodological limitations. First of all, the sample size of 129 interviews, while detailed, remains rather small to effectively represent the Cambodian population of that period. Furthermore, these interviews were selected on the basis of their availability, mostly from the DC-Cam, thus do not represent a truly random sample. A larger random sample from the complete set of interviews would be necessary to significantly generalize the proportion of responses.

Although this research respects and values the accounts of every Cambodian, the respondents also had their own limitations. A few stories could have self-serving agendas, like in cases of former Khmer Rouge soldiers attempting to polish unpleasant details from their past employment. In other cases, and perhaps less obviously, the survivors could have altered the version of their story, either consciously or unconsciously, as a coping mechanism for the terror of the regime.

Also, the amount of time between the end of the regime and the actual interview might have varied their perception of the regime, possibly from failing memory. More generally, their perceptions were likely informed with decades of propaganda and rumors about the Khmer Rouge government. For example, many interviewees in the United States consistently referred to the Khmer Rouge soldiers as “Pol Pots”, responding to the mainstream allocation of responsibility to the leader. Ironically, during most of the regime, these rank-and-file soldiers ignored the existence of ‘Pol Pot.’

The control of information and movement during the regime prevented anyone – arguably even the leaders of the country – from knowing what was happening nationally, both from the inside and the outside. In fact, the compilation of stories and documents from as many survivors as possible is the only way to form a precise picture of events during the regime.

Due to language restrictions, I am only able to access English or French sources and access to the more extensive primary Khmer sources was not possible. Translated materials consequently have their setbacks, particularly when these languages have such different roots. It is still possible to gather the primary meaning from these cases, but more subtle expressions and multiple meanings are likely to be lost in translation. Alexander Hinton's recent anthropological study of the genocide provides ample evidence for the wealth of information contained in Khmer words in their original cultural contexts.

Furthermore, there is no official transliteration of Khmer written words from its original alphabet to any Western language, which implies that the same word or even a person's name can be written quite differently. Unlike many languages in the same region, spoken Khmer is not a tonal language, but it utilizes complex sounds that are difficultly translated in another script. Furthermore, the same word can be pronounced differently within Cambodia due to regional accents and the fact that two different alphabets, an 'official' and a 'rural,' coexist. The Khmer words used in this thesis are simply copied from its sources, and the same word is consistently written the same way.

A peculiar problem in the study of mass murder is the fact that the interviewees were only the *survivors* of the Khmer Rouge, hence data about a substantial proportion of

the population, the casualties, will never be collected. In this case, the casualties are estimated to represent as many as 20 percent of the population. Furthermore, if it is still difficult for Cambodians who lived through the regime to fathom the extent of the tragedy, it is almost impossible for any outsider to simply imagine its magnitude.

Finally, although I took note of the gender of the interviewee or the author of the story, I did not include an analysis of the effect of gender on the experiences of the survivors. This omission does not imply that gender is not a significant variable; on the contrary, a gender-based analysis would require a study on its own, particularly in a hierarchical and 'conservative' society like Cambodia. Regardless of the cultural background, men and women in any conflict or massacre are treated distinctively. For instance, men tend to be executed for fear of retaliation, while women, if less targeted for execution, are often victims of various sexual assault. In that sense, the Khmer Rouge era was no exception, and a further research on gender based on this framework would duly anticipate different perceptions and reactions to the regime whether the survivor is male or female.

### Decisions and Parameters

The starting point of this research is the acknowledgement of a space for individual choices for Cambodians during the Khmer Rouge rule. Is this stretching the concept of agency too far? While I believe that advancing an argument reclaiming the role of society in this repressive regime is mostly appropriate and feasible, some parameters need to be set in place in order to avoid misleading implications.

The basic premise is that Cambodians were not merely passive during the three years of the Khmer Rouge regime. A broad survey of survivors' accounts would suffice to prove this point. If we take a group of Cambodians who had to survive the same ordeal at the same time, we can locate the differences in their thoughts about the situation and subsequent actions. Therefore, being able to perform different actions in a similarly repressive situation shows the existence of minimal room for decision-making.

A good example can be found in Ysa Osman's *The Cham Rebellion*. In the first part of his book, the author lists different interviews of Cham villagers who went through the same ordeal at the beginning of Democratic Kampuchea. Indeed, those Khmer Rouge survivors were all arrested without having committed a crime and were sent for interrogation at the Kroch Chhmar prison headquarters in Kampong Cham. Despite the extent of the coercion, these villagers all reacted differently: a prisoner disobeyed the rules set by the Khmer Rouge in defiance, another decided to lie during his interrogation to avoid torture and advised his fellow prisoners to use the same tactic, yet another decided to stick to the truth and claim his innocence, and the last one attempted to escape twice during his arrest.<sup>15</sup> Those differences illustrate variation even in the most restrictive situation. From this example, we can infer that Cambodians living outside the prison system had more freedoms in their decision-making.

Asserting the agency of the subjects of a repressive regime is not tantamount to displacing the responsibility for their fate from the hands of the guards and soldiers into their own. In order to avoid any implication of blaming the victim, this research only looks at which decision was taken and on which premise, without systematically referring

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<sup>15</sup> El Him's story, from Osman Ysa, *The Cham Rebellion: Survivor's Stories from the Villages*, (Phnom Penh: Documentation Centre of Cambodia, 2006) 24-44.

to the outcome of that particular decision. Avoiding the allocation of blame and responsibility is intended to prevent passing undue judgment on individuals.

Besides being unethical, linking decisions to outcomes could also be misleading. Some person's salvation often proved to be another's demise. For example, the decision to undertake the dangerous Thai border crossing cost the lives of many Cambodians, but it also became the only way for some of them to survive. While some conditions could explain those different outcomes, according to many survivors themselves, the determining factor for survival was mostly: luck. Indeed, this un-quantifiable variable appeared in almost all the survivors' accounts to explain why they survived a particular event, while many others perished. In short, this research does not intend to develop into a problematic 'survival guide to the Khmer Rouge.'

It is also important to avoid the other extreme of romanticizing the range of possibilities available in that period. Some survivors' stories relate complex strategies to deceive the Khmer Rouge, others offer gripping tales from escape-artists and a few describe courageous instances of resistance as freedom fighters. Despite the interest generated by such stories, these examples are exceptions rather than the rule, as most actions were much more 'modest' in nature. There might also be a bias towards such stories in published accounts. Many biographies and movies about the Khmer Rouge are focused on a story centered on some 'heroism' and may be more appealing in contrast to the grisly world of such human tragedies. Hence, the set of publications available on the market sometimes offers an unrepresentative sample of the reality of the Democratic Kampuchea by overplaying the actual decision-making capacity available to most Cambodians.

Bearing in mind these limitations, this study proposes a context-sensitive definition of 'decision-making'. The living conditions will be detailed further in the course of this thesis, but generally, we can describe Democratic Kampuchea as a totalitarian regime relying on extensive coercion based on deception rather than an explicit rule-of-law, in which society was forced to work in different collectivized economic units mostly related to agricultural production divided on the basis of previous social class and current age-group. The coercive nature of the state was often concretized in large-scale executions planned by the higher echelons of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, although there were many references to personally motivated executions ordered by local authorities or spontaneous decisions by Khmer Rouge soldiers and guards. In addition, death often came as a result of unchecked diseases, famine and overwork, which were linked to varying degrees to decisions by the state authorities.

## Chapters

Instead of dedicating a separate chapter for the literature review and the overview of the regime, I incorporate a specific section of both in each chapter. This division is aimed at providing the contextual parameters most likely to influence certain actions and decisions.. For instance, I link the Khmer Rouge evacuation and relocation policies with escape (Chapter 5), and its policies on the economy (i.e. destruction of currency, market, prohibition of private ownership) with the creation of an extensive parallel black market (Chapter 6). This association aims to represent the contrast between intended and brutally

implemented policies, and the actual situation emanating from individual decision-making.

Furthermore, the attention of previous literature has been unevenly geared toward certain issues, like the empowerment of the Khmer Rouge and sometimes resistance, while others have rarely been studied, like the black market and the use of skills during the Khmer Rouge. The chapters are ordered to follow the most common and arguably predictable responses, starting with joining the Khmer Rouge and cooperation, to the less common responses based primarily on the data compiled for this research, namely escape and the black market.

The second chapter (Chapter 2) examines the processes of recruitment for those who joined the military and administrative branches of the Khmer Rouge (which were closely intertwined). The chapter begins with a brief history of the Communist revolutionary movement in Cambodia, then continues with the five years preceding the Khmer Rouge capture of Phnom Penh, when most of the recruitment occurred. Establishing the motives for joining the Khmer Rouge is necessary to appreciate the differences of objectives within the seemingly monolithic entity of the totalitarian state. The different expectations from mostly poor rural Cambodians enrolled in the ranks of the Khmer Rouge can help to explain the disparity of motives witnessed during the regime itself. Those differences in motives in turn allowed for variations in interactions between representatives of the state and members of society that will be discussed more at length in the following chapters.

The next chapter (Chapter 3) examines the most common reaction to the repression enforced by the Khmer Rouge: cooperation. While this category appears like a

euphemism for passivity, some important clarifications justify interpreting some forms of compliance as an active process for dealing with the harsh reality of the regime. This omnipresent compliance resulted from the recognition of the threat that the Khmer Rouge were posing to the lives of their subjects despite the deceptive information disseminated through propaganda. In some cases, cooperation meant a performance to appear as more acceptable under the new revolutionary hierarchy. This chapter attempts to highlight nuances in seemingly straightforward binaries based on identity and in the prevailing expected reaction to the regime's cruelty.

Apparently antithetical to compliance were different forms of resistance (Chapter 4). The main reason behind disobedience was the ongoing food crisis triggered by ill-advised or faultily implemented economic policies on agriculture. At the individual level, the necessity to gain more food for personal survival triggered numerous instances of infringement of rules. On a larger scale, other motives played an important role in more violent instances of resistance such as assassination plots, confrontations, revolts and rebellions. However, while those spontaneous outbursts of violence seem relatively frequent, they had little impact on the conduct of the regime, despite overwhelming dissatisfaction against it.

The previous behaviors indicated some form of interaction with the ruling forces, yet in the minds of some Cambodians, were not sufficient to assure safety against the Khmer Rouge. Hence came the decision to escape the regime altogether (Chapter 5). Considering the prohibition of internal movement and the reinforcing of border surveillance, attempting to escape to neighboring countries was a risky and costly endeavor. Internal displacement, as defined by taking refuge in natural shelters or other



villages in Cambodia, was substantially more common, particularly in cases when executions appeared imminent. Often seeking refuge in a neighboring village or work camp under the protection of the local village chief was sufficient to provide a shelter until the end of the regime.

The last chapter (Chapter 6) evaluates the interactions between the new people, base people and the Khmer Rouge that occurred as a result of local trade and barter. Contrary to Democratic Kampuchea's ideals of asceticism and anti-materialism, base people and lower-level cadre still harbored desires for previously unattainable goods. These goods were within their reach by trading with new people who had hidden their valuables and now needed to improve their subsistence. Simultaneously, some Khmer Rouge cadres found private benefits in utilizing the skills of new people who would otherwise face harsh discrimination. These interactions partially invalidated the rigid segregation of classes and officially-enforced hatred propaganda separating the base people and the new people.

## Chapter 2-Enter the Khmer Rouge

While the empowerment of the Khmer Rouge in 1975 might have appeared as a rather sudden development for some, the origins of communism in Cambodia can be traced back to at least forty years before the establishment of the regime.<sup>16</sup> This chapter will begin with a brief overview of the creation and expansion of the Communist Party of Kampuchea from the thirties onward. From being a marginal yet growing political movement, the Khmer Rouge gained a dramatic momentum after the 1970 coup by Lon Nol and Sirik Matak.<sup>17</sup>

Although the term '*Angkar*' referred to a single organization embodying the 'State' in Cambodia, when the organization formed the government between 1975-1979, its members had divergent and sometimes conflicting ideals. Many Khmer Rouge soldiers shared similar social backgrounds, but they had many divergent reasons for enlisting; from these differences, veterans, soldiers and militia of the Khmer Rouge also had different expectations from the government once it gained power. Even if they had worked together under the same banner before 1975, their divergent viewpoints created tensions within the ranks of the Khmer Rouge. A reflection on the nature of this organization is necessary for the purpose of this thesis since those who supported the regime and enforced its policies consequently affected the lives of Cambodians during the Democratic Kampuchea period.

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<sup>16</sup> An example for the perceived unlikelihood of the Khmer Rouge victory can be found in 'the Unexpected Victory' by Timothy Carney, in Karl D. Jackson, Cambodia 1975-1978, Rendezvous with Death, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989)

<sup>17</sup> US military intelligence has been plotting Sihanouk's overthrow from the past few years, and first advised Lon Nol to perform a disguised assassination. Lon Nol refused, and rather overthrew Sihanouk while he was visiting France, the Soviet Union and China. (Kiernan: 300-301)

Therefore, the following section of this chapter addresses the different motives for joining and the Khmer Rouge efforts for recruitment. The sheer increase of Khmer Rouge combatants over only a few years bears witness to the popularity of the movement and possibly the effectiveness of the recruitment strategies deployed to entice rural Cambodians to join their ranks.<sup>18</sup> The time frame under scrutiny for that period precedes the focus of this thesis, since very few Cambodians joined the Khmer Rouge during the Democratic Kampuchea period.

### Who were the Khmer Rouge?

The history of communism in Cambodia can be traced back many decades before the Khmer Rouge regime. In the twenties and thirties, the Vietnamese were largely responsible for the beginning of this ideological movement in Indochina. The first reported incidents involving Communists in Cambodia occurred in 1929 with the arrests of several militants of Vietnamese origin.<sup>19</sup> The next year, the Vietnamese Communist Party changed its name to the 'Indo-China Communist Party' (ICP) during a conference in Hong Kong to represent the broader reach of its anti-colonial struggle, yet no Khmer representative was present.<sup>20</sup> The involvement of the ICP in Cambodia began with its support for anti-French nationalist Khmers, the *Khmer Issarak*, from 1945 onward, but few Khmers changed sides to join the ICP.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kiernan 2004: 345.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Kiernan, How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid: 10.

<sup>21</sup> Gareth Porter, 1983, 'Vietnamese Communist Policy toward Kampuchea, 1930-1970', in *Revolution and its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays*: 65.

In 1950, with the advent of a pro-Western government in Thailand, resistance to Vietnamese help from the Issaraks and changing Vietnamese strategies in their war against the French, General Vo Nguyen Giap called for the 'active construction of independent Lao and Kampuchean armies' and 'the creation of a broad political base.'<sup>22</sup> After about twenty years of symbolic 'Indochinese' involvement, Cambodian and Laotian participation in Communist struggle finally concretized, as the ICP approved the creation of the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP) and the autonomous Cambodian branch, the People's Revolutionary Party of Khmerland (PRPK) was created with Son Ngoc Minh as its first leader.<sup>23</sup>

In the meantime, the struggle for Cambodian independence continued both on the battlefield and politically. On the ground, Issarak forces gained modest victories against the French, and while the scale of the conflict was much smaller than in Vietnam, the violence and intensity of the fighting should not be underestimated.<sup>24</sup> Philip Short, for instance, describes how the Issarak assassinated French supporters and burnt down villages in reprisal, how colonial troops also burnt villages and raped women, and how the 'Khmer Viet Minh' brutally executed those expected to be traitors.<sup>25</sup>

In the capital, the French authorities tried to assuage claims for independence by granting Cambodia the status of an 'Associate State in the French Union' in 1950.<sup>26</sup> Concretely, the French gave full autonomy on 'Local Subjects as Press and Information and Local Budget, Labour Services, Tourist Office,'<sup>27</sup> while maintaining power in the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid: 67.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Short, 2005, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*: 55.

<sup>24</sup> Craig Etcheson: 42.

<sup>25</sup> Short 2005: 88-89.

<sup>26</sup> V.M. Reddi, *A History of the Cambodian Independence Movement*, Sri Venkateswara University: Tirupati, 1970: 165.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

remaining vital ministries. In the 1951 elections, the Democratic Party, proponents of full independence and opponents of conservative politicians (hence Sihanouk), won 54 seats from 78.<sup>28</sup> This electoral defeat for Sihanouk and the acclaimed return of Cambodian nationalist Son Ngoc Thanh from imprisonment in France pushed King Norodom Sihanouk to take drastic measures to secure power in Cambodia the next year. With the support of French troops, Sihanouk gained power in a bloodless coup and replaced the elected Democrat cabinet with his own supporters.<sup>29</sup> Having entered the political stage, the King declared a 'Royal Crusade for Independence' (which David Chandler qualified as a 'political carte blanche that Sihanouk issued to himself') which demanded full independence from the French, much to the latter's dismay. After the French military defeat in the hands of the Viet Minh in 1954, Cambodia was thus well positioned to negotiate its independence at the Geneva Conference.

In the subsequent period of independence, the Khmer Issarak movement dissolved, since its leaders considered their objective to be attained. Some Communist members also shared this sentiment, and they decided to leave the movement with the belief that their class struggle ended with the departure of the French. Around a thousand Issaraks, many of them Communists, followed the Vietminh back into Vietnam, and Hanoi became an important training center for Cambodian Communists.<sup>30</sup> The remaining Cambodian Communists created a political party, the *Pracheachon*, to compete for elections, but initially failed as the Sangkum intimidated most candidates out of the election.<sup>31</sup> After this defeat, the Pracheachon Party leader Sieu Heng was also discovered

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<sup>28</sup> David Chandler, 1991, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*: 56.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*: 63.

<sup>30</sup> Kiernan 2004:154.

<sup>31</sup> Short: 123.

to be a government informant. From this point onward, the KPRP entered a dormant stage and membership dwindled from 850 after independence to 250 a few years later.

In addition to this reduction of their struggle, Sihanouk further marginalized the remaining Communists with arrests and exclusion from the political process; hence, many of the veterans took refuge in the jungle or the countryside during the fifties and sixties. According to Kiernan, this separation of the various veteran members and the departure of many veteran Communist members to Hanoi provided an opportunity for a previously unknown man to climb ranks in his role as the liaison officer remaining in Phnom Penh; this man, Saloth Sar, eventually became the leader of the organization in 1962, and the vanguard of the party accordingly shifted around the same time.<sup>32</sup>

This shift in leadership had important implications for the future of Cambodia. Before elaborating in the dramatic rise of this party to power, we shall first examine the background of these new leaders. The main figure of the party, Saloth Sar, was born in a middle-class family in Kampong Thom province. In addition to this relatively well-off origin, his cousin was one of the concubines of King Sisowath Monivong. As a result, the future Pol Pot was able to receive his primary schooling from a Catholic school in Phnom Penh, his high school at a public school in Kampong Cham, and his higher education at Russey Keo Technical School as a carpenter.<sup>33</sup> The quality of his education was quite unrepresentative of the experience of the majority of Cambodians during the twenties and thirties, when formal education was beyond the reach of almost all Cambodians as even Norodom Sihanouk had studied in Saigon.<sup>34</sup> More importantly, Saloth Sar pursued his

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<sup>32</sup>Kiernan: 198.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid: 25-27.

<sup>34</sup> Lacouture 1972: 20.

education in France. Despite his failure in securing any degree, he nonetheless made important contacts as a member of the *Parti Communiste Français*.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, other important members of the new vanguard of the sixties shared his middle-class rural origins and French education. Ieng Sary, for instance, was born in a middle-class family in Travinh (Southern Vietnam, formerly Cochinchina) and pursued his education in France.<sup>36</sup> Sary and Sar's future wives, the Khieu sisters, Thirith and Ponnary, also studied in France and came from a relatively higher social standing, as their father was a judge in the city of Battambang. Khieu Thirith and Khieu Ponnary also hold important positions during Democratic Kampuchea. Other high-profile leaders like Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon and Hu Nim all completed their doctorates in Economics in France (submitted respectively in 1959, 1955 and 1965).<sup>37</sup> Hence similar middle to upper-middle class background and French education seemed to be common factors for this group of leaders behind the policies of the Khmer Rouge.

Other important figures in the movement, like Hu Nim and Hou Yuon, came from more modest backgrounds. They grew up in small landowning families and pursued their education in Cambodian high schools before becoming teachers.<sup>38</sup> Yet, their different origin from the Pol Pot clique may have been a factor for their execution in S-21 as early as 1975. Another important leader took another route to prominence; Long Rech (aka Nuon Chea) completed his education at Thammasat University in Bangkok and enrolled in the Thai Communist Party.<sup>39</sup> Despite these few exceptions, the leaders of the regime

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<sup>35</sup> Etcheson: 50.

<sup>36</sup> Kiernan: 28. It is also ironic that Ieng Sary, as a leader of the organization, came from 'Kamphuchea Krom,' considering that Khmer Krom were targeted during the regime as intrinsically traitors.

<sup>37</sup> Etcheson: 51-52.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid: 29.

<sup>39</sup> Etcheson: 59.

mostly shared a similar background, as an educated middle-class frustrated with the lack of opportunities in the corrupt political system.

From a compilation of DC-Cam interviews and biographic cases, the leaders' social background different greatly from that of the followers who joined after 1970. According to my research, almost all of the interviewees came from a rural background, most of whom from either poor or lower class (25 out of 31). In Cambodia, their economic status can be determined by their family's ownership of property: the most destitute peasants did not own any land, had irregular employment, debts, and sometimes their family members had to be separated. For example, young boys were sent in temples to attain at least basic education and receive some food and shelter. Lower-class rural Cambodians typically owned at least a small parcel of land with a few fruit trees and a few farm animals like pigs and chickens, if not a few buffaloes. Those humble origins impacted their reasons to join the Khmer Rouge. Unlike the Khmer Rouge leaders, they did not have the luxury of aspiring for a better social situation, but rather struggled to maintain basic subsistence level and employment.<sup>40</sup>

In relation to their socio-economic status, the level of education from these Khmer Rouge soldiers was very low, if it existed at all. Even in times of peace, their education had often to be ceased from a lack of money to pay for basic courses or the need to help their families in producing income. As noted earlier, many boys acquired basic literacy level in pagodas, but this type of religious education was not an option for young Khmer girls. While the peasants' lack of education may have rendered them particularly vulnerable to Khmer Rouge propaganda, this lack of education did not

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<sup>40</sup> Milton Osborne, Politics and Power in Cambodia: The Sihanouk Years, (Camberwell (Victoria): Longman Australia, 1972) 76.



necessarily make the poorer peasants less aware of their reasons for joining and the implications of such choices.

Many accounts revealed that the ongoing civil war of the early seventies exacerbated the problem of education. Many teachers had taken refuge into cities to avoid the fighting, and as a result, even children who could otherwise pursue an education were not able to do so. The Khmer Rouge army not only offered military training, but also political and technical training. Part of the appeal for joining the Khmer Rouge were those opportunities of achieving a better career than those otherwise available for these lower-class Cambodians. As a young female Khmer Rouge, Ming Thoeun joined the revolution after dropping out of school because of the bombings; since the situation in her village was dangerous, some Khmer Rouge subsequently came to recruit new soldiers.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, beside class and education, the age difference between leaders and soldiers in the regime could be termed as a generational gap. As discussed earlier, the Khmer Rouge leaders received their education in the forties and fifties, and pursued careers before their armed struggle. In 1975, for instance, Pol Pot was 50 years old, Khieu Samphan, 46, and Khieu Ponnary, 55.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, Henri Locard describes Khmer Rouge soldiers, perhaps too generally, as ‘children or ignorant adolescents.’<sup>43</sup>

The above comparisons between the leadership and the followers of the Khmer Rouge reveal two important aspects of the organization. First, the differences between these leaders and followers were quite significant. The leaders generally came from at least middle-class rural background, enjoyed substantial education, often from abroad,

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<sup>41</sup> Leak Lena Tat, [interview] *Searching for the Truth*, Third Quarter 2007, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Sokyn Em, Osman Ysa and Aun Long, *Searching for the Truth*, Number 16, April 2001, 31.

<sup>43</sup> Henri Locard. *Pol Pot's Little Red Book: The Sayings of the Angkar* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004) 6.

and were in their forties during the struggle. On the other hand, their followers tended to come from humble rural origins, may not have accessed any education and were mostly much younger. Second, each group, leaders and soldiers, seemed particularly homogenous within itself. Such comparisons were only possible considering that, with a few exceptions, they had distinctly similar experiences, hence making it possible to generalize their backgrounds. However, despite their shared experiences, the followers who joined the Khmer Rouge during the seventies did not share the same motives.

### Recruitment and Motives

After two rather quiet decades, the political situation in Cambodia after 1970 and the spillover effects of the neighboring Vietnamese conflict gave new life to the previously dwindling CPK.<sup>44</sup> In merely five years, the revolutionary army was in a position to successfully overrun the official government in a complete victory. Even before this victory, the Khmer Rouge had made such advances that only the massive bombing campaign unleashed by the Americans seemed to be able to delay the almost inevitable Khmer Rouge victory.<sup>45</sup> A factor for the success of the Khmer Rouge was their effective recruitment efforts that allowed them to entice or coerce rural Cambodians into swelling their ranks. According to Kiernan, in merely two years, 'the Khmer Communist regular and guerilla forces totaled two hundred thousand troops and were still

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<sup>44</sup> In 1961, the new vanguard of the KPRP also changed the organization's name to the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), which became the official name representing the Khmer Rouge.

<sup>45</sup> Kamboly Dy, A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979), (Phnom Penh: Documentation Centre of Cambodia, 2007) 11.

expanding. (The Lon Nol army was only slightly larger).<sup>46</sup> Parallel to Khmer Rouge recruitment, voluntary recruitment in the Republican army was nonetheless impressive as well, Kiernan notes that within the first year of the regime, the army grew from 35,000 troops to around 150,000.<sup>47</sup>

From the surveyed interviews, the Khmer Rouge benefited from voluntary involvement, persuasion and coercion to increase the size of its army. The reason for the recruitment also influenced the experience and perspective of the young Khmer Rouge soldiers. For example, the soldiers who joined after believing Khmer Rouge propaganda, and even more so those coerced into joining, were more likely to feel disillusioned and often either attempted to desert the Khmer Rouge or participate in resistance against the government.

A large array of heteroclitic motives often overlapped in the minds of the young Khmer Rouge, even if they did not state them in their interviews or biographies. An example of the difficulty to distinguish voluntary and persuaded involvement was represented in the testimony of Mak Tork. As a youth of twelve at the time of his recruitment, he iterated that ‘No one forced me to do so, I did it voluntarily. Like other people, we wanted the King to return.’<sup>48</sup> Yet he also stated later that his parents encouraged him to join and that the village chief propagandized for the liberation of the country from the Lon Nol regime. Since it is clear that the most important authority figures convinced this youth to join the Khmer Rouge, it is doubtful to what degree was his decision ‘voluntary’.

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<sup>46</sup> Ben Kiernan, How Pol Pot Came to Power, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004) 345.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>48</sup> Interview by Sochea Phann, Searching for the Truth, Third Quarterly Issue, 34.

As soon as Prince Sihanouk was deposed, many Cambodians protested in Phnom Penh against the Lon Nol regime, and the police subsequently shot at thousands of protesters.<sup>49</sup> These constituted the first wave of volunteers to join the Khmer Rouge in the jungle. This feeling of hatred continued to swell during the civil war, in correlation with the level of corruption in the government and the instances of brutal policies enforced by Lon Nol officers.<sup>50</sup> Phe Phai Pheap, former Khmer Rouge soldier, gave his reason for joining: 'He reasoned that his commitment to the Khmer Rouge stemmed from his painful anger toward the Lon Nol soldiers who had shot and killed a number of demonstrators who were protesting the coup d'état against King Norodom Sihanouk.'<sup>51</sup>

A crucial point noted from all the cases was the absence of an important motive: belief in communism. In fact, beside the educated elite already members of the CPK, subsequent Cambodians joining the Khmer Rouge never referred to their faith in Communist ideology as a motive. There could be two reasons for this absence. As listed above, many motives cited were unrelated to ideological struggle, and the presence of the Khmer Rouge as the sole fighting force allegedly for the King and against Lon Nol and the Americans proved a powerful motivator. On the other hand, the Khmer Rouge regime and its association with communism became obviously compromised since its 1979 defeat in the hands of the Vietnamese, and it was in the interest of the previous supporters of the regime to downplay their participation in the tragedy, thus their previous ideological commitment. In short, the behavior of Khmer Rouge soldiers cannot be

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<sup>49</sup> Kiernan 2004: 302.

<sup>50</sup> The Samlaut rebellion during the Sihanouk years, when the rebels were executed and beheaded, and their heads were then trucked to Phnom Penh as a warning; or the massacre of thousands of Vietnamese who had their bodies dumped into the Mekong to be 'sent back to their homeland' present some examples of repression.

<sup>51</sup> Vannak Huy, Searching for the Truth, Number 24, December 2001: 21.

generalized from an assumed commitment in communism neither should the ideological importance of the indoctrination be overlooked despite the lack of mention in the soldiers' autobiographies.

The Khmer Rouge also welcomed former *Issarak* rebels who joined them in their struggle. With their previous collaboration in the independence struggle, these former *Issarak* were not only welcomed, but the Khmer Rouge also accepted some in high positions within their party. For instance, Mat Ly, a former Muslim Cham *Issarak* rebel, was nominated to be the leader of the Eastern Zone in 1970, an important position.<sup>52</sup>

Joining the revolution was also a manifestation of Cambodian nationalism. Besides having illegally overthrown Prince Sihanouk, Lon Nol was clearly perceived as an ally (at best) of the Americans. Furthermore, the direct interventions in Cambodia by American forces in either invasions or extensive bombings, despite their alliance with the Lon Nol government, reinforced the latter's image as a puppet in foreign hands. Several revolutionaries thus perceived the Khmer Rouge as a national force fighting for the liberation of their country against a foreign-backed usurping regime.

This perspective was particularly important for overseas Cambodians. Hour Chea recalled that in France, where most of the overseas Cambodians were pursuing their higher education, there were initially three political groups: the pro-government, the leftist and the centrist groups.<sup>53</sup> With the unfolding events in Cambodia in the early seventies, most members of the centrist group joined the pro-Communist organization, as

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<sup>52</sup> Osman Ysa, [Searching for the Truth](#), First Quarter Issue 2004: 35.

<sup>53</sup> AKF: Association des Khmers en France (Association of Khmers in France) was apolitical and gathered many Cambodians of middle-class origin. The author, Hour Chea, belonged to this organization before the coup.

did Hour Chea himself.<sup>54</sup> He specified that his reasons were his patriotism for Cambodia and his faith in Prince Sihanouk's exiled government in Beijing. Following his belief, he returned in Cambodia in 1976, but was eventually distressed by the new face of his transformed country.

Considering the targets for recruitment were mostly male teenagers, some of the recruits' rationale for joining was informed by their juvenile desires. More precisely, a recurring reason for joining the Khmer Rouge was the wish for many of those youths to simply own a gun and be involved in fighting. Thus, instead of being fearful of facing enemy fire, some youths rather imagined their heroic involvement in battle. However, not surprisingly, most were quite disappointed with the harsh reality of war, but when they came to realize the danger that they had willingly encountered, it was already too late to withdraw. Sen Yen, for example, volunteered into the Khmer Rouge without telling his parents: '[He] used to think that fighting was fun, but later realized that earning his living with combs and scissors is better than holding a gun.'<sup>55</sup>

Earning the right to bear arms under the Khmer Rouge provided clear benefits as well. Meng-Try Ea and Sorya Sim mention the importance of gaining respect vis-à-vis other children and villagers for the youth who decided to join the Khmer Rouge.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, they add that militia or soldiers did not have to toil in the fields like other youths of their age and they also received larger daily rations. The immediate tangible

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<sup>54</sup> UEK: Union des Étudiants Khmers (Khmer Students' Union), which eventually split. The new group was called Unek, Union Nationale des Étudiants Khmers. Hour Chea, Quatre Ans avec les Khmer Rouges, (Paris: Tchou, 2007) 32

<sup>55</sup> Phala Prum, Searching for the Truth, Fourth Quarter Issue 2003, 16. Sen Yen became a hairdresser after the regime.

<sup>56</sup> Meng-Try Ea and Sorya Sim, Victims and Perpetrators?: Testimony of Young Khmer Rouge Comrades, (DC-Cam: Phnom Penh, 2001)14.

benefits and the abstract notion of respect both helped young Cambodians to join the Khmer Rouge forces.

Finally, the last reason for joining voluntarily the Khmer Rouge and, according to Ben Kiernan and William Shawcross, the most significant one, was the extensive American bombings of the countryside. While this campaign had been started in 1969, it reached its climax in spring 1973, and subsequently dramatically increased the ranks of the revolutionary party.<sup>57</sup> Geographically, even if the Vietnamese Communists were concentrated on the two easternmost provinces of Cambodia, the bombing campaign covered the whole country as far as the Thai border. Every village or pocket of population was targeted, in some cases several times. These bombings had an immense effect on Cambodians who felt powerless in defending themselves against this threat from above. From their anger and desire for revenge, many decided to join the Khmer Rouge. Without intending to minimize the importance of this explanation, I argue that the actual range of motives for the growth of the Khmer Rouge was much broader..

The Khmer Rouge did not simply wait for Cambodians to volunteer in joining them. In fact, they spent a lot of energy and resources in trying to convince people to join their cause. Generally, the structure of the CPK, even before their victory, replicated the structure of the state. As a result, there were provincial, district and sub-district leaders. The most notable difference, however, was their creation of various Zones, each incorporating a few provinces and each requiring its own leader.<sup>58</sup> At the local level, the village chief assumed the same traditional functions, with two important distinctions:

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<sup>57</sup> Kiernan 2004: 390. Besides the increase in the number of recruits, Kiernan also put forth the argument that those bombings radicalized the Party in key provinces and that these new recruits mostly joined because of their hatred and desire for revenge, thus changing the face of the organization altogether.

<sup>58</sup> There were seven Zones in total: East, North, Northwest, Southwest, Western, Center and Northeast. See Kamboly Dy: 23.

first, he now had to be a member of the Khmer Rouge, thus had more authority with less autonomy, and second, he was in charge of recruitment. District and sub-district cadres were responsible for propaganda, and the village chief compiled the list of his villagers eligible to serve the revolution. Hence he had an important role both for the conduct of propaganda and, later, deciding which youth would be conscripted.<sup>59</sup>

Poverty and the worsening of the education system during the civil war both were powerful motivators since enrolling in the Khmer Rouge would not only provide income, but also training and employment for those who joined them. For example, a former Khmer Rouge using the pseudonym 'Mary' explained that most of the youths of her village joined the revolution to escape poverty: 'We were so poor at the time. We wanted to liberate ourselves from poverty, and voluntarily served the revolution.'<sup>60</sup> The significance of this message for the most destitute Cambodians is thus particularly relevant.

For many, becoming Khmer Rouge personnel provided a unique opportunity to benefit from otherwise unattainable privileges before, or even after, Democratic Kampuchea. For example, many young soldiers were sent to China to learn photography, driving or take other technical courses. For example, Mary went to China to learn 'telephone techniques' in 1977, but had to return to Cambodia after the arrest of her brother.<sup>61</sup> In Cambodia, many were able to attain positions of authority, while this type of social mobility had never been accessible in other political systems. Instead of a daily struggle against poverty, these Cambodians were instead well-fed and respected. Presently, despite the taboo and resentment against the Khmer Rouge regime, a few

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<sup>59</sup> Kiernan 1996: 54.

<sup>60</sup> Interview by Socheat Nhean, *Searching for the Truth*, Second Quarter 2005: 23.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid: 24.



former Khmer Rouge retrospectively consider that period as their highest accomplishment. As a former female cadre, Sun Sokha reflected upon her time in the Khmer Rouge:

When Sokha was a chief of an elderly unit, she seemed happy and proud. However, due to her current difficult living conditions, she had stopped thinking about the revolution. 'I have never been remorseful about my life in the revolution. But for some reason, I just have a bad feeling. I struggled in the past... and now I am poor.'<sup>62</sup>

The use of propaganda was also significant for persuading Cambodians to join their ranks. In response to the carpet bombings, the Khmer Rouge knew how to turn the peasants' misfortunes into an opportunity to gather a larger following. Their propaganda often evolved around those bombings as Cambodians deeply resented their effects, but the Khmer Rouge often varied their messages in order to convince different people.

Many Cambodians also believed that Sihanouk would return from to power in Phnom Penh after Lon Nol's defeat. In reality, after 1975, Sihanouk did not have any input in decision-making, and the Khmer Rouge never intended to share their power with him. In fact, after 1975, Sihanouk was indeed allowed to return, but only a hostage of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>63</sup> The Khmer Rouge were not solely responsible for this misinformation. Prince Sihanouk himself, from his base in China, enjoined Cambodians to join the struggle of what he believed to be a liberation movement trying to reinstate him in power. While such was the intention of many soldiers, this outcome was not achieved after their

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<sup>62</sup> Bun Sau Sour, Searching for the Truth, Number 23, November 2001: 22.

<sup>63</sup> Norodom Sihanouk, Shadow over Angkor: Volume One: Memoirs of HM King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, (Chiang Mai: Monument Books, 2005) 188.

victory. In fact, Sihanouk only provided free recruits and legitimacy to the forces that eventually destroyed the lives of so many Cambodians.

Beside the formal propaganda from the Khmer Rouge, the enticement of friends, family and social acceptance of the revolution were also important in persuading the youths of the countryside to join the Khmer Rouge. The support of these social agents sometimes made the difference between joining or not. In certain cases, the potential soldiers themselves did not need to be enticed into recruitment. If a significant number of villagers or important members in their family followed the revolutionary guidelines, they would in turn try to influence younger members of their groups. Considering the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of Cambodian society, in many cases the children did not object to the desires of their parents, particularly their fathers. However, it should be noted that a few youths decided to join against the wishes of their parents. This disobedience was possible because even the parents had to submit to a greater authority: the coercive nature of the Khmer Rouge.

So far, the previous motives were based on the choices of the young rural Cambodians, male and female, to join the Khmer Rouge, whether from their own desires or from their responses to propaganda. However, as the Khmer Rouge gained more control over territory, their recruitment tactics were increasingly coercive in nature. Young soldiers, at best, were 'nominated' to join the Khmer Rouge army. In other words, the Khmer Rouge effectively conscripted all the youths in a village to join them, regardless of their parents' or the youth's objections. More ominously, some were forced into joining under latent threats formulated against their family members remaining in the villages. In a village in Kandal province, in 1973, 'girls and boys between the ages of 13

and 18 were selected by their village chiefs to serve the Khmer Rouge revolution. They did not understand why they should do so. They just obeyed their chiefs who said: 'join the revolution to liberate the country.'<sup>64</sup>

The Khmer Rouge were able to blackmail children into joining because of their recruitment structure. As detailed earlier, the village chief also fulfilled the role of the authority responsible for registering children eligible to join the Khmer Rouge. However, in some cases, several children and teenagers, either fearing death or missing their families, decided to desert and return back to their houses. When the village chief eventually discovered them, they sent them back to the front, reminding them that he also had the authority to make life difficult for their parents. In the same village mentioned above, a girl named Im Chan left the battlefield after being ordered to guard corpses, but back in her village, the chief ordered her back to the front. As her father explained: 'If my daughter did not serve the revolution, she would be unable to escape death. All young women in the village were sent to the battlefield by the sub-district chief.'<sup>65</sup> Regardless of the motive or method for recruitment, it was very difficult to quit the Khmer Rouge revolutionary army.

In order to avoid the forcible recruitment of their children, particularly if some had already joined the Khmer Rouge, some parents enrolled them into monasteries. However, the Khmer Rouge had strict policies against the practice of religion, and eventually forcibly defrocked all monks. In some cases, the novice monks were defrocked and immediately forced to join the revolutionary army. Such was the case of Neth, a child monk who was forcibly defrocked, and sent to a school of politics in Phnom

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<sup>64</sup> Pivoine Pang, Searching for the Truth, Number 33, September 2002, 47.

<sup>65</sup> Pivoine Pang, Searching for the Truth, Number 33, September 2002, 48.

Penh; he was eventually recruited to sample the food of the Khmer Rouge elite before each meal in prevention of poisoning attempts.<sup>66</sup>

The different recruitment techniques and motives revealed an initial sketch of the complexity of the interplay of power and decision in the creation of an expanded Khmer Rouge apparatus. In some cases, being part of the Khmer Rouge corresponded to the fulfillment of their own desires. If they were eventually disillusioned with the regime, it does not change the fact that, with the knowledge available to them at that point in time, the majority chose to take part in the Khmer Rouge revolution. As the next section will address, the fulfillment of their expectations did not remain in their hands after they actually joined the Khmer Rouge.

### Expectations and Dissatisfaction

As soon as the Khmer Rouge claimed victory, the lives of Khmer Rouge members changed. Few were released from their units and sent back to their home villages. More commonly, they remained in their units and occupied various economic roles: mostly as farmers, but also as medical staff, factory workers, or otherwise in fishing units and salt production. A select few were sent in the small leadership or technical schools in Phnom Penh, or even in training abroad. Moreover, many continued as combatants, this time patrolling the cities, fields and borders, arresting suspects in their villages, guarding prisoners across the different security levels, including S-21, and finally, executing prisoners or any individuals selected by the Center or the local authorities. Regardless of their new role during Democratic Kampuchea, all these soldiers shared one thing in

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<sup>66</sup> Interview by Naroeun Chhay, Searching for the Truth, Fourth Quarter 2006, 25.

common: they were no longer masters of their own destinies, and their preferences were not allowed to interfere with *Angkar*'s design for each one of them.

Furthermore, beside their actual occupation, these former soldiers had to abide to strict code of conduct forbidding them to speak against *Angkar*, long for their families or things of the past, own property or even fall in love. In this restrictive living situation, they also had to submit to daily self-criticism sessions, during which any serious accusation, legitimate or not, from a fellow member may lead to an untimely death. Accordingly, some former Khmer Rouge considered themselves after that period as victims of the government, and were shocked with the treatment that they received from other Cambodians who were often blaming them for the loss of their loved ones.

Yet, as articulated by Alexander Hinton, displacing the blame on higher authorities could also be a convenient method for guilty Khmer Rouge to prevent persecution or judgment from their fellow Cambodians.<sup>67</sup> Hinton argued that it was more likely that while following these orders, some Khmer Rouge also chose to collaborate in order to fulfill their own desires. In fact, the combination of secrecy from the leaders and brutality gave local leaders impunity and power over the life and death of the Cambodians under their control, who could use the term '*Angkar*' to fulfill their own ends. Some former Khmer Rouge cited their desire for revenge or their anger for the former Lon Nol regime as motives to join the Khmer Rouge. The government exacerbated this hatred through propaganda and included urban populations in their definition of 'enemies.' The persecution of civilians, particularly high-ranking civilian or military officials, thus follows from the set of motives evoking revenge or hatred.

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<sup>67</sup> Alexander Hinton, 2005, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*: 295.

Still, some Khmer Rouge claimed that they were not aware of the extent of the people's suffering during the regime, or even did not realize that any of them had suffered. Man, a Khmer Rouge soldier serving as an interpreter for Chinese engineers, claimed that 'I did not notice how miserable the people were because I never faced a hard time. Once at a work site, after drinking coconut juice, we threw the coconut meat away, but I did not see the workers who picked them up to eat.'<sup>68</sup> Considering the scale and geographical extent of the killings, such a perspective seems quite unlikely. Yet, the Khmer Rouge made a conscious effort to pursue secrecy by conducting killings mostly at night and at some distance from the work camps, often under some false pretext of relocating the victims. A few Cambodians claimed to be unaware of the government's lethal side. Pol Pot's wife, Khieu Ponnary, provides a good, if surprising, example: even though she had been active politically during the civil war, she seemed to have succumbed to some mental illness in 1975 and lived in an isolated house for the duration of the regime. In most cases, these former soldiers probably used such claims to undermine their responsibility in the deaths of their compatriots. Still, exposure to the killings varied, as did the responsibility of these Khmer Rouge.

Finally, this overview of different motives or processes in joining the Khmer Rouge explicate how the behavior of members of the Khmer Rouge varied despite the existence of a totalitarian state with a rigid set of rules and punishments. Base and new people in Cambodia had repeatedly noticed differences in their living conditions with changes of the local leader. Some leaders and soldiers were often responsible for acts of cruelty against civilians beyond their orders. Yet, some base and new people noted that other Khmer Rouge leaders or soldiers were more humane, and indeed, a few admitted

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<sup>68</sup> Man, Searching for the Truth, Number 25, January 2002, 25.

that the direct intervention from these authorities saved their lives. As noted in the first chapter, this variation can be partially accounted for with the relative decentralization in Cambodia, but even within the same region or even village, important fluctuations occurred when there were changes in leadership. This chapter presented the hypothesis that the large array of motives and resulting expectations were a plausible explanation for such discrepancy. The recognition of the heterogeneity of the Khmer Rouge is necessary to understand the existence of a space of negotiation with certain leaders and appreciate the complexity of state-society interactions.

### Chapter 3- Shades of Compliance

The Khmer Rouge established a totalitarian government that was, by definition, particularly coercive in nature. As soon as they achieved victory, they immediately implemented radical measures of social revolution: evacuation of cities, relocation of urban and rural population to different areas of the countryside, destruction of religious symbols, currency, markets, identification documents, private property and any other aspect that could link their new subjects to their previous social or economic situation in the Lon Nol or Sihanouk regime. From the information that they collected from official documents and autobiographies, the Khmer Rouge began their first mass killings by eliminating former high-ranking civilians and military personnel. Vickery's depiction of the evacuation somehow glosses over the elimination of enemies and the atrocities of the evacuation, yet the majority of works describing that period of the regime and my own research refer to the massacres of Lon Nol officers and even the hunt of soldiers who first escaped their scrutiny.<sup>69</sup>

This chapter focuses on the new and base people's compliance with the Khmer Rouge under their repressive rule. Even when survivors took other decisions, or if their accounts did not refer to their cooperation to the regime, cooperation was a necessary prerequisite to life in this new Cambodia. While this chapter seeks to address the reality of the coercive apparatus and its effects on society, it also aims to present the agency of relatively disadvantaged groups in undermining the system of classification separating socio-economic groups in new social classes. The new and base people could undermine

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Vickery, 1984: 72-82.



this system by emulating (or at least attempting to perform) the behavior of the Khmer Rouge's desired subject population, concealing or assuming a different identity.

The first section of this chapter therefore documents the specific policies linked to the creation of new identities and the rights subsequently granted to each identity. Even though their classification of citizens seemed accurate and the rural-urban cleavage was considerable, a closer examination of each individual Cambodian's past history reveals that their complex identities often crossed those simplistic categorizations. The external appearance of cooperation often belied a voluntary and sometimes elaborate performance by many Cambodians to avoid attracting attention on themselves.

Following the overview of these Khmer Rouge policies, this chapter continues with a section on descriptions of the helplessness overcoming Cambodians during that period. Their interpretation of the regime is crucial to understand why they chose to adopt some behavior over another and how the lens of their previous beliefs informed their perspective of the regime. For instance, many survivors' accounts were using religious terminology to describe this unsettling situation. Finally, the last section elaborates on the precise strategies employed to perform the role of the expected revolutionary. These accounts from different regions in Cambodia will provide details on how Khmer Rouge social categories could be circumvented during the regime.

### Complete Social Transformation

Even more so than the advent of the Khmer Rouge, the nature of its revolution has been one of the most common themes for publication about Democratic Kampuchea.

Michael Vickery, for example, put forth the notion of a 'peasant revolution', since he did not consider the Khmer Rouge leaders as following appropriately the maxims of Communism.<sup>70</sup> As the title of his main work on Democratic Kampuchea mentions, Ben Kiernan rather believes that power and race were the most significant motivators behind developments of the Khmer Rouge regime. He noted that race and ethnicity under the Khmer Rouge have been overlooked by previous scholars and then argued that, along with internal struggle for power, 'Khmer Rouge conceptions of race often overshadowed those of class.'<sup>71</sup> He gives as example the fact that official propaganda claimed that the population was 99 percent of Khmer origin, thus overlooking a fifth of the population that did not share this Khmer ethnicity. Also, in Khmer Rouge leadership, racial lines took precedence over revolutionary credentials.

Interestingly, W.E. Willmot argues that the Khmer Rouge leadership has mistakenly overplayed the notion of class in rural Cambodia and downplayed ethnicity in rural-urban conflicts.<sup>72</sup> From his analysis of Pol Pot's 1977 Party Anniversary speech and Khieu Samphan's PhD dissertation, he argues that these leaders generalized the relative rural inequalities from the province of Battambang to the rest of Cambodia and blindly applied principles from other revolutionary context such as Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union. In fact, unlike its neighbors, the Cambodian countryside suffered little from rural landlordism, and French scholar Jean Delvert even deemed pre-civil war Cambodia 'an almost perfect rural Democracy.' While this enthusiastic description might

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<sup>70</sup> Micheal Vickery, Cambodia: 1975-1982, (Boston: South End Press, 1984) 289-290.

<sup>71</sup> Kiernan 1996: 251.

<sup>72</sup> W.E. Willmot, 'Analytical Errors of the Kampuchean Communist Party,' in *Pacific Affairs*, 54-2, Summer 1981: 209-227.

not be exactly correct, Willmot rather locates the agrarian problem in the exploitative relationship between the rural merchant, usually Chinese, and the Khmer farmers.

Willmot concludes that this error led the Khmer Rouge leadership to force policies to address this perceived inequality between landlords and peasants and interpret the massive support from rural Cambodians during the civil war as the validation of their hypothesis –even if the reasons were in fact quite unrelated. This mistaken mandate emboldened the Khmer Rouge leaders to implement brutal measures that were also immensely unpopular amongst the very people who were supposed to benefit from them.

The views presented above discuss the relative importance of ethnicity and class in Khmer Rouge ideology, but regardless of their comparative importance, both identities of Cambodians during the Lon Nol regime reflected the hierarchy of their status in Democratic Kampuchea. This section explores the implication of the existence of such a hierarchy and its repercussions on the behavior of Cambodians: as ‘base’ or ‘old’ people were favored by the regime and consequentially suffered less, the ‘new’ people therefore strove to be considered as base people in order to enjoy more rights and increase their chances of survival. From this need arose the decision of concealing their identities.

As the first published book on the subject of Democratic Kampuchea, Francois Ponchaud’s *Cambodge Année Zéro* already made reference to the existence of a hierarchy from interviews of refugees. He noticed the basic division of society: ‘First and foremost, the ‘people’ (*pracheachon*) are factory workers and peasants. [...] Those whose behaviour is detrimental to the people, or even Khmers Rouges who make mistakes, are called ‘sub-people’ (*anoupracheachon*). This goes some way to explain why the townspeople have

been treated so harshly: they weren't real part of the people.'<sup>73</sup> This definition refers to the most basic delimitation of the social classes in Cambodia, and touches upon the issue of their differential treatment in the eyes of the Khmer Rouge leadership. In other works, Ponchaud's 'people' are often referred to with various synonyms such as the 'old people', the 'base people', 'the ancients', and other related terms. As for the 'sub-people', they were more often referred to as 'new people' or 'April 17<sup>th</sup> people', from the date of liberation.

A second type of hierarchy may have operated along 'racial' or ethnic lines as well. Kiernan in particular developed his work on that aspect of the Khmer Rouge regime. The Khmer Rouge did not merely intend to promote a 'Khmer race' at the detriment of other ethnic groups, since Khmers were quite as likely as members of another ethnic group to suffer or perish during the regime. The aim of these statements could have been the promotion of Cambodian nationalism or, even more so, a concept of unity that could be traced back in Angkorian times. In fact, according to several sources, the only groups to apparently benefit from a favorable bias during the regime were mountainous tribes of Northeastern Cambodia: the Khmer Rouge leadership seemed personally grateful for their assistance during the infancy stages of the revolution and Pol Pot only trusted them as personal bodyguards.<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, *Angkar* clearly singled out some ethnic groups for displacement or execution. In relation with its conflict with Vietnam, the governing party specifically targeted ethnic groups associated with this country. More precisely, the

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<sup>73</sup> François Ponchaud, *Cambodia Year Zero*, (Allen Lane: London, 1978) 108-109.

<sup>74</sup> Also referred to as 'highland Khmers' or '*Khmer loeu*'. Philip Short (2004) *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*: 171.

Vietnamese were either deported to Vietnam or completely executed from Cambodia.<sup>75</sup> Correspondingly, another group known as the Khmer Krom was also targeted.<sup>76</sup> However, whether other ethnic groups like the Chams or the Chinese were also subject to targeted persecution from *Angkar* or were simply caught like all Cambodians in the CPK's radical policies is more debated amongst researchers of the period.<sup>77</sup>

Acknowledging this clear difference in treatment, many Cambodians from different ethnic groups also sought to use their complex identities in order to escape persecution based on ethnicity. In other words, many Cambodians had a mixed ethnic heritage from intermarriage, most often between Khmer and Chinese, but also between Khmers and Vietnamese, Lao or Thai. However, due to the often imposed nature of ethnic identities, the option of assuming the identity of a different ethnic group was less frequent than the possibility of dissimulating one's socio-economic origin.

### Powerlessness and Beliefs

The Tuol Sleng security prison in Phnom Penh represents a ghastly aspect of the regime, where around 17,000 Cambodians, mostly Khmer Rouge members, lost their lives after being interrogated, tortured and then finally executed in the outskirts of the city. Yet this cause of death during the Khmer Rouge represents less than 0.1 percent of the casualty figure during this period. Typically, in the words of Kiernan, 'cynical deception and stupefying violence' were the means used to execute enemies of the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> The Khmer Krom are ethnic Cambodians who lived in the former Cambodian territory of the Lower Mekong Delta, but which was eventually annexed and colonized by the Vietnamese.

<sup>77</sup> An example of the debate on the importance of ethnicity on Khmer Rouge policy is examined further in the next chapter on the topic of the Cham rebellion.

regime.<sup>78</sup> Mostly after dark, executors selected the victims for ‘relocation’, only to lead them to a forest or grove near their village and work camps for a crude execution using agricultural implements, clubs or knives to save precious bullets. Most Cambodians were thus eliminated outside the knowledge of their loved ones. Yet death also came in the form of disease, starvation and overwork. Many perished in hospitals or collapsed on the worksite, much to the indifference of the local Khmer Rouge leaders and soldiers. With time, this indifference, or rather resignation, even spread to the victims’ relatives, as death was now becoming common and expected. In fact, some parents even expressed a distressing relief at the death of the few newborns during the regime, considering that death was preferable to life in that hated regime.

Considering that 80 percent of Cambodians were Buddhists of the Theravada faith in 1975, this religious background was likely to impact the response to the government for some survivors. For instance, a few noted that despite having a burning desire to revolt or kill Khmer Rouge soldiers, their belief in karma prevented them to take such actions. For example, an interviewee using the pseudonym *Look Tha* (grandfather), a former villager now refugee in the United States, recalled that ‘even if I was angry with the Pol Pots, I never said or did anything to get revenge; if I did so, I would also be bad like them. I believed that if I had acted badly in a previous life, something bad will happen to me in this life. But if in a previous life I had not killed, stolen or done bad things to other people, I would escape being killed by the Pol Pots.’<sup>79</sup>

On the other hand, not all Cambodian Buddhists expressed the effect of religious beliefs on decisions and actions. For instance, while she felt the same anger towards the

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<sup>78</sup> Kiernan: 4.

<sup>79</sup> Usha Welartna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 58.

Khmer Rouge, Nya Srey, a young housewife who also emigrated to the United States, reasoned that ‘I felt very angry and revengeful then, but there was nothing I could do; I didn’t want to be killed.’<sup>80</sup> For that reason, religious causality should not be overplayed, but it still influenced many Cambodians’ perception of the regime and their choice of behavior under those trying circumstances.

An aspect of Cambodian Buddhism in particular had an important impact on their perception of the regime. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Puth, a Buddhist monk, allegedly made a prophecy about terrifying events that would occur in the future in Cambodia. This ‘Puth Prophecy’ related to the sudden empowerment of *thmils*, who would unleash untold sufferings, death and hunger, upon the Khmer people. The latter would be caught between ‘tigers and crocodiles’ (thought to refer to the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese). Besides apocalyptic premonitions, this prophecy also came with guidelines for survival: those who knew how to plant a ‘kapok tree’ would be able to survive. Samnom Sarot recalled that ‘my grandmother uttered a saying: ‘We have houses and roads, but no one lives in or walks on them. People fight to get a single grain of rice sticking on a dog’s tail... Grandchildren, you must grow sesame and kapok trees. When it’s time to run, run to the Northeast to have peace.’ Planting kapok means do not answer when you are asked, and growing sesame refers to stupidity.’<sup>81</sup> This old saying based on the previously mentioned prophecy found many echoes throughout Cambodia, hence obedience to the regime could be seen not only as an expected reaction, but also as a reflexive decision informed by some Cambodians’ beliefs.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid: 212.

<sup>81</sup> Samnom Marilin, Searching for the Truth, Number 24, December 2001, 44.

## Obedience and Volunteering

Arising from the existence of this pervasive violence and repression, obedience to the Khmer Rouge seemed to be the only possible way to survive during Democratic Kampuchea. Chan Yim, an elderly housewife at the service of Northern Zone leader, considered her life as ‘water in a piece of broken cup, which could spill easily.’<sup>82</sup> She added in the same interview that only eight among a hundred midwives saw the end of the regime. She also claimed that she succeeded to survive because she insisted to eat at Ke Pauk’s table, and only repeated what she was instructed to during the meetings.

Ung Vuth, another midwife working under the service of Ta Mok, voluntarily left Phnom Penh in the early seventies to practice as a nurse for the Khmer Rouge.<sup>83</sup> For half of the regime, the village, sub-district and district chiefs particularly respected her as a diligent worker who did not report any deaths during her service. Ta Mok even personally arranged her wedding. Yet, despite her hard work, she was sent to Sanlong Prison in the south of country after her parents were accused of treason. She eventually lost all of her twelve relatives under the Khmer Rouge.

Kuch Van, an elderly woman living close to the Vietnamese border, reported being tempted in crossing to the other side, a feat that she witnessed many of her neighbors achieve.<sup>84</sup> She nevertheless maintained that the Khmer Rouge would kill her family in retribution if she succeeded to take refuge in Vietnam. She summarized her life under the Khmer Rouge as such: ‘I ate according to what they gave me, I never stole

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<sup>82</sup> Bunsou Sour and Sopha Ly, Searching for the Truth, First Quarterly Issue, April 2003, 14. Ta Mok was the leader of the most radical zone during the Khmer Rouge, the Southwest Zone, and one of Pol Pot’s most loyal followers until the end of the nineties.

<sup>83</sup> Sopha Ly, Seaching for the Truth, Number 18, June 2001, 46.

<sup>84</sup> Kalyann Sann, Searching for the Truth, First Quarter Issue 2004, 32.



since I was scared of being killed, tortured or criticized. I obeyed, so I am still alive.’<sup>85</sup>

The previous stories and this last example summarize the life and the attitude of a significant number of Cambodians towards the Khmer Rouge. These Cambodians obeyed all the rules to avoid retribution, and attribute this decision to their survival. Yet, as following examples illustrate, obedience was often not sufficient to live through the regime. The previously quoted Cambodians were all base people, who faced food scarcity, but not starvation; threat of death, but not systematic execution.

The ‘volunteers’, Cambodians who decided to work *even more* than required, already challenged the assumption that strict obedience was the only existing or valid attitude to adopt with the Khmer Rouge. For example, Nguon Saing Ly, a student from Phnom Penh, was relocated in Kandal province after 1975.<sup>86</sup> Like other new people evacuees, he was assigned to farm rice; however, he volunteered to work in the much despised ‘number one fertilizer unit’, which consisted of collecting human feces from latrines in order to produce fertilizers for the rice fields. He took this decision because he observed that, despite the disgust inspired by this task, the work was actually much less demanding than toiling in the fields. At the same time, the authorities would favorably remember this kind of initiative.

However, Pin Yathay warned against the danger of working more in order to win the favors of the Khmer Rouge leaders. He noticed that in his work camp in the jungle of Kampong Chhnang province, the first casualties claimed by the harsh working conditions were not women or the elderly, but rather healthy, well-built men. He concluded that, in

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ly Sambath, Searching for the Truth, Second Quarter 2007, 54.

their anxiousness to demonstrate their loyalty to the regime, they often surpassed their limits and were never able to recover with the limited food supplies.<sup>87</sup>

Pin also demonstrated another rationale for volunteering. Freedom of movement was strictly prohibited under the new regime, but sometimes, the leaders had to select some of their people for relocation in other areas of the country. In order to perform those selections, they often asked for volunteers, hence opened the door for opportunities: new people were then confronted with choices. The leaders provided little information about the new location, and those who chose to volunteer had to estimate the chances of having a better livelihood (less work, more food) according to the new location. As a result, Pin volunteered twice for relocation, as both locations were leading him closer to the Thai border, his ultimate goal for escape.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Hour Chea, another refugee, volunteered to work in the jungle, because he thought that he would be able to pick more food in the forest than relying on the minute portions offered in the villages.<sup>89</sup> He was able to withstand the dangers of the jungle for a while, but eventually succumbed to malaria and had to return to the village.

### The Performance of Compliance

As detailed in the first section, the Khmer Rouge had precise policies regarding the classification of the diverse social identities. Before the advent of Democratic Kampuchea, educated and uneducated Cambodians composed two very distinct societies. Kiernan addressed this division in economic terms: ‘one rural, producing for subsistence,

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<sup>87</sup> Pin Yathay: 127.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Hour Chea, Quatre ans avec les Khmer Rouges, (Paris : Tchou, 2007) 74.

the other largely urban, producing a few goods for the world market and consuming mostly international commodities. Rice growers provided food for the city dwellers, but the cities offered little for rural consumption.’<sup>90</sup> Milton Osborne was also aware of the discrepancy between both societies when he realized that ‘villages [...] were a world I could not penetrate’, even after having allegedly visited them hundreds of times.<sup>91</sup> During his work in Cambodia and historical research in the fifties and sixties, he was well acquainted with many urbanites, yet still considered village life as foreign.

Perhaps a telling sign of the discrepancy between both groups was the language. In fact, the Khmer language, besides variations in accents in different provinces, has a different vocabulary associated with the rural and the urban portions of the population. In addition to differences in Khmer, educated urbanites were often instructed in French, the face of colonization in Cambodia. Even after independence, French continued as an elite language and persisted through various schools. Furthermore, the French government offered scholarship to a few university students to pursue their higher education in France.

Accordingly, many educated Cambodians attempted to conceal their education in order to avoid being subjected to the harsh treatment imposed on the new people, or the execution of those who did not display sufficient ‘change’ to this new revolutionary lifestyle. They either did so by hiding their class or their urban origin.

Meng Reaksmey’s father, occupying an important position in the Ministry of Agriculture, pretended on the day of the invasion to be merely a chauffeur for the

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<sup>90</sup> Kiernan 1996: 5.

<sup>91</sup> Milton Osborne, *Before Kampuchea: Preludes to a Tragedy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2004) 128.

Ministry and drove a commander around Phnom Penh.<sup>92</sup> When he was gathering necessary medicine from a pharmacy, he polished his story by claiming that he needed to know how to use anti-malarial medicine when driving officials to the jungles. Pin Yathay similarly downplayed his role in the Ministry of Public Works, referring to his previous position as a technician.<sup>93</sup> He also started to introduce himself as Thay, in fear of being recognized by name.

If the identity of high-level ministry workers was dangerous, the threat of execution was imminent for the former high-level military officers. Serey Len Deour's father, a lieutenant-colonel in the Lon Nol Republican army, tried to hide his identity as a high-ranking member of the army by pretending to be a former basketball coach.<sup>94</sup> However, his attempt was short-lived, as within a month, his real identity was uncovered and he was subsequently executed. As both types of positions, high-ranking ministerial or military officials, were more liable for persecution and execution, they tried to associate their identity with lower-class occupations, in an attempt to appeal to leniency from the Khmer Rouge cadres.

However, they did not try to hide their urban and educated background, thus were nevertheless considered as new people. The danger of concealing their identities was very high: many Cambodians knew who they were and could denounce them; the Khmer Rouge intelligence apparatus retrieved employee rosters and compared them with the information gathered by local cadres. Yet until such evidence would present itself, urban evacuees had the benefit of doubt in relation with their former rank in the urban centers. As Sok Suong, a villager from Pursat, lamented: 'At that time we could not lie to [the

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<sup>92</sup> Meng Reaksmey, *Searching for the Truth*, Fourth Quarter 2004, 43.

<sup>93</sup> Pin Yathay, *L'extraordinaire récit d'un rescapé de l'enfer Cambodgien*, (Paris: l'Archipel, 1987) 78.

<sup>94</sup> Serey Len Deour, *Searching for the Truth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2004, 54-59.

Khmer Rouge] because the chief and I lived in the same village. He knew my family's background well. Those evacuated from Phnom Penh could hide their backgrounds as no one knew them.'<sup>95</sup> His envy towards the former city dwellers is understandable: his wife was a Khmer Krom, and consequently, he lost her and his daughter during Khmer Rouge executions of the members of this ethnicity in 1978.

In relation with identity, ethnic identities were also significant, and members of different minority groups also had to dissimulate their background. For instance, Ma Khin Me was a Khmer Kola, a Cambodian of Burmese descent from the west of the country.<sup>96</sup> She remembered that the village chief informed her that she would be executed if she was heard speaking Kola, even with her children. From barely knowing Khmer, her children could not remember their mother tongue by the end of the regime. Yet, she added that the Khmer Rouge were not persecuting the Kolas, because 'they trusted the Kolas' integrity.'<sup>97</sup> Her story would support the argument that a hierarchy between ethnicities was indeed in place in Democratic Kampuchea, but she is refuting that her ethnic group was particularly mistreated as a group.

The Khmer Krom and the Vietnamese were not as fortunate. Chay Kim, another Khmer married to a Khmer Krom, lived in Kandal province before the Khmer Rouge, but was relocated in Pursat with many Khmer Kroms during the regime.<sup>98</sup> Unlike Sok Suong though, she knew that the Khmer Rouge were planning to execute all Khmer Krom. During a meeting, when the Khmer Rouge officials divided the Khmers and the Khmer Krom, she pretended to be a Khmer Krom: she wanted to die with her husband and her

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<sup>95</sup> Dany Long, Searching for the Truth, First Quarter 2005, 22.

<sup>96</sup> Sophal Ly, Searching for the Truth, Third Quarter 2005, 18.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*:20.

<sup>98</sup> Kannith Keo Kim, Searching for the Truth, Number 36, December 2002, 25.

seven children. She even defied her husband in taking this decision. However, during the meeting, her husband stood up and said: 'My wife is not a Khmer Krom. May I leave her in your care? If she survives, please look after her.'<sup>99</sup> Many witnesses confirmed his claim, and while her husband was taken away for execution, Chay Kim survived with all her children. Her story represents the opposite example of Khmers who assumed the identity of minorities for various reasons. Other Khmers from Kompong Som (Sihanoukville) pretended to be Vietnamese in order to be deported to Vietnam, although their fate after being taken from the village is not known.<sup>100</sup>

Din Oeun, a Khmer woman married to a Vietnamese, also recalled how her husband was taken for execution: 'I think that they killed my husband because they learned about him through the statistics each village collected. I never told anyone my husband was a Yuon; they knew it themselves'.<sup>101</sup> Even before the Khmer Rouge victory, she was trying to convince her husband to leave for Vietnam, but he refused, saying that 'I am happy to live and die here.'<sup>102</sup> This last story illustrates that although it was difficult for one to dissimulate his or her ethnic identity, there was nevertheless a choice involved in choosing to seek refuge in other countries.

The previous examples began to challenge the simplicity of identities as seen by the Khmer Rouge. For the ethnic identities, the frequency of intermarriage blurred the lines between ethnic groups for married couples, and even more so for their children. Marriages between Khmers and Chinese were quite common in the cities, but not all cases specify the origin of their parents. Thus any division based on ethnicity was

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid: 26.

<sup>100</sup> Moeung Sonn, *Prisoner of the Khmer Rouge*, (Paris: Fayard, 1993), 46.

<sup>101</sup> Interview by Dany Long, *Searching for the Truth*, Number 33, Sept. 2002, 45. The word 'Yuon' is slang Khmer term to designate Vietnamese people.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

arbitrary. For example, Neou Kim Ann, a Khmer villager from Kampong Cham, was refused a position in a special unit under a ministry because he had 'a Vietnamese name.'<sup>103</sup> Whether the CPK dictated policies according to ethnic groups or local authorities influenced their decisions on previous racist biases, the real complexity of ethnic identities in Cambodia proved to be a deterrent to such reductive categorization and a possibility for some Cambodians to adapt their identity to the situation.

While there was indeed an important cleavage between urban and rural groups, these geographical divisions were debatable. First of all, as mentioned earlier, the population of Phnom Penh consisted overwhelmingly of rural refugees escaping bombardments and fighting on the ground, yet they were all considered as new people at the same level as urbanites. Second, the classification of these 'new people' encompassed rural territory still under the control of Lon Nol forces prior to April 17<sup>th</sup> 1975. This division did not correlate with the villagers' allegiance in contrast to the proximity of those territories to major cities and roads, thus easier to defend for the motorized Lon Nol army. Finally, there was a lot of rural-urban migration, hence many urbanites were former villagers who sometimes were able to climb social ranks. Such were the stories of the published memoirs of Pin Yathay, Hour Chea and Moeung Sonn, who all came from modest backgrounds, but could attain French scholarships to continue their higher education in France. They then enjoyed high positions in the capital upon their return.

Even without foreign education, before the Khmer Rouge regime, some Cambodians were able to enrich themselves and move to the urban centers while retaining their possessions in the countryside. Hence, many evacuees from Phnom Penh, even those who had migrated permanently, often aimed to return to their home villages,

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<sup>103</sup> Neou Kim Ann, Searching for the Truth, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2005, 22.

where many of their relatives were often still living. Those familial links often transcended class or urban-rural cleavages and were therefore meaningful in those evacuees' survival. These numerous fault lines running through Khmer Rouge's identity policies produced many injustices and simultaneously allowed many urban evacuees to use their knowledge from their rural roots to survive the regime by retracing their own personal histories, often linked with the Cambodian peasants.

The arbitrary reclassification of post-revolutionary society into different identities disadvantaged greatly the poor peasants who found refuge in cities, the only places spared from bombings during the civil war. For example, the population of Phnom Penh swelled from 400,000 in 1970 to two million in 1975.<sup>104</sup> Yet, the Khmer Rouge considered those refugees at the same level as other urbanites. Unlike the latter though, they did not enjoy remnants from past economic benefits.<sup>105</sup> At the same time, some of these refugees negotiated with Khmer Rouge and base people to convince them of their humble origins.

In order to study further the limits of class cleavages, we need to delve in the complex relationship between members of each 'class' under the Khmer Rouge found in most of the interviews. As these previously segregated groups had to live either in the same village or in nearby locations, they had frequent interactions, albeit initially rarely cordial ones. The base people viewed the newcomers with suspicion, and the Khmer Rouge did its best to bring the worst out of their perception of the 'new people'. On their side, the urbanites, beside a possible prejudice against the villagers, generally viewed them as active and willing participants of the revolution.

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<sup>104</sup> Kiernan 1994: 48.

<sup>105</sup> See Chapter 6



With time, some tensions subsided, but in their shared plight and increased mutual understanding, many of their relationships improved. Soun Seyla, coming from a middle-class family from Battambang, witnessed how her father succeeded to improve their situation by interacting with the villagers:

After my father created strong bonds with the base people of Ta Siev, we were in a much better position than other April 17 families. Eventually, we became base people because our family got on with them very well. The village chief Kean loved my family a lot. This caused some base families to become jealous, but they could not make trouble for us. We were allowed to have a few possessions – we owned land and a house, which was very rare for those in April 17 class.<sup>106</sup>

This chapter aimed to address the issue of compliance, as dictated through the inflexible terms set by the Khmer Rouge. However, the various examples illustrated both the complexity of the responses to Khmer Rouge rules and imperatives as well as the complexity (or superficiality) of their own ethnic and social identities. While repression, harsh living conditions and arbitrary executions plagued their lives, many Cambodians' religious belief also instructed them on the best course of actions in those difficult times, rather than being only passive agents from a persecuting force. The Khmer Rouge's reductive associations created injustices and allowed some of the new people to attain better positions by being able to emulate peasant behavior.

Finally, while compliance was often seen as the wisest choice under the Khmer Rouge, a quote from Ma Khin Me points to its possible insufficiency: '[...] The Kolas dared not rebel against *Angkar*. Because they did everything *Angkar* told them to, most Kolas died as a result of insufficient food, also, they were not good at seeking food

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<sup>106</sup> Soun Seyla, *Searching for the Truth*, First Quarter Issue 2005, 53.

[sic].<sup>107</sup> From this logic, unwavering obedience is associated with failure, and this conclusion led many Cambodians to take more antagonistic approaches, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid: 20.

## Chapter 4-Resistance: Disobedience and Rebellion

In addressing the topic of resistance in Southeast Asia, James Scott's thesis from his work *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* seems particularly relevant. This pertinence applies to this chapter, since Scott also argued for the importance of everyday resistance in creating significant outcomes, in contrast to rarer and unfortunate peasant rebellions and uprisings.<sup>108</sup> However, Kiernan replied that this type of resistance would only have been possible during Democratic Kampuchea if Cambodian peasants were '*being left alone with an adequate subsistence.*'<sup>109</sup> By this assertion, he implied that Cambodian peasants and new people were unable to resist in traditional ways since they were under surveillance and were deprived of adequate food supplies. I also agree that the extraordinary circumstances of the Democratic Kampuchea period prevented the usual means of everyday resistance, yet everyday resistance still existed in other forms that acknowledged the constant surveillance and harsh punishments, because such resistance provided another successful way to acquire sufficient subsistence.

The difference arises from a contextual understanding of the concept of 'resistance' as applied to that period. As Kiernan rightly pointed out, the circumstances of Democratic Kampuchea prevented most attempts of *traditional* resistance otherwise witnessed in Cambodia under other regimes. However, the near absence of traditional resistance under Scott's definition or even in a more 'Western' understanding did not signify that resistance did not occur during the Khmer Rouge regime. For this research, I

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<sup>108</sup> Scott, James C. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xv-xvi.

<sup>109</sup> Kiernan 1996: 214.

defined resistance simply as *any intentional and voluntary infringement of rules set by Angkar*. As a result, I recorded the large extent of disobedience predominantly motivated by the lack of food in several regions.

The first part of this chapter examines the implementation of agricultural policies and reviews the roots for the devastating outcome of mass starvation. In yet another tragic irony of the regime, even if agricultural production lay at the core of the Khmer Rouge's economic policies, the agricultural output actually decreased in comparison with the national rice production during the civil war.

During the first year of the regime, Cambodians already noticed the scarcity in the availability of food and medicine. Fortunately, the negative effects from the Khmer Rouge's agricultural and trade policies were temporarily withstood with the remaining provisions from the Lon Nol regime. However, those supplies were limited and starvation soon took its toll on the overworked Cambodians, who were also forbidden to own or even collect any food source. In fact, the situation became so difficult that cooperation alone was often not sufficient for survival: despite the threat of harsh physical punishment, many Cambodians disobeyed in order to secure enough food for themselves.

The next section of this chapter follows how the failing macro-economic policies and the limited access of food for most Cambodians led some of them to disobey in order to alleviate starvation. An important aspect in securing more food, trade with the base people or the Khmer Rouge, will be discussed in details in the last chapter. The different interviews revealed that the scale of such disobedience was almost as extensive as the cooperation with the regime, and in many cases, simultaneous.

The last part of this chapter discusses the most threatening instances of resistance, manifested in several spontaneous rebellions, conspiracies and the creation of anti-Khmer Rouge forces. This first aspect of subsistence-motivated small-scale disobedience ought to be differentiated with the large-scale rebellions aimed at overthrowing the government. From the existing literature on the topic, the second aspect will analyze the implications of previous hypotheses by contrasting the data compiled for this research.

### Economic Failures and Starvation

Agricultural production featured prominently in the leaders of the Khmer Rouge's agenda. Pol Pot's speech during the Party's Anniversary in 1977 summarized the Khmer Rouge ideology: 'We take agriculture as the basic factor and use the fruits of agriculture to systematically build industry in order to advance toward rapidly transforming a Cambodia marked by a backward agriculture into a Cambodia marked by a modernized agriculture.'<sup>110</sup> Misleadingly, this project of 'modernization' only involved manual labor and natural fertilizer, thus avoided the use of mechanized and industrial agricultural techniques. The Khmer Rouge only aimed at an increase in the output of the most important food source, rice, and they implemented this objective through the evacuation of the urbanites to the countryside and their participation in farm work, massive irrigation projects across the country and jungle clearing to increase the extent of agricultural land.

In order to maximize labor for rice production, the Khmer Rouge divided the population into cooperative units and mobile work unit. They prohibited all private

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<sup>110</sup> Charles H. Twining, "The Economy", in Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989) 110.

ownership, and by the end of 1975, introduced communal eating throughout the country. The working cooperatives, each representing a single village or work camp, regrouped around fifty up to five hundred workers.<sup>111</sup> In the middle of the regime, the size of cooperative substantially grew in order to encompass a few villages. Each worker had to complete a certain quota per day, according to the season and his function: sowing grains, planting seedlings, harvesting rice, digging earth, carrying stones, collecting human or animal waste, amongst other things.

Other than sedentary farmers -married adults and elderly Cambodians- teenagers and children were typically enrolled in mobile work units. These working groups were broadly organized like military units and affected to different projects across a certain sub-district or district. The type of work expected from them tended to vary, although it mostly consisted of digging canals or building dams throughout the duration of the regime. For both types of workers, the idyllic rhythm of work associated with farmers was rather replaced with an industrial requirement of constant activity, without pause.<sup>112</sup>

With the increased workforce and incessant work, one could expect at least an increase in production. Yet, Twining estimated that the actual production in fact decreased to about *half* the amount produced in the troubled times of the early seventies.<sup>113</sup> Jeffery Himel cites, among many reasons, that the Khmer Rouge substituted the several varieties of rice naturally growing in Cambodia with a homogenous 'high-yielding' variety of rice from China unsuitable for the soil and geography of all regions

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid: 127.

<sup>112</sup> Twining: 131-132.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.: 144.

of Cambodia.<sup>114</sup> Another significant reason for the failure of rice growth, according to Himel, referred to the absence of imported insecticides and fertilizers. In fact, each cooperative had to collect its own human or animal waste in order to produce fertilizers, which indeed helped the growth of rice, but not sufficiently when compared to chemical fertilizers. Pertaining to the issue of pesticides, Hour Chea recalled that because rats and other pests were eating their crops, two persons every hour for each night were selected to make loud noises while walking through the fields in order to chase the rats away.<sup>115</sup>

This extensive construction of the dams and canals during the regime should have improved in the water distribution system in Cambodia. In fact, ‘in an inventory of Cambodian irrigation systems conducted in 1993-1994, fully 79% of the schemes had been constructed in the short period of Democratic Kampuchea’.<sup>116</sup> This achievement occurred during the four short years of the regime and surpassed quantitatively all other projects in Cambodian history. Yet, *qualitatively* these projects could not withstand Cambodia’s annual flooding season, and many were destroyed at worst, unusable at best. Himel detailed other technical mistakes made by the Khmer Rouge, objecting to take heed of advice from engineers of the ancient regime, but rather encouraging local leaders to undertake large irrigation projects through ‘trial and error’.<sup>117</sup> The exclusive use of manual labor and local soil to build dams, often on flat land, rendered them vulnerable to erosion and of marginal utility.<sup>118</sup> Overall, the massive irrigation projects were a minimal

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<sup>114</sup> Jeffrey Himel, “Khmer Rouge Irrigation Development in Cambodia”, Searching for the Truth, First Quarter 2007: 44-45.

<sup>115</sup> Hour Chea: 92.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*: 44.

<sup>117</sup> Himel: 48.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*: 49.

success, but considering the amount of labor, and victims, of these large-scale works, the irrigation projects cost much more than what they produced.

Before these failures in planning and implementation, Communist collective farming already had a poor record in other countries prior to the Khmer Rouge. The first such program in USSR before the Second World War was imposed on unwilling peasants with massive purges and persecutions for resistance. Yet the Communist Party dropped the program after realizing its inefficiency. Maoist China suffered a similar fate in the late fifties and early sixties with the equally tragic ‘Great Leap Forward,’ which particularly influenced Pol Pot’s agricultural policy. Again, after massive loss of human lives resulting from starvation, such program was dropped. In neighboring Vietnam, the Communist Party sustained its collectivization during the war, but the regime collapsed soon after the reunification of the country.<sup>119</sup> However, the Khmer Rouge did not learn from those historical and monumental mistakes and rather tried to surpass those experiments through even more radical measures.

Democratic Kampuchea’s trade practices further exacerbated the food problem. Despite the country’s restricted foreign policy and claims of economic independence, the Khmer Rouge still relied on China and North Korea for military hardware, technicians and foreign currency.<sup>120</sup> In 1977, the leaders of the Khmer Rouge boasted having sold 100,000 tons of rice to Yugoslavia, Madagascar and Hong Kong.<sup>121</sup> Sometimes,

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<sup>119</sup> Kerkvliet 2005: 1.

<sup>120</sup> Kiernan 1996: 376.

<sup>121</sup> Kiernan: 380.



Democratic Kampuchea even offered rice in the form of aid to other socialist and African countries.<sup>122</sup>

Finally, new people's access of food was more linked to food distribution than food production. Even with a diminished input in rice, Cambodians might have substituted that lack from other vegetables or meat. However, *Angkar* was meant to provide all food and the cooperative was responsible for distributing it, while private property or seeking other sources of food was forbidden. Members of a cooperative thus received a uniform amount of food in the form of rice or rice gruel.<sup>123</sup> The rice was measured in a milk tin, which Twining estimated to a daily average of approximately 250 grams.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, while the unit of measurement remained the same, more persons had to share those already insufficient rations. For instance, during his stay in the jungle in Pursat, Pin Yathay noticed that the daily ration decreased from a tin for four persons to a tin for six persons within a few weeks in 1975.<sup>125</sup>

While in the previous chapter some informants attributed their survival to their unwavering obedience, others rather believed in the necessity of disobedience. Nya Srey, for instance, was unable to work during the regime due to sickness and received only a portion of the already meager daily rations, but 'when [her children] managed to steal some rice, [her son] ground it secretly and [her] daughter winnowed it with her hands.'<sup>126</sup> She thus concluded: 'I survived because of my children.' Even more so, she survived

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<sup>122</sup> For example, the country gave 3,000 tons of rice to the new Communist government empowered in Laos in 1975.

<sup>123</sup> This amount was uniform for the members of a cooperative, but it fluctuated between cooperatives. Many accounts noted that the daily allocation of rice gruel reduced during the regime. Also, the allocation also varied in function of a person's age or health, with the sickest being entitled to smaller rations.

<sup>124</sup> Twining: 150.

<sup>125</sup> Yathay: 124.

<sup>126</sup> Nya Srey, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 206.

because they repeatedly transgressed the rules of *Angkar* in their quest for food, as many other Cambodians also decided to do.

### The Necessity and Forms of Disobedience

Disobedience was not only linked to the necessity to gather more food, but also the physiological despair resulting from malnourishment. Consequently, a number of accounts elaborated on the urge to get enough food, regardless of the risks involved. For example, Sim Soth was involved in an incident when he stole porridge in front a passing cadre:

I could no longer control my hunger, and took a few spoons of porridge and swallowed them. The unit chief Touch gave me a hard kick and shouted: ‘Seeing I was eating you wanted to do so? Want to breathe your last breath?’<sup>127</sup>

Disobedience took many forms. Many transgressed *Angkar*’s rigid and cruel rules by benefiting from the cover of darkness or the inattention of some guards in order to stealthily gain more food from stealing, either literally from the village’s reserves or more ‘theoretically’ by picking fruits or catching small animals to eat. Acknowledging the various risks implied with complaining or presenting a request to *Angkar*, many chose this non-confrontational approach, only feasible if no authority figure was aware of their acts.

They often found imaginative ways to perform such actions. For example, Sinith Heng recalled that: ‘Unable to resist hunger, I began to steal food. I climbed coconut trees and then used a stick to pierce the skin of the coconut. I did not pick the fruits, as

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid: 54.

that would leave evidence behind.’<sup>128</sup> Hour Chea, when he was responsible for the production of palm sugar, woke up every morning to eat enough to sustain him for the rest of the day.<sup>129</sup> He felt that his actions were betraying the community, but he had decided at that point that preserving his health was more important than Communist ideals.

In some instances, cases of disobedience acted against the integrity of a person’s beliefs. For instance, Look Tha, mentioned previously as a former Buddhist monk, recalled that he ate every small animal available, from snails to lizards, even if he had decided years ago to avoid eating meat ‘because I did not want to kill living beings anymore.’<sup>130</sup> He also observed that other villagers did the same thing, although they were aware that they would be punished severely if caught. Pin Yathay also found it morally objectionable to drown a cat and its kittens to eat; he reminisced about how he used to make fun of the rumour that Vietnamese would eat cats and dogs: ‘At this point, I did not find it funny at all.’<sup>131</sup>

In most cases, whoever was able to secure more food shared their loot with the rest of their family. Neou Kim Ann, in order to feed his sick sister in Kampong Cham, cut a papaya tree during the regime, but was then arrested and dragged for execution on the grounds of destroying *Angkar*’s property.<sup>132</sup> He resisted his arrest and tried to persuade the militiaman to free him: ‘Brother Comrade, I cut the papaya tree because it has not borne fruits for two years and will not bear any fruit again. If you don’t believe me,

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<sup>128</sup> Sinith Heng, Searching for the Truth, Third Quarterly Issue, 55.

<sup>129</sup> Hour Chea: 176.

<sup>130</sup> Look Tha, Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America, Usha Welaratna, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 206.

<sup>131</sup> Yathay: 153.

<sup>132</sup> Neou Kim Ann, Searching for the Truth, Fourth Quarter 2005, 22.

please go and see it.’<sup>133</sup> While the militiaman left to verify the assertion, Kim Ann was left with a guard. Fortunately, he was acquainted with the guard, who then liberated him.

In another case, Ma Las, from Battambang, tried to secure some food for her sick son. After having obtained leave from the village cadre, she borrowed a bicycle to sneak into her former village in order to gather some potatoes.<sup>134</sup> She then traded these potatoes for palm juice sugar, which was sufficient to improve her son’s health. In Kandal province, Chey Phon, who worked as a fisherman, stole some of the fish to bring to his wife although he was well aware that ‘*Angkar* would surely have killed me if they had known.’<sup>135</sup>

Like these previous examples, cases of disobedience occurred frequently across Cambodia and were successful as long as the authorities did not catch the culprit. If such was the case, as some stories illustrated, the corresponding punishment varied according to the guard, soldier or leader who witnessed the act. In fact, the consequences varied greatly: while most cases referred to severe beatings or executions, a few were able to persuade the authorities of their innocence or benefitted from the leniency of the authority figure. Even though such outcomes varied, the possibility of death still existed and was very much present in the minds of those who transgressed laws to secure more food.

Disobedience also took a more direct form as confrontation. Despite the risks associated with verbal confrontation, a few successful cases led to improvements in their situation. Pin Yathay witnessed an incident of peaceful protest in his jungle camp in Pursat after a few days of delay in receiving their daily food allowance:

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Kalyan Sann and Farina So, *Searching for the Truth*, Third Quarter 2005, 11.

<sup>135</sup> Chey Phon, *Searching for the Truth*, Fourth Quarter 2005, 17.

Normally, no one would have considered protesting, but this was the last drop. On the second day, an incredible event occurred. A few hundred new people had organized a peaceful protest in the village, with five former lecturers leading them, to protest the lack of food. The rations arrived the next day, but a week after this event, the five teachers and a few villagers disappeared.<sup>136</sup>

As this event illustrated, protest against the Khmer Rouge existed, and could even be successful in achieving its goals. However, this demonstration occurred at the beginning of the regime, thus the villagers, comprising mostly of new people, were not yet aware of the practices of the Khmer Rouge and their treatment of opposition. In fact, there was no clearly stated law or rule against protest, and Cambodians had to deduct the implications of their actions after witnessing some ruthless event or disappearances. Another case of confrontation at the beginning of the regime involved Chhay Rin, an elderly street vendor from Phnom Penh, who soon after her deportation in the Northwest asked to the soldiers: ‘My children, there are only bushes. There is nothing but tree leaves to eat, so why did you bring me here?’<sup>137</sup> She was subsequently brought for execution for insulting *Angkar*, but survived the blows.

In another account of direct confrontation, Vilboreth Bou recalled how his mother interrupted a speech given by a Khmer Rouge cadre to criticize the regime: ‘You live as a king and we live as slaves. Is this equal? Do these people here have anything to do with tycoons when they are starving to death?’<sup>138</sup> The listeners kept silent after her interruption, aware that she had signed her death warrant by pronouncing these words. As

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<sup>136</sup> Translated by the author, Yathay: 140.

<sup>137</sup> Interview by Sopearith Choung, *Searching for the Truth*, Number 11, November 2000: 46.

<sup>138</sup> Vilboreth Bou, *Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors*, De Paul, Kim and Pran, Dith, eds. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997): 129-133.

a matter of fact, she was immediately brought to a killing pit along with her young son. Yet the following developments did not occur as expected: on the verge of being killed, a Khmer Rouge soldier named Sok suddenly opened fire on the Khmer Rouge leader. He had been a student of Vilboreth's mother and refused to kill her, and chose to turn his weapon towards his superior, then asked his former teacher for forgiveness. While this story - if true - was quite unrepresentative of many events of the Khmer Rouge regime, it would illustrate how Khmer Rouge soldiers could have a choice in carrying out executions or resisting themselves, and as such, 'obeying orders' were not a sufficient excuse for the actions taken during the regime.

Despite the risk of execution associated with direct confrontation, there were indeed many of such incidences, although the stories elaborated above represent a minority of Cambodians who survived, largely through the intervention of Khmer Rouge leaders. As stated in the first chapter, an official's decisions and application of rules depended largely on his or her convictions, which fluctuated greatly between many cadres. Considering the risk associated with such confrontation, other Cambodians found alternative means to denounce injustices without jeopardizing their lives.

Pom Sarun, working in a hospital in Phnom Penh, witnessed corruption among some doctors and nurses, thus had decided to write an anonymous letter to the responsible of the hospital by sliding a note under the pillow of his daughter.<sup>139</sup> As a result of this action, the staff engaging in corruption was sent to work in a cooperative. Her act seems relatively benign, but this type of denunciation and this display of literacy were sufficient to at least send her to reeducation. Nevertheless, the anonymity of the

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<sup>139</sup> Joanna Rebecca Munson, Searching for the Truth, Third Quarterly Issue, 60.

message reduced the chances of retribution, unlike the more public affirmations discussed above.

Hour Chea, finding himself enrolled in the navy towards the end of the regime, witnessed another denunciation. A Khmer Rouge friend, named Sarat, denounced the company of soldiers and its chief during a meeting. The previous day, he had written a denunciation letter to their superior, thus fifteens *yothear*s were sent into a disciplinary regiment.<sup>140</sup> As seen with these examples, confrontation was indeed possible and existed during the regime. However, its extent was limited and the repercussions for the open complaints were often met with drastic measures. Yet, these few acts of resistance were successful in disrupting policy implementation, even if the effects were only on a small scale. Such notion dispels the impossibility of peaceful resistance during the Khmer Rouge regime, and the success of these denunciations again reinforces the notion of difference amongst the Khmer Rouge rulers.

#### The Nightmare of Krauchmar: Violent Resistance and Rebellions

While a few researchers studied the existence of open resistance, they interpreted their significance differently. In his research on the first case of spontaneous resistance against the Khmer Rouge, Ysa Osman documented the uprisings of Krauchmar district in the Kampong Cham province. These events occurred following the Hari Raya of October 1975 and are commonly referred to as the ‘Cham Rebellion.’ In short, after this announcement of the suspension of religious rights of these devout Muslims and the planned arrest of three of the leaders in the island village of Koh Phal, the villagers took

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<sup>140</sup> ‘Yothear’ refers to revolutionary soldiers in Khmer.

part in an uprising decided for the next day. For this purpose, various Chams unearthed their swords and gathered their knives to fight off a Khmer Rouge invasion. However, with their trained forces and heavy weaponry, the Khmer Rouge defeated the resistance fairly easily at the cost of many rebels' lives. Afterwards, the villagers were dispersed and several participants were jailed.

Echoing the events of the nearby village of Koh Phal, the Chams of Svay Khleang also fomented an uprising against the Khmer Rouge. With the suddenness of their attack, they were able to secure an old rifle and an automatic weapon from a Khmer Rouge soldier. Furthermore, the population of Svay Khleang was much greater than Koh Phal. As a result, the following battle proved more costly to the Khmer Rouge, who lost an estimated hundred troops.<sup>141</sup> Yet even in this case, the villagers suffered disproportionately, and the great majority of the rebels either died during the battle or after a sojourn in jail. Osman unfortunately does not provide an analysis of the many interviews transcribed in his book. He simply acknowledges that his book 'offers multiple perspectives on the shared experience of Cham Muslims in Kroch Chhmar district and elsewhere in Cambodia.'<sup>142</sup>

In Kiernan's book, *The Pol Pot Regime*, the events in Krauchmar constitute the cornerstone of his main argument about the preeminence ethnic cleansing during the Khmer Rouge regime. He articulates his approach by highlighting that official CPK documents did not acknowledge the existence of the Cham ethnic group, or 'worse, the Chams were also, potentially, a weak link in the CPK state. With their distinct language and culture, large villages, and independent national organizational networks, the Chams

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<sup>141</sup> Lep Vanmoth in Osman Ysa, The Cham Rebellion, (Phnom Penh: Documentation Centre of Cambodia, 2006) 87-89.

<sup>142</sup> Ysa Osman: 161.



probably seemed a threat to the atomized, closely supervised society that the Center planned.’<sup>143</sup> In order to deal with this threat, the Khmer Rouge imposed anti-religious policies, and as Kiernan argues, their relocation into distant regions testifies to the attempt to eradicate the Chams as a culture.

However, the problem with the argument of the Center singling out the Chams as an ethnic group is the Party’s anti-religion and displacement policies were imposed nationally on all Cambodians, and not only the Chams. Vickery acknowledges that Chams suffered under the Khmer Rouge and that a Khmer disposition against them could have resulted in more violence against their group during the regime, but he deems the ethnic cleansing claim to be speculative, considering that some Chams even served the rebellion.<sup>144</sup> Vickery also added that the practice to make them eat pork could also be circumstantial rather than intended, considering that pork is the main source of meat in Cambodia. The major difference with other uprisings and resistance was that the right to practice their religion was a powerful motivator for the Cham rebellion. For instance, Lep Vanmoth cited Khmer Rouge’s policies of making Chams ‘raise swine in the mosque, make women cut their hair and seize and burn the Quran’ as major reasons behind the uprising.<sup>145</sup>

Margaret Slocomb’s *Chikreng Rebellion: Coup and Its Aftermath in Democratic Kampuchea* presents another perspective on resistance. The event occurred in April 1977, two years after the Cham rebellions, and at the other side of the country, in the Chikreng

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<sup>143</sup> Kiernan: 260.

<sup>144</sup> Michael Vickery, 1984, Cambodia: 1975-1982: 181-182.

<sup>145</sup> Lep Vanmoth: 88.

district of the Northwestern province of Siem Reap.<sup>146</sup> A purge of the leaders and soldiers of the Northern Zone, following an accusation of treason on Koy Thuon occurred a few months before the uprising. Ta Sok, Sorn and Rom, cadres from Takeo in the Southwest, replaced the district leader in Chikreng.<sup>147</sup> They subsequently started an anti-Khmer Rouge campaign in their district, inciting the peasants to rebel against *Angkar* for the lack of food and its extreme policies. After a few months of agitation, a rebellion occurred across the district and a few Khmer Rouge local cadres and base people during the rebellion. The former agitators, namely Ta Sok and Ta Sorn, arrested the demonstrators the next day, and they executed the demonstrators on the accusation of treason. As the author concluded:

What happened to the villagers there, and the other ‘base people’ whom they killed, was simply manipulation of their desire to taste freedom (*daumbei si sereipheap*) as one villager said, a cynical ploy to have one group destroy a target group that was already doomed and, by so doing, to reveal the first group as another target, like moving ducks in a shooting gallery.<sup>148</sup>

In Chikreng, according to Slocomb, the Khmer Rouge manipulated the peasants in order to intervene and replace the purged leadership with more ‘loyal’ soldiers from the Southwest. In fact, this view casts some doubt on the ‘spontaneity’ of the rebellion in the Krauchmar district as well. After all, unlike their usual policy of arresting and executing leaders through deceit, the Khmer Rouge leadership informed the village of its intentions to arrest all the leaders at once. Therefore, the village had time to prepare and

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<sup>146</sup> Margaret Slocomb, 2006, “Chikreng Rebellion: Coup and Its Aftermath in Democratic Kampuchea”, in *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, 16: 59-72, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

protest, thus may have unwillingly acted in the interests of the *Angkar Loeu*'s consolidation of power for this particular region.

With time, the greatest threat to the regime came from within its own ranks in the forms of rebelling Khmer Rouge and freedom fighters, known as *Khmer Rumdos*. The Khmer Rouge initially comprised of different leaders with their own perception on the application of communism in Cambodia. For instance, many did not agree with the evacuation of cities and devaluation of money. Yet, the *Angkar Loeu* pressed ahead regardless of the opposition and decided to methodically remove this opposition throughout the regime. Oft-quoted reasons for rebels were the immediate threat posed by Pol Pot's clique's centralist policies; this group sent many cadres through the gates of Tuol Sleng and replaced these cadres with troops from the Southwest, the most loyal to Pol Pot. In unsuccessful captures or assassinations, the target officials and troops often had to turn against the center to protect themselves.

Nevertheless, even though the motives for resistance for the Khmer Rouge varied from the base and new people involved in disobedience and confrontation, the issue of starvation was also important in motivating the Khmer Rouge to act against the highest authorities. Prak Yoeun, a Khmer Rouge soldier stationed in Kampong Cham, heard his superior Oeun say: 'We must topple this regime, it's a starving regime. We must create a regime wearing colored shirts.'<sup>149</sup> Pin Yathay also reported a reference to a new regime of 'colored shirts' while he was in the western province of Pursat. He first met a base person sharing his disillusionment of the regime, then learned about the experience of one of his friends.<sup>150</sup> His friend received the visit of a base person desiring to purchase

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<sup>149</sup> Prak Yoeun, *Searching for the Truth*, First Quarter Issue 2004, 34.

<sup>150</sup> Yathay: 97.

colored clothing, 'at any price'. The demand seemed unusual since base people usually wanted suits or dark clothing, since colored clothing was forbidden during the regime; the villager thus conceded his identity as a *chhlop* and explained his intentions:

The Khmer Rouge are not all the same. [...] I, for instance, do not believe in this society of misery and forced labour. You should not condemn all the Khmer Rouge. [...] The regime will not hold for long. You know why we need coloured clothes. When the time comes, those wearing them will be on your side.<sup>151</sup>

Ou Daov, a commando for the Khmer Rouge, received a visit from his cousin Yean in the neighboring province of Koh Kong.<sup>152</sup> His cousin was also a commander and advised him: 'Younger brother, please try to stay alive here for a while. When we arrive in Phnom Penh, we will set up a coup against Pol Pot. So you should act cautiously and convince people to join with us.' After waiting for a few months, he heard that *Angkar* had prevented this brewing revolt in a bloodbath. Kiernan mentioned that other attempts of rebellion against Pol Pot occurred the following year, in the north and the eastern Cambodia.<sup>153</sup> In fact, officials of the Khmer Rouge planned rebellions against Pol Pot in different areas of Cambodia by, but had been repeatedly suppressed by internal purges.

Kiernan, first in the *Pol Pot Regime*, then in *Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia*, focused particularly on the rebellions in the Eastern Zone fomented by former Khmer Rouge. Following *Angkar Loeu's* suspicion of the Eastern Zone and the Khmer Rouge's defeat in the hands of the Vietnamese, the Center started to take measures against their cadres: as many as 409 Khmer Rouge cadres from the Eastern

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ou Daov, *Searching for the Truth*, Third Quarter 2007, 55-60.

<sup>153</sup> Kiernan: 390.

Zone had been sent to Tuol Sleng by April 1978.<sup>154</sup> When the leader of the Eastern Zone, So Phim, went to Phnom Penh to negotiate with Pol Pot, he was greeted by two ferries loaded with Khmer Rouge forces who opened fire on him<sup>155</sup> He escaped and committed suicide as the combined troops of Mok, Ke Pauk and Son Sen invaded his territory.<sup>156</sup> This started the rebellion against *Angkar* in the Eastern Zone and the flight of many Khmer Rouge forces to Vietnam.

Other interviews corroborated these events. Mat Ly, previously a Cham leader of the Eastern Zone, was demoted in 1975 in favor of So Phim. During the regime, he climbed the ranks and became Vice-Secretary of Tbaung Khun district.<sup>157</sup> In this position, he was able to assemble a small force of 300 men and attempted to ambush Pol Pot in the forest of Dambor district, but his plan was unsuccessful.<sup>158</sup> Ou Daov, mentioned above, was remobilized to fight against the Vietnamese in 1978. In the waning last weeks of the Khmer Rouge reign, he claimed to have shot at a commander and organized a force of 1,000 men to fight Pol Pot's troops.<sup>159</sup> However, as only three soldiers decided to stay under his command, he decided to flee to the north of the country.

### Freedom Fighters and Resistance

Some non-Khmer Rouge also took up arms and assumed the role of freedom fighters operating from forests and border areas. Bun Thad, a peasant refugee from

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<sup>154</sup> Kiernan: 393.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.: 399.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid: 402.

<sup>157</sup> Mat Ly, Searching for the Truth, Fourth Quarter Issue 2004, 35-36.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ou Daov, Searching for the Truth, Third Quarter 2007, 55-60.

Battambang, volunteered to join such forces in Thailand.<sup>160</sup> Once in the jungle, he recounted that the resistance force numbered around a hundred men: ‘My first job was to go to the border with 12 people to fight with the Communists, and in that battle 7 people got killed.’<sup>161</sup> On his second mission, he had to dig a trench in Preah Vihear province across a mined field, and three fellow soldiers died after stepping on mines. After those inconclusive experiences, he chose to escape from the freedom fighters and make his way back to Thailand.

In Eastern Cambodia, such ‘freedom fighters’ were Khmer Rouge having defected during the doomed 1978 offensive against Vietnam. Kiernan noted that around two thousand troops led by future president Heng Samrin undertook sporadic attacks across the border since July of the same year.<sup>162</sup> The rebels mentioned by Ou Daov were of another breed: former citizens of Democratic Kampuchea having fled their country and formed small groups to retaliate against the Khmer Rouge along the Thai border. Nevertheless, none of these forces were successful in challenging central authority. Without Vietnam’s massive intervention, violent Khmer resistance was unlikely to operate any significant change in the political structure of Cambodia. Even though some chose the path of open resistance, the general impact of this choice seemed limited in practice. Whereas plots and violent conflict against the Khmer Rouge did not produce the desired effects, more subtle and understated forms of resistances were more effective in producing change and undermining Khmer Rouge power.

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<sup>160</sup> Bun Thad, Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America, Usha Welaratna, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 120.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Kiernan 1994: 440.

In reflecting upon the perception of the Chikreng rebellion in academia, Slocomb witnessed a discrepancy between ‘the spirit and motivation evoked by the English term “rebellion” as Western historians had reasonably termed the event, and the actual nature and cause of what the people themselves recalled with shame and regret as *patekam*, a demonstration.’<sup>163</sup> She then deduces that the more pessimistic view from the locals could be the result of the subsequent brutal repression and the realization that the Center engineered the uprising itself.

Whether these events are recalled with glory and pride, or rather with shame and grief, depends primarily on the perception of its witness. In several Western works on the Khmer Rouge, ‘resistance’ is often assumed to signify a righteous struggle against the unspeakable evil that represented the Khmer Rouge regime. Yet, like the different motivations of the Khmer Rouge volunteers, these rebels may not have been necessarily motivated solely with ideals of freedom or a vision of ‘appropriate’ socialism. In fact, Khmer Rouge troops often chose to oppose the regime when they realized that the Center was adopting radical measures to centralize more power or that the desperate attacks against Vietnam would eventually lead to their demise. Opportunism was present on both sides of the conflict. Finally, one fact has emerged from these different stories: Cambodians from different origins had the choice to resist, despite the overwhelming disincentives against them, and the majority of instances of resistance involved self-motivated survival, either in securing necessary food or avoiding impending execution.

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<sup>163</sup> Slocomb, 65.

## Chapter 5-Escape: Boundaries and Movement

The previously discussed actions of cooperation and resistance, while useful in surviving the regime, did not ensure a person's complete security until the Khmer Rouge's demise. In contrast, a more definitive solution with higher risk was flight from the regime's grasp. Since such decision directly contravened the *Angkar's* definite policies against their subjects' displacements, the punishment associated with escape was severe: in cases of internal escape, imprisonment was the usual punishment, and in cases of attempts of crossing the border, execution was the rule. Escape is thus a form of resistance since it requires an infringement of rules, but its motives and conduct were usually quite distinct: flight often arose from the belief of eventual execution, while resistance had more diverse motives ranging from hunger to discontent with the government.

If the definition is only limited to 'flight to another country,' the few qualifying cases would not be representative of a larger social occurrence. However, within Cambodia itself, the incidences of voluntary internal displacement were relatively quite common. This chapter will elaborate on the different aspects of escape, both external and internal; the pervasiveness and success of internal escape reveals two important aspects of the regime: that internal displacement was sufficient to avoid execution and that it was only be possible with a relative decentralization of Democratic Kampuchea's bureaucracy.

The first section briefly describes Khmer Rouge policies associated with surveillance and control of relocated Cambodians. At the height of the Khmer Rouge



regime, relatively few Cambodians successfully crossed the borders of their homeland.<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, their success was contingent on the policies of these countries towards Cambodian refugees.<sup>165</sup> Despite these strict rules and overwhelming obstacles, some Cambodians still attempted to escape the grasp of *Angkar* by fleeing the country.

The next section follows the cases of Cambodians who decided to leave their country during the regime. After the regime's collapse, a number of Cambodians decided to flee the incoming Vietnamese, and sometimes – voluntarily or otherwise – followed the Khmer Rouge to their refuges along the Thai border. In those instances, life under the Khmer Rouge did not end along with the Vietnamese invasion: they had to evade *Angkar* in the several months following the Khmer Rouge retreat.

Finally, the last section examines the more frequent and generally smaller-scale instances of internal displacement arising from different motives. Internal displacement often appeared to be motivated by the necessity of fleeing imminent execution. Even if their lives were directly threatened, it was often sufficient to find the protection of a village chief from another location, rather than exiting the country. In a few cases, relocation was rather motivated by the need to improve one's chances of survival, often concerned with access to food and protection from disease.

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<sup>164</sup> After the Khmer Rouge's defeat, the scale of the refugee situation of Cambodians traversing to Thailand or attempting to reach neighbouring countries by boat created a serious regional concern, but it was not the case during the regime itself.

<sup>165</sup> They were found guilty of crossing the border without valid travel documents, which had all been destroyed earlier on by the Khmer Rouge, and were thus arrested as political prisoner. (From Ronnie Yimsut's interview, 'Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors,' De Paul, Kim and Pran, Dith eds. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997) 193.

## Decisions and Perceptions

The Cambodians were in a position to flee at critical times before and after the Khmer Rouge victory over the Lon Nol forces. Many urbanites decided to leave before the inevitable fall of Phnom Penh. Members of a household debated about the decision to stay or leave the country. Their perception of the Khmer Rouge and their idea of living in a country other than Cambodia helped guiding their decision. In any case, following the harsh and unforgiving living conditions and high mortality rate of the Khmer Rouge regime, those who had successfully argued to stay in Cambodia often bitterly felt the weight of their decision.

After the Khmer Rouge gained power, the prospects of living under the Communist government, were not relevant in their decision-making anymore, as the consequences soon became obvious. Rather, the difficulty of the obstacles and chances of success were foremost in the minds of those who decided to leave the country. As the mass exodus from Cambodia after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge attested, many Cambodians had harboured desires to leave. However, not all escape was necessarily carefully deliberated or planned, and some who left to reach the promise of a better life elsewhere were never seen again. Youk Chhang, current director of the DC-Cam, decided not to escape on the basis that his uncle had attempted to reach Thailand, but was never seen again afterwards.<sup>166</sup>

Their perception of the neighbouring countries – Laos, Vietnam and Thailand – played a role in the decision of the destination, even if these countries as such were not the ultimate goal of these political refugees: those who had previously studied, worked or

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<sup>166</sup> Youk Chhang, Searching for the Truth, Second Quarter 2005, 7.

knew relatives in Europe or North America wished to reach these countries for safety. Hence, Vietnam or Thailand were sometimes chosen for their chance of eventually reaching other countries.

Information from outside Cambodia was virtually unavailable, but a few fortunate new people had kept their radios hidden and updated their knowledge by listening mostly to the *Voice of America*. Pin Yathay, for instance, had been planning to leave Cambodia from the beginning of the regime and tended to take decisions according to the likelihood of a successful evasion. Therefore, during the evacuation, he first headed south, as close as possible to the Vietnamese border in the province of Takeo. Eventually, using his radio furtively, he learnt that South Vietnam had fallen into the hands of the Communists, thus that any attempt to reach a third – capitalist – country would then be tenuous. His doubts were also confirmed during a discussion with a Khmer Rouge cadre who told him: ‘You surely know that Vietnam is not completely revolutionary...’<sup>167</sup> From this discussion, he learned about the strained relation between Cambodia and Vietnam, thus decided to rather use every opportunity to be relocated closer to Thailand.

On the other hand, Moeung Sonn, another foreign-educated engineer, did not aim to escape to Thailand: ‘First, I did not want to live in Thailand, *the land of all the shady trafficking*. Further, I had all my business in Kampong Som, with little in the way of cash in hand, gold or jewellery. Especially, I was not the least afraid of a country controlled by the Khmer Rouge, under the moral sponsorship of Sihanouk.’<sup>168</sup> From this last quote, we can trace several elements important to the decision of staying in Cambodia. The first one being the perception of foreign countries, informed through personal experience and

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<sup>167</sup> Translation from the author, Yathay: 93.

<sup>168</sup> Moeung Sonn, *Prisoner of the Khmer Rouge*, (Paris: Fayard, 1997) 49. Emphasis added.

knowledge. In this particular case, Moeung Sonn worked at the refinery in Kampong Som (Sihanoukville), the main seaport of Cambodia. From his position, he witnessed the corruption and smuggling involving Thailand. Second, he had a practical understanding of the implications of moving outside Cambodia: some form of wealth was required for subsistence across borders, and if wealth was lacking, the comfort and social status of the new people were markedly lower. Third, the perception of the Khmer Rouge was very important in determining the final decision in leaving the country. In all fairness, it would have been difficult to foresee that the Khmer Rouge regime in times of peace proved far more destructive than the simultaneous civil war and large-scale bombings of their country. Hence, even the Cambodians who considered the Khmer Rouge as a threat could not foresee how much of a threat *Angkar* revealed itself to be.

In fact, many families debated how they should react to the imminent Khmer Rouge victory. For example, Nguon Hou, from a relatively well-off family in Phnom Penh, recalled the argument between his parents on that topic:

My father and older brother came up with an idea that my family should move to the States, as they foreseen [sic] the KR would defeat the Lon Nol government and slaughter people. But my mother disagreed and refused to leave her birthplace. She added that the KR waged war only with the aim of liberating the country and would not kill people.<sup>169</sup>

Some decisions were made quite *in extremis*, as by Area Cheat Ponnary's parents, who were on a ship on April 17<sup>th</sup> headed towards Thailand with Lon Nol soldiers.<sup>170</sup> But his father decided just before leaving that he preferred remaining in Cambodia. A combination of their perceived threat of the Khmer Rouge and their attachment to

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<sup>169</sup> Nguon Hou, *Searching for the Truth*, First Quarter 2005, 45.

<sup>170</sup> Aron Cheat Ponnary, *Searching for the Truth*, Third Quarter 2005, 22.

Cambodia determined their ultimate decision. Serey Len Deour's father refused to join his brother, Cambodian Ambassador to Japan, for this single reason: 'There is no better country to live in than ours.'<sup>171</sup> Crowds of elated Cambodians rejoicing at the end of the war greeted the Khmer Rouge in their entrance in Phnom Penh. Some greeted them reluctantly, but most were genuine in their reception of the Khmer Rouge and their relief in the end of the war.

During Democratic Kampuchea, the proximity of these countries in relation to the location of the work camps or villages provided an opportunity for escape. Cambodians relocated to frontier provinces were thus understandably more likely to cross borders than those inland. For instance, most refugees to Thailand came from Battambang, and provinces close to Vietnam, such as Takeo, Svey Rieng or Kampong Cham, were the origin of many refugees to that country. However, considering the tense political climate and eventual fighting between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam, finding refuge in Vietnam was rarer during that period, with the exception of the exodus from the Eastern Zone after purges. Kiernan, for instance, documented that on four days in July 1975, 2,400 Cambodians crossed the border from Battambang province to Aranyaprathet, and 1,900 more joined them in August.<sup>172</sup>

### Beyond Borders

In their attempt to enforce total control over the Cambodian society, Khmer Rouge leaders implemented a series of drastic policies pertaining to the geographical

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<sup>171</sup> Serey Len Deour, Searching for the Truth, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2004, 56.

<sup>172</sup> Kiernan 1994: 142

distribution and surveillance of its citizens. The first of such policies was the evacuation of all cities, a decision voluntarily unprecedented in 'Communist' history.<sup>173</sup> Once in those work camps and villages, these Cambodians were often relocated and reassigned to other camps or even distant regions. Beside these mandatory relocations, population movement was strictly prohibited. The village chief or unit leader had to authorize any displacement with a written travel permit. Universal travel permits were also necessary for the Khmer Rouge soldiers themselves. The phrase 'prison without walls' often epitomized the situation during this period.<sup>174</sup>

From biographies and the numerous accounts recalling attempts to cross the border, the obstacles to reach safely the other side of the frontier were numerous and often deadly. Within Cambodia itself, Khmer Rouge forces were constantly patrolling the highways and major routes, in addition to the already pervasive surveillance apparatus within each community. Considering such heavy surveillance, the most common routes to reach safely other countries were through heavily forested mountains. In order to reach Thailand, a common route from the southwest or west of the country was through the Cardamom Mountains. The journey would take weeks, even for the better-equipped Khmer Rouge who fled the Vietnamese invasion in 1979.<sup>175</sup> The lack of food, unwelcoming terrain, confusing directions and sparse Khmer Rouge camps made this particular journey very difficult to accomplish.

At the border itself, the concentration of permanent troops was high and the Khmer Rouge took additional measures to secure the border. A portion of the forested

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<sup>173</sup> This forced evacuation of cities constituted the pride of the Khmer Rouge leaders, who considered themselves more revolutionary than their Vietnamese neighbours.

<sup>174</sup> The analogy was used frequently, but it was notably the title of Part 1 in Alexander Laban Hinton, Why Did they Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005)

<sup>175</sup> Moeun Sonn, Prisoner of the Khmer Rouge, (Paris: Fayard, 1997) 267.

area was densely mined, barbed wire fences covered some areas and hidden sharpened bamboo stakes completed the measures preventing border crossing. While the stakes were not deadly as such, it would take considerable time to clear a safe path while being in a vulnerable position, even more so if such obstacles had wounded the escapee.<sup>176</sup> Finally, in case of capture, execution was the implemented policy, and after incredibly exhausting journeys, the captives were unlikely to escape this fate.

In some provinces in the east, crossing to Vietnam was relatively more straightforward, depending on the proximity of the border and the presence of deterrents. Bopha, for instance, recalled that ‘in the forest, we lived very close to the Vietnam border. Some people escaped to Vietnam by pretending to fish and swimming across the river, and my brother, sisters and I planned to swim across too. But I fell ill with malaria, and we were forced to stay in the jungle.’<sup>177</sup>

Once on the other side in either country, the Cambodian refugees’ safety was not yet assured. For instance, Thailand, after an inflow of refugees reaching its borders as early as July and August 1975, sent officers to negotiate the repatriation of these refugees with the Khmer Rouge, who then accepted to receive them.<sup>178</sup> Vietnam’s policies toward refugees changed drastically during that period. At the beginning of the regime, when Vietnam tried to maintain cordial relations with Democratic Kampuchea, their policy towards refugees was intransigent: Chanda learned later that ‘during the first five months after the ‘liberation’ of Phnom Penh, more than 150,000 destitute Vietnamese had flooded the Dong Thap, An Giang, and Tay Ninh provinces. The Vietnamese were

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<sup>176</sup> Pin Yathay: 300.

<sup>177</sup> Bopha, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America*, Usha Welartna, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 72.

<sup>178</sup> Kiernan: 142.

allowed to stay, but refugees of Chinese and Khmer descent were forced back.’<sup>179</sup> The non-Vietnamese Cambodians were thus likely executed upon their return.

However, the relations between Cambodia and Vietnam worsened following Khmer Rouge plans to ‘reacquire’ Kampuchea Krom, on the grounds that it represented former Cambodian territory. The Vietnamese nevertheless attempted to use refugees as exchange chips in order to soothe the straining relations between both countries.<sup>180</sup> Chanda took note of such an exchange: ‘In one such operation in early 1977, the Vietnamese provincial official authorities allowed the Khmer Rouge to select forty-nine refugees from a camp in Moc Hoa to be taken back in exchange for one bull per person.’<sup>181</sup> Yet since 1975, the Vietnamese government had been tacitly accepting around 300,000 Cambodian refugees.

In mid-77, the Khmer Rouge attacked the Vietnamese border.<sup>182</sup> As the Khmer Rouge skirmished across the border and attacked bordering towns in Vietnam with mortar, the tension between both countries mounted and Vietnam became more overtly welcoming to Cambodian refugees. In August 1978, Cambodian rebel troops found a way to breach the border, while it was previously ‘hard to contact Vietnam, because there were mines.’<sup>183</sup> Samrin later claimed that as many as 10,000 evacuees crossed the border at that time. In late September, he estimated that the total number of refugees numbered 40,000. Chea Sim, also interviewed by Kiernan, added ‘we all went together, after seeing that if we didn’t we would be killed.’ Finally, the Vietnamese army assisted 60,000

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<sup>179</sup> Chanda: 16.

<sup>180</sup> Chanda: 85.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Kiernan: 359.

<sup>183</sup> Heng Samrin, interview from Ben Kiernan, Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia: Documentation, Denial and Justice in Cambodia and East Timor, (Edison, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2008) 102.



Cambodians in seeking refuge in Vietnam after their punitive expedition of December 1977. The Vietnamese government then requested assistance from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.<sup>184</sup>

These examples of policies illustrated how opportunities for escape were contingent on the geographical location of the escapees and the rapidly shifting foreign policy of Thailand and Vietnam concerning the fate of refugees. Yet, while the Khmer Rouge deployed all the measures at their disposal, some escapees nevertheless succeeded to overcome these obstacles, as the following section will discuss.

#### Escape Artists: A Few Cases of Cambodian Refugees before 1979

In one of the early instances of escape to another country during Democratic Kampuchea, Saleh Mein explained how he fled the scene of the Cham rebellion on Koh Phal.<sup>185</sup> He had participated actively in the rebellion as a combatant, but at the end of the clash, he was suffering from head wounds. Along with eight other rebels, he decided to escape the Khmer Rouge on a boat towards Vietnam. However, because of his wounds, the others were reticent in letting him join their group. He finally convinced them to throw him in the Mekong if he was to loudly shout in pain or died while on the boat.

They left Koh Phal at night, thus were not noticed by the Khmer Rouge guarding the island. In the next few days of their trip on the mighty river, they stopped on deserted islands during the day to sleep and gather some food. They had evaded the Khmer Rouge successfully, but once on the border between Vietnam and Cambodia, many armed patrol

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<sup>184</sup> Chanda: 216.

<sup>185</sup> Saleh Mein, from Ysa Osman, The Cham Rebellion: Survivor's Stories from the Villages, Documentation Series No.9, (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2006) 71-75

boats were scouting the area with searchlights. An unpredictable occurrence allowed them to pass three groups of patrols: one of their passengers was caught with a fit of coughing while they were gliding through the silent waters. When one of Mein's comrades intended to slit his throat, they noticed that the echoes of the coughing drew the patrols away from the center of the river towards the banks of the river, thus far from the escapees. Ultimately, they were able to reach Vietnam and were fed by a Cham villager on their arrival.

In another case later in the regime, in the region of Battambang, Bun Thab also escaped the Khmer Rouge, this time towards Thailand.<sup>186</sup> He had been tied up with two of his friends, waiting for impending execution. When heavy rain started falling, his friends and him decided to run away. He hid in a banana grove, and Khmer Rouge seeking for them could not see him under the cover of darkness and tropical rain. He found his friends again. Before the start of their journey toward Thailand, they stopped at one of his friend's house to gather a homemade lighter and some food for the journey. They then set out in an approximate direction of Thailand: 'The monk knew from old stories that Thailand was to the north of our country, so we began going in that direction.'<sup>187</sup> Once at the border, Khmer Rouge guards saw the group and shot one of his friends. Yet, he was still managed to cross the border and some Thai peasants offered them food.

Finally, Pin Yathay's numerous attempts and successful flight from his country provide another insightful example of escape. As mentioned earlier, he had decided to escape Cambodia from the onset of the regime, but his initial plan of crossing to Vietnam

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<sup>186</sup> Bun Thab, Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America, Usha Welartna, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 117-135

<sup>187</sup> Ibid: 122.

was foiled by the strained relationship between the two countries. As a result, he decided to move within Cambodia as close to Thailand as possible. To reach that goal, he volunteered to be displaced and his family was sent to the province of Pursat. From the jungle camp there, he first attempted to leave Cambodia in 1976 with other families. However, this plan failed when one of their group members decided to quit when faced with an unexpected wide river barred them from advancing. When his identity was discovered and he learned about the planned execution, he decided to leave with his wife to reach the previous jungle base where they used to live. Even though their escape was successful, they had to take the decision to leave their last remaining child in the care of a Chinese woman.

Finally, he planned his final escape through the Cardamom Mountains with his wife and other friends who wanted to join them. During the preparatory stage, they amassed as much provisions as possible through stealing and bartering, surveyed the areas and discussed the best route to take. Despite this well-planned expedition, on the first day of their departure, they unfortunately met a Khmer Rouge patrol and their group was subsequently divided. During the few weeks of his trek through the jungle, he eventually lost his wife and her friend, and all his provisions. When he emerged from the forest, Khmer Rouge soldiers apprehended him at the border. While they fed and interrogated him, he pretended to act stupid, although he was well aware that they would execute him the next day. Fortunately, a sudden storm and loosely tied ropes allowed him to break out from his confinement during the same evening and reach Thailand in June 1977. His freedom and survival proved costly: during the regime and his escape, he had

lost his entire family, and despite careful planning, luck ultimately allowed him to survive this ordeal.

As enthralling as the stories from the likes of Saleh Mein, Boun Thab, Pin Yathay or Dith Pran are, flight from Cambodia was relatively rare during the regime in comparison with instances of internal escape.<sup>188</sup> However, it is important to acknowledge these events, since they represent how some Cambodians willingly chose to overcome overwhelming odds in what they perceived to be the most effective way to survive the Khmer Rouge regime.

#### Desertion and Internal Escape

As stated earlier, instances of internal escape represented a large share of the cases of escape in its different aspects. This type of escape tends to be overlooked, possibly because refugee status is only granted according to the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.<sup>189</sup> Without crossing the imaginary lines between nations, Cambodians still sought to escape Khmer Rouge control, sometimes by taking refuge in natural areas shielding them from interferences, namely dense jungles and mountains. Some also avoided the Khmer Rouge by relocating themselves within Cambodia. This last point is significant in reinforcing the relative decentralization of Khmer Rouge rule: ultimately, the decision of whether a refugee would be accepted or rejected lay in the hands of the village chief.

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<sup>188</sup> Dith Pran was the main character from the eighties Hollywood movie on that period, 'The Killing Fields', which also narrates the unlikely escape to Thailand of a Cambodian journalist during the regime.

<sup>189</sup> In its Article 1.A, Paragraph 2, the Convention states that a refugee has to be outside his country of nationality.

The first instances of internal escape were within the ranks of the Khmer Rouge organization itself. During the civil war, the Khmer Rouge's young recruits, willingly or otherwise, were confronted to the brutal reality of war, and many wished to quit.<sup>190</sup> Nhem Sal, for instance, was a young Cambodian conscripted in the revolutionary army and feared being killed on the battlefield.<sup>191</sup> While on patrol in Mondulkiri province, he saw many corpses in a valley: 'I recognized most of them as my former comrades, who had been sent to work at a different location just days before.'<sup>192</sup> He then immediately decided to return to his village, in fear of losing his life as well. On his way, he encountered a few comrades who were equally deserting the Khmer Rouge, and they soon formed a little band of seven. They traveled during a month, but were finally apprehended close to Kampong Cham. From there, they were sent to S-21 in Phnom Penh. However, after their interrogation, they were transferred to a lesser prison.

Apart from fearing being killed during battle, some Khmer Rouge resented being separated from their families for so long. As the soldiers were rarely permitted to visit their village, they often formulated during the civil war and the duration of the Khmer Rouge government. Sey Sok, another young soldier, went to great lengths to return to his village after serving the Khmer Rouge for a year.<sup>193</sup> The interviewer noted that 'he risked his life to return home because he really missed his parents.'<sup>194</sup> He left with a friend who came from the village, and both were captured and escaped thrice during their long journey. From Kampong Cham, they reached their village in Siem Reap, on the other side

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<sup>190</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>191</sup> Nhem Sal, Searching for the Truth, Fourth Quarter Issue 2003, 12-14.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Sey Sok, Searching for the Truth, Second Quarter 2007, 22.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

of the country, where Sok was able to remain for five months, but after that time he was sent to a construction site with his unit until the end of the regime.

In the accounts used for this research, the usual punishment for desertion did not seem particularly severe. Local leaders formulated threats against the deserters or their families, but the consequences were far less disastrous than being accused of treason or learning that a family member used to live in a city. In fact, desertion appeared to be a rampant problem for the Khmer Rouge. Yet, as *Angkar Loeu* strengthened its grip on power, Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers were being purged and desertion occurred for different reasons.

After years of loyal services for *Angkar* in Phnom Penh, Neth, a former Khmer Rouge soldier, was arrested in 1977 for being under the orders of So Phim, the secretary of the Eastern Zone, now considered a traitor.<sup>195</sup> He was then brought to a killing pit along with about fifty other soldiers who were beaten then stabbed three times one after the other. Neth was the fifth. He was still fortunate to survive his wounds, along with his friend. They applied mud to their wounds and searched for food. They subsequently ran away and Neth was appointed militiaman by the villagers in some mountainous area, where the Khmer Rouge would not find him again.

Neth's story was uncommon for Khmer Rouge soldiers, but other Cambodians survived massacres and then escaped the surroundings of the event. If they had remained on location or returned to their village, they would be sent for execution again as the executors often double-checked the identity of the casualties to determine if everyone had been 'smashed' as planned. Chhay Rin, the old lady who protested in the precious chapter, regained consciousness after the attempted execution, then joined a mobile unit

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<sup>195</sup> Neth, *Searching for the Truth*, Fourth Quarter 2006, 25.

nearby.<sup>196</sup> Him Man, a Cham villager, left a procession of Chams on their way to be executed by hiding in nearby bushes with his wife.<sup>197</sup> They stayed in these bushes and the nearby pond for nearly three months, avoiding the Khmer Rouge's searches and feeding on what they could find. Finally, driven by hunger, they were caught by the Khmer Rouge. However, the latter decided not to kill them, for the time being.

At the beginning of the regime, Savuth Penn's father, a Lon Nol officer, was summoned by the Khmer Rouge to 'greet the King'.<sup>198</sup> Instead, he and other officers were asked to stand in formation, then the Khmer Rouge opened fire on them. Penn's father survived with a bullet passing through his right arm and a few bullets hitting his skull. He managed to crawl back to his village, where his family greeted him. Pressured by Khmer Rouge threats to execute any person hiding an enemy, his family debated at length on the measure to deal with the situation. Shunning away plans of poisoning her father, hiding him permanently or helping him flee to Thailand, his brother-in-law decided to alert the authorities, who then made sure that he would not escape again.

During the commonplace executions of the regime, those who were fortunate enough to survive this ordeal had to escape the location of the event and find some refuge. From these stories, refuge rarely took the form of another country, but rather mostly other villages or natural shelters within Cambodia. Before such execution could occur, some Cambodians had the chance to receive the information about their impending execution from some informant, and subsequently flee in time. Pin's second escape was motivated from learning that Khmer Rouge soldiers would wait a week to see if disease would kill him, otherwise they would execute him themselves.

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<sup>196</sup> Interview by Sophearith Choung, Searching for the Truth, Number 11, November 2000, 46.

<sup>197</sup> Him Man, Searching for the Truth, Second Quarter 2004, 26-28.

<sup>198</sup> Savuth Penn, Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields, 43-44.

Pu Ma, a young mother now refugee in the United States, was also fortunate to receive such information: 'When we were walking, the good soldier said to me 'Pu Ma, Pol Pot is going to kill all of you. Run, you maybe get killed or you may escape.'<sup>199</sup> She then ran to her mother's village, but soon after her mother was executed, a young *chhlop* spoke to her: 'Pu Ma, tonight at twelve o'clock they want to kill your family.'<sup>200</sup> She then left with her brother and children, and decided to leave to Thailand, since she was living in the bordering province of Battambang.

As for external escape, internal escape seemed primarily motivated from the necessity to avoid execution. Yet as most cases of such escapes occurred within Cambodia, crossing boundaries was not necessary to attain a certain degree of safety. Once again, the differences within the Khmer Rouge organization were very important in determining the decisions taken by these Cambodians. In the last story, a Khmer Rouge soldier and a *chhlop* informed Pu Ma that her name was on the list for execution, thus she was able to avoid being killed. On the other hand, Pin Yathay's execution was decided from a bitter Khmer Rouge soldier who resented his dismissal from his former employer.

Beyond the necessity to avoid execution, a few other factors motivated escapees. As deserters from the Khmer Rouge explained, they missed their families while in the revolutionary army, and the rigid rules of the Khmer Rouge prevented them to even visit, let alone quit their commitment. Ma Khin Me argued a different reason for internal escape.<sup>201</sup> She had heard that the nearby village of Sre Taken had abundant porridge in contrast with the portions given in her current village of Damnak Dangkao, thus she

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<sup>199</sup> Pu Ma, Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America, Usha Welartna, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 97-116.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ma Khin Me, Searching for the Truth, Third Quarter 2005, 18.



subsequently decided to reach this village with her two children. Aware that such movements was not allowed, she gave her children into adoption to empathic villagers, as she feared to be execution. However, she was neither punished nor executed, and the village chief allowed her to remain in Sre Taken.

Besides presenting another motive for flight, this story also illustrated the importance of local authorities and the fact that they ultimately decided their application of laws. Pin Simorn, who had been admitted to Saang Prison in Kandal in 1977, used her watch to bribe the prison guard for her freedom. The guard accepted and gave her directions to reach Siem Reap, where she stayed until the end of the regime.<sup>202</sup> Some leaders or authority figures could have interpreted rules according to their own beliefs or altruism, but personal gain was also an important factor in their decision, as the next chapter will address.

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<sup>202</sup> Interview by Savina Sirik, Searching for the Truth, Third Quarter 2005, 14.

## Chapter 6: Black Market: The Price of Survival, Desire and Corruption

The black market and the use of skills for private benefits offset the Khmer Rouge ideals of eliminating material desires or the value of higher education. Despite the abolition of private property, currency and markets within the first month of its rule, a market economy nevertheless emerged across its territory as small, autonomous markets based on barter. With the difficulty of mobility, those small markets were not integrated to each other thus exchange rates and values between different products varied greatly from one village to the next. The first part of this chapter examines the establishment and functioning of this parallel economy (in fact the sole existing economy), and the resulting relationship between new people, villagers and some Khmer Rouge themselves.

This last chapter exposes how skilled new people, peasant base people, and local Khmer Rouge cadres circumvented the official goals of eliminating material desires and remnants of formal education and wealth. They succeeded doing so in establishing black markets and in ‘hiring’ skilled individuals for private benefits. Consequently, these processes defeated the officially-enforced segregation of these classes who found in some instances more benefits from this kind of cooperation. These widespread processes occurred outside the knowledge of a totalitarian regime that sought to control every aspect of the lives of its citizens; hence the existence of such black markets provide a powerful reminder of the possibility of agency even in such difficult times.

After acquiring luxury goods, the Khmer Rouge also needed individuals who were able to maintain them in a functioning state, since no shops or markets existed. Hence, the Khmer Rouge requested the help of skilled individuals for their private

benefits in repairing watches, batteries and different vehicles. In other cases, they asked for skills as cooks, midwives, singers, dancers, painters or even alcohol makers. The second part of this chapter thus discusses the paradox of skilled individuals being effectively rewarded for their knowledge rather than punished as Khmer Rouge directives prescribed. Lower-rank Khmer Rouge approached most of those skilled individuals, but some even volunteered to offer their services despite the risk of exposing their identity to reprisals. Also, the desire to undermine educated individuals and the pursuit of autarky were often in opposition: former engineers were able to repair and operate machinery improving agricultural production and, in some cases, recycle goods deemed unnecessary in the current regime into useful contraptions.

### Black Market: From Aspirins to Omegas

François Ponchaud's work on Democratic Kampuchea already mentioned the existence of trade. He referred to trade as the only alternative method to obtain more food, and observed that exchange rates between items varied from locality to locality within the same province.<sup>203</sup> From his interviews, a refugee claimed that the Khmer Rouge themselves were organizing the barter to collect the gold from the evacuees.<sup>204</sup> Even if the 'Khmer Rouge' had been involved, this example does not explain if such a practice was part of an official secret policy, or if these low-level Khmer Rouge were actually reaping the rewards of such trade for private benefits. In this section, I will use examples to discuss with more clarity the nature of public or private transactions.

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<sup>203</sup> François Ponchaud, Cambodia Year Zero (London: Allen Lane, 1978) 81.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

Overall, most of the trade was mostly self-interested and the Center did not seem involved in a systematic attempt to reach hidden wealth: opportunistic low-level cadres spearheaded their own trade.

Different groups with their own demands conducted the nascent trade across Cambodian territory, despite the efforts by the Center to eradicate any remnants of capitalist economy. Khmer Rouge property laws were quite simple and straightforward: ‘Absolutely everything belongs to the *Angkar*.’<sup>205</sup> ‘Illegal’ trade was first a privilege for those with surplus food to obtain prohibited or rare items at the beginning of the regime. As food and medicine became scarce and executions became more frequent, the black market gradually represented a necessity for survival for many of the new people. In seeking to alleviate hunger and disease, they chose to use the remnants of their possessions to increase their chances against death. Such trade was possible because base people generally suffered from relatively less severe hardships than the new people. As a result of the new people’s desperate demand, the value of basic food items like rice or fruits increased dramatically, and those items were traded in exchange for goods. Those simultaneous processes increased the volume of trade with time.

During their evacuation from different cities in Cambodia, many urbanites had been informed that they were only leaving temporarily to safeguard their lives from allegedly imminent American bombings. This Khmer Rouge claim revealed itself to be a ruse a few days following the relocation of all urbanites on the countryside. However, the urbanites’ reaction to this unexpected event varied: some had brought little with them, expecting indeed to return safely to their homes in a matter of days. Others also believed

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<sup>205</sup> Henri Locard. Pol Pot’s Little Red Book: The Sayings of the Angkar (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004) 277.

they would be allowed to return, yet brought with them their valuables for fear of being robbed in their absence. Taken aback by the abrupt tone of this evacuation or witnessing some brutal executions, more fortunate urbanites rather decided to bring with them provisions and valuables in their distrust of the Khmer Rouge. The implications of such decision were important for the duration of the regime: some jewelry items and valuables were crucial during Democratic Kampuchea.

However, the Khmer Rouge foresaw that evacuees would leave with their possessions. On the national roads, blockades of Khmer Rouge soldiers were awaiting the citizens to collect documents, currencies and valuables. The different roadblocks stripped many Cambodians from their wealth, although some had dissimulated foreign currencies like Thai bahts, French francs and American dollars. The Cambodian riel had become worthless, but some still retained them at the beginning in hope of the reintroduction of currency. Amongst belongings liable to trade, there were photographs, pants, sarongs, kramas, jewelry, gold, suits, watches, scissors, tobacco, perfume, radios and other similar small items. Throughout that period, hiding those goods and bartering them in times of need proved crucial to the survival of many new people. Unfortunately, those with little provisions were greatly disadvantaged, both by the new social system and their incapacity to participate in the black market.

Trade was easier in the vicinity of base people. After the first wave of evacuations, the base people shared their villages with the evacuees, which facilitated the conduct of exchanges. However, in the second massive relocation, new people were displaced to fringe areas in previously unpopulated jungles and had to establish new villages and work camps. In other parts of Cambodia, new and base people were

segregated in different villages. Considering the difficulty of movement, interactions between new and base people required stealthy meetings. As a community chief at the beginning of the regime, Moeung Sonn lamented that some new people pretended to be sick in order to trade with the base people in the afternoon while everybody else was toiling the fields.<sup>206</sup>

By aspiring to refashion Cambodians into revolutionaries, the Khmer Rouge imposed an ascetic lifestyle on them and their soldiers. The Khmer Rouge thus wore standard black pajamas, as were the base people. Evacuees wore the same clothes from their evacuation, and some dyed them into darker colors. External adornments like watches, make-up and jewelry were equally forbidden. In the words of the government: 'Physical beauty hinders the will to struggle.'<sup>207</sup>

On the other side of the market, base people primarily bought precious items and sold food. Since most references to the black market were coming from interviews from former new people, such motives for purchasing luxury goods at a time of crisis are unknown, particularly since adorning accessories could be punishable by death. Arguably, their desires for those items may have arisen from their lingering desire for previously unattainable possessions. Regardless of their motives, the discrepancy in the access to food between the two social groups allowed the base people from utilizing this advantage for their personal gain.

The existence of such an economic relationship between two supposedly segregated classes of Cambodians represents a small aspect of complex interactions between both groups. Fueled by propaganda from the Khmer Rouge, the base people had

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<sup>206</sup> Moeung Sonn, *Prisoner of the Khmer Rouge*, (Paris: Fayard, 2007) 77.

<sup>207</sup> Locard: 264

been encouraged to detest the evacuated urbanites and correspondingly, many urbanites reacted by reinforcing their pre-existing prejudices against Cambodian peasants and accusing them of complicity with the Khmer Rouge. Yet the existence of barter between both groups sometimes eased and facilitated the communication between new and old people. Hence, at least on a short scale, the divide-and-rule policies based on class differences were in part leveled through mutual benefits. In one case, however, villagers refused to an urbanite woman the privilege to trade: Veng Chong had collected corn and intended to trade it for fish with the base people in order to feed her sick daughters.<sup>208</sup> Instead of gaining some food, she rather received a sermon from the villagers: ‘You’re living on us, how dare you trade? You should know, we liberated you.’<sup>209</sup> After this refusal, she did not dare to try to trade again.

In addition to base and new people, many local cadres and soldiers decided to enter the black market to obtain material goods. High-level Khmer Rouge leaders were living comfortable lives and benefited from different luxury goods. As the executive branch of the government, they could access this lifestyle ‘legally’ using policies that they would articulate themselves. In contrast, lower-level Khmer Rouge desiring to improve their lifestyles had to find alternatives ways to bypass the strict ownership rules that also applied to them. A possible way to obtain their desired goals was to execute new people and grab their possessions. There were quite a few instances of such personally motivated executions.

Pin Yathay also described another possible link between executions and economic benefits. He noticed that rice was allocated to each camp depending on the number of

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<sup>208</sup> Veng Chong, Searching for the Truth, First Quarter 2004, 37.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid: 38.

people residing there according to their daily quotas. Since the local cadres had control over the lists of their dependents, they were in a position to decide to report whether a person died or not. At the same time, the cadres traded using quantities of leftover rice from individuals who no longer needed it. Hence, Pin formulated the hypothesis that these leaders could use executions to access more rice for trade.<sup>210</sup> While such practice presents a surprising new motive behind executions, there has not been other evidence to validate the fact that this practice occurred elsewhere in Cambodia, or even to confirm Pin's claims.

Executions seemed like a simple way to secure more goods, but new people hid their valuables, hence the Khmer Rouge were not aware of the existence or location of these goods. The black market thus provided an effective way to secure these items. All parties engaging in such trade usually had recourse to intermediaries for the transactions. This way, the new people did not expose themselves directly to the Khmer Rouge, but they still received food and medicine in exchange. These intermediaries, either new or base people, would usually keep a portion of rice as a fee for their services.

In a position of power, the Khmer Rouge also received bribes in exchange for some services. Those 'services' varied. For instance, Pom Sarun bribed a nurse to receive better food and be transferred to a better hospital.<sup>211</sup> The current director of DC-Cam, Youk Chhang, remembered that his mother had given the camp leader scissors to ensure that he would not have to work during the regime.<sup>212</sup> Serey Len Deour similarly remembered that her mother used jewelry to be reassigned to caring for children instead of working in the fields; she also obtained the right of her son to visit his father with

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<sup>210</sup> Pin Yathay: 125.

<sup>211</sup> Pom Sarun, Searching for the Truth, Third Quarterly Issue, 57-60.

<sup>212</sup> Youk Chhang, Searching for the Truth, Second Quarter 2005, 6-7.



another bribe.<sup>213</sup> Finally, soon after the Khmer Rouge victory, Sophanarith Mean's father, a border patrolman, tried to cross to Thailand with all his family, only to find that Khmer Rouge soldiers already blocked his route.<sup>214</sup> However, he discussed with their leader and could pay his way through with the valuables at their disposal. In short, these stories present different examples of the use of bribes for different ends.

Finally, the Khmer Rouge had a particular incentive to trade as they could use some items to display their hierarchical position. Even though the Khmer Rouge uniform consisted only of a plain black pajama, a red *krama* and sandals made from tires, there were a few subtle ways to differentiate between ranks and swagger with their attire. First of all, higher-ranking Khmer Rouge had more clothes and did not labor in the fields; as a result, the quality, cleanliness and integrity of their pajamas differed from those who only had one set of clothing to work and sleep in. Second, the textile used for their *krama* varied in quality, and silk scarves were the most valued and expensive. Third, besides their symbolic rubber sandals, they could adorn themselves with the 'Mao caps' characteristic of the Chinese Communist movement, and had a high revolutionary significance even in Cambodia. Fourth, as only Khmer Rouge cadres had the power to write the all-important travel permits or the execution lists, pens were used to display their special privileges. They often wore them visibly in their pockets, with the largest part of the pen showing at the front.<sup>215</sup>

Watches were another item of significance and most Khmer Rouge collected them from the new people during the evacuations. As in the previous regime, those automatic

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<sup>213</sup> Serey Leng Deour, Searching for the Truth, Third Quarter 2004 56-59.

<sup>214</sup> Sophanarith Mean, Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields, Kim De Paul and Dith Pran eds. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997) 143-145.

<sup>215</sup> Hour Chea, Quatre Ans avec les Khmer Rouges, (Paris : Chou, 2007) 117.

watches were recognizable according to their corresponding quality and brand, and watches of the 'Omega' brand were the most prized of all. Overall, despite the asceticism prescribed by the Party, new subtle ways were available to the Khmer Rouge to distinguish themselves from the people. Teeda Butt Mann, an evacuee from Phnom Penh now residing in the United States, summarized the situation as such:

But while the entire population was dying of starvation, disease, and hopelessness, the Khmer Rouge was creating a new upper class. Their soldiers and the Communist Party members were able to choose any woman or man they wanted to marry. In addition to boundless food, they were crazed with gold, jewelry, perfume, imported watches, western medicine, cars, motorcycles, bicycles, silk and other imported goods. [...] While [female soldiers] were enjoying their nice black pajamas, silk scarves, jewelry, new shoes, perfume, they stared at me, seeing if I had anything better than they did.<sup>216</sup>

This assessment of behavior from lower-level Khmer Rouge cadres seems accurate in addressing the importance of material goods. Other accounts supported her view that members of the Khmer Rouge replaced the former elite rather than eliminated classes in Cambodia. However, this claim carries a certain bias of perception, as mostly former urbanites, the most disadvantaged of this new regime, supported this claim of the reversal of classes. These new people also usually accused base people of cooperating with the Khmer Rouge unconditionally, a claim disproved by several researchers. In short, this corruption and materialism in lower-level cadres existed in many instances, but it cannot be generalized to all Khmer Rouge.

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<sup>216</sup> Teeda Butt Mann, Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields, 11-17.

## Trade Creation and Tobacco Addiction

Pin Yathay's life in Veal Vong and his description of the process of trade provides important insights in the creation and mechanism of trade during the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>217</sup> He was displaced in Veal Vong, a jungle village in the province of Pursat in proximity of a village of base people. Once there, he noticed the trade between new and base people exchanging luxury objects and rice allowances. From routine barter, Pin remembered systematic exchange rates taking place: trousers were exchanged for ten boxes of rice, a shirt for four, and a sarong for six. For gold, one *tael* yielded 30 or 40 boxes, depending on the value of the gold or the estimate of the jewelry's worth.

Like some new people, Pin had a large amount of American dollars that were deemed worthless in that current trade, except to purchase jewelry. Hence, he decided to manipulate the market in order to increase the value of his 3,000 American dollars and gain more rice as a result. He first collected 40 boxes of rice with clothes and jewels, then proceeded to obtain 200 American dollars in exchange for 20 boxes of rice via a Chinese courtier. When the news reached other new people, they decided to use their stock of American dollars for immediate purchases instead of waiting for an eventual escape. As a result, instead of buying only 10 boxes of rice, 100 dollars could now be exchanged for 15 boxes. Pin then spent as much as 1000 dollars in order to secure a large provision of rice for him and his large family. Once he left Veal Vong for another village, he also noticed that the exchange rates were different and that the market was not as elaborate as in the jungle.

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<sup>217</sup> Pin Yathay, Tu vivras, mon fils : L'extraordinaire récit d'un rescapé de l'enfer Cambodgien, (Paris : l'Archipel, 1987) 125-148.

This example illustrates that the small markets were functioning like larger economies, and were subject to fluctuations based on demand and supply. Interestingly, Pin observed that the Khmer Rouge were partaking as well in this market, and that they were generally honest during transactions. In fact, their relatives were usually involved in trade on their behalf. This example also shows that the Khmer Rouge were taking part in trade for their personal benefits, and still had to comply with the ‘rules of the market’ in dealing with new people, despite the explicit power difference between the two groups.

Tobacco became important in trade across all groups and was neither a subsistence item nor a luxury good. Several cases mentioned the use and trade of tobacco, and Meng Raksmeay’s essay on his experience during Kampuchea, ‘Tobacco and I’, provides an insightful summary on the use and trade of tobacco.<sup>218</sup>

As a teenager from Phnom Penh relocated in a mobile unit in Kandal, Meng had to toil endlessly on dams and channels along with other April 17 people. With time, he observed that the unit leader allowed quick breaks for the smokers, representing a significant relief from continuous hard labor. Hence, he decided to learn how to smoke gradually by sucking on the smoke of other smokers. Considering the lack of paper or filters, the smokers had to hand-roll the tobacco using banana leaves and light their cigarettes on a bonfire. This elaborate process allowed him and others to take longer pauses and facilitated friendships with base people.

Reflecting on the larger commerce of tobacco, Meng mused that ‘cigarettes are everything.’ He meant that tobacco could be traded for any other good: ‘palm tree brown sugar, chickens, dried salt fish, salt corn, yams and so on.’<sup>219</sup> Such intrinsic value was

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<sup>218</sup> Meng Raksmeay, *Searching for the Truth*, Second Quarter 2007, 53-54.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

quite helpful considering that he used to receive a weekly ration of tobacco for personal consumption or trade. Tobacco probably enjoyed such a high demand as other forms of entertainment were prohibited, and it provided some relief from anxiety as well. Meng finally added that ‘sometimes I traded tobacco with my unit chief, thinking I could barter my survival.’

### Skills- “Keep for a While”

As part of their social engineering project, the Khmer Rouge undermined higher education from previous regimes. In a slogan compiled by Henri Locard, *Angkar* claimed that ‘there are no more diplomas, only diplomas one can visualize.’<sup>220</sup> This slogan simply meant that the Khmer Rouge only valued concrete achievements attained through physical labor such as dams and rice fields. Consequently, refugees reported that educated Cambodians were ‘suspected, hunted out, often arrested and executed.’<sup>221</sup> Like other aspects of their former identity, holding a degree was officially liable for persecution. However, this chapter provides counter-examples to this generally acknowledged perception. While there were obvious instances of discrimination against educated Cambodians, some cases demonstrate that their knowledge and qualifications sometimes provided a viable way to survive the regime.

In their new education policy, the Khmer Rouge offered daily political meetings to all Cambodians after their daily work. But besides those sessions, they did not seek to educate teenagers and adults, considering that they have been already exposed to

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<sup>220</sup> Locard: 95.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

capitalist ideas. Instead, they favored teaching children, regardless of their previous backgrounds, as they thought their minds would be more receptive to their revolutionary ideas. As testimonies from children of urban background after the regime exposed, even younger children with previous education were able to discern the misguided teachings from the Khmer Rouge, and this realization possibly reinforced their perception of difference in contrast with those local leaders of peasant background. Another problem for the Khmer Rouge was the fact that in their determination to teach children whom they considered 'blank slates', they had the peculiar obstacle of finding these children 'too blank.'

Despite the official policy on educated people and the assumption that they were unilaterally persecuted, many educated or skilled Cambodians managed to survive or have an easier life by using their knowledge or skills. Perhaps the most obvious examples were the survivors from the S-21 security complex. At the end of the regime, only nine Cambodians were found alive in S-21; after some research, the Vietnamese realized that these fortunate few were the sole survivors from the 17,000 prisoners who had been captured and executed. These survivors all shared an aspect in common: they had skills that the Khmer Rouge exploited, thus received more freedom. In the official lists, beside their name, was the mention 'keep for a while.'<sup>222</sup> One of these survivors was Bou Meng, a villager who had learnt to paint on his own.<sup>223</sup> When Duch, the prison chief, was looking for a painter to produce a portrait of Pol Pot, Bou volunteered. Under the threat of execution if his task was not carried out successfully, he nevertheless survived his ordeal in the prison.

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<sup>222</sup> Bou Meng, Searching for the Truth, First Quarterly Issue, April 2003, 23-24.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

The story of Chum Manh, a motorcycle repairman from Phnom Penh, is quite similar.<sup>224</sup> During the evacuation, he had already decided to propose his skills to the Khmer Rouge, and headed for Prek Kdam to offer his help. In that location, he was assigned to recycle automobile engines into boat engines, and had to also repair automobiles, tractors and microphones. He was eventually sent to Phnom Penh, but like Bou Meng, he was asked to put his skills to use by repairing sewing machines. Besides his name in the execution list was the same mention of ‘keep for a while.’ Among the other S-21 survivors were Ruy Nea Khong, a carpenter, Heng Nath and Iem Chan, sculptors, and Ing Pech, a machinery repairman.<sup>225</sup> Thus, there was a direct correlation between these particular survivors and the usefulness of their skills for the *Angkar*.

In other jails throughout Cambodia, people with special skills were able to improve their living conditions by offering their services. Som Rithy, jailed in Siem Reap, claimed that ‘I managed to survive because I was skilled in repairing motorbikes.’<sup>226</sup> Some Khmer Rouge soldiers had asked him to repair a motorcycle, and from that day, he routinely repaired more vehicles for the Khmer Rouge. He considered he owed his life to his skill because of the ominous directive that came with broken motorbikes: ‘You must repair these well, otherwise, I will take your life.’<sup>227</sup> In Kraing Ta Cheng prison in the south of the country, Say Sen survived for a quite different reason: the prison chief was quite fond of alcohol made from sour palm juice and Say knew how

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<sup>224</sup> Chum Manh, *Searching for the Truth*, Number 22, October 2001, 13-16.

<sup>225</sup> *Searching for the Truth*, April 2003, 24. From a document of 22 August 1978 entitled ‘Prisoners who can be used.’

<sup>226</sup> Som Rithy, *Searching for the Truth*, Fourth Quarter 2005, 29-33.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

to produce it.<sup>228</sup> In return, he was able to circulate freely in jail, instead of being shackled all day like other prisoners.

Until this point, the skilled individuals survived during their incarceration, and while there were a few instances of volunteering, the Khmer Rouge asked these prisoners to collaborate. Thus the extent of decision-making involved in the process remains debatable. The importance of this survival strategy becomes clearer outside the prison system, when some Cambodians volunteered their skills and utilized them to improve their lives. As transpired from the examples cited above, there was a fine line between collective and private benefits obtained from the use of these skills. Moeung Sonn's contraptions or the repair of motorboats seems more leaning toward the public good, yet the brewing of alcohol, repair of watches and portraits for Pol Pot illustrate how these skilled individuals were used for private benefits, which also meant outside the reach of the *Angkar* by local Khmer Rouge. The following cases also correspond to that self-interested utilization of skills.

Meas Phally, a new person from Phnom Penh, remembered how she obtained the good graces of a female Khmer Rouge leader after a work accident.<sup>229</sup> The unit chief cared for her personally, and in return, Meas sang to her several traditional songs to entertain her. Afterwards, this leader managed to have her work indoors most of the time. This decision brought some scorn from resentful peasant women, but the unit leader continued to protect her protégée. Chey Phon also enjoyed special favors from the Khmer Rouge.<sup>230</sup> He explains that his hard work may explain his special position, but he also

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<sup>228</sup> Say Sen, *Searching for the Truth*, First Quarter 2005, 17-19.

<sup>229</sup> Meas Phally, *Searching for the Truth*, Second Quarter 2005, 49-52.

<sup>230</sup> Chey Phon, *Searching for the Truth*, Fourth Quarter 2005, 15-17.



acknowledges that the Khmer Rouge seemed to enjoy his skill in playing the *tro*.<sup>231</sup> For that reason, the cooperative asked him and other musicians for a daily performance, for which he received a cigarette. It would seem as a meager salary, but considering the value of tobacco during Democratic Kampuchea, it proved quite valuable for survival. Finally, some base people were also willing to pay for entertainment according to Sinith Heng.<sup>232</sup> While he did not play any particular instrument, the villagers appreciated his skill for whistling. In exchange, he earned some extra food for his family.

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<sup>231</sup> The *tro* is a traditional Cambodian string instrument.

<sup>232</sup> Sinith Heng, Searching for the Truth, Third Quarterly Issue, 54-56.

## Conclusion

Even though the events discussed in this thesis occurred more than three decades ago, Cambodians today can still feel the repercussions of this major human tragedy of the twentieth century. The Khmer Rouge regime has been studied extensively from different angles, and the works of the many scholars on that topic paved the way for studying other aspects of Cambodian society, beyond recollections of suffering and individual survival tales. In fact, Kiernan's mention of the resistance of Cambodians against the Khmer Rouge convinced me of the pertinence of looking for other instances of coping with this totalitarian threat. While this thesis did not aim to construct a social history, it did overview major themes – recruitment, compliance, resistance, escape and barter – that represented major actions taken by Cambodians to cope with those trying and uncharacteristic times. Through the recollection of these individual – perhaps anecdotal – events, I intended to present another side to life during the Khmer Rouge regime. After all, the regime lasted for more than three years, and it appears as self-evident that humans found ways to circumvent incredibly oppressive conditions.

This thesis could also pave the way for further research documenting the social history of Democratic Kampuchea. A more in-depth research using a larger number of sources in Khmer, including more cases from DC-Cam, personal interviews, records from the S-21 security system and official Khmer Rouge documents would yield a more accurate and generalizable portrait of the situation. Instead of emphasizing on these various 'themes,' a more in-depth social history could be framed chronologically, as much as possible. Finding a definite time-frame could prove to be a challenge however,

as many interviewees did not or could not remember the date of occurrence of important events.

Another methodology could involve researching in more details the interactions within a single work camp/village. This project would require finding as many accounts and interviewees as possible from a precise location to analyze the development and complexity of interactions between Khmer Rouge officials, militia, base people and new people over time. Such a framework could eliminate certain inaccuracies and false information through cross-referencing the different stories provided. However, in order to represent a fair representation of Cambodia, specific particularities of that location must be taken into account.

Also, any chapter discussed in this thesis could yield sufficient material to be the focus of a single research or thesis. This present thesis only provided an overview of some issues that could benefit from further research. For instance, the topic of ‘freedom fighters’ represents an interesting aspect of the struggle for resistance between the Khmer Rouge and Cambodian people, but information on the topic so far is still too scarce and vague to determine their impact on the regime.

For more contemporary considerations, this topic evokes the notion of memory. Even though the majority of Cambodians were born after the Khmer Rouge regime -due to the predominance of youths-, the repercussions of the regime can still be felt in Cambodian society and politics. Yet, until very recently, the topic of the ‘Pol Pot regime’ was not thought in school, and was much less open for public debate. In fact, by the time of submitting this thesis (November 2009), Cambodian high school students are receiving their first history book on the period, Kamboly Dy’s *A History of Democratic*

*Kampuchea (1975-1979)*, a publication from the Documentation Centre of Cambodia.<sup>233</sup>

Simultaneously, the international tribunal is examining the case of ‘Comrade Duch’, the director of the infamous S-21 prison and now one of the few prosecuted officials of the former Khmer Rouge.

While these developments offer encouraging prospects for memory and justice in Cambodia, they are still the result of various political interests. Ashley Thompson noted in her article, *Mémoires du Cambodge*, the cyclical ‘loss of memory’ and ‘rediscovery of Cambodia’ which occurs since the beginning of the French protectorate:

The latest saviors of Cambodia – those who just arrived - complain once more about the abominable loss of history: History is lost, and it is History itself which produced this loss. Its elite almost exterminated, its archives and social networks destroyed, Cambodia, as it is said, even lost its memory: once again. [...] Using schoolbooks and tribunals, without forgetting the restoration of the Angkor site – immense construction yard for monuments to the dead, as a matter of fact – we took upon ourselves the mission to reconstitute memory to a forgetful Cambodia.<sup>234</sup>

It would be tempting to become cynical at the perspective that, on the one hand, foreign scholars seek to educate Cambodians on their lost history/memory; while on the other, some scholars claim that Cambodians do not have the necessary skills for analysis and are more useful in collecting data.<sup>235</sup> Hopefully, in the future, Cambodians will be better equipped to write about their history and address their own memory.

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<sup>233</sup> Guy De Launey, ‘Textbook sheds light on Khmer Rouge era,’ BBC News, 10th November 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8350313.stm>.

<sup>234</sup> Ashley Thompson, (2006) ‘Mémoires du Cambodge,’ *Labyrinthe*, 23, 24-25.

<sup>235</sup> The Cambodian authors Meng-Try Ea and Sorya Sim reported these comments from American scholars using the facilities of DC-Cam. Meng-Try Ea and Sorya Sim, *Victims and Perpetrators?: Testimony of Young Khmer Rouge Comrades*, (DC-Cam: Phnom Penh, 2001): v.

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