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## Book Review: Golden Leaf: A Khmer Rouge Genocide Survivor by Kilong Ung

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## Book Review

**Ung, K. (2009). *Golden Leaf: A Khmer Rouge Genocide Survivor*. USA: KU Publishing. 203 pp. \$22.45 (paperback). ISBN: 9780982350201**

*Reviewed by*  
**Carl L. Bankston III, Ph.D.**  
*Tulane University*

Kilong Ung's memoir combines an individual view of historic events, horrific tragedy, an adventure story, and, ultimately, a success story. It follows the pattern of the inspirational autobiography, but it is more than just another account of a protagonist overcoming enormous odds. It is a sensitive reflection on the mystery of one of the twentieth century's great evils.

Kilong was a boy of about 15 when the Khmer Rouge took power in Cambodia in 1975. Some members of his family were linked to the old regime, but others were initially hopeful about the new order. Kilong's father was not one of the hopeful ones, but from the beginning predicted the worst. The father proved to be right.

The Angkar, or "Organization" of the Khmer Rouge forced Kilong's family, and other members of the urban middle class out to the countryside to pursue the dream of creating an egalitarian agrarian utopia. Kilong was forced to treat his parents as equals, violating traditional Khmer values of respect for age and hierarchy. Gradually, he saw the lives around him turn into a daily struggle to survive and he saw his father, grandmother, and mother die. When he asked the Khmer Rouge leader for permission to attend his father's funeral, the leader coldly replied that this would have no value and, after a few minutes, said that the father had already been buried. Vignettes such as this enable Kilong to illustrate the loss of all normal human values under the Khmer Rouge.

The outbreak of war between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese, followed by the invasion of the latter, gave Kilong and his surviving siblings the chance to flee to Thailand. Fortunately, they were accompanied by neighbors who could speak Thai. The author manages to catch the ambivalence of many Cambodians toward the invasion, the relief at the disruption of the Khmer Rouge regime, but also the discomfort with a Vietnamese occupation. While making their way toward the Thai border, Kilong and his companions were confronted by Thai bandits and then captured by Khmer Rouge guerrillas, and were almost surprised by their own good fortune in reaching the country to the west.

Kilong is unclear about how long he spent in Thai refugee camps. Apparently, the stay passed with a sameness that made it difficult to mark time. However, they soon received



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Bankston—Book Review of *Golden Leaf*

permission to resettle in the United States and took a bus to a Bangkok holding camp, where they waited for the American authorities to find a U.S. sponsor. On the flight to the United States, he describes himself as a bewildered outsider, but also as someone with a drive to fit in to what seemed to him a beautiful new world.

In America, Kilong's hard life in Cambodia made him a competitive and driven student. From San Diego, he resettled in Portland, Oregon, where he attended high school. His drive to succeed and his deferential manner toward authority led his teachers to point him out to others as a model student. While some of the students showed prejudice against him, most either left him alone or were friendly. Kilong describes the particular friendship he developed with one of his classmates, and recounts how this friendship led him deeper into American culture.

One of the strongest vignettes in the American portion of the book comes when Kilong tells about his interview to enter Reed College and how his passion for George Orwell's *Animal Farm* won him acceptance. Ironically, Kilong had wanted to attend the University of Oregon or Oregon State University instead of this small, prestigious college. The degree from Reed led to graduate school at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, where Kilong earned a Master of Science degree.

Returning to Oregon, Kilong became a prominent businessman and an active member of the Cambodian community. He recounts, with particular pride, his becoming a Rotarian and a knighted member of the Royal Rosarians. Perhaps the most moving part of the last section of the book, though, are the passages in which Kilong tells about his return to Cambodia twenty years after his desperate flight.

This is a very impressive work. In a few places, Kilong slips into flights of excessively high-flown prose, but for the most part his writing is direct, precise, and intense. He has a gift for recalling and describing compelling details, such as the coldness in the voice of a camp leader or the chirping of birds on a quiet morning after the Vietnamese invasion. He shows a sharp memory for his own thoughts and emotions in specific scenes, and when he evokes his past he enables readers to see things through his own eyes. Some of the events in Cambodia are disturbing, but many of those in America, where so many things are odd and misunderstood, come across as whimsically comic.

I would strongly recommend *Golden Leaf* to anyone interested in the Cambodian refugee experience, or, more broadly, to anyone interested in good autobiographical writing. This is a book that tells us a great deal about the Cambodian genocide. It also tells us much about America.

### About the Reviewer



Carl L. Bankston III is Chair of the Department of Sociology and Director of the Asian Studies Program at Tulane University. His research interests focus on Asian migration and sociology of education. He has published over one hundred articles and book chapters and fifteen books, including *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (1998), co-authored with Min Zhou.



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