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To Keep You is No Gain, To Destroy You is No Loss: A Study of the
Historical and Behavioral Roots of Cambodian Genocide Under Democratic
Kampuchea

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This essay is a study on totalitarianism and genocide through the lens of historical manipulation and cultural behavior unique to Cambodia (later called Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge). The purpose is to describe the cause and effect that colonial machinations and native social behaviors had on the development and perpetuation of the Khmer Rouge. The study is limited by time and research capabilities, as I do not yet speak, read, or write Khmer or Vietnamese. Because the topic spans over two-hundred years, the research focuses on the two endpoints of colonialism and totalitarianism and neglects the time continuum in-between. It is a comparative project that weighs heavily on behavioral research as pulled from historical and anthropological studies on the area and people. The work is significant in that it attempts to bridge the gap between colonialism and Khmer Rouge by linking the events through cause and effect.
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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS): This essay is a study on totalitarianism and genocide through the lens of historical manipulation and cultural behavior unique to Cambodia (later called Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge). The purpose is to describe the cause and effect that colonial machinations and native social behaviors had on the development and perpetuation of the Khmer Rouge. The study is limited by time and research capabilities, as I do not yet speak, read, or write Khmer or Vietnamese. Because the topic spans over two-hundred years, the research focuses on the two endpoints of colonialism and totalitarianism and neglects the time continuum in-between. It is a comparative project that weighs heavily on behavioral research as pulled from historical and anthropological studies on the area and people. The work is significant in that it attempts to bridge the gap between colonialism and Khmer Rouge by linking the events through cause and effect.
Totalitarian terror grows by leaps and bounds. It not only...[is]...aimed at anticipating political resistance—it becomes the fundamental method of achieving the revolution without which the regime would lose its total character and probably also its power. Totalitarian terror is therefore the vital nerve of the totalitarian system...Because of the belief of the infallibility of its dogma, the regime is propelled toward an increase in terror by a violent passion for unanimity. Since history tells the totalitarian he is right, he expects others to agree with him. This passion for uniformity makes the totalitarian insist on the complete agreement of the entire population.1

In our new Cambodian society there exist such life and death contradictions as enemies in the form of various spy rings working for imperialism, and international reactionaries are still planted among us to carry out subversive activities against our revolution. There is also another handful of reactionary elements who continue to carry out activities against, and attempt to subvert, our revolution. These elements are not numerous, consisting of only 1 or 2 percent of our population. Some of them operate covertly while others are openly conducting adverse activities.2

Introduction: An Explanation of Colonial Events and their Contribution to the Development of Democratic Kampuchea

This paper proposes to study Khmer social practices and behavioral modes that enabled the Khmer Rouge to topple the Lon Nol regime and establish Democratic Kampuchea (DK), as well as attempt to dissect the Khmer Rouge’s vision of a pure, communistic haven. The methods by which the Khmer Rouge coerced the millions of Khmer citizens to obey their arbitrary rules have socio-cultural roots. Desiring respect and fearing a position as the lesser of two partners are traditional Khmer social schemes best identified in the patron-client system. Studying the ways in which Cambodians interact contributes to an explanation of how the secret genocide conducted at S-21 and similar centers were planned and executed. Further, it aids in the understanding of Khmer Rouge actions apart from torture. Examples of the less physical tactics

of the Khmer Rouge include the manipulation of children to worship the Angka (the organization) and serve the regime as militant cadres and guards, how city dwellers placidly emptied the cities in the initial days of the new regime, and how overt resistance, like armed rebellions or uprisings, did not occur against the regime.

Sokhieng Au’s “Indigenous politics, public health, and the Cambodian colonial state” served as an intellectual incentive to investigate the generic behaviors of Cambodian individuals. Although the article covers the behavioral modes of protest and reaction against French-implemented medical procedures, her proposed outcome to “support a general aim of furthering the understanding of Khmer political behaviour in the colonial period…and provide alternative models to the existing trope of Khmer socio-political behaviour” does not alienate her research from contributing to a scholarly discussion of the Khmer Rouge. Colonial Khmers used a menagerie of tactics against Western medicine, of which they neither understood nor felt it necessary with which to comply. So, too, did post-colonial Khmers living in the twentieth century use the same or similar tactics against the Khmer Rouge, and vice versa, the Khmer Rouge against the Cambodian people.

Au’s delineation of the protest methods used against the France include petition, inaction, flight, murder, and manipulation of prevalent social customs to prohibit or delay the French from coercing the Khmers to obey the European medical regulations or to prevent the Khmers from carrying on with their traditional social customs, such as elaborate funerals for recently deceased, wealthy victims of plague. Memoirs written after the Khmer Rouge’s defeat by the Vietnamese in the 1970s incorporate elements of the traditional modes of protest Au discovered in her research on colonial Cambodia. Despite the gap of centuries, the social order remained

3 Sokhieng Au, “Indigenous politics, public health and the Cambodian colonial state,” *South East Asia Research* (London) 14, no. 1 (Mar 2006), 33-86.
essentially the same; thus, the behavioral backdrop behind these two events has a continuity that enables research of totalitarianism in Cambodia. The common denominator is France. Thus, colonial France’s manipulation and interpretation of Cambodian history lay at the root of the Khmer Rouge movement.4

Looking at the Khmer Rouge’s posture during their period in power, it is easy to pick out schemas of paranoia and face-saving mechanisms that were familiar to the traditional pre-revolution Khmer. Much of what other scholars say about Cambodian aggression—including the brand of grudge which serves as a catalyst for future violence, *kum*—has a tendency to exclude research outside of direct contact with the negative emotions people experience. Judy Ledgerwood’s article “Khmer Kinship: The Matriliny/Matriarchy Myth” and Chhuong’s *Battambang During the Time of the Lord Governor* offer wonderful academic insights into Khmer cultural norms and patterns that contribute, both directly and indirectly, to understanding Cambodian wartime behavior.5 In other words, research that focuses strictly on the Khmer Rouge once it had achieved power, like David Chandler’s *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison*, has its uses, although its localized scope of the regime is prohibitive to completely answering questions with any level of accuracy of how and why genocide developed.6

Cambodians, like many Eastern countries, adhere to a conception of time that contradicts the Western linear progression. In the Eastern philosophy, the past exists within the present; this means that the sorts of behaviors displayed by Cambodians during the time of French colonialism and plague are present during the time of Pol Pot and his genocide. The opinion

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4 Cambodge
scholars generally take when discussing Cambodian extremes, like rage, is that Cambodians have a peculiar degree of emotional acuteness and control not possessed by other cultures; one author sophomorically labeled the behavioral peculiarities of Cambodians as “Khmerness,” which can seep into architecture, trade, and burial rituals.7

Through an examination of sources—to include memoirs, scholastic works, speeches, and empirical data of Cambodia, prior to, during, and after the Khmer Rouge—this paper concludes that although the conception of “Khmerness” lacks any scholastic backing, there are cultural patterns and other indicators of how and why the Khmer Rouge were able to attain and maintain their power in the 1970s. That genocide occurred should not come as a shock to any scholar of Cambodia. Cambodian grudges, kum, the system of patron-client relationships, internal familial organization, the lack of any socially-approved outlet for releasing the initial feelings of anger or resentment, the pressure to “save face” and the obligations a Cambodian has to his family’s honor all contribute to excessive violence. It was the creation of a regime that channeled these behaviors to one focused end that proved explosive on a large scale.

To illustrate the theme of this paper more effectively, I must call upon an analogy of Professor Jones’s of Northern Illinois University, concerning the Southeast Asian conception of power: like “the force” in Star Wars, power is neither good nor bad until someone harnesses it for his personal use. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge took hold of the neutral power of traditional modes of behavior—neutral because without manipulation they neither toppled nor benefited society as a whole—and exploited them to suit their own purposes. Thus, the genocide has cultural origins.

This study is broken into two large blocks, the first of which cycles through some of the major characteristics of Cambodian behavior that I deemed especially pertinent to a discussion on the Khmer Rouge. Some of the characteristics are peppered with examples from Haing Ngor's memoir, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, to better illustrate the concept at hand. The second part of the essay is concerned with folding the behavioral characteristics into an analysis of specific events that occurred under the Khmer Rouge. It is in this second block that the research on Democratic Kampuchea is explained through these cultural models.

**Khmer Behavior**

Westerners seek justice, a repayment of debts for transgressions against them. This repayment is usually given by a third party court system; carrying out vendettas and other forms of seeking revenge are not socially-approved methods for the blue or white collar workers of America. The "eye for an eye" quotation from the Bible best explains the Westerners' desire in seeking justice to level themselves with the aggressor. Reciprocate the hurt, and the transgression is forgotten.

Cambodians, however, seek disproportionate revenge, typically referred to as "a head for an eye." Dr. Ledgerwood of Northern Illinois University recalled a newspaper article published after the Khmer Rouge had been overthrown that illustrated disproportionate revenge: a Cambodian man had been slighted by another man while out drinking in a bar. Having kept some of his former munitions from the DK era, he went home, retrieved a grenade, and threw it in the bar. By killing the man who had made him lose face he was able to stand above him—he had vanquished his enemy and proved himself the superior in their relationship.

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9 Dr. Ledgerwood, HIST 498J, 22 October 2007.
Not all examples of “head for an eye” are so extreme. In this example, the grenade thrower had been intoxicated and had impaired judgement. Other incidents of a disrespected person taking steps to humiliate the person whom had insulted him include public teasing to strangers and friends and marrying the sister of an enemy and treating her poorly after he takes second and third wives. In this last example, the family of the wife was unable to kill the man for treating her poorly because she would be a widow, and if she left him she would be a divorcee—both of which would incur public shame for her and her family.

Cambodians themselves will admit to suffering from this desire to entirely vanquish their enemies. Admittedly, they will do all they can to prevent themselves from reaching the point of murder, but all Cambodians are aware that such extreme violence is not outside the realm of possibility. An unnamed Cambodian male in his mid-twenties explained the volatility of acting on one’s anger.

Since I was little, I have not wanted to argue with anyone. Even if another person does something to make me mad, I don’t want to argue with them. I try to control my heart (tuap chett). If I argue with another person, I might stop speaking to them forever after, but I wouldn’t want to fight them. But I know in my heart, if I ever did get into a fight with someone, I would beat them until they were no longer alive. I would beat them to death at once. I wouldn’t want the person to live because I know he would take revenge upon me on a later day. So I don’t want to argue with anyone.

This illustrates two extreme ways of dealing with personal grudges, or kum. The first is to cease interactions with the person. This quiet, non-confrontational method of controlling anger while simultaneously carrying out a personal hatred might last for a period of days or until one of the two parties involved in the argument dies (although the death would be natural or accidental, not

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11 Ibid., 213.
caused by the person with whom he is not speaking). This method of arguing is often difficult to resolve, as Cambodians rarely tell one another “I am mad at you” as many Americans would in response to an argument, thereby presenting an opportunity for discussion and reconciliation over the disagreement.

A silence might receive a temporary truce by one person in the argument claiming a third party wishes to see the other person, or that a third party misses that other person. One poignant example of this inclusion of a third party to call a temporary truce to an argument exists in Dr. Heing Ngor’s memoir, *Survival in the Killing Fields*. His father had given him a severe beating as punishment for allegedly stealing from his store. In fact, Ngor had not stolen from his father, it was his brother. Nevertheless, he was beaten unconscious. Once he came to, he left his family and lived a quasi-carefree life helping a distant cousin operate his bus-taxi in a nearby rural village. He did not communicate with his family during this time—he was ready to live on his own, away from the abuses suffered under his father’s rules. Weeks passed by, and by happenstance Ngor and his cousin met his father by a roadblock. His father told his cousin, within earshot of Ngor, that Ngor’s mother was missing her son terribly and that she wonders at when he will come home. He neither looked at nor acknowledged Ngor’s presence. Nevertheless, Ngor understood the message and returned to his mother. The family was reunited, and everyone saved face in the process, for his father neither apologized, which would lower his status in the family for humbling himself to his son, and his son, upon moving back into the house, recognized the traditional order of familial life. His grudge could continue and manifest itself in other ways, but not to such a degree that it would publicly shame the family.

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The second way in which the young Cambodian man explained how he might choose to deal with a grudge is to kill a man so that he would not have the chance to, in turn, seek vengeance on him. Much of the desire to entirely vanquish an enemy results from Cambodians seeking to be higher than others, which is directly related to the patron-client relationships that characterize nearly all of Cambodia’s social interactions, internal and external. Cambodian patron-client relationships are like other patron-client relationships of Southeast Asia. Person A will seek the assistance or favor of Person B. Person A is indebted to Person B, whose status has risen by adding another person into his circle of people who are partially or wholly dependant upon him. The cycle is not limited to Persons A and B; Person A has his own circle of people who depend on him, just as Person B is a client to other persons of higher status. These intertwined relationship networks are a continuous push-pull in the society in which the patron-client system operates. Always, in the Cambodian system, does one seek to have more clients than one does patrons; one must always strive to be at the top of his social chain.

In a skewed way, this translates into how Cambodians feel it necessary to eliminate the possibility of their enemies striking back at them for any grave offence. The risks of not getting rid of an enemy in serious cases could prove fatal, for the enemy could strike back not only at the person with whom he was angry, but at his entire family, which would wipe out his line and remove the possibility of anyone seeking revenge for this act. It is better to cheat death by getting rid of the enemy and his line before he has the chance to get you and yours.

Not every grudge is the result of one incident. Most are a compound reaction to a number of insults suffered on one end, and those insults can range in scope and level of humiliation endured. Over time, just as in any society, anger that does not have a proper channel
of release will explode. It is an obvious conclusion that Cambodians do not often have the opportunity to rid themselves of anger in constructive ways.

Killing an enemy is an excessive way of coping with or ridding oneself of anger. This extreme reaction is most likely due in part to how anger is internalized in order to save face. Saving face, or maintaining an exterior posture that hints at a peaceful home life, external respect, and harmony with others, is as integral a component to the Cambodian way of life as is the patron-client system; indeed, it is nearly inseparable from it. Saving face is akin to keeping the peace among people; avoiding arguments and maintaining cool under pressure are characteristics of the Buddhist monks, the moral and religious keepers of Cambodian society. To emulate them is to follow a path that is honorable and proper; thus, Cambodians often attempt to repress their anger and feel compelled to obey the tacit rules of life. Happiness is essential to the common good.13

To borrow another example from Ngor’s memoir: after high school, Ngor went to live among the monks, as is tradition in Cambodia. An old monk took to Ngor and explained that all that is holy and divine runs though his veins, because it takes a father and a mother to make a child. The father and mother protect the child in youth; consequently it is the child’s duty to protect and honor the parents when he is older, as well as his relatives who came into the family before him—he must always serve and protect them. The monk told him, “Obey your elders, boy. If your family is happy, you will have a good life. If all the families are happy, then the village will be happy. If all the villages are happy, then the land will be strong and content.”14

14 Ibid., 21.
Obedience is an easy way to save face. If a young Cambodian child does what he is told and does not cause problems with rude questions, mischief, or rambunctious behavior, he will do his family honor. Young children are taught obedience and the pains of public ridicule at an early age. Humiliation is incorporated into primary school-levels of education, as teachers often force students to stand up in class if they get an answer wrong and remain standing until someone answers it correctly, and parents do not hesitate to threaten to give children away to strangers if they maintain obnoxious antics. Whether the children realize it at the time or not, both standing up in a room of their seated peers and threats of being sold are forms of losing face that are directly related to issues of obedience.

For example, a son who steals from his father's business by skimming money from the accounts makes his father lose credibility, both for raising a disobedient son and for having been swindled by a relative, whereas a son who goes to medical school and doctors his father when ill allows his father to boast of such an intelligent and respectful (read: obedient) son, thereby gaining face.

One particularly striking example of face and familial loyalty that occurred after the Khmer Rouge took control of the country and evacuated the cities was in a refugee camp. Even here, Ngor explained, having face was important. Once reunited with his father and mother, he had found a traditional-style Cambodian home in which to live—a small enclosed room standing on stilts several feet high to save it from the monsoon rains.

Now that I was reunited with my family I was nearly content. Family is the glue that holds society together. Life makes more sense for being connected to the past through parents, and to the future through children. Being together also had its practical benefits. For one, more people to rely on in case of emergencies. For another, more food,

15 Hinton, 192.
because my family had stockpiled food and taken it with them from the city. And finally, I had gained face for bringing the family into the house, because I had done my duty as a son; and my father had gained face because I had put him literally above me.17

Even after the Khmer Rouge attempted to eliminate all previous social norms and familial loyalty, people held fast to their time-honored traditions. This will be discussed in further detail in the following section of the paper, Behavior under the Khmer Rouge Regime.

**Behavior under the Khmer Rouge Regime**

Given what we know of Cambodian behavior—that they are generally peaceful because of their internalized anger, which can erupt when the right trigger mechanism is squeezed—let us now examine what it is that happened under the rule of the Khmer Rouge.

The Khmer Rouge focused on recruiting from the countryside. Although Sihanouk, the beloved former ruler who had been overthrown in a coup by Lon Nol, took pains to ensure all of the children received quality education—he dedicated twenty-five percent of the national budget to that specific effort—the country children were those whose minds typically did not grasp the Western-style lessons of world history and mathematics.18 The Khmer Rouge took advantage of the relatively uneducated boys and girls, whose racial purity as "dark, ethnic Khmer" often contrasted highly with the lighter skin tones of those who lived in the city. The Khmer Rouge zeroed in on a few key sensitivities of the native Cambodian: exalting the past glory of the Khmer race, with Angkor Wat as its symbol of its former achievement and status, the Khmer Rouge positioned itself as nearly inseparable from their impressive past by referring to itself as the Angka, meaning organization, which is similar in sound and spelling to Angkor. There had


18 Elizabeth Becker. *When the War was Over.* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), 6.
been, too, an unspoken tension between the wealthy city people and the poor country rice farmers. The perception that they toiled endlessly and received little for their pains due to a prohibitive tax infrastructure and a culture of *bonjour*, a French word that, among other meanings, traditionally translates into “hello,” although in Cambodian slang is used to label the required bribing, skimming from the top, and unpaid favors the government officials require the peasants to pay or give in order to conduct business without hassle. *Bonjour* is a word for corruption; under the Lon Nol regime corruption grew at an insufferable pace.

Additionally, the organization was smart about how it required its members to refer to one another, its use of the traditional and respectful way of calling a respected individual Brother or Grandfather. This helped to both exalt the individual in power and it eased the transition for those youths who joined the movement and abandoned their families. It was within the Khmer Rouge that they had a Father or a Sister; not at home. It was successful in replacing the family structure for its lowest members; those who had actual authority in the government still held fast to their former, pre-revolutionary, conceptions of family honor and face.

Using those three strategies as the base-layer recruitment schemes, the Khmer Rouge were able to recruit successfully among the peripheral members of society and the poor. It was the poor, in fact, who were the exalted members and cherished within the group for their purity; not surprisingly, the DK’s communist leanings preferred the farmers to the intellectual. It is easy, therefore, to comprehend how the country-versus-city tension could bubble over into outright violence, as it did, when examining the relationship with *kum* in mind. Years of bribing,

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19 Becker, #.  
20 Ngor. *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 25. “*Bonjour, mon ami,*” my brother said sarcastically, quoting one of the few French phrases he knew. *Bonjour* had two meanings. Literally it was a greeting like “hello”, but the French practice of shaking hands offered a chance to pass folded money from one palm to another. In Cambodian slang, *bonjour* meant graft.  
21 Chandler.  
22 Chandler—Brother Number One.
working hard in the hot Cambodian sun in a rice field to have but a portion of the crop left after
taxes and *bonjour* contrasted sharply with images of city people eating in restaurants and driving
Mercedes cars; the Khmer Rouge looked to the eighty-five percent of the Khmers living in the
country for their base of support, following a popular Leninist “fundamental law”: “Only when
the ‘lower classes’ do not want the old way, and then the upper classes cannot carry on in the old
way—only then can revolution triumph.”

The patron-client theme presented in the first section of the paper was a sensitive point in
the recruitment of the country people for the Khmer Rouge. A Khmer Rouge cadre member,
Prum Pal, was partially responsible for propaganda work among the peasants living in Kreng
Beng village. Although she had been imprisoned in S-21 a few years later, she “confessed” to
promising country people that they could achieve higher status if they worked with her—playing
on the traditional patron-client theme in Khmer society. With a deep-rooted desire to be a
“bigger” man, more important, and above others, her psychology was important in getting the
numbers the organization needed to sustain the revolution. She confessed that she would say,

Uncle, you have worked in the rice fields since you were a child;
Uncle you don’t have enough food; [they] control things and you
still don’t have enough...Uncle, you work for the Republic but
you do not have a high rank and after winning you will only work
in the ricefields...Your children will only remain rice farmers, too.
But if uncle wants to become a big man he will have to fight the
Republic. That was the only way he could become a big man.

Prum Pal used standard Cambodian methods of respect, calling her potential recruit “Uncle” and
promising upward mobility and a better life for his family. It is quite clear that Uncle, whoever

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23 V.I. Lenin, “Left Wing Comminism” in Selected Works.
he was, could pick out the possibility of a better way of life not only for himself, but for his children—that working for the Khmer Rouge meant honor for his line.\(^{25}\)

Once folded into the Angka, the individual Khmer Rouge underwent a series of classes for indoctrination.\(^{26}\) Because many of the recruits were typically uneducated, the political reeducation often ignored the finer points of political doctrine and focused on unleashing internal rage. They followed the system even when it appeared as though it might fail, for without knowledge of the fundamentals of politics, it was unlikely that they could identify the incongruities of doctrine when compared with the reality of the party’s organization and purpose.\(^{27}\)

Chandler dedicates an entire chapter in his book on S-21 explaining the backgrounds of the workers who interrogated, guarded, and helped to perform the low-level work for the facility. Most had joined the revolution when they were young—some as young as ten years old.\(^{28}\) He also examines the roots of obedience, a character trait that is at an early age reinforced in Cambodian youth in schools. Public ridicule, tied to the theme of saving face, produces a level of obedience. But can this level of indoctrinated obedience, the face-saving measures, and the

\(^{25}\) That the paper omits mention of the Khmer Rouge’s coercive tactics in attaining recruits does not mean that they did not influence the development of the party. One examples of their subversive recruitment techniques includes vans driving to the entrances of movie theatres on Friday nights. When young men left the show, the Khmer Rouge would grab them up, stuff them in the van, and drive away. For an article on the lack of popular support for the Khmer Rouge, see Kate G. Frieson. “Revolution and Rural Response in Cambodia: 1970-1975” in Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia: The Khmer Rouge, the United Nations and the International Community, Ben Kiernan, ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale Monograph Series, University of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993.).

\(^{26}\) Chandler. Pol Pot plans the future.

\(^{27}\) Ngor’s memoir includes a brief conversation he overheard between a fellow doctor and a friend about what the Khmer Rouge actually were on their lowest level. His friend had commented that the soldiers did not even know they were communists: “When have you ever heard them use the word ‘communist’?” “That’s true,” said the paediatrician after a moment’s thought. “But what are they?” “Kum-monuss,” I said...It was a play on words: kum, the long-standing grudge that finally explodes in disproportionate revente, and mouss, meaning people. “That’s what they are at the lower level, revenge people. All they know is that city people like us used to lord it over them and this is their chance to get back. That’s what they are, communist at the top and kum-mounss at the bottom.”

Ngor, 171

\(^{28}\) Chandler. S-21.
devotion to a family (either biological or manufactured), upon political tweaking, be enough to induce someone to kill and participate in genocide?

On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society is an American book that examines specific, American battles and encounters. Yet its findings easily translate into the situation of 1970s Cambodia and offers insights into the lower-level perpetrators' minds. The famous Milgram study conducted at Yale University examined the innate obligation a person feels to carry out the orders given by someone in a position of authority. Participants of the experiment were led to a room with a person in a chair. They were to administer levels of electrical shocks according to what a man in lab coat ordered. Despite seeing that they were causing the person being electrocuted physical pain, many continued to increase the voltage on command. As this example is a more controlled experiment of one method of torture at S-21, the situation easily translates to Cambodia's genocide and torture methods. Because many of the men working in S-21 felt an obligation to authority, their man in the white lab coat was replaced by the Angka—the nameless, faceless body to whose revolution they were participants.

Not only did the Khmer Rouge cadre who committed genocide feel an obligation to authority, but they felt what Grossman identifies as "anonymity and group absolution", meaning that as long as he can share the blame among his peers who are performing the same duties, he can reconcile his actions. This is a natural phenomena, occurring not only among soldiers on a battlefield, but within any group in which taking life is a possibility, such as street gangs or mafias. Therefore, the man is not the killer, but the group is.

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30 Ibid., 141-142.
...Groups also enable killing through developing in their members a sense of anonymity that contributes to further violence. In some circumstances this process of group anonymity seems to facilitate a kind of atavistic killing hysteria that can also be seen in the animal kingdom. Kruck's 1972 research describes scenes from the animal kingdom that show that senseless and wanton killing does occur. They include the slaughter of gazelles by hyenas, in quantities way beyond their need or capacity to eat...Shalit points out that 'such senseless violence in the animal world—as well as most of the violence in the human domain—is shown by groups rather than by individuals.

Many survivors of the Cambodian holocaust who are willing to talk about their experiences as Khmer Rouge militants and perpetrators of violence usually recall their actions as a means of self-preservation. While self-preservation might have been a conscious rationalization for their participation, the influence of the group is just as real, if not a more authentic, reason for them to have killed.

The group mentality is a component of the upbringing that Cambodian children receive while in primary school, as mentioned earlier. Public shaming, losing face, and familial obligation all contribute to reinforce a person's identification of himself as being of the group, not apart from it. The nature of the Khmer Rouge as a military organization incorporated this organic group mentality of the animal kingdom into their indoctrination process; all military organizations do this in order to function. But they also went a step further in choosing their soldiers and cadre from a specific racial and economic background. They selected the dark skinned Cambodians of the countryside to fill their ranks. This external similarity made identification of members of the group especially easy; dark skin meant an ally, light skin meant an enemy.

Even today, Cambodians will talk about the racial differences between the Khmer Rouge and the other Cambodians who were the victims of their revolution. Cambodians traditionally

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stereotype dark skin with poverty and manual labor and light skin with wealth and comfort. One scholar who had spent time with Cambodian peasants remarked that many of them whom he interviewed about the Khmer Rouge "regularly refer...to the Khmer Rouge as aa khmau, which loosely translates as 'those black bastards.' A high percentage of the Khmer Rouge rank and file were apparently from the poorest rural areas of Cambodia, where Khmers tend to have very dark skin." The Khmer Rouge found prime candidates for soldiers in the countryside of Cambodia, having all the prerequisites to become obedient, faithful servants of the Angka: uneducated, young, suffering from economic repression and poverty, and enjoying racial similarity.

Other theories posit that Buddhism itself contributed to the genocide. In addition to the obedience imbedded in Cambodians throughout their youth, the religious and moral keepers of society, the monks, reinforce the behavioral characteristic. The Khmer Rouge leadership exploited the benefits of such religious indoctrination, but desired to eliminate the source of it—the religion itself. Taking hold of a fear of the patron-client relationship, the Angka feared that its client, the Buddhist monks and lay practitioners, would rise and attack the organization and the revolution. The rationale behind this was simple:

While the Constitution [of Democratic Kampuchea] ford not explicitly name Buddhism [as a religion to be banned], it is clear from DK rhetoric and actions that Buddhism...was considered reactionary, feudalistic, and exploitative. Buddhism, of course, would have competed with the state for manpower, resources, and loyalties. DK class analysis categorized monks as belonging to a "special class" and comparable to "subcapitalists" or petty bourgeois;...the other-worldly orientation of Buddhist teachings was viewed as detrimental to Democratic Kampuchea's desire for active transformation of this world.

Like everything the Khmer Rouge did, there was a semblance of order and reason behind the choice to eliminate Buddhism entirely from the lives of the citizenry. Yun Yat, the minister of

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education and propaganda and wife of a party leader, explained, “Under the old regime peasants believed in Buddhism, which the ruling class utilized as a propaganda instrument. With the development of revolutionary consciousness, the people stopped believing the bonzes and left the temples. The problem gradually becomes extinguished. Hence there is no problem.”35

Buddhism as doctrine seeps into a number of crevices. To look at it from the Khmer Rouge leadership angle is to identify a potential enemy, a usurper of personnel and resources, and a purveyor of a dissenting ideology, one that preaches against ignorance and that focuses on human bonds. Understandably, the Khmer Rouge felt the need to eliminate the threats against their party to best achieve the highest likelihood of success in their program. To consider Buddhism from the victim’s point of view, many Cambodians felt they were suffering from bad Karma produced in a previous life; that their lifespan included the Khmer Rouge regime induced much guilt. Ngor’s religious principles caused him similar worry in the early days of the Khmer Rouge takeover of Phnom Penh. To him, karma was important, but any existential punishment he might have incurred through bad karma did not alter his plans to fight the regime. He believed if the people could not fight them physically, then it was important to fight them in their minds.36

Other Cambodians he recalled, those belonging to the more mystical sects of Buddhism, felt old prophesies were coming true. Some predictions were from the traditional Khmer canon of folklore that includes various omens of ill-fortune, such as the observation of a white crocodile or the rusting of the royal sword. Other signs, however, were a part of put tuminay,

35 Des Moines Register, 1978.
meaning "Buddhist predictions." The entire population of Cambodia was familiar with these stories, which included rumors that their enemies will empty the cities after a social catastrophe, the persecution of Buddhists by their enemies, and the rise of the uneducated to positions of authority. A few examples of superstitions highlight the ease with which Cambodians could apply the stories to the actual events that occurred in the wake of the Khmer Rouge takeover.

A ferocious, bloodthirsty spirit, the king of the demons, will come from [a distant province] and enter into the hearts of the people, to create disorder in every city...to cause the people to think that wrong is right, that black is white, that good is bad.

They will take the bribes of others, until no more of them remain. They will then flee to live in a foreign country, in the rural areas, by way of the forest, and their health will return. At that time, they will depend on the assistance of foreigners; they will exist with the help of others [instead of by their own efforts]...

Clearly, any basic knowledge on the Khmer Rouge’s rise to power can fill in the holes created by these prophesies. Understandably, the citizenry would look to their old methods of explanation to rationalize the happenings of the Khmer Rouge takeover and their subsequent destruction. If they had believed in karma, it is not impossible to conceive of hundreds, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of Buddhist Cambodians resigning to their fates, as the prophesies had foretold of the coming of the Khmer Rouge.

Conclusion

The lack of ethnic uniformity among the Cambodians was an integral component in enabling the genocide. By first separating the ethnic Cambodians from the mixed blood Cambodians and foreigners, the Khmer Rouge intensified the degree of separation between them. The rural

38 Ibid., 20.
39 Ibid., 21.
prejudices against the prosperous city dwellers, graft, the patron-client system and other
traditional Cambodian social customs and modes of upbringing all contributed to the ease with
which the Khmer Rouge was able to recruit members to fill its ranks and carry out its program of
destruction.

The proposed model is an organic one, and relatively easy to understand: instead of
wondering what external factors contributed to the development of the regime, look at the
characteristics and habits of the people who conducted the genocide. The external influences
certainly exaggerated the percentages of recruits and tenacity with which the Khmer Rouge
operated, but 'exaggerated' and 'produced' are important differences. Many scholars
erroneously point to the American bombing campaign as one of the causes of the high level of
recruitment of Cambodian countrymen into the Khmer Rouge.40 If anything, the bombing was a
secondary cause; the initial reasons for their participation in the political movement included the
ones mentioned above: economics, traditional modes of retaliation, race, and lack of quality
education.41

Scholars cannot judge a culture for being predisposed to violence. Violence is a human
experience, a universal code in which even the most docile cultures participate. Like the
Cambodians, one anthropologist noted, Germans have similar cultural obligations and practices
that had made them susceptible to the mass extermination of Jews and other minorities during
World War II. The reasons are internal—like the test subjects who electrocuted the victims
simply because a man in a lab coat said to, both Cambodians and Germans were playing on
programmed responses to authority. It is when the rationalization becomes 'the Germans had
pre-existing hatred of the Jews' and 'because the rural Cambodians had struggled for years under

40 Eva Mysliwiec, Kampuchea Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea. (Oxford: Oxfam,
41 The Cambodian Agony.
a regime that encouraged oppressive taxation and graft and therefore learned to hate capitalism' that the beginnings of comprehension about genocidal motivation begins.

When the questions turn to the motivation of the trigger pullers—not just the ideological roots of hatred and means—that the universal experience of killing and death becomes the focus. The theory of group dynamics as an enabler is particularly persuasive; genocide is not limited to one culture or one person. Pol Pot has the finger pointed at him for being the mastermind, but there are different reasons for the actions taken by the leadership on different levels. Pol Pot might have been among the few humans who enjoy killing, or he could have been so emotionally distant from the killing that it had little effect on his actions. Whatever his motivation, the Cambodian people at large, specifically the rural peasants who cooperated with the Khmer Rouge have telling characteristics that highlight the tendency of their culture to commit these sorts of crimes.
Bibliography


