

Chapter 2

Victims and Perpetrators in Cambodia: Communities Moving Towards Reconciliation on a Rocky Road

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Introduction

Imagine that the man who had led your parents and siblings to their deaths lives in the next village. Imagine that besides your family members, he also led three hundred other people to their deaths at that prison in the next village. You feel angry, sad, and sometimes you want to take revenge against him. You know that he was not the one giving orders: that man, who ordered the killings, was killed by the Khmer Rouge (KR) during their regime. But that does not really help your pain – whenever you see this man (I will call him “Pel”) you remember your past and mourn the loss of your family. So you do not even want to see Pel and you avoid him whenever possible, which is fairly easy, as he does not go out much. You feel somewhat better knowing that, when you do see him, he appears a poor, broken man, with hunched shoulders and eyes to the ground. He seems to feel regret for the past.

But now, imagine that you are Pel, that man who led people to their deaths. You are one of the few former KR cadres who still live in the village. You had to do this job during the KR period, or you would have been killed. It was not you who ordered those people’s deaths, or even those which people would be killed. But today, you do not dare leave your house, except to till your fields. You do not go to the local Buddhist temple, or weddings or funerals; you are totally isolated. Twenty years ago, you spent more than a year in prison and you still suffer from the beatings you received there. You feel angry and frustrated at what happened to you, and you feel afraid of your neighbours. You are filled with anxiety, as there was an attempted robbery at your home and your father-in-law was killed about ten years ago – you believe the robbers were trying to kill you.

These two perspectives, from victim/survivor and perpetrator, respectively, and the relationship between them are at the core of this analysis of reconciliation in Cambodia. During the KR rule in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, more than 1.7 million people perished by execution, starvation, lack of health services, and

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overwork. Now, 35 years after the end of the regime, the tribunal for the senior and most responsible KR leaders is underway (the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, or ECCC),¹ and two trials have been completed with three defendants found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity (amongst other crimes). Memorialisation and dialogue initiatives are being conducted in the public space created around the tribunal. Cambodian society is still struggling to come to terms with the past, and reconciliation at the community level is in process, but precarious.

This chapter discusses the role of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders in the period of recovery since the KR regime, and their views of the trials of the former KR leaders and the activities that have arisen around the ECCC. While the tribunal is trying a handful of senior leaders, tens of thousands of lower-level perpetrators are living throughout the country. Based on qualitative research conducted between 1999 and 2014, interviews with ordinary Cambodians and staff of the organisations working with them provide insights into how individuals and communities are dealing with the past.² Illustrative case studies show how victims and perpetrators are managing to live in the same communities.

Background

After years of destructive civil war, the KR overthrew the Cambodian Republic on 17 April 1975, and immediately emptied the cities, leaving a wake of women in childbirth, and hospital patients grasping their intravenous drips along the roads. As the KR implemented a revolution modelled upon Mao Tse Tung's China, communal working, eating, and decision-making were implemented in the hope of reinstating Cambodia to the position of power achieved during the Angkor period, which covered large parts of Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Educated people, those wearing glasses or speaking foreign languages, and those working for the government were all targeted for execution (they were identified as "new people" or

¹See <http://www.eccc.gov.kh/en>.

²In order to capture deep meanings and detailed nuances of the complex term "reconciliation", the studies upon which this chapter is based used a qualitative research design, including multi-site case study review. Data sources included document review and field research through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The data was analysed using the NVivo qualitative analysis software program (Bazeley 2007): commonly used terms were coded such as reconciliation, community, forgiveness, and then compared across individual interviews in ten case studies. The sampling was non-random, and convenience, using the snowball method to identify former KR respondents who rarely call attention to themselves in Cambodia. The initial study communities were chosen to include different proportions of: victim-survivors, former Khmer Rouge, accused perpetrators, and communities with different experiences of violence and hardship, and with a variety of rural/urban populations. I first visited some of these communities in 1999, then in 2007/8 (135 interviews), and again in 2013/14 (100 interviews). Interview number identifies interviews. Gender balance was attempted, as was a sampling of occupations, ethnicities, religious groups, and education levels.

“17 April people”). The rural populations were for the most part identified as “base people” and were given more privileges and positions of power, while “new people” were targeted for hard labour, harassment, torture, and execution.³ Yet everybody suffered: besides the physical suffering of extreme overwork, starvation and lack of health care, and the loss of a huge number of family members, Cambodians also suffered from psychological harm from dehumanisation, fear, survivor’s guilt, anger, and loss of trust.

After almost four years of KR rule, in December 1978, Vietnamese soldiers and a core group of former KR cadres pushed into Cambodia and overthrew the Khmer Rouge, creating the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). While the Vietnamese-backed factions of former KR installed themselves in Phnom Penh, the KR who had been controlling the country under Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Nuon Chea fled in disarray to the Thai–Cambodian border, along with thousands of emaciated and devastated refugees. Immediately after the KR period, the PRK was scrambling to provide basic services given the mass destruction of physical infrastructure and human resources under KR rule. The PRK leaders (including current Prime Minister Hun Sen) immediately instated a policy of accepting all Cambodians back into the fold, while at the same time blaming certain senior KR leaders for genocide and making summary arrests of other local-level leaders who had not managed to flee. From 1978 through the late 1990s, the PRK (later renamed the State of Cambodia) was in a civil war with the KR forces and other “non-communist resistance” forces fighting from the Thai–Cambodian border. After peace accords were signed in 1991, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) operated in Cambodia and returned hundreds of thousands of refugees, taught human rights, supervised the police and local administration, and conducted elections, creating a new Royal Government of Cambodia in 1993. However, recovery was still slow, partly due to the complete destruction of much of the country’s physical infrastructure as well as the loss of the educated population during the KR regime.

In many post-conflict societies, including Cambodia, the years of war and violence have taken their toll, leaving these countries damaged both physically and psychologically. While economic growth has been continuous, especially for the burgeoning middle class, and the country is not currently at war, Cambodians today continue to suffer from poverty (especially in rural areas), widespread corruption, and human rights abuses (politically ordered arrests and sometimes killings, land grabs, clampdowns on freedom of expression and association, etc.) and thus are in a state of negative peace. They must grapple with the effects of globalisation (resulting in increased migration to work in factories in large cities and abroad) and modernisation (with exposure to television, drugs, and gangs). In this environment,

³There were exceptions to the designations of “base persons” versus “new persons”. Although “base people” were in general the trusted supporters of the regime, several villagers from poor families were also labelled in the less trustworthy categories of “base people” (*nyeak triem* or *nyeak penyhar*) because they had a relative who was a civil servant or they or their family members had committed some other violation of the KR rules.

it is difficult for the ordinary Cambodian citizen to begin to build trust in government and society. For full reconciliation, besides restoration of relationships between victims and perpetrators, institutional and societal change and reconstruction are needed.

Rebuilding social capital after mass violence is dependent upon underlying culture and social structure. The majority of Cambodians live in rural areas, make a living in agriculture, and rely on the local (politicised) administrative structures for support and security. The family is the primary unit of social organisation, and Cambodians are linked together in complex webs of kinship, hierarchy, and patronage. Cambodian dispute resolution styles of conflict avoidance have affected the way Cambodians think about reconciliation. The predominant Buddhist religion also greatly influences how Cambodians perceive the various processes of reconciliation and the factors affecting reconciliation.

Psycho-social factors are also important in considering reactions to conflict as well as to recovery and reconciliation in post-conflict periods: 11.2% of Cambodians are said to be affected by post-traumatic stress disorder (Sonis et al. 2009, p. 535). More recent research by Chhim indicates that another cultural understanding of post-traumatic distress (“*boksbat*” or broken courage) should be considered: *boksbat* symptoms are closely related to processes of healing and reconciliation (2013, p. 160).⁴ The trauma suffered by individuals, however, cannot be separated from the context of the larger political and economic situation. The processes of reconciliation, including healing, thus must incorporate attention to the sociopolitical factors as well as to individual space in order to achieve the long-term goal of peacebuilding and sustainable development (Clancy and Hamber 2008, pp. 9–10).

Victims, Perpetrators, and Bystanders

After a period of mass violence, the goal of reconciliation in a reconstructed society is ultimately to reintegrate victims and perpetrators. If victims focus on their victimhood to the exclusion of all else, or if perpetrators live separate lives as pariahs, or trumpet their impunity, society cannot move forward towards development. The categories of victim, perpetrator, and bystander are not always mutually exclusive, and the lines between them are often blurred.⁵ The conflict in Cambodia was Khmer against Khmer, and the majority of people were not separated by race, ethnicity, or

⁴These symptoms include: “(phey-khlach (double fear), bor-veas-cheas-chgnay (wishing that the trauma would go away), dam-doeum-kor (planting a kapok tree-remaining mute), chos-nhorn (submissive, easily giving in), kob yobal (ideas are buried), and loss of togetherness” (Chhim 2013, p. 160).

⁵Although the terms victim and perpetrator are both value-laden and imply clear delineation of guilt, I have used them throughout the text (in contrast to survivor and offender or harm-doer), because they are well known in Cambodia and clearly understood.

religion.⁶ Thus, it was not easy to determine who was who, as families were often divided by chance and politics. I have focused on three groups from my research: victims (most often “new people”), perpetrators (those former KR who have either confessed or are accused by the majority in a community of committing crimes during the KR period), and bystanders (those former KR cadres or “base people” who did not actively commit crimes, but observed or benefitted from the crimes of others).⁷

Amongst the victim group, several distinctions can be made, depending upon victims’ roles and identities: “no victim is only a victim, but also an actor with many identities, roles and resources” (Huyse 2003, p. 56). Almost all Cambodians consider themselves victims, as shown in a 2008 survey on justice and reconciliation: 93% of the respondents (which included both victims and former KR) who had lived under the regime considered themselves victims (Pham et al. 2009, p. 2).⁸ The term victim may also apply to former KR, as the KR turned upon themselves and targeted their own cadres who suddenly became enemies of the regime. Indeed in the Tuol Sleng (S-21) prison, the majority of those killed were former KR cadres weeded out during increasingly paranoid internal purges (Chandler 1999).⁹

Automatic moral judgements are inherent in the categories assigned to people after violence: victim (associated with innocence and purity) and perpetrator (associated with guilt and evil) (Baines 2008, p. 4). Thus, in the analysis of a post-mass violence situation, it is important to disaggregate the category of perpetrators and acknowledge the complexity of guilt and innocence, and the blurriness of the victim and perpetrator categories (Lemarchand and Niwese 2007, p. 168; Pouligny et al. 2007, p. 11). This disaggregation is rarely done in Cambodia,

⁶The KR discriminated against three primary minority groups based on their ethnicity: the Chinese-Khmer, Vietnamese, and Muslim Cham. These groups of people were all considered in the category of new people and were persecuted.

⁷The grey areas between the two extremes of victim and perpetrator have led Coloroso to identify a range of roles played by people in genocide. These include: (1) planners, instigators, and perpetrators; (2) henchmen; (3) active supporters; (4) passive supporters; (5) active bystanders; (6) passive bystanders; (7) witnesses; (8) active witnesses, defenders, and resisters; and (9) victims (Coloroso 2007, pp. 82–83, 144–151). At the time of the KR regime, it was estimated that approximately 15% of the 5.3 million “base people” died (800,000) and 33% of the 2.4 million new people died (also about 800,000) (Kiernan 1996, p. 456). Thus, there are millions of people (5.3 million) who enjoyed a relatively better standard of living than the minority group (2.4 million). Although much attention is focused on the planners and instigators of the most grievous crimes of the KR (such as killing and torture), the majority of “base people” under the KR have committed moral and/or political offences. These moral and political offences included enjoying direct or indirect advantages at the expense of others, or inaction in the case of human rights abuses, including the above criminal offences. However, these moral and political offences were not always committed by choice.

⁸Their experiences included starvation (82%), lack of shelter (71%), destroyed property (71%), forced evacuation (69%), forced labour (53%), torture (27%), witness of torture (30%), and witness of killing (22%) (Pham et al. 2009, p. 2).

⁹In the infamous Phnom Penh prison (Tuol Sleng, or S-21), more than 14,000 “enemies” of the KR regime were tortured and killed between 1976 and 1978 (Chandler 1999, p. viii).

as the term KR is often used interchangeably with perpetrator. Rigby cautions against facile distinctions between victims and perpetrators, as the agonising decision to become a perpetrator (often under the threat of death) cannot be judged by outsiders who were not in that difficult situation (2001, p. 116). Indeed, several of the victim respondents could understand and empathise with those difficult decisions. One expatriate United Nations (UN)/Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) worker recounted the words of his Cambodian colleague (who narrowly escaped being recruited as a KR cadre) speaking to another colleague (who had self-identified as victim and only talked of her own suffering, never once listening to the suffering of her colleagues):

My colleague told us that her father who had a high position in the Lon Nol government happened to survive the first two years because he had dark skin and could act like he was a cyclo driver. But then he was caught and he was killed before her eyes, not taken away, he was killed right on the spot! And she was there, and then she was made the chief of a youth group, and that was three months before the Vietnamese came in. If it had been six months, or three months longer ... she could have been like [the known perpetrator]. She told her colleague: "You should be happy that you were just too young!" And finally she just stopped speaking.... I wonder when do you stop being a victim and become a perpetrator? (IV # 58).

The third group of the study was labelled "former KR" who were often bystanders and includes those who were self-identified, or identified by other villagers, as former KR, but not as having committed any crimes. Respondents often placed former KR soldiers in this category (rather than being labelled as perpetrators), as victims did not usually see them as having committed crimes against the population. For the purposes of this study, this category also includes former KR who had relocated (usually to KR-controlled areas in the northwest or north) and whose background remained unclear.¹⁰

Given the methodology of the research with primarily a single interview of an individual, it was difficult to know exactly the role of respondents, especially former KR, during the KR period. Many stated that they were rural inhabitants, "base people", without any authority or other role in the regime. Although it is clear that many former KR suffered as well as victims, there should not be too much emphasis on the role of former KR (especially known perpetrators) as victims, and this should not be their primary identity. As Huyse argues, when perpetrators claim they are victims to the point of avoiding any responsibility for their actions, reconciliation processes can be obstructed: "Such blurring of guilt can become an obstacle on the path to coexistence, trust and empathy from the point of view of many victims" (2003, p. 62).

The term "perpetrator" includes former KR ("base people", cadres, security personnel, or soldiers), who identified themselves as former KR and who have been accused by others of harming or killing others during the KR period. Although I did not interview any former KR at senior levels who belonged to the most serious

¹⁰In the context of the study, in many cases, I was only interviewing people one time and would not have known the true past of many respondents, so I have classified them as merely former KR.

category of planning the atrocities, certainly I interviewed some individuals accused of ordering and directly killing others. In Cambodia, the KR often transferred cadres out of their home villages to lead in other villages and frequently moved cadres from place to place. But in some cases, some lower-level perpetrators, such as spies (*chhlop*) who were often also the henchmen who executed people or led them to their deaths, were from the same communities and were well known by the victims. Mr. Pel, one of the key informants discussed in this chapter, was in this situation, because as a “spy” he was responsible for bringing victims to the prison to be executed.

What Is Reconciliation?

Reconciliation can be considered within a framework of transitional justice, described as including the components of criminal prosecutions (such as the ECCC), reparations (included in the ECCC), institutional reforms, truth commissions, memory initiatives (including state and local responses in Cambodia), and guarantees of non-repetition.¹¹ Reconciliation is usually seen as an outcome or goal of transitional justice processes. However, at the same time, reconciliation is often debated and may be viewed as an ethically compromised concept, too religious, or an unreachable dream.¹² Coexistence is usually a more acceptable term for the process of former adversaries learning to live together after mass violence, as in most cases survivors, be they victims, perpetrators, or bystanders, are obliged by circumstances (geography, poverty, and politics) to work out some way to live together, or at least, in the same communities.

Reconciliation can be seen along a continuum: from an anarchic state of war to a utopian state with perfect harmony, from zero to total peace, and from simple coexistence to forgiveness and consensual democratic reciprocity (Etcheson 2003, p. 2). Galtung described interim stages of coexistence in terms of “passive coexistence”, meaning negative peace or absence of violence, or as “active coexistence”, meaning positive peace or the capacity to deal with conflict non-violently and creatively (2001, p. 3). The “amount” of reconciliation can also be described by its “depth” and can be referred to as thin or thick (Crocker 2002, p. 528).

Reconciliation is both a process and a goal (Lederach 1997; Rigby 2006, pp. 1–2). It is a slow, long-term process. Reconciliation requires changes in relationships, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and goals, as well as deep and broader social changes (Bar-Siman-Tov 2004, p. 4; Broneus 2007, p. 5). Lederach emphasises the centrality of relationship as the “birthplace and home of reconciliation” and the need to build

¹¹See International Centre for Transitional Justice <http://www.ictj.org/about/transitional-justice> or swisspeace <http://www.swisspeace.ch/topics/dealing-with-the-past/about.html>.

¹²The concept of reconciliation is especially contested when it is conflated with forgiveness. The prerogative for forgiveness should lie entirely with the victim and cannot be forced, and thus cannot be a mandatory component of reconciliation.

trust (2001, p. 195). Reconciliation requires participation on the part of both victims and perpetrators (Rigby 2001, p. 12). Both the future and the past are key aspects of reconciliation: “Reconciliation, in essence, represents a place, the point of encounter where concerns about both the past and the future can meet” (Lederach 1997, p. 27). The experience of mass violence and serious human rights violations serve to disturb the victim’s (and often the perpetrator’s) identity and security. These violations of human rights and resultant feelings of pain, fear, and vulnerability cause questioning of the very meaning of life (Schreier 1992, pp. 29–34). Thus, the restoration of human rights, through transitional justice and human rights development, including the rule of law, is important to the process of reconciliation (Hamber and van der Merwe 1998, p. 1). While there is wide agreement that reconciliation incorporates several constituent elements, there is no consensus on what these are. The most widely quoted scholar includes four main elements: truth, mercy, justice, and peace (Lederach 1997, pp. 28–30).

I identified four stages or degrees of coexistence or reconciliation (stages 1, 2, and 4 from Rigby 2006, pp. 5–6, 16, and stage 3 from McGrew 2011): (1) surface coexistence or non-lethal coexistence of separate lives (parties living apart); (2) shallow coexistence of parallel lives (parties living alongside each other, but with role-specific interactions); (3) moderate coexistence of every day (parties living with and amongst each other, but relationships are fragile and tentative); and (4) deep reconciliation of community (parties living with and amongst each other with rich and multi-textured interaction).¹³ Surface and shallow coexistence may occur in the early stages of resolving conflict, moderate coexistence while the process of reconciliation is well underway, but deep reconciliation is a more long-term process that can take generations.

Although there have been several quantitative studies on reconciliation and justice in Cambodia, there have been only a handful of qualitative research studies (Etcheson 2005). In spite of the lack of studies, some authors have concluded that reconciliation has already been achieved in Cambodia (Urs 2007; Widyono 2009)—a premise that this chapter refutes. In the Cambodian language, the two main terms for reconciliation (*phsah phsaa* and *bangruop bangruom*) are not clearly understood nor often used in everyday speech and are often confused with other words such as mediation and facilitation.¹⁴

¹³The term non-lethal coexistence was coined by Kriesberg (1998, p. 183).

¹⁴Some authors have used other definitions for reconciliation: Urs (2007, p. 79) used “*somros somroul*” (which she also defined as facilitation or mediation). Hettne and Eastmond used the term “*rup rum cheat*” for “everybody joining together pure-heartedly” and also suggested that “*sros sruel knea*” or “to cooperate” is more common, though not a true definition of reconciliation (2001, p. 7). I argue that the term used by the Centre for Peace and Development (*phsah phsaa*) is more appropriate as it is most commonly used in Cambodia and because the Centre had by far the greatest amount of experience in this field in Cambodia. *Samroh samruol* in the glossary (same as *somros somruel*) or mediation, and *samrap samruel*, or facilitation, both include the meaning “to smooth over and seek harmony”. In practice, mediators often encourage parties to paper over their conflicts and live peacefully again, without addressing the root causes.

Building Relationships and Healing

This chapter focuses on two processes of reconciliation: building relationships and healing. Repairing torn relationships is central and essential to reconciliation, and the healing processes take place both on an individual and a community level (Lederach 2001, p. 200; Staub and Pearlman 2001, p. 206). Relationship building between two parties includes processes of acknowledgement, remorse, and apology (Assefa 2001, p. 340). Trust is another important factor, as the KR regime left a legacy of distrust as well as the effects of the surrounding decades of war in Cambodia. The KR specifically attacked trust relationships by creating betrayal and suspicion and dissolving traditional social and family ties (Luco 2002, p. 72; Zucker 2008, p. 197). Other aspects of the process of relationship building are the development of regard, recognition, and respect. Healing requires dealing with strong emotions such as hatred, anger, and fear, which are described in the case study. Three stages of healing have been identified first by psychiatrist Herman (1997, p. 290) and then validated by others (such as Charbonneau and Parent 2012, p. 8). These stages include: (1) safety and security (closely related to non-repetition); (2) remembering and mourning; and (3) return to everyday life.

After mass violence, besides the physical and psychological damage to individuals, community is also damaged, as mistrust, anger, and fear overwhelm community solidarity. As mentioned above, the KR regime specifically targeted breaking the trust of traditional ties between family members, neighbours, work colleagues, the Buddhist clergy, indeed all relationships. In the face of this onslaught, during and after conflict in Cambodia, values shifted to prioritise survival, especially within family and patronage relationships, over ties to community or nation (Nee and Healy 2003, p. 37). This has made building community reconciliation a great challenge in Cambodia.

Reconciliation and Buddhism

Buddhism profoundly shapes the Cambodian identity, as “to be Khmer is to be Buddhist” (Smith-Hefner 1999, pp. 21–63), and thus Buddhist concepts are integral to the understanding of reconciliation in Cambodia.¹⁵ Through the examination of the Buddhist canon and traditions, John D’Arcy May concludes that reconciliation is implicit in both ethical principles and in Buddhist practice, and includes mutual forgiveness (1994, pp. 177–182). Behaviour is governed by the belief that one’s present life is just the latest in a long series of lives, shaped by the law of karma or the acts done in preceding lives (Neumaier 2004, p. 70).

¹⁵Cambodians are primarily Buddhist (97%), while 2% are Cham Muslim and 0.4% Christian (Central Intelligence Agency 2014).

Buddhist temples remain at the centre of Cambodian village life, and temples and monks play an important role in social interaction, remembering lost family members, and making merit for reincarnation in future lives. In everyday life in Cambodia, many of the Buddhist principles are mentioned by leaders and by respondents in this research. However, in general, understanding of Buddhist principles and precepts is very low; the Buddhist clergy is politicised and poorly educated after its decimation during the KR regime, and Buddhist documents are lacking. Most Cambodians summarise the Buddhist beliefs into two simplistic concepts: (1) do good, receive good, do bad, receive bad (karma) and (2) hatred can never be appeased by hatred; hatred can only be appeased by love (McGrew 2000, pp. 28–29). In practice, Cambodians commonly do good deeds by making donations to the temples and monks in order to make merit and to be reborn into a better life. Yet, Cambodian interpretations of and reliance upon spiritual and religious beliefs remain important factors in their daily lives and in their processes of reconciliation.

Factors Affecting Victim–Perpetrator Relations

This section reviews a variety of factors that can affect relationships between victims and perpetrators as individuals and communities reconcile. The type and gravity of the offence committed, as well as the motivation, define different categories of perpetrators. Did perpetrators commit crimes because they were ordered to do so and, if so, were they afraid for their own lives? Did they take the initiative and enjoy killing others? Did they do it for community gain or self-interest? Although only a handful of former KR has admitted any direct guilt at all, most former KR who were involved in the movement have claimed that they were under orders and living in fear of their lives (Ea and Sim 2001). KR cadre and youth were often forced to kill others to demonstrate their loyalty to the revolution.

As Cambodians have been listening to the ECCC trials and are involved in NGO dialogue and memory projects, victims are increasingly reaching some understanding of perpetrators' actions in the past. Many victim/survivors spoke negatively of the “cruel” (*kach or sahav*) perpetrators, who were generally perceived as committing serious crimes by choice (signifying the factor of motivation). The majority of respondents reported that the cruellest of the KR leaders were chased and killed in revenge immediately after the KR regime. However, when victims took into account mitigating factors, coexistence in the same community was more possible. For example, in one community I studied, a victim stated that he was living in close proximity to former KR perpetrators who had done cruel things to him in his daily life. He was able to acknowledge that those former KR did not join it by choice, so he was able to justify their involvement. Similarly, in this exchange

below, two victims (1 and 2) openly discussed a former KR perpetrator (and neighbour) who had been sitting nearby before the interview started. One victim understood that the motivation of the perpetrator was to avoid being killed himself, and as a consequence, he was better able to develop empathy and live peacefully with his neighbour.

2: There are only the lower leaders around here; there are not any top leaders. These lower leaders had arrested and beaten me, but later on, at this house here [He pointed to a house near his house] we could not punish them because they were ordered from the top leaders. The leaders ordered them to cut off the hands of the people who stole rice. Now, there are still many cruel persons in this village. I was beaten and tied up by them. If children stole rice, the spies [*chhlop*] arrested them, and beat some of them until they were unconscious. One very cruel perpetrator lives to the south of my house.

1: He did this because he was hungry. That man used to be the KR too.

2: At that time, everybody was the Khmer Rouge because even if we did not want to be the KR, we would die ... if we were against them, we would be killed (IV # 103).

Poverty, age, and ignorance are also important factors affecting victim–perpetrator relationships. Many of the informants spoke with regret and anger about the KR regime’s selection of ignorant, uneducated people as local-level leaders. However, this tactic of selection by the KR did not always cause anger against individual perpetrators in the post-mass violence period and instead became a mitigating factor. This respondent in a small group interview felt that the accused perpetrator’s lack of education was a mitigating factor in his crimes:

He lives near here, just two houses from here across the street. They have stopped saying anything bad against him. All those killers, they couldn’t read at all, so it was easy to make them kill people. And it was the rule of Pol Pot to only choose people who never went to school to be leaders (IV # 1).

Another mitigating factor was the age of the alleged perpetrator at the time of the past events. Many respondents still expressed resentment that their oppressors were often young people, not surprising given the great emphasis that is placed upon age, wisdom, and seniority in Cambodia’s hierarchical social structure. Although they were angry with the young individual perpetrators, they were primarily angry at the KR system that had turned their social world upside down.

My research signified other factors that affected how victims felt towards the KR regime and its perpetrators. Victims will have suffered differentially depending on such factors as: the severity of the general economic conditions in the area (some regions had more starvation than others); if and how often the person was displaced; how far they were separated from their family; and the severity of the leadership (in imposing regulations related to food, labour, executions, imprisonment, etc.). The amount of family support, luck, personality, motivation, religious devotion, and belief in the importance of forgiveness also influenced how the victim viewed and recovered from the trauma of the past and thus how they were able to reconcile with former KR perpetrators and bystanders.

Community Reconciliation

As noted above, the KR period, as well as the civil war throughout the 1990s, took a toll on community reconciliation: notably, a lack of trust encouraged by the KR policies; economic hardship with less mutual assistance; civil war pitting family members against each other and other factors contributed to a lack of social cohesion. Throughout the 1980s under PRK rule, the KR were demonized, bones were collected, memorials were erected, and the government held a “show” trial for the leaders of the KR. The Cambodian government then made several attempts over the years to welcome former KR leaders into society by negotiating with senior leaders of the KR in various KR strongholds, under Prime Minister Hun Sen’s “Win-Win” policy. By the late 1990s, the former KR were either welcomed into the government or remained in KR enclaves, and their senior leaders were identified for prosecution by the Royal Cambodian Government and UN’s planned tribunal. At this time, the government considered all Cambodians in communities across the country reconciled, and there was little public discussion about the past. However, with the establishment of the ECCC, NGOs started working on programmes related to truth, justice, and reconciliation, and with more media attention to the past it became clear that reconciliation was not such an easy task. In more recent years, human rights abuses by the government, violent conflict over political power, as well as the scattering effects of globalisation, flows of population from rural to urban areas, and economic migration to Thailand have also been challenging community cohesion.

In my research, the degree of community reconciliation was found to be related to several factors including: village population statistics (the percentage of victims, perpetrators, and former KR and “base people”), the presence and status of surviving family members, the frequency of contact between victim and perpetrator, the degree of physical distance, and geography. Most respondents in minority populations (whether they were victims, perpetrators, or former KR) in general expressed more fear than majority populations. In some cases, if people never met, they could put the past out of mind. However, if often faced with a former perpetrator, visions of the past may interfere more often with daily life and force people to deal with the past more than they wished. In Community B, a village of victim/survivors was adjoining another village of primarily former KR “base people” and cadres. In this case, the resentment, fear, and anger of the victims were strong. Community B was thus only at a stage of surface coexistence, thus living separate lives with negative feelings and almost no interaction.

On the other hand, many of the victim respondents stated that they never saw the most serious perpetrators again, as some were killed by revenge killings and the rest ran away. Victims assumed the perpetrators were afraid to return and had relocated to former KR strongholds—where the majority former KR populations rarely talk about their pasts. In the case of perpetrators who committed less serious crimes, several victims reported meeting them only occasionally, such as by chance on the road, or at social occasions in the village. Another small group of victims had by

chance met a perpetrator (who had committed more serious crimes) in passing once or twice since the KR regime—a few had heard apologies.

Community (and individual) reconciliation can be advanced through cultural practice. Water blessing and other Buddhist ceremonies are important for the healing of individuals and society in Cambodia. These ceremonies are now frequently used in NGO activities in communities for dialogue, reconciliation, raising awareness, and mental health trauma healing. Water blessing ceremonies used by the NGO Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation in their testimonial therapy practices have been found to be beneficial to acknowledge victims' suffering, restore dignity, and respect deceased relatives¹⁶ (Poluda et al. 2012, p. 101). Respondents reported that suffering could be relieved by going to the Buddhist temples, and many report that the major holidays (Khmer New Year and Pchum Ben, or Days of the Ancestors) are important times to remember their ancestors (McGrew 2011).

Views of the ECCC

As noted in the above definition of reconciliation, justice and the restoration of norms of human rights are important elements of reconciliation. The ECCC or Khmer Rouge Tribunal was established in 2006 to try senior leaders most responsible for crimes committed between 1975 and 1979 against the 1.7 million mainly Cambodians who perished. The first hearings of one leader (Case 001 of Kang Guek Eav, known as Duch) commenced in 2009, and the court delivered a guilty verdict in 2010—the appeal was completed in 2012 delivering a life sentence. The first phase of the second trial of four other senior leaders (Case 002/1) was completed—though defendant Ieng Thirith has been declared mentally incompetent, and her husband Ieng Sary has passed away, leaving two defendants Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan. They were found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity in August of 2014, and both received life sentences. The second part of Case 002/2 is underway trying the same defendants (Nuon Chea & Khieu Samphan) on charges including genocide. Cases 003 and 004 against second-tier senior leaders, Meas Muth, Ao An, and Yim Tith, are under investigation, while the investigation of Im Chaem has been completed. Most observers assume these cases

¹⁶In Cambodian culture and spiritual life, a great emphasis is placed on respecting deceased relatives, in the aforementioned ceremonies such as Khmer New Year and Pchum Ben (Days of the Ancestors). In Pchum Ben, families try to visit five different Buddhist temples in search of their wandering souls. Many families keep spirit houses in or outside their homes, where they leave food offerings, and light candles and incense daily to respect the souls of their ancestors. This practice has been all the more difficult due to the extensive and secret killings carried out during the KR regime, as many families do not know how or where their loved ones have died, so have not been able to conduct the appropriate rituals.

will never be tried as the Cambodian government has not cooperated with the court to date.

While there was much hope initially that the ECCC would bring justice, healing, and reconciliation to the Cambodian people, Cambodians are increasingly frustrated with the slow progress of the trials for senior Khmer Rouge leaders as they age and die off, and the reports of corruption and government interference. In spite of these frustrations, however, the great majority of Cambodians that I spoke with recently are still in support of completing the trials, at least for Case 002. Other studies also indicated a surprising amount of support for the ECCC in spite of its flaws (Pham et al. 2009). Another recent study showed that in addition, the public space for dialogue and dealing with the past had been opened up as a result of the ECCC (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2016). Direct victims of the KR as well as their surviving family members can apply to be civil parties to the case, which allows them to participate in proceedings; many of these individuals have also reported generally positive effects from the ECCC (Stover et al. 2011, pp. 530, 541).

Other than the ECCC, there have been very few attempts to deal publically with the past at the local level, although more NGOs have recently been pursuing community-level truth and memorial projects.¹⁷ A “joint narrative approach” (as described originally by Galtung 2001) where victims and perpetrators begin dialogue on common topics to eventually deal with the past may be helpful in Cambodia: “The purpose of this approach would be to create a situation whereby victims might meet perpetrators, with a focus on healing through joint sorrow and shared pain” (McGrew 2011, p. 518). The next section reviews a case study of an accused perpetrator in a community with such a dialogue project.

The Case of an Accused Perpetrator, Mr. Pel, and an NGO Intervention

I first came to Community “A” in 2005 to visit an amputee whom I had first met in 1999. Community A is made up of four villages. This cluster of villages can be divided into two parts; one village that in the 1960s was relatively more prosperous (Village 1) and three that were less so (villages 2, 3, and 4). Prior to the KR regime, some of those in the less prosperous villages served as labourers on the more prosperous villagers’ lands or in their businesses. When the KR took over in 1972 in this area, for the most part, roles were reversed and the majority of those from the less wealthy villages were labelled “base people”, while many of the people in Village 1 were labelled “new people”. Some of the “base people” were appointed as

¹⁷See ADHOC at <http://www.adhoc-cambodia.org/>, the Documentation Center of Cambodia at <http://www.dccam.org/>, Kdei Karuna at <http://www.kdei-karuna.org/>, Transcultural Psychosocial Organization at <http://www.tpocambodia.org/>, Youth for Peace at <http://www.yfpcambodia.org/>, Youth Resource Development Project at <http://www.yrdp.org/website/?lang=en>.

heads of groups, spies (*chhlop*), or into other positions of power—many of these lower-level cadres committed atrocities. Most of these accused perpetrators had been killed or fled (the most cruel or those who had ordered the killings), while a handful of cadres remained in the community. During the KR period, Mr. Pel, whose story started this chapter, was living in Village 2 and was a spy (*chhlop*), responsible for bringing victims (his fellow villagers) to the prison to be executed. Especially, as he remains in this village today, this “intimate” crime leaves particularly deep marks, both individually and collectively, weakening the regulatory foundations of society (Poulligny et al. 2007, p. 7).

After the KR period, the community experienced another shift, as many villagers had died (especially those from Village 1), and many were displaced—some of those displaced villagers have since returned, while others have disappeared. In 2007, Mr. Pel was a total social outcast in his village similar to the accused perpetrator in Zucker’s work on remembrance—she described a former village chief, accused of reporting on fellow villagers to the KR, as a “social pariah” (2013, p. 91). During my visits in 2007 and 2008, Pel’s hunched shoulders, bowed head, and muted voice all led to an impression of a crushed, downtrodden man. He and his wife said that he rarely left the house, and he was afraid to go to the temple or the market. He spent a lot of time talking about his various illnesses. During my visits, Pel and his wife complained about his mistreatment in detention in 1979 and 1980 and resulting health problems. Although denied by the commune chief (who claimed the incident was a random robbery), several villagers told me that Pel was afraid to leave his house because his father-in-law had been shot dead in the doorway, but the bullet had been meant for Pel. He certainly showed a lot of fear when I first visited him in 2007/8.

However, when I visited Pel in 2014, I was astonished by his change of attitude and demeanour. Although still poor, he was noticeably more confident—I met him in the midst of the rice harvest, and he was playing a key and public role amongst family and others as their rented rice thresher was furiously spewing an overflowing heap of rice husks. Now, he had a big smile on his face and almost strutted with pride at his foreign visitor, as he pulled out chairs for us under his wooden house. He was very happy, he said, with the NGO programme, which had started up a few years ago. Both he and another former KR key informant said that the community now understood they had been forced to act under orders. Through the dialogue programme, these former KR acknowledged (at least some of) the things they had done and expressed (at least some) remorse. Other members of the community now recognised them, and respect was developing. Although another village official who had been involved with the dialogue project was disappointed that not all of the remaining accused perpetrators had cooperated with the project, he was pleased that these two former KR cadres had confessed to at least some of what they had done in the past and felt that the village was more at peace.

When I first came to the village in 1999, and also in 2006–8, some public mourning had taken place with local memorials being built at several Buddhist temples, but there was no public remembering—and none from the viewpoint of the accused perpetrators and former KR. Two of the well-known perpetrators lived on

the periphery of the rest of the community. With the arrival of the NGO in about 2012 and their dialogue and memory projects, victims and perpetrators began to remember and to dialogue: as time passes, lives are returning towards normal. Victim/survivors gradually began to accept the realities that in many cases the accused perpetrators had to follow orders or they would be killed. Interviews indicated that victims also understood the KR approach of choosing the poor and uneducated to carry out many of the gruesome tasks of executions and were prepared to excuse those individuals perceived as ignorant. Transformation in communities has started to take place in Cambodia, and as trust between victims and perpetrators slowly increases, victims can see accused perpetrators as being subject to complex and difficult situations and holding multiple identities.

Conclusion

So what does reconciliation mean in today's Cambodia? As victims, perpetrators, and bystanders struggle to move forward with their daily lives, while the violent past greatly influences many aspects of the present lives of survivors as well as the lives of their children—seeking justice, truth, and reconciliation is not on the top of most people's agendas. Scratch the surface though, and the tensions between victims and perpetrators lie just below, especially in rural areas where everybody knows everybody else and their pasts.

The villagers in Community A (as well as in many other villages throughout Cambodia) have been going through the three stages of healing mentioned above (security, remembering, return to normalcy). They now have relative security (food, shelter, and a somewhat stable government), remembering is taking place, and they are approaching a stage of normalcy. Community A is even now moving past a stage of moderate coexistence towards deep reconciliation. As they are farther removed from the events of the past, there are minimal fears of non-repetition (especially in this community where the former KR are in a small minority). Conditions of moderate coexistence are similar in the newly created former KR communities where many victims/survivors resettled seeking land and jobs, and where peoples' backgrounds are not known and few ever speak about the past.

However, not all communities are developing at the same pace—my research shows that those communities where victims and perpetrators are in similar numbers, or where former KR greatly outnumber the population of victims, the road to reconciliation is rocky. For example, during my visit in 2014, Community B, with two villages of victims living nearby a village of former KR including accused perpetrators, was still barely in a state of surface coexistence, and feelings of anger were still very strong. Respondents were tired of questions about reconciliation and were overwhelmed with the struggle to make a living.

While different communities are at different rates of recovery depending upon the various factors discussed in this chapter, the very presence of the ECCC has opened up a public space to discuss the past, partly through the increasing number

of NGOs working on memorialisation and community dialogue around the ECCC. Many individuals and communities in Cambodia are coming to grips with their troubled pasts and beginning to move forward towards reconciliation, but it is a long, rocky road, with ups and downs, and will take many years to come.

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