

9-2014

OH Project: Healing from Cambodian Genocide Headnote

Patricia A. Schechter
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/caco_interviews



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Schechter, Patricia A., "OH Project: Healing from Cambodian Genocide Headnote" (2014). *Oral History Interviews*. 1.

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/caco_interviews/1

This Book is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral History Interviews by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

HEADNOTE

An Oral History Project of the Cambodian American Community of Oregon

Patricia A. Schechter
Professor of History
September 2014

Background to the Oral History Project Gifted to Portland State University from the Cambodian American Community of Oregon

These interviews are part of a group of 17 video oral histories conducted in Portland, Oregon in the spring of 2009. The participants are members of the Cambodian American Community of Oregon (CACO), a non-profit volunteer group that sponsors social and cultural activities for Cambodian migrants and their families. In 2008, CACO successfully sought grant support to record intergenerational interviews. Their project was designed to build community, to pass heritage from the migrating generation to youth born in the United States, and to use storytelling to help narrators heal from wartime trauma. In a series of workshops at Portland State University, participants devised questions, conducted practice interviews, strategized around bilingualism, and reviewed the idea of informed consent. A short documentary film was made from the videos called *The OH Project: Healing from the Cambodian Genocide*, which has been shown in a range of [public venues](#). The *OH Project* won an [honorable mention](#) from the Oral History Association in 2010. Since then, CACO leadership, the filmmaker, and PSU faculty have been in conversation about the future potential of the interviews. In early 2014, CACO leadership agreed to donate their materials to the PSU library. The transcripts and videos in this digital selection of clips constitute a first step in the archiving process at the Library's department of Special Collections.

Central to CACO's decision-making about the collection was the need to balance the interests and privacy of the narrators with the historical significance and teaching power of the documents they created. This balance is acute because the historical truth contained in these interviews is highly personal. Each narrator relates a story of family stress, separation, and reconstruction during the civil war and strife in Cambodia. To shore up their power, the Khmer Rouge, the ruling military-political organization from 1975 to 1979, attacked *kruosaa niyum* or "familyism," the filial piety that is central to traditional Cambodian culture. The interviews describe how people resisted this attack in their intimate interactions, decisions, and behaviors within family life, especially between parents and children (with narrators in the children's role). Five participants decided to share their story publicly as a way to recognize the important efforts of all the CACO members who were involved with the project. In making this material accessible, the PSU library staff, filmmaker, and associated faculty seek to honor CACO's interest in raising historical consciousness without overexposing individuals to an unpredictable and potentially prying public. The main way to regulate access is to make only select written transcripts available on line and to limit video access over the internet. Further materials can be accessed in person by contacting PSU Library Special Collections.

These five interviews were transcribed as a group in September 2014. The interviews were conducted in English, spoken by the narrators as a second language. The transcripts are as close to verbatim as possible. One editorial decision in transcription was to render verbs consistently in the past tense when narrators referred to historical events. Repeated use of “and” as the first word of a sentence has been minimized. When possible, words in Khmer have been transliterated. Some Cambodian place names and proper names have been transcribed in English as simply “place name” or “proper name” where the tape is inaudible or where a translation/transliteration is not available.

Introductory remarks for the transcripts

The interviews share certain features in common. Much of the action described takes place in western Cambodia in Battambang province, which borders Thailand. Also, the youth interviewers asked a fairly standard group of questions. These two features provide a measure of consistency and comparability across the interviews. The interviews last about one hour each and are “snap shot” and exploratory in nature. Themes have been identified and some archetypal scenarios have been given voice, but those looking for a fuller treatment of the long wars of the region, the work camp experience, or refugee life can refer to other studies listed in the bibliography. The narrators also have something in common: they are mostly the advantaged children of relatively educated Cambodians caught up in the strife of the 1970s. This factor makes sense in two ways. Educated Cambodians—teachers, engineers, clergy, government workers—were singled out for pointed abuse under the Khmer Rouge, because the regime sought to return to the country to their idea of a simple, pre-colonial Cambodia. Also, refugees who made it to the United States tended to be connected to families with advantages. Within those families, a favored son or precious only daughter sometimes received extra resources like schooling, skills, responsibilities, or even gold. These resources enabled individuals to negotiate opportunities for themselves or gave them confidence to engage in risk-taking behavior.

Finally, each interviewer asked their narrator about “life under the Khmer Rouge.” The phrase is a short handle on a broader time period (1968-1991) and a varied sequence of events that includes civil war, regime change, shifting regional conflicts, and protracted refugee crises. Some of the most significant events are actually the transitions around and within the Khmer Rouge regime (’75-’79), yet interviewers tended to ask about living “under” it. Ironically, “under” the Khmer Rouge, conditions were oddly stable or consistent, if dire. Indeed, the experience of forced labor, with its dull routine and physical exhaustion, seems to have blurred peoples’ memory, rendering it flat as a story or event. By contrast, narrators’ memories are much more vivid during transitions, when decision making, geographical movement, or a change in living conditions (illness/health or food/hunger) burned specific scenarios and people into their minds. The telescoping of experience under the handle “Khmer Rouge” must be borne in mind by readers of the transcripts.

These interviews remain a rich source of information, both for their detail and for their overall structure of meaning-making. The structure of meaning-making falls along a continuum. At one end—Kakrona Khem’s narrative is a good example—the narrative breaks down into fragments, underscoring the difficulty of making settled sense out of the experience. At the other end, Melanie Lim lays out her story

with cogency and literary flair (thanks to years of practice “telling her story” for the media and family members). As already suggested, each story pivots around a highly personal experience which potentially anchors a larger historical meaning of “The Khmer Rouge.” For Kakrona Khem, this experience is really two experiences in parallel: his rejection of his mother’s offer to send him away to protect him from the war and his later decision to make a run for it on his own terms. For Melanie, the pivotal event is her visit with her parents during a short furlough from her work camp, the last time she saw her mother and father and brothers alive. Though interviewers tended to ask “before and after” kinds of political or military questions, the narrators’ stories cohere around a founding family event which they place at the center of their far-flung and episodic wartime and refugee experience.

The protagonists of these stories are not political, revolutionary, or militants of any sort. They tended to be from respectable families in their villages or children from poorer families who made a special investment in their child’s education. Age cohort and the role of marriage are final striking features. Most of these narrators were mature teens when their stories unfolded in the late 70s, individuals just about to take on their adult roles in their society until interrupted by Pol Pot. Their roles as mates translated into interesting potential as they navigated the regime. Taking a wife, accepting an arranged marriage, or bartering one’s spouse-like domestic skills allowed each protagonist to generate alliances or emotional and economic resources that could improve their chances of survival or even escape. These were capacities not available to smaller children, to married adult parents, or to elders. Thinking of oneself as a potential wife or husband allowed individuals to hang on to “normal,” to hang on to a future, and sometimes to hang on to a new spouse in order to leverage survival. The cruel underside of this life cycle dynamic is the suffering of SivHeng Ung, who was a new bride with an early pregnancy when the Khmer Rouge took over, a vulnerable status which subjected her to particular cruelties, as her narrative attests.

The theme of resistance to the Khmer Rouge regime’s attack on family rings out unmistakably in these narratives. Researchers who listen to entire interviews will notice how the denouement of each ritually restores the moral core of filial piety. Despite hardship, disruption, and loss, the interview experience vindicates family dignity and reaffirms the centrality of intergenerational relations. Each interview ends with participants offering one another verbal tributes of gratitude, love, and respect. By sharing words, tears, and hugs, participants embrace the story and its telling and thereby confirm the enduring power of kinship.

Bibliography

- Etcheson, C. (2005). *After the Killing Fields : Lessons from the Cambodian genocide*. Westport: Praeger.
- Jackson, K. (2014). *Cambodia, 1975-1978 Rendezvous with Death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kiernan, B. (2008). *Genocide and resistance in Southeast Asia : Documentation, denial & justice in Cambodia & East Timor*. New Brunswick: Transaction.
- Kiernan, B. (2008). *The Pol Pot regime : Race, power, and genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (3rd ed.). New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press.
- Schanberg, S. (2010). *Beyond the Killing Fields: War Writings*. Dulles: Potomac Books.
- Ung, K. (2009). *Golden leaf : A Khmer Rouge genocide survivor*. USA: KU Publishing.

Ung, L. (2000). *First they Killed my Father: A daughter of Cambodia Remembers*. New York: HarperCollins.

Yimsut, R. (2011). *Facing the Khmer Rouge : A Cambodian journey*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.