

COLLECTIVE CAMBODIAN MEMORIES OF THE POL POT KHMER ROUGE REGIME

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Introduction

April 17, 1975 was Day Zero for Cambodia. Two thousand years of Khmer history was immediately meaningless. That was the time the Khmer Rouge (hereinafter referred to as the KR) regime forces marched unopposed into central Phnom Penh. Within hours, they began to implement their barbarous plan for a utopian Communist society. The KR attempted to completely transform Cambodia overnight by organizing the country into farming cooperatives, demanding total devotion to the state, and wiping out any remnants of the old regime. That meant shutting off all contact with the outside world, eliminating loyalty to friends or family, emptying the cities, eliminating the Buddhist religion, and creating a fearsome central authority, the "*Angkar*," that punished any deviation with torture and death.

The military leader of the KR, Pol Pot (born Saloth Sar), became the new government's prime minister. He established a radical Maoist regime, the Democratic Kampuchea (DK), whose political and social policies devastated Cambodia. Pol Pot's revolutionary regime saw itself as an agent of change and civilization in the region. It claimed that the Cambodians were asleep or enslaved for two thousand years. As was often said by the KR, two thousand years of Cambodian history had now come to an end. April 17 was the beginning of Year Zero for the new Cambodia.

A political goal of the KR was to wipe out not only any opposition but also any potential opposition. Almost immediately upon taking control of Phnom Penh, the KR ordered the evacuation of Phnom Penh and all other cities. The city dwellers were forced to migrate to the countryside with little or no preparation. The KR economic program involved an all-out push to build capacity for growing rice. The people of the countryside and the evacuees from the city were set to work clearing land, planting crops and building canals, all under the supervision of armed KR. Thus began their lethal project of social engineering intent on making the utopian communist society.

The human cost of Pol Pot's reign—three years, eight months, and 20 days—is difficult to grasp on a human level. More than 2 million people were killed or died of overwork, starvation, and malnutrition. Many thousands were executed for imbibing western influence. KR turned the country into be a chamber of terror.

During my first mission to Cambodia in September 2003, it immediately became clear to me that the KR crimes of the 1970s still cast a shadow over Cambodian society. The killings of all educated professionals had left gaps that still crippled the judiciary, government

administration, including health and education structures. The moral impact was even more profound. The fact that no one had been held accountable for the mass killings and other atrocities clearly contributed to the culture of impunity which is still pervasive in Cambodia.

Wherever I went in Phnom Penh or in the provinces, one message became clear: the crimes were not forgotten. Almost everyone I met was personally affected, had suffered badly, or had close relatives who died. From a survey of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) presented in their website (www.dccam.org), 89.42% lost relatives during the KR regime. Only 1.305 was spared the loss of relatives. Even now, more than two decades later, the overwhelming majority wanted those responsible to be tried and punished. The only argument against arrests and trials was the risk of further unrest and civil war.

However, with the death of Pol Pot in 1998 and the fall of the last stronghold of the KR zones of Pailin and Anlong Veng, Cambodia is nearing the endgame of the epic tragedy of its long history of civil war. Peace seems to have finally come to this beautiful land after three decades of civil war. Visitors can quickly develop the image of an idyllic, antiquated, and unhurried country of mystical jungle temples and Buddhist serenity (see also Elliot, 2002). Seanglim Bit (1994) aptly described Cambodia as a “gentle land of smiling people” inhabited by nonviolent Buddhists who were always courteous, friendly, and ready with a smile.

Nevertheless, behind the Khmer smile there is a history of almost constant warfare. Since the 15th century, Cambodia had known more chaos than tranquility. As Yves Ramousse notes (see Ponchaud, 1990: 7), the joy of being Cambodian owes very little to the gifts of history. Pol Pot and his KR regime, a radical Communist movement, was one of the most cruel regimes that left the country devastated. It is a complex legacy which, up to now, still has a dramatic effect across the entire range of Cambodian realities—economics, military, social and political (see Etcheson, 2000: 42-46). For many Cambodians, the image of peace is a thin veneer.

If we examine closely the effects of twenty-five years of war and political violence on social relationships and social processes, we realize that we are in the dark heart of Cambodia’s tragic history. From this follows some questions: How are the Cambodian people and government involved in the making and evoking of the memories of Pol Pot’s KR regime? How are their memories shaped and codified by the information they received from history and through their own experiences?

The main purpose of this research is to investigate collective Cambodian memories of the atrocities of Pol Pot’s KR regime. My objective is to observe a variety of Cambodian collective memories around the core question of how and why the society constructs its dark past in selective ways. My task is to discover the strategies used by the state and community in remembering their dark past.

Theoretical Framework

The study of collective memory has a long and interdisciplinary history. The concept, which emerged in the mid-seventies, rose when the legacies of the past became central to sociological, historical, political and linguistic research. Collective memory essentially was

carried by the tide of thought of historians on the relativity of knowledge in history and on the conflict of interpretations (see Lavabre, 2003; Aquilar, 1999).

Collective memory, as Markovits and Simon Reich (1977) assert, “is the lens through which the past is viewed, to help both masses and elites interpret the present and decide on policy.” But as these authors also underline, we have to distinguish between *history* as a set of objectively definable events and *collective memory*, the subjective attribution of meaning to those key events. Collective memory becomes the more formidable influence over time due to “its multiplicity, its murkiness, and its malleability.” There are several collective memories, whereas there is only one unitary history (Aharony, 2004).

It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. As Halbwachs points out, the individual memory is socially constructed. Hence, the distinction between individual and collective memory is not necessarily a sharp one. Both reflect the conditions of the present in which they originate (Holtorf, 1993).

Scholars in the humanities have argued that memory is not only influenced but also constituted by social contexts of the present. This position is expressed by David Bakhurst (see Holtorf, 2000) who claims that to remember is always to give a reading of the past. According to Halbwachs, collective memory is a “reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present” (see Aharony, 2004). Therefore, in order to understand how collective memory works, we have to consider not only historical knowledge or narratives but also, as Aharony stresses, “the construction of our emotional and moral engagement with the past.” Some collective memory, consequently, can be easily manipulated.

There are two different kinds of collective memories. The distinctions are established in a study by Walton (2001) who explores the difference between theories of cultural hegemony (or cultural domination) and social memory. Walton points out that the theory of *cultural hegemony* generally understands collective memory as a tool of social control that may be contested but is typically possessed and managed by powerful groups (elites, class fractions, parties) for their own purposes as an imposed consensus. Hegemony or the domination of cultural meanings in the interest of a few is the core proposition, although the theory recognizes struggles for cultural power, contested meanings, and the possibility of “counter hegemony.” The victors in social struggles write history in a variety of textual forms (monuments, museums, architecture, books, etc.) that celebrate their interests and support their continuing domination.

As for *social memory*, Walton asserts that the theory centers on the idea that groups form distinct memories through the agency of formative class, ethnic, gender, educational, occupational, spatial, and generational experiences. Social memory is less a matter of instrumental and ruling ideas than it is a plurality of mental worlds that may exist in conflict with or insularity from competing ideas. Halbwachs (see Feichtinger, 2002) coined the term “collective memory,” which he understood as prior to and the source of individual memories. Memory is socially derived and as coherent or segmented as the groups that comprise society. Group memories are selective readings of historical fact that change as groups themselves are reconstituted over time. As Walton (2001) suggests, social memory deals less with power and manipulation, and more with social bases and diversity.

The collective memory is conveyed in myriad forms of remembrance including historical texts (both popular and academic), commemorative ceremonies (festivals, rituals, parades), public displays (museums, monuments, expositions), as well as in the works of art and architecture (Walton, 2001). Those strategies examined in this study express Cambodian accumulated and shared experience.

Making and Evoking Memory

While examining several categories of significant collective memories, I realized that former categories are insufficient to elucidate Cambodian collective memories. Hence, while receiving sense from Walton (2001) and Chen (2003), I add a third main category to the construction of Cambodian collective memories. Aside from *cultural hegemony*, *social memory*, there is *natural representation*.

Cultural hegemony is described as a state-sponsored representation that shows the choice of those in power regarding remembering and forgetting, including consideration of how the specific period should be remembered. Collective memory is subsequently used as a tool of social control by powerful groups (elites, class fractions, parties) (Walton, 2001). *Social memory* is a community representation of the particular historical events that are expressed freely, privately. The new category of *natural representation* or *natural memory* is needed since the two categories are insufficient to understand the politics of memory in the Cambodian context. The representation of natural remembrance has another important characteristic: they are, by definition, anonymous. They are not vivified by names or formal signs that we can intimately bind and that could elicit sentiments and emotions. Nevertheless, they transmit a past. *Natural memory* is attributed to the natural displays of the *silence* memories.

Cultural Hegemony

Public Displays

Genocidal Tuol Sleng Museum (S-21)

The Genocidal Tuol Sleng Museum has become the central site for the construction of memories of the Pol Pot KR regime. The former prison became a museum, a public and state-sponsored representation of the DK years. Before the wars of the last 25 years in Cambodia, Tuol Sleng was a primary school and a *lycee* (Tuol Svay Prey). If we step into the museum, we can still imagine the milieu of a school. But inside, the horrors of DK and the years of KR control in Cambodia are so vivid and ghastly. Tuol Sleng became a major place of torture and death and became the site of unspeakable brutalities for the perhaps 14,400 prisoners who passed through its gates. We do not know precisely the number of prisoners detailed at the Tuol Seng. The lowest estimate is 10,000 and the highest more than 20,000. An official leaflet launched by the museum figures 12,499 prisoners including 2,000 children and 79 former workers at the prison. Moderate figure used in this report is 14,400.

S-21 was an important secret prison operated by the KR in Phnom Penh from mid-1975 through the end of 1978. Prison S-21 had the most primitive cells and facilities, and here they imprisoned, tortured, interrogated, raped and killed thousands of innocent people, including, in their final paranoid phase, their own cadres. Prisoners were shackled and in many cases 20-30 were shackled to an iron bar. The guards had been indoctrinated from childhood and were vicious and sadistic.

S-21 was only an “anteroom to death,” as Chandler (2000) puts it, where a prisoner is forced to follow the bureaucracy of death (Barnett, 1980). Upon arrival at S-21, the prisoners were photographed, tortured until they confessed to whatever crimes their captors charged them with, and then executed. The prisoners’ photographs and completed confessions formed the dossiers that were submitted to the KR authorities as proof that the “traitors” had been eliminated. Of the 14,400 people who were imprisoned at S-21, there are only seven known survivors. S-21 was known simply as *konlaenh choul min dael chneh* – “the place where people go in but never come out.”

The Killing Fields of Choeung Ek Memorial

Horrific episodes in the KR experience in Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek became cornerstones in the making and evoking the collective memory of Cambodia. Choeung Ek is a collection of mounds, mass graves, and a towering monument of catalogued human remains. The site has been made famous by the film *Killing Fields*.

The Killing Fields of Choeung Ek is now a place of pilgrimage. It was a place where more than 17,000 civilians—peasants, intellectuals, ministers, diplomats, foreigners, women, and children—were killed and buried in mass graves. Many of them were transported here for liquidation after having been detained and tortured at Tuol Sleng. This place is a chilling reminder of the brutalities of the genocidal KR regime. In the center of the area is a 17-story glass stupa that houses 8,985 skulls exhumed from mass graves. The stupa is built in the traditional pagoda style, striking in its tall narrow shape and its bright white, gray, and yellow paint. The collected remains are neatly stacked on shelves and sorted and labeled according to sex and age. Many of them have gaping holes at the back where they were struck with a hoe, cane, or heavy stick.

Up until 2003, the Document Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) has identified 348 burial pit sites; 19,471 mass graves; and 169 prisons that operated during the Pol Pot regime. Seventy-seven memorials had been constructed by the regime’s survivors. They are located throughout 170 Cambodian districts and all of twenty Cambodian provinces (DC-Cam, 2003).

Former KR Strongholds

The Ministry of Tourism of Cambodia established Anlong Veng and Pailin, former KR strongholds, as historical tourist areas. The hardliners, including Ta Mok and Pol Pot, made the Dangrek escarpment and the town of Anlong Veng their last headquarters and base. It is often referred to as their “jungle hideout.” Ideally located on the border of Thailand and Cambodia, it allowed them easy access to Thailand. The area consists of four zones significant to KR history:

a military management base, a center of economic activities, a political meeting point, and the place where Pol Pot was cremated.

Pailin became the final stronghold of Ieng Sary, Brother Number 2, when he and 10,000 soldiers and civilians defected to the government in August 1996. His defection triggered the collapse of the remnants of the KR. The regions are all situated in the northwest to southeast edge of Battambang Province. Pailin is trying to become a tourist center, just like Anlong Veng.

Arts and Visual Representation

Vann Nath Paintings at Tuol Sleng Museum

What actually happened to the prisoners in the KR's secret prison S-21? Vann Nath, one of the seven survivors of Tuol Sleng, provides the horrifying answers with his touching paintings displayed at the Tuol Sleng museum.

In 1979, Vann Nath was asked by the new government to paint pictures of the prison tortures for the world to know the secret horrors of the KR (Vann Nath 1998 and interview). These heartbreaking works now hang in the Tuol Sleng Museum—and they are unforgettable.

Poster, Image of Remembrance

At the National Route Number 6, about 46 km from Phnom Penh in front of the Police Military office in Baray District, Kampong Thom Province, the authorities have exhibited a poster of the historical consciousness of peace and war. The poster image aims at teaching Cambodians desirable character traits and providing a positive sense of heritage and identity for their future. The poster is divided into two sides that show situations of peace and war with some messages in Khmer.

Commemorative Ceremonies

National Rebirth Day of January 7th

Pram Pi Makara (January 7) in Cambodia is known as the Rebirth Day of the Nation, or the Day of Liberation. This state-sponsored representation of the KR is a national holiday to commemorate the fall of the KR regime when Phnom Penh was liberated by the Vietnamese Army. In the 1980s, almost all Cambodians engaged fervently in this commemorative ceremony.

Today, the Cambodians have various perceptions about “the day of liberation.” Among some members of the new generation and the opposition party, *Pram Pi Makara* was “the day of Vietnamese invasion,” something that should not be celebrated at all. At the 7 January 2004 ceremony, there was a rally by an Anti-Jan 7th student activist group. The rallyists were dispersed by the police. Even journalists were threatened by police officers to stop reporting on the crackdown (Samean, 2003).

The Day of Anger of May 20th

May 20 is “*Tivea Chong Kamheung*” (Day of Anger), also known as the Day of Hatred. It is the day set aside by the People’s Republic of Kampuchea – PRK and later, the government of Cambodia—to commemorate the heinous crimes committed by the Pol Pot KR Regime (see Hinton, 2001 and Hughes, 2000). During the PRK period (1979-1991), the day of anger was a prominent and well-organized public holiday with significant ceremonies held in Phnom Penh, provincial cities, and villages throughout the country. But after the Peace Accord in Paris in 1991, the May 20th commemoration was no longer formally promoted by the Cambodian government (see Hughes, 2000).

The national holiday was popularly known as the “Day to Remain Tied in Anger” or “Day of Hate.” In each district, people would gather at the local DK killing field to listen to government officials and victims speak about the atrocities that occurred under the KR regime. Villagers often carried knives, axes, clubs, or placards saying things like “*Defeat the Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary Clique*” or “*Remember Life under Pol Pot who tried to Destroy the Cambodian Lineage.*” The holiday served as an effective device to keep many people “tied in anger” against the KR who were still engaged in guerrilla warfare against the government at the time. The ceremony continues today but in a more modest form.

Historical Texts

Student “Social Study” Textbooks

In this report, I refer to the article of Bun Sou Sour who translated information pertaining to the history of the KR regime and its aftermath as written in Cambodian social study textbooks. The textbooks were issued by the Ministry of Education Youth and Sports of the Royal Government of Cambodia.

Since a textbook itself is a social product, the information that it contains and the way that the history is narrated are always influenced by the political and social context in which the sources are written. It is clear that the information about the KR regime is very partial in the social study textbooks and curriculum in Cambodia, from which the development of collective memories of the KR atrocities could not be mediated. The table illustrates how the curriculum for students in Cambodia was and remains dominated by issues focused on the victory of the current regime.

Poetry: *Looking into the Khmer Land*

In August 1980, a year after the toppling of the KR regime, the Ministry of Propaganda, Cultures and Information of the PRK published an anthology of poetry entitled *Looking into the Khmer Land in the Times of Pol-Pot-Ieng Sary*. The anthology written in Khmer by Chuon Mem consists of 138 couplets of Khmer traditional poetry.

What is important to note here is that the great suffering and terrible pain of the Khmers during the KR regime were described vividly:

The vultures and gibbons were crying along the valley of mountains seeing brutal tortures,
pile bodies increasing in number for great leap forward, flies and mosquitoes felt shivers for
fear of ghosts haunting. (Couplet 14)

Social Memory

All Cambodians have a story to tell about the KR. There are still hundreds of thousands of living narratives that will never be told. From a survey made by DC-Cam presented on their website, 89.42% of the population lost relatives during the KR regime, whereas only 1.30% did not lose anybody. The same survey also gave data on what the people thought when they talk about the KR regime: killing (63.28%), food (31.53%), hard labor (29.80%), living separately (23.11%), and others (12.31%). This survey allowed many people to express their memory freely and privately without power (politics) manipulation.

Public Displays

Multimedia Representation

Considering the fact that the KR regime is one of the fiercest and most consuming upheaval in this century of revolutions, there are numerous filmmakers who produced films pertaining to this maniacal regime, including documentary films for television programs. According to DC-Cam, there have been about 290 films related to the KR regime produced up to 2003 (DC-Cam, 2003). Only three of the best-known movies will be described briefly below.

The Killing Fields

The film is based on the article “The Death and Life of Dith Pran” by Sydney Schanberg. In 1973, reporter Schanberg arrived in Cambodia. He was assisted by Dith Pran, a Cambodian, who became his friend. After the fall of Phnom Penh, Dith Pran was imprisoned by the KR, along with Schanberg and other journalists who were fortunately released upon Dith Pran’s intervention. The film, directed by Roland Joffe, is one of the most well-known films about the personal memorial of Dith Pran, who fled Cambodia in the 1980s. This is the true story of the brutality of the KR.

S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine (Written and Directed by Rithy Panh).

This painful history is an extraordinary documentary based at S21, now a genocide museum. Van Nath was one of the death camp’s few survivors. A painter whose experience at S21 has informed his work, he returns with Panh to the rooms where he was beaten and starved. Also returning are a number of S21 prison guards, the men who tortured Van Nath, and thousands of others. Van Nath gets to confront his former captors. Van Nath is still trying to come to terms with what he went through nearly 30 years ago.

Rapp Songs by Prach Ly

The End'n is Just The Beginn'n written by Prach Ly is a Rapp song album that contains 17 rap songs reflecting on the 1970s when 1.7 million people died in the communist KR attempt to turn Cambodia into a large agrarian commune. The songs are a big hit and are very popular in Cambodia. Three of the songs are in Khmer language and the rest are in English interspersed with Khmer. At parties, in bars and in homes around Phnom Penh, the album has teen-agers buzzing about songs on death, forced labor and broken families.

Arts and Visual Representation: The Pagoda and the art of remembrance

Buddhism is the heart and soul of Cambodian culture. For centuries, Cambodian life centered on the pagoda. Pagodas functioned as the centers of excellence in knowledge, culture and religion. Buddha's life story and teachings can be found in almost every pagoda in Cambodia. But at Wat Kampong Thom, besides the lavish paintings that teach the visitors about the life and virtues of Lord Buddha, there are also the remembrance paintings of the Pol Pot KR regime. These depict the horrors of the Pol Pot regime, contrasted with the happiness and serenity of the Heng Samrin times. Because a pagoda is a sacred space, its role in building historical consciousness by revealing the atrocities of the KR becomes particularly interesting. The pagoda also becomes a backdrop for the ritual of remembrance, as it is able to invoke tradition to offer a space that is socially memorable, spiritual, and even iconic. These paintings potentially offer a fine reading of how people are think of their collective past, and thus how they would like to position themselves in the future.

Historical Texts

The scope of what constitutes a historical text is intentionally narrow. Essentially, I have included academic texts and autobiographical memories which describe vivid personal or professional accounts that disclose the sense of past in Cambodia during and preceding the KR period (1975-1979). Internet-based representations (online resources) have been omitted from this summary.

Academic Texts

Chandler, David P. *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*. Chiang May: Silkworm Books, 2000.

This is more than a biography of the enigmatic KR leader, Pol Pot. It traces the Cambodian communist movement throughout the 1950s and 1960s up until the end of Pol Pot's life in 1998. This book is the first comprehensive, scholarly analysis of the life of the KR enigmatic leader. Using hundreds of interviews with survivors, Chandler, the leading authority

on Cambodian history, meticulously examines Pol Pot's biographical details and clears up many misconceptions about Pol Pot.

Chandler, David P. *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000a.

Chandler gives a remarkably deep analysis of Pol Pot's secret prison S-21, within which the auto-genocide of the Cambodian people stands out as a haunting symbol. David Chandler has made extensive use of the archives of S-21, with photographs and "confessions" to show the absurd paranoia of the leaders in Democratic Kampuchea. This book provides important insights into the purges during the KR period. It uses a historian's approach, with scholarly and well-written details, to explore the questions many Cambodians struggle with: "How and why did all the killing and suffering happen?"

Autobiographical Texts

Szymusiak, Molyda. *The Stones Cry Out: A Cambodian Childhood, 1975-1980*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986.

Molyda Szymusiak (adoptive name of Buth Keo), the daughter of a high Cambodian official, was born in Phnom Penh on October 19, 1962. After 1975, she and her family were driven from the capital into the countryside. Molyda and the three surviving members of her family went to Paris in 1981 where they were adopted by Polish exile Jan Szymusiak. *The Stones Cry Out*, a powerful and compelling story of terror, struggle and death sprinkled with moments of tenderness, is startlingly good as literature.

Nath, Vann. *A Prison Portrait: One Year in the Khmer Rouge S-21*. Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999.

Vann Nath is a prime eye-witness of the unimaginable hardship and horror at the KR secret prison of Tuol Sleng. He survived the bloodshed because as a painter he could provide useful paintings of Pol Pot. This is a touching memoir from one of only seven known prisoners to survive S-21 out of more than 14,400 inmates of the infamous interrogation and extermination center of the Pol Pot KR regime.

Natural Representation

The natural representation of the KR plays essential roles. They serve to awaken the people's memories of the genocide. Two sites of natural memory will be described below: Ang Trapeang Thmaw and Kamping Puoy reservoirs.

Ang Trapeang Thmaw Reservoir is situated just across the border in Banteay Meanchey Province in the Phnom Srok region, about 100 km from Siem Reap. This place is now one of the three biospheres on Tonle Sap Lake, and the site of the bird sanctuary under the supervision of the Wildlife and Forestry Department (WFD) of the Cambodian government. This

is one of only two places in the world where it is possible to see the extremely rare sarus crane, as depicted on bas relief at Angkor. This reservoir was created by forced labor during the KR regime. Thousands were killed or perished from disease and starvation in building this reservoir.

Kamping Puoy Reservoir is described as the “Killing Dam,” where thousands of people were forced to work or starved to death in its construction. There are no monuments or relics to remind the visitor of what occurred there, but the large lake, located an hour and a half from Battambang, are a popular picnic spot on weekends. This reservoir fascinates some tourists because it was the scene of much misery and death during the KR regime.

Conclusion

The Pol Pot KR reign of violence, terror, famine, fear, and brutality in Cambodia left a very complex legacy that had a dramatic effect on the entire range of Cambodian daily life. The Cambodian nation's soul deserves healing after so much suffering. Up to now, the KR regime is still an unresolved and tremendously painful trauma as the head of state and KR's highest ranking officer still lives freely--untouchable and with impunity. The failure to bring to justice even just a single one of KR's crimes after 26 years has a bad effect. Future generations are seriously at risk of losing knowledge of their history –or at best, that history will come to be seen as unreal. Justice has been invisible to them. Consequently, it is very difficult to distinguish between genuine anti KR sentiments and manipulated (politics) arguments. All these developments form part of the political and cultural discourse of a society that has not yet been able to agree on its collective identity.

Most forms of remembrance in Cambodia are *state-sponsored representations*, meaning, they are deliberately created by the recent authorities to gain political support. Two central sites for the construction of memories, namely, the Genocidal Tuol Sleng Museum and the Choeung Ek Killing Fields Memorial which display the skulls and bones of the KR victims, and two commemorative ceremonies, January 7th – *Prampi Makara* and May 20th –*Day of Hatred*, are state-sponsored representations of the KR years. The representations of the KR regime by design resemble the memorializing of the Holocaust of Hitler Nazi's Germany and the "sinister charisma" of Auschwitz (Chandler, 2000: 5-6). Cambodians believe that the souls of the tortured continue to linger because their remains have not received proper cremation according to Buddhist rites. Since remains are used by the current regime in official propaganda, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the memory of the atrocities of the KR regime is an endeavor caught between the push of politics and the pull of people's emotion. As a result, the tragedy of Cambodian history, to use Chandler words (1999: 314), refuses to end.

Memories of the past are not a fixed and independent entity but a construction--the way an individual or collective remember what has happened to them or around them. The excess of what Rigby (2003) called 'the wrong kind of memory' is one of the biggest obstacles to reconciliation. I want to sum up by underlining the theory of Halbwachs (1992) that memory needs continuous feeding from collective sources. If certain memories are inconvenient to or a burden to a people, they can always be opposed--the sense of reality inseparable from their present life. Cambodians are free to choose.

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