Like a Chronic Illness

Cambodia is still suffering in the aftermath of genocide.
A journey through a traumatized land.

A blossom has blown onto the torture bed. A touch of white on the rusty frame. A filthy blanket, iron shackles, and the battery case for electroshocks. Through the open window comes the sound of children laughing. Outside, young girls run around the meadow, hair flying, uninhibited, unaffected by the relics of terror inside.

Tuol Sleng, the genocide museum in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, is a place out of time. Once a school, it then became the most barbarous prison of the Khmer Rouge. Of 14,000 prisoners, only seven have survived. The rusty bed frames, the battery cases, everything is exactly as it was when it was abandoned. Exactly as the Vietnamese found it when they overthrew the Pol Pot regime in 1979. Even the terse labels carry the political handwriting of the Vietnamese: "Pol Pot clique." As if it were simply a handful of renegades who had gone astray.

Almost two million people died in the four years of a stone-age communist experiment. Twenty-one years later, the period of the Khmer Rouge has yet to find a place in Cambodia's national memory. Tuol Sleng, the only museum, is the first place the vacuum is felt. The area is now fenced-in; the homeless used to inhabit this site of former suffering. Across from the museum there is a magnificent new villa. Every day, its owners look across at the wooden frame that was used to lower victims head-first into the trough.

Vann Nath's hair has the intense whiteness that is left by shock. He is one of the seven who survived. A painter, in prison he painted for his life. A series of Pol Pot portraits. The book he wrote telling his story has been published only in English translation, not in Khmer, the language of the Cambodians. "No market for it; no money," Vann Nath explains. We are sitting on his roof terrace. He is fifty-five years old and a little tired. He also painted the horrors, later. Precise, realistic paintings, you want to shut your eyes like a child watching a horror film—the technique of clamping down the arms while tearing out fingernails.

There is not a single history book in Khmer about the genocide. Even if there were one, 40 percent of all Cambodians would not be able to read it. That's how high the illiteracy rate is. School books? During the ten years of Vietnamese occupation, there were

a couple pages about the Pol Pot clique. After 1991, when official policy declared national reconciliation with the Khmer Rouge, the subject was totally taboo in school curriculum. Half the Cambodian population is under eighteen. For most of the younger generation, the genocide is nothing but oral history, family stories. The older ones sometimes say to naughty children, "You're behaving like the Khmer Rouge."

Like a formless shadow, the Pol Pot period enshrouds the country. A tribunal against the last remaining leaders of the Khmer Rouge is now within reach. It can give the shadow some contours and break the silence. "Whereas the Jewish response to the Holocaust is to emphasize keeping memories of the experience before the community to act as a catharsis, no similar process has yet emerged in the Cambodian community," wrote Seanglim Bit, a social psychologist.

The Persisting Shadow Over the Second Generation

A quarter of the population was either starved or murdered. Death had become ever-present in the land of the killing fields. In 1979, the people returned to the rice fields and patched their huts of palm straw, their shattered souls in tow. The neighbor or the uncle might have been a member of the Khmer Rouge. He too returned and patched his hut. They didn't talk much. Countless children had watched as those closest to them were killed before their eyes. Some victims started resembling the perpetrators toward the end, chopping up their captured torturers in bloodthirsty hatred.

Nowadays, people who are too loud while nailing up their mosquito netting might have to reckon with the neighbors stabbing them in the back. And anyone who scratches a car while parking might get shot in the stomach. Someone who steals a moped will be stoned on the open street. And there is a terrible trend of throwing acid on wedding couples, disfiguring their faces for the rest of their lives, a symbolic destruction of happiness and beauty.

"The entire population that was born prior to 1975 is more or less traumatized," says Kann Kall. He heads a small center offering psychosocial services that is funded by the Netherlands. "The people complain of physical ailments, headaches and insomnia. They are not aware of the ties to the past." Kall lost his parents at thirteen. He went through everything that his meager staff of twenty-five is now diagnosing in the villages. The loss of any shimmer of trust in the community, deep-rooted fear, pathological suspicion, lack of

motivation and an inability to plan for the future. Individual symptoms, but they add up to a picture of a weak and weary country, almost half the national budget of which is still supplied by international aid.

Up until five years ago there was not a single psychologist educated in Cambodia. Now, one hundred have just graduated from university. Most psychological disorders stemming from the Pol Pot period and the subsequent two decades of civil war will never be treated. They add the madness to the daily crime reports and they hide in the form of the battering husband. Domestic violence in Cambodia has increased to the same extent as politically motivated violence has gone down.

According to a recent study, most acts of violence are committed by 20-24-year-olds, the heirs to devastation that has not yet been dealt with.

"The aftermath of genocide has settled within our people like a chronic illness. And this illness will destroy the next two generations if the people do not finally learn to talk about it," says Kann Kall. His voice is numb from grief. Will a tribunal against the Khmer Rouge force the people to talk? "Yes, but it is not a game. On the international stage it might be a political game. But for Cambodia this process will either bring huge psychological relief or new trauma."

The Liberating Search for Truth

There is no sign hanging outside the heavy door to the Documentation Center of Cambodia. The center was established through the Cambodian Genocide Program of Yale University and it is now an autonomous research institute. Youk Chhang, the director, is sitting at his laptop. He went to college in the United States and is a very self-confident man. As a child he witnessed his sister being murdered. "That is always with me," he says, "but I feel free today." His glance moves along the shelves of the archive. "The years I spent studying have helped me. I am moving forward. I don't cry; I am not even angry anymore."

The center has collected over 400,000 pages of documents in its archive, including life stories of 8,000 Khmer Rouge cadres, diaries, torture protocols, diplomatic correspondence. Youk Chhang vehemently contradicts the popular assumption that there is not much to research on the genocide in Cambodia. "There is no simple truth about the Khmer Rouge." "This," he says as his eyes once again scan the shelves, "is not about Cambodia. It is about human beings. It can happen anywhere."

A mood of optimism. The center just published the introductory issues of the journal *Searching for the Truth,* the first publication in the Khmer language. A project called the Family Tracing Service helps families obtain information about deceased family members. It is healing; it gives them a sense of closure. And there are plans for a modern new museum, a combination of research facility and memorial, styled after the large Holocaust museums. "Once the tribunal has been established, we will get some funding," says Youk Chhang. "Then no one could say no and retain their dignity."

For the democratic activists in Phnom Penh, most of whom have returned from exile, there is another side to the search for truth—the responsibility of the West. After Pol Pot was overthrown, the Khmer Rouge who kept fighting continued to receive support for a long time. The Vietnamese had come from the wrong side of the Cold War when they ended the mass murder. "Hypocracy!" That is the response of Kao Kim Hourn, a political scientist, when he is asked about the tribunal. "Who cares about Cambodia? It's nothing but nonsense. And no one cared when two million people were slaughtered here." But of course, he adds quietly, it is important that the trial take place.

Lao Mong Hay, executive director of the Khmer Institute of Democracy, has spent fifteen years writing letters to the editor throughout the world, calling for a strictly international tribunal. Now this weak compromise has come out of it. He immediately wrote an angry petition to the United Nations: Discrimination! Violation of the principle of equal treatment! Is genocide in Cambodia less important than genocide in Rwanda or Bosnia? If you ask Lao Mong Hay why he writes so much, he answers succinctly, "I always feel guilty." He was attending college in London when the Khmer Rouge took power. "I was sitting in a safe place while my brothers were dying." He signs his letter of protest on behalf of others: "In the name of my two brothers . . . ."

The Obscene Culture of Impunity

Kek Galabru, a physician, met us with cheerful cynicism. "I went to Paris in 1971. That's the reason you see me here. Otherwise I would join the others in a mass grave." A cosmopolitan woman of 57 with a shining aura, her beauty of earlier years is still visible in the slight wrinkles in her face. Her French and English fluctuate rapidly. But most of all, she is a fierce fighter. Dr. Galabru is president of the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, known simply as Licadho; it is the most persistent indicter of

the "culture of impunity." Whoever has power or wealth or government protection gets off scot-free. At the head of those beyond the law, the leaders of the Khmer Rouge set an example - when even mass murder goes unpunished, then morality is fighting a losing battle. Then a police officer can shoot a karaoke singer if she rejects his advances.

Licadho has recently published a report on torture, offering shocking insight into the "vicious cycle of violence and trauma." The Cambodian police, according to the report, routinely use torture to force confessions or money from the people they arrest. In most cases there are no political motives for the torture; it is a way "to get things done." Dr. Galabru is outraged that the United Nations has agreed to work with such a state. "The judicial system is totally corrupt. Witnesses will refuse to testify out of fear." Her cell phone rings; more people driven from their land have arrived in Phnom Penh! Another facet of the culture of impunity: Farmers have had their land taken away and up to now, no one has been prosecuted for it.

We drive to a trampled meadow along the Mekong River. This is where the poorest of the poor gather, sandwiched between a luxury hotel on one side and a casino ship on the other. Sar Sopheap, a rice farmer, has traveled here to register a complaint with the government. He plans to stay until he gets heard, camping on this meadow, half naked, with nothing but a tarpaulin over his head. Soldiers forced him and 125 other families from their small parcel of land in order to sell it to a Korean company. The compensation he received was barely enough to buy two meals in the city.

The tentacles of this and other injustices trace back to the period of the Khmer Rouge. Those haters of education burned more than just books; they also burned other papers and documents, so that hardly any Cambodians can prove today that they own their land. But recently, the victims have started to fight back. Words such as law and complaint have entered their heads, even if they cannot spell or write them. This is why longtime observers of the Cambodian tragedy say that there has been much improvement. Tender sprouts of a civil society are pushing their way out of the parched soil. Trade unions have been established, and people are striking and demonstrating.

Hardly anywhere else in the world has foreign goodwill romped so freely, with such ambivalent consequences. In 1992 the United Nations came with a peacekeeping force of 16,000 military plus 8,000 civilian personnel. The UNTAC mission cost billions and accomplished little more than social upheaval. Children could suddenly earn more by

washing cars than their parents could in the rice fields. In the wake of the UN mission, the number of nongovernmental organizations exploded. There are around 300 NGOs currently registered in the small country of Cambodia, half of them international. They definitely accomplished much good, especially by sowing the concept of human rights. But the pull of dollar salaries has led doctors, sorely needed by the country, to prefer to offer their services to NGOs as translators. And teachers are working as guards at the doors of the relief organizations.

The Intellectual Poverty and the Shame of the Intelligentsia

Rural Cambodia shows its poverty in gracious form. Melancholy isolation, villages frozen in times past, no plastic, often no electricity. The curse of the country is its intellectual poverty. The nation's elite was exterminated; when the Khmer Rouge were overthrown, there were only 300 university graduates still in Cambodia. Whoever had completed elementary school could become a teacher.

A visit to a village school. The teacher is out at the moment, something that happens frequently. Since a teacher's salary is below the subsistence level, educators have to plant their fields as well as teach. In the second-grade classroom, 144 young expectant faces crowd together. They are pressed so closely that the ones sitting at the ends of the old wooden benches almost fall off. There are only 32 in the sixth-grade class next door, and half of them are absent today to work in the fields.

The dwindling of class size keeps the cycle of poverty and lack of education going. Less than ten percent of all children nationwide complete elementary school. Corruption is thriving in the city, even in the classroom; students have to buy goods from the underpaid teacher if they want to move up to the next grade. Many parents accept education for their children only as a supposed shortcut to wealth.

Perhaps the most moving thing about this society is the shame that educated Cambodians feel in view of the cultural decline of their people. Neth Barom, vice rector of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, says quietly, "Cambodia has become Asia's garbage dump. Anything whose expiration date has passed is exported here. Our country does not produce anything notable. Even the television repairmen at the market are Vietnamese, since our people do not have the training."

Early in the morning at the Faculty of Fine Arts: small, ten-year-old, graceful princesses move their fingers in the mysterious sign language, practicing the steps of classical Cambodian dance. Cloth wrapped into pantaloons around their hips, sparkling belts. In a childlike sing-song, the girls set the rhythm. Nine years of training are necessary to achieve the disciplined agility of a professional dancer at the Royal Ballet. Candles are glowing in the twilight in the practice hall and offerings are laid out. A ceremony for the deceased has begun. The little princesses are concentrating so hard on their steps that they cannot feel the burden. They embody the revival of traditional culture from the graves of the killing fields.

The Nervous Innocence of the Guilty

The condition of the road to Pailin, in the semi-autonomous zone of the Khmer Rouge, seems symbolic of the inaccessibility of the guilty parties. Our vehicle bounces from pothole to pothole, five painful hours for the last ninety kilometers. Then finally the highlands at the border to Thailand come into view, and tanks are rusting at the side of the road. The heart of darkness sends out its greetings, with massage parlors and Thai pop on every station. What a strange and noisy backwater! The present seems more disreputable than the past.

Ever since Ieng Sary, foreign minister and Pol Pot's brother-in-law, joined the government forces in 1996 along with about 12,000 supporters, legal and illegal trading of wood from tropical forests and local gemstones has been flourishing in Pailin. This refuge of the Khmer Rouge is a cynical epilogue to their former egalitarianism—some of the leaders are rich, living in secluded villas, surrounded by the impoverished village life of the masses. The ordinary Khmer Rouge soldier is now in the employ of the government army or has received a small piece of land from the state, as reconciliation.

Cautious rapprochement through four levels of intermediaries, and then we are finally sitting across from the 45-year-old Sakha. She says, "Pol Pot was a friendly, good-looking man; he always smiled. Everyone liked him immediately." When he died two years ago, she mourned. "What they say today about the Pol Pot period is not true. There was enough to eat; life was easier than it is today." She rocks her youngest child in the hammock, and wipes her eyes. Her husband has shrapnel in his head; he is always nervous. Sakha starts crying, maybe about her life.

Hoeun, the friendly head of the village, was a sort of group leader with the Khmer Rouge. He too insists that there was always enough to eat. Our chatting circle grows as an elderly gentleman who is extremely hard of hearing joins us. He was an officer in the ousted Lon Nol regime and had to stay in hiding for four years, since the Khmer Rouge wanted to kill him. How is the old man doing around his former arch enemies? "I don't think at all about politics," the almost deaf man shouted. "Now we are all ordinary people."

Savuth lives in a better house. He was a commander with the Khmer Rouge and today he is a commander in the Royal Army. Was the Pol Pot period good or bad, Mr. Savuth? "Well," he says, "it's hard to say. The principles were good, but then there was too much in-fighting." He has not told his adolescent children much about the time. All of a sudden, they are standing behind us, listening closely. Savuth's legs swing nervously. "A trial is in any case unnecessary," he says, "since the Khmer Rouge doesn't exist anymore." After we have already said goodbye, Savuth adds, "I never wanted any bloodshed."

An army officer lives a few houses down. After 1979 he hunted the Khmer Rouge with the Vietnamese. His own brother was among the hunted. The brother now lives across the way and they are friends again. "The Pol Pot period was hell," the officer tells us. He married a fighter for the Khmer Rouge. Strange connections, all kinds of pasts in this zone united in silence.

We meet the governor of Pailin on a Sunday excursion. He is surrounded by bodyguards. Thick gold chains around his neck, a large sparkling gemstone on his finger, Bermuda shorts. Chhean was a confidant of Pol Pot. He is going for a hike, he says. A short time later his entourage has disappeared into the Caesar Casino, within sight of the barrier at the border to Thailand. Our driver refuses to park in front of the casino. Please do not disturb the gentlemen! Fear.

There are many steps leading up to the old pagoda of Pailin. At the top, a sculpture represents the cruel punishments in the Buddhist hell. Tongues are torn out; heads are lowered into water troughs. The methods seem familiar—known from the torture prison of Tuol Sleng. The evening light slowly falls, and down in the valley the monks are singing.