

In the Shadow of Genocide

As long as I can still see my shadow while walking to the rice fields, I will never be able to forget the slaughter committed by the Khmer Rouge against my wife, children and the people of Cambodia between 1975–1979.

Lay Ny, a farmer from Prey Veng¹

Why did you kill? From the day I arrived in Cambodia to conduct anthropological research, I wanted to pose this question to Khmer Rouge who had executed people during the genocidal Democratic Kampuchea regime, which lasted from April 1975 to January 1979. When the Khmer Rouge, a radical group of Maoist-inspired rebels headed by Pol Pot, came to power after a bloody civil war in which six hundred thousand people died, they immediately set out to transform Cambodia into an agrarian, communist state. In the process, they enacted policies that resulted in the deaths of over one and a half million of Cambodia's eight million inhabitants—more than 20 percent of the population—from starvation, overwork, illness, malnutrition, and outright execution.

For most Cambodians, life during Democratic Kampuchea (hereafter called DK) was like a giant prison camp in which basic rights and freedoms were severely curtailed in the name of revolution. The cities were evacuated; economic production and consumption were collectivized; books were confiscated and sometimes burned; Buddhism and other forms of religious worship were banned; freedom of speech, travel, residence, and occupational choice were dramatically curtailed; formal education largely disappeared; money, markets, and courts were abolished; and the family was subordinated to the Party Organization, *Ângkar*.² Cambodians I interviewed sometimes grimly described DK as “hell on earth” (*norok loki*), “the fire without smoke” (*phloeng et phsaeng*), or “the prison without walls” (*kuk et chonhcheang*). One survivor explained

to me, “Everyone suffered as if they were in jail. We were ordered around and watched closely like prisoners. We were forced to work extremely hard, yet given little food. . . . There was no freedom. We weren’t allowed to speak or move about freely. And, if there was a problem, a person would be killed and discarded. You always had to be prepared for death.” Most Cambodians remember DK as a time of enforced, arduous labor, oppression, chronic starvation, prevalent illness and disease, widespread fear and terror, and death.

When I interviewed several Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers about DK, they all denied killing people outside the battlefield. Finally, during my last month in Cambodia, I arranged an interview with a former soldier who had worked at Tuol Sleng, the infamous Phnom Penh prison where at least fourteen thousand people had been confined and then executed during DK, many after being tortured into giving a “confession.” Finding this man, whom I will call Lor,³ had not been easy. My research assistant, Bros, spent several days in an area south of Phnom Penh where a number of former Tuol Sleng cadres were rumored to live. One woman told Bros that she had worked at Tuol Sleng; when I formally interviewed her, however, she denied it. So, when Bros informed me that Lor openly admitted to working at Tuol Sleng and had agreed to come for an interview the next day, I was both intrigued and a bit apprehensive.

My feelings were exacerbated by rumors I had heard about Lor. An official at the Tuol Sleng Museum claimed that the man I was about to interview had admitted to killing four hundred people. One of the few prisoners to have survived Tuol Sleng told me that Lor had in fact executed more than two thousand men, women, and children. He said that Lor “was savage like an animal in the forest, like a wild dog or a tiger. I didn’t dare look at his face. . . . We were terrified of him.” Prior to the interview, I imagined Lor as a heinous person who exuded evil from head to toe. He was not what I expected. When he walked into the room, I saw before me a poor farmer in his late thirties, who greeted me with the broad smile and polite manner that one so often encounters in Cambodia.

After we had exchanged formalities, I began asking Lor about his life as a Khmer Rouge soldier. Lor denied being an interrogator or executioner at Tuol Sleng, but admitted to being a guard. In fact, he said he was eventually given responsibility for receiving new inmates and for transporting prisoners to a killing field located at Choeng Ek, a small village just outside of Phnom Penh. Lor emphasized that he did not execute people; he simply transported the prisoners to Choeng Ek and checked off the names as they were killed.

The method of execution Lor described was simple and brutal. One or two Khmer Rouge soldiers would lead a prisoner to a ditch in front of which he or she was ordered to kneel. A guard would then strike the prisoner once on the back of the neck with an iron bar. If the person didn't die immediately, the soldier would hit him or her repeatedly until the victim fell into the mass grave, which later was covered with dirt. Lor said that while the prisoners never tried to escape, they would often beg their executioner, "Please, don't kill me." Some prisoners went silently to their deaths; others screamed as they were killed.

As the interview continued, Lor explained that he had been arrested in 1979 and interrogated by district police of the new Vietnamese-backed government. Lor thought he would be killed so, when the police asked him how many people he had executed, he lied and said, "I am the killer, by myself, of one thousand people." Lor claimed he gave this false number in the hope that the police would kill him quickly. To his surprise, Lor was sent to prison for a year and then released. He returned to his native district, where he later married and had children.

At this point, I asked Lor, "So, during the Pol Pot period you never killed anyone?" Lor hesitated momentarily and then responded, "I did kill one or two people, but I did this so that others wouldn't accuse me of being unable to cut off my heart." While Lor's comment that he had killed "one or two people" suggested that he had killed many more, I decided not to press him on the matter for fear he would stop giving detailed answers, a pattern I had encountered in other interviews with former Khmer Rouge. Instead I asked him to explain why he had killed the "one or two" prisoners. Lor replied, "At the time, my boss was also present. . . . As we walked he asked me, 'Have you ever dared to kill one of them, Lor?' I responded, 'I never have, elder brother.' So he said, 'Like your heart isn't cut off (*chett min dach khat*), go get that prisoner and try it once. Do it one time so I can see.'" Lor told the soldier who was about to execute the prisoner to give him the iron bar and then "struck the prisoner so they could watch me. I hit him one time with the iron bar and he fell to the ground. Afterwards, I threw the bar aside and returned to the place where I marked off the names. When my boss asked me to do this, if I didn't do it [pause] . . . I couldn't refuse."

. . .

Lor's chilling story highlights the key problematic of this book: How do perpetrators like Lor come to commit murderous acts in such situations?

Was Lor a sadistic monster who was drawn to killing and reveled in it? Was he an ideological fanatic who raged against the despicable “hidden enemies burrowing from within” that Khmer Rouge speeches and radio broadcasts incessantly warned were subverting the revolution? Was he a strategic calculator who saw an opportunity to rise in rank in the new society and took it, regardless of the fact that he would be required to kill other human beings? Or, as Lor explained to me, was he merely “following orders” in a highly constrained environment and a difficult historical moment that victimized Lor by forcing him, on pain of death, to do things that he would otherwise not have chosen to do? These are highly controversial issues that have dominated debates in academic circles, journalistic accounts, and the popular imagination, and which I will explore in subsequent chapters of this book.

How are we to resolve the paradox of perpetration? It is best to resist simple, reductive explanations; while often containing some truth, they provide partial answers to the complex processes that move human beings to kill. A more complete answer requires that we consider a number of factors and leads us to other questions, in particular those dealing with the origins and dynamics of genocide.⁴ The second key question with which this book is concerned is: How does genocide come to take place? How did the Khmer Rouge rise to power in the first place? Why did people like Lor join the revolutionary movement? Why did the DK leadership enact genocidal policies that resulted in the death and suffering of so many people? These issues in turn demand discussion of the conditions of life in this horrifying “prison without walls.”

Such questions are notoriously difficult to answer. A number of people, many of them survivors of the Holocaust and other genocides, have warned that social science can never capture the experiential horror of genocide, suggesting that explanations of genocide risk oversimplification, and may lessen or even absolve guilt — a concern that is accentuated when perpetrators assert that they were “only obeying orders.” Hannah Arendt’s book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, generated enormous controversy precisely because it raised questions about the banality of evil and the moral culpability of Nazi bureaucrats like Adolf Eichmann. These matters are important ones, highlighting the importance of looking at multiple modalities of representation, from poetry to the visual arts, and of recognizing the limits of explanation.

Silence poses its own dangers, however. If we do not seek to analyze genocide, then it becomes a floating signifier of evil, appropriated at will for moral condemnation or contained in ways that make us feel more

comfortable. Genocide has too often been associated with the “barbaric” in a sort of twentieth-century stage theory of mass violence in which “barbaric” acts of violence are linked to modes of being antithetical to and lower than those of “civilization.” This conception is evident in the writings of Raphael Lemkin, the scholar and advocate who coined the term *genocide*. Lemkin originally proposed calling genocidal acts “crimes of *barbarity*.”⁵ His later search for a neologism was inspired, in part, by a speech in which Winston Churchill proclaimed, “We are in the presence of a crime without a name.”⁶ In one of his unpublished notebooks, Lemkin drew a line connecting “THE WORD” to “MORAL JUDGEMENT”; elsewhere he stated that the new term would serve as an “index of civilization.”⁷ In other words, his signifier would index a type of “modern” morality — and a type of “civil” society governed by international law — by marking its binary opposite. Through its association with barbarity, *genocide*, the signifier that Lemkin ultimately selected, implicitly diverted attention from the possibility that something all-too-modern was involved in this mass violence. The Nazis could more comfortably be viewed as an atavism, a throwback to a more “primitive” state of being that seemingly produces frenzies of mass violence in places like Bosnia and Rwanda — thus the frequent depiction of these conflicts as a primordial clash resulting from a seething cauldron of “ancient tribal hatreds.”

This position is highly problematic.⁸ There is a deep and complex relationship between genocide and modernity,⁹ which are bound by tropes of “progress,” projects of social engineering, the reification of group difference (often in terms of racial categories), capitalism and the pursuit of profit, bureaucratic distancing, the rise of the nation-state and its highly increased centralization of power, technologies of mass murder, and crises of identity and the search for meaning in a world of upheaval. Moreover, to ignore this relationship is to overlook a deeply troubling implication — that some of the processes that help generate genocide are operative in our everyday lives, a point that was vividly illustrated by Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiments, which I discuss in the Conclusion.¹⁰

To reflect on genocide, then, is not just to explore evil but also to gain greater insight into ourselves and the society in which we live. Furthermore, if we do not attempt to understand the etiology of genocide, we will be unable to prevent its recurrence. Analysis also provides a basis for advocacy, as the international community in general, and the United States in particular, has too often stood by as genocide unfolded,

claiming ignorance or disbelief.¹¹ Rwanda and Bosnia are recent examples of this tragic trend.

For all of these reasons, it is crucial for us to try to understand perpetrator motivation and the origins of genocide. In doing so, we must bear in mind warnings about the limits of analysis and representation. Clearly, exegesis has limitations: it can never fully convey the experience of genocide and provides only a partial and positioned perspective. Moreover, no account can be complete, meaning that the picture the analyst constructs will inevitably have gaps. Having stated these caveats, in what follows I attempt to fit together a number of analytical “pieces” of the puzzle about why people kill and how genocide comes to take place. The book is also meant as an example of how anthropology can engage with pressing public issues like genocide, about which the discipline has much to say and much remains to be said.

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When I first traveled to Cambodia as a graduate student in 1992, I did not expect that I would study genocide and meet people like Lor. I had just completed my second year of doctoral studies and planned to do language training and preliminary research on the embodiment of emotion in Cambodia. Upon my arrival, I was immediately struck by the devastation the country had suffered. The signs of a quarter-century of civil war and genocide were omnipresent. Urban shantytowns, beggars, roads scarred with potholes that were sometimes impassable, a lack of electricity, tattered clothing, and malnourished children suggested a debilitated infrastructure and endemic poverty. One was reminded of the prevalence of mines by the frequent sight of the maimed and the many red skull-and-crossbones signs reading “Danger! Mines!” Cambodia was also awash with munitions, ranging from handguns and AK-47s to unexploded ordnance (much of it from U.S. bombing raids during the Vietnam War) in villages and rice paddies. Later I developed an eye for more subtle signs: bullet holes in the side of a building, the large number of female-headed households, the vague contour of a bomb crater in a rice field, the difficulty of finding expert informants, or a slight tensing of the body when “the Pol Pot period” was discussed.¹²

Statistically, Cambodia ranks in the world’s bottom tier in terms of poverty, infant mortality, life expectancy, and per capita income.¹³ In 1995, the per capita income was \$260 (a figure that has barely risen since); according to the World Bank, Cambodia was then one of the

twenty poorest countries in the world. The country had the dubious distinction of having almost one unexploded mine for every Cambodian man, woman, and child (Cambodia also has the highest percentage of amputees in the world) and, more recently, of having one of Asia's highest rates of HIV infection. While the Cambodian genocide did not cause all of these problems (many of which were exacerbated by a U.S.-led international embargo of the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea during the 1980s), it has been a major contributor to the difficult life conditions so many Cambodians confront.

The year 1992 was a time of hope. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was preparing to oversee an election that would allow the various Cambodian factions that had been fighting since the end of DK to become part of a new, democratically elected government. Still, the wealth of thousands of foreign UNTAC officials and soldiers stood in strong contrast to Cambodia's endemic poverty. White cars, trucks, and sports utility vehicles, stamped in black with "UN," filled the roads of Cambodia, contrasting sharply with the mopeds and pedicabs that most Cambodians used for transport. Many U.N. officials received a per diem of \$145, an amount that seemed outrageous given Cambodia's per capita income. Although an election eventually was held, it was hampered by the pullout of the Khmer Rouge, political violence, and a threatened secession that enabled the ruling government to effectively maintain their hold on power despite losing at the polls.

During this time, I lived with a Cambodian family and took Khmer classes at the University of Phnom Penh. I was struck by the fact that, despite the suffering they had endured, most of the people I met were extremely friendly and warm. This social demeanor, which is partly linked to local conceptions of face, honor, and social harmony, no doubt contributed to colonial and postcolonial characterizations of Cambodia as a "gentle, smiling land" — stereotypes formed in ignorance and belied by Cambodian history.

Almost inevitably, most Cambodians I got to know eventually began to tell me about their experiences during DK, often quite unexpectedly. These recollections often began with a description of the March 18, 1970 overthrow of Prince Sihanouk, who had ruled Cambodia since 1953, when he led the country to independence from French colonial rule. This was a landmark event since, within days of the coup, Sihanouk had joined his former enemy, the Khmer Rouge, in calling upon his rural "children" to fight the "illegitimate" Khmer Republic (1970–75), which had been established after Sihanouk's overthrow by his former general,

Lon Nol.¹⁴ While the coup was supported by many urbanites, particularly the middle class, the educated, traders, and merchants, Sihanouk's speech galvanized large numbers of peasants to follow their beloved, charismatic, fatherly king in joining the Khmer Rouge movement. Although the Khmer Rouge had been active in Cambodia for over fifteen years, it was only after the Vietnam War intensified and Sihanouk was overthrown that they began to gain the legitimacy and support that would bring them to power.

During the next five years, the U.S.-backed Khmer Republic engaged in a fierce civil war with the Khmer Rouge, who were supported by communist China and, at least initially, North Vietnam. Life in Cambodia became increasingly difficult as the economy collapsed, foreign soldiers (Vietcong, South Vietnamese, and U.S. troops) encroached and skirmished on Cambodian soil, and bullets, artillery shells, and bombs rained from the sky. The destruction wrought by ground battles was compounded by intensive U.S. bombing.¹⁵ Between 1969 and 1973, nearly 540,000 tons of bombs — over three times the tonnage dropped on Japan during World War II — were dropped on Cambodian soil, almost half of it in 1973. On the local level, the bombing resulted in enormous suffering, impoverishment, displacement, and perhaps as many as 150,000 deaths. Hundreds of thousands of rural Cambodians fled to the cities. Phnom Penh, which had had a prewar population of around six hundred thousand people, held roughly two million refugees by the end of the war. In total, perhaps six hundred thousand Cambodians had perished by the time the Khmer Rouge achieved victory in April 1975.

Upon taking power, the Khmer Rouge set out to achieve a “super great leap forward” into socialism that would be unprecedented and would supposedly create, as a May 1975 radio broadcast announced, “the cleanest, most fair society ever known in our history.”¹⁶ They immediately ordered the urban population to evacuate the cities “for a few days.” The urban dwellers would not be allowed to return. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians streamed out of Phnom Penh and other cities, a journey that urbanites remember for the sweltering heat, the stench, the times when the masses moved at a crawl, the fear of armed Khmer Rouge soldiers, the loss of their homes, the uncertainty of the future, the panicked attempt to make it to a familiar village, the first “disappearances” of loved ones, and the unusual and sometimes bizarre sights — swollen corpses, hospital patients being pushed along still hooked to IVs, women giving birth by the side of the road, isolated executions, and even the

occasional suicide of people who would rather die than live under the Khmer Rouge. Peng, a boy at this time, recalled:

I remember when my family made the journey from Phnom Penh . . . and took a boat to Prek Kdam. While riding in the boat, I heard people speaking about the corpses they saw floating on the water. I looked and saw lots of corpses floating in the river. When the boat arrived at Prek Tam, my family got out and journeyed onward. There were many people walking in groups along National Highway 6. Some pushed small carts loaded with things, some carried possessions, some held small children in their arms. Everyone walked from four o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night, when they all rested along the side of the road. The road really stank from the corpses of soldiers and people who had died from illness along the road, since they didn't have access to medicine or a doctor. Because at that time, people drank water that was not hygienic, water from a pond next to the road that had corpses and feces in it. There were a lot of corpses along the road creating a stench; no one had buried the bodies.

When they were eventually settled in rural villages, such urban dwellers, including both longtime urbanites and peasant refugees who had fled to the cities during the civil war, discovered that they were labeled "new people" (*brâcheachon tmey*), "1975 people," or members of "the April 17 group" (*puok dap brampir mesa*). The rural villagers who had resided in Khmer Rouge zones during the war, in turn, were called "old people" (*brâcheachon chas*) or "base people" (*brâcheachon moulâdthan*).

Both "new people" and "old people" found themselves living in a radically changed world. The Khmer Rouge initiated radical structural transformations, which were inspired, despite Khmer Rouge assertions about the uniqueness of their revolution, by Soviet, North Vietnamese, Thai communist, and, especially, Maoist models.¹⁷ As in these cases, the preexisting "exploitative" relations of production were fundamentally altered through collectivization and the creation of cooperatives (*sâbâkâr*), though more rapidly than ever before. The party's 1977 Four-Year Plan proclaimed that the regime had "achieved a socialist society straight away. The situation is completely different from other countries. . . . We are faster . . . we are four to ten years ahead of them. We have new relations of production; nothing is confused, as it is with them."¹⁸

Collectivization strongly undermined three key features of traditional peasant life: the family, whose members jointly engaged in economic production and consumption; the village, which was composed of friends

and relatives who shared a sense of identity and sometimes assisted one another; and Buddhism, which provided a social, moral, and educational locus for everyday life.¹⁹ In the new society, Buddhism was banned and the means and relations of production communalized. Cambodians soon were working and dining in collectives that provided the large labor pool needed to accomplish the key economic goal of the new regime: dramatically increasing rice production to yield enough food to “raise the standard of living of the people” and generate capital needed for imports, defense, and the development of industry.²⁰ The Khmer Rouge calculated that they could attain the requisite rice surpluses by increasing the average rice yield per hectare from one to three metric tons of paddy, a goal that was stressed in the Khmer Rouge refrain, “Three tons per hectare.”

To achieve this goal, the DK regime mobilized the entire population to increase production. Throughout the country, people were divided into work “forces” (*kâmlang*) based on sex and age.²¹ Mobile work teams (*kâng châlat*), consisting of young, unmarried teenagers and adults, engaged in strenuous labor (for example, digging dams and canals or clearing large swaths of land), often traveling great distances to work with thousands of other Cambodians on huge Khmer Rouge projects. Married adults also labored hard, but tended to reside in villages and work for their cooperative. The elderly and the very young, in turn, performed light tasks for the cooperative, though children were sometimes sent away to live together in camps. This division of labor often separated family members.

The work groups were sexually segregated and organized along military lines into “squads,” “platoons,” “companies,” “battalions,” and “regiments.” Such military metaphors were omnipresent in Khmer Rouge discourse. Just as an enemy would be defeated in battle, so too would the revolutionary spirit of the people “defeat” the problems facing the country and enable them to “become masters of the lands, the rice paddies, harvests, indeed, of the fruits of their labor.”²² Units (*kâng*) of workers from the cooperatives were sent to “launch offensives” (*veay sâmrok*), “struggle” (*brâyut*), and “fight heroically” (*tâsou*) on the economic “front lines” (*sâmârâphoum mukh*). As Haing Ngor explains:

“Struggle” was military talk, like “front lines.” It reflected the idea that the nation was still at war. On the front lines we didn’t just work, we “struggled,” or else “launched offensives.” We were to “struggle to cultivate rice fields vigorously,” “struggle to dig canals with great courage,” “struggle to clear the forest,” and even “struggle to solve the manure problem.” We

were to “launch an offensive to plant strategic crops,” and “launch an offensive to perform duty with revolutionary zeal.” . . . The goal of this struggling and launching of offensives was “victory,” or “mastery.” We were going to achieve “victory over the elements.” We would become “master of the rice paddies and fields and forests,” “master of the earth and water,” “master of the canals,” “master of the flood problem.”²³

Victory would be achieved when the people had mastered nature and achieved the “super great leap forward.” The Khmer Rouge did not hesitate to move large numbers of people to achieve this goal. In late 1975 and early 1978, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians — most of them “new people” — were relocated to underpopulated (and sometimes barely habitable) areas, particularly in the northeast and northwest, that allegedly had rich agricultural potential.

Despite its ambitious plans, the DK regime quickly ran into problems that derailed the revolution and ultimately fueled mass murder.²⁴ Although it made some gains, the regime failed to attain its economic objectives. To meet their large, inflexible production quotas, local cadres sometimes sent rice to Phnom Penh that should have been set aside for consumption. When the party leadership heard reports that people in the countryside were suffering, they decided that subversion was to blame. Thus a December 1976 political speech, thought to have been given by Pol Pot, stated that “hidden enemies seek to deprive the people of food, while following our orders to an extent. . . . They take our circular instructions and use them to mistreat the people and to deprive them, forcing them to work, whether they are sick or healthy.”²⁵

The existence of such “hidden enemies” confirmed the necessity of the political purges already underway. The DK regime decided to “purify” the general populace, targeting hundreds of thousands of “class enemies” for elimination. At the same time, “bad elements” within the ranks of the party had to be purged. Tens of thousands of cadres were eventually arrested and killed, many after being forced to “confess” their crimes at interrogation centers like Tuol Sleng. If many of these confessions referenced alleged economic sabotage and membership in traitorous networks, they also increasingly included mention of ties to Vietnam — particularly after 1976, when tensions between DK and Vietnam escalated, resulting in military clashes that culminated in Vietnam’s overthrow of the DK regime in early January 1979.

The ease of Vietnam’s victory was facilitated by the DK purges, which had resulted in the execution of many of the country’s best-trained cadres, already in short supply. In addition to losing experienced cadres,

the Khmer Rouge had trouble building the local infrastructure necessary to indoctrinate the masses. The DK regime explicitly recognized this “problem of cadres,” which prevented the party line from “being absorbed” by the people and thereby transformed into proper revolutionaries. As the December 1976 speech states, “The line must seep in everywhere until it is effective. When we solve this problem, we can solve any others that arise.”²⁶ The “problem of cadres” was evident at the frequent political meetings people had to attend, where local cadres, many of whom were uneducated and barely understood the party line, often spoke in an unconvincing manner, reciting a litany of clichéd slogans. Unable to inspire the populace, such cadres used fear and force to ensure compliance.

Not surprisingly, most Cambodians, including many “old people” and members of the Khmer Rouge, became increasingly dissatisfied with this repressive regime, which created a society characterized by unrelenting work, malnutrition, starvation, illness, familial rupture, the loss of Buddhism, a lack of rights, brutality, terror, and death. Chlat, a “new person” who returned to his home village in Prei Chhor district after the Khmer Rouge took power, described some of the difficulties he endured:

The mobile work force performed the really hard labor. They called us the “shock troops” and we often slept in the countryside. . . . My suffering greatly increased when I was working on the mobile work team. . . . For instance, when we were working at a dam site, we were required to carry four cubic meters of earth each day. Sometimes we could do it and other times we couldn’t. If you were short, the head of our mobile work group would have the others come and help us finish. It was really difficult. They would walk around inspecting to make sure that we had transported all four meters of earth. At mealtimes, a gong would sound and we’d go get a plate of food. Everyone had one spoon to eat with. . . . When I first joined the mobile work team, we were just given rice gruel. Sometimes things were better, sometimes they were worse. In my district, things got better during harvest season. We’d get a ladle of rice. But a little later the rice would become scarcer, and we’d just get rice gruel again. . . . In some places, people would receive as little as a half a [condensed-milk] can of rice gruel.

And there was so much sickness. No one had any strength and people became emaciated. . . . But at the hospitals, [the staff] didn’t know how to do anything. They just guessed at it. Sometimes they would just grind up some tree bark and mix it with something. When they had enough, they’d inject it into people. . . .

Once I came home to visit and found that my parents were ill. That night I had a dream that I had lost a tooth. I thought, “My parents are ill, surely one of them will die.” Before I left again, I whispered to my sister, quietly so that my father wouldn’t know and become frightened, “Elder

sister, please try really hard to care for mother and father or anyone else who becomes ill.” When I left, my mother felt very bad for me. She was standing there under a tree in front of the house watching me go. After I had traveled a kilometer, I turned back and she was still there watching me. She did that until I was out of eyesight. . . .

My mother was sick for three months. I went around pleading for medicine, telling them, “I’ll give you anything, even my arm, if you give me some medicine for my mother.” But I couldn’t get any. My mother eventually died after drinking a bit of water and then throwing it up. I was really angry [at the Khmer Rouge]. There was only one monk left in our village. He helped us perform some brief rites. The next day, Pol Pot’s plan to get rid of all monks was implemented, and the monk was disrobed. . . . Still, my mother was lucky that she died before the Khmer Rouge ordered my brother’s entire family to get into a truck and drove them off to be killed. If my mother had experienced this event, it would have surely driven her mad.

Given such suffering and privation, it is not surprising that, despite their traditional fears of the Vietnamese, few Cambodians opposed the Vietnamese army when it invaded Cambodia in late December 1978: most felt relief and joy when the DK regime fell in early January 1979.

Unfortunately, life has not been easy for Cambodians since that time. When the Vietnamese-backed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) took power in early 1979, it was confronted by a number of problems, including a severely damaged infrastructure, a flood of refugees fleeing to Thailand, and a possible famine.²⁷ Social services, including health care and education, were practically nonexistent, and much of Cambodia’s civil service had to be rebuilt from scratch. To its credit, the PRK regime moved quickly to address many of these problems, an impressive feat given the internal chaos and the international isolation the country faced because of its association with Vietnam. Buddhism reemerged, though in a limited form at first, and the economy was reorganized in a semisocialist manner, which was later abandoned. Meanwhile, the international community imposed an embargo on Cambodia, while assisting the Khmer Rouge and other groups that were waging civil war against the PRK. Despite its genocidal past, the Khmer Rouge was even given a share of Cambodia’s seat at the United Nations, while the PRK regime was excluded.

Formal and informal peace negotiations began in the mid 1980s, culminating in the 1991 Paris Agreement, which called for a United Nations–sponsored election in 1993.²⁸ By this time, the PRK regime, headed by Hun Sen, had renamed itself the State of Cambodia (SOC) and initiated a number of reforms to liberalize the economy, privatize prop-

erty, and make Buddhism the state religion. Despite pre-election political violence and intimidation and a threat that the Khmer Rouge, who were boycotting the election, might disrupt the polls, the 1993 elections were held in a relatively “free and fair” manner and elicited high voter turnout. Although the royalist party, FUNCINPEC, won the most seats in the National Assembly, it was forced by a threatened secession to accept a power-sharing agreement with the Cambodian’s People’s Party (CPP), the political arm of the SOC regime. A new constitution restored the monarchy and established the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), nominally headed by King Sihanouk, who “reigns but does not rule.” After roughly a quarter-century of armed conflict and five different governments, Cambodia was welcomed back into the international community, regaining its seat in the United Nations and worldwide legitimacy.

Problems remained, however.²⁹ While open-market policies enabled some people to become extremely wealthy, many more continued to live in poverty and suffer from a lack of adequate social services. Political tensions also persisted between FUNCINPEC and the CPP, whose leader, Second Prime Minister Hun Sen, wielded true power due to the CPP’s organizational base and disproportionate influence over the police, army, and judiciary. These tensions culminated in a July 5, 1997 coup in which FUNCINPEC and its leader, Prince Ranariddh, were routed. The international community once again intervened, and new elections were held the following year. With the opposition in disarray, Hun Sen’s CPP won the 1998 election and has held power since.

The year 1998 also marked the final demise of the Khmer Rouge. After boycotting the 1993 election and continuing to fight the new government, the Khmer Rouge leadership gradually lost support due to a RGC program that enticed Khmer Rouge soldiers tired of war to defect. The 1996 defection of a large faction of troops associated with Ieng Sary, Pol Pot’s brother-in-law and longtime comrade, left the Khmer Rouge with a much smaller force and diminished territorial holdings. When Pol Pot heard rumors that another longtime associate, Son Sen, might defect in June 1997, he ordered the execution of Son Sen, his wife, and a dozen other family members. His actions ignited an internal feud within the Khmer Rouge that ended with Pol Pot’s overthrow by his former general, Ta Mok.

Pol Pot became a captive of his own movement and a month later was convicted by a “People’s Tribunal” to life imprisonment (house confinement) as crowds of former followers shouted at him, “Crush! Crush! Crush! Pol Pot and his clique!” Pol Pot sat with his head bowed, “an anguished old man, frail eyes struggling to focus on no-one, watching his

life's vision crumble in utter, final defeat.”³⁰ When asked if he felt responsible for what had happened during DK, Pol Pot told journalist Nate Thayer, “My conscience is clear. Everything I have done and contributed is first for the nation and the people and the race of Cambodia. . . . I came to carry out the struggle, not to kill people. . . . Even now, and you can look at me: Am I a savage person?”³¹ Pol Pot died less than a year later without having taken responsibility or been held accountable for the death of more than 1.6 million Cambodians.

The Khmer Rouge movement came to an end at the close of 1998, when Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, two senior Khmer Rouge leaders, agreed to end their armed struggle and disbanded their troops. After thirty years, Cambodia finally had peace. In early 1999, Ta Mok and the former head of Tuol Sleng, Duch, were arrested. They have remained in prison since then, awaiting a decision on whether they and other senior Khmer Rouge leaders will be tried before a U.N.-sponsored criminal court, an eventuality that now looks likely with the signing of an agreement between the United Nations and Cambodia on June 6, 2003.

While Cambodia's recent history is filled with devastating moments, I was strongly affected by the testimonials people gave about DK. Many Cambodians spoke of this period with tears in their eyes; a few broke down in sobs, unable to continue. These stories, like so many I subsequently heard, have stayed with me, demanding explanation: How could this happen? Why did so many people suffer and die under the Khmer Rouge? What could motivate a person to participate in mass murder?

Such questions are particularly vexing in the Cambodian case, since much of the killing was perpetrated by ethnic Khmer against ethnic Khmer—thus the occasional characterization of the Khmer Rouge period as an “autogenocide.” While this label is problematic (it overlooks the fact that the Khmer Rouge also targeted ethnic minorities, including Muslim Chams, Vietnamese, and Chinese, and that ethnic Khmer were manufactured into different sorts of political beings), it does foreground a contrast with other cases, including the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, and the Rwandan genocide, where the killing more directly followed the lines of preexisting communal divisions that, while fluid and malleable, were more easily crystallized into rigid differentiations that could serve as a basis for mass murder in particular historical contexts. Thus, as I discuss in Chapter 5, while genocidal regimes usually make intensive efforts to manufacture difference, the Khmer Rouge leadership did so to an even greater degree, since the political and class differences it asserted were often quite difficult to discern on the local level.

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I returned to Cambodia for a year from 1994 to 1995 to conduct my doctoral fieldwork. While I had initially intended to live and work in a rural village, I quickly found that this would be difficult because of security concerns. Just before my arrival in Cambodia, a group of Khmer Rouge soldiers (the Khmer Rouge were still active in parts of Cambodia more than fifteen years after the end of DK) had seized three Western tourists, whom they would later execute. Shortly thereafter, Khmer Rouge radio announced that the group was putting a price on the head of people from several Western countries, including the United States. Because of this event and other safety problems, I decided to do a multi-site ethnography, residing in Kompong Cham city and conducting research there, in Phnom Penh, and in a nearby rural village, which I will call Banyan.

Much of my research was carried out in Banyan, which is located at the intersection of two small dirt roads roughly seven kilometers from Kompong Cham city. Several days a week, I would travel to the village by moped, a journey that took about twenty minutes. Banyan is moderately large, comprising over five hundred villagers (246 men and 268 women at the time of my census) living in ninety-five homes. Almost half of the villagers (250 people) were under the age of eighteen, a demographic that is not uncommon in Cambodia and that, along with the large number of female headed households, reflects the country's recent violent past.

Although the villagers primarily practice single-crop, wet rice farming, they supplement their income by growing sugarcane, potatoes, corn, peanuts, and various types of beans. Many also have small vegetable gardens and fruit groves. A small number of villagers earn extra cash in other ways, such as extracting sugar palm juice, selling cigarettes and snacks at a stall in front of their homes, or working in construction or as police. While a few Banyan villagers are destitute, most are able to eke out a living each year. In general, Banyan is slightly better off than more remote villages. A modest number of relatively large homes have wood and tile roofs, more than one room, and entrance steps made of concrete and wood (as opposed to the sugar palm thatch roofs, single-room dwellings, and spare wooden ladders of the poor). In Khmer fashion, the homes are raised on wooden piles set in concrete, with the homes of the wealthy typically larger and higher up. With a few exceptions, the homes line the two roads, which form a "T," and are surrounded by gardens and lush, green paddy fields sprinkled with sugar palms.