
Memory and Sovereignty in Post-1979 Cambodia: Choeung Ek and Local Genocide Memorials.¹

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Introduction

This chapter seeks to investigate the politics and symbolism of memorial sites in Cambodia that are dedicated to the victims of the Democratic Kampuchea or “Pol Pot” period of 1975-1979. These national and local-level memorials were built during the decade immediately following the 1979 toppling of Pol Pot, during which time the Cambodian state was known as the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). I will concentrate especially on the Choeung Ek Center for Genocide Crimes, located in the semi-rural outskirts of Phnom Penh. The chapter also examines local-level genocide memorials² found throughout Cambodia. These two types of memorial – the large, central, national-level memorial, and the smaller, local memorial – command significant popular attention in contemporary Cambodia. An analysis of these two memorial types offers insights into PRK national reconstruction and the contemporary place-based politics of memory around Cambodia’s traumatic past.

The Choeung Ek Center for Genocide Crimes

The Choeung Ek Center for Genocide Crimes,³ featuring the large Memorial *Stupa*, is located fifteen kilometers southwest of Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital. The site lies just outside of the urban fringe in Dang Kao district, but falls within the jurisdiction of the municipal authority of Phnom Penh. The Choeung Ek site, originally a Chinese graveyard, operated from 1977 to the end of 1978 as a killing site and burial ground for thousands of victims of Pol Pot’s purges (Chandler 1999: 139-140). Most of those killed and buried in mass graves at Choeung Ek were transported to the site from the secret “S-21” Khmer Rouge prison facility in inner-city Phnom Penh. The S-21 site now houses the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes, also an important national memorial site.

Phnom Penh's "liberation" from Khmer Rouge rule came on January 7, 1979, by virtue of the advance of the army of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and assisting anti-Khmer Rouge Cambodian forces. Close to a year after liberation the killing field at Choeung Ek was discovered. As it became clear to Khmer and Vietnamese investigators that Choeung Ek was a major site of the recent mass violence perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, the work of further physical examination and documentation of the site was initiated.⁴

Choeung Ek During the PRK Period

Mass exhumations took place at Choeung Ek in 1980, with 89 mass graves disinterred out of the estimated 129 graves in the vicinity. A total of 8,985 individual skeletons were reportedly removed. With assistance from Vietnamese forensic specialists, the skeletal remains were treated with chemical preservative and placed in a long, open-walled wooden memorial-pavilion. After the initial work of exhumation, further preservation of the Choeung Ek site was not proposed until the mid-1980s. A new memorial, further chemical treatment of the remains, new fencing and an additional brick building for exhibition purposes were all suggested at this time (*Instructions to construct buildings*, Tuol Sleng archives document). Large-scale construction work on the site did not commence until early 1988, when Ministerial and municipal authorities set about implementing the formulated changes to the site. The skeletal remains housed in the original wooden memorial were relocated to a sealed glass display case within the large new concrete Memorial *Stupa*. A number of large signboards, giving information about the Choeung Ek site and its victims, were also added at this time.

"A Center for Typical Evidences"⁵

The most distinctive feature of the Choeung Ek Memorial *Stupa* is the prominent display of exhumed human remains. The role designated to the exhumed human remains is as quantifiable evidence of the crimes of Democratic Kampuchea. That Choeung Ek serves to illustrate "typical evidences" of mass political violence is explicit in the official English-language visitor brochure and signboard information on-site. The necessity of holding on to human traces as evidence is echoed in the sentiments expressed by key

individuals in contemporary Cambodia when speaking of the Choeung Ek Center, the local memorials and the Tuol Sleng Museum. The Vietnamese General, Mai Lam, under whose curatorship both the Tuol Sleng Museum and Choeung Ek Memorial *Stupa* were developed, has spoken of the preservation of human remains as being “very important for the Cambodian people – it’s the proof” (Mai Lam quoted in Ledgerwood 1997: 89). These multiple declarations demand further attention.

Given that the Democratic Kampuchea period significantly affected all sectors of Cambodian society, there seems little need to have prioritized such evidence for a population who had had proof enough; that is, for survivors who had themselves been materially and psychologically affected. The education of the next generation of Khmer is a common rationale given in official communiqués and public orations in favor of the preservation of evidence in the post-1979 era. This preservation-for-education practice sees remains, objects and sites – “primary” artifacts – as capable of instructing and unifying the society around knowledge of what has come before. Topographically, by maintaining a mass of human remains in the physical memorials, deaths considered valueless under Pol Pot are reclaimed as artifacts to be “known” by the nation. What is “remembered” via the Memorial’s display is a fundamental political principle of the Khmer Rouge: that all life in Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea was considered by the Khmer Rouge authorities as potentially traitorous to the regime. Following this, that the loss of such life was no loss because such life was valueless. Such life, following philosopher Giorgio Agamben, is designated as distinct from and external to political life, and constitutes “bare life”. According to Agamben, “bare life” is the life of *homo sacer* or sacred man, an obscure figure of archaic Roman law, whose essential function remains central to the structure of modern politics. *Homo sacer* is he who is excluded from the locale of the *polis*. *Homo sacer* is he who is excluded from the locale of the *polis*. *Homo sacer* is he who “may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (Agamben, 1998: 8). One slogan of the Khmer Rouge precisely conveys this supreme political principle: “spare them, no profit; remove them, no loss.”⁶ Many of the Cambodians killed by the Khmer Rouge suffered this designation; considered “bare life” they were those who could be killed but not sacrificed.⁷ This is one of the most important conditions under which Cambodian memorials have been constructed.

The displays of physical horrors of Pol Pot's rule also served to justify Vietnam's military intervention into Cambodia in 1978 and 1979. At the Tuol Sleng Museum and the Choeung Ek Center, the extreme actions of the "Pol Pot clique" – the purges, the border attacks on Vietnam – are presented as reasons for Vietnam's decision to wage war against, and ultimately invade, Democratic Kampuchea. As anthropologist Judy Ledgerwood argues in the context of the Tuol Sleng Museum, for Khmer "the metanarrative of the PRK state, of criminals committing genocide ousted by patriotic revolutionaries, framed and provided an explanation for seemingly incomprehensible events" (Ledgerwood 1997: 93). The presentation of physical evidence in the service of such a metanarrative also evokes a *legal* functioning of evidence; evidence of a *genocide* (universally-defined) necessarily motions to universal (international) laws.

As Gary Klintworth observes, Vietnam has made ambiguous claims as to the "humanitarian" purposes of its invasion of Cambodia. This is, he notes, a result of the "uncertainty of that concept in international law." Yet, as Klintworth (1989: 11) further notes, Hanoi has always alluded to its humanitarian purpose by referring to "the extremely barbarous policy of Pol Pot."⁸ Thus, the evidence of the mass violence perpetrated in Democratic Kampuchea made public by the PRK government after 1979 "morally justified" Vietnam's invasion (Klintworth 1989: 11, Keyes 1994: 59, see also Ledgerwood 1997: 87-94). In this light, for the PRK government, "the initial illegality of its formation may be offset by the fact that it was preceded by a regime that engaged in gross violations of basic human rights" (Klintworth 1989: 96). International law and United Nations provisions for territorial sovereignty, human rights, and the indictment of former state leaders for crimes against humanity are now, undeniably, considerations of domestic political activity worldwide. This is true even in cases where such provisions are dismissed, enacted unevenly, or used to freight additional geopolitical claims. The physical evidence of mass political violence can testify, under international humanitarian law, especially in cases where few witnesses can be found – or found willing – to speak of past crimes. Evidence of trauma and its international exposure was integral to post-1979 Cambodia because legitimacy was to bring humanitarian and economic aid to the country.

The forensic activities at Choeung Ek conformed to this political imperative. Human remains as “typical evidences” were retained and displayed in order that they might petition international legal, economic and humanitarian groupings. Human remains as evidence, enshrined in national and local-level memorials, also lent legitimacy to Vietnam’s invasion, reminding Cambodians that this action was warranted by the brutality of Pol Pot’s genocidal regime.

Symbolism of the Choeung Ek Memorial *Stupa*

A *stupa* is a sacred structure that contains the remains of the deceased – especially those of greatly revered individuals – in Buddhist cultures. The construction of *stupa* is a significant activity that produces merit for the living and encourages the remembrance of the dead. The particular context of the construction of the Choeung Ek Memorial *Stupa* in 1988 was one of a revival in political interest in Khmer Buddhism.

In the domestic political context that followed the ousting of Pol Pot in 1979, moral condemnation of the Khmer Rouge “provided the PRK government with only a negative legitimacy... [and being] unable and probably unwilling to reclaim the monarchical tradition as part of its own legacy... [the PRK government] had, therefore, to find institutions other than the monarchy through which to bolster its legitimacy” (Keyes 1994: 60).

Thus, in the early-1980s, limited political support was given to the re-ordination of monks and the rebuilding of *wat*, and representative posts on high-level government Councils were set aside for religious figures (see Keyes 1994 and Harris 1999). Although such reinstatements of religious authority and spaces for worship were widely welcomed, the problems faced by people everywhere in terms of cultural life and religious connections were close to insurmountable. For many it was impossible to know if or where loved ones had perished. Moreover, performing adequate ceremonies for the dead was difficult because so many senior monks had been lost under the Khmer Rouge. Nevertheless, among the first religious rituals and observances to re-appear spontaneously after 1979 were commemorations for the dead. In some places these ceremonies were performed by non-ordained individuals who shaved their heads and wore white (Harris 1999: 66). Up until the late 1980s, however, the government circumscribed the role that religion could play in Khmer life in favor of a consolidation of a centralized political authority (Keyes 1994: 43).

Changes in the PRK government's policy towards religion at the end of the 1980s encouraged the flourishing of Buddhism at many levels of life. Charles F. Keyes (1994: 62) dates this change of political will to 1988, the year that construction of the new Memorial *Stupa* commenced at Choeung Ek. Keyes suggests the transformation of the state-religion nexus at this time was precipitated by the imminent withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia, PRK meetings with Sihanouk (in 1987 and 1988), and a subsequent in principle agreement to the creation of a government that would include the PRK, Sihanouk and republicanists (the "Khmer Right"). With the possibility that it would be contesting general elections with these groups in the near future, the government sought broader popular appeal by becoming — as had kings in the past — conspicuous patrons of Buddhism (Keyes 1994: 62).

In the months prior to 1988, architect Lim Ourk was employed to design a new Memorial *stupa* for Choeung Ek. He drew three possible designs for the site, inspired by the sublime architectural forms of the Royal Palace of Cambodia in Phnom Penh (Lim Ourk, pers. comm. 2000). His three designs varied in height, roof structure and degree of carved detailing. The tallest, most decorative "*stupa*" design was chosen by the municipal committee. According to Lim Ourk, the final decision of the committee members was made with the local people of the Choeung Ek area in mind, considered to be rural folk with traditional tastes.⁹

The Choeung Ek Memorial (although officially and popularly termed a *stupa*) is an inescapably postmodern monument. Although it draws on a number of traditional religious architectural forms, these forms are transformed under a thoroughly late-twentieth century dilemma: how to memorialize a genocide. The total monument is an assemblage of multiple cultural forms, and is disturbing to both Cambodians and non-Cambodians, if in different ways.

The Choeung Ek Memorial *Stupa* draws on the architecture of Buddhist temple pavilions. The temple pavilion contains sacred objects; for example, an urn containing cremated remains or Buddhist texts (Matics 1992: 43). Pavilion features include redented walls, four projecting porches with tall doorways which lead into a square central area, and roof tiers ascending to the roof superstructure. The superstructure of the Choeung Ek *Stupa* is especially reminiscent of the pavilions of the Cambodian Royal Palace.¹⁰ Because the Royal Palace remains a preeminent space of scriptural learning and governance, the architectural reference to these forms designates Choeung Ek as a place of

Buddhist and Khmer cultural significance and political power. Five stages in the middle section of the uppermost roof portion of Choeung Ek symbolize the five rings of subsidiary mountains around Meru, the sacred mountain of Buddhist cosmology. In accordance with this cosmological composition, the central pillar which emerges from the Memorial's roof is the *axis mundi*, the "world mountain" or "pivot of the universe" evident in the earliest *stupa* structures (Fisher 1993: 31). The monument's fine uppermost spire is ringed with two sets of seven discs which may be abstracted lotus forms or umbrellas – the "honorific and auspicious emblems" associated with monks and royalty in Buddhist cultures (Fisher 1993: 31). Elongated "sky-tassels" on the roof gables ward off unsavory spirits that fall from the sky, while giant *naga* snakes of ancient Khmer mythology guard the lower four corners of the roof structure. The pale stone of the lower half of the monument is also highly symbolic, white being representative of death, decay and impermanence in Khmer Buddhism.

Despite the presence of these traditional symbols within the Memorial, the lower half of the Choeung Ek memorial quite obviously breaks with the form of the temple pavilion and *stupa*. The vestibule at the center of the Memorial is a tall rectangular glass prism. This part of the monument presents a very different architectural story. Traditionally, the sacred pavilion and *stupa* contains the *cremated* remains of a single person.¹¹ This individual, usually someone of high social status (such as a senior monk), is someone who is known to the community engaged in building the *stupa*. The placement of cremated remains in an urn or relic chamber usually concludes a lengthy funerary practice of significant, ritually mediated contact with the body of the deceased. In the traditional *stupa*, the relic chamber encloses the cremated remains. The Choeung Ek Memorial is an exception to all these principles. Most controversially, it contains the uncremated remains of many individuals. The memorial has also been designed to disclose the remains interred inside, exposing them to public view. The center of the Choeung Ek structure is a glass exhibition cabinet inside which hundreds of skulls have been neatly shelved.

Also salient to the Choeung Ek Memorial is the Khmer Buddhist differentiation between types of deaths.¹² Death caused by violence or an unexpected accident is a highly inauspicious death. Cremation is most urgent such a case, and very different funerary protocols must be followed as compared to, for example, death from old age. In cases of violent or accidental death it is

widely believed that the spirit of the deceased remains in the place of death as a spirit or ghost, instead of moving on to the realm of re-birth (see Keyes 1980: 14-15). Ghosts may harm the living by causing great sickness and misfortune. In light of this belief, many Cambodians consider Choeung Ek a highly dangerous place and refuse to visit the Memorial. In addition, to have the uncremated remains *on display* is considered by some to be a great offence, and tantamount to a second violence being done to the victims.

The PRK government's memorial initiatives may be compared to those of its political allies at the time: the Soviet Union, the eastern European states, Vietnam itself and Laos. One especially fruitful avenue of comparison is that of the PRK with the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). Grant Evans (1998) provides a detailed analysis of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) engagements with Lao Buddhism in the era following the country's 1975 revolution. LPDR national monuments and commemoration events, like the PRK memorial initiatives, sought political legitimacy and involved a "reorganization of the ritual calendar" (Evans 1998: 41). In 1977, a large "*stupa* to the unknown soldier" was built in front of the That Luang (Grand *Stupa*) in Vietiane to honor the revolution's war dead (Evans 1998, 16). Smaller *stupa* to the unknown soldier were constructed in provincial capitals across the LPDR. Evans recalls Benedict Anderson's argument: that only modern states construct tombs to the Unknown Soldier because "nationalism is more properly assimilated to religion than political ideologies because most of the deepest symbols of nations are symbols of death" (Anderson 1991 quoted in Evans 1998: 120). The major divergence between the Lao and Cambodian cases is that Cambodia's Choeung Ek *Stupa* is consecrated not to soldiers but to victims of a genocide, which, as I noted above, cannot properly be understood as constituted by *sacrificial* deaths.

So while the Choeung Ek Memorial *Stupa* seeks religious restitution and a permanence of memory that recalls the traditional role of the Buddhist pavilion or *stupa*, it also contradicts that role. It discloses a state of incorrect religious practice — the maintenance of uncremated, multiple and anonymous human remains. This tension is openly recognised by architect Lim Ourk, who wants the uncremated remains to directly convey to visitors the horror of Cambodians' experiences under Pol Pot. The memorial does not attempt to symbolically redeem the dead, as in other memorial traditions. It instead preserves the injustice and impropriety of the victims' deaths in its architectural form.

The occasion of the official inauguration of the Choeung Ek Memorial *Stupa* reflected the tenor of religious freedom that characterised the later years of the PRK period. Senior PRK government officials addressed an audience of invited monks, lay Cambodians and foreign guests. Food and other offerings were made to the monks and the assembled crowd made a counter-clockwise circumambulation of the Memorial.¹³ The involvement of a number of foreign guests in the ceremony anticipated, consciously or unconsciously, future international tourism to the site. The act of making offerings to the monks at the Choeung Ek inauguration mirrored the activities of *phchum ben*, the Khmer Buddhist festival for the ancestors. The relationship between *phchum ben* and genocide memorials is discussed further.

Local-level Memorials

Initiation of Local Memorials

Scores of local-level memorials throughout Cambodia mark sites of former Khmer Rouge prisons and mass graves. Municipal, district or village authorities built the majority of these memorials in the early 1980s. Their construction was promulgated by the central government, specifically the Ministry of Information and Culture under the then Minister, His Excellency Chheng Phon. Exhumations of burial sites had been carried out in the years following January 1979 under the direction of an official government Genocide Research Committee into the Khmer Rouge crimes.¹⁴ Local communities also exhumed some mass graves. A small number of graves were reportedly exhumed in search of valuables buried with the victims, while others were exhumed and victims' remains then reburied elsewhere, possibly following cremation.¹⁵ However, even if there had been political and popular will for a formal policy of exhuming all known mass grave sites, the widespread privations of the early 1980s made this impossible. A significant part of the country remained engaged in warfare or was extensively mined, and labour available for such undertakings elsewhere was scarce.

A Ministry of Information and Culture memo, dated October 5, 1983, directs municipal and provincial officers to inspect local genocide sites, prepare statistical data on the sites, create a "file of evidence" on genocidal crimes committed in the area and to report this information to the Ministry. The officers are also instructed to widely encourage local people to "carry onward

their vengeance” about the “crimes and suffering” by preparing “memorial sites” to “the victims of the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary regime.” According to the two-page memo, at least one memorial was to be completed in each province or municipality prior to the fifth anniversary of National Liberation Day on January 7, 1984. In addition, the memorial site was to become the focus for the “Day of Anger” (*Tivea Chang Kamheng*) commemoration of May 20, 1984. Nine days later, another memo from the Ministry of Information and Culture to all provincial and municipal People’s Revolutionary Committees reiterated that the construction of memorials to the victims of the genocidal regime was “an important historical matter of national and international political note” (Ministry of Information and Culture memo, October 14, 1983). It is likely that the impetus for the official program of memorial building stemmed from a Report of the Genocide Research Committee of the National Front for the Salvation and Construction of Kampuchea (hereafter “the Front”). The Research Committee’s Report was tabled on July 25 1983, and discussions of the report ensued during the August 1983 session of the National Assembly. Chheng Phon signed both the October 5 and October 14 memos. These two documents confirm the intention of the government to memorialize genocide sites throughout the nation.

Construction of Local Memorials

Local memorials provided a public space for remains of victims and a location where religious rites could be performed (though not cremation).¹⁶ The building of local memorials, predominantly in the form of *stupa*, fused pre-existent religious practice with official concern for the maintenance of evidence of crimes against the populace. Though the use of uncremated human remains in local memorials is likely to have been controversial in local communities, no resistance to the memorials is noted in the official documentation of the time. Undoubtedly, Buddhist rites associated with death occurred in the post-1979 period quite apart from the deliberate memorial activities of state.¹⁷ However significant uniformity in the age, form and commemorative function of some eighty memorials across Cambodia’s fifteen provinces suggests that Ministerial directives were carefully followed through.

Local memorials stand in places where victims were buried, incarcerated or executed. Almost without exception, local memorials contain (or once contained) human remains. Remains were taken from graves in the local area, were uncremated, and are visible inside the memorial structure, as at Choeung Ek. As the Khmer Rouge often used temple buildings and compounds for imprisonment and mass burial, memorials consistently occur inside or near to *wat*. Memorials may also be located within temples because of the auspicious nature of temple grounds. While official memos suggest that secular groups (local authorities and People's Revolutionary Committees) were responsible for the construction of memorials, their maintenance often remains the concern of religious figures and collectives.¹⁸

Commemorations

Tivea Chang Kamheng — May 20 Day of Anger

During the PRK and State of Cambodia (1989-1991) periods, *tivea chang kamheng* (the “Day of Anger”) was a well-organised national holiday marked by significant ceremonies in Phnom Penh and provincial centers throughout the country. These ceremonies acknowledged the hundreds of thousands of deaths attributable to the ‘Pol Potists.’ The Day of Anger held on May 20, is not tied to seasonal or lunar cycles, as is the case for other major Cambodian observances: *kathen*; *phchum ben*; the Water Festival and the Royal Ploughing Ceremony. Like the contemporary observances of National Liberation Day, Constitution Day, Paris Agreements Day and Human Rights Day, the Day of Anger is linked to the Gregorian calendar as an important modern political event. After Cambodia’s warring political factions signed the Paris Agreements in 1991, the Cambodian government no longer formally promoted *tivea chang kamheng*.

The May 20 commemorations were coordinated by the Front, in cooperation with various Ministries and provincial and district authorities. Factories, schools, hospitals and other enterprises were instructed to make banners and posters condemning the crimes committed by the Pol Pot regime. These banners and placards were carried to the public meetings and other events of the Day, which commonly revolved around the local memorials (*Instructions to organise May 20, 1990*). Ceremonies involved wreath laying, song, prayer, ritual

offerings to the dead, poetry and speeches by local officials (*Report from Stung district, Kampong Thom May 20, 1989* and *Day of Anger, May 20 1991, Stung Treng*). Survivors of Democratic Kampuchea were asked to come forward at the ceremony to testify to crimes known to them, and to speak of their personal losses. Local officials also made speeches at the ceremonies and rallied the assembled groups to unify their individual emotions and share in their vigilance against the return of the Khmer Rouge. Emphasis was given to the strong feelings and actions that arose from acts of recollection, rather than on memories themselves, as is evident in the following transcript:

Beloved comrades and friends ...those who died are reminding us to be vigilant, to strengthen our solidarity and practice revolutionary activities. We must be on the alert against the cruelties and poisonous tricks of the enemy, even though they try to hide themselves in multiple images (*Speech of Comrade Chea Sim, May 20 1986*).

The participation of individuals in local commemorations was thus represented as integral to the reconstruction of a larger revolutionary state.

Tivea Chang Kamheng also provided an opportunity to promote the notion of solidarity between Vietnam and Cambodia. The relationship between the two states was sometimes expressed at May 20 meetings as a direct statement of thanks to Vietnamese soldiers and the Vietnamese people. Such a statement occurred at the 1986 ceremony when Chea Sim, President of the National Assembly, paid homage to “Vietnamese of three generations,” soldiers who had been “sacrificed in our territory and for the sake of our people.” He continued by conveying his “respect and gratitude to the Vietnamese mothers and sisters who have sacrificed their children, grandchildren and husbands to fulfill a glorious international obligation in our country” (*Speech of Comrade Chea Sim, May 20 1986*). As these sentiments suggest, the May 20 commemorations also concentrated public attention on bilateral and international state affairs. In the same speech, Chea Sim spoke of the “foolish, dark tricks” of the regrouped Khmer Rouge within the tripartite government (the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea – CGDK)¹⁹ waging war from the western border. And it was not only the large Phnom Penh ceremonies that turned to geopolitical debate. Matters of international solidarity were reportedly raised at a district-level ceremony of a few thousand people at Tuol Phlorng Memorial in Stung district, Kampong Thom province on May 20, 1989 (*Report from Stung district, Kampong Thom*). Cambodian intellectuals meeting in a run-up conference to the May 20 commemoration of 1988 used the

occasion to launch a petition to the United Nations and the World Peace Council. The petition

...called on these organisations and the world public to take measures against the universally condemned criminals Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan and their associates and denounces the dark schemes of certain countries and forces for giving material support and moral assistance to the genocidal Pol Pot clique in its attempt to return to Kampuchea to massacre the Kampuchean people and undermine the national revival (SPK [State Press Agency], May 18 1988: 3).

In 1990, a communiqué of the Front reiterated that the Day of Anger must “make people realise the current crimes committed by the Pol Pot clique, and be dedicated to the prevention of the return of the regime.” The May 20 1990 commemoration also reportedly petitioned “the international tribunal in the Hague and religious figures the world over” to concern themselves with the State of Cambodia (*Instructions to organise May 20, 1990*).

Initiated within a decade of Vietnamese military and administrative presence in Cambodia, the Day of Anger served to publicly affirm the relationship between the PRK and Vietnam.²⁰ The central aim of the commemoration was to activate memories of the genocide, precisely to invigorate popular support for the war against the Khmer Rouge perpetrators still threatening the nation. In this sense, it is inadequate to term the Day of Anger a day of memorialisation. The Day of Anger marked a traumatic period that was not strictly past, or certainly had not been neutralised. This sense of suspended historicity continues to figure in the more recent commemorations, as it continues that no person has ever publicly appeared before a Cambodian court to be tried for the crimes of Democratic Kampuchea.²¹ This long-standing situation underscores the current debate around a trial of former Khmer Rouge leaders with international assistance. It is this situation that has also increased domestic and international interest in the “remembering” that May 20 ceremonies have again staged in recent years. In 1999, 2000 and 2001, May 20 ceremonies at Choeng Ek, promoted by the Phnom Penh municipality have again drawn large crowds to the Choeng Ek Memorial. The 1999 May 20 event at Choeng Ek is examined further below.

Phchum ben — Festival of the Ancestors

For many Cambodians today, remembering and grieving for family and friends lost under Democratic Kampuchea centers on the Khmer Buddhist “festival of the ancestors” – *phchum ben*. This ancient commemoration takes place at the local *wat* of villages and cities throughout Cambodia. *Phchum ben* is a fifteen day period during which offerings are made to the spirits of ancestors. The festival begins on the first day of the waning moon during the period of *photrobat* (September-October) (Kalab 1994: 67). During daily prayer at the temples over the festival period:

...the monks chant the *parabhava sutta* (the sixth sutta of the sutta nipata),²² [which is] also chanted daily on radio during these fifteen days. On the last day people bring enormous quantities of Cambodian cakes wrapped in banana leaves to the temple, and most families [have] *bangsolkaul* performed for their ancestors. *Bangsolkaul* is a ceremony in which four monks recite texts while connected by a white cord to an urn containing ashes of ancestors. In this way, merit is transferred to the departed (Kalab 1994: 68).

Monks receive food, drink and other offerings as intermediaries between the living and the spirits of the dead. Spirits are believed to search for offerings from family throughout the *phchum ben* period, and most families visit seven *wat* over the festival period to ensure the goodwill of their hungry and restless ancestors.

Phchum ben is also observed at Choeung Ek in the contemporary period, despite the fact that the site is not a *wat*. In the early years after Choeung Ek was discovered, people living locally in the district visited the killing field at Khmer New Year and *phchum ben*. One explanation for the popularity of Choeung Ek as a site for *phchum ben* is the significant and chaotic dispersion of populations throughout Democratic Kampuchea. The post-1979 period has undoubtedly witnessed the emergence of a new social geography of *phchum ben*. The true resting places of many remain unknown to their families. Survivors may be embracing the Choeung Ek Memorial *Stupa* as a proxy location for the passing of merit to the spirits of their deceased or missing relatives. In this way, Choeung Ek allows for the performance of rites for spirits who lack a proper place of death.²³

Contemporary States Memory and Present-Day Choeung Ek

In 1999, during a period of intense diplomatic pressure and speculation about a trial of former Khmer Rouge leaders, the May 20 Day of Anger was again observed at Choeung Ek. Banners at the event read: 'Remember forever the criminal acts of the genocidal Pol Pot regime' and 'Long live the Cambodian People's Party.' A crowd of around one thousand people watched as monks performed religious rites and government officials made speeches. The ceremony was covered by international mass media; reports of the gathering appeared, for example, in the *New York Times* and on the Australian television news bulletins. The commemoration made public the Cambodian government's performed *remembering* of the genocide.²⁴ The ceremony undoubtedly set out to counter accusations that the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and Prime Minister Hun Sen lacked commitment to the proposed tribunal. During the ceremony, Phnom Penh Deputy Governor Chea Sophara spoke directly to the victims whose remains are interned at Choeung Ek:

I am here today to inform all of you who died that, owing to the win-win policy of the Prime Minister Hun Sen, all Khmer people have reconciled and united. The Khmer people are now at peace, and the Kingdom of Cambodia has become a full member of ASEAN (Chea Sim quoted in Seth Mydans 1999).

The ruling party – pushing for stability in the face of potentially divisive international trial negotiations – understands precisely the challenge “to attend not only to the needs of the living, but also to those of the dead [in Cambodia]” (Keyes 1994: 68). Choeung Ek's dead, Chea Sophara indicates, are still unable to escape concerns of liberation by an external force. In 1999, however, it was not an incoming army, but the economic “liberation” granted by Cambodia's recent ASEAN membership, that was to comfort the spirits.

Almost a year later, on March 19, 2000, a UN delegation involved in negotiating international assistance for the proposed Khmer Rouge trial paid Choeung Ek a visit. UN Undersecretary General for Legal Affairs and Head of Delegation, Hans Corell, laid a wreath of yellow flowers on the steps of the Memorial. On the wreath was printed (in English) “Mr Hans Corell, Head of The United Nations Delegation, in Memory.” The journalists accompanying Corell attempted to draw him further on the question of memory: in of whom or what? They reminded Corell that the UN had failed to stem the economic and political assistance given to the Khmer Rouge by various states and

international groups throughout the 1980s. Corell deflected this criticism of the past actions of the UN by invoking the issue of *personal* responsibility: “We can, of course, all ask ourselves where we were when all this happened,” was his somewhat amnesiac response. For the purpose of public visits such as Corell’s, Choeung Ek is a place that focuses attention on *universal humanitarian concerns*. Simultaneously, and seemingly paradoxically, the site is also taken to symbolize an “uncivilized” and essentially Cambodian horror. It is this doubled (mis)representation that at once exoticizes and universalizes the memorial sites and Cambodia’s past. This (mis)representation of Cambodia’s memorial sites (and Cambodia generally) is rehearsed ad nauseum in media reports, films and documentaries, and tourism literatures both within Cambodia and beyond.

Changes to the Local-level Memorials

Many local memorials have been rebuilt since the early 1980s. Local communities have provided the impetus, labor and funding for such projects. Other memorial reconstructions have enjoyed explicit party-political support. One such new memorial is found near Lake Bati, at Trapeang Sva in Kandal province, a few hours drive south of Phnom Penh. Before 1999 this memorial was made up of a large collection of human remains shelved inside a derelict building (a former teacher’s college used as a prison by the Khmer Rouge). The new memorial is a small, pale blue concrete *stupa* located nearby. The new *stupa* houses part of the collection of remains taken from the previous memorial. Near the new *stupa* is a large rectangular concrete signboard listing, in Khmer, the names of donors and also gives the inauguration date of the memorial (July 2, 1999). According to the signboard, funding for the new *stupa* came from the local temples, the CPP of Kandal province and a number of individual donors, including prominent CPP political and military leaders and their wives.

The memorials are also supported by the local people who believe that the sites should be maintained for the education of others and out of respect to the dead. Individual merit making is a motivating factor. Tourism, both domestic and international, has also had an effect on the upkeep of some local memorials. Some communities gain donations from visitors to local memorials and are thereby able to upgrade these memorials. A small *stupa* on the outskirts of Siem Reap (just off the main road to the Angkor temples), was also repaired

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in 1999, and is flanked by a concrete signboard in English. The signboard informs visitors that the *stupa* honors the innocent victims of “the savage Pol Pot regime” whose remains are held in the memorial. A collection box nearby allows the tourists who visit the site to leave a donation.

Other local memorials built during the early 1980s have not been rebuilt. In most cases, exposure to natural elements has resulted in the deterioration of the built structure and the physical remains contained within. Roaming cattle often cause additional disturbance to the memorials. The economic and labor costs of maintaining these sites are often too great for poorer communities. In other places, local memorials displaying human remains may have been unpopular ventures from the outset; considered unhelpful or offensive, they have been left largely unattended. More recently, Hun Sen publicly addressed the issue of victims’ remains.

At a public rally in Kampong Chhnang, on April 25, 2001, Hun Sen indicated his willingness to hold a national referendum to decide whether or not the remains in Cambodia’s memorials should be cremated. The Prime Minister stated that such a referendum should occur after any trial of former Khmer Rouge, given that the remains were evidence of Khmer Rouge crimes. The return to a discourse of evidence directly echoes the original arguments made by the PRK government almost two decades prior in proposing the memorials. Hun Sen’s comments indicate the CPP’s ongoing valuation of the memorials as means to the consolidation of political loyalty for the party of “liberation.”

In concluding this discussion of changes to local-level memorials, it is necessary to consider another belief-system of Cambodia – that of the *neak ta*. In Khmer cosmology, powerful *neak ta* or guardian spirits reside in the landscape.²⁵ The *neak ta*

is the most omnipresent figure of the divinities which populate the supernatural world of the Cambodian countryside ...the *neak ta* is not just a kind of simple spirit but rather a phenomenon or energy force relating to a specific group such as a village community (Ang Choulean 2000).

Ang Choulean notes that shrines or “huts” to the *neak ta* are designated by small collections of natural and human-made objects. The objects represent land (soil, nature) and spirit (mythic ancestor, being) elements. There is great variation in the size and type of objects assembled by local people at a *neak ta* place. At these sites, Ang Choulean notes, the deterioration of objects within the overall morphology of the site is quite acceptable. For example, wooden

carvings may rot, or anthropomorphic stone may weather out of shape, or animals may disturb the auspicious collection. Such changes only serve to confirm the fecund presence of the *neak ta*. Where local-level memorials are also *neak ta* sites it is possible that understanding and practice proper to *neak ta* worship has been transferred to the memorials. In light of this, it is insufficient to assume that the physical deterioration of a genocide memorial indicates that the local population pay no attention, or attribute no importance, to the site.²⁶

Conclusion

While there are definite plans to further curate the national Choeung Ek Center, the future of local-level genocide memorials is less certain. Cambodia's genocide memorials are products of contestations between multiple actors, meanings and values, including Cambodian party-politics, Khmer Buddhist beliefs about death, and local and internationalised discourses of justice, education and memory. To understand these contestations is to apprehend the dynamic, controversial, and political nature of these memorials.

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Endnotes

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and assistance of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), Phnom Penh, and Professor Helen Jarvis, University of New South Wales, Australia, in the course of my research on various sites and practices of memory in contemporary Cambodia. An earlier version of this chapter was given as a paper at the 18th Annual Conference on Southeast Asian Studies, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, February 16-17, 2001. I give thanks to the organisers and participants of this conference for their comments – and I am especially indebted to Professor David Chandler who read and commented on the paper in his role as Discussant for the conference panel “Looking Back at the Khmer Rouge.”

² Some eighty local memorials have been visited and mapped by DC-Cam in cooperation with the University of New South Wales (Australia) and the Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University, see <http://www.gmat.unsw.edu.au/researchsect.html>

³ The site is also often referred to as the “Choeung Ek killing field”.

⁴ *Genocidal Center at Choeung Ek*, a visitor pamphlet published in 1989 by municipal and Ministerial authorities.

⁵ Quotation from the preface piece to *Genocidal Center at Choeung Ek*.

⁶ Ben Kiernan makes note of this slogan (1996: 4) and reports two additional sources that testify to its usage by Khmer Rouge cadre.

⁷ In contrast, a nation’s war-dead are routinely understood as having been sacrificed. When this understanding is transposed to the building of monuments, a single soldier’s anonymous remains are often called upon to stand in for the larger number of lives sacrificed. See further discussion below around the “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier”.

⁸ Klintworth elsewhere notes: “Vietnam’s foremost justification for its attack on Kampuchea was self defence” and shows “self-defence” as enshrined in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.

⁹ However the local people of Choeung Ek area were not directly consulted as to the choice of Memorial design.

¹⁰ The Royal Palace, commenced in the late nineteenth century, is strongly representative of the Rattankosin (or “Bangkok”) style, which was the predominant architectural style of Thailand at the time. This Thai style, and preceding architectural forms in Thailand, nonetheless involves considerable Khmer engineering and artisan expertise dating from the Siamese sacking of Angkor in 1431 (Broman 1998: 53).

¹² In special circumstances, relics of the Buddha may also be interred within *stupa* structures. These important *stupa* often become important sites of pilgrimage.

¹² As articulated by Charles F. Keyes and Phra Khru Anusaranasasanakiarti in their detailed article on Buddhist funerary practice in Theravada Buddhist Northern Thailand published in 1980.

¹³ Counter-clockwise circumambulation is found in Theravada Buddhist funerary custom: “When a funerary procession reaches the cemetery, it makes a three fold circumambulation around the pyre. During this circumambulation, the living keep their left side (the inauspicious side) towards the pyre, but the body, carried around head first, has its right side nearer the pyre” (Sanguan, 1969 quoted in Keyes and Anusaranasasanakiarti 1980: 12).

¹⁴ The Genocide Research Committee, made up of government figures and cultural scholars, traveled to provincial areas of the country to inspect sites of Khmer Rouge violence. The Genocide Research Committee reported its findings to the PRK political organ known as the National Front for the Salvation and Construction of Kampuchea.

¹⁵ These observations are based on statements given by local informants interviewed by DC-Cam staff and recorded in the DC-Cam mapping project database of genocide sites. On Khmer Rouge disturbance of exhumed remains see, for example, entries for sites: 010602 [Wat Sopheak Mongkul, Banteay Meanchey], 020801 [Wat Po Laingka, Battambang]. On exhumations for valuables see entries for sites: 060802 [Vityealei Reaksmei Sophorn, Kampong Thom] and 050204 [Wat Amphe Phnom, Kompong Speu] and 200501 [Thlork, Sviev Rieng]. Remains were reported as having been taken from the memorial

site 080701 [Wat Roka Koang], while reports of reburial were given at 031003 [Kra Ngaok, Kampong Cham], 040301 [Wat Khsam, Kampong Chhnang] and 170903 [Wat Khsach, Siem Reap]. Replanting of mass grave areas as orchards has occurred at: 030301 [Wat Skun, Kampong Cham], 030703 [Wat O Trakuon, Kampong Cham] and 060802 [Vityealei Reaksmei Sophorn, Kampong Thom].

¹⁶ In some places exhumation was a socio-economic imperative, given the demands on agricultural land to meet serious food shortages in many provinces in the immediate post-Democratic Kampuchea period.

¹⁷ As well as religious festivals, pre-existing Buddhist and “animist” beliefs about death, re-birth and haunted places have provided continuity with the time before the Khmer Rouge in post-1979 Cambodian society. See discussion of *neak ta* (guardian spirit) beliefs below.

¹⁸ This observation is made in light of the extensive interviewing of DC-Cam and my own site visits to six local-level memorials in Kandal, Kampong Speu, Sihanoukville and Siem Reap provinces.

¹⁹ The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea was formed in 1982 comprised of the remnant Khmer Rouge forces, Khmer royalists (under Sihanouk) and Khmer republican factions. The CGDK forces, supported by the United States, People’s Republic of China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), continued to fight the PRK from the Thai border up until the Paris Agreements of 1991.

²⁰ It is important to note, however, that the May 20 commemoration also provided, over many years and in diverse settings, a public, legitimate and sympathetic context in which Cambodians could express their grief.

²¹ This is not to negate the efforts of a 1979 trial *in absentia* of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, conducted by a People’s Revolutionary Tribunal in Phnom Penh with assistance by various international legal figures drawn from sympathetic socialist states. It is notable that the guilty findings of the trial went unrecognized outside of Cambodia.

²² The sixth sutta of the sutta nipata outlines the Buddha’s teachings on the causes of a person’s downfall, effectively prescribing ways of life by which a person may avoid his or her downfall.

²³ Evans (1998) drawing a comparison between the Northern Thai Buddhist context explicated by Keyes (1987) and Laos, concurs with the view that the common practice of merit transference could be understood as a type of ancestor worship. He also notes that this is most apparent during the Lao festival of the dead, where offerings with the name of a dead person are given to the monks (Evans 1998: 28-29).

²⁴ My interview sources indicate that the Day continued to be observed in Phnom Penh by CPP officials, within CPP offices throughout the provincial areas and at city compounds. Reports of May 20 commemorations continuing annually to the present day are not uncommon at the local memorial sites. The Cambodian People's Party has dominated Cambodian politics since it came to power (then known as the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea – PRPK) as the government of the new state of the PRK in 1979.

²⁵ *Neak ta* are generally understood to belong to an “outside realm” because their power is not constrained by the moral injunctions of the Buddha; they are traditionally associated with forested areas (*prei*) as opposed to the realm under a king (*srok*) (Keyes 1994, 44).

²⁶ Further research is necessary to substantiate this hypothesis. However, the new memorial at Trapeang Sva is an example of a local genocide memorial sharing ground with a *neak ta* site. The presence of the *neak ta* is marked by shrine under a low, gnarled tree a few meters from the new *stupa*.