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Political Psychology, Identity Politics, and Social Reconciliation in Post-Genocidal Cambodia

By: Shireen Ebrahim, UC Berkeley

ABSTRACT

Various factors besides culture and religion assist in defining the identity of a community. In the case of Cambodia, the tragic genocide of the Khmer Rouge and its aftermath forged a Cambodian identity suffering from severe psychological trauma. The lack of essential reconciliation and rehabilitation efforts by the government has played a role in the transgenerational passage of the trauma and needs to be addressed for the stable progression of Cambodian society.

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HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Cambodia's name has become synonymous with a country still coping with the horrific aftermath of the Khmer Rouge reign from 1975 to 1979 that tragically brought about the death of approximately two million Cambodians. Their death, brought on through either famine or work, translated into major structural and economic challenges. However, the gravest challenge faced by society remains the question of identity and mental health of Cambodians. The Khmer Rouge genocide and the feeble response of Hun Sen's regime left a lasting psychological imprint on the cultural identity of Cambodians that lived through the atrocities, and continues to do so indirectly in the lives of the younger generations. Only through acknowledgement of the national truth about Cambodia's history and proper pursuit of social reconciliation efforts will Cambodians be more likely to gain closure and reshape their identity.

The cultural identity of Cambodians has been a central question since Cambodia's independence from France in 1955, in the first regime of Norodom Sihanouk. In defining the nation, Sihanouk named ethnic Khmer reverence- a deep sense of respect and nationalism- and Buddhism as the fundamental attributes of Cambodians. Through the selective categorization of Cambodian identity, other ethnic and minority groups were excluded and left with an uncertain status in society. Despite the dominant ethnic Khmer community,

Sihanouk's identity requirements marginalized and caused tension among the other minority religious and ethnic groups (Zook, 2014b). Following the seizure of power, the Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot and the other high-ranking leaders known as "brothers," implemented a new form of regime that incorporated racial and cultural purity beliefs with extreme Marxism and Maoism. Having first formed as a rural-based armed resistance under Norodom and then Lon Nol, the Khmer Rouge quickly began a quest to purify and return Cambodia back to the imagined glory days that had been lost through Western influence. Under Khmer Rouge ideology, the new "pure" Khmer civilization had to empty out of their so-called artificial cities and move into the rural heartlands. The leaders believed that the rural heartlands held the key to the foundation of the powerful agrarian based empire of the past. Individuals categorized as "new people" – based on their occupations, western connections, or higher classes – were forced to work in farmlands, tortured as prisoners, or outright killed (Zook, 2014b). The tactical division of the population favored the chosen "old people" as a way of gaining support and recruiting the poor and young commoners frustrated with the struggles of class inequality.

IMPACTS ON THE PEOPLE

The biggest source of anger among the poor communities was the disrespectful manner in which rich individuals looked down upon them. This shameful treatment would cause a recipient to lose face, which was and continues to be an integral part of Cambodian social hierarchy (Procknow 2014). Alexander Hinton of Rutgers University notes from his research "while many Cambodians are usually able to manage their anger so that disputes do not break out, they do not always simply forget about a manner." Though he observed that the notion isn't applicable to all, he did acknowledge that Cambodians can hold a grudge after several small anger-provoking instances and will not forget the shame. In the interest of elevating their own status and gaining respect, they must exact revenge through a much more disproportionate act than the initial offense in order to completely destroy their enemy (Hinton 1998). In order to fulfill moral obligation, be perceived as "higher than," and to ensure an ultimate end to the conflict, these retaliatory acts can result in the killing of the individual or even the entire family lineage. This "Cambodian cultural model of disproportionate revenge (*karsangsoek*) contributed to the genocidal violence that occurred during the time of Democratic Kampuchea (DK)" (Hinton 1998, 353). He further deduced that "the Khmer Rouge ideology took the resentment stemming from all these sources and gave it a common focus (class struggle) and target (the urban population)" thus laying the groundwork for the emerging violence (Hinton 1998, 362).

On the other hand, the "old people" such as farmers, were viewed favorably, thus relieving some of the smaller ethnic groups in remote regions of Cambodia of the terrors. The Khmer Rouge saw them as "core people" who had no contact with Western habits and thus caused them to live collectively (Mam 2008). The minority ethnic groups that were less directly targeted during the genocide became a source of resentment by the Khmer community following the collapse of DK. Many Khmer individuals despised and mistreated ethnic groups such as the Phnong people, author and activist Somaly Mam's group. In her book, she details how the Khmer viewed "Phnong as barbarians who are uncontrollably

violent-some even say we are cannibals” (Mam 2008). Writing about the Khmer’s perception of Phnong people as inferiors demonstrates the animosity still felt today in identity politics between those who were categorized and celebrated as “Cambodian” during Sihanouk and Pol Pot’s regimes.

Aside from the collective cultural identity established by DK through the new and old people, the Khmer Rouge instilled a new form of ideology that has shaped the character of Cambodians. The results of this ideology was in part due to the forced methods employed by the Khmer Rouge leaders but also indirectly through the tactics taken up by the people in coping with the atrocities of the time. This ideology was one of self-perseverance and self-assertive attitudes that represented a new feature of Cambodian life (Downie 2001). The threat of witch-hunt like accusations of foreign connections spawned paranoid and made people fear for their lives, while trust was lost among even the closest communities, neighbors, and families. Pot’s idea was for everyone, especially the poor and the young, to do everything on their own and be able to form a self-sustaining society without any foreign influence. Downie outlines how traditionally, Buddhism constituted the moral and ethical system of Cambodia and was extremely important for the preservation of the Khmer nation and culture. However following the abolishment of Buddhism by the DK, there was a complete destruction of trust, human dignity, and perhaps moral values. This “survive or die” culture of the Khmer Rouge broke down social and family norms, making people less likely to help one another when they were no longer bound by the former system of obligations. Buddhist notions of the pursuit of happiness and truth were completely demolished with the angst and promotion of a selfish society.

This self-reliant culture of Cambodians is a consistent theme in Mam’s book but is especially highlighted with Khmer families and their children. Self-reliant culture is understood as a key factor in the massive trafficking industry of Cambodia as friends and parents themselves are often responsible for trafficking of children (Zook, 2014a). Mothers and family members are willing to sell their children or wives to brothels in order to sustain themselves financially. The cultural mentality is described by Mam as one in which women are seen as servants and only know shame in regards to their bodies. Rape and violence against women is accepted, and is common not only among the poorest but even the richest Cambodians (Mam 2008). With no public forum for support and reconciliation, police and public officials are able to carry on with the self-serving ideals with the assistance of bribes ceasing any efforts in curtailing sex and labor trafficking.

LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

Trafficking, poverty, and lack of proper infrastructure are only some of the ramifications of the DK and the political upheavals of Cambodia’s history. The death of the two million individuals not only left physical and structural scars but even more crucially, deep psychological trauma that continues to haunt Cambodia’s society. Those who survived the killing fields and forced labor often dealt with various issues such as death, torture, or assault of a close family member or a friend. The loss of income, housing, and personal possessions by individuals all contributed to the feeling of a lost identity and thus hold psychological roots in prominent issues such as trafficking. Psychological disorders such as

anxiety, depression, PTSD, and thoughts of suicide are substantially high in the older generations of Cambodians. McLaughlin reveals “studies have found probable PTSD rates ranging from 14.2% to 33.4% among Khmer Rouge survivors” and psychologically scarring trauma that has a role in high substance and alcohol abuse as well as domestic and sexual violence. Survivor interviewees have cited the huge socio-economic problem of poverty, as both a cause and a consequence of poor mental health (McLaughlin 2014). Besides the obvious problem of psychological effects on individuals, those traumatized also become marginalized and alienated in society.

Despite all of the correlations of mental health between identity and socio-economics influencing Cambodian society, psychiatric and mental health services in Cambodia remain extremely limited. “It is estimated that only 0.02% of the entire Cambodian health budget goes towards mental health” (McLaughlin 2014). Although the United Nations enacted a few mental health programs, they were short-term and failed to establish a lasting presence. Political and societal circumstances provide the foundation for the essentially non-existent Cambodian mental health provisions. Lack of large-scale data fails to provide the substantive support for policy makers in order to promote mental health services a top priority in their agenda; with the lack of adequate resources, extant mental health services are overwhelmed and unable to meet the needs of the population. The field of mental health had not even emerged onto the public scene until a few short years ago, a consequence of the tragic killings of almost all Cambodia psychiatrists during the reign of the Khmer Rouge. In the past few years, the Cambodian government has finally recognized and labeled the issue of mental health as one of its main targets for the future, yet the deficiencies in governmental programs, services, and funding have demonstrated otherwise.

While the absence of governmental institutions and programs has formed political roadblocks for the rehabilitation of Cambodians, cultural norms and belief systems also have significant influence. These societal norms can be seen within the cultural mindset of Cambodians, in which many do not recognize mental health issues as serious or in need of attention. Taboo notions in regard to psychiatric hospitals, mental health illnesses, and their causes still prevail in society; the stigma of being labeled “crazy” hinders many individuals from seeking assistance in fear of losing face in their communities. The Khmer Rouge legacy of self-preservation becomes evident once again in the form of self-censorship and unwillingness to disclose information to others. Cambodians alive during the genocide do not want to dredge up the past as it provokes too many painful memories. A collective silence has come to define the character of the Cambodian community that did not share their stories with the younger generations. Those born after the genocide lack virtually any knowledge on their past and the societal and parental emphasis on silence has been further reinforced with Hun Sen’s regime.

There are however a small number of families and individuals who do wish to discuss their trauma and receive support, but lack the necessary knowledge on the resources available to them. Not knowing the types of treatments available, many can get overwhelmed and instead choose to return to their traditional sources such as healers, monks, and nuns. This can be a cause of concern as healers and monks are often not properly trained and equipped to deal with mental disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Recently, there has been a surge of studies advising integration of traditional and religious actors into

the mental health discipline and discussion; they suggest that combining Western treatment and Eastern cultural beliefs can ensure better results and confidence for patients (McLaughlin 2014). Only having Western medications and methods of coping with mental illnesses will not necessarily resonate with Cambodians who have not shared the same history or cultural background as Westerners. The Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) is an excellent example of an organization that has incorporated Buddhist ceremonies, in which families testify about the deaths of their loved ones before monks in a pagoda, into their trauma counseling and self-help programs.

TPO has also been successful in implementing educational programs for children and communities to bring about a form of public discourse concerning their historical legacy (Bartu 2014). Having been a member of the Khmer Rouge himself, Hun Sen's regime focused on burying the past rather than taking part in public reconciliation. Through the cultural norms, children are not encouraged to engage in conflict resolution dialogue. In her memoir *First they Killed My Father*, Loung Ung writes "they do not ask me about my experiences. In our culture, it is enough that the older sibling relates the family's story. Children are not asked for opinion, feelings, or what they individually endure." Although they may not know it, children of genocide survivors also feel the toll of their parent's trauma as often symptoms of PTSD are passed down to them. Specialists believe that the trauma of Khmer Rouge impacted the parenting style of survivors and transmitted symptoms such as aggression and impulsiveness to future generations. Experts argue that "elevated rates of PTSD among the general Cambodian population, which may reflect a wider transmission of Khmer Rouge-associated trauma" (McLaughlin 2014). The intergenerational transmission of trauma will most likely continue if not attended to, for it has become ingrained in the Cambodian cultural fabric.

DIASPORA

The experience of trauma and PTSD is not limited only to Cambodians living in Cambodia today. During the reign of Khmer Rouge and the unrest between the transitional periods, approximately 400,000 Cambodians fled to refugee camps in Thailand and Vietnam or traveled to the United States. Although the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees was successful in returning refugees to Cambodia through incentive programs and packages, refugees still experience their own distinct form of trauma from the difficulties faced at the refugee camps. Thailand was especially hostile towards refugees that they labeled "illegal immigrants" (Zook, 2014b). Internally other challenges persisted especially for women; rape and violent assaults towards women and girls were frequent. With the end of the Democratic Kampuchea, Khmer Rouge members also fled to refugee camps and lived alongside families that had escaped from there. These emotional tolls were heavy on the families who took in resentment by Cambodians upon their return back home. Substance abuse and domestic violence as well as examples of attachment theory are powerful actors for many refugees, including refugees even in the United States.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE CAMBODIAN POLICIES

With the risks of trauma being so high, the Cambodian government must not only establish better mental health provisions but also provide a better foundation for national reconciliation and social rehabilitation. Reconciliation is defined as “process that allows a society to move from a divided past to a shared future; means by which former enemies can find a way to live side by side without necessarily liking or forgiving each other, and without forgetting the past” (Hazan 2009). By rebuilding a new cultural identity together, Cambodians would be able to create hope for the future by acknowledging the pains and communal victimization of the Cambodians. Communitization, the act of sharing traumatic experiences along with a period of mourning over losses, is a major part of the healing process that was not established by the government. Without these steps, there will be a lack of trust and security that is essential in the further development of the nation. NGOs and civil society have difficulty advancing their roles in society without the existence of trust as a community (Downie 2014). These cultural conditions influence political development and thus must become a top priority for the central government.

Educational reform like those of the TPO has been one aspect of civil society that requires vast amounts of resources, publicity, and funding. During the Khmer Rouge, teachers had been targeted and imprisoned as new people. However even with Hun Sen’s regime, the only mentions of the genocide were linked to political propaganda and didn’t present correct facts and information. It was only a few years ago that Cambodian textbooks finally even began to offer an unbiased portrayal and discussion of the genocide to students (Ngo 2014). Understanding history and its main players is essential for the younger population in order to veer towards a more democratic future and to avoid past mistakes. The government would be able to foster social reconciliation for students and their families by acknowledging the suffering of survivors and promoting new moral values and societal bonds in educational system. Of the generations born after the genocide, 80% have poor or very little knowledge of the Khmer Rouge (UCBHRC 2009). Through a willingness and devotion to education about the genocide as a political decision, there have been small steps taken towards remembering rather forgetting.

In a major nationwide survey conducted by the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center, 80% of the dominantly Khmer respondents considered themselves to be victims of the Khmer Rouge and an overwhelming 90% stated that members of the Khmer Rouge should be held accountable for the crimes they committed. Yet through the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), only one person has been sentenced to prison after 30 years of crimes committed by KR leaders. Many of the upper leaders did not stand trial while those standing trial were initially granted pardons (UCBHRC 2009). This form of criminal justice has not been able to render a true sense of resolve and closure especially with the Cambodian notion of revenge and remembering. Many Cambodians today live side by side with former Khmer Rouge members and tensions run high over the desire to take vengeance. Therefore informal truth commissions as suggested by Bartu, will be able to provide the proper setting and groundwork for dialogue between the DK former combatants and victims themselves.

The politics of Cambodia’s cultural identity has suffered much turmoil with the various regime changes and conflicts over the course of its history. These radical shifts have

had profound impacts on Cambodia's society, culture, political processes, and administrative structures. First through the Democratic Kampuchea regime and then with the secretive and limited comprehensive policies of the communist state of Hun Sen, the destruction of human dignity and psychological trauma still dominates Cambodia. By focusing the nation on social rehabilitation programs and the public acknowledgement of a shared past, Cambodians will be closer in achieving a more peaceful state of mind and stable society.

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