Promoting Genocide Education and Reconciliation through Oral History: the Case of Cham Muslim Youth in Cambodia[1]

FARINA SO[2]

In March 2007,[3] the Cham Muslim Oral History project of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) invited one hundred Cham youth from across the country to participate in an educational program consisting of visits to several genocide commemoration sites and the courtroom of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia for the Prosecution of Crimes Committed during the Period of Democratic Kampuchea (ECCC). The majority of these students were university students. During the event, surveys were conducted to assess their views on the Khmer Rouge regime and related issues such as genocide prevention and methods of achieving reconciliation in Cambodia.

At the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center (also known as the Choeung Ek Killing Fields), students saw the visual reminders of the atrocities committed under the Democratic Kampuchea government. These included thousands of prisoner photographs, images of mass graves, stained jail cells, and torture devices.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is located on the very place that was the microcosm of the terror, brutality, and paranoia that characterized Democratic Kampuchea. Formerly a high school in the 1960s, the Tuol Sleng site was turned into the highest level security prison by Khmer Rouge leaders in 1975. An estimated 16,000 prisoners entered the prison where they were forced to confess their "crimes" and ultimately executed in a nearby field. The nearby field was known as *Choeung Ek*, or crow's feet. The Choeung Ek field is now a memorial for the executed prisoners. A tall white monument was built near the entrance; incense sticks are supplied at the foot of the monument for visitors to burn as they say prayers for the souls of victims.

At the genocide museum and genocide memorial, Oral History project staffs conducted surveys and interviews with the students. The project team leader also announced the holding of an essay contest. In an effort to connect Cham youth to their parents, students were asked to interview a parent about their experiences during the genocide and write about it in an essay. In the essay, students should also include their own views on the Khmer Rouge regime. Sincerity, creativity, along with practical criteria

of style and language were used to select the top ten essays.

After the Genocide

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, many survivors lost family members. Traumatized, demoralized, and left to grieve for a loved one, some had feelings of revenge. Over time and under the guidance of the Qur'an, these feelings dissipated. Although the Qur'an does allow for retribution, forgiveness is preferred because it would constitute a blessing by Allah.

Some Cham families decided to leave Cambodia as a result of the political instability and dire economic conditions that enveloped the nation after the genocide ended in 1979. Such families have migrated to Malaysia, France, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan.[4] As for those families which remained in Cambodia, some returned to live in their home villages prior to the genocide while others relocated to other villages. El Yakin's father obtained a high government post in Takeo and was even promoted to be governor of Takeo province. His father decided to resign from his post however and returned to Kilometer 7 in Phnom Penh to reunite with his family. El's father reasoned that after everything that he had been through, reunion with family and harmony were the most important things in life.

The matter of legal prosecution of atrocities committed under the Khmer Rouge is currently underway at the ECCC. A handful of former Khmer Rouge leaders have been arrested and detained in detention facilities located behind the six-hundred-seat ECCC courtroom. They are charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity, but none have been clearly charged with crimes of genocide. Some scholars and lawyers (outside the ECCC) have made a case of genocide in regards to the Cham population, which constitute not only a distinct ethnic group but also religious group.

DC-Cam interviews with hundreds of survivors reveal that the Khmer Rouge did specifically target members of ethnic minorities for abusive treatment and execution. Muktar Rohany, a university student, wrote that Toloars Tikah's family and many other Cham families in Kampong Cham province were killed based on ethnic grounds. Toloars Tikah said, "the Khmer Rouge just wanted to eliminate Cham Muslims, even though we are innocent. I was one among my family who escaped the killings because I hid my identity. I was then relocated to another place."

Under the overall policy of prohibition of religion during Democratic Kampuchea period, following the five pillars of Islam could result in punishment or execution for Chams. Muhammad Aly recalls his punishment for praying. Born in Kampong Cham province, Aly continued praying during the installment of the new regime in 1975 until one day a Khmer Rouge cadre saw him and warned him to stop. The Khmer Rouge then "reeducated" him by making him transport large amounts of earth. Afterward, they told him that if he was caught praying again, he would be executed.

The general policy of separating members of family into work units (such as the children's mobile unit or the women's mobile unit) was also devastating for Chams because traditionally, they live collectively in Cham communities. Many Chams were also forced to eat pork and other non-*halal* (unlawful) foods. Many mosques, like pagodas, were turned into stables, reeducation camps, and storage. In Toloars Faisha's essay, she writes "…the Khmer Rouge built communal halls and turned mosques into pig pens or a storage space for grains and other foods; they even stored *prahok* (a fermented fish dish) in former places of worship.[5]

Cham children were deprived of religious teachings during those four years; religious teachings that were considered fundamental to their spiritual growth. Instead, many were indoctrinated with Khmer Rouge ideology which emphasized collective agricultural egalitarianism and self-reliance. In the first ever textbook on

the Khmer Rouge regime, author Dy Khamboly describes what children were taught at that time:

> In Democratic Kampuchea, there were no formal schools. Instead children were sent to study under trees or people's houses. While children were taught their ABCs, most of their education was devoted to political instruction. Young children were routinely taken from their homes and made to attend indoctrination sessions so they could serve as soldiers, bodyguards, or messengers.[6]

After the fall of the Democratic Kampuchea, many villages were abandoned including Koh Phal village which were essentially uninhabited.[7] Haji Muftar, *imam khet* of Kampong Cham province claims that six villages in Kampong Siem district, Kampong Cham province were abandoned after the Khmer Rouge collapsed and that most of the villagers were killed or had died during the regime.[8]

Despite the enormity of all these challenges, Chams have worked hard to reincorporate religious and traditional customs back into their communities after the genocide. Over three hundred mosques have been built across Cambodia since the fall of the Democratic Kampuchea government and plans are currently underway for the construction of more mosques.[9] Also the number of people who go for the *hajj* increased year by year, and in year 2008, there were over three hundred Cham Muslims who made a pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina, in Saudi Arabia.[10]

Higher education and Cham youth

In 1992, the university enrollment rate for Chams was quite low; only a dozen were enrolled at the University of Medicine and Economics according to H.E. Dr. H.J. Sos Mousine.[11] In 1999, the figure increased to approximately two hundred as a result of scholarships given by H.E. Ahmad Yahya,[12] a member of Cambodia's National Assembly. In 2001 however, funding for these scholarships was cut off leaving many students without the financial resources to continue their education after the second year of college. Consequently, some students dropped out of school. Those that were able to financially sustain themselves graduated and received their degrees. For all the students, including those who were unable to continue after the cessation of funding, the opportunity to attend college initiated a dialogue between parents and children about the importance of education.

The Cambodian Islamic Youth Association, a non-governmental organization (NGO), has also been a driving force in the promotion of education by providing scholarships for English courses at the high school and college levels. In 2005, the NGO received financial support through joint efforts between donors such as the U.S. Embassy, World Education, Australians, UNAIDs, and educational institutions such as Phnom Penh International University, Australian Cultural Centre, and the International Computer School (ICS). This collaboration has helped two hundred fifty students to attend college and fifty-seven to attend short-term college programs by early 2008. Currently, there are hundreds of Cham youth who are enrolled in college, some of which are from the countryside.[13]

Scholarships have also been available for Cham youth to study abroad in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Netherlands, the United States, and in Arab states. There are hundreds students pursuing a bachelor's degree in Indonesia under the Islamic Development Bank Foundation. With support from the Almanar Foundation and other Islamic organizations, hundreds of students are obtaining professional training or a bachelor's degree in business in Malaysia.[14]

While there appears to be a rise in the number of Cham youths enrolled in college, the greater majority of them do not enjoy this privilege. One significant factor is poverty, a problem that their Khmer counterparts also face. Another factor relates to constraints in

their family situation. Some Cham girls in the sixth or seventh grade drop out of school under pressure from their parents to either pursue Islamic education or find a job to help support the family. [15] Although the aforementioned organizations work hard to alleviate these and other social and financial constraints, the problem of access to higher education still looms large in the Cham community.

Summary of Essay Contest

Forty seven essays were submitted in the writing contest, twenty-six from female students and twenty-one from male students. The top ten essays were selected according to the following criteria: (1) style and language, (2) coherence of ideas and viewpoints on the Khmer Rouge, (3) creativity and thoughtfulness, and (4) grammar and spelling. In April 2008, the writers of the winning essays were given a special award in a small ceremony. All essays were published in DC-Cam's magazine *Searching for the Truth*.

The stories presented in the essays contain many parallels. The students wrote about large-scale evacuations and relocations, difficult working conditions, constant fear, scarcity of food, struggles to practice Islam, strains on family relationships, and executions. Beyond the experiences of their parents, many students also wrote about their ideas of what constituted justice for the crimes of the Khmer Rouge and how genocide could be prevented in the future.

Soth Naseath[16] had a difficult time getting his mother to speak about her life during the genocide. After several attempts to get his mother to talk, she began to cry. As her tears flowed, she slowly started to describe her experiences to her son. Soth wrote,

> In the end, I was able to encourage my mother to tell me in her own words what happened. Tears kept falling down her face and I greatly pitied her. I was also quite frustrated because I could not comprehend her enormous degree of pain. In the end, she agreed to disclose her past because she believed that teaching her children about the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge was important.

Soth's mom was arrested and put in jail during that period. Her "crime" was escaping to the other side of a river in an attempt to find food because she was starving. She was caught and immediately taken to prison without questioning. In prison, she was handcuffed and was only given watery rice soup two times per day. She was also forced to do a variety of physically exhausting labor that she deemed unbearable. According to Son's mom, dead bodies were transported out of the prison everyday. She believed that her turn would soon come. Several months later, however, she was released from prison after the village chief testified that she was innocent.

Von Navy[17] wrote an essay titled, "My Parents are also Victims." In her essay, she describes the dramatic death of her older sister. In the final minutes of her life, Von's older sister lay in her mother's arms and whispered, "Mother, I am very hungry." Starvation was a constant theme in many of the essays.

For Cham youth, information about the genocide comes from various sources including teachers, parents, neighbors, and scholarly-oriented magazines. The information coming from some of these sources may be limited in scope and therefore many youth will look to other sources to verify one source and/or to obtain a more complete understanding of what happened. In general however, much of their information about Democratic Kampuchea come from parents, relatives, and neighbors because they are not formally taught in schools and few relevant reading materials are available. One dominant way in which they learn about the genocide is during mealtime. Parents often tell their children how little they had to eat under the Khmer Rouge, that they starved, and that many people died of starvation. As a result the children learn much about difficult life conditions, but hardly anything about the political, economic, or military issues relevant

to that era (something that many parents know little about themselves).

Math Tahir, a young NGO volunteer based in Kampot province, wanted more information on Democratic Kampuchea. He has not only visited the mosque located in another village, but often contacts DC-Cam for Khmer Rouge related publications. Math explains that, "When you listen to survivor's stories for the first time, it seems fictional or like a folktale, but when you learn more about what happened from other people and other sources, you realize that what they are telling you is the truth."

On genocide prevention, the Cham students came up with several methods. One rather simple, but significant suggestion was remembrance - keeping alive the history of what took place by educating all Cambodians about what happened and creating spaces for remembrance. They believed that if the genocide was preserved in both people's memory and historical records, this would prevent it from happening again. Having solid morals and respect for others were also mentioned in the essays. Others suggested that there should be more exhibitions about the Khmer Rouge regime so that information about this era would be more accessible to the public. Lastly, some stressed that tolerance and forgiveness were necessary and should be practiced in the family, so that they could radiate outward in society.

The essays also spoke about the concepts of justice and reconciliation. Some defined justice as honesty and impartiality while others related it to equality before the law. Once justice was achieved, according to some, the journey towards reconciliation could begin. Others thought that once apologies were offered, forgiveness would follow, reconciliation between victim and perpetrator would occur. One female student wrote however, "It is hard to forget horrible experiences when you have experienced them directly yourself." The student's father lost his entire family in the genocide. Today her father lives in the same village where the man who killed his brother lives; her father does not have peace. The student believes that only time and Islamic teachings will help to mitigate his anger and suffering. She writes,

> He has never told us about this person, but I know that he is suffering inside. I hope that time and the happiness in our family will help to relieve his pain. Perhaps it is better if this person comes forward and confesses in front of my father because Islam teaches us to forgive those who admit their guilt. As for me, if I knew that person I might be angry with him at first, but later things would become normal again because the event took place so long ago and I certainly wouldn't want to continue living a miserable life.

Cham youth, like many people in Cambodia, receive news of the ECCC through the radio, newspapers, television, and select magazines which feature articles about the tribunal. Overall, Cham youth seem to support the hybrid nature of the tribunal, remarking that having the involvement of the United Nations will help to ensure that justice is properly attained. The process of justice is not one that courts partake alone however; Cham youth believe that it is also important for Cambodians to learn about the history of Democratic Kampuchea, attend the trial proceedings, and if possible come forward as witnesses. During a meeting at the ECCC courtroom last year, many of them asked tribunal officials about the structure, cases, and processes of the ECCC.

Oral History in a human rights context

Oral history can function in many fields and serve many purposes. It can be used in journalism, literature, business, anthropology, sociology, art history, and human rights. In the field of human rights, it can be a tool for documenting atrocities.[18] For example, truth commissions often times use the oral history approach in truth seeking. Victims are given the opportunity to tell their stories; they are given voices. Once these stories are collected, an investigation can

follow and possibly the adjudication of human rights violations cases.

Oral history gives voice to those whose voice is little heard and empowers people to record their personal experiences. According to Oral History Society,[19] oral history enables people who have been hidden from history to be heard, and for those interested in their past to record personal experiences and those of their families and communities.

The stories people tell can be a mixture of facts and opinions that are expressed in their own terms. Some people are not able to remember all aspects of an event, especially with the passing of time, and thus their stories may be fragmented or illogical. This does not negate their stories however, for each survivor has his or her own truth which is real to them. As more stories are documented, collective experience and collective memories are created. Oral historian, Valerie Raleigh Yow, agrees on the power of oral history. She commented in her book[20] that, "although there is no research that helps us to make quick and definitive [stance] on accuracy of memory that can be used as evidence, there are criteria, however, that can enable us to evaluate oral history evidence."

The writing competition reveals the importance of the oral history approach in two main ways: education and relationship-building. As students listen to their parents telling them about the atrocious conditions under the Khmer Rouge regime, they not only learn about the experiences of their parents, but they are also gaining a better understanding of their parents. Some of the students commented that writing down their parent's experiences was an important exercise for them because it gave them a greater appreciation of the difficulties of that era and a greater appreciation of their parents as well. One student from Kampong Thom province said, "Prior to the writing contest, my parents had told me very little about what they experienced. Afterward, I realized how incredible their experiences were." Through negotiation and dialogue between parent and child, a learning environment is created in the home. Oral history becomes the vehicle which helps to connect the survivor generation with today's youth; a connection that is needed in Cambodian society today.

Conclusion

One challenge of moving forward in a nation traumatized by violent conflict and massive human rights atrocities is the treatment of the past. The past cannot be forgotten in the buried memories of survivors and undisclosed documents. All members in the new society must work together to share, preserve, and understand the past, no matter how tragic it may be. Oral history is one way in which the past can be treated in a manner which is conducive to healing the country. By having Cham youth ask their parents to speak about their everyday experiences during Democratic Kampuchea, they not only gain knowledge about that era but also about where their parents are coming from. As the parents share their stories with their children, the bond between parent and child deepens. Some parents have commented that they are happy in knowing that their children are interested in their stories. Others even say that they feel a sense of relief and letting go of sorts, as they narrate their stories to their children.

While I promote the use of oral history in the context of informal genocide education, other approaches can be employed as well. Students can take part in activities such as art competitions, dramas, musical performances, and other creative lines - all centered on the themes relating to the Khmer Rouge, as informal means of learning about their parent's and their nation's past. Visits to museums and other places containing information about Democratic Kampuchea are also beneficial. Such exercises encourage the discussion of genocide in Cambodia and thus contribute to reconciliation process in the country.

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Endnotes

[1] I would like to thank Dacil Keo for her assistance in reviewing and editing this paper.

[2] Farina So is the Oral History Project Leader in the Documentation Center of Cambodia (Phnom Penh, Cambodia).

[3] Dacil Keo, "Cham Muslim Students and Law Students Tour: Learning about Genocide and the ECCC", *Documentation Center of Cambodia*. http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/Cham20Youth20and20 Law20Student20Report.pdf (accessed January 15, 2008)

[4] Cham Muslim Students. "One of the 47 Essays about their parents' experiences under Democratic Kampuchea," Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007.

[5] Toloars Faisha is a third year student of Norton University. She wrote a seventeen-page essay of her parents' experience under Democratic Kampuchea and her views toward the regime.

[6] Khamboly Dy, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* (Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007), 35. This textbook is intended for high school students and it has been officially accepted by Prime Minister Hun Sen and Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports as a reference book for teachers in 2007.

[7] Osman Ysa, *The Cham Rebellion: Survivors' Stories from the villages* (Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2006), 53. The village of Koh Phal is located on an island in the Mekong River in Kroch Chhmar district of Kampong Cham province. Prior to the Democratic Kampuchea regime, Koh Phal had 1,864 residents. After the regime fell and the surviving residents came back home, only 183 people remained.

[8] Those villages are Chamkar Samsib, Kokor, Koh Rokar, Koh Prak, Ro-Ang, and Khvav. The families in the six villages totaled 2,320 in 1970, and there were only 110 families left after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea regime.

[9] Farina So, "Website Development: Building Bridges Between the Cham Muslim in Cambodian and the Rest of the World," *Documentation Center of Cambodia*, http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Public_Info/Building_Bridges_Between.htm (accessed 15 January 2008).

[10] Seth Muhammad Sis (Officer of Khmerization office, Department of Pedagogical Research, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports), in discussion with the author, 25 January 2008.

[11] H.E. DR. HJ. Sos Mousine (Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Rural Development), in discussion with the author, 25 January 2008.

[12] H.E. Ahmad Yahya, in discussion with the author, 25 January 2008.

[13] H.E. Hap Umaly, in discussion with the author, 25 January 2008.

[14] Seth Muhammad Sis (Officer of Khmerization office, Department of Pedagogical Research, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports), in discussion with the author, 25 January 2008.

[15] Farina So, "Education for Cham Muslim Women in Cambodia," *Documentation Center of Cambodia*, http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Public_Info/Cham20Muslim20Leaders/Cham_Muslim_Leaders.htm (accessed January 15 2008).

[16] Soth Naseath is a graduate of Phnom Penh International University with a management degree. His mother is Khmer and his father is Cham.

[17] Von Navy is a junior at Western University majoring in English. Her parents are from Angkor Ban village, Kampong Cham province.

[18] Columbia University Oral History Research Office, "Telling the World: Oral History, Struggles for Justice and Human Rights Dialogues." The above paragraph is derived from a discussion among the fellows and faculty members at Columbia University Oral History Research Office, June 2007. I was one of the fellows engaged in the discussion about the importance of Oral history and Oral history as an interdisciplinary subject. For further reading, go to http://usearch.cc.columbia.edu/query.htmlqtOral20History20Research20Office.

[19] Oral History Society, "Oral History Practical Advice: Getting Started." http://ww.ohs.org.uk/advice (accessed January 28, 2008)

[20] Valerie Raleigh Yow. *Recording Oral History*. (California: Rowman's Little field Publishers, Inc. 2005), 36.