

**DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA**

**MAGAZINE: SEARCHING FOR THE TRUTH, DEBATE SECTION, JULY 2009**

**Engaging Cham Muslims in Khmer Rouge History Learning:  
Will the Khmer Rouge Leaders Be Charged for Genocide?**

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Two grassroots meetings at two mosques in Kampot province<sup>1</sup> were organized to engage around 350 Cham people in discussion about Khmer Rouge (KR) history, education, and the ongoing legal proceedings against five KR leaders at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)<sup>2</sup>. KR crimes have left an unforgettable traumatic scar in human history, as the KR's nearly four-year rule between 1975 and 1979 is believed to be responsible for the death of approximately one fourth of the Cambodian population. At the Kampot meetings, when speaking of the regime, most participants could not find any verbal expressions capable of describing the horrible living conditions of that time.

With justice imminent, Cham people, the second largest population in Cambodia, have managed to use various means to teach the younger generation KR history. During the meetings, many participants said that the learning process was valuable for their people as a whole. This paper discusses the role of story-telling in educating Cham children about the KR regime, as well as people's perceptions about the integration of KR history into public school's curriculum.

**Past Learning about KR**

Oral history is rooted in Cambodian culture and the power of storytelling is important in helping people pass on their stories from one to another generation. This is the reason that many people have begun to speak out about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge regime to the next generation. Children are told about evacuation, separation, starvation, killings, torture, fear and Islamic religious persecution as shaped by selective memory and personal experiences. The process has been ongoing for 30 years.

An 80-year-old Haji, Sraleb, said that telling the next generation the story of the KR period is indispensable for helping them understand, and also to prevent future atrocities. He further said that he has to "remember" to avoid the atrocities and "remember" to move forward. One of his children, who was drafted into a children's unit, was cremated without any consent from Saleh. He was not allowed to visit his son before he died. The KR said that there was no need for him to come as he was not a physician. He felt very disappointed with the Khmer Rouge's cremation of his son because it was against Islam.

Commenting on religious persecution and language prohibition, No Halima said that the KR forced her to eat pork, abandon Islamic practices, and give up speaking Cham because they considered Cham to be a foreign language. But she could not swallow the pork soup and give up praying and other religious practices. She asked the KR to allow

her some more time to adapt to the KR policy. Faced with death threat as she once experienced the warning from Khmer Rouge spy, Halima stopped speaking Cham overtly; however, she could not help using little Cham language for communicating with her relatives for some purposes. Likewise, Taer Aminah feared the young Khmer Rouge cadres who threatened her life and banned the practices of Islam. She keeps telling these stories to her children every day because she is concerned about their future and that of the next generation, who either know little about the KR or do not believe that they existed.

Similarly, Muhammad Aly said that life was very terrible during the Khmer Rouge; he ended up stealing bran to eat due to hunger. But some of the young generation “do not believe this fact until they have faced it”, complained Aly. That makes many parents concerned about their children’s behaviour towards the Khmer Rouge regime, so they keep telling the younger generation about the atrocities in order to feel some relief and also to avoid a repetition of a history. In this regard, DC-Cam’s “Connecting Youth with their Parents” program is important as it values individual stories as a mechanism for transforming survivors’ concerns into a truth-telling process for the next generation. For this program youth were asked to write a story about their parents’ experiences so that they could learn more about the KR. It was also intended to improve the relationship between parents and children and help parents lessen their sufferings once they see that their children have learned about their bitter experiences.

### **KR History under Discussion**

Educating the younger generation about the KR regime is very important for raising their awareness and serving as preventive tool. There are multiple ways of educating youth about the Khmer Rouge, i.e., through drama, oral history, poets, novels, teaching in classroom. The later, which involves rigorous process, has been approved by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports<sup>3</sup>. As a consequence, the next generation will soon learn the history of Democratic Kampuchea as part of a newly-established school curriculum.

The Kampot meeting raised several important questions: whether the case of Cham Muslim under the KR was genocide, and how to prevent genocide from happening. Commenting on the KR persecution of Cham Muslims, Lib Yakaub said that he believes that the KR killed people with intent and plan; without plan and intent, they could not slaughter people systematically. He argues that “the Khmer Rouge had already decided who would live and who would die” However, it is hard to find any direct evidence or written documents proving the KR intent to kill Cham Muslim based on religious and ethnic grounds, as is required for legal prosecution of genocide. Nonetheless, it is suggested that searching for evidentiary information from the ground might enable investigators to discover essential evidence for this case. It is noted that most Cham Muslims feel that they greatly suffered from the Khmer Rouge policies to destroy religions, Cham language, religious practices, and identity.

The two July meetings about genocide education and oral history broadened Cham Muslim’s knowledge about the Khmer Rouge regime and Khmer Rouge tribunal, generated wider discussion on these topics, and may have contributed to genocide prevention. All participants were eager to share their experience with the rest of the group. Their stories grew louder as they gathered together during the meeting. Reading

from the text book also helped them connect their personal stories to the written text. At each meeting venue several young participants were asked to read the excerpted text about Cham people and most of them said it resonated with their personal experiences even though the text does not go into detail.

47-year-old Sim Sann expressed his feelings about coming to visit the courtroom and learning as to how the court prosecutes the KR defendants. He recalled his life experience during the KR period after he was evacuated to Voar Mountain (Phnom Voar). Fear, overwork and a lack of food were the most difficult part for him as a child during KR, said Sann. He wanted to find out the truth and supported the idea of integrating genocide education in classroom.

In response to questions about punishing the KR leaders, DC-Cam Director Youk Chhang said that teaching genocide in the classroom has multiple functions and is one of many ways contributing to punishing the regime. Taer Aminah agreed with this answer and said that she cannot forgive Duch and other Khmer Rouge leaders due to the fact that they all committed serious crimes on her family and the rest of Cambodian people. The KR claimed the lives of her husband and her children and made her a widow. She not only pities herself but also other widows and orphans who survived the regime. She wishes to see the KR leaders held accountable for their crimes before they can ask for forgiveness. In addition, she wants to educate the next generation about the regime. Therefore, she is happy to hear that next generation will learn about the regime in public school. The meetings generated a good discussion and provided an opportunity for participants to raise their voices and have their concerns heard.

### **Conclusion**

Life under the KR brought untold hardship for the Cambodian people as a whole. Cham people were ill-treated and prohibited from practicing religion, culture and tradition, and speaking the Cham language. These are the reasons that the older generation of Cham people have kept narrating their life experience through different means. Story-telling is the most common method by which they informally educate their children. Some parents even detail their life experience and encourage their offspring to write it down as a part of DC-Cam's Oral History Project. Told about the genocide education studies that will be included in the public school's curriculum, most of the participants expressed their satisfaction as it is going to enable their children to formally learn about the KR regime. In addition, their children could learn greater detail about that time and believe what their parents' stories. These mechanisms help Cambodian society, including the Cham community, turn bitter memories into education.

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[1] The meetings were held in Tadib village and Kampong Keh village.

[2] Visit <http://www.eccc.gov.kh/> or [www.cambodiatribunal.org](http://www.cambodiatribunal.org) for the Khmer Rouge Tribunal progress

[3] For more detailed information about DC-Cam's Genocide Education Project, visit [http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/Genocide\\_Education.htm](http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/Genocide_Education.htm)