



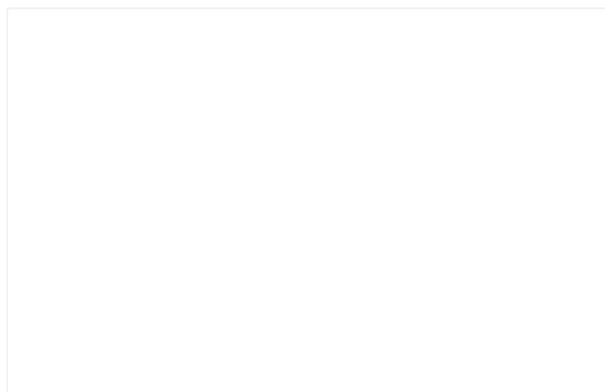
# Changing the Story: Whose stories and why?

Written by Peter Manning (University of Bath), Ly Sok-Kheang (Documentation Center of Cambodia) and Sayana Ser (Documentation Centre of Cambodia)



Ang-Krong village, Kratie province, 1975.  
Archive photograph from the DC-Cam 2004 publication "Stilled Lives: Photographs from the Cambodian Genocide".

Between 1975 and 1979 1.7 million Cambodians died of hunger, disease or were executed under the Khmer Rouge regime. During those four years, the Khmer Rouge sought to engineer a racially pure, classless, agrarian-based society, abolishing private property, prohibiting religion, and persecuting religious minorities. In 1979, Vietnamese-backed rebels overthrew the regime, ending an experience of atrocities and suffering that is now the subject of genocide prosecutions at the ongoing [Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia](#). While the four years of the Khmer Rouge rule appear neatly bracketed within the years 1975-1979, and attract the greatest attention as the darkest chapter in Cambodia's history, the Khmer Rouge movement continued to wage civil war in Cambodia against occupying Vietnamese forces for a further ten years, and perpetrate violence against civilians until the late 1990s. Cambodia's protracted experiences of pervasive insecurity, war and conflict therefore exceeds and resists neat periodisation. Cambodia reminds us that experiences of conflict and atrocities are rarely discontinuous or episodic, raising important questions about how and whose stories should be told across the various histories at play in our attempts to build inclusive and sustainable responses to experiences of grave violence.





Unidentified cadre, photo courtesy of the family of Um Sarun.  
Archive photograph from the DC-Cam 2004 publication “Stilled Lives: Photographs from the Cambodian Genocide”.

Since 1979, one story about the Khmer Rouge has been dominant. Authored by the Cambodian state, mobilised at key commemorative activities, furnishing the limited place for Khmer Rouge history in the public school curriculum, and underpinning prosecutions of Khmer Rouge crimes in both 1979 and the recent ECCC proceedings, this narrative stresses the culpability and malice of the Khmer Rouge leadership. Although this story, demonising and denouncing senior Khmer Rouge figures, has resonated among Cambodian communities – and while it might be the preferred reading of the Khmer Rouge years for the Cambodian government it is not necessarily *fictitious* – it has also left questions and gaps unexplained in terms of the role, responsibility and experiences of lower-level Khmer Rouge within the multiple stories of Cambodia’s experiences of atrocities, conflict and suffering, especially in respect of how Cambodian families across generations talk about their experiences. Indeed, as organisations such as the [Documentation Center of Cambodia](#) (DC-Cam) have shown, the stories of lower-level Khmer Rouge are often complex, and can disrupt clean distinctions of victim and perpetrator, even as they often raise challenging questions for the place of ‘perpetrator’ narratives in reconciliation and redress efforts. Yet for DC-Cam such complexities are an opportunity: exploring and learning from the granularity of such individual stories offers a resource for promoting more inclusive and reconciliatory education for young people in Cambodia.



Khmer Rouge family, provided by the family of Chhuon Sroeun, Kampong Cham province.  
Archive photograph from the DC-Cam 2004 publication “Stilled Lives: Photographs from the Cambodian Genocide”.

After the Vietnamese intervention in 1979, Khmer Rouge troops – and hundreds of thousands of refugees – were forced to the western border region with Thailand. Anlong Veng, a small town in Oddar Meanchey province, emerged as a key site in Cambodian history from this point. From 1979, Anlong Veng was a Khmer Rouge stronghold, key battlefield, and the last redoubt of senior Khmer Rouge leaders

before key defections ended the war in 1999. Today, the town is largely inhabited by former Khmer Rouge members, whose reintegration experiences have been uneven. Former Khmer Rouge members will often, on the one hand, acknowledge the gravity of the crimes of the past while, on the other, nostalgically celebrating the lives of their former leaders. The opportunities to learn from the experiences of such lower-level Khmer Rouge – a group stigmatised across Cambodia – are particularly important in efforts to promote education and reconciliation in Cambodia.

Since 2016, the Anlong Veng Peace Center, an initiative of DC-Cam led by *Changing the Story* Co-Investigator Dr Ly Sok-Kheang, has developed the Peace and Human Rights study tour project, which brings students and trainee teachers from different areas and provinces across Cambodia to learn from the experiences of Anlong Veng's residents and the heritage sites across the area. The tour aims to provide first-hand experience of face-to-face dialogue with former Khmer Rouge to develop more critical and insightful understandings of past violent conflict, allowing participants to explore the terms of conflict, violence, and peace. Indeed, the tours promise to yield more complex understandings of the multiple stories of those that experienced the Khmer Rouge regime and subsequent conflicts. One former Khmer Rouge member regularly participating on the tours to retell his experiences, Pok Sokhin, was himself forcibly conscripted into the movement in the Anlong Veng area as he searched for lost relatives in 1990, some 15 years after the fall of the regime, eluding prevailing approaches to reconciliation in Cambodia that focus on 1975-1979 alone. Despite suffering grave injuries on the battlefield, he recalled former senior Khmer Rouge figures with some fondness, as harsh but fair leaders. The complexity and, indeed, often conflicted feelings of former Khmer Rouge are therefore crucial for furnishing more inclusive and granular efforts to harness education for reconciliation in Cambodia.



Healing the landscape – Peuy Ta Mok

The April 2018 Anlong Veng Peace Tour cohort of trainee teachers and students from Takeo province.

Photo: Keo Theasrun, Documentation Center of Cambodia (Anlong Veng, 18 April, 2018)

On April 18, twelve trainee teachers, including students from Takeo province and three from the local area, themselves children of former Khmer Rouge, participated in the tour. Preparing for the journey to Anlong Veng, the students from Takeo wondered what they would learn from the visit, and what to expect from the tour. Were the former Khmer Rouge residents living in Anlong Veng be so different in their beliefs, attitudes, and culture? Several students had little familiarity – or belief – in the history of the Khmer Rouge in general. The April 2018 Peace Tour also marked a particularly important moment within the wider *Changing the Story* project. While tour participants had previously been assigned research tasks to draft reports on the history and experiences of local residents, the April 2018 tour was the first deployment of participatory film-making methods as a means for students to explore the stories of local residents and former Khmer Rouge. Working in groups of four, the student-teachers were trained in the use of audio-visual equipment ‘on-site’, identifying key themes and questions for their films to explore, before conducting interviews and capturing footage of key sites in the

area. The ‘multiplication’ effect of the participatory-film making approach is significant: the trainee-teachers will be able to incorporate their films within their own teaching as they return to their schools.

*(click on the images below to enlarge them)*



Group Discussion



Field visit -- Pot Pot's Grave site



The group film at Ta Mok's Museum.



Project leads Dr. Ly Sok-Kheang, Dr. Peter Manning and Prof. Paul Cooke.

The experiences of the trainee teachers on the tours, as they take ownership of the production of learning resources about the Khmer Rouge history, promises to be a fruitful avenue for promoting dialogue, intergenerational memory and understanding of the Khmer Rouge regime, especially as the perspectives and experiences of stigmatised lower-level Khmer Rouge are taken seriously. While sensitive to the need to avoid any moral equivocation of different experiences of harm, for DC-Cam and the Anlong Veng Peace Center, reconciliation involves, at least, understanding and acknowledging that lower-level former Khmer Rouge living in Anlong Veng also suffered, themselves experiencing evacuation, starvation, and separation from their family members and relatives at points too.



Landscape near Anlong Veng Peace Center  
Photo: Keo Theasrun, Documentation Center of Cambodia (2018).

For more information about the Anlong Veng Peace Tours, see our [previous blogs about Anlong Veng](#) or read an overview of the Cambodia strand of Changing the Story [here](#).

**To see more images from the April 2018 Anlong Veng Peace Tour, visit [DC-Cam's Google Photos](#) page.**

TAGS: [CAMBODIA](#)