

The Khmer Rouge Regime

A Personal Nightmare

An Original Khmer Poem

By

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Funded by

Theodore Edson Parker Foundation; Mass Humanities, a state-based affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities; Abbott & Dorothy H. Stevens Foundation; Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center community grant program, a project of Lowell National Historical Park and University of Massachusetts Lowell; Lowell Cultural Council, a local agency which is supported by Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency; Glory Buddhist Temple; Middlesex Community College; Lowell's Cambodian Opera Fund; Cambodian Living Arts, a project of the Marion Institute; and many generous local businesses and individuals.

Published by

Light of Cambodian Children, Glory Buddhist Temple, and Cambodian Expressions

2010

A salutation, with my hands rising together and my head bowing downward,
Paying homage to the *Triple Buddhist Gems*¹ on the pedestal above my head;
Now, I will narrate about recent tragic events in Cambodia,
The horrific nightmare that the Khmer people have endured.

On the seventeenth of April, One Thousand Nine Hundred Seventy-Five,
The Khmer people suffered hell on earth for nearly four years;
The *Khmer Rouge*² tortured and killed people in all villages and districts;
Entire extended families, including infants, were executed without pity.

The Khmer Rouge confiscated all personal and family belongings,
Even spoons and dishes, pots and pans, knives and axes, and baskets;
The cities became ghost towns; big houses were destroyed and ransacked,
As everyone was evicted to the jungle to dig ditches and build dikes all over the country.

Buddhist temples became prisons, where the village leaders were confined and tortured;
The *Pali*³ texts and holy scriptures were thrown about, scattered across the temple grounds;
The sacred Buddha statues, big and small, were knocked down and completely destroyed;
Clerics and monks from every religious institution were targeted and murdered.

All young children were torn away from their parents,
Taken away and relocated at isolated labor camps;
For many years, parents were forbidden to see their sons and daughters,
Even during times of severe illness and death.

¹ The Triple Buddhist Gems are the central focus of inspiration and devotion for Buddhists. They are the Buddha (Enlightened One), Dharma (Buddha's teachings), and Sangha (community of disciples).

² Khmer Rouge literally translates as "Red Khmer." The communists in Cambodia were given this label in the late 1960's by Norodom Sihanouk, who was Cambodian Head of State at the time. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia from 1975 to early 1979, during which nearly two million Cambodians died as a result of execution, starvation, untreated illness, and overwork.

³ Pali is the sacred language of Buddhism in which religious texts are chanted. It originated in southern India.

The entire population endured hard labor under threat of execution;

The Khmer Rouge even beat near-full-term pregnant women;

The thin rice gruel fed to us was worse than pig and dog provisions;

Daily meals consisted of watery vegetable soup, with water grass and amaranth.

Sometimes we had no rice gruel for several days; they fed us only rice dust;

Too famished to sleep, with deathly pale faces and emaciated bodies;

Too exhausted to toil, yet the Khmer Rouge still enforced their work order;

Many men were worked to death, leaving children as orphans and wives as widows.

Young women were bereft of their beauty, resembling their aging grandmothers;

Young men too were transfigured into aging grandfathers;

With kneecaps bigger than their thighs, their heads broader than their shoulders,

Having lost all, including their hair, their bodies became withered.

With swollen faces and sunken jaundiced eyes, yet no medicine to cure their illness;

Masses of people were dying; sickness was epidemic throughout the country;

Scores died from starvation, yet the Khmer Rouge had no pity;

Dying from exhaustion, the emaciated survivors were not able to bury the dead bodies.

Those who tried to escape would be caught and executed;

Some were blown to bits by landmines; some were shot to death at the Thai border;

Only one in a hundred escaped death; the jungle was filled with rotten corpses;

The Khmer Rouge was constantly on the prowl, ready to kill any alleged traitors.

The Khmer people were massacred by the millions by the savage Khmer Rouge hand;

Imprisoned, tortured, and bludgeoned to death, their bones were scattered throughout the land;

Many died from overwork, and many others from sickness and starvation;

Hunger was so severe; people ate rats and rice-field mice in desperation.

Then, in the year Nineteen-Seveny-Nine, the *Yuon*⁴ army invaded Cambodia;

On January seventh, the savage Khmer Rouge fled into the jungle, their former sanctuary;

*Heng Samrin*⁵ was placed by communist Hanoi to govern the dilapidated country;

Fearing another communist regime, many Khmer survivors fled their homeland.

Near the border, the ruthless Thai bandits robbed us of everything;

Gold, diamonds and all valuables, nothing was left for any Khmer or Chinese;

The *Siam*⁶ robbers beat the refugees, toppling many people over the paddy dikes;

They searched us thoroughly, even inside the private parts of our bodies.

Emerging from the terror of the Thai robbers, we entered *Nong Chan*⁷;

We could not remain long, fearing the barbaric Thais would return to beat us again;

The Khmer refugees were forcefully herded onto hundreds of buses

And transported to a mountain range⁸ bordering *Preah Vihear*⁹ province.

At dawn, the Thai soldiers pushed us over the cliff, firing shots through the crowd, killing many;

Young and old, male and female, including infants were mowed down violently;

The Khmer refugees scrambled over each other, frantically

Stampeding down the mountain in fear for their lives.

⁴ Yuon is a commonly known word used by the Khmer for Vietnamese.

⁵ Heng Samrin is a former Khmer Rouge commander who defected to Vietnam in late 1977, then formed a liberation force made up of former Khmer Rouge and Khmer Vietminh, along with the communist Vietnamese army, to invade Cambodia in late 1978 and early 1979. On January 10, 1979, the Vietnamese army installed their puppet regime with Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, Pen Sovann and Hun Sen as the new leaders of the People's Republic of Kampuchea.

⁶ Siam is a former name of the Thai.

⁷ Nong Chan is a Cambodian village across the border from Thailand.

⁸ Mountain Range refers to Mount Dangrek, where over 50,000 Khmer refugees were inhumanly transported, dumped, shot, killed and pushed over the cliff of Mount Dangrek by the Thai soldiers. Many of them died from stepping on dormant landmines, booby-traps, lack of food and water. Some survived the whole ordeal to tell the horrific acts of crime against humanity perpetrated by the Thai army in mid-1979.

⁹ Preah Vihear is one of the ancient Khmer temples built by the Khmer kings in the 11th century. It is also the name of a Cambodian province which borders Thailand.

The path down the mountain was narrow and steep, packing the crowd tightly;
People had to hang onto vines, tree roots, branches, and small trees;
Tossing their bundles down the precipice, the men jumped down hurriedly,
Awaiting their newborns to be passed from the hands of their mothers.

We descended the mountain from dawn till late afternoon, finally reaching a low basin,
Surrounded by dense forest and enclosed by a pair of huge mountains;
A great number of those who searched for firewood were killed by landmines;
Many others looking for water suffered the same providence.

Tens of thousands of Khmer refugees had fallen into grave danger;
In great distress, we prayed to Buddha and also to the spirits of our ancestors;
If we turned back, the Thai soldiers would shoot and block our path;
If we moved forward, there was no road, only thick, tall grass ahead.

“Going in the water, you’ll face hungry crocodiles; by land, you’ll meet tigers;
Entering the jungle, you’ll be cut by sharp thorns; climbing trees, you’ll face angry wasps;”
At that time, the *Cham*¹⁰ and *Javanese*¹¹ decided to charge forward
And were blown to death by landmines as they cleared a safe path for others.

“O! Maha Mount Dangrek, majestically stretching as far as the eyes can see;
The tall *Sralao*¹², reaching into the sky, among the *wild guava*¹³ and *Chrey*¹⁴ trees;
The sound of the cicadas calling out to each other loudly,
As if to express deep sympathy for the desperate wandering Khmer refugees.”

¹⁰ Chams are the ethnic Khmer Muslims living in Cambodia. They emigrated from central Vietnam, which used to be the Cham kingdom during the 15th & 16th Centuries before Vietnam invaded and annexed it as part of the Annam kingdom.

¹¹ Javanese are also ethnic Khmer Muslim, who had come from the Island of Java and settled down in Cambodia centuries ago.

¹² Sralao is a kind of hardwood tree used to build houses for the wealthy, or made into high-end furniture.

¹³ Khmer poets and writers, inspired by the sweet fragrance of the wild guava flowers (purple and pink), which are used as a metaphor for their lyrical poems, songs and romantic novels.

¹⁴ Chrey is a kind of tree commonly grown in Cambodia’s countryside, or on hills and high plateaus.

As they tread slowly through the thick, tall, grass deep in the jungle,
Many landmines exploded, maiming children and elders; people were dying everywhere;
Some were severely wounded, with arms and legs blown to pieces;
Some were lying unconscious, about to take their last breath.

Down to their last crumbs, wives and small children were on the verge of collapse;
Wives wailed in despair as they abandoned their injured husbands;
If they remained, there would be no food for any of them!
With profound heartache, they tragically deserted their loved ones behind.

The Khmer refugees struggled to cross the dense jungle and mountain;
Children cried with pangs of hunger; many died from illness and starvation;
We walked, ate and slept amid the foul corpses' stench,
Swollen and bloated, many without heads and limbs.

With every step, we carefully followed the tracks of the people ahead;
One misstep on the trail could result in our last breath;
The treacherous journey took five strenuous days,
And we advanced only about two thousand meters of distance!

There was a couple with two young daughters,¹⁵ both suffering from the measles;
Their parents' shoulders swelled with pain as they carried the girls through the jungle;
Some women gave birth on the journey, near the marker of *Kilo-Thirty-Eight*;
Other women almost died, suffering painful miscarriage.

Another mother arrived at *Sa-Em*¹⁶ and delivered a healthy baby daughter;

¹⁵ Tan Kim An, the father, was traveling with his two daughters, Phal and Pheap, who were sickened by the measles.

The grandfather¹⁷ was so delighted; he named her the “*Beautiful Sa-Em Preksa*”;
Others delivered babies at the foot of the mountain in the cold, falling rain;
Some people had to abandon their elderly mothers in utter desperation.

Along the remote, desolate path, we slept exposed to the wind and rain;
We were starving and chilled to the bone, our log fires provided no flame;
Swarms of hungry mosquitoes and gnats caused our sleep to be in vain;
Throughout the night, our clothes were completely drenched by heavy rain.

At sunrise, we hurriedly gathered together and marched on further,
Until we arrived at *Mount Tbaeng Mean Chey*¹⁸, our stomachs rumbling with hunger;
So worn out from the terrifying journey; even pausing for a rest sapped our strength;
We were famished, parched, and trembling from exhaustion.

We labored on through the mountainous jungle, sleeping along the rugged trail;
For almost two months, we struggled near collapse to reach our home-village;
We had traded all of our new clothes for food along the way;
With neither a mat nor a pillow, we slept on the ground, devoid of hope.

Once home, unbearable conditions¹⁹ compelled us to flee, risking death, again;
We marched northwest, seeking freedom and safety near the border of Thailand;
To avoid the military guards, we waded through endless flooded farmland;
Sneaking past the guard posts, we remained hopeful as we pushed westward.

Finally arriving at *Serei Sophoan*²⁰, local skirmishes delayed us many nights;

¹⁶ Sa-Em is one of the villages in Oddor Meany Chey province, near the Thai-Cambodian border.

¹⁷ A grandfather by the name of Ho Eav Chhay named his granddaughter Srey Sa-Em Preksa, literally meaning the “Beautiful Sa-Em Forest.”

¹⁸ Tbaeng Mean Chey is the name of a mountain in Oddar Mean Chey province in Cambodia.

¹⁹ All Khmer villages were now under the control of the Vietnamese communists, and the civil war among internal factions continued. With the country’s infrastructure having been destroyed by the Khmer Rouge, there were no resources available to begin rebuilding or to farm the land. In 1982, Western nations imposed a formal embargo on development aid to Cambodia in order to protest the Vietnamese occupation.

We ran into many terrifying situations on the road before making our way to *Chum Rum Thmey*²¹;
We remained in the border camp more than a month, in a state of perpetual terror,
As the devil camp-rulers preyed on the refugees with no compassion whatsoever.

The *devils*²² controlling the camps along the border deceived the refugees,
Using fear tactics to prevent them from crossing into Thailand safely;
They controlled people's movements as part of their smuggling activities
And demanded payment for humanitarian aid, enriching themselves and their families.

Hundreds of buses were brought in by the United Nations and the Thai government
To transport the desperate refugees to the newly built Holding Centers inside Thailand;
Yet, many did not dare to leave because they were tricked by the devils' schemes;
Only later, when the *Yuon* army attacked, did people flee for their lives.

The refugees were like clumps of aquatic plants, drifting across a vast body of water
With no safe place to stay; they were drifting in the wind forever;
At the mercy of their own *Karma*²³, voyaging dangerously in the open water;
Some vanished, some survived; and some lucky ones went to heaven.

Bandits lurking in the forest murdered scores of innocent people;
They fought each other for control over the border camps and power;
When the *Yuon* army attacked, they rounded up many desperate refugees,
Forcing them back into Cambodia, where they were robbed by armed villagers.

²⁰ Serei Sophoan is the name of an urban district and town in Cambodia approximately 100 kilometers away from the Thai-Cambodian border.

²¹ Chum Rum Thmey, literally meaning New Camp, was set up by displaced Cambodian people along the border areas near Thailand, where the international agencies provided limited rice, dried fish, canned food, water and other emergency relief services. During the peak of the crisis, more than 500,000 Cambodians were living along the Thai-Cambodian border. Additionally, more than 100,000 were living in refugee centers inside Thailand. The last border camp closed in 1999.

²² The Devils here refer to some evil elements of the Khmer Resistant Groups including the communist Khmer Rouge, the Royalist/Sihanoukist Group and the Khmer Serei group who associated with the former minister, Sonn Sen. They all established their camps along the Thai-Cambodian border to mount a liberation movement to oust the invading communist Vietnamese armies from Cambodia. They received military and financial support from China, Thailand, the United States, and Great Britain.

²³ Karma is a consequential action resulting from one's own acts.

The ruthless villagers stripped their fellow Khmer of their clothing,
Without mercy, they slaughtered many of their fellow countrymen;
The *Pol Pot*²⁴ followers also competed for control of the area, forcing people away;
The people of Cambodia endured endless dangers perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge cadres.

One day there were thunderous explosions inside the makeshift camp;
Everyone hurriedly grabbed their few belongings and fled in all directions;
Many people were killed and injured, including children and grandchildren;
Some newborns became orphans, as their parents perished in the chaotic situation.

The International Red Cross tried their best to save the injured,
Transporting many busloads of the wounded for treatment across the border;
They rescued and brought great numbers of homeless orphans
To safety of the Refugee Holding Center, easing their suffering and pain.

Food, water, and essential supplies were provided daily
To the Southeast Asian refugees who fled their countries in search of safety;
Fearing of the *Yvon* communist, they had to abandon their native country;
To escape from war and misery, they poured into neighboring Thailand.

We were determined not to turn back, despite artillery attacks from the *Yvon* army;
Even with landmines exploding everywhere, men and women still forged ahead steadily,
Live or die, nothing could prevent us from reaching the third countries,²⁵
To build new lives and seek glorious freedom and liberty.

²⁴ Pol Pot was the infamous Khmer Rouge leader of communist Democratic Kampuchea during the mid-1970s.

²⁵ The third countries refer to the United States, Canada, Australia, France, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Japan and other democratic countries which accepted refugees for permanent resettlement. The second country refers to Thailand, where the temporary refugee camps were located.

We struggled for many months and years in the barbwire camps as refugees;
The Thai government imprisoned us, and the Siam soldiers stomped on us mercilessly;
Some refugees were beaten to death; many were robbed of their last few pieces personal property
And the Thai soldiers brutally raped the Khmer refugee women²⁶ almost nightly.

*Lompini*²⁷ camp was our last stop for refugee processing in Thailand;
It was extremely filthy, and we had to sleep like animals on the ground;
Contaminated water and putrid raw sewage floated all over the camp-ground;
Swarms of mosquitoes constantly bit us and tormented our bodies.

At long last, we boarded a plane and lifted off from Thailand;
We were like birds released from the wicked hunters' hands;
We flew high above the ground in search of freedom in a new land;
Some of us arrived at *Manila*,²⁸ according to our own merit and destiny.

The Philippine government did no harm to the refugees;
Instead, they cared for the Lao, Khmer and Vietnamese with great empathy;
The Philippine people treated the Khmer with respect and dignity
And welcomed monks inside the camp to support the Buddhist religion.

Some refugees were resettled in Malaysia, France, and Australia;
The country with the greatest resource was the United States of America,
Accepting many Lao, Khmer and Vietnamese into its towns and cities;
Hundreds and thousands were granted political asylum to resettle permanently.

²⁶ The Thai soldiers were paid by the international community to provide protection for the refugees, however they preyed on them at night after the humanitarian personnel retreated to their separate living quarters, away from the camps. Torture, robbery, and rape committed by the Thai soldiers were common inside the refugee camps.

²⁷ Lompini was the Refugee Holding Center, which served as the last destination for refugee processing before leaving for the third countries.

²⁸ Manila is the capital of the Philippines.

Japan, Italy, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland,
 Belgium, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and New Zealand,
 England, Canada, Thailand, and Indonesia;

All mercifully rescued the desperate refugees from drowning in an ocean of fear.

We wish to honor the International Red Cross and the United Nations,
 And other international organizations whose profound compassion
 Rescued the desperate refugees who were about to perish in a turbulent ocean;
 Embodying the *four precepts*²⁹ of the *Bodhisattvas*,³⁰ they saved the Khmer, Vietnamese and Laotian.

Here, I will conclude my brief account of Cambodia's tragic events;
 May men and women preserve this memory and never let them be forgotten!
 The savagery of the Khmer Rouge regime should be permanently etched in stone,
 And this history should be taught and passed on to the future generations.³¹

We, the Khmer refugees, a family of six members,³²
 Were once forced down the cliff of Mount Dangrek by the Thai soldiers;
 On our second attempt fleeing to Thailand, we were full of determination;
 By the time we succeeded, it took us more than two rainy seasons.³³

In the year One Thousand Nine Hundred and Eighty-One,
 In the middle month of July, the most joyous day of seventeenth,
 We all boarded the plane and lifted off from Manila,

²⁹ The four precepts of the Bodhisattvas: 1) Metta (lovingkindness), 2) Karuna (compassion), 3) Modita (sympathetic joy), and 4) Oupekha (impartiality).

³⁰ A Bodhisattva is a living Buddha who chooses to stay on earth in order to save people from their suffering.

³¹ In Khmer genealogy, it is traditional to honor seven generations and they are (1) Great Grandparents, (2) Grandparents, (3) Parents, (4) Children, (5) Grandchildren, (6) Great Grandchildren and (7) Great Great Grandchildren.

³² The family members: Grandpa Tiv Sim Van, aka Van Ly; along with Ho Ban Ho, Neang Keo, Neang Kouch, Ly Chhivby, and Grandma Tan Sear.

³³ The rainy season in Cambodia is from May to October when the southwest monsoon brings more than 75% of the country's annual rainfall. With the peak of the wet season from July to September, it can rain as much as two out of every three days. Two rainy seasons would be equal to two years, in the context of the description in this poem.

Finally reaching the land of freedom, the United States of America.

We wish to express deep gratitude to our dearest friend, Sovann Chea,
Who generously sponsored our family with lovingkindness and great care;
He enabled us to come and live in our third and great country,
Away from past sorrow, to rebuild our lives with freedom and liberty.

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Lowell, Massachusetts; USA

A.D. 1982

English Translation and editing by Samkhann C. Khoeun

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February 7, 2010; Lowell, Massachusetts