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**THE LIVING ARCHAEOLOGY OF A PAINFUL HERITAGE:  
THE FIRST AND SECOND LIFE OF THE KHMER ROUGE MASS GRAVES**

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**Abstract**

*This chapter focuses on a particularly difficult category of 'archaeological artefact', namely the thousands of human remains of the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) that were disposed of in mass graves or left scattered across the landscape. After the overthrow of this regime, the handling of these remains fell to the newly installed Vietnamese-sponsored Cambodian state in the 1980s and then the Khmer villagers from the 1980s until now. The chapter describes how the government on the one hand and the peasants on the other have been treating these unidentified bodies in different ways as two contrasting perceptions and practices of memory and commemoration. The peasants' 'living archaeology' of the mass graves is structured by their religious system in which the earth is a major element. The ritual practices performed for the anonymous dead of the mass graves follow two rationales: the rationale of the earth as a living element 'nurtured' by fragments of Angkorean statues as well as by the corpses buried during various times, and the rationale of the sacred geography of 'powerful places'. The chapter draws on ethnographic field work carried out in a village and its environment in the province of Pursat (Western Cambodia).*

**Introduction**

Far from famous Angkor and its beautiful ruins, where archaeologists and architects have worked since the French protectorate, an unnoticed and macabre archaeological programme has been carried out in Cambodia after the end of the Pol Pot regime (1975–

1979). Vietnamese–Cambodian teams of researchers reporting to the newly installed Phnom Penh authorities were sent to the countryside with next to no investigation equipment and financial support to roughly assess the mass graves and killing sites spread throughout the country<sup>1</sup>. Deep in the earth, beside the old sculpted stones and fragments of ancient statues, hundreds of thousands of human remains were slowly disintegrating without proper funeral rites in quiet Cambodian paddy fields, under large trees, in the ponds, and in the bush. Later on, in the late 1990s, this special *genre* of archaeological work was refined by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia so as to provide a more accurate picture of the execution death toll of the Democratic Kampuchea. (**Fig. 1**) In this chapter, I will contrast two perceptions and practices of memory and commemoration related to the Khmer Rouge genocide as they are applied to the treatment of the dead in the mass graves and killing fields: those of the Cambodian state and those of the Khmer villagers. This chapter is built on ethnographic work in a village and its neighbourhood in the province of Pursat (Western Cambodia, district of Bakan).

## 1. MUSEUMS AND MEMORIALS. THE STATE ARCHAEOLOGY OF REMEMBERING

The Democratic Kampuchea was strongly inspired by Mao and his agrarian state doctrine. The Khmer communists dreamt of achieving a “super great leap forward” that would catapult Cambodia to a level of political and economic sophistication equivalent to that of the Angkor era (8th to 13th centuries), when Cambodia was a powerful empire. This bloodthirsty utopia led to a totalitarian organization whose chiefs ordered the deportation of hundreds of thousands of people to work as slaves in the rice fields. The revolution led to the death of at least 1,700 000 people who were executed, starved, and who died of untreated diseases and other abuses, as well as to internal purges which created permanent terror among the Khmer Rouge cadres themselves. In 1975, 1, 700 000 people represented a quarter of the Cambodian population. One can still read advertisements in newspapers, on posters or via the internet, written by survivors looking for family members who disappeared some 30 ago. Today, the uninformed traveller might easily travel through the country enjoying the vision of peaceful

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<sup>1</sup> Chuch Phoeurn, Secretary of State, Ministry of Culture, personal communication, 2 July 2010.

This research is part of a larger personal research programme entitled “Social breakdown and construction of memories in Cambodia”. This article is built on ethnographic work in a village and its neighbourhood in the province of Pursat (Western Cambodia, district of Bakan). During the Democratic Kampuchea, the casualties were dramatically high in Pursat province. This field work focuses on special places rather than on interviews and biographies. The perception of the genocide and its aftermath from the villagers’ perspective is analysed through the symbolic language of the sacred geography. The research has been funded by the Centre of Southeast Asia Research (CASE, Paris) under the French Centre of Scientific Research.

villages and rice fields, and remain unaware of the “haunted landscape”<sup>2</sup> full of ghosts and painful memories.

Democratic Kampuchea was overthrown in January 1979 by its former communist allies from Vietnam; Cambodia was thrown into chaos. For partly (but not only) strategic reasons the new Cambodian government, set up under the supervision of the Vietnamese, quickly made efforts to build a national justice and memory strategy and to organize public mourning. Pol Pot and Ieng Sary were sentenced to death *in absentia* by the Revolutionary People’s Court (Tribunal Populaire Révolutionnaire 1990) while people in the countryside were forbidden to take the law into their own hands by punishing the local Khmer Rouge cadres (but not all of them) who had been cruel. A museum was set up inside the main political detention camp (S-21) with the help of Eastern European museography specialists. The new People’s Republic of Kampuchea also dealt with the numerous mass graves, killing fields, and the individual corpses scattered all over the country.

Local authorities, following instructions from Phnom Penh, urged the villagers to put the human remains together and place them in boneyards built in each commune (*khum*). Villagers helped by picking skulls and bones from the nearby village area, although in some places the human remains were just left in a pile in the bush under a big tree or left in ponds or wells. The sophistication of these boneyards and memorials called ស្នប់ (*sdop* from the word *stūpa*) or សាងសង់ (*sang song* which means “to build”<sup>3</sup>) was more or less dependent on the amount of money available locally, since the country was then suffering extreme poverty. They were made of wood or bricks, and covered by a roof of palm leaves or tiles. According to the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, more than 80 memorials were built in Cambodia in the 1980s. Officials of the party who were appointed members of the newly created Committee of Organization of National Celebrations (គណៈកម្មាធិការរៀបចំបុណ្យជាតិ, *kanakamathikar reap bon cheat*) came to the communes (*khum*) of Pursat and helped to organize the 7<sup>th</sup> January Liberation Day and the 20<sup>th</sup> May Day celebrations. The former was the anniversary of the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime while the latter was the so-

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<sup>2</sup> I have borrowed here from “Haunted Landscapes and Ambiguous Memories: Interactions with the Past in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia”, Euroseas Conference, Convenors: Oliver Tappe and Vathana Pholsena, Aug. 2010, Gothenburg.

<sup>3</sup> It remains unclear to me why the verb *sang song* is used in this context as a noun.

called Day of Anger (ទិវាចងកំហឹង, *tivea chang komheung*), which commemorated the victims of Khmer Rouge crimes. Every year an official ceremony was held in front of the memorials, and although Buddhism was scarcely tolerated in the 1980s, monks from the nearby monasteries were invited to pray for the dead and perform a *bangskol* (បង្សុក្ខណ៍) which, in the present popular perception common in mainland Southeast Asian Theravadin countries, means that laymen make offerings to the monks who, in turn, are able to send the merits obtained to the dead by chanting special prayers (Bizot 1981). The celebration was also organized for political and propaganda purposes: at that time, the Vietnamese protectorate over Cambodia was criticized inside as well as outside the country and the government made efforts to explain the presence of numerous Vietnamese soldiers and political advisors by insisting on crimes committed by the “Pol Pot clique” and the danger they still represented if the survivors were not protected by the Vietnamese. The human remains thus became the best proof of the genocide and therefore a symbol of the legitimacy of the newly-installed Vietnamese-backed government (Fig. 2). The biggest monument was the Choeung Aek memorial built on a killing field where thousands of prisoners from the “S-21” political prison in Phnom Penh were sent for execution.

In the early 1990s, the time of commemoration was followed by a period of “suspended historicity” (Hughes 2006) when state memorials were gradually neglected by officials and abandoned in most communes.<sup>4</sup> No one was interested any more in repairing and looking after these symbols of the genocide. This was concomitant with the collapse of the Cambodian Communist State and various state-run facilities (such as ministries, hospitals, and schools) following the rise of political liberalization and the free-market economy. Moreover, these memorials had been set up at a particular time (cold war, Khmer Rouge guerrilla, isolation of Cambodia, flow of refugees) with ideological and strategic objectives that no longer existed after the peace agreement was signed in 1991 between the four Cambodian parties and the United Nations Transitional Authority was subsequently established in Cambodia. Furthermore, in the peasants’ perceptions these memorials were state-sponsored commemoration devices and they did not feel particularly connected to them. The celebration of the Day of Anger was still performed but it was given a new political colour in the changing ideological context: from a state-sponsored ceremony, it was “downgraded” to the

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<sup>4</sup> Some memorials are still looked after for different reasons and by different organizations, all over the country (Hughes 2005; Margolin 2007).

status of a party-sponsored event and now bears the less aggressive name គោរពវិញ្ញាណក្ខន្ធន្តែង (Ceremony of Paying Tribute to the Spirits [of the dead under the Pol Pot regime]) and it is performed on public premises like schools in Pursat and other local places (see Figs. 3a and b).

## 2. TREES, STONES, AND TERMITES MOUNDS: THE VILLAGERS' LIVING ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MASS GRAVES

### 2. 1. The dead at a distance, but still associated with the world of the living

After the 1991 peace agreement followed by the 1993 free elections, most of the memorials were neglected by the government and collapsed. However, the villagers did not turn the page. They collectively (and unconsciously) put in place new practices of remembrance framed by the popular religious system and based on a “switch off/switch on” perception of temporality that I will describe below.

In the 1980s, the villagers devoted most of their energy to surviving and to building new lives and families.<sup>5</sup> The annual festival of the Gathering of the Rice Balls (ភ្នំបីព្រួញ, *pchhum ben*) – known by foreigners since the French Protectorate as the Festival of the Dead – was permitted again in 1990. It is traditionally a major national festival that facilitated bereavement by enabling people to perform rituals aimed at helping their beloved dead to access a better future life. Although many corpses have been gathered and put in memorials or under large trees, the landscape was still haunted by hundreds of ghosts manifesting themselves through អ័រ (ap)<sup>6</sup>-like lights and cries in the night.

The widespread fear of ghosts/corpses<sup>7</sup> was due to the fact that most of the dead during the Pol Pot regime died a “bad death” and what is more, did not receive a proper funeral. As in other Southeast Asian societies, people who commit suicide, are murdered,

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<sup>5</sup> Even now when I meet with villagers and ask them about the history of their village, their family often gathers around and listens to their biography for the first time. Although the stories are not kept secret in most cases, they are not a topic of everyday discussions within families. Many old Cambodians also complain that the younger generation does not even believe them when they speak about their ordeal during the Khmer Rouge regime.

<sup>6</sup> An *ap* is a female witch who belongs both to the natural and supernatural world. She goes out at night with her head and bowel floating low in the air and emitting a phosphorescent blue light. She is linked with bad death and human waste (Ang 1986: 263-284).

<sup>7</sup> In Khmer language, ខ្មោច (*khmaoch*) means “corpse”, “ghost” and some other kinds of spirits that may interact with human beings. The dead are always liable to come in contact with the living, hence the superimposition of the meanings of *khmaoch*.

have fatal accidents, or die during childbirth are perceived as the “bad dead” (*khmaoch tai hong*, ខ្មៅចំណាយហែង meaning literally « violent death »), which is in opposition to “normal death” caused by old age and ordinary diseases (i.e. associated with natural aetiology). Shorter funeral rituals are usually performed in these cases and there is a risk that these dead do not follow the usual way of the *saṃsāra* but transform into malevolent entities of various forms that stay near the living. The victims of the murderous Pol Pot regime potentially belong to this category. Nonetheless, bushes and forests were progressively cleared, roads were built, and rice fields and fruit trees were planted over the mass graves, a symbolic indication that the life cycle was starting again. A former village chief told me that he created a new market near the Snam Preah memorial in order to prevent ghosts from bothering the living, because ghosts prefer remote, dark, and uninhabited places (there is still no electricity or roads in the countryside and in the 1980s, there were only bicycles). The places associated with violent events (such as slaughters, mass graves, and memorials full of human remains) progressively became “powerless” (*sap*, ស្ងួត, also means “tasteless”).

However, those places were never completely “inactivated”. Firstly, because the Khmer peasants live in a natural environment that they know is scarred by previous events. Even where there is no longer any mark of these dreadful events in the landscape, the Pol Pot regime is still deeply embedded in it. The peasants remember each pond, well, and field where bodies were found. Sometimes, these memories are preserved through the area’s toponymy. For example, a rice field is now locally known as the “Svay Rieng rice field” after hundreds of deportees from the Eastern provinces, including newborn babies and pregnant women, were slaughtered there one night in 1978. Secondly, the building of the state memorials and the official ceremonies that were organized in front of them were not effective enough to pacify the wandering souls. From time to time some of them burst into the life of the living through dreams to ask that their wishes (for a proper funeral, for instance) be fulfilled. However, in most cases, their wishes are not so different from those of the living and those of the “normal dead”: food, offerings, clothes, cigarettes, and even entertainment.

In one case, a man living near the old Snam Preah memorial (which no longer exists) was asked for help in his dreams: “One night, five or six years ago [twenty four or twenty five years after the genocide], I dreamt of a man named Sok.<sup>8</sup> He told me that he did not know

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<sup>8</sup> Sok is a very common personal name in Cambodia. It could mean that this dead is not well identified as an individual but symbolically represents all the dead of the memorial.

where to go. He was a dead from the memorial ([which at that time was falling apart]. So the next morning, with the help of a neighbour, I carried all the human remains from the memorial to another place near the railway behind my house. This was a good place to put the remains because the dead could then go whenever they wanted to go, toward the east or toward the west. They could go back to their native land (*srok*). So we burnt all the remains there. I lighted three incense sticks and prayed for the dead, asking them to go back home. And since then, I make offerings of water, rice and food to them every year during the Gathering of the Rice Balls Festival (*phchum ben*).” (Figs. 4a and b).

A 50-year old woman living near Don Am village has a similar story of being contacted in her dreams: “In 1992 [more than ten years after the genocide], I dreamt that a voice coming from the well [in Don Am village, where the bodies were piled up. See Fig. 5a] told me: ‘Please come and give a video projection! The winning lottery number is 21’. The next day, I ran to buy a lottery ticket and won three million riels [around 750 dollars]. Then my husband and I built a small house (ខ្នុរ, *khtom*) to say thank you and we invited all the nearby villagers to watch a video. The video projector was installed near the mass grave as requested in the dream. Then, during the next Gathering of the Rice Balls Festival (*phchum ben*), we made offerings to the dead of this mass grave. Later on, I dreamt once again of a voice coming from the well and revealing a winning lottery number to me. But later I never won again. [So she progressively lost interest in the mass grave and neglected to go and worship the place/the dead. Then the *khtom* fell into ruins (see Fig. 5b)]. But from time to time when I have a dream or fall sick, I always go to the well and offer incense sticks.” In this case, the dead in the mass graves were Khmer Rouge cadres who had been purged and were killed. In the talks between living and the dead associated with their natural environment, the form of death (which is here “bad death”) is more relevant than the political and social background of the dead in their former lives. This has been also observed about the ghosts of the Vietnam war.<sup>9</sup> The motif of the lottery number revealed by an invisible entity has been reported in other Southeast Asian societies and is not specific to the dead of the mass graves.

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<sup>9</sup> See Heonik Kwon (Kwon 2008: 27) who quotes the Vietnamese proverb: “There is no enmity in the cemetery”. In Vietnamese popular perception the dead forget everything about the past except the suffering caused by a violent death.

## 2. 2. The dead merged with their natural environment and “powerful places”

This popular living archaeology involves the perception that the dead have merged with their natural environment. It takes place in the Khmer popular perception of “powerful places” (កន្លែងមានកម្លាំង, មានបូរមី, *konlaeng mean komlang, mean boromey*<sup>10</sup>). “Powerful places” are sites that can have an influence – in a good or bad way – on the destinies and lives of the living. Some special kinds of trees, stones, objects, and events that took place there reinforce the aura of the place. I found many associations between all those elements and the dead in general. One of the most outstanding is the connection between trees and the dead. In one case, in Voat Luong monastery (Snam Preah commune), I found a huge and beautiful *ficus* tree (*daeum chrey*) that was said by the old lay ritual officiant (*achar*) to be “powerful” (Fig. 6a). The branches could not be cut without asking the tree’s permission and offering incense to it. A careless monastery chief even died for breaching this code. The “power” of the tree is manifested through various signs. For example, the monastery Superior now in charge, has found by chance a small silver statue without a head at the bottom of the tree. The “power” is reinforced by the old Buddhist statues that are left at the bottom of the tree (See Fig. 6b). Moreover, in the 1970s the monastery itself was perceived as having an “aura”, reinforced by the Superior’s personal gifts of healing and of predicting the future. This prevented the Khmer Rouge soldiers from destroying the sanctuary. It took me some time to understand that the tree grows on a stūpa that it entirely covers. The stūpa is perceived in Southeast Asia as the dead him/herself (Mus 1937). This reinforces the presence of the dead among the living. The power is also closely associated with Buddhism, since the *ficus* tree (*daeum chrey* tree) is believed to be the third Buddha Kassapa’s tree. This example shows the association between the dead (in the stūpa), a tree, an object (the silver statue which is, like the dead of the mass grave, lying in the ground), and the Buddhist field represented by the Buddhist statues, the monastery, and the stūpa itself (which is primarily the monument where the Buddha’s relics were kept and worshipped).

The “places manifesting aura” (*konlaeng mean boromey*) are often those where spirits, particularly land guardian spirits (*neak ta*), are merged with the earth. Like the stūpas that I have mentioned above, the land guardian spirits *neak ta* are “dead[s] present among the

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<sup>10</sup> *Boromey* (បូរមី) is derived from the pali word “*pāramī*”, which means the 10 Buddhist perfections leading to Nibbāna. François Bizot (Bizot 1994: 116) has convincingly drawn a genealogy from the initial Buddhist meaning to the Khmer popular meaning of “strength”, “power”, “sacred energy” emanating from a cult artefact.

living<sup>11</sup>”. Indeed, they are often the first land-clearers of the villages who are perceived by the villagers as ancestors. Moreover, the *neak ta* are often the dead who cannot be reborn for various reasons, just like the dead of the mass graves. Termite mounds are other signs of “power” (*boromey*) or of spirits’ presence which can be found either near land guardian spirits’ places or near some killing sites and mass graves (Figs. 7a and b).<sup>12</sup>

### 3. CONCLUSION

As anthropologist Choulean Ang has shown, the earth is a major element of the Khmer religious system.<sup>13</sup> By practicing archaeology in its largest sense – lay and popular as well as professional archaeology – Cambodia is able to plait a string between its past and its present. Beyond the majestic temples of Angkor, there are numerous ruins of temples and ancient buildings from various eras all over the country. The earth is enriched with many fragments of old statues and artefacts, both old and new, in some cases buried during times of war in order to prevent them from destruction and robbery. There are countless stories about people who find valuable objects in the ground and this is taken as a sign of luck or a good omen. The most famous narrative is that of Lady Penh who found Buddha statues near a hill (*phnom*) and founded the Cambodian capital there, the Hill of Lady Penh. These stories and practices related to a popular and sacred archaeology are integrated into a larger system of perceptions about “powerful places” full of *boromey*. In its contemporary sense, the *boromey* means a circulating energy emanating from special places. The anonymous dead of the Khmer Rouge genocide are part of this *weltanschauung* of places mixing past and present and following two rationales, the rationale of the earth, which absorbs and then “gives back” the artefacts, and the rationale of the sacred geography of the “powerful places” themselves.

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<sup>11</sup> Alain Forest, *Le culte des génies*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> I will give a detailed analysis of the similarity between the land guardian spirits *neak ta* and the dead of the mass graves (Guillou forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> See for example Ang (Ang 1995).

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