

# The Act of Constructing Memory at Cambodia's Bophana Center

By Jackson Brook

In a quiet Cambodian village in the province of Battambang, Heng Kuylang hacks a long bamboo sapling with a machete while reflecting on her decades of marriage to a man she has never loved.

Like countless Cambodians who came of age between 1975 and 1979, Heng and her husband were forced to marry each other under Pol Pot's genocidal Khmer Rouge regime, a violent and dystopian attempt to end capitalism and rebuild a new society free of Western influences. Approximately one in four Cambodians died in that effort, slain in the killing fields, starving to death in forced labor camps, or succumbing to disease in a society that had nixed modern medicine.<sup>1</sup>

*"They [the Khmer Rouge] told me that if I refused the [marriage] proposal, I'd be killed," Heng says. "I was scared and I agreed to it. However, I didn't know my husband's face and he didn't know me either."*<sup>2</sup>

After the forced marriage—a group ceremony consisting merely of holding hands and promising loyalty to each other—Khmer Rouge spies watched to make sure the marriage was consummated. Today, Heng and her husband are still together, though she admits she merely tolerates him.

*"I feel sad not knowing who to share my story with," Heng says. "I have always been angry with the Khmer Rouge ... Who knows we were victims who went through suffering of all kinds?"*<sup>3</sup>

Heng gave her testimony in a nearly seventeen-minute-long video recorded in 2017 as part of an ongoing initiative called Acts of Memory, produced by the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center and designed to collect testimony from Khmer Rouge survivors. Generally, the survivors in these videos were interviewed by younger family members. Approximately 100 video testimonies have been documented by Bophana Center.<sup>4</sup>

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Founded in 2006 by filmmakers Rithy Panh and Pannakar Ieu, Bophana Center has served as one of Cambodia's most important archival institutions, gathering and safeguarding thousands of hours of archival footage and responsible for the production of dozens of films and documentaries about the Khmer Rouge era and its legacy. The center has also trained and supported hundreds of young Cambodians in the art of filmmaking and the techniques of video production.<sup>5</sup>

The growth of Bophana Center parallels Cambodia's national movement toward justice and reconciliation. The same year that Bophana Center opened its doors, Cambodia and the United Nations began their joint efforts to prosecute leaders of the Khmer Rouge in a special judicial process known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

The ECCC served as an important instrument to document the crimes of selected Khmer Rouge leaders and mete out official prison sentences in an effort to bring justice and closure to survivors. Perhaps the most notorious of the ECCC's defendants was Comrade Duch, the director of the S-21 prison complex where thousands were tortured to death, who received life imprisonment in 2012 and passed away behind bars last year.<sup>6</sup>

But in focusing its efforts on prosecuting a handful of top Khmer Rouge cadres, the ECCC has been criticized by both Cambodian and international observers for providing a limited response that has failed to fully address the scope of the Khmer Rouge, particularly the crimes of lower-level perpetrators.<sup>7</sup> While the court ultimately found the defendants guilty—including Pol Pot's second-in-command, Nuon Chea, and the prominent leader Khieu Samphan—the magnitude of the individual pain and suffering wrought by the Khmer Rouge regime still lingers.<sup>8</sup> The Khmer Rouge controlled parts of Cambodia well before 1975 and did not formally surrender until the late '90s; even today, the residual trauma of the Khmer Rouge continues to affect Cambodian society and psyches across geographic, generational, and cultural boundaries, including in the diaspora communities.<sup>9</sup>

For example, Dr. Chhim Sotheara, a Khmer Rouge survivor and executive director of the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, has articulated the concept of *baksbat* (translated as "broken courage"), conceived of, clinically, as "a Cambodian idiom of distress" distinct from post-traumatic

stress disorder and encompassing a range of symptoms such as *kob yobal* ("buried ideas") and *dam-doeum-kor* ("planting a kapok tree"—"remaining mute"). Other observers have identified poverty, substance abuse, and domestic violence

Video no. 4. Heng Kuylang's Interview

Year: 2017, place: Kampot, Cambodia

Mrs. Heng speaks about her married life under the Khmer Rouge regime. On April 17, 1975, she was forced to evacuate from Phnom Penh to the countryside. In early 1976, she was forced into marriage in a cooperative in Battambang Province. She was informed only one day before the wedding date. There was no traditional ceremony. The couple held hands and made their marriage commitment statement before Khmer Rouge cadres. At night, there were spies underneath the newlyweds' house to check if they made love. If the couple didn't do so, they were punished.

**Source note:** All images (screen captures from the videos) and captions in this article are from the Bophana Center website at <https://tinyurl.com/3ak9d37w>.

***Bophana conceived of Acts of Memory as a means to allow students to interview survivors—particularly their own relatives . . .***

as current manifestations of trauma among Cambodian communities.<sup>10</sup>

To this day, it is common in rural areas for survivors to live near people who were directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of their family members during the Khmer Rouge era, typically with little to no accountability for the perpetrators. As Cambodian-American medical sociologist Dr. Leakhena Nou from California State University of Long Beach points out, it has been difficult to enable individual and societal recoveries when many of the people and communities that have been harmed still lack opportunities and resources to process and understand their own psychological and emotional trauma.<sup>11</sup>

Numerous academics have noted that the sweeping and tidy “state-sponsored narrative of national reconciliation” produced by the formal trials of the ECCC has left a gap in assessing the complicated legacies and individual experiences of Khmer Rouge survivors and perpetrators alike. However, there still exists space for alternative processes—especially in the arts—to negotiate with the past through collective memory projects like Bophana’s Acts of Memory, which, though receiving sponsorship from the state, are able to operate on a more open-ended and grassroots level.<sup>12</sup>

The precursor and inspiration for Bophana’s Acts of Memory project was an app designed to teach Khmer Rouge history to high school and university students. Until relatively recently, Khmer Rouge history was not officially taught in Cambodian schools, and then only as a minor portion of the curriculum. Meanwhile, much of the original scholarship on the Khmer Rouge era was produced by Western academics, published in English.

“Normally, young [Cambodian] people don’t really understand the development of the history of Cambodia,” explains historian Keo Duong.<sup>13</sup>

To make this history more clear and accessible, Bophana received the support of the ECCC to produce a dynamic mobile application on Khmer Rouge history, funded by New Zealand’s Rei Foundation Limited and the European Union via the United Nations Office for Project Services.<sup>14</sup> The multiyear effort, begun in 2016, led to an app available in English and Khmer synthesizing Cambodian history into an objective and comprehensive account of important events before, during, and after the Khmer Rouge, supplemented by original and archival films, art, and photographs produced and curated by Bophana. The app is classified as a reparations project associated with ECCC Case 002/02 and is available for use in schools nationwide.

To promote the app, Bophana Center staff went on a national tour, training 458 teachers on how to use the app in their classrooms and visiting 263 high schools to provide students with exposure to the app and enable them to learn independently. Following the success of the app—downloaded more than 60,000 times—Bophana decided it wanted to offer students an opportunity to take their newfound knowledge of Cambodian history and apply it to their own lives and communities.

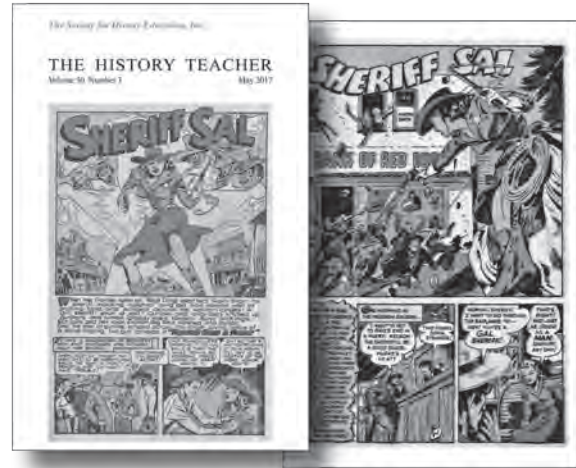
Bophana conceived of Acts of Memory as a means to allow students to interview survivors—particularly their own relatives—in video recordings that would then be integrated into the app and posted on Bophana’s website with English-language subtitles. The participants were some of the officially recognized victims of the Khmer Rouge (known as “civil parties”), those who had chosen to be part of the ECCC process (although the number of actual victims is certainly much higher).<sup>15</sup>

The concept for Acts of Memory originated from the personal experience of Bophana’s director, Chea Sopheap, who as the son and younger sibling of Khmer Rouge survivors recognized the value these interfamily conversations could have for all generations.

He recalls growing up in a household where his parents would chastise

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***“I talked a lot, but today’s young people did not believe,” says Chea Nouen, an elderly woman who survived a massacre. “I wonder if they believe now . . .”***



Video no. 22. Ms. Hab Kimhoeurn interviews her aunt, Mrs. Chea Nouen  
 Year: 2018, place: Siem Reap, Cambodia  
 Mrs. Chea Nouen was a victim who managed to survive the Phnom Troung Bat massacre. She was arrested and tortured twice by the Khmer Rouge, who accused her of betrayal and theft of chicken and rice from Angkar. She is the only one to have witnessed the Khmer Rouge executions at the Phnom Troung Bat massacre site.

him for not working hard enough—“If you did not work, then you would not get any food to eat,” his mother would say. Since he saw bountiful rice fields all around him as a child, Chea wanted to know why there had been no food to eat in the earlier days. This led to ongoing conversations in which his family members gradually shared the extent of the suffering they endured under the Khmer Rouge:

*As Chea explains: “I understood from that experience that the younger generation trying to understand and accept what happened to their parents is something that can relieve what that [the parents] have hidden in their heart for a long time.”<sup>16</sup>*

To this end, Chea expresses two main goals of the Acts of Memory program: first, to make sure that youth become more deeply aware of and understand on a personal level the history and impact of the Khmer Rouge era on their lives, motivating them to prevent mass violence from occurring again; and second, that their parents or relatives are able to engage in a healing process through initiating conversations and the sharing of personal memory.

The underlying assumption of Acts of Memory that personal storytelling can enact healing and empower the individual parallels the growing field of narrative exposure therapy. NET, as it is known, is an evidence-based treatment for trauma in which

individuals are asked to construct autobiographical narratives around their traumatic experiences.<sup>17</sup> Doing so links “hot” memories (strong, stressful emotions like the feeling of fear that continues to act upon the individual, divorced from the original experiences that caused them) and “cold” memories (organized and clear memories, such as what happened on a certain date, which do not elicit stress). At risk of oversimplifying, telling one’s story is thus a way of relinking “hot” and “cold” memories, such that the strong psychological reactions are reintegrated into the past, allowing these feelings to be properly contextualized and detaching them from the present. In simpler terms, it is a way for people to make sense of why they feel the way they feel. While Bophana’s interviewees were not specifically taught or engaging in NET (though they did receive trauma-informed training), it is worth noting that Chea’s intuition connected with an increasingly common (Western) approach for dealing with trauma.

Likewise, Cambodian scholars have long identified the need for more personal and intimate forms of social and emotional reconciliation on individual and community levels, beyond the national political reconciliation epitomized by both the ECCC and, earlier, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). UNTAC, the peacekeeping operation in Cambodia from 1992 to 1993, sought to include representatives from the Khmer Rouge in the newly formed government. Though peace would eventually be wrought, it was seen by many observers as coming at the cost of silencing trauma and unresolved grievances by survivors.

For one scholar, the more intimate forms of emotional reconciliation necessary to help in healing survivors and strengthening the foundations of Cambodia’s political stability require the “transformation of collective trauma ... [into] memory, so that all negative energy is not transferred down and onto the new generations”<sup>18</sup>—that is, to make the causes and experiences of pain and suffering visible and acknowledged in conversations, community initiatives, or national memorials. Only recently, for instance, were the forced marriages of the Khmer Rouge specifically classified as a crime and some survivors given the opportunity to speak about their experiences in court testimony.

The direct social and emotional reconciliation of intergenerational dialogues and their dissemination also served as a powerful antidote to

denial and skepticism of Khmer Rouge history, surprisingly common among Cambodian youth.

Some scholars such as the historian Keo Duong suggest this amnesia and cynicism arose as coping mechanisms by youth struggling to grapple with such great tragedy (“How could Khmer kill Khmer?”), or else the legacy of nationalist propaganda that sought to pin blame mostly on a small group of actors—“the Pol Pot clique”—implied to be allied with outside interests, namely the Vietnamese.<sup>19</sup>

At least some of the survivors speaking in Acts of Memory were open about their wariness in presenting their experience to the younger generation:

*“I talked a lot, but today’s young people did not believe,” says Chea Nouen, an elderly woman who survived a massacre. “I wonder if they believe now ...”*<sup>20</sup>

*“I think they believe now,” interjects her niece, the interviewer.*

There was also a particular sense of urgency to record testimonies of the elderly survivors such as Chea in Acts of Memory, as most of these Khmer Rouge survivors and perpetrators will be dead in the next two decades. For the medical sociologist Dr. Nou, failing to connect the traumas of the past to their ongoing reflections in the present—whether in unresolved individual mental health crises or in the broader contemporary political dysfunction of Cambodia—puts both survivors and their descendants at risk of not being able to understand a crucial aspect of their identities, even as it still acts upon them, shaping their lives and surroundings.<sup>21</sup>

However, it is important to recognize that many Cambodians practice traditional forms of healing that exist outside the Westernized conceptions of what constitutes coping with trauma. Buddhist rituals and ceremonies such as making merit for the departed (i.e., through offerings to monks), along with meditation, are among the ways many Cambodians process their experiences of living through the Khmer Rouge, coping with loss and suffering.<sup>22</sup>

Still, not all Cambodian families that survived the Khmer Rouge are as open and direct with each other about their experiences as Chea’s was, nor do these intergenerational dialogues necessarily occur spontaneously and productively.

Often, lessons about the Khmer Rouge were passed down through harsh directives, such as chastising children for perceived shortcomings like not eating all the rice in their bowls, explains Yim Sotheary, a psychotherapist and peace and conflict consultant.

“We emotionally and mentally reject that kind of learning; it’s taught in a form of blaming children,” says Yim, herself the daughter of Khmer Rouge survivors.<sup>23</sup>

To prepare the dozens of Cambodian youth—mostly in their early to late twenties—to engage in the recorded Acts of Memory conversations with their relatives, Yim and Dr. Alberto Perez Pereiro, a sociologist fluent in Khmer and affiliated with the National University of Singapore, provided training in interviewing and trauma-informed project planning.

Key to the training was the need to equip students with the ability to engage in a potentially fraught conversation with a family member and avoid traumatizing themselves or retraumatizing their loved ones.

The conversations were established and framed in such a way as to restore a sense of agency in survivors, for instance, allowing them the choice in where they wanted the interview conducted and through open-ended questions that allowed them to direct their own narrative and choice of topics.

## *Healing in Acts of Memory was conceived not simply as a one-time event, but as a life-long process.*



Video no. 13. Ms. Oem Sela and her father, Mr. Oem Savon  
Year: 2018, place: Svay Rieng

Mr. Oem Savon was about ten years old during the Khmer Rouge regime. He worked in the child mobile unit, tended cattle, picked up cow manure for fertilizer, etc. He later worked in the mobile unit, such as digging, building dikes, and so on. He lost four relatives during the Khmer Rouge due to severe torture, starvation and lack of medication for disease.



Documentary no. 14. Ms. Oem Sela and her mother, Mrs. Ngin Rina  
Year: 2018, place: Svay Rieng

Mrs. Rina was seven during the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge ordered her to pick up cow manure and help look after the little children with her grandmother. The other two older siblings were tending cattle. At the age of eight, she had to tend cattle in addition to regular works. Her mother was accused of immorality, and she was fined to pile up three meters with one meter deep of dirt a day and stay away from the family.

Importantly, and aligned with trauma-informed project planning guidelines, interviewers were encouraged not simply to fixate on trauma and suffering, but to seek out the fortitude and strength that allowed the survivor to endure these experiences. Healing in Acts of Memory was conceived not simply as a onetime event, but as a lifelong process.<sup>24</sup>

As such, the conversations took place in everyday settings, in the midst of household chores such as peeling fruit or chopping wood, in order to normalize the interaction and put the participants at ease.

However, despite the attempt to create a sense of normalcy, participants were urged to recognize that they were producing a recorded interview

*The conversations took place in everyday settings, in the midst of household chores such as peeling fruit or chopping wood . . .*



Video no. 1. *Path of Life*

Year: 2017, place: Battambang

After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, a wide gap in knowledge remains between those who survived the horrors of the regime and those who were born later. In families, intergenerational dialogue happens between parents and children. Such is the case of Mr. Im Bunchhoeun and his wife, Mrs. Soeun Chanthorn. They are Khmer Rouge survivors, who retrace their path from 1975 to 1979 with their children who were born after the Khmer Rouge.

and, depending on the context and subject matter, could risk incriminating themselves or divulging information they would rather not have shared in public.

“This is a member of your family, the person that loves you; this person might not be aware of the ethical or legal implications of what they’re saying, what they said,” Pereiro explains.<sup>25</sup>

The father’s eyes are closed as he reaches inward for his answer to his daughter’s question in their home in Svay Rieng. He has already recounted how he spent hours as a ten-year-old child under the Khmer Rouge picking up cow manure for fertilizer, digging fields, and constructing dikes in the massive agricultural expansion projects that saw millions laboring all day with barely any food to sustain them. His daughter has learned how her father was once forced to sleep beside corpses, fleeing massacres. Now, she asks him to compare his childhood to the lives of youth in the present day.

Says the father, Oem Savon:

*If I had to compare, these two lives were as different as heaven and earth. We had nothing back then, unlike today. We didn’t live with our family. In the morning, we split up to do physical work, always on our own. We didn’t go to school; there was no education, unlike today. There was no freedom, regarding food and education. It was so different from the present day.<sup>26</sup>*

His daughter, Oem Sela, later shares in front of her father and a public audience at a speech at Bophana Center that the experience brought the two of them closer together, offering her a greater appreciation of the struggles in his life:

*I knew about this history in general, but I did not know if my family members had any connection to these events. In fact, after the conversation with my father, my father told me that my grandfather and uncle were killed during these events.<sup>27</sup>*

In the recording of these harrowing discoveries, however, there is no attempt to force a resolution for the survivor participants and their kin;

rather, the two are given a space to begin a reflection on the events of their lives under the Khmer Rouge and their lasting repercussions. As with Oem Sela and her father, it often appears that the conversations are a start, rather than an end, for the interviewee and the interviewer to process the experience together, in some cases prompting a dialogue that will continue later, perhaps over the course of a lifetime, in private.

While it is hard to quantify healing in survivors or measure the direct and indirect impacts of these dialogues, they do appear to have rendered significant changes in certain individual lives. At a ceremony for Acts of Memory participants hosted at Bophana Center, some youth interviewees would later share that they had long been estranged from their family members, whether in the form of emotional distance or living in fear of physical abuse. One male student, who grew up in a household where his father drank and beat him, testified that through Acts of Memory, “I was able to sit down with my father and have a lot of discussions on many things that happened to him.” The conversations revealed information he had never known, he said, helping him to connect with his father and opening up an avenue

toward further conversations later on.<sup>28</sup>

In other cases, such as the testimony of Mrs. Heng and her forced marriage, the survivor appears to gain public recognition and acknowledgment of a situation that may have long been less visible and understood by her society.<sup>29</sup>

Before Mrs. Heng’s testimony, the Acts of Memory video records her husband preparing firewood, never looking at or speaking to the camera. After the audience hears her story, the audience watches the two cook fish together in silence, now with appreciation for the disturbing context framing their relationship and what would otherwise appear to be a banal domestic scene.

Yet the malaise is broken as viewers then see her sitting beside one of her new grandchildren, kissing the baby and smiling.

The audience, and Mrs. Heng, is left to linger in this ongoing juxtaposition, even as the video ends. While the conversations recorded in Acts of Memory are inevitably abbreviations of experiences, the complexities of each survivor’s life and testimony are still presented unhemmed, bound neither by all-encompassing trauma nor pithy closure.■

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Video #4. Heng Kuylang and her husband work together smoking fish. See Heng Kuylang's video/interview information on page 50.

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