

## Sacred Vows

By U. Sam Oeur  
Translated by Ken McCullough

MINNEAPOLIS: COFFEE HOUSE PRESS, 1998  
226 PAGES

From 1975 to early 1979, until the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot began a savage program of “purification” during which approximately 1.75 million Cambodians, or roughly a quarter of that country’s population, lost their lives. Now, although Pol Pot has long been driven from power, and history has seen the collapse of the Khmer Rouge as a fighting force, ordinary Cambodians are still confronting the legacy of that horrific period.

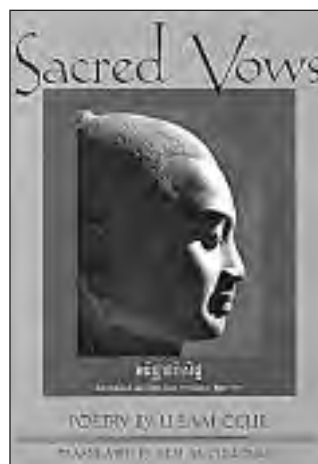
The Cambodian tragedy, and the story of America’s involvement in Indochina, can be more readily understood when students are given access to the voices of ordinary people, survivors of the holocaust who can tell their story in their own simple, direct words. Because the literature is so sparse, it is therefore highly significant that Coffee House Press released U. Sam Oeur’s book of poetry, *Sacred Vows*, in a special bilingual edition.

Oeur was born in 1936 into the large family of a prosperous farmer in the Cambodian province of Svey Rieng. In 1962, he enrolled in Cal State/Los Angeles to pursue a degree in teaching industrial arts. While there, he was encouraged by the then-director of the Asia Foundation, Mary Gray, to apply to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop for his MFA. Upon Oeur’s completion of his MFA, he returned to Cambodia, where he assumed a busy professional life, winning election to the National Assembly in 1972 and becoming Secretary General of the Khmer League for Freedom.

Shortly thereafter, the situation in Cambodia began to unravel and on April 17, 1975, Oeur and the more than 1.8 million inhabitants of Phnom Penh were driven into the countryside in a brutal Khmer Rouge attempt to rid the country of intellectuals and others “tainted” by foreign influence.

By a stroke of fate, Oeur survived, though he spent the next nine years in “six different concentration camps” and lost his twin daughters and numerous relatives. In 1992, when, through the strenuous intervention of concerned colleagues at the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program, Oeur managed to escape Cambodia and return to the United States, he “had a small suitcase full of tattered reference books and a few scraps of notes—the rest of the work was in his head.” Oeur had “destroyed his copy of his MFA thesis along with an eighty-page poetry manuscript.”

This book, however, is more than just a painstaking reconstruction of a manuscript that was lost. In what can only be seen as a supreme demonstration of moral will, Oeur forces himself to re-live his traumas in order to document the Khmer Rouge’s



four-year reign of terror, surely one of the great atrocities of history and one for which there has not yet been an accounting.

It is impossible to get the full flavor of Oeur’s poetry simply by reading what is on the printed page. Coffee House Press decided to present the English and Cambodian versions of the text on facing pages, a decision that is not particularly helpful. As the translator Ken McCullough, himself an accomplished poet and a graduate of the Iowa Creative Writing Program, states in his introduction, traditional Cambodian poetry is “chanted in a monotone.” Furthermore, he writes that Oeur’s poetry “has operatic qualities—narrative passages are chanted in a conversational tone, but passages which revolve around loss . . . are delivered in a manner comparable to the most emotionally charged aria.” One can only imagine, therefore, the power and resonance of the following lines when chanted in traditional Cambodian:

*Mothers left their babies with the elder women.  
The mothers’ breasts were full of milk, causing pain  
to the point of tears, while others had gone dry,  
yet the Red-Eyes shouted, “Two more acres!”  
By evening, when the mothers were released,  
some babies had starved to death, others were  
unconscious.  
The only way the mothers bore this burden  
was by raising a mournful wail . . .*

In a poem simply entitled “The Loss of My Twins,” Oeur describes the death of his daughters:

*. . . when my wife’s labor pains began . . .  
I felt so helpless. Two midwives materialized—  
one squatted above her abdomen and pushed,  
the other reached up into my wife’s womb and ripped  
the babies out.*

*What a lowing my wife put up  
when she gave birth to the first twin.  
Very pretty, just as I’d wished, but those fiends  
choked them and wrapped them in black plastic.*

*Two pretty girls . . .  
Buddho! I couldn’t do a thing to save them!*

Another poem, called “Water Buffalo, Cobra and the Prisoner of War,” recounts an incident at the Boh Leave Concentration Camp in November 1976. Oeur, the prisoner, is “hacking at

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trees, uprooting them, clearing bushes, transplanting rice” when he confronts a beautiful black cobra, to whom he addresses this anguished lament:

*You, cobra, are free,  
and if my flesh is truly your blood,  
plead my case with the spirits of this swamp  
to lead me to Buddham, Dhammam, and Sangham.*

*The cobra stared at me with loving kindness  
then lowered his head.*

*He slithered into the swamp to the south,  
and I went back to my work of surviving.*

Even in those poems documenting the horror, there are images of startling beauty, moments when the poet looks up from his suffering and momentarily transcends it. In the long, multisectioned poem called “The Wheel Turns,” in which Oeur describes his family’s eviction from Pnomh Penh, he writes:

*Swarms of Red-Eyes with AK-47s  
stood around my shack shouting  
“Pack stuff for Pnomh Chi!”  
I loaded an oxcart with the elderly and their gear  
we were herded northward while the moon rose like a  
disk of cheese.*

At times Oeur’s poetry has a documentary matter-of-factness. Encountering the woman who murdered his twin girls, he writes:

*At the first concentration camp  
we called on one of the women who had killed my twins,  
but I was too weak to take revenge.  
I tried to smile at her, but just walked past.  
We reached home, Chbar Ampeou,  
in mid-February, ‘79.  
Our house was empty—none of my books remained—  
just a single ragged page of Emily Dickinson.*

Oeur’s poetry should be looked at as a prime example of war literature, something that can be read beside such other school-book texts as *The Red Badge of Courage*. This is a brave and necessary book, one that opens a window into a time and culture that should never be forgotten, and one that may correct an unfortunate imbalance in world history texts that deal primarily with Western interpretations of war.

The first person voice is anguished and immediate: there is no denying its power to move. This is a book that should open up stimulating discussion in any high school classroom. Hopefully, it will stimulate students to pursue individual readings on a subject that is still not adequately explored. ■

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