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THE KHMER ROUGE PERIOD IN CAMBODIA

Readings: Syzmusiak, *The Stones Cry Out*; Ngor, *A Cambodian Odyssey*; May, *Cambodian Witness*; Criddle and Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*. Students are required to read at least two chapters of one of the first person accounts listed above.

Description: When the Khmer Rouge came to power in Cambodia in April 1975, they undertook a radical experiment in social engineering, emptying the cities and forcing the entire population into backbreaking agricultural labor with little food. The result was the death of at least 1.4 million people from a population of some 7-8 million. This lecture discusses the events of this period, readings are from first person accounts of survivors, and a film provides historical perspective.

Film: *The Prince and the Prophecy*, James Gerrand

Lecture notes:

Democratic Kampuchea, 1975-1979

Instant Revolution: The goal was to maximize production by everyone becoming farmers. The cities were emptied, everyone moved to agricultural cooperatives. Those moved from the cities, were called New People and viewed as enemies. Old people or base people were those who had lived in liberated zones before April 17, 1975, and were therefore more trusted. This became the most important social distinction for the rest of the regime.

Rice: In rural areas people grew rice as before, but with efforts made at double and triple cropping. Massive irrigation projects were undertaken, control of water to increase rice production was seen as central to economic development, everything else was unimportant. Not only city people suffered under these drives to dig canals and grow rice year round. Rural folks complained of a lack of food, and of high levels of violence. Moreover, while they grew rice as before, they were not allowed to eat the harvested rice, it disappeared. In some cases it was gathered and shipped for export, in other instances it was hoarded by leaders at different levels of the DK leadership. In some areas of the country production did not increase despite these

Herculean efforts because the irrigation systems were poorly designed and constructed. They were frequently destroyed by the rains they were designed to control. City people were often pushed into new settlement areas where they were told to clear jungle without tools, experience, inputs or knowledge of farming. Mortality rates were very high in these areas from exhaustion, starvation and disease.

Variation: There were regional variations in the experience of Cambodians under the DK regime, as well as changing patterns over the course of the regime. Executions of soldiers and others who supported the previous regime were high at the beginning of DK rule and then declined. Executions increased again dramatically in 1977 and 1978 as the regime began to turn in on itself, searching for traitors within its own ranks.

Certain policies that were applied variously across the country included:

- separation by age and sex, in some areas people lived with their work units, rather than as families
- communal dining, late in some places, early where Mam was
- purges and executions, in 1978 particularly bad in the eastern zone
- break up of the family, separation of extended families, taking children away to be raised by angkar, the organization, young adults sent off on mobile work teams
- children used to spy on adults
- marriages, as no longer arranged by parents, but by angkar. Some people were allowed to suggest or approve possible matches; others were matched to strangers.
- effects of starvation, breaks down the loyalties of groups, even families

The Destruction of Buddhism: Monks were disrobed or killed. Destruction of temples, desecration, smashing of images and other sacred objects. Destroying of spirit houses. Could not practice rituals. A generation grew up without religion.

Replaced by Marxist ideology. Propaganda and self-criticism sessions filled many evenings after exhausting labor. One crime was memory sickness thinking too much about what things had been like in your life before. Thinking too much about the past was evidenced by keeping pictures or other objects from life before the revolution. The idea was to start from nothing, from zero.

Living in Constant Fear: People were constantly lied to get them to march to their deaths-- get on the trucks, march down the path--supposedly to go to a new work site or new housing, but really being taken to be killed. People lived with the constant fear of being taken away, and with not knowing if people who had been taken away were alive or dead.

Obviously DK was not a solid monolith, there are many stories of bribery, favoritism, supplementing rations by trading gold, gems or clothes. But most Khmer were not so lucky.

Health Problems: from malnutrition, starvation, overwork and disease. Almost no modern medical treatments were available. What little did exist, like quinine to prevent malaria, was very difficult to procure. Many women suffered from a condition brought on by bearing many children followed by extreme heavy lifting that literally caused their uteruses to collapse and drop out of their bodies. Normally this would require immediate surgery, but no medical care was available. People suffered swollen arms and legs from protein and salt deficiencies. Terrible teeth problems.

Reversals: Cambodians talk about DK as a time of reversals in the social order. Measures were taken to give the appearance of uniformity to the population, black clothing, short haircuts, etc., but in reality the soldiers and cadre were the new elite. They ate well, lived in relative comfort. The old people, uneducated rural peasants had power over new people, former urban elite. Many of the former found this nearly incomprehensible. Monks were eliminated. People tried to hide their formal education, former positions of status, military rank, connections to the royal family. Age was also reversed as a marker of status, very young children taken to be trained as soldiers--the only ones considered pure. Elderly, who were previously accorded great respect, were cast aside by DK as useless, unproductive. Gender roles also shifted. Young women could be neary, female soldiers and female group leaders. Language changed with these shifts, deleting words from daily vocabulary that used to mark status, comrade replaces sir, using peasant terms for some basic words.

In our study of cultures of Southeast Asia, these changes raise issues about the loss of culture and the loss of humanity. Selflessness is the Cambodian ideal, generosity. DK survival required hiding food, lying, silence, closing in on yourself to protect even your own thoughts. Robbing people of their lives.

- no religious activities
- no ties to natal village
- weakened ties to kinsmen
- no patron-client ties
- even age not available as a compass
- in a way stripped of their ethnicity?