

## **“Dig a hole and bury the past in it”: reconciliation and the heritage of genocide in Cambodia**

**By Colin Long and Keir Reeves**

We first visited Anlong Veng in November 2005, arriving from Thailand through the border crossing at Sa Ngam, on a drizzly, surprisingly cool day. The border crossing is a ramshackle collection of huts and small traders' stalls lining a muddy path. It has a distinct backwoods, isolated feel, understandable given it was only opened for legal transit in November 2003, and links Thailand's Sisaket province to one of the most under-developed areas in Cambodia, which was until 1999 controlled by remnants of the Khmer Rouge. The presence of sand-bagged machine gun nests on the Thai side of the border only adds to the sense of entering a wild, possibly dangerous place.

Given that the only other people crossing the border when we arrived were Cambodians in the back of pick-ups, heads swathed in *krama*, the ubiquitous scarf of Cambodian peasants, our presence caused some bemusement among the border guards, especially since we were on foot. A Cambodian border policeman offered us a lift (for a fee) to Anlong Veng, some 15kms away, and since there was no other obvious means of going any further (certainly no public transport), we gratefully accepted.

The border crossing is at the top of the Dangrek escarpment, near the remains of a number of residences of former Khmer Rouge leaders, including Pol Pot, a military post of the area's former Khmer Rouge commander, Ta Mok, and Pol Pot's grave site itself. The road to Anlong Veng is currently under construction, and on this day was little more than a mud slide, negotiable by only the most skilled drivers in four wheel drives; fortunately our border policeman was one of those.

Our impressions of the frontier crossing, and our perilous descent down the mountain, created a sense of anticipation that bordered on foreboding which was dramatically heightened when we stopped at Ta Mok's house on the outskirts of Anlong Veng town. Ta Mok was, during the period of Khmer Rouge control of Cambodia (the period of Democratic Kampuchea), a member of the Standing Committee of the Party Central Committee and the Secretary of the southwest zone and later of the north/central zone, as well as Chief of the General Staff (Fawthrop and Jarvis, 2005: 264). After the Vietnamese ousted the Khmer Rouge in 1979, Khmer Rouge forces retreated to six areas mostly bordering Thailand, from where they received Thai, Chinese and western support to continue an insurgency that wreaked immense destruction on Cambodia until the final demise of the movement in 1999. Ta Mok, whose reputation for ruthlessness is reflected in the moniker 'The Butcher', took control of the band of mountains to the north of Siem Reap, with his headquarters at Anlong Veng. As other Khmer Rouge strongholds fell or surrendered to government forces in the 1990s, the remaining Khmer Rouge leaders, including Pol Pot and Democratic Kampuchea defence minister, Son Sen, joined Ta Mok at Anlong Veng.

Here the Khmer Rouge leaders, increasingly isolated and desperate, fell on each other for one last time. Nothing if not consistent, the small band of surviving leaders embarked on a final round of violent purges in 1997: Pol Pot ordered the murder of Son Sen and his family, which in turn sparked Mok to arrest the former Brother Number One and subject him to a people's court. Duly convicted, Pol Pot was sentenced to house arrest and died the following year in a hut near today's border crossing (Short, 2004: Ch. 12). His body was hastily cremated and his ashes heaped into a pile, with a scrappy corrugated iron roof to protect it from the rain, and bottles planted in the earth as a border. It is a tawdry monument to one of the greatest murderers of the twentieth century.

Ta Mok's house is the most intact and substantial of the 28 tourist-historical sites in the Anlong Veng area. In fact the house compound consists of three structures on a man-made isthmus jutting into a lake that Mok created by damming a stream. At the entrance to the isthmus is the Anlong Veng Tourism Office, housed in a wooden hut and infrequently open.

Our vehicle jolted to a halt in a grove of trees beside Ta Mok's house. Several young men sidled up to us, one engaging our driver while another sought four dollars from us as an entrance fee. One of the men was soon identified to us as a guide and we followed him towards the buildings. Just in front of the main house is a large open-sided shed with a concrete floor, where several people squatted in conversation, casting us frowning glances. Here, too, were two small steel cages, recognisable from news footage and photos in books as the 'tiger cages' used by the Khmer Rouge as jungle prison cells (on a subsequent visit a guide confirmed that they had been used to hold people, but only 'traitors' to the Cambodian nation).

As we entered the house a most extraordinary scene developed. A mini-van pulled up amongst the trees, disgorging a wedding party – bride, bridesmaid, groom, best man and groomsman – all clad in improbably impeccable white. Our guide ushered us into Ta Mok's house. The place is a rough two storey concrete and timber structure with tiled floors and almost devoid of furniture. In fact its only decoration consisted of four naïve murals which betray much of the essence of the Khmer Rouge's ideology. On the first floor, an end wall features a peeling mural of Angkor Wat portraying an idyllic Khmer society against the backdrop of a lurid sun-rise. Upstairs a colourful map of Cambodia painted on a wall shows the country divided into provinces; neighbouring Thailand and Laos are indicated, but southern Vietnam, what is known to the Cambodians as Kampuchea Krom and was, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, part of the Cambodian kingdom, is a grey, unidentified wasteland. Flanking the map are other murals, one of a jungle scene and another of what is taken to be the nearby temple of Preah Vihear. The absence of readily-identifiable ideological symbols seems at first glance rather odd, until one remembers that, particularly in its latter days, the Khmer Rouge tried to portray itself above all else as the defender of an historic Khmer essence (hence Angkor Wat, the temple and the jungle) against the depredations of aggressive foreigners – chiefly the Vietnamese.

We noticed the wedding party entering the house where they began to pose in front of the murals for photographs. We asked the bride if we could take some photos of her too, but she turned away unsmilingly, and the party continued to ignore us. A number of men loitered apparently aimlessly about the house. They were clearly not visitors, but what exactly was their association with the site was unclear. Their presence was somewhat unsettling.

At this instant something akin to a tempest sprung up, slashing across the lake and driving sheets of rain horizontally through the open windows of the house. The bizarreness of the scene – a photoshoot of a wedding party in the former house of a man in prison awaiting trial on charges of genocide, sullen men loitering, and an atmospheric sound and light show courtesy of the weather – provided an interpretative experience of this site of pain and shame that no museum curator could ever hope to create.

The storm quickly passed, and within minutes the grey tranquillity of this strange Cambodian day had returned.

‘Why’, we asked our guide, ‘would people wish to have their wedding photos taken in such a place?’

‘Because’, he replied, ‘they think that Ta Mok was a good man, who provided much for the local people’.

‘And what’, we asked, ‘do you think of Ta Mok?’

‘Yes, he was a good man’.

‘And do you know where he is now?’

‘Yes, he is in Tuol Sleng prison’.<sup>1</sup>

Our sense of unease was rapidly turning to a feeling of repulsion as we realised that we were surrounded by unreconstructed former Khmer Rouge cadre – had the wedding party, we wondered, so resplendent in white in an area otherwise caked in a brown layer of mud and poverty, been the children of high-ranking Khmer Rouge leaders who still live in the area?

We examined the rest of the site quickly, not daring to enter the foul-stinking rooms under the houses – were they garages or bomb shelters, as our guide suggested, or prison cells, as our driver thought? – and, the feeling of ghoulishness becoming overwhelming, decided to leave.

Does Anlong Veng, we pondered as our driver cheerfully raced us towards Siem Reap, offer anything worthwhile to the visitor seeking understanding and commemoration of the Khmer Rouge genocide?

Subsequent visits to Anlong Veng produced similar experiences: the same sense of a tragic past being exploited with little thought or care, the void created by a lack of interpretation filled by uneducated former Khmer Rouge with their own highly distorted understanding of Cambodian history. The questions inevitably arise: why is Anlong Veng being developed as a tourist attraction? Does the preservation of these former Khmer Rouge sites help in

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<sup>1</sup> In fact Ta Mok died in captivity just seven months after this visit, apparently from a stroke.

the understanding and commemoration of Cambodia's traumatic history? Why do we want to preserve such sites? To prevent forgetting? To aid in reconciliation? Can sites like Anlong Veng perform the latter role? In traumatised societies what is most important – justice or reconciliation? If the latter, does the preservation of sites of trauma help in achieving reconciliation?

In the most prosaic sense, the development of Anlong Veng as a tourist-historic site is part of an attempt by the Cambodian government to reintegrate the area back into a nation finally at peace. It is part of an economic development program that has also seen the area opened up by roads, especially the one linking the town to Cambodia's tourist epicentre at Siem Reap, the location of the Angkor World Heritage site, and the creation of a border crossing with Thailand. It is envisaged that Anlong Veng will eventually sit astride an overland route from Bangkok to Siem Reap.

Although Anlong Veng is only a few hours by road from Siem Reap, its isolation from the project to rebuild the national community after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime in the face of the 1978 Vietnamese invasion should not be under-estimated. Together with Pailin and other Khmer Rouge holdouts until the 1990s, Anlong Veng still remains tenuously integrated into the nation. Ex-Khmer Rouge officials retain positions of authority in all former Khmer Rouge strongholds, and a large proportion of Anlong Veng's population consists of ex-Khmer Rouge cadre or soldiers. If the development of the town's heritage sites is intended to reintegrate it into the national historical discourse, it is not very successful.

If the Cambodian People's Party Government in Phnom Penh hopes to reintegrate Anlong Veng into the nation, what message does it want portrayed through the area's heritage sites, and is that message being adequately conveyed? Here we must briefly touch on a debate that is of overwhelming importance to contemporary Cambodia: the debate about the correct response to the Khmer Rouge (Linton, 2004). Which is more important to contemporary Cambodia – justice or reconciliation? Since its earliest days, the PRK regime, and subsequently the government of the CPP, offered the hand of reconciliation to Khmer Rouge who were prepared to abandon opposition to the government and renounce their involvement with Pol Pot's forces.

Large numbers of low level Khmer Rouge soldiers and cadre took up the opportunity, the desertions increasing rapidly into the 1990s as Prime Minister Hun Sen offered amnesty to remaining Khmer Rouge leaders if they brought their forces back into the national fold. Although Pol Pot himself was never offered amnesty, other extremely high-ranking Khmer Rouge leaders benefited from a policy that offered to forget their pasts if they 'sincerely reformed' and 'created feats on behalf of the Revolution' (that is, on behalf of the PRK regime) (from the decree-law establishing a 'Revolutionary People's Trial of the Genocide Crime of the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary Clique', cited in Heder, 2002: 190).

On the surface the amnesty policy appears to have been very successful in breaking the back of the Khmer Rouge insurgency, and the organisation, deserted by most of its leaders and their troops, finally collapsed in 1999. But considerable disquiet remains, both inside Cambodia, and particularly within the international human rights advocacy system, about the absence of any judicial accounting for the crimes of the Khmer Rouge (Linton, 2004; Fawthrop and Jarvis, 2005). By abandoning the Khmer Rouge in its dying days, despite decades of service to its murderous program, leaders such as Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan have managed to avoid any punishment for their actions. Hun Sen has argued that achieving peace and national 'reconciliation' is more important than a strict judicial accounting and punishment for perpetrators. Just what Hun Sen means by 'reconciliation', however, is rather problematic. His definition appears to consist of 'integration' of the former Khmer Rouge back into the nation and the absence of armed conflict. Having achieved this reconciliation, he believes that the proper treatment of the country's traumatic history is to 'dig a hole and bury the past in it' (Linton, 2004, p. 12). Given that Cambodia's history of genocide is most starkly manifested in the familiar images of exhumed mass graves, Hun Sen's words are insensitive at best, somewhat sinister at worst.

In deciding how to deal with the Khmer Rouge past, the government has paid scant attention to the wishes of the Cambodian people. Surveys have consistently shown a desire on the part of ordinary Cambodians for some sort of trial process. In contrast to this, the government's attitude to the Khmer Rouge has been confusing for ordinary Cambodians. On the one hand they are told that the Khmer Rouge were responsible for the most heinous crimes. On the other they are told that reconciliation with them is the price of peace, even if 'reconciliation' means digging a hole and burying the past in it (Linton, 2004).

Confusion about approaches to the past is replicated in sites of remembrance in Cambodia. The major site of commemoration is Tuol Sleng, the Khmer Rouge prison and torture centre in suburban Phnom Penh, and its associated killing field at Choeung Ek, on the edge of the city. Both sites are powerfully confronting. Both were established as places of commemoration by the Vietnamese when they displaced the Khmer Rouge in 1979. One of their very clear functions was to display to a world – except for the Soviet Union and its allies – that was opposed to Vietnam's intervention the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime that the Vietnamese had brought to an end. Just as the PRK and CPP would subsequently do, the interpretation at the sites sought to blame a small group of leaders – the 'Pol Pot-Ieng Sary Clique' – for the corruption of Cambodian communism and the descent into genocidal madness. In more recent years this interpretation has become more nuanced in Tuol Sleng at least, where new exhibits explore the thoughts and motivations of low-level perpetrators as well as victims. The earlier, simplistic message about the culpability of a small clique of leaders has been opened up to a degree, and the full tragedy of the Cambodian trauma has been exposed in a way that is more shocking and distressing than the propagandistic treatment that characterised the site's early interpretation, and that still characterises the interpretation at Choeung Ek.

Nevertheless, the stark brutality of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek leave the visitor in no doubt that these are sites of commemoration of the victims of a great crime. In a sense Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek continue to bear witness to the crimes of the Khmer Rouge that largely continue to go unpunished, their raw exposure of the brutality of the Cambodian communists demanding some form of accountability. In a country where the history of the Khmer Rouge period is virtually not taught in schools, such sites can also play an extremely important public education role (Fawthrop and Jarvis, 2005: 146-147; Kiernan, 2004).

As places of interpretation and commemoration of the Khmer Rouge past the sites at Anlong Veng are far more problematic. Here Hun Sen's strategy of 'reconciliation' and 'integration' plays out in an utter failure of interpretation and a complete surrender of moral responsibility for commemoration of the past to the exigencies of development and reintegration of the Anlong Veng region into the nation.

We are conscious here that our reading of the Anlong Veng sites diverges substantially from that of Timothy Dylan Wood (2006), who has perhaps spent more time than anyone studying the Anlong Veng area. Wood believes that the Ministry of Tourism views the tourist-historical sites at Anlong Veng as a resource for economic development of the town, and the reintegration of the area's former Khmer Rouge soldiers and their families.<sup>2</sup> However, at the same time, he argues, the Ministry seeks to impose 'a singular, true representation of history as well as its (authentic) restoration/reconstruction'.

The problem with this interpretation is the lack of evidence on the ground. The profound problem with Ta Mok's house, with Pol Pot's grave, is the lack of adequate interpretation, and the lack of control over the messages being conveyed at these sites. The visitor does not get a sense of victor's history. The guides do not stick to the official narrative and there is no alternative source of interpretation: no signage, no leaflets, no guidebook. Can anyone imagine being given a guided tour of Hitler's bunker by former SS soldiers and being told by them that Hitler was a good man because he got the trains running on time? Of course not. But that is, in effect, the closest parallel to what the visitor is expected to accept at Anlong Veng.

Anlong Veng seems to us to demonstrate, not the government's 'keen ability to manage its former enemy', as Wood claims, but the extent to which Hun Sen's CPP regime has abandoned the search for justice and truth in order to achieve its version of reconciliation and peace. Integrating Anlong Veng into the nation through tourism development, with little attempt to control the interpretation of the area's historic sites, serves Hun Sen's purpose of bringing the former Khmer Rouge back into the national fold, but without any demand that they acknowledge guilt or pay penance.

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<sup>2</sup> Wood (2006: 5) reports that the area was once home to 16,000 Khmer Rouge troops and their families.

The Hun Sen regime's desire to achieve its version of reconciliation and peace is an important explanation of the disjuncture between what Wood sees as the Ministry of Tourism's desire to control the interpretation of Anlong Veng's historic sites and the reality of their interpretation. But there are other factors in operation here too.

The failure of interpretation, as we see it, indicates the extent to which Cambodia remains, in fact, a fractured and fragmented country. Former Khmer Rouge leaders continue to exercise considerable power in a number of regions, and at all levels of government. Hun Sen's strategy of ignoring individuals' former activities with the Khmer Rouge so long as they now pledge allegiance to the CPP has encouraged this lack of accountability for past actions and the persistence of regional autonomy. While the Ministry of Tourism may have a clear sense of how it wants the Anlong Veng sites interpreted, its ability to implement its vision in a far-flung province inhabited by substantial numbers of former Khmer Rouge is obviously lacking. Lack of expertise and funding clearly also restrict the Ministry.

One of the fundamental failures of interpretation practice demonstrated in Anlong Veng has to do with the lack of understanding of the difficulties associated with perpetrator sites as sites of commemoration. By 'perpetrator sites' we mean places associated purely or primarily with the perpetrators of pain and suffering – Hitler's bunker, the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky in Moscow, Stalin's dacha, Saddam's palaces – rather than places associated with their victims – Auschwitz, Tuol Sleng, gulag camps, Robben Island, the Berlin Wall, to name a few. Given that all heritage practice involves the making of judgements about what is worthy of preservation and what stories are to be told through preservation, we see no difficulty in stating that if the purpose of heritage preservation in the case of places of pain and shame is to commemorate the victims, then there is little role for the preservation of perpetrator sites.

We believe that the sites at Anlong Veng fall clearly into the category of perpetrator sites but that the parameters within which we must interpret their meaning are clear and agreed by virtually all parties: their relationship to the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. Do these sites further understanding of the Cambodian genocide or help in the commemoration of the victims? The answer, we believe, is no. There seems to be a clear understanding in other cases where commemoration of the victims of crimes of the nature and scale perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge is seen as the *raison d'être* of heritage preservation that perpetrator sites are inappropriate commemorative sites – Germany is the best example (Fulbrook, 2002). The failure to recognise this in Cambodia is the result of the confused approach to historical accountability and justice that filters from the top down (in fact, as Linton (2004) shows, many ordinary Cambodians are much less confused about the need for a proper accounting for the past than their political leaders).

The failure also derives from poorly developed understandings of heritage interpretation and preservation practice. The problem in Anlong Veng is that

the imperative of economic development through tourism has led to the hasty and ill-considered incorporation of historic sites into a heritage tourism strategy which Cambodia is not professionally equipped to manage. The national government's desire to stimulate development in the Anlong Veng region and thus to reintegrate it into the nation is entirely laudable. However, the choice of tourism development as a primary strategy reveals the extent to which tourism has become embedded in international development thought as a panacea for developing countries. In fact, the reliance on tourism reflects the lack of legitimate development options open to struggling countries like Cambodia in the context of an international system strongly loaded against them, and the lack of innovative thinking and commitment to meaningful and sustainable development exhibited by political elites and international development organisations. The contrast with the treatment of Nazi-related sites in Germany demonstrates that even in the treatment of genocidal histories there are great disparities between the wealthy and the poor.

The Anlong Veng sites raise some difficult questions about the purpose and nature of heritage interpretation and preservation. Contemporary interpretation practice, at least in the west, has tended towards the opening up of meanings, the rejection of didacticism and the promotion of multiple stories and self-discovery. But how appropriate is this approach in cases involving places of pain and shame?

Wood seems to fall into the relativist trap with his concern for the voices of Anlong Veng locals to be heard in the interpretation of the Khmer Rouge sites:

The Anlong Veng museum project provides a glimpse into the logic underlying aspects of government development initiatives. First, the processes by which the government and its various affiliates have amassed data and pursued representations (by tour guides) demonstrates the fixing of a particular narrative, operating as 'truth' and achieved at the expense of the perspectives and participation of locals who were actively involved with the ousted forces of Democratic Kampuchea (Wood, 2006:).

The involvement of locals in development projects is quite appropriate in normal circumstances, as most international aid agencies now recognise. But this politically correct approach to development practice is simply inappropriate in the interpretation of the Anlong Veng sites. Why should interpretation take into account local perspectives if locals believe that Ta Mok and Pol Pot were good men? Do former Khmer Rouge have the right to have their understanding of history seriously considered in interpreting the Cambodian past? How are the perspectives of former Khmer Rouge to be weighed against the perspectives of other Cambodians who suffered not only because of the actions of the Khmer Rouge leaders, but of those Anlong Veng locals who followed those leaders?

Our conclusion, which does not come easily to us as heritage professionals committed to our field and to the power of heritage as a force for remembrance, is that preservation of the Anlong Veng sites does little or

nothing to further understanding or commemoration of Cambodia's tragic and painful past. To wipe them from the heritage and tourism map would not be to encourage a culture of forgetting. Tuol Sleng and other such sites, together with the everyday reality of Cambodian trauma and, hopefully, the trials of the remaining leaders, ensure that the Khmer Rouge period will not be forgotten. Forgetting Anlong Veng's Khmer Rouge sites, though, will contribute to a culture of true reconciliation by ensuring that the message about the Khmer Rouge period is clear and untrammelled by moral and historical relativism, by emphasising above all else the voices of the victims and silencing the perpetrators once and for all.

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