Trajectories of memory embodied in memorial and historical sites


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Trajectories of memory embodied in memorial and historical sites

John Kleinen

S cholars, artists and eyewitneses participated at a conference in Utrecht in 2017 to discuss the history of memory embodied in Tuol Sleng, a Phnom Penh secondary school converted into a special interrogation and execution place by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. They discussed the memorial museum itself, but also artifacts, pictures, movies, theatrical productions and paintings that contain tangible and intangible traces of the Khmer Rouge’s mass slaughtering, which turned Cambodia into an enacted utopia between 1975 and 1979, accompanied by a Vietnamese cameraman. The prison guards left behind when the Vietnamese army and a small group of defected Khmer troopers. A small unit of prisoner number 462, a mother and her child; she too had her name returned to her. Chan Kim Srun became the symbol of the Pol Pot regime. The thousands of photographs made by the Khmer Rouge in the prison became an impressive memorial for the victims who were executed 15 kilometers from Tuol Sleng/S-21 at Choeung Ek. The prison was the summit of a system of 197 interrogation centers that together formed the center of the Killing Fields of Cambodia. In Tuol Sleng alone an estimated number of 18,000 people were interrogated, tortured and killed. Just a dozen male prisoners and four children survived. Pol Pot’s reign of terror between 1975 and 1979 was accountable for the death of at least 1.7 million people. Nowadays Tuol Sleng is open to the public as a genocide museum. It plays a role in the painful ‘heritage’ left by the former regime, for imagining a past that is remembered, but nearly lost. As proof of an atrocity it tells a narrative that is elsewhere created. The contributors of this special issue reflect upon this legacy in a kaleidoscopic way. Important is that local voices are included here, like the former and present directors of the museum, Chey Sopheara and Chhay Visoth, who give the reader an intrinsic Cambodian perspective upon a painful past. They also tell of the laborious way the Khmer Rouge crushed innocence and reduced people to dust. The display of photographs also played a pivotal part in the outreach work of the extraordinary chambers in the courts of Cambodia (ECCC). While the verdicts of judicial cases against the main perpetrators might have been a deception for many who suffered from the Pol Pot regime, the criminal
process is, like Sarah Williams argues in her contribution “only one dimension of an ongoing process of remembering” (p.75). Julia M. Fleischman, however, suggests that the results of forensic medical anthropology in the form of human remains are used quite late during the trials of former Khmer Rouge leaders. Her findings are supported by the contributions of Chhay Visoth (about explicit graffiti) and Magali An Berthon (about textile and clothing), who also make an appeal not to dismiss these forms of evidence.

This special issue dealing with the Cambodian genocide—still a term that requires explanation—also gets its weight from the visual material it presents (including archive photos of the museum itself) and the various interviews the editors held with Cambodian and non-Cambodian artists, who were asked to share details of their relationship with Tuol Sleng and the ways in which their work is influenced by the past.

The interview by Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier with American anthropologist Eve Zucker concludes the section with a fascinating account of memory practices of villagers who try to cope with the horror in their community. It also reflects on the fieldwork she conducted in Cambodia—an experience she recounts in her book Forest of Struggle: Morailties of Remembrance in Upland Cambodia (2013)—as she tracked the recovery of a village community in the southwest of the country, a site that was a Khmer Rouge base and battleground for nearly thirty years. The interview opens up the question of the remembrance of Khmer Rouge atrocities beyond Tuol Sleng and the urban environment. It points to a nationwide traumatic landscape, which in turn helps to better understand the role of the museum in today’s Cambodian memory politics, and to imagine alternative forms of memorialization of a historical period that continues to haunt generations of Cambodians. This closing paper reminds the reader of the limited space most of the authors have contributed to debates about theoretical issues. Ever since Jean Lacouture’s inapt verdict about the Khmer Rouge as an expression of tropical fascism, allusions to the Gulag or Laogai systems have been scarce. As said, the Khmer Rouge’s mass slaughtering as a means to create an enacted utopia, inspired by Maoist China, comes closer to realities than the many references to Nazi-Germany. An approach as proposed by Dutch sociologist Abraham de Swaan in his book The Killing Compartments (2015) might be a way-out to understand and to compare the tragedy that struck the inhabitants of Cambodia between 1975 and 1979.