

Failure Through Neglect: The Women's Policies of the Khmer Rouge in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

From 1970 to 1979, revolution brought civil war and the radical rule of the Khmer Rouge (KR) communists to Cambodia. This paper uses interviews with former Khmer Rouge female cadres, KR documents and relevant secondary sources to evaluate the KR's policy on women during this period. The author contends that this policy represented a literal interpretation of Frederick Engels's theories on women and the family, as the Khmer Rouge attempted to sever the bonds of the Cambodian family. This study also compares the Khmer Rouge's approaches to women's issues and the recruitment of women, with that of the communist revolutionary movement in China. This comparison reveals that the Khmer Rouge's women's programme lacked the development, sophistication and organization of the Chinese movement and failed to attract women to its revolutionary cause. Four interconnected factors are specified for this failure on the part of the Khmer Rouge: 1) poor recruitment strategies; 2) the forced break up of families; 3) ineffective indoctrination of female recruits; 4) and a total failure to formulate an effective role for women in the revolution.

I. INTRODUCTION

“During the struggle, we encountered many difficulties. For example, cadres separated from their families and not ideologically firm would sometimes decide to run back to their families and away from the revolution.”¹

-Nuon Chea (“Brother Number Two,” Prime Minister, Democratic Kampuchea) in 1978.

“Because of missing home, I ran to my parents often. I always missed my parents and always wanted to escape to return home.”²

“I reached home five times. One time, I was sick – shaking, cold, hot temperature. They [the Khmer Rouge] put me in a hammock and carried me back.”³

-Sum Sreng (former female Khmer Rouge cadre) in 2002.

INTRODUCTION

The Cambodian revolution was notable for many unfortunate reasons, most conspicuously its incredible cruelty and destructiveness to human lives.⁴ From 1970 to 1979, countless Cambodians suffered terribly and millions died as the country was engulfed in violence, first during a vicious civil war (1970-1975), and then, under Democratic Kampuchea (DK), the infamous regime of the ultra-radical Khmer Rouge (KR) communists (1975-1979). Their leader was Saloth Sar, better known by his *nom de guerre*, Pol Pot.

Also notable was the lack of ideological support for the revolution amongst those in whose name it was supposedly being fought – the Cambodian peasants, who composed

¹ Nuon Chea, “Statement of the Communist Party of Kampuchea to the Communist Workers’ Party of Denmark,” July 1978, (accessed 19 February 2003); available from http://www.bigpond.com.kh/users/dccam.genocide/posting/Nuon_Chea's_Statement.htm.

² Sum Sreng, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

³ Sum Sreng, interview by author, 18 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁴ The Cambodian revolution is described here as covering the entire 1970-79 period. The Khmer Rouge used the language of war and revolution even after coming to power in 1975, and the sweeping changes the movement attempted to implement were, by most definitions, nothing short of revolutionary in themselves.

eighty-five to ninety percent of the Cambodian population.⁵ The Khmer Rouge's leaders wanted to transform Cambodia into an autarkic, agrarian utopia. Although they founded their revolutionary plans on anticipated peasant support, these plans rested on a warped perception of rural Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge romanticized peasants, idealizing their work ethic, their morality, and their commitment to an austere way of life. They also inflated peasant grievances, exaggerating their exploitation and their potential for revolution. As James C. Scott has pointed out, however, peasants are essentially risk-averse: they will tolerate an exploitive system if it conforms to their "moral economy" – "their notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation" – and satisfies their basic needs, guaranteeing them a relatively stable level of minimum subsistence.⁶ Such was the pre-war perception of the majority of Cambodian peasants, whose lives were difficult, but not penurious.

Peasants were attracted to the revolution, in fact, by their reverence for Norodom Sihanouk, Prince of Cambodia. He and his supporters formed an alliance with what the Prince himself had dubbed "*les Khmers Rouges*" – the Cambodian communists, who had been his sworn enemy until the rightist coup in March 1970 that ended his long rule and brought US-backed General Lon Nol to power. The alliance was called the National United Front of Kampuchea (NUFK).⁷ In the civil war that followed, most peasants fought to restore the pre-war order, with their god-prince Sihanouk as the head of state – not to implement revolutionary change. In fact, peasants were confused by the Khmer Rouge's misguided communist programme emphasizing landlordism as the peasants'

⁵ Craig Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984), 16.

⁶ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 3.

greatest problem – most of them owned their own land. Thus, only a minority of the poorest, landless peasants were truly committed to the KR cause, while most displayed lacklustre support for the principles of the Khmer Rouge revolution. This led to the KR's use of force to gain adherents, particularly during the final years of the war when the Khmer Rouge took control of the alliance and began systematically defaming the Prince in their propaganda and marginalizing his influence. Peasants were often threatened into joining the KR forces, further eroding rural enthusiasm for a revolution that offered them little except unwanted separation from their families, violence, and the ubiquitous use of terror.⁸

These points were certainly true for Cambodian peasant women, who suffered from the Khmer Rouge's radical attempt to re-define their roles and upset their social relationships. This paper will demonstrate that the Cambodian communists failed to attract women in significant numbers, alienating them from the communist cause through harsh recruitment tactics, poor indoctrination and forced separation from their families; in fact, the KR neglected women's issues almost entirely, failing to formulate a credible policy for Cambodian women. As a result, they had little reason to support *Angkar*, or the "organization" – the secretive term by which the Khmer Rouge was referred to amongst the population.

In contrast, communist China developed sophisticated women's programmes and made effective use of women during its long revolution. This paper will contrast the sophisticated women's policies of the communist movement in China with the virtually non-existent women's policies of the Khmer Rouge.

⁷ Kate Frieson, "The Impact of Revolution on Cambodian Peasants: 1970-1975," (PhD. diss., Monash University, 1991), 58.

The KR's neglect of women's issues is reflected in the historical literature on Cambodia. Few scholars have specifically studied the role of women under the Khmer Rouge and the many works that explore the larger history of the movement devote little attention to Cambodian women. This paper attempts to fill part of the gap in the historical literature pertaining to women in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. My findings are based on a review of the literature and interviews conducted with twenty-one Cambodian peasant women during July and August 2002; it is their oral histories that form the backbone of this paper. The study represents a preliminary exercise in oral history, and a modest beginning of the study of KR strategies towards recruiting and utilizing female cadres.

II. "OUR LINE IS DIFFERENT": THE WOMEN'S POLICIES OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE KHMER ROUGE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The Chinese communists' approach to women and the family is particularly important for a study of women under the Khmer Rouge, for two related reasons. First, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was the Khmer Rouge's strongest supporter for most of the latter's existence, and Cambodian communist leaders, including Pol Pot (who, himself, travelled relatively little), made numerous trips to China. Therefore, the Chinese communist experiment would have a strong influence on leaders of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), the political arm of the Khmer Rouge. Second, the extremism that characterized the major ideological, social and economic events that defined CCP rule – the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and the battle for control of the Party after Mao's death – resembled the radicalism of Democratic

⁸ Ibid., 249-52.

Kampuchea and, in the case of the latter two events, took place during the Khmer Rouge's battle to achieve and hold onto power; and during these convulsive episodes, the role of women in China was an important theme.

Democratic Kampuchea inflicted radical change on Cambodian women and the Cambodian family. While other communist regimes in Asia, including China's, failed to eradicate family traditions and sometimes reinforced them, the Khmer Rouge destroyed families' traditional nuclear structure and constructed a society based on communal living. The rough framework for such a society was provided by Frederick Engels in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*.⁹ The Khmer Rouge attack on the family began during the civil war in Cambodia (1970-1975) when peasants – including young women – were forced from their villages by the communists to serve the revolution. While peasant women participated in the Chinese revolution, the massive family transformations that the Khmer Rouge introduced and Engels advocated did not take place in China. Indeed, a brief examination of the Chinese communist regime reveals that Engels's plan was not fully implemented there – Democratic Kampuchea came much closer to doing so.

In *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels defined the role of socialist woman and her path to liberation. He wrote that women's emancipation would only take place once all women were introduced to industrial production and the "monogamous" (or nuclear) family ceased to be the primary unit of economic production. Such a family, he wrote, produced female "slavery": men were usually the earners, ensuring them a superior position within the household, while women's domestic duties

⁹ Frederick Engels, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1902).

remained private and, therefore, unrecognized.¹⁰ Communal modes of production, on the other hand, would eliminate the private household: the care of children would become a public matter, freeing women from their domestic bonds, allowing them to fully participate in production and granting them equal status to men.¹¹

CCP Chairman Mao-Tse Tung built on Engels's framework. He believed that the women's liberation movement should be subordinate to the revolution as a whole, writing that women's liberation would take place *through* revolutionary activity. While the CCP made progressive pronouncements on women's issues it criticized "feminism" as representing bourgeois politics.¹² Mao advocated a gradual approach to women's rights, warning of a counter-revolutionary reaction if reforms were enacted too swiftly. He subordinated women's emancipation to the larger revolutionary movement, stating that the abolition of inequalities between men and women "will follow as a natural consequence of victory in the political and economic struggles."¹³

Prior to the upheavals of the twentieth century, Chinese women played a heavily subordinate role within their society in accord with Confucian principles. The traditional Chinese family was patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal; it granted women few rights and allowed them little authority.¹⁴ The CCP's official policy on women and the family fluctuated depending on location and circumstance, but throughout its existence, it displayed strong patriarchal tendencies, despite legislation and rhetoric to the contrary. Its marriage decrees (which gave women the freedom to choose their husbands and the right

¹⁰ Ibid., 90.

¹¹ Ibid., 91-2.

¹² Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 42.

¹³ Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 1 (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1967), 46.

¹⁴ Johnson, 8-9.

to divorce) were particularly controversial amongst the conservative peasantry; during its revolutionary struggles in the 1930s and 1940s, the Party scaled back their implementation in order not to jeopardize CCP support in its crucial rural bases. In the end, the Party preferred to follow Mao's gradual approach to reform: women's liberation would remain subordinate to the revolution as a whole and was to be realized upon victory.

Nonetheless, the CCP effectively mobilized peasant women on a large scale to support its revolution. The Party recognized the importance of mobilizing the entire family, and to this end, convincing women of the value of revolution was crucial to gaining the support of their husbands and sons. In order to win the trust of peasant women, the CCP Women's Associations engaged in activities that helped women directly. These groups were to mobilize women, and encourage them to engage in agricultural production to aid the war effort and maintain production at home in the absence of men; such activities would, according to the Party, further women's interests, improving their social and economic position and gradually redefining their role, which in some areas (particularly the northwest of the country) had called for minimal participation in production.¹⁵ Women also played a more direct role in the military struggles against both the Japanese and the Kuomintang, working in intelligence, laying mines, nursing the wounded, carrying supplies and defending villages.¹⁶

The CCP laws providing women with land and marriage rights attracted young women to the movement, although they were often frustrated by the laws' inconsistent application. The CCP refused to dismantle the traditional Chinese patriarchy, but simply

¹⁵ Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Women in China* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 202.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

modified it, sticking to the belief that real change would follow victory. As political scientist Kay Anne Johnson noted, however, Mao underestimated the tenacity of peasant customs and failed to acknowledge peasants' inherent conservativeness: many fought for the *restoration* of their traditional lives – ones that had been shattered by war – and not for social change. So when the CCP attempted to execute reforms in the early 1950s – granting women land and marriage rights – they aroused significant hostility amongst the peasantry, and their implementation was quickly relaxed. During both the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution abortive attempts were made to increase women's role in production, thereby “liberating” Chinese women. Simultaneously, however, women were expected to continue to perform their domestic chores: this burden of “double-work” was then glorified by the CCP and turned into a socialist virtue. Evidently, the gender equality through revolution that Engels and Mao had predicted did not occur in rural China.¹⁷

The Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) was no doubt aware of the social upheavals and ideological battles that China had endured; and while the CPK almost certainly borrowed from the Chinese experience (the term “Great Leap Forward,” for example, was a favourite expression of the CPK)¹⁸ the Cambodians may also have taken note of their giant neighbour's socialist “failures” with regards to women and the family.

Indeed, the deficiencies of China, as well as communist Korea, were singled out in the CPK's Four-Year Plan, issued in 1976: in each country, the Plan warned, “the

¹⁷ For a review of works on women in twentieth century China and the persistence of Chinese patriarchy, see Emily Honig, “Socialist Revolution and Women's Liberation in China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no.2 (February 1985): 329-336.

¹⁸ See, for example, Party Center, “Decisions of the Central Committee on a Variety of Questions,” in *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976-1977*, ed. David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), 3.

capitalist and private sectors are in the process of daily strengthening and expanding their base in every aspect. So long as the capitalist system exists, it will strengthen itself and expand and become an obstacle to the socialist revolution.”¹⁹ The CPK, on the other hand, proceeded along a much smoother socialist path: “As for us, we organize collective eating completely. Eating and drinking are collectivized... Briefly, raising the people’s living standards in our own country means doing it collectively... They are happy to live this system.”²⁰

The Khmer Rouge implemented communalization in Cambodia both during the civil war and following victory, putting men, women and children to work in fields and factories, disrupting family life and increasing the unpopularity of the regime. Through this process, the CPK claimed that it had “liberated” women. Indeed, it appeared to have implemented Engels’s doctrine in its purest form: women produced, therefore they had been freed. Since, during their brief tenure in power, the Khmer communists did not experience an organized backlash against their family policies as the Chinese communist’s did, their destruction of the family appeared total; they had achieved Engels’s communal plan more quickly and completely than China.

The Khmer Rouge had the opportunity to learn from the revolutionary experiences of China, (as well as those of Vietnam and North Korea), including the country’s use of women and its policy towards the family; however, the KR made an explicit choice not to. As Pol Pot said, “we don’t think of foreign help.”²¹ Instead, “independence, mastery and self-reliance” became the bedrock of Khmer Rouge policy,

¹⁹ Party Centre, “The Party’s Four-Year Plan to Build Socialism in All Fields, 1977-1980,” July-August 1976, in *Pol Pot Plans*, 107.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

according to the Party's Four-Year Plan: "We don't solve the problem as some other country's do. Our characteristics are different. Our line is different. Our philosophy is different. Our standpoint is different, so solving problems takes different methods."²² The Khmer Rouge was convinced of the uniqueness and eminence of its own revolution: "Our revolutionary movement is a new experience, and an important one in the whole world, because we don't perform like others...Ours is a new experience, and people are observing it. We don't follow any book. We act according to the actual situation in our country."²³ The Khmer Rouge also deliberately distanced itself from other communist revolutions. The Plan noted the fact that China, Vietnam and Korea all took many years to fully develop socialism. "As for us," it boasted, "we have a different character from them. We are faster than they are. If we examine our collective character, in terms of a socialist system, we are four to ten years ahead of them...nothing is confused as it is with them."²⁴ Cambodia made such incredible progress, according to the Plan, because "we leaped from a people's democratic revolution into socialism."²⁵

Indeed, a major factor that differentiated the Cambodian revolution from its Asian counterparts was its incredibly swift progression – the Khmer Rouge swept to power just five years after its military campaign was launched against the "imperialist" enemy. The Chinese communists – as well as their counterparts in Vietnam and Korea – fought much longer wars before achieving complete victory and had much more time in which to hone their policies, make effective use of their limited resources and determine the best way to

²¹ Party Centre, "Preliminary Explanation Before Reading the Plan, by the Party Secretary," 21 August 1976, in *Pol Pot Plans*, 162.

²² Party Centre, "The Party's Four-Year Plan to Build Socialism in All Fields, 1977-1980," July-August 1976, in *Pol Pot Plans*, 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

stay in power. The Khmer Rouge's rapid rise to authority in Cambodia was paralleled by the speed with which it implemented radical reform, and the result was that the movement lacked the flexibility and sophistication of its predecessors. Of course, the KR itself did not see it that way; for its leaders, speed was essential for building the revolution: "we want to build socialism quickly, we want our country to change quickly, we want our people to be glorious quickly."²⁶ In fact, according to the 1976 Plan, Cambodia was already a socialist society.

The comparative approach undertaken in this section must necessarily be limited by the notable differences in the traditional status of women in Cambodia and China. Cambodian women enjoyed greater freedom and authority than rural women in China; rural Cambodians were largely Buddhist and their society lacked the rigidly entrenched Confucian patriarchy of Chinese society. Women could even own land. However, the comparison remains useful because it is by no means certain that the Khmer Rouge made note of structural and cultural differences in other societies and adapted their policies accordingly; a grasp of nuance and subtlety was hardly a Khmer Rouge strong point. Therefore, the Khmer Rouge may have transferred the patriarchal repression of Chinese women to Cambodian women, prescribing a harsh dose of Engels's ideas for a social ailment from which they did not actually suffer.

²⁶ From a speech probably made by Pol Pot, *Tung Padevat* (Revolutionary Flags), "Excerpted Report on the Leading Views of the Comrade Representing the Party Organization at a Zone Assembly," June 1976, in *Pol Pot Plans*, 25.

III. NEGLECT, COERCION, AND FAILURE: THE WOMEN'S POLICIES OF THE KHMER ROUGE

“Men and women are fully equal in every respect.”²⁷

-Article 13 of the Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea.

Under the Khmer Rouge, women's issues in Cambodia were not tackled with anything approaching the rigour and organization displayed by Chinese communists during their revolutionary struggles. A crude application of orthodox Marxism substituted for a truly progressive movement, while peasant women's cherished family traditions were demeaned or ignored. Coercive recruitment methods engendered hostility towards the regime, and indoctrination was shoddy where it existed at all. Finally, Cambodia's organized women's movement was practically non-existent and leaderless.

This chapter is based on my interviews with fifteen Cambodian peasant women recruited by the Khmer Rouge during the Civil War in 1974 – many, although not all, recruited forcibly. The women, all farmers prior to the Democratic Kampuchea regime, were recruited from Prek Sdei commune, about ninety kilometres south of Phnom Penh. Their experiences followed a common pattern. Following recruitment, they underwent brief training sessions lasting from two to six weeks before being sent to the battlefield where they were used as porters, carrying rice, ammunition and wounded soldiers. Some received no training at all; few claimed to have fired a gun. The terror of the battlefield and the painful separation from their families resulted in these women running back to their villages without first receiving permission from their unit commanders. They were inevitably caught and returned to the front. Some ran away and were caught numerous

²⁷ Etcheson, 225.

times. After the Khmer Rouge victory in April 1975, *Angkar* sent all these women to Presyar prison camp, a division of the dreaded S-21 interrogation centre, where they remained for the duration of Khmer Rouge rule (1975-1979). Their crime was having run away without authorization. During the chaos that followed the 1979 Vietnamese defeat of the Khmer Rouge, the women fled as refugees to the Thai border along with thousands of other Cambodians. Ultimately, they returned to their villages – some within months, others only after many years in refugee camps. The focus in this section will be on their initial experiences with the KR before April 1975: their recruitment and training, and their experiences at the front.²⁸

These women's stories reveal why the Khmer Rouge failed to convince large numbers of peasant women of the merit of its revolutionary cause. There were four interconnected factors for this failure: 1) poor recruitment strategies; 2) the forced break up of families; 3) ineffective indoctrination of female recruits; and 4) a total failure to formulate an effective role for women in the revolution.

Recruitment

Numerous deficiencies characterized the Khmer Rouge's recruitment strategy. First, the communists frequently resorted to coercion and terror to gain adherents. Lo Sim, a farmer, said that she was 19-years old when the Khmer Rouge came to her village in 1974 and forced her to leave with them: "If we refuse to join we cannot live peacefully, they push us. If we refuse they come to insult us, they say 'why stay here, others have already joined?' ... If we are not able to go they will carry us. We get killed if we refuse."²⁹ Im Chantha described the situation at the time in similar terms: "Even if

²⁸ For a discussion of the methodology and circumstances of these interviews, see the Appendix.

²⁹ Lo Sim, interview by author, 17 July 2002, Pratheath village, interview transcript.

they did not force, you still had to go. Because they needed you, you must go.” She added that if she had refused to join, they would tie her up and hit her.³⁰ This initial treatment at the hands of the Khmer communists certainly represented a poor introduction to the revolutionary movement for Lo and Im, and did not bode well for the KR’s attempts at transforming them into dedicated converts to their cause. Their experiences are in accord with political scientist Kate Frieson’s assertion that peasant support for the revolution “was not given out of commitment to the movement but out of a basic human desire to survive the exigencies created by the war.”³¹

The treatment Lo and Im endured appeared to have been fairly widespread in Cambodia by 1974: according to Kenneth M. Quinn, a United States foreign service officer stationed in Vietnam during the war, the period from 1973 onward saw the Khmer Rouge accelerating their radical program, as they increased the use of terror and began drastically reforming traditional Cambodian society. This meant that the communists’ most effective recruitment tool amongst the peasants – their identification with Prince Sihanouk – was now unceremoniously set aside.³² Sihanouk was the traditional political leader and religious authority in rural Cambodia, and his presence had been essential in attracting large numbers of peasants to the joint KR-Royalist cause.³³ While the Prince’s royal presence was certainly ill-fitted to the communists’ programme, the Khmer Rouge were poorly placed to replace him – their communist platform offered little of interest to peasants. Cultivating the image of Pol Pot as a wise, revered, secular leader with whom peasants could identify – along the lines of Mao Tse-Tung or Ho Chi Minh – does not

³⁰ Im Chantha, interview by author, 9 July 2002, Pratheath village, interview transcript.

³¹ Frieson, 16.

³² Kenneth M. Quinn, “Political Change in Wartime: The Khmer Krahom Revolution in Southern Cambodia, 1970-1974,” *Naval War College Review* 28, no.4 (Spring 1976): 6.

appear to have been considered by the communists. The result was a crude, brutal system of forced recruitment.

Not all women in Prek Sdei, however, required threats to join the Khmer Rouge. Nam Sokha, just 13 or 14 years old at the time, admitted that she willingly joined the Khmer Rouge when they came to her village in 1974. “I volunteered to follow them thinking that it was fun to go with them. When all of us joined them, why should a few of us stay?”³⁴ Sum Sreng, youngest in her group, also described the initial impression of the KR recruitment drive as one of “fun.”³⁵ Som and Nam’s naïve attitudes may be attributable to their youth: both were just 14 years old in 1974. Another woman, meanwhile, Tuy Son, volunteered in order to avoid an unwanted marriage.³⁶

The initial enthusiasm of these recruits, however, was squandered by the Khmer Rouge, as they failed to strengthen it through effective indoctrination. All of the women described extremely brief training sessions that do not appear to have firmed up their revolutionary resolve, as we shall see. Indeed, historian David Chandler observed that many Cambodians were willing to risk waging a revolution for a while but then drew back; “most of the people,” he wrote, “failed to catch fire.”³⁷ This was largely a consequence of the break up of the Cambodian family, the second major reason for the Khmer Rouge’s failure to earn female peasant support.

Separation of Family Members

“From the beginning of our struggle, whether during the political or during the armed struggle, or during the war, private property affected the interests of the revolution. For

³³ Etcheson, 129.

³⁴ Nam Sokha, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

³⁵ Sum Sreng, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

³⁶ Tuy Son, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

³⁷ David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics War and Revolution Since 1945* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1991), 237.

instance, those who thought of their family interest, always separated from the revolution. They abandoned the revolution, lived apart, seeking well-being in their family instead of the party.”³⁸

- From the CPK journal, *Tung Padevat* (Revolutionary Flags), Special Issue, September-October 1976.

The leaders of the Khmer Rouge revolution did not look favourably upon the familial loyalties described above; they wanted their revolution to seep into every part of society, including the close-knit Cambodian family: “The socialist revolution encompasses everything,” wrote a CPK leader, most likely Pol Pot.³⁹ Collective living was imposed and Cambodians were forced to work, eat and raise their children collectively; it was a despised policy, however – a poor substitute for the intimacy of family. Being away from their loved ones caused Cambodians to gradually lose any faith they had in the revolution. As Nay It – one the interviewees who joined the KR voluntarily – described, “After joining them [the Khmer Rouge], they do not let us go back to visit home. That way, they make me completely not believe them.”⁴⁰ Parents and children were separated for weeks at a time, if not permanently, and, as historian Kalyanee Mam demonstrated, the Khmer Rouge even forced Cambodians into marriages they did not want with partners they may not have even known.⁴¹ The attempted destruction of the Cambodian family began during the civil war.

However, assaulting kinship ties was a critical miscalculation on the part of the Khmer Rouge and was a key factor in the failure of the Cambodian revolution; it was,

³⁸ “Sharpen the Consciousness of the Proletarian Class to Be as Keen and Strong as Possible,” in *Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 285.

³⁹ Party Centre, “Report on Activities of the Party Center According to the General Political Tasks of 1976,” 20 December 1976, in *Pol Pot Plans*, 183.

⁴⁰ Nay It, interview by author, 18 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

according to historian Ben Kiernan, the most intolerable aspect of the Khmer Rouge regime.⁴² The observations of May Ebihara, an anthropologist who spent a year in a rural Cambodian village in the 1960s, reveal why. The family constituted the most basic social unit for Khmer peasants – there were few clubs, associations or political parties in the villages. As a result, “the bonds between husband and wife, siblings, and *especially parents and children* are the strongest and most enduring relations found in village social organization” (emphasis added).⁴³ The bond between mother and daughter was particularly strong.⁴⁴ Young women were very attached to their parents who, in turn, were highly protective of their daughters, so much so, that newly married couples usually chose to live with the bride’s parents in the years immediately following marriage – at least until the husband had sufficient resources to build a house of their own.⁴⁵

Attachment to family was part of peasants’ generally *conservative* outlook – one that was decidedly un-revolutionary.⁴⁶ Peasants supported the Khmer Rouge revolution in order to restore the pre-war societal order; quite simply, they wanted an end to the war so they could get back to living their everyday lives,⁴⁷ ones that included strong, close-knit families.

The behaviour of the women interviewed here reflected this conservative outlook, specifically with regards to the family. After being sent to the frontlines of battle where

⁴¹ Kalyanee Mam, “Democratic Kampuchea (1975-79): Women as Tools for Social Change,” (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 9 November 2000).

⁴² Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996; reprint, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkwork Books, 1999), 215.

⁴³ May Ebihara, “Khmer Village Women in Cambodia: A Happy Balance,” in *Many Sisters: Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Carolyn J. Matthiasson (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 320.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁴⁶ Etcheson, 80.

⁴⁷ Frieson, 247-8.

she laboured as a porter, Sum Sreng, like the other interviewees, was understandably fearful for her life, and her subsequent actions, as she described them, matched those of the other women: “Because of missing home, I ran to my parents often. I always missed my parents and always wanted to escape to return home.”⁴⁸ Each time she ran, however, fourteen year-old Sum was caught and returned to her unit at the front, regardless of her condition: “I reached home five times. One time, I was sick – shaking, cold, hot temperature. They put me in a hammock and carried me back.”⁴⁹ Nam Sokha endured similarly harsh treatment, as she described how she ran home once because she missed her parents and was “sick and skinny. My belly was swollen and I had the flu. I went home as fast as I could. After arriving home, they said they had to take me back.”⁵⁰ Both were punished for their transgressions. Nay It was told by her leaders not to bother returning home because her parents had been killed by the Vietnamese; she later discovered that this was not the case: “They lied. They lie to us not to return home... They didn’t want us to return home.”⁵¹ In fact, as mentioned above, she cited the Khmer Rouge’s rigid refusal to allow her to visit her village as one of the reasons she stopped accepting what the KR had to say. All of the women interviewed made an attempt to return to their villages, most citing a longing for their parents as the reason.

Women like Nam and Sum demonstrated the determination of peasants to maintain their familial bonds, despite – or perhaps *because* – of the hardships of war.

Their repeated, stubborn attempts at escape provide a striking contrast to Ebihara’s

⁴⁸ Sum Sreng, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁴⁹ Sum Sreng, interview by author, 18 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁵⁰ Nam Sokha, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁵¹ Nay It, interview by author, 14 August 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript. Henri Locard wrote that the Khmer Rouge often lied to young cadres by inventing stories about their parents’ being killed in bombing attacks. See Locard, 83.

description of a thoroughly indoctrinated Cambodian youth under DK, alienated from family and wholly devoted to various revolutionary associations:

Youth were a special target for indoctrination into revolutionary ideology...Such indoctrination, combined with actual organization into distinct work teams and youth associations, as well as physical separation from home, would produce alienation from family ties and development of primary loyalties to other groups such as the association, the army, the party and the revolutionary state in general.⁵²

Although such adolescents surely existed, it is evident that they were not the rule, as peasant traditions died hard amongst Cambodians of all ages; Mam, for example, documented courageous acts by parents that demonstrated their strong attachment to their children. She interviewed mothers who, while living under DK, attempted to maintain their bonds with their children by stealing food for them⁵³ – a brave but dangerously un-revolutionary acknowledgement that *Angkar* could not provide sufficient rations, and had failed in its duty after usurping the traditional role of parents.

The Khmer Rouge demanded the unquestioning support and loyalty of the Cambodian people; revolutionary fervour required it, as Khieu Samphan, who was the CPK “President” at the time (Pol Pot remained the true leader of the country) remarked in a 1978 speech marking the third anniversary of the Khmer Rouge victory:

We are all determined to draw our inspiration from the noble and lofty revolutionary heroism of our Revolutionary Army by always holding loftier and make as strong as steel our revolutionary patriotism and our revolutionary pride towards our nation, our people, our Revolutionary Army, our revolution and our Party by *resolutely putting the interests*

⁵² May Ebihara, “Revolution and Reformation in Cambodian Village Culture,” in *The Cambodian Agony*, ed. David A. Ablin and Marlowe Hood (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1987), 29.

⁵³ Mam, 25.

of the nation, the class, the people and the revolution over the personal and family interests... (Emphasis added).⁵⁴

Former KR cadre Ith Sarin described this quest for popular submission as a “dictatorial condition of the party over the individual, an unbounded authority of the party over everything”;⁵⁵ the state wanted control over decisions previously made on an individual, or family basis, so the authority of both had to be eradicated.⁵⁶ According to *Angkar*, Ith wrote, “The individual, is inept, is deficient.”⁵⁷ Indeed, the peasant women interviewed only proved this woeful personal inadequacy through their repeated truancy – an offence committed because, in the eyes of *Angkar*, they were contaminated by individualistic thoughts. Im Chan was aware of the danger of revealing her inner beliefs regarding the revolution. Following her recruitment she “was always mad. But I kept it inside. If I let go of my feelings, they [the Khmer Rouge] could maybe punish me. At that time, if we spoke out, [with] one word we could live, one word we could die.”⁵⁸

Nuon Chea, “Brother Number Two” behind Pol Pot, and for awhile, Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea, acknowledged the existence of the disease of “family-ism” during the Civil War. In a statement to the Communist Workers’ Party of Denmark in 1978, he remarked: “During the struggle, we encountered many difficulties. For example, cadres separated from their families and not ideologically firm would sometimes decide to run back to their families and away from the revolution.” Ideology,

⁵⁴ Khieu Samphan, “Speech by Comrade Khieu Samphan, President of the State of Democratic Kampuchea at the mass meeting held on the occasion of the Third Anniversary of the Glorious April 17 and the Founding of Democratic Kampuchea,” (Documentation Center of Cambodia), 5.

⁵⁵ Ith Sarin, “Life in the Bureaus (Offices) of the Khmer Rouge,” in Timothy Michael Carney, “Communist Party Power in Kampuchea,” Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, Data Paper Number 106 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, January 1977), 48.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), 211.

⁵⁷ Ith Sarin, “Life in the Bureaus (Offices) of the Khmer Rouge,” in Carney, 48.

therefore, was the “key factor” in attempting to shore up this lack of a “firm revolutionary standpoint.” The emphasis on ideology continued after the 1975 “Liberation.” In the same statement, Nuon Chea explained that in “cadre education, we place stress on destroying old society ideological standpoints which remain powerful”; including, no doubt, those that cherished the maintenance of a close family.⁵⁹

While, as journalist Elizabeth Becker noted, the Khmer Rouge never *officially* banned the family as such,⁶⁰ almost all of the Khmer Rouge’s directives led to the separation of family members.⁶¹ They even banned the use of the traditional terms that Khmers used to address members of their own family – terms that were highly respectful of elders.⁶² One of the most direct criticisms of the institution appeared in a Party document that listed some of the CPK’s own shortcomings: it lamented the fact that some cadres’ consciences still favoured “family-ism,” along with “private property,” “authority,” “notoriety,” and “jealousies.”⁶³

Plucking young women from their families in Koh Thom and forbidding them from visiting their parents was part of a larger systematic process on the part of the Khmer Rouge aimed at undermining rival sources of authority. The KR’s harsh, rigid family policies are an example of their use of Marxism-Leninism as a “blunt instrument and a destructive weapon,” as they implemented Engels’s ideas on productive female

⁵⁸ Im Chan, interview by author, 17 August 2002, Pratheat village, interview transcript.

⁵⁹ Nuon Chea, “Statement of the Communist Party of Kampuchea to the Communist Workers’ Party of Denmark,” July 1978, (accessed 19 February 2003); available from http://www.bigpond.com.kh/users/dccam.genocide/posting/Nuon_Chea's_Statement.htm.

⁶⁰ Becker, 229.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 182.

⁶³ Party Center, “Summary of the Results of the 1976 Study Session,” undated, in *Pol Pot Plans*, 171.

labour with a fearsome inflexibility;⁶⁴ however, the above-mentioned Party self-criticism demonstrated the persistence of cherished family bonds, in however weakened a state.

By contrast, the Chinese Communist Party gave women a revolutionary role *within* the family; it was their duty to maintain the home while their husbands were at war. While the reformist tendencies in communist China were muted, peasant traditions were respected; the wisdom of such a course of action was evident to revolutionary leaders.

To the ultra-communist Khmer Rouge, however, such compromises were heresy and they were determined to create the purest socialist regime possible; indeed, as demonstrated in the previous section, they believed they had already done so. They paid the price for their radicalism, however, as they failed to engender loyalty to the regime and from their point of view, their inflexibility proved highly unproductive; from the point of view of Cambodian women, these policies were an incomprehensibly cruel attempt at destroying their most cherished relationships and sealed their hostility to the regime. Nam Sokha's anguish at her and her family's treatment has still not diminished: "All my parents and many others died. There were eighteen people in all that died. Very painful. I want to kill all the Khmer Rouge who killed my parents. If killing them could return my parents, I'd kill them right away."⁶⁵

Indoctrination and Education

The Khmer Rouge was utterly unable to convince peasant women to forget their families and sacrifice for the revolution. The revolutionary education they provided was crude and confusing, often very brief and sometimes, non-existent. The KR, therefore,

⁶⁴ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 237.

⁶⁵ Nam Sokha, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

failed to live up to its oft-repeated goal of awakening the political consciousness of the masses. Political meetings often consisted exclusively of directives to peasants to “work hard” without providing a reasonable reason for doing so – except the threat of punishment, including death, if they refused. The CPK simply could not make its autarkic, communist ideology relevant to peasants, and it also lacked an educated corps of cadres that could explain its ideas effectively.

The first problem with Khmer Rouge indoctrination was its perfunctory nature; this was especially acute during the latter stages of the civil war when the informants for this study were recruited by the Cambodian communists. The Khmer Rouge purged or used as cannon-fodder some of its best trained cadre, many of whom had spent years training for revolutionary action in Hanoi: their long association with the Vietnamese meant that these cadre were anathema to the xenophobic, anti-Vietnamese Khmer Rouge leadership. Intellectuals who joined the revolution were also mistrusted.⁶⁶ U.S. Foreign Service officer Timothy Carney described the resulting situation: “In contrast to their Vietnamese neighbours, the party rigidly enforces its new values, possibly because not even senior cadre have the experience that generates an institutional self-confidence basic to pragmatic, flexible implementation of principles.”⁶⁷ Nam’s family was victimized by such inexperience, which was lethally combined with raw ambition and cruelty. She recounted:

the worst were the people who informed and told stories to the leader for names and reputations. Like my parents, they were not Chinese, but they [the accusers] said they [her parents] were Chinese, Vietnamese. They accused, informed. *Especially the young leaders*, who just joined the ranks and wanted to be big, they said my parents were

⁶⁶ Roel Burgler, *The Eyes of the Pineapple: Revolutionary Intellectuals and Terror in Democratic Kampuchea* (Fort Lauderdale: Verlag Breitenbach Publishers, 1990), 212.

⁶⁷ Carney, 11.

Chinese or Vietnamese and took them away to be killed. They even wanted to kill my [younger siblings] also, still too small and who didn't understand anything. (Emphasis added).⁶⁸

The directives of the Vietnamese communists, by contrast, were explicitly designed to avoid such behaviour: their recruitment policy was *selective*, in order that their larger goals not be subordinated to the ambition of ideologically weak individuals. Historian Sandra C. Taylor explained: “the Party cautioned against taking in too many members, over whom it might lose control. ‘Opportunism’ or ‘voluntarism,’ allowing the group to move the way its members wanted, rather than following instructions from the Party, was to be avoided.”⁶⁹ Unfortunately for the Prek Sdei women, the leaders they were forced to follow exhibited precisely the insensibility, rigidity and poor leadership Carney observed, as they were unable to empathize with their cadres and find some way to compensate for their loneliness and fear.

The depressed condition of these women was partially the product of their cursory indoctrination, which only produced a shallow commitment to the revolutionary cause. This, in turn, left them incapable of handling the hardships and loneliness of the battlefield. Sum, only fourteen years old when recruited, was particularly vulnerable. After leaving her village, she was given about a month and-a-half of military training, but does not remember being taught about the *nature* of the revolution, and what its benefits would mean for her and her family. She just carried supplies to the front, and almost immediately realized she had made a mistake – that joining the revolution was not the “fun” she had thought it would be: “I knew right away that I was wrong, yes. I made a

⁶⁸ Nam Sokha, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁶⁹ Sandra C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 42.

mistake that was impossible to correct. I just wanted to run away.”⁷⁰ She claimed that she had “been tricked by their [the Khmer Rouge’s] politics. They took us to join the army. We were not mature yet. We were tricked. We were small.”⁷¹ Disillusioned and confused, the young women resisted whatever training was provided, according to Sum: “We never wished to learn anything, we only discussed how to run home. We ran, they caught us and took us back” upon which they “guided us to have high fidelity and struggle forward, but not to go back [home].”⁷² Now, when asked why she fought, she replied “I don’t know. Just fight until the front line is broken. I don’t know, just fight.”⁷³

Nam’s experience was similar. “[I] never trained. I went all the way carrying rice, never had time to study. They allowed me to enter the battlefield and I never had training.” But once there, she was expected to think only of the revolution: “In the army, they asked us to struggle. We did not think of back home. They didn’t want us to think of our parents.”⁷⁴

Lo Sim said that she, too, was given no training. However, she initially believed in the little she was told about the reasons for the fighting – “for the nation and for the territory” as she described it – and this seemed “acceptable.” She kept thinking about “liberation” and “at the beginning I believed them [the Khmer Rouge], I believed in their political view.” That soon changed, however: “At the beginning I believed, but later, why believe? They just talk but do not do what they say.”⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Sum Sreng, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁷¹ Sum Sreng, interview by author, 18 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Sum Sreng, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁷⁴ Nam Sokha, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁷⁵ Lo Sim, interview by author, 17 July 2002, Pratheat village, interview transcript.

Nor were these memories invented long after the fact. The London *Daily Telegraph* interviewed a young woman in 1974 who described a similar experience to those recounted above: “I was taken from my village nearly a year ago. The men who came to take me said they would kill my family if I refused. I had two or three days training with the American rifle, the rest of the time I dug bunkers and carried supplies...I was there because I could only obey orders”⁷⁶ Evidently, then, indoctrination for many young women was sketchy, at best. They may have been taught slogans and songs, the basics of party policy and how to fire a gun, but little else.⁷⁷

Even worse, the Khmer Rouge displayed a reckless disregard for the welfare of its combatants. According to a dissident, Hanoi-trained communist cadre, KR leaders “would say we should attack right away no matter how many got killed, as long as we won, not to worry about how many got killed because it didn’t matter.” He added: “Once there was some path of attack, that would be it. There would be a single path of attack.”⁷⁸ This is in line with the Khmer Rouge’s obsession with revolutionary expeditiousness; indeed, the CPK noted, post-victory, its swift defeat of the enemy: “The Party has all the duties of leadership. If the Party is strong, *it can seize victory quickly*. The Party promised this before the war.”⁷⁹ (Emphasis added). While the Party may, indeed, have delivered a relatively swift victory, the consequences for its men and women on the battlefield were atrocious.

Despite evidence of poor KR indoctrination and horrific battlefield conditions, much of the existing literature portrays Cambodian peasant youth as fiercely loyal to

⁷⁶ Frieson, 221.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Becker, 158.

Angkar, both before and after the Khmer Rouge victory. Indeed, the CPK itself acknowledged the fact that youth formed the vanguard of its revolution and boasted that it specifically targeted children and adolescents for recruitment, launching then nourishing their revolutionary fervour.⁸⁰ In an oft-cited passage from one of the earliest examinations of the Cambodian revolution, Quinn described the process by which rural youth were transformed into militant Khmer Rouge cadre. His description is worth quoting at length for the contrast it provides to the accounts discussed in this study:

The KK [Khmer *Krahom* or Khmer Rouge] began a program of intensive political training for young men and women which involved taking them from their home hamlets to remote indoctrination centers for a period of 2 to 3 weeks. While there is no information about the nature and content of this training, it seems to have achieved significant results. According to all accounts, youths (age 16-18) returning from these sessions... were fierce in their condemnation of religion and the “old ways”; rejected parental authority; were passionate in their loyalty to the state and party; were critical and contemptuous of customs; and had a militant attitude which expressed confidence in mechanical weapons... these youths stopped working on their family plot and instead worked directly for the youth association on its land. The association thus seemed to become a new point of identification for the youth, at least partially replacing the family.⁸¹

The youths Quinn described appeared to have undergone a far more intensive indoctrination than that of the Prek Sdei women interviewed here – it would have to have been if a lifetime of tradition was really wiped out in just two or three weeks of training. The Khmer Rouge program, it appeared, then, could be terrifyingly effective.

Quinn’s descriptions were almost certainly quite accurate, and were based on extensive interviewing by the experienced U.S. Foreign Service officer. However, there are two factors that Quinn’s analysis overlooks: first, as scholar Michael Vickery

⁷⁹ *Tung Padevat* (Revolutionary Flags), “Excerpted Report on the Leading Views of the Comrade Representing the Party Organization at a Zone Assembly,” June 1976, in *Pol Pot Plans*, 24.

⁸⁰ See Carney, 31-3.

underlined, there was significant geographical and temporal variation in conditions throughout Cambodia's upheavals in the 1970s; therefore, what was true at one place or time was not necessarily true at another.⁸² Quinn's interviews were conducted between July 1972 and January 1974, *before* most of the women interviewed by me had joined the Khmer Rouge.⁸³ Presumably, when Quinn conducted his research, there were more well-educated cadres conducting indoctrination sessions than there were later, as the radical element within the Khmer Rouge (led by Pol Pot) had still not had a chance to liquidate all of its perceived rivals. Meanwhile, Quinn's informants were from various parts of Cambodia and it is unclear from what part of the country their observations arose. Second, while the youth Quinn described returned from indoctrination centres thoroughly radicalized, their revolutionary mettle had yet to be tested in the fires of the battlefield – the true test of their commitment to the Khmer Rouge revolution.

Craig Etcheson, a political scientist, analyzed the depth of peasant support for the Khmer Rouge's ideology and concluded that very few cadres were able to *internalize* it, framing their worldview with it so that "the individual believes in the moral rightness of the cause."⁸⁴ Peasants did not understand communist policy and were not committed to achieving the Khmer Rouge's aims.⁸⁵ Most of the women interviewed remained confused about the reasons that they fought; they had a vaguely nationalistic concept of fighting for their country, but were unable to cite anything approaching a communist revolutionary ideology. Nam explained that she was only taught "to be mentally strong for struggling against the enemy." She said that she was not clearly told why there was a war; when

⁸¹ Quinn, "Political Change," 12-13.

⁸² Vickery, 88-92.

⁸³ Quinn, "Political Change," 25-6.

⁸⁴ Etcheson, 81.

asked, she replied: “I don’t know. They asked me to go, I went. I didn’t understand. For many years now. We were afraid and we followed.”⁸⁶ By 1973, the Khmer Rouge desperately needed bodies to fight the brutal civil war, but did not have the time or the resources to effectively indoctrinate peasants such as Nam; coercion, often brutal, had to be used to gain compliance.

Indeed, the breakneck pace that the KR set for the Cambodian revolution, both during the civil war and under DK, undermined efforts for a proper revolutionary education: Pol Pot, himself, said in a speech that “we want to build socialism quickly, we want our country to change quickly, we want our people to be glorious quickly.”⁸⁷ To maintain this untenable position, the KR leadership deluded itself into believing that it was widely supported by a scrupulously indoctrinated mass of young peasants, brimming with revolutionary zeal, and throughout their brief reign, they continuously repeated the centrality of an ideologically “correct” structural base to the Party’s success. An excerpt from a brief history of youth in the Party, published in the KR’s youth journal, is typical:

Because of receiving a progressive and revolutionary ideology from the party, the revolutionary struggle movement of youth surged increasingly stronger in both the cities and the rural areas and united with the movements of the people as a whole under the leadership of the party. Which is to say in the combat movement of youth which the party began in 1962...became the right arm of the party under the direct aegis of the party.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid., 160.

⁸⁶ Nam Sokha, interview by author, 18 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁸⁷ *Tung Padevat* (Revolutionary Flags), “Excerpted Report on the Leading Views of the Comrade Representing the Party Organization at a Zone Assembly,” June 1976, in *Pol Pot Plans*, 25.

⁸⁸ “The Communist Party of Kampuchea and the Problem of Khmer Young Men and Women,” in Carney, 33.

In another example, Ieng Sary, Democratic Kampuchea's foreign minister, explained to *Le Monde* in 1972 the importance of proper ideology and political consciousness for his movement's revolution:

...pour faire triompher la revolution, il est indispensable d'avoir à chaque échelon un noyau dirigeant composés d'hommes fermes sur les principes, sachant appliquer d'une manière créatrice, dans les conditions nationales concretes, notre ligne politique, avec des objectifs biens précis...Le facteur déterminant de la victoire, c'est l'homme, c'est le peuple, politiquement conscient du combat qu'il doit mener.⁸⁹

While the CPK leaders boasted of their "success" and described a revolutionary Cambodia that did not exist, their uneducated cadres on the ground went about systematically alienating the masses – youth included – forcing them to work in an ideological vacuum, substituting terror for actual doctrine. The common experiences of Nam Sokha, Sum Sreng and their colleagues, were proof of this situation: instead of being treated for their inflection with "family-ism" through a systematic process of indoctrination, they were simply punished – they were all imprisoned following the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975, and their prison biographies listed their crime as "running away." They were, therefore, castigated – but not *treated* – for their misplaced loyalties. Only after they had been driven from power by the Vietnamese in 1979 did the Khmer Rouge finally admit that its personnel on the ground may not have had the exemplary ideology leaders thought they did: "Mistakes might have been made by some cadres" in rural areas, admitted Ieng Sary, later that year at the United Nations. Alluding to the

⁸⁹ Claude Julien, "Personne ne nous imposera un compromis, nous déclare un 'chef historique' de la revolution khmère," *Le Monde*, 15 January 1972, p.1

numerous atrocities attributed to his Party's rule, he added the claim that "some acts occurred without our knowledge."⁹⁰

The hopelessness of life under the Khmer Rouge is unintentionally captured in one of the Party's own journals. The following passage – dripping with unintended irony – is actually meant to describe life under the KR's capitalist predecessors. Sadly, it reads like an uncharacteristically frank assessment of the bleakness of its own regime:

Our young people in their youth are comparable to flowers which are budding and brilliantly blossoming. But, in the society of the oppressor class, our youth of all strata are withered and blighted, stifled and muffled, in difficulty and suffering, because of the oppressors' wickedness and because of the threats and intimidation of the fascist, despotic regime of the oppressors. The future of our youth is black, null.⁹¹

The Role of Women under the Khmer Rouge

During the chaos and upheaval of the Civil War, the Khmer Rouge struggled to win the support of the Cambodian peasantry; as we have seen, through its confusing policies, coercive tactics and institutionalized brutality, it alienated much of the countryside, succeeding in mobilizing support to only a shallow degree amongst the majority of Cambodians.

Rural women were alienated for these same reasons, as well as one other: neglect. Quite simply, the Khmer Rouge did not formulate a cohesive policy on women: it produced no specific directives on how to mobilize their support; it failed to analyze their pre-revolutionary status and propose practical, popular improvements in line with its autarkic, Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist policies; it espoused a simplistic, ill-thought-out formula on women's rights based on a literal interpretation of Engels's theories of female labour; it exploited female labour while passing it off as progress for women; and it never

⁹⁰ "Cambodian Killings Denied," *Washington Post*, 12 October 1979, p. A22.

made women's issues a priority within the Party, thereby unintentionally writing off the support of half the population. The lack of a cohesive policy meant that the Khmer communists stumbled badly in their attempts to attract the support of rural women, dealing a significant blow to their revolutionary cause.

Anthropologist May Ebihara spent considerable time in rural Cambodia and her observations are our main window into the lives of peasant women before 1970. She supported the assertion put forth by others that "Khmer women...possess substantial authority, independence and freedom."⁹² This is most evident in the economic sphere, as women actively contributed to household wealth through cultivation and other part-time work. As mentioned above, women also traditionally controlled the household finances, as well as market and commercial transactions. Ebihara noted that these responsibilities brought women into contact with the world outside their village.⁹³ These freedoms were largely true for adolescent girls, as well. Ebihara observed that young women worked in the fields, earned money (which they could keep) through secondary employment in neighbouring villages, and could even own property.⁹⁴ Still, the life of a female adolescent was fairly leisurely.⁹⁵ She noted that it was important for female adolescents to remain virtuous, and described how one family forbade their daughter from venturing out at night unaccompanied. Ebihara also described the family as the primary social unit in rural Cambodia, and underlined the extremely tight bond between parents and children.

Evidently, much of rural women's traditional lives did not conform with Khmer Rouge practice, and without a concerted effort at addressing these inconsistencies, it is

⁹¹ "The Communist Party," in Carney, 33.

⁹² Ebihara, "Khmer Women," 338.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 312.

unsurprising that the KR was unable to garner female support. There were many such contradictions. First, women's independence and freedom did not make them ideal cadres for a regime that quashed individuality and demanded unquestioning loyalty. Second, women's commercial role was not conducive to communist economic policies under the Khmer Rouge. The KR abolished money and markets and imposed collectivized production. As a result, under DK, women found the source of much of their clout and authority taken away from them – something that must have bred resentment. Pol Pot observed these two contradictions in a 1976 speech in which he criticized their presence in other socialist countries that remained “individualistic,” continuing to pursue the accumulation of money for personal wealth. The CPK's plan, however, would “not follow this path at all. We will follow the collectivist path to socialism.”⁹⁶

A third contradiction was the strong family bond between parent and child – and mother and daughter in particular – that was severely compromised by the KR's forced separation of families. Most of the women interviewed in Prek Sdei recalled their parents' distress as they left their villages with the Khmer Rouge. Nam, who voluntarily joined the communists, lamented her attitude at the time and recalled the reaction of her parents when she left: “They cried. Because we were young and followed others. Never knew why. Never thought of the worries of parents. Others raised hands, we just raised also.”⁹⁷ Sum's parents also cried when their daughter left,⁹⁸ as did those of another young villager, Nop Lai.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ibid., 313.

⁹⁶ Party Center, “Preliminary Explanation Before Reading the Plan, by the Party Secretary,” 21 August 1976, in *Pol Pot Plans*, 156.

⁹⁷ Nam Sokha, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁹⁸ Sum Sreng, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

⁹⁹ Nop Lai, interview by author, 12 July 2002, Chong Prek village, interview transcript.

Pol Pot, however, had little sympathy for parents' distress: "mothers," he decreed, "must not get too entangled with their children."¹⁰⁰ In fact, too much affection amongst family members was considered a threat by the Khmer Rouge: the minutes of a 1976 CPK meeting decried the presence of such sentimentalism within the Party itself: "Up to now in the ranks of our Party it has generally (been a case of) family-ism, sibling-ism, relation-ism. This problem is a very dangerous one because it flouts the Party's criteria."¹⁰¹ Such chilling disregard for family bonds demonstrated the Khmer Rouge's complete disconnection from peasant reality. It failed to adequately study the contradictions between its communist programme and women's traditional lives, and was unable to produce a women's policy that addressed these issues. The result was poor female support for the revolution.

The interviews conducted in Prek Sdei reveal that the Khmer Rouge reduced their women's strategy to a simple formula. Roughly, it stated that because women do the same work as men, men and women are equal. Mam came to similar conclusions in her study of women in Democratic Kampuchea. This idea resonated with some interviewees, but met with confusion and contempt from most, as the Khmer Rouge only preached an equal role for women as long as one worked hard and went to battle. Nay It, who was lied to about her parents' death, believed that the KR wanted to destroy the family, although she is not sure why. Overall, she said, the KR treated women badly by sending them to the front, adding that before the Revolution "We had rights. But when we became soldiers we didn't have any. We went to the front line we had no rights at all."¹⁰² Sum

¹⁰⁰ Party Center, "Preliminary Explanation Before Reading the Plan, by the Party Secretary," 21 August 1976, in *Pol Pot Plans*, 158.

¹⁰¹ Party Center, "Summary of the Results of the 1976 Study Session," (undated), in *Pol Pot Plans*, 176.

¹⁰² Nay It, interview by author, 14 August 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

remembered being taught little about women's rights. While in prison camp she attended meetings but "only heard about how to work hard"¹⁰³ and she believed that these gatherings were "only to motivate us to work."¹⁰⁴

Nam Sokha, however, spoke at greater length about women's issues, and despite the hardships and loss that she suffered at the hands of the KR, spoke positively of the empowerment women earned through their work at the front: "About equal rights, men could carry guns and we also could carry guns. If we could carry guns and had the same strength, nobody looked down [at us], we were the same. Men could carry guns, we also could carry guns; that way we all struggled."¹⁰⁵ She stated unequivocally that "We had equal rights. Women even asked for that. We all struggled and carried guns with strength. Women may be stronger than men. Men were leaders, women were also leaders."¹⁰⁶

A 1973 wartime propaganda piece produced by the NUFK embassy in Beijing – and probably reflecting the ideas of the Sihanoukist element in the United Front alliance joining the Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk forces – demonstrated how the KR *could* have proselytized amongst women. It described some of the sources of pride for women that Nam touches upon. This piece represents one of the few documents that are known to discuss women's revolutionary role in Cambodia. Parts of this document paralleled Nam's testimony regarding women's rights, as its praise for women's revolutionary efforts highlighted their military exploits. It also resembled Vietnamese propaganda used to recruit women. It depicted Cambodia locked in a Manichean struggle with an immoral

¹⁰³ Sum Sreng, interview by author, 18 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

¹⁰⁴ Sum Sreng, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

¹⁰⁵ Nam Sokha, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Pothi Reamea village, interview transcript.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

opposition. It was designed to appeal to rural women's sense of virtue and it initiated readers into the menaces confronting Khmer village women:

In the areas provisionally controlled by the enemy, apart from fascist repression, women are still obliged to cope with the high cost of living, a lack of necessary elementary provisions, notably rice, and find it very difficult to make ends meet. To this are added other worries: their husbands and their sons could be conscripted at any moment at all, their daughters could be kidnapped and raped by the troops of Phnom Penh and Saigon. The American way of life, a depraved society, and prostitution have poisoned the minds of so many girls and women.¹⁰⁷

There was hope, however: "More than ever, Cambodian women know that the only possible way to free themselves from this thrall-ring is to join in the struggle with the men, without hesitation or compromise, against the American aggressors and their valets for the national liberation."¹⁰⁸ The document listed many of the revolutionary duties of women, including combat, medical work, making booby-traps, village defence and agricultural production. It also praised them for their efforts: "Just like men," the document trumpeted, "Cambodian women, yesterday and today, have contributed greatly to the struggle against foreign aggression in defence of the fatherland."¹⁰⁹ The anonymous author of this document also gave women a sense that they were part of a larger struggle, and depicted them in heroic, virtuous terms: "For arming themselves with their high revolutionary morality and demonstrating supreme revolutionary heroism, they have achieved exploits which our people hold in high esteem. They are thus contributing to tearing apart those backward perceptions of women which still have currency in the

¹⁰⁷ "Cambodian Women in the Revolutionary War for the People's National Liberation (1973)," (Kingdom of Cambodia: National United Front of Kampuchea, 1973), Cambodia Genocide Program Database, accessed 18 February 2003; available from <http://www.yale.edu/cgp/kwomen.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

world.”¹¹⁰ The document concluded by recounting a story that described how a group of cunning revolutionary women lured a group of Lon Nol soldiers into a trap, liberating a village. The story may actually have had its source in Vietnam, as it resembled one used by communist Vietnamese propagandists in describing the exploits of Ut Tich, a popular revolutionary heroine of the independence war against France.¹¹¹

The document is a relatively sophisticated piece of propaganda by Khmer Rouge standards, as it directly addressed issues important to village women and how they were affected by war. It acknowledged the threat war posed to the family and the virtuousness so important to peasant women, and then linked the fight against these threats with the revolutionary cause. Notably, there was no mention of communism and Sihanouk was still described as the Front’s leader. The propaganda piece also exemplified a limitation common to the Chinese, Vietnamese and Cambodian communists: women’s reforms were linked tightly with their wartime service and were not portrayed as being worthy in their own right. This tract was clearly produced during an early, more moderate phase of the revolutionary movement, at a time when Sihanouk’s presence attracted a high number of peasant recruits to the Front.

But while such propaganda may have worked in attracting women to the revolutionary cause, it was not capable of hardening women to endure the danger and adversity of the battlefield. That could only come from sustained indoctrination, a process that was sorely lacking by the time the interviewees were recruited. Also, in striking contrast to the CCP and the Vietcong, the Khmer Rouge gave women nothing concrete to fight for: long-term revolutionary benefits for women – such as political equality,

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Taylor, 11.

maternity leave, or access to education – were virtually non-existent in the KR programme.

Lacking, then, a level of depth that came even close to matching the women's policies' of communist China and Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge use of women in the war was *exclusively* exploitative – no argument could be made for their liberation; it was a brutally rudimentary application of Engels's ideas, forcing women to accept their “liberation” as they were thrust into the military or production, and it foreshadowed their abuse of female labour during Democratic Kampuchea, as described by Mam: “the Democratic Kampuchea regime used gender-specific policies only to offer an appearance of providing equal rights for women. In actuality, these policies aimed solely to mobilize the labor of over half the population.”¹¹² After over fifty interviews with Khmer women, Mam asserted that the communalization of child-rearing and domestic tasks did not liberate women, nor make them more equal to men, but simply permitted DK to better exploit their labour for public tasks; women resented the loss of their traditional role – a source of pleasure and pride – which was replaced by onerous duties for a revolution they did not believe in.¹¹³

Indeed, the CPK's neglect of women's issues ensured that women would never become devoted revolutionaries in large numbers. The bungling of women's issues is reflected in the little that we know about the Party's women's group, the Women's Association of Democratic Kampuchea, and its president, Khieu Ponnary, who was also Pol Pot's wife. In his book *The Pol Pot Regime*, Ben Kiernan described a bizarre visit to

¹¹² Mam, 4.

¹¹³ Ibid., 26.

DK by a delegation from the Vietnamese Women's Union in 1977.¹¹⁴ The Union had been invited by a group of Cambodian women who had visited Vietnam the previous year. The Women's Association of Democratic Kampuchea was represented by Ieng Thirith, Ponnary's sister and wife of DK foreign minister, Ieng Sary. Mysteriously, Ponnary never made an appearance and was never even described as president of the Women's Association, although nobody else was either; Thirith, meanwhile, said very little about the Association. The leader of the Vietnamese delegation was puzzled: "I got the impression there was no real Women's Association, or if there was, they were trying to do away with it."¹¹⁵ Khieu Ponnary, Kiernan wrote, was said to have gone insane in 1975;¹¹⁶ Becker wrote that she began to lose her mind during the years of isolation she spent with her husband in the maquis before and during the revolution.¹¹⁷ "Ieng Thirith," Becker claimed, "was to become the 'First Lady' of the Revolution."¹¹⁸

This was an unfortunate development for Cambodian women, as Thirith – like her counterparts in the upper echelons of the DK hierarchy – was badly out of touch with peasant reality, including that of peasant women. In a 1980 interview with Becker, she defended DK's policies, in the process demonstrating her total misunderstanding of what was important in the lives of Cambodia's peasant women: "Before, women had to work, to come home and search for the fish, the rice, to cook it, care for the children. This was terrible. In communal living they only have to come home from work and eat."¹¹⁹ As

¹¹⁴ Kiernan, 159-63.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Becker, 146.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

Becker pointed out, what was “terrible” for Thirith were the pleasures of everyday life for many women: raising their children and tending their home.¹²⁰

Little else is known about the Women’s Association. The Prek Sdei women wrote the obligatory biographies while in prison camp, most of which stated that they had belonged to something called “Women’s Youth”; none of them, however, were clear on what exactly that meant and they did not remember belonging to any formal women’s association as such. Carney noted that during the civil war, the NUFK did create organizations to mobilize the peasant population, including the Patriotic Youth of Kampuchea and the Patriotic Women of Kampuchea. Part of their function, he wrote, was for internal and external consumption, as they demonstrated support for the revolution and the Party then recruited candidates from these associations.¹²¹ No known evidence exists, however, of a definitive women’s policy emerging from these or any other such organizations. It is clear, then, that for the Khmer Rouge, *effectively* organizing women was simply not a priority. This mistake, like countless others the regime made, ignored the realities of the Cambodian masses.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Khmer Rouge’s failure to gain the support of women was part of the massive overall failure of Democratic Kampuchea as a state and the Khmer Rouge as a movement. Tragically ambitious agricultural policies, extreme paranoia and systematic terror – all characterized the rule of the Khmer Rouge, while careful planning, an effort to nurture a positive relationship with peasants and flexible leadership were all sadly absent.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Timothy Carney, “The Unexpected Victory,” in Jackson, 27-8.

Angkar's voice was the only one permitted under the Khmer Rouge, but little of what it said resonated with peasants in general, and, as this thesis has argued, with women in particular.

Women in revolutionary China, however, operated within a solid ideological framework that offered tangible benefits in exchange for service to the revolution. The rights of women to vote, to divorce their husbands, and to own land became part of the communist party's platform. Women's responsibilities were expanded during wartime struggles and they performed well in their new roles, making valuable contributions to the communist cause while men were fighting at the front. At the same time, however, the communist leaders in China hesitated to radically change certain peasant traditions, including the family: patriarchy was a powerfully entrenched force in this Confucian society. Attempts were made to communalize certain domestic tasks (thereby freeing women to enter communal production) but the nuclear family remained intact and important. Women's liberation was identified as a goal, but its attainment was to take place through revolutionary activity. This idea originated with Frederick Engels's belief that women could only be "liberated" once they were fully involved in industrial production. Engels, however, went further than the communist party in China was willing to go to liberate women: he saw the nuclear family as enslaving women, and called for its abolition, with domestic tasks such as child-rearing becoming public, communal responsibilities.

Engels's radical ideas are most clearly evident in communist-controlled Cambodia, where an awkward but devastating attempt was made at mass communalization that was supposed to render the family obsolete; they also dovetailed

nicely with the Khmer Rouge's desperate need for labour and military personnel. The experiences of the women interviewed here provide an early example of this policy, as they were punished severely for their attachment to their families and "disloyalty" to *Angkar* when they ran away from the front during the war. The Khmer Rouge wanted to implement the most purely communist programme yet attempted; indeed, the Cambodian communists liked to brag of the uniqueness of their revolution, and Engels's family theories provided a rough blueprint for some of the truly radical change they hoped would be a model for revolutions around the world.¹²² As such, the experience of its Asian communist brethren in China may have served as an important example – not for their relative success, but for their failure to enact the truly drastic social change Engels prescribed.

The attempt to "go it alone" on the part of the Khmer Rouge was, of course, a dismal failure. Its leaders were simply unprepared to govern the country effectively,¹²³ and important details such as a well-defined women's policy were never considered. Complex social, agricultural and economic reforms were to be implemented through "revolutionary fervour"¹²⁴ and not careful planning that responded to actual circumstances. Just as agricultural production was to be boosted through hard work alone, women were to be liberated through their backbreaking labour. The result, David Chandler wrote, was that "Cambodia soon became a gigantic prison farm"¹²⁵. Ironically, this situation did mark the achievement of gender equality in Cambodia: ultimately, the

¹²² Chandler made the point that the KR leaders hoped that "larger nations would learn from its revolutionary experience." See David P. Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 107.

¹²³ Etcheson, 225.

¹²⁴ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 239

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

cruelty of Pol Pot's regime did not discriminate between men and women, and all Cambodians suffered greatly.