

The Politics of Representation: Authenticity and Emotion in Tuol Sleng Visitor Books¹

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Abstract: After the invasion by the Vietnamese military that toppled the Khmer Rouge regime in early 1979, the newly installed government of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea decided to turn the central prison, codenamed S-21, into a museum: the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Archive (TSGM). At a time when the exact nature of the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge was still contested and the Khmer Rouge was supported as part of an insurgency along the border by the US, Europe, China, and ASEAN, the new Communist government, backed by a Vietnamese occupation force (in turn backed by the Soviet Union), faced not only economic sanctions and embargoes, but also a legitimacy crisis. The new regime had to legitimate its control over the state while many of its members had been Khmer Rouge functionaries and mid-range commanders—and the new government was not only Communist (again), but also set up by a hated neighbor whom many Cambodians considered to have colonialist intentions. This article looks at the TSGM visitor book entries from the first two years of its establishment (1979–1982). It traces how, within the politics of representation, narratives of authenticity as a vehicle for political legitimacy are created through the languages of emotion, immediacy, and shock. The article focuses on variances in representation among entries from groups of visitors in three languages (Khmer, English, and German) and how these connect to local and Cold War politics and their respective audiences. Central to the understanding of the narrative of authenticity and the language of emotion, however, is not only what these entries tried to highlight, but also what was left out: their silence on the complexities of S-21, the political regimes involved in its history, the compound in which the museum was established, and the lives of the victims.

Introduction

This article adds to the literature on the politics of representation within the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Archive (TSGM) in Phnom Penh, which was created within the compound of the central security center of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) codenamed S-21. The prison authorities were in charge of interrogating and eventually executing “enemies of the revolution.” Several works on the early politics of memory within the museum’s compound and its construction (Hinton, 2011; Ledgerwood, 1997; Violi, 2012) form the backdrop of this analysis, which focuses on the visitors’ books of the museum. These politics of memory and representation are important for understanding the memory space visitors entered when visiting the museum during the first three years of its life. They explain the political context and, quite literally, what visitors saw, and which complexities had been left out of “sight” (Williams, 2022). What the following article does not look at, however, is whether the Khmer Rouge in legal terms committed genocide or not. For this question, readers may consult the rulings of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Cambo-

dian Courts (ECCC), particularly the conviction of Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan in Case 002 (ECCC, 2018). This also means that it does not aim to judge whether certain representations of the period under discussion had been closer to ‘the’ truth than others.

From this starting point within existing literature, the article focuses on how these politics of memory represent what happened under the Khmer Rouge in the TSGM visitor books. It looks at how visitors from different countries—in this case, almost exclusively representatives of political parties, ministries, religious groups, unions, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—create an authority to speak *about* and, ultimately, *for* the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime. The focus is therefore on how the authority to speak truth about what happened under the Khmer Rouge, which sealed its country off from the rest of the world by closing its borders, is constructed. Very few foreigners were allowed in³. Visitors to the museum who wrote in the museum’s books were writing about the realities of a regime about which they had scarce information—a fact that, on the one hand, complicates speaking truth and, on the other, makes this case particularly interesting to analyze.

The article focuses its analysis on “who” is represented as a victim, “how” responsibility for past horrors is represented, “why” certain narratives of the past are prioritized, and, most importantly, “how” the claim to represent the victims’ truth is made. It thereby adds to literature analyzing the books as an “instrument of political instruction” (Hughes 2018). The main thesis of the following article is that a “truth” constructed through narratives of authenticity, immediacy, emotion, and shock translates, for international visitors in particular, into a narrative of conversion. The narratives of conversion from non-believer to believer and the evidence of “being there” and “seeing with one’s own eyes” serve as vehicles to further certain political representations of the Khmer Rouge regime. The experience of shock, speechlessness, and emotion serves to create evidence of being (passively) moved, affected, and overwhelmed by a—or, rather, the—truth. Entries by Cambodian representatives, by contrast, feed into the idea of rage and anger against a non-Communist “clique” killing its own people. While all entries comply with this idea to certain degrees, the entries in the Khmer language strongly reiterate the new government’s quest for legitimacy as a Communist regime created by the invasion and, at that time, occupation of Vietnamese.

To understand the politics of representation in the visitor books, the article briefly introduces two points. The first chapter provides a short history of the regime’s security apparatus and the central prison, S-21. The second chapter introduces the theoretical toolkit, namely the politics of representation developed by Stuart Hall (1997) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994), and Michel Foucault’s ([1970] 1981) analysis of discursive rules and techniques of “speaking truth.” The third chapter turns to the history of how S-21 was turned into the TSGM and sketches the selectivity of representation and construction of authenticity by the first post-Khmer Rouge government of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and the early museum staff. This is central to the understanding of claims of representation and authenticity by visitors to the museum, as it forms the discursive and material background to their perceptions.

Finally, the fourth chapter turns to the core of the argument, namely the visitor books. While six visitor books exist, dating not only from the beginnings of the museum but also from its later stages, the article only looks at the first two, which cover the period immediately after the museum’s inception until November 1980 (TSGM Book 1) and from then until June 1982 (TSGM Book 2). In view of the amount of data, as entries were made by delegations from around the world, the article further limits its analysis to entries in three languages: English, the local Khmer language, and German—not only because the author is German, but also because of the attempt

made by the Cambodian government, as reflected in the entries discussed below, to place the site within a history of Auschwitz.

Reeducation and Security Centers in Democratic Kampuchea

Reeducation and security centers were one of the backbones of the Khmer Rouge's attempt to transform Cambodian society into a Socialist utopia, its "Super Great Leap Forward" to turn a dependent country in the periphery of the capitalist world system, exploited by feudal and capitalist classes, into an egalitarian state without inequalities based upon radical collectivism (Bultmann, 2018). The security apparatus consisted of 196 security and reeducation centers, reaching from the lowest level of the subdistrict to the district, the region, the zone, and, finally, culminating in the central prison codenamed S-21. While the regime initially mainly targeted members of the old elites or former higher ranks of the exploiting order, the revolution and its economic policies quickly started to fail; rather than enjoying prosperity, hundreds of thousands died in famines. After a year in power, Pol Pot, in a famous speech, was already calling for a hunt for "enemies from within" or "microbes" within the Communist Party and its military apparatus. While district-level centers tended to process members of the "old society," those at the top (provincial level and S-21 in particular) after Pol Pot's speech increasingly hunted for enemies within the Party's own ranks (Locard, 2000). This explains why—according to some estimates—roughly 60 percent of the victims in S-21 had been members of the Khmer Rouge's own party and military apparatus (Williams, 2022, p. 9).

The Khmer Rouge did not just kill people in what came to be known as the Killing Fields in isolated locations throughout the Cambodian countryside (Ponchaud, 1977). In addition, hundreds of thousands of its victims had been incarcerated in one of these centers before being killed (Tabeau & Kheam, 2009).⁴ The higher the security/reeducation center ranked in the order of the system, the more likely that the inmates had been tortured into confession and that they would be killed. While a certain share of inmates had been released from lower-level prisons, almost no one survived incarceration in the central prison (Locard, 2000). The main reason for this is that the higher the level of the prison, the more serious the alleged crime and the higher the position and alleged importance of the inmates. This structure also meant that S-21 received higher proportions of the Communist Party's own cadres, commanders, and soldiers, partially explaining why S-21, as a central prison, was occupied with finding enemy networks (or *khsae* in Khmer) and why it produced confessions as proof of its inmates' treasonous mentality. Within a racialized framing (Kiernan, 2002), inmates had to confess to being "Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds" (Hinton, 2005, p. 226)—that is, to being friends on the surface but enemies in their minds. Confessions served to uncover this hidden truth within their biography and political consciousness (Bultmann, 2020).

The regime adhered to strict secrecy with regard to all spheres of life. Not only did it seal the border and allow few visitors and diplomatic representations in the capital, but it also isolated cooperatives from their surroundings. Few people were allowed to travel between cooperatives, and most of those who could do so required a permit (for instance, to visit sick relatives in another cooperative). Due to the high levels of secrecy practiced by the regime, not only did the international audience know little about the security apparatus, its institutions, and its practices, but Cambodians themselves had only a rough grasp of the system, as those who went to one of the reeducation and security centers mostly died and had been taken from secluded cooperatives on the pretext of "helping the organization" (*Angkar* in Khmer). Those who saw people disap-

pear in their cooperatives usually assumed that they had been killed immediately (which in many cases was the case, and in many not). Even the existence of the Party was not announced until 1977, and the leaders of the regime were only known to the inner circles of the Party apparatus.

Within this system of almost invisible rule, security centers remained largely invisible to both people within the DK and those outside it. Thus, the knowledge of people visiting the country when the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was established in 1979 and 1980 was sketchy at best, having been gained from refugees reaching the borders, the diaspora, and the academics and journalists who interviewed them, while information from within the country had been largely channeled through Vietnamese and PRK propaganda. Within this still very much contested Cold War politics constellation, the TSGM occupied an important position in fostering certain imaginations and memory spaces. Together with *Choeung Ek* (commonly known as the "Killing Fields"), the site where S-21 inmates were executed en masse, Tuol Sleng had for decades been the only center (of 196) to receive international, academic, and public attention. Indeed, it took a long time for visitors to realize that S-21 was the apex of a widespread system: neither the only nor the deadliest center of its kind (Heder, 2012; Oesterheld, 2014). For this reason, the politics of representation during the early years after the regime's fall in 1979, when TSGM was set up, operated largely in an information vacuum.

Politics of Representation

Within this configuration, in which information about the regime, particularly in its early years, was hard to establish, this article focuses on the politics of representation for and by visitors to TSGM. The politics of representation as a theoretical and analytical tool refers to the struggle in society over the meaning of images and depictions in a specific culture (Hall, 1997). In view of the representations of the Khmer Rouge regime, the article analyzes how early visitors to TSGM established "facts" and "the truth" of what happened in DK while visiting the museum compound – in other words, without reading these politics against later knowledge production on the question of genocide or recent rulings of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. The politics of representation refers to a symbolic struggle over the meaning of events, stories, and artifacts the visitors experienced during their visits and how this established truth was created via a set of discursive procedures and rules (Foucault, [1970] 1981).

This politics of representation, as speaking truth for those who cannot speak, is, among other things, the critical focus of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994), whose theory forms the center of the argument of this article. Spivak points to the act of re-presenting a truth of the other, a subaltern who cannot speak, as a means of positioning oneself as a legitimate representor who can speak for that other. Within this strategy of representation, truth becomes immediate, open, and clear, something stripped of mediation and therefore representable in both senses of the word. The visitor books are replete with strategies of representation and authorization that all relate to authenticity as an immediacy of truth laid bare by being there and seeing with one's own eyes. Spivak points out that often:

Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as "speaking for," as in politics, and representation as "re-presentation," as in art or philosophy. Since theory is also only "action," the theoretician does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group. Indeed, the subject is not seen as a representative consciousness (one re-presenting reality adequately).

(Spivak, 1994, p. 70)

These politics of representation are exacerbated with subaltern subjects that are dead. Spivak herself talks about attempts of various groups in power to speak for self-immolating widows or to represent the truth of a suicide of a woman resisting political pressures from a militant group of which she was part (*ibid.*). In all cases, however, dead or alive, the represented subject cannot speak and is not listened to in the hegemonic discourse; rather, their representor positions him- or herself as the one experiencing or understanding their truth, thereby positioning him- or herself as the one who now speaks for the subaltern subject. This running together of two types of representation, where the one authorizes the other, can be observed in the visitor books as well.

Discovery and Inception: Early Representation at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Archive

The Khmer Rouge regime was ousted by the Vietnamese, who eventually occupied the country after a series of border incidents (Morris, 1999). The Khmer Rouge fled to the Thai–Cambodian border and organized a resistance with other factions—basically their former enemies from older administrations (Bultmann, 2015). The Vietnamese occupation force, in turn, installed a new government headed by mid-ranking Khmer Rouge defectors and so-called Khmer Vietminh, the cadres that had fled to Vietnam during the early 1970s due to anti-Vietnamese sentiments within the movement before the Khmer Rouge took over (Slocomb, 2004). The new government quickly decided to turn S-21 into a museum called Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. However, this name is a misnomer. Visitors believe that this was the name of the school in which the prison was created, but the school’s name was in fact Tuol Svay Prey, while Tuol Sleng was the name of another school nearby. However, due to its long history and branding, the museum has retained this name, which, it recently emerged, is not completely wrong because the prison consisted not only of the school buildings that now form the museum, but stretched over the whole neighborhood, with multiple buildings for interrogation, housing, medical staff, and so forth (Porée, 2017).

Although the Vietnamese-installed government now led the country, the Khmer Rouge continued to fight along the border, supported by Western governments that, in turn, isolated the Vietnamese government (Chanda, 1986; Gottesman, 2004). This situation followed Cold War politics that saw Western support for everyone fighting states backed by the Soviet Union: in this case, Vietnam. Within a coalition of their former archenemies, the Khmer Rouge even occupied a seat at the United Nations (UN) as the recognized “government” of Cambodia (Haas, 1991). At the same time, Cambodia’s new government in the interior under Vietnamese control—whose legitimacy was challenged—lobbied for the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge to be recognized as genocide. These efforts included a People’s Revolutionary Tribunal at Phnom Penh’s Chaktomuk Theatre that sentenced Pol Pot and Ieng Sary to death in absentia on August 19, 1979. After a few years, academics and members of the international community joined the calls for treating the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge as genocide and engaged in decade-long negotiations for an international tribunal (Etcheson, 2019). With Eastern German funding, Mai Lam, who had previously been in charge of setting up the Museum of American War Crimes in Ho Chi Minh City, was put in charge of creating TSGM by the Vietnamese. The newly created museum invited visitors from around the world and tried to make connections between S-21 and Auschwitz, to which former inmate and the museum’s first Cambodian head, Ung Pech, traveled for inspiration, seeking—according to David Chandler—to “mold Tuol Sleng in that vein” (Chandler, 2000, p. 27).

The new government did not only try to legitimate foreign occupation. It also faced a severe legitimacy crisis due to strong anti-Vietnamese sentiments within the population and the fact that the occupation force was communist and was installing another communist regime (Ledgerwood, 1997; Wild, 2022). This—according to the literature—resulted in three main strategies on the compound of S-21: the reduction of complexities, the use of shock, and a genocidal framing. In regards to the first, for instance, the museum chose, rather than explaining anything to visitors, to only exhibit empty rooms with small sets of artifacts of torture to construct “a sense of authenticity” (Hinton, 2011, p. 71). Thus, it operated with a radically “non-verbal approach” (ibid.) and an “almost total absence of information material” that aimed to let visitors “feel” the site instead of explaining it (Violi, 2012, p. 47). For early visitors, the site looked almost untouched, with blood stains still on the floor.

However, what was visibly created by the museum’s staff was a “skull map,” which depicted Cambodia with the Tonlé Sap and Mekong looking like a stream of blood surrounded by skulls and bones taken from mass graves. Additionally, a former inmate and artist, Vann Nath, was hired to paint scenes from the prison, which like the skull map relates to the next strategy used by the museum after immediacy and the impression of authenticity, namely shock. The use of an anonymous mass of mugshots also fed into a strategy to reduce complexities. Instead of telling individual stories and pointing to the complexities of the site, the museum confronted visitors with dozens of photographs taken by the Khmer Rouge to register the inmates when they arrived at S-21. The museum thus centered on an aggregate of anonymous pictures created by the prison staff for registration purposes and did not mention that a majority of those shown had been Khmer Rouge cadres themselves (see previous section). In place of explaining the victims’ backgrounds, the museum remained silent on their biographies, with some inmates singled out in an ocean of photos, mainly women and children or women with children (adding another layer of shock). This omission continues to characterize the “mnemonic space” at TSGM (see Williams, 2022). Thus, the impression of authenticity and the reduction of complexities while confronting visitors with shocking skulls and anonymous masses of mug shots was not simply an expression of authenticity and untainted truth but—to a certain degree at least—the result of “a carefully crafted mediation” (Benzaquen, 2014, p. 793).

Shocking visitors with skulls and photographs also relates to the third strategy of representation highlighted in the literature: a genocidal framing. Not only did the museum seek inspiration in Nazi camps, as previously outlined by David Chandler, but it also tried to actively distance the Khmer Rouge regime from socialism. Instead of referring to perpetrators as socialists, it depicted the crimes as a result of a paranoid and racist “Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique,” a non-communist aberration led by a small group of genocidaires. Whatever happened had happened to everyone in the same way—something Michael Vickery (1984) called the Standard Total View—and was the result of top leaders, such as Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, “going fascist” (Caswell, 2014, pp. 63-67). In this way, the new government not only tried to bring the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge closer to the definition of genocide, but, as a socialist successor government under socialist Vietnamese control, it also tried to distance the regime’s actions from socialist governance (Gottesman, 2004; Ledgerwood, 1997). Additionally, the first post-Khmer Rouge government consisted of former Khmer Rouge defectors, who had a strong interest in focusing on the top leadership and painting a picture of not only a Cambodian people, but also true socialist cadres subjugated to the horrors perpetrated by that small circle or clique of the most responsible leaders. The narrative was that, aside from the members of the Central Committee, everyone had been a victim of a fascist and racist Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique.

Representation within the Visitors' Books

During the museum's first months, it was only open to foreign visitors, international delegations, and journalists (Ledgerwood, 1997, p. 88). However, it was later opened to local visitors, with "around 324,921 Cambodian visitors" having attended by October 1980 (Williams, 2022, p. 6). These visitors were confronted with the politics of representation, as discussed in the previous section. Within the delineations defined by these politics, they also took part in representing the Khmer Rouge regime and its atrocities. The entries made by international visitors in the visitors' books construct three narratives of authenticity and truth: 1) of being there and seeing with one's own eyes, resulting in a "conversion" from outsider to believer (Alexander, 2004); 2) of being passively touched—or even overwhelmed—in one's humanity by trans-political and senseless inhumanity, making them speak not as politicians but as defenders of humanity; and 3) of being left speechless when confronted by self-explaining "evidence." However, the emphasis on conversion, speechlessness, and humanity in the face of inhumanity differs slightly among members of different kinds of delegations from different countries.

Almost all entries made by international visitors stem from delegations of international organizations, embassies, unions, religious representations, and political parties that had been invited to learn about the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, to lobby for Cambodia's isolated, newly created government, and to delegitimize the Khmer Rouge's occupation of Cambodia's seat at the UN (for details on the contents of the books compare Hughes 2018). Of course, one can find multiple references to the master narrative of the museum: that a tiny group surrounding Pol Pot was closer to fascism and Nazism than to communism. An entry by a delegation from the German Democratic Republic (GDR), for instance, reads:

Wir sind tief erschüttert von den Verbrechen der Pol-Pot-Clique am kampucheanischen Volk. Auch wir mußten in unserer Geschichte die Verbrechen der deutschen Faschisten erleben, die mit den gleichen Methoden Millionen von Menschen vernichteten. Kämpfen und arbeiten wir gemeinsam, daß nie wieder ein Hitler und ein Pol-Pot zur Herrschaft über Menschen gelangt.

We are deeply shaken by the crimes of the Pol Pot clique against the Kampuchean people. In our own history, we too had to experience the crimes of the German fascists, who, using the same methods, destroyed millions of people. Let us fight and work together to ensure that Hitler and Pol Pot never again come to power over humans.

(January 25, 1981, TSGM Book 2)

This quote is typical of the entries made by GDR representatives. It directly equates what happened under the Khmer Rouge with fascism and Nazism. The representatives of the GDR evoke a picture of fascism that causes shock and disgust and is, as one quote maintains, "only comparable in its barbarity to fascist atrocities" (March 19, 1980, TSGM Book 1). Entries made by GDR representatives all replicate the narrative of the state that demarcates a small clique surrounding Pol Pot and Ieng Sary as genocidal fascists and the Cambodian people in toto as victims. There are multiple entries linking Tuol Sleng with extermination camps. One visitor even makes a direct link to his own experiences in a Nazi camp, calling Tuol Sleng an extermination camp:

Aus Anlaß des 1. Jahrestages des Sieges des kampucheanischen Volkes in Phnom Penh weilend, hat die Delegation der deutschen Demokratischen Republik tiefbewegt

das Vernichtungslager Tuol Sleng besucht. Einst selbst ein Häftling Nr 1681 im faschistischen KZ Dachau weiß ich, wieviel Blut, Leid, Elend, Not und Tod diese Mauern gesehen haben. Wir ehren das Andenken der tausenden Toten, indem wir niemals aufhören werden, für eine neue, bessere Welt zu kämpfen, uns für die Sache und den Sieg des Sozialismus einzusetzen.

While in Phnom Penh on the occasion of the first anniversary of the victory of the Kampuchean people, the delegation of the German Democratic Republic visited, deeply moved, the Tuol Sleng extermination camp. Once prisoner No. 1681 in the fascist Dachau concentration camp myself, I know how much blood, suffering, misery, hardship, and death these walls have seen. We honor the memory of the thousands of dead by never stopping fighting for a new, better world, fighting for the cause and the victory of Socialism.

(January 7, 1980, TSGM Book 1)⁵

The entries are replete with references to the need to prevent a return of the Khmer Rouge then fighting along the border, which would mean a return of fascism and (as highlighted by GDR Minister of Defense Heinz Hoffmann in his entry voicing Cold War politics) “its Chinese masters”—against which the Kampuchean people, supported by the Vietnamese and Soviets, had to “defend their recently achieved liberty” (January 13, 1982, TSGM Book 1).

While entries from East Germany replicate the discourse of the PRK government and equate Pol Pot directly with Hitler, visitors from West Germany do not refer to any alleged truth of the regime (fascist, socialist). Entries are usually comparatively short. Uta Ranke-Heinemann, for instance, a famous German critical theologian and peace activist, jotted down one word only: “Entsetzlich (“horrible”) (undated between December 4 and 7, 1979, TSGM Book 1). On the same page, another German visitor noted: “Even for a German this is difficult to understand” (ibid.). These entries voice shock and a certain level of speechlessness, yet they remain strikingly silent with regard to politics.

This picture clearly changes in entries made by delegations from communist parties from the Global North. These—like the GDR delegations—highlight the connection to Hitler while complaining that Pol Pot was a fascist committing his atrocities “in the name of Communism”:

Words fail in face of this terrible picture of crime and human cruelty. How is it possible to so dehumanize people that they become capable of such acts. And that in the name of communism! It is a pity that the world knows so little of one of the darkest pages of our time. It is only comparable to Hitler’s crimes. But so much less is known about it. One feels humble in face of such a picture of human degradation (sic). Let us hope and act that the martyrs of this regime have not died in vain. Let us make sure it never happens again.

(Bernie Taft, Communist Party of Australia, April 1, 1982, Visitor Book 2)

In this entry, the connection between Pol Pot and Hitler is set up against the pity that “the world” knows so little about what happened. Just one day later, another member of the Socialist Party of Australia, Alan Miller, called for support for true socialism:

Pol Pot represented all that was backward, vile and degrading. One can only compare his atrocities to Hitler (sic) Germany. Pol Pot mis-used the word communism, just as Hitler mis-used the word socialism.

True communists condemn the hideous Pol Pot regime and welcome the new revolutionary government and party of Kampuchea, which, with the Kampuchean people, will build a socialist Vietnam.

(April 2, 1982, TSGM Book 2)

The aim to build a socialist Vietnam is either a sign of how unaware the visitor was of the Cambodian people's fears of being colonized by the Vietnamese or a mistake. However, there is a clear distinction between true and false communism.

Most English-speaking entries claim superior knowledge by "having been there" and by "seeing," which translates into an authorization to "tell the truth" (Bliesemann de Guevara, 2017). Only by having been there is one able to speak truth, as highlighted by this unionist: "The prison has to be seen to be believed. Those of us who have had the opportunity to see will spare no effort to tell our people" (Q. Beaver, Factory Shop Steward and Trade Union, Sydney Australia, undated, TSGM Book 1). For this unionist, there is a direct line between seeing without mediation and evidence of truth-bearing realities. Or, as Paul Mc Chary from the World Church Service put it: "The visit makes more dramatic and more factual the information we had concerning this period of Kampuchean history" (March 1, 1980, TSGM Book 1). Being there and seeing means that "mere" knowledge from reading becomes fact: "The reality of what I had read has been impressed upon [me] in reality" (SAWS – R.H. Wentland, March 9, 1980, TSGM Book1). Or, as a member of the Seventh-Day Adventist World Service from Washington DC in the US put it: "Now I know for sure that the tragedy of so wonderful a country is true" (March 9, 1980, TSGM Book 1). Another visitor put it bluntly: "Without seeing it, one cannot quite believe it" (Chairman of Relief Appeal for Kampuchea and two cameramen, undated, TSGM Book 1). The truth received by being there is, of course, that of an annihilation of the Khmer people, as highlighted by a World Vision delegation: "It is sad that man should do such atrocious things to man. It is even sadder that the world cannot see, as clearly as we have seen, the horrible extent to which Pol Pot/Ieng Sary went to annihilate the Khmer people" (Delegation of World Vision, undated, TSGM Book 1).

Seeing gives credence to a certain truth of the regime, but seeing is not just believing. It is also an act of conversion from a non-believer to a believer. This is clearly spelled out in an entry by Joseph H. Crown, Vice-Chairman, Commission of Jurists of International Association Democratic Lawyers and Chairman of the Lawyers Committee on American Policy towards Vietnam:

Until going to Phnom Phen (sic), I was skeptical of reports that the Pol Pot regime tortured prisoners and mass-killed prisoners. The torture chamber in the prison which was a school before, the chains on the beds and in the small prison cells, the [illegible] fold for hanging, the cemetery in the yard for prisoners killed is a shocking, chilling experience that shocks human conscious (sic). Pol Pot was a terrorist, not a true revolutionary even tho[ugh] he called himself a communist—the Nazis also used the name of 'National Socialism'.

(April 1979, TSGM Book 1)

Finally, entries voice a shock that touches humanity and provokes deep-felt emotions. As in the above comments by German visitors, others write about a struggle to find suitable words for what they have experienced. A Norwegian journalist, Jan Otto Høy, starts by writing "It is difficult to find the words to describe the horrors of Pol Pot-regime" and continues "I have seen many

films from the Nazi concentration camps in Europe—but I think this system seems even crueler” (undated, TSGM Book 1). While clearly formulating a truth of the regime, the experience is framed as an encounter with something incomprehensible that leaves an imprint in the visitor’s mind. An Indian journalist comments: “This is an unforgettable day in my life. What I saw and heard going around the prison will remain indelible in my mind. This gave me a real picture of the cruelty, that is unheard in human history, suffered by the people of Kampuchea under Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique” (March 22, 1980, TSGM Book 1).

Several entries connect something like a universal human truth and level of understanding, a deep-seated shock that eclipses everyday thinking and emotions. A German entry reads: “Reason and emotion cease; and the suffering and pain of the Kampuchean people must be made known to all people in the world.” (Original: “Verstand und Gefühl setzen aus; und Leid und Schmerz des kampucheanischen Volkes müssen allen Menschen in der Welt zur Kenntnis gebracht werden”, Sybille Weher, December 7, 1979, TSGM Book 1). Another visitor writes: “Words cannot describe adequately the suffering that the Kampuchean people went through. The visit to this ‘prison’ is an experience we cannot go through without deep emotion”—an emotion that translates into political action guided not by politics, but ethics and good will: “Anything possible must be done by all men of good will everywhere to help the Kampuchean people re-build their country. Let the future help them forget the past” (Zia Rizvi, January 2, 1980, TSGM Book 1).

That which cannot be described calls for ethics in times of Cold War politics: Ethics to stand with the right people, as fostered by US-American involvement in the civil war that led to the takeover of the Khmer Rouge from 1970 until 1975:

Words cannot describe the sense of tragedy, which we feel upon visiting this dreadful place and learning the personal stories of our guides. The people have suffered unbelievably during the past decade—from the American bombing, the war between 1970 and 1975, and then the terrible years of Pol Pot.

We hope and pray that energies can now be turned to healing and rebuilding Kampuchea. We appeal to all nations to refrain from using the Kampuchean people as pawns in their struggle and to give full aid in the present food crisis and for long-term reconstruction.

(Delegation from the American Friends Service Committee, September 17, 1979, TSGM Book 1)

Several entries voice the inhumanity of the atrocities and how it shook or even paralyzed them, rendering them unable to think and feel straight. The experience is a truth that evades politics, that evades understanding, that evades discourse—but it calls for action to support the newly established and internationally isolated PRK government. It is “a horrible example of MAN’s inhumanity to MAN” (illegible name, Catholic Relief, February 5, 1980). Only by sustaining that shock, that deep impression, can one understand why the Vietnamese invasion and official “liberation” on January 7, 1979 was necessary:

Today’s (sic) visit to this prison has impressed upon my mind and memory what a tyrant and inhumane person Pol Pot was. Never in my life have I seen so much misery displayed as is here. The crimes of Pol Pot were total and insane.

It was important for me to visit this prison because it has helped me to understand what the Khmer people have suffered since 1975 under Pol Pot. I now understand

why January 7, 1979 was a victory for Kampuchea.

(Stephen R. Collins, CWS, January 24, 1980, TSGM Book 1)

The visitors replicate the government’s discourse and call for it to be supported. Some of the framing, however, can only be understood within the framework of an eclipse of complexities within the museum itself, for instance those mentioned in the previous section, namely that the victims in the prison had largely been Khmer Rouge cadres and, until their own imprisonment, part of the system (Williams, 2022), including members of the prison’s own staff and even interrogators and torturers (Bultmann, forthcoming). For the visitors, there is only an anonymous mass of victims: “We pray that the hatred and inhumanity perpetrated on the innocent victims of this prison will be indelibly printed in the minds of the Kampuchean people to ensure that such acts may never occur again” (Bob Ainsworth, World Vision International, undated, TSGM Book 2).

Yet, while international visitors were unable to see that there were many cadres among the victims, Cambodian visitors were well aware of this fact. Interestingly, however, Khmer visitors connect the dead cadres with statements claiming this shows that Pol Pot was even worse than Hitler or that the Khmer Rouge atrocities had been the deadliest genocide in history because Pol Pot, in this framing, killed his own people and, as a reactionary, went so far as to exterminate “patriots and Cambodian revolutionaries.” As outlined in this entry, seeing the prison and these crimes, unparalleled in history, causes anger, which leads to a moral imperative to side with the former Khmer Rouge who, as good and proper revolutionaries, were attacked by the genocidal Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique, and to view the new government, alongside the Vietnamese, as liberators. Further, it offers an imperative to attack the fascist West and its ally, the Chinese:

ការសម្លាប់ជាតិឯងដែលមានលក្ខណៈប្រល័យពូជសាសន៍ មិនដែលធ្លាប់មាននៅក្នុងប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្ររបស់មនុស្សលោក។ ដូច្នោះធ្វើឲ្យយើងខ្ញុំទាំងអស់គ្នាមានការឈឺចាប់កាន់តែខ្លាំងឡើងចំពោះពួកប្រតិកិរិយាប៉ុលពត អៀងសារី នឹងពួកប្រតិកិរិយាចិនប៉ែកាំង បានធ្វើលើប្រជាជននឹងអ្នកស្នេហាជាតិ នឹងអ្នកបដិវត្តកម្ពុជាដែលបាត់បង់អាយុជីវិតរាប់លាននាក់។ ដោយឡែកតែនៅសាលាទូលស្លែងនេះយើងខ្ញុំទាំងអស់គ្នាក៏អាចសន្និដ្ឋានបានជាមូលដ្ឋានថា ពួកប៉ុលពត អៀងសារី វាសម្លាប់អ្នកបដិវត្តន៍អស់រាប់រយពាន់ម៉ឺននាក់ដែល។

A deadlier genocide has never been seen in human history. We have a growing pain against the reactionary Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique and the Chinese in Beijing, we as patriots and Cambodian revolutionaries who lost millions of lives. Let alone in this Tuol Sleng school we can observe how the Ieng Sary–Pol Pot clique killed hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries.

(May 28, 1979, TSGM Book 1)

Khmer entries were usually not made by one of the hundreds of thousands of ‘ordinary’ visitors, but by high-ranking members of delegations from a political school of the Ministry of Education and Museums. Therefore, they do not provide insights in the reception of the museum by the wider populace, but by official government representatives. These entries all refer to the torments of the Khmer people, to a genocidal clique, and to anger, pain, and mourning:

ឆ្លងតាមការពិនិត្យ លើភាពជាក់ស្តែងនៃកុកទូលស្លែង ដែលពួកក្បត់ជាតិ ប៉ុលពត អៀងសារី ធ្វើទារុណកម្មយ៉ាងខ្លោចផ្សារបំផុត មកលើប្រជាជនកម្ពុជា ។ យើងខ្ញុំទាំងអស់បានឃើញ យ៉ាងច្បាស់ជាក់ស្តែងនូវអំពើព្រៃផ្សៃប្រល័យពូជសាសន៍ឯង ប៉ុលពត អៀងសារី។ យើងខ្ញុំ មានកំហឹងឈឺចាប់និងចង់គំនិតចង់អាយាតតកូនតទៅរៀងរហូត។

After examining the apocalypse of Tuol Sleng prison in which the Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique brought great torments on the Kampuchean people, we have clearly seen the brutality of this Pol Pot–Ieng Sary genocide and we are in anger, in pain and mourn the murder of our ancestors forever.

(January 25, 1980, representatives of the political school of the Ministry of Education and Museums, TSGM Book 1)

They attack China (which waged a punitive war against Vietnam shortly after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia), they pledge loyalty to the Vietnamese liberators, and they constantly raise the theme of anger:

សូមចូលរួមមរណសញ្ញាចំពោះបងៗបដិវត្តន៍ ដែលសុខចិត្តបូជាជីវិតបុព្វហេតុដោះជាតិ ចេញពីណឹមប្រល័យពូជសាសន៍បនក្បត់អាប៉ុលពត អៀងសារីឆ្កែបំរើជាចម្លែបនប្រតិកិរិយា ចិនប៉េកាំងយើងខ្ញុំមានសេចក្តីរំភើបនឹងចង់កំហឹងរាប់ពាន់ឆ្នាំចំពោះឧក្រិដ្ឋកម្មដែលប៉ុលពត អៀងសារី

Please join our revolutionary brothers who are willing to sacrifice for the source of liberation from the genocidal and traitorous Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique, the dogs serving as tokens for Beijing’s interests. Our enthusiasm will bring us together for a thousand years in anger against the Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique.

ក្រោយពីបានឃើញសព្វគ្រប់ក្នុងមន្ទីរឃុំឃាំងរបស់អាប៉ុលពត អៀងសារីមក យើងខ្ញុំឈឺចាប់ណាស់ហើយចង់គំហឹង ជានិច្ចនូវអំពើមហាព្រៃផ្សៃ មហាថោកទាប ប្រល័យពូជសាសន៍ឯង ដែលក្នុងប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រពិភពលោកមិនដែលមានទាល់តែសោះ។ យើងត្រូវតែរួបរួមជាមួយ រណសិរ្សសសាមគ្គីសង្គ្រោះជាតិកម្ពុជា រួមគ្រឿងស្នាដៃមួយមិត្តរៀនណាមជីកំលើងឬសព្វ កអាឆ្កែប៉ុលពត អាអៀងសារី បំរើចិនប៉េកាំងអោយអស់ពីទឹកដីយើង។

Third group: After seeing everything at this detention center of A-Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, we are deeply saddened and constantly angry about these atrocities that are unparalleled in world history. We must unite with the Cambodian National Salvation Front, stand shoulder to shoulder with our Vietnamese friends, uproot Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, and expel Beijing from our territory.

(May 19, 1979, representatives of the political school of the Ministry of Education and Museums, TSGM Book 1)

This reference to anger and pain is not made by chance. Rather, it connects to a government discourse in which the Cambodian people unite with the government in anger to fight the remaining

Khmer Rouge along the border and thus aims to translate their narrative from a common victimhood into solidarity with the new socialist state under Vietnamese occupation. Judy Ledgerwood analyzed the expression *chheu chap*, used in the entries above, with reference to a publication by the Ministry of Information and Culture:

[P]artly contained within this notion is anger born of betrayal and frustration. It is the anger that the state propaganda machine focuses on in its presentation of Tuol Sleng and of the DK [Khmer Rouge] period more generally. The phrase *chheu chap* in state publications becomes a compound: *kamheng chheu chap*, *kamheng* meaning anger or rage. From an irresolvable grief is born a pain that results in rage. Take, for example, a quotation from a 1984 PRK publication in Khmer, which reads ‘*kiev phneak po penh dov daoy kamheng chheu chap* [the pupils of our eyes are full of a rage born of agony].’ (Ledgerwood, 1997, pp. 91, citing from Ministry of Information and Culture 1984)

All Khmer visitor book entries univocally refer to solidarity in anger and pain; to the fascist clique and a population of victims; to a crime worse than Hitler’s; and to the need to fight the fascism of the West and its Chinese ally. While most Khmer visitors worked with a narrative of anger that refers to nothing but a purity of emotion caused by their visit, only one political advisor of the Cambodian Ministry of Education listed what he actually saw; yet he, too, turned it into evidence of the claim that the crimes committed at Tuol Sleng were more brutal than anything Hitler ever did:

ចូលទស្សនាលើញពួកអ្នករងគ្រោះទារុណកម្មដែលជាប់ពន្ធនាគារទូលស្លែង នោះទារុណកម្ម មានសភាពយោរយៅយ៉ាងខ្លាំង លើសហ៊ីត្លែរទៅទៀត។
១ កន្លែងសួរចម្លើយ ឃើញមានរំពត់ ដំបង ខ្មោះជើង ខ្សែភ្លើង
២ កន្លែងដាក់ទោស ឃើញខ្មោះជើង ធ្មេញដាក់លាមក ទឹកនោម
៣ កន្លែងចងក ហើយភ្នំឡើងលើ មានពាងទឹកពីរ សំរាប់ជ្រលក់ក្បាលអ្នកទោសនៅក្នុង ពាងទឹកដើម្បីសួរចម្លើយ
៤ កន្លែងកប់ខ្មោចមានប្រវែងទទឹង៧ទឹក បណ្តោយពីរម៉ែត្រ មានឆ្អឹងខ្មោចប្រមាណ៥នាក់
៥ កន្លែងដាំបាយ រោងជាង ក្រោយពេលទស្សនាយើងខ្ញុំ ទាំងអស់គ្នាមានកំហឹង ឈឺចាប់ យ៉ាងខ្លាំងចំពោះអំពើហោរយៅរបស់ប៉ុលពត អៀងសារីនេះយ៉ាងខ្លាំង។ ហើយប្តេជ្ញាកំទេច រាល់ឧបាយកលរបស់ប៉ុលពត អៀងសារីឲ្យបានដាច់ខាត ហើយការពារ សាធារណរដ្ឋ ប្រជាមានិតកម្ពុជាឲ្យបានយូរអង្វែង។

Visiting to see the victims of the Tuol Sleng torture prison, made clear that this torture was even more brutal than Hitler.

- 1) In interrogation rooms, I saw sticks, batons, manacles, and wires.
- 2) In detention rooms, I saw manacles and buckets with urine and excrement.
- 3) In interrogation rooms, I saw a place where they hang and two large water jars where they drowned prisoners.
- 4) A mass grave is 0.7 meters wide and 2 meters long containing five skeletons.
- 5) Kitchens and storage halls.

After seeing all of this, we are angry at the inhumane acts of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary. We are committed to undermine their ideology and protect the People's Republic of Kampuchea.

(Advisor to the Ministry of Education, September 1979, TSGM Book 1)

Conclusion

These entries use an authority to speak which emanates from having been there, from witnessing truth at first hand, and from being deeply affected by pain and anger to draw borders of victimization and the legitimacy of political claims. The victim becomes an empty spot in this struggle over legitimacy that uses immediacy, emotion, and authenticity as a means to draw borders between perpetration and victimization and between socialism and fascism or genocide. All visitors speak *for* the subaltern dead that cannot speak (Spivak, 1994) and voice *their* truth and the truth of a regime that victimized *a people*. The discourse here circulates around immediacy. Visitors have directly encountered the truth by seeing it and experiencing it on site. They have been shocked and thereby touched in a non-political emotion: that of humanity standing against the barbarism of a Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique that, in its inhumanity, matches Hitler's extermination efforts. They voice a truth—a truth that cannot be explained, that leaves them speechless, and that needs to be directly experienced to be spoken with authority. This is a universal truth of the regime that cannot be judged from books or from afar. Some visitors may have had their doubts previously (of whether the events had truly happened or even whether communism played a role in them), but they experienced a conversion from non-believers to bearers of an untainted and authentic truth. They have not (actively) constructed a truth, but they have been (passively) overwhelmed by it. This makes the entries in the TSGM visitors' books social performances between “ritual and strategy” (Alexander, 2004).

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TSGM-Visitor Book (1), entries until Nov 12, 1979, copy provided by Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Archive.

TSGM-Visitor Book (2), entries until June 10, 1982, copy provided by Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Archive.

Notes

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³Only a small number of embassies of “friendly” nations remained operational in the capital, and some political delegations, especially Chinese advisors and workers, were also allowed in.

⁴The exact ratio of killings inside and outside the prison system is—and likely remains—unknown. The problem is, amongst others, that the infrastructure of the ‘security and reeducation centers’ differed a lot across localities and depending on the level of the system. Lower levels, in particular, often consisted of ‘centers’ comprising of not much more than a hut in a forest clearing. Whether executions in these or by ‘security cadres’ in work sites that took victims to a forest or a field and then executed them with a club should be considered executions inside or outside the system is often a matter of perspective (Craig Etcheson, personal communication). However, among the 196 centers, some of the larger ones at the district level already executed more than 30.000 people (Ea, 2005)

⁵All translations from Khmer and German to English from the author.

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