



The Cold War in Asia

THE BARTER ECONOMY OF THE KHMER ROUGE LABOR CAMPS

Scott Pribble



The Barter Economy of the Khmer Rouge Labor Camps

Pribble investigates the barter economies that developed in many of the labor camps established under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

When the Khmer Rouge abolished currency and markets in 1975, starving Cambodians created underground exchanges in labor camps throughout the country, bartering luxury items for food and other necessities, while simultaneously undermining the regime's ideological goals of eliminating any traces of capitalism in Democratic Kampuchea. Pribble asserts three key points about the barter economy in the Khmer Rouge labor camps. First, the underground exchanges in Democratic Kampuchea provided food and medicine for desperate people subsisting under a totalitarian regime, saving the lives of countless Cambodians. Second, bartering was the riskiest way to obtain food because it was dependent upon the discretion of two or more individuals from different social classes under the threat of violent punishment, thereby altering the social dynamics of the camps. Finally, despite the regime's extreme efforts to eliminate foreign influence from the country and impose communist ideology on millions of citizens, basic forms of market capitalism and a demand for superfluous luxury goods persisted in labor camps throughout the country.

A fascinating study of the human consequences of imposing rigid ideology, that will be of particular interest to scholars and students of political history and Southeast Asian history.

Scott Pribble is a San Francisco-based historian, specializing in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Cambodia.

The Cold War in Asia

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For Myra, Lois, and Neptune



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Scott Pribble

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Introduction

Try to imagine life without currency, stores, or credit cards. How would society function? How would ordinary people get food, clothing, or medicine? How would people pay for services? It is difficult to conceive of an existence without some form of transactional currency in modern society, yet this was the reality in the Pol Pot era of Democratic Kampuchea. When the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia on April 17, 1975, the fanatical communist regime abolished currencies and markets in an effort to rid the country of any remnants of capitalism. Anyone who possessed or traded currency would be beaten or executed for a single violation of this new diktat. In a war-ravaged nation with millions of citizens and insufficient food, increasingly desperate Khmers quietly defied these laws by creating independent trading networks in the newly formed labor camps throughout the country. Using substitute currencies, men, women, and children of every class and ethnic group traded in these underground markets, as the only requirements for participation were coveted goods and a willingness to risk one's life. As labor camp rations decreased during periods of drought, the underground exchanges became vital to the survival of many camp residents in a country with hundreds of thousands of people dying from malnutrition and a regime unable and largely unwilling to help.

Influenced by the cultural revolution of Mao Zedong, the French Revolution, and the Vietnam Workers' Party, the leadership of the Khmer Rouge attempted to create a model of ideological purity in Cambodia that would inspire other communist movements across the globe. The political organization known as the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) sought to limit foreign influences in the country and build a self-reliant society without classes or social hierarchies. Led by the enigmatic dictator Pol Pot, the CPK renamed the country Democratic Kampuchea, abolished private property, emptied hospitals, closed schools and monasteries, and burned books. Within days of the overthrow of the government of the Khmer Republic, the regime evacuated the cities, forcing most of the citizens of Cambodia into labor camps in the countryside at gunpoint.

While the labor camps were part of a country-wide effort to develop agriculture and feed the populace, they were also political tools designed to mold

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model citizens for the new society. The Khmer Rouge promoted mass conformity in the cooperatives by mandating that inhabitants wear similar clothing and hairstyles. The regime instituted communal eating, collectivized childcare, and severe restrictions on movement and speech. The Khmer Rouge cadres numbered 60,000 in a nation of roughly 7 million people, so its leaders employed harsh measures to subdue the population.¹ Soldiers controlled the countryside through violence and food rationing to keep their captives weak, fearful, and silent. Most of the people in the cooperatives worked day and night, rain or shine, toiling in the fields for more than ten hours per day. Too exhausted to rebel, laborers expended all their energy planting crops, digging ditches, and building dams, while the cadres collected the agricultural output, then distributed meager portions of rice as compensation during mealtime.

After years of deliberation, the CPK determined that the abolition of domestic and foreign currencies was necessary to eliminate the economic exploitation that Western capitalism had imposed on Cambodia.² The political leadership, known to its citizens as *Angkar* (“the organization”), believed that money was “the source of corruption”³ in society. The abolition of currency was purported to be a vital aspect of the regime’s success. Money “financed inequality,”⁴ and its abolition eliminated the assets of the wealthy almost instantaneously. The existing class structure of Cambodia disappeared. Within a few days of the fall of Phnom Penh, paper currency had become utterly worthless in Cambodia. As citizens struggled to comprehend these immense economic changes, the Khmer Rouge simply informed its subjects that they no longer needed money and that the regime would provide for the populace.

Without cash, people sought new ways to acquire desperately needed food. Khmers began bartering during the forced evacuations of the major cities and secretly continued the practice in the countryside. The rice rations distributed by the Khmer Rouge were insufficient to sustain life in many of the labor camps, so distressed villagers resorted to foraging, stealing, and bartering to supplement their diets. Despite the CPK vision of a classless, egalitarian society, cadres established a multitiered social hierarchy in the camps, though the various classes interacted when it was mutually beneficial. The favored class of the communist regime, the rural farmers (also known as “Base people” or “Old people”) generally received larger rations of rice and had permission to grow their own food. The people from the cities, pejoratively named “New people” or “April 17 people,” had limited access to food, though many had smuggled their valuables into the camps during the forced evacuations.⁵ Since many of the poor Base people desired the luxury “city goods” and the New people needed food, a system of exchange between the Base people and New people gradually developed into “a new form of economy, based on barter.”⁶ Though technically illegal, the level of enforcement varied from camp to camp and year to year. As the underground exchanges evolved, several substitute currencies emerged as the new basis for trade in the cooperatives, including rice and gold.

The focus of this research is primarily centered on these underground exchanges in the labor camps. This book examines the origins and evolution of the independent barter economies that formed in camps all over Cambodia throughout the Pol Pot era and continued in its aftermath. The research includes an analysis of the various goods that served as substitute currencies and the complex negotiations of their value, which was dependent upon supply and perceived demand. The book also identifies and assesses the risks associated with barter under the Khmer Rouge, as fear and the potential for punishment drove the behavior of almost every action in Democratic Kampuchea. Finally, this work investigates the social dynamics of the barter economy, its effects on identity group interactions, and its impact on the hierarchies of the labor camps.

Definitions

To properly examine the concepts of barter and markets in the context of Democratic Kampuchea, some definitions are necessary. In *Barter, Exchange, and Value: An Anthropological Approach*, social anthropologists Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones intentionally refrained from providing a standard definition of barter, but they did identify several characteristics of nonmonetary transactions. (1) The objects of trade are different in kind. (2) The traders are equal participants who can freely decide not to barter. (3) There is no identifiable measure of value for the objects of trade. (4) The transaction is transformative, as it moves objects between the different systems of meaning of the participants.⁷ Although the traders in the labor camps of Cambodia were often unequal participants, the other characteristics listed here typify ordinary exchanges under the Khmer Rouge. Humphrey and Hugh-Jones described the concept of barter as a “kind of exchange which creates social relations in its own mode,” as its participants often cultivate relationships to allow for the possibility of future trades.⁸ This was of great consequence in Democratic Kampuchea. The ability to build socioeconomic relationships under extreme circumstances was of utmost importance to a Khmer villager. The April 17 people from the cities needed specific interpersonal skills to navigate the complex social interactions of the camps and earn the trust and respect of the privileged classes to participate in trade. Individuals who did not have the requisite social skills or the ability to determine which people were safe to trade with endangered their inventory and lives. In their analysis of barter networks, Humphrey and Hugh-Jones also emphasized the bargaining skills of individuals. In the labor camps, each negotiator attempted to obtain the maximum value from their trading partner while giving up the smallest portion of their inventory.⁹ Many of the villagers in this study took great pride in their dealmaking abilities and frequently credited their negotiation skills for their survival. As rations from the Khmer Rouge decreased, people’s lives depended on making their supplies last as long as possible, so traders were forced to calculate how and when to use their limited resources. For the

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purposes of this research, barter is simply defined as a mutually agreed upon exchange of goods or services between two or more individuals. A can of rice for medicine is barter. A link of a gold chain for a ride on a boat is barter. An individual giving palm sugar to a Khmer Rouge cadre in exchange for an opportunity to visit his family is barter (although it is also bribery). Thus, any nonmonetary exchange of goods or services in Democratic Kampuchea is considered barter.

The definition of markets must also be established. Markets in modern society represent a vast and complex network consisting of countless transactions between various entities and regions. This did not exist in Democratic Kampuchea during the Khmer Rouge era. There were no shops, stands, or physical spaces for trading in the labor camps. As the CPK began to enforce its rules more vigorously, the underground markets were often contained within a single village and unconnected to other cooperatives. The number of markets in the Khmer Rouge era is unknown, though primary sources indicate that it was widespread with varying levels of activity throughout the countryside. There was no designated period of time for bartering. Villagers initiated trades whenever they felt it safe to complete a transaction. Exchanges were done in secret, and negotiations were usually quick so as not to arouse the suspicion of Khmer Rouge soldiers or their spies in the villages. Sometimes, two villagers working in the fields whispered offers and hastily traded their supplies. In other cases, a New person ventured into a Base person's hut, hoping to exchange goods. The marketplace was any space where individuals signaled to each other that they wished to negotiate a trade. In the context of the Khmer Rouge labor camp, a market was a collection of individuals who periodically attempted to barter at unspecified locations.

Sources and Methodology

The majority of the research for this study came from two sources: the memoirs of Khmer refugees and interviews with survivors currently living in Cambodia and the United States. The authors of the autobiographies, overwhelmingly from the major cities in Cambodia, were almost exclusively April 17 people. As the primary targets of the Khmer Rouge's revolution, these individuals were understandably more likely to write about their experiences. As firsthand accounts of "history from below," these former villagers represented the lowest rung of the social hierarchy in Democratic Kampuchea, and their assessments of the regime were unanimously negative. Most of the authors immigrated to the United States or Europe as refugees after the revolution, writing their memoirs decades later. Some of the refugees described the process in terms of passing on their stories to future generations while also attempting to confront and cope with their darkest memories. While there are dozens of autobiographies from New people, written accounts from Base people and Khmer Rouge cadres are brief and rare, in part due to limited access to education in rural areas.

The primary sources of this research came from labor camps in almost every region of Democratic Kampuchea. While most of the authors lived in the western provinces of Cambodia, they also inhabited every administrative zone except for the northeast and the Kratie Special Region (505). The Khmers interviewed for this study were more proportionally dispersed throughout Cambodia. Though the zones and provinces were not equally represented by primary sources, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that the underground exchanges were widespread in Democratic Kampuchea. This research does not seek to establish that significant bartering occurred in every labor camp in every zone or province. Instead, sources show a prevalence for underground trading in Democratic Kampuchea in many different areas, consistent with the claim of American journalist, Elizabeth Becker, that “black markets flourished throughout the country.”¹⁰ The specific geography of the underground markets is not a primary focus of this study, though the locations will be noted throughout the book.

There are benefits and disadvantages to using the memoirs of survivors as sources. Autobiographies can be useful historical tools in that they offer unsolicited accounts of events. There is no interviewer to nudge the source in a specific direction with a leading question. Authors have usually had months or years to reflect on specific events as they write, organizing their memories and reconstructing timelines into a narrative accessible to audiences and valuable to researchers. The memoirs in this study are personal histories of former villagers, usually centered on the loss of parents or siblings during the Khmer Rouge era. References to barter are ancillary to the authors’ main stories, often comprising a handful of sentences in a full-length book. Nevertheless, scores of Khmer authors thought that the underground markets in the labor camps were sufficiently noteworthy to be included in their books. I stumbled upon the topic of barter in the Khmer Rouge labor camps while researching an entirely different subject. After reading dozens of mentions of secret trading in the memoirs of survivors, I believed this topic warranted further study.

One critique of the use of memoirs is that there is potential for embellishment to drive book sales. While a few accounts of Khmer Rouge labor camps have received international attention, most of the authors in this study had little to no prospect of earning significant income from their books. Many of the autobiographies in this study were self-published. Aside from this, if an author were to embellish a topic, it would likely be about more salacious material (such as violence or cruelty) than the intricacies of the underground economy. Furthermore, when dozens of books contain similar depictions of daily life under a tyrannical regime, and there is no discernable motivation to mislead audiences, it is reasonable to accept these accounts as credible unless there is evidence to the contrary. In addition, interview subjects with nothing to gain provided corroborative details about the barter economy in Democratic Kampuchea.

The accounts of written primary sources were recorded decades after the events occurred. The memoirs generally employ a chronological narrative structure and reflect the collective memory of the Khmer community abroad.

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As members of the underclass in the Khmer Rouge era, they share an interpretation of events likely shaped by interactions within these communities after they immigrated to Western nations. Some authors, consciously attempting to recover distant memories during the writing process, consulted with family members to compare their recollections of labor camp experiences. Sources recalled detailed information about insignificant events—for example, the number of cans of rice or ounces of gold involved in a single barter transaction. While it is tempting to be skeptical of the reliability of these accounts, experts in the psychiatric field believe that persistent trauma can sharpen or preserve memories, even over extended periods. Yearslong episodes of trauma, as experienced in the Khmer Rouge labor camps, often create vivid and intense mental imprints in survivors.¹¹ Whereas “normal” memories will fade over time or change based on subsequent experiences, traumatic memories are isolated in the mind and stored in a process that renowned psychotherapist Pierre Janet called “dissociation.” This essentially creates “a dual memory system” that prevents individuals from putting certain events behind them.¹² Dr. Michael Jaffe, an American psychiatrist specializing in trauma, noted that people who experience intense stress over a long period often remember events in great detail as if they occurred recently. While there is no consensus in the psychiatric community as to why people can recall these events vividly, Jaffe argued that, from a clinical and evolutionary perspective, trauma often remains clear in the minds of the survivors as a means to protect individuals from exposing themselves to potential dangers in the future.¹³ In a 50-year study of two hundred Harvard graduates who lived through World War II, researchers questioned participants about their wartime experiences in two interviews four decades apart. The subjects who did not experience significant trauma during the war gave vastly different accounts of events when questioned in 1946 and 1990, while the individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) gave consistent responses 45 years after the initial interview. According to Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, who has done extensive research on the relationship between PTSD and memory, someone who experiences a traumatic event “will retain an intense and largely accurate memory of the event for a long time.”¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, PTSD, anxiety, and depression are prevalent among victims of the Khmer Rouge, who survived unrelenting abuse over a period of almost four years.¹⁵

Other primary sources for this research come from oral histories of survivors living in Cambodia and the United States today. Over 50 interviews were conducted. Each of the interviewees answered specific questions about the underground markets in Democratic Kampuchea. Since the voices of Base people were omitted from the memoirs, individuals from this social class were intentionally sought out to add divergent perspectives to the research. The opinions of the Base people were crucial to this study, as they were often portrayed in the memoirs as hostile to April 17 people or tacitly supportive of the Khmer Rouge. This presented a risk of stereotyping. Regardless of their feelings toward the city folk, many rural peasants helped New people in times of

desperation and risked their lives to trade with them. While the Base people were generally treated better than the April 17 people, they also experienced tremendous hardship in the labor camps. In a complex environment where survival was a concern for almost everyone, Base people (and cadres) were not exempt from the violence and psychological manipulations of *Angkar*. At the same time, it is possible that the interview subjects refrained from sharing memories that would have reflected poorly on themselves and this should be taken into consideration when reading these accounts. The discussions ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours and included conversations about barter and currency in Cambodia before, during, and after the Khmer Rouge era.

The interviews in this study are intended to supplement and challenge the homogeneous perspectives of the memoirs. Though vital to this research, interviews conducted almost 50 years after events are imperfect representations of history and are fraught with some of the same issues as the memoirs. In addition to this, individuals may not be able to fully organize and articulate their memories in a brief interview because the subject has not had sufficient time to contemplate past events and organize their thoughts. Some of the Base people did not experience the same levels of trauma as the April 17 people, and their memories may not be as acute as a result. Several of the interview subjects were over the age of 70 when they were questioned, which could make for complications in their recollections. The interviewees also include New people and a handful of former Khmer Rouge cadres.

Main Arguments

This book presents three arguments. First, the barter economy in Democratic Kampuchea saved a significant number of lives. While it is impossible to calculate how many people survived because of the underground exchanges, primary sources repeatedly cited the ability to find additional food as the only way to fend off starvation and sickness. Whether it was through theft, foraging, or trading, people who did not eat more than the meager rations provided by the Khmer Rouge often died from some form of malnutrition. Barter played a crucial role in the survival strategies of many Khmers, especially for the April 17 people. Though dozens of Khmers provided hundreds of examples of specific trades, determining the breadth of the illegal markets posed another challenge. This study does not contend that there was an operational underground economy in every village or that villagers bartered on a daily basis. Instead, the research will demonstrate that illegal trades occurred in parts of almost every administrative zone by a substantial proportion of the Khmer population and that these transactions supplied traders with sufficient food and medicine to save family members. Therefore, the underground markets established in labor camps all over Democratic Kampuchea merit inclusion in the history of the Khmer Rouge era.

The second argument is that the barter economy was the riskiest way to obtain food because trade was dependent on the discretion of two or more

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individuals in a totalitarian surveillance state. Foraging at night and stealing food were perilous undertakings, but these were solitary activities that did not depend on a network of self-interested individuals. If someone within the barter system was caught trading, that person could easily implicate everyone in the network and jeopardize the lives of dozens of people. Many sources stated that the Khmer Rouge would punish the family members of the individuals caught trading. Depending upon the leniency of the village chief of the labor camp, the exchange of goods was often considered a capital offense. Under constant scrutiny from Khmer Rouge soldiers and their network of spies, an individual's ability to identify trustworthy partners and develop strong relationships was essential to survival.

Finally, despite the regime's constant Marxian propaganda and indoctrination tactics, basic forms of market capitalism, including a demand for nonessential products, persisted in labor camps throughout the era. This is not to argue that the Cambodian people collectively embraced Western capitalism or rejected every aspect of communism (some historians contend that the CPK was not a Marxist regime, which will be addressed later in the introduction). The point is that neither the ideological conditioning nor the punitive consequences for trading altered the desires or behaviors of the population. While it is unsurprising that New people would trade their valuables for food to avoid starvation, the underground exchanges did not exist purely for survival. Many Base people willingly risked their lives to trade their surplus rice and medicine for luxury items: jewelry, gold, and clothing. Whether it was due to the rural peasants' desire for luxuries that they did not have access to before the revolution or a belief that these items might have some value in the future, participants in the barter system willingly traded their limited supply of food for goods that provided no immediate benefit in a time of extraordinary economic uncertainty. These illegal trades and this mindset represented a challenge to the regime and symbolized the CPK's inability to influence the people who were supposed to be the main beneficiaries of their ideological vision. Even Khmer Rouge soldiers coveted watches and other status symbols often associated with the West, occasionally engaging in illicit exchanges of food or favors for these items. This research will show that the years of intense repression, propaganda, and ideological training did not diminish people's desire for private property.

Historiography

The historiography of the underground economy in Democratic Kampuchea is limited. While several scholars mentioned the barter system of the Khmer Rouge era in their research, references were brief and anecdotal without any significant analysis. Elizabeth Becker, one of the few journalists permitted to visit Democratic Kampuchea and interview Pol Pot, referred to a burgeoning black market economy in the first year of the new regime but offered only a handful of transactions as evidence.¹⁶ Craig Etcheson referred to the economy

as “a clumsy agrarian barter system”¹⁷ with little explanation. British journalist Philip Short argued that the barter system in Cambodia demonstrated that the April 17 people from cities “were at heart less removed from peasant life than they sometimes tried to pretend,”¹⁸ but did not expand on the statement. In *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, renowned Cambodian historian David Chandler claimed that Pol Pot’s only regret from the Khmer Rouge era was the abolition of money, but did not offer any meaningful description or analysis of the underground economy.¹⁹ Military historian Boraden Nhem contended that bartering for food was “the norm” and “acceptable” during the Khmer Rouge era, “but it depended on who was the seller and who you were buying from.”²⁰ In *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79*, Ben Kiernan provided more insights on the economics of the labor camps than other scholars. While highlighting several examples of the punishments that Khmers faced for trading commodities, Kiernan discussed some of the social dynamics of the underground exchanges between the Base people and New people and mentioned the participation of some Khmer Rouge cadres but did not elaborate on the significance of these relationships.²¹

The lack of in-depth analysis offers an opportunity for further research on this topic. Historians have written about the leadership, policies, and behavior of the Khmer Rouge, but only a handful of scholars have written extensive monographs focused on a specific aspect of life in Democratic Kampuchea from the perspective of its citizens. Ian Harris, a professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Cumbria, published two studies focusing on the suppression of Buddhist monks under Pol Pot. Peg Levine, an associate professor from the University of Melbourne, wrote about the destruction of traditional rituals in Democratic Kampuchea from the standpoint of the Khmer people. In *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, Andrew Mertha examined the financial relationship between the Khmer Rouge and China but did not expand upon the economic subsystems within the labor camps.²² The only people who have described the underground exchanges in any detail were the people who lived through the Pol Pot era and survived because of their ability to obtain additional food through these trades.

While the historiography of the underground exchanges is limited, scholars have written extensively about the economic theory of the Khmer Rouge. The main arguments of this book are centered around the notion that the CPK’s interpretation of Marxist economic theory led to policies and practices that failed to produce sufficient food or other benefits for the Khmer people. As a result, the population had no choice but to provide for themselves—and they did this by creating their own currencies and developing underground markets. Scholars of Cambodian history, such as Steve Heder and Chandler, have referred to the Khmer Rouge as communists, though others have challenged this characterization. Kent State geography professor James Tyner argued that the CPK “adopted a vulgar Marxism,”²³ consisting of a nonmarket hybrid economy that was more in line with “a classic model of state capitalism and

production for exchange”²⁴ of the “Soviet Union and other so-called communist or socialist governments.”²⁵ While calling itself communist, the government apparatus of Democratic Kampuchea still controlled the means of production, which Tyner claimed was more consistent with socialism than communism. “In contrast, socialism is defined as a system in which productive property is socialized—becoming the property of the people as a whole—and is then administered by the state for the people as a whole; under communism, by extension, all property and surpluses are owned and controlled by the workers themselves.”²⁶ The CPK continued the exploitation of laborers by replacing the former capitalist overseers with state functionaries in the form of Khmer Rouge cadres. According to Tyner, the government profited from the work of the villagers by taking agricultural surpluses from the camps and trading them with other nations in exchange for capital investments for future industrialization.

Tyner also contended that the CPK’s macroeconomic theory was less influenced by Marx than the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that emerged in the 1960s. The NAM was an anti-colonialist (and often anti-capitalist) group of developing countries that strove to avoid alignment with the major powers during the Cold War as a means to assert their independence while pursuing their economic interests. Democratic Kampuchea, like many of the nations in the NAM, employed an economic strategy known as import substitution industrialization, predicated on “self-reliance and self-determination,”²⁷ by trading for manufacturing and defense-related imports and using protectionist policies to avoid taking loans from Western nations. While they were not entirely isolationist and maintained a long-term economic relationship with China, the CPK was careful to avoid foreign transactions that might compromise their independence.²⁸ According to Tyner, the CPK’s ‘Four-Year Plan’ from 1976 articulated a strategy of rapid industrial and agricultural modernization that was consistent with the theory of import substitution industrialization, while the government operated in a manner that was more in line with socialism and state capitalism than communism.

While Tyner’s arguments about the macroeconomic policies of Democratic Kampuchea are persuasive, his contention that the CPK was not truly communist is much less convincing on a microeconomic level. First, the CPK unquestionably self-identified as communist, publicly and privately, starting with the party name. Most of its leaders had joined the French Communist Party and the Cercle Marxiste as students in Paris in the 1950s.²⁹ In 1976, the CPK officially announced its Marxist-Leninist ideology to the world, and in 1977, Pol Pot proclaimed that the CPK was a “precious model” for the “international Communist movement.”³⁰ In the villages, Khmer Rouge officials bragged about building “true communism, the only truly classless society in which everyone would be equal.”³¹ From a semantic perspective, Tyner’s use of the description “state capitalism” is a misnomer. Associating Democratic Kampuchea with capitalism due to some aspects of its economic policy is akin to calling the United States “socialist” because of its public school and federal postal system. There is also evidence that the import substitution

industrialization model was a temporary measure to modernize the country and that the intent of leadership was to continue on a path guided by Marxist thought, including the eventual elimination of the government. As Pol Pot declared in August 1975 to the Central Committee, “[I]n conformity with Marxist-Leninist principles, it is necessary to...reduce progressively this defect which is the State until it is extinguished completely, giving place to [a system of] self-management of factories by the proletariat and of agricultural by the peasants.”³² A CPK Party Center document from September 1975 suggested a similar sentiment: “[A]ccording to the Marxist-Leninist system, the state body is to be gradually abolished, not to be strengthened any further. ... So the top structure disappears.”³³ Furthermore, an internal party document from 1975, titled “A Short Guide for Application of Party Statutes,” stated the party’s objectives: “The long range goal of the party is to lead the people in creating a socialist revolution and a Communist Society in Cambodia.”³⁴ Etcheson argued that the “withering away” of the state actually began in 1977–8 as “social relations within Democratic Kampuchea did for a time lose their character, as is supposed to happen in the perfect, final stage of communism.”³⁵ The ultimate objective of the regime was to implement their interpretation of Marxist doctrine, so the CPK employed transitory economic strategies, such as import substitution industrialization, as a means to achieve their vision.

Many of the core policies and theories of the regime were inspired by Marxist doctrine. The Khmer Rouge collectivized the masses and actively discouraged individualism through indoctrination tactics aimed at instilling the correct political consciousness. Cadres suppressed all forms of religion and punished Theravada Buddhist monks who resisted.³⁶ The regime denigrated the most important social structure of Cambodia, the family, frequently separating spouses and children, while Khmer Rouge schools taught adolescents that *Angkar* was their true parents. Most of all, the CPK upended the entire class structure by abolishing private property, markets, and currency (for a lengthy discussion of the abolition of private property and currency, see Chapter 2). Though a new class structure existed in the camps, economic inequalities between the classes were insignificant compared to the period before the revolution. Tyner correctly asserted that the government of Democratic Kampuchea did not institute “strict Marxism.”³⁷ Instead, it was a Khmer interpretation of “Marx’s vision of a stateless, moneyless and classless society”³⁸ that captured the spirit of communism if not the precise prescriptions described in *Capital*. Is being a Marxist or communist predicated on following every aspect of the doctrine? The regime repeatedly stated its intentions to create an egalitarian, communist state and introduced policies aligned with Marxian ideals. Whether their policies were implemented as Marx envisioned is certainly debatable—but there is no doubt that the theories and practices of the CPK were primarily influenced by Marx.

Kiernan also challenged the communist classification of the CPK, stating that the regime had a “tenuous relationship to orthodox Marxism-Leninism” and that the “communist currents of the CPK’s thinking were overshadowed

by nationalist or racist ones.”³⁹ De-emphasizing the class warfare elements of Khmer Rouge ideology, Kiernan devoted an entire chapter of *The Pol Pot Regime* to document the persecution of minorities in Democratic Kampuchea, which included “Chams, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thais, Laos, and twenty other groups.”⁴⁰ The historian concluded that the CPK’s “racialist preoccupations and discourse were of primary importance,” specifically citing forced assimilation efforts and the decimation of half of the Cham population during the Pol Pot era.⁴¹ Kiernan also claimed that the regime’s “anti-internationalist thinking”⁴² and fixation on self-reliance were in conflict with Marxist-Leninist theory. Pointing to a number of quotes from top Khmer Rouge officials and the CPK magazine *Tung Padevat* (“Revolutionary Flag”), Kiernan argued that the regime strayed from Marxist orthodoxy by proclaiming that they were a revolutionary movement with “no model” for their society.⁴³ The ethnic and nationalist focus of the CPK was, in essence, a betrayal of the communist slogan, “Workers of the World Unite!”⁴⁴

While the Khmer Rouge did idealize ethnic Khmer purity and persecute minority groups, it would be more accurate to state that the regime oppressed any identity group that they viewed as a potential threat to their political goals. Chams, Vietnamese, and Chinese were horribly abused by the Khmer Rouge, but the persecution was due to a perceived self-interest rather than racism or ethnic bigotry. For one, the regime made many exceptions for individuals whom they deemed loyal or critical to their cause. Most of the CPK leadership were of Sino-Khmer extraction, including Pol Pot. Many Cambodian tribal minorities served *Angkar* as “trusted bodyguards, messengers, and party members.”⁴⁵ These individuals achieved an elevated status because they had either demonstrated the correct political consciousness or proved their allegiance to the regime, despite their ethnic identities. Though Pol Pot and his allies did execute many of the Khmer communists who returned from Hanoi to join their movement, several pro-Vietnamese Khmers served as loyal Party members in the highest levels of the government. Nuon Chea and Ta Mok, for example, trained in Vietnam as members of the Indochinese Communist Party in the 1950s and were generally “in favour of the Vietnamese role in Cambodia” in its revolutionary efforts.⁴⁶ At the same time, the two leaders demonstrated faithfulness to the political objectives of the regime, which took precedence over any attachment to the Vietnamese communists. Ethnicity and foreign ties did not necessarily disqualify an individual from a leadership role in the party.

Second, the CPK targeted countless ethnic Khmers from a number of designated categories, including April 17 people from the cities, monks, intellectuals, and East Zone party members.⁴⁷ Thousands of Khmer Rouge cadres were tortured and executed at Tuol Sleng. Any group of individuals that could potentially undermine or challenge the regime was suspect, as there were less than 100,000 Khmer Rouge soldiers charged with controlling a country of millions. A small group of rebels, united by a common religion, ethnicity, or ideology, could do considerable damage to a relatively tiny regime. With this mindset, *Angkar* saw enemies everywhere, and the recurring purges spared no

identity group. Ethnic resentment was simply another tool that the CPK used to brand ideological dissenters as traitors to the nation and justify their persecution. As the ancient rivals of Cambodia, the Vietnamese served as the enemy of choice. Before the revolution, stories of Vietnamese soldiers committing extreme acts of barbarity against the Khmer people were commonplace in Cambodia.⁴⁸ In Democratic Kampuchea, any ethnic Khmers who resisted the demands of the cadres or lacked the proper political consciousness became “Cambodian bodies with Vietnamese brains.”⁴⁹ The ethnicity of the suspect did not matter—cadres used the label to intimidate defiant ethnic Khmers into compliance or to justify their punishment.

Finally, Marx’s intense focus on class signified a bias against national and ethnic identities inherent in communism. As Heder argued in 1997, the building of communism necessitated that class consciousness took precedence over all other forms of identity. In order for conformity to be established, the ethnicity of minority groups and their customs had to be diminished or erased. For Marxists, privileging the identity of minority groups over a class-based allegiance was counter-revolutionary.⁵⁰ Therefore, conformity and assimilation to the cultural norms of the majority population were imperative for a successful communist revolution. Though approximately half of the Cham and Chinese Khmer population perished in Democratic Kampuchea, hundreds of thousands survived the Pol Pot era by feigning support for the regime and following orders. While Kiernan’s argument that the CPK promoted racism and nationalism is valid and supported by evidence, his contention that the regime focused on race more than class and ideology is less persuasive, given that the perceived loyalty and compliance of the individual, rather than the identity, often determined their fate.

Conclusion

This research is the first to explore the microeconomic systems within the labor camps of Democratic Kampuchea and the regime’s failure to constrain commerce in a country where food and property were supposed to be distributed exclusively by the state. The barter economy during the Khmer Rouge era was symbolic of the failures of the regime and its adaptation of utopian communism. A nation of agricultural abundance could no longer feed its population. A government that promised egalitarianism perpetuated a rigid class system. A regime that attempted to indoctrinate its citizens with Marxist ideology could not eliminate markets or the demand for luxury goods associated with capitalism. The social and economic experiment that was supposed to be a model for global communism became an embarrassment for Marxist theorists and a nightmare for the people of Cambodia.⁵¹

The barter economy in Democratic Kampuchea ensured the survival of thousands, if not tens of thousands of Cambodians. New people in the labor camps faced an impossible choice: watch their family members starve or risk execution by finding alternative sources of food through trade, foraging, or

theft. The meager rations provided by the Khmer Rouge at the labor camps were not enough to sustain life for four years. An extra handful of rice, a dead rat, or a tablet of tetracycline kept loved ones alive. Bartering for these goods involved delicate and skillful negotiations that required trust, discretion, and the respect of villagers from the privileged class to keep these transactions hidden from *Angkar*. Relationships had to be developed and a deep understanding of the value of commodities had to be constantly reassessed to calculate supply and demand. Those with the skill and daring to collect enough food prolonged their lives until the Khmer Rouge was forced from power in January 1979.

While some Khmers traded for food to keep their families from starving, others traded for bracelets, necklaces, and sarongs. In a society that sought to eliminate classes and social hierarchies, people still longed for illegal goods that had no apparent value under the Khmer Rouge and were willing to risk their lives to obtain them. Rural Base people were heavily involved in the underground exchanges, even though they were the class of Khmers that the CPK held up as model citizens and championed as the beneficiaries of the revolution. Individuals coveted jewelry that the regime associated with Western capitalism and, therefore, could not be displayed in cooperatives where everyone wore the same clothing and hairstyles. While jewelry and gold had served as substitutes for banking in rural Cambodia before the revolution, these goods were a liability in Democratic Kampuchea. The mere possession of luxury items frequently led to severe punishment. Some Base people appeared to view these goods as status symbols that could be used to distinguish them from their fellow villagers. The underground markets represented a subtle rebellion against the authoritarian regime and served as an emblem of the failures of the CPK to sell its ideological vision to the population, while also demonstrating the Khmer people's desire to return to life before the Khmer Rouge era. The irony is that the regime's restrictions on private property seemed to increase the demand for private property, as Pol Pot's efforts to stamp out individualism and entrepreneurship were ultimately unsuccessful.

Notes

- 1 Jackson, Karl D., *Cambodia, 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 9.
- 2 The CPK initially intended to issue their own currency in Democratic Kampuchea but wavered on this issue several times between 1975 and 1979. A full discussion of the decision-making process is included in Chapter 2.
- 3 Channy Chhi Laux, *Short Hair Detention: Memoir of a Thirteen-Year-Old Girl Surviving the Cambodian Genocide* (Bloomington, IN: Archway Publishing, 2017), 94.
- 4 Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, First edition (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1988), 171.
- 5 Base people were also referred to as “Old people,” “Ancients,” rural villagers, or rural peasants. New people were called “April 17 people,” evacuees, city dwellers, or city residents. These terms will be used interchangeably throughout the book. For more on the different classes of people, see Chapter 9.

- 6 Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 50.
- 7 Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones, *Barter, Exchange and Value: An Anthropological Approach*, ed. Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones, Illustrated edition (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–2.
- 8 Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones, 6–8.
- 9 Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones, 10.
- 10 Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1998), 246, Kindle.
- 11 Jacek Debiec, “Memories of Trauma Are Unique Because of How Brains and Bodies Respond to Threat,” The Conversation, September 24, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/memories-of-trauma-are-unique-because-of-how-brains-and-bodies-respond-to-threat-103725>.
- 12 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), 177–82, Kindle.
- 13 Dr. Michael Jaffe (psychiatrist specializing in trauma) in discussions with author, May 19, 2018 and January 7, 2022.
- 14 van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 177–8.
- 15 Katherine Kam, “‘Killing Fields’ Survivors Struggle With PTSD,” WebMD, February 17, 2015, <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/news/20150217/cambodians-post-traumatic-stress-disorder>.
- 16 Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 246.
- 17 Craig C. Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 208, Kindle.
- 18 Philip Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, First edition (New York, NY: Owl Books / Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 319, Kindle.
- 19 David P. Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, Revised edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), location 3509, Kindle.
- 20 Boraden Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge: Ideology, Militarism, and the Revolution That Consumed a Generation*, Illustrated edition (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2013), 68, Kindle. Nhem’s assertion that trading was “acceptable” contradicts much of the research in this book, though it is possible that the trade was tolerated in some labor camps for the entire period.
- 21 Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79*, Third edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 170, 182–3, 198, 211, 221, 301.
- 22 Ian Harris, *Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks under Pol Pot*, Illustrated edition (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012), Kindle; Peg LeVine, *Love and Dread in Cambodia: Weddings, Births and Ritual Harm under the Khmer Rouge* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2010); Andrew C. Mertha, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, Reprint edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), Kindle.
- 23 James Tyner and Gordon Cromley, “Camps, Cooperatives and the Psychotopologies of Democratic Kampuchea,” *Area*, 2018, 5, <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12423>.
- 24 Stian Rice and James Tyner, “The Rice Cities of the Khmer Rouge: An Urban Political Ecology of Rural Mass Violence,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42 (2017): 559–71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12187>.
- 25 James A. Tyner, *From Rice Fields to Killing Fields: Nature, Life, and Labor under the Khmer Rouge* (Syracuse University Press, 2017), location 113, Kindle. Tyner defined state capitalism as “a mode of production whereby a ruling class controls the state apparatus and, through this control, manages the means of production and subsequently appropriates the surplus value.”
- 26 Tyner, *From Rice Fields to Killing Fields*, location 3825, Kindle.

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- 27 James A. Tyner, "‘Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool’: State Capitalism, Nonmarket Socialism, and the Elimination of Money during the Cambodian Genocide," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 14, no. 1 (2020): 148, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.14.1.1710>.
- 28 Tyner, "Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool," 146–55. See also Tyner, *From Rice Fields to Killing Fields*, location 103, Kindle.
- 29 David Chandler (in Forward), *Cambodian Communism and the Vietnamese Model, Volume I: Imitation and Independence, 1930–1975*. (White Lotus, Ltd., 2004), ix.
- 30 Etcheson, *The Rise And Demise Of Democratic Kampuchea*, 212; Timothy Carney, *Communist Party Power in Kampuchea Documents and Discussion* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell Univ Southeast Asia, 1977), 5; Ben Kiernan, *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea 1942–1981*, ed. Chanthou Boua and Ben Kiernan (London: Armonk, N.Y: Routledge, 1982), 234.
- 31 John Barron and Anthony Paul, *Murder of a Gentle Land: The Untold Story of Communist Genocide in Cambodia* (New York: Reader’s Digest Press, 1977), 41.
- 32 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 307.
- 33 Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 98. Kiernan references "Examine the Control and Implement the Political to Save the Economy and Prepare to Build the Country in Every Field," Document no. 3, dated September 19, 1975.
- 34 Carney, *Communist Party Power in Kampuchea Documents and Discussion*, 56.
- 35 Etcheson, *The Rise And Demise Of Democratic Kampuchea*, 215; See also Charles Twining, *Cambodia, 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989), 129.
- 36 Harris, *Buddhism in a Dark Age*.
- 37 Tyner, "Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool," 144.
- 38 Tyner, "Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool," 145.
- 39 Ben Kiernan, *Marxism in Asia*, ed. Colin Mackerras and Nick Knight (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 234, VitalSource Bookshelf Online.
- 40 Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 251–309.
- 41 Kiernan, *Marxism in Asia*, 243; Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 463.
- 42 Kiernan, *Marxism in Asia*, 246.
- 43 Kiernan, 233–46.
- 44 Kiernan, 246.
- 45 Chandler, *Brother Number One*, location 1731, Kindle.
- 46 Heder, *Cambodian Communism and the Vietnamese Model, Volume I*, 29.
- 47 Steve Heder, "Racism, Marxism, Labelling, and Genocide," *South East Asia Research* 5, no. 2 (1997): 107, 115, 150.
- 48 Sotheacheath Chea and Dan Woodley, "Vietnam: The View from Cambodia," *The Phnom Penh Post*, December 24, 1999, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://m.phnompenhpost.com/national/vietnam-view-cambodia-3>.
- 49 Henri Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2005), 181.
- 50 Heder, "Racism, Marxism, Labelling, and Genocide," 105–6. See also Ephraim Nimni, *Marxism and nationalism: theoretical origins of a political crisis*, (London: Pluto, 1991), 12–25.
- 51 David Chandler (in Forward), *Cambodian Communism and the Vietnamese Model, Volume I*, viii.

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1 Revolution and the Labor Camps

The Khmer Rouge would likely be a tiny footnote of history had a confluence of events not conspired to grant them a pathway to power. For most of the 1950s and 1960s, the Khmer communists were a relatively small band of rebels living in the *maquis* of Cambodia and plotting to overthrow the government.¹ After years of agitation, the CPK commanded less than 4,000 regular troops in 1970 and had difficulty recruiting rural peasants to join their cause, in part due to the popularity of the head of state and member of the royal family, Norodom Sihanouk. As king of Cambodia, Sihanouk had won his country's independence from France in 1953 and managed to keep the violence and turmoil in Vietnam from engulfing his nation, earning him the loyalty of vast swaths of the population.² For years, Cambodia had maintained a policy of neutrality in the war between North and South Vietnam, but increased American involvement induced Sihanouk to side with Hanoi and China. In 1966, Sihanouk formed a clandestine alliance with the North Vietnamese, allowing them to position troops in Cambodia. This provided Hanoi with a sanctuary against American attacks and additional routes to transport supplies. In exchange, the Vietnamese communists promised to avoid confrontations with civilians and Sihanouk's troops. Meanwhile, the secretive group of Khmer communist revolutionaries led by Pol Pot (formerly Saloth Sar), Nuon Chea, Hu Nim, Hou Yuon, Ieng Sary, Son Sen, Khieu Samphan, and a handful of other cadres continued their armed struggle against Sihanouk. The CPK led a series of revolts and commanded about 20 percent of the countryside, though they had little hope of taking control of the nation until a coup d'état in March 1970 changed the course of Cambodian history.³

On March 18, 1970, while Sihanouk was in France, the Cambodian National Assembly voted to depose the head of state. Pro-American prime minister and military general Lon Nol had plotted for a year with another member of the royal family, Sirik Matak, to oust Cambodia's leader.⁴ Sihanouk had fallen out of favor with conservative urban elites and army leaders due to the presence of North Vietnamese bases on Cambodian soil and a faltering economy. Lon Nol became the new head of state, and Sirik Matak served as his assistant. This turn of events immediately improved the prospects of the CPK, as Sihanouk flew to Beijing to meet with Zhou Enlai and Vietnamese premier

Pham Van Dong. In response to the coup, Sihanouk formed an alliance with the communists, including his former enemies in the Khmer Rouge, in opposition to Lon Nol's new government. Within a few days, the deposed head of state broadcasted a message to the Cambodian people, urging them to wage war against the traitor, Lon Nol. Pro-Sihanouk riots erupted in the eastern region of the country, and violence against Vietnamese civilians surged around Phnom Penh. Within weeks, American and South Vietnamese tanks and troops invaded eastern Cambodia, further escalating the conflict, while pushing the Vietnamese communists toward the center of the country. The temporary incursion and a devastating American bombing campaign drove tens of thousands of outraged Khmer civilians into the ranks of the Khmer Rouge. The civil war was in full force with the American-backed Lon Nol regime facing off against the Chinese-backed Vietnamese communists and the Khmer Rouge.⁵

The decisive battles of the Cambodian civil war had been fought in 1970 and 1971, as two major Lon Nol offensives failed to defeat the battle-hardened troops of the North Vietnamese. The United States ramped up aid to Lon Nol and expanded its attacks on communist forces with a massive carpet-bombing campaign, dropping 540,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia. These attacks decimated the countryside and killed between 50,000 and 150,000 Khmer civilians, while only delaying the inevitable takeover by communist forces. Despite the bombings, the Khmer Rouge conquered almost all of the territory east of the Mekong River by March 1972, while hundreds of thousands of rural peasants fled to the capital. As the war raged on, Lon Nol's military had become beleaguered by corruption. Military officials pocketed money intended for the war effort and sold ammunition to the communists. By the end of 1972, North Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodia as part of a cease-fire agreement with the United States, though by that time, Lon Nol's force controlled only a few pockets of the country. The Khmer communists continued their march toward the capital, while the Americans briefly stepped up their bombing raids until the United States Congress put an end to the military camping in August 1973. The Khmer Rouge gradually surrounded the capital and stormed into Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. The civil war was over, and the revolution was just beginning.⁶

Evacuations and Labor Camps

As his troops entered the capital, Pol Pot announced eight directives at a Special Center Assembly on April 17, 1975. The first priority was to "evacuate people from all towns."⁷ While the evacuation of the cities confounded the population, the CPK had several strategic and ideological reasons for the order. First, the new regime had to rebuild the country after years of civil war. Cambodia's economy was in shambles, and the cities did not have sufficient food to sustain a population of millions. The US Agency for International Development (USAID), which had stopped sending rice to Cambodia in April

1975, predicted that “general deprivation and suffering will stretch over the next two to three years before Cambodia can get back to rice self-sufficiency.”⁸ Thus, the CPK opted to send people to the relatively plentiful countryside where they would produce food for the citizenry and serve the regime’s economic interests.⁹ A year after the evacuation, the leaders of the Khmer Rouge devised a four-year economic plan that included an ambitious agricultural goal of harvesting three metric tons of rice paddy “from every rice-growing hectare in Kampuchea”¹⁰ and six to seven tons per hectare in the “fertile, first-class fields”¹¹ annually. The national average for harvests before the civil war had been approximately one metric ton per hectare per year, so the former city residents would form the army of laborers needed to attain the lofty objectives.¹² Second, the regime felt that the cities provided opportunities for the enemies of the revolution in the military and the monkhood to collude and agitate against them. Therefore, the population needed to be dispersed throughout the country so that counterrevolutionary forces would be unable to build any significant opposition to the Khmer Rouge. Without common physical spaces to congregate and share information, political dissidents would not be able to organize protests or build any mass movements against the relatively small regime.¹³

Finally, there were a number of ideological reasons for the mass expulsion. The Khmer Rouge saw cities as hierarchical bastions of capitalism and “symbols of exploitation,”¹⁴ where people made an easy living by selling commodities produced by hardworking rural peasants. Hou Yuon, one of the intellectuals of the CPK, articulated this sentiment in his 1955 thesis, stating, “[T]he tree grows in the rural areas, but the fruit goes to the towns.”¹⁵ In 1964, he reiterated his opposition to the population centers: “[W]hat we habitually call ‘cities’ or ‘market towns’ are pumps which drain away the vitality of the rural areas.”¹⁶ For Pol Pot and his colleagues, the evacuation of the cities arrested the capitalist impulses of society and eradicated the exploitative relationship between affluent urban intermediaries and rural peasants. As egalitarians, the CPK also believed that forcing everyone to labor in the countryside would level the playing field between the economic classes and eliminate the traditional social hierarchies that plagued the country. As one Khmer Rouge slogan stated, “[T]here is only one class—the peasant class.”¹⁷ In addition, the leaders thought that hard labor in the fields would promote a spirit of self-reliance among the population. The evacuations presented an opportunity to rebuild the country in the CPK’s utopian image and start over at “Year Zero.”¹⁸

Pol Pot’s sixth directive at the Special Center Assembly in April 1975 was to “establish high-level cooperatives throughout the country, with communal eating.”¹⁹ The Khmer Rouge began to establish cooperatives in the early 1970s, with enforced collectivization in some regions of the countryside in 1973. The camps were essentially rural villages where the Khmer Rouge cadres controlled the social, economic, and political behavior of the residents. According to Pol Pot, the Central Committee originally created the

communes because merchants in the “liberated zones” were profiting off rice sales to the Lon Nol government and the Vietnamese while the peasants and the Revolutionary Army of Kampuchea went hungry.²⁰ The camps allowed the Khmer Rouge to control the economic output of each village and prevented individuals from hoarding food for the purpose of profit. The CPK initially created small communes of 15 to 30 families and gradually expanded them to encompass entire villages.²¹ The cooperatives were established to serve the long-term goals of the party, as the surplus rice and other commodities would be traded with friendly nations to build up their military and finance the development of light industry. The CPK would focus on heavy industry later. Khmer Rouge cadres collected the rice harvests, distributed a portion to the residents of the camps, and transported the remainder to the administrative zone to support the immediate needs of the CPK. For the CPK, the labor camps were an absolute necessity as the first step toward economic independence.²²

The cooperatives also presented an opportunity to reeducate the population with the “proper political consciousness” and serve as “the greatest of universities ... for the study of revolutionary knowledge.”²³ At an August 1975 meeting of the Standing Committee, the CPK concluded that it was imperative to “do whatever is necessary to make the people stable in a monolithic bloc of solidarity with revolutionary state power.”²⁴ Village life included frequent propaganda lectures from cadres about the glorious achievements of the regime, collectivism, and the benefits of hard work. Haing Ngor, an April 17 person who later starred in the 1984 film about the Khmer Rouge, *The Killing Fields*, recalled soldiers ranting about experiential learning through manual labor: “Our school is the farm. The land is our paper. The plow [*sic*] is our pen.”²⁵ By working the land side by side with their comrades, New people could attain the proper consciousness while producing for the regime. At the same time, these individuals would develop an *esprit de corps* and eventually evolve into “one huge new family and think only of the interest of the collective.”²⁶ To further promote the concept of collectivism, the CPK mandated communal eating in 1976. In theory, the villagers would be inspired by a collectivist fervor and transform themselves into hyperefficient agricultural production teams. The cooperatives would then harvest enough food to meet the CPK’s needs and improve the living standards of every citizen in Democratic Kampuchea.²⁷

The administration of the cooperatives, which formed the “organizational foundation”²⁸ of the country, followed a military structure. Democratic Kampuchea was divided into zones that encompassed several provinces, which were split into progressively smaller regions, districts, subdistricts, cooperatives, and villages. A three-person committee led each administrative unit of the geographical hierarchy, which was tasked with the implementation of CPK policies and communication between the different levels of administration. Many of the committee chairmen were former soldiers, though civilian cadres and Base people also served as camp administrators. Consistent with their

philosophy of self-reliance, the CPK granted the various geographic subdivisions a certain degree of autonomy, as each of the regions was managed differently. As many former villagers who lived in multiple camps attested, the cooperatives varied in strictness, depending upon the temperament of local leaders.²⁹ Though the camp leaders had relative independence with regard to daily operations, the CPK ordered cadres to channel all requests and materials through the capital.³⁰

While the CPK's stated goal of improving living standards in the camps might have been sincere, it was abundantly clear that the regime did not particularly care if a large portion of the population died in the process of building these utopian communities. According to survivors, the regime appeared to show little concern for their well-being at all. The Khmer Rouge took their land, abolished their religion, and fractured their families, destroying the things people treasured most. Violence was commonplace, and the cadres controlled almost every facet of the villagers' lives from morning to night. Most Khmers worked 10 to 12 hours per day for 12 months with few days off. Rations were repeatedly reduced, while production goals remained the same. The famine of 1977 and 1978 led to more suffering and death. The Khmer people especially resented the policy of communal eating and the intentional decentering of the family, which was the foundation of the entire culture. In the tiny village of Sobay, where American anthropologist May Ebihara conducted research after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea, rural villagers expressed "bewilderment, anger, and hatred at the various ways in which their customary existence was overturned,"³¹ even though these were peasants that the revolution was supposed to serve. Few interviews with Base people revealed any positive aspects of the cooperatives other than an occasional expression of relief that their camp was not as horrible as others or that April 17 people were treated much worse.³²

Village Life before the Khmer Rouge

Village life before the revolution bore little resemblance to the cooperatives of Democratic Kampuchea. While there were similarities in terms of the physical structures and the daily activities of the villages, the culture and economy were completely altered by the Khmer Rouge. Ebihara's research in the rural villages of Svay and Sobay a decade before the civil war described communities with ancient customs and traditional attitudes toward family, religion, and property. The nuclear family formed the primary social and economic unit in each village. It was the principal factor in major decisions, including marriage, inheritance, and finances. Ebihara noted that there were "no significant formal groups apart from the family and household,"³³ which provided the "strongest emotional bonds in village life, particularly between parents and children."³⁴ As Ebihara noted, the family household was the "one kin grouping" that assumed "great importance in peasant life."³⁵ While the family was not entirely disintegrated under the Khmer Rouge, familial bonds were

strained, as children and spouses were regularly sent to work in different villages. Displays of affection were discouraged. In many cooperatives, cadres instructed family members to refer to each other as comrade (*mit* or *met*) instead of mother, father, son, or daughter. In rural villages, such as Sobay and Svay, Khmers saw no reason to make changes to this fundamental aspect of their existence. Peasants could not conceive of a social order that undermined family loyalties, much less transfer their allegiance to the revolutionary state or a collective.³⁶

Khmer peasants in the villages of Sobay and Svay also cherished their time-honored religious traditions. Theravada Buddhism, which included elements of Hinduism and animistic, indigenous folk beliefs, was the official national religion of Cambodia before 1975 (and remains so today). Before the revolution, villagers regularly celebrated Buddhist holidays and observed religious ceremonies, such as marriages, births, and funerals, as central elements of their lives. Marriages, for example, were momentous occasions with lengthy, elaborate ceremonies, in which the families of both spouses and Buddhist monks were intimately engaged. In Democratic Kampuchea, cooperative leaders frequently paired potential mates in somber group services with an implied threat of consequences if anyone dared to challenge the matchmakers. Funerals were also important religious events in rural villages. Ebihara described one funeral in Svay, which involved the prayers and chants of monks, visits by friends and relatives to pay respects to the deceased, and a lengthy cremation process. In other villages, ritualistic burials were common. Customary funerals were abandoned in the Pol Pot era, as many sources complained about being unable to properly bury deceased family members. The CPK eliminated any meaningful displays of these rituals or observances for ideological reasons, though many Khmers continued their religious practices secretly. Still, the people resented the fact that the government had upended ancient and sacred cultural traditions.³⁷

Finally, many rural villagers had some form of private property before the revolution, including homes, rice paddies, cattle, and jewelry. Even poor families passed on property to the next generation, a practice that had reinforced the bonds between children and parents for centuries. Khmer peasants owned modest houses of wood and thatch and small plots of rice fields that were essential to their identity and sources of ancestral pride. Villagers in Sobay referred to themselves as “people of the rice paddies.”³⁸ While small landowners grew rice primarily for subsistence, those with surplus commodities engaged in trade frequently and used their earnings to buy jewelry. Due to their distrust of traditional banks, Khmers who accumulated cash quickly converted it to gold bars or jewelry. These possessions, though relatively meager, could not be easily replaced by an intangible reordering of social hierarchies or ideological promises of a utopian future from outsiders, whom they generally distrusted. When the CPK abolished property rights and appropriated the peasants’ gold and land, they also took a piece of the villagers’ identity and disrupted their way of life.³⁹

Notes

- 1 In this context, *maquis* is defined as a “jungle hideout for resistance fighters.”
- 2 Sihanouk initially served as king, then abdicated the throne in 1955 to participate in electoral politics.
- 3 David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Fourth edition (Colorado Springs, CO: Westview Press, 2007), 233–54; Timothy Carney, *Cambodia, 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 15–32; Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79*, Third edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 16–7; John Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia: From Empire to Survival*, Illustrated edition (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2006), location 1949–2563, Kindle.
- 4 There has been much speculation that the United States was involved in the coup, though no clear evidence has been produced.
- 5 Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930–1975*, Second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 297–302; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 249–54.
- 6 Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia*, location 1949–2563, Kindle; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 233–54; Carney, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 15–32; Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 2–24; “Chronology of Cambodian Events Since 1950,” Yale University Genocide Studies Program, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://gsp.yale.edu/case-studies/cambodian-genocide-program/publications/chronology-cambodian-events-1950>.
- 7 Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 415.
- 8 Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 62–3. Kiernan references document from the US Agency for International Development.
- 9 Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 257; Carney, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 33.
- 10 David Chandler, *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976–1977*, eds. David Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), 37.
- 11 David Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua, eds., *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976–1977* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), 51.
- 12 Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 262. A hectare is a unit of land equal to 10,000 square meters or 2.47 acres.
- 13 Chandler, 257; Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 64; Carney, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 33.
- 14 Stian Rice and James Tyner, “The Rice Cities of the Khmer Rouge: An Urban Political Ecology of Rural Mass Violence,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42 (2017): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12187>.
- 15 Ben Kiernan, *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea 1942–1981*, eds. Chanthou Boua and Ben Kiernan (London: Armonk, NY: Routledge, 1982), 13. Kiernan cites Hou Yuon thesis from 1955.
- 16 Kiernan, 12. Kiernan quotes Hou Yuon from 1964.
- 17 Henri Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2005), 273.
- 18 Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia*, location 2678, Kindle; Jackson, Karl D., *Cambodia, 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 5–7; Carney, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 39; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 257. Inspired by the calendar of the French Revolution, the Khmer Rouge declared April 17, 1975 the first day of Year Zero, which represented the rebirth of Cambodia under the new regime and the beginning of the complete transformation of society.
- 19 Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 415.

- 20 Elizabeth Becker, *When The War Was Over: Cambodia And The Khmer Rouge Revolution*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 1998), 148, Kindle.
- 21 By late 1977, 20 percent of cooperatives contained 700 to 1,000 households.
- 22 Carney, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 28–9; Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book*, 253; Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 58, 62–3; Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia*, location 2695, Kindle; Charles Twining, *Cambodia, 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 127; James A. Tyner, *Red Harvests: Agrarian Capitalism and Genocide in Democratic Kampuchea*, First edition (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2021), 71–5, Kindle; Michael Vickery, *Cambodia, 1975–1982* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1999), 167.
- 23 James Tyner and Gordon Cromley, “Camps, Cooperatives and the Psychotopologies of Democratic Kampuchea,” *Area*, 2018, 3, 5, <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12423>. Tyner cites Document E3/729, “Kampuchean You Must Forge and Re-Fashion Themselves in the Movement to Strengthen and Expand Production Cooperatives,” archived by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) at <http://www.eccc.gov.kh/en>.
- 24 Tyner, *Red Harvests*, 53.
- 25 Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia*, location 2772, Kindle.
- 26 Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book*, 269; see also Tyner and Cromley, “Camps, Cooperatives and the Psychotopologies of Democratic Kampuchea,” 4.
- 27 Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 58.
- 28 Carney, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 84.
- 29 Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, First edition (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 108; Carney, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 83–6; JoAn D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (East/West Bridge Publishing, 2020), 82, 130–1, Kindle; Kong Sam-Art, Interview by Pheakra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia, December 10, 2021; Dith Pran, *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors*, ed. Kim DePaul (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), locations 571, 711, Kindle.
- 30 Carney, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 86; Vickery, *Cambodia, 1975–1982*, 74; Rice and Tyner, “The Rice Cities of the Khmer Rouge: An Urban Political Ecology of Rural Mass Violence,” 7; James Tyner et al., “Phnom Penh during the Cambodian Genocide: A Case of Selective Urbicide,” *Environment and Planning A* 46 (August 1, 2014): 1879, <https://doi.org/10.1068/a130278p>.
- 31 May Ebihara, *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia: The Khmer Rouge, the United Nations, and the International Community*, ed. Ben Kiernan, Monograph Series 41 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1993), 55.
- 32 Tyner and Cromley, “Camps, Cooperatives and the Psychotopologies of Democratic Kampuchea,” 1, 3; Tyner et al., “Phnom Penh during the Cambodian Genocide,” 1881; Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book*, 251–2; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 264; Ebihara, *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia*, 55.
- 33 May Ebihara, *Spay: A Khmer Village in Cambodia*, ed. Andrew C. Mertha (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publication, 2018), 44, VitalSource Bookshelf Online.
- 34 May Ebihara, “Residence Patterns in a Khmer Peasant Village,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 293, no. 1 (1977): 63.
- 35 Ebihara, *Spay*, 250.
- 36 Ebihara, 44, 191; Ebihara, “Residence Patterns in a Khmer Peasant Village,” 58.
- 37 May Ebihara, “Intervillage, Intertown, and Village-City Relations in Cambodia,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 220, no. 1 (1973): 371, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1973.tb40255.x>; Ebihara, *Spay*, 153, 204–7, 247; Peg LeVine, *Love and Dread in Cambodia: Weddings, Births and Ritual Harm under the Khmer Rouge* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2010), 20–6, 58–69.

- 38 Ebihara, “Intervillage, Intertown, and Village-City Relations in Cambodia,” 360.
- 39 Ebihara, “Residence Patterns in a Khmer Peasant Village,” 52, 58; Ebihara, “Intervillage, Intertown, and Village-City Relations in Cambodia,” 359–70; Ebihara, *Svay*, 95; Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book*, 282; Sheridan Prasso, “The Riel Value of Money: How the World’s Only Attempt to Abolish Money Has Hindered Cambodia’s Economic Development,” *Honolulu: East-West Center / Asia Pacific Issues*, no. 49 (January 2001): 1–4, [https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/riel-value-money-how-worlds-only-attempt-abolish-money-has-hindered-cambodias-economic-;](https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/riel-value-money-how-worlds-only-attempt-abolish-money-has-hindered-cambodias-economic-) Kao Yeng, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia, December 19, 2021; Nop Sophal, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Speu, Cambodia, March 19, 2022.

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2 The Abolition of Currency and Its Ideological Roots

The decision to abolish currency was neither haphazard nor impulsive. Inspired by Marxist theory and the fervor of the French Revolution, the CPK deliberately opted to eliminate money in Democratic Kampuchea after years of intense discussion and experience in the villages. Party leaders did not all agree on the economic agenda and occasionally wavered on the policy, while those who objected too strongly to the majority opinion vanished. Plans to introduce a new currency were started, then halted several times. Pol Pot told interviewers that their monetary policy was a temporary measure, though the regime never found the right time to distribute their new currency. The CPK also banned markets and financial institutions, a move that was “unparalleled anywhere in modern history.”¹ While extreme by any historical standard, these were carefully considered policies that were central to the regime’s primary goals of eliminating private property and creating an egalitarian society. In the end, *Angkar* calculated that the existence of currency and markets would inevitably result in economic disparities and undermine the communist revolution. This chapter examines the ideology behind the abolition of currency and the evolution of the policy over the course of the 1970s.

Ideological Roots

One of the more mystifying aspects of the CPK was its adherence to an aggressive interpretation of Marxist doctrine. According to *The Communist Manifesto*, “the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single phrase: Abolition of private property.”² Pol Pot and his colleagues appeared to understand this literally when formulating economic policy. Despite their initial, explicit definition of communism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels further clarified that they were primarily concerned with the type of property that allowed owners to profit off the work of other citizens: bourgeois capital. There was no need to abolish the personal “property of the petty artisan and of the small peasant.”³ The leadership of the Khmer Rouge chose to ignore this distinction. The CPK’s unique reading of Marxist doctrine was shaped by a commitment to a perceived ideological purity and an ambition to outdo other communist regimes. In its attempt to build a Khmer variant of Marxism that would serve

as a model for other countries, the CPK abolished almost all private property in the pursuit of egalitarianism. Khieu Samphan, who served as head of state of Democratic Kampuchea, once summarized the ideology in a party study session:

[T]he moment you allow private property, one person will have a little more, another a little less, and then they are no longer equal. But if you have nothing—zero for him and zero for you—that is true equality.⁴

While the second article of the Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea used more moderate language: “property for everyday use remains in private hands,”⁵ the Khmer Rouge took the elimination of private property to extremes, forcing its citizens to forego everything they owned except for a handful of personal items. The actual policy was better encapsulated in two common Khmer Rouge slogans: “all that every Cambodian has the right to own is a small bundle he can carry on his back”⁶ and “absolutely everything belongs to the *Angkar*.”⁷ Though this adaptation of egalitarian Marxism served as the economic model for party leaders, the passion and fanaticism of the regime were inspired by French radicals.

While studying in Paris, some of the future members of the Khmer Rouge became enthralled by the history of the French Revolution. Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Hou Yuon, and Son Sen were among the young Khmer students living in France in the early 1950s when the first conceptualizations of Democratic Kampuchea were formed. The writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the dedication of revolutionaries such as Maximilien Robespierre had an immense impact on the future leaders of Cambodia. As overzealous Jacobins used the Reign of Terror to purify France of its perceived enemies, the CPK would employ this same fervor to attempt to “cleanse” its new nation and “smash” its foes. Party leaders composed two national anthems, “The Reg Flag of the Revolution” and “The Dazzling Victory of 17 April,” that borrowed heavily from the violent 1792 French anthem, “La Marseillaise,” with repeated references to liberation and blood.⁸ Pol Pot’s declaration that the revolution marked the end of “over two thousand years of Cambodian history”⁹ was reminiscent of the French revolutionaries’ introduction of a new calendar to signify the rebirth of society. Years after the Khmer Rouge were driven from power, Khieu Samphan told a French journalist that “Prime Minister Pol Pot and I were profoundly influenced by the spirit of French thought—by the Age of Enlightenment, of Rousseau and Montesquieu.”¹⁰ As a student in Paris, Saloth Sar (Pol Pot’s birth name) studied the writings of Petr Kropotkin, a nineteenth-century Russian anarchist who wrote extensively about egalitarian communism and the French Revolution’s coalition of intellectuals and peasants. Saloth Sar likely noted correlations between eighteenth-century France and modern Cambodia. In *The Great French Revolution, 1789–1793*, Kropotkin argued that private property was the foundation of revolution and that the compromises made by French radicals led to their demise—despite their

devotion to the cause. Kropotkin's linkage of communist ideology with the principles of the French Revolution would be incorporated into Saloth Sar's intellectual evolution over the next few decades.¹¹

The idea behind the abolition of currency also had Marxist origins. As part of an effort to bypass the capitalist stage of development and implement a Khmer version of communism, Pol Pot and his allies adopted measures that had been rejected elsewhere, including the eradication of money. The Bolsheviks attempted to impose a nonmonetary economy without success. Chinese and Cuban communist leaders considered the idea as well, but ultimately abandoned the plan for more practical policies.¹² In what Mertha described as a "literalist interpretation of communism,"¹³ the leadership of the Khmer Rouge found inspiration in Marx's vision of a society without currency as a means to eliminate the social inequalities associated with capitalism. James Tyner claimed that the CPK largely misunderstood Marx's critique of money, though he conceded that other followers of Marx interpreted his writings in a similar fashion. According to Tyner, Marx saw money as a "symptom of the capitalist mode of production," which resulted in "production for exchange and the accumulation of profits for profit's sake."¹⁴ Money as a commodity was representative of a bigger problem: exploitative capitalist social relations. As a "universal agent of separation,"¹⁵ Marx believed that money inevitably led to inequality and hoarding as "social expressions for superfluity or wealth."¹⁶ These ideas would have resonated with the Khmer communists, who believed that the elimination of physical currency in Democratic Kampuchea could provide a shortcut or "great leap" toward a communist state.¹⁷ And while Marx envisioned a "stateless, moneyless and classless society aimed to encourage the fullest development of human consciousness and creativity," he never discussed the inner workings of a society without money.¹⁸ The leaders of the Khmer Rouge decided that Democratic Kampuchea would be the first true test of Marx's utopian vision.

The CPK sought to outshine other communist movements with regard to radical policy, as though they were in a competition to create the most egalitarian society on Earth.¹⁹ According to Philip Short, Khmer Rouge leaders believed the French Revolution failed because it did not go far enough. They felt the same about the Soviets and Mao Zedong. In order for the revolution to succeed, "Cambodian communists would go where none had gone before."²⁰ This certainly applied to the abolition of currency. In a document from a Standing Committee meeting in 1975, the regime singled out China and Korea specifically for their cautious approach to collectivization and the fight against capitalism. "In the socialist part of the world at present the problem has been posed that too strong an emphasis on collectivisation leads to a disappearance of the individual or family nourishment. That's why they allow some privateness and still use money. As we see, this path doesn't completely repress capitalists."²¹ At a CPK meeting a few weeks later, Pol Pot reiterated his critique of regimes that allowed the use of money: "Individualism continues to grow. Every individual thinks only of having a large salary, only of acquiring

large amounts of money.”²² By abolishing currency, Democratic Kampuchea would surpass other Marxist regimes in its quest to be the first state to eliminate the scourge of capitalism.

Ben Kiernan and David Chandler argued that there were other ideological principles influencing the decision to abolish currency. In *The Pol Pot Regime*, Kiernan pointed to a CPK Party Center document from September 1975 that suggested the continued use of money would corrupt the new government by fortifying state power. “According to the Marxist-Leninist system, the state body is to be gradually abolished, not to be strengthened any further.”²³ As the leadership saw it, the existence of currency would undermine the eventual withering away of the state, as envisioned by Marx. The CPK’s actions over the next few years often contradicted this purported desire to limit the power of the government, though their interpretation of Marxist ideology may have been sincere at the time. In *Brother Number One*, Chandler wrote that the decision to abolish currency was part of an effort to extinguish capitalism from Democratic Kampuchea, stating that the CPK believed that the “vestiges of capitalism (and inequality) would not survive without money in circulation.”²⁴ This sentiment also had Marxist origins. As Barbara Goodwin argued, “Marx illustrates the essential role of money in capitalist production; other economic structures might do without money, capitalism cannot.”²⁵ In essence, choking off the money supply would further the development of a communist state and simultaneously smother any attempts to return to a capitalist system.

Evolution of the Currency Policy

A narrative of the decision-making process to abolish currency and markets has never been fully established. This section will attempt to provide one by piecing together a number of accounts from secondary sources, supported by the testimony of Khmer witnesses. The rough timeline reveals a ponderous process of policymaking shaped by a combination of anti-capitalist ideals, impassioned speeches, and experiences on the ground. While Saloth Sar vaguely alluded to a new society without money in a speech to an audience of monks as early as 1962, evidence of serious consideration by the CPK did not appear until the early 1970s.²⁶ Leaders engaged in years of practical and ideological discussions, as no regime in modern history had abolished currency and markets. The CPK proceeded with caution, testing their ideas in the liberated zones years before the fall of Phnom Penh. They studied and analyzed like-minded regimes in an attempt to learn from past mistakes. The leaders even considered introducing a new currency, going so far as to print bank notes and distribute them on a small scale, but decided against it in the end. In 1975, Pol Pot lectured CPK policymakers about the gravity of the issue. “Money constitutes a danger, both now and in the future. We must not be in a hurry to use it.”²⁷

One of the key concerns of the CPK was that continued use of currency would eventually lead the country back to a society of private property and inequality. This would have undermined the entire rationale for the

revolution. In a speech to the Central Committee in 1975, Pol Pot declared that the use of money drove “the individual away from the collective” and created “privilege and power.”²⁸ Nuon Chea, deputy secretary of the CPK, warned that the existence of money and markets would induce the population to covet private property.²⁹ CPK documents from September 1975 similarly cautioned that it was “dangerous” to use money because it led to “individual and private ownership.”³⁰ The population could not be trusted to manage money in accordance with the regime’s ideals. Even if the government provided equal wages to the population, their spending habits would differ. Some people would spend while others would save. Inevitably, some citizens would have more money than others, and “inequalities would multiply.”³¹

CPK leaders also saw the abolition of currency as a guard against corruption and future challenges to state power. Documents from the September 1975 CPK Party Center meeting (referenced earlier) showed concerns that a new currency could be used by enemies “to destroy our cadres by bribing them” and to “trap people’s sentiment.” The same document warned that the nascent state was unprepared to protect itself from theft, counterfeiting, and nefarious foreign enemies (such as Vietnam and Thailand), who would “act to destroy our money.”³² Ta Mok, the secretary of the Southwest Zone, had previously argued in an August 1975 speech that the abolition of money “would remove the problem of corruption and curtail the activities of enemy agents.”³³ Other party leaders felt that there was a direct line from money to corruption and exploitation that ultimately produced “an oppressed class and an oppressing class.”³⁴

The Khmer Rouge learned from Chinese communists and through their own personal experiences that permissive attitudes toward currency and markets created impediments to their political goals. The CPK’s counterparts in China were still paying wages to state workers, and Chinese citizens were saving their money. Zhou Enlai told party leaders that capitalism was still a threat to state power in China, which the CPK believed to be the direct result of the use of currency.³⁵ Fears of a capitalist resurgence in Democratic Kampuchea were a primary concern to leadership: “So long as the capitalist system exists, it will strengthen itself and expand and become an obstacle to the socialist revolution.”³⁶ In the early 1970s, citizens in areas under Khmer Rouge control resisted the policies of the new government, with some Khmers committing suicide or killing their own livestock because they did not wish to give up their private property. In a six-month period, 60,000 Cambodian citizens fled to South Vietnam to avoid the CPK’s collectivization projects. A cadre named Ping Say reported in 1973 that his relatives in the Northern Zone had complained bitterly about the abolition of markets in their region.³⁷ CPK leaders lamented that many people in the liberated zones in Kratie reverted to their “old, capitalist ways” whenever possible, while the merchants refused to cooperate with or “subordinate themselves” to the Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot claimed that he did not want to ban markets in Kratie initially, but felt he had to act as the CPK “could not control the population because the traders...controlled

the distribution of goods.”³⁸ Merchants in the territories under Khmer Rouge command were hoarding and selling their rice to the Vietnamese and the Lon Nol government because these trades netted higher profits, while the peasants and the Revolutionary Army went hungry. In order for the revolution to succeed, the CPK concluded that they needed more control over the economy. In 1973, the Central Committee of the party established cooperatives in the liberated zones and eliminated currency “to make illegal sales worthless,” while making rice available to the public.³⁹ This appeared to solve the problem, at least from the party’s perspective.

The leadership of the CPK did not all agree on the economic plan for the country. A handful of CPK leaders criticized the proposed policies to their detriment. At a Northern Zone conference in July 1971, Hou Yuon, Hu Nim, and Koy Thuon expressed concern about the plans for collectivization. At other times, Hou Yuon and Ney Sarann spoke out against the elimination of markets as too extreme. Party leaders did not tolerate vociferous dissent. After challenging the party line on a number of issues, including the abolition of currency, Yuon disappeared and was never seen again. Hu Nim, an intellectual who served as the party’s minister of information, also openly protested the elimination of money and advocated for its reintroduction. This objection was partly responsible for Nim’s eventual arrest, torture, and execution. It is likely that others disagreed with the economic policies but kept quiet for good reason. Other CPK leaders argued forcefully for the abolition of money and markets. At a meeting in Phnom Penh in May 1975, Nuon Chea claimed that the existence of currency and markets would always lead to private property, which could not be tolerated. Ta Mok argued in favor of a barter system in order to limit corruption and potential subversion by enemies in August 1975. So Phim and Koy Thuon agreed. Pol Pot believed that the elimination of currency was essential to the success of Democratic Kampuchea. Khieu Samphan, one of the CPK’s intellectual leaders on economic issues, strenuously objected to private property or any form of inequality, which likely meant that he supported the ban. Foreign minister Ieng Sary originally advocated for the introduction of the replacement currency in the early 1970s but appeared to have gone along with the consensus in subsequent years. Though few party members vigorously criticized the preferred economic policies of the majority, the CPK proceeded with caution on the issue. In 1975, Pol Pot noted that the yearslong discussion was still unresolved, stating, “[W]e need to think more deeply about this matter.”⁴⁰

As the CPK debated the elimination of money, the regime printed samples of the new national currency in December 1973. The revolutionary currency consisted of different sizes and colors, displaying images of heroic male and female Khmer Rouge soldiers in battle, laborers operating heavy machinery in factories, and workers planting rice in the fields. The five *riel* note included a picture of Angkor Wat. The printing of the new banknotes may seem at odds with the mindset of the CPK leadership, but it was emblematic of the regime’s tentative approach and evolving thoughts on the subject. Originally intended

to be introduced to the liberated zones by the end of 1974 (banknotes from the Lon Nol government had already been phased out in several regions), the new currency was withheld by the Central Committee, which wanted to wait until the Khmer Rouge controlled all of Cambodia before circulating it. In January 1975, Pol Pot's old friend, Ping Say, brought a full set of the new money, printed in China, to CPK leaders via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In May 1975, it was decided that new currency would be gradually circulated in various regions, even though *Angkar* had issued an edict to withhold the new banknotes just one month earlier. Within a few months, a regional commander named Pich Chheang began to distribute the new currency in region 41 of the Northern Zone as an experiment. A national banking system was proposed around the same time. According to one survivor of the Pol Pot era, posters showing the new currency appeared in Prek Po district, and some of the banknotes were exchanged with village leaders for rice. Despite these trial runs, the new currency was discontinued as the CPK reconsidered the policy.⁴¹

Though the actual implementation of the policy to eliminate currency and markets occurred in 1975, there had been several test runs in liberated zones years earlier, even as they circulated money in other regions. In May 1972, party members at a Central Committee meeting approved a measure to suppress private trade after Pol Pot complained that the revolution was not moving quickly enough. The Khmer Rouge began by banning markets in the cooperatives in 1972, though private trade and money were still permitted. Ping Say reported that markets were eliminated in the Northern Zone in 1973 and claimed that he was rebuked by Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim after suggesting that they open a trade office where people could buy supplies. That same year, the CPK started to move people from the eastern province of Kratie into cooperatives where trading and private ownership of land were banned. In an interview with Yugoslav journalists, Pol Pot claimed that the use of currency "was reduced by eighty percent"⁴² in liberated areas in 1974 as part of the effort to deal with recalcitrant merchants (as described earlier), and money was completely abolished in the Northern Zone by mid-1974. Though the policy was not yet official, these years of experimentation convinced the CPK leadership that the abolition of currency could work on a national level. In early 1975, the Central Committee made the decision to eliminate money, markets, and private property, though the rank and file of the Khmer Rouge "were not informed of these decisions until the eve of the final assault"⁴³ on Phnom Penh.⁴⁴

Pol Pot's eight directives from the April 17, 1975 assembly included two orders related to monetary policy: "abolish all markets" and "abolish Lon Nol regime currency, and withhold the revolutionary currency that had been printed."⁴⁵ On the eighteenth of April, soldiers in the Northern Zone reportedly celebrated by throwing paper currency in the air, bellowing that "the revolutionary *Angkar* has put an end to money."⁴⁶ As Battambang was being evacuated, one eyewitness recalled a Khmer Rouge soldier informing residents that "money will not be used anymore."⁴⁷ Within a few days of the fall of the capital, Khmer Rouge cadres dynamited the National Bank of Cambodia,

demolishing the building. Little is known about the explosion or its perpetrators, but the destruction served as a symbol of Democratic Kampuchea's economic future.⁴⁸ Khmer citizens continued to use the Lon Nol *riel* as they were being evacuated from Phnom Penh in desperate attempts to collect food and clothing, though enforcement of the new edict would gradually intensify over the next few weeks and months. Despite the pronouncement on April 17, the decision to abolish currency was not final. Pol Pot reiterated his decision in a speech in Phnom Penh on May 20, 1975, when he banned the use of money in the newly formed cooperatives. The policy was reinforced at a conference on September 19, 1975, after a lengthy discussion between leaders, and then reconfirmed again at the CPK's Fourth Congress in January 1976.⁴⁹

While the abolition of money became the official policy of the Khmer Rouge, debate on the issue continued throughout the Pol Pot era. For most of 1975, the leadership appeared to change their minds on the subject regularly.⁵⁰ Even though two official announcements to ban money had recently been issued, the CPK agreed in May 1975 to gradually introduce the new currency in Democratic Kampuchea as a means "to demonstrate to the people the reality of our state power."⁵¹ As noted earlier, trial runs of the new currency began in the Northern Zone in September. This is consistent with the memoirs of a survivor named Pin Yathay, who recalled that a "Khmer Rouge chief announced that money was to be reintroduced towards the end of the year" in August 1975.⁵² In yet another reversal, *Angkar* banned the use of currency once more at the conference referenced earlier on September 19, 1975.⁵³

For a while, the currency policy seemed to have been settled. In July and August of 1976, the Standing Committee of the CPK met to discuss the future of the country. An unpublished document titled, "The Party's Four-Year Plan to Build Socialism in All Fields, 1977–1980" clearly defended the decision to eliminate currency.⁵⁴ On September 30, 1976, the 16th anniversary of the CPK, Pol Pot stated that the party was in complete agreement on the ban:

Money is very poisonous, for it can pull us back into a society of privacy. Now, none of us prefers it anymore, and this is a vital tool that allows us to get rid of the tendency toward possession and introduce collectivism quickly. If money and salary exist, we will not be able to realize collectivism.⁵⁵

Minutes taken from meetings of the Standing Committee of the Central Committee of the CPK from November 1976 confirmed this sentiment. "The more we forget about money, the happier we feel; not using money is good and comfortable."⁵⁶

Despite this sense of conviction, Pol Pot seemed ambivalent about the use of the currency less than 16 months later in a March 1978 interview with Yugoslav journalists. The party secretary stated that the CPK would consider reintroducing currency, but only "if the people judge it is necessary to go back and use money."⁵⁷ It is not clear what precipitated this change of mind. One CPK official later claimed that the policy had always been a temporary one.

Another cadre stated that efforts to reintroduce currency began in August 1978, when a group of Khmer financial specialists was summoned to Phnom Penh to administer the project. Khieu Samphan validated this assertion, claiming that Pol Pot and Ieng Sary had decided to use money just before the Vietnamese invasion. Despite Samphan's statement, it is likely that any issuance of a new currency would have been delayed by months or years of debate based on the CPK's history of indecision on this topic.⁵⁸

The decision to abolish currency was accompanied by propaganda and indoctrination efforts. The CPK employed a variety of techniques to disseminate their ideas to citizens, including slogans, ideological meetings, revolutionary songs, and radio announcements. French historian, Henri Locard, compiled hundreds of Khmer Rouge slogans in the book, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar*, a number of which alluded to the regime's ideas about money, private property, and markets. In a country where oral tradition was a vital part of the culture, the use of slogans was effective. Likely crafted by the Ministry of Information and Culture or the Standing Committee of the CPK, the sayings were short and memorable. Party leaders spread them through the ranks and various administrative zones with instructions to be repeated regularly for maximum impact. Sayings like "there are no more sales, no more exchanges, no more complaints, no more robberies, no more looting, no more individual property"⁵⁹ conveyed the regime's ideological opposition to markets and private property to ordinary Khmers. Straightforward and unambiguous, these statements did not allow for any possibility of misinterpretation. Other slogans condemned the possession of gold and jewelry or anything else that may be used as currency: "gold, silver, necklaces, bracelets, and chains that bind your arms and legs! Comrades, they shackle the revolutionary movement! They are absolutely forbidden!"⁶⁰ Ill-tempered soldiers shouted these phrases at audiences during the ideological study sessions that took place in the evenings at the labor camps. After working in the fields in the scorching heat all day, weary villagers were forced to listen to Khmer Rouge speeches about the glories of the regime and the rigid protocols of the new society. Likewise, radio broadcasts over portable loudspeakers spouted revolutionary ideals to the citizenry, "cities are evil; technology is evil; money and trade are evil."⁶¹ These phrases may not have converted skeptics, but they remained in the memories of survivors years after the Khmer Rouge regime had been driven from power. While the propaganda and intimidation tactics were largely successful at suppressing the voices of the population, Khmers quietly found ways to subvert the new monetary policies by developing illegal markets and substitute currencies.⁶²

Conclusion

A monetary policy this radical and unprecedented in modern history would have been a shock to any society—and it wreaked havoc on a country already plagued by poverty and violence. Some populations within Cambodia had

bartered for goods and services before the revolution, but the concept of banning both currency and markets was incomprehensible. The immediate aftermath of the ban during the evacuation of the cities will be covered in Chapter 3, though some of the survivors' reactions to the new edicts captured the overall sense of confusion and despair of the population. In response to the ban on trading, Chhalith Ou, an April 17 person from the northwest region, claimed, "[W]e didn't know what was happening in our country or why."⁶³ Yathay conveyed the hopelessness of city residents who had worked their entire lives to save money or own property: "[T]he abolition of money had cancelled at a stroke all our financial assets ... we had lost everything that was dear to us, and almost everything that would ensure our survival."⁶⁴ Others attempted to explain the rationale of *Angkar*. New people from Phnom Penh surmised that the regime banned trading because it "was for individual enrichment"⁶⁵ and "too much like the old way."⁶⁶ Sida Lei, a woman orphaned by the regime, summed up the ideology succinctly: "Trading is capitalist. Trading is against the communist regime."⁶⁷

Why did CPK leaders believe that they could implement policies that had not been successful anywhere else in the world? The tiny country had only gained independence from France two decades earlier, and its economy had been decimated by five years of civil war. The lengthy decision-making process regarding the abolition of currency was a sign of uncertainty, though their ambitions to extinguish capitalism from their country and build a new model of communism prevailed over any reservations. According to Kiernan, the regime adhered to a "firmly-held, if degenerate, philosophy of voluntarism"⁶⁸—a belief that the people of Cambodia could accomplish any goal or overcome any obstacle through sheer willpower if only the population had attained the correct political consciousness. This idea was articulated in one of their well-worn political slogans: "Long live the extreme prescient line of Kampuchea's revolution: only count on your own force and be resolutely and completely master of the motherland's destiny!"⁶⁹ The inability to achieve a particular political goal could always be explained by the absence of a proper political mindset. Mistakes were the result of a deliberate effort to undermine the regime. The ideology of the regime was never at fault. If the regime's aggressive economic goals were not achieved, it was due to an intentional act of disobedience or a challenge to the authority of *Angkar*. This mindset led the government to perceive enemies everywhere. These enemies needed to be eliminated so that others would realize that they needed to work harder to adopt the correct political consciousness. Instead, it weakened the regime and led to an endless cycle of violence. One of the recurring themes of the Pol Pot era was the constant battle between the political theories of *Angkar* and the realities of life on the ground.⁷⁰

During the Khmer Rouge era, CPK leaders touted their decision to ban currency as a breakthrough in socioeconomic development. Referring to the prohibition of money and markets, a Central Committee document stated, "the world never thought of such policies before," and that these decisions

solved “an intractable problem that mankind has been wrestling with for centuries.”⁷¹ Minutes taken from a CPK meeting after the takeover of Phnom Penh adopted a similarly triumphant attitude: “Some issues related to organization: there are no markets; no one ever thinks about markets. Concerning currency, we haven’t used money for the past year, which is unique in the world.”⁷² This appeared to be a favored talking point of the regime. The CPK had been successful in indoctrinating some of the revolutionary ranks, as one Khmer Rouge group leader was overheard bragging that “the reasons for our success are the evacuation of Phnom Penh, the abolition of money, and the institution of a collective regime.”⁷³ While the leaders remained publicly faithful to the policy between 1975 and 1979, both Pol Pot and Ieng Sary later expressed regret about the ban on currency. In the early 1980s, Ieng Sary confessed that “political errors were made,”⁷⁴ including the nonmonetary economy of the Khmer Rouge. Despite all the carnage and mayhem in Democratic Kampuchea, Pol Pot told Japanese journalists in 1979 that he only had one regret about his reign as the leader of the Khmer Rouge: the banning of currency.⁷⁵

Notes

- 1 Craig C. Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea*, Kindle (New York: Routledge, 2019), 222, Kindle.
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- 3 Marx and Engels, 82.
- 4 Philip Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, First edition (New York: Owl Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 316, Kindle. Short references interviews with Long Visalo (a Khmer expatriate who returned to Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge victory) on November 26, 2001, and December 8, 2001.
- 5 Francois Ponchaud, *Cambodia: Year Zero* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1978), 200.
- 6 Henri Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2005), 281.
- 7 Locard, 277.
- 8 Locard, 39–43. Locard states that the anthems were likely written by Pol Pot though this is not confirmed.
- 9 David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Fourth edition (Colorado Springs, CO: Westview Press, 2007), 255.
- 10 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 73. See also David P. Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), location 791, Kindle.
- 11 Short, 72–6. See also Ben Kiernan, “External and Indigenous Sources of Khmer Rouge Ideology,” in *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, 1972–79*, eds. Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 12 James A. Tyner, “‘Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool’: State Capitalism, Nonmarket Socialism, and the Elimination of Money during the Cambodian Genocide,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 14, no. 1 (2020): 146, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.14.1.1710>. Tyner cites the works of Paul Einzig, Stephen A. Smith, and Zbigniew M. Fallenbuchl.

- 13 Andrew C. Mertha, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, Reprint edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 18, Kindle.
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- 15 Karl Marx, “‘The Power of Money,’ Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” Marxists Internet Archive, 1844, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/power.htm>.
- 16 Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1, 2, & 3: The Only Complete and Unabridged Edition*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), location 2122, Kindle.
- 17 Tyner, “Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool,” 144–5.
- 18 Tyner, “Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool,” 144–5. See also Barbara Goodwin, “The Political Philosophy of Money,” *History of Political Thought* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1986): 549.
- 19 Steve Heder, *Cambodian Communism and the Vietnamese Model, Volume I: Imitation and Independence, 1930–1975*. (White Lotus, Ltd., 2004), 9–10. See also Sheridan Prasso, “The Riel Value of Money: How the World’s Only Attempt to Abolish Money Has Hindered Cambodia’s Economic Development,” *Honolulu: East-West Center / Asia Pacific Issues*, no. 49 (January 2001): 1–4, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/riel-value-money-how-worlds-only-attempt-abolish-money-has-hindered-cambodias-economic->.
- 20 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 317.
- 21 David Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua, eds., *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976–1977* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), 107.
- 22 Chandler, Kiernan, and Boua, 156.
- 23 Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79*, Third edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 98. Kiernan references “Examine the Control and Implement the Political to Save the Economy and Prepare to Build the Country in Every Field,” Document no. 3, dated September 19, 1975.
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- 25 Goodwin, “The Political Philosophy of Money,” 549.
- 26 Tyner, “Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool,” 143. See also David P. Chandler, *Brother Number One*, location 1423, Kindle.
- 27 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 307.
- 28 Short, 307. Short references interviews with Phi Phuon (the Chief of Security at the Khmer Rouge Foreign Ministry) on May 4–6, 2001 and November 14–5, 2001.
- 29 Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 55. See also Tyner, “Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool,” 149.
- 30 Kiernan, 99. Kiernan references Kiernan references “Examine the Control and Implement the Political to Save the Economy and Prepare to Build the Country in Every Field,” Document no. 3, dated September 19, 1975.
- 31 Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, First edition (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 171; Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 151.
- 32 Kiernan, 98–9. Kiernan references “Examine the Control and Implement the Political to Save the Economy and Prepare to Build the Country in Every Field,” Document no. 3, dated September 19, 1975.
- 33 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 307.
- 34 Boraden Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge: Ideology, Militarism, and the Revolution That Consumed a Generation*, Illustrated edition (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2013), 68, Kindle.

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- 37 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 246–7.
- 38 Short, 256.
- 39 Elizabeth Becker, *When The War Was Over: Cambodia And The Khmer Rouge Revolution*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 1998), 148–9, Kindle. See also Pot Pol, Interview of Comrade Pol Pot Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea Prime Minister of the Government of Democratic Kampuchea to the Delegation of Yugoslav Journalists in Visit to Democratic Kampuchea: Department of Press and Information Ministry of Foreign Affairs Democratic Kampuchea, March 17, 1978, 10–3.
- 40 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 307; Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930–1975*, Second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 327–9; Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 57, 230–1; Huy Sophorn, “A Pure Society Is One without Money,” *A Magazine of the Documentation Center of Cambodia: Searching for the Truth*, February 2002, 23; Kiernan, *Pol Pot Plans the Future*, 231; Boraden Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 68; Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 316. Short references interviews with Long Visalo (a Khmer expatriate who returned to Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge victory) on November 26, 2001 and December 8, 2001; Tyner, “Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool,” 143–4.
- 41 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 257, 306; Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 68; JoAn D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (East/West Bridge Publishing, 2020), 59, Kindle.
- 42 Pot Pol, Interview of Comrade Pol Pot Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea Prime Minister of the Government of Democratic Kampuchea to the Delegation of Yugoslav Journalists in Visit to Democratic Kampuchea: Department of Press and Information Ministry of Foreign Affairs Democratic Kampuchea, March 17, 1978, 11.
- 43 Chandler, *Brother Number One*, location 2263, Kindle.
- 44 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 228, 248; Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 67; Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 369, 374.
- 45 Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 415. On page 55 of *The Pol Pot Regime*, Kiernan contends that the date of this meeting was in May 1975, contradicting his earlier work. The April 17 date of the meeting is used here because it is consistent with eyewitness accounts of soldiers telling evacuees in April that money had been abolished.
- 46 Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 47.
- 47 R. Z. Halleson and Chhalith Ou, *Spare Them? No Profit. Remove Them? No Loss* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2010), location 372, Kindle.
- 48 Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 67. See also Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 276. Short argued that the destruction of the bank was an elaborate theft, while other scholars, such as Boraden Nhem and Sheridan Prasso, contended that it was ordered by the Khmer Rouge.
- 49 Sophorn, “A Pure Society Is One without Money,” 22; Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 67; Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 98–9; Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 307.
- 50 Nhem and Short offered somewhat conflicting information on this series of events in 1975, though it is likely that both scholars are correct and the CPK wavered on the issue frequently in the first few months of the new regime.
- 51 Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 94.
- 52 Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 64.

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- 53 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 306; Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 94.
- 54 Chandler, Kiernan, and Boua, *Pol Pot Plans the Future*, 50, 107–8.
- 55 Sophorn, “A Pure Society Is One without Money,” 22.
- 56 Phat Kosal, Ben Kiernan, and Sorya Sim, trans., “IENG SARY’S REGIME: A Diary of the Khmer Rouge Foreign Ministry, 1976–79,” Yale University Genocide Studies Program, September 1998, <https://gsp.yale.edu/ieng-sarys-regime-diary-khmer-rouge-foreign-ministry-1976-79>.
- 57 Pol, Interview of Comrade Pol Pot Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea Prime Minister of the Government of Democratic Kampuchea to the Delegation of Yugoslav Journalists in Visit to Democratic Kampuchea: Department of Press and Information Ministry of Foreign Affairs Democratic Kampuchea, 12.
- 58 Tyner, “‘Currency Is a Most Poisonous Tool’: State Capitalism, Nonmarket Socialism, and the Elimination of Money during the Cambodian Genocide,” 151. Tyner cites written testimony of Prasith Thiounn, June 8, 2009 at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia; Etcheson, *The Rise And Demise Of Democratic Kampuchea*, 209; Chandler, *Brother Number One*, location 3132, Kindle; Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 383.
- 59 Locard, 281; Sophorn, “A Pure Society Is One without Money,” 23.
- 60 Locard, 283.
- 61 JoAn D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (East/West Bridge Publishing, 2020), 51.
- 62 Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book*, 1–17.
- 63 Halleson and Ou, *Spare Them?*, location 817, Kindle.
- 64 Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 74.
- 65 Vannead Horn, *The Spirit of a Fighter: From Cambodia, Victim of the Khmer Rouge Genocide, to France Then USA* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2016), Kindle location 4252.
- 66 Vincent Lee, *Father Missed His Plane: A Real-Life Story of a Boy’s Separation from His Family, Survival and Adversity in the Killing Fields of Cambodia and Beyond*, ed. Simon Luckhurst (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 59.
- 67 Sida Lei, e-mail message to author, June 24, 2021. Sida Lei is the author of the memoir, *Two Teaspoons of Rice: The Memoir of a Cambodian Orphan*.
- 68 Ben Kiernan, *Marxism in Asia*, ed. Colin Mackerras and Nick Knight (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 236, VitalSource Bookshelf Online.
- 69 Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book*, 48.
- 70 Kiernan, “Kampuchea and Stalinism,” *Marxism in Asia*, 236.
- 71 Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, 342. Short references ‘Extraits de quelques textes du Bureau 870’ as well as Locard and Chandler.
- 72 Kosal, Kiernan, and Sim, “IENG SARY’S REGIME: A Diary of the Khmer Rouge Foreign Ministry, 1976–79.”
- 73 Laurence Picq, *Beyond the Horizon: Five Years With the Khmer Rouge*, First edition (New York: St. Martins Press, 1989), 56.
- 74 Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea*, 198.
- 75 Chandler, *Brother Number One*, location 3505, Kindle. Chandler references interviews of Pol Pot by Japanese journalist, Sho Ishikawa, in December 1979.

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3 Origins of the Barter Economy

The barter economy of Democratic Kampuchea was not new to Cambodia. There is a long history of barter in the region going back at least as far as the Khmer (or Angkorean) empire. The inhabitants of this extraordinary civilization, ancestors of today's ethnic Khmers, dominated much of mainland Southeast Asia from the ninth to the fifteenth century. The god-kings and their subjects constructed massive Hindu and Theravada Buddhist religious monuments that rank among the top tourist destinations in the world today. The ancient Khmers also built a vibrant city that was home to approximately one million people with a bustling economy primarily based on barter. The bas-reliefs of the legendary Bayon temple included depictions of market scenes with women trading goods. Religious inscriptions from the period revealed that slaves were being traded for unhusked rice, buffalo, and spittoons. Archaeologists have found no evidence of a formal system of currency in Angkor, though gold and silver were often used in trade. A Chinese diplomat named Zhou Daguan, who traveled to the region in the late thirteenth century, documented his observations about the Angkorean people, their culture, and economy, and described life as an ordinary citizen in the only remaining eyewitness account of Angkor. With regard to commerce, Zhou included several notes on the local markets that operated each day from six in the morning until midday. Merchants paid some form of rent (likely a portion of their inventory) to local authorities for a space to trade their goods. Khmer women generally ran the markets, conducting small transactions by bartering rice or other grains and Chinese goods. Zhou claimed that Angkor did not produce silver or gold and that the people valued precious metals from China. Larger transactions were paid for with cloth, silver, or gold. Taxes were also paid with rice, gold, cloth, sugar, or spices. After more than 600 years of prosperity, the empire fell to invaders from Siam in the fifteenth century, and much of the population moved from the large city into small villages.¹

Barter continued to play a significant role in Cambodian society until the end of the nineteenth century, as peasant farmers regularly traded their crops for consumer goods. The economy began to change when the Kingdom of Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1864 to fend off aggression from Vietnam and Siam. Commerce expanded along with cities and infrastructure.

Whereas the king owned all property in Cambodia before the colonial era, the French privatized the land to encourage enterprise and generate revenues for the state through fixed property taxes. They also imposed a head tax that required payments in cash, forcing many peasant families to work for wages. As a result, the use of currency became more widespread. At the same time, many Khmer farmers still paid their rent with crops through the middle of the twentieth century. As Hou Yuon described in his 1955 academic writings, “[T]enancy of the rice fields is nearly always paid for in produce.”² Hu Nim reported that the same arrangement was in place in 1965. One former villager noted in her memoirs that her landowning grandparents would collect rent from their tenants in the form of rice.³

Though barter was still common in the countryside, rural peasants increasingly used cash in the twentieth century. Ebihara’s research in West Svay in 1959–60 indicated that the Cambodian *riel* was frequently used to buy and sell herbs, vegetables, fruits, and fish at neighboring markets. While farmers still repaid creditors with surplus rice from the latest harvest, many residents made crafts, played music, and took part-time jobs as bicycle cab drivers to earn money. Ebihara also found that the economy in Sobay was largely based on cash transactions. In this village, as in West Svay, peasants would raise pigs, make palm sugar, or travel to Phnom Penh for work in order to earn cash to buy goods at the local market. Interviews with dozens of rural Khmers largely validated Ebihara’s research, revealing that barter and cash transactions were both common before the revolution. A clear majority of the sources reported using the *riel* in everyday activities, though many Khmers still exchanged rice and gold for various services and commodities.⁴

Bartering gradually increased among Cambodians in the first half of the 1970s, as the civil war between the Khmer Republic and the Khmer Rouge consumed the country. As the Khmer Rouge gained momentum in their march toward the capital, Lon Nol’s war-weary soldiers deserted the battlefield, trading their guns for rice. During the Khmer Rouge siege of Phnom Penh, people started to trade with gold and American dollars because inflation had destroyed the value of the *riel*. A local resident described a city in which “inflation was out of control” as the Khmer Rouge cut off supplies from Phnom Penh. In 1974, “cash was nearly worthless,” so his mother had to pay for consumer goods with gold. In 1970, an ounce of gold was worth 3,500 *riels*. By 1975, the same amount of gold cost 400,000 *riels*.⁵ Teeda Butt Mam, a teenage girl at the time, recalled that her mother often grumbled about inflation and shortages of various goods, claiming that it “required a shopping bag of bills to purchase a bag of rice.”⁶ Though the civil war and soaring inflation weighed heavily on the population, life was about to get much worse for the Khmer people.⁷

As the Khmer Rouge rolled into the capital city on the morning of April 17, 1975, there was a brief celebration as people cheered for the end of the five-year civil war. Phnom Penh residents waved white flags as a sign of compliance, while others congratulated the forces with shouts of “victory” or

“congratulations, comrades!”⁸ Teenage soldiers marched through the streets clad in black pajama-like clothing and “Ho Chi Minh sandals” made of rubber tires. Many of the young men and women carried AK-47 rifles almost as tall as them. An unfamiliar voice on the radio proclaimed victory for the revolutionaries and ordered the residents to surrender and lay down their weapons. Khmer Rouge soldiers fired their guns into the air and demanded that residents leave the city. Within a few hours, citizens began to realize that the end of the civil war was not going to bring peace and stability.⁹

Families that recognized the perils they faced carefully gathered their valuables and looked for ways to hide them before leaving Phnom Penh. Soldiers assured residents that they would be allowed to return to their homes in three days while instructing them to limit the number of supplies they carried. Discerning Khmers ignored the directive and swiftly packed up their clothing, gold, jewelry, fabrics, American dollars, and anything else that they did not want the Khmer Rouge to steal in their absence. At this point, the residents of Phnom Penh and other cities knew little about the communist soldiers and even less about their own future. Apprehensive parents created secret compartments for their valuables in clothes and bags in case they were searched by the Khmer Rouge. One survivor remembered his mother sewing four deep pockets into a sarong for her jewelry, gold, and precious stones. Mam witnessed her neighbors hide their jewels in skirt hems and jacket linings while concealing larger items such as radios, cameras, and silverware in giant bags of rice and beans. One mother “collected all of her valuable jewelry and stuffed it into a wide cloth money belt that she placed around her waist underneath her garments.”¹⁰ Siv Eng, a female student at the time, recalled that her mother sewed hidden pockets into a cloth belt to store their jewelry for the evacuation. Residents also looked for ways to stash larger collections of gold and jewelry. Some hid valuables in their cars, only to learn a few hours later that they would not be able to drive to the next destination. One of Eng’s more astute relatives quickly disassembled a bicycle and then “filled the hollow frame with hundreds of gold pieces”¹¹ before putting it back together for the trek ahead.¹²

The concealment of jewelry was not uncommon during this period of civil war and persistent economic uncertainty. Channy Chhi Laux, a teenage girl from Battambang in 1975, explained that the practice was “a wartime kind of preparation,”¹³ where parents would hide valuables in their children’s clothing in case the family got separated and the young ones had to fend for themselves. Laux’s mother put the family’s jewelry collection into small bags and then sewed them into the crotches of her children’s underwear. This was not the only story of a mother hiding the family’s valuables in her children’s underpants. It was a reasonable plan under the circumstances. Some parents intentionally gave their belongings to their children in the hopes that soldiers would not inspect the kids as vigorously as they examined adults. Chanrithy Him, a New person evacuated from Phnom Penh, remembered that her father put two wristwatches on her arm under her shirt, assuring his wife that “they won’t search children.”¹⁴ Fortunately, the Khmer Rouge did abide by some

traditional Cambodian cultural norms—soldiers mostly refrained from searching the bodies of their captives, especially the women and children. Locard claimed “that there were never any body searches. According to Khmer tradition, the body was respected as sacred, even among the Khmer Rouge.”¹⁵ Evacuees who chose to hide their valuables in their clothing for the long trek out of the cities would later benefit from this decision.¹⁶

Within a few hours of victory, soldiers started forcing the population out of Phnom Penh under the pretext of an impending American bombing campaign. Khmer Rouge cadres marched through neighborhoods, barking orders at families to leave their homes immediately or face severe consequences. Soldiers barged into hospitals and forced doctors and patients out at gunpoint. Survivors wrote of patients hobbling along in the streets still attached to their intravenous poles. Family members carried relatives who were too enfeebled to walk. The Khmer Rouge pointed rifles at fellow Cambodians, kicking and clubbing people while shouting insults such as “capitalist.” Over the course of a few days, a giant mass of people formed and slowly inched their way out of the city. One group of Khmer women described the dreadful scene:

It was a stupefying sight, a human flood pouring out of the city, some people pushing their cars, others their overladen motorcycles or bicycles overflowing with bundles, and others behind little homemade carts. Most were on foot, like us, and heavily laden.¹⁷

Him referred to the evacuation as a “human river” that flowed “as far as the eye can see” along with pigs, dogs, chickens, and crying children.¹⁸ Panicked families searched for loved ones. Bodies of dead Khmer Republic soldiers lay on the streets. With temperatures reportedly reaching over 100 degrees, one evacuee claimed that the scorching pavement burned the soles of his feet through his sandals. Roads became toilets when dysentery and diarrhea set in. Similar evacuation stories came from other cities, such as Battambang and Poipet. This chaotic episode marked the beginning of the barter economy in Democratic Kampuchea, as people desperately began to trade their belongings for any necessities they could find.¹⁹

Though the Lon Nol currency was technically abolished on April 17, 1975, by the CPK, money was still being used during the evacuation at various times and locations. Despite proclamations from soldiers that the old republican currency was now worthless, “everyone refused to believe it.”²⁰ When Chhalith Ou first told his parents that he had heard that money would no longer be used in Cambodia, his mother called his claim “nonsense” and dismissed it as a rumor: “[T]here is no country that does not use money.”²¹ Khmers slowly marched from Phnom Penh toward the countryside, where roadside merchants flourished for a brief period. Haing Ngor recalled seeing vendors with makeshift stalls and tarps selling cigarettes, books, and tape cassettes during the evacuation, suggesting that many people still believed that life would return to normal after a few days. Farmers sold meat along the highway.

Hyperinflation set in, as markets sprung up along the roads “selling food at five times the already inflated Phnom Penh prices.”²² One evacuee claimed that “a mango that would normally have cost 50 *riels*, now cost 5,000.”²³ Wealthier Khmers paid the equivalent of US\$100 for a pound of rice and \$50 for a fish on the highway out of Phnom Penh. Mam’s brother-in-law paid a week’s wages for a single dried fish and spent more than 1 million *riels* in the temporary markets outside of the capital. The value of a particular item depended upon its utility during this chaotic period. According to Laux, “everything was turned upside down. A bicycle was worth more than a motorcycle, and an oxcart was worth more than a car.”²⁴ Motorcycles and cars were either too cumbersome for family members to push along the packed roads or “borrowed” by Khmer Rouge soldiers for their own use. An oxcart or a bicycle was far more practical at this point.²⁵

As people started to realize that the value of their money was rapidly diminishing, traders began to refuse the Lon Nol *riels*. Eng recalled overhearing a woman saying that money was “no longer needed because the *Angkar* will provide everything for us.”²⁶ Khmers discarded their *riels*, and the highways became littered with useless banknotes. Individuals who had been saving money for decades were now destitute. A merchant who had accumulated a large sum of money became so despondent that he hanged himself in a hut of a village near the city. Primary sources included two separate anecdotes of Chinese vendors drowning themselves because their bags of *riels* were useless. At this point, money was only good for toilet paper, making paper bags, and starting fires.²⁷

When the population finally realized that their currency had no value, “barter became the means of exchange”²⁸ on the roads out of the major cities. At different times and locations, trading gradually replaced cash transactions. As more than one million Khmers plodded along at a snail’s pace under the blazing sun, parents searched for food and other goods to calm hungry children and anxious relatives. Basic necessities, such as rice and salt, “became more valuable than diamonds and pearls,” according to Vincent Lee, a Chinese Khmer from the capital. During the evacuation, Lee’s mother refused an offer of 2 ounces of gold for her 15 kilos of rice.²⁹ Those with food to spare during the evacuation had tremendous leverage in the exchanges. The family of Sokphal Din bartered most of their small stash of gold, diamonds, and watches for some rice and vegetables. Another former Phnom Penh resident bartered a Rolex watch for a pot and some rice. Ou saw a neighbor exchange a diamond ring for a single chicken. Bartering had to be done discreetly in some areas, and careless individuals who wore earrings or bracelets were quickly relieved of those possessions by soldiers who “assumed that they were capitalists, flaunting their wealth.”³⁰ Much of the bartering took place in small villages near the main roads, where the city folk stopped to rest until they were inevitably ordered back on the highway by hostile Khmer Rouge soldiers. Rural peasants came from their homes to offer palm tree fruit, juice, and coconuts to the evacuees in exchange for oil, salt, kerosene, and clothing. The Lon Nol *riel* was rarely used again.³¹

Food was not the only item that city folk coveted during the long trek. Some Khmers attempted to trade for medical supplies to help sick and elderly family members struggling in the unbearable heat. Ou's parents traded a pair of trousers for four tablets of medicine when one of his siblings was ill. The most valuable items during the evacuation were food and medicine, but any item that facilitated transportation also commanded a steep price. Car owners attempted to trade their vehicles for bicycles. One woman traded two gold rings and a necklace purportedly worth US\$500 for a little cart that broke down only 5 kilometers after the exchange. Clothes were also in demand during the evacuation, according to Sieu Sean Do, a 12-year-old boy when the Khmer Rouge invaded Phnom Penh. Soldiers had forced many city residents out of their homes before they had time to pack. Believing that they would return to the city in three days, many evacuees focused on gathering short-term essentials like food. Once it became clear that they would be on the road for more than a few days, families that had not packed any additional clothes began to trade some of their supplies for shirts and pants. New clothes were highly valued. Pin Yathay bartered pants and sarongs for food and medicine and exchanged his watch for two fishing nets. One mother traded old clothes and a can of sardines for a ride for her family in an ox cart. Some farmers in the villages refused gold, asking for goods from the city that had been previously unavailable to rural villagers: silk clothing, watches, tarps, and medicines. Barter became part of the daily routine, as fretful families watched their food supply dwindle. The evacuations continued for weeks for some, and months for others.³²

Eventually, the people who survived the long trek from the cities reached their new homes at one of the rural labor camps, where local cadres forced them to work for the revolution. As people reached the "liberated zones" and settled into the cooperatives, trading continued. Private trade was tolerated, or at least not criminalized, in many villages in the early days of the regime. Elizabeth Becker wrote that the first few months after the revolution were relatively comfortable for Khmers who had gold and rice. A young mother named Simone Leng stated that "for the first few months after the Khmer Rouge took over you could still barter secretly."³³ She traded lilies in exchange for aspirin, salt, and sugar. Simone's husband, Mac, agreed that the Khmer Rouge administration was less strict at the beginning of the regime, though the cadres still did not permit him to grow or own his own food. Trade was permitted in Lee's cooperative after the ban on money: "[P]eople were expected to exchange what they made or grew for what they wanted."³⁴ While trade was tolerated in some villages, the labor camps were not uniform and varied greatly in terms of operations and leniency. Cadres barred Base people in some villages from fishing and trading from the early days of the revolution. After a brief period of relaxed rules, the Khmer Rouge banned trading in Ou's village and placed restrictions on movement outside the camp. Mam wrote that "lenient soldiers pretended not to notice trading, yet others strictly enforced the rules by beating offenders and confiscating goods."³⁵ Basic rights largely depended on the disposition of the individual soldiers who managed each cooperative.³⁶

The Khmer Rouge eventually enforced the ban on money more rigorously in the cooperatives. Soldiers reminded their captive audiences at village meetings that money was “the source of corruption”³⁷ in society and would no longer be used. Portable loudspeakers blared unequivocal messages about the evils of money and trade as a warning to those who might consider exchanging their goods with other villagers. One former villager described a cooperative meeting where a high-ranking Khmer Rouge official took money from his pocket and tore it up in front of the villagers, proclaiming that money was no longer needed. A New person living in Kampong Thom recalled that “village administrators came and collected money from New people.”³⁸ Foreign currency was also confiscated when discovered. Mam noted that the possession of American dollars was “especially dangerous” because it was “equated with being a spy for the Americans.”³⁹ Yathay wrote of an anecdote about Khmer Rouge cadres searching the pockets of an older man in the camp and finding thousands of American dollars. After accusing the man of concealing “imperialist money,” the soldier tossed the wad of dollars into a river.⁴⁰ Villagers either discarded their *riels* and foreign currency or hid them with the hope that the regime might someday collapse.⁴¹

Without money to exchange or places to trade, underground markets started to emerge in many of the labor camps. New people who had consumed all the food they had brought to the cooperatives turned to the local Base people for help. As members of the favored class, Base people received larger rations of rice from the Khmer Rouge and were allowed to grow their own food in many camps. April 17 people who had not exhausted their supply of gold, jewelry, and clothes during the evacuation looked for opportunities to barter. As Yathay explained, “the local peasants—the Ancients—had plenty of their own food. And we had goods that they desired.”⁴² Within a few months, New people and Base people had begun to develop underground markets in camps scattered throughout Democratic Kampuchea. Laux recalled that the Base people who had saved extra food from the last harvest began exchanging it “with the newcomers like us for gold and fancy jewelry.”⁴³ Din, a New person, described the scene in his village when the underground exchanges started to form:

The local villagers realized that the people from the city would need help to survive and some of them smuggled food to us in the forest. Their help did not come for free but, at the time, food was more important than gold or diamonds.⁴⁴

While some rural peasants may have initially supported the Khmer Rouge, this did not mean they accepted the regime’s ideology blindly. Despite the ban on trade, some Base people willingly profited off their newly elevated status and took advantage of the economic opportunities that came with it. Considering the circumstances, these trades were mostly fair for both parties. New people had limited options for feeding their families and “there was no economy other than the barter system.”⁴⁵

As the Khmer Rouge started to crack down on trade more forcefully, villagers took steps to evade discovery. One of the challenges was finding trustworthy trading partners in a precarious environment. The underground exchanges worked on the “basis of confidence and discretion”⁴⁶ of each participant, and frequent trading partners needed to develop mutual trust in order for the system to work. If the Khmer Rouge discovered an illegal exchange, all participants faced severe punishments and possibly execution. For regular traders, both parties had an interest in protecting one another, though April 17 people were extremely vulnerable when attempting to initiate an exchange with a Base person for the first time. If the Base person decided to tell the local authorities about a trade offer, the New person would be in danger. The Khmer Rouge usually sided with rural peasants over city folks. According to several New people, identifying dependable trading partners required a combination of luck, skill, and instincts. Sieu Sean Do, an evacuee from Phnom Penh, grew up in the countryside and was already familiar with the language and culture of the rural farmers. Finding Base people to barter with was relatively easy for people like Do. Jennifer Lau recalled that her mother befriended a Base person who pointed her to trustworthy people in the cooperative, though Lau’s mother also relied on her own intuition to navigate the complex social environment of the camp. Seng BouAddheka, a teenage April 17 person, stated that her family was forced to take risks to survive, and initiating an exchange with a Base person was part of the “game of luck.”⁴⁷ In a country where almost a quarter of the population perished over a four-year period, survival required fine-tuned social skills and a dose of luck.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The evacuation from Phnom Penh and other cities marked the beginning of the underground economy in Democratic Kampuchea. As troops ordered residents into the countryside, the CPK abolished currency, and a confounded population rushed to buy supplies with their increasingly worthless *riels*. With inflation soaring, Khmers began trading their valuables for food, clothing, medicine, and transportation on the roads out of the cities. Rural farmers offered their goods to the evacuees in exchange for gold, jewelry, and other items that they did not have access to before the revolution. Barter became routine for many Khmers. The march from the cities lasted weeks and months before the former city residents finally reached their destinations in the labor camps. The cooperatives presented a host of new problems. New people received limited food rations and lived in a hostile environment. Those who had managed to conserve their supply of gold and jewelry quietly bartered their valuables with the Base people for food and medicine. After a brief period of lax enforcement, the Khmer Rouge clamped down on all forms of trading. As a result, small, independent networks of trading partners emerged in villages throughout Democratic Kampuchea. As cooperative rations decreased and starving villagers sought new sources of food, these trade networks evolved

into underground markets with substitute currencies, complex negotiations, and brokers. As Yathay wrote in his memoirs, “[A] new economic system, barter, ensured survival of a sort.”⁴⁹

Notes

- 1 John Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia: From Empire to Survival*, Illustrated edition (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2006), location 640–55, 1023, Kindle; Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor* (London: Orion Publishing Co, 2003), 88, 136; Daguean Zhou, *A Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People*, ed. Peter Harris, Illustrated edition (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2007), 70–1; Michael D. Coe, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, Reprint edition (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 145, 150.
- 2 Hou Yuon (academic work), Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua, *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea 1942–1981*, (London: Armonk, NY: Routledge, 1982), 41.
- 3 David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Fourth edition (Colorado Springs, Colo: Routledge, 2007), 121; Francois Ponchaud, *Cambodia: Year Zero* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1978), 147; Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia*, location 1340–51, Kindle; James A. Tyner, *From Rice Fields to Killing Fields: Nature, Life, and Labor under the Khmer Rouge* (Syracuse University Press, 2017), location 771, Kindle; Hu Nim (academic work), Kiernan and Boua, 80; Chanrithy Him, *When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 76; Chanrithy Him, interview by author, May 21, 2021.
- 4 May Ebihara, *Svay: A Khmer Village in Cambodia*, ed. Andrew C. Mertha, First edition (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program Publication, 2018), 119–42; May Ebihara, “Intervillage, Intertown, and Village-City Relations in Cambodia,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 220, no. 1 (1973): 360–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1973.tb40255.x>; Kae Ngeat, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia, February 27, 2022; Kou Phai, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Prey Veng, Cambodia, January 7, 2022; Im Soeun, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Thom, Cambodia, January 30, 2022; Chun Neang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tboung Khmum, Cambodia, January 8, 2022; Chhot Phorn, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia, February 27, 2022. Based on dozens of interviews with survivors, no noticeable regional patterns could be determined from respondents.
- 5 Vincent Lee, *Father Missed His Plane: A Real-Life Story of a Boy’s Separation from His Family, Survival and Adversity in the Killing Fields of Cambodia and Beyond*, ed. Simon Luckhurst (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 21, Kindle.
- 6 JoAn D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (East/West Bridge Publishing, 2020), 24, 46.
- 7 Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930–1975*, Second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 356; Les Sillars, *Intended for Evil: A Survivor’s Story of Love, Faith, and Courage in the Cambodian Killing Fields* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2016), 47, Kindle.
- 8 Les Sillars, *Intended for Evil*, 53.
- 9 Sieu Sean Do, *A Cloak of Good Fortune: A Cambodian Boy’s Journey from Paradise through a Kingdom of Terror* (Hibiscus Press, 2019), location 1240, Kindle; Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 27, 31; Patrick Keo, *KHMER RISE: How I Escaped the Genocide*: (Self-published, 2019), 82, Kindle; Chanrithy Him, *When Broken Glass Floats*, 56.

- 10 Sovannara Ky and Howard Glass, *The Sieve of Angkar* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 29.
- 11 Heather Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye: A Memoir of a Khmer Rouge Survivor* (Austin, TX: Rebel Press, 2019), 43, Kindle.
- 12 Chanrithy Him, *When Broken Glass Floats*, 61, 64; Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 38, 41; Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 29; Channy Chhi Laux, *Short Hair Detention: Memoir of a Thirteen-Year-Old Girl Surviving the Cambodian Genocide* (Bloomington, IN: Archway Publishing, 2017), 38–9; Elizabeth Becker, *When The War Was Over: Cambodia And The Khmer Rouge Revolution* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1998), 164, Kindle; Sokphal Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia: Surviving a Living Hell* (Amsterdam Publishers, 2020), 18, Kindle; Frances T. Pilch, *INVISIBLE: Surviving the Cambodian Genocide: The Memoirs of Mac and Simone Leng* (Bandon, OR: Robert Reed Publishers, 2017), location 591, Kindle; Heather Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 16, 41; John Barron and Anthony Paul, *Murder of a Gentle Land: The Untold Story of Communist Genocide in Cambodia*, First edition (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1977), 88. It is not unusual for Khmers, especially those living in the rural villages, to convert their cash savings into gold or jewelry due to a general lack of faith in banks (per Ebihara).
- 13 Channy Chhi Laux, interview by author, May 23, 2021.
- 14 Him, *When Broken Glass Floats*, 69.
- 15 Henri Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2005), 276.
- 16 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 26–7; Barron and Paul, *Murder of a Gentle Land*, 98; Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 54.
- 17 Ponchaud, *Cambodia*, 24.
- 18 Him, *When Broken Glass Floats*, 66–7.
- 19 Patricia McCormick, *Never Fall Down*, (Balzer + Bray, 2013), 20–2, Kindle; Sillars, *Intended for Evil*, 55, 71; Do, *A Cloak of Good Fortune*, location 1299, Kindle; Him, *When Broken Glass Floats*, 62; Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 42; Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia*, 28–9; R. Z. Halleon and Chhalith Ou, *Spare Them? No Profit. Remove Them? No Loss*. (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2010), location 412, Kindle.
- 20 Var Hong Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise: Escape from Cambodia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), locations 417, 490, Kindle; Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 46.
- 21 Halleon and Ou, *Spare Them?*, location 378, Kindle.
- 22 Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise*, locations 417, 490, Kindle.
- 23 Seng BouAddheka, *If on This Earth There Are Angels: A Story of Survival and Renewal from the Killing Fields of Cambodia* (Vivid Publishing, 2016), location 541, Kindle.
- 24 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 74–5.
- 25 Haing Ngor and Roger Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), location 1646, Kindle; Him, *When Broken Glass Floats*, 40; Becker, *When The War Was Over*, 23; Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 47.
- 26 Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 33.
- 27 Neary Heng and David M. Corbin, *From Internment to Fulfillment: How to Shift Into Peace, Purpose and Prosperity Against All Odds* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 61, Kindle; Philip Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, First edition (New York: Owl Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 279, Kindle; Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, location 1624, Kindle; Barron and Paul, *Murder of a Gentle Land*, 121; Criddle and Teeda

- Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 45, 53; Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, Reprint edition (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 35; Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 36; Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise*, location 417, Kindle; Sillars, *Intended for Evil*, 56.
- 28 Halleson and Ou, *Spare Them?*, location 613, Kindle.
- 29 Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 34.
- 30 Sokphal Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia: Surviving a Living Hell* (Amsterdam Publishers, 2020), 34.
- 31 Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia*, 27–9; Katya Cengel, *Exiled: From the Killing Fields of Cambodia to California and Back*, Illustrated edition (Lincoln, Nebraska: Potomac Books, 2018), location 1532, Kindle; Halleson and Ou, *Spare Them?*, location 601, Kindle; Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise*, location 639, Kindle.
- 32 Frances T. Pilch, *INVISIBLE*, location 1201, Kindle; Halleson and Ou, *Spare Them?*, location 601, Kindle; Barron and Paul, *Murder of a Gentle Land*, 108; Sieu Sean Do, interview by author, June 7, 2021; Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 52, 71–2; Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 57; Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 48.
- 33 Pilch, *INVISIBLE*, location 640, Kindle.
- 34 Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 49.
- 35 Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 48.
- 36 Tous Mak, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021; Souy Sreng, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia, December 18, 2021; Seng Chek, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, November 29, 2021; Robert Chau, Interview by author by video conference, September 6, 2022; Becker, *When The War Was Over*, 229; Pilch, *INVISIBLE*, location 619, Kindle; Him, *When Broken Glass Floats*, 72; Halleson and Ou, *Spare Them?*, location 822, Kindle.
- 37 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 94.
- 38 Keo, *KHMER RISE*, 73.
- 39 Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 59.
- 40 Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 52.
- 41 Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 51; McCormick, *Never Fall Down*, 34.
- 42 Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 50.
- 43 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 98.
- 44 Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia*, 54.
- 45 Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 49; Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 50, 87.
- 46 Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 88.
- 47 Seng BouAddheka, interview by author by email, June 29, 2021.
- 48 Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 88; Do, interview by author by telephone, June 7, 2021; Jennifer Lau, interview by author by telephone, June 2, 2021.
- 49 Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 87.

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4 Substitute Currencies

Rice and Gold

After seizing the old republican currency from the population, the Khmer Rouge focused on confiscating and collectivizing private property. The egalitarian absolutism of the regime necessitated that each person possessed the exact same amount of property—meaning that *Angkar* owned everything, and the people of Democratic Kampuchea owned nothing. Collectivized property obviously included rice and gold, which were cornerstones of traditional Khmer culture. In some instances, soldiers would simply ask the villagers to turn in their possessions. Many complied, rather than take unnecessary risks. After witnessing extreme acts of violence and hostility, some Khmers calculated that the lives of their families were more important than getting caught with unauthorized goods. The Khmer Rouge collected rice, along with other food and cooking supplies, and put them in a cooperative storage facility to be shared with camp residents. The CPK associated gold and jewelry with capitalism and Western imperialism and, therefore, forbade them in the new society. Since markets had been banned and there was nothing to buy, cadres seized these luxury items and told villagers that there was no reason to own gold or jewelry. The Khmer Rouge searched the homes and even the clothes of camp residents. Few were willing to protest the confiscations for good reason. The Khmer Rouge would enter the makeshift homes of villagers and rifle through their meager belongings, taking whatever was deemed illegal by the cooperative. “We couldn’t do anything when they took our items,” stated Kae Ngeat, a New person who lived in Pursat province.¹ In a blatant violation of Khmer cultural norms, soldiers occasionally searched the bodies of camp residents, including women. A former village chief from Svay Rieng claimed that they collected two to three *chi* of gold (one *chi* is equal to 3.75 grams) from each house in the initial seizures. One New person recalled that the Khmer Rouge were remarkably skilled at finding hidden gold, stating, “[I]t was like they could smell it.”² Searches of camp residences and personal spaces continued in cooperatives throughout the Khmer Rouge era.³

While the stolen rice was brought to storage areas for subsequent distribution, villagers did not know what happened to the gold and jewelry after it was confiscated by soldiers. Some of the spoils were pocketed, though a few sources claimed that the Khmer Rouge discarded the gold because they were afraid of

being caught with it. In some cooperatives, cadres put the seizures on display for the whole village to see. Several interviewees reported that the Khmer Rouge placed the confiscated gold jewelry on palm leaf mats to dry in the sun for days or weeks. It is unclear why this was done, though one possible explanation is that cooperative leaders wanted to exacerbate class tensions in the camps by making a spectacle of the wealth of the April 17 people. One Cambodian scholar hypothesized that the Khmer Rouge believed exposure to sunlight would diminish the value of the gold. It was not known what happened to the valuables after they were removed from the mats, though Locard reported that some cadres traded the gold and jewelry for goods at the Thai border or kept it for themselves.⁴

By the time they had arrived at the cooperatives, much of the population recognized that rice and gold were essential to their survival and that these items needed to be hidden from the increasingly aggressive Khmer Rouge cadres. Some families buried their rice in the ground. This included Base people, who were not exempt from having their supplies confiscated. A Base person named Soeur Nuon reported that her family put rice in a jar, which was subsequently buried under their house. Others claimed that they buried their gold and jewelry in the ground. One villager recalled that her mother put the family's jewelry in a bottle and then sewed it into a compartment in one of their pillows. Others created secret pockets in their clothes to hide their valuables, as was done during the evacuation of the cities. Khmers sewed gold and jewelry into sarongs, sleeves, pants, waistbands, and *kramas*. The more cautious villagers created pockets in their underwear, where Khmer Rouge soldiers would be least likely to search. There were a few instances of even greater ingenuity. Robert Chau, an April 17 person from Banteay Meanchey, recalled that his grandmother hid gold in her daughter's hair. In an extreme example of concealment, a survivor claimed that a doctor cut open his own leg and then put diamonds inside his body before stitching it back up. Villagers hiding their private property marked one of the first acts of defiance against the regime. Evasion and risk assessment became a part of daily life for families, especially when rations were reduced.⁵

The amount of rice distributed to the villagers by the cooperatives was inconsistent and in many cases insufficient to sustain life. Rice rations were given to laborers as a form of wage in lieu of currency. Poor harvests led to reduced rations. Compounding the problem of food shortages, the CPK took sizable portions of the rice yield and traded them to foreign countries, such as China, for military equipment and other supplies. Charles Twining, who worked at the US State Department at the time and later became the Ambassador to Cambodia in the 1990s, interviewed Khmer refugees in 1975–1977 and found that “very few people could have been obtaining even that minimal amount of 400–450 grams, and many were receiving 250 grams or less.”⁶ Rice harvests delivered uneven results in different regions of Democratic Kampuchea, and daily rations dropped below basic subsistence levels in 1977 when a massive flood combined with a flawed irrigation system

reduced national crop size by more than 20 percent from the previous year. As a result, “daily per capita consumption dropped to a dangerously low 125 grams of rice, compared to 200–300 grams per day in 1976.”⁷ Survivors described the situation in even bleaker terms. Some reported that the cooperative distributed the equivalent of one can of rice (approximately 250 grams) to a family of four to six people daily. A few individuals claimed that ten people shared a single can of rice per day, the equivalent of 25 grams of rice per person. In many camps, cadres fed villagers a type of rice soup or porridge containing water and only a few kernels of rice that “even the dog didn’t want to eat.”⁸ Malnutrition and famine claimed hundreds of thousands of lives each year.⁹

Even an adequate daily portion of rice would likely have led to widespread health issues. According to Dr. Elaine Hsieh, a nutritional biochemist,

A diet consisting of only white rice provides energy in the form of carbohydrates but lacks vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients needed to maintain healthy tissue and organ function. Prolonged nutritional deficiencies can cause malnutrition, which affects every system in the body and results in the wasting away of muscle and organs, a weakened heart and respiratory system, a breakdown of the gastrointestinal tract, cognitive impairment, and even death, mainly due to increased vulnerability to infectious diseases.¹⁰

The nutritional imbalance, combined with the long work hours, took an extreme toll on the population. Pol Pot and his colleagues had set unrealistic production goals, assuming that the population could achieve these goals if they only worked hard enough for the revolution. Fatigue and sickness were common. Moreover, the cooperative diet left the villagers craving protein. Numerous sources complained about the lack of meat and its effects on the body.¹¹ Even the Base people who were given enough rice to eat longed for more protein and dietary variety. This is not to diminish the value of rice to villagers in Democratic Kampuchea. The meager diet of rice kept millions of Khmers alive. “As long as you had rice, you could live on that,” stated Dan Lu, a New person who lived in Banteay Meanchey.¹² As Khmers learned during the evacuations, rice was more than just food. In the underground markets, rice provided an opportunity for Khmers to trade their supply for other foods and medicine, as many villagers foraged for other forms of nourishment or stole from the cooperative.¹³

Rice as Currency

As the underground markets developed, rice became the most valuable commodity in the labor camps. Rice had been the staple food of the Khmer population and Cambodia’s main agricultural product since the first century of the Angkorean empire. Using a complex and labor-intensive process, farmers have

cultivated paddy rice (or wet rice) in the lowland regions of the country for consumption and trade for thousands of years. In addition to being a commodity, rice was an important part of the Khmer cultural identity, especially in the countryside where the majority of the population lived. Family life was often centered around rice cultivation before the revolution. As noted in Chapter 1, rural peasants in Ebihara's study referred to themselves as "people of the rice paddies."¹⁴ Rice also carried spiritual significance in Cambodia. During *Pchum Ben* ("the Festival of Ancestors"), Khmers provided monks with balls of rice as an offering to their ancestors suffering in hell, hoping their deceased relatives would "gain some relief and be reborn."¹⁵ To this day, rice cultivation touches almost every aspect of Cambodian society—even the Khmer word for politics (*ne-yoa-bai*) includes "rice" (*bai*).¹⁶

In Democratic Kampuchea, rice served as the principal source of food and doubled as the primary currency in the camps. Rice was easy to measure, transport, hide, and trade. Haing Ngor described it as "the perfect medium of exchange."¹⁷ There was a constant demand for it, as New people struggled to find enough food for their families. According to Kou Phat, a Base person from Prey Veng, "evacuees wanted nothing more than rice, rice, rice."¹⁸ When villagers were safely out of the view of Khmer Rouge cadres, they traded rice for beef, eggs, medicine, gold, jewelry, fabric, tiger balm, tobacco, and even transportation. Though rice was scarce in certain periods, it was served daily in various quantities. As the "capital base"¹⁹ for the Khmer Rouge, there was a continuous, if inconsistent, replenishment of the new currency. Camp residents made efforts to save a portion of their allotment whenever possible. Arn Chorn-Pond, an April 17 person who was evacuated from Battambang, kept some of his rice for later trades: "I eat some now, put some in my pocket. Because this good rice, I know it can be like money."²⁰ In some camps, cadres gave Base people larger portions at mealtime. Sam Neang, a Base person living in Tbong Khmum, claimed that the cooperative workers gave her additional plates of rice at night for her baby. Another Base person claimed that her friend working in the cooperative provided her with extra rice to store at home. Others resorted to stealing rice and stashing it in their houses. Kong Sam-Art, a Base person in a Kampong Cham cooperative, stated that she took two kilograms each time she was ordered to mill rice: "I put those rice in the bottom of the basket and put bran on top. I showed that I brought bran for the cows at home, but when I arrived home, I cleaned and hid it."²¹ Traditional rice milling involved a lengthy process of removing the husk (the hard outer shell) and bran layer from the rice seeds by pounding and then sifting the fragments until edible white rice was produced. The work was often manual, though tools were used in some cooperatives. Villagers traded both husked and unhusked rice. Unhusked rice was more valuable in the underground markets, as it was fully processed and edible. Farmers gave the bran layer to their cows or pigs, though Khmers sometimes ate it in times of scarcity during the Pol Pot era. Khmer villagers employed a number of different strategies to gather extra rice for consumption or trade.²²

In order to exchange rice with fellow villagers, basic units of measurement had to be established for negotiation purposes. The primary unit of measurement was the Nestle condensed milk can, which carried between 200 and 250 grams of rice. The tin cans were uniform in size and shape, making it possible to quickly assess the weight by hand, and they had been used regularly throughout Cambodia before the revolution. Nestle cans could be carried fairly easily. For large trades, a person could transport a few cans of rice at a time by stacking them together. Most of the trades involving rice used these cans as a measurement of value. Another measuring device used during the period was the *tau*. This was a wooden container in the shape of a box or a large bowl equal to roughly 12 kilograms of rice (or 48 cans). The *tau* was not as prevalent as the condensed milk can in bartering, largely because a New person carrying a large basket of rice through the camp would arouse suspicion.²³

Gold as Currency

Gold was the other primary currency in the labor camps. Like rice, gold holds a special significance in Khmer culture and history, even more so than gemstones or other precious metals. In his record of thirteenth-century Angkor, Zhou Daguan wrote of magnificent gold towers and statues in the center of the capital city and noted that the king of the Khmer empire carried a ceremonial gold sword. The ancestors of modern Khmers traded their gold for food and clothing in the markets of the Angkorean empire. Rural peasants have often converted their cash savings or surplus commodities into gold jewelry instead of using banks due to some deeply rooted concerns about financial security. In Ebihara's study of the village of Sobay, goldsmiths formed ornaments out of gold for rural folks who preferred their savings in jewelry. During the Cambodian civil war, families that owned gold were shielded from the damaging effects of hyperinflation. The aesthetic appeal of gold was secondary to its social and cultural value. Khmers who owned gold were considered to be educated and refined. Ownership purportedly improved one's standing in the community. Gold served as a symbol of future prosperity. Because of its historical and cultural significance, gold retained its worth in the underground markets because traders believed that it would always hold value in the Khmer consciousness, regardless of who controlled the government. While almost all of the other items bartered in the exchanges served a function or purpose, gold was "the only trustworthy currency"²⁴ that was valued by the population as a matter of faith.²⁵

Whereas rice was sold in uniformly sized milk cans, measuring gold was less precise. In Cambodia, gold was usually measured by weight in quantities of *tael* or *damleung* (approximately 37.5 grams), *chi* (3.75 grams), or *mace* (3.78 grams). In the cooperatives, there were no scales to weigh the gold, making the process of determining value subjective. Khmers owned the precious metal in many forms: bracelets, watches, necklaces, waistbands, dentures, nuggets, and leaves. Some New people owned bracelets or necklaces that had to be

broken into pieces in order to exchange them for other goods. An April 17 person would cut out some of the links of their gold chains or belts before a trading excursion and then offer the individual pieces for barter. In other cases, New people had to barter entire pieces of jewelry in order to obtain any reasonable amount of food. Some Khmers carried large nuggets of gold that needed to be cut for exchanges. Sieu Sean Do, an April 17 person placed in a Tbong Khmum cooperative, recalled that his father owned a 30 *tael* chunk of gold that was the size of a teacup. Whenever he wanted to trade with someone in the camp, Sieu's father placed the gold chunk on a piece of wood and hacked off a small slice with an ax for the pending transaction. Without a precise way to measure the weight of the gold, traders haggled over the value of the piece in relation to the other commodity to be exchanged.²⁶

Authenticating the gold was relatively easy for Khmers. In part due to the population's cultural familiarity with the precious metal, villagers were able to determine whether or not a piece of gold was real "by the way it looks, the weight, and by the way it feels."²⁷ Some people could determine authenticity due to "the golden color" and the softness of the metal. "You can bite on it to bend its shape," recalled Sida Lei.²⁸ Individuals could see the imprint of their teeth when they bit into gold. Other gems and precious metals could not be as easily authenticated. One of the main reasons that it became a primary currency was that ordinary people could determine whether gold was real or fake. According to Siv Eng, out of all the precious metals and gemstones, "only gold was valued in the very end. Even diamonds and rubies did not retain their worth."²⁹

Not all gold was equal in Democratic Kampuchea. According to Pin Yathay, "gold varied in value according to the aesthetic appeal of the object in question."³⁰ In Yathay's camp, villagers granted more value to bracelets than necklaces. It was not clear why bracelets were preferable to necklaces, though it was an indication that, even in the worst of times, Khmers were particular about their jewelry. The quality of the gold was a factor, as well. Traders valued pure gold and at times would not accept anything less than 24 karat.³¹ Pure gold was soft, and the fineness made it easiest to authenticate.

Negotiation

Sources recalled countless instances of rice and gold exchanges, often in great detail. A few examples provided insights into the significance of these transactions to traders, even decades after the regime collapsed. Moeurn Kong, a New person that lived in Kampong Chhnang, remembered that "one *chi* of gold could be exchanged for two to three cans of rice. ... Some people used *damlungs* of gold to exchange for half a *tao* of rice."³² A villager in Kampot recalled bartering one *chi* of gold for ten cans of rice. An April 17 person from Pursat claimed that his wife traded her five *chi* gold necklace for five to six cans of rice. Prices were inconsistent and changed with the supply. Eng wrote that "the value of bartering and trading fluctuated from week to week, relative to

the amount of rice available.”³³ When food was scarce, the cost of rice skyrocketed. Yathay noted that after a decrease in rations, one *tael* of gold that could previously be traded for “40 cans of rice – now bought only three cans’ worth of rice.”³⁴ The cost of rice increased as the Khmer Rouge enforced the ban on trade more stringently, making each transaction more dangerous. Francois Ponchaud, a French Catholic priest in Cambodia who helped to expose the abuses of the regime, reported that a gold *damleung* that once bought 70 cans of rice in Phnom Thippadey, was worth only 20 cans just one month later. Famines in the later years of the regime also drove up the price of rice. Loung Ung, a New person and the author of *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*, wrote that one ounce of gold (28 grams) purchased a few pounds of rice in 1976, while Ngor claimed that two *damleung* of gold (75 grams) bought only two cans of rice flour near the end of the Khmer Rouge era. The value of rice and gold also changed from village to village. Yathay noted that the system of exchange that developed over time in one camp may not exist at all in another village. The availability of rice in an underground market sometimes depended upon the leniency of camp leaders or the audacity (or desperation) of its inhabitants.³⁵

Barter in the underground markets required New people to develop a specific set of skills. Villagers had to be able to network and remain in constant communication with others for potential bartering partners. As one April 17 person revealed, “[O]nce we know that a house got some extra rice, we would pay a visit then ask if they wanted to trade with us.”³⁶ Another crucial skill involved the identification of safe and trustworthy trading partners in a stressful environment (as discussed in Chapter 3). Many Base people resented the former city residents, as the Khmer Rouge effectively drove a wedge between the two groups by publicly castigating the April 17 people for their supposed privilege and laziness. A New person’s ability to interpret body language or tone of voice might help them avoid individuals that disliked city folk or were loyal to the regime. This was a matter of extreme importance, as any allegation of an attempted trade by a Base person could lead to severe consequences. Cadres did not distinguish between true and false accusations. As with other caste systems, an individual’s class determined the veracity of their accusation. New people also tried to appeal to the sympathies of their fellow Khmers during exchanges. Many April 17 reported having to resort to pleading for Base people to barter with them. Sometimes a display of humility or submission by an April 17 person was enough to persuade a Base person to engage in trade.³⁷

Bartering also required keen negotiating abilities. Some former merchants had years of experience in trade before the revolution, while other Khmers developed their negotiating skills in the camps. The ability to extract the maximum amount of value from each exchange became a source of pride among villagers, especially the April 17 people. The longer a family of New people could preserve their inventory of gold or jewelry, the better their chances of surviving the Khmer Rouge era. On the other hand, Base people also had to

manage their supply of rice because the rations distributed in the cooperatives were inconsistent and often unpredictable. A poor harvest or an order from the CPK offices in Phnom Penh could lead to reductions in rations in any camp. Without any formal standards or value system, the worth of rice or gold was determined by a number of factors. At times, negotiations seemed arbitrary, with little rationale for the actual value of the items. “With the New people, we guessed at calculating gold for rice. We guessed altogether,” stated Neang.³⁸ In other cases, the parameters for prices were based on recent transactions in a specific area. Yathay stated that he knew the “relative value of their goods”³⁹ because of the steady stream of people that visited his village with intentions to trade. Since food was an immediate need (and gold was not), rural villagers with rice often had the upper hand in negotiations. “The Base people set the price. They are the ones who determined how much rice should be traded for gold or other goods,” stated Tous Mak, a New person living in Battambang.⁴⁰ One Base person named Krouch Soun acknowledged the leverage that they had over their hungry trading partners: “New people who had a lot of gold did not care about price as long as they got some rice to fill their stomachs for the day.”⁴¹ Others felt that Base people took advantage of the desperation of April 17 people by asking for more gold than the trade warranted.⁴²

Interviewees offered several examples of typical negotiations. Aum Sovannari, a New person, recalled that “those with gold would request the amount of rice that they hoped to receive. Then there would be a negotiation from the person with the resources about how much she could share.”⁴³ Soun recounted a very similar experience. “It went something like, ‘*bong* [a Khmer term of respect meaning “older sibling”], I have one troy ounce of gold and wish to get 30 cans of rice.’ Sometimes the family offered 20 or 25 cans and asked ‘do you still want to trade?’”⁴⁴ If the two parties agreed on the amounts, they exchanged goods and the transaction was complete. If they did not agree, the New person generally moved on to offer their gold to another villager.⁴⁵

Each of the illegal exchanges had to be conducted in secret, “otherwise they’d kill you.”⁴⁶ New people “traded silently with friends or neighbors,”⁴⁷ remarked Pan Ren, a Base person who lived in Tbong Khmum. Villagers frequently whispered to each other about potential trades. A New person from a Battambang cooperative stated that “sometimes, we did not need to say the word ‘trade,’ we just gave something to them then they would give us back some rice.”⁴⁸ Phat recalled that traders “just pretended to be talking to one another normally” and waited for the right opportunity to make a deal. Sometimes April 17 people acted as if they were working, keeping a low profile until they felt it was safe to enter a sympathetic Base person’s home and quietly propose a trade. Transactions were often quick and informal, with little time to inspect the inventory.⁴⁹

The locations and times of the exchanges were also of concern to traders. Many transactions took place in homes, where there was some semblance of privacy. Cautious individuals negotiated the specifics of a trade verbally and arranged a place to meet later. The meeting place would often be in an area

where villagers would normally congregate, so as not to arouse suspicion. The participants then completed the barter transaction with a swift exchange of goods while others performed their daily routines. Trades in some cooperatives happened under the cover of darkness. Villagers reported exchanging gold for rice late at night when the cadres and *chhlops* (“spies”) were asleep. Base people also initiated trades after dark, secretly bringing their rice to places where April 17 people stayed to barter for gold. New people traveled to different villages for trade opportunities. A Base person living in Pursat recalled that April 17 people frequently scouted out different villages and potential traders while at work, asking other laborers if their camp had rice. If they learned of a village with ample rice, the New people snuck off to trade their gold there. Villagers regularly adapted their behavior according to the leadership style and rigidity of their camp, including where and when they engaged in illegal activity.⁵⁰

It must be reiterated that not every labor camp in Democratic Kampuchea had an underground market. Several interviewees claimed that their village did not have any illegal trading after the brief period of leniency in 1975. A few sources claimed that they never exchanged anything in the labor camps. Phat claimed that trading was somewhat tolerated in his village until the Khmer Rouge began to enforce the policy of communal meals. After that, the underground exchanges ceased to exist because people were unable to store rice in their homes safely. Village leaders had some degree of autonomy to dole out punishments as they saw fit. Some cadres showed mercy to villagers who were caught bartering or looked the other way. Others had offenders executed as a first offense. Much of the population changed camps periodically. New people might be living in a camp with relaxed rules one day and an extremely rigid cooperative the next. Two Base people stated their cooperatives had sufficient rice to feed everyone satisfactorily and thus, there was little need for underground markets. A handful of former villagers claimed that gold had little to no value in their labor camps. One Base person said that rice was so scarce in his village in Takeo province that no one ever considered trading it away. In this camp, gold was “useless” and “cheaper than pig dung.”⁵¹ A New person named Kilong Ung declared that gold was essentially worthless in the camps and that some people threw away their jewelry because it was too risky to keep it. The lack of consistency in Democratic Kampuchea was in some ways a hallmark of the regime. Sometimes village leaders disappeared and were never seen again. Rules in the cooperatives could change overnight without explanation. One of the most difficult aspects of Democratic Kampuchea was dealing with the unpredictable nature of life in the camps.⁵²

Conclusion

When the evacuees from the cities reached the cooperatives in the countryside, the April 17 people and the Base people established informal trading networks, replacing the worthless Cambodian *riel* with substitute currencies long

associated with traditional Khmer culture: rice and gold. Under a regime determined to break from Khmer traditions and impose a new culture, people bartered rice and gold in the cooperatives just as their ancestors from the Angkorean empire had done in centuries past. The underground markets were not physical spaces, but rather individual members of the multitiered social classes acting in their own self-interest to collect goods they desperately needed or simply desired. While some Base people truly sympathized with the New people and traded their rice with them out of pity, others intentionally took gold from their perceived oppressors to improve their economic standing. The April 17 people traded willingly, as they had little choice but to barter their valuables for rice to survive. The underground exchanges were illegal in Democratic Kampuchea, and traders faced harsh punishment if discovered. Khmers in cooperatives throughout the country took risks by possessing and trading gold and jewelry, items strictly prohibited by the regime as remnants of Western capitalism and imperialism. The CPK had intended for rice production to feed the population and improve living standards while financing “national defense and reconstruction efforts” through exports.⁵³ Instead, rice was being traded in the underground markets as a means to accumulate the types of private property that the regime hoped to eliminate.

Notes

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- 51 Heng Soeun, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia.
- 52 Khout Pheu, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia; Nop Sophal, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Speu, Cambodia; Kou Phat, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Prey Veng, Cambodia; Sam Neang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tboung Khmum, Cambodia; Tim Heang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Speu, Cambodia, March 19, 2022; Nop Sam, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Speu, Cambodia; Reach Sam-Art, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Svay Rieng, Cambodia; Kilong Ung, Interview by author by telephone; Frances T. Pilch, *INVISIBLE: Surviving the Cambodian Genocide: The Memoirs of Mac and Simone Leng* (Bandon, OR: Robert Reed Publishers, 2017), location 332, Kindle.
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5 Other Substitute Currencies

Gold and rice were not the only currencies used in the underground markets. There were a number of other commodities that served as secondary currencies in Democratic Kampuchea.¹ While these goods were not as prevalent as gold or rice in the exchanges, they were bartered frequently in many different camps and provinces. Secondary currencies included clothing, salt, sugar, medicine, tobacco, meats, and various other products and services. Currencies in the underground markets generally fit into three categories: commodities for consumption, commodities for exchange, and goods that were a combination of the two categories. These terms and concepts are not formal classifications (nor were they used by Cambodians), but rather designations to group commodities according to their practical value in the camps. Commodities for consumption, for example, were tangible goods that were usually traded once and then consumed within a short period of time. Medicine, meats, and other foods fall into this category. Commodities for consumption were consequential and usually necessary for survival. There was little social or cultural value associated with these goods. These items were not status symbols. On the other hand, commodities for exchange were nonessential goods, like gold, jewelry, watches, and clothing. These items did not provide any immediate benefit to the owner, though they could be traded repeatedly. Commodities for exchange were status symbols in Khmer culture, which gave them perceived value among a large portion of the population. Without this shared perception, these items would have been worthless in the cooperatives. Finally, some commodities served a purpose and could also be resold when necessary. Goods like rice and salt could be eaten, and they could also be stored and traded. Items like fishing nets, cooking pots, and bicycles belonged in this category as well, although their value depended upon the location of the cooperative. Each group of commodities served a specific purpose in the cooperatives, and collectively, they enabled villagers to establish small trading networks and acquire goods they desperately needed. Though there were many commodities exchanged in the underground markets, the following items stood out because of their practical use and perceived value in the villages.

Clothing

After rice and gold, clothes were among the most commonly traded currencies in the underground markets. Clothing differed from other commodities in that it did not provide significant or immediate benefit to the recipient, especially in the camps of Democratic Kampuchea where they could not be worn or displayed. While April 17 people used their “city” clothes as currency to trade for rice and other food, Base people mostly kept them for personal use, as they had limited access to these luxury goods before the revolution. Chak Ny, a New person from Kampong Thom, claimed that Base people “wanted clothes more than gold.”² Whereas gold and jewelry were status symbols in Cambodia, they also provided long-term value in the markets during and after the regime. Well-made clothes were also markers of social status, but they generally deteriorated over time due to use and were more cumbersome to carry and store. On a short-term basis, shirts and pants could be bartered again if necessary, but in a period of scarcity and malnutrition, fine clothing was a luxury and generally not a primary concern. A woman from Pursat named Lim Vo illustrated this point perfectly when she recounted a story of her older sister berating her brother for trading 20 cans of their corn kernels for a silk sarong. The older sister angrily asked him, “[C]an you eat this sarong?”³

New people quietly presented their shirts, sarongs, and fabrics to their village counterparts and negotiated for the amount of food they wanted. The worth of the clothing item was based on aesthetic appeal, quality of the fabric, and comfort. Silk shirts were “invaluable”⁴ and one of the most popular articles in the exchanges. Base people frequently traded for sarongs and pants. Heun Sareoun, an April 17 person from a Banteay Meanchey cooperative, stated that she received 25 cans of rice for a single sarong. Several sources claimed that certain articles of clothing fetched enormous sums of rice on the black market. For example, Kong Sam-Art claimed that a silk skirt traded for 100 kilograms of rice in a nearby village, and a Base person located in Takeo said that she bartered 4 *tau* of rice (48 kilograms) for a pair of pants for her father-in-law. Fabrics from the cities were also popular in the exchanges among Base people, who used them to make their own clothing. Twining wrote of an instance where a group of individuals in one village raised silkworms and manufactured silk to trade with other camps. A former village chief reported trading two meters of black fabric for more than 70 kilograms of rice in a single day. While these types of exchanges were not the norm, they demonstrated the high demand for fine clothing and fabrics from the cities. In many camps, Base people with food had more leverage, and hungry evacuees from the cities accepted much less for their clothes.⁵

Photos of Khmer Rouge soldiers and leaders often depict men and women dressed in black, long-sleeved, button-down shirts, pajama-like pants, and a red-and-white checkered *krama* (a Khmer scarf) around the neck. These were common uniforms for soldiers and camp residents alike, as social conformity was a crucial component of the CPK’s ideology. Though Cambodians have

traditionally worn bright, colorful clothing, doing so in the cooperatives was an invitation for unwanted attention from the Khmer Rouge. It was a mistake to stand out in this environment. Teeda Butt Mam, a New person in a Kampong Cham camp, noted that she was never specifically ordered to wear the black outfit, but following the crowd was a safe strategy. One of her family's rules at this time was "always fit in, don't be different."⁶ Base people also spoke of being too afraid to wear their new clothing in public, hiding them away until the end of the regime. Vo reported that her brother only wore his sarong at night because wearing it in the daytime would get him "killed quickly."⁷

Some Base people dyed their luxurious new clothes black and wore them around the camp. Even if they preferred colorful garments, at least "those fabrics were nicer to wear than those given by the Khmer Rouge."⁸ Camp inhabitants dyed their clothes black by soaking them in a pot of water mixed with various fruits and leaves so that they could safely wear them as they worked. Other villagers received one set of clothes per year from the regime as part of their "compensation."⁹ Sometimes April 17 people bartered goods and clothing with Base people for their black outfits, as evacuees from the cities did not have the pajama-like uniforms that other villagers wore. Sam Neang gave a black shirt and skirt to a New person in exchange for a platinum bracelet because the individual "only had colorful clothes."¹⁰ An April 17 person named Sovannara Ky recalled that her father bartered their "city clothes" for "dingy, dark clothing"¹¹ from some rural villagers. The young woman did not appreciate having to wear the shabby clothing at the time, though she eventually realized that this was a wise move.¹²

Shoes were frequently traded in the underground markets. The Khmer Rouge wore shoes made of rubber from the remnants of discarded car tires. These were known as "Khmer Rouge sandals" or "Ho Chi Minh sandals"¹³ (after the footwear of Vietnamese soldiers who once fought on the same side as the Khmer Rouge during the revolution). The base of these sandals was constructed from tires. The treads could be seen on the bottom of the soles. The straps came from tire inner tubes. As people wore out their old shoes working in the fields, some traded goods for these sandals. Footwear was highly valued in Democratic Kampuchea, as villagers spent most of the day on their feet, working in the fields. Sokphal Din claimed that his plastic flip-flops were his "most valuable possession ... so precious that they could have even been exchanged for gold or diamonds."¹⁴ Numerous memoirs mentioned the calluses and scars on the feet from walking barefoot for long periods of time.¹⁵

The accounts of survivors suggest that the motivation behind bartering for clothing and fabric during a period of food insecurity was largely based on status and luxury. Many of the interviewees referred to the beauty and quality of the garments without acknowledging the practicality of the items. "I exchanged a shirt for my husband. The owner asked for a liter of rice wine because he was sick. The shirt was beautiful, with short sleeves."¹⁶ A Base person from Kampong Cham traded "for some beautiful fabric from Phnom

Penh.”¹⁷ Yong Kin, a mobile unit leader in Tbong Khmum province, bought a sarong for one *chi* of gold “because I had only black clothes.”¹⁸ While these clothes and fabrics may have been more comfortable than the Base people’s outfits, they served no significant functional purpose and did not warrant their steep trade values in the markets during a period of economic uncertainty.¹⁹

Salt

Many Khmer sources claimed that salt was one of the most widely used currencies in Democratic Kampuchea. Salt, which had been widely available in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge, was almost nonexistent in many regions for most of 1975 and only reappeared at the end of the year after production was renewed in Kampot and a distribution system was established by the Khmer Rouge. Laux confirmed the fact that salt was difficult to find in the first year, adding that it was difficult to live without because “your body is just craving for salt.”²⁰ After the first year, salt was provided by cooperatives on a somewhat regular basis. “Sodium, the mineral in salt, is important for nerve and muscle function and fluid regulation,” noted Dr. Elaine Hsieh. “Prolonged lack of salt can cause abnormally low sodium levels in the blood, a condition called hyponatremia. Symptoms include muscle cramps, headaches, fatigue, nausea and vomiting, seizures, coma, and even death.”²¹ Nawuth Keat, a New person in Battambang, needed salt to preserve his fish and declared that it was “more valuable than jewelry.” Keat also noted that “people who ate nothing but fish and rice died from malnutrition. In a tropical jungle climate, people need salt.”²² Sources provided numerous examples of New people bartering their gold for salt. “I saw my mother trade her necklace weighing three *chi* (eleven grams) for two cans of salt,” remarked another villager.²³ Tous Mak traded her husband’s watch for one and a half cans of salt. Salt was similar to rice in that it was a commodity for both consumption and exchange. Some villagers saved a portion of their rations specifically for trading, hiding them in a condensed milk can for later use. During periods of shortages, the value of salt increased dramatically, and savvy Khmers were able to earn significant profits in the form of gold or rice.²⁴

Sugar

Sugar was another important currency in the camps. While palm sugar was not necessarily an essential food, it provided much-needed energy to starving villagers and contained essential minerals, such as potassium, phosphorus, zinc, iron, copper, and manganese. Khmers collected palm sugar by climbing a lontar palm tree and then extracting the sap from the tips of the rootlike projections at the top. This was a dangerous task, as people occasionally fell from the top of the trees, but it was worth the risk under the circumstances. One survivor described the taste of sugar in near-religious terms. “It was a delicacy that seemed to come straight from paradise. None of us had had sugar for several

months,” wrote Yathay.²⁵ Numerous villagers mentioned either palm sugar or sugar cane as part of their inventory of trading currencies. One New person recalled receiving palm sugar as payment for a haircut. Aside from being a tasty treat, sugar did have some practical medical uses. Haing Ngor, a young doctor who managed to hide his profession from the Khmer Rouge, used sugar cane to feed his pregnant wife who was vomiting profusely due to morning sickness: “[T]he only foods she could keep down were sweet.”²⁶ Yathay claimed that eating palm sugar for three weeks cured his edema and diarrhea and restored his health. New people with access to sugar had “an expensive and coveted product”²⁷ that could be easily bartered in the underground exchanges.²⁸

Medicine

Western medicine was one of the most valuable commodities in the underground markets. Trained doctors were almost nonexistent in Democratic Kampuchea by the end of the Pol Pot era. The Khmer Rouge perceived traditional education as a threat to the regime and executed thousands of intellectuals and medical professionals. As a result, medical care in Democratic Kampuchea was horrendous. Being sent to a Khmer Rouge hospital or clinic was often tantamount to being left for dead. Medical workers were poorly trained, and the equipment was unsanitary. Patients received tree bark, multi-vitamin injections stored in used bottles of Coca-Cola, and homemade malaria pills made of yams and *sdao* leaves. Survivors of the regime referred to the pills as “rabbit turds,” because of their shape and color, and claimed that they had little effect on the patient.²⁹ The population suffered immensely from malnutrition and various sicknesses as a result of the limited rations combined with the extreme labor demands, and there were no viable medical options available.³⁰

All of these factors made Western medicines highly coveted in the underground exchanges, as villagers desperately sought treatment for family members. Camp inhabitants attempted to trade for quinine, penicillin, tetracycline, and aspirin to treat widespread ailments, such as malaria, diarrhea, dysentery, edema, smallpox, beriberi, and cholera. Conditions were so poor that it was reasonable to assume that a family member would eventually get sick. Ny stated that people frequently needed malaria medicine in her village in Kampong Thom. Though her husband was a doctor, and they had a small supply of malaria pills, they only traded these precious items in emergency situations. Villagers who refused to exchange their goods for rice or gold might be persuaded with an offer of medicine. In the book, *Cambodia: Year Zero*, Ponchaud listed the market values of various drugs that were being traded in Kampong Cham in the summer of 1975, including aspirin, one tablet for 1 kilogram of rice, and streptomycin, one vial for 15 kilograms of rice. Mam recalled that four quinine pills required an ounce of gold. A Base person in Takeo bartered one *tau* of sweet rice for two pills of diarrhea medicine for his nephew. The high trade value of a handful of pills was an indication of the dire circumstances and lack of reasonable medical care.³¹

Tobacco

Though not as widely traded as some of the other commodities listed earlier, cooperative residents exchanged tobacco regularly. Many April 17 and Base people reported bartering tobacco for gold and rice, using it exclusively as a currency. Ny claimed that 200 grams of tobacco could be traded for as much as five cans of rice. Kilong Ung stated that the Khmer Rouge and the Base people were “big smokers”³² at the time, so he intentionally took up smoking to accumulate a supply of tobacco for trading purposes. Surprisingly, the Khmer Rouge provided rations of tobacco to smokers during work breaks. After taking a few puffs of a cigarette to prove to the soldiers that he was a smoker, Ung pocketed the remaining tobacco. One of the problems with this strategy was the possibility of developing an addiction, thus creating another need to be met. Obviously, people who exchanged food for tobacco to smoke in a time of deprivation wasted valuable resources. These individuals occasionally had to curtail their habits and barter portions of their stashes for other commodities. In some camps, villagers were allowed to grow their own tobacco, which provided valuable opportunities for New people to trade for food.³³

Meat

Rice was not the only food that was used as currency in Democratic Kampuchea. Meats were also in high demand. The cooperatives did not serve meat regularly (if at all), so much of the population was not eating enough protein to survive.

Lack of protein causes a type of malnutrition called kwashiorkor, which is characterized by an emaciated appearance but with a swollen belly, as well as hair loss, inflammation of the skin, loss of muscle mass, decreased immunity, weakening of the heart and respiratory system, and stunted growth and development in children.³⁴

The underground markets provided the only opportunity for many Khmers to get meat. Base people in some camps were permitted to raise animals, which could be used for trade if the Khmer Rouge did not seize them for the cooperative. Villagers traded their pork, fish, and chicken for rice and other currencies. Krouch Soun recalled that an old woman offered a diamond ring to her father for some chicken as her dying wish. Those without access to food turned to foraging for small animals, which could be used for barter. Laborers hunted for mud crabs, iguanas, frogs, small birds, and snakes in the fields, which they quickly killed and stuffed in their clothing when out of view of the soldiers. Meat was a commodity for consumption, as villagers did not usually have the resources to preserve their food properly. In most cases, it was consumed quickly, though some Khmers did have dried fish. Cooperative residents

frequently trapped and traded rats and mice. Siv Eng wrote in her memoir that “everyone” in her camp in Battambang caught mice because “protein was a necessity.”³⁵ As a result of overhunting in her village, there were few mice left to catch, and their value increased in the underground market. One New person claimed that the Khmer Rouge allowed rat hunting because these pests would eat the rice crops, but this does not appear to have been the norm. In an indication of how dismal the situation was in Democratic Kampuchea, Ngor declared that “in the countryside mice were a treat.”³⁶

Watches

Many Khmer villagers also coveted watches. While the Khmer Rouge soldiers’ affinity for various watches will be covered extensively in Chapter 10, these items were also popular among the Base people in Democratic Kampuchea. Japanese and Swiss watches were very much in fashion in Cambodia before the revolution, and this trend continued in the cooperatives. New people cherished their timepieces and were often reluctant to part with them. Vincent Lee recalled that his mother traded “Papa’s Rolex watch for a few kilos of unhusked rice from the neighbors,”³⁷ but only after his family became so desperate that they started to eat food that was usually served to pigs. Kou Phai, a Base person who lived in a Prey Veng camp, contended that though her mother rarely bartered, she did trade for a lady’s wristwatch. Phai also stated she hoped she could wear the watch once the “situation in the country returned to normal.”³⁸ One account from Tbong Khmum stated that Base people were allowed to wear watches in his cooperative, but this was an anomaly. Few villagers dared to provoke the envy of a cadre by showing off a foreign watch. Like clothing and jewelry, watches were commodities for exchange in that they provided little practical value for ordinary citizens. The Khmer Rouge usually managed the work and meal schedules, brutishly alerting villagers when they needed to be somewhere. While many forms of jewelry (other than gold) decreased in value during the Khmer Rouge era, these accessories were one of the few luxury items that retained their worth throughout the four-year period.³⁹

Other Currencies

A variety of other goods and services were traded in the underground exchanges. Khmers bartered for rides on ox carts and boats. They traded food and gold for assistance with the burial of family members and chores around the camps. While the Cambodian *riel* was worthless, individuals who had stashed away American dollars were able to barter for goods in some camps, depending upon the perceived value and demand. Gemstones and (non-gold) precious metals served as secondary currencies in various camps. Some of the more daring villagers traded for practical items like fishing nets so that they could sneak off and attempt to catch their own food. Khmers bartered

household goods such as cooking pots, kerosene, cooking oil, MSG (monosodium glutamate), dishes, blankets, pillows, and even radios. Several villagers reported trading for bicycles and thatch for their roofs. Khmers exchanged food such as crickets, corn, mushrooms, and rice wine. While these goods were not as common as the currencies listed earlier, they were indicative of the wide range of goods and services available in the underground markets. As one New person remarked, “I traded everything. Diamond, gold, sarongs, and even pickles. Anything was possible.”⁴⁰

As with rice and gold, villagers employed various negotiating strategies to get the best deals or build relationships with trading partners. Mak played on the sympathies of her fellow traders to collect as much rice as possible. “Then I took my beautiful krama made from silk to a village in zone five [Banteay Mencheay] for rice. I went to one house, she pitied me and she gave me three cans and refused to take my krama. I went to another house she did the same, gave me three cans for free then I went to another house and got another three cans.”⁴¹ Some people relied on the goodwill of others by giving fellow villagers gifts in hopes of getting something in return in the future. “Sometimes, we just gave them a blanket and said ‘*bong*, I would like to give you this blanket.’ Some families would give us some rice back then or a few weeks later.”⁴² Keen negotiators took advantage of inexperienced traders. Seng BouAddheka remembered that her older sister went out to trade her “precious Citizen watch”⁴³ and returned with only one fish and uncooked rice, which was not enough for one meal for her family. Others used their jobs in the camps to make goods that villagers needed. The Khmer Rouge tasked Var Hong Ashe with making hats for the residents of a Battambang camp. Ashe honed her creative skills, making “nicer hats” than the other laborers with “little decorations”⁴⁴ that she traded for small gifts of food. Some Khmers attempted to manipulate the underground markets by exaggerating the demand for their supplies. Kilong Ung recalled that younger villagers engaged in various games and gambled food on the results. In these circumstances, villagers understandably used any available option to them to collect a little more food or medicine in each trade.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Many commodities were used as currency in the cooperatives, each contributing in different ways to the development and evolution of the underground markets. Commodities for consumption, such as medicine and meat, provided an important and immediate value to each trader. Numerous sources credited these goods with saving the lives of loved ones. On the other hand, commodities for exchange, including watches and clothing, were granted value based on a collective sociocultural perception of their worth and maintained this value throughout the Pol Pot era. A few commodities such as rice and salt served both functions, largely because they could be consumed and stored easily for later exchanges. Distinctions between these categories are

important because they each represented a specific failure of the regime. If the regime had provided sufficient food or improved the living standards as promised, villagers would not have needed to trade for commodities for consumption to survive. If the CPK had effectively persuaded the population that their ideological goals were achievable or worthwhile, Khmers would not have assigned value to luxury items like clothing or gold jewelry. The underground markets were a symbol of the regime's inability to deliver tangible results for April 17 people and Base people alike. As a result, the Khmer Rouge resorted to more authoritarian measures and harsher punishments, further alienating the population, including the people whom the regime claimed to champion.

Notes

- 1 Primary currencies denote goods that were traded in high volume in every village where underground markets existed, whereas secondary currencies were less frequently bartered and represented any good other than rice and gold.
- 2 Chak Ny, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Thom, Cambodia, January 30, 2022.
- 3 Lim Vo, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia, February 26, 2022.
- 4 JoAn D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (East/West Bridge Publishing, 2020), 48, Kindle.
- 5 Khey Mony, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021; Heng Soeun, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia, December 19, 2021; Kae Ngeat, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia, February 27, 2022; Chak Ny, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Thom, Cambodia; Lim Vo, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia; Pan Ren, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia, December 12, 2021; Heun Sareoun, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021; Kong Sam-Art, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia, December 10, 2021; Heng Ry, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia, December 18, 2021; Chun Neang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia, January 8, 2022; Charles Twining, *Cambodia, 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 122; Reach Sam-Art, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Svay Rieng, Cambodia, February 13, 2022; Tim Heang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Speu, Cambodia, March 19, 2022.
- 6 Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 59–60.
- 7 Lim Vo, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia; Jennifer H. Lau, *Beautiful Hero: How We Survived the Khmer Rouge*, First edition (Lotus Book Group, 2016), 75; Kong Sam-Art, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia.
- 8 Tous Mak, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021.
- 9 Sam Neang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia, December 11, 2021; Twining, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 122.
- 10 Sam Neang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia.
- 11 Sovannara Ky and Howard Glass, *The Sieve of Angkar* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 47, Kindle.
- 12 Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 59–60; Lau, *Beautiful Hero*, 75; Pan Ren, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia.
- 13 Twining, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 121.
- 14 Sokphal Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia: Surviving a Living Hell* (Amsterdam Publishers, 2020), 64, Kindle.

- 15 Var Hong Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise: Escape from Cambodia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), location 1882, Kindle; Lang Srey and Cornelia Bagg Srey, *The Smell of Water: A Twelve-Year-Old Soldier's Escape from the Khmer Rouge Army, and His Determination to Stay Alive*, Fourth edition (Singha Books, 2016), 22.
- 16 Kong Sam-Art, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia.
- 17 Chun Neang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tboung Khmum, Cambodia.
- 18 Yong Kin, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tboung Khmum, Cambodia, January 8, 2022.
- 19 Set Sara, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Thom, Cambodia, January 30, 2022; Heng Soeun, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia.
- 20 Channy Chhi Laux, Interview by author by video conference, May 23, 2021.
- 21 Elaine Hsieh, PhD, RDN (nutritional biochemist and registered dietitian), Interview by author by email, September 16, 2022.
- 22 Nawuth Keat and Martha Kendall, *Alive in the Killing Fields: Surviving the Khmer Rouge Genocide*, First edition (New York: National Geographic Children's Books, 2009), 58, Kindle.
- 23 Yeut Savai, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 12, 2021.
- 24 Twining, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, 134; Sam Neang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tboung Khmum, Cambodia; Channy Chhi Laux, Interview by author by video conference; Channy Chhi Laux, *Short Hair Detention: Memoir of a Thirteen-Year-Old Girl Surviving the Cambodian Genocide* (Bloomington, IN: Archway Publishing, 2017), 176–7, 388; Krouch Sear, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021; Moeurn Kong, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia, February 26, 2022; Tous Mak, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia; Chileng Pa and Carol A. Mortland, *Escaping the Khmer Rouge: A Cambodian Memoir*, Illustrated edition (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2008), locations 1568–1608, Kindle.
- 25 Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, First edition (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 108.
- 26 Haing Ngor and Roger Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 346.
- 27 Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 70.
- 28 Elaine Hsieh, PhD, RDN (nutritional biochemist and registered dietitian), Interview by author by email; May Ebihara, "Intervillage, Intertown, and Village-City Relations in Cambodia," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 220, no. 1 (1973): 369, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1973.tb40255.x>; May Ebihara, *Spay: A Khmer Village in Cambodia*, ed. Andrew C. Mertha (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publication, 2018), 123–4; Chak Ny, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Thom, Cambodia; Kae Ngeat, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia; Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia*, 39; Sichan Siv, *Golden Bones: An Extraordinary Journey from Hell in Cambodia to a New Life in America*, First edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 110, Kindle; Pa and Mortland, *Escaping the Khmer Rouge*, location 2165, Kindle; Frances T. Pilch, *INVISIBLE: Surviving the Cambodian Genocide: The Memoirs of Mac and Simone Leng* (Bandon, OR: Robert Reed Publishers, 2017), location 643, Kindle; Katya Cengel, *Exiled: From the Killing Fields of Cambodia to California and Back*, Illustrated edition (Lincoln, Nebraska: Potomac Books, 2018), location 2622, Kindle; Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 135–6.
- 29 Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 275–6.
- 30 Francois Ponchaud, *Cambodia: Year Zero* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1978), 62–3; Keat and Kendall, *Alive in the Killing Fields*, 58.
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- 32 Kilong Ung, Interview by author by telephone, August 3, 2021.
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- 36 Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 178; Kou Phat, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Prey Veng, Cambodia, January 7, 2022; Kong Sam-Art, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia; Kao Yeng, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia, December 19, 2021; Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 116; Set Sara, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Thom, Cambodia; Thoun Po, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Thom, Cambodia, January 30, 2022; Krouch Soun, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021; Srey and Srey, *The Smell of Water*, 23; Phen Saron, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021; Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia*, 87; Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise*, location 1482, Kindle; Sillars, *Intended for Evil*, 141; Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 157.
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- 40 Survivor, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia. The individual did not wish to give a name. October 29, 2021; Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia*, 81, 119; Siv, *Golden Bones*, 110; Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 43; Sillars, *Intended for Evil*, 170; Chanrithy Him, Interview by author by video conference, May 21, 2021; Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 304; Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 89, 162; Sieu Sean Do, Interview by author by telephone, June 7, 2021; Lau, *Beautiful Hero*, 86; Heng Soeun, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia; Heng Ry, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia; Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 67, 84; Soeur Nuon, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo,

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- 41 Tous Mak, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia.
- 42 Anonymous survivor, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia. The individual did not wish to give a name.
- 43 Seng BouAddheka, *If on This Earth There Are Angels: A Story of Survival and Renewal from the Killing Fields of Cambodia* (Vivid Publishing, 2016), location 775, Kindle.
- 44 Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise*, location 1832, Kindle.
- 45 Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 104; Kilong Ung, Interview by author by telephone.

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6 Perils and Punishments

“We were not allowed to trade, but we did it anyway. If we got caught, we would be killed.”

– Khev Mony, Base person, Pursat province

On March 30, 1976, the Central Committee of the Khmer Rouge met to make decisions about the future of the country. A document that summarized the events of this meeting began with the line: “The Authority to Smash (People) Inside & Outside the Ranks.”¹ In order to strengthen state power and establish a “revolutionary authority,” the CPK deliberately instituted a policy of mass violence, which was carried out enthusiastically by subordinates. According to Chandler, “killing was an integral part of the system of Democratic Kampuchea.”² If the regime suspected an individual of misconduct or disloyalty, that person was in grave danger whether they were guilty or not. No one was exempt from the aggression of *Angkar*. The regime’s violent policy of *kamtech* (“to smash”) applied to Base people, soldiers, and even members of the Central Committee. As Boreth Ly wrote in his book, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide*, “*Kamtech* was more than a policy; it was an ideological mandate or task delegated by the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) to crush any enemies of *Angkar*, thus leaving no traces of their identity, nor any memory of them.”³ The Khmer Rouge erased individuals just as they had eliminated individualism.⁴

There were more than 100 civilians for each Khmer Rouge cadre, so the CPK developed strategies to subdue the population through a combination of authoritarian tactics. Practically every cooperative imposed restrictions on speech and movement. Cadres controlled the rationing of food to ensure compliance. Soldiers intensified their use of violence and psychological abuse to maintain order. As the regime established its dominance over the population, the Khmer Rouge also cracked down on any attempts to barter or accumulate property, as it threatened the social order. Cadres surveilled the cooperatives and carried out propaganda efforts to discourage trading. The penalties for participating in the underground economy ranged from aggressive warnings to immediate executions. Punishments extended to anyone who

might have knowledge of the illegal exchanges. Simple trades of basic goods were often harrowing experiences, as the Khmer Rouge had developed an extensive system of intimidation to keep people in line. This chapter focuses on the constant danger that Khmers faced for bartering and the atmosphere of fear and anxiety that shaped the behavior of traders.⁵

Surveillance

The Khmer Rouge attempted to enforce the ban on trading in the camps using several tactics to maximize obedience and conformity. Propaganda and sloganeering were significant elements of this strategy. Cadres frequently barked CPK slogans at villagers to remind them that private property was prohibited, and they were constantly being watched: “Useless to hide your own possessions, the *Angkar* has magnifying glasses.”⁶ Many of the CPK’s sayings repeated the same concepts and themes, reinforcing one another. One of the most cited slogans of the era, “the *Angkar* has [the many] eyes of the pineapple,”⁷ served as a warning to audiences that an all-powerful surveillance state was monitoring every activity in the country. Even the term, *Angkar*, or “organization,” projected a menacing image of faceless, nameless overlords who controlled the country. In fact, much of the population did not know the identities of the nation’s leaders for several years, adding to the mysterious aura of the *Angkar*. The Khmer Rouge communicated these phrases repeatedly and in an aggressive tone that was foreign to Khmer culture. The message was succinct and unambiguous: every citizen was a suspect and every illegal action would eventually be discovered.⁸

The slogans were not just empty words meant to scare the population. The Khmer Rouge created elaborate surveillance networks inside the camps to catch offenders. Creating suspicion between fellow Khmers was a crucial component of the surveillance state, as cadres actively encouraged villagers to snitch on one another.⁹ Siv Eng described the inescapable feeling of always being on guard: “[T]he *mulethan* [Base people] were watching, and even the city people were encouraged to rat out any behavior that was considered individualistic. Tattletales were rewarded.”¹⁰ The culture of informing was also promoted at ideological training sessions. Several times per week, soldiers forced villagers to attend political lectures, or *bonn*, where local cadres glorified the regime and its ideology.¹¹ One important aspect of these meetings was the criticism and self-criticism session, in which villagers were expected to confess their own shortcomings while also pointing out the failings of other camp residents. Merely being called out by another villager at one of these meetings was a serious offense: “[A]n envious neighbor, or one harboring a grudge, could cause trouble or even death by accusing his enemy of failure to live by some Khmer Rouge rule.”¹² Whenever an April 17 person offered to trade with a Base person, there was a potential for betrayal at the subsequent *bonn*. Revolutionary schools were also used to prop up the surveillance state. Children under the age of 14 were forced to attend these schools, where

teachers encouraged them to spy on their own parents. Kids were instructed to make sure their mothers and fathers followed camp rules and exhibited proper revolutionary behavior. At night, soldiers patrolled the cooperatives, “listening and looking into the houses.”¹³ All of this reinforced the image of the omnipresent state.

Another arm of the surveillance network, known as *chhlops* (“spies”), roamed the villages, looking for illegal activity and then reporting back to the cadres. The Khmer Rouge recruited these spies to serve as “the *Angkar*’s eyes in people’s communes.”¹⁴ Most of the *chhlops* were the young children of Base people, hoping to curry favor with the soldiers. Eng recalled that “they were like pesky cockroaches lurking everywhere. They crouched behind bushes, under huts, and behind trees.”¹⁵ The *chhlops* listened in on conversations and watched the New people closely, hoping to catch someone criticizing the regime or participating in illegal activity. Spies who provided information that led to the arrest of a suspected capitalist might earn special privileges from camp leaders. Villagers either whispered to each other or kept silent to avoid trouble. Jennifer Lau stated, “[A]t night, while lying down in our hut, we had the uneasy feeling that someone was eavesdropping on our conversations.”¹⁶ Var Hong Ashe recounted a story in which two *chhlops* barged into her house one morning and found her stash of rice, which they promptly seized. Kou Phai claimed that spies watched over her camp closely and chased out any April 17 people who came into the village looking to trade. With soldiers, spies, and fellow villagers constantly watching for missteps, *Angkar* was able to project the image of an all-knowing force that could smash its enemies at any time.¹⁷

Punishments

Once the regime officially decided to abolish currencies and markets, camp leaders began to punish all manner of activities related to bartering. While “black-marketeering” was “an act of treason”¹⁸ and a capital offense in many camps, punishments were not absolute, and village leaders largely controlled the destiny of the traders. As discussed in previous chapters, the Khmer Rouge initially tolerated some bartering if the villagers did it discreetly. As the regime progressed, cadres gradually tightened the restrictions, making it more difficult to trade, and increased the intensity of the punishments. For the first or second offense, “we were sent to a harder labor camp as punishment,”¹⁹ where the suspect worked without food or breaks. In some cases, soldiers beat the offenders and then confiscated the bartered goods with a warning that the next time would result in death. These individuals considered themselves lucky. Phai stated that her father was caught exchanging goods and he was merely “educated.” The Khmer word for “to educate,” *saang* (literally “to build”), had multiple meanings in Democratic Kampuchea. When a person was educated by the Khmer Rouge, it sometimes meant they were released after receiving a stern lecture about following cooperative rules and the

consequences for noncompliance. Other times “being educated” was a euphemism for a violent beating or execution. The terms “arrest” or “disappearance” generally indicated that a person was never seen again. Phai stated that if an individual was caught trading in her camp, “first time was okay, but the second or third time would lead to disappearance.”²⁰ A Base person from Takeo province recalled that her family “rarely dared to trade as we were afraid of getting arrested.”²¹ People who disappeared or were arrested were assumed to be dead.²²

There were several accounts of executions of villagers who were caught trading. Nhip Srim, a former Khmer Rouge soldier, claimed that his father was shot to death for trading rice. A man attempting to barter for rice to feed his children was shot by soldiers with AK-47s after being accused of “sabotage” and perpetuating the myth of a “food shortage.”²³ One ethnic Lao farmer in Banteay Meanchey claimed that one of his fellow villagers was executed for exchanging gold for rice. While some executions were public, soldiers usually marched suspects out of the camp or whisked them away to some unknown location while villagers slept. Phai claimed that her neighbor “was caught exchanging items and taken away in the middle of the night.”²⁴ Similarly, Haing Ngor recounted an incident where a fellow villager was led away by cadres “with his arms tied behind his back”²⁵ for trading gold to Base people. These individuals were never seen again. News of arrests and murders spread throughout the cooperatives, adding to the anxieties of participants in the underground economy.²⁶

At times, punishments for trading in underground markets extended beyond the participants. Cadres punished villagers for associating with suspects. Dan Lu stated that soldiers executed individuals who witnessed or knew about an exchange and did not report it. The Khmer Rouge sometimes tortured the trader to find out if anyone else knew about the exchange. Loung Ung wrote that offenders were “whipped into confessing the names of all parties involved.”²⁷ While there were many cases of leniency, the people who engaged in illegal bartering knew that the risks included the execution of their friends and family. Sida Lei recalled that the Khmer Rouge caught her neighbor trading gold for medicine. After soldiers confiscated their goods, “the entire family was taken away and they disappeared.”²⁸ The punishment was a successful deterrent in some cases. As Krouch Soun noted, “[I]f we were caught trading, the Khmer Rouge would kill the whole family.”²⁹ Some Base people refused to trade. The people involved in each barter transaction were not only jeopardizing their lives but also the lives of their loved ones. The fact that the underground exchanges existed at all in this environment was an indication of the Khmer people’s desperation to find food and medicine.³⁰

Suspects had few options when trading was discovered by authorities, though some offenders were able to save their lives by begging soldiers for mercy. Several April 17 people recounted stories in which displays of submission persuaded cadres to show leniency. In these instances, the act of humility and compliance served as a form of punishment for the crime of bartering.

While these were genuine displays of fear, New people also seemed to understand that uneducated cadres from the countryside could be satisfied with witnessing a former member of the upper class submit to them and beg for mercy. It was also possible that, despite their brutish façades, Khmer Rouge soldiers were capable of sympathy. When Loung Ung's mother was caught trading, a soldier punched and kicked her brutally while she pled for her life, repeatedly telling her attacker that she had a sick daughter. The soldier eventually relented and spared the woman. When spies discovered that Ashe was trading gold for rice, they brought her to the village chief for judgment. She immediately confessed her sins and pleaded, "I promise to improve myself according to the *Angkar's* wonderful rules."³¹ The village chief informed Ashe that he would look into the matter but ultimately forgot about the incident. Rather than deny the charges of illegal bartering, offenders offered confessions and capitulated to authorities. Since entire families could be punished for the behavior of one individual, a humiliating display of submission was a tolerable option.³²

New people also had to be watchful of their trading partners. The privileged status of the Base people gave them tremendous power over the April 17 people. Food was in such high demand that a Base person could easily engage in price gouging if they sensed desperation in the prospective buyer. Several New people reported being taken advantage of by unscrupulous Base people. Lau's mother traded regularly with the sister-in-law of a village chief who demanded steep discounts. Rejecting an offer from the relative of a village chief was extremely dangerous, so Lau's mother reluctantly accepted some unfavorable deals. In some cases, traders offered to help New people exchange their goods as intermediaries. After collecting the inventory for the transaction, the intermediaries simply kept the goods for themselves. Since bartering and private property were illegal in Democratic Kampuchea, April 17 people could not report these thefts. Loung Ung's mother once set up a meeting place with a Base person for a transaction, only to be ambushed by a soldier who stole her jewelry and beat her. The power dynamic between the two classes created economic opportunities for Base people. Some of these individuals opted to prey upon the April 17 people, which added to the fear and paranoia that enveloped the cooperatives.³³

Conclusion

Violence and surveillance combined to create a pervasive culture of fear in the camps and the inevitable outcome of the systematic intimidation campaign was silence. The Khmer Rouge was largely successful at maintaining order and controlling camp inhabitants. Villagers watched their words carefully and submitted to the demands of soldiers without protest. Silence and feigned acquiescence were logical survival strategies for most Khmers. "Normally lively villagers were turned into silent automatons."³⁴ "Plant a kapok tree" was a common saying among April 17 people during this era. This was a play on

words, as the Khmer word for “kapok,” *ko*, was a homonym for “mute.”³⁵ The message was clear. Villagers who kept quiet never said the wrong word and limited the probability of punishment. The problem was that Khmers also needed to eat, which meant that they needed to trade for food. Exchanging goods; however, required communication and interaction. New people needed to develop relationships with Base people at a time when trust was in short supply and extreme caution was the norm. These individuals decided to take risks and reach out to other villagers, finding ways to trade their valuables for food to stave off starvation. “Nothing is worse than hunger,”³⁶ stated Chun Neang, a former resident of a Kampong Cham camp. Tous Mak quipped that bartering in the underground markets was worth the risk of being discovered by cadres: “[I]f we die, we die with a full stomach.”³⁷

Notes

- 1 David Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua, eds., *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976–1977* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), 3.
- 2 David Chandler, *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976–1977*, ed. David Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), 2.
- 3 Boreth Ly, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 18, Kindle.
- 4 Ben Kiernan, *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea 1942–1981*, ed. Chanthou Boua and Ben Kiernan (London: Armonk, NY: Routledge, 1982), 227.
- 5 Jackson, Karl D., *Cambodia, 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 9.
- 6 Henri Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2005), 279.
- 7 Locard, 112.
- 8 Locard, 1–17, 112–3; Haing Ngor and Roger Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 214.
- 9 Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book*, 114. Note the Khmer Rouge slogan “secretly observe the slightest deeds and gestures of everyone around you.”
- 10 Heather Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye: A Memoir of a Khmer Rouge Survivor* (Austin, TX: Rebel Press, 2019), 83, Kindle.
- 11 Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 143. In Buddhism, a *bonn* is a religious celebration; at the labor camps, it was an indoctrination session to promote the values of the new society.
- 12 JoAn D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (East/West Bridge Publishing, 2020), 93.
- 13 Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 65.
- 14 Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book*, 114.
- 15 Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 83.
- 16 Jennifer H. Lau, *Beautiful Hero: How We Survived the Khmer Rouge*, First edition (Lotus Book Group, 2016), 74.
- 17 Boyden, Joseph and Shawn Gibbs. “Children of War: Responses to Psycho-social Distress in Cambodia.” (1997); Kou Phai, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Prey Veng, Cambodia, January 7, 2022; Vincent Lee, *Father Missed His Plane: A Real-Life*

- Story of a Boy's Separation from His Family, Survival and Adversity in the Killing Fields of Cambodia and Beyond*, ed. Simon Luckhurst (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 73, Kindle; Sokphal Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia: Surviving a Living Hell* (Amsterdam Publishers, 2020), 54, Kindle; Var Hong Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise: Escape from Cambodia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), location 1110, Kindle.
- 18 Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 88.
- 19 Phen Saron, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021.
- 20 Kou Phai, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Prey Veng, Cambodia.
- 21 Heng Ry, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia, December 18, 2021.
- 22 Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, First edition (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 71, 166; Kate Frieson, *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia: The Khmer Rouge, the United Nations, and the International Community*, ed. Ben Kiernan, Monograph Series 41 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1993), 44; Kong Sam-Art, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tbong Khmum, Cambodia, December 10, 2021; Aum Sovannari, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, November 8, 2021; Chileng Pa and Carol A. Mortland, *Escaping the Khmer Rouge: A Cambodian Memoir*, Illustrated edition (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), location 2334, Kindle; Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, 48; Francois Ponchaud, *Cambodia: Year Zero* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1978), 54; Phen Saron, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia; Tim Heang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Speu, Cambodia, March 19, 2022; Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 197.
- 23 John Barron and Anthony Paul, *Murder of a Gentle Land: The Untold Story of Communist Genocide in Cambodia*, First edition (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1977), 116.
- 24 Kou Phai, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Prey Veng, Cambodia.
- 25 Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 197.
- 26 Wynne Cougill et al., *Stilled Lives: Photographs from the Cambodian Genocide* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2004), 120; Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79*, Third edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 301.
- 27 Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 88.
- 28 Sida Lei, Interview by author by email, June 30, 2021.
- 29 Krouch Soun, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021.
- 30 Dan Lu, Interview by author by telephone, October 15, 2021; Kou Phai, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Prey Veng, Cambodia; Krouch Soun, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia; Sam Neang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tboung Khmum, Cambodia, December 11, 2021.
- 31 Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise*, location 1123, Kindle.
- 32 Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 148; Lau, *Beautiful Hero*, 206.
- 33 Lau, *Beautiful Hero*, 203; Sieu Sean Do, Interview by author by telephone, June 7, 2021; Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 147.
- 34 Frieson, *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia*, 55.
- 35 Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 253; Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book*, 115.
- 36 Chun Neang, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tboung Khmum, Cambodia, January 8, 2022.
- 37 Tous Mak, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021; Survivor, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia. The individual did not wish to give a name., October 29, 2021; Jennifer Lau, Interview by author by telephone, June 2, 2021; Chantha Sok-Banks, Interview by author by telephone, August 29, 2021.

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7 Chinese Khmers in the Underground Economy

The next four chapters will focus on the social dynamics of the barter economy and its effects on various identity groups in Democratic Kampuchea. Chinese Khmers, women, New people, Base people, and Khmer Rouge cadres all played important roles in the underground markets. The exchanges shaped the behavior of villagers, and their relationships influenced the economic sub-culture within each labor camp. The social hierarchies established by the Khmer Rouge affected everyone in the cooperatives, as individuals struggled to make sense of the new society while searching for ways to provide for family members. Fighting starvation and coping with the deaths of friends and family members, individuals developed a variety of strategies to interact with villagers from different backgrounds in order to obtain the goods they needed from the underground markets.

History of the Chinese in Cambodia

Chinese Khmers have been associated with commerce for centuries, having worked as merchants in Cambodia ever since the capital of the deteriorating Angkorean empire was relocated to Phnom Penh in 1434. While the empire had been largely self-sufficient for centuries, civilizational decline and the location of the new capital along the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers led to significant economic changes in the region. During the fifteenth century, the Khmer population became more dependent on world markets and leaned on foreign traders to manage transportation between cities. Most of the foreign traders were of Chinese ancestry.¹ This presence in the commercial trade continued for centuries, through French colonization to the late 1960s, with Chinese Khmers expanding their influence as small industrialists and economic intermediaries between the peasantry and the upper class. In his study, *The Chinese in Cambodia*, Canadian anthropologist William Willmott proclaimed that “all authorities” agreed that Cambodia’s rice trade had “always been controlled by Chinese.”² Though they were less than 10 percent of the population in the early 1960s, Sino-Khmers dominated “almost all internal trade and a substantial portion of manufacture, including rice-milling and transportation, vital to the Cambodian economy.”³

Foreign-born Chinese and native Chinese Khmers were the largest minority in Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh in April 1975. In his extensive study on Cambodian demographics, Willmott estimated that the number of people with Chinese ancestry in the country increased from 130,000 in 1890 to 425,000 in 1962, 13 years before the Khmer Rouge revolution. Many of these immigrants had fled to Cambodia during the Chinese civil war in the 1940s. Approximately one-third of Chinese residents lived in Phnom Penh. While indigenous Khmers with ethnic and cultural roots in the region accounted for 85 percent of the population, Chinese Khmers represented about 7.5 percent of the country.⁴

While the Chinese population facilitated trade between peasants in the rural areas and consumers in the cities, they also faced ethnic and economic resentment. In the book, *Economic Success of Chinese Merchants in Southeast Asia: Identity, Ethnic Cooperation and Conflict*, Canadian economist Janet Landa Tai dubbed the Chinese business community in Southeast Asia an “ethnically homogeneous middleman group,” whose trade practices were frequently viewed by indigenous populations as exploitative and opportunistic.⁵ In Cambodia, Chinese Khmers seemingly segregated themselves from ethnic Khmers, as they set up their own stores, temples, newspapers, and schools around the country. In 1956, the Cambodian government restricted Chinese immigrants and Sino-Khmers from 18 occupations. Legislators had prohibited them from owning property since 1929. Money lenders in Cambodia, many of whom were Chinese, charged interest rates of 12 percent per month, adding to the ethnic tension, as a large portion of the rural population was in significant debt and blamed the Chinese for the problem. In his 1959 PhD thesis, Khieu Samphan excoriated the usurers for their exorbitant interest rates of “200 percent to 300 percent per annum.”⁶ Hou Yuon captured the underlying resentment when he wrote in 1964 that “the peasants are masters neither of the sky nor the price of their goods! In the market gardens, as in the market place, all power is vested in the Chinese.”⁷ Despite this class and ethnic antagonism, relations between ethnic Khmer and Chinese in the 1960s were “probably better than in any other country in Southeast Asia,”⁸ with no significant history of violence between the two groups and relatively high rates of intermarriage. Whereas violence against Chinese immigrants erupted in other Southeast Asian countries during the twentieth century, overt acts of physical aggression toward Chinese merchants were relatively uncommon in Cambodia until the 1970s. Some Chinese Cambodians believed that the long-ruling head of state, Norodom Sihanouk, had protected the rights of ethnic minorities and kept the peace between the various identity groups. When Sihanouk was removed from power in the March 1970 coup d’état, many minority groups were left in a vulnerable position under the new government of the Khmer Republic. As the civil war erupted in the early 1970s, anti-Chinese sentiment intensified in Phnom Penh. Authorities closed Chinese schools and newspapers. Inflation spiraled and food prices increased, and many Khmers

blamed Chinese businessmen for the economic woes. The Khmer Rouge continued the scapegoating of the Chinese population after taking control of the country in 1975, interweaving their class warfare ideology with nativist rhetoric.⁹

Though the government of China backed the Khmer Rouge financially and militarily, ethnic Chinese in Democratic Kampuchea did not benefit from this relationship. While the CPK borrowed from Mao Zedong's ideology and political strategy, the regime also promoted a nationalist agenda that idealized Khmer ethnic purity. Chinese Cambodians were often in physical danger, even as the regime willingly accepted aid from China. This inconsistency did not go unnoticed by Sino-Khmers. Rumors spread through the labor camps that the regime sold surplus rice to China in exchange for farm equipment and munitions, leaving undernourished Chinese Khmer confused and frustrated. As Channy Chhi Laux remarked, "[H]ow ironic that the Black Uniforms hated us for being Chinese, for they were backed by Communist China."¹⁰ Haing Ngor noted another contradiction—most of the CPK leadership were mixed Khmer and Chinese, including Pol Pot himself. According to an article in the *Phnom Penh Post*, "of the eight members of the top organ, the Standing Committee of the Communist Party, only two were ethnic Khmer, Ros Nhim and Chhit Cheoun (Mok)."¹¹ Pol Pot's father was of Chinese Khmer ancestry. Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Son Sen, Vorn Vet, and So Phim were of Sino-Khmer extraction. For a government that supposedly venerated ethnic purity, this group of leaders did not represent the ideal Khmer citizen. Ironically, the CPK considered the Chinese (along with the Vietnamese) to be "racially corrupt."¹² The regime furthered negative stereotypes of elite Chinese merchants, encouraging resentment and abuse from low-level Khmer Rouge cadres and Cambodian villagers in the labor camps.¹³

Hostilities against Chinese Khmers

Since the Khmer Rouge aspired to rid the country of capitalism and foreign influences, individuals perceived to be both foreigners and merchants were especially vulnerable. To be a New person from the city and a Cambodian of Chinese descent was "a double jeopardy"¹⁴ in the new society. According to Vincent Lee, "being a wealthy Chinese [person] from Phnom Penh was enough to be designated an enemy of *Anghkar*."¹⁵ The Khmer Rouge openly promoted class warfare and advanced stereotypes of Cambodians of Chinese ancestry as "business owners and thereby automatically the cause of inequality."¹⁶ The anger was not limited to the Khmer Rouge cadres, as many of the poor Cambodians who hailed from rural areas were already hostile to the Chinese. Laux wrote that ethnic Khmer children in the camps called her the "Big Pocket Chinese Girl"¹⁷ behind her back, an obvious reference to her perceived economic privilege. Racial bullying was common in the labor camps.

Base people accused Chinese Khmers from the cities of being lazy and unable to do manual labor. While it was true that many Sino-Khmers initially struggled with agricultural labor in the camps, most of the former city residents, including ethnic Khmers, found work in the camps to be extremely challenging. One ethnic Khmer villager heard repeated insults from young cadres, such as “You Chinese! You can’t cultivate rice. You know nothing but leisure.”¹⁸ Kilong Ung recalled that the Base people referred to all city folk as *Chen*, the Khmer word for “Chinese,” insinuating that everyone from the cities was tainted by the commercial affairs of privileged Chinese Cambodians.¹⁹ While racial insults, such as “chalk-face,” “white-face,” and “Chinese capitalist,”²⁰ were certainly a form of intimidation, in many labor camps, these slurs were accompanied by violence.²¹

Survivors of the regime recalled many instances of Sino-Khmers being assaulted or even executed for their ethnicity. One Chinese Cambodian villager, Simone Leng, stated that Khmer Rouge soldiers killed her brother-in-law because he was part Chinese, claiming that “in some areas, anyone with Chinese blood was eliminated.”²² Having one Khmer parent did not shield minorities from violence. Jennifer Lau wrote that a family friend who was part Khmer was executed because a cadre overheard him speaking Chinese in the labor camp. In one particularly cruel example of violence, soldiers in the village of Tuk Chjo announced to cooperative residents that families of Chinese ancestry would be allowed to return to their homeland. A sense of relief pervaded the camp as eligible villagers prepared for their journey out of Democratic Kampuchea. After a brief period of celebration, those who had volunteered to “go back” to China were taken away and assassinated. Rumors about the murders of Chinese Khmers were commonplace during this period, creating an atmosphere of heightened anxiety that began during the mass evacuations from the cities and lasted throughout the entire regime. The violence and racism became so prevalent that Chinese Cambodians made attempts to hide their ethnicity, with limited success.²³

Chinese Cambodians went to great lengths to conceal their identities. “At that time, no one in Cambodia wanted to be known as Chinese,”²⁴ Lau recalled. The Khmer Rouge sought to completely “rid Cambodia of outside ethnic poison,”²⁵ as soldiers regularly interrogated their captives, demanding to know their nationality or ethnicity if they did not appear to be “pure” Khmer. One identity marker that families attempted to conceal was the Chinese language. Chinese Cambodian parents often forbade their families from speaking any language other than Khmer in the cooperatives. Lau wrote that her mother “told us never to again utter a word in Chinese” and instructed her family “to use generic and informal peasant words.”²⁶ Some villagers severed ties with people who spoke Chinese to avoid unwanted attention. Those with noticeable Chinese accents recognized their vulnerability and tended to speak only when necessary. Sino-Khmers took other steps to blend in with Cambodians during this period. Villagers frequently changed their names, using common Khmer ones to avoid detection. “I

traded my Chinese name, Siv Eng, for the new name, Aun. It was imperative to remain anonymous.”²⁷ Chinese Cambodians also abandoned long-honored traditions in order to protect themselves. For example, Lau’s family stopped using chopsticks and dyed their clothes to dull the colors in order to appear more Cambodian. Assimilation was a key component of survival strategies, though certain physical characteristics made it more difficult to blend in with ethnic Khmer.²⁸

One of the more remarkable aspects of this research was the number of times that survivors noted physical differences between the Chinese Cambodians and ethnic Khmers. The Khmer Rouge appeared to be obsessed with skin color. This observation was mentioned by survivors of every social, ethnic, and gender group. Chinese Khmer sources made many references to being targeted for their lighter skin color, which differentiated them from the ideal Khmer with darker skin. Base people were generally darker in skin tone than city dwellers, in part due to exposure to the blazing sun during their daily work activities. The CPK promoted dark skin as a source of pride and a symbol of commitment to the regime’s agricultural efforts. Lighter skin people were “impure.”²⁹ Loung Ung wrote that she was regularly harassed by the children in her village for her skin color. “They throw mud at me, claiming it will darken my ugly white skin.”³⁰ Chantha Sok-Banks recalled that her Chinese-Malaysian mother tried to darken her skin through exposure to sunlight and by rubbing charcoal on her body. Skin color was not the only physical marker that cadres associated with Chinese ancestry. Sino-Khmers also claimed that the shape of their eyes and texture of their hair, as distinguishing characteristics of their ethnicity, made them targets. In a society where survival was dependent on conformity, Chinese Khmers were painfully aware of the physical differences between them and the idealized Khmer. They soon realized that they could not conceal their identity by merely changing their names or speaking Khmer. Their appearance made them suspects.³¹

The Chinese Khmers and the Barter Economy of Democratic Kampuchea

At the bottom of the social hierarchy, Chinese Cambodians had limited options for survival other than the underground exchanges. They were reviled by the communists because of their commercial activities before the revolution and disliked by Base people due to their perceived wealth and inexperience with manual labor. In a society where everyone had to look out for their own interests to survive, few wanted to help or even associate with the Chinese community in the cooperatives. As a Chinese man who lived in a Kampong Speu camp noted, “[W]e got the wateriest gruel ... we were the last to receive clothes.”³² Chinese Khmers did not have access to food, but members of the community did have gold, jewelry, and clothing. During the evacuations from the cities, many Sino-Khmers wisely chose to take their

valuables with them and began trading on the long road to the cooperatives. Chinese villagers continued to exchange their goods with Base people in the camps, bartering their clothing and gold for rice, meat, food additives, medicine, and other commodities.³³

Sino-Khmer sources provided scores of examples of their trades with other villagers. Laux's family bartered some of their jewelry for "bananas, sweet yams, beans, rice, salt, and tobacco"³⁴ Ngor traded his mother's silk *sampots* for panels of thatch to build a roof for their hut. Siv Eng's brother exchanged his expensive watches for mouse meat in a period of desperation.³⁵ Ngor, a doctor before the revolution, treated Base people for illnesses in exchange for bananas and sugar cane. Camp residents traded with Chinese villagers for tiger balm, a medicinal ointment from China used to treat external pain. Base people also recalled being approached by Sino-Khmers with offers for exchanges. Though many villagers were willing to trade with the Chinese, these interactions were based more on self-interest than sympathy. Without an inventory of coveted goods to barter, Chinese Khmers would not have been able to obtain food or other commodities.³⁶

Though many of the Sino-Khmer sources were quite young during the Pol Pot era, they were certainly aware of the challenges that their parents faced to provide for them. While most laborers worked long hours in extreme heat, the regime often assigned "grunt labor"³⁷ to Chinese villagers, making life even more difficult. Loung Ung wrote that "New people must work extremely hard to prove they are worth more alive than dead. Pa says because we are different—Chinese-Cambodian—we will have to work harder than the others."³⁸ The punishing workload took a physical and psychological toll on Sino-Khmers, making them more susceptible to illnesses than ethnic Khmers. As villagers rarely received the necessary rations or medical treatment to remain healthy, Chinese Khmers traded their gold and food for tetracycline, penicillin, or medicinal leaves when their family members were sick—even sometimes when the children or parents were already too ill to recover. Ngor recalled that his wife "traded a *damleung* of gold, or 1.2 ounces, for fifteen 250 mg. tablets of tetracycline"³⁹ to treat his dysentery, a deadly disease in this environment. Family members had little choice but to barter large quantities of their goods to obtain Western medicine due to the limited supply. The sacrifices made by spouses and parents strengthened familial bonds and provided the motivation for individuals to persist through long periods of intense suffering.⁴⁰

Some enterprising Sino-Khmers acted as brokers in the new economy. Utilizing their experience in commercial trading, Chinese men and women served as intermediaries, helping April 17 people who had valuables find Base people with surplus rice to barter. Brokers would negotiate the value of the exchanged items and keep a commission in the form of a percentage of the rice. Lau described her mother's role as the village broker in a camp in northwestern Democratic Kampuchea: "People came to her with gold and jewelry and she would help them barter for rice and poultry. Her fluency in three Chinese dialects and Khmer positioned her as the perfect conduit between the

haves and the have-nots.”⁴¹ Lau’s mother charged a 10 percent surcharge for all transactions while negotiating values between the two trading parties by relaying messages back and forth through the camp. If she exchanged a piece of gold jewelry for ten cans of rice, Lau’s mother would take one can of rice as a commission. Brokers actively pursued traders and often struggled to find enough rice to meet the demand. They worked with individuals from each class: April 17 people, Base people, and even family members of the Khmer Rouge. Keeping all parties satisfied required tact and a high level of social aptitude. They needed to be careful not to offend traders during negotiations, as people could take advantage of the brokers’ vulnerabilities to extract better deals from them. In an environment where Khmer Rouge cadres and their spies were constantly on the lookout for the slightest infraction, brokers worked with many villagers at great personal risk to themselves and their families.⁴²

Though being a broker was extremely dangerous, these individuals also had some control over their own destinies. Successful brokers could accumulate rice and other commodities without giving up their own supplies. They knew which villagers had inventory and understood the dynamics of the markets, giving them advantages during periods of scarcity. Villagers used brokers to minimize their risk of being caught by cadres, as the buyer and seller rarely met each other during these types of transactions. Brokers assumed these risks in exchange for commissions and a considerable degree of influence in the underground markets. For example, brokers could influence the value of goods and create demand for items that they held. Pin Yathay, an ethnic Khmer, described an episode where he intentionally offered his rice to a Chinese broker for worthless American dollars in order to create a demand for his secret stash of foreign currency. “The rumour of our exchange spread quickly through the camp and to two or three neighbouring villages. Suddenly, people began to think their dollars might be of immediate, rather than long-term value. Naturally, my broker was among the first to cash in on this new market.”⁴³ Creating this demand for formerly useless American dollars eventually enabled Yathay to purchase several pounds of rice, while the broker expanded his business opportunities with the introduction of a new currency. Understandably, villagers were not above colluding to manipulate the market under the circumstances.⁴⁴

Whether or not the Chinese had a disproportionate influence in the underground markets is debatable, but the perception among many former cooperative residents was that the community played a significant role in the development of the exchanges. This may have been due to preconceived notions about Chinese merchants in the era before the revolution. As noted earlier, Base people called the evacuees from the cities *Chen*, whether they had Chinese ancestry or not. City folks were generally paler than the rural peasants who worked in the sun each day, and cadres accused anyone with light skin of being a foreigner. It is certainly possible that former villagers mistakenly identified people as Chinese because of their appearance or due to long-held cultural associations between

the Chinese community and commercial activity. Whether it was true or not, the notion of disproportionate participation by Chinese Khmers in the underground markets was a belief held by New people, Base people, and even some Chinese Khmers. A Base person in Kampong Speu asserted that she could tell that a trader was Chinese if they had gold. Another Base person, Yong Kin, stated that when the Chinese evacuees from Phnom Penh came to her village in Tbong Khmum, she was “sure they had gold and money with them.”⁴⁵ A New person from Banteay Meanchey claimed that the Chinese and Vietnamese “always traded” in her cooperative “as many of them were businesspeople.”⁴⁶ An ethnic Chinese tailor who was evacuated to Takeo province claimed that “many of the Phnom Penh Chinese”⁴⁷ bartered their clothes and gold for extra rice in her camp. Chinese Khmers were the only ethnic group consistently associated with the underground exchanges in interviews and memoirs.⁴⁸

The image of the Chinese Khmer merchant was a stereotype, but at the same time, most of the Chinese families in this study sample had parents or grandparents who worked as intermediaries in the major cities before the revolution. Laux’s father ran an import-export business in Phnom Penh. Eng’s family owned a pawn shop in Battambang. Lau’s father worked as an intermediary in his own transportation business. The parents of Ngor sold dry goods. According to Lee, whose mother managed a small shop in the capital, “a lot of Chinese merchants were setting up businesses in Phnom Penh”⁴⁹ before the revolution. Chinese Khmer sources often provided detailed descriptions of the structural and transactional aspects of the barter system in their memoirs, while ethnic Khmers tended to focus on alternative methods of finding food, such as foraging. All of this suggests that the Chinese population in Democratic Kampuchea did play an outsized role in the development of the underground markets, though it was primarily due to their limited options as members of the lowest rung of the social hierarchy.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Despite heroic efforts to keep their families alive, only 200,000 of the 425,000 Chinese in Cambodia survived the Khmer Rouge era, suffering the largest proportion of deaths of any ethnic group during the period.⁵¹ Having participated in Cambodian commercial enterprises since the end of the Angkorean empire, Sino-Khmers were a target of ideologues who viewed them as predatory capitalists. The CPK promoted class warfare and romanticized nationalist ethnic purity, ideologies that combined to create villains of the Chinese community, who were imagined to be wealthy foreign merchants exploiting the local population. As the Khmer Rouge evacuated the cities, Sino-Khmers carefully concealed their valuables and smuggled them into the cooperatives. When they needed to find alternative sources of food to supplement the meager rations distributed by the Khmer Rouge, the underground markets provided the only option for many in the community. Chinese mothers and fathers secretly negotiated with the Base people at the camps, bartering their jewelry

or brokering transactions in order to acquire as much sustenance as possible. They managed their inventory carefully while calculating when to trade for essential items like medicine. Ironically, the commercial experience and accumulation of private property that made Chinese Cambodians enemies of the revolution also helped them to survive the regime. Those with backgrounds in business used these interpersonal skills to make deals with Base people, often trading commodities, such as gold or fine clothing, that had little practical value in the Khmer Rouge era. They adapted to the hostile social terrain of the markets, managing difficult relationships with people who could betray them at any time. While there is little evidence to show that the Chinese Khmers created or dominated the underground markets, they were certainly involved in trade, perhaps even disproportionately, and their participation in the exchanges increased the odds of survival for one of the most vulnerable identity groups in Democratic Kampuchea.

Notes

- 1 William E. Willmott, *The Chinese in Cambodia*, First edition (University of British Columbia, 1967), 9. The terms Chinese Khmers, Sino-Khmers, Khmers of Chinese extraction, and Khmers of Chinese ancestry include immigrants from China, ethnic Chinese born in Cambodia, and the children of at least one Chinese parent. These terms will be used interchangeably throughout the chapter.
- 2 Willmott, 53.
- 3 Willmott, *Chinese in Cambodia*, 10.
- 4 Willmott, *Chinese in Cambodia*, 5, 15–17, 83, 94–5.
- 5 Janet Tai Landa, *Economic Success of Chinese Merchants in Southeast Asia: Identity, Ethnic Cooperation and Conflict* (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 2016), 1–9, 89.
- 6 Ben Kiernan, *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea 1942–1981*, ed. Chanthou Boua and Ben Kiernan (London : Armonk, NY: Routledge, 1982), 7.
- 7 Kiernan, 11.
- 8 Willmott, *Chinese in Cambodia*, 40, 83.
- 9 Haing Ngor and Roger Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 41; Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1998), 243–44, Kindle; May Ebihara, “Intervillage, Intertown, and Village-City Relations in Cambodia,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 220, no. 1 (1973): 367, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1973.tb40255.x>; Vincent Lee, *Father Missed His Plane: A Real-Life Story of a Boy’s Separation from His Family, Survival and Adversity in the Killing Fields of Cambodia and Beyond*, ed. Simon Luckhurst (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 1–4, 10, 18, Kindle; JoAn D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (East/West Bridge Publishing, 2020), 11; R. Z. Halleson and Chhalith Ou, *Spare Them? No Profit. Remove Them? No Loss.* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2010), location 1492, Kindle; Willmott, *The Chinese in Cambodia*, 45–6, 50; Kiernan, *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea 1942–1981*, 8.
- 10 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 118.
- 11 Bora Touch, “Debating Genocide,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, January 28, 2005, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/debating-genocide>.
- 12 Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 62.

- 13 Andrew C. Mertha, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979*, Reprint edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 6–15; Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 120; Nawuth Keat and Martha Kendall, *Alive in the Killing Fields: Surviving the Khmer Rouge Genocide* (New York: National Geographic Society, 2009), 55; Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 292, 424–7; Bora Touch, “Khmer Institute: Jurisdictional and Definitional Issues,” Khmer Institute, 2001, <http://www.khmerinstitute.com/>; Philip Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare*, First edition (New York: Owl Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 18, Kindle.
- 14 Kilong Ung, *Golden Leaf: A Khmer Rouge Genocide Survivor* (self-published, KU Publishing, 2009), 35.
- 15 Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 85.
- 16 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 118.
- 17 Laux, 179.
- 18 Seng Ty, *The Years of Zero: Coming of Age under the Khmer Rouge* (self-published, 2013), 55.
- 19 Ung, *Golden Leaf*, 17.
- 20 Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 244.
- 21 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 118; Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 126; Ty, *Years of Zero*, 45; Keat and Kendall, *Alive in the Killing Fields*, 43–5; Sieu Sean Do, Interview by author by telephone, June 7, 2021; Channy Chhi Laux, Interview by author by telephone, September 10, 2022.
- 22 Frances T. Pilch, *INVISIBLE: Surviving the Cambodian Genocide: The Memoirs of Mac and Simone Leng* (Bandon, OR: Robert Reed Publishers, 2017), 97.
- 23 Dith Pran, *Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors*, ed. Kim DePaul (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), location 682, Kindle; Jennifer H. Lau, *Beautiful Hero: How We Survived the Khmer Rouge*, First edition (self-published, Lotus Book Group, 2016), 75; Steve Heder, “Racism, Marxism, Labelling, and Genocide,” *South East Asia Research* 5, no. 2 (1997): 116; Ty, *Years of Zero*, 50–1; Heather Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye: A Memoir of a Khmer Rouge Survivor* (Austin, TX: Rebel Press, 2019), 37, Kindle.
- 24 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 263.
- 25 Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 92.
- 26 Lau, *Beautiful Hero*, 73–4.
- 27 Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 188.
- 28 Lau, *Beautiful Hero*, 73, 75, 112; Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 54; Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 237; Bun Yom, *Tomorrow I’m Dead: How a 17-Year Old Killing Field Survivor Became the Cambodian Freedom Army’s Greatest Soldier* (AudioInk Publishing, 2012), location 373, Kindle; Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 193, 237.
- 29 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 179.
- 30 Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 126.
- 31 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 118, 179, 210, 326; Pilch, *INVISIBLE*, 27; Allen, *Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 5; Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 45; Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 11, 156, 283; Chantha Sok-Banks, Interview by author by telephone, August 29, 2021; Dan Lu, Interview by author by telephone, October 15, 2021; Kilong Ung, Interview by author by telephone, August 3, 2021; Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 9.
- 32 Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 244.
- 33 Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 57; Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 16, 41.
- 34 Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 102.
- 35 Allen, *Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 157.

- 36 Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 172, 346; Heun Sareoun, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021; Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 157; Nhoung Sar, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Speu, Cambodia, March 19, 2022; Phen Saron, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021.
- 37 Ung, *Golden Leaf: A Khmer Rouge Genocide Survivor*, 61.
- 38 Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 62.
- 39 Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 185.
- 40 Lau, *Beautiful Hero*, 59–60, 95; Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 185; Ung, *First They Killed My Father*, 49.
- 41 Lau, 106.
- 42 Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, First edition (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 88; Lau, *Beautiful Hero*, 106, 202–6.
- 43 Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 105.
- 44 Lau, *Beautiful Hero*, 106.
- 45 Yong Kin, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Tboung Khmum, Cambodia, January 8, 2022.
- 46 Heun Sareoun, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia.
- 47 Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79*, Third edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 183.
- 48 Jennifer Lau, Interview by author by video conference, September 7, 2022; Nhoung Sar, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Speu, Cambodia; Lim Vo, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia, February 26, 2022; Phen Saron, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia.
- 49 Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 6.
- 50 Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive, My Son*, 166; Ngor and Warner, *Survival in the Killing Fields*, 11, 197; Laux, *Short Hair Detention*, 12; Allen, *The Girl Who Said Goodbye*, 19; Lau, *Beautiful Hero*, 11.
- 51 Penny Edwards, *Ethnic Groups in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Center for Advanced Study, 2009), 202.

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8 Khmer Women and the Barter Economy

Cambodia may appear to be a traditional patriarchal society to the outside world, but the reality is more nuanced. While males have dominated political leadership for centuries, women have often assumed the lead roles in their family life, especially as it pertains to finances. Khmer women typically control the family assets and form a large segment of the labor force, working as farmers and merchants. Tourists who go to the Central Market in Phnom Penh today will find that the overwhelming number of salespeople running the stalls are women, who shout to potential buyers about their merchandise, haggle with customers, and compete with fellow vendors for sales. Women have largely maintained this role in Cambodian society for hundreds of years, serving as central figures in the economy dating back to the Khmer empire. This cultural dynamic continued in Democratic Kampuchea, where mothers and daughters from the cities bartered with rural women frequently. Many primary sources contended that women dominated the underground markets in the cooperatives and served as the primary breadwinners for their families.

Records of women running local markets in Cambodia go back to the Angkorean empire. Much like today, men served as the political leaders of Angkor, while women worked as merchants. As noted in Chapter 3, the bas-reliefs of one of the major temples included scenes of women bartering their goods in the markets of the capital city. The Chinese diplomat who visited the kingdom in the late thirteenth century, Zhou Daguan, marveled at the business acumen of Khmer women: “The local people who know how to trade are all women.”¹ Zhou also noted that when “a Chinese [man] goes to this country, the first thing he must do is take in a woman, partly with a view to profiting from her trading abilities.”² While Zhou’s depictions of daily life in Angkor are the only surviving written account from the period, his limited observations suggest that Khmer women had considerable power in the empire, at least from an economic perspective. After the decline of the civilization of Angkor in the fifteenth century, women continued to play a primary role in the family finances. David Chandler noted that in the nineteenth century, rural trade in the form of bartering “was handled to a large extent by women.”³ In the 1960s, May Ebihara wrote that the wives and mothers were the “treasurers” of the family in the village she observed. “Money earned by

the husband or children is given to her for safekeeping and apportionment, and angry tirades befall anyone who takes even a few riels from the family kitty without telling her beforehand.”⁴

Many of the primary sources recalled that their mothers assumed the position of the financial head of household before and during the Khmer Rouge era. Individuals from different genders and economic backgrounds portrayed their mothers and grandmothers as the guardians of the family funds. A rural wife who lived in Takeo stated that her husband always gave her his earnings for safekeeping and asked for permission to spend money. Before the revolution, mothers converted their cash and surplus goods into gold and jewelry to keep as savings, because they did not trust banks. Khmer women usually wore the family’s assets in the form of rings, bracelets, and necklaces, to protect them from theft. It was the mothers and grandmothers who sewed secret pockets into their family’s clothes to hide their valuables from soldiers during the evacuation from the cities and buried the jewelry in the camps. Survivors bragged about their mothers as shrewd businesspeople. Chhalith Ou declared that his mother “was already skilled in negotiating bartered goods for her family from all the years she had acted as the head of our household while my father Chhav was working in Phnom Penh.”⁵ Women in Cambodia were largely responsible for ensuring the financial security of their families before the Khmer Rouge took over.⁶

Women Bartering in the Camps

Women’s role as financial leaders of the family continued in the cooperatives. While there were countless examples of men bartering in Democratic Kampuchea, many interviewees asserted that the majority of negotiations were done by females. A Base person from northwestern Cambodia claimed that she had “never seen any men engage in the trading,” and that she “usually traded with old women.”⁷ An April 17 person from Battambang claimed that she “only traded with women,” since “there were not many men left”⁸ in her village after the civil war. According to Krouch Soun, women usually had greater opportunities to trade, as they were more likely to work in the gardens and kitchens, where they interacted with Base people regularly. In many cases, mothers were responsible for managing the family’s limited inventory and determining the right time to trade their dwindling supply of jewelry or clothing for food. They haggled with other traders in the camps to get the best deals possible. They also bore much of the risk associated with barter. Women had to evaluate which Base people were dependable and trustworthy before initiating trades. They set up the meeting places, conducted the exchanges, and then stealthily transported their new goods back to their homes without being noticed. In times of desperation, mothers sacrificed their pride and begged others to trade with them. Aum Sovannari recalled that her mother once went to the house of a Khmer Rouge cadre and pleaded with his wife to exchange some rice for her crickets. Trading was a tremendous burden and a harrowing experience for many Khmer women in the labor camps.⁹

Mothers also took on the role of the family disciplinarian with regard to financial matters. As Ebihara discovered in the village of Svay before the revolution, there was a pecking order within each family on economic issues, with the eldest woman at the top of the hierarchy. This responsibility was even more important in the Khmer Rouge era, as resources were scarcer and the risks greater. Vannead Horn's mother forced her husband to reduce his smoking habit to one or two cigarettes per day so that she could trade the remainder of his stash of tobacco for food. While the authority of the mother was largely unchallenged, those who questioned the financial decisions were quickly rebuked. In one anecdote, Sokphal Din criticized his mother when she bartered gold for a pillow instead of food: "My mother threw a woodblock at me, which hit my left elbow and cut my skin."¹⁰ The subject was never discussed again.¹¹

Much like their counterparts from the cities, female Base people handled the family finances and were responsible for much of the bartering in the underground markets. These wives and mothers also had to provide for their families. Women negotiated deals and managed their limited supply of food when rations were reduced. They traded their surplus rice and stockpiled as much gold as possible, hoping that it would retain its value regardless of who ruled the country. They needed to be able to distinguish real jewelry from fake and avoid incautious traders who might get caught by soldiers and spies. Though Base people were a privileged class in the cooperatives, these women also faced violent punishment if they were caught trading.¹²

When asked why women handled most of the bartering in the underground markets, female sources offered a variety of explanations. The most common response was that Khmer Rouge watched men more closely, perhaps because they viewed them as a greater threat to the regime. "Women were searched less rigorously than men"¹³ during the evacuation from Phnom Penh and the disparate scrutiny of men continued in the camps. As a result, many wives felt that they had better odds of engaging in trade without getting caught. Others claimed that the Khmer Rouge punished men more severely for engaging in trade, so mothers took on the responsibility because they were more likely to be spared if discovered by cadres. "Men were afraid to die,"¹⁴ stated Seng Lang, a New person who lived in Prey Veng and Battambang camps. Women were also allowed to move more freely due to their work assignments, making trade easier from a logistics perspective. Sources also gave cultural reasons for women's disproportionate participation in the underground markets. A handful of interviewees contended that women were better suited for trade because they were more outgoing and willing to appeal to the sympathies of the Base people, whereas men "kept their pride high"¹⁵ and would not beg others to trade with them. One Base person argued that it was easier for women to make exchanges because soldiers were less suspicious of two women conversing and would typically ignore these types of interactions. On the other hand, a man talking to a woman in the cooperatives would draw attention from cadres and spies as a possible romantic encounter, which was another punishable offense

in Democratic Kampuchea. A few women claimed that men traded more in their cooperatives, but this was the minority viewpoint.¹⁶

Male sources generally agreed that women did the bulk of the trading. Some men asserted that the women in their families handled most of the trades because they already had years of experience haggling in the markets before the revolution. Seng Chek, a New person who lived in a cooperative in Kampot, bluntly stated that women usually took on the role of trader for the family because they were more articulate and better at negotiation. One New person who lived in Pursat claimed that the Khmer Rouge viewed women as less capable of following camp rules and, as a result, were more forgiving of the women's transgressions. While women might have been treated less harshly than men in some cases, the Khmer Rouge certainly did not go easy on them. Survivors reported countless examples of soldiers raping, torturing, and murdering women. Another male New person claimed that men and women traded in his camp equally. The ratio of women to men bartering in the underground markets depended on the leniency of village leaders and the social dynamics of the individual camps. Women tended to do more of the trading in stricter cooperatives where men faced greater scrutiny and harsher punishments.¹⁷

Mothers as Heroes and Saviors

Both male and female sources described their mothers in heroic terms, largely due to their role as primary providers during the period. Jennifer Lau's memoir, *Beautiful Hero*, is essentially a biography of the matriarch of her family, Meiyeng, and a tribute to her courage, with much of it focusing on her mother's negotiating skills. Bun Lim dedicated his book to his mother, calling her "the foundation of our family," whose strength and ability to "wheel and deal"¹⁸ saved her three children. Horn praised his mother as "the hero of my life"¹⁹ and boasted that she had learned several languages so that she could trade with immigrants in Cambodia before the revolution. Other survivors lauded their mothers' wisdom and preparations for the revolution. Vincent Lee boasted of his mother's "eye for a bargain" and credited her with the forethought of collecting "enough food to last us a couple of months"²⁰ as they were being evacuated from Phnom Penh. Ou wrote that his mother's decision to go against her husband's advice and convert their savings into gold saved the family. Some mothers attained divine status in the minds of their children during this era. Laux referred to her mother as "our angel and our inspiration."²¹ A woman who had suffered from malaria as a 7-year-old in Battambang proclaimed that her selfless mother "walked far and traded gold for medicine and made offerings to the gods to save my soul."²² Arn Yan recalled that his mother traded her jewelry to bring him medicine in the hospital and claimed he survived the regime "largely because my mother really cared about me."²³ Seng BouAddheka's mother traded silk for two birds, which she subsequently released as "a way to redeem sin"²⁴ in hopes of saving her

dying son. Pisey Leng called her mother a “savior” and a “guiding light.” Leng declared her mother’s “resourcefulness saved our lives many times during the four years we spent in camps as slaves belonging to the Khmer Rouge.”²⁵

Conclusion

In some ways, the Khmer Rouge reinforced and even enhanced women’s status as leaders in Cambodian culture. They served in the leadership of the CPK, governed cooperatives, and joined the ranks of the military, which included an all-female unit in the Southwest Zone. Among the villagers, Khmer wives and mothers became heads of household, as well as central figures in the development of the underground exchanges. At a time when having additional rice made the difference between life and death, the matriarchs became the breadwinners of their families. When their husbands were sent to work in the fields, Khmer women reached out to their rural counterparts and initiated trades, while assuming the risk of violent punishment if discovered. Female New and Base people secretly haggled over prices and exchanged goods to provide for their families. Women from the cities carefully managed their inventory of jewelry and clothing so that their supply of these currencies might outlast the regime. Rural women calculated the amount of surplus food that they could trade and collected valuables from the New people with the hope that they could use these items after the regime fell. Yet even as the regime promised equality and challenged some male-centered cultural norms, women of both classes longed for the political and economic systems that existed before the revolution. Women’s involvement in the underground economy signified a rejection of the CPK’s ideological goals, despite the regime’s purported egalitarianism.²⁶

Notes

- 1 Dagan Zhou, *A Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People*, ed. Peter Harris, Illustrated edition (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2007), 70.
- 2 Zhou, 70.
- 3 David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Fourth edition (Colorado Springs, CO: Westview Press, 2007), 121.
- 4 May Ebihara, *Svay: A Khmer Village in Cambodia*, ed. Andrew C. Mertha (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publication, 2018), 134, VitalSource Bookshelf Online; John Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia: From Empire to Survival*, Illustrated edition (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2006), location 640, Kindle.
- 5 R. Z. Halleon and Chhalith Ou, *Spare Them? No Profit. Remove Them? No Loss*. (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2010), location 613, Kindle.
- 6 Heng Ry, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Takeo, Cambodia, December 18, 2021; Im Soeun, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Kampong Thom, Cambodia, January 30, 2022; Halleon and Ou, *Spare Them?*, location 619, Kindle; Ebihara, *Svay*, 134; Seng Ty, *The Years of Zero: Coming of Age Under the Khmer Rouge* (2013), 64, Kindle; Sovannara Ky and Howard Glass, *The Sieve of Angkar* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 64, Kindle; Chantha Sok-Banks,

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 - 8 Anonymous survivor, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021. The individual did not wish to give a name.
 - 9 Kae Ngeat, Interview by Pheaktra Song, Pursat, Cambodia, February 27, 2022; Seng Lang, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021; Channy Chhi Laux, Interview by author by video conference, May 23, 2021; Krouch Soun, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 29, 2021; Pisey Leng and Jennifer Colford, *The Wisdom Seeker: Finding the Seed of Advantage in the Khmer Rouge* (Harmark Publishing, 2015), 16, Kindle; Lee, *Father Missed His Plane*, 54; Sieu Sean Do, *A Cloak of Good Fortune: A Cambodian Boy's Journey from Paradise through a Kingdom of Terror* (Hibiscus Press, 2019), location 1437, Kindle; Var Hong Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise: Escape from Cambodia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), location 1098, Kindle; Snok Som Un, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 28, 2021; Yeut Savai, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, October 12, 2021; Jennifer H. Lau, *Beautiful Hero: How We Survived the Khmer Rouge*, First edition (Lotus Book Group, 2016), 108; Sokphal Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia: Surviving a Living Hell* (Amsterdam Publishers, 2020), 54, 58, Kindle; Sieu Sean Do, Interview by author by telephone, June 7, 2021; Aum Sovannari, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia, November 8, 2021.
 - 10 Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia*, 81.
 - 11 Vannead Horn, *The Spirit of a Fighter: From Cambodia, Victim of the Khmer Rouge Genocide, to France Then USA*. (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2016), location 4393, Kindle.
 - 12 Krouch Soun, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia; Snok Som Un, Interview by Socheata Seng, Cambodia.
 - 13 JoAn D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You Is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (East/West Bridge Publishing, 2020), 54.
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 - 19 Horn, *The Spirit of a Fighter*, location 121, Kindle.
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 - 21 Channy Chhi Laux, *Short Hair Detention: Memoir of a Thirteen-Year-Old Girl Surviving the Cambodian Genocide* (Bloomington, IN: Archway Publishing, 2017), 551.

- 22 Dith Pran, *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors*, ed. Kim DePaul (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), location 1119, Kindle.
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9 Base People versus New People

While espousing the virtues of egalitarianism, the Khmer Rouge continuously exacerbated class tensions by pitting poor Base people from the countryside against New people from the cities. Cadres actively encouraged hostility in the camps, telling the Base people that the Khmers from the cities were exploitative and irredeemable. Two common CPK slogans epitomized this mindset: “The 17 April people are parasitic plants,” and “Where there are 17 April people, no development is possible.”¹ The social hierarchy introduced by the Khmer Rouge was essentially a “caste system,”² whereas April 17 people were “treated as second-class citizens, potential sources of counterrevolution, and subversion.”³ Although most of the residents of the cities in 1975 were actually rural peasants who had recently fled the countryside during the civil war, the CPK believed that they needed to brand these people as enemies of the state to achieve their ideological goals. As David Chandler put it, “hatred had to be maintained,”⁴ and New people were one of the regime’s many targets. According to Seng Chek, “that is what the Khmer Rouge wanted. They wanted people to hate each other.”⁵ Nop Sam, a Base person from Kampong Speu, asserted that the cadres’ enmity for the April 17 people was so intense that it was dangerous to communicate with them. “Even if they were my relatives, we would pretend not to know them.”⁶ Despite the class antagonism, members of the two classes acted as occasional allies in the underground markets, secretly working together to exchange goods out of mutual self-interest.

Base people had a number of privileges that were not granted to April 17 people. According to Ebihara, “cadres and Old (Base) people ate well”⁷ in 1976–1977—an assertion that was corroborated by individuals from both classes. Sam Neang claimed that the Khmer Rouge allowed the rural peasants “to eat as much as we want”⁸ and gave her additional rice for her baby. Other villagers stated that the cadres gave the Base people enough rice at mealtime to take a small portion home to eat or trade at a later time. When the rural villagers consumed their surplus rice, they were able to replenish their supply fairly easily. Pin Yathay recalled that Base people were allowed to grow their own food. Base people were charged with supervising food storage, a job that gave workers the opportunity to take rice from the cooperative without the Khmer Rouge noticing. Rural peasants were also more likely to develop

relationships with village leaders and soldiers. Kao Yeng, a Base person who lived in a Takeo camp, claimed that the village chief was “kind” and gave her medicine in the form of palm sugar when her husband was ill.⁹ In some of the laxer cooperatives, the Khmer Rouge allowed Base people to trade. Base people could wear watches in some villages. Teeda Butt Mam recalled that the local girls in her camp “felt secure enough to wear lots of makeup, gold bracelets, other jewelry for their weddings.”¹⁰ In addition to this, many Base people were allowed to stay in their original homes throughout the Pol Pot era.¹¹

Though Base people had more advantages than April 17 people, their lives were far from comfortable. Everyone feared the Khmer Rouge and tread carefully around the soldiers. Base people worked long hours alongside the former city residents and faced starvation during periods of scarcity. As Ebihara noted, living conditions in the village of Sobay changed dramatically after the revolution, and many of the freedoms the rural farmers had previously enjoyed were severely restricted. Chanrithy Him stated that the Khmer Rouge prohibited the Base people in her camp from trading or engaging in any activity that might enable them to develop relationships with other villagers. In some cooperatives, Base people could only barter if they had a deep friendship or familial connection with a Khmer Rouge cadre. Souy Sreng, a Base person from Takeo, stated that all food was communalized in his village and anyone who ate in their individual homes would be “re-educated.”¹² When asked about the difference in living conditions between the two classes, a Base person named Nop Sophal stated, “[T]hey were miserable and we were miserable too.”¹³

The Relationship between New People and Base People

One of the more interesting aspects of the research was the differing perspectives on the relationship between the Base and New people. While a handful of sources acknowledged that the Base people “hated” or “looked down on”¹⁴ evacuees from the cities, many rural peasants claimed to have treated the New people well. Kong Sam-Art asserted that the rural peasants in her village were “compassionate” and declared that trading with April 17 people “was like doing merit,”¹⁵ a reference to the Buddhist practice of doing good deeds for future karma or spiritual enlightenment. Sam Neang said that her family was “friendly” with the evacuees and “helped them a lot”¹⁶ by giving them clothing and teaching them cooking techniques. Similarly, Krouch Soun claimed that her family shared their resources with the former Phnom Penh residents because the Khmer Rouge mistreated New people and “wanted them to die from hunger.”¹⁷ Several other Base people echoed this sentiment. Some of the Base people argued that the April 17 people were treated the same as everyone else in the camps and contended that both classes received the same amount of food. Others stated that the Base people did not discriminate against the New people in the cooperatives.¹⁸

The April 17 people remembered the relationship between the classes quite differently. Vannead Horn referred to them as “the eyes and ears of the new

revolutionary regime” and stated that “those Rural (Base) People became overnight the new masters of the City People.”¹⁹ Set Sara claimed that they spied on his family “all the time”²⁰ in Kampong Thom and blamed them for his sister’s death after a Base person reported her to the Khmer Rouge. Kilong Ung argued that the rural peasants were part of the ruling class, whereas the April 17 people were the “quasi-enemy.”²¹ Base people had more to eat, nicer clothes, and better living conditions. According to Channy Laux, the rural villagers saw the former city dwellers as intruders who were consuming a significant portion of their food supply. A New person who lived in a Battambang camp said, “[T]he Base people treated us like their enemy.”²² Another villager stated, “Base people viewed New people as lazy.”²³ Despite the harsh treatment from their rural counterparts, some April 17 people blamed the Khmer Rouge for the behavior of the Base people. Horn wrote, “[I]t was not the fault of the Rural People from whom I received and suffered the disdainful looks and unprivileged treatments but from the architects of new Cambodian society.”²⁴ Robert Chau similarly claimed that much of the Base people’s resentment toward April 17 people was driven by the Khmer Rouge. Sean Sieu Do declared that there were “a lot of good *neak mulethan* [Base people],”²⁵ adding that some of them treated his family well and occasionally gave him free food.²⁶

Though class hostilities persisted throughout the Pol Pot era, the underground markets forced New people and their rural neighbors to interact and develop relationships. While these were not transactions among equal participants, New and Base people found ways to work together and negotiate for goods. Sources in memoirs and interviews cited hundreds of examples of the two classes exchanging food, clothing, jewelry, and other commodities. New people usually took the lead in initiating contact and building these economic partnerships. April 17 people who had lived in the countryside before the revolution developed relationships with rural villagers relatively easily. Even though they came from the cities, these Khmers could speak the language of the villagers and pick up on the social cues that other city dwellers missed. Other April 17 people acquired these social skills over time. Laborers from other villages walked past Yathay’s camp each day, exchanging greetings as they crossed paths. These brief interactions gradually evolved into conversations and eventually led to bartering and even friendships. The perilous environment created a bond between traders from different classes, who shared in the risks. In some cases, bartering in the underground markets improved the relationship between the New and Base people, despite the power imbalances. Rural peasants profited from the underground markets in the accumulation of gold and jewelry, but at the same time, they did develop some genuine sympathy for the former city residents.²⁷

New people sometimes resorted to begging or other appeals for sympathy in order to obtain desperately needed food and medicine. These were displays of submission in which New people, who were perceived to be on a higher rung of the social hierarchy before the revolution, humbled themselves in front of a Base person. This proved to be a useful strategy for the April 17 people.

Many Base people remembered these gestures from the former city residents decades later, suggesting that the impact was significant. Sean Sieu Do explained the Khmer concept of *smau*, which he described as using “charm” or “sweet talk” while making a polite request.²⁸ At 12 years old, Sean regularly used this tactic to flatter his rural neighbors and get free food from them. As discussed in Chapter 5, Tous Mak, a New person in northwestern Cambodia, recounted a story about going to a house in a neighboring village and begging a Base person to trade her food for a silk *krama*. Touched by the display, the female Base person pitied her and gave her three cans of rice while refusing to accept the trade. Tous Mak repeated the process until she had nine cans of rice to take to her family and retained her *krama*. Sources from both classes stated that the Base people regularly traded out of pity for the New people. Clearly, the rural villagers did not need jewelry or clothing to survive in the camps. They also knew that it was risky to trade their limited food supplies, but the submissive gestures of the New people did evoke sincere compassion. At the same time, these displays appeared to have given rural peasants a sense of satisfaction from seeing members of the former upper classes in such vulnerable positions.²⁹

On the other hand, New people also reported many instances of Base people taking advantage of the power imbalances to gain leverage in trading. Whether it was class-based enmity or simply opportunism, Base people understood the desperation of their counterparts from the cities and benefited from the inflated prices of their rice and other food. They traded for jewelry and clothing that they could not have afforded before the revolution. “It was time for them to collect their treasure that they did not have under a capitalist regime,” noted Sida Lei.³⁰ The fear of being reported to the Khmer Rouge by the Base people loomed over each transaction. Aum Sovannari, an April 17 person, recalled that her aunt would present a piece of jewelry for trade and ask for a specific amount of rice in return. The Base person typically made a counteroffer, and, in the end, the New person “would take whatever was offered.”³¹ If an April 17 person did not feel that a barter offer was equitable, they either accepted the bad deal or looked for another trader. While the underground exchanges did provide opportunities for April 17 people to obtain essential food and medicine, the transactions did not always improve relations between the New and Base people.³²

Motivations for Owning Luxury Items

What was the motivation of the Base people for acquiring gold, jewelry, and clothing? In a period of great uncertainty and a high probability of drought and famine, why would individuals trade their precious food supply for jewelry that could not be displayed or clothes that could not be worn? This is one of the most puzzling aspects of the underground markets in Democratic Kampuchea. Surprisingly, responses from members of both classes were fairly consistent and generally fell into two categories. First, Base people wanted jewelry and clothing for materialistic reasons. Quite simply, this was their first

opportunity to own items they did not have access to in the past. Second, there was a sense among the Base people that the regime would eventually collapse, and their new collection of jewelry and clothing would be valuable again. This was further evidence that much of the ideological training that the Khmer Rouge imposed upon the population was essentially disregarded by the Base people—the class that the revolution was purported to benefit most.

Even though the Khmer Rouge punished individuals who possessed capitalist and imperialist goods, many rural peasants believed that trading for luxury items was worth the risk of getting caught. One of the main reasons for the rural folks' fascination with gold and jewelry was cultural. The Khmer people had always revered gold, rubies, and jewelry.³³ As in most cultures, these items were associated with elite status and high society. This was especially true of traditional Khmer jewelry. Prosperous Khmers wore them at weddings and other important events in Cambodia. "The local Cambodian villagers who still had rice and chickens had been happy to trade for gold and diamonds as they had never had any of these things before."³⁴ New people claimed that the Base people "loved" gold and jewelry.³⁵ Sam-Art, a Base person, traded for these items because she "thought the gold was precious. I still love it."³⁶ There were even a few accounts of bold female Base people wearing jewelry during Khmer Rouge wedding ceremonies. Watches were another highly coveted piece of jewelry that was of little practical use during the Khmer Rouge era. Sam-Art stated that wristwatches were "the most luxurious thing at that time"³⁷ and were very popular among the Base people. Kou Phai recalled that her mother bartered for a woman's watch, hoping that the prohibitions on wearing them would eventually be lifted. Tous Mak, a New person, claimed that it was a Base person's "dream come true to finally be able to wear one."³⁸ While these possessions continued to have value in the underground markets and could be traded repeatedly, Khmers from both classes asserted that Base people wanted jewelry primarily for its aesthetic appeal and the status associated with it.³⁹

Base people also coveted fancy clothing, another nonessential item that the Khmer Rouge deemed "decadent"⁴⁰ and capitalist. Fine clothing had some value in its sturdiness and comfort in the oppressive heat of the region, but for the most part, it was a luxury item in Democratic Kampuchea. In order to be worn publicly, the colorful clothing had to be dyed black, so the appearance and value were immediately diminished. The only immediate practical value of the clothing was comfort, as New people's clothes "were nicer to wear than those provided by the Khmer Rouge."⁴¹ Several April 17 people claimed that the rural villagers cherished their new acquisitions because they had never seen, much less owned, such fancy clothing. Chun Neang, a Base person from Kampong Cham, fondly remembered trading for "beautiful fabric from Phnom Penh."⁴² Sam-Art traded wine and rice for a "beautiful" short-sleeved shirt for her husband, even though he did not dare to wear it in the camp.⁴³ For many Base people, the opportunity to own silk shirts and beautiful sarongs outweighed any risks of punishment or concerns about food insecurity.⁴⁴

The rural villagers' fascination with elaborate jewelry and elegant clothing was about more than status and material possessions. Many Base people coveted these items because they believed the regime was "unsustainable"⁴⁵ and would eventually self-destruct, leaving them with valuable assets to use in the future. If the Khmer Rouge collapsed, the rural peasants could return to their former lives in better financial positions than before the revolution. While clothing might not have the same worth after years of use, gold and jewelry would likely retain their value after the regime ended. Base people who traded for jewelry "gambled on the possibility that gold would be used again in the future,"⁴⁶ and they kept it hidden "in case the country returned to normal."⁴⁷ Rural villagers amassed as much gold and jewelry as they could and waited for the day that they could use their new valuables. Chak Ny, an April 17 person, asserted that the Base people "wanted gold for their children and grandchildren."⁴⁸ Kou Phai, a Base person, claimed that her mother buried four to five *chi* of gold (approximately 15 to 18 grams) in the camp. A Base person living in Pursat stated that his mother, who had access to rice at her job, accumulated two kilograms of gold through trade in the underground markets.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The relationship between the New and Base people in the underground markets uncovered some of the weaknesses in the CPK's strategy and exposed the failures in the implementation of its vision by rank-and-file cadres. Few civilians had any faith in the regime's ability to govern or provide for them. April 17 people bartered for food because they knew the Khmer Rouge could not feed the population. Base people recognized that the situation was unsustainable, and traded for gold and jewelry, just in case things returned to normal someday. The notion of a return to normalcy was a common theme among survivors from both classes. Despite the cadres' propaganda promoting class warfare, the two classes cooperated regularly in the underground markets, risking their lives to trade for commodities. As the regime condemned capitalism and material possessions, Base people traded their excess food for luxury items like silk clothing and gold jewelry. At a time when the regime was preaching egalitarianism and collectivism, rural villagers who had previously occupied the lowest level of the socioeconomic hierarchy were practicing individualism and celebrating private property. The Khmer Rouge carried out the revolution in the name of the peasant class, promising equality and improved living standards, but could not deliver. As a result, rural peasants and even cadres never fully accepted the CPK's ideology and yearned for aspects of the economic system that the regime had supplanted.

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10 Cadres, Watches, and Lighter Chains

The Khmer Rouge cadres were not supposed to own flashy watches or jewelry. As representatives of the regime, they were expected to embody the revolutionary spirit and reject capitalist indulgences. Party leaders had trained their subordinates in the early 1970s to live by certain “righteous precepts” to win over the peasant class in rural Cambodia. These rules included admonitions against touching the property of the local villagers or taking bribes. In 1973, the Khmer Rouge periodical, *Revolutionary Young Men and Women*, encouraged young men and women to “nurture a revolutionary consciousness” and embrace “a high spirit of collectivity, ridding oneself of individual interests.”¹ Leaders challenged young students to reject the traditional education that taught them to serve an “imperialist, feudal, and capitalist culture.”² A document purportedly written by Khieu Samphan in 1976 instructed cadres to give up their material possessions: “Just be content with two sets of clothes, and a toothbrush. Get rid of that second watch, and the necklace.”³ According to the CPK’s ideology, equality was not possible as long as private property existed.⁴

Nevertheless, the Khmer Rouge in the cooperatives did not always follow the teachings of *Angkar*. There was no real sense of equality in the camps, as the ruling class of cadres lived a vastly different experience than New and Base people. The soldiers held the weapons, enforced the rules, and decided who lived and died. Cadres had plenty of “delicious food” to eat.⁵ Some soldiers received four meals per day, with cooks who prepared special foods for them. The extent to which cadres were allowed to ignore the rules as set forth by *Angkar* largely depended upon the disposition of the camp leaders. Soldiers wearing jewelry or clothing that they had stolen from villagers still had to be careful to avoid allegations of capitalist behavior, but generally, they did not face the harsh and immediate punishment designated for villagers.⁶

Cadres and Wristwatches

Soldiers engaged in mass theft during the evacuations from the cities in April 1975, taking New people’s clothes and jewelry while claiming that *Angkar*

needed to borrow them. The robberies continued in the camps, as soldiers confiscated a variety of goods for communal and personal use. When Sean Sieu Do's family first arrived at the cooperative, the Khmer Rouge rifled through their belongings and took what they wished, telling their captives, "[Y]ou don't need this anymore."⁷ Though soldiers stole a number of different luxury items, they specifically sought out wristwatches from the New people. During the march from Phnom Penh, soldiers barked at the evacuees, demanding their watches at various checkpoints along the road. When Chanrithy Him's father handed over his watch to the Khmer Rouge, they responded aggressively, "Does comrade have more?"⁸ Unsuspecting city residents who wore their watches during the evacuations were quickly relieved of their possessions at gunpoint. Villagers who neglected to hide their watches sufficiently in the cooperatives eventually witnessed them get snatched up or borrowed indefinitely by cadres.⁹

In her memoir, Jennifer Lau wrote, "If communism were a religion to the Khmer Rouge, wristwatches were their idols of worship."¹⁰ The Khmer Rouge loved foreign wristwatches, especially from Japan and Switzerland. The most popular brands at the time included Seiko, Citizen, Orient, Orion, and Omega. There was a hierarchy of status by brand. "On the black market, there were two categories of watch, automatic and non-automatic, with several different grades of automatic, headed by Omegas."¹¹ Wristwatches with automatic dials were the most prestigious, especially those made by Seiko and Omega. Known for their accuracy and durability in harsh environments, these particular brands were worn by the world's elite. President John F. Kennedy wore an Omega Slimline watch at his inauguration in January 1961.¹² The American astronauts that landed on the Moon from 1969 to 1972 had Omega Speedmasters strapped to their spacesuits.¹³ James Bond, the fictional pinnacle of men's fashion during this period, wore Seiko watches in the movies "The Spy Who Loved Me" (1977) and "Moonraker" (1979).¹⁴ As cadres chanted slogans to New people about shedding their imperialist possessions and rejecting Western consumer goods, they forcibly collected expensive brand-name watches worn by the rich and famous.¹⁵

What was it about wristwatches that made them so valuable to the Khmer Rouge? Survivors of the regime generally gave two answers to this question: status and resale value. Watches were the "most luxurious thing at that time."¹⁶ Villagers sometimes traded their gold pieces for a watch because it was more valuable. Wristwatches were "extremely scarce"¹⁷ in Democratic Kampuchea, which increased their status in the minds of the cadres and made them more valuable in the underground markets. Khmer Rouge soldiers traded the watches for other goods at the Thai border or kept them as valuable assets in case the regime collapsed. As Lau stated ironically, watches were the "hottest commodity in this egalitarian society," with the highest quality timepieces "worth five to ten times more than a solid gold bracelet."¹⁸ Most of the young soldiers who filled the ranks of the Khmer Rouge came from extreme poverty and, like the Base people, they had never seen luxury items, much less had access to them.¹⁹

While most camp inhabitants faced serious repercussions for being caught with a luxury timepiece, the Khmer Rouge wore watches regularly and without reservations about being seen with a status symbol. A female New person living in Pursat claimed that the soldiers were allowed to wear wristwatches for the purpose of keeping track of time. Thus, a sort of loophole existed for the cadres. The Khmer Rouge directive to “get rid of that second watch”²⁰ implied that cadres could keep one for timekeeping. If *Angkar* allowed soldiers to wear one watch, then these young men could technically seek out the most prestigious watch available without breaking the rules. According to Lau, cadres would “roll up their sleeves to showcase the watch on their wrist.”²¹ This was an act of ostentation that seemed to contradict everything that *Angkar* represented: showing off a status symbol made in a capitalist, imperialist foreign country. The fact that many of the high-status watches were made in Japan, a country that had occupied Cambodia only 30 years earlier, made these flamboyant displays even more absurd.²²

In some cases, cadres wore more than one watch, if only to taunt or mock the privileged victims of their theft. Just after the evacuation from the city of Battambang, Arn Chorn-Pond recalled seeing a Khmer Rouge soldier wearing six or seven wristwatches on his arm. He nicknamed the young man, “Comrade Wristwatch.”²³ Chantha Sok-Banks stated that the teenage cadres in her camp wore jewelry along with their watches, even though they could not tell time. Sean Sieu Do recounted a surreal incident when soldiers sped by him in a large truck, wearing their capitalist watches and jewelry while singing a Khmer Rouge anthem, before driving off a bridge and crashing into a river. “They looked so stupid,”²⁴ stated Do, noting the irony of wearing flashy jewelry in a communist dictatorship. Though some camp leaders tolerated soldiers wearing multiple watches or showy jewelry, this was not universal, as owning status symbols was generally frowned upon and attracted unwanted scrutiny.²⁵

As with other aspects of life in Democratic Kampuchea, differences between camps were the norm. Many of the sources consulted in this research reported seeing Khmer Rouge soldiers wearing just one watch around the labor camps. Modest displays of high-status luxury items were tolerated, but not encouraged. In Sokphal Din’s village, only high-ranking officials ever dared to wear a watch. In a handful of other cooperatives, no one wore wristwatches publicly. Base people donned wristwatches in a few camps. Regardless of the discrepancies between villages, numerous survivors associated luxury wristwatches with Khmer Rouge soldiers and recognized the contradiction between the propaganda of the state and practices on the ground.²⁶

Cadres and Lighter Chains

The rank and file of the Khmer Rouge also had a fondness for another type of jewelry: gold cigarette lighter chains. As avid smokers, soldiers usually carried

around cigarette lighters with them. To keep from losing them, cadres fastened one end of a metal chain to the lighter and the other end to the waistline of their pants. The individual put the lighter in their pocket and the chain dangled a few inches below the waist, much like the metal wallet belt chains worn by hipsters today. Not only did this keep the cigarette lighter from getting lost, but it was also a fashion statement among men at the time. And the most fashionable lighter chains in the cooperatives were ones made of gold. Since most soldiers did not have access to precious metals before the revolution, they used their positions of authority to extract gold necklaces from the New people in the cooperatives. The young men then fashioned the gold necklaces into cigarette lighter chains, sometimes with the assistance of a craftsman in the village. Others wore the lighters as pendants on gold necklaces.²⁷

The gold cigarette lighter chain was another instance of local leaders tolerating items in the camps that contradicted *Angkar* policy. While lighter chains of any other metal would have been acceptable, using gold as a decoration conflicted with CPK doctrine. A watch had practical uses, whereas a gold chain for a lighter was completely frivolous. It was simply a means to show off the cadres' stolen possessions and assert their status as members of the privileged class. Almost a quarter of the interviewees, each residing in different camps during the Khmer Rouge era, claimed to have witnessed this trend. Several Base people claimed that high-ranking cadres, as well as village and commune chiefs, also wore these chains. One woman noted that people used the gold lighter chains in her camp, even though no one dared to wear gold in any other circumstance. No explanation for this inconsistency was given. In other villages, cadres exercised caution, aware of the risks of these displays. Yong Kin claimed that some of the young men "were afraid to wear" the chains openly, so they hid them in their pants or shirt pocket: "Sometimes, they pulled a little bit (of the lighter chains) out of their pocket to show off."²⁸

Cadres in the Underground Markets

In some camps, the Khmer Rouge participated in the underground markets. While most sources asserted that soldiers simply "took whatever they wanted"²⁹ and did not need to trade, a number of former villagers reported that the cadres secretly bartered rice for gold and jewelry. Defying the cooperative rules and the spirit of the regime's ideology, soldiers and even some Khmer Rouge officials stole food and medicine from the cooperative stockpile and traded with New people to enrich themselves. One individual claimed that the cadres set up the underground markets in order to trade for the gold that villagers had hidden from them. Other New people stated that the Khmer Rouge controlled the black market in their camps. Pin Yathay described a complex embezzlement scheme from which families of the

soldiers profited. The country's central distribution center provided rice to the villages based on census data. In order to accumulate more rice, Khmer Rouge cadres "simply never reported many of the dead"³⁰ to the state. So as villagers died, cadres continued to collect the same portion of rice from the government, which was then funneled into the underground markets. Cadres gave the rice to their relatives to trade with New people for jewelry and clothing because "the Khmer Rouge themselves could not be seen to be playing a part in the system."³¹ Perversely, profits increased as more New and Base people died, which incentivized the violence. It was also not unusual for family members of soldiers to exchange goods with villagers. Kae Ngeat traded with the spouse of the village chief in Pursat and stated that the soldiers' wives frequently bartered with villagers. According to Tous Mak, the "family members loved jewelry, watches, and sarongs" and were "very keen to trade."³²

Another method of profiting off the villagers came in the form of bribes. There were several accounts of New people using their powers of persuasion along with gifts to get favors from the soldiers. These particular transactions required a high level of tact and advanced interpersonal skills. With a finite supply of luxury goods, this was one of the riskiest endeavors because the soldiers were likely to "just seize whatever it was that you were offering"³³ and punish the trader for the infraction. Sovannara Ky described a typical scenario for these types of transactions:

The New people had to "feel their way around" and try to gauge the willingness of the Khmer Rouge to participate. You dare not flat out ask for help or try to bribe them. If you thought they might be willing, then you might tell them what you needed and follow it up with "there's something in it for you" type of comment.³⁴

Sometimes, the April 17 people gave gifts as a form of goodwill to the Khmer Rouge, hoping for better treatment, though there was never any guarantee of reciprocity. Teeda Butt Mam noticed that her crew leader was looking for a small plastic bag and offered up hers as a means to create some sort of bond with the female cadre. "In exchange, I hoped my life as a worker would not be so hard. It worked."³⁵ Kulong Ung reported that Base people sometimes turned in April 17 people to the Khmer Rouge as a form of bartering, reporting infractions in order to receive additional food. New people also received time off from work or permission to see their relatives by "donating" various goods to soldiers. A New person in a Pailin camp traded gold and jewelry to the Khmer Rouge for safe passage through a blockade, escaping to Thailand in April 1975 before the mass atrocities began. Luong Ung recalled that her father bribed a soldier with a gold necklace in order to be transferred to another village where he was less likely to be recognized as a former member of the Lon Nol government.³⁶

Any form of bartering by soldiers was a violation of cooperative rules and subject to punishment. Despite their privileged status, members of the party were not allowed to flout the regime's directives. The Khmer Rouge sent thousands of their own cadres, including party leaders, to the interrogation center known as S-21 for suspected crimes against the regime. Only a handful survived. Soldiers in the villages periodically disappeared without explanation and were replaced by new ones. The network of village spies that terrorized ordinary Khmer civilians also threatened cadres. According to Sovannara Ky, a New person, "the Khmer Rouge didn't trust each other"³⁷ and sometimes looked for traitors within their own ranks, perhaps as a means of self-preservation. In one anecdote, Ky was caught with rice by two aggressive soldiers and quickly fabricated a story about a Khmer Rouge cadre that traded it to her for a gold necklace. Upon hearing the story, the two soldiers immediately went to search for the corrupt cadre, forgetting about Ky and her rice. Even in cooperatives with lenient leaders, soldiers who participated in the underground markets were still taking risks. Rumors and allegations of corruption spread quickly in Democratic Kampuchea. The atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia loomed over everyone.³⁸

Conclusion

Khmer Rouge cadres were supposed to exemplify proper political consciousness after having "received continuous constructive education from the party."³⁹ These were the men and women tasked with reeducating the population in the cooperatives. They repeated the CPK's slogans and promoted the party's agenda during frequent political lectures, haranguing villagers about the virtues of the new society and the evils of capitalism. At the same time, they bartered in the underground markets that had been banned by party leaders. The cadres accumulated watches, gold chains, and status symbols that had little to no practical function in Democratic Kampuchea. Nevertheless, despite years of indoctrination, the Khmer Rouge rank and file still coveted flashy jewelry and other frivolous goods. This represented an unintentional challenge to the authority of the regime. Almost every New and Base person in this research noticed that the cadres were ignoring the regime's own moral proclamations and edicts. Soldiers chanted revolutionary slogans and sang communist songs while celebrating the acquisition and exhibition of private property. April 17 people quietly mocked the cadres for their blatant hypocrisy.⁴⁰ Why did the soldiers need or want material possessions in the new collectivist society? It made no sense. The Khmer Rouge, like the Base people, appeared to be preparing for the end of *Angkar* by collecting valuables through theft and trade. The soldiers who had gained the most from the revolution in terms of status and improved living standards lost faith in the regime's egalitarian philosophy and their ability to run the country. Without throngs of true believers ready to fight for the ideals of the

utopian society, the Khmer Rouge collapsed as soon as Vietnamese armed forces invaded Democratic Kampuchea in December 1978.

Notes

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- Current prime minister and former Khmer Rouge military leader Hun Sen owns a collection reportedly worth \$13 million and presents Cambodian-made luxury watches as gifts to world leaders. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/hun-sen-asean-watches-11082022032911.html?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.
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11 Aftermath

Vietnamese forces invaded Democratic Kampuchea on December 25, 1978, after years of border skirmishes instigated by the Khmer Rouge. As the foreign army advanced rapidly, cadres abandoned the cooperatives to defend the country but were completely outmatched. On January 7, 1979, just two weeks after the initial assault, over 150,000 Vietnamese troops expelled Pol Pot and his colleagues from Phnom Penh for good. Vietnam installed a puppet government, led by a former Khmer Rouge division commander, Heng Samrin, of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP). The country was renamed the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Though the struggle for survival continued, the nightmare was over for millions of Khmers who had endured Pol Pot's reign of three years, eight months, and 20 days. Families gathered up their meager belongings and scavenged for supplies left behind by cadres in the camps. Survivors wandered the countryside, looking for lost relatives and opportunities to rebuild their lives. Though the KPRP "did not approve of private trading,"¹ the new government tolerated the return of commercial enterprise, and the Khmer entrepreneurial spirit reemerged.²

Barter Explosion after Khmer Rouge Collapse

Markets that were once illegal in Democratic Kampuchea flourished after the Khmer Rouge was driven out of power. While some of the Khmer population still feared a potential return of the regime, they ventured out and set up markets along roads and highways all over the country, where people gathered to trade for food for their families. "Every day was a farmer's market"³ in the first few months after the Khmer Rouge was defeated. As Vietnamese troops restricted access to Phnom Penh for several months, thousands of Khmers who had hoped to return to their homes settled on the highways outside of the city, living under trees and huts. Some of the largest and busiest markets in the country sprang up on National Highway Five, just a few kilometers north of the city. Survivors reported trading in small open markets on the side of roads throughout the PRK. According to Kong Sam-Art, the period after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge was the "top time" for bartering.⁴ Even though

the country was occupied by the military of their ancient enemy, the Khmer people had more economic freedom than at any time in the last three years.⁵

As in the labor camps, rice and gold continued as “the main currencies”⁶ in the new markets. Khmers who had hidden away rice in the camps or collected it from the fields after the Khmer Rouge fled brought their stash to the markets to swap for other goods. The number of commodities available in the markets multiplied as seasoned risk-takers snuck into the cities and smuggled out goods that had been left in people’s homes before the evacuations. Khmers traded rice for fish, fruits, vegetables, desserts, clothes, waffles, noodles, seasoning, baskets, cookware, pencils, morning glory, haircuts, cassettes, soap, homemade aluminum buckets, transportation, and equipment rentals. While some of the commodities had been available in the cooperatives, the selection paled in comparison to the extensive inventory found in the markets after the Vietnamese invasion. Savvy negotiators gradually built up their supplies of rice through daily “wheeling and dealing,”⁷ outmaneuvering inexperienced traders and taking advantage of the price fluctuations in different marketplaces. Families lugged around baskets and sacks full of rice. With markets decriminalized, the population made up for almost four years of tyrannical restrictions with a burst of activity.⁸

The people who had accumulated gold and jewelry in the cooperatives were in a strong financial position in the new markets. Unsurprisingly, gold retained its value after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea and appreciated significantly in some regions. Khmers cut their gold into tiny pieces and traded it for small everyday goods such as food, clothing, and medicine. They also used gold to buy furniture, motorcycles, watches, cows, and even land. Daravann Yi recalled that her mother paid rent for their apartment in Phnom Penh with gold necklaces and bracelets. Khmers who believed that gold would be more valuable in the long term bartered their surplus rice to accumulate more of the precious metal.⁹

Without having to hide their activities or constantly look over their shoulders for spies, trading evolved into a more sophisticated endeavor, including a focus on the measurement of commodities. After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, individuals could take their time to inspect the goods and measure their trades more accurately. Rice, primarily bartered in condensed-milk cans or *tau* in the camps, was sold in many different quantities in the post-regime markets. One of the measurements was the *kantang*. Whereas a *tau* of rice was equal to 12 kilograms, a *kantang* contained six kilograms, or 24 cans, of rice. One *thang* was approximately 24 kilograms of rice, twice the size of a *tau*, and was often sold in a sack. Barterers looking to make larger sales brought 50-kilogram sacks to the market to trade with customers. The quantity of the purchase was limited to the amount that could be carried home by the buyer. Weakened by years of scarcity, few survivors were strong enough to carry a 50-kilogram sack alone. From a transportation perspective, gold was far more practical than rice. Newly freed Khmers cut links off bracelets or sawed their gold pieces in half to barter for cheaper items. Others melted their jewelry into

small gold leaves. Suddenly, vendors had scales that they used to weigh the merchandise more precisely.¹⁰

“We all became gold experts, able to tell good quality from inferior,”¹¹ Vincent Lee remembered. People assessed the authenticity of the precious metal using a variety of techniques. Quality gold was soft, and if the piece was large enough, a barterer could test the precious metal by bending it. Some veteran traders determined its authenticity by examining the color carefully or by setting it on fire: “[I]f it’s real gold, the color remains the same, bright gold. If not, it turns black.”¹² Lee inspected gold by dropping it on the ground. “Pure gold doesn’t bounce well off a hard surface because of its relative softness.”¹³ Bartering had become a sort of spectacle in the PRK, as Khmers jockeyed for the best deals and carefully examined the goods to avoid getting swindled. The hard times were far from over, but a hint of optimism surfaced in the stories from the period immediately after the Khmer Rouge collapse.¹⁴

When asked for details of their trading exploits, Khmers exhibited the extraordinary ability to recall exchange rates for specific transactions. A woman named Khout Pheu stated that she traded her 2.5 *chi* gold necklace for seven cans of rice after the regime fell. Prices fluctuated widely by month and region. Pan Ren recalled that one *chi* of gold fetched 25 kilograms of rice in Tbong Khmum, while Moeurn Kong only received 30 cans for the same amount of gold in Kampong Chnang. Haing Ngor made an incredible claim that one *damleung* (37.5 grams) of gold, which traded for a single can of rice in 1978, “bought a sack containing 1,750 cans of rice” in the city of Battambang one year later.¹⁵ A few Khmers contended that the value of rice decreased significantly after the first year of the new government as farming resumed and markets proliferated. Others proclaimed that rice became more expensive over time, doubling in value in the provinces of Kampong Cham and Kampong Chnang. “At the beginning, one *mace* of gold equaled 20 kilograms of rice, but later it was equal to only ten kilograms of rice.”¹⁶

As the country gradually reintroduced infrastructure, Cambodians found salaried jobs that paid workers in rice, including government positions. “Public servants were paid in rice.”¹⁷ Kao Yeng claimed that her husband loaded and unloaded cargo on Vietnamese boats in exchange for rice. Another Khmer reported receiving 30 to 50 cans per day of work. Businesses and entrepreneurs paid employees with gold, oil, canned food, soap, and gasoline. Workers then took their “wages” to the markets and bartered them for the goods they needed.¹⁸

As the number of competitors increased, so did the types of currencies. While rice and gold maintained their status as primary currencies during and after the Khmer Rouge era, people improvised and made good with what they had. Many people at the markets coveted clothing and fabrics, especially after wearing the same colorless outfits over the past four years. Jennifer Lau recalled that her mother traded flip-flops for a meal and lodging at a stranger’s house. Salt was another form of currency that was more valuable than gold at times. In certain areas, actual currency was used in the markets. A number of former

camp residents in the southwestern region of the PRK remembered people trading with the Vietnamese *dong*. One man claimed that he bought goods with money that he had saved from the Lon Nol regime. Families that did not have access to rice or gold traded various types of food at the new markets.¹⁹

Though much of the population struggled to obtain adequate food, many entrepreneurs thrived in the period after the Khmer Rouge. Yi remembered Phnom Penh being “alive and full of people” and that he “could not believe that people had already started to rebuild businesses without having official currency.”²⁰ Khmers who owned the means of production earned steady profits. Chak Ny’s family bought a rice milling machine for 20 *chi* of gold, and then rented it to others for a portion of their rice. Chun Neang owned a sewing machine and sold her services for food. Others traded for fishing nets, then bartered their yield in the markets. Khmers with access to boats offered rides to travelers for rice. Some Red Cross truck drivers traded rides to the cities for gold or diamonds. Khmers without access to equipment improvised. Families worked together to make snacks, such as rice flour and honey cakes, then bartered a portion of them for supplies to replenish their inventories. Khmers, young and old, exchanged petrol, soap, palm sugar, thyme, bamboo shoots, ice, and anything else they could find to make a living. One enterprising family collected hundreds of banana leaves and sold them at the markets as wrappers for other goods. Intermediaries traveled long distances to earn profits in different markets.²¹

Khmer entrepreneurs found success at the border markets. “Hundreds of thousands of desperate survivors headed for the Thai border with whatever valuables they had,”²² recalled Seng BouAddheka. The trips to the Thailand border were perilous, with bandits, soldiers, and landmines lying in wait for their next victims. Nevertheless, Khmers bartered their gold and jewelry at the border for “anything one needed to start a new life,”²³ which they later sold in the PRK for profits. The vast array of items included flip-flops, sarongs, hats, scarves, candy, cutlery, whiskey, makeup, rope, and toothpaste. Sokphal Din started a smuggling business, traveling to the Thai border in the back of a truck to trade his 24-karat gold pieces for cigarettes. Returning from his first trip, he trekked to Siem Reap, where he sold the cigarettes for double the price. Din continued to trade at the border, using his profits to buy a bicycle for regular two-day journeys from Siem Reap to the Svay Sisophon markets near the border. On the other side of the country, Khmers traveled to Vietnam to conduct business, trading their gold for a variety of products.²⁴

Survivors also found willing trading partners among the Vietnamese soldiers in the PRK, as military personnel willingly profited off the local population. The occupying force from Vietnam had access to many useful goods, including machinery, such as generators and motors. Civilians exchanged their gold for these items. They also traded with soldiers for food and rides in their military vehicles. While some survivors expressed gratitude for the expulsion of the Khmer Rouge and recalled positive experiences with the soldiers, the

relationship between the Khmers and Vietnamese was complicated. Old prejudices resurfaced. According to Teeda Butt Mam, the Vietnamese treated Chinese Khmers as second-class citizens. Others accused the soldiers of serious abuses against the local population.²⁵

While this was a period of relative freedom with glimpses of hope, opportunists and criminals preyed on the incautious. Market vendors sometimes sold their rice in slightly smaller cups to trick unsuspecting traders and protect their supply. People attempted to sell fake gold to inexperienced barterers. When Lee's bicycle repair shop needed more customers, his two brothers placed nails on the highway to improve their business prospects. Theft was common. As with the evacuation from the cities in 1975, Cambodian families sewed secret pockets into their clothing to hide their valuables or buried them in the ground. Sam Neang declared that there were "too many rice muggings" in Tbong Khmum.²⁶ Bandits plagued the countryside, preying on Cambodians escaping to Thailand. Survivors hoping to get to refugee camps in Thailand attempted to hide their valuables from the thieves, sometimes taking extreme measures to protect their remaining assets. Several former refugees wrote of people swallowing their diamonds or hiding gold in their nostrils or anuses on their trek to the border.²⁷

Many Khmers hired guides to help them get to Thailand. These individuals promised families safe passage to Thai refugee camps in exchange for gold, often charging exorbitant prices. Though their prospects had improved after the CPK was removed from power, many Cambodians still struggled to feed their families and worried about the unstable political climate. Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese troops continued to clash, and the population did not trust the new government due to its ties to Cambodia's ancient rival. Desperate to leave their home country, thousands of Khmers turned to guides to smuggle family members into Thailand, where they hoped to immigrate to foreign countries and rebuild their lives. The journey to the border was extremely dangerous, as bandits and soldiers hunted for victims, stealing their valuables and sexually assaulting young women. It was also an expensive endeavor. "It would take everything we had to pay the five guides, as well as bribe camp guards and officials,"²⁸ recalled Mam. "The going rate was an ounce of gold (28 grams) per refugee,"²⁹ though others paid far more for the service. For a three-day boat trip to Thailand, Khmers paid up to ten ounces of gold per person. Some guides swindled their customers, taking their money without delivering the people to the refugee camps. In order to ensure that relatives were safely delivered to Thailand, leery families negotiated to pay half of the fee after the journey was completed. Desperate Cambodians decided that the risks and the price were worth it to leave their broken country behind.³⁰

Once inside the refugee camps in Thailand, bartering resumed. The refugee camp in Khao I Dang (KID), which opened in late 1979, was the largest and most well-known, housing over 150,000 Khmers in January 1980. Though it was an improvement over life under the Khmer Rouge, "KID

camp was no picnic.”³¹ Hastily constructed by relief agencies, in conjunction with the Thai government, the many holding centers offered basic medical services, food, water, and shelter to the hundreds of thousands of Khmers who escaped the PRK. The camps only provided a minimal amount of food to the refugees, so families that still had some valuables bartered for bamboo huts, cookware, and additional food. Private enterprise blossomed. “Almost every refugee was a trader to some extent.”³² In the Nong Chan camp, Channy Laux’s mother bought pineapples from Thai villagers who lived nearby, which were then cut into eight slices and resold for profit. Sokphal Din worked as an intermediary at the Rythissen camp, buying and selling various goods to Thai and Khmer people. A few Khmers who spoke English worked for camp administrators as translators and were paid in food. Refugees used currency, the Thai *baht*, for the first time in many years. This became the new standard of trade in the camps, as Khmers sold their gold and food for actual money. Refugees continued their efforts to achieve some semblance of financial stability as they waited patiently for months and years in dismal conditions for a relative or a church to sponsor their immigration to a new country. Camp administrators worked on thousands of immigration applications. Refugees without any contacts in foreign countries paid Khmers with sponsors to pretend to be part of their families so that they had a chance to leave the Thai camps and start anew.³³

The Reintroduction of Currency

Survivors who stayed in Cambodia witnessed the reintroduction of the new Khmer *riel*. On October 10, 1979, nine months after Vietnamese forces ousted the Khmer Rouge from power, the PRK reestablished a central bank, the People’s Bank of Kampuchea, which served as the country’s monetary authority, commercial bank, and national treasury.³⁴ Five months later, on March 20, 1980, the bank reissued banknotes in the amounts of one dime, two dimes, five dimes, one *riel*, five *riels*, 10 *riels*, 20 *riels*, and 50 *riels*. Nearly five years after the CPK began its extreme economic experiment, Cambodians were finally able to use their own currency again. Within a few weeks, government officials announced a ban on the use of Vietnamese *dong*, disrupting the personal finances of Khmers who had accumulated the foreign currency for over a year. Though Cambodians were able to recall minute details of prices and trades in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge, their memories of the reintroduction of currency were relatively hazy. Many of the interviewees did not remember the announcement of the new banknotes or the year of the issuance. This was indicative of the slow and gradual integration of the new currency combined with the general indifference of the population, who had become accustomed to bartering and remained skeptical of the new government’s economic plans. Respondents also misremembered the denominations and the image printed on the new currency, as if the reintroduction of money was relatively insignificant.³⁵

The PRK distributed the new banknotes through several different channels. The government began paying the salaries of civil servants in *riels*. The state also provided loans to individuals to stimulate the economy and further circulate the currency. Borrowers were encouraged to grow crops, fish, and restore farms. Yong Kin and Chun Neang received the new currency from the department of commerce in exchange for their husked rice. Kin also asserted that the district office in her region lent 20,000 riels to each family. Sam Neang recalled that people in her village received loans of 400 riels from the government, though the disparity in the amounts of the loans suggests an error in memory by one of the individuals. While the reintroduction of currency represented a move toward economic stability, the Khmer people continued to barter with rice, gold, and other commodities. According to many survivors, the population did not use the new currency consistently for another two to three years.³⁶

Conclusion

Reflecting on the flurry of trade and small markets that had sprung up all over the highways in 1979, Vincent Lee proclaimed, “capitalism had been reborn.”³⁷ Though the PRK was technically a socialist state, the government adopted a pragmatic approach to the economy and permitted private enterprise as officials made preparations to deal with the humanitarian crisis it inherited. The eruption of barter and markets in the months after the expulsion of the Khmer Rouge marked the evolution and expansion of the underground exchanges in the cooperatives and the reemergence of the economic system that existed before the revolution. Former New people worked day and night collecting and creating commodities to barter in the markets in attempts to feed their families. Base people who accumulated valuables in the cooperatives traded for goods that could be used to rebuild their lives. While hundreds of thousands fled to refugee camps in Thailand, millions of Cambodians remained in the devastated country with the hope that the old economic system would allow them to determine their own financial future. This was not a validation of the prerevolutionary economy, as Cambodians participated in the quasi-legal markets out of necessity, but it did represent a rejection of the CPK’s ideology and indoctrination efforts. Despite the tremendous suffering during this period and the indignity of Vietnamese soldiers patrolling the streets, Cambodians readily acknowledged that the freedoms in the PRK were an improvement over the empty promises of economic security and equality under the Khmer Rouge. Survivors reunited with their remaining family members. People moved relatively freely through the countryside. Khmers resumed their religious practices without having to watch out for spies or cadres. None of the sources expressed any nostalgia for life under the Khmer Rouge, not even the rural peasants who were purportedly venerated by the regime as model citizens. Despite years of compelled indoctrination, the CPK’s vision of a collectivist, egalitarian society was dismissed by the Khmer people.

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Conclusion

In the introduction of this book, three main arguments were presented regarding the development of underground markets in Democratic Kampuchea. Though these assertions have been addressed and discussed at length in the previous chapters, the conclusions will be reiterated and summarized here. The first assertion was that the underground markets in the cooperatives saved the lives of many Cambodians. This is not a particularly controversial argument. There is ample evidence for this claim, especially as it pertains to the April 17 people. Primary sources repeatedly stated that their survival hinged on the additional food and medicine obtained from bartering in the underground exchanges. Interview subjects and authors of memoirs witnessed trading in the majority of Cambodian provinces from the northwest border near Thailand to the southern region adjoining Vietnam. Though markets did not exist in every cooperative and varied in size and participation rates, this study clearly demonstrates that the practice was widespread. Therefore, if the majority of primary sources reported the existence of illegal markets in their cooperatives, and the claims by New people that their survival depended upon bartering are to be believed, then an assumption can be made about the number of lives saved due to the underground exchanges. Though the exact numbers are unknowable, a conservative extrapolation of the data suggests that thousands, if not tens of thousands, of Khmers are alive today because someone in their family bartered for food or medicine in the camps of Democratic Kampuchea.

The second point was that the markets were the most dangerous method of obtaining food because each transaction depended upon the cooperation and discretion of two or more people. Villagers who foraged for food in the fields or stole rice from the cooperatives also risked their lives, but these were actions by individuals that did not depend on the loyalty or discretion of others. In a society where the social classes were pitted against each other by the Khmer Rouge, placing trust in another human being was perilous. The labor camps operated as miniature surveillance states, with cadres and spies constantly on the lookout for transgressions against the regime. Cadres who caught villagers bartering forced the perpetrators to reveal the names of other traders through torture. Family members of suspects accused of trading were killed to deter

other camp residents from bartering. A single trade endangered the lives of many. Fear and suspicion were constants in the cooperatives.

Despite the risks, New people had no choice but to engage with the Base people to acquire food. This required a combination of daring and sophistication. April 17 people needed to be able to network with other villagers and build relationships with trading partners. They had to be able to identify reliable, careful, and trustworthy individuals who would not betray them. A Base person who felt they got less than they deserved in a trade could falsely accuse a New person of a crime and have them arrested without any evidence. New people were in extremely vulnerable positions. They developed friendships with rural peasants who had been trained by the Khmer Rouge to view them as class enemies. April 17 people also had to negotiate the best deals possible to conserve their limited inventory of valuables. Since Base people held most of the necessities, New people approached each transaction from a weak negotiating position. The supply of goods changed frequently, sparking price fluctuations. The former city residents needed to be shrewd and quick-witted in a stressful and volatile social environment.

The final argument of the book is that the regime could neither control market forces nor suppress the demand for extravagances in the cooperatives. Despite its efforts to indoctrinate the citizens and punish undesirable behaviors, villagers still participated in the illegal markets in labor camps in every corner of the country. April 17 people bartered their valuables for food because the rations distributed by the regime were inadequate. Base people traded for jewelry and clothes because they believed the regime would eventually fall apart. Even the Khmer Rouge cadres collected watches and gold chains in anticipation of the downfall of the regime. The people at the top of the new social hierarchy lost faith in the regime's ability to successfully manage the revolution and secretly longed for the old economic system that the Khmer Rouge destroyed. There was no plan to deal with droughts other than to reduce rations. Khmer engineers who might have been able to help rebuild the country had been killed. Ideological rigidity trumped practical approaches to governance. The CPK's failure to fulfill the promise of improved living standards and deliver the benefits of collectivism led to serious misgivings about the regime's competency.

In addition to this, the regime's effort to promote its vision of the new system to the population failed miserably. The slogans and revolutionary songs did not create converts. The lectures at the frequent ideological training sessions about the evils of capitalism were generally disregarded. Propaganda about egalitarianism and condemnations of private property and imperialist luxury goods was ignored. The Khmer Rouge could not persuade the Base people or even the soldiers to give up the status symbols of the old society, even under the threat of violence. In a country where the population wore the same clothes and hairstyles, Base people sought out gold, jewelry, and fancy clothing from the cities despite the fact that these items could not be displayed or worn in the cooperatives. At the same time, these rural villagers were

trading away their finite supplies of rice and medicine for nonessential goods in a time of economic insecurity. The rice that was supposed to finance the CPK's effort to build the utopian communist state was being bartered for sarongs and gold necklaces. Moreover, the regime failed to curtail the demand for private property among its most fervent supporters, the Khmer Rouge soldiers. Instead, these cadres seized upon the opportunity to capitalize on communism, accumulating high-end foreign watches and gold chains for their cigarette lighters. Impressionable young men, one of the target audiences for the CPK's propaganda, walked around the cooperatives wearing flashy jewelry, in direct conflict with their ideological training.

The underground markets and the commodities exchanged by villagers of both classes represented a challenge to the authoritarian regime. New people despised the Khmer Rouge and the ideology that demonized them. Base people and cadres ignored the proclamations about collectivism and egalitarianism and acted in their own self-interest. Opportunism undermined idealism. Cadres and rural villagers extracted wealth from the former upper classes, undermining the CPK's stated goal of creating an egalitarian economic system that benefited everyone. This is not to imply that the underground markets brought down the Khmer Rouge. Many other factors contributed to its downfall, most notably the CPK's constant antagonism toward Vietnam. When the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia in December 1978, Khmer Rouge soldiers exhibited a lack of will to defend the country against the superior forces of Vietnam, and the regime evacuated from Phnom Penh two weeks later. In the end, the underground markets became a symbol of the CPK's naivety about its ability to impose massive changes on a population and transform society and human behavior. The authoritarian dictatorship could not simply force people to abandon their culture and financial interests without providing a viable alternative or producing tangible results. Soon after the Khmer Rouge was expelled from the capital, Cambodians reunited with their remaining family members and worked to restore their farms, markets, religion, and ancient customs.

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