
SONGS AT THE EDGE OF DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA

Alexander Laban Hinton*

At a first glance, it might seem difficult to see the threads connecting David Chandler's essay "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" to his more recent works on Democratic Kampuchea (DK), such as *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*.¹ How, for example, does one move from an ancient story ("How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name") about a mother who abandons her three daughters in the forest to the depths of twentieth-century torture at a place like Tuol Sleng? Chandler provides us with a model and a clue, as he frames the stories in the "Songs" essay in terms of moral order, arguing that they manifest a tension between a vision of what *should* be and the reality of what *is*. During the tumultuous period in Cambodian history that preceded French colonialism, Chandler argues, such stories wove a meaningful narrative between an idealized conception of a properly ordered society and a world frequently characterized by violence, chaos, and fragmentation (see also Hansen, this volume).

In this essay, I argue that this tension between order and disorder—which encompasses the fluctuation between states of meaning and meaninglessness, purity and contamination, and clarity and blindness—has direct relevance to understanding Democratic Kampuchea and the dynamics of violence in places like Tuol Sleng. In the multidimensional spirit of Chandler's work, I move toward the DK sociomoral order and Tuol Sleng through another Cambodian legend concerned with moral order, *Tum Teav*, which concludes with King Reamea's obliteration of Governor Archoun's (*Archoun*) family line seven generations removed.

* David Chandler has been an inspiration, and I'd like to thank him, first and foremost, for his groundbreaking work and the mentoring he has provided to so many junior Cambodia Studies scholars, including me. I'd also like to recognize Judy Ledgerwood and Anne Hansen for their tireless work in editing this volume, and Deborah Homsher for her copyediting of my chapter. Thanks also to Nicole Cooley who, as always, provided helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ David P. Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perception of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Facing the Cambodian Past, Selected Essays 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1996), pp. 76–99; David P. Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

Before turning to *Tum Teav*, I want to note that Chandler's work in general, and the "Songs" essay in particular, suggests that "order"—that hoped-for movement toward the more rarely attained condition of "proper arrangement,"² with all of its idealized entailments (purity, prosperity, cohesion, clarity, and so forth) and feared antitheses (impurity, poverty, fragmentation, chaos, degeneration, darkness)—is a root metaphor in Cambodian society. This theme emerges clearly in the essays in this volume, all of which touch upon order in different ways. Some focus on the ritual mechanisms for reordering, as illustrated by John Marston's focus on temple building, Ashley Thompson's analysis of possession, and Judy Ledgerwood's discussion of the political rites invoked by the leaders of the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Others, including my own, stress literary narratives that enact public models of ordering. Thus, Anne Hansen's chapter explores how two Buddhist narratives, the *Kotelok* and *Buddh Tumneay*, emplot the consequences of lives and times that are more or less ordered in accordance with Buddhist Dhamma.

Besides its foregrounding of the centrality of order in Cambodia, Chandler's "Songs" essay stands out in at least two other key ways. First, even as he takes up the issue of order, Chandler does so in a non-reified manner that recognizes ambiguity—or the "gaps in the world," as the title of Hansen's essay puts it. The world of "Songs" is one of liminal spaces, uncertainties, questions of meaning, and transitions, "gaps" that are taken up in various ways by the authors in this volume, perhaps most clearly by Edwards when she revisits the *srok/prei* distinction in the "Songs" essay's examination of "How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got its Name." It is precisely through these ambiguities and "gaps" that Chandler is able to raise the larger existential questions that give his analysis such power.

Second, the power of "Songs" is also related to the way in which Chandler moves from a very local or textually oriented perspective to much larger sociopolitical processes. Despite their wide range, the essays in this volume all follow Chandler in making such linkages, as they discuss such issues as millennialism (Hansen, Ledgerwood, and Marston), the colonial encounter (Au and Edwards), political transitions (Ledgerwood and Davis), Democratic Kampuchea (Edwards, Hinton, and Thompson), and the intersection of the local and global (Hansen). As this brief discussion suggests, and the essays in this volume attest, Chandler's work serves as both a foundation and a model for the current and future generations of scholars working in Cambodia studies. For this we owe him great thanks. Following Chandler's theoretical work on narrative, I now turn to the connections between *Tum Teav* and DK.

Tum Teav

The King listened to Pech describe [Tum's murder].
 He became frightfully angry. [He] spoke ...
 "Inform the soldiers
 Without delay
 To seize the [a-] villain whose heart and mind [*chett*] know no bounds.
 Whoever dares to disobey me will be reduced to ashes!"
 "The [*vea*] scoundrel dared to oppose me [*anh*]!"

² Chandler, "Songs," p. 77.

The punishment: chopping, boiling, being pounded into the earth and buried
up to the neck,
Then death by raking over the head.
Don't doubt [me] for one second, despicable [a-] Archoun!"
— Tum Teav³

The story of *Tum Teav*, which bears similarity to *Romeo and Juliet*, was first put into writing by the nineteenth-century poet Sânthor Mok and is thought to have a partial basis in historical fact. Because Sânthor Mok's manuscript was in poor shape, a poet and monk named Preah Botumthera Saom reworked *Tum Teav* in 1915. Cambodian scholars still debate whether Sânthor Mok or Botumthera should be considered the author of the manuscript.⁴ Beginning in 1958, *Tum Teav* was integrated into the national curriculum of Cambodian secondary schools and universities; it is also recounted orally by village elders and parents and sometimes dramatically enacted. Most Cambodians are thus familiar with this legend, which is perhaps the most famous romantic epic in the Cambodian literary tradition.

Set in the sixteenth century, *Tum Teav* begins when Tum, a handsome young monk, sets out with a fellow monk and friend, Pech, to sell bamboo tables for their pagoda. When they arrive at a village in Tbaung Khmum province, the inhabitants coax Tum, who has a lovely voice, into singing religious chants. Teav, a beautiful young girl, hears Tum sing, falls in love with him, and sends Tum a message telling him about her feelings. After Tum returns to his pagoda, he and Teav suffer enormously because they miss each other so much. Consumed by misery, Tum decides to disrobe against the will of the chief monk, who has foreseen that Tum will have bad fortune if he does this. Tum and Pech return to Tbaung Khmum.

Hearing of Teav's beauty and her family's wealth, the powerful provincial governor, Archoun (*Ârchoun*), and his wife decide to seek Teav's hand in marriage for their son. Teav's mother is jubilant about the prospect of her daughter's marriage into such a powerful family. She tells Teav, "I [am] giving you in marriage to the Governor's [son],/[So we can] have happiness from rank [*bon*] and wealth!/[We will have] daunting power [*amnach*] and status [*sakti yos*]"⁵ Teav's mother becomes outraged when Teav, who longs for Tum, refuses to consent to the marriage. When Tum arrives in Tbaung Khmum, he goes to Teav's house and professes his love. She invites him to stay with her and they become lovers. The next day, Teav's mother returns from an overnight trip to find Tum there. Not knowing that Tum and Teav are lovers, she agrees to let Tum stay at the house. Meanwhile, Archoun's son begins to bring gifts to Teav in an attempt to win her favor.

The King of Cambodia, Reamea, hears of Tum's wonderful singing and sends for him to come sing at the palace. King Reamea is so impressed that he asks Tum to remain at the palace as a court singer. At the same time, the king sends emissaries throughout the land to find a royal concubine. In Tbaung Khmum, the emissaries see

³ Saom (Preah Botumthera), *Tum Teav* (Paris: Cedoreck, 1986), p. 116. The translation is largely based on George Chigas, "A Draft Translation of the Story of *Tum Teav* by Preah Botumthera Saom" (Masters thesis, Cornell University, 2000), pp. 506–08; and Sophea Mouth (personal communication).

⁴ For an interesting analysis, history, and draft translation of the text of *Tum Teav*, see Chigas, "A Draft Translation."

⁵ Saom, *Tum Teav*, verse 49, translated in Chigas, "A Draft Translation," pp. 240–41.

Teav and decide she would be a perfect match for the king. Hoping to curry favor with the king, Archoun agrees to break off his son's engagement to Teav. Teav's mother is even more pleased about this turn of events. Teav and Tum continue to suffer in their longing for one another. When Teav arrives at the palace, King Reamea calls for Tum to sing for his prospective concubine. Upon seeing that the woman is Teav, Tum decides to risk death by singing about his love affair with her. The king becomes extremely angry, but Teav tells the king that Tum has spoken the truth. King Reamea's anger diminishes, and he arranges for the two of them to wed.

Upon hearing that her daughter has married the impoverished Tum, Teav's mother becomes very upset. She decides to send a message to Teav saying that she is gravely ill and asking Teav to return home to nurse her back to health. Meanwhile, she goes to see Archoun and arranges for Teav to be married to Archoun's son, complaining "I'm so angry, Governor, with despicable [a-] Tum/[He has] brought disgrace [to my] reputation [ap aon ke]./[He is] arrogant [and] has no respect for anyone."⁶ When Teav discovers her mother's real intentions, she is devastated and ignores her mother's tirade about Archoun's wealth and the importance of reputation. Heartbroken, Teav sends Tum a letter explaining what has happened. Tum becomes furious and immediately returns to Tbaung Khmum with a letter from the king declaring that he authorized Tum and Teav's marriage.

Tum and Pech arrive in Tbaung Khmum on the day of the wedding. After working his way through the crowd, Tum calls out for Teav, who comes and reaffirms her love for him. Tum asks her to get him a drink, neglecting to present the king's letter to Archoun. While she is gone, Teav's mother complains angrily to Archoun about Tum's audacity and lack of respect. Enraged, Archoun and his son act on their "evil [thoughts] toward Tum./[They] had no pity [or] compassion [for] Tum./[In their] aversion [and] fury./[They] drew [their] swords [and] banded together. [They] grabbed [Tum and] stabbed [and] hacked [at him] without discussion./ ... [beating his] entire body to a pulp./Blood flowed without end. [They] split open [his head]."⁷ Archoun's men dump Tum's battered body on the side of the road near a Bodhi tree, where he dies in pain. Upon hearing of his death, Teav runs to the spot, takes out a knife, cuts her throat, and then falls on top of Tum's body so they will die together.

Following these events, Pech returns to the palace and tells the king what has transpired. King Reamea becomes incensed that Archoun has killed Tum and disregarded his authority, and he orders his army to prepare to march to Tbaung Khmum. When they arrive there, Archoun, who is extremely frightened, brings offerings to the king to assuage his anger. King Reamea ignores these supplications and commands that Archoun's family and relatives seven generations removed be buried up to their necks in the ground and then have their heads raked off by an iron plow and harrow. In addition, all the members of Archoun's political faction are to be boiled alive and the residents of the district forbidden to leave the area. After King Reamea's subordinates carry out his orders to annihilate Archoun's line and faction in this manner, King Reamea returns to his palace.

As was true in the three narratives David Chandler discusses in "Songs"—"How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name," the story of Thon and the abbot, and the historical Wat Srolauv chronicle—*Tum Teav* is centrally concerned with questions of moral

⁶ Ibid., verse 81, translated in Chigas, "A Draft Translation," p. 368.

⁷ Ibid., verse 104, translated in Chigas, "A Draft Translation," pp. 495–61.

order, manifesting the tension between order and disorder, mindfulness and ignorance, clarity and delusion. Throughout the text, an idealized vision of a properly ordered society is juxtaposed against the real world, where characters stumble and make terrible mistakes, leading to violence and disruption. Much of the story revolves around issues of hierarchy and relative social standing. Each person occupies a place in the social order, which entails a set of expectations about how they should act and be treated by others. The text is replete with hierarchical idioms that signify a character's status. King Reamea and the abbot, for example, are described and referred to using registers of "otherworldly respect."⁸ Their high status is further reflected by nonverbal behaviors, as people bow down, respectfully greet, or prostrate themselves before these mighty figures. When King Reamea approaches Tbaung Khmum, Archoun even builds an elevated road to honor him.

The story also emphasizes the tremendous merit and power of figures like Reamea, Archoun, and the abbot of Tum's temple, describing them as people who have *amnach*, *baromey*, or *bon*. Such individuals display signs of their merit and power, such as the abbot's ability to discern the truth and King Reamea's regalia, vast authority, and ability to crush his enemies. (Tum also has a degree of power, as illustrated by his knowledge and skill.) Because of their high social standing, such people are in a position to serve as patrons. The abbot first serves as Tum's patron while he is a monk, while King Reamea later assumes this role, providing Tum with rank and position in return for his services and loyalty. Reamea also commands a large circle of clients—they, in turn, have their own patronage networks—whom he uses to quash a disloyal client, Archoun (and Archoun's "string"). Archoun attempts to assuage his royal patron's anger through offerings and supplications. Reamea is also depicted as a potent center whose power to reorder the world is ritually displayed during moments such as his departure for Tbaung Khmum: before setting off, Reamea and his entourage march around his palace, itself a representation of the center of the cosmos, three times.

The number three is a symbolically loaded number in Buddhism, denoting the ordering power of the "Three Gems" of Buddhism—the Buddha, the Dhamma (the truths preached by the Buddha), and the Sangha (the monastic order that the Buddha founded).⁹ During religious ceremonies, Cambodians usually declare their faith in the "Three Gems" and burn three sticks of incense before an image of the Buddha. There are three realms in Buddhist cosmology (the Realms of Desire, Form, and Formlessness), three "baskets" of Buddhist doctrine (the basket of discourses, of discipline, and of metaphysics), and three cardinal vices (desire, passion, and ignorance) and virtues (compassion, equanimity, and wisdom) in Buddhist morality. Moreover, in attaining enlightenment, the Buddha gains the superordinate "threefold knowledge" of his past lives, the nature of rebirth, and the origins and elimination of suffering. Other icons of hierarchy and order, including mandala symbols such as the sunshade and Bodhi tree, also appear in *Tum Teav*.

⁸ John Marston, "Cambodia 1991–1994: Hierarchy, Neutrality, and Etiquettes of Discourse" (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 1997).

⁹ The following lines about the symbolism of the number three are taken from Alexander Laban Hinton, "Under the Shade of Pol Pot's Umbrella: Mandala, Myth, and Politics in the Cambodian Genocide," in *The Vision Thing: Myth, Politics, and Psyche in the World*, ed. Thomas Singer (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), pp. 170–204, which also includes a more detailed discussion of mandala symbolism.

Nevertheless, while representative of an idealized moral order, many of these same characters are motivated by more worldly concerns that lead them to act in disruptive, disordered ways, a theme that also emerges clearly in Anne Hansen's essay in this collection. Most of the characters in *Tum Teav*, for example, are deeply concerned about face, honor, and reputation. Teav's mother exemplifies this tendency, as she is obsessed with increasing her family's status through marriage. She angrily chastises Teav for falling in love with a person of undistinguished origin, an act that will shame her and destroy the family's reputation. Tum's actions are also influenced by honor, as he returns to Tbaung Khmum to fight for Teav and does not use King Reamea as a "back" by showing the letter. In many ways, Tum personifies the trope of the heroic warrior who "struggles" (*sou*) against adversity, even to the point of challenging powerful figures regardless of the poor odds for success. Status concerns also motivate the violence of Archoun and Reamea. When Tum dares to disturb Archoun's son's wedding, for example, Archoun loses face since he is the local governor and others should fear and respect him. Kru, a highly respected high school teacher from Kompong Cham, explained to me, "This made Archoun [and his son] angry. They lost honor and face before others [*bak ketteyos ke bak muk bak moat ke*] because there were many guests at the wedding. When someone does something like this, it also destroys one's power and potency [*amnach etthipol*]." King Reamea's reputation and power are similarly threatened by Archoun's defiance. In both cases, the protagonists respond with brutality, in a display of power, completely crushing those who would dare challenge them.

At its core, *Tum Teav*, like the brahmani text from Ind's *Kotelok* that Hansen discusses in this volume, remains a deeply Buddhist tale involving a moral critique of various disordering behaviors, particularly violence and anger. In Buddhist ontology, such actions stem from ignorance and desire, which lead one to become self-absorbed, to act in a "mindless" manner, and to suffer, thereby fueling the process of dependent origination.¹⁰ Almost all of the conflicts in *Tum Teav* proceed in this manner, as the characters are driven by the Buddhist vices of greed (*lobha*), anger (*dosa*), pride (*mana*), and delusion (*moha*). Ignorance and attachment are at the core of the story, as Tum and Teav fall in love and are consumed by desire. This leads them to experience excruciating suffering (*dukkha*), a theme that pervades the text (see also Edwards and Hansen, this volume). Thus, after Tum returns to his temple, Teav's torment is described as follows:

Miss Teav, worried, [was] always in seclusion.
 She had become very miserable and withdrawn.
 Increasingly uncertain, [she] awaited Tum's return.
 [She] said [to herself], "My regret pains [my] body.
 [I] can't relax. The weight [on my] body [is] like a mountain.
 The mountain [was] uprooted [and] fell, pinning me down.
 [My] breath [is] intermittent. [I'm] scared to death.
 Enough! Oh Tum, I'm dying!
 [My] body [is] pale [and] emaciated [from this] misery."¹¹

¹⁰ Maha Gosananda, *Step by Step: Meditations on Wisdom and Compassion* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1992); Phra Prayudh Payutto, *Buddhadhamma: Natural Laws and Values for Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 72–73.

¹¹ Saom, *Tum Teav*, p. 25, translated in Chigas, "A Draft Translation," pp. 139–40, with slight modifications.

Tum is similarly plunged into “darkness” and suffering by his desire. As Kru noted, Tum’s ignorance is surprising because he is a monk and should have developed clarity of mind:

Tum’s heart [*chett*] is characterized by rapid change. Tum is a monk and should have moral discipline ... but when he meets Teav, Tum’s thoughts quickly change and become attached to Teav. He is unable to block and control [*tuap skat*] [his desire] in the mindful manner befitting a monk. ... He can’t block his heart [*tuap chett*] or keep his emotions in check [*tâmkal chett*], so he decides to disrobe.

Elsewhere the text suggests that this weakness of character may be in part related to Tum’s inflated sense of himself.

Caught up in an escalating cycle of desire and delusion, Tum lies to his mother and the abbot about the reasons he is disrobing. The abbot, who manifests the quality of mindfulness, immediately discerns the truth but gives Tum permission to disrobe. Throughout the remainder of the text, Tum’s impurity of mind is depicted through metaphors of misdirection, darkness, and the wild. Thus, while returning to Tbaung Khmum, Tum becomes “lost” in the jungle—tormented by fear and worry, shrouded in darkness, heated by passion, and deluded by hallucinations. By the time he arrives in Tbaung Khmum, Tum is like a “crazy” person, frightening to the first people he encounters, a group of children.

It is precisely in such states that people become particularly prone to violence and anger. Thus, Tum becomes “hot” and angry when he learns that the object of his desire, Teav, is to be wed to the king and, later, Archoun’s son. Other characters are attracted to material wealth and status. Teav’s mother repeatedly flies into fits of rage when her desire to increase the family’s status is thwarted by Tum and Teav. When Teav tells her that she loves Tum, Teav’s mother “cursed [Teav] saying, ‘Scoundrel! [You are] stubborn as steel. / I [would like] to grab [your] mouth [and] tear [it] apart now.’”¹² Attached to their power and status, King Reamea and Archoun also become enraged when others challenge their face, honor, and authority. To highlight the consequences of such anger, the text describes the violence they perpetrate in graphic detail. Revenge is a strong undercurrent of the action, as various actors harbor grudges for perceived slights and affronts; the Buddhist abbot, in contrast, manifests the mindfulness that enables a person to replace anger and vengeance with compassion and forgiveness.

Like “How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name” and the story of Thon and the abbot in “Songs,” then, *Tum Teav* manifests the tension between order and disorder, as angry, “disordered” characters are described through metaphors of heat, confusion, and blindness, states of mind that lead them to commit the sin of violence. Tum, the hero of the story, even dies at the base of a Bodhi tree, a symbol of the clarity of vision that readers may gain as they learn about the consequences of ignorance and desire and are shown that ultimately everything, like Tum’s body, is “impermanent

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 85, translated in Chigas, “A Draft Translation,” p. 383.

like a pile of sand.”¹³ Elsewhere, I have discussed how *Tum Teav* embodies local understandings of anger and revenge that patterned part of the violence during DK.¹⁴ Here, I want to turn in a different direction, linking *Tum Teav*, the DK moral order, and Tuol Sleng through Chandler’s dialectic of order and disorder.

SONGS AT THE EDGE OF THE DK REVOLUTIONARY ORDER

Given the pain, suffering, and horror that echoed within the halls of Tuol Sleng, it is difficult to pick a point of entry into this institution of death. Perhaps it is apposite to move outside the prison’s walls and back in time before it began operation, reapproaching Tuol Sleng from the broader context that shaped its institutional form and function. If Tuol Sleng may be viewed as a symbolic ordering mechanism, the DK regime’s obsession with purity and order was apparent from the moment the Khmer Rouge took power.

Within days, Khmer Rouge radio broadcasts began asserting the glories of the new regime, contrasting its purity to the decadence of the US-backed government it had overthrown, Lon Nol’s Khmer Republic (1970–75). A May 15, 1975, broadcast, for example, lamented that under the influence of the Lon Nol regime and its imperialist masters (the United States), many Cambodians had “become mired in the corrupt, fascist culture of US imperialism” and lost touch with their true “national identity and spirit.”¹⁵ The decline was so precipitous, the broadcast asserted, that the revolutionary forces were shocked by the almost foreign appearance of the urbanites:

Upon entering Phnom Penh and other cities, the brother and sister combatants of the revolutionary army—the sons and daughters of our workers and peasants—were taken aback by the overwhelmingly unspeakable sight of long-haired men and youngsters wearing bizarre clothes making themselves indistinguishable from the fair sex. By tradition, as any other people in the world, our Cambodian people wear pants with comfortably fitting hips and small legs. Some of the youths in Phnom Penh were wearing skin-tight pants with over-sized bell-bottoms. ... Our traditional mentality, mores, traditions, literature and arts, and culture and tradition were totally destroyed by US imperialism and its stooges. Social entertaining, the tempo and rhythm of music, and so forth were all based on US imperialistic patterns. Our people’s traditionally clean, sound characteristics and essence were completely absent and abandoned, replaced by imperialistic pornographic, shameless, perverted, and fanatic traits.

With its “mighty and matchless” influence, the DK regime had immediately set out to “clean up” this decadent state of affairs. On a concrete level, the revolutionary army began—as a May 14, 1975, broadcast states—physically “cleaning up and

¹³ Ibid., p. 105, translated in Chigas, “A Draft Translation,” p. 465. For an analysis of another set of Buddhist narratives, see Anne R. Hansen, “Ways of the World: Moral Discernment and Narrative Ethics in a Cambodian Buddhist Text” (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1999).

¹⁴ Alexander Laban Hinton, “A Head for an Eye: Revenge in the Cambodian Genocide,” *American Ethnologist* 25,3 (1998): 352–77; Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Foreign Broadcast Information Services (hereafter FBIS), (5/15/75: H4-5).

eliminating the filth of the rotten old society left behind by the traitorous clique.”¹⁶ This speech focused in particular on the cleansing of sites associated with the corruption of the Lon Nol regime, such as “gambling dens,” “drinking lairs and prostitutes’ brothels,” and “black markets where the traitorous clique used to steal and pilfer from our people.” More broadly, the DK regime proclaimed that it was restoring the country’s “cleanest, soundest, most traditional, popular, and national features,” instilling an “outstanding spirit ... in the minds of our people,” and generating a newfound “spirit of love for the nation, people, sound mores and traditions, honesty and justice.”¹⁷ If before “people cursed and swore at each other, even within families,” such things did not take place in the new revolutionary society: “There is no burglary, no gambling, no more prostitution, no more opium or marijuana smoking.”

Through such proclamations, the DK regime was asserting itself as a new potent center that, like powerful kings such as Reamea or the Buddha himself, was able to move the country from a state of disintegration to one of moral order.¹⁸ In fact, the DK regime was often referred to as *Ângkar*, a term that literally meant “the Organization” but could metaphorically conjure up the image of an almost superhuman being.¹⁹ Like the Buddha, *Ângkar* was depicted as “enlightened,” a quality that made it “clear-sighted,” “brilliant,” “alert and intelligent,” and “clairvoyant.”²⁰ People often said that “*Ângkar* has the eyes of a pineapple” (*Ângkar mean phnek mnoah*), a phrase that implied that *Ângkar* was all-knowing and able to see what everyone said or did. Such clarity of sight is precisely what so many of the characters in *Tum Teav* lack, leading them to act in ignorance and to generate disorder.

Given its “enlightened” and “clear-sighted” vision, *Ângkar* was depicted as able to transform Cambodian society into a new revolutionary order, one that would be premised on three interrelated bases: the Party “line” (*meakea*), proper “organization” (*karchattang*), and revolutionary “consciousness” (*sâtriarâmma*). All of these elements are manifest in a 1977 speech Pol Pot gave to commemorate the seventeenth anniversary of the Community Party, a text that also both asserts and celebrates the Party’s vision and the new moral order it had instituted to revitalize a country plagued by decadence, fragmentation, and foreign dominance. Pol Pot, for example,

¹⁶ FBIS (5/14/75: H7).

¹⁷ FBIS (5/15/75: H4-5).

¹⁸ Alexander Laban Hinton, “Purity and Contamination in the Cambodian Genocide,” in *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, ed. Judy Ledgerwood, (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), pp. 60–90; Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?* See also Ledgerwood and Marston, this volume.

¹⁹ John Marston, “Metaphors of the Khmer Rouge,” in *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*, ed. May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 105–18; François Ponchaud, “Social Change in the Vortex of Revolution,” in *Cambodia 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 151–77.

²⁰ Henri Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2004); Laurence Picq, *Beyond the Horizon: Five Years with the Khmer Rouge* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1989); Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea: Speech by Pol Pot, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Kampuchea Communist Party Delivered on September 29, 1977* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1977); Ponchaud, “Social Change in the Vortex of Revolution.”

described how, at the first Party Congress in 1960,²¹ the revolutionaries had established the Party's political line, which had been formulated over several years by a committee that had "studied and researched the history of our people's struggle" and "a number of revolutionary movements elsewhere in the world."²² Using this "analysis" and the "science" of Marxism-Leninism, the revolutionaries ascertained "the real nature of Kampuchean society at that time," which consisted of class "contradictions within Kampuchean society," particularly the contradiction between peasants and landowners, and contradictions between "the Kampuchean nation and foreign imperialism, particularly US imperialism."²³

To overcome these contradictions, Pol Pot argued, the Party had to adhere to "the principles of independence, sovereignty, and self-reliance" and to "mobilize the poor peasants and the lower-middle peasants" by overcoming their false consciousness and igniting their latent "class hatred."²⁴ Only the "correct" Party line would enable this to happen and lead to successful revolution. In a passage that could be about *Tum Teav* if the words "a political line" were replaced with "Buddhist mindfulness," Pol Pot stated, "Without a political line which gives judicious guidance, one becomes blind. Even with great strength and determination, one cannot win. Once one loses one's orientation, one doesn't know what to hold onto, one proceeds toward certain defeat and, in the end, ruin."²⁵ Since the Party had ascertained the "correct political line," however, it would be able to transform radically Cambodian society. The Party was like a social engineer who, with blueprints (the political line) in hand, knew how to rebuild Cambodia from the bottom up. Interestingly, the Khmer Rouge often described this process using structural, spatial, and construction metaphors, as new institutions and people were "built" from a "base" or "foundation" and in terms of "stands," "standpoints," "borders," and "dividing lines" that followed from the DK regime's "enlightened" blueprint for society.²⁶

Thus, Pol Pot's speech explained, after the old regime had been overthrown, the Party had "laid the foundation of our collectivist socialism," "rebuilding" Democratic Kampuchea in accordance with Marxism-Leninism and the principles of "independence, sovereignty, and self-reliance."²⁷ Collectivization and cooperatives stood at the socioeconomic center of this reorganization, as the old capitalist relations of production were abolished and forces of production collectivized. If most Cambodian peasants had previously eked out a living farming their tiny plots of land with a small amount of privately owned resources, they now began to work with collectively owned equipment on collectively owned lands.²⁸ Private property,

²¹ As Chandler has noted, in selecting this date, Pol Pot was asserting the primacy of his revolutionary genealogy over that of long-time revolutionaries who were in the process of being purged at Tuol Sleng. See Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, and David P. Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, rev. ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

²² Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22, 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁶ Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?* See also Marston, "Metaphors of the Khmer Rouge."

²⁷ Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 59.

²⁸ May Mayko Ebihara, "Svay, A Khmer Village in Cambodia" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1968); May Mayko Ebihara, "Revolution and Reformulation in Kampuchean

money, and markets were eliminated, as was Buddhism, which, the Khmer Rouge claimed, siphoned money from the poor and mystified class contradictions. Families that had traditionally worked and consumed the product of their efforts together were now segregated; children were told their new parent was *Angkar* and allegiance should be given first and foremost to it. As a result of these changes, Pol Pot stated, Cambodians had “become the true masters of the lands, the rice paddies, harvests, indeed, of the fruits of their labor.”²⁹ In contrast to life under the old regime, “each cooperative has become a small collectivist society, an entirely new society, freed from corrupt and depraved culture and traditions. It is a new healthy society, which is consolidating and developing itself constantly, where equality and harmony prevail.”³⁰

With such organization and a correct political line, each person would more readily be able to “build” himself or herself into a progressive revolutionary. Acknowledging that “we all carry vestiges of our old class character, deep-rooted for generations, and, after all, the transition to revolutionary proletarian character is still quite recent,” Pol Pot’s speech noted the importance of conducting “thorough-going educational work, which is aimed at developing collectivist and social ownership and gradually eliminating the idea of private ownership.”³¹ This “educational work” could include radio broadcasts, revolutionary songs and dances, hard labor, political education meetings, party documents, special study sessions, “criticism and self-criticism, and periodic self-examination of our own revolutionary lifestyle, under the supervision and with the aid of the collective; all this, under the leadership of the Party.”³² Ultimately, each person had to work relentlessly to “sharpen the consciousness” (*samruoch sâtriarâmma*), fighting regressive tendencies such as the inclination toward “privativism,” which included the desire for material possessions and wealth, “personal sentiments” (familial attachments, sexual attraction, religious beliefs, factionalism), and individualism (including vanity, boastfulness, and an excessive concern for one’s face or rank).³³ While engaging in such consciousness work, Pol Pot explained, “our goal is to continue to build the revolutionary strength of the people, so that each of us becomes a revolutionary of the new Kampuchea, who zealously defends and builds the country, and who contributes to the rapid raising of the people’s living standards.”³⁴

This view of consciousness entailed a new socio-moral hierarchy, on the top of which stood those outstanding revolutionaries—comprising mostly the young (whose “consciousness is most receptive to revolution”³⁵) and the poor (who had been oppressed in the former regime)—who had successfully transformed their way of thinking.³⁶ The DK Party Statutes, approved at a Party Congress in January 1976,

Village Culture,” in *The Cambodian Agony*, ed. David A. Ablin and Marlowe Hood (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1990), pp. 16–61.

²⁹ Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 61.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ See *Revolutionary Flags*, Special Issue (September–October 1976), p. 78.

³⁴ Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 57.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁶ Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*

illustrate this point as they lay out the criteria for selecting Party members, a position that conferred extremely high status during DK. The statutes state that the ideal Party members are “workers and peasants of extremely high political consciousness, indomitable vanguard elements who set the example for others.”³⁷ This elevated state of political consciousness was to be ascertained on the basis of: revolutionary service (“a very active and unbroken record of militancy repeatedly tested in revolutionary work”); class background (“a good social class background-composition”); moral purity (“private and political life must be ethically proper”); history of associations (“no enemy entanglements”); and a record of and potential for further self-construction (by engaging in criticism and self-criticism, by their style of life, and by having “a clear and consistent life history with the details of the person’s native village or the milieu in which he lives and works”).³⁸ Ultimately, these factors were central to the key criterion in selecting cadre for leadership positions in the Party—their political consciousness, or ability to think and act in accordance with a “firm revolutionary standpoint on the political line of the Party.”³⁹

While the Khmer Rouge ideological calculus definitely favored the young and the poor who constituted the bulk of the “base” upon which the revolution would be built, it was theoretically possible for people from less pure backgrounds to “build” a progressive revolutionary consciousness, though this entailed constant “struggle.” Thus, despite their “feudalistic” class background, the Thiounn brothers, who came from an aristocratic family with a history of association with the palace, were able to rise through the Khmer Rouge ranks because of their long history of revolutionary service (beginning with their leadership of the Khmer student Marxist circle in Paris). Such individuals nevertheless had to engage in persistent self-construction to overcome the corrupt tendencies that allegedly arose from their background. In a life-history he wrote during DK, Thiounn Prasith, the former Khmer Rouge diplomat who also had a French wife, analyzed how his “conservative feudalistic” roots had negatively affected his consciousness:

This movement makes [me] very conscious of understanding that I who come from the exploiting class am the object of socialist revolution. That means that I strongly need to struggle within myself in order to destroy personal property completely, and to build up collective property. The class struggle inside me is very strong, too. The giving up of personal property is happening constantly. It makes me happy constantly. But this struggle is very long lasting. I need to try harder. ... Family property still plays a role, especially emotions toward my children. But comparing [this feeling] to the beginning of the year, it is lighter and more stable than before. But no matter how hard it is, I won’t walk away from the revolutionary ranks or from the Party ranks.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ong Thong Hoeung and Laura J. Summers, eds., “The Statutes of the Communist Party of Kampuchea,” in *The Party Statutes of the Communist World*, ed. William B. Simons and Stephen White (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984), p. 243.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 245–46.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 250ff.

⁴⁰ “Autobiography of Thiounn Prasith, former Khmer Rouge ambassador to the United Nations, date December 25, 1976,” published by the Cambodian Genocide Program (<http://www.yale.edu/cgp/readings/reading.htm>).

Such self-construction—even by someone with a “conservative feudalistic” class background and associated corrupt mental tendencies—could potentially enable a person like Thiounn Prasith to cultivate an ability to think “mindfully” and act in accordance with the Party line.

Such cases, however, were fairly exceptional. Most of the population was divided on the basis of where they had resided during the civil war: “old people” (*brâcheachon chas*) or “base people” (*brâcheachon moulâdthan*) who had lived in Khmer Rouge zones generally had greater rights, held higher status, and were considered to have a more progressive consciousness than the “new people” (*brâcheachon tmey*) or “1975 people” (*puok dap brampir mesa*) who had lived in Phnom Penh and other large cities controlled by Lon Nol’s Khmer Republic (1970–1975). The “new people” occupied the lowest rung of the new DK social order, a devalued group that was the first to come under suspicion and whose precarious position in the DK regime was reflected by a Khmer Rouge saying that was sometimes applied to them: “To keep you is no gain; to destroy you is no loss.” In fact, the Khmer Rouge considered some of the urbanites who were too closely associated with the old regime—particularly former medium-to-high ranking police, soldiers, civil servants, and government officials—to be incorrigible and set out to eradicate them soon after taking power. Nevertheless, the DK regime held out hope that many of those with regressive tendencies could, like Thiounn Prasith, transform themselves through political education, agrarian labor, and constant “struggle.” Over time, Pol Pot stated, they would begin to “see with their own eyes that our country has become independent, ... our countryside is being completely transformed, and the future of our country and people is bright. Many things reinforce their confidence in the new revolutionary regime.”⁴¹

Even as it celebrates the DK regime’s “clarity of sight,” ineluctable progress, and new moral order, however, Pol Pot’s speech acknowledges the existence of “life-and-death contradictions” that were due to “the presence of enemy agents, who belong to the various spy networks of the imperialists ... who secretly implant themselves to carry out subversive activities against our revolution.”⁴² Like *Tum Teav*, the story “How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name,” and the Wat Srolauv chronicle in “Songs,” Pol Pot’s remarks suggest an on-the-ground reality of violence, blindness, and disorder that diverged from and even directly contradicted the idealized vision he elsewhere asserts.

Pol Pot’s remark about “life-and-death contradictions” alludes to a series of events, real or perceived, that had cast a shadow over the revolution.⁴³ On the economic front, local cadre had great difficulty meeting the Party’s unrealistic goals of dramatically and immediately increasing rice production. Fearful of incurring the Party’s wrath, many cadre sent rice that should have been set aside for consumption to Phnom Penh, thereby depriving the local populace of sufficient rations. When rumors of the resulting starvation and suffering reached Phnom Penh in the middle of 1976, Pol Pot dispatched Ieng Thirith, the newly appointed DK Minister of Social

⁴¹ Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 62.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴³ David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991); Chandler, *Voices of S-21*.

Affairs, to investigate. In an interview with Elizabeth Becker, Ieng Thirith described the problems she discovered:

Conditions there were very queer. ... In Battambang I saw they [the cadre] made all the people go to the rice fields. The fields were very far away from the villages. The people had no homes and they were all very ill. ... I know the directives of the Prime Minister [Pol Pot] were that no old people, pregnant women, women nursing babies, or small children were to work in the fields. But I saw everybody in the open rice fields, in the open air and very hot sun, and many were ill with diarrhea and malaria.⁴⁴

Instead of entertaining the possibility that these conditions might be due to the “enlightened” Party’s flawed economic policies and unrealistic expectations, Ieng Thirith and other Party leaders blamed the failures on sabotage: “Agents had got into our ranks, ... and they had got into the highest ranks. They had to behave with double faces in order to make as if they were following our line.”⁴⁵

Party documents from this period echo Ieng Thirith’s comments.⁴⁶ Thus, the Party could maintain that “our line is correct” by explaining that “hidden enemies seek to deprive the people of food, while following our orders to an extent. ... They look like people conforming with the law. They take our circular instructions and use them to mistreat the people and to deprive them, forcing them to work, whether they are sick or healthy.”⁴⁷ Pol Pot and his allies became increasingly convinced that subversives were plotting to overthrow the regime. A December 20, 1976, “Report of Activities of the Party Center According to the General Political Tasks of 1976” warns that “there is a sickness inside the party,” a group of enemy “microbes” who had “hidden and buried itself inside our flesh and blood,” and who intended “to smash the leadership and to fight to destroy our revolution.”⁴⁸ For the Khmer Rouge, revolutionary consciousness was fickle and difficult to discern. A long-time revolutionary could suddenly regress or turn out to have been a reactionary “hidden enemy” the entire time—just as the mother of the girls in “How the *Koun Lok* Bird Got Its Name,” the person who more than anyone else would be expected to protect and care for her children, suddenly abandons and tries to kill her daughters.⁴⁹ Ultimately, the true state of a person’s consciousness could only be revealed through signs, a mistake made here, a suspect association made there. The pursuit of these “microbes” revealed deep cracks in the DK moral order, fissures in which violence, fear, and uncertainty became a part of everyday life.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1998), p. 236.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ David P. 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).

⁴⁷ Chandler, Kiernan, and Boua, *Pol Pot Plans the Future*, pp. 206–7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 183–89.

⁴⁹ See also Edwards, this volume; Solange Thierry, *Le Cambodge des Contes* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1977).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: SONGS AT THE EDGE OF TUOL SLENG

While the often chaotic, terrifying, and violent world in which Cambodians lived during DK has been described by Chandler⁵⁰ and others, I want to conclude by turning to Tuol Sleng, an institution about which Chandler has written the definitive study.⁵¹ Tuol Sleng occupies an interesting place in relation to the DK idealized sociomoral order, as it was symbolically devoted to containing and eliminating the “hidden enemies burrowing from within,” who were perceived as threatening the very existence of this order. The centrality of this institution was illustrated by a metaphor that Son Sen, the DK Secretary of Defense, sometimes used to describe Tuol Sleng: he called it the “nation’s breath” (*dânghaoem cheat*).⁵² This metaphor had enormous ontological resonance in a country in which health is viewed as being linked to the equilibrium of the bodily humors, particularly of the “winds” flowing in the body, and inner balance associated with proper respiration.⁵³ To call Tuol Sleng the “nation’s breath,” then, implied that it was a key mechanism for maintaining the stability and health of the body politic. Of course, as illustrated by Teav’s invocation of breath to describe her suffering during Tum’s absence (“Pain [and] anger twist inside [my] liver. / [My] breath [is] intermittent. ... Enough! Oh Tum, I’m dying!”), the breath can also be linked to emotional disequilibrium, an association that more aptly captures the spirals of violence and destruction at Tuol Sleng.

In many respects, Tuol Sleng was structured to produce order. Like a disease that was diagnosed and treated, the prisoners, most of them revolutionaries who had come under suspicion, were removed from the larger society, confined and disciplined (photographed, registered, shackled, and regulated), and, frequently, tortured into giving a confession.⁵⁴ Since the “all-knowing” Party did not make mistakes, the arrest of these “microbes” implied their guilt. (In fact, after the DK purges began in earnest, only a handful of prisoners survived incarceration at Tuol Sleng, and these individuals survived only because they had special skills that were useful to the prison authorities.) Interrogators were therefore expected to generate “proof” that retroactively legitimated the arrest, affirmed the “clarity of sight” of the DK regime, and explained away the problems plaguing the country. If “doing politics” didn’t produce a confession, the interrogators could utilize tortures ranging

⁵⁰ Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*; David P. Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past, Selected Essays 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996); Chandler, *Voices from S-21*; Chandler, *Brother Number One*.

⁵¹ Chandler, *Voices from S-21*.

⁵² Chandler, *Brother Number One*, p. 166, n4.

⁵³ Devon Hinton, Khin Um, and Phalnarith Ba, “*Kyol Goeu* (‘Wind Overload’) Part I: A Cultural Syndrome of Orthostatic Panic among Khmer Refugees,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 38,4 (2001): 403–32; Devon Hinton, Khin Um, and Phalnarith Ba, “*Kyol Goeu* (‘Wind Overload’) Part II: Prevalence, Characteristics, and Mechanisms of *Kyol Goeu* and Near-*Kyol Goeu* Episodes of Khmer Patients Attending a Psychiatric Clinic,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 38,4 (2001): 433–60; John Lambert Marcucci, “Khmer Refugees in Dallas: Medical Decisions in the Context of Pluralism” (PhD dissertation, Southern Methodist University, 1986); John Lambert Marcucci, “Sharing the Pain: Critical Values and Behaviors in Khmer Culture,” in *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*, ed. May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 129–40; Toni Shapiro(-Phim), “Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia” (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1994).

⁵⁴ Chandler, *Voices from S-21*.

from beatings and cigarette burns to water submersion, partial suffocation, and the forced consumption of feces and urine.⁵⁵

The goal of interrogation was to produce confessions, which were written and rewritten until the narratives were just right. As Chandler notes, over time the confessions took on a characteristic four-part structure, beginning with “life-histories” that listed a prisoner’s familial connections, work units, and associations: “These *curricula vitae* were normally followed by a section titled ‘history of [my] treasonous activities’ or ‘my political biography,’ with data arranged in chronological order. A third section, called ‘plans,’ described what the prisoners would have done had they not been arrested.” In the last section, prisoners had to list their associations, “or ‘strings of traitors,’ with indications of their whereabouts. In some cases, the ‘strings’ included everyone, even dead people, who had been named in the confession.”⁵⁶

If the end of interrogation was preordained, the process was not, with the interrogators trying to discover what treacheries the prisoners were hiding and the prisoners trying to figure out what their interrogators suspected and wanted them to say. If interrogation and torture forced the prisoners to confess, the written confession itself then served as the key medium through which this interchange between prisoners and interrogators proceeded. Thus, an interrogation manual from S-21 instructed that the prisoners had to “write confessions in their own voice, clearly, using their own sentences, their own ideas. We should avoid telling them what to write.” Once this text had been procured, the interrogators would be able to “raise their weak points, press them to explain why they did things, why they are lying, concealing, abbreviating things.”⁵⁷

As the process proceeded, the prisoners were transformed into the mimetic opposite of the progressive revolutionary they had supposedly been attempting to resemble.⁵⁸ Since consciousness had to be interpreted through signs, the “evidence” of the prisoners’ true state of regressive consciousness was “revealed” in the text of each person’s confession, a narrative that was constructed so that it represented the inverse of the life-histories that cadre like Thiounn Prasith wrote to assert their progressive political consciousness.

For example, in his Tuol Sleng confession, a Northern Zone cadre named Reap describes how he was ordered to “try to build the military forces in a positive manner so that they would serve the revolution.”⁵⁹ While it is likely that Reap did perform such consciousness work with his troops, his confession transforms such acts into their opposite. According to the confession, instead of carrying out this order, Reap tries to convert his soldiers into CIA agents and entice them to join a plot to overthrow the government. In the narrative, Reap describes how he sought to influence his “traitorous forces” by describing the hardships they faced (perhaps using the opportunity to express some of the true unhappiness many people felt about the harshness of revolutionary life):

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 130.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁵⁸ Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*

⁵⁹ The following material on Reap (Re Sim) is drawn from his Tuol Sleng confession, CMR 126.20. For a detailed discussion of Reap’s confession, see Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*

... collectivism is difficult, requiring much work. You receive little food and do not have the freedom to travel about freely. This is the discipline of *Ângkar*. We are liberated, but can't go visit at other people's homes. Even at the age of twenty, we don't yet have wives. This is because the collectivist way is strict.

Further, according to his confession, Reap attempted to corrupt the minds of his followers with "privatist" sentiments, attracting them "with watches, new bikes, or new clothes according to their desires, playing upon self-love, making them into a group that thought of self-interest, not the way of *Ângkar*. ... And those I dared to build joined the CIA." Following this passage, Reap's confession lists the names of over a dozen soldiers in this "string connected with me." Elsewhere in his confession, Reap describes his supposed participation in a variety of other traitorous activities, such as plotting to poison his superior and to overthrow the DK regime, secretly supporting a group of local bandits, fostering decadence, and engaging in economic sabotage.

Once the narrative had been constructed in a satisfactory manner, prisoners like Reap were returned to their cells and eventually executed. Their confessions, however, survived them, providing fodder for the paranoia and megalomania of Pol Pot and associates. Such confessions seemingly confirmed that plots and treachery lurked everywhere, even among the highest echelons of the Party. Economic sabotage, in turn, explained away production failures and food shortages in the countryside, while the activities of such "hidden enemies boring from within" provided a rationale for why the masses often failed to display the sought-after revolutionary fervor. Having properly "analyzed" the source of these "life-and-death contradictions," the Party could "solve" these "contradictions ... by the measure proper for enemies,"⁶⁰ reeducating some, eradicating many others. Tuol Sleng was perceived as crucial to this process, as it symbolically purified and reordered society through the incarceration, interrogation, confession, and execution of the dangerous "microbes" that were creating "life-and-death contradictions" in the new revolutionary society.

In other respects, however, Tuol Sleng manifested an on-the-ground reality that differed markedly from this idealized position as the ordering "nation's breath," one that more closely resembled the world of violence, blindness, and fragmentation characteristic of *Tum Teav* and the "Songs" stories of Thon and the abbot and "How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name." This latter characterization more neatly fits the reality of the prisoners' lives, as they endured privations and torture while piecing together their confessions. Based on an interrogator's notebook and other documentation, we know that the prisoners were emotionally manipulated and made to feel abandoned, to think of their loved ones, and to hold onto a glimmer of hope that they might still survive. The resulting mixture of hope, despair, and confusion is evident in a memorandum written by Siet Chhe, a high-ranking Khmer Rouge official who was interrogated and tortured for more than five months, on May 8, 1977:

⁶⁰ Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 58.

On the evening of May 7-8, 1977 [i.e., tonight], my state of mind has been unstable in a way that I cannot describe. I can't see any road to the future. I beg the Party to show pity on its child at this time.

[These are] developments in my state of mind: State 1. The period after the Organization first arrested me until 4 May 77, was one of report writing on every point that the Organization wanted explained. I hoped that the Organization would inquire and investigate at the bases ... [to] verify my statements. ...

State 2. From the evening of May 4 until [today], I underwent all kinds of torture according to *santebal's* procedures. *Santebal's* perception [so far] has been that I am a 100 percent traitor and that there is no way at all that I am not a traitor.

So, given their stance, the level of torture has gradually been increased so that as I face this situation my feelings fluctuate wildly. I do not see any way to get out. [Tonight] my feelings are as follows:

1. If I admitted to being a traitor when I was not, I would not know how to report any [genuine] activities with collaborators in a reasonable, continuous way. ...
2. Weighing this back and forth, I see the best way out as death ... sudden death to escape the pain ... and be with the Party until the end. But there is no possibility of sudden death. Again, no way out. ... I fear torture and death. If I was connected with any traitors, I could immediately tell the Organization and I would be free from this torture immediately.
3. After considering this back and forth, and finding no way out, this morning I struggle to write to let the Organization know about the development of my feelings and pity me. This last request is to ask the Organization kindly to delay my torture and to reconsider the three traitors' testimony that accused me. These enemies made this up. I know there must be contradictions in some important points.⁶¹

This harrowing passage exemplifies the fear, confusion, and disorientation that so many prisoners must have experienced under interrogation.⁶² Most immediately, Siet Chhe is searching desperately for an end to the suffering, whether through "sudden death to escape the pain" or through a miraculous intervention of "the Organization" that would "kindly delay my torture." With his "feelings fluctuating wildly," Siet Chhe simultaneously seems to "not see any way to get out" while he pleads with "the Organization" to intervene and exonerate him. To an extent,

⁶¹ CMR 138.11, translated by Richard Arant and David Chandler and quoted in Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, pp. 84–85.

⁶² For a description of the experience of torture at local prisons in the Cambodian countryside, see Haing Ngor, *A Cambodian Odyssey* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1997), pp. 215ff., 239ff., 300ff.; and Vann Nath, *A Cambodian Prison Portrait: One Year in the Khmer Rouge's S-21* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998), pp. 27ff.

prisoners like Siet Chhe resemble the girls in “How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name” insofar as they are all inserted in a liminal context associated with violence and “the wild,” a space where their identity is transformed and they come to be regarded as less than human. And, like the characters in *Tum Teav*, the prisoners suffer in a place characterized by “blindness,” having lost control of their bodies, their surroundings, and their understanding of the larger events at play. The downfall of former high-ranking cadre like Siet Chhe also resonates with the historical chronicle in “Songs,” which tells of Narin’s family’s fall in status and how Narin and his son eventually die unredeemed and in the forest.

While we must be careful not to exculpate the prison personnel (for, regardless of their orders, they were the ones who tormented prisoners like Siet Chhe) or make their plight directly comparable to that of the prisoners, we may still recognize that the cadres who worked at Tuol Sleng lived in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty.⁶³ Revolutionary consciousness was always on display in this panoptic institution, as one’s fortune could suddenly plummet with the smallest mistake or innuendo.⁶⁴ In fact, many Tuol Sleng cadres, including interrogators, were suddenly arrested and found themselves imprisoned at Tuol Sleng, making confessions of their own.⁶⁵ And, for the cadres at Tuol Sleng, there was little doubt about what one’s fate would be. One cadre from Tuol Sleng, “Lor,” told me: “We were always afraid. Most of all we were scared that we’d say something wrong. Or, if they arrested any big bosses and brought them there [and you were connected to their string], you might be imprisoned, too, when they gave names.” Such remarks parallel those made by other Tuol Sleng cadres.⁶⁶ For such perpetrators, then, obtaining a successful confession provided a form of order against the threat of fragmentation and violence, as it likely guaranteed survival for another day.

Like the mother in “How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name,” the crocodile in the story of Thon and the abbot, or characters like Archoun or Teav’s mother, the perpetrators at Tuol Sleng acted in blindness, driven by a fear and ignorance that led them to act in often brutal ways. And, like the narratives from these stories, the text of the Tuol Sleng confessions reflected a tension between an idealized moral order and a messy reality. At the same time that it asserted a newly ordered revolutionary society, in which “hidden enemies burrowing from within” had been arrested by the “all-knowing” *Ângkar*, the sequence of actions narrated within the confessions (a history of treasonous acts that the Party Center had not foreseen) and the murky and brutal process by which the confessions were obtained suggested the world of brutality and violence that lay at the core of DK, but which the DK regime refused to

⁶³ Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*

⁶⁴ Laurence Picq recalled one incident in which a projection team suggested that an assembly of top cadre celebrating the regime’s third anniversary view a documentary on Democratic Kampuchea, filmed by a Yugoslavian delegation of journalists, that had just arrived: “Although the sound track was missing, we watched a succession of images that presented a reality undeniably different from the official version. The terror that infused the scenes filmed in rural zones was clearly transmitted to the assembled spectators, all of whom were aware of the consequences that would flow from this diplomatic incident.” Picq, *Beyond the Horizon*, p. 117. See also Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over*, p. 315. The projection team was immediately arrested and accused of being CIA agents.

⁶⁵ Chandler, *Voices from S-21*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*; Meng-Try Ea and Sorya Sim, *Victims and Perpetrators: The Testimony of Young Khmer Rouge Cadres at S-21* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2001).

acknowledge as part of its own character, identifying it, instead, as alien. Similarly, even as it celebrates the glorious history of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, Pol Pot's speech alludes to this alternative reality of "life-and-death contradictions," of certain fragmenting "reactionary elements" that had "camouflaged themselves."⁶⁷ For, ultimately, everyday life in Democratic Kampuchea bore much more resemblance to the brutality, discord, and violence manifest in *Tum Teav* and "Songs" than it did to the idealized order the Khmer Rouge so frequently tried to assert.

At the beginning of this essay, I noted three themes that run through the texts discussed in "Songs" and in the essays in this book: order, ambiguity, and relevance to real-world events. While Chandler returns to all of these issues at the end of his text, his concluding remarks focus more specifically on questions of meaning that arise as "gaps" emerge between "what ought to happen in the world" and "what often happens."⁶⁸ He notes that "in a sense, the texts 'answer' [these] questions that no one dared to ask, but in the end, what do they *explain*? No more, and of course no less, than songs at the edge of the forest, as night comes on."⁶⁹

This evocative phrase from which the "Songs" essay gets its name, Chandler tells us, is inspired by a passage from Fredrik Barth's book, *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea*.⁷⁰ The passage describes how, during their evening dances, the Baktaman "sing their songs of love and violence" at a clearing edged against an "immense, untouched forest-covered landscape, dwarfing man's tiny village clearing and muting his tiny noise." It is here, according to Barth, that the Baktaman sing and dance while enacting highly symbolic and culture-specific rites that serve as "both their main beacons and their tools" for constructing meaning against the enormity of this landscape with all of its existential, social, and religious connotations.

Like the Baktaman rites, the Cambodian "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" grapple with such larger questions in a locally meaningful way—one that is further illustrated by the essays in this volume, ranging from Marston's discussion of temple building and millenarianism to Thompson's discussion of spirit possession. As Hansen's chapter notes, narratives like the "Song" texts do provide answers of a sort, often through prescriptions for better action and moral purity that stand in contrast to the decisions that characters make in the stories. This is certainly true of *Tum Teav*, as well as (and in an almost perverse manner) the Tuol Sleng confessions that enact a drama of treachery that, if reversed, would lay out the path to being a proper revolutionary. Thus, each confession tells of how the prisoner "joined the CIA" just as he or she joined the revolutionary movement, destroyed crops instead of working hard to grow them, betrayed the revolutionary organization instead of blindly obeying it, and so forth.

Chandler's essay tells us that it is precisely at such times, when the idealized version of order clearly grates against the lived experience of disorder and chaos, that people must confront that enormous Baktaman-like landscape that throws into

⁶⁷ Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 58.

⁶⁸ Chandler, "Songs," p. 99.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Fredrik Barth, *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 267.

relief the limits of our being—those gaps that all of us confront with the cultural beacons and tools that we have at hand, with our songs at the edge of the forest.

In the wide-ranging spirit of David Chandler's work and particularly with the imagery of "Songs" in mind, I close with "Brotherhood," a poem by Octavio Paz that sings one of these songs in a very different context:

Brotherhood⁷¹
Homage to Claudius Ptolemy

I am a man:
little do I last
and the night is enormous.
But I look up:
the stars write.
Unknowing I understand:
I too am written,
and at this very moment
someone spells me out.

⁷¹ Octavio Paz, "Brotherhood," in *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957–1987*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York, NY: New Directions, 1987), p. 508.