

*Covering Genocide Trials: The Discursive Position of Genocide Victims In Cambodia*

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**Abstract**

In the Cambodian society victims of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) are taking up an uncommon discursive position. Anyone who has suffered from the Khmer Rouge is considered to be a victim including former Khmer Rouge members who were brutally disadvantaged by their own party. Within this context perpetrators can also be considered victims.

This discourse, although laudable at first sight, generates and disguises negative effects. In the current Cambodian political and business system former Khmer Rouge members still fill powerful positions, maintaining an unjust kleptocratic structure of corruption, a deep rich/poor divide, and the seizure of natural resources. Fitting in wider Cambodian contexts the discourse on victimhood denies the actuality of injustice that is a continuum of the Khmer Rouge era.

A discourse analysis, based on the work of Laclau & Mouffe (1985), of the exhibition in former torture prison S-21 ('Tuol sleng genocide memorial') demonstrates this oppressive discourse.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, Khmer Rouge/Red Khmer, Khmer Rouge Tribunal, S-21, Discourse analysis, Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe

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*It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.*  
Voltaire (1771)

## **Introduction**

Cambodia has a violent and regrettable past. The absolute nadir is the killing of appr. 20% of its population (1.7 mln deaths, although the estimates vary) during the 1975-1979 Khmer Rouge regime (Kiernan, 2005, p. 458. Heuveline, 2001. Yale Genocide Program). At a superficial level Cambodia is coming to terms with the past: in former torture prison S-21 photographs of murdered people are displayed, and the five highest leaders (after Pol Pot) of the Khmer Rouge have been brought to court. In the 'Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia', better known as 'Khmer Rouge Tribunal', they face charges of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide (ECCC, NS/RKM/1004/006). Unique in the history of international tribunals victims can participate in the trial as 'civil parties'.

This seemingly open acknowledgment of victims (at least: survivors) is in contrast to their actual position in society. A discourse analysis, based on the work of Laclau & Mouffe (1985, 1990), of the exhibition in former torture prison S-21 reveals not only the submissive position of victims but also the oppressive political system that maintains injustice.

## **S-21 / Tuol sleng**

Since the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime the former torture prison S-21 operates as the main museum preserving the memory of the past (nowadays also known as 'Tuol sleng genocide memorial' – see picture 1). But it does so in a typical way. The museum was set up by the Vietnamese conquerers that expelled the Khmer Rouge to the North-West periphery of the country. Central to the remembrance became the atrocities of the murderous regime and the idea that 'everyone' was a victim of the murderous regime. For example a tortured prisoner who used to be a member of the Khmer Rouge or a former Khmer Rouge executioner who was forced to commit his crimes to postpone his own death. Photographs of former inmates make up the majority of the exhibition, as can be seen in picture 2.



Picture 1: S-21 / Tuol sleng genocide memorial



Picture 2: Photographs of former inmates on display.

Adding to the idea that ‘everyone’ was a victim is the shock that of the approximately 14,000 prisoners only an estimated 12 survived S-21: without exception all the people in the photo’s were killed as a result of their imprisonment. But no matter how much photographs reveal, there is also always something that is not part of the image. In the words of Susan Sontag: ‘... to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude’ (Sontag, 2003, p. 46). This raises the question what is not shown in the images.

Laclau & Mouffe's (1985, 1990) method of discourse analysis can help bring to light what is obscured by these photographs.

To understand identifiable points of reference that give coherence to a discourse, Laclau & Mouffe introduce the concept of 'nodal points':

[...] order – or structure – no longer takes the form of an underlying essence of the social; rather, it is an attempt – by definition unstable and precarious – to act over that 'social', to *hegemonize* it. [...] the social always exceeds the limits of the attempts to constitute a society. At the same time, however, that 'totality' does not disappear. If the suture it attempts is ultimately impossible, it is nevertheless possible to proceed to a relative fixation of the social through the institution of nodal points (Laclau & Mouffe, 1990, pp. 90-91).

Here, nodal points refer to the absence of absolute fixation of meaning, opening up possibilities for analysis what is not shown in the S-21 photographs. It is the 'logic of equivalence' that equates discourses ( $A=B=C$ ) and excludes an 'outside' (D):  $A=B=C \neq D$ . The 'constitutive outside' is both needed to construct the 'logic of equivalence' as well as a threat as it prevents absolute fixation of meaning. So, what discourses are equated at S-21 and what is the 'outside'?

## **Analysis**

### *Logic of equivalence*

Two main discourses are at work in S-21. The first is that of victimhood.

[*description/analysis of photo's*]

Only a minority of the photo's are accompanied by text in the form of short stories of the few surviving victims. A tortured prisoner, for instance, tells about his former membership of the Khmer Rouge and his motives for joining the party. Also, there are photo's and text of the former S-21 killers. One of them states he wanted to leave the torture prison and the accompanying killing field, but that he was forced to do his murderous work on penalty of death.

The discourse of 'everybody being a victim', including former perpetrators, is grounded in a historical context. During the Khmer Rouge era enemies were thought to be everywhere: from opposing military forces to both high and low placed persons in own ranks, causing a widespread suspicion so that potentially everyone was a suspect and could be tortured before being killed. One of the reasons for this is the Maoist doctrine of 'permanent revolution': the struggle is perpetual. But where in Maoist China, due to a Confusion belief, people could be 'reeducated' in prison camps, Cambodian culture did not subscribe to the idea of a second change in life: an enemy had to be eliminated.

The second discourse at work in S-21 is that of the visitor. Although there are a few photo's of former perpetrators, S-21 can mostly be visited from the perspective of victims. Besides their photo's their cell blocks can be seen, just like a room (covered in blood stains) where high ranking Khmer Rouge members were tortured. In this

sense current day S-21 is like Auschwitz concentration camp: visitors take up the discursive position of victims when visiting the exhibition (in Auschwitz one cannot enter the guard's watch tower, just like in S-21 one cannot visit the guard's dining hall, etc). At S-21 this can partly be attributed to the Vietnamese conquerers who have founded the exhibition in line with their political interests.

The discourses at work in S-21 are those of 'everyone is a victim' (A) and of the visitor (B), who are connected through the logic of equivalence: A=B. When entering S-21 as a visitor one is also entering a very specific discourse of victimhood. But every chain of equivalence has a constitutive outside: something that is both necessary for and a threat to the equivalence.

### *Outside*

As mentioned before, according to Susan Sontag '... to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude'. So, what is not shown in (the photographs of) S-21?

One of S-21's tourguides lays the pathway to revealing what is excluded from the exhibition. A victim from the Khmer Rouge regime herself (both her parents were killed, she was forced into slavery and beaten regularly) she is bitter about the way the remembrance of the murderous era is constructed. In a history book with pictures (Dy, 2007) she pointed out the position of the reigning King of Cambodia at that time: he was present in some Khmer Rouge situations (e.g. at a train ride) but he is not depicted in the photographs. Frames are shaped in such a way that the King is literally excluded from the image.

Former King (from 1941 to 1955 and again from 1993 to 2004) Norodom Sihanouk has had a complex relationship with the Khmer Rouge: he at one point lent his support to the party but was also placed under house arrest when he resigned as the Head of State of Democratic Kampuchea (as Cambodia was known during the Khmer Rouge years). This complex relationship is not part of the public discourse of remembrance of the Khmer Rouge era.

If we take this a step further, we also notice an absence the depiction of current political and business leaders in Cambodia who were once connected to the Khmer Rouge. Former Khmer Rouge member Hun Sen is the current Prime Minister and one of the longest serving political leaders in the world – neither the fact that he was Battalion Commander of the Eastern region is recognized nor the related history of other current political and business leaders.

A lot is disguised from the discourses concerning the remembrance of Khmer Rouge era. But what makes up the discursive 'constitutive outside'? The atrocities of the 1970's are localised in both 'the past' and the 'top leaders' of the Khmer Rouge. Nowhere in S-21 is there a bridge to the present: injustice is limited to the 1975-1979 period.

*[description/analysis of photo's/top leaders]*

As the tourguides bitterly stated, the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, established in 1997, does not bring former Khmer Rouge leaders to justice except for five top leaders.

## **Conclusion**

An exhibition, just like a photograph, both shows and disguises perspectives on the subject of portrayal – in other words: it constructs discourses of remembrance. In S-21 a chain of equivalence is created that resonates Cambodian culture. First, a curious discourse of victimhood comes into play through the subjugation of every Khmer Rouge era Cambodian (victims and perpetrators alike, except a handful of top Khmer Rouge leaders) to the nodal point of ‘victim’. Second, the discourse of ‘visitor’ is constructed as empathizing with victims (excluding for instance discourse on knowledge of political circumstances, military actions, and the 1970’s international context). These two discourses are then equated, but only through a constitutive outside: top leaders are portrayed as ultimate masterminds that held the country hostage (even though the Khmer Rouge were active until 1996 and had a seat at the United Nations until 1993), disguising the involvement of present day political and business leaders in the Khmer Rouge and thereby obscuring the actuality of injustice that is still part of Cambodia, but now in the form of corruption, a deep rich/poor divide, and the seizure of natural resources.

A constitutive outside is, as Laclau and Mouffe stress, always a necessity (in order to construct a chain of equivalence) and a threat: it can potentially break up the status quo. In the case of Cambodia’s remembrance of its Khmer Rouge past the country could merit from new discourses entering the public domain.

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