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No More Precious Wealth: Literature and Politics in Cambodia since the Khmer Rouge Era

Klairung Amratisha

Abstract

Literature and politics have always been inextricably interlinked in modern Cambodian history but never so directly as in and after the Khmer Rouge era. The victory of the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975 caused radical changes in all aspect of Cambodian life. This paper is an attempt to examine the political factors which determined the direction of modern Cambodian literature from 1975 to the end of the twentieth century, starting with the destruction of literature under the Khmer Rouge control. Next, the use of literature as a propaganda tool of the government of the People Republic of Kampuchea during the 1980s will be analysed in details. The paper concludes with the study of the revival of Cambodian literature both in the homeland and in exile together with its main trends and its authors, readers as well as publication.
No More Precious Wealth: Literature and Politics in Cambodia since the Khmer Rouge Era

I hid the precious wealth,1 packed the suitcases with milled rice, packed old clothes, a small scrap metal oven, pots, pan, plate, spoons, an axe, a hoe, some preserved fish in small plastic containers—loaded it all in a cart and towed it eastward under the full moon, May '75.

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O, Monument of Independence! O, library! O, books of poetry! I can never chant the divinely-inspired poems again! O, quintessential words of poets! O, artifacts I can never feel or see again!

...........................
O, Rang trees, the spawning grounds, turned to charred stilts by the Pot-Sary 2 conflagration. Annihilate the Rang trees, the sugar palms, the Khmer Republic!

There are no more intellectuals, no more professors—all have departed Phnom Penh, leading children, bereft, deceived to the last person, from coolie to king.

U Sam Oeur, "The Fall of Culture" 3

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1 From the poet's notes, 'the precious wealth' refers specifically to his volumes of poetry and philosophy.
2 Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, the leaders of the Khmer Rouge.
3 This poem is taken from U Sam Oeur's selection of poems. The English translation of the Khmer original is done by the poet himself with the collaboration of Ken
The victory of the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975 and their evacuation of Phnom Penh signalled the commencement of the Pol Pot era in Cambodia. For three years and eight months, between April 1975 and January 1979, the Khmer people were subjected to the most intense, rapid, and far-reaching social changes in their history. In the process, at least one and a half million Khmers died as a result of revolutionary policies, including a great many writers, scholars, as well as members of the reading public. Schools were closed, temples and libraries were demolished or put to other uses, and books were deliberately destroyed. All literary activity was curtailed; no writer in Cambodia was able to express his reflections, ideas, or feelings. Cambodian literature, with its long history of 1,200 years, degenerated under the Khmer Rouge control and disappeared into utter darkness.


5 The number of deaths under the Khmer Rouge has been the subject of much debate. Various estimates range from one to three million deaths out of an original population of 7.3 million in 1975. Apart from execution, hundreds of thousands of Khmers died from disease and starvation directly resulting from the regime’s draconian policies.

The destruction of literature under the Khmer Rouge

The Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime instituted by the Khmer Rouge undertook radical transformations to create an egalitarian society entirely new both in socio-economic terms as well as cultural. As the spokesman of the Khmer Rouge announced regularly on their official radio that "two thousand years of Cambodian history have virtually ended", the new society was to be racially pure and to have no antecedents. Therefore, it was necessary for Pol Pot and his followers to "break" the old system by destroying the patterns of political authority, economic activity, and cultural tradition that had characterised it. Apart from emptying all cities and towns, the DK regime sought to identify, arrest, or execute officials from the former governments and neutralise those elements in society perceived as potentially threatening to their rule and desirous of a return to traditional Cambodian society. The Khmer Rouge apparently saw the intellectual community as one of their major threats; monks and teachers as well as writers were considered as playing a key role in "blinding" the peasants to their exploitation. Students were part of a corrupt society that had no connection to the class that would provide leaders in his new society. Thus, while military officers and former civilian officials were the primary target for elimination, the Khmer Rouge also initiated a campaign to identify

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7 In its attempt to establish an egalitarian social order and maximise agricultural production, DK evacuated urban centres and turned virtually the entire population into peasantry. It reorganised people into cooperatives with communal ownership, production, and distribution, and replaced the family/household with work teams as the basic socioeconomic unit. From an ostensibly classless society, a new socio-political hierarchy emerged, dominated by DK cadres and "old people" who had come from DK base regions under Khmer Rouge control before 1975, or people from the "basic" classes of poor and lower-middle peasantry. These persons were given a superior status to "new people" or "April 17 people" or, more ominously, "the enemy" from urban centres. Buddhism was crushed for being feudalistic and exploitative and replaced by a political ideology propounding new values and codes of behaviour that extended to modes of proper dress and demeanor. May Ebihara, "Beyond Suffering: The Recent History of a Cambodian Village" in The Challenge of Reform in Indochina, Börje Ljunggren, ed, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,1993), p.151-152.
teachers, professional people, students, and intellectuals - anyone with education - and to wipe them out, or at least to ruthlessly persecute and suppress them. As a consequence, the majority of writers, literary scholars and the educated reading public were eliminated during this period. According to You Bo, the president of the Association of the Khmer Writers between 1993 and 1996, more than 200 of the around 300 post-independence writers were executed during the DK period. Of the 47 employees of the National Library in 1975, only 4 survived in 1979 while the whole staff and all the scholars of the Buddhist Institute, the centre for the study and conservation of national culture with the largest library in Cambodia, disappeared. Chheng Phon, the Minister of Information and Culture of the People's Republic of Kampuchea announced in 1989, "We had 10 percent of teachers and professors left after the destruction. Ninety percent were gone. There were 38,000 artists and intellectuals. During the Pol Pot period, just 300 people have survived." Buddhist monks, who were the creators and preservers of classical literature, were also murdered in large numbers. In 1980 it was estimated that five out of eight monks were executed during the Pol Pot regime. Intellectual life was virtually eliminated.

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8 It was reported that during the evacuation of Phnom Penh, loudspeakers mounted on motor-cars called on intellectuals to report to the new authorities with a view to taking part in the reconstruction of the homeland. Those who came during the first days were immediately sent to unknown destinations. Group of Lawyers of Cambodia, People's Revolutionay Tribune Held in Phnom Penh for the Trial of the Genocide Crime of the Pol Pot - Ieng Sary Clique, (August 1979): Documents, (Phnom Penh: Group of Cambodian Jurists, 1988), p.150.

9 Sam Saroien, "Bidhii Pit Ning Poek Vagg Pantuh Pantal Anak Nibandh Khmaer [The Closing and Opening Ceremony of Literary Courses for Writers]" Dassanaavattii Anak Nibandh Khmaer, 2, 6 (September 1996), p.3.


12 Charles F Keyes, "Communist Revolution and the Buddhist Past in Cambodia" in Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast
Not only were writers and readers killed, but literature, which was despised as a product of the former exploiting classes, was also deliberately desecrated. To the Khmer Rouge, books were links to the past, to the old society, to the old way of doing things. They contained foreign learning that would have no place in the new society. By destroying books and eliminating the intellectual class, the Khmer communists apparently hoped to ensure that the mass of the population would be cut off from their cultural roots and the direction of the new social order would be thus unobstructed and irreversible. Many Khmers tell stories of books, magazines, newspapers, palm leaf manuscripts - anything having to do with culture and education - being confiscated or destroyed during the evacuation from the cities. With the destruction of libraries throughout the country, it has been estimated that as much as 80-90 percent of the book collection of Cambodia was lost or dispersed. All books and documents stored in libraries, schools, universities and centres of research were burnt or ransacked. At the national library on 17 April 1975, a former school teacher saw young Khmer Rouge cadres "carrying out stacks of what they called "imperialist" books, throwing them into the street, and burning them." The shelves themselves were filled with dishes and the ground were used to raise pigs. The Buddhist Institute was entirely uprooted and ceased to exist. Virtually the entire library collection and documentary collection of the


13 The Khmer Rouge policy of culture and arts was defined as follows, "In the five year plan for 1977-1980, concerning culture, literature, and the arts, these should be rid of all vestiges of imperialism, colonialism, feudalism and other former ruling classes." This meant murdering or at least persecuting the artists and all those who had anything to do with Khmer culture and destroying libraries, radio, and television stations, i.e. all cultural establishments. Group of Lawyers of Cambodia, op.cit., p.143.


Commission on Manners and Customs were permanently lost. While the Buddhist Institute library used to house more than sixteen hundred palm-leaf manuscripts, in Phnom Penh in the early 1990s, there were less than eight hundred manuscripts left at four sites. More than 95 percent of the palm leaf manuscripts kept in temples throughout the country were destroyed under DK. More than 83 percent of the temples no longer had any manuscripts and only 30 percent of manuscripts found are complete.

Other libraries were also scattered during the 1975 evacuation. Hundreds of thousands of books in the libraries of the Khmer-Mon Institute, the National Institute of Pedagogy, the University of Phnom Penh, as well as other academic establishments were ransacked and thrown out into gardens and on the pavements. On 19 April Teeda Butt Mam saw that the law library had been destroyed. At her English school next door, "stacks of books had been simply tossed out of library windows and set afire." And later," looking down into the Bassac River, I saw books and magazines by the hundreds floating in lazy eddies; the river was awash with soggy literature."

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Under the Khmer Rouge, oral tradition - typically Cambodian - once again was made to take precedence over the written culture brought in from the West. As reading would have helped people to form personal opinions and acquire unorthodox ideas, it was formally forbidden. The use of literacy was severely limited. The DK regime had abolished all schooling above the lowest primary grades. At the village level, writing was sometimes used in banners strung up with revolutionary slogans, in simple agricultural records, passes written to allow people to travel from place to place, and letters, which only "old people" were allowed to write. The DK regime produced only a small number of publications: the text of a speech by Pol Pot, two primary school textbooks, a few propaganda periodicals (i.e. the party's official journal, *Dang Pativatt* [Revolutionary Flag]; the magazine for

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19 François Ponchaud reported that the Khmer Rouge were able to function practically without bureaucracy: no written resumés, hardly any archives, few official texts or periodicals. François Ponchaud, "Social Change in the Vortex of Revolution" in *Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death*, Karl D Jackson, ed, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p.158.

20 There is some evidence that a few schools of different kinds existed in the capital for DK cadres--and even the teaching of foreign languages--but for the mass of the population the only system of education provided was rudimentary classes for small children on the alphabet and the number system, often crudely and ineffectively taught. The stated philosophy of the Khmer Rouge was that education by practical experience should come before schooling. Most of the DK cadres considered higher education as useless and people who had obtained it were less reliable than the uneducated. As Michael Vickery reported, in one of the districts of the Southwest, people were not killed for being educated, but they might well be killed for words or action interpreted as boasting of their education. Michael Vickery, *op.cit.*,173. In some areas, people with glasses were labelled as "capitalists," and were badly treated. So were people who used foreign words in conversation or complained about conditions. For the educated, it was wise to hide any evidence of the kind of social background that literacy presented. For this reason, together with the closing down of schools and the limited uses of literacy, there was a great reduction of literacy during the DK period although there is no basis for saying that it was the policy of the DK to wipe out literacy. John Marston with Sotheary Duong, *Language Use and Language Policy in Democratic Kampuchea*, Paper presented at the Indochina Studies Program colloquium on "Language Use and Language Policy in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam: Modern Developments", University of Hawaii, 27-28 June 1988, pp. 6-7.
youth, *Yuvajan Ning Yuvanarii Pativatt* [Revolutionary Youth]; and *Dassanaavattii Ruup Bhaab* [The Illustrated Journal]), and two booklets of songs of the revolution. Accounts of the period indicate that the general population had little or no access to printed material.\(^{21}\) During the DK period, nothing of significant literary value was produced. In the party's journals between 1975 and 1979, there appeared various poems constantly addressing the same theme: peasant and agricultural development under the discerning direction of the party. These poems attempted to show that the Khmer Rouge's agricultural and hydrological systems were superior to all those existing before them.\(^{22}\)

Revolutionary songs had an extremely important role in the radical revolution of the Pol Pot government. They were used intensively as part of the DK's programme of 'national culture' and as weapons in the revolution. Many Khmers report that songs and news were broadcast over loudspeakers as they worked everyday.\(^{23}\) A number of songs celebrate an idealised conception of work and increased productivity, while some are odes to the countryside and the life of the agricultural worker. Many other songs praise the bravery of the Khmer Rouge soldiers and express defiance against their main enemy, the Vietnamese.\(^{24}\) All these songs use imagery and vocabulary

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p.7.


\(^{23}\) Haing Ngor, for example, remembers that, "In the late morning, they turned on the loud speaker system at the common kitchen. It began with the national anthem. After the national anthem came a song called "Hooray for the Courageous, Strong and Marvellous Revolutionary Soldiers' Group." After this came "New Safety for the Small Town Under the Light of the Glorious Revolution," and then "Our Splendid Fighting Comrades Struggle to Study the Revolutionary Way of Living." I knew them all, and hated them. They were all so un-Cambodian." Haing Ngor, *A Cambodian Odyssey*, (New York: Macmillan,1987), pp.206-207.

\(^{24}\) Six revolutionary songs, namely "The Red Flag", "Solidarity Group", "The Beauty of Kampuchea", "Cultural Group", "The Summer Wind", and "Rainfall In Pisakh (April-May)", were translated by David P Chandler. The translator mentions that some of the
reported to be a more general characteristic of the rhetoric of the Khmer Rouge.

Apart from songs, poems and other written documents also bear witness to the great change in the Khmer language during the Pol Pot era. As differences in status no longer existed, there were changes in the use of pronouns and terms of address such as the prohibition of the honorific title lok. Foreign words, especially French ones, were no longer permitted. Ironically, much of the vocabulary that Khmers point to as typical of Khmer Rouge language was the elevated "revolutionary" vocabulary created from Pali and Sanskrit origin. For the old words, many were given new meanings and unusual words were given greater frequency. A good example is the word Angkar which has a complicated set of implications in and of itself. It means literally "organisation" and was often used to mean this but it was also referred to the Communist Party. Commonly, this word was represented to people as a vague entity above them. At other times people were told that they themselves, the population, were Angkar. Sometimes it seemed to refer to Pol Pot himself. The Khmer Rouge also used military vocabulary to refer to non-military activity. For example, children's study was described as prayuddh bangrik nau kar yal ting "struggling to increase understanding and knowledge". The DK regime also created a lot of slogans and sayings. The best-known among the Khmers were Duk Min Camnen,

revolutionary songs use existing folk-tunes and traditional rhythms, but the main difference between them and pre-revolutionary songs, aside from such obvious ones as the choice of subject matter, is that the songs are sung in unison rather than by individuals - a trend reflected in the words as well, which praise collective efforts at the expense of individual ones. David P Chandler, trans, "Six Revolutionary Songs" in Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea 1942-1981, Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua, eds, (London: Zed Press,1982), p.326.

Tak Cen Ka Min Khaat "To keep you is no benefit, to kill you is no loss" and Angkar Man Bhnaek Mnas "Angkar has the eyes of a pineapple." Although the Khmer Rouge had come to power in no small part because of their alliance with the military forces of the Vietnamese Communists, by early 1977 relations between Democratic Kampuchea and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam had become extremely hostile. In late December 1978, after two years of border clashes, the Vietnamese sent a military force of 120,000 men, among them a few thousand Khmer soldiers, into Cambodia and drove the Khmer Rouge government out of Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979.

The revival of literature during the People's Republic of Kampuchea

Following their invasion of Cambodia, the Vietnamese installed a new government in Phnom Penh and placed Heng Samrin, the president of the National Union Front for the Salvation of Kampuchea, as head of state. The country was called the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and Hun Sen became the prime minister in 1985. Vietnam's installation of the Heng Samrin-Hun Sen regime also gave rise to a guerrilla movement of the

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26 The first one was used constantly by the Khmer Rouge cadres to threaten the "new people" or before killing them. The second one means Angkar knows everything that is going on. This saying is reported as having been used in public meetings where people were admonished that they should not break rules or resist authorities because Angkar would know whatever they did. For details of the slogans and sayings created by the Khmer Rouge, see Henri Locard, Le "Petit Livre Rouge" de Pol Pot ou Les Paroles de L'Angkar, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996).

27 The Salvation Front was founded in December 1978 with the main goal to overthrow the Pol Pot regime and to establish a people's democratic regime to make Cambodia into a real peaceful, independent, neutral and non-aligned country advancing to socialism. In addition to these general goals, the Front promised in its appeal to do away with the extremes of the Pol Pot period such as collective labour while emphasising the freedom of religion, the reuniting of families, and the creation of urban economies. A central goal was the creation of relations of friendship between Cambodia and Vietnam. Kimmo Kiljunen, ed, Kampuchea: Decade of the Genocide, (London: Zed Books, 1984), p.22.
three major resistance groups: Prince Sihanouk's party FUNCINPEC\textsuperscript{28}, the former prime minister Son Sann's Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and the Party of Democratic Kampuchea or the Khmer Rouge.\textsuperscript{29} Each of the four, including the Hun Sen regime itself contested the others' claims to legitimate authority over Cambodia. However, the PRK had developed an effective, albeit dictatorial, authority over more than 80 percent of the national territory, though their fighting against the resistance groups, particularly the Khmer Rouge, continued until the early 1990s. What the PRK lacked was legitimacy, international recognition outside the Soviet bloc, and voluntary domestic support.\textsuperscript{30}

After the near total interruption of education, publication and literacy under the Khmer Rouge, the PRK government had tried their best to re-organise cultural and literary activity, especially by establishing the Ministry of Information and Culture which would be the main organisation responsible for publishing. Moreover, considerable attention was given to the revival and development of Khmer language and literature, both within the new school system and in the press. During the first half of the PRK regime, the task of cultural and literary revival was in the hands of some older writers who survived the Khmer Rouge and held important positions in the government. Keo Chenda, the poet and novelist who wrote a political novel in the early 1960s, was the first PRK Minister of Information and Culture between 1979 and 1980. Under his ministership, there was a reappearance

\textsuperscript{28} Its full name in French is Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendent, Neutre, Pacifique et Cooperatif; in English the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia.

\textsuperscript{29} In 1982, at the urging of the ASEAN, the United States, and China, the three groups opposing the Hun Sen regime formed a government in exile, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, headed by Prince Sihanouk. Their forces sought international aid to resist the Vietnamese and to win Cambodia back, and they had a distinct advantage in that they were recognised by the United Nations as the lawful representative of the state of Cambodia.

and increasingly wide diffusion of traditional Cambodian culture. In August 1980 at the National Palace, there was a meeting of 200 songwriters and poets from many different provinces.\textsuperscript{31} Between 1979 and 1980 two state-controlled newspapers appeared which would play an important role in disseminating the contemporary novel to the public. Chheng Phon, the second PRK Minister of Information and Culture from 1981, was a poet and playwright. He was in charge of the establishment of the Cultural Publishing House, the main publisher of modern novels during the PRK period. His vice-minister, Pech Tum Kravel, was a poet and literary scholar whose works included a new versification textbook and the study of the Cambodian shadow theatre. All literary and artistic publications during the 1980s were under the supervision of these two men. Vandy Kaonn, a prominent journalist and editor of several pre-war newspapers as well as a literary scholar, survived the Khmer Rouge period to play a political role in the PRK. He founded in 1981 the Institute of Sociology as a centre for scientific and political research. The Institute published his study of Cambodian literature, \textit{Réflexion sur la littérature Khmère}, in 1981. He also compiled and edited two volumes of Khmer folktales, \textit{Rioeng Breng Puran Khmaer}, in 1987. In the same year, the Institute published his socio-political novel, \textit{Koh Pisac} [The Island of Devils], which satirically attacked Prince Sihanouk. Another writer who survived the bloodshed of 1975 was the prolific novelist Kong Boun Chhoeun, who became the vice-president of the Cinema Department of the Ministry of Information and the secretary-general of the Association of Writers in Kampuchea. He wrote three novels along revolutionary lines which were published by the Cultural Publishing House. Another older writer who had important influence on the revival of literature in the educational system was Sar Kapun, the author of the famous nationalist novel of the 1950s, \textit{Tejo Kraham} [The Red Techo]. During the PRK period, he became the vice-minister of National Education. The

creation of new textbooks, particularly literature textbooks for all levels, was under his supervision.\textsuperscript{32}

It was reported that, under the PRK's re-establishment of the educational system, the new syllabus had more time devoted to Khmer language and literature than previously.\textsuperscript{33} The newly created school textbooks, including literary texts, had to reflect the ideology and political orientation of the government. The PRK policy of national cultural development stressed that art, culture and literature must 1) inculcate a revolutionary spirit within the people, 2) stimulate patriotic and international proletarian spirit, 3) recover the authentic identity of culture and arts by conserving national and ethnic specificity, 4) construct a socialist cultural and artistic basis with national and popular character, and 5) assimilate progressive culture and arts of the other countries of the world.\textsuperscript{34} As the policy insisted on the goal of eventual socialism, the new literary texts for the last three years of the secondary school comprised three 1950s' political novels of Im Thok, \textit{Sim Anak Par Laan} [Sim, The Driver], \textit{Gulii Kamnaen} [The corvée Coolies], and \textit{Gruu Pangrien Sruk Srae} [The Village Teachers]. That Im Thok's three novels, with their strong socialist ideological line, emphasising the struggle of workers and peasants against capitalists, the bourgeoisies, and feudalists, were required as reading texts in literature classes, showed that the study of literature during the PRK period concentrated on the moral and social lessons to be drawn from the stories rather than their artistic and literary value. This conception was confirmed by the literary textbooks of the sixth to the ninth level, in which much attention was given to "folk" literature, particularly the folktales and folk songs, with emphasis on their social content. While several \textit{Cpap}, the traditional Codes of Conduct, were still featured, the verse-novels which occupied a large part in the pre-war literature textbooks disappeared - no doubt because of their royalist bias and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, p.50.
\textsuperscript{34} Yasushi Kono, \textit{op.cit}, p.3.
\end{flushright}
emphasis on the supernatural. There were also many new short poems and stories which praise the Communist Party and their victory over the Khmer Rouge and celebrate the friendship and co-operation between the Khmers and Vietnamese. Some were written by Sar Kapun, the vice-minister of National Education himself. All the literary texts were obviously studied along the socialist line as the Ministry of Education had published in 1986 a manual for teachers entitled *Kar Proe Pras Dassanah Maak Lenin Knung Kar Pangrien Aksarsilp* [Marx et Lénine dans l'Enseignement de la Littérature].

The PRK had created one new subject called "political morality" which combined the type of material found in traditional civics study with some history lessons, particularly on the history of the Cambodian revolutionary movement and the left-wing struggle against the French. The textbook for this subject included Cambodian folktales and the translations of many Vietnamese stories that depict heroes who fought in the war against the imperialists. There were also many reading texts which underline the inter-Indochina friendship.

In addition to formal education in Cambodian literature, the press played an important role in disseminating new literary works and in being a vehicle for encouraging new writers. Four newspapers were published under the PRK, all controlled by the state and under the direction and review of the Commission for Education and Propaganda of the Communist Party. The most important newspaper in terms of general culture and literature was *Kambuja*, a national weekly newspaper run by the energetic editor Khieu Kanharith, one of the pre-war intellectuals. *Kambuja* published short stories regularly and most issues contained an ongoing serial novel by a local author, a Khmer translation of a contemporary foreign novel, and a page devoted to poems sent in by readers. There were also frequent articles on Cambodia of general interest. This weekly stimulated public interest in

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literature, particularly among young people, as it was also distributed to schools for use in reading lessons. Some novels serialised in *Kambuja* were very popular among readers such as *Yap Kantal Thnai* [Darkness in Broad Daylight], written by Pok Ponn Somach. The weekly, therefore, published this novel in book form in 1988. Another newspaper which helped disseminate modern literature was a weekly newspaper of the Phnom Penh municipality, *Phnom Penh*, which sometimes published novels in book form. For example, the political novel *Subhamanggal Knung Kruosar Balakar* [Happiness in the Family of the Workers] of Keo Chenda which was written along the Marxist-Leninist line in the early 1960s and had to be published in Hanoi in 1961, was reprinted for the first time in Cambodia in 1983 by the newspaper *Phnom Penh*.

In 1985, the Cultural Publishing House of the Ministry of Information and Culture was set up. One of its main tasks was to publish general literary works such as folktales, children's books, novels and short stories. It also intended to simplify or modernise classical literature, as well as publish new creative works by well-known and would-be authors, to suit contemporary tastes. Though the Cultural Publishing House hoped to produce 10-13 new titles a year, by 1990, it had published only around 20 novels due to many constraints such as lack of personnel, equipment and supplies. In terms of personnel, the Cultural Publishing House required that the newly written novel should be provided by the newly-founded Association of Writers in Kampuchea, but this was difficult as the Association had only 4 members in 1988.  

In the Publishing House itself, there were not enough qualified persons to choose and edit the manuscripts to be published. The director, Mr Yi Thon, was the only one who had studied Khmer literature at university level prior to the Pol Pot regime. None of the other employees had much education or experience in literary work, so all the editorial work had to be done by the director himself. Concerning equipment and supplies, much of the printing equipment was out of date, components provided by

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various donors were seldom compatible, and spare parts were unavailable. Good quality paper was also in very short supply. Paper and ink had to be imported from the Soviet Union at a high cost despite its low quality.\textsuperscript{37} Publication was restricted by low print capacity. The average cost of printing a novel was 11.5 riel per copy, while the sales prices was 12.5 riel\textsuperscript{38}, which meant that there was no profit for the Publishing House, or hardly any margin for authors or book-sellers. The novels had over the years primarily been distributed through government offices to state employees.

All novels published in the PRK were supposed to be written to help the people understand and support the policy of the government, and to encourage them to participate in the work of national security and reconstruction. No criticism of the government, nor dissenting views on policy were allowed. The new political orientation on literature was solemnly declared by Chheng Phon, the Minister of Information and Culture, in 1988:

\begin{quote}
The complete building of a new society always takes into account that during the lifetime of a generation, several models of state are followed. The full blooming of culture and literature requires that everything out-of-date be rejected, choosing only elements of progressive and revolutionary art. Traditions that are tied to reactionary culture from the time of colonialism and imperialism must be destroyed.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{39} Natalia Fochko, interview conducted with Chheng Phon in 1988, unpublished text in French, quoted in Khing Hoc Dy, \textit{op.cit}, p.34
With the exception of Kong Boun Chhoeun, almost all of the novelists of the Cultural Publishing House were young writers who were members of the Communist Party or officers in the Revolutionary Army. The most prolific was Nond Chand, a reservist captain and chief of the cultural and artistic office of the Commission of Propaganda and Education of the Revolutionary Army. He wrote several novels for the Cultural Publishing House such as *Camrieng Nau Loe Samarabhuumi Cung Kroy* [Song in the Last Battlefield], *Phkaa Riik Bel Arun Rah* [The Flower Blossoms at Dawn], *Camrieng Jiivit* [Song of Life], and *Nar Na Ubuk Kuun* [Who Is Your Father, My Child?]. Two of his novels, *Damnuk Sakavaadi* [The "Sakava" Song] and *Juop Kanlaeng Bhloeng Cheh* [Meeting in the Middle of Fire], won the gold and silver medals in a literary competition in 1988-89. Another prolific novelist of the PRK was Mrs Pal Vannariraks, a member of the Revolutionary Party and official at the Cultural Office of Chamkar Mon in the 1980s. She wrote several novels and screenplays for propaganda films. Two of her novels, *Ranoc Phut Hoey* [The Waning Moon Has Already Passed] and *Joeng Megh Thmii Nai Ktii Sangghim* [The New Horizon of Hope], won first and second prizes in the literary competition organised for the tenth anniversary of the PRK in 1989. According to the former director of the Cultural Publishing House, two novels of Ty Chy Huoth, a member of the Communist Party, namely *Vil Rak Dranam* [Return to the Nest] and *Megh Paat Tuong Cand* [The Moonless Sky], were the most popular among readers during the PRK.40 These two novels were broadcast on the Party's radio and published in book form in 1984 and 1988 respectively.

The recurring themes of novels written under the PRK are the tragic life of the Khmer during the Pol Pot years, the heroic acts of soldiers in the revolutionary army fighting against the Khmer Rouge and the non-communist resistance factions, and inter-Indochinese friendship and

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solidarity. Novels with the first theme describe the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge and the misfortunes and terror the country experienced from 1975 to 1979. Since the Khmer Rouge was the main enemy of the PRK, these novels were written to "remind the Khmer people not to forget the genocidal regime of Pol Pot who always wanted to return to power and to kill the Khmer again." Two novels of Kong Boun Chhoeun, Anak Toer Kaat Byuh [Those Who Cross the Storm] and Slik Jhoe Caak Maek [The Leaves Fall from the Trees] are in this category. In Anak Toer Kaat Byuh, the author gives a detailed description of the situation in Phnom Penh before and on 17 April 1975 and the hardship and suffering the "17 April" people had to endure for four years. Slik Jhoe Caak Maek tells the life of Vanny, a seven year-old Khmer girl who is separated from her parents during the Pol Pot years and put to work in the children's mobile unit. The cruelty of the DK cadres towards Khmer children is portrayed through Vanny and her friends' lives. The children must work day and night, building dams and moving fertiliser, and getting only a watery rice gruel twice a day. Some are killed simply for breaking a spoon, condemned as traitors for destroying the property of the Angkar. Others were killed for letting the buffaloes collide. Vanny herself is about to be killed after stealing rice from the kitchen for her sick mother but she is saved by a Vietnamese combatant when the Vietnamese troops liberate the village. Praise for the Vietnamese liberation of Cambodia is the typical ending of most novels in this category.

Novels with the second theme, such as Nond Chand's Bhlieng Ratuv Ktau [Rain in the Hot Season] and Sar Sieng Hieng's Grab Kambhloeng Cangkroy [The Last Bullet], have the heroes enlisted in the revolutionary army to defend the motherland and rebuild the country. The authors never forget to show us the differences between the Pol Pot regime and the new regime. In Grab Kambhloeng Cangkroy, the hero, Asna, decides to join the

revolutionary army after 1979 for fear that "Pol Pot may come back to power again." While he is away on military training in Vietnam, his misguided teenage brother joins the Khmer Rouge troops. The hero, therefore, disguises himself and joins the DK army in order to search for his brother and spy on the enemy. In the DK camp, he is able to inform the people there about the far better living conditions under the PRK. "People have enough food to eat and gain freedom for religion." Asna successfully persuades many misguided people including his brother to run away from the DK camp. On their way back to the city, they encounter Khmer Rouge troops and his brother is shot dead, but he later kills many of the DK soldiers with the help of Vietnamese troops. In some other novels of this type, such as Ty Chy Huoth's *Vil Rak Dranam* [Return to the Nest] and Sam Sophal's *Satv Ratrii Car* [The Nocturnal Animals], the heroes are misguided youth who join the resistance factions along the border after 1979, but later surrender, after realising the evil and tricks of the resistance, and receive a warm welcome from the PRK.

Novels in the last group celebrate the friendship and solidarity between the Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Laotian people. In *Megh Pat Tuong Cand* [The Moonless Sky] written by Ty Chy Huoth, the hero, Bauphan, is a Laotian prisoner who is sent to Tralac Island during the French period and later moved to prison in Phnom Penh. When he is released, he falls in love with a Khmer woman and hopes to marry her after their countries are liberated. He then returns to his country to join the Communist Party of Laos and is sent to work in Hanoi. After the overthrow of the DK regime, Bauphan has a chance to go back to Cambodia only to find that his lover was killed during the Pol Pot years because of her refusal to marry a DK cadre. The author mentions in the preface of the novel that he wrote the story with the intention of revealing the bravery and solidarity of the Indochinese people who fought together to liberate their countries from French colonialism, American imperialism and Chinese communism under the leadership of the Indochinese Communist Party until gaining victory and
freedom. Additionally, the Cultural Publishing House published some Lao and Vietnamese novels translated into Khmer such as *Byuh Jiivit* [The Storm of Life] written by a Lao novelist, Dao Noeu.

The new novels produced during the PRK period are indeed a propaganda tool of the government to strengthen the people's commitment to PRK and to attack the Khmer Rouge and the non-communist resistance factions of Prince Sihanouk and Son Sann. Similar to many texts written for schools, they were created to remind the Khmers that:

> *The Khmers should not forget the flesh and the blood shed by the Vietnamese brothers who have made the sacrifice of their life to help us to liberate ourselves from the regime of Pol Pot/Ieng Sary/Khieu Samphan. We must be full of gratitude towards them and know that nobody else other than Vietnam has assisted our national salvation and to get us out of this tragedy. And we must base ourselves on this gratitude to nurture an inextinguishable hatred towards the regime of Pol Pot/ Ieng Sary/ Khieu Samphan and other band of reactionaries, who, by all means, want to destroy our revolution and the Khmer-Vietnamese solidarity.*

During the PRK period, there was only one state-owned bookshop in Phnom Penh and some private bookstalls. The National Library, which also served as the only public library for the city of Phnom Penh, with its more than 700,000 population, could not answer the needs of readers wanting entertainment from books. The National Library was not open to the public.

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until August 1988. Though the library housed almost 50,000 volumes, it had only 315 unduplicated books in Khmer language in the main collection. Most of them were works on geography, history, social sciences, and education as well as encyclopaedias, dictionaries and textbooks. Cambodian literary works, both classical and modern, were very few. No pre-1975 novels were available. In the 1980s, books were rare and thus became precious. Novels were the only way for escapism, the only door opened for dreams; they were liked by the people and sold out within a couple of months. UNICEF reported that there was a high demand for reading materials in Khmer and though generally distribution was limited to the towns and cities as transport was poor, books that did reach rural area communities had high readership.

There was also a high demand for novels outside the political and revolutionary themes. Mrs Mao Somnang, the only professional novelist in present-day Cambodia, remembers that in 1981, she presented the manuscript of her first novel, a detective novel entitled "The Mysterious Night", to the owner of a small bookstall in front of a school. He told her

44 The collection was a strange jumble of old French-language works and new books which were gifts from socialist comrades such as collections of Lenin's writings and Vietnamese materials. Even in the early 1990s, most of the collection was still stacked in piles around the building, unused and unusable. A sizeable number of works were eaten and damaged by vermin. The main problem of the National Library was that it had no budget and its staff had no training in library work. A lack of trained personnel meant backlogs in weeding and cataloging as well as preservation. Judy Ledgerwood, "A Building Full of Books" Cultural Survival Quarterly, 14,3 (1990), pp.52-54.

45 It was reported that the Khmers approaching Phnom Penh in 1979, secretly entered the city which was then forbidden to them, in search of food and books - technical as well as literary- which they found at the old market, an important selling place until 1975. After being deprived for a period of any education, they were desperate to read books. Marie Martin, op.cit, p.14.


47 I got this information from a French newspaper in which the title of the novel in Khmer was not given.
that he could find a readership for it and that she could earn some money. She therefore made 50 copies of her 200 page manuscript. Though the manuscript was written in pencil on very poor quality paper, the copies were all rented in just a week. It was such a success and there was such a demand that the owner of the bookstall also helped recopy himself and distribute the story to the provinces. It was obvious that authors also wished to write other types of novel apart from the propagandist ones. Mrs Pol Vannarirak, the award-winning novelist from the literary competition arranged by the PRK, had in fact written more than a dozen sentimental novels but she was not able to openly publish them in book form. Only her revolutionary novels were published in the 1980s.

In 1989, the Vietnamese finally withdrew their military force in Cambodia and the name of the country was changed to the State of Cambodia (SOC). The government inaugurated a series of reforms including privatising state-owned enterprises. It also claimed to have abandoned Marxism-Leninism as an ideology and foreign investment was encouraged. The streets of Phnom Penh became alive with people, markets teemed with everything, and restaurants mushroomed, all with television sets and videos for their customers to watch. Novels which were precious as the only form of escapism started to be replaced by televisions and video.

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48 Nay Rithy and Frédéric Amat, "Mao Somnang, Unique Écrivain Professionnel entre Séries Télés et Romans" Cambodge Soir, 282 (Vendredi 9 - Samedi 10 - Dimanche 11 Mai 1997), p.4


50 In 1984, the PRK established its Kampuchean Television (TVK) with assistance from Vietnam. It was used for political purposes and showed mainly news and political films. Most programmes were produced locally but foreign films from India and socialist countries were dubbed into Khmer and shown two to three times a week. Since the last years of the 1980s, there was widespread introduction of video and the capacity to receive overseas television signals which resulted in a rapid increase in the number of private individuals or associations making films and engaging in producing, copying and distributing video cassettes. In 1984, the PRK established its Kampuchean Television (TVK) with assistance from Vietnam. It was used for political purposes and showed mainly news and political films.
the films and videos were apparently smuggled from Hong Kong and Thailand, some private groups started to produce Cambodian films to be broadcast on television and video. Revolutionary writers turned to write novels, mostly love stories, to be made into films and videos. As this kind of video-script novel could earn the authors a considerable sum of money, novelists began not to care much about having their works published for the public. The increasing popularity of television and video in the late 1980s had a great impact on the development of novels in Cambodia in the next decade.

The national reconciliation programme of the government came with the opening of the country. Along with many overseas Cambodians visiting their home country came the aid programmes from NGO and organisations around the world to help Cambodia. In 1989, Cornell University began a programme to preserve some of the unique library and archival materials surviving the country's holocaust. The palm leaf manuscripts were cleaned, put in insect-resistant boxes, and some of them were microfilmed so that more than one copy of the work will exist and in more than one location. In 1992, the Cornell library had microfilmed all of its Khmer-language holdings - approximately 1,000 titles - and holdings on Cambodia in western languages - another 2,000 titles - and given microfilm copies to the National Library. A large number of pre-revolutionary literary works, both

Most programmes were produced locally but foreign films from India and socialist countries were dubbed into Khmer and shown two to three times a week. Since the last years of the 1980s, there was widespread introduction of video and the capacity to receive overseas television signals which resulted in a rapid increase in the number of private individuals or associations making films and engaging in producing, copying and distributing video cassettes. The number of television sets in Cambodia rose from 5,000 in 1986 to 40,000 in 1990. There was also a massive growth of video halls, both state-operated and private-owned, which ranged in seating capacity from 60-200. In Phnom Penh and provincial towns in 1990, every neighbourhood restaurant had a television set and video and it was always overcrowded with people watching video programmes. UNICEF, op.cit, pp.142-148.

classical and modern, had finally returned to Cambodia in the early 1990s in the form of microfilms. Additionally, the Cultural Publishing House and some other printing houses of the government started to publish some pre-war novels. The three classic novels *Suphaat* [The Story of Sophat], *Kulaap Pailin* [The Rose of Pailin], and *Phkaa Srabon* [The Faded Flower] were, of course, among the first to be reprinted. Gradually the overtly political fiction has been replaced by romantic fiction and crime novels.

**Khmer writers in exile**

Since 1975 large numbers of Khmer refugees fled their homeland in search of refuge, most of them to Thailand.\(^5\) Over the next thirteen years, a whole generation grew up in refugee camps. Between 1991 and 1993, over 300,000 of these people returned to Cambodia, while a further 300,000 found permanent residence abroad. Roughly half of these now live in the United States, the others divided among France (c.40,000), Canada and 

\(^5\) The Khmer refugees fled in several waves and at different times. The first wave, which left in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge defeated the Lon Nol government, included government officials, professionals, and other westernised or educated people in a higher socio-economic strata. Some 35,000 to 40,000 persons fled to Thailand and another 150,000 went to Vietnam. In the next three years, they subsequently resettled in third countries, going primarily to France, the United States, Australia and Canada. When the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979, the second influx of refugees, numbering about 100,000, fled to the Thai border. They included urban and professional people who had survived the Pol Pot regime by concealing their backgrounds. Also fleeing were large numbers of rural people, and Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers. A severe famine in 1979 and 1980 and fears of another Communist government forced the third and largest wave of some 500,000 Khmer refugees to flee. By June of 1980, more than 150,000 Khmer refugees were in holding centers operated by UNHCR. Thousands of others waited in border camps, either for admittance to Thai camps and from there to countries of resettlement, or for peace in Cambodia so they could return to their homes. J Patrick Hamilton, *Cambodian Refugees in Thailand: The Limits of Asylum*, (New York: US Committee for Refugees, American Council for Nationalities Service, 1982), p.6.
Australia (c. 15,000 each) and other countries (c. 10,000). Many of these people are educated, urban, professional people, and include a few writers.

The destruction from years of warfare, the horrendous losses during the DK regime, followed by the presence of the traditional enemy, the Vietnamese, and, the new realities of living in third countries, all raised fears among the Khmer refugees that their culture has been lost or altered. This perception has led to efforts by both Khmer and non-Khmer to preserve what remains of Cambodian literature and to increase the next generation's understanding and appreciation of it. At the same time, Khmer refugee writers abroad, both old and new, began to create new literary works from the last years of the 1970s, and continue to do so.

Several refugee camps in Thailand, including Khao-I-Dang, Sakaeo, Kamput, and Mai Rat were opened in 1979 and 1980. In addition to shelter and food, the holding centres also established, with the aid of various governmental and private agencies, education, medical, and processing services. Schooling inside the camps included the study of literature and some young refugee poets reported learning classical Khmer versification while living in camps in Thailand. Apart from textbooks, hundreds of works of Cambodian and Buddhist literature were published in Bangkok for distribution to Khmer refugees in various camps by the Japan Sotoshu Relief Committee (JSRC) with the co-operation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The JSRC reproduced a large number of classical literary works as well as famous novels of the pre- and post-independence period.

54 For details of the perception of pre-revolutionary Cambodian culture as having been lost, see May M Ebihara, Carol A Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood, "Introduction" Cambodian Culture Since 1975: Homeland and Exile, pp.1-5.
55 George Chigas, "Forward" in Cambodia's Lament; A Selection of Cambodian Poetry, (Millers Falls, Massachusetts: George Chigas, 1991), p.VII.
About forty newly written novels, stories, and collections of poems produced by refugees in the camps were also published. According to Khing Hoc Dy, such works often focus on the dramatic events between 1975 and 1979 and subsequent experiences under the Vietnamese occupation from 1979 to 1989. Suffering and nostalgia for the homeland are almost always represented. This may be mostly the case in poems and short stories; but some novels written by refugees in the Sakaeo and Khao-I-Dang camps still show the strong influence of pre-war novels, especially Suphaat and Kulaap Pailin, the two sentimental classics. Ghlaat Sruk Kamnoet [Away from the Homeland] written by Ching Sophon in 1982 is the best example. The title of the novel may mislead the reader into thinking it is the story of a refugee forced to flee Cambodia. In fact, the story is set in Battambang in 1972 and concerns the life of a lowly lad who falls in love with a high class lady. The characterisation of the orphan boy and the high class girl, the hero's taming the heroine, the heroic protection of the girl, and the revelation of his real identity, are elements which bear strong influence from Suphaat and Kulaap Pailin. It is difficult to say whether the author created the story in this way just because when he started writing novels in the camp, there was not many novels to be studied apart from these two easily available classics or whether he intended to borrow elements from the two novels to show his literary nostalgia for quality novels of the pre-war period which were lost during the DK years. His purpose in creating this novel could also be very political, for as a writer in a pro-Sihanouk camp, his use of many elements from popular pre-war novels reminded people of better times and the need at that moment to support the resistance struggle. No matter what reason the novelist had, to write this novel at least demonstrated his desire to preserve his culture and literature which were in jeopardy of being lost.

57 It is said that the radio station of Prince Sihanouk's FUNCINPAC group in the refugee camps always played sentimental songs from the pre-war era to remind people of their life in that time.
As for the Khmer refugees who were able to resettle in the western world, the painful recollection of lost family members and friends, abandoned homes and vocation is exacerbated by the experience of geographic displacement. For many of them, the sense of exile in a foreign land has fostered a particularly poignant nostalgia for their motherland. The power of nostalgia, together with the perception of Cambodian culture as having been lost, has served as an emotional impetus for cultural reconstruction in foreign countries. The result of this reconstruction was the formation of Cambodian communities scattered around the world. In France and the United States, many organisations sprung up in the Cambodian communities with the goal of preserving and fostering Cambodian culture, for example, the Khmer Studies Institute in Connecticut, the Cambodia Foundation in Texas, and Cedoreck (Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur la Civilisation Khmère) in Paris. These organisations, as well as those of other Cambodian communities, have published a number of Khmer journals, some of which serialised modern Cambodian novels written by Khmer refugees. *Kuun Khmaer* [Khmer Children], the monthly journal founded by Cedoreck in 1983, for example, regularly published short stories and novels, especially those by Madame Pech Sangwawann, a long-term member of the Association of Khmer Writers in Phnom Penh before 1975. Another journal of Cedoreck, *Seksa Khmer* [Khmer Studies], was a significant source of articles on Cambodian literature. These cultural organisations also reproduced Cambodian literary texts published before 1975. Cedoreck published, by offset press, several texts of classical and modern literature. To encourage Khmers abroad to write in their own language, literary competitions were held by Cambodian community organisations in America. In 1987, the Cambodia Foundation in Texas organised a literary contest for poems and novels with principal themes of tragedy under the Pol Pot regime, grief, separation from families and loved ones, and nostalgia for Cambodia.\(^5\)

A number of the post-independence novelists who survived the Khmer Rouge period and resettled in Europe and America were active in reproducing their old works as well as creating new novels. Biv Chhay Lieng, the well-known novelist and film-maker, arrived in France in January 1976. Three years later, he wrote a new novel entitled *Peh Tuung Mae Kantaal Sneh Kamm* [The Heart of the Mother in the Middle of the Genocide]. At the same time, he re-edited some of his old historical novels written during the 50s and 60s such as *Brah Cand Raajaa* [King Chand Raja] and *Viirapurars*[The Hero], which he was able to find in libraries in France and America. Soth Polin, the author of many philosophical works, first settled in France, reprinting his most famous novel, *Jiivit It Nay*[Life Without Sense], in Paris in 1981. *L'Anarchiste*, his French translation of the novel *Anak Phsang Breng Arat Aray* was also published in Paris in 1980. Soth later moved to America and became the editor of the Khmer-language newspaper, Nokor Thom. Another older writer, Madame Pech Sangwawann, several of whose novels were serialised in newspapers and broadcast on Phnom Penh radio from the late 1960s, has been very active in preserving and disseminating Cambodian culture and literature since her arrival in France in 1977. She wrote many new novels for serialisation in the journals and magazines of the Cambodian communities both in France and America. Since 1988, her novels in Khmer were broadcast on Radio Asie in Paris every Thursday. In the same year, she founded the Association of Khmer Writers Abroad.

There were also a number of new writers who started writing novels in their own language with the intention of preserving and promoting Cambodian literature. In France, young Khmer writers published their novels from the late 1970s, for example *Phkaa Jhuuk Kambujaa* [The Lotus Flower of Cambodia], by Ing Kien and *Kroy Bel Bhlieng* [After the Rain] by Ros Viriya. In Germany, Yim Gueschse published his two novels *Raamakerti Knung Ktii Sramai* [Reamker in the Dream] and *Laa Hoey Kulaap Bhnam Ben* [Farewell, the Rose of Phnom Penh] in 1986. Most of the novels written by both older and new writers abroad during the 1980s and the early 1990s share the same theme of the tragic life of the Khmers under Pol Pot;
their sufferings, grief, and separation from families and loved ones, and their hazardous escapes in search of freedom were compellingly and movingly portrayed.

The horrors and atrocities of the Pol Pot regime, portrayed in Cambodian fiction of the 1980s have reached a much wider audience through the autobiographical accounts of survivors written in French and English, which began to appear at the beginning of the 1980s. Among the first of them are Pin Yathay's *L’Utopie Meurtrière: Un Rescapé du Génocide Cambodgien Témoigne* and Molyda Szymusiaik's *Les Pierres Crieront: Une Enfance Cambodgienne, 1975-1980*. *L’Utopie Meurtrière*, published in Paris in 1980, is considered by readers as well as scholars of Cambodian studies as one of the best survivors' accounts.59 *Les Pierres Crieront* tells the experiences of a Khmer girl who was only 10 years old in 1975. First published in Paris in 1984, this book was translated into English just two years later, under the title *The Stones Cry Out*. The Khmer refugees in America started publishing their autobiographical accounts in the second half of the 1980s. The former student Someth May, who survived the Khmer Rouge while watching the deaths of many friends and loved ones, tells us of the horrors of the "killing fields" in his *Cambodian Witness*, published in 1986. In 1987, Haing Ngor, who won an Oscar for his portrayal of the New York Times photographer Dith Pran in the well-known movie *The Killing Fields*, describes his own experiences under Pol Pot and afterwards in *A Cambodian Odyssey*. A year later, he wrote *Surviving the Killing Fields*. Also in 1987, Teeda Butt Mam describes how her upper class family struggled against the terrors of Pol Pot before at last escaping to America in her gripping account, *To Destroy You Is No Loss*. In the 1990s, a number of survivors' accounts written in French and English continued to appear. Among them are the story of Ly Heng, *Cambodge: Le Sourire Baillonné*, which was published in Belgium in 1992 and Dith

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59 This book, definitely anti-Khmer Rouge, was forbidden in Cambodia during the PRK period because of some lines at the end of the book, where the author affirms the determination of the Khmers not to allow Vietnam to colonise Cambodia.
Pran's *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields*, which was published in 1997. At the turn of the century, another wave of survivors' accounts in English came out to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Khmer Rouge capture of Cambodia. The most recent ones include Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father* and Chanrithy Him's *When Broken Glass Floats*. Most of these autobiographies reflect three distinct phrases of the authors' lives: their experiences in pre-Communist Cambodia, their traumatic survival of the Khmer Rouge holocaust, and their risky escapes for freedom to the border.

The novels and autobiographical accounts written by the survivors of the Pol Pot era both in Khmer and western languages are attempts by the Khmer writers to inform the world of the reality of the genocide that they and their people had seen and personally suffered and to denounce the perpetrators responsible for the mass executions, forced labour and devastation of their society. Through their works, the authors not only confirmed to themselves, but also to their fellow Khmers and to the world at large that such incomprehensible destruction actually happened and that the pain they continue to suffer is therefore justified. Moreover, most of the authors, as survivors, feel it was their burden to bear witness on behalf of their families, friends and other Khmers who died during the genocidal reign of Pol Pot, and thus fulfil a debt to remember and speak for them and ensure their stories are heard. As Someth May writes in *Cambodian Witness*:

> My experiences were no different from those of my family and friends. Any of us could tell the same story. But unlike so many of us, I managed to survive. The revolution forced me to become a liar, a thief, a smuggler, a classical dancer, a refugee and finally a stateless person. And now that I have survived I want to tell the story, exactly as it happened.  

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Apart from their significance as literary testimony, the survival novels give a new function to Cambodian literature: the medicine that helps to heal the Cambodian traumas. Writing these novels has become a vital part of the process of healing the wounds of the past for both the writers and their Cambodian audience as they struggle to come to terms with the feelings of pain and guilt associated with the genocide. Though no writers, nor their audiences, are able to find a logical explanation for their sufferings, the fact that their stories are heard helps them regain a sense of trust in the world and get on with their lives in a healthy way.

One of the best examples of the survival novel is *Vipatti Knung Samarabhuumi Snehaa* [Disaster in the Battlefield of Love] written in 1990 by Mrs Duong Ratha, a Khmer refugee working as a social worker in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her other novel, *Daarunakamm Nai Citt Bhaktii* [Torture of the Loyal Heart], won the first prize of the Nou Hach Award in a literary competition held during the Cambodian Festival in Long Beach, California in 1987. *Vipatti Knung Samarabhuumi Snehaa* tells the story of two young lovers who are parted by the Khmer Rouge and eventually reunite after years of physical and emotional suffering. Unlike other survival novels which often begin with Pol Pot coming to power and his evacuation of the people to the countryside, this novel portrays the hardships of country people who live in the Khmer Rouge liberation zones in the last years of the Republic period. When the hero, a high school student in Pursat, returns to his village to nurse his sick mother, the reader sees how the Khmer Rouge force him to join their army by threatening not to give his mother medicine and confiscating all his wealth and property. The author also depicts the battle between Pol Pot troops and the Republican army which causes the villagers to endure the harsh life as refugees in the provincial capital. Through the life of the hero, who becomes a Khmer Rouge officer, the internal politics and scramble for power among DK cadres from different zones is revealed, while the suffering of the "new people" from hard labour, lack of food, and brutal torture is depicted through the heroine's life. The communist language of the Khmer Rouge is well recorded such as the change of the greeting word from *suo stii* "hello" to *samaggii* "solidarity" as
well as many of its proverbs and sayings. Many small details given in the story, such as the excitement of the young Khmer Rouge cadres when they first see ice during the evacuation of the cities, or the rise of the price of a cup of noodles from 300 to 400 riel when the villagers become refugees and migrate to the city, add an appealing and realistic quality to the novel. While the readers are moved almost to tears by the fate of the two lovers artistically described by the author, the reality recorded in the story makes *Vipatti Knung Samarabhuumi Snehaa* an invaluable testimony of the Khmer Rouge horrors.

While most of the survival novels conclude with the ending of the Khmer Rouge period or the escape of the main characters and their arrival in a new world, some writers choose to depict the struggle of the refugees to cope with their new life in the western world such as *Joeng Megh Thmii*[The New Horizon] by Madame Pech Sangwawann and *Phkaa Jhuuk Kambujaa* [The Lotus Flower of Cambodia] of Ing Kien. These two novels deal with the life of refugee girls in France. *Phkaa Jhuuk Kambujaa* tells the story of a young Khmer woman who arrives in France with help from Catholic Relief. Her acceptance by the family of her former lover is due to their Christian attitude to charity. This novel records the change in religious belief of the Khmer refugees which is not found in other works.61

Up until now, Khmer writers abroad continue to produce literary works but it seems second generation Khmer, particularly in the United States, are beginning to write in English rather than in their own language. For example, in the journal of the United Cambodian Students of America, *Praleng Khmer* [Khmer Spirit], all the poems and short stories, written by

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61 There had been reports from Thai refugee centres that some Khmer had converted to Christianity because, it is said, the horrors of Democratic Kampuchea led to disillusionment with Buddhism—or, in some instances, espousal of Christianity may have been stimulated by the hope that such conversion would increase chances of acceptance for relocation to Western countries. May Ebihara, "Prospects for the Preservation of Religion" in *First International Scholars Conference on Cambodia: Selected Papers*, Russell A Judkins, ed, (New York: State University of New York at Genesco,1988), p.23.
Khmer students, are in English language. Their stories reflect issues such as generational conflict between culturally conservative parents and their Americanised children.

**Literary situation in Cambodia since 1990**

After decades of civil war and political upheaval, the Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict was signed in Paris on 23 October 1991 by the four Cambodian political factions: the FUNCINPEC, the SOC's Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP), and the Democratic Kampuchea Party (The Khmer Rouge). The agreement led to the establishment of the United Nation Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), which was to monitor a transitional period leading to free elections in 1993. After the May election, FUNCINPEC and CPP agreed to form a coalition government, sharing the prime ministership, with Prince (now King) Sihanouk reigning as head of state.

The economic and political developments which took place during the UNTAC period between 1991 and 1993, especially the conversion to a market economy, resulted in the growth of internationally financed media

62 The Khmer Rouge subsequently disavowed the Paris agreement and have remained outside the legitimate government.

63 The presence of UNTAC in the early years of the 1990s stimulated the Cambodian free-market economy, primarily in the form of an urban boom in construction activity, trade, and services for foreign consumption. Urban booms, however, caused sharp price increases and promoted shallow and imbalance economic growth, corruption, and urban-rural gap. Inflation and revenue also eroded public services and infrastructure. Elizabeth Uphoff Kato, "Quick impacts, slow rehabilitation in Cambodia" in *Keeping the Peace: Multidimensional UN Operations in Cambodia and El Salvador*, Michael W Doyle, Ian Johnstone, and Robert C Orr, eds, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1997), pp.186-202. The vast numbers of refugees returning to Cambodia after the Paris agreement had brought about a massive influx of new inhabitants and a rapid growth of speculative investment in Phnom Penh. There were more than 200,000 rural migrants since late 1992, attracted by the increased wealth of the city, and by the hope of an easier life in...
and the proliferation of small independent newspapers which had a great impact on the development of the modern novel. The UNTAC period witnessed Cambodia's first flourishing of the free exchange of ideas - at least in Phnom Penh. In addition to bulletins and newspapers put out by political parties, such as FUNCINPEC's *Anak Jati Niyum* [The Nationalist] and *Réalités Cambodgiennes*, came a score of publications produced by independent editors. In addition to indigenous newspapers, a number of foreign-owned publications graced the bookstalls, themselves a new phenomenon. The most successful of those, and the one generally acknowledged to have the highest circulation in Cambodia, is *Rasmii Kambuja* [Light of Cambodia], owned by a Thai media firm and a Sino-Khmer businessman and printed in Thailand, but with one of Cambodia's most experienced and skilful journalists as its Khmer editor-in-chief. Selling 15,000 copies a day, *Rasmi Kambuja* had a strong impact on the rest of the print media. Apart from a sophisticated layout and colour photographs which attracted a lot of readers as well as advertisers, the strength of *Rasmii Kambuja* lay in its combination of sensational crime stories, a wide variety of articles from domestic politics to foreign entertainment news, and serialised novels. In the 12-page format, one page

contact with Westerners. In 1993, the total population was in the region of 1.3 million. Some Cambodians become very rich from the urban boom, but many more saw their standard of living drop due to inflation and growing insecurity. There was still general impoverishment among the population. Michel Igout, *Phnom Penh Then and Now*, (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1993), pp.20-21.
was reserved to serialise a novel everyday. One of the regular novelists of *Rasmii Kambuja* was Say Khun, six of whose novels were serialised in the newspapers between 1993 and 1994. His works, all sentimental stories with some love scenes, seemed to attract a wide readership and became the model for other newspapers to follow.

Following the appearance of *Rasmii Kambuja*, more than thirty Khmer-language newspapers came out in the second half of 1993. Very few were serious papers and most were funded by small independent media enterprises. They, therefore, had to rely on salacious crime news and novels. In the four-page format, some newspapers such as *Koh Santibhaab* [The Island of Peace], *Setthakicc* [Economy], and *Kamlang Thmii* [Generation Force News], serialised 2-3 novels covering up to one-and-a-half pages. Novels published in these newspapers varied from love stories to crime and detective novels and ghost stories. There sometimes appeared novels which reflected social problems in Cambodia of this period. Aok Bunthoeun's *Srii Paar Parisuddh* [The Virgin Bar-Girl], serialised in Kamlamn Thmi between 1993 and 1994, depicts the miserable life of a virtuous girl who is forced by poverty to become a bar-girl during the UNTAC period. The author wrote this story with the intention of teaching bar-girls, which were huge in numbers after the coming of UN personnel, to behave properly. The novel was very popular among readers and boosted sales of the newspaper to 3,000 copies a day. It can be said that the proliferation of Khmer-language newspapers during and after the UNTAC period brought some amateur novelists to prominence without having to bother to publish their work in book form. However, it would be unfair to assume that the newspaper novelists' write only second-class novels. One prolific author, Vasna Daravichey, won the second prize of the King Sihanouk Literary Award of the Association of Khmer Writers in 1996 with his novel, *Dviib Lok Haek* [The World Tears Apart].
The growth of independent newspapers also corresponded to an amazing proliferation of bookstalls and later bookshops throughout the country, but particularly in Phnom Penh. Though the main profit of these new bookshops and bookstalls came from the sale of English-language textbooks and dictionaries, a number of novels were sold as well. Most of them were reprints of pre-war novels, both popular and less-known ones. Some of the revolutionary novels of the PRK's Cultural Publishing House were still be found.

Along with the internationally financed print media came a new television station, the Thai-financed IBC TV which began broadcasting in early 1993. It became popular very quickly, especially for its Hong Kong films and Thai soap operas dubbed into Khmer. IBC TV was soon subject to criticism that it was promoting Thai cultural imperialism. Therefore, the company tried to make a point of including more Cambodian films. Writers were needed to write novels to be made into movies and soap operas. In 1994 Mrs Mao Somnang was offered US$ 500 to write a series of 20 episodes. Her novels became popular among the television producers and the novelist was able to give up her former profession, selling cigarettes and petrol on the pavement, and devote herself entirely to writing novels and screenplays. After the success of IBC TV, Cambodian television turned more and more to producing its own series. Television became so popular among Khmers that a special newspaper devoted solely to entertainment news, Jiivit Kamsant, Jiivit Taaraa [Relaxation and Celebrities' Lives], was able to survive in the media market; the most popular magazine in Cambodia since 1994 has been the magazine Prajaapriy [The Popular Magazine] whose main columns are about film stars, both Khmer and foreign. The popularity of television in Cambodia at the expense of reading is hardly surprising, given that the adult literacy rate was only 22% for women and 35% for men in 1994. Since

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then, there has been a gradual decrease in novel publication as writers can gain more profit from writing stories to be made into soap operas rather than for publishing in book form.

The post-UNTAC period brought a huge influx of aid from foreign organisations and many western as well as Asian countries begun bilateral assistance programmes. A couple of them were responsible for the preservation and revival of literature and the re-establishment of literary institutions. Entirely uprooted by the Khmer Rouge since 1975, the Buddhist Institute was formally re-established in 1992. Soon afterwards, the Japan Sotoshu Relief Committee (JSRC), which was active in reproducing Cambodian literary works during the 1980s, began a three-year reprinting programme of some 50 important titles of classical and Buddhist literature with support from several Japanese sponsors. Almost at the same time, the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation (HBF), a German foundation linked with the Party Alliance 90/ The Greens, signed a co-operative agreement with the Buddhist Institute to provide infrastructure and technical assistance to allow the work of the Institute, including its co-operation with JSRC, to function more efficiently. A new building near the river was constructed to accommodate offices and the new library. The main task of the Buddhist Institute was to resume and maintain its former status as a national centre of learning, research, documentation and dissemination of Buddhism, literature and culture. The Institute's library was reopened to serve the public in March 1996. A small collection of literature, Buddhist texts and books on Cambodian culture and history have been recovered and collected. At present, the library also holds all books published by JSRC in the refugee camps in Thailand, including many novels written by refugees in the camps during the 1980s. Some of them are still in manuscript form and have not been published. Between 1996 and 1997, Buddhist Institute library branches were set up in 22 provincial temples and the HBF has begun to
equip and maintain these provincial libraries with books available in the
market and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{65}

It was also in 1993\textsuperscript{66} that the Association of Khmer Writers was re-
established. You Bo, a writer, journalist and film-maker, was president
between 1993 and 1996, while Chey Chap, a poet and lecturer in
Cambodian literature at the University of Phnom Penh has been the
president of AKW since 1997. King Sihanouk is once again its honorary
president while the Prime Minister Hun Sen is the honorary advisor. In
1997, the Association had 74 members consisting of novelists, poets, as
well as scholars.\textsuperscript{66} Activities organised by the AKW before 1975 have been
brought back. Two literary competitions have been organised since 1995:
the King Sihanouk Award received funds from the King while the cash
prizes for the 7 January Award were given by Prime Minister Hun Sen. The
prize winning novels of the King Sihanouk Award and the 7 January Award
have been published by the Association every year with funds from the
Heinrich Böll Foundation. In order to promote and to improve the standard
of writers to the level of former times, the Association has also revived its
literary course for writers, which lasts for five months, twice a year. The
Canada Fund, the Canadian NGO, has paid part of the costs for teachers and
materials. Until the end of 1996, more than a hundred would-be writers had
passed this literary training. The AKW also publishes a monthly journal
consisting largely of news of the Association and some articles on Khmer
language and literature.

As for trends in the novel in the 1990s, it can be said that contemporary
Cambodian fiction has developed in two directions: one returning towards
the novelistic tradition of the 1950s and 1960s, and the other continuing the
socialist influence from the PRK period. The literary nostalgia for the
pre-war novels can be seen in the republication of old works and imitation

\textsuperscript{65} Thonevath Pou, \textit{op.cit}, pp.104-105.  
of the types which were popular in the 1950s and 1960s. While the classic novels such as Suphaat, Kulaap Pailin, and Phkaa Srabon are never difficult to find, some publishers go to great efforts to search for the works of other popular writers of the 1960s and print them again. For example, a detective novel of Vong Phoeung, Rapang Mukh Arth Kampang [The Secret Mask], was reprinted by Apsara Bookshop in Phnom Penh in 1996. The owner of the bookshop has revived the Pralomlok Thnai Saur [Saturday Novel] by printing a historical romance, Me Ampau Mas [The Golden Butterfly] written by M Phakdy in 1973, in a booklet of 30 pages every Saturday. Newly-written historical romances, set in the Angkor and post-Angkor period, have also reappeared, for example in Kong Boun Chhoeun's Randah Taav Bayaayat [The Lightning Sword of Pahnayat]. Say Khun's Ratrii Kmoc Yak Braling [The Night Ghosts Taking the Soul] is a type of ghost-thriller, of the type popular during the early 1970s. Many new sentimental novels have their settings in 1960s' Phnom Penh. Ratri 15 Koet [The Night of Full Moon] written by Mrs Chenda and published by the Association of Khmer Writers in 1994 is a reminiscence of life and love of the young Phnom Penh people in the 1960s. At the end of the story the author clearly states her nostalgia for the "Golden Cambodia" under the time of Prince Sihanouk. She laments:

I think of the time of Prince Sihanouk which left so many memories of happiness and prosperity to the Khmer people... We knew well of the happy and sophisticated life which led us to consider our motherland the island of peace.67

67 Mrs Chenda, Ratri 15 Koet [Th Night of Full Moon], (Phnom Penh: Association of Khmer Writers, 1994), p.149.
A story which could be considered the best example of the 1990s' novel is *Ralak Pok Khsac* [*The Waves*] which is influenced by the pre-war novel tradition but has also absorbed some new literary influences. Mrs Mao Somnang wrote this first-prize winning novel along the popular theme of most Cambodian love stories: the miserable life of an orphan who eventually overcomes all obstacles and gains love and happiness by her virtue. Apart from the typical plot, all traditional episodes of the sentimental novel, such as the misunderstanding, the coincidence, the use of tricks, or the villain's attempt to rape the heroine, are fully exploited. The characterisation is also very conventional. The heroine is portrayed as the perfectly virtuous woman, with a soft, sweet manner. Combined with these traditional elements is the use of new technique influenced by television. The story moves rapidly, with more dialogue than descriptive passages; and like the soap opera, there are a lot of minor characters and numerous small sub-plots to hold the reader's attention. In the printed novel, however, all the loose ends seem to be tied up in quite an unconvincing way, since there are too many characters and episodes for the author to handle convincingly. As most contemporary Cambodian novelists also write screenplays for television series, the influence of screenplay technique is inevitable in the novel.

The second direction of Cambodian literature in the 1990s, the socialist influence from the PRK period, can be seen in the study of literature in secondary schools and higher institutions. All the literature textbooks used in schools are still those created in the PRK period. Though some sentimental classic novels have now returned to the curriculum, the main focus is still on works with socialist ideology and folk literature. At the Royal University of Phnom Penh, the curriculum for students who major in Cambodian literature is still dominated by the socialist literary studies, with, for example, special courses on Russian, Chinese and Lao literature.

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68 The University of Phnom Penh and its Faculty of Letters and Humanities was reopened in 1988. Since 1995, 200 students were accepted to study Cambodian literature as their major subject each year.
and also one course on literary works since 1979. In the course on the theory of literature, much attention is given to "social practices in literature". In the course on post-independence literature, novels selected to be studied are mostly those related to class struggle. For the 7 January Literary Award of the Association of Khmer Writers funded by Prime Minister Hun Sen, the main theme set for the competition was the tragedy of the Khmers during the DK period. As real power still remains in the hands of those (former) socialists who have held it since 1979, the socialist influence on literature may take decades to disappear.

Since 1996 Cambodia has experienced further far-reaching political developments, including the terminal weakening of the Khmer Rouge, the death of Pol Pot, and the new election resulting to the stabilisation of the country. While such changes are unlikely to have any particularly detrimental effect on the Cambodian literature, neither are they likely to make life easier for the Cambodian novelist. Writers, bookshop owners, readers, as well as literary scholars share the opinion that less novels are published in present-day Cambodia than in the immediate post-UNTAC period and much less than during the period of the Cultural Publishing House in the second half of the 1980s. Though there are no less writers in the country, everybody seems to face the same problem. As Mrs Mao Somnang, the award-winning novelist, says:

*All of us face the same difficulty in publishing our work and making ourselves known. Since the opening of the country's economy in 1993, it seems that the massive appearance of television has cut off the expansion of books, which had begun to flourish in the 80s.*

Indeed, it is very difficult for writers to publish their work by themselves. The average cost of printing a novel is 2,500-3,500 riel per copy, while the

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69 At least 55 novelists submitted work for the first King Sihanouk Literary Award in 1995.

70 Nay Rithy and Frédéric Amat, *op.cit.*, p.4
sales prices could not be over 3,000 riel. This means there is almost no profit for the authors and in many cases, those who dare to publish their work themselves make a loss. Even the price of 3,000 riel seems to be too expensive for many readers as the majority of Khmers are still very poor and to buy a novel can cost at least five percent of the monthly wage of an average state employee. It seems reasonable to assume that when one has just barely enough to live on, one does not want to spend money on novels. Reading becomes a luxurious hobby which not many are able to afford, while those that could afford it, the richer upper-class, are not interested in Cambodian novels. Moreover, the rapid growth of television has turned most of the audience of the novel to the television which has become the main entertainment medium. Mrs Mao Somnang, who is said to be the "only professional writer" in Cambodia today, never had her novels published during her 17 years of writing except the one which won the King Sihanouk Award and was published with funds from the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Indeed she would prefer to be a "real" novelist rather than screenwriter but "the Khmer people have not got a taste for books; they prefer to watch television." Indeed, for the immediate future, economic pressures are likely to continue to exert an overpowering influence on the Cambodian literary scene, limiting the vision and ambition of writers, who barely make any money from their art, let alone a living, and the demands of a reading public, who if they have any money to invest in reading matter, prefer the more certain pleasures of magazines to the unknown delights of literature.

Another major problem concerning literary creation is the serious intellectual loss through death and exile. The tremendous number of writers and literary scholars killed during the Pol Pot years, combined with the exodus of refugee writers, has left Cambodian literary circles drained. Only a small number of older writers remain for younger writers to learn from, and seek to emulate, while the huge loss of books in 1975 has meant that

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71 The average salary of the university-graduate civil servant is 70,000 riel (around US$ 27-30) per month.

72 Ibid, p.4
even middle-aged writers of today have had a much more limited exposure to good quality literary works than the generation before them. With all these factors, writers, literary scholars, as well as the reading public seem to agree that the ‘precious wealth’ of modern literature may take many decades to appear in Cambodian society again.
References


