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Cambodia's Prison (Visitor) Books: a Medium of Political Instruction

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Nombre des délégations et journalistes internationaux qui visitèrent Tuol Sleng dans les années qui suivirent la chute du régime des Khmers rouges écrivirent des commentaires dans les livres de visiteurs que le musée mettait à leur disposition. La géographe Rachel Hughes étudie la dimension de médium d'instruction politique de ces livres, et met en évidence leur rôle comme élément de dialogue international et source d'information sur les premières années du musée.
Mots clés : musée du Génocide de Tuol Sleng, Cambodge, livres de visiteurs, République populaire du Kampuchéa, solidarité, mémoires de prison, témoignage.

In January 1979, the Khmer Rouge state of Democratic Kampuchea was invaded and liberated by anti-Khmer Rouge Cambodian forces, aided by the Vietnamese army. In the first few years following the end of Khmer Rouge rule, thousands of Cambodians and formal delegations of international visitors toured the new Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, housed within the former site of the Khmer Rouge S.21 security centre. The majority of international visitors to the museum came from socialist states, but journalists and advocates from capitalist countries also visited. Incoming international visitors at this time had their visit to Tuol Sleng scheduled for them by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the new Cambodian state, the socialist People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Some early visitors were also issued with an Authorization Pass from the Ministry of Culture, Information and Propaganda, which oversaw Tuol Sleng Museum at that time.

Once they arrived at the museum, international visitors and delegations were actively guided through its halls, often by Ung Pech, one of only a handful of S.21 survivors and the museum's first Director. Ung Pech had become the Director of the Museum when it opened in 1980 (Chandler, p. 5), having returned to work at the site in November 1979 (Vann Nath, p. 100). Tours were routinely conducted in Vietnamese, English and French. Following their guided tour, many international visitors were ushered into a large reception hall in the administrative buildings at the centre of the museum complex. The formality of such occasions was underscored by the provision of comfortable seating, coffee tables, ashtrays and flower arrangements. In this more hospitable space, visitors were asked to contribute their comments to a large, hard-cover visitor book.

Digital copies of more than a thousand pages from six visitor books (dating from 1979 into the early 1990s) have been retained by the present-day museum. In the early books, page-long responses are common, but in the later books, many comments crowd onto a single page. Responses in the visitor books are written in a great variety of languages, including Khmer, English, Vietnamese, Russian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Indonesian, Japanese and German. The comments contained in the visitor books represent one of the few sources of insight into how Tuol Sleng was experienced by visitors during the early period of the museum and the early phase of the reconstruction of the country. This was a time in which the new government in Phnom Penh continued to wage a civil war against remnant Khmer Rouge forces. It also sought to disseminate knowledge internationally about what had happened to the country and Cambodians under Khmer Rouge rule. In the following discussion, I focus on the two earliest Tuol Sleng visitor books, spanning the years 1979 to 1982, and on a

small number of English-language and Vietnamese-language responses only.

Whether the visitor books were initiated by Cambodian staff or the Vietnamese advisors, then assisting at Tuol Sleng, is not known. What is obvious is that these books were enlisted in a wider post-1979 practice—that of curating former sites of Khmer Rouge violence for the development of a coherent national (and internationalised) narrative, one of liberation and true revolutionary rebirth. The Tuol Sleng visitor books also resonate with a Vietnamese literary genre concerned with prisons, revolutionary writing and instruction, known as the revolutionary prison memoir (*hoi ky nha tu*). Both these kinds of books instruct their readers on revolutionary politics, across two different, but related, space-times—that of post-colonial Vietnam and post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia.

VISITOR BOOKS

Visitor response books are now an indispensable institutional technology of many public museums, monuments and galleries (see for instance the studies of Macdonald, Noy, Coffee, and Isaac). They are a medium for the communication of personal experiences by museum visitors and are often viewed as a kind of reverse souvenir—a site where individuals gain some satisfaction from recording their transient presence in the museum for posterity. Visitor books are also used by museum staff as a way of accessing visitors' views and suggestions. Visitor books generally give little information about the visitors themselves, however, and are often omitted from large-scale systematic studies of museum visitors and their experiences.

It is important to consider the political, cultural and material processes that produced the responses contained within the Tuol Sleng visitor books. These books display many of the features of standard visitor books, yet are also anomalous in important ways; for example, nationalities, names of visitors, and professions or roles of visitors are generally recorded. Many comments are lengthy, impassioned and written in a formal register. Responses are offered by individuals on behalf of other individuals, either other members of an immediate delegation, or absent constituencies (for example, fellow citizens of other nations, members of political organisations, peace collectives or trade unions). As well, comments address not only the curators of the museum, but also the new government and Cambodians as a national or cultural group.

Curators and guides were often present while visitors wrote their responses, and curators took an interest in what visitors had to say about the museum. Pages from the two earliest books provide evidence of this interest: marginal annotations appear here, possibly in the hand of Ung Pech. In both French and Khmer script, details have been added, for example, visit dates and the number of individuals in a delegation represented by a single response. These annotations act as an official witnessing of the international visiting of Tuol Sleng. The visitor books are not, however, a comprehensive record of international visitors. The earliest date in the first visitor book is from April 1979, and certainly journalists visited the site before this (for instance the correspondent of the newspaper *L'Humanité* in Vietnam, Alain Ruscio, who visited Tuol Sleng at the end of January 1979, as indicated in his diary). Eleven thousand foreigners had passed through the site by October 1980, according to a Ministry report (Ledgerwood, p. 88). Only 286 comments are found in the first visitor book (albeit for the shorter period of April 1979 to June 1980), and some of these were penned in Khmer, so it appears that not all international visitors or delegations wrote in the books.

It is also not known whether the visitor books were ever examined by anyone other than the Museum staff, but it is probable that office-bearers in relevant Ministries also saw the books. Significant assistance was being lent to Tuol Sleng at this time by the Vietnamese curator, Mai Lam, and no doubt he too reported on the development and success of the museum to his own government. This official, marginal witnessing, however, speaks of the larger curatorial logic of the museum, which was precisely to produce witnesses and testimonies. In the last section of this paper, I consider how international visitors witnessed Cambodia's traumatic past at Tuol Sleng Museum. Prior to this, it is necessary to consider these books as a medium of political instruction. This medium was developed under Vietnamese supervision – and includes communications penned by important Vietnamese figures—but was principally designed to meet the novel requirements of a former Khmer Rouge 'prison' turned museum in post-1979 Cambodia.

PRISON (VISITOR) BOOKS AS A MEDIUM OF POLITICAL INSTRUCTION

In this section, I explore resonances between the Tuol Sleng visitor books and Vietnamese texts from a revolutionary literary genre that is itself heavily indebted to French writings. Historian Peter Zinoman has argued that the 1960 publication and dissemination of Ho Chi Minh's poetic *Prison Diary* raised the prison memoir genre to the status of primary autobiographical vehicle for the leaders of Vietnam. Zinoman traces the lineage of these Vietnamese "literatures of confinement" to twentieth-century Communist prison memoirs more broadly, and notes that the writings of Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo were "staples of the elite Franco-Vietnamese educational curriculum of the 1920s and beyond" (Zinoman, p. 29). Zinoman writes that:

> The central theme of Vietnamese revolutionary prison memoirs is the transformation of colonial jails into revolutionary schools. In the scholastic prisons of such accounts, revolutionaries spend their first months in confinement studying Marxism-Leninism and practical skills and then apply what

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Members of an international delegation, seated in the reception hall, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, date unknown.

> they have learned to protest poor conditions, organize fellow inmates, and convert non-Communist offenders to the cause. (p. 31)

As has been argued elsewhere, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum sought to promote a public history that damned "the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique" and praised the Vietnamese-supported liberation (Hughes, pp. 175-192). But for the Tuol Sleng curators, there were few openings for a celebratory or redemptory narrative of the "prison" of S.21. No-one had ever been released from S.21, and there were no accounts of incarcerated revolutionaries who had transformed the prison into a place of learning and the radicalisation of others. In fact, S.21 represented the inversion of such a narrative: it was a place of pre-1975 learning, a high school, which had been turned into a prison in which no-one had prospered. Many of the high-ranking Khmer Rouge purged at S.21 were widely recognized revolutionaries who lost this status on arrest. The extent to which their confessions could be read for "political instruction" after 1979 was limited by the obvious effects of torture and suggestion by S.21 interrogators, and by the fact that, again under torture, these figures had implicated one another (for extended discussions, see Chandler and Hinton). Koy Thuon, for example, implicated over one hundred others (see Chandler 1999, p. 62). There were, however, early curatorial attempts to celebrate some of the Cambodian revolutionaries purged at S.21 as true martyrs of the revolutionary-state-to-come (the PRK). A photograph of Hu Nim, "a dedicated revolutionary" (Chandler, p. 64), was installed in what was thought to be his former cell, and his image and confessions were depicted in the Museum's visitor brochures up to 1999.

The few survivors of S.21 remained alive because they had been forced to cooperate with their Khmer Rouge jailers, and they were ordinary people, like mechanics and artists, not highly literate, revolutionary heroes. Rather than an experience of revolutionary asceticism that allowed for the production of political texts, those imprisoned in S.21 assisted, under violent duress, in the production of fantastic confessions of CIA and KGB plots which implicated thousands of fellow Cambodians (often leading to their arrest, incarceration and death). Remarkable accounts of suffering and survival were eventually written by three former S.21 prisoners—Vann Nath, Bou Meng and Chum Mey—published in 1998, 2010 (authored by Huy Vannak) and 2012, respectively. These men were not well-known revolutionaries or leaders, although Vann Nath became more widely known in the wake of his memoir.

Coming much earlier than these accounts, the Tuol Sleng visitor books provided a site for revolutionary agency in a place where it had been eviscerated. As visitors read each other's comments, and as they composed their own responses in relation to the exhibits and their tour guide's narrative, the books were a medium for political solidarity in a place that could only belatedly assume this instructive function. The recipients of such instruction were not, as for the Vietnamese prison memoir, fellow prisoners, but the many officials, NGO workers and journalists now visiting the museum.

Zinoman notes that one of the features of the Vietnamese prison memoir is "how little they have to do with personal memories" (Zinoman, p. 21). The revolutionary prison memoirs of Vietnamese leaders drew heavily on existing revolutionary scripts to promote an official public history of their rise to power (p. 22). Something similar can be said for the Tuol Sleng visitor books. The written responses of visitors to Tuol Sleng, especially those of high-level official delegations, promote an official public political line on the old and new Cambodian state: that the Khmer Rouge state was feudalist or fascist, not communist, and that the PRK is the true revolutionary Cambodian state, aided but not ruled by Vietnam. A Central Committee Secretary of the Socialist Party of Australia confuses this revolutionary master-script somewhat in his comment, mistakenly writing "Vietnam" instead of "Kampuchea":

> True communists condemn the hideous PP [sic] regime and welcome the new revolutionary government and party of Kampuchea which, with the Kampuchean people, will build a socialist Vietnam [sic] (Second visitor book, un-paginated).

Another response declares that: "to have such things linked with the name of communism seems to me a final obscenity" (*ibid.*). An academic, visiting in March 1980, openly questions: "where did the Kampuchean revolution go wrong? Why?" (first visitor book, 29 March 1980, p. 210).

Comment after comment pledges solidarity with the new state. Vietnamese comments unfailingly refer to Cambodians as friends and brothers, are respectfully worded, and yet offer some subtle instruction. A group of officials from the Department of Industry remind curators of a truism they credit to "Uncle Ho:" "there is nothing more valuable than independence and freedom" (first visitor book, 13 October 1979, p. 225). Another comment from a group of Vietnamese officers visiting in October 1979 states: "we find it necessary to work closely with revolutionary groups to prevent these murderous gangs from committing their deplorable crimes" (first visitor book, 20 October 1979, p. 229). Another response lionises the actions of Cambodian defectors and resistors everywhere: "the courageous Cambodians rose up to overthrow the brutal and murderous Pol Pot-Ieng Sary regime, leading the country out of the abyss!" (first visitor book, 21 June 1979, p. 141). Yet another writes:

> Several of us are victims of colonialism and have been subjected to torture. [...] However, upon visiting Tuol Sleng, we think the level of brutality of the Pol Pot gang and their officials exceeds what we have seen (first visitor book, 29 February 1980, p. 37).

In this direct comparison, Army General and Ambassador Nguyen Trong Vinh draws a direct comparison between the kinds of experiences chronicled and survived by heroic Vietnamese figures such as Ho Chi Minh, and Cambodians' experiences. This cannot directly refer to those incarcerated at S.21, almost all of whom did not survive. The difference noted between the two experiences is one of "the level of brutality", but the solution is the same: solidarity. Nguyen Trong Vinh concludes by stating: "we [Vietnamese] are determined to stand by you [Cambodians] in the cause of eliminating this murderous gang" (*op. cit.*).

WITNESSES TESTIFY

Many additional responses in the Tuol Sleng books refer directly and self-consciously to the task of witnessing. For example, journalist Wilfred Burchett, visitor to the museum in May 1979, writes that:

Members of an international delegation outside the museum buildings at Tuol Sleng, date unknown.

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> In forty years of reporting, I have never witnessed anything as atrocious as this death factory of the Pol Pot regime (first visitor book, p. 139).

Indian, Palestinian, Indonesian, Thai, Swedish, Japanese, Norwegian and Australian journalists' responses are found in the early visitor books. International print and television journalists who witnessed the atrocities of the S.21 site and other sites in Cambodia reported to large audiences in the years 1979 and 1980, especially. The most significant of these television reports was John Pilger's 1979 documentary, *Year Zero*, which aired to large audiences in Australia and Britain (see Sánchez-Biosca, p. 140). In addition to journalists, many international visitors came to the museum as members of professional and political delegations of organisations. These included: the Organization of Democratic Lawyers of India; the International Association of Democratic Lawyers; the Lawyers Committee on American Policy Toward Vietnam (USA); the World Federation of Democratic Youth; the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; the Left Socialist Party (Denmark); the Communist Party of Australia; the Socialist Party of Australia; the National Conference of Black Lawyers of the (USA and Canada); and peace delegations from Africa, Finland and Czechoslovakia. International aid organisations visiting the museum in the early years included: Oxfam, World Vision International; the Red Cross; the Seventh-Day Adventist World Service; Catholic Relief; UNICEF; and the Quaker organization, American Friends Service Committee. These delegates and NGO workers write that they will report back to their constituencies their eyewitness experiences of the evidence of widespread, orchestrated violence.

Financial, technical and emergency relief measures are also pledged in these responses.

Giorgio Agamben, writing of Auschwitz, notes that there are two words for "witness" in Latin:

> The first word, *testis*, from which our word 'testimony' derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party (*terstis*). The second word, *superstes*, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it (p. 17).

The early visitor to Tuol Sleng assumed the role of *terstis*, the witnessing third party. Their viewing of the museum's exhibits acted as a kind of intervention between two parties: the former Khmer Rouge state and the new Cambodian state of the PRK. Although witnessing in relation to Democratic Kampuchea has shifted greatly over time (see Benzaquen), in bearing witness to the past at Tuol Sleng, these early visitors also testified that the PRK was not violent, not oppressive. Visitor book responses sought to verify that the country was now part of a modern and progressive nation, a nation that could withstand the scrutiny of visitors. The very presence of such visitors was in and of itself a kind of testimony to the legitimacy of the PRK, one founded on the absolute illegitimacy of the state it replaced.

CONCLUSION

Curators at Tuol Sleng, and PRK authorities more widely, looked to international visitors to act as third-party witnesses, to support and disseminate the truth of Cambodia's situation internationally. Foreign visitors were to return to their countries of origin and tell people what had "really" happened in Cambodia (Ledgerwood, p. 90). Encouragement of this role was provided by the visitor books, in which visitors testified to their witnessing of the crimes of Pol Pot in one of the key sites where they had been committed. In time, it was hoped, the Khmer Rouge would be universally condemned, their United Nations General Assembly support removed, and that financial aid and material assistance would then flow to the PRK.

Despite the thousands of witnesses produced by Tuol Sleng in its early years of operation, these desired events did not come to pass. Cambodia remained a pariah state, excluded from the UNGA for more than a decade after 1979, nursing a civil conflict that continued into the mid-1990s (Amer, p. 52-60). For the new Cambodian nation, and for the Tuol Sleng Museum itself, the visitor books played an additional and important role. They were a medium for *post facinus* political instruction about the past, present and future, as well as for declarations of solidarity and resolve – between Vietnam and Cambodia, but also between Cambodia and other sympathetic states and organisations. /

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