

The Cham Rebellion: Survivors' Stories from the Villages

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This book is a study of what happened to Cambodia's Cham Muslims living in the Khmer Rouge-controlled Kroch Chhmar district (Kampong Cham province) during the 1970s. Based on reconstructed events and survivors' memories, it is an account of ordinary Muslims caught up in a utopian maelstrom of deceit, brutality, fear, unexpected compassion, torture, and deliberate murder on an almost unbelievable scale while the Muslim world, and the world at large, was "occupied" with other concerns.

Chapters 1 and 2 explain how the Khmer Rouge entered the district and found young Cham and Khmer men eager to join up. How could they resist, when Norodom Sihanouk, who enjoyed near-divine status among the peasantry and presented himself as the sole architect of Cambodia's independence, called upon them to join with the Khmer Rouge (which he had already done) to reverse General Lon Nol's overthrow of his government? In the "liberated" zones, the Khmer Rouge renamed villages with numbers; selected new Cham village heads based on their lack of education, total servility, and unquestioning obedience; and gradually communalized life because, they promised, that would make the people's lives better and easier.

The Khmer Rouge helped the Cham farm and harvest, asked locally esteemed Cham figures to manage their affairs, and respected Islamic beliefs and practices. Such deeds convinced many Cham that the Khmer Rouge message was compatible and even identical to that of Islam. By 1973, however, Cham religious and other officials began to be replaced, arrested, and sometimes executed (in secret). After this became public knowledge, the people's protests were sometimes heeded. But even then, some people were beginning to close their eyes to avoid drawing attention to themselves. As the Khmer Rouge's demands became more insistent, threats gave way to ever-rising levels of violence and intimidation. *Surau*s (small village places of prayer common throughout the Malay-Indonesian world) were closed, praying was forbidden, women had to uncover and cut their hair, Qur'ans were collected and burned, and Muslims were made to raise pigs and eat pork. While the Cham of Koh Phal village never obeyed these "requests," those of Svay Khleang village did. But when the Cham's anger over what they considered to be the Khmer Rouge's betrayal could no longer be contained, both villages revolted within weeks of each other.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with these revolts, launched during Ramadan 1975. In Koh Phal, Ta Yok, a Cham appointed by the Khmer Rouge to handle Cham affairs, addressed the audience at what turned out to be the final meeting. After pointedly lighting a cigarette, he stated bluntly: "Today begins a new world" (p. 55). The following day, when a Khmer Rouge cadre came to collect the Qur'ans for burning and to lead forty religious leaders and elders away, both of which the villagers refused to allow, they mobilized themselves on the assumption that they would die sooner or later anyways. After several days of resistance and about 1,000 villagers had been killed defending their village with swords and knives against a well-armed and trained military force, the 900 survivors were rounded up and dispersed. The village was reportedly burned to the ground, renamed, and became the site of a Khmer Rouge security office. Apparently, the surrounding forty-nine mass graves did not bother its occupants.

The villagers of Svay Khleang, a major center of Cham Islamic learning, reached their limit two weeks later. Largely unaware of what had happened in Koh Phal, even though it was only ten kilometers away, they asked the Khmer Rouge to let them hold the Eid al-Fitr prayer in their *surau*, which they had agreed to close one year ago. Receiving no answer, they assumed agreement and observed the prayer. Unbeknownst to them, however, each worshipper's name was recorded. Someone saw the list and the accompanying arrest order. Word spread, and the villagers mobilized themselves. The rebellion, launched the next day, was crushed ruthlessly. The survivors were

led away, and some of the men were executed. After a month in prison, surviving family members were reunited and dispersed.

Chapter 5 deals with Cambodia's Cham community from "liberation" (1975) to collapse (1979). The author says that these two rebellions convinced the Khmer Rouge to destroy the large Cham communities and erase their non-Khmer ethnic identity. One survivor thought that the Khmer Rouge provoked these rebellions to justify their imminent murderous assault on all Cham communities.

After Cambodia fell to the Khmer Rouge, they implemented their anti-Islam and anti-Cham policies through conspicuous displays of armed might during village-wide meetings of unarmed civilians, threats that any dissent or resistance would not be tolerated, and mass arrests and deportations without warning. Interestingly, many of the interviewees in this chapter are women, so a new perspective is given: how formerly sheltered teenaged girls react when confronted with naked hostility and imminent death; how mothers bear the forcible removal of their children or helplessly watch them starve to death. The book ends with a postscript, a bibliography, and endnotes.

This disturbing book fits in well with recognized western scholarship (e.g., Michael Vickery and Ben Kiernan), other survivors' accounts (e.g., Haing S. Ngor, Pin Yathay, and Molyda Szymusiak), and with what my Cham friends who survived have told me over the years. As I was walking the streets of Phnom Penh in 2004 with some of them, I could not stop looking at the people we passed and wondering who they had been during the 1970s. It was a deeply unsettling experience.

The author is to be commended for his meticulous research and documentation of a period that many people have already forgotten and that many young Cambodians, I have read, cannot believe ever happened.

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