

**Oukoubah: Justice for the Cham Muslims under the
Democratic Kampuchea Regime**

Ysa Osman

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Imagine that a struggling revolutionary movement is promising paradise after your defenseless country is unwillingly sucked into the maelstrom of total war; that the revolutionary leaders are highly respected men and women, many of whom were educated in the former colonial master's homeland; and that the ruler, who is credited with single-handedly achieving your nation's independence and enjoys near-divine status among the

masses, joins the revolutionaries after being overthrown and calls upon you to do likewise. And then, full of post-victory idealism, imagine that you live for three years, eight months, and twenty days in the horror that introduced a new word into the English language: *auto-genocide*. Welcome to Democratic Kampuchea, whose ruling elite, the Khmer Rouge, targeted the author's people, the Cham Muslims, for extermination: "The enemies of Angkar [the "Organization"] come in many categories, but the biggest enemies are the Cham. The plan is to destroy them all before 1980" (p. 6).

This book is divided into five parts: "Introduction," "S-21 Prisoner Cases," "Analysis," "References," and "Appendix." The "Introduction" deals with the controversial questions of how many Cham died under the Khmer Rouge (from 77,000 to 400,000-500,000) and how many lived in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge took over (from about 250,000 to 700,000, the latter number being accepted by the Cham). Osman then moves on to how the Khmer Rouge sought to destroy community solidarity: turning Cham against Cham and children against parents, forbidding Islamic and Cham customs *in toto*, destroying the Qur'an and the *kekitab* (a book explaining the Qur'an), making local leaders "disappear," splitting up families during forced evacuations, and resettling the Cham among ethnic Khmer and Chinese. He also explains why he chose the thirteen case studies that make up the next part: "...there is sufficient documentation for study and research" (p. 8).

"S-21 Prisoner Cases" presents information about thirteen Cham prisoners who died in S-21, the code name for Tuol Sleng, part of a former high school complex that became the "crown jewel" of a nation-wide system of concentration camps and torture centers. Each case is based on "confessions" extracted under extreme torture ("[T]orture is used to get their answers, not for entertainment. So make them hurt so they will answer quickly." p. 59, n. 225) and then cross-checked with survivors who had had some contact with the deceased both before and during the Khmer Rouge period, as well as with surviving family members or relatives. Each prisoner is identified by name, date and place of birth, parents and siblings, profession, and a brief life sketch until he ended up in the Khmer Rouge army (through forced conscription), in S-21, and, finally, in a mass grave.

"Analysis" details the plan to turn Cambodia into "... a society of happiness, equality, justice and true democracy, with no rich, no poor, no class oppressors and no class oppressed, a society in which the people live together happily in great national unity ..." (p. 77). The method chosen was, to say the least, unique: initiating forced population transfers from urban to rural areas right after their 17 April 1975 victory; creating new social classes: "old (base) people" who had lived under the Khmer Rouge before April 17 and

“new (April 17) people” who had been evacuated, and their various subcategories; prohibiting private property, currency, markets, exchanges, and bartering; and limiting (in practice, outlawing) traditional rights and freedoms (e.g., observance of ethnic customs and religious practices, speech, travel, personal relationships, and protest). Smaller sections are devoted to who bears responsibility for the prisoners’ deaths, the rules they had to obey, why and how they were arrested (usually implicated by someone being tortured or through trickery), and similar matters. The final two sections deal with the Khmer Rouge’s attempted elimination of Islam and ideological training for the youth, who were regarded as “‘pure,’ having never been affected by the reactionary influence of earlier societies” (p. 98) – and upon whom the regime depended.

The “References” document the tertiary sources, the DC-Cam (Documentation Center of Cambodia) sources, the author’s interviews, and interviews by DC-Cam researchers and others. The “Appendix” gives information about the number of Cham killed, who and how many of the Cham intelligentsia were murdered, and other data.

The book has a few shortcomings. First, it seems to have been written for those who are familiar with recent Cambodian history; there is no map, no discussion of Cham history, how and why the Khmer Rouge came to power, the sources of its murderous ideology, its leaders and what happened to them, how Prince Sihanouk helped them to power, and why Washington supported the Khmer Rouge for twelve years after Vietnam drove them from power on 7 January 1979. Second, no “confessions” by female Cham prisoners are included. While the full list of Cham prisoners is provided, due to the Cham penchant for truncating Muslim names and then spelling them phonetically, the reader cannot even ascertain if there were any female Cham prisoners at S-21.

Osman acknowledges the third problem: “Given the experience levels of DC-Cam researchers, we do not strictly apply the standard social research hypothetical-deductive methodology. ... Cambodian schools as yet do not inculcate a culture of learning that respects individual critical thinking and writing. Aspiring Cambodian scholars also face a severe lack of library resources, both in quantity and quality” (p. 149). Since the Khmer and the Cham intelligentsia were largely “disappeared” and Cambodia remains one of the world’s poorest countries, this situation is hardly surprising.

All of that aside, however, this is a valuable book simply because it lets the Cham speak for themselves. Thus, it does not become lost in theorizing and speculation. Osman and his informants know what they are talking about, because they lived – and survived – a holocaust that will always remain

largely incomprehensible to an outsider. One hopes that more such Cham narratives and analyses will follow, and that their quality will improve.

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