

An Obituary for Innocence: Revisiting the Trauma during the Khmer Rouge Years in Cambodia through Children's Narratives

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Abstract

The totalitarian regime of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia under the dictatorship of Pol Pot initiated a saga of brutal mass genocide that exterminated millions and completely upended the social and political machinery of the country with its repressive policies. One of the most atrocious aspects of the regime was the deployment of tens of thousands of children as child soldiers through the indoctrination of the ideologies of the state as well as through coercion and intimidation. This paper intends to study the impact of child soldiering on child psyche through an analysis of two texts- Luong Ung's *First They Killed My Father* and Patricia McCormick's *Never Fall Down*. The paper shall explore how militarization and authoritarian rule dismantles commonly held perceptions about childhood as a period of dependency and vulnerability, where instead, children become unwitting perpetrators of horrible crimes that ultimately triggers trauma and disillusionment. In its analysis of the texts, the paper shall attempt to use Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil' in the context of the child soldiers whose conformation to the propaganda of the Khmer Rouge lacked any ideological conviction.

Keywords: Cambodia, Khmer Rouge, child soldiers, trauma, banality of evil, children's narratives, agency.

Introduction

Southeast Asia, in the second half of the twentieth century witnessed one of history's most brutal regimes under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia between 1975 and 1978. This totalitarian rule, under the dictatorship of Pol Pot attempted to enforce an extreme Maoist Communist system of governance that initiated a ruthless saga of mass genocide and other forms of atrocity that killed over two million Cambodians. According to Patricia McCormick, the Cambodian Genocide which wiped out almost a quarter of the population of Cambodia is probably the "worst genocide inflicted by a country on its own people" (McCormick, 2012, p.2). Trained by the North Vietnamese Communist army and equipped with Chinese and Soviet weaponry, the Khmer Rouge began to expand territory in the Cambodian countryside and garnered popular support which eventually enabled them to overthrow the corrupt military government under Lon Nol and win the Cambodian Civil War. The Khmer Rouge forces took control of the capital city, Phnom Penh in April 1975 and installed Pol Pot as the leader of the country. The year 1975 was declared as "Year Zero" as the regime attempted to reset and restart the historical, social and religious foundations of Cambodia with the hopes of creating a communist style agrarian utopia. In this process, Pol Pot isolated Cambodia from the global community and forced all Cambodians to live in labour camps under a rigorous work schedule. He abolished the country's currency, outlawed the ownership of

private property and the practice of religion in the new nation. Between 1975 and 1978, the Khmer Rouge engaged in extreme violence to exterminate all the enemies of the revolution. The radical Communist regime identified the city dwellers, who were called the 'new people' as the enemies of the state and began a systematic torture and execution of hundreds of thousands of such educated, middle class Cambodians. The cities were emptied of their populace with false propaganda about American bombings and the people resettled into rural farming communes that were devoid of even the most basic amenities. While the regime hunted educated intellectuals, doctors, teachers, Buddhist monks, potential leaders of a revolutionary movement, sympathizers of the previous military government or even people who bore the slightest semblance of an intellectual by way of knowledge of a foreign language or simply because they wore glasses, several thousands died from starvation, disease and exhaustion. The Khmer Rouge unleashed a four year reign of terror upon Cambodia that sought to purge the country of anyone who was or could be a potential threat to the regime and completely pulverized the social and political machinery as well as the spirit of the people of the country. Their despotic rule and repressive policies destroyed all Cambodian institutions, culture and heritage and even desecrated the temples of Angkor Wat which were converted into prisons and execution chambers where all the "class enemies", that is the urban middle class, were subjected to the most outrageous brutalities.

While the Khmer Rouge's chronicles of violence consisted of the most gruesome and deplorable forms of crime, this tyrannical government also launched the fiercest ever attack on the institution of the family. The traditional idea of family life with father, mother and children was discouraged and repressed and they redefined the notion of family which simply excluded children. All children under the Khmer rule belonged to the 'Angkar' or the 'Angka', which translated to the 'Organization', implying the top level of the regime. Most children above the age of eight were separated from their families and sent to live in barracks or work-sites where the heavy indoctrination of the Communist ideology into the minds of impressionable young kids began. "Familyism", the Khmer Rouge term for missing one's loved ones became a crime, often punishable by death and the Khmer Rouge soldiers attempted to proselytize children into their ideologies about family life through songs and poems which taught them about the unreliable and antagonistic entanglements of family ties which needed to be severed for the greater good. The songs served as effective tools of propaganda that advocated the heroism of Pol Pot and his soldiers, the obligatory glorification of the 'Angka' as the Supreme power and the advantages of the collective agricultural society that the Khmer Rouge sought to establish. (Kiernan, 1997)

As extensive militarization suffused life in Cambodia, children's lives were completely overturned as they were forced to snap out of their insouciance and naiveté and were pushed into a much harsher world that stripped them off all their quintessential childlike innocence and purity. This paper aims to present a "child's eye-view" (Kiernan, 1997, para. 2) of the Cambodian genocide through the first-hand narratives of children and their experiences during the horrific regime of the Khmer Rouge. One of the most atrocious aspects of the Khmer rule was the deployment of tens of thousands of children as child soldiers through the indoctrination of the ideologies of the state as well as through coercion and intimidation. In the Introduction to *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs of Survivors*, Ben Kiernan (1997) writes that as adults became "alienated from the regime", "young children became the only hope for the Khmer Rouge to reproduce itself" (para. 20). Therefore, they employed children as militia, as spies, as soldiers and as executioners and they praised the "Comrade Child" for being "pure and unsullied by the corrupt past of the adults" (Ponchaud, 1977, p. 143). The motive behind this was to further estrange children from their families in order to create a new society devoid of any memory of the past. Pol Pot himself

declared that, "It is the youth of today who will take up the revolutionary tasks of tomorrow" (qtd. in Klemenists and Czirják, 2016, p. 216) and he considered youths' role in the revolution to be the "dictatorial instrument of the party." Child soldiers served in several capacities in the Khmer army and it was not uncommon for these children to hold a substantial amount of power in the work camps. As one woman recalls, "In Pol Pot's times, children could catch an adult if they thought that they had done wrong. They could beat the adult." (Boyden and Gibbs, 1997, p. 77). Children, because of their pliable minds came to be easily indoctrinated into the extreme Communist ideologies and became notorious as one of the most brutal cadres of the regime.

Role of Child Soldiers and the Psychological Impacts of Child Soldiering

This paper unpacks and interrogates the role of the child soldiers under the Khmer Rouge and how such a role affected the psyche of the children through an analysis of two texts in particular-Patricia McCormick's *Never Fall Down* and Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*. In order to do this, at the very outset it is important to define the term 'child soldiers'. A standardized definition of the term has emerged after much deliberations held in two major international conferences set a decade apart, which defines child soldiers as:

"Any person below eighteen years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities" (Drumbl, 2012, p. 4).

A survey conducted by the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) showed that cases of children being recruited as soldiers is particularly prevalent among the Khmer Rouge, who according to the report, "continued over a long period to recruit children under 15 with little or no education, especially from the hill-tribe areas of North West Cambodia" (LICADHO, 1998, p.3). The LICADHO's report was based on interviews with inmates at the Dey Ath Defectors' Centre in Phnom Penh which also highlighted the plight of girl soldiers under the Khmer Rouge who were mercilessly alienated them from their own families to give them military training from as early as five years. Several recent studies have discovered that around the world, in conflict ridden countries, the percentage of female child soldiers is as high as 40%, which in Cambodia during the 1970s may have been even higher. Cambodian girls were perceived as "highly obedient and easily manipulated...and ensure a constant pool of forced and compliant labour" (Katz, 2015). Girl soldiers were mercilessly exploited as they would be stationed at the front of all military action and bore the brunt of any casualties, medical treatments would be refused to them in case of any ailments and disobedience of course led to strict punishment and even death.

Loung Ung's memoir *First They Killed My Father* provides a penetrating first-hand account of the experiences of female child soldiers under the Khmer Rouge. One of seven children of an affluent and privileged Chinese-Cambodian family, Ung bore witness to the horrors of the Cambodian Genocide since the age of five when her family was forced to flee their home and eventually move away from each other in order to ensure survival under a regime that was inexorably hunting down the bourgeois elite. At the age of seven, Ung was recruited into a military training camp for child soldiers, where she learnt how to fight the Youns (the Vietnamese forces). Ung's memoir demonstrates the physical, emotional and psychological ordeal that she had to go through during the time:

“I was a very angry kid. I was so angry the supervisor at one of the orphanage camps picked me out of many other children to go and be trained as a child soldier...I was given a stick to hit people...instead of learning about compassion and joy and kindness, I was taught to hate. I was taught to kill” (Ung, 2000).

Ung’s story is a harrowing yet powerful narrative which provides graphic descriptions of how a familiar, comfortable and secured life of a child suddenly gets converted to a world of insecurities, fear and constant dread where the child hopelessly gropes around to ensure survival. Living under an oppressive regime, children in Cambodia between 1975-1978 came of age amidst unspeakable barbarity and atrocity and the only way they could ensure survival was through a gradual desensitization towards the horrific circumstances around them. Arn Chorn-Pond’s narrative *Never Fall Down* written by Patricia McCormick further substantiates this claim. Chorn-Pond in his memoir recounts an incident when the Khmer Rouge soldiers ask him to bury dead bodies in a ditch with a soldier watching him constantly for any sign of emotion: “Then the guy with the ax, he look at me. Deep in the eye. To see what I feel. I make my eye blank. You show you care, you die. You show fear, you die. You show nothing, maybe you live” (McCormick, 2012, p.70). Emotions and fear were considered as signs of weakness and inadequacy which was punishable by death under the Khmer regime. It is because of this that children like Ung and Chorn-Pond survived and lived to tell the tale while Ung’s sisters Keav and Geak perished as they failed to withstand the nightmarish trauma.

As this paper delves into a deeper understanding of child psychology in times of conflict through the narratives of Arn Chorn-Pond and Loung Ung, it must be understood that such children living amidst war and adversity are completely alienated from the archetypal idea of childhood. Jo Boyden points out in his essay “Children Under Fire: Challenging Assumptions about Children’s Resilience” that militarization and authoritarian rule dismantles commonly held perceptions about “childhood as a decontextualized and universal life phase characterized by dependence and vulnerability” and rather posits a paradigmatic shift towards the understanding of childhood as “a highly diverse life phase shaped not simply by biological and psychological universals but also, and more importantly, by personal and environmental factors” (Boyden, 2003, p.1). The change of paradigm in the conception of childhood has been well manifested through the narratives of children under the Khmer regime where children through their roles as child soldiers became unwitting perpetrators of horrible crimes that ultimately triggered trauma and disillusionment.

Such a construction of the childhood of children from conflict-ridden areas like Cambodia brings forth significant question in this discourse about child soldiers- are these children the innocent victims of a brutal regime or are they complicit perpetrators of criminal activities? The answer, of course is not straightforward and merits a deeper analysis about the image of child soldiers in international law and politics. In this context, we can refer to Mark A. Drumbl’s book *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy* where he typifies the image of child soldiers in transnational discourse. The first image is that of a “faultless passive victim” (Drumbl, 2012, p.7) , a helpless object manipulated by the malevolence of deranged militia and forced to fulfill their nefarious ends. The second image is that of the child soldier as “irreparable damaged goods” (p.7), psychologically devastated and traumatized beyond cure. The third image, according to Drumbl is that of the child soldier as a “hero” (p.7), brave, valiant and enterprising. The fourth and the final image stylizes the child soldier as a “demon and bandit: irredeemable, baleful and sinister” (Drumbl, 2012, p.8) who is incorrigibly and mercilessly murderous. But a close scrutiny of the narratives under study reveals that the child soldiers under the Khmer regime cannot be unequivocally be pigeonholed into any one of these four category of images. Confronted with

incessant propaganda, fear-mongering and brainwashing from an autocratic state, exploitation through forced labour and ghastly image of death and destruction all around, the only impulse for these children was survival. Arn Chorn-Pond states poignantly: "Death is just my daily life now" (McCormick, 2012, p.59). The work-camps for children were pathetic places where impoverished children were dying in hundreds every day because of malnourishment. Children, as young as four or five years were laboriously working on rice fields amidst grueling working hours to enable the Khmer Rouge realize their vision of an agrarian utopia, yet all that these children got as food at the end of the day was a bowl of rice gruel that failed to alleviate their hunger. Arn Chorn-Pond in *Never Fall Down* provides a potent description of how hungry kids frantically hunted for some extra food in order to remain alive. They ate frogs and insects like crickets and spiders, sour tamarind fruits and even poisonous plants which eventually caused deaths. Yet, children like Chorn-Pond remained obdurate in their battle for survival.

The Angka, on the other hand was completely oblivious of the sufferings of the people of the country and were fixated on their death dance. While the entire population was dying of starvation, disease and hopelessness, the corrupt Khmer Rouge government was busy creating a new upper class who were privy to all luxuries that they had denied the citizens of Cambodia in the name of Western influences which was previously abhorred by the radical Communist regime. Under such circumstances, children like Arn Chorn-Pond and Loung Ung devised their own survival strategies. Ung, along with her sister Chou and brother Kim leave their mother and their youngest sister Geak, for separate work-camps as the families of all the "new people" were under constant threat. The child Ung's rage against the injustice of the regime, her repressed agony about the deaths of her father and her sister Keav ignites an inextinguishable fire of hate within her which becomes her strength and enables her to join the army of child soldiers. Ung explicitly states: "I do not want to sacrifice for the country that killed my pa" (Ung, 2000, p.130) but she has no other choice if she has to live. Arn Chorn-Pond also talks about a similar experience in his memoir. When the Khmer Rouge soldiers begin to recruit boys to form a music band that would sing the glory of the Angka, Arn takes the gamble because he thinks that joining the band would ensure him a little more food: "Maybe, I think, maybe you play these song, maybe they feed you a little more" (McCormick, 2012, p.64). Arn diligently learns to play the Khim, a stringed musical instrument from the old music teacher so that he could escape death, a fate that befalls the other boys of his camp who fail to master any instrument or learn the songs and the music teacher himself whose memory of the old Cambodian world before the Khmer Rouge was a threat to the regime. Arn Chorn-Pond faces choiceless choices in his bid to survive, to someday reunite with his aunt and cousins. The eleven year old manages to use considerable guile around the soldiers and learns to make himself valuable through his musical ability, which also provides him with a certain amount of power which he learns to use for his own benefits- a piece of meat, some extra rice or even just to drown the sounds of screaming prisoners and cracking skulls all around. Therefore, the Cambodian child soldiers maybe construed as helpless passive victims and "instruments of war" whose only motivation under an oppressive regime was the preservation of the self for which they disguised themselves either as obedient and valiant heroes or as dangerous and menacing fiends, roles which were completely incongruous to the imaginations of an ordinary childhood and thus resulted in concomitant physical and emotional injuries that scarred them for life.

“Can one do evil without being evil?": Arendt’s “Banality of Evil” and Child Soldiers

Such an interpretation of child soldiers under the Khmer regime may be contextualized theoretically through Hannah Arendt’s concept of the ‘banality of evil’. Philosopher and political scientist, Hannah Arendt, in her report for the New Yorker in 1961 on the war crimes trial of Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi operative responsible for the transportation and killing of millions of Jews during the Holocaust, one of the worst genocides in the history of mankind, found Eichmann to be a rather ordinary and bland bureaucrat, who, according to her was “neither perverted nor sadistic” but “terrifyingly normal” (Arendt, 1963, p. 276). In Arendt’s analysis, Eichmann seemed to have acted without any motive other than to diligently advance his career in the Nazi bureaucracy. In her case study, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt states that Eichmann performed evil deeds without evil intentions, a fact that was connected to his “thoughtlessness” and a disengagement from the reality of his evil acts (Arendt, 1963, p.288). Arendt dubbed these collective characteristics of Eichmann the “banality of evil” implying that he was not inherently evil but merely a shallow and clueless accomplice in some of the worst crimes against humanity. The question that Arendt grappled with in her theory is that “can one do evil without being evil?” (White, 2018) and the same question may be posed as we analyze the role of the child soldiers under the Khmer Rouge through an evaluation of various instances in the two narratives under study.

Arn Chorn-Pond in *Never Fall Down* talks about a particular boy in his work-camp who worked hard and even sneaked about the other boys to the superiors so as to please them and remain in their good books. Chorn-Pond also talks about another child-soldier, Sombo who joined his camp as a bodyguard to one of the top bosses. He appeared very fierce and terrifying to all the kids in the camp with his two guns and a frowning face. Though outwardly hostile, Sombo surreptitiously tried to protect the kids in the camp and Arn gradually develops a bond with him and even teaches him to play the khim. Yet, he was as ruthless as any other Khmer Rouge soldier when it came to killing prisoners sentenced to death. When asked about what makes the Khmer Rouge soldiers so bad, Sombo provides an answer that is perturbing and poignant at the same time: “It’s not bad or good. They kill only so they won’t be killed themselves” (McCormick, 2012, p.125). As Arn learns about the grim reality of survival in a world where death, starvation and brutality are the norm, he, too gradually turns complicit in this systemic evil. His absolute repulsion and shame at the tasks the soldiers ask him to do does not stop him from committing them as he begins to accept his role as a cog in the Khmer Rouge machinery. Chorn-Pond and his friends became participants in wretched tasks-burying dead bodies in graves, watching the Khmer Rouge kill people as silent bystanders, play frenzied music to drown the sounds of the killings and even cook human flesh for the soldiers. Chorn-Pond, in his role as the lead musician realizes that he has acquired the capability to wield some amount of power against the guards and other superior soldiers:

“And I know then I have power. Power from playing the khim and leading the other singer...I feel big with this power-tall, not like little kid...no one here talks back to the Khmer Rouge, no one challenge them. But maybe I can now” (McCormick, 2012, p.106).

The lines between good and evil come to be blurred as these children negotiate between life and death in the face of extreme state aggression. Loung Ung in *First They Killed My Father* recalls her severely arduous training period as a child soldier when she learnt to use weapons like the sickle, the hoe, the rake, the hammer, the machete and even the rifle in order to fight the Vietnamese forces. This points at the partial success of the indoctrination mission of the Khmer Rouge as they had managed to antagonize children like Loung Ung and Arn Chorn-Pond against the Vietnamese

to the extent that they were ready to take up arms against them. While Chorn-Pond adeptly used clever maneuvers and shrewdness in his dealings with the Khmer Rouge soldiers, Ung channelized her extreme personal rage and hatred towards the regime in her role as a child soldier. These children allow the degradation of their own self and spirit because their primary motive is survival. Ung says explicitly:

“I cannot allow this weakness to control me, or let it seep into my spirit. If this happens I know I will die because the weak do not survive in Kampuchea” (Ung, 2000, p. 139).

A study of several children's narratives as well as a survey of some reports on child soldiers in Cambodia reveals that apart from active service, children were also embroiled in other para-military activities related to the ongoing conflict. Children were recruited as spies to carry information about the movements of Vietnamese forces and they were also involved in tasks as dangerous as laying landmines which posed serious risks to their health and welfare. For the pitiless Khmer Rouge regime, the youth were the perfect soldiers as it was “easy for commanders to give orders because the children did not have a conscience and are illiterate”(qtd. in Klemenists and Czirják, 2016, p. 217). Chorn-Pond also recalls his time working as a spy for the regime along with Sombo and others. He almost feels proud of this position of power but comes to a quick realization about the ideological indoctrination taking place in the process: “All of a sudden I'm Khmer Rouge. These people I hate, now I'm one” (McCormick, 2012, p.145). Such appalling and thoughtless collaborations with evil, the despicable and fragrantly immoral deeds committed by children that enjoyed validity and legitimacy within the world of the Khmer Rouge embodies Arendt's theory of the “banality of evil” in the context of the child soldiers.

Conclusion

As this paper unpacks and interrogates the lives of children during the Cambodian Genocide, it may well be surmised that children were probably the worst sufferers of the conflict. Disruptions to schooling, rural poverty, destruction of crops and property and the general lack of economic opportunities outside subsistence agriculture caused the youth to decide to join the army, either actively or in para-military services. While it is difficult to establish accurately the extent of recruitment of children into the armed forces in Cambodia, but research, personal accounts and anecdotal evidence from NGO staff and several memoirs of children like the ones discussed above indicate that it was very widespread. However, the evidence gathered through the surveys conducted by the LICADHO points to the conclusion that most of the recruitment is voluntary rather than forced which again brings to the fore the survival instinct among the children which this paper postulates. This instinct, of course seems paradoxical as it was the very self and spirit of the people that the Khmer regime sought to annihilate.

This paper also intends to study how these beleaguered children of conflict exercised their own agency in order to rebuild and reconstruct their lives. In this context, we shall also look into a few children's narratives from Dith Pran's *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors* in order to understand the extent to which the children acted as agents of their own change. While not much attempt has yet been made in Cambodia to quantify the effect of involvement in military conflict on the children concerned, but it is quite obvious that it resulted some physical as well as psychological ramifications, particularly for those actively involved in battle. Several child soldiers ended up in hospitals with wounds or sicknesses such as malaria and diarrhea, and some were left with permanent disabilities through the loss of a leg, arm or eye. Loung Ung talks about the deplorable conditions in which her sister, Keav died in a hospital and also her own

experiences in the hospital where she was denied proper medicine and care. The psychological consequences of the genocide was of course graver as the children suffered from trauma and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The “killing fields” of Cambodia left a deep scars in the minds of the children, and many of those interviewed said they suffered often from horrible nightmares. Patricia McCormick in her Author’s Note to *Never Fall Down* wrote about the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Arn Chorn-Pond-how he could recall certain experiences in chilling detail while he remembered others only vaguely. Rigid discipline, separation and complete alienation from family and the lack of possibilities for normal socialization were also factors responsible for psychological and emotional distress among children.

Yet, these children showed remarkable resilience in reconstructing their lives from the debris of conflict. Most children, like Ung and Chorn-Pond braved all adversities and managed to cross over into Vietnam and Thailand and from there they migrated to the USA where they restarted their lives from scratch. Ung went on to become a national spokesperson for the Campaign for a Landmine Free World and was also named one of the “100 Global Leaders of Tomorrow” by the World Economic Forum, in addition to several other distinctions. Arn Chorn-Pond dedicated his life to humanitarian causes and founded organizations like Children of War and Cambodian Living Arts through which he sought to preserve the traditional artistic forms of Cambodia that had been almost erased from the collective memory of the people by the Khmer Regime. Several memoirs in Dith Pran’s edited volume also talks about how the survivors of the genocide recovered and rebuilt their lost childhood through their own agency. The memoirs of Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, Chath Piersath and Teeda Butt Mam asserts the importance of music and dance in their struggle for revival. Most children, educated themselves and started to work for the welfare and development of their own people. The Khmer Rouge hoped to use children as the basis of a new society without memory but the memoirs of so many survivors shows that their efforts were fruitless. Ben Kiernan writes in the “Introduction” to *Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields*:

“After the Vietnamese overthrow of the Pol Pot regime, a unique social revolution took place in Cambodia...orphans all over the country immediately began putting back together their shattered families and lives” (Kiernan, 1997, para. 21).

And if these memoirs are anything to go by, it proves that they succeeded. This paper, in taking a “child’s-eye view” on the Cambodian Genocide and the Khmer Rouge regime attempts to dispel the general idea that children suffer less than adults in their traumatic experiences because they are prone to forgetting but in the end it may be emphatically asserted, in a slight twist of the words of author Iris Chang in her review of Ung’s memoir, “the horror of the Cambodian Genocide is matched only by the indomitable spirit of the children of Cambodia.”

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