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Beini Ye ^a

^a University of Münster, Germany

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Forced Marriages as Mirrors of Cambodian Conflict Transformation

BEINI YE

Imagine you are 20 years old and the police knock on your door and ask you to come to the police station to verify your identity. Once you arrive, they introduce you to an unknown person and declare you to be married to this person from this day forward. They send both of you to a cell where you are expected to spend the night together and consummate the marriage. During the period of Democratic Kampuchea, between 1975 and 1979, thousands of Cambodians went through just such an experience: they were forced to marry by the Khmer Rouge regime.

Ms. Sokchan Pen, 48 years old, was one of them. One day, Ms. Pen was called to a meeting by the leader of her working unit. When she arrived at the canteen, she was married to a Khmer Rouge soldier whom she did not know. She had no choice; under the Khmer Rouge's totalitarian rule, any rejection of orders meant punishment and eventually death. After the wedding, her husband raped her on orders from the ruling institution, called Angkar ("the organization" in Cambodian). Her story is portrayed in the recently premiered documentary, *Red Wedding* by Lida Chan.

More than any other crime, cases of forced marriage highlight the link between past and present, individual and family, and individual survivors and the whole of post-conflict society. Life stories of survivors of forced marriage illustrate how injustice is transmitted between generations and in what areas reconciliation has proven to be necessary. Despite its significance to Cambodia's transitional justice process, the unique phenomenon of forced marriage has received insufficient attention thus far.

It is widely known that mass killing, forced labor, evacuation, and torture took place during the Khmer Rouge regime. The fact that thousands of people were also forced to marry was long ignored. These marriages followed a similar pattern even though there were regional variations depending on the approach of local leaders. All weddings throughout the country were conducted in mass ceremonies of between 5 to 100 or more couples. The time, place, and persons attending were determined by Khmer Rouge cadres. With

all aspects of private and public life regulated and controlled by Angkar, no one could marry without the approval of their cooperative chief. Following a communist ideology, which had abolished all traditions and religious beliefs, there was no religious ceremony as there had been in weddings before and would again be after this period. Both women and men, most often between the ages of fifteen and thirty, were affected by the order to marry. Refusal was considered an act of disobedience and almost always punished in one way or another. The severity of punishment varied from a warning to imprisonment and/or execution.

Even though no explicit order emanating from the ruling organs of the Khmer Rouge has been discovered thus far, these common characteristics demonstrate that there was an intentional policy to forcibly wed Cambodians of all ranks and classifications. Much like other crimes of the regime, such as mass deportations from one place to another, no documents that explicitly spell out the motivation behind these forced marriages have surfaced. Nonetheless, context and circumstantial evidence suggest why the Khmer Rouge leaders may have created this policy. All couples forced to marry were expected to “get along with each other.” This terminology was used by the Khmer Rouge not only to imply that the couples should maintain a harmonious relationship, but also that the marriages had to be consummated through sexual intercourse. For this purpose, most newlyweds were assigned to huts within which to spend the first few nights together while under surveillance from spies. In Ms. Pen’s case, and not unlike that of many other women, this order resulted in rape and sexual violence. After these initial days, husbands and wives were often separated again to rejoin their respective work units. These practices strongly suggest that the production of children to strengthen the regime’s workforce was one main objective of forced marriages.

While the marriage ceremony was a brief affair of an instant, the marital bond was intended to bind the couple to each other for a lifetime, and, in some cases, has endured until today. Even though the survivors were married without religious ceremony and in times of armed conflict by an oppressive regime that would later be overthrown, the overwhelming majority of survivors and their families viewed the marriage as fully valid. As a result of this and a social mores that view divorce and separation with disdain, this provided an extra impetus to remain together. But there are also those who lost their husbands and became widows, and those who separated from their husbands and became divorcées, subjecting them to the social stigma that comes with these statuses in Cambodian society.

After the death of the husband Ms. Pen was forced to marry, she was considered a widow and faced discrimination from others in her village. This became apparent when the family of a man who had proposed to her refused to accept the marriage because the would-be bride was no longer a virgin.

At this point, Ms. Pen decided to never again reveal her story in the hopes of protecting herself and being able to live a normal life. Eventually, she remarried and had five children with her second husband.

Keeping the past a secret is a typical reaction of survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime. It is a mechanism for self-preservation that everyone living through this period adopted. The policies of the Khmer Rouge punished any behavior that was considered to be against the revolution. Persons classified as enemies, spies of the Vietnamese, intellectuals, and others were tortured and killed. Often, especially at the start of the regime, it was completely unforeseeable who would be punished and for what misconduct. Quickly, it became clear that even the most innocuous facts, attitudes, or acts could be the impetus for severe punishment or even death. To survive, the population remained silent about everything they saw, heard, knew, or felt. In addition to the physical separation from their families and friends, the fear of committing any wrongdoing led to the total emotional isolation of the individual from the relationships, customs, and habits that would have normally sustained them. Each person was on their own in the fight for survival.

Today, the emotional isolation continues for survivors of forced marriage, especially women, and as a result, the injustice they suffered is transmitted to their children. The fear of revealing the truth can burden family relationships, which are built on trust and sharing. Children may have difficulties understanding their parents' actions and feelings, in particular when they show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. This creates a situation in which survivors of forced marriage cannot benefit from the support of their families, an important resource for healing and dealing with their trauma.

Not all marriages broke apart after the fall of the regime; some couples have continued to stay together for a number of reasons. For some, it is the result of a sense of duty to support their children and spouse, while for others, it has been out of respect for the marital tie, while others eventually developed genuine feelings for their spouse. Common to all cases is the fact that two individuals were forced to establish a family together with someone they did not chose and at a point in their life that they did not determine. This may have an impact both on the relationship between the spouses as well as that with their children. Naturally, this impact is more apparent in some families through domestic violence, and less so in others, such as where survivors are haunted by the knowledge that they were forced to sacrifice their personal aspirations to a regime that took no interest in their desires. In spite of the strength and power of these feelings, they may still never be expressed.

Many survivors, including Ms. Pen, wonder about the reason behind their forced marriages. Why did Angkar force people to get married? Who was responsible for this policy? Actions of the Khmer Rouge regime were hardly ever explained or justified. The decision-making leaders remained

anonymous behind the ubiquitous name of Angkar. This allowed agents of the Khmer Rouge to commit crimes against anyone subject to their power merely by referring to an order. For the survivors, a feeling of a complete loss of power in determining their own fate resulted.

This feeling continues to today, especially among survivors of forced marriage. So far, this policy of the Khmer Rouge has not been the subject of much study. Until recently, there was no reliable estimation of how many people were affected by forced marriage. Hopefully, the results of a population-based survey conducted by the Berkeley Human Rights Center, which is expected to be published soon, will shed more light on the prevalence of this practice. Attempts to better understand forced marriage are the subject of discussion among some scholars, but there is very little awareness of the issue among the general population.

When injustice and trauma are left unaddressed, the effects are inevitably transferred to the next generation. Survivors who lack an understanding of their past and the broader context of their suffering find it difficult to share their experience with those who did not live through the Khmer Rouge era. They face questions they cannot answer, facts they cannot explain. In particular, topics like forced marriage, which have not often been addressed in the public, generate disbelief. As a result, many survivors feel powerless and remain silent on their suffering, in this way perpetuating the culture of secrecy first created by the Khmer Rouge.

Ms. Pen sets a courageous example of not only how to break the cycle of transferring the injustice of the past to the future generations, but also of how to try to bring peace to a troubled mind and heart. The steps she takes in the process of making *Red Wedding* provide useful examples of how and in which areas a reconciliation process must be initiated in order to achieve healing and a sense of justice for Cambodia's survivors.

For more than 30 years, of all those close to her, only Ms. Pen's best friend knew about her first marriage. Now, Ms. Pen has chosen to tell her story publicly, as a first step in trying to reconcile with her past and to find personal peace. This has given her a sense of relief from the constant pressure of hiding a secret. At the same time, she herself has been empowered to take action against the nightmares of the past.

In the case of crimes that lead to social stigma, such as sexual violence, breaking the silence and overcoming shame are crucial steps for personal healing. This can be seen in many other post-conflict areas where sex crimes were used as a weapon of war. In Cambodia, an open confrontation with the past has also been difficult for other types of violence. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, not many dared speak about what had happened to them. The reasons for this are varied, resulting from fear of former Khmer

Rouge cadres still living in their village, being afraid of punishment as a former agent of the Khmer Rouge, simply because they were never asked about their experience, or for a host of other reasons. If the cycle of emotional isolation that was imposed by the Khmer Rouge regime is to be broken, it is essential that Cambodians face their past openly. Such a process reinforces self-determination by survivors and allows them to seek help from others.

The Khmer Rouge regime, through their policy of separating children from their parents, husbands from their wives, sisters from their brothers, and generally severing the bonds of family at all levels, also destroyed the survivors' strongest support network. To escape the emotional isolation experienced by so many and to avoid transmitting the injustices of the past to future generations, it is essential to (re)build trust between family members, especially with the generations born after the war. In Cambodia, with its culture of oral storytelling, inter-generational dialogue can once again be a key source of healing. In the case of forced marriage, the need for truth-telling between parents and children is even more evident. Where the couple has stayed together, an injustice committed against the survivors was the sole basis on which the family was originally established.

Ms. Pen was more afraid of telling the truth to her children than to outsiders. She feared they would no longer accept her as a mother. When she finally was able to reveal her whole story to them, their continued love and support gave her additional strength. Contrary to her expectations, her daughters expressed understanding and empathy for what Ms. Pen suffered—both elements that are profoundly meaningful to survivors of trauma.

She was able to cross this barrier only after having first explored the past on her own. In the course of her search, she discovered just how widespread and systematic the policy of forced marriage had been, which person was in charge of ordering her forced marriage, and what might have been the motivation behind this policy. She sought out former Khmer Rouge leaders and posed these questions to them face-to-face. In this way, she overcame the sense of powerlessness, which was the legacy of a regime that had strictly limited access to information and rejected any call to justify its actions. Again, actively seeking to understand the past worked as powerful tool in combating feelings of powerlessness created by an arbitrary cruel regime. Emboldened by this process of empowerment, Ms. Pen was able to share her story with her children without being afraid that they would not believe or would reject her.

It is the duty of post-conflict societies to advance truth-finding, to strengthen survivors in their quest to understand their experiences and trauma, and to encourage them to document their stories. In Cambodia, a central tool for exploring the truth about the Khmer Rouge regime has been established through the creation of an international tribunal trying the senior leaders—the

Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). The trial itself is a platform to seek answers to some of the questions survivors have about the motivation of the Khmer Rouge leaders and the responsibility of certain individuals. At the same time, it offers an opportunity for survivors to publicly tell their story and have its credibility confirmed by an official institution. Outside of the Court, the legal proceedings have been a catalyst for truth-seeking among the general population, which has resulted in numerous projects encouraging an open dialogue among Cambodians.

On the topic of forced marriage, however, such a dialogue and public discussion is still in the fledging stages. Only recently has the ECCC included forced marriage as a crime against humanity in its indictment of former leaders of the regime. It remains to be seen how deeply the Court will address this issue during the trial. Research on the extent, consequences, and nature of such marriages is rare. In 2007, Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP) initiated a project that deals specifically with this topic and is so far the only civil society organization working in this field. The film *Red Wedding* is one example of how CDP intends to raise more awareness on forced marriages. Other examples include student forums and radio shows. As well, Ms. Pen is now admitted as civil party before the ECCC, which gives her the right to more active participation in the trial. And, she is but one among more than 400 other survivors of forced marriage who were similarly admitted. CDP is providing legal representation for this group of civil parties and is organizing study tours, workshops, and trainings to empower them and encourage them in their pursuit of justice.

Through an analysis of the aftermath of forced marriages, many parallels to other crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge regime can be found. Survivors of other forms of violence in Cambodia also tend to keep their feelings and sufferings to themselves as a result of the emotional isolation imposed during that period. A lack of understanding about what happened beyond individual experiences impedes intergenerational dialogue and truth-finding for all survivors. These two challenges need to be addressed in the transitional justice process underway in Cambodia today.

A close look at cases of forced marriages also reveals how past crimes can influence the lives of Cambodians in the present. It is no surprise that, in the context of a family whose very creation was forced and which in many cases has a history of violence, conflicts and violence between family members often results. Without dialogue and confrontation with the past, these can lead to the intergenerational transmission of these problems. The relationship between survivors and their families is a mirror for the relationship between survivors and the whole of post-conflict society. Both truth-seeking and truth-telling are necessary to establish a stable foundation for long-term peace.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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Beini Ye studied law at the University of Münster, Germany (2005) and completed a legal apprenticeship in Berlin (2008). She currently works as Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) Senior Advisor to the local NGO Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP) on the project on gender-based violence during the Khmer Rouge regime. GIZ is the German governmental agency for development aid, which is hosting a special program on peace and reconciliation in Cambodia called Civil Peace Service. E-mail: beini.ye@giz.de