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The “Master of the Land”: cult activities around Pol Pot’s tomb

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ABSTRACT

In April 1998, Pol Pot, the dictator who had been overthrown by his own movement one year earlier, died on the forest plateau of Anlong Veng, near the Thai border, to which the Khmer Rouge had gradually retreated in the 1990s. A modest tomb was erected there, on the very spot where he was cremated. Drawing on fieldwork carried out in October–November 2011, this contribution describes the strange aura which surrounds Pol Pot’s tomb. The latter is the focus of funerary practices unusual in Cambodia, the historical reasons for which are examined in detail. It will be shown that the perpetrator continues to exert an almost supernatural hold over this last bastion of the Khmer Rouge, influencing the ideological and the military, the ritual and the religious spheres alike.

KEYWORDS: Pol Pot, Khmer Rouge, Democratic Kampuchea, tourism, tomb, cult activity, Buddhism, spirits

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INTRODUCTION

We are in the hamlet of Choam (“The Pass”), a frontier post between Cambodia and Thailand in the district of Anlong Veng, on the forest plateau of the Dangrek mountains, in the northernmost region of the country.¹ Radio Phnom Penh (420 kilometres away) is broadcasting the latest news on the opening of the second trial at the “Khmer Rouge Tribunal”, the court which, having already sentenced Duch,² has the task of judging the main surviving members of Democratic Kampuchea’s ruling elite:³ Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary.⁴ Pol Pot, the “Brother Number One” who led this Maoist regime from 1975 to 1979, died in 1998, and his grave is here, in Choam.

POL POT’S GRAVE IN CHOAM, AN IN-BETWEEN ZONE OF AMBIGUITY

This burial site is peculiar, reflecting the character of a region which is unlike any other part of Cambodia. Its setting is Cambodia’s “Wild North”, where the jungle remains largely uncleared, and crossing the border is a strip of red earth, the major road which serves as a reminder of the government’s intent to develop this zone which, until the last communist guerillas were flushed out in 1999, had been a Khmer Rouge bastion inaccessible to government troops. However, “development” here means, above all, the construction by a tycoon with close links to government of a huge casino within easy reach of Thailand, where gambling is illegal. In one of History’s ironies, the resting place of Pol Pot, the intransigent revolutionary who gave the order in 1975 for Cambodia’s national bank to be dynamited and for all Cambodian “capitalists” to be sent out into the fields for reeducation, is thus symbolically located close to this temple of easy money, currently a building site on which the new Khmer Lumpenproletariat, including many former Khmer Rouge fighters, toil away in shifts. The monument – if one can call it that – is situated in a clearing, overgrown with weeds, which is reached by a narrow path. It consists solely of an earthen mound in the shape of a grave, ringed by small white stones and covered by a ramshackle roof of rusty corrugated iron sheets. The site’s extremely modest scale and run-down appearance declare very clearly whose memory it preserves: a member of the losing side. Nevertheless, the more attentive observer can detect beneath this veneer of neglect, which – as we will see – appears almost orchestrated, a degree of discreet care: the area surrounding the improvised memorial is swept, a small pot of incense and a bouquet of fresh flowers in a plastic bottle are placed in front of it. The remains of earlier offerings of food and drink, following Khmer ritual, have been left in a nearby bush. The impression of strangeness intensifies: this funerary site does not adhere to traditional practices in that the Khmer do not usually assemble

¹ The research presented here was supported by the Centre Asie du Sud-Est (CASE), Paris, funded by the Centre national de la recherche scientifique. I carried out a short preliminary period of fieldwork in Anlong Veng in October-November 2011 with Hang Chansophea, one of my former students in Phnom Penh in the 1990s, now an independent researcher. Her presence and diplomatic skills helped win over the confidence of former polpotists who regard the French as old enemies. I would like to thank her here. The observations presented in this chapter were taken around the last bastion of the Khmer Rouge, the Anlong Veng district in the province of Oddar Meanchey. The reader should keep in mind the geography of the two main sites referred to here. The first is the district capital of Anlong Veng, a town situated at the foot of the mountainous Dangrek plateau, where the polpotists occupied a number of buildings. The second is around fifteen kilometres from there, at Choam, on the forest plateau to which the Khmer Rouge retreated following battles with government forces. Pol Pot’s tomb is situated on this high plateau.

² Sentenced on appeal to life in prison in February 2012.

³ Kampuchea means “Cambodia” in the Khmer language. Khmers make up around 85 % of the Cambodian population. “Democratic Kampuchea” is the official name of the so called Khmer Rouge regime.

⁴ Ieng Sary died in March 2013. His wife Ieng Thirith (Pol Pot’s sister-in-law) was diagnosed in November 2011 as mentally unfit to stand trial until further psychiatric examinations are carried out following treatment. She died in 2015.

around tombs, especially when these are empty, as this one appears to be. For Pol Pot was cremated and, according to former loyalists whom I have interviewed during my fieldwork, had shortly before his death paid one of his men to scatter his ashes in lake Tonle Sap. As for the rituals practised by Cambodians of Chinese descent – a heritage which Pol Pot’s family can claim – these expect a tomb to be left untended and open to the healing forces of nature. So there is nothing “Chinese” about this grave either...

Today, 30 October 2011, like every Sunday, the border with Thailand is open. The first visitors are a family of Thai tourists. They quickly walk around the site, take photos of each other in front of the tomb enjoying their Sunday outing, and leave again after a few minutes. Later on in the morning, a group of five soldiers in uniform arrive, walking in single file up the same path – two Cambodians accompanying their opposite numbers from Hanoi. The tone of this visit is markedly different, as these officers have come to see their old enemy, beaten in January 1979 with the invasion of the country by Vietnamese troops, followed by the establishment of a new regime in Phnomh Penh which endures to this day. The rest of the morning passes without any other visitors. The only passers-by are a few workers from the casino building-site who have come with their children at the changeover between shifts to draw water from the only well in the area. It is true that the recent border skirmishes, in early 2011, between Cambodia and Thailand over the Angkorian temple of Preah Vihar further to the east, have put off the few western tourists who used to venture this far. Yet none of the former Khmer Rouge fighters living here whom I interviewed complained about this: “I took an Italian tourist here to Pol Pot’s tomb one day. I couldn’t believe it: he spat on the grave! I was very shocked and told him that he mustn’t do that because Pol Pot is someone who built many things in Cambodia, canals, dams...” I was told by a mototaxi driver whose family are all “loyal” (literally “children and grandchildren”, *kūn cau*) to Pol Pot – although he himself has a much more critical view of the maoist leader’s achievements. The same expression of outraged disbelief is visible on his face before the foul-mouthed graffiti, written in French which I translate for him, which decorates another site of polpotian memory a few kilometres away in the forest, a clandestine meeting-room which is now in ruins, indicated by a peeling official signpost erected by the Ministry of Tourism. The power of the ambiguous, of the in-between, over this realm, visible as much in the way the former Khmer Rouge base of Anlong Veng is now organised as it is in the funerary rites and memorial practices surrounding Pol Pot’s tomb, can only be understood in the light of the historical events which have played out over the past thirty years, following the fall of the Khmer Rouge. This period has seen a succession of memory-based initiatives coming one after another, and at times even interfering with each other, without any one of them ever achieving lasting dominance within Cambodian society. I will begin by describing the conditions surrounding the death of Pol Pot (1998) within the context of post-genocide Cambodia society (1979-onwards), before examining the specific characteristics of the funerary rituals centred on him and, finally, analysing his slow transformation into an ambivalent ancestral figure of a “master of the land” at Anlong Veng, the religious and general ritual function of which I will discuss before showing how this construction is the result of a form of popular memorialisation.

THE DEATH OF THE PERPETRATOR

Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)

The Cambodian communists, derisively dubbed the “Khmer Rouge” by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, were a product of the Cold War. Cambodia, a small country with a population of less than 6 million in the 1960s, acted as a buffer state in this period, tossed back and forth between the big Cold-War players (USA, China, USSR), assisted by their regional allies (Vietnam, Thailand). The Cambodian communist movement first arose under the French colonial regime under the aegis of the Indochinese Communist Party, which had been founded in 1930 by Ho Chi Minh. The pre-eminence of this first generation of communists, who were very closely allied with the Vietnamese, would be eclipsed ten

years later by a group of students trained in Paris within circles closely linked to the French Communist Party, among them Pol Pot⁵, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan and Khieu Thirith (the future wife of Ieng Sary).

Within this party, renamed the Workers' Party of Kampuchea in 1960, as was the case throughout similar political currents of this period, a marked tension would arise between a universalist communist ideal and an intense nationalism – the latter tendency, in the Cambodian case, focused on their Vietnamese neighbour, which would go from being an ally to an enemy as Democratic Kampuchea came to an end in 1978.

The necessary preconditions for an armed struggle for power did not arise before 1970, the year in which Prince Sihanouk was toppled by a coup d'état led by General Lon Nol and supported by the United States. From his exile in Beijing, the Prince called for a popular uprising before establishing a government in exile which brought together opponents to the regime in Phnom Penh, including the communists. Exploiting this tactical alliance, the latter launched an intensive propaganda campaign at the village level in order to gain the support of the peasantry, using the image of the Prince, the official head of their movement. Meanwhile, America's Strategic Air Command, having withdrawn from Vietnam following the Paris Accords, focused its bombing campaign entirely on Cambodia from 1973 onwards. Hundreds of thousands of tons of bombs were dropped on the country in the period leading up to August 1973. This fostered an emotional hardness among the young Khmer Rouge recruits and their leaders, who were forced to exist in almost inhuman conditions, and this would influence the way in which, once victorious, many of them treated their enemies, including the civilian population. The communists took Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975, with the help of Vietnamese revolutionary fighters.⁶ The most extreme faction, under Pol Pot, would only gain complete military and administrative control over all parts of Democratic Kampuchea in 1977. Communist China would become his chief political and technical supporter, as well as providing the inspiration for his agrarian policy.

The Maoist revolution as applied in Cambodia consisted in establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat while at the same time reviving the splendour of Angkor, the glorious era between the eighth and thirteenth centuries during which the Khmer empire covered a large part of the Indochinese peninsula. The Angkar – the secret organisation which governed the country and was in fact the central committee of the Party – thought that this could be achieved by drastically increasing rice production, which would form the basis of the nation's prosperity and provide the initial stimulus for industrialisation. The Khmer revolution would have to be carried out using the means available, namely the bare hands of the people: the rice paddies were reorganised and worked non-stop, and massive areas cleared for the construction of canals and dams, some of which are still in use today. Cambodians would die in their hundreds of thousands from work-induced exhaustion, aggravated by a poor diet and untreated illnesses.

The entire Cambodian population was forcibly displaced – and not just city-dwellers, as is often stated – even if this only meant moving a few kilometres. The mass displacement of totally unprepared city-dwellers, unused to the harshness of life in the fields, to rural cooperatives in which the most radical form of collectivisation was implemented, led to conditions of appalling famine. These were made yet worse by the fact that the rice produced was being shipped out from the cooperatives to Phnom Penh or China. In parallel with this, traditional society was razed to its very foundations, wiping out

⁵ See D. P. CHANDLER, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview, 1999 [1992]. In this biography, Pol Pot comes across as an affable student, well-liked by his fellow students and later by his students, albeit without any particular charisma or talent, apart from his penchant for reciting French poetry. Extremely discreet during the years of his ascent through the ranks of the party, he cultivated an aura of mystery around himself and did not encourage a cult of personality. Busts and portraits of him only appeared in the very last years of Democratic Kampuchea.

⁶ Saigon fell two weeks after Phnom Penh.

Buddhism, family links, language, the arts... all in a general climate of terror in which local commanders were masters of life and death, and themselves in turn subject to the directives emanating from regional commanders and the Angkar. According to the widely-accepted estimate calculated by Ben Kiernan,⁷ 1.7 million Cambodians, or more than a quarter of the population, perished between 1975 and 1979.

Yet it would be almost thirty years before the polpotist group would be regarded as “genocidal” – in diplomatic, political and judicial terms – in the eyes of the western coalition. Over the same period, by contrast, the pro-Vietnamese government in Phnom Penh would shift in the opposite direction, moving from denunciation of the “genocidal Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique” in 1979, to a programme integrating their fighters within the national army in 1996. The ambiguities which surround the funerary treatment of Pol Pot’s tomb – and, more generally, the way in which Cambodians themselves, in all their diversity, perceive him – can only be understood in the light of these geopolitical developments.

The downgrading of the Khmer Rouge to a resistance movement (1979-1997) and its subsequent steps on the path back towards power

Following numerous provocations by Khmer Rouge troops, 120,000 Vietnamese soldiers launched an offensive against Cambodia in 1978. The forces of Democratic Kampuchea fled towards the north-east, offering little resistance. This invasion changed the balance of international power in the region. China continued to support the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea, reminding Vietnam that it was still encircled. The United States, whose relations with China had improved considerably over the 1970s, aligned themselves with the Chinese position to act as a counterweight to the influence of the Soviet Union projected through its Vietnamese ally.

China, the United States and the member states of ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) were united in their vigorous denunciation of the invasion of Cambodia and the illegitimacy of the new People’s Republic of Kampuchea, calling for the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and retaining Democratic Kampuchea’s seat at the UN. They would support the coalition formed in 1982 between the three main factions opposed to the Phnom Penh government: Democratic Kampuchea (the party of the Khmer Rouge), the United National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (the FUNCINPEC, Prince Sihanouk’s new party) and the National Liberation Front for the Khmer People (the FLNPK, a non-communist nationalist party led by a former minister of Prince Sihanouk’s former party, the Sangkum, living in exile in France, Son Sann). In exile in Beijing and under pressure from the Chinese, Prince Sihanouk accepted this new alliance with the Khmer Rouge.

The latter had embarked in great haste on building a new, more acceptable image for themselves by placing their brightest and most cultured representatives in public relations posts. Pol Pot, meanwhile, officially left his post at the head of the government, being replaced by Khieu Samphan, but in reality he maintained his command over the armed wing of the movement from the safety of Thai territory, on the border with Cambodia. It was here that the Khmer Rouge forces, after being routed in the Vietnamese offensive, gradually built up their strength through a network of Chinese, American, Thai and more general humanitarian assistance. Right until the end, the polpotist group hoped to regain power, either by force or by diplomatic and governmental means, by a complex set of alternating or simultaneous alliances with its historical ally the FUNCINPEC and the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP).

Peace negotiations began in 1987. Among the key points discussed were the withdrawal of occupying Vietnamese troops and the position of the Khmer Rouge in the future government. Although the

⁷ B. KIERNAN, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996.

crimes committed by Democratic Kampuchea were becoming increasingly well known in the 1980s thanks to published testimony from survivors and research by historians, the FUNCINPEC-Democratic Kampuchean coalition forbade any mention of the genocide during these talks. By contrast, from the outset the People's Republic of Kampuchea (the Phnom Penh government) built its legitimacy, both with respect to the Cambodian population and in the eyes of the international community, on its condemnation of the crimes of the polpotist group. The new Cambodian government, made up in part of former communists who had rebelled against the central committee and fled to Vietnam, before returning with the occupying Vietnamese troops, presented itself – with some justification – as having liberated the country from the Khmer Rouge yoke. Throughout the country, “A Pot” was now seen as bearing chief responsibility for the deaths, famine and suffering.⁸

In October 1991, the Paris Accords were finally signed, leading to the creation of a provisional government which included representatives of the four factions, among them two high-ranking polpotist officials, Khieu Samphan and Son Senn. As part of the agreement, the United Nations' Transitional Authority in Cambodia organised elections to a constituent assembly in June 1993. These effectively resulted in the formation of bipartite government comprising the FUNCINPEC (Sihanouk's party) and the CPP (the ruling pro-Vietnamese party). However, it was not long before power struggles arose between the two parties, previously military enemies. Courting allies, such as the Khmer Rouge, thus became increasingly important.⁹

Pol Pot: victim of the last of the Khmer Rouge purges

The mechanism by which the revolutionary movement would finally disappear was falling into place at this time, as opinion within the ruling group became increasingly divided regarding the opportunity to join the peace process and enter into a multilateral government. Secret negotiations between previously rival factions – in particular the FUNCINPEC and the ruling CPP – were well under way at this stage.¹⁰ However Pol Pot, fearing that he would see his movement isolated within the peace process, announced in March 1993 that it would not participate in the UN-brokered elections and would retain its weapons.

He then set up his headquarters in Anlong Veng, under constant military pressure from government forces, before having once more to move his base higher up to Kbal Tonsaong, on the forest plateau of the Dangrek mountains, very near the Thai border. This massive concrete construction, built directly onto a rocky outcrop, is impregnable from the Cambodian plain which stretches out 300 metres below it. It is fed by a large cement reservoir which collects water directly from the mountain. Every aspect of this impressive construction in the middle of the jungle speaks of the considerable financial and human resources which were still available to Pol Pot a few months before his death.

This place, like all the sites where the cadres of the polpotist movement sought refuge in its final years, is today part of a “tourist circuit” – if one can use such a grand term to describe a few panels with flaking blue paint which have been placed in front of these remnants and announce, in Khmer and English, the historic function of the site in question: “Pol Pot's house”, “Khieu Samphan's house”, “Site of Pol Pot's trial” or “Please help preserve this historic place”... to the rare visitors who venture this far by mototaxi. I will return to the subject of these very rudimentary tourist facilities shortly.

By this point, in the mid 1990s, defections were becoming increasingly common in the ranks of the Khmer Rouge, the most decisive one being that of Ieng Sary in August 1996, which deprived the movement of all its bases in the south (along the length of the Thai-Cambodian border, from Smlaut to Phnom Chhat) as well as 4000 men, or half of the movement's fighting strength. Government

⁸ “A” is a title placed before a name in Khmer. In this case, it has a highly deprecatory sense.

⁹ R. M. JENNAR, *Trente Ans depuis Pol Pot. Le Cambodge de 1979 à 2009*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2010.

¹⁰ P. SHORT, *Pol Pot. The History of a Nightmare*, New York, Henry Holt & co., 2004, p. 431.

envoys promised an amnesty and continued command of their units to any Khmer Rouge officers who were likely to defect. This approach, based on the incorporation of whole combat units retaining their existing commander, is precisely that followed in the Anlong Veng region today. The military administration based in Phnom Penh – this former Khmer Rouge base has yet to come under civilian administration – merely oversees a power structure which is still controlled by former Khmer Rouge commanders. Indeed, one gets a better sense, after a stay in Anlong Veng, of what the years under the Democratic Kampuchean regime must have been like: not so much a concentration camp as a series of zones governed by warlords who were more or less autonomous but always at risk of being purged by the central authority.

The final battle would pit Ta Mok against Pol Pot on 1997. The Khmer Rouge were by now very close to concluding a deal with the FUNCINPEC which would considerably strengthen the latter against the increasingly dominant CPP. However, Pol Pot's terrible international reputation meant that he could play no political role once these negotiations were concluded. More and more isolated, and doubting the loyalty of Son Senn,¹¹ one of the longest-serving Khmer Rouge cadres alongside him at Anlong Veng, Pol Pot had this former comrade executed along with his entire family in June 1997. The old revolutionary with his gentle smile remained faithful to his convictions and his methods right up to his dying breath. Four days later, Ta Mok,¹² alarmed by the news of this murder, in turn ordered the arrest of Pol Pot. In July, the former leader was judged by a "revolutionary tribunal" in front of several hundred Khmer Rouge fighters, men, women and children, who all raised their fists in unison, chanting "crush, crush, crush Pol Pot and his clique!" thus reproducing the hundreds of political meetings and self-criticism sessions which they had most likely endured over the years. In a striking piece of historical irony, Pol Pot was thus overthrown by his last ally, after having been found guilty of betrayal. In the end, he was the final victim of a system which had turned purges into a form of government. Pol Pot was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Government troops launched an offensive against Anlong Veng on 15 April 1998. Pol Pot died that very night from cardiac arrest.¹³ The date was 16 April 1998, 23 years almost to the day since the fall of Phnom Penh (17 April 1975).¹⁴

Thai forensic specialists took fingerprints, dental photographs and hair samples. An American correspondent wanted to remove one of his teeth, supposedly for purposes of identification. Three

¹¹ Son Senn was a member of the permanent committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea from 1975 onwards and acted as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence under Democratic Kampuchea.

¹² Ta Mok joined the ranks of nationalist *Issarak* movement aged 23, under French colonial rule. He became a high-ranking member of the Permanent Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea in 1975 and participated in numerous massacres and purges. This one-legged warlord (due to an anti-personnel mine) was a feared guerrilla fighter in the 1980s and 1990s. He was arrested in December 1998 by government forces and died in 2006 in a military hospital before he could be tried by the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

¹³ The journalist Nate Thayer, whose sources are very reliable, has suggested that Pol Pot was arrested by the Thai secret services; N. THAYER, "How the US Dropped the Ball When Offered to Bring Pol Pot to Trial for Mass Murder", 24 January 2014, accessed 9 October 2017. <http://www.nate-thayer.com/how-the-us-dropped-the-ball-when-offered-to-bring-pol-pot-to-trial-for-mass-murder/>

¹⁴ Dates of death are never entirely due to chance. Pol Pot's health had been declining and he could feel that his death was approaching, according to statements given to journalists by those close to him. Backed into a corner and aware that he would soon be arrested – according to one version of events, his former comrades had agreed to hand him over to international justice – he died at a highly symbolic period in Cambodian history, the Khmer New Year. The aged King Norodom Sihanouk also died on the day of one of the most important ceremonies in the Khmer ritual calendar, the Day of the Dead, on 15 October 2012.

days afterwards Pol [Pot]'s widow and his daughter carried out the Buddhist rites. Then his body was cremated on a pile of rubbish and car tyres.¹⁵

The exact circumstances of Pol Pot's death and cremation are not yet known with absolute certainty, and rumours of suicide or poisoning continue to circulate. For instance, one man loyal to Ta Mok told me – and this may or may not be true – that “Pol Pot killed himself by taking poison. He did not want to become the subordinate [*kūn cau*, “child and grandchild”] of Hun Sen [the Prime Minister of the kingdom of Cambodia] when this man had once been his assistant [Hun Sen had been aide de camp to a regimental commander in the eastern zone during the years of Democratic Kampuchea].”

What interests us particularly here is the rushed and unceremonious disposal of the body of the perpetrator, on a makeshift pyre and without any ritual accompaniment. This was the funeral of a beaten enemy whose last remaining supporters kept, and still keep, very quiet. This final failure is clearly legible in the contrast between the modest tomb of the “Brother Number One” and that of his nemesis, Ta Mok (who died in 2006). For the latter now rests in a sumptuous tomb, built within the walls of a Buddhist monastery in the village of Srah Chhuk, halfway up the slope of the forest plateau.¹⁶ Following his wishes, he was not cremated, perhaps because of his Chinese lineage, as one of his followers suggests. The decoration on the lintels is based on Angkorian motifs, and a statue of an elephant, a symbol of strength, is prominently placed on the dome of his concrete monument.

Just as the humble appearance of Pol Pot's tomb reflects his ultimate fate within his own movement, so the various different ways in which the dead leader was treated can only be understood in the light of the multiple inflections of status which I have described above. I will thus examine in turn how a former enemy position, now a government stronghold, has been made into a deliberately low-key tourist site, before discussing the quiet homage paid by the “children and grandchildren” (loyal supporters) of Pol Pot, who now form a minority within their own movement, and finally the ritual practices of the area's new inhabitants, who have come from around Cambodia, attracted by freshly cleared land and the prospect of creating small businesses.

A RANGE OF FUNERARY RITUALS

Tourism: a deliberately basic approach

The Anlong Veng district was still covered in thick primeval forest ten years ago. Following their victory in March 1998, government troops occupied this zone. On the forest plateau near the Thai border at the Choam pass, soldiers still bivouac in the forest, where they live with their families. Everywhere there is an atmosphere of a pioneering frontier, with a market which is extremely rudimentary compared to those in other regions of Cambodia and where combat fatigues and other items of bush equipment are offered for sale alongside very basic food-stalls which serve little more than rice soup.

The incorporation of this new district within the ambit of the Phnom Penh government was accomplished in two ways. Firstly, it was opened up to the outside world through the construction of a fine new road linking the district administrative center of Anlong Veng to Thailand, with the aim of increasing trade. The building of a casino just metres from the border also forms part of these projects. This has led directly to an increase in the price of land, pushing the former Khmer Rouge fighters

¹⁵ P. SHORT, *Pol Pot*, op. cit., p. 442. Video footage shot during the cremation does not show rubbish but rather Pol Pot's personal effects. The Khmer Rouge, who had rejected Buddhism, did not carry out any funerary rituals and recommended that bodies should be used as fertiliser. I have often heard corpses being referred to in these terms in the communist zones. This did not prevent Ieng Sary and Khieu Ponnary (Ieng Sary's sister-in-law and Pol Pot's first wife) from having a funerary monument (*stupa*) in a well-known monastery in Phnom Penh, where their ashes were placed following Buddhist rites.

¹⁶ See footnote 1.

further into the forest, where costs are lower. In addition to this, according to one informant, only the barest trickle of developmental aid from NGOs is allowed through, so as not to assist a population which is not entirely loyal to the government.

The projects to develop tourism around Pol Pot's tomb are part of a wider scheme of "soft" development which combines the control of former enemies with a rather cursory effort to provide tourist amenities. It was with this in mind that, in December 2001 the Prime Minister Hun Sen signed a circular calling for the preservation of memorials to the victims of Democratic Kampuchea, and for the development of Anlong Veng as a historic site open to tourists.¹⁷ The Ministry of Tourism sub-contracted the project to a private company, Red Dot, with the hope of seeing Anlong Veng become the second-biggest tourist destination after Angkor Wat.¹⁸ This policy of delegating work of this sort had already been adopted for other sites on the tourist trail relating to the memory of the genocide, in particular the Tuol Sleng museum in Phnom Penh and the mass graves at Choeung Ek, near the capital. The government's plan never achieved the success that had been expected if one is to believe the visitor figures for Anlong Veng: 2004 saw an average of 10 foreign visitors per month – mainly Thais – and between 50 and 300 Cambodian visitors.¹⁹

This "commercial" project has been described by some as "obscene".²⁰ It shows the extent to which the symbolic and political content of memorialisation is always ambivalent. In this particular case, the objectives of the state were threefold. The first was to keep a rebel-held zone within the perimeter of the territory controlled by central government. The second aim was to contribute to the project of the "historicizing" the Khmer Rouge movement which was spurred by the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in 2007 – by this I mean the process of transforming a problem which had up until that point been perceived by the CPP as essentially political and military into a question of national history. An initial phase of state memorialization, largely unknown to westerners, had already been put in place following the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. It chiefly consisted of numerous ossuaries, spread across all the country's districts.²¹ This second wave of memorialization thus had different functions, driven by a changed context.

The government's third and final objective was to gain financial benefit by catering to the international tourist market. "Dark tourism", as tourist visits to sites of mass crimes are known, has been thoroughly incorporated into the official and informal tourist trail in Cambodia since the early 2000s. The drivers of taxis, mototaxis and rickshaws cheerfully propose a ride down the Mekong followed by a visit to the execution site at Choeung Ek, sometimes using unbearably horrific photographs as a "teaser" for passing tourists. The Khmers' affective economy is focused on different areas. The feelings that Cambodians have regarding the genocide, and their efforts to assuage personal suffering, have nothing to do with the development of tourism in this respect,²² which is really just an adaptation of the existing heritage infrastructure surrounding the genocide to the international tourist market.

¹⁷ T. D. WOOD, "Touring Memories of the Khmer Rouge", in CHAU-PECH OLLIER, L. and WINTER, T. (eds), *Expressions of Cambodia. The Politics of Tradition, Identity and Change*, Oxford-New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 181-192.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁰ O. de BERNON, "Du manifeste politique à l'obscénité commerciale. Le traitement du souvenir des victimes des Khmers rouges à Phnom Penh et dans les environs", in BOUCHY, A. and IKEZAWA, M. (eds), *La Mort collective et le Politique. Constructions mémorielles et ritualisations*, Tokyo, Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, University of Tokyo, 2011, pp. 143-161.

²¹ A. Y. GUILLOU, "An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide: the Dead of the Mass Graves and the Land Guardian Spirits (neak ta)", *South East Asia Research*, vol. 20, no 2, 2012, pp. 193-212.

²² *Id.*, "Les rituels funéraires, y compris en l'absence des corps, et leur contribution au soulagement des souffrances post-génocide", *Psy Cause*, no 64-2, *Le Bouddhisme en psychiatrie et dans les psychothérapies* (actes

The ambiguity of the government's development of tourism at Anlong Veng thus stems from the economic ambitions of the state, tempered by the fear of seeing these sites transformed into polpotist sanctuaries. This latter fear is perhaps well founded, as the present ethnographic study has revealed the discreet efforts of Pol Pot's loyal supporters to produce an alternative memory.

The discreet efforts of Pol Pot's supporters

The Ministry of Tourism recruited a small number of former Khmer Rouge fighters as guides at the Anlong Veng site, exhorting them, during training sessions for their new job, to "refrain[ing] from praising Khmer Rouge leaders".²³ Indeed, during the long hours that we spent with a guide whose job it was to look after the headquarters of Ta Mok and Pol Pot in the district's capital, the head of the tourism bureau – a civil servant from Phnom Penh – called him several times on his mobile phone to remind him of this order. "I am saying nothing compromising"²⁴ he protested, looking me straight in the eye.

In fact, this one-legged guide, a victim like so many others here of an anti-personnel mine, was one of the mainstays of the discreet resistance effort kept up by former loyal followers of Pol Pot and Ta Mok on the very site of their own touristification. A former instructor in Phnom Penh in the days of Democratic Kampuchea, he explained to us with steely passion, in his own way, the aims of this revolution which went awry²⁵ and the intellectual, patriotic and moral qualities of its leaders, now dead, in their struggle against a liberal capitalism whose effects, as he puts it in an allusion to the new casino, are now being seen at Anlong Veng. He railed against the Ministry of Tourism, who did not take the trouble to present the site with the dignity it deserved. As a true guardian of the temple, he made it his business, in spite of his handicap, to carefully sweep the floors, see that visitors behaved respectfully and protect the mural paintings which decorate the walls, representing Angkor Wat and the temple of Preah Vihear.²⁶ As a protest against this lack of respect, he explained, the former fighters from Anlong Veng never come here, leaving the site to passing visitors.

At Pol Pot's tomb, a few kilometres away to the north, I observed the same underground efforts at rehabilitation. A former Khmer Rouge fighter with one eye missing, currently working on the construction site of the casino, approached me and asked, "Do you want to know who killed the people under Pol Pot's regime? Under his government, only thieves and adulterers were killed. The others died of illness and famine: Pol Pot did not kill them. And then there were revenge killings. When you hated a family, you did not just kill one person but his whole lineage so as to avoid a vendetta." This is not the place to analyse these declarations, which raise the whole question of guilt, which was being dealt with at the same time, and in almost the same terms (albeit reaching precisely the opposite conclusions), by the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. For the Tribunal considered the entire chain of command, whereas this former Khmer Rouge fighter expressed a Khmer – and more generally South-East Asian – concept of power as being "nested" in a series of "privileges", whereby each successive level distributes territories to be administered freely by the next level down.

du VIII^e Congrès international de l'Association internationale francophone Psy Cause et de la revue Psy Cause, 20-21 novembre 2012, Siem Reap), 2013, pp. 17-20.

²³ T. D. WOOD, "Touring Memories..." , p. 185.

²⁴ "I am speaking lightly" is the literal translation of this phrase from Khmer.

²⁵ Khmer Rouge leaders such as Khieu Samphan and Pol Pot all, without a flicker of conscience, forged narratives which presented them as sincere revolutionaries who wanted the best for their people. The violence was not committed by them but rather by low-ranking cadres outside their control. They themselves had to fight the internal enemies of the revolution, covertly directed by the Vietnamese and their agents. References to CIA agents disappeared after 1979.

²⁶ These paintings portray the splendour of the Khmer empire.

Although the Ministry of Tourism does come about once a year to tidy up Pol Pot's funerary monument, most of the regular maintenance work is done by the warlord's loyal retainers. Relations between the followers of Pol Pot and those of Ta Mok, who had been allies for thirty years before their final confrontation, do not seem to be hostile. Nate Thayer, a reporter for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, has spoken of the deference with which the old chief was still treated by his victorious adversary's men following his trial.²⁷ The two leaders, as far as I could tell at any rate from the semi-public conversations (conducted in the presence of a third party) that I had in Choam, continue to arouse respect and gratitude for their personal discipline, their moral probity, their intellectual qualities, their patriotism and the efforts they made to develop this area; this contrasts starkly with the perception of the actions of the CPP, whose only plan in this respect involves giving carte blanche for the construction of a casino. In private, however, it is true that one hears much more critical statements, often revealing the merciless temperament of these leaders, Ta Mok in particular, who were both quite prepared to kill suspects in cold blood without giving them a second chance.

These loyal retainers make sure the tomb is swept and regularly change the pot of incense and the small bunch of wild flowers placed in a plastic bottle in front of it. Fake dollar bills are also burned as an offering. These are to be used by the occupant in the world of the dead. The remains of offerings of food are evidence of ancestor-cult practices, based on Chinese models.

The split between these two former adversaries (both groups are now aligned with the government in Phnom Penh) can nevertheless still be read in the language of funerary ritual, as is often the case in rural Khmer society. One former polpotist, for instance, told me that "Two or three years ago, I dreamt that Pol Pot was complaining about his tomb, the metal roof of which was damaged. He asked me to go and tell Ta Neuo [Ta Mok's successor as military chief of this zone who is now under the orders of an officer from the Phnom Penh army] so that he would repair it. I obeyed but Ta Neuo never had the tomb repaired." Like any dead person, Pol Pot is thus liable to communicate with those close to him. And he continues to demand the dignified treatment which is refused to him by his victorious enemies.

Buddhist Rituals and the New Population

The ritual treatment of Pol Pot's tomb is also undertaken by a quite different population, namely the new arrivals to the area. Given that it is a pioneer frontier which has only recently been opened up to internal immigration, and also given the national context of rising land prices, the Anlong Veng district has seen the arrival since the early 2000s of thousands of Cambodians (and Vietnamese) who have come from all over the country in search of agricultural and commercial opportunities. This population barely mixes with the former Khmer Rouge fighters, who remain together in their own villages.

As is the social norm in rural Cambodia –where more than 80% of the country's inhabitants live – relations between old and new inhabitants are expressed through the language of spirits, and in particular that of the territory's tutelary spirits, called *aṅak t̄ā*. A woman in her sixties, originally from the Angkor region further to the south, plays a pivotal role in the organisation of these rituals. Nicknamed Grandmother Wicker Basket (*yāy kaṅtrak*) on account of her trade, she acts as the medium for several spirits residing in this area, and who speak through her when they take possession of her during séances. She has also begun organising a number of ceremonies, some linked to spirit cults,²⁸ others Buddhist,²⁹ to use the categories referred to by the Cambodians themselves. The analysis of these ceremonies is outside the scope of the present chapter. We can very simply say that they aim

²⁷ N. THAYER, "Pol Pot, I presume", *Wall Street Journal*, 1 August 1997, accessed 9 October 2017. <http://natethayer.typepad.com/blog/2011/11/pol-pot-i-presume-nate-thayer-wall-street-journal.html>

²⁸ The main one being that of the Black Grandmother (*yāy khmau*).

²⁹ In particular a *kathina* and a *punya dār lān*. On the role played by the *punya dār lān* in rebuilding social links in a village inhabited by former Khmer Rouge fighters and simple farmers, see E. M. ZUCKER, *Forest of Struggle. Moralities of Remembrance in Upland Cambodia*, Honolulu, Hawaii University Press, 2013.

to symbolically unify and pacify the territory, while retaining its historical specificity as a former Khmer Rouge base commanded by visible and invisible leaders (I will return to this point in the next section) and also symbolically relinking it to the rest of Cambodia.

In line with the role of ritual entrepreneur which she had taken on with the tacit agreement of Choam's inhabitants, Grandmother Wicker Basket also began taking care of the late Pol Pot. To this end, she organised a funerary ceremony for him which is extremely common in Cambodia, known as a *pañsukūl*. This consists in earning Buddhist merits by offering robes to monks, a major act of merit in popular Khmer Buddhism. The merits thus obtained by the worshipper are shared, via the intermediary of the same monk, with the dead person. In Grandmother Wicker Basket's mind, this act was simply a way of obeying the Buddhist requirement for compassion towards all beings. Her intention was, through this ceremony, to help the late Pol Pot move up a little on the karmic level. For Buddhists have every reason to think that his genocidal acts will "ripen" and pull him down to a lower form of existence, such as an animal or a wandering soul, racked by hunger and suffering (a *preta*). These types of existence will last for thousands and thousands of years before this bitter "fruit of karma" (*kamma phala*) shrinks and finally disappears, giving way to a better form of life. Grandmother Wicker Basket thus hopes that, through her prayers, Pol Pot will not be reincarnated as a murderer. However, when journalists from Phnom Penh got wind of her ritual efforts and descended en masse in search of the story *du jour*, she panicked at the idea that people would taken her to be a loyal follower of Pol Pot – a claim she vigorously denies – and stopped praying for the dead leader.

Given that the potential reintegration of the figure of Pol Pot within the Buddhist view of the universe has (for the moment) been blocked, the cult of spirits – another facet of the Khmer religious system – is the domain within which the local interpretation and inscription of Pol Pot's tomb must now take place.

THE "MASTER OF THE LAND": THE RITUAL TRANSFORMATION OF POL POT

Right next to Pol Pot's tomb, a makeshift café with an earthen floor serves a breakfast of rice and coffee and provides entertainment for its modest number of customers with a television. The owner arrived ten years ago, accompanying her husband, who is an employee ("child and grandchild", *kūn cau*) of the chief of the Immigration Police. Like all newcomers, she must pay homage to and propitiate the territory's tutelary spirits, without whose favour it is impossible to settle in happily. And, in this corner of freshly cleared forest, it is around the tomb that these cults have crystallized.

People from around here, but also from elsewhere, come to make offerings of food on certain holy days as well as for the Festival of the Dead and the Khmer New Year [both key dates in the Khmer ritual calendar]. Myself, I do the same from time to time because he is the master of the land (*mcās'tī*), the spirit who protects this place. I do it to get good results for my business and also just to be happy in life.

Daily offerings of food as well as more significant offerings, such as a pig's head and court music (by a *biñ bādy* orchestra) immediately bring to mind cult practices involving tutelary spirits.

A second key ethnographic indicator is to be found in the small handcrafted wooden altar, attractively carved in the Thai style, placed in the north-eastern corner (thus facing in the most propitious direction) of the tomb. It houses a small statue of an elephant, the symbol of power. This offering was made by some Thai visitors, according to those who live nearby. Old associates of the former dictator,³⁰ they had come to pay him homage after his death and to ask him for help. A sort of ritual

³⁰ A number of Thais, a mixture of soldiers and traders in wood and precious stones, were in regular and friendly contact with the communist guerillas up until the very end of the movement. The Khmer Rouge likewise regularly crossed over into Thai territory from their bases along the border.

“contract” was made with the tutelary spirit (*aṅak tā*) in which the humans request assistance, promising an offering if their prayer is answered. This indeed came about, as the tutelary spirit revealed a winning lottery number to his protégés in a dream. The latter duly organised a ritual, called *lā pamṅan'*, which consists in honouring the promise of an offering and thanking the tutelary spirit. Their gift was this little altar. It is absolutely vital that this ritual, marking the closure of the pact, be carried out, as failing to do so carries serious sanctions, which may go as far as death for those who do not keep their promise.

What, then, has happened to the late Pol Pot on the ritual level? How has he gone from being a feared warlord to a quasi-tutelary spirit of this territory? It would be wrong to see these cult activities as a form of admiration or homage to the tyrant Pol Pot and his ideology on the part of the new inhabitants of Anlong Veng or passing visitors. They should instead be interpreted as a local Khmer (and Thai, as the two cultures share numerous traits) form of writing history, namely the history of a powerful man who left his mark not only on his time but on the whole nation. Before becoming interested in the cult activity around Pol Pot's tomb, I had spent several years working in the province of Pursat (western Cambodia), where a similar process is visible. Here, the tutelary spirit, called Grandfather Khleang Mueng,³¹ is similarly known throughout Cambodia. Like Pol Pot, he was a warlord,³² and he too died on the site where his cult is celebrated today. And, like Pol Pot, his transformation into an *aṅak tā* was the result of a merging of the mythico-historical account of a powerful individual with the cult of the power of the land, which the Khmers believe to be populated by immaterial beings whose territory they share and so must honour.

This ethnographic study has thus shown that Pol Pot is similarly, according to this traditional schema, perceived as a clearer of the land, in symbolic terms the first inhabitant of the site and, for this reason, its invisible owner. The human inhabitants of Choam would not be able to live there tranquilly without propitiating the powers of the recently cleared forest, which are symbolized by the “master of the land” – often called elsewhere the “master of the water and the land”, as these two elements are in their own right able to symbolise the whole of Cambodian territory. For it is important to understand that what we have here is a place (the tomb)³³ associated with a personality (Pol Pot) which together take on meaning in this symbolic transformation. The local interpretation of the “death of the perpetrator” is thus that Pol Pot has been transformed into an immaterial being, bearing the weight of karma (just as human beings do) but merged with the soil of his last fiefdom, rather than being reincarnated. Like an *aṅak tā*, he watches over the daily lives of the area's human inhabitants, a powerful being with an ambivalent personality.

Pol Pot, having died in 1998, has thus embarked in recent years on a “post-mortem career”³⁴ with many facets, the product of the history of the Khmer Rouge movement and, to a greater extent, the history of the perception of the genocide across different social milieus, states and institutions – all acting as agents of contradictory memorial approaches.

³¹ A. Y. GUILLOU “Khmer potent places. *Pāramī* and the localization of Buddhism and monarchy in Cambodia”, *The Asia and Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 2017, 18 (5): 421-443.

³² Khleang Mueng was a general in the army of Ang Chan Reachea (Paramarājā II) during his war against the Siamese in the sixteenth century. The royal chronicles recount his exploits, as so local legends.

³³ The *aṅak tā* are associated with an unusual feature in the landscape: a mound, a tall tree, a termite hill... and in this case a tomb.

³⁴ In anthropological terminology, the deceased's “post-mortem career” refers to the successive symbolic states attributed to them in a given religious context.