THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION AND BEING EDUCATED IN NARRATIVES ABOUT KHMER ROUGE REGIME AMONG 2ND AND 3RD GENERATION SURVIVORS

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Abstract - In this article I will discuss how grade 11 and grade 12 students talk about education and being educated in the context of the Khmer Rouge regime. Education was among the most common themes during the interviews. Among other things, it was used to evaluate societies, times, people and even lives. However, while education was valued on its own and was seen to belong among things that were lost during the Khmer Rouge regime as such, it was often used to refer to something else - the loss of opportunities the students could have had, the loss of development and economic growth.

Keywords - Education, Evaluation, Khmer Rouge Regime.

I. INTRODUCTION

Democratic Kampuchea, famously known for its genocide, was established in 1975 and met its end in 1979. Overthrown by Vietnamese army, Khmer Rouge retreated to mountain areas along Thai boarder and continued military actions that caused further losses [1]. Some parts of Cambodia were controlled by the Khmer Rouge until the end of the civil war in 1997. With the collapse of Khmer Rouge regime and especially with the establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (herein after ECCC) and the court processes that followed drew private memories of the regime out into public, broadcasting some of them them to the whole nation and encouraging other survivors to share their stories more openly. After 10 years of virtual absence the history of Khmer Rouge also started to return to the public school curriculum in 2007 [2].

While there has been substantial interest in Khmer Rouge in the international academia, not many researchers wrote about narrative construction among 2nd and 3rd generation genocide survivors. Two of the few articles that analyzed how the 2nd generation talks about Khmer Rouge regime were written by Marianne Melander et.al. [3]and Burcu Münyas [4]. The purpose of the article by M. Melander et.al. was to discuss how the traumatic memory of the Khmer Rouge period was transmitted from the 1st to the 2nd generation survivors. Burcu Münyas wrote on transmission of memory in families of victims and perpetrators. Most of the other research done on the 2nd and 3rd generations focus on the transmission of trauma. Narrative construction of 2nd and 3rd generations of survivors certainly needs more attention.

In this paper I would like to discuss how grade 11 and grade 12 students talk about Khmer Rouge period with focus on the theme of education. The article is based on analysis of 25 semi-structured interviews with grade 11 and grade 12 students from 3 different public schools. 20 of the interviews were conducted with students from 2 separate schools in Kandal province, each school 10 students. The other 5 students went to a school in Prey Veng province. All of the students interviewed were 18 years old or above. Most of the informants were contacted and agreed to participate in the research through local teachers. The interviews were conducted as part of a broader doctoral research about social memory and learning processes of Khmer Rouge history. It's important to mention that most of the students listed first generation survivors (family member, relatives, neighbors who lived through and remember the Khmer Rouge period), school (history teachers, school history textbooks, teachers of other subjects) and internet (mostly youtube and facebook) as their biggest sources of information about Khmer Rouge regime.

There were a few recurring themes in the interviews. Lack of food, hard labor, separation from family members, forced migration, death, development (or lack of it), communal living/eating/working (which focus on it being forced in some interviews) were among the most common ones. Interestingly, many of the students also spoke about education (or lack of it). Education was mentioned and discussed in various contexts. Some students spoke of lack of education opportunities during Khmer Rouge regime, others about the effects the Khmer Rouge period had on the education quality in Cambodia, about the killings of educated people and survival of the uneducated. It seems that education has a part in the way informants think about the regime and is used as an evaluation criteria of both societies and people. In this paper I would like to discuss how students employ education as an evaluation criteria when talking about Khmer rouge regime and what kind of broader understandings that indicates.

II. EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

Education is discussed and mentioned in various ways. In many of the interviews education and being

educated is contrasted with being uneducated or lack of education opportunities. One of the common emergences of such contrasting came when students were asked about the most important periods in Cambodia's history. Democratic Kampuchea was mentioned the most, but Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime and the colonial period were also common. Some of the students mentioned education among the criteria of choosing these periods. One of the students said that one of the positive things about the colonial period was the obligatory school attendance - parents were punished for not sending their children to schools. When discussing Khmer Rouge regime later in the interview the student said that when talking about Khmer Rouge regime, her grandmother would tell her that there were no education opportunities, unlike today. Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime is not only associated with economical growth, but with different types of development, also in the field of education. One of the informants claimed that during Sangkum Reastr Niyum Cambodia was a fast developing country, well known abroad, with a lot of educated people and good industry. According to him, unlike in many other countries nearby, people in Cambodia could study English. However, under Khmer Rouge the educated people were killed, most of the survivors were uneducated and that hindered the later development of the country:

"During the Sangkum Reastr Niyum era people were living in peace and development, but during Democratic Kampuchea, we lost a lot of educated and skilled people. They were brought to be killed by the [Khmer Rouge] leaders. And only uneducated people existed [in the country]. Many people were killed by the leaders. So, it is really important [to be interested in these two historical periods]. We can see the differences between the Sangkum Reastr Niyum and Democratic Kampuchea era."

"For me, if there was no [Khmer Rouge] regime, it would mean that the Sangkum Reastr Niyum would [still] exist. So, [the continuation of Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime] would mean that there would be a lot of many typesof educated people among Khmer people. [We would also] have leadership, [and] educated people who could govern the country [well]. So, if that [Khmer Rouge] era didn't exist, our country would be a fast developing country like other countries. Because we would have [good] leaders, and young people like me would be highly educated . The country would move [forward] very fast, and the same for the economic development, if there existed many educated people in the country. Other countries would recognize our development." (originally in Khmer; male, 18, Kandal province)

Another student also listed Democratic Kampuchea and Sangkum Reastr Niyum among the most important historical periods (she listed 4 periods in total: 1) Khmer Empire because of its great size and power; 2) Democratic Kampuchea for pain and losses people and the country endured; 3) Sangkum Reastr Niyum for fast development; 4) Longvek for it's weakness and loss of culture). According to her: "And the second is Khmer Rouge because this is the most… the most painful. And we lost our… our people, like, one million only in three years. In four years. And it is make… it's… it's make the country, like, […] and we lost many of our students and … […] intellectuals. […] Don't have the developing and it will make the country unpowerful and easily for the enemy and another country to get the … the… the… country of Cambodia. And our… and our culture have lost too. Like Khmer New Year or… or… or wedding…. wedding and […] dancing. And our… our […] literature too. We have lost everything. (laughs)." (originally in English, female, 18, Kandal province)

We can see that both of the quoted students chose the "best" (greatest development, greatest size and power) and the "worst" (weakness, losses, pain, lack of development) periods in Cambodia's history as the most important. Among the reasons why Khmer Rouge period is seen as the worst period in Cambodia's history is the mass killings of the educated people. Later in the interview the second student spoke about the loss of the educated as a loss of a valuable resource. A few other students expressed that Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime should be seen as an example to follow, while Khmer Rouge regime - an example to avoid.

While most of the interviewees link economical and other struggles in Cambodia today and its recent history to Democratic Kampuchea, the first student draws a clear connection between education and development. More than that, education seems to be considered the primary source of growth. It was through destruction of education and elimination of educated people that decades of Cambodia's future and informant's 'now' were shaped in negative ways. According to the interviewee, if Khmer Rouge regime never existed, there would not only be more educated people which would mean greater leadership and development, but the informant would have better education opportunities. Similar views were shared by more students.

The examples discussed in this chapter also show that education, it's quality and being educated are used to evaluate societies not only because of their connection with development, but because of their importance on their own. Possibility to study English during Sangkum Reastr Niyum is a source of pride, greater number of educated people in fictional "could-have-been" Cambodia are signs of a better society. The theme of Education both as a resource and as important on its own seems to be associated with a sense of loss. Together with other things such us people, private property, certain traditions and practices, education is spoken of as something that was, that could have been, but was lost during Khmer Rouge regime:

"One more thing, I can say that, Khmer Rouge era was the time in which it was attempted to eliminate the poor and [create] balance between rich and poor. But it was conducted in extreme ways, so almost all of the people were poor and many human resources were lost, and [later on] the country lacked development. All of that affected us a lot. It meant that Cambodia was not developing by moving up, but it fell to the bottom. So [I] can say that it was a dark era, and all sectors [of the country] were very gloomy. Almost all of the things were lost, especially, the human resources which is considered to be the basis of the country were also lost. Many people were challenged by many problems such as food supplies which also effected their health, and [regarding to the] education, many skilled [people] were lost. The people [who survived] only understood rice production. So [I] can say that [Khmer Rouge] era was very gloomy." (originally in Khmer, male, 18, Kandal province)

III. EDUCATION AND PEOPLE

As mentioned in an earlier section, some of the students link their current lived realities, the opportunities they have to the Khmer Rouge regime. One of the interviewees remarks that if Khmer Rouge regime hadn't existed, Cambodia would not only be a more developed and a democratic country, but her family would be in a better economic situation and her father wouldn't have passed away (informant's father died a few years ago). The quality of education in Cambodia would also be better and the informant would be able to study abroad. This informant as well as one of the informants quoted in the previous chapter spoke of the existing education opportunities and the quality of education as one of the main spheres through which their lives were affected by the Khmer Rouge regime. Burcu Münyas presents similar findings. According to them, lack of education among 2nd and 3rd generation survivors is one of the primary sources of their sense of victimhood. Both economical difficulties (as the result of parents' lack of education caused by the Democratic Kampuchea) and lack of education are seen as results of the Khmer Rouge regime [4].

However, the relations to the current education situation and opportunities were not always negative. Some students compared the now to the Democratic Kampuchea or spoke of comparisons their family members and other first generation survivors made. One of the informants mentioned that during Khmer Rouge regime there were no education opportunities at all, that people have a lot of opportunities at the moment. Young people need to study, because people who lived through the Khmer Rouge regime could not. A few other interviewees shared similar opinions. As mentioned above, students also spoke of their family members and other people comparing the current situation to the one during Democratic Kampuchea. Among other things interviewees were encouraged to study because people could not do that during the Khmer Rouge regime. As we can see the first student as well as those who shared her opinion seem to have internalized the first generation's relations to education in the context of the Khmer Rouge period and the now. Marianne Melander et. al. also reports that her 2nd generation informants expressed positive feelings towards the current period because of its differences from Democratic Kampuchea. According to the authors, Khmer Rouge regime was often seen as motivation to work harder. They also mention parents encouraging certain behaviors (not just working hard, but not being picky with food etc.) in their children through accounts on Khmer Rouge regime [3].

Level of education is used not only to evaluate societies, but also people. One of the students asks why Angkar leaders, who were educated, treated the Cambodian people badly ("And my friends also ask [teacher] about this, that - why? Why some people is living was not hard? And… and they told me, they asked teacher that about why the Angkar is really have smart like us. (continues in Khmer) [They] had high education, but why they did like that?" (English, Khmer; female, 18, Kandal province)). Education is seen as being incompatible or even contradictory to violence, cruelty. Interviews with 1st generation survivors showed that some of the violence committed by the Khmer Rouge is excused with them being uneducated. This would imply that while lack of education might not be necessarily associated with capacity for violence, but it is associated with less of moral independence (being more easily swayed by ideology and propaganda, following it more blindly) and lesser ability to tell right from wrong. However, current data makes it hard to speculate how common such beliefs are among 2nd and 3rd generations.

Also, as discussed in the previous chapter, at least some of the students associated the almost complete eradication of the educated people with lack of development and hence the current situation in Cambodia. A few informants said that only uneducated people remained which made it hard to develop the country. In some interviews the killings of the educated people were the only mentions of mass killings. The other mentions of death were mostly in the context of family history. This seems to indicate a few things. First of all, educated people seem to be associated with victimhood relatively more than other groups of people. Ethnic minorities, who also were heavily persecuted, were almost never mentioned, people who had governmental positions or were part of the army were mentioned less often. Second, it seems that educated lives were given the kind of value, that uneducated ones were not seen to have. As per Cecilia Ridgeway, "A characteristic, whether nominal [religion, region of origin, race, gender, ethnicity] or graduated [wealth, education and such], has status value when consensual cultural

beliefs indicate that persons who have one state of the characteristics (e.g., whites or males) are more worthy in the society than those with another state of the characteristic (blacks or females)".[5] As we saw, not only lives, people, but whole societies were evaluated this way. Khmer Rouge regime, as an explanation for the current state of Cambodia, becomes a reason for the placement of Cambodian people, Cambodian society on status value scale, among other things through the characteristic of education. Its is because of the Khmer Rouge regime that education levels in the society, the quality of education are not as high as they could have been, and that Cambodia is not doing as well as other countries. I would argue, that the sense of victimhood students expressed did not only come from association of education with higher opportunities and better individual economic situation, but through its association with status value too.

However, the educated are attributed their extra worth not only because of the perceived value of being educated in on its own, but also because of more pragmatic understandings. As per one of the students quoted in the previous section: "(…)we lost a lot of educated and skilled people. They were brought to be killed by the [Khmer Rouge] leaders. And only uneducated people existed [in the country]." Asdiscussed, mass killings of the educated people and most of the survivors being uneducated is seen as the main reason for the lack of development in the country. Here educated lives are placed above uneducated ones and it is indicated that one of the factors is the difference in ability to participate in and cause development. Hence educated lives are both seen as inherently more valuable than uneducated ones and reduced to a resource that can be used to better the country. Many other students spoke of human losses as loss of human resources too.

IV. CONCLUSION

The themes of education and being educated appeared in most of the interviews and were used in a few ways: when discussing different times and societies, to explain the current state of Cambodia and aspects of informants' lived realities. All of the informants being grade 11 and grade 12 students and having little time until their graduation made the topic of education deeply relevant to their lives. The commonality of this theme in the interviews is undoubtedly related to the concerns and issues the students have. Likely because of that the impact of Khmer Rouge regime on their individual lives is experienced mostly through education. However, while education seems to be valued on its own and is seen to belong among things that were lost during the Khmer Rouge regime as such, more often than not this theme is used to refer to something else - the loss of opportunities the students could have had, the loss of development and economic growth. Education as valuable on its own and as a resource is also used by the students to evaluate societies, people, lives and their own selves. Khmer Rouge regime, often through education, along with serving as an explanation of the current state of the society and self and source of victimhood, is seen as a source of motivation to do better. Development and the absence of development during and after Democratic Kampuchea being one of the most common themes in the interviews as well as the commonness of the linkage between education and growth not only show the importance of development in the ways to think about the Khmer Rouge, but it also seems to indicate that it might not always be the educated people that are seen to be lost, but the growth that they symbolize.

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