

How many Cham killed important genocide evidence

Documentation Center of Cambodia

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Letter to the Editor

I would like to express my thanks to Professor Ben Kiernan, Professor Alex Hinton, and to Mr Bora Touch for bringing the very important issue of Khmer Rouge genocide against Cambodia's religious and ethnic minorities into public discussion with recent discussions over population figures.

It is a matter of crucial importance to have scholarly exchange about whether the Cham were targeted for killing by the Khmer Rouge because of their religious or ethnic identity. My letter here does not address this issue of genocide directly, but rather it concerns the number of Cham people who were executed during the Democratic Kampuchea regime. It is important to have an accurate estimate for this because one of its implications is as a point of evidence for genocidal crimes that were committed against this group.

In my book entitled *Oukoubah: Justice for Cham Muslims under the Democratic Kampuchea Regime*, published in 2002, I found that from 400,000 to 500,000 Cham deaths occurred while the Khmer Rouge held power during 1975-79. This figure has been rejected by scholars such as Ben Kiernan, in *Critical Asian Studies*, 2003, whose findings show a much lower total. Professor Kiernan found that only over 87,000 Cham died under the Khmer Rouge. He claims that the estimates I put forward are unbecoming of the institute for which I work due to its alleged "sloppiness."

Dr Michael Vickery's estimate, in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 1990, is 11,000 and Mr Touch judges that Professor Kiernan's is accurate, and adds to it a source from government tallies in 1962. The variation in these estimates comes from using data from different sources to calculate the total Cham population before the Khmer Rouge regime. My own estimate is supported by extensive field research I conducted with the Cham, while Kiernan's and Vickery's are based on French calculations from 1874 and 1936. The figure given by Touch is based on figures from the Cambodian government in 1962.

After this question arose again recently, I carried out some detailed research. I interviewed a number of Cham in almost all localities where Cham resided from early times. Those I interviewed were elderly people who lived during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum era, from 1955-1970. Most were former village chiefs or subdistrict officials during that time. When I asked them if they knew of or witnessed any population surveys of the Cham in that era, no one knew of any such activity. Some answered that reports of the total population in their villages and subdistricts were sent up to the district and provincial level. Those reports did not detail the numbers of various ethnic minorities in their areas, which included the Cham, Chinese, and Vietnamese. The numbers did not differentiate among ethnic groups at all. Furthermore, during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum era, Prince Sihanouk renamed the Cham as "Khmer Islam," an action which was criticized at the time by some Cham who claimed that the Prince intended to erase the Cham identity.

As to the matter of the colonial census of the Cham population, when I asked Cham elders about French population surveys, no one knew of any. Mr Sen Mat, aged 92, worked with the French in the Memot rubber plantation in Kampong Cham province. He told me that he once saw the French record the names of over 300 plantation workers, most of whom were Cham. The French, however, listed these workers simply as "Cambodian rubber sap collectors." This raises serious questions about the accuracy of figures from French colonial sources, especially as they relate to the recording of Cham population figures.

According to Kiernan's calculations, he reasons that there were 250,000 Cham in 1975. Vickery says that there were 191,000. The assumption upon which these numbers are based, however, is that the current Cham population in Cambodia is now greater than it was formerly before the era of the Khmer Rouge. Field evidence, however, points to the exact opposite conclusion.

In my recent field research, I questioned Cham villagers in each village to determine whether the number

of Cham residents today was less or more than it had been in 1975. The answer I most often received was that the number was much less today than it had been in the past. Some said the number was about the same. In only a small number of villages did the people say there were more Cham today than there had been in earlier times. I collected these responses from Cham villages in Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Kampot, Kampong Thom, and Kratie provinces. Although it is true that some Cham have left their villages of birth and established new settlements, it is also the case that many Cham villages disappeared after the Khmer Rouge killed their entire populations, or almost their entire populations.

According to the current official figures given by the chairman of the Highest Council for Islamic Religious Affairs in Cambodia, Okhna Sos Kamry, there are now 510,000 Cham living in Cambodia. This figure is based on the most current reports from every Cham mosque around the country and there is no reason to doubt its accuracy. Since the Cham population in most regions is lower than it was before the Khmer Rouge, especially in the area that has traditionally been the center of Cham population, Kampong Cham, we can surmise that there were more than 500,000 Cham Muslims in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge took power. My figure of 700,000 Chams living in Cambodia prior to 1975 would then seem to be quite plausible in light of this information.

Of course, this is a very difficult area of research since almost all leaders of Cham communities were lost in this period. All would certainly agree that more data based on actual field research, in addition to the old colonial accounts still in use by scholars, are sorely needed. Having conducted such intensive field research and interviews over the past few years, however, I am pleased to say that there are now new historical data available that are based on actual witness accounts coming to light. A forthcoming and lengthy new book, *The Cham Rebellion*, will present firsthand information about Cham Muslim experience in the period of Democratic Kampuchea, including the killings that took place in Kampong Cham province in the years 1973-1979.

On a personal note, I would like to say that I hope that this work may offer to all of us a deeper understanding of the suffering of Cham Muslims during this tragic era of overwhelming human loss. Readers may then draw their own conclusions based on the facts about whether the killing of Cham is defined as a genocide.

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