

The Stare

For a decade, I sought to explain the forces that drove the Cambodian genocide. Then I found the one man who knew the answer

By Alex Hinton

Grandfather Khan continued to live unpunished among the villagers he had terrorized during the Democratic Kampuchea of 1975 to 1979, the years of the Khmer Rouge's genocidal rule. In a time when nearly one-quarter of Cambodia's people perished from disease, starvation, overwork, and execution, Khan was said to have killed hundreds of people in the prison camp he commanded and in the area surrounding it. Survivors reported that some of his victims were strung up by their feet and eviscerated, internal organs left to dangle before their faces as they died. He also allegedly consumed the liver and bile of his victims in the belief that doing so would allow him to absorb their vitality.

I have been trying to understand such horrors since the early 1990s, when I first started researching the Cambodian genocide as a graduate student. I wanted to know why genocide occurs. What motivates a perpetrator to kill? How does a person bring himself to not just murder another human being but to do so in the cruelest of ways? In the summer of 2000, as you'll read in this excerpt of an [essay](#) I wrote, I enlisted a Cambodian woman named Ming to find Khan and ask him, Why did you do it?

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Ming arrived early the next morning. She was a reporter who had a friend who knew where Grandfather Khan lived. She wore Western clothes: a blue button-down shirt that fell loosely over khaki pants. Her hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail, accentuating her high forehead and round face. In her early 30s, she was short and stout and had intense eyes. When I climbed into the passenger seat of her Toyota, I noticed a pair of small bells hanging from the rearview mirror.

It was monsoon season, but we set off under a clear sky broken only by a few clouds. Ming drove slowly, threading her way through the jumble of trucks, cars, mopeds, bikes, pedicabs, and pedestrians that filled the streets of Phnom Penh. As we neared the city's outskirts, Ming turned onto the highway that would take us toward the southern provinces, where Khan lived. The traffic abated, and the urban edifices were replaced by rice fields. Each time she braked hard, the bells chimed lightly.

As the driving became less demanding, I began to ask Ming about Khan. "Where exactly does Khan live?" I inquired. "How do we find him?"

"In a village by the mountains. He has many relatives there."

I began to get nervous. Khan lived in a remote village in which we had no local contacts. Cambodia can be dangerous, particularly when one wanders into remote places to inquire about a past that many would rather forget. Guns are everywhere, kidnappings frequent, violence common. I considered turning back.

Then Ming said, "I'll tell you my story, OK?"

Ming was eight years old when the Khmer Rouge took control of Phnom Penh. Her family was well-to-do, possessing just the sort of "impure" urban background that the Khmer Rouge wanted to purge from its new revolutionary society. Ming's family paid for this immediately. Her father, an engineer in a government ministry, was loaded into a military jeep and taken away. Ming's voice shook as she told me, "I don't know what they did to him. He had a big stomach, so the Khmer Rouge thought he was a big shot."

Like everyone else in Phnom Penh, Ming's family was ordered to leave while "Angkar cleans the city." Angkar means "the organization." Sometimes the term referred to the higher authorities; in other situations, it signified an almost divine entity to whom unquestioning loyalty and obedience were due. Angkar had power over life and death. Those who had suspect backgrounds or who "betrayed" the new regime were taken away to "see Angkar." Most

never returned.

Ming's mother told her children to gather enough clothing and food to last a few days. Then they joined the tens of thousands of people who clogged the roads out of Phnom Penh, moving inches at a time in temperatures approaching 100 degrees. Corpses littered the streets: dead government soldiers, civilians who had died from exposure and thirst, and victims of Khmer Rouge executions. The people of Phnom Penh soon realized that the Khmer Rouge had no intention of letting them return to the capital. Ming's family headed south, toward her father's birthplace in Takeo Province, toward Khan.

Her family never made it to her father's birthplace. Instead, the Khmer Rouge ordered them to live in a village near the subdistrict office where Khan was the head of the local militia. Ming's family quickly came under suspicion because of their "impure" urban background and because her mother, Sopha, was unable to perform basic manual tasks.

Soon afterward, an official from the subdistrict office came to research the family's background. The Khmer Rouge investigated everyone's life history but was especially meticulous about investigating those with "impure" backgrounds. Sopha had revealed too much to them. Ming explained, "My mother is very honest. So she told them all sorts of things about our background: that we were educated and even knew French. We became very scared."

One day, a peasant farmer who disliked Ming's mother accused her of "economic sabotage," in this case, disturbing some fishing nets. Around noon, several of Khan's men arrested Sopha. "I cried and cried and cried because I knew that people who were taken away like that were killed. I cried so hard I was yelling; everyone in the village knew. I was sure that we were going to lose our mother. Then we would completely be without parents." As Ming recounted this traumatic experience, she began to break down. Tears ran down her cheeks. She whispered a few words at a time. "Years later, my mother told us that Khan's men had tormented her. They had led her away into the jungle and showed her the ditch into which her dead body was to be dumped. They pointed to the tools that they were going to kill her with and asked her to say the name of each one." Ming paused. "But they let her go. They let her go. She returned home close to midnight. It was a miracle."

Ming had one more story to recount. At the age of 10, she was allowed to join her sister's mobile work brigade. One morning, the group was sent to harvest rice near an old pagoda across the road from Khan's prison. "I heard the nearby screams of a person crying out, 'Oooooiii! Oooooiii!' So I asked one of my friends to come with me to see what was going on. I wanted to find out. Maybe that's why I'm a newspaper reporter now."

Ming and her friend crept up the steps of the pagoda. Most of the windows were blocked by wooden shutters. One, however, was slightly open. What they saw through it was terrifying. Several of Khan's men stood near a blindfolded prisoner strung up by the feet so that his head was a foot above the ground. "One of the Khmer Rouge took a knife and sliced open the prisoner's stomach. As his blood sprayed out, he screamed. There was blood everywhere. The man was still alive. His body was shaking. His brain was still working. Then the killer reached in and took something out of his body. It was so horrible. I was trembling all over, terrified. At that point, a couple of guards saw us, and we ran away. They couldn't find us because we mixed in with the other children. Sometimes I still dream about this horrible thing that happened in front of my eyes."

"Why did they reach into the prisoner's stomach?" I asked.

"Because they wanted to take out his liver or gallbladder. During that time, the Khmer Rouge ate human liver because they thought that it would make them strong. Or they used the gallbladder for medicine." In Cambodia, the liver is thought of as the seat of courage. It is also said that eating it makes the eyes turn red. Ming added, "Everyone said that Khan ate human liver because his eyes were always red, always very red."

As Ming finished this gruesome tale, a mountain rose in the distance and rice fields lined each side of the road. My initial nervousness returned. What if Khan kidnapped us? When I had arrived to do my doctoral fieldwork in 1994, three Western backpackers had just been kidnapped and taken to a Khmer Rouge stronghold in the mountains. Later, they were brutally killed.

"Do you think it's safe?" I asked Ming. "Are you scared?"

She paused and then said with a nervous smile, “Yes, a little scared.” Then she pointed out the window. “There it is. That’s the place.”

Looking to the left, I saw a large blue and gold pagoda. Though framed by lush green trees, it was dilapidated and filled with broken stone. Two trees towered over the main hall of worship, which was surrounded by naga (serpent) balustrades. Several of the naga heads were missing. All over Cambodia, religious buildings like this one were turned into interrogation and execution centers. This was one of the ways the Khmer Rouge showed their hatred of religion, which they viewed as both a parasite and an opiate of the masses.

Ming asked, “Do you want to go in?”

“Yes,” I replied quickly, both out of curiosity and my desire to buy time to figure out a safe way to meet Khan.

“This way.” Ming set off quickly toward the pagoda’s northern wall. I followed her to a tall window with wooden shutters. “Here’s where I saw them kill the man. I was little, so I had to stand on my toes to look through an opening in the window. It was horrible.” Ming pointed to a nearby rice field and said, “I heard that over 30 mass graves were discovered over there.”

I sat down on a hard wooden bench in front of the subdistrict office, a modest building with latticed windows located across the main road from the pagoda. It had become a hot, humid morning. Luong, the head of the subdistrict office, had sent a moped taxi to find Khan. I had no idea if he would appear. He might not be home or, if he was, might not come.

Over the years, I have interviewed many perpetrators. Few admit committing the atrocities others accuse them of. Often, however, they are willing to talk in detail if asked why other perpetrators performed genocidal deeds. This indirect method of questioning allows them to save face and uncovers a great deal about the mind of killers. Some perpetrators downplay their involvement. Two days earlier, I had interviewed a notorious prison guard said to have executed hundreds of people. He denied this allegation but admitted he had killed “one or two.” Clearly, this vague answer suggested he had killed many more.

Reflecting on the seriousness of Khan’s crimes, I began to doubt he would come. Then gravel sputtered in the dirt as a moped pulled up to the office. “He’s here,” Luong said in a low voice. Ming shifted uneasily on the bench. We all turned to look.

The first thing I noticed were Khan’s eyes, sunk into the crevice between high cheekbones and a low brow. He stared at us, which is considered rude and aggressive in Cambodia. His chin stuck out defiantly, and the skin between his eyebrows was deeply creased, giving him a fearsome look. He had likely put on his best clothing to meet us: a white shirt with only three buttons fastened at the top, a pair of black pants that didn’t zip up, and a red-and-white checkered scarf that gave his eyes a red tint.

Khan was a poor peasant farmer, precisely the type of person the Khmer Rouge appointed to positions of power because of his or her “pure” class background. He looked to be in his 60s and was unlike any other perpetrator I had ever met. When I stood to greet him, he responded without any of the outward friendliness I usually encountered when meeting Cambodians, even perpetrators.

Luong offered us the use of a small “office” that contained dirty laundry, gasoline drums, dining utensils, and a desk. We sat on blue plastic chairs, Khan opposite Ming and me, perhaps three or four feet away. The only light came from an open door and the cracks between the wooden planks of the wall. Silhouetted against the light, Khan looked even more menacing.

Alex Hinton, an associate professor of anthropology at Rutgers–Newark, is the editor or author of four books, including his latest, Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide (University of California Press, 2005). The excerpt of “The Perpetrator, the Victim, and the Witness” by Alex Hinton is reprinted by permission of MANOA: A Pacific Journal of International Writing.

In the Heat of the Night

Retellings of Khmer Rouge atrocities led Alex Hinton to become an authority on genocide.

In 1992, when Alex Hinton first traveled to Cambodia as a 28-year-old graduate student, the country was awash in guns, an AIDS crisis was emerging, and red signs emblazoned with skulls and crossbones were everywhere, warning, “Danger!! Mines!!” The heat was relentless and to top it off, an antimalarial medication was producing bizarre mood swings in Hinton, even as he struggled to learn the Khmer language and cope with the Wild, Wild East aura of life in Cambodia. “It was a strange time,” he recalls.

Initially planning to research interpersonal relationships among Cambodians, Hinton found himself in the darkness of open-air huts and stone houses, listening to stories about the terror of the Khmer Rouge era. “The power would go out,” he says, “and suddenly one person would start talking about their story of life under the Khmer Rouge and the horrible things that happened.” Amid the susurrus of frogs and insects, cigarettes would be lit, the matches flaring in darkness. “You’d have the glow of the embers as these words came out,” he says. “Sometimes, you couldn’t see the person, and then their face would be illuminated for a second, and it would fade away with these horrible, horrible stories about the things that happened. Then, almost always, people would ask at the end, ‘How could this happen? How could Cambodians do this to each other?’

“After I heard these stories,” he recalls, “I knew what I was going to study.”

Hinton’s book, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (University of California Press, 2005), represents the culmination of years of research, challenging our often simplistic notions about the motivations of genocidal perpetrators. His book tackles the cultural underpinnings of genocide, as well as the psychology of those who kill. That his research is infused with the psychological dimensions of genocide is not surprising. His father is a psychiatrist, as are both of his brothers. Killers, he concludes, are not simply automatons; they are psychologically invested in what they do. “Though we might despise them, genocidal perpetrators are meaning-making beings with complex motivations that cannot simply be explained away in terms of ideological fanaticism or obedience to authority,” he writes.

Hinton’s work uncovers the potential, in all of us, and in every society, to commit atrocious acts. “One of the most startling aspects of meeting perpetrators of genocide is how ordinary they often are,” he writes in an opinion piece for the *Christian Science Monitor*. Hinton likens the study of genocide to “looking in this really dark mirror,” and says, “If you don’t look in that mirror and think about yourself in that manner, then the potential for genocide is greater.”—Allan Hoffman

Witness to Genocide

Rutgers–Newark is now home to crucial documents from the Khmer Rouge regime

When the United Nations war-crime tribunals begin in Cambodia, likely in late 2006, U.S.-based journalists, scholars, human-rights lawyers, and genocide victims will turn to Rutgers–Newark for records documenting the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. An agreement between Rutgers and the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-CAM), an independent nonprofit based in Cambodia, brings invaluable materials from the research institute—including photographs, telegrams, confessions, and memos from Khmer Rouge leaders—to Rutgers–Newark; preparations are currently under way to make the documents available at the Dana Library. Viewed as being at the forefront of efforts to document the Khmer Rouge era, DC-CAM (www.dccam.org) is now making its U.S. home at Rutgers, largely due to the efforts of associate anthropology professor Alex Hinton—the driving force in establishing the repository here.—Allan Hoffman

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