

Of Armadillos, Auto-Genocide and AIDS

By Cheong Pak Yean



This placid scene belies the untold horrors of the "killing fields".

More sad than quaint, the words scrawled on the white-washed walls of an elementary school "A is for Armadillo" reminded us that we were in a land beyond time, Cambodia, a land still recovering from "Year zero". "Year zero" is 1975 when the Communist Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot 'liberated' Cambodia from the CIA-backed Lon Nol regime. We were on a roller-coaster ride en-route to the "killing fields", the Choeng Ek Genocide Centre in Phnom Penh.

We were lucky to be riding in that rickety van, the Cambodian doctor accompanying us had said. Thousands were forced marched from various detention centres to Choeng Ek. He survived the genocide of intellectuals,



The skulls each cried out the fate of their owners.



The "Chankiri Tree", where many children met violent deaths.

doctors and anyone who could possibly pose a challenge to Khmer rule. It could be that he had good eyesight and could pretend to be a farmer after fleeing to his ancestor village. He said that of the 600 or so doctors in Cambodia then, only 54 were left four years later. A time warp, I was then attending the 10th MASEAN Conference, November 2001 as its Secretary-General and had stumbled upon the events that happened a quarter of a century ago.

The skulls neatly arranged in multiple tiers in the stupa-like memorial at the mass graves bore testimony to the barbarity of those men; mostly "little men" as the Khmer Rouge used kid-soldiers, 10 to 15 years old. A pathology trainee's nightmare, the skulls each cried out the fate of their owners – fractures in the temporal bones inflicted by axes and smashed up maxillas from blows of batons. Bullets were not to be wasted. Remnants of ropes on the sturdy branches of the "Chankiri Tree" nearby and its scarred bark were further forensic evidence – the latter caused by the impact of young children's heads being smashed against the tree.

The large pits that pock-marked the landscape after some of the mass graves were dug up, are now overgrown with grasses and wild flowers. The beautiful but irreverent rustic scene complete with butterflies fluttering around was something out of a postcard. There were even buffaloes grazing in the paddy fields on the horizon. Only remnants of human bones and teeth,

scattered like twigs and pebbles along the paths around the graves, reminded us of this crime against humanity.

We retraced the victims' trek to one of the detention centres where they were incarcerated before being sent to Choeng Ek. Like "911", "S21" is also a number that has gone into infamy. Security office unit 21 used the buildings where the Tuol Sleng genocide museum now is, to detain and interrogate thousands including the Khmer Rouge's own cadres accused of dissension. The Khmer Rouge took over a school in 1975 and converted the classrooms into prisons – narrow cells of only 0.8 X 2 metres, located on the first two floors and the large communal rooms on the top storey.

Those imprisoned in the communal rooms were not chained. Something crueler was devised. Ankles were shackled to rings embedded in the floor by tight fitting horseshoe shape braces ending in eyes at both ends. Long straight rods like those used in construction sites were then threaded through the eyes of these ankle braces. Prisoners in the big rooms were secured with feet facing each other alternately – a single 6-metre straight iron rod could hence secure 30 persons with a single lock at one end. Bathing was irregular with mass hosing by water every few days. Urination and defecation were into metal pots while shackled. Diseases were rampant.

Grotesque torture scenes were captured in monochrome photos now displayed on the walls of the museum. The tormentors did their jobs with draconian thoroughness and documented not just the victims but the techniques in prints. These faded sepia prints unleashed primordial fears from the attics of my mind. The beastly men were "re-enacting" scenes from the hell chambers of the Haw Par Villa, a theme park which was popular in Singapore in the fifties. Back then, little children like me visiting it were reminded that purgatory and torture after death were just retribution for evil deeds. But what had the victims of Choeng Ek done to

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be tortured as such on earth? Hell hath no fury like living beings gone berserk!

More usual punishment was by whipping and electric cattle prods if house rules were flouted. The draconian rules stated in part: "Do not be a fool for you are a chap who dares to thwart the revolution. Do nothing. Sit still and wait for my orders. If there is no order, keep quiet. While getting lashes or electrification, you must not cry at all." 10,499 people were processed between 1975-79 in the one detention centre we visited. The lucky ones met swift death on the killing fields. In five years, the Khmer Rouge caused the death of at least 1.7 million Cambodians through starvation, diseases and torture.

Why did this happen? Why did the civilised world allow this to happen? Unlike what happened in pogroms, Auschwitz or more recently in Bosnia, the killing was directed not against another ethnic or religious group, but against fellow Cambodians. A new word "auto-genocide" has to be coined to describe that phenomenon. Was it a pathetic case of paranoia and insecurity – of having seized absolute power but being incapable of governing? Or was it a society who had lost its bearings, war-weary at being caught in the unending big power rivalry of Indo-China – Burmese, Thai, French, then American, Chinese and Vietnamese. When elephants dance, the grass is always trampled upon.

A land traumatised, a people still exploited – not just by perverted art collectors goading for decapitated body parts of sculptures from Angkor Wat, but also by lecherous tourists and others on sex tours exploiting young bodies from the slums of Phnom Penh. The Prime Minister, Hun Sen in his opening speech at the 10th MASEAN Conference, announced that Cambodia has made significant success in curbing the AIDS epidemic in his country. The prevalence of HIV infection has declined from 3.9% in 1997 to 2.8% in 2001, based on last year's sentinel surveillance of the general population aged 15 to 49 years old. This is a heartening 30% decrease in official figures but even so, 1 in 36 adults infected is still an alarming figure. A study also

revealed infection rates of 31.9% in brothel-based sex workers, 22% in bar girls, 18.8% in beer girls and 14.8% in karaoke girls. Cambodian STD experts told Dr Thirumoorthy that up to 30% of antenatal mothers checked in a major hospital are also infected. The virus has bored down to the core of a society that is "Year zero" plus 26.

The experts also tell us that the thriving sex industry burgeoned to sequentially serve the various occupation forces - Russian, Vietnamese and then various United Nation peacekeepers. Now locals and sex tourists sustain it. Many of the workers are from Vietnam. A full-colour leaflet distributed to visitors to Svay Pak "11 km Street of Flower" proudly announced that the 1996 AIDSCAP study revealed that the prevalence of AIDS in the brothels there is only 18.6% and exhorts clients to "HAVE A NICE TIME!" in both English and Japanese.

The glossy leaflet has interesting 'tips for clients'. This was produced with the help of foreign non-government organisations (NGOs) working to contain the HIV virus by the pragmatic promotion of condom use. Besides advice on hygiene and abusive behaviour, it instructs clients that "You always use a condom. For anal contact, use an extra sturdy condom. Always use lots of lube too. Sex workers are expert in safe sex satisfaction and afterwards, it will be the sex and not the condom you remember! Ask to try the female condom! A visit may not be perfect. You may be unfamiliar with each other. Don't expect too much. Remember, you can always shop around next time." A delicate balance is maintained between promoting safe sex and purveying to base pleasure with shrewd marketing flair.

Why did I choose to write about the low life and sewers? In conversation with some doctors before the trip, they sang the beauty of our Raffles Hotel's majestic outpost in Seam Reap and the 'must-see' wonder of the ancient world. For one, I cannot write about the temples. I did not make the extra effort to see Seam Reap this trip. I was holed up in the conference hotel for most of the four days managing the meeting before rushing back to my singleton practice. Maybe it was enough to know why there are so many social and church groups in Singapore



Scenes reminiscent of those from the hell chambers of the Haw Par Villa.



A leaflet on safe sex.

now organising missions to Cambodia. Singaporeans do not have to venture far to do humanitarian work.

Armadillos, better known as anteaters, are standard fare in restaurants in Phnom Penh. Dr Wong Chiang Yin gamely ordered not only anteaters, but also snakes, fruit bats, monitor lizards and other exotic game for dinner and enjoyed seeing some of us squirm. Anteaters may soon be extinct in Cambodia and the kids would probably better relate to apples. How about auto-genocide? The boy soldiers who ran the Tuol Sleng detention centre in the 1970's are now in their 40's. There was never a formal trial for this lesser known Khmer holocaust. Even Pol Pot died of natural cause earlier this year without being called to account. The events are still too painful and divisive for Cambodians to confront. An article in Times magazine reported that the deteriorating skull exhibits would be soon removed for reasons of hygiene*. Some say it is an attempt to sanitise history, to forget and to move on. The HIV virus would be more difficult to root out. Sad but true, I left Cambodia learning that "A" also stands for armadillos soon to be extinct, auto-genocide soon be sanitised and AIDS which would continue its toll. ■

Editor's Note

See pg. 11 for related poems.

*Afternote:

The above article was written in December 2001. On 7 January 2002, the 23rd anniversary of the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, the Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen announced that "the mountains of human skulls, symbolising the barbarity of the 1975-1979 "killing fields", would be kept as evidence of atrocities, as sites of religious worship to the dead" and would remain on display. The week before, he also announced that the bars and karaoke lounges would be closed literally at gun-point. The Cambodian story continues.

Credits for Photographs:

We would like to thank Dr Wong Chiang Yin for "Killing fields" and "Chankiri Tree", and Regina Chin for "Skulls".