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DEATH ON DISPLAY: BODIES AND BONES IN CAMBODIA AND RWANDA

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Drawing on ethnographic data gathered in Cambodia and Rwanda, this thesis examines how local people in both countries engage with memorial sites created to commemorate mass atrocities. It focuses on two sites in each country, all of which prominently display human remains and other artifacts of atrocity. Building on Benedict Anderson's conception of nations as "imagined communities" it seeks to probe how such sites, as curated by post-genocidal regimes, affect ideas of national belonging and whether they effectively create a narrative of "reassuring fratricide" upon which countries build a shared understanding of the nation's past and present composition. According to my findings, although evidence of atrocity has been instrumentalized through memorialization in order to bolster the credibility of post-genocide regimes as rightful custodians of the nation, memorial sites pose a complex intervention in the eyes of the visiting public. Rather than fostering reconciliation, such memorial efforts can actually exacerbate underlying tensions related to national belonging and divergent historical experiences. Moreover, the purported need to preserve evidence of atrocity both challenges and, in some cases, modifies the local spiritual beliefs and customs of citizen visitors, reformulating the ways in which victims of state terror are either reintegrated into or rejected from the national body.

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INTRODUCTION

During the 15-day *Pchum Ben* holiday each fall, Cambodians make food offerings to the spirits of the dead in order to help them accumulate merit and peacefully transition through the cycle of life and death, including reincarnation. As the spirits, especially those who died “unnatural deaths,” wander the earth, their living relatives travel throughout the country, bringing sticky rice cakes, curries and other popular dishes to monks, who serve as intermediaries between living and dead. Although these offerings generally take place at pagodas, some Cambodians have begun to include sites of tremendous symbolic suffering, such as the Choeung Ek “killing fields” outside of Phnom Penh, as part of their *Pchum Ben* journey. As I observed in October 2012, people traveled to Choeung Ek during the 15-day period to light incense and make offerings before the tower of skulls that has become a well-known emblem of the disastrous legacy of the Khmer Rouge period; they came in the greatest numbers on the day set aside for an official ceremony. Some of those I met, such as Sokha,¹ know from Khmer Rouge records that their relatives were killed at the site. Others believed they had discovered the final resting places of their loved ones through spiritual means. As Chenda, 53, told me,

I have been looking for my aunt for years. This year she came to me in a dream and told me she was here (at Choeung Ek). I came here for the first time two days ago and my skin got tight and I could smell death.² Then I saw my aunt walking away from me; her hair was short and she was wearing black. I made an offering of bread and a bun and burned incense. This morning I came back at 4am with my

¹ Informants have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their identities and privacy.

² Cambodians I interviewed described “tight skin” and “smell of death” as indicators that the spirits of one’s relatives are nearby.

nephew and threw rice and chanted the *dharma*³; some of the spirits are shy so you have to throw rice in the dark. Now I have come back with more packages of food.

While Chenda performed her more personal rituals near the tower filled with skulls, an official ceremony was taking place in another corner of the killing fields site. Villagers from the area brought offerings to the various monks assembled and local officials made speeches in honor of the estimated 1.7-million Cambodians who had died during the period of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979). The most important official in attendance, a district governor with the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), told those assembled:

Today we do dedication and offerings on behalf of the CPP from all levels and the CPP team leader from Phnom Penh to work together to honor those who sacrificed their lives. Some died individually, some as families. Some relatives are far away and may not know where their relatives died. So all of us today will dedicate on behalf of the CPP to all those who died during the Khmer Rouge. ... I will remind you that almost every family lost people during the Khmer Rouge. Even those who we don't know where they were brought, we want to dedicate to them. People want to collect the bones but there was killing all over. There are many holes and we don't know which holes have which people's bones.

Ending his speech, he reminded the audience to "give gratitude to the three leaders of the CPP" for helping drive the Khmer Rouge from power and to "remind young people to register to vote" in the upcoming elections. While the CPP official seized upon the opportunity to speak at the symbolically resonant Choeung Ek in order to remind those in attendance that they owe an obligation (in the form of votes) to the regime that ostensibly saved them from the Khmer Rouge, various individuals visiting the site had come for personal or spiritual reasons. This juxtaposition shows the multiplicity of meanings and

³ Although *Pchum Ben* offerings to spirits are generally made through monks, people believe it is also possible to feed some kinds of spirits directly; this usually must be done very early in the morning before the sun rises.

uses that can be derived from human remains; or, as Katherine Verdery notes in her study of the politicization of dead bodies in post-socialist countries, “different people can evoke corpses as symbols, thinking those corpses mean the same thing to all present, whereas in fact they may mean different things to each. ... What gives a dead body its symbolic effectiveness in politics is precisely its ambiguity, its capacity to evoke a variety of understandings.”⁴ While the remains displayed at Choeung Ek are bones, rather than bodies, the role they play in post-atrocity state building and the variegated responses of citizens to these processes are not dissimilar.

In this thesis, I will focus on four high-profile memorial sites at which remains are prominently displayed: the Cheoung Ek “Killing Fields” and Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia, as well as the Kigali Memorial Center and Murambi Genocide Memorial in Rwanda. I will revisit foregoing arguments about the role of memorial sites in state-building practices, and how that role is complicated in efforts to commemorate mass atrocity.⁵ The fact that human remains have played such a crucial role in mapping out both memorialization strategies in Rwanda and Cambodia indicates the importance of corporeality not only in the two countries, but, perhaps, to humanity, as a powerful emblem of mortality and identification as humans. As Verdery notes, “more to the point is their ineluctable self-referentiality as symbols: because all people have bodies, any manipulation of a corpse directly enables one’s identification with it through one’s own

⁴ Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Post-Socialist Change* (New York: Columbia University, 1999), 29.

⁵ Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (New York: Berg, 2007), 20.

body, thereby tapping into one's reservoirs of feeling.”⁶ Both Cambodia and Rwanda have seized on this symbolism in an overt appeal to survivors and future generations, international actors, and those members of various opposing social or political factions they may wish to intimidate. As this thesis further demonstrates, both states are using bodies (or the remains of bodies) to establish historical narratives that bolster their legitimacy as leaders of the nation. Yet, in both contexts, previous conceptions of national and social self-identification, as well as spiritual beliefs, all seemingly disrupt or complicate the homogeneity of the site's role as communicated by the state.

Benedict Anderson has written that the formation of national biographies requires that deaths be remembered and forgotten in particular ways. Yet in cases where memories of tragic death are relatively fresh, the sculpting of a historical narrative of “reassuring fratricide” is particularly fraught. Based upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in both Rwanda and Cambodia, I strive to make several claims related to memorial sites and their role in attempted narrative consolidation: 1.) Given similarities in the ways evidence of atrocity and human remains have been instrumentalized through memorialization, they serve as powerful tools of legitimization for post-genocide regimes, particularly those that wish to portray themselves as liberating forces and rightful custodians of the nation; 2.) Rather than fostering reconciliation, such memorial efforts can actually exacerbate underlying tensions related to national belonging and divergent historical experiences; and 3.) The purported need to preserve evidence of atrocity both challenges and, in some cases, modifies the local spiritual beliefs and customs of citizen visitors, reformulating the ways in which victims of state terror are either reintegrated into or rejected from the

⁶ Verderer, *Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, 33.

social body. Ultimately, memorial sites pose a complex intervention in the eyes of the visiting public: they solicit conformity of memory, yet are beholden to the inevitable variation of individual experience.

The ethnographic data I will rely upon to structure my argument was gathered during three months in Rwanda (from June to late August 2012) and two and a half months in Cambodia (late August to mid-November 2012). It should be noted that my work in Cambodia builds upon two and a half years during which I lived in the country (from 2004-2005 and 2008-2009) working as a journalist and writing frequently about Khmer Rouge-related issues. I focused on two sites in each country – the Kigali Memorial Center and Murambi Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, and the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes and Choeung Ek in Cambodia. My methodology consisted primarily of semi-structured and unstructured interviews with both Rwandans and Cambodians who worked with memorial sites in various capacities, as well as with national visitors to the sites. In addition, when possible, I engaged in participant observation with different individuals who worked at the sites, trying to get a sense of their daily lives both inside and outside of the memorial environment. During my time in Rwanda, I conducted interviews (and sometimes multiple interviews) with 31 informants, including staff members at the National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide (CNLG), the government body that oversees all memorial sites; those who actually worked at memorial sites, from top level administration to maintenance staff; Rwandans who worked for outside organizations that had some interaction with the memorial sites; and Rwandans of both Hutu and Tutsi heritage who visited the sites for various purposes.

In Cambodia, I interviewed 52 people (some multiple times) and also engaged in participant observation with select individuals who worked at the two memorial sites I was researching. My informants included staffers at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, from administrators to former prisoners to cleaners; Cambodians from other organizations who worked with the memorial sites in some capacity; and Cambodian visitors to the sites, most of whom came through “Study Tour” groups organized by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), the UN-backed tribunal set up to try former Khmer Rouge leaders.

In the process of forming “national biographies,” Anderson describes how historical tragedies must be both remembered and forgotten; in other words, remembered in particular ways as part a people’s *shared* national story.⁷ As an example, he explains that Americans are encouraged to view “the hostilities of 1861-65 as a great ‘civil war’ between brothers rather than between – as they briefly were – two sovereign nation-states.”⁸ Judy Ledgerwood invokes Anderson when examining the narratives formed through S-21, which was transformed into the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes after the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979 and drove the Khmer Rouge from power. “Unlike individuals, nations cannot write their biographies as a string of natural ‘begettings.’ Rather than births, the fashioning of narrative is marked by deaths.”⁹ The nation co-opts and shapes the remembering and forgetting of “suicides, martyrdoms,

⁷ Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), 206.

⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 201.

⁹ Judy Ledgerwood, “The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative.” *Museum Anthropology* 21:1 (1997): 82.

assassinations, executions, wars and holocausts to serve the national purpose.”¹⁰ This process is particularly fraught, however, in countries like Cambodia and Rwanda that have experienced massive internal violence that cannot easily be understood and interpreted as serving a greater, nation-building purpose.¹¹ To this day, Cambodians often lament the “senseless” nature of killing under DK and are particularly upset and bewildered by the concept of “Khmer killing Khmer.” For the DK regime, however, there was of course logic to such killing – many of the atrocities committed ostensibly served the purpose of eliminating enemies of the regime, those who might thwart the nation-building process of the Khmer Rouge. Yet once the regime was defeated and discredited, such deaths became incomprehensible in the logic of alternative state crafting practices.

¹⁰ Ledgerwood, “Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum,” 82.

¹¹ Williams, *Memorial Museums*, 20.

CHAPTER ONE: State Building and Formation of National Identities

In order to understand the horrific violence that took place in both Cambodia and Rwanda, as well as the ways in which leaders and citizens of the countries are attempting to reimagine their nations in the wake of atrocity, it is necessary to examine the (largely colonial) process through which formation of national consciousnesses emerged in these areas. Social categories and power dynamics sculpted under colonialism, as well as conceptions of national belonging, would inform the definition of internal enemies during periods of genocidal violence and continue to complicate post-atrocity nation-building efforts.

Like many countries in the developing world, Rwanda and Cambodia were late to experience statehood, and a corresponding sense of nationality. While 17th Century Rwanda and Cambodia were characterized by weak royal lines struggling to centralize power in their surrounding geographic areas, the modern system of nation states was developing in Europe. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 declared “all states equal in their sovereignty” and ended a series of wars that helped extricate the mechanisms of government from religious authority. Throughout the next several hundred years, intra-European relations remained relatively peaceful, enabling the development of increasingly powerful domestic forms of government. As lower and middle classes became more prosperous and educated, they began to demand a greater role in governmental affairs; citizens were no longer content to cede power to absolutist rulers.

Adam Watson writes that “the self-assertion of the middle class in Europe took two forms: the demand for participation in government, and nationalism.”¹ These sentiments fueled the French Revolution, which, he claims “let loose a tidal wave of nationalism” throughout the continent. Technological advancements in transportation and communication enabled people to begin to imagine themselves as a national community. Increasing perceptions of rulers as out of touch and inept prompted citizens, as in France, to assert the primacy of “the people” in state affairs. Populations challenged the notion that a state should consist of a random array of territories held together by a monarch and “the sovereignty of the people implied that the only legitimate state was one based on and expressing the will of a particular kind of collective entity called a nation. Wherever the German tongue is spoken, sang Arndt, there is the German fatherland.”²

The rise of Napoleon temporarily disrupted the peace within Europe, but his conquests were inevitably undone partly by the burgeoning phenomenon of nationalism. Although Napoleon had effectively harnessed French national sentiment and patriotism as a tool of recruitment for his armies, his imperial designs ran up against the growing national sentiments of other communities in Europe. Richard Langhorne writes that “the state, which had pre-existed the revolution as the normal form of organization for European societies, acquired a new object: to represent the well-being and aspirations of a particular ethnic group, or at least to contain or be supported by a population a majority

¹ Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis*. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 174.

² Watson, *Evolution*, 174.

of which came from one nationality.”³ From that time, Langhorne writes, ethnically heterogeneous states began to decline and new groups of people who envisioned themselves as “nations” started calling for their own states.

As the state system developed in sophistication and complexity throughout the continent, European contact with the outside world intensified, leading to the export of Eurocentric models of government. Much of the colonial effort was driven by intra-European competition and the desire for new markets and natural resources. Watson writes that,

this momentous expansion of the European system to cover the whole world was one result of the sudden and kinetic advances in technology, sometimes called the Industrial Revolution, which greatly increased the economic and strategic power of Europeans relative to non-European communities. In Europe, the power of the states grew as the Industrial Revolution spread, and the pressures within the system increased.⁴

Moving outward helped relieve this strain. Europeans encountered various pre-existing forms of social organization in the areas they colonized and attempted to mold them in a manner that best suited their interests. The colonial powers carved up Africa during the 1884 Berlin Conference, paying little attention to the allocation and allegiances of various peoples, tribes and communities. Because many of the newly formed African states maintained these borders after independence, the continent today consists of the most ethnically diverse states in the world.⁵

³ Richard Langhorne, *The Essentials of Global Politics*. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006): 129.

⁴ Watson, *Evolution*, 203.

⁵ Wanjala Nasong'o, “Reengineering Social Institutions for Peace and Development: The Case of Postgenocide Rwanda,” in *Development, Modernism and Modernity in Africa*, ed. Augustine Agwuele (New York: Routledge, 2012), 304.

In other words, the formation of states and national identities in colonized areas was largely externally imposed and served the purported interests of European authorities. This posed a significant challenge to the formation of post-colonial, independent states. By the end of World War I, imperialism began to fall out of fashion internationally, replaced by calls for self-determination. At the same time, European nations began to realize that, even though they did not believe colonized subjects were necessarily capable of self-governance, they no longer had the capacity or political will to maintain their imperial holdings.⁶ While diverse coalitions within emergent states may have mobilized to drive the Europeans from power, they often fell into factional conflict once the immediate foreign threat had retreated. In the case of many African nations, because borders had often been drawn in the service of colonial interests – and not due to some shared characteristics of the enclosed population – they struggled to reconcile nation and state. As R. Brian Ferguson writes, “the core idea ... is that a bounded sovereign country should be associated with a ‘nation,’ an identifiable people, contrastable to other peoples.”⁷

Nationalism and Identity in Rwanda

Although the horrific 1994 genocide that took place in Rwanda – with nearly one million people slaughtered in around 100 days – was largely understood by the outside world as a primordial ethnic struggle between Hutu and Tutsi, the killing was more a manifestation of the tensions that have characterized postcolonial states than it was a

⁶ Watson, *Evolution*, 225.

⁷ R. Brian Ferguson, *The State, Identity and Violence: Political Disintegration in the post-Cold War world*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 14.

continuance of deep-seated ethnic conflict. Although the categories of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa (indigenous forest people) had existed in pre-colonial times as somewhat fluid social indicators that varied from region to region, Rwanda under first the Germans, and then the Belgians, moved from a tripartite to a dualistic society. Considered racially superior by the Europeans, Tutsi were placed above Hutu in the colonial system of indirect rule, a social stratification that led to widespread resentment. The successful independence movement that ousted the Belgians from power in 1962 was tightly linked to a growing sentiment of Hutu nationalism. But the dream of a fully Hutu nation state could never be realized, as the Tutsi, even when forced into exile, continued to view Rwanda as their homeland as well. (Although the Twa still lived in the country, they did not play a very active political role.) Attacks and counterattacks were launched in the ensuing decades until Rwandan President Juvenal Habyrimana's plane was shot down in 1994, serving as a catalyst for genocide. Since that time, the new Rwandan regime (composed predominantly of those who fought for the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front) claims it is trying to forge a new national identity for Rwandans free of mythologized ethnic divisions. Yet the state's intensive focus on the 1994 genocide and the *Tutsiness* of victims seems to contradict this effort, as does the extent to which Rwandans themselves have adopted and internalized the categories solidified under colonialism.

According to the current officially sanctioned narrative, all Rwandans lived in peace before the arrival of Europeans and it was the colonizers who created discord between the various peoples who inhabited the Great Lakes region of Africa. Although there is great disagreement surrounding the history of Rwanda prior to colonization, as well as the emergence of the Tutsi and Hutu identities, there appears to be a good deal of

evidence that these designations were not completely manufactured by the colonizers. Complicating such debates is the lack of an authoritative written record that predates colonialism. Under colonial authority in the early 20th century, several influential scholars attempted to create a written history for the country, but their accounts were limited, over-representing the experiences of the royal court as the history of Rwanda as a whole. One of the most prolific was Abbé Alexis Kagame, whose compilations of oral histories are still often consulted by researchers seeking information about Rwanda before 1900.⁸ Although a great deal of Rwandan history written during the colonial era has been debunked, Jean-Pierre Chrétien notes that the “colonial library” has nonetheless been internalized in much of Africa, making it difficult to disseminate new historical ideas – and giving real world power to potential colonial mythology.⁹

As Mahmood Mamdani writes, the contested histories of the Hutu/Tutsi distinction have become so politicized post-colonization and particularly in the wake of the 1994 genocide that espousing one of the two dominant strands of thought will immediately ally scholars with a political camp.¹⁰ The point of view supported by most Tutsi is that there is no concrete difference between the two groups – they were class distinctions that evolved over time. According to Mamdani, “there is undoubtedly much truth in the refrain that RPF cadres were fond of repeating to every foreign visitor to postgenocide Kigali: ‘We speak the same culture, and live on the same hills; we are the

⁸ Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 4.

⁹ Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History*, (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 9.

¹⁰ Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 41.

same people.’”¹¹ Yet Hutu intellectuals hold that Tutsi and Hutu originate from different populations. In this version of events, Hutu settled the area first, encountering only the indigenous Twa people, and Tutsi later migrated to Rwanda, using their superior military prowess to conquer the Hutu and force them into positions of servitude.

Mamdani argues that the two versions of history could be seen as complementary, rather than alternative, accounts. He writes there is no one answer to the question “Who are the Hutu and who are the Tutsi?” and that these are *political* identities whose meanings have shifted over time. Ancestors of the two groups probably came from separate historical points of origin – and Tutsi may have existed as an ethnic designation before the foundation of the state of Rwanda, but a Hutu identity did not. “It emerged as a transethnic identity of subjects in the state of Rwanda. The predecessors of the Hutu were simply those from difference ethnicities who were subjugated to the power of the state of Rwanda.”¹² Moreover, whatever their geographic origins, these people did form a common culture over generations spent living side by side and intermarrying.

In social terms, Tutsi and Hutu referred to status (conveyed as wealth in cattle); thus, people could move between categories for reasons such as intermarriage or a gain or loss in fortune. Even among those who made their living from herding rather than farming, only the most elite subset were generally designated as Tutsi. Meanwhile, “Hutu” was used as a term to describe foreigners – defined as anyone who lived outside the realm of the kingdom – and general boorishness.¹³

¹¹ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 57.

¹² Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 74.

¹³ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 134.

A Hutu who gained status through wealth or by becoming a chief could become a Tutsi through a ritual of *Kwihutura* – literally, a cleansing of one’s Hutuness. ... If a Tutsi lost his cattle and turned to farming for a living and married into a Hutu family, that person could become a Hutu.¹⁴

Moreover, people also defined themselves in terms of lineages and clans, which were composed of members of both groups, and these distinctions often meant more than the Hutu/Tutsi divide.¹⁵

Although a process of power centralization and increasing differentiation between Hutu and Tutsi was already underway when Europeans arrived in Rwanda, colonization would serve to recast and heighten the Tutsi/Hutu divide as Tutsi were granted privileged status under a system of indirect Belgian rule. The Germans were initially given authority over Rwanda at an 1890 conference in Brussels, and the first German explorers traveled throughout the country several years later. They were surprised to find a highly complex system of governance in Rwanda that they believed could not have been constructed by a native African population.¹⁶ In order to explain what they saw, they read conceptions of racial difference onto the populace, drawing upon popular theories in Europe. During the age of imperial conquest, “race became the marker dividing humanity into a few superhuman and the rest less than human, the former civilized, the latter putty for a

¹⁴ Paul Magnarella, “The Hutu-Tutsi Conflict in Rwanda,” in *Perspectives on Contemporary Ethnic Conflict: Primal Violence or the Politics of Conviction?* ed. Santosh Saha (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 109.

¹⁵ Peter Uvin, “On counting, categorizing and violence in Burundi and Rwanda,” in *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses*, eds. David Kertzer and Dominique Arel. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 160.

¹⁶ Timothy Longman, “Identity Cards, Ethnic Self-Perception and Genocide in Rwanda,” in *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, eds. Jane Caplan and John Torpey. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 351.

civilizational project.”¹⁷ Various regions of Africa were ranked according to their perceived levels of racial sophistication, with the Sahara serving as a major line of division. Civilizations in the Northern portion of the continent were seen as more advanced, as was the Northeastern “Nile” area. South of the Sahara lay “Africa Proper” which, Hegel writes,

as far as history goes back has remained – for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world – shut up; it is the gold-land compressed within itself – the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of conscious history is enveloped in the dark mantle of night.¹⁸

Wherever societies in Africa displayed advanced organization, Europeans believed other, foreign forces must be responsible. This had led to the formation of the “Hamitic Hypothesis,” which argued that a separate, non-negroid race had managed to spread civilization to some parts of Africa. The category was applied to people such as the Egyptians and Ethiopians, who were cast as “whites in black skin.”¹⁹ In the racial hierarchy of Caucasians, Teutonic Anglo-Saxons occupied the highest position, but the so-called “Hamites” at least made the cut – they were included at the very bottom of the white races, just below the Slavs.

The Germans and later, the Belgians, seized on the social Tutsi/Hutu division as proof of the Hamitic Hypothesis. They racialized the categories, determining that the taller, supposedly more refined Tutsi were a group of Hamites that had effectively ruled over the inferior, negroid Hutu (and marginal Twa). The first explorers and ethnologists,

¹⁷ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 77.

¹⁸ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 78.

¹⁹ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 84.

many of whom were associated with the Catholic Church, attempted to count and categorize the peoples they encountered in Rwanda, taking various kinds of censuses almost immediately. Due to lack of funding, the first colonial censuses relied on self-identification of respondents.²⁰ However, with time colonial authorities imported supposedly “scientific” practices, sending researchers throughout the country to catalogue peoples’ height, skull circumference and nose size, among other characteristics.²¹

The intensification of census taking and introduction of identity cards in the 1930s further locked Tutsi and Hutu into their respective social roles. This was not necessarily the goal of the colonial leaders, Timothy Longman writes, as the cards were most likely introduced for mundane administrative purposes. Registering race “was merely one component of a broader program to increase the regulation of Belgian subjects.”²² The foundational knowledge for distribution of identity cards came from the 1933-34 census. Some scholars have argued that the “ten cow rule” was used to identify Tutsi – any family possessing more than ten cows was ultimately placed in this category. However, Mamdani writes that this is an oversimplification and that there were simply not enough cows in Rwanda at the time to attribute more than ten to every family classified as Tutsi. Decisions were most likely made by assessing wealth in cattle, relying on oral accounts and testimonies from members of the church familiar with local communities and using measurements of height, skull circumference and nose size previously catalogued by

²⁰ Uvin, “On Counting,” 155.

²¹ Uvin, “On Counting,” 156.

²² Longman, “Identity Cards,” 353.

colonial ethnographers.²³ This census was a pivotal point in Rwandan history, because it served, in many cases, as the first recorded proof of a family lineage's designation as Hutu or Tutsi. The corresponding identity cards would serve to subjugate those of different races as power shifted over time, and became a key tool for rooting out Tutsi during the 1994 genocide.

Given this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the struggle for independence in Rwanda became linked with perceived ethnicity.²⁴ The years leading to the "Hutu Revolution" of 1959 involved a complex set of players, each with multifaceted agendas. Tutsi also ultimately wanted to achieve independence from the Belgians and developed their own brand of nationalism, one that preserved Tutsi privilege. Meanwhile, Hutu elites called for a "double liberation," from both the "Hamites" and their colonial oppressors. Ironically, those supporting a Hutu state called for a slower process of decolonization; if the Belgians left too abruptly, they determined, the Tutsi would use their power to seize control of the country. Belgian political and church authorities felt threatened by Tutsi demands for a more immediate independence and this, along with the perception that some Tutsi elites were being drawn to the ideas of communism, led the colonizers to abruptly switch alliances.²⁵ "In the new narratives of the White Fathers, the Tutsi became an oxymoronic figure; he was at the same time communist and feudalist.

²³ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 99.

²⁴ Uvin, "On Counting," 158.

²⁵ Josias Semujanga, *Origins of Rwandan Genocide*. (New York: Humanity Books, 2003), 147.

From then on, as the last governor general of Rwanda-Burundi said later, the moral contract, which used to bind Belgium to the Rwandan kingship, was broken.”²⁶

One of the ironies that surrounds the development of a Hutu Power ideology is that it “did not challenge the established interpretation of Rwandan society, but rather denounced the injustice of the subordination of the majority population.”²⁷ In other words, Hutu nationalists did not question the colonial fiction of two different races; rather, they turned the narrative on its head. Tutsi elites had previously encouraged the dissemination of the “Hamitic Hypothesis” because, in painting them as a foreign race, it placed them above the Hutu in the hierarchy of humanity. Now, Hutu nationalists charged that because they were foreign, the Tutsi had no claims over the Rwandan state. Mamdani writes,

To understand the logic of genocide, I argue, it is necessary to think through the political world that colonialism set into motion. This was the world of the settler and the native, a world organized around a binary preoccupation that was as compelling as it was confining. It is in this context that Tutsi, a group with a privileged relationship to power before colonialism, got constructed as a privileged *alien settler* presence, first by the great nativist revolution of 1959, and then by Hutu Power propaganda after 1990.²⁸

Uvin adds that post-independence, the Hutu regime was able to legitimize itself in two main ways – spreading the belief that Rwanda belonged to the Hutu, “its true inhabitants,” and using a depoliticized argument with the outside world that the sole

²⁶ Semujanga, *Origins of Rwandan Genocide*, 147.

²⁷ Longman, “Identity Cards,” 353.

²⁸ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 19.

purpose of the state was to pursue economic gain for the masses.²⁹ Meanwhile, massacres of Tutsi and of Hutu favoring a more moderate nation-building project continued.

When Hutu took control of Rwanda in 1959, their revolution did nothing to reverse the ethnic stereotypes inherited from colonialism.”³⁰ Indeed, perhaps the major flaw of the 1959 revolution and Hutu nationalist movement was that it failed to challenge the faulty and discriminatory logic upon which colonial society was based. Members of the Hutu counterelite decried injustice perpetrated by the Tutsi and claimed that Hutu deserved to control the state because they were the true inhabitants of Rwanda. Yet this logic did little to undermine the assumptions that Tutsi were *superior*. “A critique of colonialism and its effects on people’s categories of perception was never allowed to develop and mature in Rwanda;” in order for Rwandans to begin to reconcile, “they must acknowledge, then question, then criticize the enduring effects that colonialism has had on their own minds.”³¹

Nationalism and Identity in Cambodia

While efforts to forge a common national identity have been in many ways hindered in Rwanda by the Tutsi/Hutu dichotomy, Cambodia has not been plagued by such perceived ethnic or racial division. The majority of Cambodians consider themselves to be ethnically “Khmer,” descendants of those who built the famous Angkor Wat temple complex. Yet as Penny Edwards has argued, the formation of national

²⁹ Uvin, “On Counting,” 164.

³⁰ Uvin, “On Counting,” 177.

³¹ Uvin, “On Counting,” 177.

consciousness in Cambodia was also very much a product of the colonial encounter and later served to inform the genocidal logic of the Khmer Rouge regime. Europeans in Rwanda solidified distinctions in pre-existing social categories that led to cyclical battles over whether Hutu or Tutsi were the *true* and *authentic* inhabitants of the Rwandan nation. Meanwhile, Cambodians were taught by the French that they were the descendants of a once-powerful race that had built Angkor Wat and ruled over much of Southeast Asia, yet had fallen from its previous glory.

While until recently, historians had often excised the colonial period from historical narratives of Cambodian nationalism, tracing its development from Angkor Wat to the burgeoning nationalist movement of the 1930s, Edwards argues that in Cambodia, “the very notion of a national culture, let alone its inner core, were products of the colonial encounter.”³² Prior to becoming a French protectorate in 1863, Cambodia was a highly decentralized territory ruled by a weak monarchy. The lack of a natural protective boundary in terms of mountain ranges enabled the Angkor empire to expand, but also made the area vulnerable to foreign encroachment in the subsequent centuries by its increasingly powerful neighbors. By the mid-nineteenth century, Cambodia was “almost a failed state” with the royalty having to appeal to outside forces to ensure the continued existence of the kingdom – eventually leading to the French protectorate.³³

Chandler writes that it was the colonial period that created the foundations for a modern Cambodian nation-state. During the period of the protectorate,

³² Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 7.

³³ David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th edition. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2007), 5.

the multi-stranded construction of a national, geocultural body of Cambodia would gradually and imperceptibly extend the rural majority's boundaries beyond the local landmarks of temple, forest, and folklore and expand the horizons of individual belonging from a local to a national community, bound by the monumental regalia of Angkor Wat, framed in a national space defined by modern mapping, and 'unified' by a national heritage, history, religion and literature.³⁴

Edwards explains that the process of creating an "imagined community," as described by Anderson, was largely a top-down effort, driven by colonists and societal elites. One of the themes at the center of this community was a French-informed linear rendering of history that emphasized decay, the extent to which Cambodians had devolved since the time of Angkor Wat, and a general pre-occupation with the possibility that Cambodia could disappear altogether.³⁵

Under the protectorate, and as part of the larger political conglomeration known as "Indochine," Cambodians were simultaneously encouraged to look backward, to the grandeur of Angkor, and forward, to a transition to modernity aided by French tutelage.³⁶ For most Cambodians, the concept of Indochine remained a foreign abstraction, and as a sense of nationalism began to grow among the French-educated elite, they increasingly embraced identities of *Khmerness*, separate from the Métropole and other colonial outposts.³⁷ By the 1930s, a sense of Cambodian national culture had been cultivated in elite circles, but there was disagreement over how this should translate politically. The point on which all political factions seemed to agree, however, was the French-inculcated

³⁴ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 7.

³⁵ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 8.

³⁶ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 2.

³⁷ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 228.

notion that Angkor Wat was the dominant symbol of Cambodian nationalism. Previous lore surrounding the temple complex was recast during the protectorate as “a new story of *national* glory, *national* neglect, *national* decline and *national* renaissance.”³⁸ (As Chandler writes, “Cambodia is a country that has been scarred by its recent past and identifies itself closely with more distant periods. It is the only country in the world that boasts a ruin on its national flag.”³⁹)

Following independence from France in 1954, King Norodom Sihanouk used Angkor Wat as a symbol of national legitimacy and redefined *Khmerness* to suit his own agenda, as subsequent leaders would do. Under his reign, while the Muslim minority and ethnic hill tribe populations became “*Khmae-Islam*” and “*Khmae-Leou*,” Vietnamese and Chinese minorities remained outside the periphery of Cambodian national identification. Lon Nol, who unseated Sihanouk in a 1970 coup, drew upon the motif of decay to blame the royal family’s decadence and incompetence for facilitating Cambodia’s decline from the time of Angkor.⁴⁰

Yet it was under the DK regime from 1975-1979 that conceptions of nationalism cultivated during the protectorate would yield the most tragic outcomes. Pol Pot, who even before independence wrote under the pen name “The Original Khmer” (*Khmae Daem*), merged Marxist ideology with tropes of national belonging that emphasized Khmer authenticity and racial purity. His vision for Cambodia drew on Angkor Wat as a

³⁸ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 248.

³⁹ Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 10-11.

⁴⁰ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 251.

symbol of his people's productive potential, which could eventually lead the nation to "independence mastery."⁴¹ Ethnic and cultural difference were not tolerated.

In many respects, the DK regime was one where the right to life was determined by one's powers of mimicry. It was not enough to *be* a Cambodian, born on the land: one had to speak, act, dress and perform according to an ideal – that of the Original Khmer. The curious ideological mix of the DK combined the rejection of modernity with the quest for a return to a prefeudal past and the simultaneous search for a progressive future.⁴²

Those of non-Khmer origin – Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham Muslims – were of course at an immediate disadvantage in this project to create a nationalist Khmer utopia. They were disproportionately targeted for persecution and extermination. As Cham women repeatedly told me during my research in Cambodia, some of their most disturbing memories from DK included being prevented from conducting their prayers and covering their hair, as well as the fact that the regime forced them to eat pork. However, in the Cambodian case, the vast majority of those killed by the regime could be described as ethnically Khmer – yet, as will be discussed in the next section, they did not adequately perform the role of the Original Khmer as mandated by Khmer Rouge ideology.

⁴¹ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 253.

⁴² Edwards, *Cambodge*, 1.

CHAPTER TWO: Genocide and National Purification

The campaigns of violence unleashed in the 1994 Rwandan genocide and during Cambodia's DK period can be seen as efforts by a particular rendering of the nation state to purge itself of unwanted, or contaminated, elements. While the term "genocide" is commonly used to refer to both atrocities, the Rwandan case appears to fit more closely with the legal definition as outlined in the UN Genocide Convention of 1948 (although not all countries, including France, officially recognize the events of 1994 as genocide). The international symbolic capital associated with genocide (and by extension, the Holocaust), has been mobilized both by the RPF in Rwanda and the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), the successor regime to DK. Yet in Cambodia today, the DK period is referred to a number of different ways: "the Pol Pot time," "the period of three years, twenty months and eight days," "The *Kosang* (establishment) period," or "*bralay pouchsah*" (a term used under the PRK that means "to kill within one's family line"). Meanwhile, in Rwanda, only one description of the events of 1994 is officially acceptable: "The genocide (*Jenoside*) against the Tutsi." For the RPF, the official label of genocide is a vital source of legitimacy. Members of government and survivor groups are so well versed in the parameters of the legal definition of genocide that they often expressed skepticism about my comparative study between Rwanda and Cambodia. "But what happened in Cambodia, that wasn't a *real* genocide, was it?" they would often ask. Yet the creation of victim categories and ways in which the states sought to rid themselves of purported internal enemies share a number of striking similarities. Moreover, as various genocide studies scholars have shown, it is often the

perception of categories of victims that drive genocidal killing, not necessarily their membership in a fixed group.^{1 2}

A great deal of debate exists concerning how victim groups are to be delineated in genocidal killing, particularly since a number of crimes commonly referred to as “genocide” fail to meet the legal definition. This issue is fraught politically, as many groups that have been the victims of atrocities believe their suffering can only be legitimized through association with the “crime of crimes” – The Holocaust. Yet the UN Convention, which came into being after World War II, defines genocide as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such.” It then goes on to list a number of ways in which genocide can be perpetrated:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Thus, “genocide” is not necessarily synonymous with “mass killing,” as is often believed.

The ways in which the Genocide Convention was sculpted reflect the sentiments and philosophical predispositions of the man who created the term, Raphael Lemkin.

¹ Jones, Adam, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction, 2nd Edition*. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 21.

² This was also a finding of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia – that persecuted groups are often defined by aggressors based on perceived characteristics.

Although the legal definition was considerably narrower than Lemkin's original concept, it was inspired by the way he believed different social collectivities contributed to humanity.

Lemkin, a Jewish Polish lawyer, struggled for decades to define and enshrine in law what had been considered a "crime without a name" – the persecution and extermination of a particular segment of a nation's inhabitants. The concept of state sovereignty had shielded brutal regimes from outside interference in internal affairs, and unfortunately, due to the evolving and often unenforced nature of international law, still continues to do so. Lemkin initially considered labeling such crimes as "barbarity" and "vandalism;" the former referred to the 'premeditated destruction of national, religious, and social collectivities,' while the latter he described as 'destruction of works of art and culture, being the particular genius of these collectivities.'"³ When these terms failed to gain traction, he came up with "genocide," a combination of the Greek "genos," meaning race or tribe, and "cide," or killing, from Latin.⁴

In his view of genocide, Lemkin privileged human groups themselves – not the individuals who composed those groups – and believed they were entities deserving of legal protection. To understand his reasoning, it is necessary to place Lemkin's understanding of genocide in its historical context. Lemkin was a proponent of "groupism" (which regards human collectivities as "internally homogenous, external bounded groups, even unitary actors with common purposes") and was what many would

³ Jones, *Genocide*, 9.

⁴ Jones, *Genocide*, 10.

consider a “primordialist” in the vein of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski.⁵ He ascribed to Malinowski’s theory of cultural functionalism and believed that “culture derived from the precultural needs of a biological life. ... Culture integrated society and enabled the fulfilment of individual basic needs because it constituted the systematic totality of a variety of interrelated institutions, practices, and beliefs.”⁶ Thus, actions that undermined the cohesiveness of a cultural group challenged the existence of the group itself – and by extension, of its members, which relied on the bonds of culture to fulfill both their basic and derived needs. Because of his conviction in the importance of group protection, Lemkin considered a broad range of acts genocidal, such as destroying cultural symbols and removing children from their group of origin.

Moses purports that “Malinowski’s theory of culture allowed Lemkin to cast his Eastern European primordialist intuitions in the language of modern social science.”⁷ Lemkin indeed makes multiple references to Malinowski in his writings and to Sir James Frazer, who he calls the “father of modern anthropology.” He writes that Frazer,

was aware of a sociological fact: that human beings have so called derived needs which are just as necessary to their existence as the basic physiological needs. These needs find expression in social institutions, or to use an anthropological term, the cultural ethos. If the culture of a group is violently undermined, the group itself disintegrates and its members must either become absorbed in other cultures which is a wasteful and painful process or succumb to personal disorganization and, perhaps, physical destruction.⁸

⁵ Dirk A. Moses. “Raphael Lemkin, Culture and the Concept of Genocide,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, eds. Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 22.

⁶ Moses, “Raphael Lemkin,” 24.

⁷ Moses, “Raphael Lemkin,” 25.

⁸ Lemkin Archives, New York Public Library, Reel 2.

In other words, cultural organization is vital to human existence. (It should be noted that Lemkin extended the desire for protection foremost to national, racial, religious and ethnic groups because “unlike other human collectivities such as political parties, they produce culture, endow individual life with meaning and comprise the building block of human civilization.”⁹ For modern readers familiar with liberal, individual-centered conceptions of human rights, this theoretical background helps explain why Lemkin was so concerned about the existence of socio-cultural groups. Not only did Lemkin believe that social groups were discrete entities that each possessed their own “genius,” but he also thought that “violently undermining” a group’s culture disrupted the social unit’s functioning and could lead to the destruction of individual members. In his *Scientific Theory of Culture*, which Lemkin specifically references in his work, Malinowski writes that “whether we consider a very simple or primitive culture or an extremely complex or developed one, we are confronted by a vast apparatus, partly material, partly human and partly spiritual, by which man is able to cope with the concrete, specific problems that face him.”¹⁰ Likewise, Lemkin saw culture as multi-dimensional, a complex network of institutions, practices and beliefs that were interrelated and all served human needs.

Although other groups based on characteristics such as political affiliation and social class were discussed in negotiations over the UN Genocide Convention, they were ultimately not included in the law. This omission has caused a great deal of controversy over time:

By the end of the 1940s, it was clear that political groups were often targeted for

⁹ Moses, “Raphael Lemkin,” 23.

¹⁰ Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 36.

annihilation. Moreover, the appellations applied to ‘communists,’ or by communists to “kulaks” or “class enemies” – when imposed by a totalitarian state – seemed every bit as difficult to shake as ethnic identifications, if the Nazi and Stalinist onslaughts were anything to go by.”¹¹

Attempts to broaden the legal definition of genocide have met with little support; indeed, even trying to enforce the UN Convention as it now reads has often proved nearly impossible politically. The 1994 slaughter in Rwanda is a case in point. Countries, including the United States, shied away from labeling the killing “genocide” because this would necessitate intervention. Former President Bill Clinton has famously called the U.S.’s unwillingness to stop the slaughter the greatest failure of his presidential career, and on a tour of Rwanda in 1998 he described the killing as genocide. Indeed, the paralysis of the international community in the face of Rwanda’s genocide helped fuel the development of the emerging legal norm of the “Responsibility to Protect.” Moreover, at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, the definition of genocide adopted is the intended destruction “of any stable or permanent group,” which Jones argues could likely become a future norm in international law.¹²

Despite the slow progress made in terms of legal expansion of the genocide convention, the parameters of genocide have been actively debated in scholarly circles. Some have criticized Lemkin’s emphasis on the culture-carrying capacity of human groups; given his logic, killing one hundred thousand people of one ethnic group is worse than killing one hundred thousand people of diverse backgrounds because the “genius” and cultural memory of the group will be lost forever to human civilization.¹³ Yet Jones

¹¹ Jones, *Genocide*, 11.

¹² Jones, *Genocide*, 14.

says where Lemkin's theory holds up is in his emphasis on collectivities as targets: "One can philosophize about the relative weight ascribed to collectives over the individual ... but the reality of modern times is that the vast majority of those murdered *were killed on the basis of a collective identity – even if only one imputed by the killers.*"¹⁴

Thus, more inclusive definitions of genocide have taken into account the variety of ways in which human groups can be defined and potential fluidity of group membership. Those defined as belonging to a target group may not even consider themselves to be members; for example, a number of highly-assimilated German Jews did not consider themselves Jewish or necessarily know they had Jewish ancestry until their origins were uncovered by the Nazis. This has led to definitions of genocide such as the following by Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn: "Genocide is a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator."¹⁵

The process of creating a target group in Rwanda began decades before the 1994 genocide and relied on the identities that became largely fixed under colonialism. As discussed previously, there is no consensus regarding the nature of the Hutu/Tutsi/Twa divide in pre-colonial times, although they may have been largely social categories determined by occupation and some degree of mobility was possible. Yet Christopher Taylor argues that studies have shown Tutsi do share a significant number of genetic markers with populations from Northeastern Africa. This would seem to support the

¹³ Jones, *Genocide*, 12.

¹⁴ Jones, *Genocide*, 12.

¹⁵ Jones, *Genocide*, 18.

element of the Hamitic Hypothesis claiming that ancestors of the Tutsi may have migrated from the north, although there is no evidence that they subsequently conquered the local Bantu-speaking people.¹⁶ A seeming contradiction exists between the current government narrative that the categories of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa were enshrined under colonialism and the insistence that the events of 1994 be legally recognized as genocide. If the designations were initially social and occupational designations – that were then racialized by colonials and subsequently ethnicized by Hutu regimes – the Tutsi would not fall under the protection of the UN Genocide Convention. However, during many conversations I had in private with Rwandans, they admitted that they *did* believe there was something of an ethnic or racial difference between Hutu and Tutsi. Whether such beliefs are based on an actual historical difference in the origins of the groups or on years of conditioning exacerbated during the colonial period is difficult to distinguish. During my time in Rwanda, I heard the groups referred to as social classes, tribes, ethnicities and races.

Whatever the nature of the distinction, a process of genocidal priming against Tutsi began after the 1959 revolution when Hutu were able to hold power over a group they perceived as largely foreign, oppressive and in collaboration with colonial forces. In the decades that followed the revolution, Tutsi suffered widespread discrimination in Rwanda and were excluded from the political sphere. They continued, nonetheless, to retain positions in education, business and the church, but their presence even in these areas of society fostered resentment among many Hutu. A quota system was enacted to

¹⁶ Christopher Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994*. (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 65.

limit Tutsi participation in such institutions, but their actual numbers often exceeded the quotas. Generations of privilege could not be eradicated overnight, and despite the new subordinate status of Tutsi in society, many Hutu who had internalized colonial stereotypes retained an inferiority complex.¹⁷ Taylor describes how this dynamic played out in the context of gender, sexual relations and marriage.

Before the revolution, it had been common for Hutu to try to marry Tutsi in order to improve their social status. However, even after 1959, when Tutsi became second-class citizens, intermarriages continued, particularly between Hutu men and Tutsi women. Partly this can be explained by the utility such unions would have for the Tutsi – marrying a Hutu man would improve her social standing and secure the privileges of Hutu citizenship for her children (which was passed through the father). But why would Hutu men continue to marry Tutsi women? This trend was controversial and highlighted a number of assumptions and stereotypes that had become enshrined during the colonial period.

In keeping with the Hamitic Hypothesis, colonizers propagated the belief that the supposedly more Caucasian Tutsi woman was more beautiful and intelligent than the Hutu female. The ideal aesthetics of beauty first introduced by colonists remained in force long after the 1959 revolution. Moreover, this belief was strengthened by the fact that when European men took Rwandan wives and mistresses, they were almost always Tutsi. Behind all their Hutu rhetoric, there was a “tragic and unacknowledgeable sense” among Hutu extremists that “when all was said and done, early Europeans had indeed

¹⁷ Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 176.

been correct in depicting Tutsi as ‘golden-red beauties’ and Hutu as inferior (and less attractive) negroids.”¹⁸

In the years leading to the 1994 genocide, as Hutu extremists attempted to eradicate Tutsi influence in order to create a “pure” Hutu state, intermarriages became increasingly discriminated against. Tutsi women were the objects of both resentment and derision. According to Hutu ethnonationalist stereotypes, a Tutsi woman would use her beauty and wits to ensnare a Hutu man, and then make him a slave to the Tutsi cause.¹⁹ They were seen as particularly threatening to Hutu purity because in marrying Hutu men, they would produce sons that were, in fact, half Tutsi, but possessed all the legal benefits of Hutu citizenship. “The Hutu Ten Commandments,” perhaps the most well known summary of Hutu extremist ideology published in the newspaper *Kangura* in 1990, seemed particularly preoccupied with the question of gender. Three of the “Ten Commandments” actually deal specifically with the issue of Tutsi women:

1. Every Muhutu (Hutu male) should know that wherever he finds Umututsikazi (a female Tutsi) she is working for her Tutsi ethnic group. As a result, every Muhutu who marries a Mututsikazi, or who take a Mututsikazi for a mistress, or employs her as a secretary or a protégée is a traitor.
2. Every Muhutu should know that our Bahutukazi (female Hutu) are more worthy of, and conscious of their roles as woman, spouse and a mother. Are they not pretty, good secretaries and more honest!
3. Bahutukazi (Hutu women), be vigilant and bring your husbands, brothers and sons back to the path of reason.²⁰

¹⁸ Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 175.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 171.

²⁰ Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 174.

Perhaps in the keeping with these “Ten Commandments,” during the genocide itself a number of Hutu men chose supposed ethnic/racial solidarity over individual loyalty, killing their Tutsi wives and mistresses. The call to Hutu women to bring their men back to the “path of reason” is also noteworthy. Reports of the genocidal killing show participation by Hutu women, particularly in attacks against their Tutsi rivals.

The issuing of the Hutu Ten Commandments came several months after the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front began its military campaign to return Tutsi who had been living in exile in Uganda back to their perceived homeland. Hate media and anti-Tutsi propaganda intensified in the ensuing years and, Taylor writes,

The only perceived blemish of the revolution, repeated frequently in the days leading up to the genocide, was its failure to purify the country entirely. Extremists regretted that they had not gone far enough in 1959, that the revolution had failed to rid Rwanda of its polluting internal other once and for all.²¹

At a time when the RPF was launching attacks in an attempt to take control of the country, all Tutsi living in the state – especially women – were seen as an internal security threat. Thus the hatred that persisted against Tutsi, despite their subordinate status in post-independence Rwanda, was fueled by a complicated mixture of colonial ideology, military concerns and a deep-seated sense of Hutu inferiority. Explaining the attitudes toward Tutsi women in society, Taylor writes, “one can seize the wealth and power from those that one envies, but one cannot seize another’s intelligence and beauty.”²²

This insidious legacy of colonialism, division and perceived inferiority fueled the brutality of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Scholars do not necessarily agree on the

²¹ Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 154.

²² Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 177.

ultimate causes of massacres. Paul Magnarella argues that pressure on resources, in terms of a land/people/food imbalance in the small country, was at the root of the genocide.²³ While this may have been a contributing factor, most scholars contend that the more immediate cause was a struggle for power that used the convenient tropes associated with the Hutu/Tutsi divide. As the Tutsi-backed RPF continued to launch attacks into the country, Hutu Power ideology and propaganda intensified. At the same time, calls for a multiparty system coming from within the country threatened those in power; to distract the population from internal political conflict, Hutu nationalists launched a propaganda campaign charging that Tutsi “avengers” were trying to take hold of the country so they could enslave the Hutu.²⁴ International pressure led to the signing of the Arusha Peace Accords in 1993, but when a plane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira was shot down over Kigali April 6 of 1994, violence broke out.

Disagreement remains over who was responsible for the assassinations. Some scholars believe a group of Hutu extremists opposed to negotiations with the RPF launched the missile that brought down Habyarimana’s plane. Others claim the RPF was behind the attack, and this was the logic used as a catalyst for genocide. Organized squads of killers took to the streets, eliminating both Tutsi and Hutu perceived as more moderate or sympathetic to the Tutsi cause. “Widespread popular compliance was achieved through a variety of means and ensured that killing Tutsi became a civic duty of

²³ Magnarella, “The Hutu-Tutsi Conflict in Rwanda,” 107.

²⁴ Semujanga, *Origins of the Rwandan Genocide*, 195.

all Hutu, rather than exceptional or spontaneous act of cruelty.”²⁵ Bands of Hutu set up roadblocks and identity cards, first instituted by the Belgians, became a death sentence for Tutsi. Yet even those with cards stamped “Hutu” were not necessarily safe. There was an understanding that identity cards could be forged or fraudulently obtained, so if those carrying a Hutu identity card displayed other perceived Tutsi-like qualities, they might be killed anyway.²⁶ Yet, even though Rwandans may not have trusted the identity cards to accurately reveal individual identities,

Rwandans nevertheless came to accept the principle behind the cards: that identities were fixed and unchanging, that everyone in the country could be clearly classified into one of three categories based on their parentage. It is this ethnicization of Rwanda society that ultimately made genocide possible.²⁷

It was a long process that had its origins in the colonial period and that led to the horrific deaths of nearly a million people during the genocide.

A great deal of the propaganda that fueled the 1994 genocide relied on the portrayal of Tutsi as “cockroaches,” or non-human entities, that were corrupting the pure Hutu nation from within (particularly by seducing Hutu men, and then bearing children who would be false Hutu, working in the interests of the Tutsi race). Cambodia during DK relied on similar tropes of “hidden enemies burrowing from within,”²⁸ seeking to destroy the purity of the Khmer communist revolution. As mentioned previously, one of

²⁵ Helen Hintjens and David Kiwuwa, “Not Ethnicity, but Race: Unity and Conflict in Rwanda Since the Genocide,” in *Perspectives on Contemporary Ethnic Conflict: Primal Violence or the Politics of Conviction*, ed. Santosh Saha (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 82.

²⁶ Longman, “Identity Cards,” 356.

²⁷ Longman, “Identity Cards,” 356.

²⁸ David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison*. (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000), 43.

the seemingly complicated elements of killing during the period of DK was that the majority of those killed were ethnically Khmer. Even though Hutu may have been slaughtered during the Rwandan genocide, this was generally because they were either sympathetic to the Tutsi enemy or mistakenly believed to be a Tutsi enemy. Yet in both cases those who were targeted for eradication were defined largely by the perpetrator group.

Alex Hinton explains how traitors and enemies were defined during DK and how this process evolved over time. While the Rwandan genocide took place in a short burst – 100 days – of genocidal killing, the period of DK evolved, as Cambodians often describe it, over a “period of three years, eight months and 20 days.” The enemies to the state killed immediately after the Khmer Rouge came to power were relatively easy to distinguish – members of the former regime, soldiers who had fought against the Khmer Rouge in the Lon Nol army and so-called “New People” (those tainted by foreign influence and urbanism). Although the regime operated differently in different areas of the country, most Cambodians could theoretically be incorporated into the new nation if they displayed the correct revolutionary political consciousness. Yet, over time, as the grandiose visions of Khmer Rouge leaders stalled and their attempts to create an agrarian utopia proved increasingly disastrous, the hunt for internal enemies sabotaging the revolution intensified.

Despite the fact that Cambodia has a largely ethnically homogenous population, Khmer Rouge leaders were able to “other” suspicious members of society, creating a target group of victims that needed to be expelled from the national body.

Genocidal regimes manufacture difference in a number of important and interrelated ways, including the crystallization, marking, organization, bodily

inscription, and mimetics of difference. First, genocidal regimes construct, essentialize, and propagate sociopolitical categories, crystallizing what are normally more complex, fluid, and contextually variable forms of identity.²⁹

As part of this process of sorting between “us” and “them,” between true Khmer revolutionaries loyal to the nation and a contaminating “other,” the Khmer Rouge ironically relied on many tropes that had been propagated during the colonial period. They saw Cambodia, as the French had described it, as a weakened country in decline since the Angkorean era and susceptible to foreign encroachment and invasion by evil outside forces that contrasted greatly with the “purity” of the Khmer people. For the leaders of DK, these outside forces were composed of imperialists, capitalists and the expansionist Vietnamese. In particular, the Khmer Rouge obsession with the “mendacious, dirty, thieving” Vietnamese stemmed partly from colonial stereotypes.³⁰

Needless to say, actual Vietnamese living in Cambodia were disproportionately targeted for extermination, as were the Chinese and Cham minorities. But in the paranoid world of DK, even those who were ethnically Khmer could suffer a lapse in revolutionary consciousness, leading to a situation in which they lost their Khmerness and became enemies with “Khmer bodies and Vietnamese minds.” One of the most horrifying realities of life under DK was that the potential victim group was constantly shifting and Cambodians never knew when they might be denounced as an enemy. Chandler explains how the Khmer Rouge leaders subscribed to a Maoist doctrine of permanent revolution, wherein internal enemies needed to be continuously located and purged in order to assure

²⁹ Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 211.

³⁰ Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*, 215.

the forward momentum of society.³¹ Hinton writes that “genocidal practice became a semiotic enterprise and an interpretive act, as cadres set out to identify enemies through the reading of signs. Everyday life became increasingly performative; everything one said or did served as an index of political consciousness.”³² The inability to perform one’s duties properly – a lost cow or illness that prevented one from working – could be seen as a lapse in revolutionary consciousness that warranted elimination. One of my informants in Cambodia told me that she was amazed her father had survived the period because, under his watch, a smokehouse for fish had burned to the ground. He was immediately accused by his superiors of trying to thwart the revolution and harboring imperialist sentiments. Indeed, such a grave mistake would have often meant certain death under DK. Her father’s case was somewhat unusual however – he used his wit and charm to convince his superiors that he was loyal to the revolution and that the incineration of the smokehouse had indeed been unintentional. Moreover, he suspected that they may have let him live for more practical reasons. He was a highly skilled fisherman and was generally able to bring in large amounts of fish for the cooperative.

Many Cambodians were not so successful in convincing others that they indeed belonged in and were loyal to DK. Partly this was due to a process of dehumanization put in place by the regime that resembles in many ways strategies used by other genocidal societies, such as Nazi Germany and Rwanda. Perceived enemies are often likened to non-human entities (such as cockroaches, lice, vermin or parasites), separated from society at large and then purged in a necessary purification of the social body. Hinton

³¹ Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, 41.

³² Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*, 220.

describes how this process took place at the Tuol Sleng detention center and how the bodies of victims were actually transformed into the wretched creatures they were assumed to be, making it easier to dispose of them for the sake of the nation. Hannah Arendt has explained a similar process in Nazi Germany, with the initial spatial separation of Jews into ghettos and then process of dehumanization that took place in concentration camps. Hinton writes that “this bodily inscription of difference is institutionalized at centers of death like the Nazi concentration camps”³³ and at Tuol Sleng “bodily violence helped construct (prisoners) into the ‘evil other’ of Khmer ethnonationalist discourse.”³⁴ Indeed, prisoners at the S-21 secret prison were subject to extreme degradation and deprivation. Segregated by sex, lower-ranking inmates were shackled in large rooms side-by-side (higher-ranking prisoners often had their own small cells), in formations reminiscent of paintings depicting African slaves on ships bound for North America. They had to ask permission from captors before being allowed to urinate or defecate into old ammunition boxes and were hosed off as a group. From here, they would be taken to individual rooms to be interrogated and tortured, the ultimate purpose of the ritual being to produce a confession of guilt for the party center. In order to extract these confessions, interrogators used a variety of brutal methods, including electric shocks, extraction of fingernails and toenails, water boarding and whipping.

According to Hinton, it would be misguided to dismiss the cruel excesses of interrogators at Tuol Sleng as merely the work of sadists. While many did go beyond what may have been required in the brutality they inflicted on prisoners, he argues that

³³ Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*, 212.

³⁴ Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*, 228.

such acts may have become performative, a way for interrogators to prove their revolutionary dedication while psychologically distancing and distinguishing themselves from their victims. He writes that,

The need to manufacture difference at Tuol Sleng was exacerbated by the fact that most of the prisoners resembled their captors in terms of youth, rural origins, social class, ethnicity, and revolutionary origins. (Some ‘new people’ and ‘class enemies’ were incarcerated at Tuol Sleng, particularly during the early operation of the prison, but most of these individuals were jailed or executed on the local, district, and regional levels).³⁵

Because Tuol Sleng purged mostly those party members believed to have betrayed the regime from within, they were much more difficult to “other” than so-called “New People,” who had significantly different experiences and backgrounds from the majority of interrogators, or than ethnic and national minorities. In a highly charged political atmosphere, where anyone could be denounced as a traitor at any time, the line between interrogators and victims was not necessarily clear. Through brutally torturing detainees, interrogators could relieve some of this existential anxiety by inscribing difference onto the bodies of their victims, transforming them into the wretched subhuman internal enemies.

In Rwanda, where the line between Hutu and Tutsi, or victim and perpetrator, was not necessarily clear, excessive brutality and mutilation seem to have served similar purposes. Moreover, as killing was carried out by militias, the performative element must be taken into consideration, as genocidaires may have resorted to ever more horrific forms of torture in order to prove their belonging and loyalty to the Hutu Power cause. Taylor describes the emphasis in Rwandan culture on flows and blockages, particularly as related to the body as conduit. Flows – as in menstruation, exchange of semen, breast

³⁵ Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*, 225.

milk and digestion – are associated with health, as opposed to blockages, which signify illness, diminished fertility and even death.³⁶ Dating from the time of the pre-colonial Rwandan kingship, individuals could also be associated with obstruction of flows; such “blocking beings” may even cast spells and cause harm to others in the social body. Extrapolating from this history, Taylor writes that the 1994 genocide “was a massive ritual of purification, a ritual intended to purge the nation of ‘obstructing beings’ as the threat of obstruction was imagined through a Rwandan ontology that situates the body politic in analogous relation to the individual human body.”³⁷ The forms of violence perpetrated on Tutsi bodies betrayed a preoccupation, whether conscious or unconscious, with blockages and flows. Movement of persons was frequently hindered by slashing a victim’s legs, feet or Achilles’ tendons. Militia members often impaled both Tutsi men and women, either from anus to mouth or vagina to mouth³⁸ and breast oblation and emasculation were frequently practiced. “In order to convince themselves that they were ridding the polity of a categorical enemy and not just assaulting specific individuals they had to first transform their victims’ bodies into the equivalent of ‘blocked beings.’”³⁹

Thus, despite the differences in socio-political context and duration of the atrocities in Rwandan and Cambodia, significant similarities exist in the ways nationalist regimes perceived, identified and sought to exterminate a collective target. These “internal enemies,” whether Tutsi or Cambodians who had lapsed in revolutionary

³⁶ Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 112.

³⁷ Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 101.

³⁸ Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 137.

³⁹ Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 140.

consciousness, were seen as forces that could potentially destabilize and destroy the nation. In forging these target groups, the ethnonationalist Hutu Power and Khmer Rouge regimes ironically relied on colonial tropes of scheming and disloyal Tutsi and Vietnamese (characterizations that are not dissimilar to those applied to Jews during World War II). Yet because target groups are significantly more fluid than the creators of the Genocide Convention – or *génocidaires* – may have envisioned, perpetrators often engage in what appears to be excessively brutal behavior in order to distance themselves psychologically from their victims (and to transform them into the subhuman national saboteurs they perceive them to be). The distinction between loyal revolutionary and internal enemy, or even between Tutsi and Hutu, is not necessarily clear cut.

Claudette, one of the few survivors of the Murambi massacre in Rwanda, explained to me how she had narrowly escaped death despite the fact that she was Hutu and even carried a Hutu identification card. She was married to a Tutsi man and fled with him to the Murambi Technical School, where they had been told by local officials they would be protected. When the *génocidaires* took control of the school and began slaughtering people, her husband made a desperate plea to save her life. “He was showing my identity card and told them over and over ‘Don’t kill my wife! She is not a cockroach!’” Claudette explained. Yet the killing squads refused to believe him, assuming the card must be fraudulent.

Although she was targeted for execution, she managed to run with her baby to some nearby shrubbery, where she waited until the massacre was over. When she later emerged, she discovered her husband and two sons had been hacked to death with machetes. Their bodies now remain in the mass graves at Murambi, where Claudette

works as a cleaning woman. As will be discussed in the following sections, attempts to reintegrate the bodies of those targeted for extermination by the state back into national consciousness and collective memory are incredibly fraught, particularly when new regimes seek to instrumentalize remains for political purposes.

CHAPTER THREE: Memorialization and Nationalism

Memory is never fixed, or ever wholly individual. The ways that people recall the past and organize experience into meaningful and relevant stories are informed by a number of sources, including national and group narratives, popular representations and mythologies. Maurice Halbwachs pioneered the concept of collective memory, and described how people use reference points determined by society – and external historical frameworks – to evoke and interpret their own, individual memories. Pierre Nora probed how cultural memory of historical events is ossified in national memorial sites (*les lieux de mémoire*), wherein “moments are plucked out of the flow of history, then returned to it – no longer quite alive but not yet entirely dead, like shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.”¹

War monuments have helped serve this purpose as they celebrate a country’s mythologized triumphs, casting violent deaths as heroic sacrifices for the state. The task of creating a unifying and widely accepted national biography, however, becomes fraught in efforts to commemorate humanity’s worst deeds. Trying to memorialize such events presents a number of challenges as citizen deaths cannot “easily be interpreted and represented as heroic, sacrificial, or somehow benefiting the greater good of society or the nation.”² Soldiers who died in battle can be seen as having given their lives for the nation, their deaths symbolic sacrifice for the homeland.

Yet the victims of genocide and other forms of atrocity cannot inhabit this commemorative model. Scholars such as Rachel Hughes have drawn connections

¹ Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between Memory and History,” in *Realms of Memory*, ed. Pierre Nora. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 7.

² Williams, *Memorial Museums*, 20.

between Cambodians killed during DK and Giorgio Agamben's discussion of *homo sacer*, a figure from Roman times whose existence fell outside the scope of the law, and who could thus be killed but not sacrificed.³ She explains that the memorial efforts undertaken by the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) "attempted to preserve the figure of *homo sacer* as symbolic as the aberration of the previous regime alone."⁴ However, this initiative was complicated by continued fighting between the PRK and a repackaged Khmer Rouge coalition force, which propagated a far different narrative of the DK period and of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia.

Moreover, some events may be too fresh in the minds of the citizenry, too real rather than mythical, to be comfortably viewed as the "reassuring fratricide" described by Anderson.⁵ Nonetheless, Williams writes that there has been a massive proliferation of memorial museums over the past 25 years that "inevitably sees them play an increasingly important role in the shaping of public historical consciousness."⁶ The Holocaust has served as the major reference point for memorial museums, which Williams describes as "a specific kind of museum dedicated to a historic event commemorating mass suffering."⁷ Both Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng in Cambodia and the Kigali Memorial Center and Murambi Genocide Memorial in Rwanda fit this designation. All initially

³ Rachel Hughes, "Fielding Genocide: Post-1979 Cambodia and the Geopolitics of Memory" (PhD diss., The University of Melbourne, 2006), 18.

⁴ Hughes, "Fielding Genocide," 19.

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 201.

⁶ Williams, *Memorial Museums*, 157.

⁷ Williams, *Memorial Museums*, 8.

preserved evidence of atrocity, but over time have moved toward increasing museumification

Development of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek

After repeated incursions by the state of DK into Vietnamese territory, a combined force of Khmer Rouge defectors and Vietnamese military forces invaded Cambodia in late December 1978, taking control of Phnom Penh January 7 of 1979. Although Vietnam ended the brutal DK period, during which an estimated 1.7 million people had died through overwork, starvation and execution, its invasion of the country was condemned by the United States, China and other nations allied against the Eastern Bloc within the Cold War context.

Thus, the new Vietnamese-backed PRK immediately set about justifying its actions through broadcasting evidence of Khmer Rouge crimes to an international audience. The initial motive for the invasion was defensive, considering that the Khmer Rouge continued to wage incursions into Vietnamese territory, but once confronted with the carnage left behind by the regime, the Vietnamese sought to justify their military action in humanitarian terms. “Evidence of trauma and its international exposure was integral to the political economy of post-1979 Cambodia. This was an economy fueled by actual and speculated international legal, humanitarian and economic aid.”⁸

However this effort proved somewhat complicated considering that Vietnam needed to vilify a fellow communist country. Chandler writes that in order to distance Vietnam and the PRK regime from the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge, the

⁸ Hughes, “Fielding Genocide,” 100.

country's new leaders created a narrative that cast DK as "a 'fascist' regime, like Nazi Germany, rather than a Communist one, recognized as such by many Communist countries. Finally, it was important for the Vietnamese to argue that what had happened in Cambodia under Democratic Kampuchea, and particularly at S-21, was genocide, resembling the Holocaust in World War II, rather than the assassinations of political enemies that at different times had marked the history of the Soviet Union, Communist China and Vietnam."⁹

Labeling DK a "genocidal" regime and ascribing blame for its crimes to the "Pol Pot-Ieng Sary Clique" served as a symbolically resonant and tactical move, even though the majority of killing that took place from 1975-79 does not fit with the legal definition of genocide. In ousting a fellow communist regime, the PRK state sought to create a narrative explaining that the revolution in Cambodia had been hijacked by a criminal element – the "genocidal Pol Pot-Ieng Sary Clique" – that was beholden to a deviant strain of Maoism. This clique had misled other, true revolutionaries, such as the Khmer Rouge defectors now serving within the PRK regime.¹⁰ Such messages featured prominently in the curation of S-21, the detention and torture center that was rapidly converted into a museum of DK atrocities. Mai Lam, one of the chief designers of Tuol Sleng, traveled to research museums in Germany, Russia, France and Czechoslovakia, although whether or not the museum was inspired by former Nazi killing sites is a matter

⁹ David Chandler, "Tuol Sleng and S-21" *Searching for the Truth*, No. 18 (June 2001), 29.

¹⁰ Alex L Hinton, "Truth, Representation and the Politics of Memory after Genocide," in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Moral Order in Cambodia Today*, eds. David Chandler and Alexandra Kent (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2008), 68.

of some contention.¹¹ The mass graves at Choeung Ek were exhumed in 1980, around a year after Vietnamese forces drove the Khmer Rouge from power.¹² Of 129 such graves in the former Chinese cemetery, 89 were excavated at the time, and Vietnamese forensic specialists used chemicals to preserve the bones before they were placed in a wooden memorial pavilion.¹³ Further curation of the site was not proposed until the mid-1980s, and the non-famous glass memorial stupa filled with bones was not constructed until 1988.¹⁴

Although Heonik Kwon has analyzed the difficulty the Vietnamese state faced in memorializing much of its war dead, it seems the Vietnamese-backed PRK regime in Cambodia was able to put civilian deaths toward a seemingly more efficient political use. Kwon writes that those who died in civilian massacres, village supporters of the Viet Cong and, of course, Vietnamese who fought for the “wrong side” during the “American War” remained peripheral figures in official commemorative efforts for many years after the end of the war:

¹¹ Ledgerwood, “The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum,” 89.

¹² Although some of the long-time staffers I interviewed at Choeung Ek claim that they were aware of the presence of mass graves before that time, it is difficult to corroborate their stories. Rith said he returned to his home village, which was around 200 meters from Choeung Ek, several days after the Vietnamese invasion: “I came to the old Chinese graveyard (Choeung Ek) to dig for cassava and while I was digging I started to notice a bad smell and hear the sound of flies. I followed the smell and 10 meters away there was a pile of bodies. I was so scared I left all my cassava there and ran home.” Rith continued to explain that while he told other people in the village about what he had seen he didn’t tell authorities because he didn’t know who was responsible for the killings. “I thought it could be people killed by the Khmer Rouge, but I also thought it could be people killed by Vietnam. It was a very uncertain time and I didn’t know who might be a Khmer Rouge spy.”

¹³ Hughes, “Fielding Genocide,” 97.

¹⁴ Hughes, “Fielding Genocide,” 97.

The death of an armed soldier and the deaths of his village supporters were clearly differentiated in the official commemoration of the war, and the latter were rarely marked by any of the rich fertility symbols that surround the former. Mass civilian death was *tham sat* (tragic mass death), which offered no generative meanings or positive commemorative possibilities. The official approach to war death in contemporary Vietnam is to preserve heroic death and to transcend tragic death in the nation's modified march toward a prosperous future.¹⁵

While deaths that could be interpreted as heroic war sacrifice were generally sidelined in post-war Vietnam, they were highlighted in PRK-controlled Cambodia. The bodies of Tuol Sleng's last 14 victims were placed in coffins on the site and mass exhumations at Cheoung Ek offered up evidence to international delegations of Khmer Rouge horror. A controversial map of skulls in the shape of Cambodia was also installed at the Tuol Sleng museum, but taken down in 2002 due concerns over the appropriateness, ethically and spiritually, of exhibiting human remains in this way.

While such efforts may have bolstered the political agenda of the Vietnamese and PRK regime, they did not necessarily help Cambodians understand and come to terms with the millions killed during DK. Unlike in Vietnam, the majority of those killed in Cambodia had not been fighting an external enemy. Hughes describes this contradiction in the interpretation of bones at Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng:

Topographically, by maintaining a mass of human remains in the physical memorials, deaths considered valueless under Pol Pot¹⁶ are reclaimed as artifacts to be 'known' by the nation. What is 'remembered' via the Memorial's display is a fundamental political principle of the Khmer Rouge: that all life in Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea was considered by the Khmer Rouge authorities as potentially traitorous to the regime and thus as life abandoned by the law.

¹⁵ Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 19.

¹⁶ A familiar expression during Democratic Kampuchea was "to keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss."

Recalling Agamben, such life is that designated *as distinct from and external to political life*, as ‘bare life.’ It is impossible to restore value to such life lost, even in somber, costly memorialization, because the victims of a genocide cannot be understood as having been sacrificed.¹⁷

This harkens back to Williams’ argument about the differences between memorializing war dead and those who have been the victims of mass atrocities. Those targeted during a genocide have been dehumanized by their perpetrators to the extent that, like *Homo Sacer*, they can be killed but not sacrificed. Moreover, their deaths served no productive purpose in the eyes of the state, as might those of Vietnamese who died fighting the American enemy. Despite the complications of civilian massacres and Vietnamese who fought for the south, “the end of the fighting in Vietnam signaled a clear victory to be claimed and cherished;” meanwhile, in Cambodia “the vast majority of those who died unnaturally did so largely at the hands of other Khmer, not against some external imperialist enemy.”¹⁸ Moreover, “in Cambodia, in 1979, the major external aggressors, who styled themselves as liberators of a sort, where the Vietnamese whose presence, the longer it was sustained after the initial period, was not necessarily warmly welcomed.”¹⁹

Around two months after the fall of DK, even before Tuol Sleng opened to the public, private tours were arranged for foreigners from sympathetic socialist parties.

Brigitte Sion writes that,

The rush to turn a death site into a gallery for visitors is another indication that the new leadership had less concern about the memory of victims than about using the site for immediate political purposes. ‘A 1980 report from the Ministry of

¹⁷ Hughes, “Fielding Genocide,” 99.

¹⁸ John Clifford Holt, “Caring for the Dead Ritually in Cambodia.” *Southeast Asian Studies* 1:1 (2012): 10.

¹⁹ Holt, “Caring for the Dead,” 11.

Culture, Information, and Propaganda said that the museum was ‘used to show the international guests the cruel torture committed by the traitors of the Khmer people.’ When nationals were allowed to visit on Sunday, thousands came to Tuol Sleng, many to find information about lost relatives.²⁰

My own interviews with those who worked at the site in its early years support this version of events. Foreign delegations, particularly from other Eastern Bloc countries, were frequent visitors to the museum, where they would often be given guided tours by some of S-21’s few survivors. This partially explains the lack of extensive explanatory signage at the site. Tuol Sleng was initially created to be interpreted by those who had experienced its horrors, who functioned as artifacts of authenticity in ways not unlike the iron shackles that bound prisoners and various torture devices used to extract confessions. Tours to Tuol Sleng were in fact compulsory for early visitors to the PRK, a condition of visa approval; international visitors were expected to act as witnesses of genocide, bringing stories of their experiences back to their home countries and even the global community.²¹ Many Cambodians also came to the site after it opened to the public, mostly in the hopes of discovering information about loved ones. Throughout the 1980s, however, the numbers of Cambodians coming to the site decreased, while foreign visitation increased. Despite the aggressive efforts of the PRK to establish its legitimacy on the mass graves of the DK regime, countries such as the United States and China continued to recognize the repackaged Khmer Rouge coalition fighting from the Thai border as the official government of Cambodia until the fall of the Soviet Union.

²⁰ Brigitte Sion, “Conflicting Sites of Memory in Post-Genocide Cambodia.” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development* 2:1 (2011): 5.

²¹ Rachel Hughes, “Dutiful Tourism: Encountering the Cambodian Genocide,” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 49:3 (2008): 326.

Nonetheless, while the Vietnamese, particularly at first, may have been concerned with exposing the crimes of the Khmer Rouge internationally, they also sought to justify their presence in the country domestically. Documentation of local visitation to Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek during the 1980s is somewhat scarce, but Cambodians I interviewed both who had worked at the sites during that time or lived in the Phnom Penh area described coordinated efforts to bring people to the memorials. Several Cambodians I interviewed recalled being taken to the memorials with school groups during the PRK period. Dara, 52, said he had gone with a group to Choeung Ek in 1980, while the exhumations were underway:

There were skeletons and flies and it smelled bad. I could not eat or sleep after going there. The people looked like meat, killed and fresh, like meat at the market with flies and worms. Not all the bodies had been exhumed yet. The teacher scolded us for trying to stay away because of the smell and she told us ‘this is how the Khmer Rouge killed people.’ Up until then I didn’t know how people had been killed.

Still, due to the dire living conditions in post-1979 Cambodia, the ongoing civil war and the difficulty of travel, few Cambodians from outside of the Phnom Penh area would have had the chance to visit these central and prominent memorials. Nonetheless, Cambodians who lived under the PRK learned about the sites through other means. They heard about them through radio broadcasts, including a popular song “Tuol Sleng, Big Prison.” Several people I talked to recalled reading about Tuol Sleng in school; indeed one fourth-grade writing text from the Ministry of Education included two essays about Tuol Sleng, one “with a graphic of a dead prisoner shackled to an iron above a pool of blood and instruments of torture.”²²

²² Hinton, “Truth, Representation,” 71.

Moreover, a number of local memorial initiatives were enacted. Starting in 1983, directives were put forth for the creation of village-level memorial *stupa* to commemorate those who died under the Khmer Rouge;²³ these served as focal points for the May 20 “Day of Anger” that was inaugurated in the same year. “Overall, authorities constructed memorial narratives that emphasized collective suffering under the ‘Pol Potists.’ Memory was rhetorically linked to the affirmations of the political accord the PRK enjoyed with its socialist allies, and to Cambodians’ loyalty and vigilance in bringing an end to the civil war that still divided the country.”²⁴

Plans for the famous monument filled with skulls at Choeung Ek were not enacted until 1988 under the guidance of Mai Lam, the Vietnamese General who had overseen the curation of the Tuol Sleng museum. Lim Ourk, a local Cambodian architect, was employed to create a memorial *stupa* that would house the remains of those killed at Choeung Ek. Although such *stupa* generally hold the *cremated* remains of the dead, especially notable figures, the structure created at Cheoung Ek kept the bones intact and, through glass walls, allowed for their continued display. According to Mai Lam, the preservation of the skulls remained “very important for the Cambodian people – it’s the proof.”²⁵ Though crafted in the model of a Cambodian Buddhist *stupa*, Hughes argues that Choeung Ek “is an inescapably modern monument. Although it draws on a number

²³ Hughes, “Fielding Genocide,” 30.

²⁴ Hughes, “Fielding Genocide,” 33.

²⁵ Ledgerwood, “The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum,” 89.

of traditional religious architectural forms, these forms are transformed under a thoroughly late-twentieth century dilemma: how to memorialize a genocide.”²⁶

Nonetheless, the stupa at Choueng Ek was constructed during a time when Buddhist practice once again began to flourish in Cambodia,²⁷ and, to various extents, Cambodians have made room for such hybridity in their spiritual understandings and practices. The site has also continued to evolve, particularly as it has received increased visitation (both foreign and local) since the start of the first trial of the ECCC in 2009 and as it is seen as an increasingly viable source of revenue.

Meanwhile, in 2005, the Cambodian government entered into a partnership with the JC Royal Company to manage the Choeung Ek site and since that time it has been altered in a number of ways. Informational placards erected by the PRK regime in 1988 have been replaced with newer signs that place less emphasis on the Cold War imperative to fight imperialism; a small building contains new, museum-style exhibits about the history of DK and prosecutions underway at the ECCC; and, within the last year, an extensive multi-lingual audio tour was created by an Australian company that smoothly leads visitors through the site. Domestically, the site is managed by the Phnom Penh Municipality, while the Ministry of Culture is responsible for Tuol Sleng. Unlike the highly centralized oversight of memorials in Rwanda – as of 2008 they all fall under the auspices of CNLG – control of Cambodia’s major memorial sites appears more

²⁶ Hughes, “Fielding Genocide,” 103.

²⁷ Holt applies Kwon’s analysis (*After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai*) of a return to ancestral rituals in Vietnam to Cambodia in the late 1980s. “The demise of the centrally-planned socialist economy resulted in the revival of ancestral rituals as a way of strengthening the moral basis of the family – a principle unit in the new economic environment” (Kwon 2006: 3).

dispersed. This could be because broadcasting a narrative of Khmer Rouge atrocities has now become less of a political priority in Cambodia. Nonetheless, recent improvements suggest not only that the sites are potential financial assets, but also that their exhibits can be useful vehicles for conveying the narrative of history being crafted by the tribunal.

Development of Murambi and the Kigali Memorial Center

The Kigali Memorial Center, also known as “Gisozi,” is the main museum and memorial complex in Rwanda, consisting of mass graves where over 250,000 victims of the genocide are buried; a museum featuring exhibits about the genocide in Rwanda, other genocides perpetrated throughout history and one dedicated to children killed in 1994; a documentation center; a conference room; a comfortable café and gift shop; and four acres of memorial gardens. It sits on a hill overlooking central Kigali and is easily accessible to international visitors, who often include a trip to the center on their Rwandan travel itineraries. The center also hosts a number of organized delegations. Such visitors are generally given flowers or bouquets by museum staff to ritually place at a specified location in the mass graves – the size of bouquet seems to correspond with the importance of the guest – and the encounter is often recorded to later be broadcast on Rwandan national TV.

Although museum staff report that more Rwandans than foreigners visit the site throughout the course of the year, most locals come as part of organized groups during the annual three-month genocide commemoration period. With its eternal flame (modeled on the one at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum), displays in three languages (English, French and Kinyarwanda) and entire exhibit dedicated to other genocides –

including the Armenian Genocide, The Holocaust, Khmer Rouge period and the conflict in the former Yugoslavia – the center explicitly appeals to international sensibilities and Holocaust-centric models of genocide commemoration. It is perhaps not surprising that the project emerged from a partnership between the Kigali City Council and British-based Aegis Trust NGO (which is an offshoot of the United Kingdom’s Holocaust Centre). The City Council began constructing a building for a memorial museum in 2000, and when James Smith, the head of the Aegis Trust, first came to visit the Gisozi site, the structure was “full floor to ceiling with bones. Some felt that the only way to show the gravity was with a pile of bones.”²⁸ Yet Smith and others involved in the memorial curation found that stacks and stacks of bones overwhelmed visitors and were not an effective way to narrate the events of 1994. As a concession to those survivors who believed remains must be displayed as evidence, the Aegis Trust created a “bone room” exhibit within the museum.

The room is darkly lit, creating something of a sacred and reverent atmosphere, and the bones are illuminated in glass cases. The display feels more professional and in keeping with the standards of exhibits in locales such as the United States or United Kingdom than do displays of human remains at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. Bones are sorted by type, and some are housed with personal effects, such as rosary beads, keys, pens and identity cards. “Outside the bone room, a plaque reminds visitors that ‘the human remains interred in this sanctuary were exhumed from the many mass graves

²⁸ Auchter, Jessica. “The Politics of Displaying Bodies: Rwandan Genocide Memorialisation and the One Million Bones Project.” University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, working paper: 3.

around Kigali. Please respect the sanctity of their final resting place.”²⁹ In order to wrest the bones from anonymity, surrounding exhibits display photographs of Rwandans killed during the genocide and clothing and personal items – such as a Superman-themed bed sheet – belonging to victims.

Outside the museum, even though hundreds of thousands of Rwandans are interred in mass graves, bodies are almost completely absent, except for one exposed portion of a mass grave covered with glass. “The bodies become perhaps even more poignant of a memorial by virtue of the fact that they are anonymous and unseen. Bodies that are not visible are bodies nonetheless. The visitor stands and imagines thousands upon thousands upon thousands of people right in front of them, but does not see them.”³⁰ Perhaps, as James Smith determined when confronted with an entire building filled with bones, the careful selection of some remains as evidence for display, along with the interment of others in symbolically resonant mass graves, creates a memorial space that is more digestible and easier for visitors to narrate.

Although located in a somewhat remote location – at least for international visitors – the Murambi Genocide Memorial has been creating a more standardized, museum-like experience modeled on the Kigali Memorial Center. Murambi, a technical school that was nearing completion of its construction at the time of the genocide, sits in a breathtaking location, at the top of a hill surrounded by, as is common in the Rwandan landscape, other steep, lush hills. It is also highly visible and feels very exposed – it

²⁹ Auchter, “Politics of Displaying Bodies,” 5.

³⁰ Auchter, “Politics of Displaying Bodies,” 5.

would be difficult to escape down the hill unnoticed by those in the surrounding area. In other words, it is an ideal location for the isolation and extermination of a group.

As was the case throughout the country, Tutsi and Hutu sympathizers fled to certain locations, especially churches, because they believed they would be safe there. The several survivors I interviewed at Murambi told me that they had been instructed to go to the technical school by local officials, who said they would be protected. Rather, concentrating them all in one location made easier the job of the *génocidaires*. The running water system that served the building was cut off and food was scarce; those crammed into the technical school became gradually weaker. Although those in the school managed to fight off several advances by *interahamwe* militias, they were eventually overcome and slaughtered en masse. United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) troops stationed at Murambi from August to October 1994 buried the bodies scattered through the site. As Jennie Burnet writes (and as I found through my own interviews), some survivors interpret UNAMIR's actions as an attempt to cover up the crimes of the *génocidaires*.³¹

After the RPF invasion ended the genocide – or “liberated the country,” in the government's terminology – the recovering state had to confront a landscape strewn with bodies, both buried and exposed. According to Clarisse, a Tutsi who moved back to Rwanda after 1994,

Genocide has been a catastrophe symbolically. Death must be as peaceful as possible. In the genocide, bodies were dumped in disrespectful places and violated. There is a national traumatization. There's a collective desire to make peace with the dead. Bodies were everywhere in the early years. When I first

³¹ Jennie Burnet, “Whose Genocide? Whose Truth?” in *Genocide: Truth, Memory and Representation*, eds. Alexander Laban Hinton and Kevin Lewis O'Neill (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 97.

came back, I bought a house and there were bodies around the property. I had to hire people to take them away. I couldn't think about who they were or I would go crazy.

Efforts throughout the country were made to collect and respectfully bury the bodies – many had been dumped in latrines, crude mass graves, rivers or simply left where they were killed. Often ordinary people and survivors contributed to this process. Peter, a genocide survivor who now works for CNLG, volunteered as a teenager:

I was motivated to do it; I have always been able to control my emotions. Many people were traumatized and didn't want to participate. I was around 15 or 16 at that time. People showed me how to wash and care for the bodies. I wanted to help the community and I was also searching for my relatives; I thought I might be able to find them.

As Peter explained, because even those who had been buried were dumped disrespectfully into mass graves, when such graves were found, the bodies would be exhumed. They were then washed, placed in body bags and reburied.

The exhumations at Murambi proceeded somewhat unusually. Before the 1996 commemoration ceremony, which takes place each year during the period of the genocide (from April to July), 27,000 bodies were exhumed from the area of the technical school.³² The majority of the bodies were then reinterred during the 1996 ceremony, while over 1,800 were mummified using lye and placed on wooden racks.³³ Staffers at Murambi told me that, according to the post-1994 Rwandan constitution, areas where mass killing occurred must be transformed into memorial sites; they said survivors, as well as local and national government officials all participated in the exhumations at Murambi.

³² Claudine Vidal, "La Commémoration du Génocide au Rwanda: Violence Symbolique, Mémorisation Forcée et Histoire Officielle," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 175 (2004/3): 584.

³³ Burnet, "Whose Genocide?", 98.

Rachel Ibreck writes that survivors' associations were involved in the creation of the memorial at Murambi, as was also the case at Bisesero and Nyamata. Yet she also notes that "the extent to which survivors were directly involved varied; they have worked in partnership with, been regulated by, or been dependent upon the state or international agencies."³⁴ Meanwhile, Burnet writes: "when I asked the staff on the site, as well as people living in the surrounding area, I received various conflicting stories as to when, why and by whom the bodies had been prepared in this way. Whether or not the regime had made an explicit decision to mummify the bodies, they mobilized the bodies as part of the mythico-history of the genocide. The bodies regularly appeared on the nightly national television news as a feature in the official diplomatic visits of international dignitaries."³⁵

I also witnessed the visits of numerous foreign delegations to various memorial sites – both in person and on national TV – during my time in Rwanda and was struck by the ways in which the RPF government has used this potent symbolic capital internationally. Various arguments have been put forth as to the government's motives in highlighting gruesome memorial sites: they are trying to counter genocide deniers; they are trying to shame the international community for its failure to intervene during the genocide; they are trying to silence critics.

Yet, while the sites have played a key role internationally, they also receive significant numbers of Rwandan visitors. Unlike foreigners, who come individually or in small delegations throughout the year, staff members I interviewed at Murambi and the

³⁴ Rachel Ibreck, "The Politics of Mourning: Survivor Contributions to Memorials in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Memory Studies* 3:4 (2010): 335.

³⁵ Burnet, "Whose Genocide?", 98.

Kigali Memorial Center said that Rwandans visit primarily in large, organized groups during the three-month official commemoration period. Some Rwandans I interviewed said they felt an obligation to participate in such visits, even if they didn't necessarily want to. This was particularly true of those who had been to Murambi, given the fact that it is the only memorial site to display corpses in such raw and horrific poses.

Since 1996, there has been a great deal of controversy surrounding the display of human remains at Murambi. However, the government now appears to be taking steps to ease this tension. While over 800 corpses remain exposed in the small classrooms behind the main building at Murambi, 25 of the best-preserved bodies have been selected for a joint project with a team from Cranfield University in the United Kingdom. They will be treated by forensic experts and then placed in airtight glass coffins within the museum exhibit portion of the site. Thus, they will be given something of a burial, in accordance with Rwandan custom, while also remaining on display. It is unclear at this point what will happen to the other mummified bodies at Murambi. Staffers I talked to at CNLG, Murambi and the Kigali Memorial Center seemed to fall into two categories: 1.) Some hoped that all the bodies could be properly preserved and displayed in glass by the U.K. team, but doubted whether the resources would be available to do so; 2.) Others felt the bodies had deteriorated to the point that they should just be buried.

At the same time, the opening of an extensive museum exhibit in May of 2011 at the site's main building helps mediate and narrativize the experience for visitors. The exhibit was created in cooperation with the Aegis Trust and the informational displays in both locations are quite similar. They each tell a story of a peaceful pre-colonial Rwanda divided by racialized social categories during German and then Belgian rule. Years of

cyclical violence followed independence, finally resulting in the genocide of Tutsi within the country as Rwandans (predominantly Tutsi living in exile) organized under the RPF staged a military return to their homeland. Both exhibits emphasize that the international community turned a blind eye to the violence and it was ultimately the heroic RPF that stopped the genocide and liberated the country. Staffers I interviewed at Murambi said they welcomed the opening of the exhibit because it helped prepare visitors psychologically and emotionally for the shock of seeing the mummified bodies in the classrooms.

CHAPTER FOUR: State Narratives, Blame and Social Divisions

While memorials in Cambodia and Rwanda help bolster the legitimacy of the PRK/CPP and RPF, respectively, portraying the powers that be as national liberators, they assign blame in somewhat different ways. Memorials in Cambodia try to hold culpable a small criminal element at top of the Khmer Rouge hierarchy. Under the PRK, this meant emphasis on the “genocidal Pol Pot-Ieng Sary Clique;” today, it translates into highlighting the five defendants being held at the Khmer Rouge tribunal. Meanwhile, memorials in Rwanda assign blame much more broadly to the country’s Hutu population. Burnet notes a shift in the early years of genocide commemoration:

Beginning with the ceremony on 7 April 1996, in Murambi commune in southern Rwanda, the symbolic use of the dead took a dramatic departure from the first annual ceremony in which Hutu and Tutsi victims were buried side by side. Rather than honoring both Hutu and Tutsi victims of the genocide, the 1996 ceremony shifted its emphasis to distinguishing between genocide “victims” (understood as Tutsi) and “perpetrators” (understood as Hutu).¹

Tutsi were the primary targets of the genocide, but the roles of Hutu varied. Some were perpetrators; some were killed, often along with their Tutsi family members; some were bystanders and some sheltered Tutsi.² Thus, a frequent criticism lodged by Hutu I interviewed against the current government was that they felt, through the government’s memorial campaign, the word “Hutu” had become synonymous with “*génocidaire*.”

Narratives of Culpability in Cambodia

¹ Burnet, “Whose Genocide?”, 97.

² Susan Thomson, “The Darker Side of Transitional Justice: The Power Dynamics Behind Rwanda’s *Gacaca* Courts,” *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute* 81:3 (2011): 377.

The limitation and expansion of culpability also ties in with legal efforts in both countries. It took years of negotiation and pressure from the international community before the Cambodian government, led by Prime Minister Hun Sen, would agree to the creation of the ECCC. Numerous activists and human rights groups have criticized the narrow scope of prosecutions, contending that crimes against humanity were perpetrated throughout all levels of DK; they say to fix blame on only five former leaders creates an inaccurate historical narrative of the period. Yet Hun Sen is in a delicate position. In order to put an end to Khmer Rouge guerilla attacks in the late 1990s, he offered amnesty to former Khmers Rouge and even gave many comfortable positions in the current government. Thus, a certain feeling of betrayal is already present in former Khmer Rouge strongholds like Pailin, in the country's northwest, where some residents feel it was unfair for the government to proceed with any trial whatsoever.

With the end of Cold War and massive United Nations intervention in Cambodia from 1992-93, the government began to downplay some of its anti-DK rhetoric and the Day of Anger was temporarily suspended as the UN attempted to involve Khmer Rouge fighters in the political process. Still, officials maintained an ambivalent relationship with the history of DK and many continued to refer to the period as "the unacceptable practices of the recent past."³ At the same time, after 1993, governments such as the United States that had supported the repackaged Khmer Rouge force throughout the

³ Alexander Laban Hinton and Kevin Lewis O'Neill, "Genocide, Truth, Memory and Representation: An Introduction," in *Genocide: Truth, Memory and Representation*, eds. Alexander Laban Hinton and Kevin Lewis O'Neill (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 6.

1980s began to label what had occurred under DK as “genocide.”⁴ Hun Sen appeared to highlight Khmer Rouge atrocities when he found it politically expedient to do so. He and co-prime minister Norodom Ranariddh (who was later ousted in a coup) did indeed write to the UN in 1997 requesting the creation of a court to try former leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime. Yet, Hun Sen changed his position soon afterward, many believe because the initial request was a tactic to intimidate remaining Khmer Rouge military forces into surrendering and reintegrating into society. By 1998, with the death of Pol Pot and demobilization of Khmer Rouge guerilla fighters, Hun Sen reportedly said Cambodians should “dig a hole and bury the past.”⁵ Blanket amnesty was granted to Khmer Rouge soldiers; many in leadership positions were offered comfortable posts within the ruling CPP infrastructure.

Yet, international pressure for a tribunal continued, and Hun Sen’s government entered into protracted negotiations with the UN. An agreement was reached in 2003 that established a hybrid court to be based in Cambodia that would try only “senior leaders and those most responsible” for the crimes committed during DK, from 1975-79. Hearings in the first trial, against former S-21 chief “Comrade Duch,” did not begin until 2009, and since its inception, the tribunal has been plagued by allegations of corruption and political interference. In particular, critics of Hun Sen charge that he has refused to allow the court to pursue prosecutions beyond five “scapegoat” defendants because casting a wider net could implicate members of the current political establishment.⁶

⁴ Hinton and O’Neill, “Genocide, Truth, Memory,” 6.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Cambodia: Khmer Rouge Trial is Justice Delayed” (June 2011): <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/24/cambodia-khmer-rouge-trial-justice-delayed>.

Investigators at the court have opened files into additional cases, but there is a great deal of skepticism regarding whether Hun Sen will allow these cases to move forward.

Cambodians from around the country only began visiting Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng in large numbers starting in 2004 as part of a “study tour” initiative launched by civil society organizations. NGOs such as the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) sought to put pressure on the government to move forward with a tribunal by bringing groups of Cambodians to the country’s two most prominent memorial sites and to the ECCC courthouse itself. Since the curation of Tuol Sleng and Cheoung Ek under the PRK regime, international tourists had continued to make up the bulk of visitors. The end of the Cold War saw an increase in foreigners from locales such as the United States and Western Europe, and their numbers grew every year, making the sites a significant source of revenue. The chilling photographs taken of seemingly dazed, frightened and sometimes even resigned S-21 prisoners have become some of the most powerful representations internationally of Khmer Rouge atrocities. While conducting interviews with international visitors to the museum in 2000, Hughes writes that she was surprised by the level of familiarity many already had with the images:

Few could recall exactly where they had first seen the portraits, but were adamant that their contact with the images had occurred prior to their arrival in Cambodia. These comments sparked my interest in how and why the portrait photographs have become the undisciplined envoys of Cambodia’s traumatic past, circulating on a global scale and through various media.⁷

⁶ St  phanie Giry, “Necessary Scapegoats? The Making of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal,” *The New York Review of Books Blog*, July 23, 2012: <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/jul/23/necessary-scapegoats-khmer-rouge-tribunal/>

⁷ Rachel Hughes, “The Abject Artefacts of Memory: Photographs from Cambodia’s Genocide,” *Media, Culture and Society* 25:1 (2003): 24.

In 1997, a selection of the photographs was even displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Although some improvements and upgrades were made to the sites over the years, however, they still lacked comprehensive explanatory signage and could be difficult for visitors to interpret.

While Hughes' interviews with foreigners at Tuol Sleng revealed that many had come to the site in order to gain a greater understanding of what had happened during DK, "tourists generally exit the museum in a state of confusion."⁸ Unless they are able to attain a trained tour guide, "while many arrive at the museum with the expectation of a better understanding of the Pol Pot period, they leave with the hope that their 'being there' was at least significant. In other words, the experience is no longer *epistemological* but *testimonial*, not 'I now know more' but 'I visited.'"⁹ Similar reactions are not uncommon among Cambodians who visit the sites as part of the ECCC study tours, depending on how the tours are conducted. However, as will be discussed shortly, the stakes are somewhat different for tourists hoping to fulfill a moral and humanitarian obligation in a foreign land, and for Cambodians struggling to understand and narrate the history of their own country.

The initial study tours conducted by organizations such as DC-Cam and CSD often selected respected members of local communities and involved multi-stage processes of outreach, discussion and visitation. Peter Manning followed a 2008 outreach effort conducted by CSD wherein Cambodians from a former Khmer Rouge stronghold were taken on tours of the sites in Phnom Penh and later participated in a large public

⁸ Hughes, "Dutiful Tourism," 325.

⁹ Hughes, "Dutiful Tourism," 326.

forum on “Justice and Reconciliation” in Pailin town (at which I was also present). Commenting on the way history is being portrayed through such efforts, he writes that “ECCC prosecutions are reflective of the way blame for DK is represented at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek and, as such, they are deployed to help persuade groups that participate in the ECCC outreach about the truth of the DK period and the need of the ECCC as a response to it.”¹⁰ Participants from Pailin were disturbed by and sometimes unreceptive to the information presented to them through the outreach process and tours of the memorial sites. Partly, this is due to the fact that “members of communities such as Pailin largely experienced KR rule in a setting of agrarian cooperativism, receiving more favorable treatment, rather than in incarceration and torture facilities in an urban setting.”¹¹ A number of participants questioned the mandate of the court and could not understand why culpability had been limited to crimes committed between 1975 to 1979. If the ECCC is to try former leaders of DK, those responsible for the American bombing in Cambodia before 1975 and crimes committed by PRK and Khmer Rouge forces after 1979 should also be held to account, they argued. Extracting DK from its historical context, many felt, did not tell the “whole story.”¹²

As hearings for the first trial began in 2009, outreach efforts expanded and intensified, as both international and domestic visitation to somewhat updated memorial sites increased. Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek now feature informational displays about the five defendants on trial at the tribunal. Tourists at Tuol Sleng can even interact with the

¹⁰ Peter Manning, “Governing Memory: Justice, Reconciliation, and Outreach at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia” *Memory Studies* 5:2 (2011): 178.

¹¹ Manning, “Governing Memory,” 170.

¹² Manning, “Governing Memory,” 177.

prison's two remaining survivors. They sit across from each other on the site's main pathway, each presiding over a desk filled with materials for sale related to their experiences and Khmer Rouge history. Both are happy to sign books and pose for photos with visitors.

When actual trial hearings began in the case of Comrade Duch, the atmosphere at the ECCC completely transformed. Until that time, proceedings had been sparsely attended, the 500-seat courtroom occupied by a smattering of international observers and participants from the occasional civil society outreach tour. But with the start of the trial and appointment of a new head of Public Affairs, hundreds of Cambodians began to be bused to the court each day as part of large-scale study tour efforts undertaken by the ECCC. Every seat in the expansive courtroom was now filled; overflow participants watched proceedings from outdoor simulcasts, and weary tour members (often children and the elderly), rested outside in the open-air canteen area.

In an interview for publication, the late head of Public Affairs Reach Sambath told me that he had advertised trips to the court on radio, TV and through the grassroots CPP political network. He said response was overwhelming, with constant calls from village leaders to arrange tours and groups from some areas requesting to come multiple times. While civil society organizations continued to do outreach – and some still organize smaller-scale study tours to this day – they were eclipsed in number by the ECCC program and today the vast majority of study tours are coordinated by the tribunal.

As the tribunal's second case unfolds, hundreds of Cambodians from around the country are bused to the sites during proceedings in an effort to “educate” them about their country's past and the cases underway at the court. During a tour held in early

September 2012, men, women and children from Takeo province met at the local commune office at 4 a.m. to catch buses for the trip. Many said they had seen programs about the tribunal and tours on TV that had motivated them to accept their village chief's offer to participate in the program. "I lost many relatives during the Pol Pot time. I want to know who was on top, who was responsible?" one woman told me. "I have watched on TV about the court, but I don't think it is as clear as being here to see for myself."

Itineraries of tours vary depending on time limitations and coordination with other groups. For example, one group may visit Tuol Sleng and/or Choeung Ek in the morning, while others start their day at the tribunal itself. Before relatively rushed and unmediated afternoon tours of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, the Takeo group began the day at the ECCC building with a briefing from a press officer about the history of the tribunal and proceedings that had taken place to date. In a somewhat politically truncated narration of the court's creation, the press officer said that the ECCC had come into being through the efforts of Hun Sen, who had requested the United Nations create a court to "discover who was really responsible for crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge."

Several older members of the audience interjected to express their support for this effort, saying that they had also "worked hard in the fields" and never had enough to eat during the DK period. Another man in attendance, however, more nervously inquired as to who, exactly, was being investigated. "I was the head of a collective during that time," he said, "and I never knew of any killings or any orders to execute people." To reassure him, the press officer explained the mission of the court is to try "senior leaders and those most responsible" for the atrocities committed during the period of DK. "The court is not

interested in small people,” he said, “only the people who made policy. You do not need to worry.”

The exchanges that took place at this press briefing illustrate some of tensions inherent in the current justice and educational efforts underway in Cambodia. Social cleavages still exist between those from former Khmer Rouge strongholds and Cambodians who lived under PRK administration. While the ECCC efforts have brought tens of thousands of Cambodians to Tuol Sleng, Choeung Ek and the court itself, they have received criticism for privileging “head count” over actual education and rushing participants through the sites with little explanation. ECCC-coordinated tours often provide little in the way of interpretation or historical context, relying on the physicality of evidence at Tuol Sleng, Choeung Ek and even the court itself to convey this state-sanctioned version of history. In many ways, the lack of clarity serves the government’s purpose – too much explanation and discussion could lead to questions that subvert the authority of the official narrative being formed. Yet visitation to the emotionally-charged memorials and exposure to human remains and other artifacts of death can nonetheless exacerbate underlying tensions, leaving Cambodians feeling confused, resentful and, in some cases, suspicious of the physical “evidence” itself.

Experiences varied for the different participants I interviewed, although they frequently told me that they had “run out of time,” so they had not been able to visit all the sites expected or their experience at sites had been cut short. Many reported that they had only 30 minutes to visit Tuol Sleng or Cheoung Ek, and that they were offered no official guides to help them interpret the sites. Although participants often told me that they agreed to join the tours because they were hoping to gain a better understanding of

the Khmer Rouge period, they left feeling confused by many of the displays and artifacts. In particular, they had difficulty distinguishing between Tuol Sleng staff and those who had been purged in the photo displays. “I saw a girl from my village in the photos, but I don’t know if she was a prisoner,” Ratana, 56, a visitor from Pailin, told me. “Maybe she was just a cook.” There were also misunderstandings about what kinds of torture methods were used, with tour participants often believing that a device used to position the heads of prisoners while their photographs were taken was actually a torture machine that drilled into the skulls of victims.

Sina, 56, a villager from Takeo who has participated in three study tours told me, “I don’t understand how Cambodia fell into this. That’s why I have gone many times. I keep going, but still no answers.” I heard similar statements from a number of those I interviewed and found that their narrations of their experiences tended to focus on the artifacts they had encountered – shackles, skulls, paintings depicting the ways in which people were tortured – rather than a description of the functioning of DK, how the regime had come to power and why its reign had been so deadly. Chenda, 28, a farmer from Takeo, offered a narrative typical for study tour participants who had lived in former PRK areas. She said she had only heard stories from her family of labor and starvation under DK, and “was shocked and frightened to see the torture materials and chains at Tuol Sleng. I did not expect it to be so cruel. I still do not really understand why the Khmer Rouge happened and why people were killed.”

Despite the frequent lack of interpretation and clarity on the ECCC study tours, the general narrative of culpability disseminated by organizers remains one of limited responsibility assigned to the top echelons of the DK power structure. In my research, I

found that Cambodians interacted with this rendering of history in a number of different ways, particularly depending on whether they had lived in PRK- or Khmer Rouge-controlled areas after 1979. Those in the former category I interviewed often said they wished more people would be prosecuted because they knew of many crimes committed by lower-level Khmer Rouge cadre that had gone unpunished. A good number also said the current number of prosecutions was sufficient, although it should be noted that their willingness to participate in tours coordinated and advertised by the local CPP infrastructure may have made them more prone to support government policy in general. Those study tour participants hailing from former Khmer Rouge strongholds had far more conflicted feelings about the narrative put forth by the study tours and the existence of any prosecutions at the ECCC.

Some visitors hailing from former Khmer Rouge stronghold Pailin outright rejected the work of the court and what they had been shown on the study tours. Ratana, a former Khmer Rouge nurse, said the leaders “wanted us to have a good and happy life” and that only a small amount of killing had taken place near the end of DK because “Vietnamese spies were trying to undermine the regime.” She recalled how helicopters had come to Pailin to arrest defendants for the ECCC and said she pitied the elderly former leaders, who she thought should be released. She went on to say that she only participated in the study tour because the village chief had asked her to – he felt they needed a woman representative, in accordance with CPP policy to promote female involvement in the program – and that she didn’t believe the DK leaders were responsible for the crimes showcased at S-21 and Choeung Ek.

Many people died during the fighting between the Khmer Rouge and Lon Nol and there were many bodies. We don’t know whose bodies those are. And the clothes

at Choeung Ek don't look like the same material of the Khmer Rouge clothes. I have no interest in going back to that place.

Several other Pailin residents I interviewed questioned the origin of the bones displayed at Choeung Ek, seemingly contradicting the justifications often invoked for exhibiting remains of victims of mass slaughter: that it is incontrovertible “evidence.” Interestingly, Ratana's 20-year-old son contradicted his mother, saying he did believe the evidence he had seen at Choeung Ek. It is not unusual, however, even for members of younger generations to doubt the story displayed at memorials. Unable to grasp why Cambodians would kill fellow Cambodians, they may revert to “mythical explanations,” particularly that the Vietnamese were responsible for the carnage at sites like Choeung Ek.¹³

Other Pailin study tour participants were more receptive to the information that they had been presented, but still questioned whether the former DK leaders were truly responsible and knew about the killing. Like many former Khmer Rouge soldiers I interviewed, Sokheng, 57, told me that “the Khmer Rouge had the best policies and sacrificed everything for the people.” They prohibited gambling, drinking alcohol, robbery and womanizing. Moreover, with the backing of former King Sihanouk, they told Cambodians that they were fighting to liberate the country from American imperialists. He said he thought the leaders may not have known about the extent of the killings, but that it might be fair to hold them accountable: “it is like in a family. If a child does something wrong, then the parents are responsible.” Rith, 46, also a former Khmer Rouge soldier, said he thought lower-level cadre must have misinterpreted the orders of their

¹³ Impunity Watch. *Perspective Series Conference, Breaking the Silence: International Memory Initiatives Exchange Forum*, 2012.

superiors. He said he had lived in Pailin with the former leaders and their families and they,

were just normal people. I met the wife of Khieu Samphan on Pchum Ben day. She chatted with me and asked about the DK time. She said people had told her they had no rice to eat. I told her my family just had a big pot of water – you couldn't even find the rice inside. She said she had no idea at that time that people were starving.

Like other former Khmer Rouge soldiers, he assigned potential blame to a number of outside sources, including the Cold War, United States and even karma. Some older people think that Cambodia was destined to go through a genocide, “no matter who the leaders were,” he explained. Vuthy, 49, thought the policies themselves may have been responsible for the brutality that occurred during DK: “We were following good policies and principles. But it became stricter and stricter and people became crazy. Leaders at the grassroots level are the ones who made the mistakes. The top leaders never said anything about killing or execution; they just talked about building the country and building solidarity.”

Narratives of Culpability in Rwanda

Meanwhile, Rwanda has taken a completely different approach to judicial accountability. Realizing that the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Tanzania would only try top leaders, the local *Gacaca* court system was implemented throughout the country to address the problem of lower-level perpetrators. Based on a traditional model of Rwandan community justice, the courts tried nearly two million people between their creation in 2001 and closure in June of 2012. Their legacy has been somewhat controversial. Supporters claim they have allowed for a widespread level of

accountability that would have been impossible through a traditional court system; critics say they endangered the lives of Tutsi witnesses in some locations¹⁴ and have led to increased social marginalization of Hutu.¹⁵ In contrast to the case in Cambodia, President Kagame and numerous RPF leaders came to Rwanda from positions of exile, so they do not have to worry to the same extent about being potentially tainted through affiliation with the previous regime.

Since 1994, Rwanda has become something of a post-genocide success story. The country is more or less stable under the auspices of an RPF political system and economic growth has helped maintain peace. In Fawcett's 2003 study of the efforts to forge a more inclusive Rwandan identity, she writes that,

The Hutu were conscientiously built into a nation by the Habyarimana regime, with a view to creating a homogenous nation-state in Rwanda. Nowadays, a more inclusive form of nation-building has been instigated by the Rwandan government. To achieve the confluence of nation and state the Rwandan people have to believe there is something holding them together as one nation, and the rhetoric of the State is attempting to provide this.¹⁶

President Paul Kagame has shied away from using ethnic categories and has drawn upon the Kinyarwandan language, which is spoken by all Rwandans, as a symbol of national unity. Through surveys conducted at the National University of Rwanda, Fawcett concludes that this effort has been well received by the younger generation and is achieving some measure of success. However, critics of Kagame and the RPF would argue that those most opposed to the regime's practices would have fled the country –

¹⁴ Ibreck, "The Politics of Mourning," 339.

¹⁵ Thomson, "The Darker Side of Transitional Justice," 378.

¹⁶ Amalia Fawcett, "Becoming Rwandan: A Dialogue of National Identity," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 22:4 (2003): 105.

and would thus not be studying at the National University of Rwanda. Moreover, even if those interviewed disapproved of the government's policies, they may not feel comfortable confiding this.

However, the authoritarian leadership of the state, suppression of political dissent and an aggressive campaign to build a new Rwandan identity have all come under a significant amount of criticism – and could signal trouble for the years ahead. Jennifer Melvin contends that the RPF's strict promotion of a unified identity through a national program of legislation, education and justice has meant a curtailing of freedom of expression and limitation of the versions of the genocide that can be discussed.¹⁷ The new Rwandan constitution that came into effect in 2003 calls for an end to ethnic divisions and “genocide ideology,”¹⁸ yet Kagame's critics charge that political opponents are often accused of fostering divisionism and “genocide ideology.” Political parties cannot be based on ethnic group, clan, region, sex, religion “or any other socially divisive categories.”¹⁹

In addition, the government has fostered the “creation of mechanisms to ensure the ‘unlearning’ of previous propaganda and the ‘relearning’ of a new sense of patriotism for purposes of recreating a new state and reimagining a new nation.”²⁰ Such mechanisms include local *Gacaca* courts to punish low-level genocidaires and *Ingando* “solidarity

¹⁷ Jennifer Melvin, “Reconstructing Rwanda: Balancing Human Rights and the Promotion of National Reconciliation,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 14:6 (2010): 932–951.

¹⁸ Nasong'o, “Reengineering Social Institutions,” 305.

¹⁹ Nasong'o, “Reengineering Social Institutions,” 306.

²⁰ Nasong'o, “Reengineering Social Institutions,” 307.

camps.” *Ingando* are mandatory for anyone who wishes to study at a public university and they teach young people to see themselves “first and foremost as Rwandans rather than Hutu or Tutsi. They also receive civic education; lessons on colonialism and its ‘divide and rule’ strategy, which was at the root of the genocide; and they were instructed in the importance of collaboration.”²¹

Longman discusses some of the pitfalls of the RPF’s “sweeping campaign to shape public memory” post-genocide. When the predominantly Tutsi RPF ended the genocide and seized hold of the country, its leadership faced a dilemma: Although Tutsi only accounted for around 10-15 percent of the Rwandan population, they dominated in the RPF, and leaders worried that ruling through sheer force would simply lead to more Hutu resentment and continued violence. As a solution, the RPF leadership sought popular compliance through,

the development of a hegemonic ideology that both would enhance the legitimacy of the RPF and the government by portraying them as heroic, representative, fair, and committed to democracy and also would undercut possibilities for opposition by discrediting ethnic-based politics and equating opposition with support for genocide. This ideology is rooted in and supported by an historical narrative about Rwanda’s past that the RPF and its supporters have used in an attempt to shape the collective memory of the Rwandan population – as well as the international community.²²

According to this RPF narrative, Rwandans lived in harmony before colonialism and it was the Europeans that created divisionism through the racial identifications of Tutsi, Hutu and Twa. They used these categories to foment tension and ruled indirectly through

²¹ Nasong’o, “Reengineering Social Institutions,” 308.

²² Timothy Longman, “Memory, Justice, and Power in Post-Genocide Rwanda” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, August 31, 2006).

the Tutsi. But when the Tutsi began to yearn for independence, the colonial authorities switched allegiances and then supported a Hutu movement. Once the Hutu were in power, the regime remained plagued by neocolonial interests, which led to a continued dissemination of the colonial-era ideology in order to augment foreign wealth and power. This enabled the government to easily mobilize the masses to slaughter the Tutsi in the 1994 genocide. While much of the RPF narrative resembles the truth, Longman contend that it lays a disproportionate percentage of blame on foreign sources – and not on internal tensions in Rwandan society itself.

In both legal and memorial efforts, only certain narratives are sanctioned by the government. Longman and Melvin argue that the *Gacaca* courts only allow for discussion of Hutu guilt, and completely ignore RPF atrocities. Thus, the new government is proposing to construct a unified society while only acknowledging the past crimes of one group of people. Another element of the state-sponsored program to promote a collective identity has been the creation of numerous memorials and commemoration ceremonies throughout the country. Ibreck notes that most scholars have focused on how such efforts serve to legitimize the ruling regime. At such sites,

Memory is neither plural, nor openly contested. The post-genocide state has a dominant role in setting limits on whose lives are to be remembered publicly and how. At official commemorations RPF leaders justify their policies and lambast their critics, while demanding public participation.²³

Confounding the project to build a unified Rwanda free of ethnic divisions, the current status people enjoy in society is generally tied to the role they played during the genocide (and thus, once again, fosters a Hutu/Tutsi distinction, even if by another name). “Official unity cannot disguise the politics of race, which involves readings people’s political

²³ Ibreck, “The Politics of Mourning,” 330.

identities and social status off their position in relation to that defining event of Rwandan history, the genocide of 1994.”²⁴

At memorials such as Murambi and the Kigali Memorial Center, the emphasis on the Tutsiness of genocide victims appears to contradict efforts to create a unified society. Within Rwanda, the events of 1994 are known as the *genocide against the Tutsi* and no other potential descriptions – “civil war,” “massacre,” “Rwandan genocide” – are officially acceptable. There is some mention made of moderate Hutu victims and also Hutu rescuers at Murambi and Gisozi, but these appear almost as perfunctory afterthoughts, dwarfed by the every-present focus on Tutsi as genocide victims. Although the RPF’s national unity policy discourages any mention of “Hutu” or “Tutsi” in public, Rwandans have developed “a new language for discussing ethnicity,” largely using the events of 1994 as a referent; this new constellation of terms has polarized “discussions of the genocide by leaving no room for Hutu victims and by globalizing blame on Hutu, regardless of whether they participated in the genocide.”²⁵

The emphasis on the Tutsiness of genocide victims is highlighted during the annual three-month commemoration period. For a foreigner arriving in Rwanda, the ever-present focus on genocide, and specifically on the *Tutsi genocide* during commemoration is striking and even unexpected. The first week of the commemoration period is the most focused, with a large gathering in the national stadium and a host of often obligatory commemoration and remembrance activities throughout the country.

²⁴ Hintjens and Kiwuwa, “Not Ethnicity, but Race,” 77.

²⁵ Burnet, “Whose Genocide?”, 89.

Yet such activities continue throughout the three-month period. Banners in shops and grocery stores urge Rwandans to remember the genocide victims; billboards with the year's commemoration theme – for the 18th anniversary it was “Learning from our history to build a better future” – tower over main thoroughfares and organizations ranging from school groups to customer service organizations arrange commemoration events with memorial slideshows and testimonies from victims (always Tutsi) and perpetrators (always Hutu). It is also during this time that the vast majority of Rwandan visitation to memorial sites takes place. Some Rwandans may come in groups or individually to grieve, but much of the visitation is coordinated by organizations and local government and more or less compulsory (either socially or legally²⁶) for both Hutu and Tutsi.

Rwandans I interviewed of Hutu background told me they felt “ashamed” to be Hutu and that “after the genocide, people thought all Hutu were demons.” One Hutu teacher told me of her visit to Murambi: “Everyone put on a mask of sadness. No one dared to ask questions because they could be misinterpreted and that would cause problems.” A Rwandan man, half Hutu and half Tutsi, said he visited Murambi with his church choir and prepared himself psychologically during the entire bus ride so he would be able to control his emotions. When he actually saw the bodies with his fellow choir members, and heard their words of anger toward the Hutu, he said he remained upset for two weeks after the trip. In some cases, these divisions and feelings of alienation have also led Rwandans to question the authenticity of the remains on display. How do we know these are Tutsi and not Hutu? they ask. How do we know these are people killed

²⁶ Scholars and experts participating in the July 2012 conference “Genocide and Denial: The Armenian, Jewish and Tutsi Genocides” at the Kigali Memorial Center discussed the imprisonment of Rwandans for refusing to participate in commemoration activities.

during the genocide and not during the war? While states like Cambodia and Rwanda may claim the need for physical evidence to prove the crimes of the past, this logic seems somewhat flawed. As Sara Guyer writes, “for those who defend them, memorials composed of unburied bones offer the clearest physical evidence of the genocide. But this clarity is obscured as soon as one recognizes that any body can make bones (and some of the bones collected at these sites may belong to people murdered after the genocide as part of the retaliation campaigns).”²⁷

Nonetheless, officials in Cambodia and Rwanda continue to stress the need for physical evidence. And it seems clear that, even while some may deny the authenticity of the remains, for others the emotional horror resulting from such displays is proof enough of their utility. One Tutsi survivor told me:

At Murambi, you see life and death right there. It still smells like death. The smell has permeated everything – walls, floors – and you can still smell it when you leave. Murambi tears you down. You would have to be inhuman for it not to. It is the most powerful memorial – you don’t need any explanation or a degree to know what it is.

In other words, supporters of the display believe the emotional weight of Murambi sends a clear message – to survivors, perpetrators, foreigners and future generations.

Unlike the “reassuring fratricide” described by Anderson, projects of collective national memorialization in Cambodia and Rwanda can actually highlight social cleavages. And the use of human remains, due to their tremendous psychological and emotional weight, only raise the stakes. Residents of former Khmer Rouge strongholds I met in Cambodia who had visited Choeung Ek often responded quite differently to the site than those from other areas. They were more likely to think the bones should be

²⁷ Sara Guyer, “Rwanda’s Bones,” *Boundary* 36:2 (2009): 156.

buried or cremated²⁸ or to doubt the physical evidence itself. Although freedom of speech is strictly limited in Rwanda, especially in relation to the genocide and memorialization, Hutus I interviewed who had visited sites such as Murambi and Gisozi were also more likely to question to whom physical remains belonged and the privileging of some kinds of victims over others. Several mentioned that they sympathized with incarcerated opposition leader Victoire Ingabire, who has been charged with divisionism and historical revisionism. After returning to Rwanda in 2010 after 16 years abroad, she came to lay a wreath at the Gisozi mass graves and purportedly deliver a speech on unity and reconciliation. Although she acknowledged the genocide against the Tutsi, she claimed that

if you look around, you realize that there is no real political policy to help Rwandans achieve reconciliation. For example, if we look at this memorial, it stops at people who died during the Tutsi genocide. It does not look at the other side – at the Hutus who died during the genocide. Hutus who lost their people are also sad and they think about their lost ones and wonder, “When will our dead ones be remembered?”²⁹

²⁸ “They should be cremated – it’s miserable to look at,” one former Khmer Rouge soldier from Pailin told me. “They should be buried so people who are alive can be calm and relaxed.”

²⁹ “Victoire’s Speech and Quotes,” accessed June 20, 2013, <http://www.victoire-ingabire.com/Eng/victoires-quotes/>.

CHAPTER FIVE: Spiritual Implications and Complications

This drive to display human remains not only potentially exacerbates social divisions, but also creates tensions with pre-existing funerary rituals and spiritual beliefs. In both Cambodia and Rwanda, there is particular concern for those who die bad, or “unnatural” deaths and that their spirits may continue to linger on earth, causing misfortune for the living. According to Hughes, “for this reason, Choeung Ek is considered by many Cambodians to be a dangerous place and they refuse to visit the Memorial. To have the uncremated remains *on display* is considered by some to be a great offense, and tantamount to a second violence being done to the victims.”¹ Once again, the responses I received from Cambodians related to this conundrum were varied. Many visitors said they did indeed believe there were spirits at Choeung Ek, but that they would not harm them, especially because they came to visit in a large group during the daylight hours. Yet one woman, Thida, told me that as soon as she entered the site, she heard voices calling her name and she decided to return to the tour bus while others continued with their visit. She said another woman in her group became so distraught and sick that she had to be carried from Choeung Ek back to the bus. The same woman died around a year later, which Thida suspected might have been connected to her experience at the site.

Staff members reported hauntings at Cheoung Ek, but seemed to agree that they had become less frequent over time – and that the site had become less frightening in general – given its continued development (museumification) and the large number of visitors it was receiving. Rith said he had several spiritual encounters around the time the

¹ Hughes, “Fielding Genocide,” 106.

stupa had been built in 1988. He and two guards had sought shelter under the stupa at night due to a rainstorm: “We heard the sound of flip-flops on the mud, around 20 or 30 people, but we looked all around when the rain stopped and no one was there. So we made an offering and burned incense; we told the spirits we were here to protect the site, not to cause trouble.” Another staff member told me: “In the past, the spirits used to come out at night, but now there aren’t as many as before because we have prayed for them and made offerings for many years.”

The presence of unburied bodies in Rwandan memorials also creates spiritual concerns. Burnet contends that “by tradition, Rwandans are horrified of cadavers”² and Guyer writes that “unlike other parts of Africa, in Rwanda, there is no tradition of displaying bones or fetishizing corpses.”³ Rwandans I interviewed stressed the need for a divide between the worlds of the living and dead and said that in pre-colonial times bodies were either left in the forest or buried and that people did not return to visit them (as in the Western Christian practice of visiting graves). Rather, they constructed small spirit huts near their houses where they made offerings. Under colonial Catholicism, Rwandans were urged to bury their dead and to put them in cemeteries. Of course, some elements of pre-colonial religion remained and numerous Rwandans told me that, until the genocide, it had been unusual for people to visit graves and cemeteries. Henriette, 33, explained, “in our culture, we used to fear places where people are buried. Rwandans prefer to go to memorials in groups because of their spiritual power. Cemeteries are places for evil things. People are afraid to pass by them at night.” Although the fear of

² Burnet, “Whose Genocide?”, 98.

³ Guyer, *Rwanda’s Bones*, 159.

corpses pre-dated colonial times, Catholicism also has a history of ascribing great spiritual power to human remains. Antonius Robben writes that starting in Medieval times, followers believed that they could be healed by the relics of saints; in nineteenth century Argentina, the remains of enemy combatants were mutilated so as to weaken their power over the living.⁴

In Rwanda, those who died tragically, particularly girls who were never able to have children or get married, need special attention to transition to the afterlife peacefully. Today, many Rwandans believe this means they need a proper burial. Although it is not politically correct to discuss indigenous beliefs and spirits in Rwanda, I did hear several stories of hauntings at Murambi. Janvier, who works at the site, used to guard the classrooms with the bodies at night:

Sometimes the spirits would talk and light fires. People in the villages around here ask how I can stay here with the spirits – they think they are angry because of the way they were killed. At night, they say they hear people singing and babies crying. At first I was scared, but now I am used to this place.

Since the genocide, there has been a surge in popularity of other denominations of Christianity (such as Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists) and some Rwandans I interviewed said that, because of their belief in religion, they did not think spirits of the dead continued to haunt the earth – and even if they did, their Christianity would protect them against any potential harm.

In both countries, I also found that people were able to accommodate memorials into their pre-existing spiritual beliefs to some extent given the historically disruptive nature of genocide and what they perceived as a need for evidentiary proof. Partly, this is

⁴ Antonius C.G.M. Robben, "State Terror in the Netherworld: Disappearance and Reburial in Argentina," in *Death, Mourning and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, ed. by Antonius C.G.M. Robben (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 139.

the result of the inability to identify most of the human remains on display in memorials – neither Cambodia nor Rwanda has the resources to undertake a large-scale DNA identification process. And even if they did, because whole families were often murdered, there may be no remaining relatives to claim the bones or bodies. Thus, while many Cambodians may prefer cremation as a means of easing the passage of spirits through the cycle of life, death and rebirth, they also acknowledge that only families can cremate the remains of their deceased. Several people I interviewed told me that they felt other funerary rituals would not be sufficient to appease the spirits of the dead, but most said they believed continued offerings and merit accumulation would allow them to transition.

In the Peruvian context, Isaias Rojas-Perez has described how, despite the emphasis on bodily integrity and a “proper burial” for victims “disappeared” during the government’s counterinsurgency campaign of the 1980s and 1990s, their relatives have developed rituals to sanctify the sites of mass exhumations. It is important to note a key difference in the Peruvian case: There has not been a major regime change since the counterinsurgency campaigns and thus the current government is not using past atrocities and human remains to bolster its own legitimacy. Rather, Rojas-Perez writes that the push for exhumations and “proper burials” by families of victims becomes a mode through which they “contest the injustice of the present by reconfiguring the past.”⁵ At the same time, it is often impossible to retrieve the bodies of the disappeared – only fragments remain – and because of this the exhumation areas become sites of collective mourning.

⁵ Isaias Rojas-Perez, “Fragments of Soul: Law, Transitional Justice and Mourning in Postwar Peru” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2010), 75.

To some extent, one can observe this phenomenon at memorial sites in Rwanda and Cambodia. The violence in both countries produced landscapes in which anonymous bodies and remains were strewn throughout, sometimes concealed and other times not, while the specter of the absent bodies of loved ones lingered in the memories of those left behind. In Peru, Rojas-Perez observed how the mothers of the disappeared present at exhumations began to perform rituals at the sites and call for the construction of a memorial:

Both justice to the dead and mourning without the body are dependent upon bringing the desaparecidos back to a social existence through a sacralization of the site of torture and killing and ritualized forms of social – and political – acknowledgement of their death. By sacralizing the site of exhumation, the mothers and relatives seek to situate the existence of their missing loved ones within socio-spatial and temporal coordinates in which their place in the world is acknowledged.⁶

He goes on to write that, through this process, relatives seek to restore relations between the living and dead. While they may not be able to locate the body of any particular missing individual, sacralizing the site housing the remains of others who suffered in a similar manner and met the same fate provides powerful collective symbolic acknowledgement. While independently performing mourning rituals at the major memorial sites I studied may not be widespread in Cambodia and Rwanda (particularly among former members of perpetrator groups), it does indeed take place, particularly among survivors. I interviewed a significant number of those who lost loved ones in both countries who said they often wondered whether their relatives may be among the remains at sites like Choueng Ek, Murambi and the Kigali Memorial Center. Like the mothers in Peru, they continued to perform rituals and mourn at such sites, which have

⁶ Rojas-Perez, “Fragments of Soul,” 318-319.

become potent symbols of collective suffering, in order to restore balance between the worlds of living and dead and to help make the tragic deaths socially intelligible.

Botum, 75, who testified at the ECCC about the arrest and execution of her husband, has regularly come to Cambodia's two largest memorials since 1990 to make offerings. Although she does not know the specific details of his fate, his picture hangs at Tuol Sleng among those of inmates to be purged, suggesting he was most likely killed at Choeung Ek. She said she first organized a large offering ceremony for him at Choeung Ek in 1990, inviting family members and a monk who had been an acquaintance of her late husband. At the end of the tribunal's first case, she organized another large offering at Tuol Sleng: "I called out my husband's name and told him I had fulfilled my duty to him at the court," she said. In her spare time, she also goes to Choeung Ek alone to pray. "Those were good and innocent people who died there and they have received many offerings, so I don't think their spirits stay there anymore," she said.

In fact, several people who believe their relatives died at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek said they already knew their loved ones had been reborn. Chan, who told me he is certain his wife was killed at CK, explained, "I don't know where exactly her bones are but it is ok because she has been reincarnated. She is the young niece of my new wife. Even though she is only a child, she is always cursing my wife and accusing her of stealing her husband." Phatry, whose father disappeared during Democratic Kampuchea, said all the members of his home village in Kampong Chhnang province believe the spirit of his father lives in a man who was born in 1980.

When he was a child he said "I was Mr. Sen" (the name of Phatry's father) and he told the story about his life and wanted to know where his wife and son Phatry were. He even pointed out the man in the village who people think killed my father. He shot him with a slingshot and said "you killed me!"

Such stories of post-Khmer Rouge reincarnation are not unusual and, many Cambodians told me, if you want children to remember their previous lives, you must not feed them eggs.

Despite the acceptance that spirits may be reincarnated without cremation, Cambodians still acknowledged that if they could find and identify the bones of their relatives, they would nonetheless want to retrieve and cremate them. Rwandans expressed similar sentiments. While they might accept the display of bodies and bones to some extent, they repeatedly told me that if they knew where their relatives were, they would want to take and bury the remains. According to Ibreck's research, "reburial is generally described as therapeutic – in the words of a female survivor: 'If you bury someone it's like a medicine you have taken' (employee of the Kigali memorial museum, 2006). The desire for reburials is connected to a profound need to restore the dignity of the victims: 'The killers did everything they could to make sure their victims didn't die in dignity.'"⁷

Multiple mass exhumations for the purpose of burial have also occurred throughout the country, most recently due to a 2008 law that prohibits the independent burial of genocide victims. Even though mass reburials took place in Rwanda in the years immediately following the genocide, people were interred in the general areas where they were killed due to a lack of resources. In a somewhat controversial decision, the RPF has declared that the bodies of genocide victims should eventually all be moved to official

⁷ Ibreck, "The Politics of Mourning," 338.

memorial sites in order to ensure preservation of genocide proof.⁸ In addition, the government has ambitious development plans and leaving small-scale mass graves strewn throughout the country is simply impractical, CNLG staff members told me. Survivor reaction to the government position has been divided. Some survivors told me they approved of the policy because they believed their loved ones would be protected and honored. Others said they took offense at what they saw as unnecessary relocation of bodies – “before the genocide, exhumations would have been unthinkable,” one told me – and said they would prefer to bury and remember their relatives outside of official state dictates.

Still, some Rwandans I interviewed (mostly survivors) described how they have come to incorporate official memorial efforts into their own spiritual and commemorative practices. Despite the lack of tradition of visiting graves in Rwandan culture, many told me they went to memorials regularly to pay their respects, lay flowers and say prayers. They said visiting the sites brought them a sense of peace and made them feel they were close to their loved ones. Eugenie, who lost multiple family members during the genocide, explained, “normally it’s not part of our culture to take flowers and visit graves, but genocide is a special case. People go even when it’s not the time for mourning. Genocide is exceptional.” She has visited the Kigali Memorial Center several times and said that during the next commemoration period she would like to keep vigil at the site overnight.

⁸ Erin Jessee, “Promoting Reconciliation Through Exhuming and Identifying Victims in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide” *Africa Portal: A Project of the Africa Initiative*, 2012: <http://www.africaportal.org/articles/2012/07/20/promoting-reconciliation-through-exhuming-and-identifying-victims-1994-rwandan-g#chapter5>.

As statements such as Eugenie's show, there is no social or religious template for confronting the horrific legacy of genocide and the remnants of those left behind.

Cambodian Buddhism does not make provisions for the ritual treatment of millions of mostly unidentified bones – neither does indigenous Rwandan religion, or Christianity.

States may try to harness these relics to legitimize their power and craft a historical narrative that emphasizes their role in purported national liberation, but they cannot control the ways in which their efforts are received. This is particularly true in societies where memory of the crimes committed is still raw, where time and psychological distance have not yet created a story of “reassuring fratricide.” Citizens may accommodate official narratives into their own understanding of history, and they may reject them. They may find post-genocide memorial efforts distasteful and spiritually offensive, or they may incorporate new rituals and understandings within their religious practice. Human remains, due to their symbolic power, become a flashpoint for social, political and spiritual cleavages. Yet they are just one element of the larger, messy struggle to manage memory and rebuild a coherent national narrative in societies where the most fundamental bonds between people have been shredded. As Jean de Dieu, a Tutsi survivor, explained,

This is a traumatized country. Foreigners say there's too much focus on genocide here, and maybe there is. But people don't know anything else. We reached the bottom of human cruelty. The way people see the community after that kind of event will not be ordinary. Genocide is in our memories.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to build upon Anderson's conception of nations as "imagined communities" by examining how states wracked by massive internal violence attempt to forge cohesive historical narratives through the instrumentalization of memorial sites – and how those who remain in these countries respond to and interact with these messages. Analyzing ethnographic data gathered at two memorial sites in Rwanda and two in Cambodia, I first demonstrated how post-genocidal regimes use the symbolic capital of vivid memorials displaying human remains to create historical narratives that legitimize their hold on power. I then probed the reactions of national visitors, finding that efforts to create a narrative of "reassuring fratricide" were complicated both by pre-existing social divisions and spiritual beliefs. While scholars such as Hughes have previously examined narratives conveyed by the state, less attention has been paid to how these are received from the ground-up, by citizens who have often been affected by the violence, either directly or indirectly.

I traced the birth of national consciousness, largely a colonial import, in both countries, and described how perpetrators defined and targeted groups viewed as threats to the nation. Moreover, this thesis demonstrated how perpetrators manufactured difference in both genocides, often mutilating and transforming the bodies of victims into the perceived "enemy." Now these bodies have been repurposed by the state, but their use and display in memorials is controversial among citizens. Sites that commemorate atrocities can exacerbate social divisions (instead of creating a unifying narrative) and create spiritual unease; yet in some

cases they have actually transformed ritual practices as Rwandans and Cambodians integrate the memorials into their spiritual beliefs. In a sense, such acts reinstate the previously reviled and discarded bodies of those cast outside the parameters of national identity back into the national consciousness.

Moving forward, I plan to continue to probe the interaction between living bodies (visitors) and dead bodies (human remains) at these sites. On a sensory level, how does visitation impact the corporeality of those current members of the nation state? As I found in my ethnographic work, visitors often reported physical reactions to sites, as in fainting or illness. Much local interaction with these sites is relatively unmediated and many Rwandans and Cambodians are unfamiliar with the practice of museum or monument visitation as it is understood in the Western world. At the same time, local and international expectations and discourses inform how the act of visitation unfolds. For example, in Rwanda, Hutu visitors to memorial sites reported a performative aspect to their visitation molded by their surroundings. While one Hutu woman told me she and others adopted a “mask of sadness” and refrained from asking questions in fear of being misinterpreted, others broke down at the sites, cursing their Hutu brothers and sisters who committed such atrocities.

International discourses that stress the importance of bearing witness to atrocity have also influenced people in both countries, and the physical act of visitation may become more significant than the information conveyed discursively through memorial sites. Hughes described how for foreign visitors, the experience of Tuol Sleng often became testimonial rather than epistemological. This is also true

for locals who visit such sites, many of whom have learned of their international significance through TV, radio and other media. According to Patrizia Violi, Tuol Sleng is “a museum to be felt rather than to be known or understood.”¹ Those who visit the site,

are invited to participate, at least for the duration of their visit, in a fully embodied immersive experience that can be seen as a form of re-enactment of the traumatic experience itself; in doing so they change roles: they are no longer merely visitors looking around and gathering information, they become, at least to some extent, a part of the historical narrative itself. They become, in a sense, witnesses themselves.²

Yet the performative act of bearing witness to atrocity is one of many influences affecting interaction with memorial sites – pre-existing spiritual beliefs, local conceptions of the body, the mimetic faculty and ritual practices are among numerous factors potentially impacting the experience of visitation. Thus, this research project is but a starting point, a call for further study related to how Cambodians and Rwandans engage with these sites that employ international modalities of symbolic capital. Of particular significance, it remains to be seen whether Cambodians and Rwandans interpret their visitation to these sites as acts of bearing witness to *international* spaces located on national soil, or as engagement with national symbols of collective memory and suffering.

¹ Patrizia Violi, “Trauma Site Museums and the Politics of Memory: Tuol Sleng, Villa Grimaldi and the Bologna Ustica Museum.” *Theory, Culture and Society* 29 (2012): 48.

² Violi, “Trauma Site Museums and the Politics of Memory,” 51.

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APPENDIX/IMAGES



Image 1: Cambodians pray at Cheoung Ek near the tower filled with skulls.



Image 2: Women prepare *Pchum Ben* food offerings at Cheoung EK.



Image 3: Officials make offerings in front of the tower of skulls.



Image 4: Food offerings in front of the Cheoung Ek memorial stupa.



Image 5: Mass graves at Cheoung Ek.



Image 6: Bone fragments at Cheoung Ek.



Image 7: Monks inspecting cases holding bone fragments at Cheoung Ek.



Image 8: Visitors examine skulls in the Cheoung Ek memorial stupa.



Image 9: Barbed wire outside detention cells at Tuol Sleng



Image 10: Individual holding cells in Tuol Sleng.

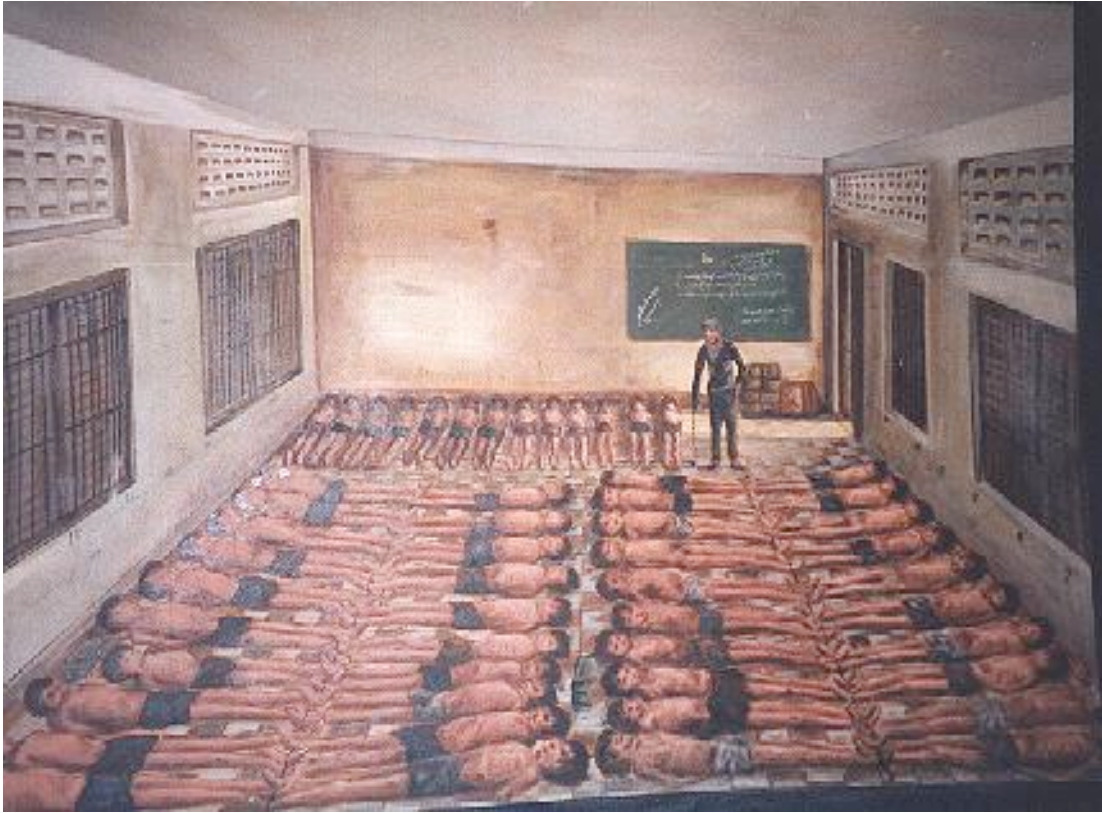


Image 11: Painting of prisoners held in collective cells at Tuol Sleng.



Image 12: Tuol Sleng survivor Chum Mey and his stand where he sells books.



Image 13: The main building of the Kigali Memorial Center in Rwanda.



Image 14: Path leading to mass graves at Kigali Memorial Center.



Image 15: Covered mass graves at Kigali Memorial Center.



Image 16: Exposed portion of mass grave at Kigali Memorial Center.



Image 17: Skulls and personal artifacts in the Kigali Memorial Center “bone room.”



Image 18: Clothes belonging to genocide victims displayed in Kigali Memorial Center.



Image 19: Photos of genocide victims in Kigali Memorial Center.



Image 20: Main building of Murambi Genocide Memorial



Image 21: Murambi main building surrounded by hills.



Image 21: Murambi classrooms that hold bodies.



Image 22: Preserved bodies at Murambi.



Image 22: Preserved bodies at Murambi.



Image 23: Room containing better-preserved bodies that will be displayed in glass coffins.

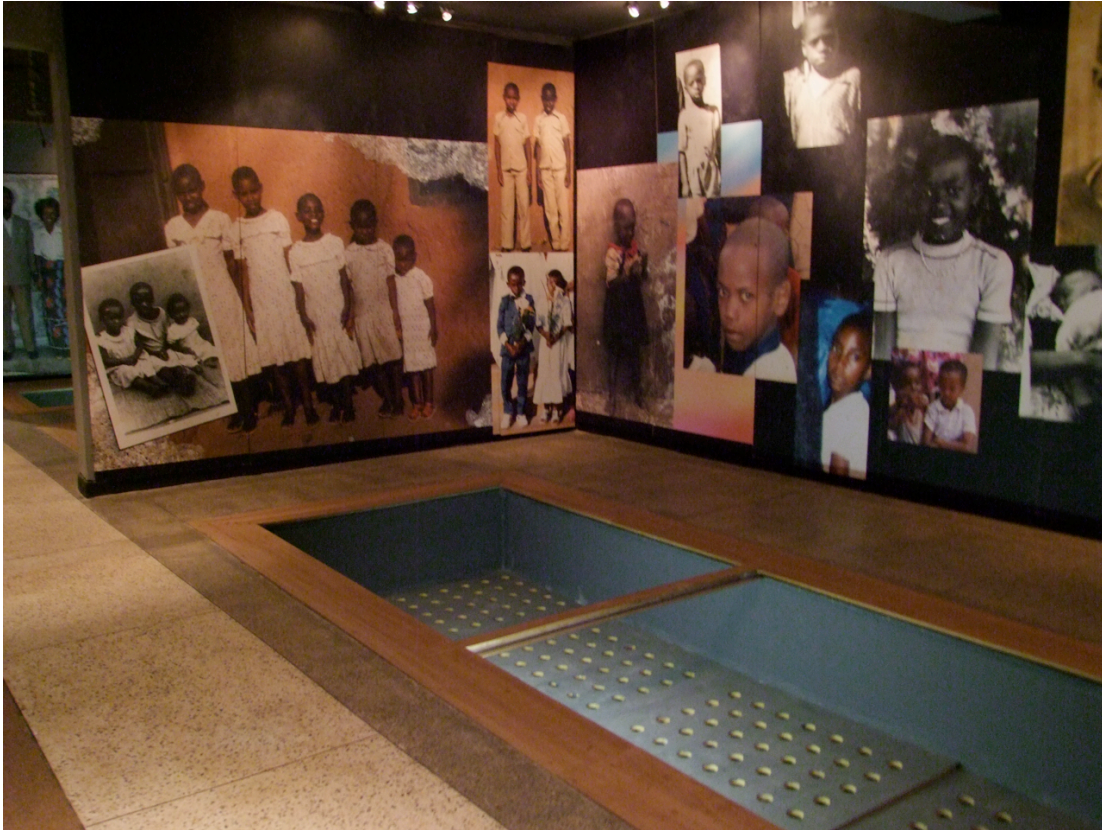


Image 24: Chambers inside Murambi museum where bodies will be displayed.



Image 25: Genocide commemoration sign in Kigali.



Image 26: Genocide commemoration billboard in Kigali.

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PUBLICATIONS

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