Cambodia

Forest of struggle: Moralities of remembrance in upland Cambodia
By EVE MONIQUE ZUCKER
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Forest of struggle considers the impact of the Khmer Rouge revolution on a remote village at the edge of the Cardamom Mountains in Kompong Speu Province, southwestern Cambodia. Eve Zucker is broadly concerned with the question that animates most anthropologists who have worked with Cambodians in the years since 1979: 'how communities negotiate the memories associated with difficult pasts and come together again to rebuild their lives' (pp. 7–8). She explores this question through the explanatory themes of morality and memory (both individual and social) as they relate to trust, distrust, and the re-establishment of broken trust in a village context.

Zucker's primary research is ethnographic: she conducted a ground-up study of local interactions, based on an extended stay in the pseudonymous village of O'Thmaa, that looks at the most basic forms of sociality: kinship, food, commensality, and life cycle and other ritual practices. Through her fieldwork, Zucker was able to observe how relatedness was established and maintained (or not) at the village level, and to consider how villagers negotiated their difficult memories of the past in the present: how they talked (and didn't talk) about the past, how they behaved in relation to each other, and how they incorporated these memories into their actions as they moved into the future.

However, this is an unusual ethnography. Importantly, it represents the first extended study of a Khmer Rouge 'base area'; and the first to consider the impact of the revolution on people who were recruited by the Khmer Rouge early on in their struggle and who were drawn into periodic contact with them in the civil war that followed their overthrow in 1979. The subjects of Zucker's study experienced multiple dislocations between 1970 and 2000 as their home territory was occupied by competing forces. War ended much later for these Cambodians than for people in most of the rest of the country, and the impact on them was enormous.

The experience of 'base people' in this 'forest of struggle' is a story we have not heard before. As Zucker points out in her introduction, many of the 'new people' from towns and cities who moved to France, Australia, or the United States as refugees after 1979 have written personal memoirs about their experiences of the Khmer Rouge revolution. This is not true of the 'base people' who occupy this marginal area: most who survived DK (Democratic Kampuchea) were illiterate, and many of the younger generation remain illiterate. Thus she is presenting new information, about individual and social processes under particular and carefully reconstructed historical circumstances.

Their early association with the Khmer Rouge did not in any way protect the villagers of O'Thmaa. Zucker's book begins with a chilling tour of the old village of

O'Thmaa that an elder from the village conducted toward the end of her fieldwork, pointing out old household sites and enumerating the former residents who had been killed or died of illness under the Khmer Rouge. Of the less than one-third who survived DK, nobody remained in this original village. Indeed, Zucker was drawn to the reconstituted village of O'Thmaa in part because there was something peculiar about the place, something subdued and distrustful about the people, and a noticeable lack of social engagement. This contrasted markedly with both the claims of the villagers that they all 'love one another' (*sralanh knea*) and her experience in the next commune, where people endured similar terrors, but had re-established social relationships and many traditional social practices. This observation provided the starting point for an exploration of the roots of trust, distrust, and the re-establishment of broken trust in O'Thmaa, which reflects on the processes of social reconstruction throughout Cambodia.

This is not ethnography in a classic sense, although it is built upon careful ethnographic data collection. Rather, it shows how the specific circumstances in this village may be illuminated by various theories, and compared to other villages where the circumstances are different and people behaved differently.

Forest of struggle is a highly interpretive ethnography, but Zucker's interpretive process is meticulously documented. She begins with a discussion of issues raised by the literature on the anthropology of morality and remembrance, then discusses how these issues ramify in culturally specific ways through Cambodian history and ethnography. She does this through a sort of Socratic discussion of possibilities, first presenting general propositions, then discussing how the specific circumstances of O'Thmaa, and the particular situation of one shunned elder, might be illuminated by these theories. She draws on important themes in Cambodian culture, such as the distinction between town and forest, the cultivated and the wild (David Chandler), the way in which myth operates in the landscape, and the concept of morality as it is illuminated in nineteenth-century Buddhist texts (Anne Hansen). In the process she provides a very thoughtful literature review of current anthropological theory pertaining to moral frameworks and social memory, and draws in much of the recent ethnography of Cambodia as it relates to these issues as well.

Zucker's work is in many ways modest: she does not present any theory of her own about how difficult memories are incorporated into the present and how social life has been rebuilt in Cambodia. Rather, drawing on other peoples' work, she shows how Cambodians use *different* moral frameworks to understand the past, how these frameworks develop out of particular historical and social circumstances, and how they may or may not be helpful in re-establishing social relations among people who have proven to be untrustworthy in the past. She preserves the very real complexity of this process, while giving us tools to think about our own experiences with Cambodians, or any other group that has lived through a traumatic past and is faced with re-establishing social relationships in the aftermath. A return to O'Thmaa in 2010, seven years after her research was conducted, provides insights about the ways that these processes continue. This is a thoughtful, scholarly, and very interesting study.

LINDSAY FRENCH
Rhode Island School of Design