

# Libraries in Cambodia during Khmer Rouge

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During Khmer Rouge rule from April 1975 to January 1979 cities were evacuated to transform Cambodia into a radical agrarian utopia. The education system was abolished and the Buddhist monkhood disbanded, with all pagodas in Phnom Penh except one near The Royal Palace been either abandoned or turned into granaries and workshops to produce fish sauce. In particular Khmer Rouge targeted the educated for execution, with the following diasporas draining the country for its trained and experienced professionals.

This cultural down melting has been described this way:

"Not only dancers, but monks who knew how to chart certain religious texts properly, craftsmen who knew how to construct distinct kinds of ow carts, and women who knew how to weave specific designs perished with their knowledge. Much of the written documentation on Khmer culture was similarly lost...the loss of cultural artifacts, such as musical instruments, masks for the dance, and Buddhist images, was also tragically high...The changes in Khmer society during the years of Khmer Rouge rule are sometimes interpreted by Khmer to have been the end of a Buddhist era, the extinction of the world as they knew it." (Ebihara 1994).

The recent history of Cambodia is mixed with paradoxes, like the unlimited praise of the Pol Pot regime by Western intellectuals, and the UN recognition - due to US pressure following the Vietnamese invasion - of Khmer Rouge as Cambodia's legitimate government for a 12-year period even after its fall in 1979.

The so-called *Black Book* was published by the Pol Pot regime in September 1979 after the fall of Phnom Penh as its official indictment against Vietnamese aggression towards Cambodia. The book is bearing evidence of a millennium of prejudice and inferiority towards Cambodia's eastern neighbour.

The following libraries were visited in February 2000.

## **The National Library**

In Phnom Penh, originally opened in 1924 by Cambodia's French rulers, was in the 1970's used as a stable and piggery providing pork for Khmer Rouge soldiers posted in the capital; the front veranda being used for feeding the pigs and for cooking. Inside, many bookshelves had been cleared of books to store food and cooking utensils, and great pots of water were still on the floor at the time of the reopening in mid-1979. Contrasting to general press reports that the collection was systematically destroyed, it is more likely that the disorder at the library is s result of deep neglect and irresponsibility by the occupants, like books evidently used to light cooking fires and as cigarette papers.

Books were on the floor or dumped under trees outside, and most catalogue drawers had been pulled out of the carved cabinet and floors were littered with cards, mainly around the toilets. Behind the building, the National Archives had been used as barracks for the people working in the piggery, and the library's garden had also been used for executing people.



The National Library



Stacks packed



Reading room

On 17th of April 1975 the staff were evacuated from the building and from the city by the attacking Khmer Rouge troops. Of the 36 staff members listed in September 1973, only two returned after the Pol Pot regime. What happened to the other 34 staff is not known. One can surmise that some did not survive the systematic persecution of intellectuals being dispatched to the countryside, including those who held even lower positions in libraries. In Pol Pot's days even knowledge of a foreign language was a mark of slavery better to be kept hidden away.

Returning to Phnom Penh in early 1979 many people picked up books and palm leaf manuscripts from the streets, houses and pagodas. Some of these may still remain in private hands, but others have been returned to the National Library. Most of the old material has been replaced on the shelves and new items cataloged with initially help of Vietnamese librarians who worked in the National Library for several years during the reconstruction. But the Vietnamese invasion of Phnom Penh in January 1979 also bore evidence of widespread looting, including gold, jewellery and precious ancient sculptures. Today much of the Cambodian written heritage is lost or resides outside the country.

The lack of material written in Khmer language is a major obstacle to the rebuilding of the collection, and except for the National Library other public libraries are practically non-existent. Only a small educated part of the middle and upper classes takes advantage of the libraries, and reading for leisure is not common practice. By 2000 the National Library is housing 120.000 documents, including 2.313 palm leaf manuscripts, and employing 26 librarians with various background. Part of the English collection still consists of books taken from the US Embassy when it was sacked after the communist takeover in April 1975.

The library also stages various cultural events like an exhibition in cooperation with Centre Cultural Francais du Cambodge: Les plus beaux livres de la bibliotheque nationale du Cambodge, in late 1999. And the only surviving group in traditional Khmer shadow theater, called Sbek Thom, were in 2000 performing the Buddhist Ramayana shadow play "Komka Tobtek" at the library every month.

Palm and mulberry leaf manuscripts, now in a A/C environment, have been microfilmed and cataloged on computer in a Cornell University Libraries project, and the project has later included the filming of the Toul Sleng archives at the genocide museum where tortures were fully documented by photos and repeatedly writing of confessions by inmates at the former S-21 prison. In four years nearly twenty thousand inmates would be tortured for confessions and killed in Tuol Sleng Prison, including the majority of Cambodian intellectuals and presumably librarians.



## Hun Sen Library

At the Royal University of Phnom Penh was opened in January 1997. The university library is the most modern and frequently used of all libraries in Cambodia, housed in a two-storeyed designed building with computer cabling and a large reading room area. First library in Cambodia to offer Internet access from the very beginning in 1998, with in-house computer education courses. Outside Phnom Penh the high level of telecommunication costs is in general prohibitive for Internet access.



Hun Sen Library



Circulation counter



Reading area

Around 600 students are visiting on a daily basis, a member card for students cost 3.500 Riel/year, allowing the borrowing of two books for a two weeks period. Now more than 10 staff members are having their BA or MA in Library and Information Science.

The library's collection is over 30.000 volumes in Khmer, English and French with some volumes in Vietnamese and Japanese, organized in areas according to DDC:

- Science and Technology
- Art, Literature, History, Geography.
- General works, Social Science, Language
- Computer Room and Audio-Visual material.
- Journals and Newspapers.

## The Buddhist Institute Library

Once an important institute visited by people from all over the world. Much of what was held prior to the Khmer Rouge regime has been destroyed and the institution relocated.

Experts on Cambodian culture say that at least 80% of the country's vast archive of Buddhist text, many carved on fragile strips of palm leaf, fell victim to the regime's utilitarian motives, ending up as baskets and hats or simply destroyed.

## Siem Reap. Public library

Located behind Wat Dam Nak, the sign on the library shows "Public Library of Setsuko Watunabe SiemReap" bearing the name of the Japanese founder and sponsor. The public library was opened in 1998 initiated by Mr. Heng Rattanak, who picked up ideas and his interest in library work from his years in refugee camps in Thailand, where a library with books in Thai was offered.



Public library



Library staff



Library use

Books can be taken out on deposit or used in the library. Textbooks for adults, mostly non-fiction in English, and books in Khmer bought at the local market, picture books and cartoons for children. Many books are donated by The Asia Foundation's Books for Asia-program, with books being selected by the library staff visiting the deposit of the foundation in Phnom Penh. A mobile library by car is serving rural districts around Siem Reap.

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