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Translating Genocide, the Politics of Memory, and (In)Commensurabilities in Post-conflict Cambodia

Sina Emde and Duong Keo

This article examines the multiple translations of ‘genocide’ in Cambodia as prolai pouch-sas since the end of the Khmer Rouge Regime. It traces the term’s double meaning from the authoritarian People’s Republic of Kampuchea’s (PRK) 1980s Khmer translation as the annihilation of the Cambodian nation, to the ECCC’s international legal translation as the annihilation of difference in the 2000s. The PRK translation differed from the international legal concept but resonated with the experiences of the majority of the Cambodian population who picked it up and vernacularised the term. The ECCC translation was rejected by many Cambodians and could not transcend the legal proceedings of the tribunal. Consequently, genocide is now a word with a double meaning appearing in different political and legal locales and settings. This duplicity became part of contestations between liberal and illiberal peacebuilding and transitional justice.

Keywords: Translation; Vernacularisation; Genocide; Memory Politics; Cambodia; ECCC

When the communist Khmer Rouge came to power in Cambodia in 1975, their victory ended a five-year civil war that had already cost more than three hundred thousand lives (Heuveline 1998). The hope of the Cambodian people that the victory of the Khmer Rouge would finally bring peace and prosperity to Cambodia was not fulfilled (Becker 1998). Instead, the KR launched one of the most radical socio-economic revolutions of the twentieth century. Their goal was the transformation of Cambodia into a self-sufficient communist agrarian state. Money was abolished, towns were forcefully evacuated, monks were defrocked. The Khmer Rouge divided the entire Cambodian population into New People (*bracheachon thmei*),

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and Old People (*bracheachon chas*) or Base People (*bracheachon mouladthan*). New People, considered enemies of the state, included the urban population, those who had undergone formal education, as well as everyone associated with the former Lon Nol government. Old People were peasants residing in those parts of Cambodia that were already ‘liberated zones,’ and strongholds of the Khmer Rouge movement during the civil war before 1975. Cambodia’s population was organised into rural collective labour units, and New People were dislocated from their homelands. Many families were separated. Children were trained to be soldiers and guards.

In addition to these class-based differentiations, some of Cambodia’s ethnic minorities were also specifically targeted as New People, regardless of whether they were urbanites or peasants (Thun and Keo 2021). Historically, Cambodia was ethnically and religiously a homogenous society (Ovesen and Trankell 2004, 241). When the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975, the population was approximately 8 million (Kiernan 2003, 586). Of these, approximately 90 per cent were ethnic, mostly Buddhist Khmer. The other 10 per cent included indigenous minorities in the highlands of Cambodia, Muslim Cham, as well as Vietnamese and Chinese communities. While the indigenous groups in the highlands were seen as ‘ethnic brothers’ and ‘Base People,’ due to their communal and subsistence socio-cultural practices, the Muslim, mostly rural, Cham, as well as ethnic, mostly urban, Vietnamese and Chinese were classified as ‘New People’ (Thun and Keo 2021, 327). Cham peasants were targeted for religious reasons as all religion was abolished. Vietnamese and Chinese residents were labelled foreigners and considered part of the capitalist class. Thus, the class-based, decidedly anti-intellectual and anti-capitalist Khmer Rouge violence intersected with religious and ethnic prosecutions of the Muslim Cham, ethnic Vietnamese, and Chinese, all subsumed under the ideal of the revolution. Ben Kiernan (2008, 458) estimates the losses among Base People to be about 15 per cent, while death among New People, including targeted ethnic minorities, was much higher, sometimes up to 50 per cent.¹ In total, executions, exhaustion, disease, and famine cost the lives of about 1.7 million to 2 million people, between 21 and 24 percent of the entire population (Kiernan 2003; Tabeau and Kheam 2009).²

The Khmer Rouge regime ended with the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 and January 1979. Several former Khmer Rouge who had defected to Vietnam in 1977 and 1978 returned with the Vietnamese soldiers, among them Hun Sen, who would come to be Cambodia’s prime minister for decades. Those returning Cambodians formed the first Vietnamese-backed government of the socialist People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), which endured with minor alterations until 1989 (Gottesman 2003; Slocomb 2003).

The PRK officially prosecuted and remembered the violence perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge as *prolai pouch-sas*³ (Götze-Sam and Sam 1995; de Nike, Quigley, and Robinson 2000), the Khmer translation of the universal legal term ‘genocide’ (Killean and Grey 2023). *Prolai pouch-sas* translates as ‘to eliminate the lineage of a people or a nation’. It thus can refer to one’s own group or to another group. Furthermore, *pouch-sas* can also be translated as race. When used without further

specification it usually refers to the Khmer majority. This Khmer translation thus ignores the annihilation of difference that is the base for the universal definition of genocide.

More than two decades later, this early translation and understanding of *prolai pouch-sas* as the nation's suffering and annihilation impacted how people engaged with use of the term in outreach activities of the hybrid international court, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)⁴ and civil society. In this context, *prolai pouch-sas* referred to the universal legal definition of 'genocide' and signified the KR intent to annihilate the Cham and Vietnamese ethnic minorities. In contrast, what was previously understood as *prolai pouch-sas* was defined by the universal legal term 'crimes against humanity' (*okredthkam brachhang monuscheat*) (Killean and Grey 2023). These temporal and semantic dynamics led to a duplicity of translations and understandings.

Rachel Killean and Rosemary Grey (2023) also depict multiple translations within the trilingual ECCC trial proceedings. They suggest that interpreters must engage with the tri-cultural environment of the ECCC to accurately convey meaning, as language reflects historical, political, and cultural contingencies. Failure to understand these nuances can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstandings both by Cambodian victims and witnesses as well as lawyers and judges.

While Killean and Grey focus on processes of translation at the ECCC, our work explores different translations and understandings of genocide as part of larger political and juridical transitions/periods in Cambodia. Speaking to the general theme of this special issue, we look at the legal universal 'genocide' and ask how this term was translated into the wider Cambodian political landscape in different locales and temporalities: the PRK's first tribunal and national remembrance and the ECCC trials as well as wider outreach and memory work.⁵ The ECCC and civil society launched an outreach programme into Cambodian provinces to inform people about the tribunal and possibilities for survivors to become civil parties in court (Sperfeldt 2013). NGOs also conducted wider transitional justice and peacebuilding programmes with urban and rural communities (Hinton 2018; Kent 2022; McGrew 2023; Sperfeldt 2012; Sperfeldt and Oeung 2019).

In concert with the theme of this special issue, we highlight the importance of wider socio-political contexts and deep histories for the ways translations unfold (see also Killean and Grey 2023). We start with our theoretical framework. We then depict the PRK translation and introduction of the universal term genocide as *prolai pouch-sas* into the Cambodian political mnemonic landscape after 1979. The third part of the article turns to the literal re/translation of the term *prolai pouch-sas* as the annihilation of difference by the ECCC and the tribunal's outreach activities since 2006. Exploring the celebration of the National Day of Remembrance at a local memorial site in the year 2011, and outreach activities of the ECCC between 2009 and 2012, we show how the earlier PRK interpretation of genocide co-existed with the translation of the ECCC. This is further elaborated in the last part of the article, which connects the duplicity of *prolai pouch-sas* to political and legal

subjectivities, alliances, and institutions. Our explorative data suggest that the two meanings of *prolai pouch-sas* are now embedded in parallel distinct worlds of a new phase of state remembrance and of the legally bound ECCC. These different translations are context-bound and rarely overlap.

Our findings are based on the first author's 12-month multi-sited research on emotion and memory in the context of the ECCC between 2009 and 2011: seven months with civil society and the ECCC, and five months in a village that was an investigative site of the ECCC and of transitional justice interventions. The second author worked with one of Cambodia's largest Youth NGOs where he was responsible for research and publication on people's memories of the Khmer Rouge. Over the last few years he has explored Khmer perceptions of Vietnam and Vietnamese communities as part of his ongoing PhD research (Keo 2018). Together the authors carried out follow-up research on the ECCC legacy in February 2023 and September 2024, deploying participant observation and semi-structured and narrative interviews as the main methods. Almost all interlocutors belong to the Khmer majority, with many marked by blurred and shifting victim/perpetrator boundaries. We are aware that the experiences of KR violence were different for targeted ethnic minorities, and that the crime of genocide may be discussed and understood differently among survivors of those communities.

Words and Translations in Context

To explore processes of translation, we turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's differentiation between monologue and dialogue and to his notion of the word as meaning (Bakhtin 1981). Bakhtin defines the dialogical and the multiplicity of voices as foundations of all speech and text. In contrast, the monologic aims at the erasure of the dialogic and the building of conformity (Tomlinson 2017). Matt Tomlinson and Julian Millie (2017) call this 'the monologic imagination,' a common practice and ideology in political and religious spheres, including the shutting down of other voices, the eradication of prior discourse, and the enforcement of the expression of a unified voice, a unified 'we'. In this sense, bending Bakhtin, dialogue and monologue can be seen as competing projects that implicate each other (Tomlinson 2017, 10) and may be historically and politically shifting (Tomlinson and Millie 2017, 262). We are drawn to these notions of monologue and dialogue as they provide a framework for thinking through our data on the translation of the term genocide in the context of different political periods of authoritarianism and democratisation (see below).

We look at the global travel and implementation of the seemingly universal term 'genocide' as a monological project that aims at the legal implementation of a singular meaning worldwide but is altered dialogically, through practices of generalisation, vernacularisation, and translation (Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014; Hinton 2010; Levitt and Merry 2009; see also introduction this issue). Didier Fassin and Veena Das (2021, 5) emphasise that in these travels '... words, keywords and

concepts exist across various languages through their translations which pose the delicate problem of their translatability'. Understanding these translation processes requires us to be 'attentive to divisions, differences, and transports among same or similar words in related languages with a history of overlapping preoccupations and mutual influence' (Fassin and Das 2021, 5). Words can never be read out of context. They are connected to the worlds of which they are part and carry a prior history that impacts on people's present interpretations. They also bear multiple connotations by virtue of their association with an ideological position, a social or political group, or a single individual (Bakhtin 1981; Danow 1991, 21–42; Pechey 2007). We thus must 'lay bare the processes through which words and worlds come to be articulated by filling up the picture through a robust attention to context, so as to avoid sheer nominalism' (Fassin and Das 2021, 4). In Cambodia, we argue, the contexts of translation of the seemingly universal 'genocide' have been shifting historically and politically from the monologic to the dialogic and vice versa and are determined by Cambodia's political shifts from the one-party socialism of the PRK, to processes of democratisation after the Paris Peace Accords in 1991, to a return to authoritarianism over the last decade. These political processes are connected to contestations between liberal and illiberal peacebuilding (Biddulph and Kent 2023; Gidley 2019; Kent 2022) and to Cambodian nationalism, which is inherently defined as Khmer (Keo 2018; Thun and Keo 2024).

Vernacularising Genocide—The People's Republic of Kampuchea

The European legal concept of genocide⁶ became a universal with the adoption and definition of the term into the UN prevention and prosecution of genocide in 1948. Genocide is defined by the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group 'that has been marked as different' (Hinton 2002, 4).

The concept first travelled to Cambodia when, in 1950, the country became a part of the UN convention as part of French Indochina (Hannum 1989, 84). It is doubtful that the term went beyond relevant Cambodian administrative units at that time. The Khmer translation *prolai pouch-sas* was only introduced into the wider Cambodian society after the end of the Khmer Rouge regime.

The PRK (1979–1989), which succeeded the Khmer Rouge, was determined to legitimise its existence and the presence of Vietnamese soldiers in the country by displaying proof for the Khmer Rouge mass atrocities both to the international community and to the survivors in the country (Emde 2013; Gidley 2017; Ledgerwood 1997). At the centre of these activities was the People's Revolutionary Tribunal (PRT), held in August 1979 in Phnom Penh, which indicted Pol Pot and Ieng, two former top leaders of the DK Regime, for genocide (Gidley 2019, 53; see also de Nike, Quigley, and Robinson 2000). In addition, the PRK transformed the former national security and torture prison S-21 into the Tuol Sleng genocidal museum, and curated the mass graves and former execution site of S-21 on the outskirts of Phnom Penh as the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre (Emde 2013; Gidley 2019, 43–78; Chandler 1999;

Hughes 2003; Ledgerwood 1997). These memorial sites and the People's Revolutionary Tribunal introduced the Khmer term for genocide—*prolai pouch-sas*—top-down as official political and legal vocabulary (Fawthrop and Jarvis 2004, 5; Killeen and Grey 2023).

The tribunal defined the crime of genocide in Article 1 of Decree Law N° 1.

Planned mass killing of innocent people, forced evacuation of the population from cities and villages, concentration of the population and forcing them to work in physically and morally exhausting conditions, abolition of religion, destruction of economic and cultural structures and of family and social relations. (de Nike, Quigley, and Robinson 2000, 45)

The annihilation of difference, seminal for the universal legal definition, was not part of the Cambodian definition. The tribunal convicted Pol Pot and Ieng Sary in absentia to be guilty of genocide on the basis of their attempt to annihilate the Cambodian people, their culture, and tradition (de Nike, Quigley, and Robinson 2000, 523–551). *Prolai pouch-sas* as the attempted elimination of the entire Cambodian nation became one of the foundations of post-conflict remembrance and nation building. This translation emphasised shared collective suffering and victimhood and avoided discussion about blurred victim/perpetrator boundaries below the senior level of Khmer Rouge leadership (Gidley 2017).

The PRK narrative framed the violence of the Khmer Rouge in terms of socialist ideology. The 'genocidal clique of Pol Pot-Ieng Sary' had betrayed the communist revolution of 1975 and, therefore, the entire Cambodian nation (Hinton 2018, 43–48; Margolin 2004). This narrative was also conveyed at national memorial sites and official national commemoration days (Gidley 2017; Hughes 2006) and transmitted to young people through the history classes and textbooks in Cambodian high schools (Dy 2013; Gidley 2017; Hinton 2014, 156–157; Hinton 2008, 69–71).⁷

The eighth-grade schoolbook from 1987 entailed a section headed 'Revolutionary betrayal: Cambodia under the genocidal regime of the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique (17 April 1975–7 January 1979)'. The subsection 'Military dictatorship and genocidal politics' deployed Khmer terms for genocide (*prolai pouch-sas*), auto-genocide (*prolai pouch-sas aeng*), and genocidal (*prolai pouch-sas*), but did not define these in a legal sense. Instead, the section was a detailed description of the policies and atrocities responsible for the nation's social suffering and a reiteration of the narrative of the betrayed socialist revolution (Ministry of Education 1987).

This vernacularisation of the universal 'genocide' complicates previous theories of travelling concepts and models (Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014; Levitt and Merry 2009; Merry 2006). Levitt and Merry (2009) emphasise the need for the vernacularisation of seeming legal universals to be accepted in local settings. For global legal concepts (in their case women and human rights) to be effective and take hold in different communities and contexts, they need to be framed locally. Most crucial in this process are the people in the middle such as NGO

workers, government officials, or activists. Their situatedness between the global and the local enables them to engage in translations and vernacularisations. Merry's approach to local translations of international law is embedded in a liberal framework that enables multiple local actors to negotiate, vernacularise, and particularise global concepts in a highly dialogic process. This was not the framework of the one-party authoritarian PRK. Their political concepts, histories, and ideologies were defined and implemented monologically top-down (Assmann 2010) and framed by the state's official remembrance and prosecution of the Khmer Rouge.

Scholars who have explored national remembrance in state socialism highlight the authoritative monologic narration of a nation's past in the public sphere where alternative and counter memories can only take place in the private and kinship domain (Kwon 2006; Watson 1994). Aleida Assmann (2010) even depicts all official national memories, regardless of the political system, as monologic because they usually aim at enhancing national identity and a positive collective self-image. Assmann (2010, 19) states, 'when facing negative events in the past, there are only three dignified roles for the national collective to assume: that of the victor who has overcome the evil, that of the resistor who has heroically fought the evil and that of the victim who has passively suffered the evil'.

We suggest that, in a similar vein, state remembrance in socialist Kampuchea installed a master translation of genocide as an act against the entire Cambodian nation (Vickery 1984). Judy Ledgerwood (1997, 93) argues that this translation resonated widely at that time as it 'framed and provided an explanation for seemingly incomprehensible events' (see also Gidley 2017). It could also resonate owing to victim/perpetrator boundaries often being blurred below the Khmer Rouge senior leaders. Many Khmer were both victims and perpetrators at different stages in their life (Emde 2023; Sirik 2023). In the village where the first author worked, many had experienced the US bombings in the early 1970s and then joined the Khmer Rouge after their arrival in 1972. Later, some of the KR villagers were purged, and all of them lost kin. The PRK translation and framing enabled these persons to silence their perpetrations and foreground their own suffering. This vernacularised term (Levitt and Merry 2009; Merry 2006) did not just locally frame the international legal meaning of genocide, it changed it by giving it a specific local meaning (Killean and Grey 2023). *Prolai pouch-sas* refers to the killing of all Cambodians regardless of ethnicity and renders the systematic Khmer Rouge violence against ethnic and religious groups, e.g. Cham and Vietnamese, invisible. The distinct prosecution of these groups is not acknowledged, and we suggest that this also speaks to notions of Cambodian nationalism that imagine the nation as a Khmer nation (Keo 2018; Thun and Keo 2024) that came from the glorious past of the Angkor Empire (Edwards 2010). We show below that this adversarial vernacularised meaning holds hegemony until today and has caused frictions with the international legal translation introduced by the ECCC.

Frictions Between Translations—Outreach and Memory Work in the Context of the ECCC

With the end of the PRK, the arrival, in the early 1990s, of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and the establishment of the politically democratic Kingdom of Cambodia, official remembrance of the Khmer Rouge became much less prominent or even forgotten. David Chandler (2008) depicts this period as a time of collective amnesia in Cambodia. Yet, after the turn of the century, the vernacularised term *prolai pouch-sas* as the annihilation of the nation encountered its original universal: the international legal definition of genocide as the annihilation of difference arriving with the establishment of the hybrid court of Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) in 2006 (Fawthrop and Jarvis 2004; Killean and Grey 2023).

The ECCC, in concert with international law, legally defined the attempted annihilation of Cham and ethnic Vietnamese minorities as genocide. The crimes previously referred to as genocide—forced labour, destruction of economic and cultural structures and of family and social relations, forced displacement, torture and executions—were now prosecuted as Crimes against Humanity (*okredthkam brachhang monuscheat*). The new meaning of *prolai pouch-sas* existed next to the older meaning that emerged from the previous socialist monologic translation into Khmer. This became most evident in ECCC outreach and civil society activities in transitional justice. The hybrid court of the ECCC and civil society activities were embedded in a wider global field of liberal transitional justice mechanisms and liberal peacebuilding efforts of the post-Cold War, aiming at transforming totalitarian pasts to better democratic futures (Gidley 2019, 18; Hinton 2018, 6). In this framework, transitional justice toolkits opened spaces for participation and dialogue (McGrew 2023). ECCC outreach activities and information were framed by the wider context and history of the International Court of Justice such as the Balkan wars and Rwanda. However, these conflicts differed substantially from the Cambodian situation, as their violence targeted a defined ethnic other. In the workshops and events that we witnessed, participants had difficulties transferring the International Court Cases to the Cambodian situation.

A Study Trip to the ECCC in 2010

In February 2010, both authors participated in an ECCC outreach trip to Phnom Penh organised by a large Youth NGO. Most of the 45 Khmer participants came from areas that were investigative sites of case 002 of the tribunal in Takeo province and Battambang. They comprised different generations, including high school students, adult villagers, and elders, and all were familiar with the NGO through its outreach and transitional justice work in both communities. During the four-day event, participants spent a day at the tribunal following case 001 against Duch and visited the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Choeung EK Genocidal Centre. Choeung Ek information on display at that time still mentioned ‘the genocidal clique of Pol Pot

and Ieng Sary' and compared the Cambodian tragedy to the Holocaust.⁸ In these various settings participants were now confronted with both the older Khmer translation and the legal terms of the ECCC.

On the last afternoon, they listened to Neou Kassie from the Victim Support Section (VSS) of the ECCC. Neou Kassie explained the hybrid legal system of the ECCC and the work of the court to the participants. Introducing the international side of the court, he equated and framed Cambodia in relation to other international trials, such as the ethnic-based violence prosecuted in Rwanda or the Balkans.

Kassie emphasised the need for the tribunal to take place in Cambodia to be accessible to survivors and to find justice for the suffering that the Cambodian nation had endured. He saw it as a necessity to hold the 'most responsible leaders' of the Khmer Rouge regime accountable for their atrocities. 'We are all victims of the Khmer Rouge regime', he said, 'We all suffered'. One of the older participants raised his hand and commented: 'I still do not understand. I understand why Hitler killed all the Jews, and why in Rwanda Hutu killed Tutsi, and that in the Balkans Christians fought against Muslims. But I still do not understand: Why did Khmer kill Khmer?' Other participants nodded. In the Q & A section, a participant asked: 'I have another question; what kind of offence did Duch commit, is it a national betrayal or a civil offence?', reiterating the argument that the Khmer Rouge had betrayed the revolution and the nation. The official did not pick up this question of betrayal. He answered:

In international law it is called a crime against humanity (*okredthkam brachhang monuscheat*). Moreover, it is a criminal offence against the 1956 law against torture and killing. There are also complaints against the four accused people of genocide (*prolach pouch-sas*) against Muslim people and Vietnamese. Therefore, for the four accused, there is an added charge, genocide, added on crime against humanity and crimes of killing and torturing. These people are also accused of destroying national heritage and religion.

Another participant then said again: 'But I still do not understand. We learned that in Rwanda Hutu killed Tutsi, in Germany Hitler killed the Jews. But why did Khmer kill Khmer?'

This question, which was asked in many outreach activities we witnessed, hints at the difficulty to retranslate the legal terms of the ECCC into the wider Cambodian society. In conversations with Khmer interlocutors the incomprehension of the political KR violence remained. We argue that one of the main reasons for this incomprehension lies in the fact that ECCC outreach did not discuss the reasons that motivated the violence. Outreach and memory work revealed the atrocities of the KR, but they did not discuss how and why the Khmer Rouge came to power. The fact that most of the violence was class-based and politically motivated posed difficulties for a comprehensive framing as genocide. The PRK translation, framed by the narrative of the betrayed revolution, did not talk much about the deeper political reasons for the KR violence either. The explanation of betrayal, however, was more comprehensible for most Khmer than the ethnic framings of the International

Court. For the Khmer participants, *prolai pouch-sas* in its universal legal meaning could not be picked up because the term already had a prior history of translation and implementation that rendered it differently and referred to all Cambodians. Given that most of the population and the victims were Khmer, the intended annihilation of ethnic minorities remains a hidden transcript outside of the affected communities, and for most Khmer participants the Khmer Rouge targeted other Khmer, which remains incomprehensible. In talking to people in the village after the tour, we observed that they still articulated their experiences with the PRK narrative of Khmer Rouge violence and nation-wide social suffering. The new vocabulary offered by the ECCC found no resonance in our conversations. The term ‘crimes against humanity’ that legally replaced ‘genocide’ as the primary charge against those standing trial, was not mentioned. In general, people struggled with the legal terms of the court such as testimony, criminology, crime against humanity, war crime, public affair section, civil party, verdict, and Extra-ordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia (see also Hinton 2018).

The encounter of these different understandings that took place during ECCC outreach activity can be read as frictions (Hinton 2018; Tsing 2005) between the universal translation of genocide by the ECCC and the local understanding of the term as vernacularised during the PRK. The vernacularised translation hindered smooth dissemination of the ECCC translation into the wider Cambodian society. Even within civil society outreach activities such as workshops and seminars, no coherent translation existed. While the two translations could potentially enter into dialogue with each other through the question ‘why did Khmer kill Khmer’, the answer—that the former understanding of genocide was now defined as ‘crimes against humanity’—was not able to engender a conversation. While the ECCC deployed the universal legal terminology, the government, as we show below, still disseminated the PRK vernacularisation in official remembrance of the Khmer Rouge period.

Prolai Pouch-sas in a Cambodian Village

The first author spent five months in a former ‘Base people’ village in Takeo province that had been under Khmer Rouge control from 1972 until 1979 and was the site of a large KR prison where more than ten thousand people were executed. This was an investigative site of case 002 of the ECCC. It was also an impressive memoryscape. In the early 1980s, the PRK exhumed human remains that were kept in provisional huts until 2001 when a stupa to store and display them was sponsored by one of the most prominent national political figures, Chea Sim. There were also two signposted former mass graves. Private funding enabled the building of a small pagoda on the grounds of one of the former mass graves. In March 2010, a Cambodian Youth NGO initiated a ten-day art and memory workshop that included a participatory mapping of the former prison site, the painting of a mural, and the making of nine information signs displaying drawings, and short texts in English and Khmer about the former prison (Emde [under review](#); Khet 2009). Few places had

experienced so many interventions since the early 1980s, and the village is an exception in the wider Cambodian mnemonic landscape. In 2011, it had become a polyphonic memoryscape in which different forms of remembrance, official and private, secular and spiritual, interacted. At official events, the PRK term *prolai pouch-sas* was still part of those dynamics.

On 20 May 2011, the National Day of Remembrance, the vice governor of the province of Takeo visited the village's memorial site. The National Day of Remembrance was first introduced in 1984 as the 'Day of Tying Anger', as part of the PRK's official memorialisation. Previously, it was held at different memorial sites nationwide and included official speeches as well as testimonies of survivors (Hughes 2006). While the name was altered, the official dramaturgy had changed little since the 1980s.

Official banners remembered the crimes of the 'genocidal regime', and provincial officials, all members of the ruling Cambodia's People Party (CPP), gave speeches. The vice governor exclaimed, 'More than three decades are over, but what was a great tremendous suffering is still remembered in the heart of Cambodian people and the survivors. It was a criminal and cruel genocidal regime'.

He went on to describe in detail the crimes and atrocities committed at the site of the prison and depicted how the remains were exhumed and displayed on the site to remember the crimes. He concluded by saying 'We are gathering today to celebrate the ceremony to share merit (*bang sakol*) for the victims under the genocidal regime which acted very cruelly in this site in Cambodia'.

Thus, in 2011, CCP officials speaking on the Day of Remembrance reiterated the PRK translation of *prolai pouch-sas*. This is not surprising given that, despite the changing political systems of Cambodia since 1979, until recently, key politicians from the former PRK were still in power. In fact, the ruling CPP emerged from the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea (PRPK), the communist party that single-handedly ruled the PRK (Peou 2019).

The official event also included actors such as civil society, villagers, and Buddhist monks. The village youth group and Youth NGO performed a play that re-enacted Khmer Rouge violence and atrocities. Dressed in black as Khmer Rouge, their play was an eerie presence of the violent past.⁹ The performance was part of the wider transgenerational memory work of the Youth NGO. They did not translate terms directly but engaged the shared collective suffering and violence of the past to talk and perform postmemories (Hirsch 2012) of forced dislocation, famine, torture, and forced labour, and to open transgenerational dialogues. The commemorations ended with the Buddhist ceremony of Bang Sakol, conducted by monks to earn and share merit with the Dead.¹⁰ The ECCC vocabulary remained absent in all these activities. The genocide of other ethnic groups was not mentioned.

While the outreach programmes of the ECCC and civil society aimed at dialogic memory work, the narratives that emerged were framed by the earlier monologic master narrative of national suffering. We suggest that these processes are also linked to past and present political alliances and subjectivities. The village at the centre of this article is a former 'base people' village, where most people have been

part of the Khmer Rouge since the early 1970s, some voluntarily, others forcibly scripted (Emde 2014, 2023). At the time of our research, important elders, including the village head, were aligned with the CCP. For the villagers, to stick with *prolai pouch-sas*'s established meaning is also a strategy to avoid questions on any possible implication in the KR violence.

The second author found similar intersections between political alliances and interpretations of *prolai pouch-sas* in his research on Khmer perceptions of Vietnamese minorities in 2021. He asked his interviewees for an interpretation of *prolai pouch-sas*. Most answers, especially from members of the CCP, related the term *pouch-sas* to all Cambodians. A CPP member in Uddor Meanchay province said that 'the term genocide is not referring to any specific ethnic group. It refers to [the killing of] the whole nation'. Another interviewee gave the example of evidence for genocidal crime by pointing to the mass killing site at a former district security office where Khmer and other detainees were imprisoned and killed. Thus, despite the outreach activities of the ECCC and the transitional justice work of many NGOs, the ECCC translation of genocide could not take hold. It was simply not picked up by the people and has remained limited to the legal context of the court. In contrast, the PRK vernacularisation referring to the elimination and suffering of the nation never disappeared from the public political sphere of national remembrance. It also avoided unwanted questions about KR perpetrators in communities. For former 'base people' and Khmer Rouge, the vernacularised translation shifts the responsibilities for the atrocities to the accused most responsible leaders and does not ask about perpetrations and violence committed by KR lower and middle cadres. It enables all Cambodians, regardless of their position during the time of the Khmer Rouge, to identify as victim-survivors and evade questions of implication in the KR violence.¹¹

In the last section of this article, we show how these translations shifted contexts once again through a new surge in national remembrance that centres around the former prime minister Hun Sen and the ECCC residual phase (Kent 2022).

Outlook: Parallel Translations

Since 2013, Cambodia has seen an increasing authoritarianism under former prime minister Hun Sen and the CPP (Morgenbesser 2019; Norén-Nilsson 2018, 2022), which culminated in the banning of the opposition party and the de-facto return to one-party rule in 2017 (Biddulph and Kent 2023, 5f; Loughlin and Norén-Nilsson 2021, 225). This shift to 'hegemonic authoritarianism' (Morgenbesser 2019) has also engendered a turn to 'illiberal transitional justice' at the ECCC, which pushed the interests of the Cambodian government within the tribunal to the fore (Gidley 2019).¹² Robin Biddulph and Alexandra Kent (2023, 7) mark this period as the making of authoritarian peace. These political transformations have been accompanied by a new surge in official state-driven monologic remembrance with the erection of so-called Win-Win memorials in the capital Phnom

Penh and the provincial capitals of former Khmer Rouge guerrilla strongholds in the country. These memorials commemorate the 1998 Win-Win policy of the Cambodian government. Until 1998, the Khmer Rouge still controlled parts of the country, such as Anlong Veng and Pailin, as the UNTAC mission in the early 1990s had failed to secure peace. They only laid down their weapons when the government offered amnesty and integration into the Cambodian state and army. The Win-Win memorials depict this final successful post-conflict peace- and nation-building as achieved through the initiative of former prime minister Samdech Hun Sen only (Kent 2022).

The monument, located about 16 km outside of Phnom Penh, is a massive rectangular platform lined with reliefs narrating Hun Sen's political life. There is an elaborate representation of KR history, the defection of Hun Sen to Vietnam, the rebuilding of Cambodia under the PRK, and the Khmer Rouge's integration into the Cambodian state and army. The ECCC is not part of that narrative. The Khmer term *prolai pouch-sas* figures in the main inscription in front of the Win-Win memorial site. Kent (2022) sees the Win-Win Memorials as an attempt at a counter-narrative to the ECCC's approach of seeking accountability for past atrocities. Instead of emphasising the need for justice regarding the Khmer Rouge leaders, it celebrates the amnesty and integration of those leaders into the Cambodian state and army in exchange for their loyalty. This resonates with Cambodian traditions that favour harmony and reconciliation over confronting historical political frictions. We suggest that this counter-narrative also entails deployment of the PRK vernacularised translation of genocide and a return to, or reinforcement of, the monologic national remembrance of the past as outlined above. Yet, in contrast to the time of the PRK, the monological vernacularised translation co-exists with the equally monological universal translation, as the ECCC entered its residual phase which aims to transform the hybrid court into a lasting legal legacy institution.

When we conducted follow-up research in February and March 2023, ECCC outreach was directed almost entirely by the Public Affairs Section of the Court under the Cambodian Ministry of Education. The target group of these activities was mostly young people, especially from high school (grade 12), and teachers, who were encouraged to include the history of the KR and the ECCC into the high school curriculum.¹³ The new Win-Win Memorial had become part of outreach programmes.

In March 2023 we interviewed Neth Pheaktra of the Public Affairs section of the ECCC.¹⁴ He emphasised the need for the ECCC to make the violence of Democratic Kampuchea comprehensible to Cambodians and outlined the information disseminated by the current outreach programme. Neth Pheaktra described the visit to the Win-Win Memorial as seminal for teaching students about the end of the violent conflicts as the foundation for the peaceful nation. Talking about outreach, he stressed that many Cambodians still want to know the truth about the KR past, asking 'Why did Khmer kill Khmer?' He noted that current outreach details the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge, for example, forced labour, forced weddings, evacuations and dislocations, separation of families, the creation of famine for the

entire population, defining them as crimes against humanity (*okredthkam brachhang monuscheat*). Asked if this term is understood by participants, as previously these crimes were mostly named *prolai pouch-sas* in schoolbooks and at memorial sites and days, he said, 'We explain *prolai pouch-sas* by describing the violence that the KR committed against the Vietnamese and the Cham.' 'It can be confusing', he added. Sometimes he would use *prolai pouch-sas* in the Khmer sense when he conducted outreach sessions because, he explained, the term allowed him to shorten his explanation—participants would just understand to what he referred. Thus, *prolai pouch-sas* may be deployed in both its Khmer and its international 'universal' meaning in the same outreach session. Meanwhile the ECCC translation remains as part of the ECCC residual phase.

In September 2023 the ECCC resource centre was inaugurated in Phnom Penh. It holds the digital archives, all material documents pertaining to the ECCC trials, and a large library that provides access to all books and documents used and written during the trials. When we visited the centre in September 2024 a new outreach phase had begun. Study tours to the ECCC were offered again for high school and university students. Collaborations with those NGOs once active in outreach were planned; namely, a mobile bus education project carrying information on the ECCC and the KR past that would travel to different provinces of Cambodia to teach high school students.¹⁵ These activities seemed to us more like a top-down education approach that was far from the dialogic outreach memory work done by civil society and witnessed by both authors in the earlier phase of the trials. The ECCC information material distributed translates 'genocide' and 'crimes against humanity' as universally legally defined. As we are writing, we see these two meanings and translations existing in parallel in different political and legal contexts.

Conclusion

It is generally assumed that the successful translation and introduction of universals into local worlds requires their generalisation (Tsing 2005) and their vernacularisation (Levitt and Merry 2009) and is the result of a dialogue between global interventions and local implementations facilitated by people in the middle such as translators, civil society members, and activists. In this process the local determines how new ideas and concepts must be framed to resonate, be comprehensible and accepted, by local actors. But, as pointed out in the introduction of this special issue, the existing literature does not sufficiently contemplate the possibility of people's prior engagements in relation to the universals implemented. The Cambodian example does not only show that such prior engagements may remain very influential for the reception of contemporary translations, to the point of even obstructing them, but also alerts us to the fact that not all universals may be implemented in dialogic fashions. The People's Republic of Kampuchea vernacularised and implemented the word genocide top down in a monologic fashion in their memorialisation of the KR violence. This translation resonated with the experiences of the Khmer majority of the Cambodian population

which led them to pick up and vernacularise the term. Consequently, the specific experiences of the attempted annihilation and prosecution of minorities during the KR regime and debates about blurred victim/perpetrator boundaries remained silent.

Furthermore, this vernacularised meaning has remained part of national remembrance until today, as part of memorial sites and official commemoration of the KR past. These dynamics made the translations of the universal concept of genocide, introduced almost thirty years later by the ECCC, partly untranslatable. The ECCC translation, equally monologic in its legal universal definition, was not able to transcend the legal proceedings of the tribunal as people would not pick it up. Consequently, genocide is now a word with a double meaning appearing in different locales and settings. The new monologic national remembrance of the Win-Win memorialisation deploys the vernacularised term to emphasise, once again, a nationally united 'we' and highlight the centrality ascribed to Hun Sen as the nation's peacemaker. The political actors involved 'mobilise the monologic' again in authoritarian political spheres (Tomlinson and Millie 2017, 259). Since 2023, the ECCC has pushed their translations and understanding of the KR past to the educated young population as part of the residual ECCC programme. It remains to be seen if, in the future, these will enter into dialogue with the vernacularised term pushed by the Cambodian government and, if so, how they are negotiated, accepted, or rejected. In conversations with our Khmer interlocutors, young and old, the question 'why did Khmer kill Khmer' is still fundamental. They refer to the KR time as a sad time because Khmer killed other Khmer, and they still ponder the reasons for this incomprehensible violence. In contrast, the suffering and deaths of ethnic minorities are marginalised and pondered only by outsiders such as the researchers or the ECCC. The term *prolai pouch-sas* likely will continue to exist in multiple and contingent ways in today's Cambodia.

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Notes

- [1] Around 200,000 Vietnamese were present in Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975. Of these, over 150,000 were expelled to Vietnam the same year (Heuveline 1998, 63; Thun and Keo 2021, 332). The remaining 20,000 Vietnamese all perished (Kiernan 2008, 458). The number of Muslim Cham was estimated between 150,000 to 250,000 of which 90,000 persons died during the DK (Kiernan 2008, 458). For the mostly urban Sino-Khmer, Kiernan estimated that of approximately 430,000 people in 1975, half perished (Kiernan 2008, 458).
- [2] The academic literature on the Khmer Rouge period is too extensive to be cited in detail. See among others Becker (1998), Chandler (1991), Bultmann (2017), Hinton (2005), and Kiernan (2008).
- [3] In this article we deploy the ECCC Khmer translations and transliterations.
- [4] The ECCC is a hybrid court. It applies both international and domestic law, and has international and Cambodian officials in all major offices, including co-lawyers, co-prosecutors, and co-judges (Hinton 2018, 14)
- [5] In this article we do not ask about scholarly/academic definitions of what constitutes genocide (Hinton 2002; Williams 2020) or, in relation to academic debates, whether the definition of genocide in international conventions and law is applicable to the Cambodian case (Margolin 2004; Margolin and Taïbi 2021; Schabas 2001; Vianney-Liaud 2014). We also ask explicitly about translations in the legal and political spheres and do not turn to religious and private realms that may communicate and remember the past quite differently (Guillou 2012; Kidron 2020). Those dynamics are beyond the scope of this article.
- [6] The term was introduced by the Polish jurist, Raphaël Lemkin, who aimed at a legal term that would grasp the mass atrocities of the Shoah. The word combines the Greek word *genos* (race, tribe) with the Latin word *cide* (killing of) and was the foundation for the United Nations Genocide Convention in 1948 (Hinton 2002, 3).
- [7] The socialist vocabulary of the PRK entailed an entire world of new terms, all official translations of socialist international concepts into Khmer, see Götze-Sam (1992).
- [8] This information sign had been removed when I returned to Choeung Ek in 2019.
- [9] Re-enactment and theatre are, in fact, mnemonic practices that are often chosen by people as a way to remember. See, for instance, the documentary *We want (u) to know* by Ella Pugliese and Nou Va conducted with a rural community, or the film ‘S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine’ by Rithy Panh. Theatre is also a regular part of the annual national commemoration of the Day of Remembrance at the memorial site Choeung Ek in Phnom Penh.
- [10] There can be no doubt that Khmer Buddhism, rituals, and care for spirits are quotidian local practices that assist people to overcome and live with the violent past, and were seminal in the remaking of worlds after the Khmer Rouge (Guillou 2012; Kidron 2020; Zucker 2013). They are, as Alexander Hinton (2018) has pointed out, part of justice assemblages that exist in contemporary Cambodia. While we also see these practices as local forms of remembrance and spiritual survival, in addition to transitional justice efforts in the context of the ECCC, they are not the focus of our article.
- [11] We are aware that these processes render differently for the Vietnamese, Cham, and Chinese minorities in the country who were defined as an ethnic or religious ‘other’ by the Khmer Rouge and the Khmer majority population (see Duong 2006; Ovesen and Trankell 2004). Their specific experiences of annihilation as ethnic minorities remain hidden and find no space in public discourses. As we have worked with Khmer villages and interlocutors, our perspective stems from those specific contexts. For Vietnamese histories, see Thun and

- Keo (2021) and Sperfeldt (2024). For Cham histories, see Eng (2014), Gray (2015), Osman (2006), and So (2011). For the Chinese community, see Edwards (1996).
- [12] Gidley (2019, 206f.) states that the Cambodian government agreed to the ECCC for the purpose of international legitimisation but wanted to avoid any domestic investigations that would implicate former KR beyond case 001 and case 002 of the tribunal. The Cambodian authorities thus minimally adhered to procedural international standards but obscured all processes that could jeopardise the CCP's narrative of the past and their political power.
- [13] Neth Pheaktra, interview with Sina Emde and Keo Duong, Phnom Penh, 17 March 2023.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] <https://eccc.gov.kh/en/resources/news-and-outreach/driving-change-the-eccc-mobile-resource-centres-journey-to-connect-cambodias-past-and-present> (accessed 15 January 2025).

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