Genocide, Healing, Justice, and Peace in Cambodia

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For three years, eight months, and twenty days, between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge held power in Cambodia. It has been described as one of the most radical and brutal periods in world history—a grim chapter of the twentieth century. It was a time of mass starvation, torture, slavery, and killing. The number of Cambodians who died under the Khmer Rouge remains a topic of debate: Vietnamese sources say 3 million, while others estimate 1.7–2 million deaths. Historians have called it the Cambodian Holocaust, a pogrom of ethnic cleansing and societal reform that still haunts many survivors and their descendants within Cambodian communities worldwide.

Among Cambodians, those living in Cambodia, and the Diaspora (the United States, Australia, France, Canada, New Zealand, and Vietnam), peace is elusive, since justice may never be achieved. “How is justice possible if Pol Pot is already dead?” many survivors asked after 1998. In 2003, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) was established through an agreement between the government of Cambodia and the United Nations, with a mandate to prosecute senior members of the Khmer Rouge for war crimes and crimes against humanity during the time the Khmer Rouge held power. The ECCC is a hybrid court composed of Cambodian and international judges and prosecutors working with Cambodian and international laws, under a French-style system. The ECCC is as significant as the war crimes tribunal since the Nazi trials at Nuremberg. This eight-year-old Court is fraught with disputes among prosecutors, judges, funders, and officials in the Cambodian government. Today, many of the surviving victims and their descendants fear that the majority of the Khmer Rouge leaders and other low-level Khmer Rouge personnel will go unpunished because the judicial process is being manipulated by the current prime minister, Hun Sen, himself a known former Khmer Rouge leader.

The authors in this issue were asked to engage these questions: What are peacemakers pursuing on the ground, in Cambodia, and in diasporic Cambodian communities? What will it take to bring about peace: physical peace,
geographic peace, imagined peace, emotional peace, spiritual peace, social peace, familial peace, individual peace, and so on? Are Cambodians, as journalist Joel Brinkley declares, “cursed” by history to live under abusive tyrants? What will it take to bring about justice? What is the interplay between justice and peace for Cambodian survivors who continue to live and struggle with the phantom of the genocide? How is genocide and injustice transmitted, culturally, temporally, and generationally? Where can Cambodians find hope, or rather, expressions of hope, and by extension, healing? How are Cambodian youths negotiating history, identity, and community? How has the genocide and the experience of surviving post-genocide been reflected in the arts of Cambodia? How are the arts used for peacemaking? What are leaders, activists, and everyday Cambodian subjects doing to pave a path for peace and justice? How are peace and justice somatically experienced and expressed? Is the Tribunal a move toward justice, and by extension, peace, or does it deepen old wounds and open up painful scars? What can we learn about justice, peace, and healing? Can there be peace without justice, or justice without peace? How can Cambodians practice forgiveness?

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