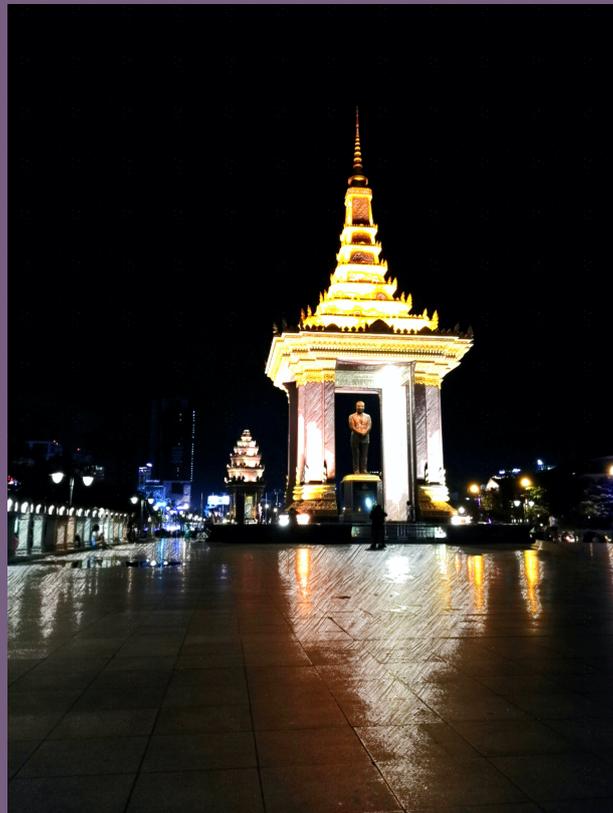


WORKING PAPER NO.4

“They Should Cremate It”: Youth Perceptions towards Skeletal Remains in Cambodia’s Genocide Memorials



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Abstract

Human remains constitute an essential part of post-conflict management, particularly after genocide and mass violence. The paper offers a case study of youth perceptions in Cambodia towards these remains. It outlines the current perception of youth towards memorials and how these perceptions are influenced by human remains. Furthermore, skeletal remains in Cambodia’s genocide memorials were perceived by youth to be critical, anchored within a political powerplay and unjust to the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime. The paper offers a new understanding of the relevance of memorialization among Cambodia’s youth and implicates future treatment of the displayed bones and skulls.

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Cover photograph: Phnom Penh by night with the view of the Norodom Sihanouk Memorial, 2019. Photographed by Jan Reinerma.

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Introduction

From 1975 to 1979 Cambodia witnessed one of the most totalitarian regimes in the late 20th century. The Khmer Rouge under the lead of Pol Pot tried to establish an egalitarian peasant state. As a consequence of their actions, the Khmer Rouge wiped out almost a quarter of their own population. No one knows exactly how many people were killed during this period. Approximately 1.6 million people died from starvation and disease or were brutally executed (Manning, 2017). After the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, the bodies of those who have been killed were buried in thousands of mass graves or left abandoned (Guillou, 2012).

After the Vietnamese overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, the new People's Republic of Kampuchea tried to collect physical evidence of the atrocities and erected memorials to display some of the bones and skulls from those who were murdered under the regime (Fleischman, 2016). The discussion of what should be done with the bones and skulls was subject to various conflicts among many social parties in Cambodia (Moon, 2017). In 2001 the Cambodian government called for action to preserve the remains¹ and in addition, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, stated that human remains need to be preserved as evidence before the court (Hughes, 2003a). As a result, the preservation and display of human remains are officially encouraged, perceived as essential for retaining evidence of the crimes permitted and are imbedded into larger political agenda with a view to future generations. Today human remains are displayed in memorials, museums, traditional *stupas*² and many other sites of memory all over the country. Notwithstanding these efforts, a lot of remains are still buried in the ground (Bennett, 2018).

Genocide memorials in Cambodia are well-documented (Bennett, 2018; Brown and Millington, 2015; Duffy, 1994; Hughes, 2003b, 2017; Jarvis, 2003; Ledgerwood, 1997; Tyner et al., 2012; Tyner and Devadoss, 2014; Violi, 2017; Williams, 2019). Especially for Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, researchers focused strongly on uncovering the motives and dynamics of dark tourism (Isaac and Çakmak, 2016; Lennon, 2009; Bickford, 2009), mnemonic attributions (Williams, 2019) and its representation on social media platforms (Benzaquen, 2014). Cambodia's genocide memorials were also evaluated towards their social impact (Fleischman, 2016). However, research has not specifically addressed the role of the skeletal remains within the memorials (Lischer, 2019).

This paper offers a case study of youth perceptions in Cambodia towards these remains. The focus is specifically on the perception of youth towards the primary components of bones and skulls in the stupas.

¹ Part of the circular on preservation of remains of the victims of the genocide committed during the regime of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1978), and preparation of Anlong Veng to become a region for historical tourism, DC-CAM: http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Maps/Victim_Memorials.htm.

² A *stupa* is a traditional Buddhist monument where religious artifacts are commonly displayed.

The paper analyses how young people think, perceive and interact with the sites that hold the human remains and asks: *How do skeletal remains influence the perception of Phnom Penh's youth towards memorials that commemorate Khmer Rouge atrocities?* The paper focusses on the two most prominent genocide memorials in Cambodia: The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocidal Center. Cambodian youth were asked how they feel and think about human remains as part of their perception towards memorials.³

Münyas (2008: 431) analyzed the transmission of the history of Khmer Rouge atrocities to post-genocide generations and concluded that genocide memorials in Cambodia “shock and frighten youth and fail to generate meaningful messages aiming toward peace and reconciliation”. Therefore, it is pertinent that research on memorials takes on a broader agenda regarding youth perceptions and the process of “retaining meaning for rising generations” (Barsalou and Baxter, 2007: 2). The significance attached to memorials will “outlast the lives of the survivors and perpetrators, affecting the ways new generations will interpret the past” (Lischer, 2019: 21). As a result, we should rightly ask the question “to whom do the memories we preserve belong, and to whom do we wish to transmit them” (Violi, 2017: 3).

Answering these questions delivers important contributions to current debates on memorialization, regarding the “social meaning that memorials acquire” (Violi, 2017: 54) as they are “promoted as an effective apparatus for producing a range of desirable social responses” (Williams, 2007: 22). The impact of memorials has often been formulated as preventive measures for “future genocides” (Williams, 2004) or as the creation of “ritual symbolic memory for future generations” (Assmann, 2006: 224), which makes studying the perception of young generations towards genocide memorials important.

Memorials are places of memory which can mediate or be mediators of memory (Assmann, 2010). These physical sites provide “[...] a visual that condenses a complex narrative into simple symbol which can then be reused in various context” (Buckley-Zistel and Schäfer, 2014: 4). It is important to note that memorials and other forms of memory can vary in their “political function” (Williams, 2007: 8), as I will show empirically with regards to the perception of youth towards skeletal remains in the memorial landscape of Phnom Penh. The term ‘*human remains*’ is used to describe the bones and skulls that are displayed in memorials, stupas, museums and other memory sites. It does not include other ‘human remains’, such as clothes or other memorabilia and so-called ‘spiritual remains’ (Moon, 2017).

The paper offers a case study of youth towards these remains, based on my ongoing research. By doing so, it offers a new understanding of the perception of memorialization for Cambodia’s youth and how they view the public display of bones and skulls in Cambodia’s genocide memorials.

³ This was part of a larger research project on the perception of Cambodian youth towards public memorials.

Methodology

Present findings are part of a larger project on memorial perceptions of young people in Cambodia towards memorials. The research was conducted between July and November 2019.

I used a number of methods intensive participant observation; formal and informal interviewing with a range of young people (random young adults at memorial sites, friends, colleagues and everyday encounters); a standardized mid-scale questionnaire; field notes; analysis of local NGO reports on memorials; participation and organization of workshops⁴ on youth in Phnom Penh; and reviewing the existing body of academic research. As I followed a mixed-methods approach, the paper aims for *complementarity* “to complement, illustrate, and better understand the results” and “therefore about a more complete picture, a better understanding, and thus a more comprehensive answer to the research question” (Greene et al., 2008: 127).

Five in-depth interviews were conducted within the data-collection phase. All interviews were with the explicit approval of the participants transcribed and analyzed. The analysis begun with several coding rounds and a qualitative content analysis with the support of the software MAXQDA 2018.

A questionnaire was used to identify the participants background, if they knew and visited several memorial sites, as such the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum or the Choeung Ek Genocidal Center. The types of questions that were used in the questionnaire were either closed or open questions. Some of the questions were drawn from previous questionnaires (see Williams et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2011) wherever possible, in order to use tested phrasings,⁵ as well as to increase the comparability to previous results. At any point each participant could have ticked “Don’t know” or “Prefer not to answer”. Overall, the survey was completed by Cambodians ($N = 76$) between the ages of 15–30 years.⁶

‘The Dead’ on Display: Spirits, Memorials and Human Remains in Cambodia

Before the Khmer Rouge killed thousands of Cambodians, death and dead bodies were part of traditional funeral rituals (Davis, 2015). During the Khmer Rouge, religion and religious acts were strongly suppressed and could lead to punishment or death (Harris, 2013). To care about the remains of lost relatives is strongly connected with Buddhist beliefs in Cambodia (Bennett, 2019) and even the social status of ‘the dead’ changed over time (Bennett, 2018).

⁴ These workshops were part of my internship at the Civil Peace Service in Cambodia.

⁵ This is especially useful in the context of doing research in the context of Cambodia, where particular phrasings can be misunderstood, or particular wordings are too complex in a survey-setting.

⁶ I used the national age-centric understanding by the Royal Government of Cambodia, which defines youth between 15 and 30 year’s old (Ministry of Education, 2011) in order to set clear demarcations towards the selection process of participants.

Genocide memorialization in Cambodia consists of sacred structures that contain the bones and skulls and other belongings of the deceased, which are called stupa (Hughes, 2017). One of the most prominent memorial sites – which over the past years transformed into a famous tourist spot – are the so-called ‘killing fields,’ namely the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre. At Choeung Ek, visitors experience the display of around 9,000 skeletal remains in such traditional stupa. 41% of youth stated that he or she visited Choeung Ek. Those who visited Choeung Ek either visited it once (81%) or twice (3%). The most reported purpose of visiting Choeung Ek was that it was part of their school curriculum (47%) or out of self-interest (41%).

Another major site of memory – where bones and skulls are displayed – is Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Visitors of the museum will see a variety of remains, such as pieces of cloths, handcuffs and many more. These remains are displayed as evidence to “be preserved for the next generation of Cambodians to learn from” (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, 2019: 96). Tuol Sleng is a complex site of memorialization which can generally be classified as a so-called *memorial museum* (Williams, 2007) and is home of a memorial that is dedicated to the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime inside the courtyard of the museum, which also changed over time (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, 2019). The focus of the museum is the prominent display of pictures of the interrogated in Tuol Sleng. In this sense, skeletal remains do not form the essential part of the exhibitions. However, bones and skulls are displayed in one of the last exhibition rooms inside a wooden shelf that is protected with glass. Seeing the skeletal remains at the end of the exhibition imprint the impression of the displayed bones and skulls the visitor. 67% of youth stated that he or she visited Tuol Sleng. In comparison to Choeung Ek, those who visited Tuol Sleng went to it either once (46%) or twice (35%). Youth visited the memorial museum either in the context of their school curriculum (49%) or out of self-interest (41%). In total, the majority of 96% of the respondents stated that museums on Khmer Rouge atrocities are important for young generations in Cambodia.

Overall, human remains are important to the government today in order provide evidence to its own people and the international community. Nonetheless, the view of those remains and especially skeletal remains are viewed critical by scholars in the field. Hughes (2005) claim that the displayed remains are frightening to many Cambodians. The frightening element of bones and skulls in memorials was also a common perception of those Cambodians who Manning (2017: 146) interviewed. Focused on Cambodia’s youth, Münyas (2008: 429) reports that “genocide memorials will mostly frighten and upset youth.” The feeling of fear towards genocide memorials became even more interesting as 80% of my respondents stated that memorials are still important to remember the victims of the Khmer Rouge, beside other digital alternatives.

I found three dominant perceptions in my data that shaped the way young people viewed memorial sites: Skeletal-remains as carriers of evidence, remains viewed as part of a political agenda and the desire for cremating the bones and skulls that are on display.

Human Remains as Evidence

Beside the spiritual importance of the dead, my data suggests that human remains and especially skeletal-remains provide “direct evidence of traumatic events” (Fleischman, 2016: 126) for young people in Cambodia. The remains provide evidence and certainty of the crimes permitted, as youth wondered “Why did Khmer kill Khmer?” (Münyas, 2008: 413). This is illustrated though part of a larger story one young Cambodian told me about, as we went through his view towards skeletal-remains and his experience with the stories he was told by his family about the Khmer Rouge:

“When I was a little young, I think that Khmer not kill Khmer. But for now, very blurred. Yes, very blurred about this. And I still keep whenever people talk about Khmer Rouge to me, I think about question why. Why, why, my people do that.”⁷

And as we continued to speak about his perception of the displayed skeletal-remains at Choeung Ek and in Tuol Sleng, he elaborated his feelings:

“I’m not so happy, you know: The feeling like, like all the time that I, I see some, the image of the skull. I always feel like why, you know. And I still feel like, confused, about what happened, for real. [...]. I have question for, whenever I see the skull there, why they kill each other like that, you know.”

These impressions resonate with the view of other Cambodians⁸ I spoke to. Displaying bones and skulls is further used as a way to educate young people about the cruelties of the Khmer Rouge regime (Gruspier and Pollanen, 2017; Manning, 2017; Münyas, 2008). Evidence continued to be important throughout my interviews. Whereas I was told by one Cambodian, that young people should see some of the cruelties that the Khmer Rouge had done to the Khmer people and without that, they would not fully understand that the genocide actually happened (IN003⁹). Finding evidence through the display of skeletal-remains was portrayed as an important feature of memorials that young people see for themselves and their peers. 46% of my respondents stated that the bones and skulls reminded them of the past and provide them with evidence of what happened.

In the case for Tuol Sleng, which is broadly viewed as a place that contains strong evidence (Gruspier and Pollanen, 2017), one young Cambodian that organizes tours to Tuol Sleng for other youth from rural provinces, explained why Tuol Sleng remains important:

“Tuol Sleng is where that kind of evidence that when if you do not believe about that, so you can see the Tuol Sleng is the memory that you can see everything happened in

⁷ Interview (001) with a young Cambodian in Phnom Penh 2019.

⁸ Interviews (002, 003, 004) with young Cambodians in Phnom Penh 2019.

⁹ Interview (003) with a young Cambodian in Phnom Penh 2019.

the KR. So, Tuol Sleng is still very important, as the evidence for [...] the young generation to learn about that and to know about that.”¹⁰

Tuol Sleng here, is framed as place where young people can find evidence of the cruelties of the Khmer Rouge, as well as a place that can educate Cambodia’s youth on past atrocities. That Tuol Sleng is transformed into museum manifests that claim towards the visitor. The skeletal remains displayed in Tuol Sleng can frighten youth (Münyas, 2008), but provide some of the answers that Khmer killed Khmer. Finding evidence through the display of human remains made those places important and authentic to young people.

Bones and Skulls within the Politics of Memory

Memorials are by nature political spaces (Lauzon, 2019; Hughes, 2003b; Williams, 2007; Young, 1993), and the skeletal remains are political artifacts (Bennett, 2019; Moon, 2017), which can be used to induce certain feelings, behaviors and opinions. Moon (2017: 281) declares that displayed remains put forth “advanced specific political objectives,” such as evidence and its implications to the rightness to rule. Political use of bones and skulls in Cambodia were further used to “orchestrate public mourning” (Guillou, 2012: 214). Within this realm of memory politics, youth is addressed specifically: memorials (and the display of human remains) shall form a “foundation of remembrance and education for current and future generation” (Moon, 2017: 282).

As in other cases (see as introduction Hartmann et al., 2018), sites of remembering in Cambodia have become major tourist sites over the years (Bickford, 2009) and gained importance for the national economy (Chheang, 2008). Youth that I spoke with told me about their view in the way the skeletal-remains are used by the current government to strengthen their legitimization to rule. The case of Choeung Ek is perceived as follows:

“Well, [...], I think the stupa with the skulls are, I mean it is the most significant place, or significant landscape in the killing fields, right. And then it comes to, to what the people want to do, right. The government, right, from my perspective they just want to keep there for tourist sake.”

And concluded with:

“But the people, if what the people really want, is that they want them to be cremated. They don’t want their country or those people, their own people to be showing that way.”¹¹

¹⁰ Interview (002) with two young Cambodians in Phnom Penh 2019.

¹¹ Interview (004) with a Cambodian Youth in Phnom Penh 2019.

Describing the importance of Choeung Ek as the “most significant place” or more generally as that “memorials hold significant importance”, was a regular frame how youth imbedded their perception towards skeletal-remains, while simultaneously drawing on their political weight attached to them. As a consequence, political instrumentalizations within the display of human remains shaped the way young people in Cambodia perceived memorial sites. The political use of the bones and skulls were seen dominantly as negative. In addition to this perspective, the next chapter alludes on the debate of cremating the displayed bones and skulls.

Cremating ‘The Dead’

Cremating the bones and skulls that are displayed in memorials in Cambodia is heavily debated among scholars, officials of the government, spiritual leaders, as well as among survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime. Hughes (2017: 276) claims that skeletal remains are commonly perceived as a home of ghosts that “may harm the living by causing great sickness and misfortune”. Young people that I spoke with sketched a clear picture of what should be done with the displayed remains:

“I don’t think they should, you know, keep all the skulls in the stupa. They should cremate it. You know, have a big ceremony, Buddhist ceremony. Invite all the people and cremate them, so they can find peace.”¹²

The aim that the bones and skulls of the victims should be cremated was a common position throughout my interviews. Beside the claim that the youth in Cambodia is frightened of the bones and skulls (Münyas, 2008), some of my respondents¹³ felt it disrespectful to display the skeletal remains, as one young Cambodian perceived them as “naked”:

“And so, I think that it’s like you know, we are portraying those victims naked. You know it paints that sort of a picture of nakedness for me. Which is, for me is not good. And it doesn’t paint a good picture of Cambodian Genocide Memorial.”¹⁴

Descriptions of nakedness and that the remains should be cremated so that the victims can find peace or even that the bones and skulls do not paint a good picture of the memorial were common around the youth I spoke with. Young people also expressed their opinion towards the display in the questionnaire that they feel upset (S017, S032),¹⁵ that they want to see the remains cremated “with respect to the victims” (S027)¹⁶ or that they “paint a bad picture of our past” (S020).¹⁷ These negative perceptions towards the display of bones and skulls in genocide memorial produced a general discomfort towards the memorial itself even as most of my

¹² Interview (005) with a young Cambodian in Phnom Penh 2019.

¹³ Interviews (001, 003, 005) with young Cambodians in Phnom Penh 2019.

¹⁴ Interview (004) with a Cambodian Youth in Phnom Penh 2019.

¹⁵ Questionnaire Nr. 017 and 032, Phnom Penh 2019.

¹⁶ Questionnaire Nr. 027, Phnom Penh 2019.

¹⁷ Questionnaire Nr. 020, Phnom Penh 2019.

respondents see these memorials as important as they “remind us [the interviewee] of the worst regime in the past” (S008).¹⁸

Concluding Discussion

The paper has shown how the perception of Cambodian youth is multilayered towards skeletal remains and how this complexity unfolds towards the perception of memorials that display these human remains.

As skeletal remains are part of the exhibition in Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng, Moon (2017: 281) states that a common belief exists regarding the necessity of cremating the dead, in order to facilitate a transition “from death to rebirth”. Cremating the dead is therefore necessary to follow spiritual beliefs, and without cremation, a memorial in Cambodia will become a “dangerous place” (Cougill, 2006: 77). Contrary to this point, Bennett (2019: 579) argues that the display of bones and skulls “in state-sponsored memorials is largely considered acceptable”. Youth that I spoke with were clear about favoring a traditional cremation over a public display of these remains. The displays of bones and skulls were dissatisfying, because the victims were portrayed in a manner that the youth perceived to be disrespectful..

Klinkner (2008: 242) argued that a gap exists in perceptions towards human remains between “those immediately affected by the Khmer Rouge terror and the younger generations”. This gap – Klinkner claims – is founded in the assumption that youth “assume that unburied or undisplayed human remains belong to bad people who do not deserve better treatment” (ibid.). My findings show a different view on how young people in Cambodia see the skeletal remains. Youth I spoke with rather held a benevolent view towards these remains, in a sense that they wished to see them cremated through a traditional ceremony, so that the victims can find peace and to not anymore be displayed as ‘naked’.

According to Lischer (2019: 6) memorials tell narratives of atrocities through the “choices designers make about site location, objects displayed, and contextual information provided”. Youth that I spoke with focused strongly on the political use of the display of bones and skulls in memorials. Moreover, the displayed skulls were seen as a part of a process for political legitimization.

However, the three examples – evidence, political use of the remains and cremation – showed the ambivalence and complexity of the relationship of youth to the remains. This triad of perceptions shaped the way my respondents viewed the Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek genocide memorials. 33% ‘agreed completely’ and 55% ‘agreed’ that memorials help to educate young Cambodians on Khmer Rouge history. Hence, memorials and museums were generally perceived as important to remember the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime (79%) and that the names of the victims should be integrated into genocide memorials (54%) in order to show

¹⁸ Questionnaire Nr. 008, Phnom Penh 2019.

respect to the dead. The role of memorials for young people are therefore not only “markers of memory” (Manning, 2017: 18), but also *markers of the present* as they include objects of evidence and the opportunity for young people to interpret the ambiguities of their display, e.g. the political function of bones and skulls.

What the present study showed is that the display of human remains constitutes an integral part of the perception towards memorials and how young people interpreted memorial sites. Skeletal remains influenced the perception of youth as they produced ambivalences between cremation as a means for justice and respect for the dead, and preservation for future generations as an object of evidence. Youth therefore formulated a critique of the public display in memorials, simultaneously drawing on the importance of memorials as a means of remembering the murderous policies of the Khmer Rouge regime.

More research needs to be done towards the perception of the specific features of each genocide memorials, such as location, design or content and how these might change the way they are perceived. The Cambodian skeletal and cultural data may also be useful for future international comparisons of youth perceptions towards genocide memorials. While much research still needs to be completed, I hope that this analysis has shed some light on the contemporary view of young people towards skeletal remains in memorials of mass atrocities, contributing to the larger field of genocide studies.

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