Eve Zucker


Eve Zucker’s monograph *Forest of Struggle* builds on an ethnographic study conducted a decade ago in a village in the Cardamom Mountains of Southwestern Cambodia. The author is interested in the relationship between social memory, violence, trauma, and morality, and asks broadly how communities manage painful memories and come together again after violent conflict to rebuild their community. She explores the thirty years after 1970, during which Khmer Rouge forces were based in the region.

Most of the available literature describing life under the Khmer Rouge focuses on the period of the regime (1975–1979) and on the urban population (referred to by the Khmer Rouge as ‘new’ people), which was forcibly moved out of the cities into rural collectives. By contrast, this study provides a well-needed insight into the experiences of a community of so-called ‘base’ (rural) people and includes experiences from both before and after the regime itself. Zucker notes that while both ‘new’ and ‘base’ people suffered from starvation, forced movement, overwork, and summary executions during the Khmer Rouge era, the experiences of the villagers she studied were part of an ongoing tension in their relationship with state power. To mark their opposition to earlier state power, many locals had in fact signed up to join the Khmer Rouge as low-ranking leaders.

This community is characterized by high rates of illiteracy, continuous forced movement from 1970, a lack of arable land and resources, and general socioeconomic vulnerability. Zucker points out that highlanders in Cambodia are also culturally positioned at the margins of the Khmer moral universe; they have long practiced different forms of livelihood and religion from the lowlanders and traditionally provided sanctuary for various rebels. As the descendants of minority ethnic groups, the highlanders are generally looked down upon by lowlanders and seen as wild and uncivilized.

Zucker’s choice of field site therefore gives the study an important place in the literature. It provides a nuanced portrayal of the various strategies for survival that the villagers adopted in the past and the complex ways in which they have since been dealing with the moral aftermath. Of particular interest is the author’s discussion of the lack of distinction between victims and perpetrators and how those who bore responsibility for the deaths of others have since been reframed as victims of circumstance. In her epilogue, Zucker notes that this is...
something that the ongoing Khmer Rouge Tribunal, by limiting responsibility to a handful of leading figures, also facilitates.

The ethnographic data were collected from two communes, which make for interesting comparison and Zucker further positions them in relation to the broader situation in Cambodia. She illustrates how the particular histories and circumstances of each commune are associated with the different ways they have adopted of reestablishing relationships within their communities. The commune in which the study’s focal village is situated is shown to have fared considerably worse than its neighbour. Zucker relates the latter’s relatively successful recovery of community life with its greater number of surviving elders and with the consequent revival of traditional practices and ideals and a rendering of the pre-revolutionary past as morally exemplary. Her focal commune has instead been more susceptible to the dubious influences of modernization.

Two central chapters of this book are devoted to a single villager who had collaborated with the Khmer Rouge and betrayed many of his co-villagers, who were then executed. Zucker’s efforts to explore his story by interviewing both his co-villagers and the man himself show professional assurance as well as sensitivity to the moral delicacy of the circumstances in which she too was living at the time.

Her interpretation of this man’s story is lucidly presented. She notes that he denies his own agency in past wrongdoings and thus reconciles them with the current benign ambitions he expresses in his practice as a Buddhist layman. She then observes how the community seems complicit in this denial; by regarding him as having acted out of moral ignorance rather than malice, and by socially excluding him yet accepting his daughter, the villagers contain the moral damage to their community.

Throughout the book Zucker’s ethnography is rich in relevant detail that is then skillfully analyzed. Some of the scene-setting passages demonstrate an admirable aptitude for creative writing and this gives the work a vibrancy that is uncommon in academic writing.

In her epilogue, Zucker describes a return to her field site a decade after completing her original study, and when the Khmer Rouge Tribunal was already well under way. This gives her work a further dimension. She notes that the Khmer Rouge collaborator she had paid so much attention to was now tolerated by the older generation and largely respected by the young, who had no memory or direct experience of his earlier misdeeds.

From her observations of how the community she studied, with time, tended to erase immorality from social memory, Zucker poses a poignant question about the Tribunal, asking to what extent Cambodians will adopt the idea pro-
moted through international justice that past misconduct should be resolved through trial, historicization and commemoration.

Zucker’s masterly study of these villagers’ struggle to negotiate their traumatic past first and foremost provides a valuable addition to the literature on Cambodia’s ongoing recovery from decades of organized violence. The deceptively simple and fluent writing style, which nonetheless deals with highly complex issues, makes this book suitable not only for scholars but for any reader interested in contemporary Cambodia. More broadly, the book is replete with insights of relevance to those who seek to enhance their understanding of social suffering and recovery in any society.

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