Alexander Laban Hinton


Rutgers University Anthropology Professor Alexander Laban Hinton is the author of *Man Or Monster: The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer,* which details the Khmer Rouge’s brutal rule in Cambodia in the 1970s, during which as many as 20,000 citizens were interrogated as well as tortured and eventually executed. At the time, the commandant of the designated S21 torturing security center was headed by a former mathematics teacher, who was named simply as Dutch.

According to Professor Hinton, who is also the Founding Director of Rutgers University’s Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights, justice came to the victims of the heinous crimes in 2009, when Dutch stood trial for what was described as crimes against humanity. In “Foreground” (pp. 3-37), readers are informed by the author that in Cambodia, “over 12,000 people passed through the gates of S-21, which Dutch ran beginning in March 1976. Almost all of the prisoners were executed, many after being interrogated and tortured into making a confession. Evil. A picture is worth a thousand words, the saying goes. One look tells the story,” (pp. 3-4).

*Man Or Monster: The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* is divided into two distinct parts: Part I, which is subtitled as “Confession”, has six full-fledged chapters, and a final but weird one-page section that is titled, “Erasure: Dutch’s Apology”. Part II, which is also sub-titled as “Reconstruction”, has four substantive chapters, followed by an epilogue; acknowledgments; timeline; abbreviations; copious notes, a bibliography, and an index.

Thematically, a major aspect of Part I is Dutch’s confession, which included his terse admission of guilt and apology of March 31, 2009: “I wish to apologize. I do not ask that you forgive me here now. I know that the crimes I committed against the lives of those people, including women and children, are intolerably and unforgivably serious crimes. My plea is that you leave the door open to me to seek forgiveness,” (p. 44). The Cambodian trial at the Extraordinary Chambers was presided over by Judge Nil Nonn, whose title was President.

Part II, the portion styled as “Reconstruction”, is made up of a collage for torture and testimonies and interrogations. Here, readers can, as well, witness artistic drawings of prisoners being whipped and those being tortured with electrical shock devices. The contents are such that they speak for themselves with reference to the misery that the victims encountered. Professor Hinton use the Epilogue section to pose the question, as whether Dutch, who tortured and had so many people killed in Cambodia was either a man or a monster?
Here, the author also discusses the conviction that the chamber (or court) handed down.

In the end, Professor Hinton wrote that Dutch’s experience did caution us, as observers and readers, about where the banality of everyday though may lead. He added: “Like him [the convicted Dutch], we constantly render articulations of self, other, and the world. And like him, we have a choice about whether to do so with effacing conviction or afacement. For me, this is the key lesson we can take from Dutch’s trial, one that, like the title of this book, is provocative, haunted, and haunting,” (p. 296).

The book, with its chilling but instructive contents, will benefit tremendously Asian experts as well as specialists on pogrom as well as researchers and students interested in the Cambodian story. Hopefully libraries would obtain copies of the book for wide dissemination of the sad Cambodian story of the murderous and disastrous Khmer Rouge era.

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