

For Cambodia, therapy

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PHNOM PENH Mao Irang is an evangelist for the new magic in Cambodia, a treatment that can cure everything from headaches to blackouts to nightmares to bursts of violence.

"I ask my friends, what is your problem?" she said. "Does your food get stuck in your throat? Do you have pain here, and here, and here? Do you have problems with your sleep? I say, 'O.K., try this doctor.'"

Her doctor is Ka Sunbunaut, one of only 26 psychiatrists in a nation of 12 million traumatized people - the survivors and the children of survivors of one of the past century's most horrifying episodes of mass murder.

After therapy with him, said Mao Irang, 35, a social worker tormented by her memories, "I felt like I was another person. I was not a prisoner any more."

The medication that liberated her was talk therapy and psychiatric drugs, treatments that are largely alien to Cambodians, who often turn to faith healers and herbalists.

The word is spreading now among a relatively small circle of educated people: Your ailments have a cause and there are treatments that can help you.

It is a quarter century since the communist Khmer Rouge were driven from power after causing the deaths of 1.7 million people from 1975 to 1979 through execution, starvation or overwork.

"Until today, most people don't realize they have psychological problems," Ka Sunbunaut said in an interview. "They don't understand about trauma. Mostly they believe it is all related to karma."

People now point each other to drugs like Prozac and Valium, which are expensive but are available without prescription. Ka Sunbunaut said most of the medications he prescribes are generic drugs manufactured in Asia.

"He gave me holy medicine," said Preap Phal Theory, 52, a former French teacher who is now a wholesale rice dealer. "It is a holy medicine. It has changed my life. I've become a normal person instead of a sick person."

Before her treatment, she said, she suffered blackouts and intestinal problems. She had convulsions. She passed out whenever she went to the bathroom.

"For 15 years I tried all kinds of medication, modern and ancient, with herbs and Chinese cures and spiritual cures and monks' blessings and praying at my home altar," she said. "For 15 years I had two jobs. One was to feed my children and the other was to be ready to fall into a coma at any moment, so I always needed an escort."

Psychiatrists now are considering the possible effects on traumatized people like Preap Phal Theory of plans to hold a trial for surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge. Preliminary work is being done now to set up a tribunal, although it will be many months before any defendants would be put in the dock.

A successful trial could bring some clarity and relief to people who still do not understand the causes of their suffering, doctors say. But for many people it could also revive traumas that have been suppressed over the years.

"At the moment I'm not sure whether a tribunal can bring peace or problems in our society," said Dr. Sotheara Chhim, a psychiatrist who heads the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, which is preparing for the trial.

He said his concerns were "retraumatization" of survivors who will come face to face again with the past, new trauma for young people who did not experience the Khmer Rouge years, and renewed anger and hostility among victims.

"I believe everybody has suffered," he said in an interview. "Everybody has inside some memory, some past trauma. But their abilities to cope are different."

The Khmer Rouge regime itself could be seen as an episode of madness. In a utopian frenzy these radical communists sought to erase the modern world and systematically killed off most of the country's educated and skilled people. Few doctors survived.

Of the 26 Cambodian psychiatrists who practice today, Ka Sunbunaut said, only 10 have been educated abroad, as he has. There are also 40 psychiatric nurses, with another 40 being trained now.

There are no in-patient clinics for mental patients, the doctor said. And he himself is only now organizing a committee for mental health, with its own budget, within the Ministry of Health.

In addition to traumatic memories, the struggle for survival created a wounded population, said Ka Sunbunaut, who also survived the Khmer Rouge years as a forced laborer.

"People learned that violence was a means of survival," he said. "'You have made a mistake, you are the enemy, so we kill you.' They lived with that for four years and now they deal with problems with violence."

There are no reliable data on the traumatic effects of the past, partly because people are not generally aware of the lasting effects of their experiences, said Sotheara Chhim.

"People think their past problems have been buried and don't realize that the present is connected to the past," he said.

A study of Cambodian refugees in the United States, published last August in the Journal of the American Medical Association, found that 62 percent had suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder in the past year, compared with a rate in the general American population of 3.6 percent.

It also found that 51 percent had suffered from major depression, compared with a rate of 9.5 percent in the general population. According to the study, 99 percent of the survivors of the Khmer Rouge years reported almost starving to death, 96 percent said they were forced into slave labor, 90 percent said they had had a family member or friend murdered, and 54 percent said they were tortured.

Even if they learn to cope with them, their memories remain to torment them, the doctors said.

Preap Phal Theary, the rice seller, closed her eyes for a moment. "I see a man running and I see a man shooting," she said. "I hear gunfire. You don't just have a picture of people running in a field, you have sound too."

For Mao Irang, who was orphaned during the Khmer Rouge years, the most vivid memory almost seems to have been a nightmare.

"When I heard my parents were killed, I fainted," she said. "I did not wake up for a week. In the hospital they thought I was dead. They put me in a pile of bodies.

"When I woke up I thought, 'What is that smell?' And I crawl, crawl, crawl to the door. And then I realize I am in the dead people's room."

She said she was 7 or 8 years old at the time.

She pressed the palms of her hands against her eyes and breathed through her nose.

"Today I feel much better."