

Skulls Haunt Cambodia, Demanding Belated Justice

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PHUM THLOK, Cambodia - The police officers next door bring them sweets and fruit and soft drinks, but still, the skulls crammed inside a little shrine on this dusty rural road refuse to leave them in peace.

"They tease us," said Pen Mon, 42, the chief of police at this outpost in the rice fields about 80 miles southeast of the capital, Phnom Penh. "They startle us in our sleep so they can see us jump."

At other times, he said, "They call out: 'Bring us water. It's so hot and crowded in here.' And then next morning we bring them water."

One police officer, Sok Saroeun, 41, said his sleep had been disturbed three times by the ghost of a female victim who approached his hammock, took off her clothes and forced him to have sex.

It is not easy living side by side with piles of the skulls of the victims of the killing fields. But that, in effect, is what Cambodians do today, 26 years after the murderous Khmer Rouge were driven from power.

This is a country that is still haunted by its past, its psychic wounds still raw, its tormentors unpunished, its traumatic history a tangle of ignorance, confusion and nightmares.

Tens of thousands of skulls remain buried in pits or piled in temples, in shrines or in the open. The people responsible for their deaths have still not been brought to court to face charges. Most of them live freely in Cambodia, surrounded like everyone else by their own killing fields.

The best current estimate is that 1.7 million people died of starvation, forced labor, disease or execution during the Khmer Rouge era, from 1975 to 1979.

The Documentation Center of Cambodia, a private organization that is compiling information on the Khmer Rouge years, has identified 19,421 mass graves around Cambodia. Its definition includes any pit containing 4 or more bodies. Some have as many as 1,000.

But there is no way to know how many skulls are scattered around the country without exhuming them all, said the center's director, Youk Chhang. Even then it would be

impossible to know how many others had been trampled or broken or had disintegrated in areas where the soil is acidic.

At a killing field near Tonle Bati Lake, 25 miles south of Phnom Penh, villagers said many of the skulls that had been stacked in a ruined schoolhouse had been eaten by cows.

"They have a kind of smell that the pregnant cows like very much," said Chhaom Than, 67, a farmer, after the remaining skulls were placed in a shrine three years ago. "After many years outside they became soft and easy to eat. If we hadn't put them in a shrine maybe the cows would have eaten all of them."

Not long ago, former King Norodom Sihanouk suggested that the time had come to cremate the skulls and bones and to let their wandering souls find rest. Prime Minister Hun Sen rejected the idea, and Cambodia remains a country filled with death's heads.

Two years ago, after years of negotiations and delays, the government and the United Nations agreed on a framework for an international tribunal to be held in Cambodia. In the months since then, the delays have resumed and the possible date for a trial continues to recede.

If a trial does one day begin, the skulls will take on a new identity as forensic evidence. Teams of specialists from abroad have already recorded, in a representative sample, the "chopping/hacking wounds," the "blunt impact traumas," the "deeply incised wounds," the "radiating skull fractures" and the "keyhole effect" left by certain bullet wounds.

Ten of these specimen skulls sit in glass cases in a locked room at Toul Sleng, the former prison and torture house that is now a museum in Phnom Penh. The others have been returned to the dilapidated, jumbled shrines that are their hot and crowded quarters now.

The Khmer Rouge chieftain, Pol Pot, died in 1998. If the rest of the aging Khmer Rouge leaders never face trial, as some specialists now fear, the skulls will remain as tangible proof of the mass killings.

But often, it seems, this proof is not enough in a nation that has failed to confront its past.

"Now a lot of people don't believe it anymore," said one of the police officers here, Mao Sakorn, 35. "They say, 'How could people have killed so many people?' They come and ask me all morning. I answer but they don't believe me, even though the evidence is right there."

As he spoke, a rash of goose bumps spread up his forearms. "It always happens," he said. "I think maybe when I talk about the dead their spirits come to me."

Even the people who live near the killing field at Tonle Bati seemed uncertain about just what happened during the Khmer Rouge years. They said they were counting on a trial to show them the truth.

"Before we cremate them, I want to find out who is right and who is wrong, who is a victim and who is a killer," said Sim Sac, 56, a rice farmer. "What I need to know first is, who were the killers."

For the farmers at Tonle Bati, as for the police officers at Phum Thlok, the skulls are an heirloom of suffering to be passed on to their children.

"If we cremate them before we have a trial, the younger generation will not know the difficulties of the Pol Pot time," said Thach Paen, 55, who grows rice, cucumbers and watermelons.

As the farmers talked about the past, a group of children stood nearby, playing a game in which they slapped their chins and made popping sounds with their jaws.

One of them was Sok Ky, 15, who goes to school in the mornings and herds cows in the afternoons. "I don't know anything," he said when asked about the killing fields. "They don't tell us anything in school."

Asked if he knew that many people had been killed by the Khmer Rouge, he said, "No."

Asked if he knew how the people here in his village had died, he said, "No."

Asked whether he knew that these skulls came from the time of Pol Pot, he said, "I don't pay attention when people talk about the Pol Pot time."

Asked if he knew who Pol Pot was, he answered, "No."

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