

# Human Sciences Encounters in Phnom-Penh: Past Presentations: Reconciliation in Cambodia

## "Reconciliation in Cambodia: Victims and Perpetrators Living Together in Cambodia, Apart."

### Abstract

Under the brutal Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979 in Cambodia, more than 1.7 million people died from starvation, overwork, torture, and murder. While five senior leaders are on trial for these crimes at the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia, hundreds of lower level perpetrators live amongst their victims today. Laura Mc Grew will present various aspects of her thesis that aim to examine how rural Cambodians (including victims, perpetrators, and bystanders) are coexisting after the trauma of the Khmer Rouge years, and the decades of civil war before and after. In this qualitative research study, 134 semi-structured interviews were conducted with rural villagers, government officials, and peace-building practitioners. Cambodian culture is characterized by conflict avoidance, and reliance on family networks, hierarchy, and patronage. Buddhism is a strong cultural influence as well. These characteristics, as well as the lack of trust resulting from the Khmer Rouge years, provided important context for this analysis of Cambodian social recovery. Research on the processes of coexistence and reconciliation inform this study (Bloomfield 2006; Huyse 2003; Kriesberg 2001; Lederach 1997; Rigby 2001). However, few studies have been done that examine community reconciliation in Cambodia (Etcheson 2005b). This thesis examines the processes of reconciliation, including interfering and facilitating factors. Processes such as building relationships and trust, and developing empathy and compassion are explored. Cambodians' views of apologies, revenge, forgiveness, and other key concepts are reviewed. Models of coexistence, acceptance, perpetrator coping strategies, and a victim decision-making tree are presented to assist in the analysis of the data. These models provide a theoretical framework for the understanding of the situation of coexistence and reconciliation in Cambodia. The thesis suggests that Cambodians are currently living in various stages of coexistence (surface, shallow, and moderate) and have not yet approached a condition of deep reconciliation. Practical applications of the findings are suggested.