

Human Sciences Encounters in Phnom-Penh: Past Presentations: Coming Home: the odyssey of upland Khmer Villagers in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge

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Between 1999 and 2002 the residents of the village “O’Thmaa” began returning to the land that was their home thirty years beforehand. The impacts of the Khmer Rouge regime, two civil wars and repeated forced evacuations made the return ‘home’ (in all its meanings) ambiguous and extraordinarily challenging. Many of the moral pillars of society were compromised or had vanished altogether, deep scars from the Khmer Rouge revolution and genocide remained fresh, and extreme poverty added additional hardships. Despite these obstacles, however, changes started occurring within the village during my time there that could be seen as small steps toward returning to a sense of normalcy, security and belonging.

Based on participant-observation fieldwork from 2002-2003 and again in 2010, this paper examines some of the means by which moral mending has, and is, taking place. In the early part of the decade through the mediums of kinship, trust, commensality, sharing stories, and village rituals villagers found ways of softening the past and building a sense of community once again. This process occurred within the milieu of new forms of modernity and the impacts of international development agencies. Now, seven years later, significant changes have occurred including the advent of ECCC Khmer Rouge Tribunal and a rise in ecotourism to the area. What are the impacts of the processes on social healing and village identity? How might the tribunal in particular augment a sense of security and belonging? Using ethnographic evidence this paper explores these changes through the themes of moral order, memory, and social change.

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