

Human Sciences Encounters in Phnom-Penh Past Presentations

A Desire to Govern: Khmer Rouge Removals of Khmer Krom to Democratic Kampuchea, 1975-78

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While the Khmer Rouge regime has been the subject of much documentation and analysis, little is known about how the Khmer Krom, or ethnic Khmers in neighbouring Vietnam were affected by its rule. This paper contributes to this topic by analysing Khmer Rouge treatment of Khmer Krom in the Vietnamese province of An Giang during the protracted border conflict of 1975-78. Drawing primarily on the testimonials of Khmer Krom survivors in that province, it examines the logic of Khmer Rouge actions to test and supplement existing analyses of the Khmer Rouge regime in general and its relationship to the Khmer Krom in particular.

Khmer Rouge cross-border military operations in An Giang included shelling, small-scale engagements with the Vietnamese army and, most notoriously, the massacre of over 3,000 Vietnamese civilians in the town of Ba Chuc. Their most concerted action was to induce to relocate to Cambodia some 20,000 Khmer Krom residents of An Giang. Analysing the experiences of the Khmer Krom relocatees, the findings suggest that the main objective of the Khmer Rouge was neither to purge these Khmer Krom according to a genocidal logic, nor secure their manpower in pursuit of Khmer Rouge development ideals. Instead the main goal was to jealously monopolise power over these ethnic Khmers, incapacitating them as autonomous agents and removing them from the control of its competitor the Vietnamese state.

Locals continue to debate why the Khmer Krom followed the Khmer Rouge to Cambodia, with some construing them as easily-misled dupes, or as willing recruits animated by ancient hatred for the Vietnamese, while others stressing the role played by coercion and intimidation. The evidence suggests that these explanations are too simplistic and the population movements took place in a climate of war-induced terror and the absence of state protection. Moreover the Khmer Rouge had established themselves durably in the An Giang settlements as an alternative government. Through exemplary deportment and speech, promises of a better future, and demonization of the Vietnamese, backed up by the elimination of dissenting voices, these emplaced cadres were able to monopolise the truth and secure many adherents to their vision of Democratic Kampuchea as a benevolent and efficacious protector of the Khmer people.