

Nov 04, 2016 by *Cynthia P. Schneider*

Arts Fuel Cambodia's Rebirth: Lesson Lost on Governments ^[1]

The revival of Cambodia's rich and unique cultural heritage has fueled the country's impressive recovery from the Khmer Rouge's genocide of 1975-79. This message rang unmistakably true as the Season of Cambodia (SOC) has dazzled New York audiences in museums, universities, galleries, and performing arts centers over the past month. Both the US and the Cambodian governments stand to learn from this game-changing lesson for post-conflict development strategy, but neither government seems to have noticed.

The one hundred twenty-five Cambodian artists supported and hosted by over thirty New York institutions have revealed the near miraculous preservation of the venerated arts of shadow puppetry and Cambodian classical ballet, as well as the dynamic new visions in dance, visual arts, and film of the artists from Cambodia's youthful majority (70% under age 30).

To understand the significance of creative expression and cultural heritage in rebuilding Cambodia, you have first to understand the utter devastation wreaked by the Khmer Rouge during their reign of terror.

Nearly a third of the population, between 1.7 and 2.5 million out of a total population of 8 million, was killed between 1975-79. The dictator Pol Pot, himself with a degree from the Sorbonne, targeted anyone with an education. Ninety per cent of artists and intellectuals were murdered.

The US opened the door to Pol Pot and his genocidal regime. America supported General Lon Nol over the more popular King Sihanouk, but it was the massive US bombing campaign, with more ordinance than the total dropped by the Allies in World War II, that led Cambodians to see the Khmer Rouge as their salvation. (The analogy to the drone campaign radicalizing Pakistan has been made).

Greeted as liberators when they entered Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge immediately launched their brutal campaign. They divided families and outlawed familial love, moved everyone into the countryside, eliminated all cultural traditions and creative expression, and made the entire population work grueling 18-hour days on a subsistence diet.

Arn Chorn-Pond -- musician, Cambodian genocide survivor, former child soldier, and founder of Cambodian Living Arts, the organization behind the Season of Cambodia -- recognized the essential role of reviving culture in rebuilding the country. In returning masters of music, dance, and puppetry to their rightful place in society, Chorn-Pond and the other co-founders of Cambodian Living Arts helped restore identity, pride, and resilience to the Cambodian people.

The Khmer Rouge targeted artists, Chorn-Pond explains, because "they expressed who they

were as human beings.” While brutal regimes like the Khmer Rouge or the Taliban recognize the threat that cultural identity and expression pose to their totalitarian control -- think of the fate of the Bamiyan Buddhas or of the libraries in Timbuktu -- the United States rarely prioritizes culture in post-conflict situations. (Afghanistan, where the US successfully has supported culture and media, is an exception). No USAID funds for Cambodia have gone to culture.

The *Season of Cambodia* shows that recovery from trauma and conflict requires more than food and security. The soul of a country must also be nourished. The shell-shocked Cambodian survivors had to move beyond the genocide, and develop the strength to rebuild their country.

The story behind Lida Chan’s documentary Red Wedding, screened in the SOC’s Film Festival illustrates how the process of filmmaking as well as the end product can heal past pain, empower Cambodians to chart their future, and bridge the generation gap between survivors of the Khmer Rouge and today’s youth.

Chan’s film chronicles 48-year old Sochan Pen’s determined search for the man who forced her, at age 16, to “marry” him. Pen escaped, but not until after her Khmer Rouge “husband” had raped and beaten her.

The process of sharing her story with the young filmmaker empowered Sochan Pen to testify against her “husband” at the Cambodia Tribunal, and to travel the country, telling her story, empowering other forced “brides” to speak up with her example.

Trained by Cambodia’s most renowned filmmaker Rithy Panh in his Bophana Center, Lida Chan and her experience affirm Panh’s belief that “Cambodians are learning to tell their own story, something that never has happened before.”

For his critical work preserving Cambodia’s cinematic past, and teaching future generations, Rithy Panh receives little support from the Cambodian or US government.

To date, the Cambodian government has not made support for the arts a priority. Imagine what a fund built from a small tax added to Angkor Wat ticket prices could do to unleash the creative and economic potential of Cambodia’s youthful population.

The breakaway success of Artisans Angkor shows that investments in culture also can reap financial rewards. Led by Phloeun Prim, the charismatic architect of the Season of Cambodia, Artisans Angkor in a decade evolved from a modest NGO to a business with tens of millions of dollars in revenue, and over one thousand employees.

The *Season of Cambodia* offers the vision of a creative, dynamic, country, with a distinctive past and a promising future, a country that, to quote Festival architect Phloeun Prim, “has made arts and culture its international signature, not just the killing fields”. That dramatic transformation should persuade both the American and Cambodian governments of the importance of supporting the cultural sector in rebuilding this and other post-conflict societies.
