

Global Genocides

HPHI5029/HPHI6029

Vuthy Hastings

Primary source analysis: (2000 Words)

Cambodian Genocide

Nao Gha, "The Chams Are Hopeless" (Oral testimony collected by Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua in 1979-1980), printed in Ben Kiernan, 'The Cambodian Genocide 1975-1979', in Samuel Totten and William S. Parsons (eds.), *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 300-301

Nao Gha, a minority Cham Muslim woman, was interviewed by Kiernan in her village in Takeo province on August 26, 1980. The translation from the Khmer is by Kiernan.

I am 45 years old. I was born in Smong village, Smong subdistrict, Treang district, Takeo province. I first met the Khmer Rouge in 1972-1973, when they came here. In 1973, they called all of us Chams to the mountains. We went to Kampot province, to Ang Krieu in Angkor Chey district. We spent a year there. They still treated us well, let us work and fend for ourselves. They spoke well to us. They called us "deported base people" [*neak moultanh phniaer*]. They did not persecute us. Our leaders were chosen from among us Chams. In 1974 they sent us back home. Everyone came back from Angkor Chey, over 100 families, but religion was no longer allowed.

In 1975, after liberation, the persecution began. Some Chams came from Phnom Penh to live in a nearby Cham village. We had to work on irrigation non-stop, day and night. Killings of

Khmers began in 1975. In 1976-77 they killed someone every one or two months, for small infringements.

Then in 1976 they dispersed the Chams. The ten villages of Chams in this area were all dispersed, for instance to Samrong, Chi Khma, and Kompong Yaul subdistricts. We were not allowed to live together. Our village was also dispersed. They burnt our village down. Four to eight families were sent out to each of eight villages. I went with five families to Kantuot village, in Tralach subdistrict. There I had to grow dry season rice, far away, and would return to the village only after seven months.

Primary Source Analysis of Nao Gha's Testimony on the Cambodian Genocide

Introduction

Nao Gha, a Cambodian Cham Muslim woman who survived the genocide, is the main speaker of the testimony and what the essay will be looking at. Her testimony was collected by Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua in 1980, which wasn't long after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime. It was published in *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts* (2009). Nao Gha's first-hand account gives us important information about what life was like for minority ethnic and religious groups during the Khmer Rouge dictatorship. The testimony raises questions about memory, historiography, and the methodological use of oral sources in understanding genocide. Survivor testimonies record crimes and help preserve historical documentation of atrocities, it simultaneously builds collective memories and frameworks for transitional justice whilst influencing academic interpretations of genocide.

1. Background of the Document

Who was the author/photographer/artist? What do we know about them?

The testimony was given by Nao Gha, a 45-year-old Cham Muslim woman from Takeo Province, Cambodia. Nao Gha lacked writing and research skills, but her voice lives on thanks

to Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua who are both genocide historians and a Cambodian scholar and feminist researcher. Both have wrote on the Khmer Rouges Crimes, and Kiernan was a key figure in making genocide studies a real academic topic. The backgrounds of both translators provide credibility to the document, their dual perspectives link Western and Cambodian approaches to historical documentation. Kiernan's research approach intergrates survivor testimonies and archival sources which matches Boua's dedication to enhancing Cambodian female voices. Together their work makes sure that the testimony is both historically and culturally accurate. The document presents a minority woman's point of view to oppose traditional accounts whilst still revealing how gender and ethnic-religious factors interacted during the Khmer Rouge's genocide.

2. Context of Production

When was it produced? What is the significance of the context?

The testimony, collected on August 26th, 1980 - a time when the Vietnamese forces had taken control of Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge in January 1979. A very important period in time for survivors like Nao Gha as they would have been recovering from trauma, and the physical and psychological effects of genocide which were still quite fresh. The People's Republic of Kampuchea was back by Vietnam and no in charge of Cambodia, bringing uncertainty to the country's geopolitical position.

The documentation of testimonies is needed urgently as memory can often fail the best of people, especially those who have gone through traumatic events. Justice procedures needed proof, even if the Khmer Rouge Tribunal wouldn't start it's hearing for many years. The act of documentation itself was also becoming an issue, both domestic and international people were grappling with how to define, acknowledge, and respond to the scale of atrocities committed. First-hand survivor testimonials are crucial as they combat political efforts to downplay or hide genocidal atrocities during the Cold War. The document exists as

both an individual memory and a political tool that represents the early stage of genocide recovery efforts.

3. Audience and Purpose

Where did it appear? Who were the intended audience? What kind of response might its audience have had?

Totten and Parsons published the testimony in a scholarly collection of other works, the collection set its sights at academics, students, and policymakers studying genocide. The main focus was experts in historical accuracy, together with those responsible for moral accountability and the prevention of future atrocities, aka Western academic and policy institutions were their main audience. In doing so they bring awareness and support for the Cambodian genocide and to get it included in the official history of 20th century crimes. The goal of the testimony is to bring about critical thinking, not to shock them with fear, it is an education tool offering first hand evidence of state violence, impunity, and the long-term impact of genocidal regimes.

4. Themes and Language

What are the key themes and ideas in the source? What kind of language or imagery is used? What does the source not address?

The main issues presented in Nao Gha's testimony include:

- **Relocation and destruction of community:** They forced relocation and destroyed village, what Nao Gha talked about were ways to break up the Cham social structure.
- **Culture and religion:** The Khmer Rouge banned religion and destroyed mosques. The goal was to wipe off the Cham Muslim identities.
- **Incremental violence:** The Khmer Rouge inserted verbal manipulation, (*'deported base people'*) before assigning them to labour roles and eventually destroying their villages and spreading them which shows how genocide grows step by step.

The language used was clear and factual due to being based on an oral testimony that was translated into English. Elaborating on emotional parts was kept to a minimum, which could be a reflection of cultural storytelling norms or trauma-induced detachment. The bigger issue here is the broader political analysis and reflection on ideology brought to us by focusing on lived experience.

5. Genre and Interpretation

Does it belong to a particular genre – e.g., diary, memoir, official report? What are the implications for interpreting it?

This testimony doesn't have the qualities of a diary, it wasn't written over time and it doesn't have the format of an official report either. Instead, it recounts things and then is communicated to interviewers and translated back. Three main reasons:

- **Memory-based account:** These are limited to what you can remember, especially in stressful situations.

- **Interviewer influence:** Framing questions in a certain way, especially about cultural factors could affect the answers.
- **Translation issues:** Khmer terms that may be lost or changed when translated to English, especially with culturally distinct ideas like 'deported base people'

Despite these issues, oral testimonies like this one are crucial to capture the subjective realities of victims, especially marginalised voices often excluded from official archives.

6. Strengths and Weaknesses as a Historical Source

What are the strengths and potential weaknesses of this kind of source material? Are there problems with using it as a historical source?

Strengths:

- **Personal touch:** It offers an emotive touch that bureaucratic documents sometimes lack.
- **Cultural perspective:** It gives a first-hand sneak peek into Cham Muslim experiences, which can often be left out of mainstream stories.
- **Chronological detail:** A clear timeline of events from 1972 -1977 is presented within the testimony, which can help piece together history.

Weaknesses:

- **Selective memory:** The reliability of one's memory, especially during extreme trauma and time lapse, is a fickle area.
- **Representativeness:** Nao Gha's voice cannot represent an entire Cham community.

- **Translation bias:** The emotional tone or cultural context could be lost amid the translations from one language to another.

The limits are based on additional sources, like survivor databases, Khmer Rouge records, and secondary literature, to make sure that the history is accurate and complete.

7. Insights into the Subject and Historiographical Debates

What does it tell us about the subject being studied? Do the insights from the source support or contradict historians' conclusions about the subject?

Nao Ghas testimony not only supports but also enriches some scholarly conclusions about the Cambodian Genocidal intent and its targeting of minorities. Historians such as Ben Kiernan argue that the Khmer Rouge pursued a form of 'auto-genocide'. His work also brings together certain ethnic groups, shedding light onto them. This includes Vietnamese, Chinese, and Chams, who were subjected to unique, racialised extermination policies (Kiernan 2008). The destruction of Cham villages, banning of Islamic practice, and the strategic dispersing of families according to Nao Cha are consistent with documented policies of cultural genocide. She recounted, 'everyone came back from Angkor Chey, over 100 families, but religion was no longer allowed' (Kiernan 2009, 300). This was a thought-out, pre-planned repression of Islamic practice which aligns with what Kiernan identifies as ideological cleansing disguised as revolutionary reform. The testimony cements the idea that the Khmer Rouge intended to destroy, in whole or in part, the Cham Muslim group – a core criterion of the Genocide Convention. Nao Gha notes, 'in 1976 they dispersed the Chams. The ten villages of Chams in this area were all dispersed... They burnt our village down' (Kiernan 2009, 301). This was not just a spur-of-the-moment act; communal infrastructure and dispersing of families were a deliberate plan to get rid of people and break them mentally and physically. This backs up Kiernan's claims in the *The Pol Pot regime* that the persecution of Cham Muslims was planned and carried out in a deliberate manner, not just an act of random violence. It also fits with the Minority Rights Group's documentation of Cham persecution, which included mass

killings and cultural suppression. Nao Gha's testimony connects personal recollection and collective historical insight when we bring in these scholarly documents.

Conclusion

The oral testimony of Nao Gha is a valuable primary source for understanding the Cambodian genocide, especially its impact on the Cham Muslim minority. We are given a closer understanding of the lived experience of religious persecution and social disintegration under the Khmer Rouge. The essay was established through the required analytical lenses given at the start of this assignment, they are – authorship, context, audience, content, genre, reliability, and historical significance. With this, the testimonies hidden messages comes out, a voice for justice, this isn't just a piece of evidence its a heartfelt story. It contributes to genocide studies in a unique way, adding memory, translation, and context into the equation, demonstrating the the Khmer Rouges violence was not just about class but also about ethnic and religious groups.

It also puts the importance of integrating survivor voices into historical discourse, ensuring that the lived realities of genocide are not lost. Nao Gha's account is not only a story but also a historical document that connects personal memory with social history, it ensures that crimes of the Khmer Rouges will be remembered not just in numbers but in human terms. The testimony goes against what is widely known from academic texts, a depersonalisation of atrocities, emphasising the need for grounding analysis in testimony to promote truth -elling, empathy and historical accountability.

Primary source:

Kiernan, B. (2004). *Century of genocide : critical essays and eyewitness accounts*. (S. Totten, & W. S. Parsons, Eds.) London: New York : Routledge.

Secondary source:

Kiernan, B. (2008). *The Pol Pot Regime*. London: Yale University Press.

Minority Rights Group. (2018, September). *Cham In Cambodia*. Retrieved from Minority Rights Group: <https://minorityrights.org/communities/cham/>

New Left Review LTD. (2024). INTRODUCTION TO CHANTOU BOUA. *New Left Review*.

PeaceWomen Across the Globe. (2025). *Boua Chanthou*. Retrieved from PeaceWomen Across the Globe – FriedensFrauen Weltweit: <https://1000peacewomen.org/en/network/1000-peacewomen/boua-chanthou-1654>

United Nations Treaty Series (UNTS). (1948, December 09). *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* 1948. Retrieved 02 2024, from United Nations: <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/1948-convention>

Wikipedia contributors. (2024, December 13). *Ben Kiernan*. Retrieved from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Kiernan#References

