Finding the Future: A review of 'Love and Dread in Cambodia: Weddings Births, and Ritual Harm under the Khmer Rouge' by, Peg LeVine
Singapore: NUS Press, 2010
ISBN 978-7791-69-472-2 (Paper); xx + 219 pp

By, Courtney Work

This is an important book that challenges what Michael Vickery refers to as the standard total view (stv) of life under the Khmer Rouge and rethinks the practice of 'forced marriage' during that era. LeVine's treatment centers on the family and the ways that marriage and especially childbirth for many were not the coerced and humiliating experiences recounted in much of the literature, but were opportunities to connect the disordered present to the continuity of past traditions and to extend imaginative reality into the future. Her discoveries critique the western-biased literature on psychiatry and patient treatment in Cambodia, arguing that attention to spirit traditions informs an important aspect of individual and community healing largely ignored by mental health professionals. This piece also complements the growing body of English language literature that foregrounds religious and spirit traditions integral to Cambodian modern life[1] as well as the literature on the powerful work of landscapes in creating social and personal spaces and enlivening memory.[2] DeVine's insights came through a decade of interviews conducted in intimate spaces, during which couples shared with the author their experiences of marriage and childbirth under the Khmer Rouge. What emerges is a nuanced story of intimate family ties that span the divide between the living and the dead and also the divide between the disruptive traumas of the Khmer Rouge and the restorative rhythms of family life. The long-term engagement with people and their stories gives LeVine's work a uniquely compassionate quality.

[1] Earlier French scholars devoted much ink to Cambodia's structure of ritual and myth. Indeed, LeVine notes that much of the writing on spirit traditions and ritual is written in French (pg. xvi). Maurice Eisenbruch, however, does write in English about spirits and traditional healers and their psycho-social importance for Cambodian subjects, a body of literature that would add depth to LeVine's treatment, for example: 'The Uses and Abuses of Culture: Cultural Competence in Post-Mass-Crime Peace-Building in Cambodia,' In After Mass Crime: Rebuilding States and Communities, ed. Béatrice Pouligny, Simon Chesterman and Albrecht Schnabel, Tokyo; New York: United Nations University Press, 2007, pp. 71-96; and The Ritual Space of Patients and Traditional Healers in Cambodia, Bulletin De l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient 79(2):283-316, 1992. Other English language treatments of spirit life are beginning to emerge. Notably important for LeVine's story are, Davis, Erik W., 'Between Forests and Families: A Remembered Past Life,' in, People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today, ed. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler, Copenhagen: NIAS press, 2008, pp. 129-144; Edwards, Penny, 'Between a Song and a Prei: Tracking Cambodian History and Cosmology through the Forest,' in, At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler, ed. Anne Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood, Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2008, pp. 137-162; and the recently published piece by Yvonne Anne Guillou, An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide: The Dead of the Mass Graves and the Land Guardian Spirits [Neak Ta], South East Asia Research 20, 2012.

[2] I am thinking especially of Heonik Kwon, Ghosts of War in Vietnam, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008; Greg McCann, Bioregions and Spirit Places: Taking Up Jim Dodge's Long Lost Suggestion, The Trumpeter, 27(3), 2011; and Keith H. Basso, Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.

There is no pity here, only an empathetic, measured, and thoughtful rendering of experiences and voices.

The author has a strong voice and takes a place in her narrative. Through this she complicates Cambodia's entanglement with the genocidal underpinnings of modernity and makes important contributions to the literature on the Khmer Rouge and Cambodian studies more broadly. The author grapples with the disconnect between the stv of Khmer Rouge atrocities and the stories she heard from the people she came to know. The widely accepted notion of "forced marriage" and "forced sexual relations between couples" during Democratic Kampuchea proved to be not quite accurate renderings of what happened to the people in her sample. People described their unions in very positive ways and most of the couples she interviewed remain happily together into the present. I found this to be true in my own research as well. The author's surprise at this discovery drives the research of this book. She is not an apologist for Khmer Rouge atrocities; on the contrary, she does not contest the horrific stories from this era and adds some chilling details from her interlocutors. What she does, however, is to interject the voice of scholarly investigation, which concludes that "images of horror, based on single-case testimonies [which comprise much of the literature], have interfered with the completeness of historical accounting" (pg. 87). One does not need to question the hardship and trauma people experienced during these years, but one is asked to shift focus away from the tantalizing trauma of modernity and toward the lived experiences of people in communities and the working-through of trauma.[3]

LeVine offers a view of marriage and child birth that not only illuminates the years of extreme revolutionary social control, but also connects with the rhythms of Khmer families through time—from the past, into the present, and projecting into the future. She discovers how for many, their marriage was what saved them from the empty and frightening world under the Khmer Rouge. Through marriage, and especially child birth, people were re-connected to the flow of life and community. The strength of family units reconnected individuals to ancestors and parents and also exerted a restructuring force on the rigid spaces of social life erected during the Khmer Rouge years. LeVine recognized a pattern of accommodation that seeped into the communal structure as private space was created for couples and the need to care for infants created circles of care among new wives and mothers. LeVine's research suggests that the physical creation of space that accommodated new families in regions of high live birth rates softened the rigidity and accompanied the terror of childbirth under the totalitarian system. One important aspect of this was how spirits, ancestors, and horoscopes figured in the individual stories. The spirits were important for all of her subjects: for some because of their inability to perform the necessary rituals and for others it was the danger and culturally intimate performance of forbidden rituals. For all, however, this connection was strong.

This brings out LeVine's second, and I think more important contribution to the literature on Cambodia. Her work not only uncovers, but attends to local engagements with spirits and ritual. She spent extensive time with her subjects and through this she realized that maintaining relationships with ancestral and tutelary spirits deeply informed the life-cycle events of marriage and birth for the couples in her study. Further, she finds that the loss of these important relationships, with ancestors and with protective spirits of the land, was a source of anxiety for many of her subjects. Through this insight, she firmly establishes relationships with the dead and

[3] See Dominick LaCapra (2009:31)

with the powerful forces of nature as constitutive of psycho-social health, and also critiques the literature on trauma in Cambodia, which ignores this important dimension of Cambodian reality. Beyond a critique of the psychiatric literature on Cambodia, her insights into spirit practices lead her to suggest another and quite potent effect of Democratic Kampuchea. She calls this effect, ritualicide. Offering a nice counterpoint to the contested accusation of genocide,[4] DeVine notes how disruptions to individual relationships with spirits and people's inability to perform important rituals were defining features of life under the Khmer Rouge that are intimately entwined with individual traumas.

The stories of hardship and fear that DeVine gathered from her subjects speak of their dangerous and disrupted lives. Individual fears of disconnection from their emaciated bodies coupled with fears of disconnection from the protective spirits of their home villages. In new areas people were adrift and could not seek protection from the local spirits or find sustenance from the unfamiliar local plants.[5] This disconnection to place is interestingly counterbalanced in DeVine's narrative as she returns to the sites of wedding ceremonies and births with her respondents. In these places, captured on film, people experience forgotten memories and reorient themselves to the present in ways that pull the traumatic memories of the past into the present through the buildings and people that continue to inhabit the space.

LeVine's book is a useful, reflexive, and ethnographically rich resource for scholars and aid workers in Cambodia and for anyone working with traumatized populations. Engagement with the future is not an explicit component of LeVine's study, but I find it to be an underlying current for both her interlocutors and for continued scholarship in Cambodia.

References

Basso, Keith H.
1996 Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Bertrand, Didier
2004 A Medium Possession Practice and its Relation with Cambodia Buddhism. In History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia. John A. Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawi'i Press.

Caswell, M.
2012 Using Classification to Convict the Khmer Rouge. Journal of Documentation 68(2):162-184.

Davis, Erik W.
2011 Imagined Parasites: Flows of Monies and Spirits. In Cambodia's Economic Transformation. Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un, eds. Copenhagen: Nias Press.

[4] Because none can explicitly confirm the Khmer Rouge intention to eliminate a particular ethnic group, the term genocide does not seem to apply, (see Caswell 2012:162-184 for a discussion of how this problem is addressed in the current trials of Khmer Rouge leaders.)

[5] For more on the important connection between geographical location, spirits, traditional medicines, and traditional healers (see Eisenbruch 1992:283-316; and, Ovesen and Trankell 2010).

Davis, Erik W.
2008a Between Forests and Families: A Remembered Past Life. In People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler, eds. Copenhagen: NIAS press.

Davis, Erik W.
2008b Imaginary Conversations with Mothers about Death. In At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler. David P. Chandler, ed. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University.

Edwards, Penny
2008 Between a Song and a Prei: Tracking Cambodian History and Cosmology through the Forest. In At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler. Anne Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood, ed. Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program.

Eisenbruch, Maurice
2007 The Uses and Abuses of Culture: Cultural Competence in Post-Mass-Crime Peace-Building in Cambodia. In After Mass Crime: Rebuilding States and Communities. Béatrice Pouligny, Simon Chesterman and Albrecht Schnabel, eds. Tokyo; New York: United Nations University Press.

Eisenbruch, Maurice
1992 The Ritual Space of Patients and Traditional Healers in Cambodia. Bulletin De l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient 79(2):283-316.

Eisenbruch, Maurice
1991 The Survival of Cambodian Culture through the Traditional Healer: A Responsibility in International Mental Health.

Guillou, Yvonne Anne
2012 An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide: The Dead of the Mass Graves and the Land Guardian Spirits [Neak Ta]. South East Asia Research 20 (2).

Harris, Ian
2008 Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Ho, Engseng,
2006 The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean. Los Angeles: University of California press.

Kwon, Heonik
2008 Ghosts of War in Vietnam. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

LaCapra, Dominick,
2009 History and its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Lefebvre, Henri
1991 The Production of Space. Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell.

Lefebvre, Henri,
2004 Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life. London; New York: Continuum.

Marston, John
2009 Reconstructing 'Ancient' Cambodian Buddhism. Contemporary Buddhism 9(1):99-121.

Massumi, Brian
2002 Parables for the Virtual: Movement, affect, sensation.

McCann, Greg
2010 Bioregions and Spirit Places: Taking Up Jim Dodge's Long Lost Suggestion. Unpublished Paper, Cited with Permission of the Author.

Ovesen, Jan, and Ing-Britt Trankell
2010 Cambodians and their Doctors: A Medical Anthropology of Colonial and Postcolonial Cambodia. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Pina-Cabral, João
1987 Paved Roads and Enchanted Mooresses: The Perception of the Past among the Peasant Population of the Alto Minho. Man 22(4):715-735.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A.
2002 The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Put van de, Willem, and Maurice Eisenbruch
2004 Internally Displaced Cambodians: Healing Trauma in Communities. In The Mental Health of Refugees: Ecological Approaches to Healing and Adaptation. Kenneth E. Miller and Lisa M. Rasco , eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Thompson, Ashley
2008 Performative Realities: Nobody's Possession. In At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler. Anne Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood, eds. Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Program.

Thompson, Ashley
2004 Calling the Souls: A Critical Edition of the Hau Praloeung, a Khmer Ritual Text. Cambodia: Reyum Institute of Arts & Culture.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt
2005 Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Yang Sam,
1990 Buddhism in Cambodia 1795 - 1954. Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University.