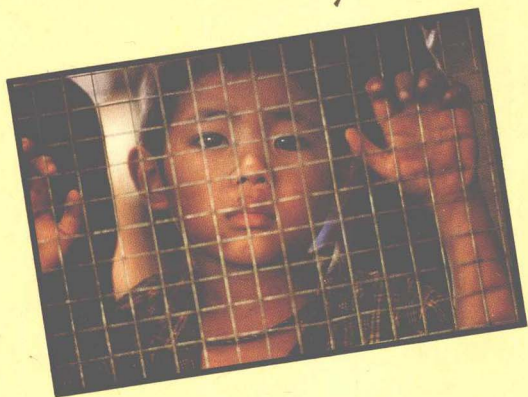


# TO DESTROY YOU IS NO LOSS

The Odyssey of a  
Cambodian  
Family



JOAN D. CRIDDLE  
AND  
TEEDA BUTT MAM

"A heart-wrenching account of one family's nightmarish  
ordeal at the hands of the Khmer Rouge  
... A tale so terrifying. ... as to stagger the soul."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

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# Preface

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF CAMBODIA

### EXAMINING COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

To many outsiders, differences between Cambodians and other Southeast Asians seem subtle. As a result, Westerners have made glaring errors in dealing with Southeast Asians by assuming that they feel a kinship with people from neighboring countries; that they speak the same or similar languages; that dress, customs, and lifestyles within a given country are similar; that Southeast Asians—at least those from Indochina—share a common religion.

“Southeast Asia” is a general term referring to nations in that sector of the world. Since the Vietnam War era, it has often been used to mean the countries of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. “Indochina” is a more specific term for those same three countries.

Until the Vietnam War focused attention on Southeast Asia, most Westerners had little awareness of Cambodia's existence. Cambodians, also called Kampuchians or Khmer, are still often confused in American minds with people from Laos and Vietnam. A prime example of this ignorance is the use of the phrase “Vietnamese boat people” in reference to any refugee from Indochina. To indiscriminately group all peoples from Indochina as such is as inappropriate as it would have been, at the end of World War II, to call a person from England or Holland a German. Indeed, many Southeast Asians harbor deep animosity

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toward people from neighboring countries; they've been bitter enemies for generations.

Even within countries, dislike and suspicion exist between one ethnic group and another. For example, many of the Hmong from Laos feel insulted if they're called Laotian, since to them, that term refers to the lowland Lao. The Hmong, a tribal people, are relative newcomers to Laos, having migrated from China via Vietnam about one hundred and fifty years ago. They've suffered bitterly at the hands of the Laotians, who refer to them as *meo*—barbarians. Such animosity is typical between seminomadic and settled people throughout Southeast Asia.

Language also divides. Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Thai, as well as the many tribal languages spoken throughout Southeast Asia, are as different from each other as are the various European languages. In addition, in each Southeast Asian nation more than one language is spoken.

Not only do language and ethnic background cause sharp delineations within each country; *where* a person lives is perhaps even more significant. Each country has three distinct populations: city residents, peasants, and seminomadic tribesmen. In America differences in customs and lifestyles between urbanites and farmers are minor; in Southeast Asia these differences are vast. Lifestyle, even more than ethnic background, distinguishes city residents from other citizens.

Southeast Asian cities are home to a polyglot people from several nations and many ethnic backgrounds. Villagers who migrate to the cities tend to shed their former customs, ethnic dress, and language as they assimilate. City residents are, at least to some degree, westernized and more educated than the rest of their countrymen. They have much more in common with urbanites from other parts of the world than they do with their own country cousins.

In contrast to this, typical lowland villagers (usually rice farmers or fishermen) often have little or no education, live in bamboo huts, own few possessions, and have limited access to technological advances or modern medical treatment. Yet these

peasants are considered “advanced” when compared to the semi-nomadic tribal people.

Historically mountain tribesmen have owned no land, have farmed by slash-and-burn (*swidden*) methods, and have no written language, although they may speak several. They tend to live in remote areas and feel little identity with the dominant culture in whichever country they happen to live. Seminomadic tribesmen refuse to be confined by national boundaries, and they seldom intermarry with other tribes. Within a given clan, the ceremonies, lifestyle, dress, and language may have remained almost unchanged for generations. Many tribal people still rely on chants, charms, and local shamans to cure disease and ward off evil spirits.

#### CAMBODIANS

Where the people who currently occupy the land now called Cambodia or Kampuchea originally came from is shrouded in the mists of bygone eras, but culturally their roots can be traced to India and, to a lesser extent, to China. With historic regularity, records of their ancestral groups were destroyed by successive invading armies. Thanks to early Chinese historians and traders, an outline of Cambodian history has been reconstructed beginning in the first century A.D. (It was only in the 1800s that these ancient records were found in China and translated. Until then, Cambodians remained unaware of their own rich and often tragic heritage except as it had been recounted in fables and traditions.) China called the two major states in the area at the dawn of the Christian era “Chenla” and “Funan.” In time the major clans in these loose-knit states became known as Khmer.

Eighty percent of modern-day Cambodians are ethnic Khmer, which is why this name has come into popular use in recent times as the name for all Cambodians. However, not all Cambodians are ethnically Khmer, and not all ethnic Khmer are Cambodians. A sizable number of Khmer are citizens of Laos, Vietnam, or Thailand, especially those living near the borders.

The Chams—another ethnic group in Cambodia—are descen-

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dants of ancient Champa, a kingdom that grew or shrank depending on the strength of its large, warring neighbors—the Khmer to the west and the Viets to the north. Chams now live in the lower Mekong delta in both Vietnam and Cambodia, but this area has not always been their home. Historically they lived in central Vietnam, with Hue as the imperial capital. This kingdom no longer exists, having been swallowed by its two power-hungry neighbors five hundred years ago. The Chams, who maintained an independent kingdom for twelve hundred years, are now either Vietnamese or Cambodian nationals, but many cling to their unique religious heritage and ancestral roots.

Chinese immigrants colonized portions of Southeast Asia about 200 A.D., and their culture was both superimposed upon and absorbed by the existing populations. In more recent history, waves of Chinese have again gravitated to urban centers throughout the region. Large numbers of these immigrants have assimilated; many have become businessmen, some have married locals, but others have maintained a distinct subculture within each host country.

Like other Southeast Asians who trace their roots to India, most Cambodians are a black-haired, slightly built, small people with varying shades of brown skin. They are part of what has been called “brown Asia” in contrast to the Vietnamese, whose main roots are from China or “yellow Asia.”

## RELIGION

Though Hinduism and Buddhism reached Southeast Asia about the same time, Hinduism is by far the older religion. Hinduism, the traditionally more militant culture, was dominant and under the aggressive rule of Hindu kings, the Khmer Kingdom flourished. Its borders expanded to their maximum size. The people built magnificent Angkor Wat and other huge temple complexes, as well as dikes, canals, and dams.

Over the centuries the native population tired of wars, bloodshed, and the endless movement of populations. Gentler ways exemplified by the Buddha gained greater acceptance. Converts spent more time trying to conquer themselves than they did

conquering others. Even their "god-kings" converted. As a result, the Khmer Kingdom gradually shrank in political importance relative to its aggressive Hindu neighbors and its borders shrank as well. Buddhism, however, continued to win adherents in the other countries throughout the area. Over time, Buddhists claimed and enlarged existing Hindu temples and have dominated religious thought in Southeast Asia for the past eight hundred years.

Buddhism is not the only religion practiced in Indochina, although it has the ability to incorporate many others within its broad philosophy. Intermingled are native beliefs in animism and ancestor worship, with a sprinkling of Confucianism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. Even within Buddhism there are many sects. Most Khmer are Theravada Buddhists, while their Vietnamese neighbors are Mahayana Buddhists. The Chams once practiced a unique blend of Hinduism and Islam; now most are Moslems. The mountain people, as Animists, often still rely on appeasing local deities—each tribe in its own way.

In the twentieth century, a new religion or lack of religion—atheism in the form of communism—entered the scene. By 1975, when the Cambodian Communists took control of the country, religion was abolished. However, in 1979 the Cambodians were defeated by the Vietnamese Communists, who installed a government that allowed some freedom of religion; Buddhist monks and a few Christian medical missionaries resumed activity. The fate of religion in Cambodia remains to be seen once the Vietnamese leave—withdrawal is scheduled for late 1989 or 1990.

## GEOGRAPHY

Cambodia has been the size and shape it is today only since the end of World War II. The Geneva Convention of 1954 formally set Cambodia's and its neighbors' boundaries; only time will tell if these borders are firmly fixed.

At the height of the ancient Khmer Kingdom (1100–1200 A.D.), the country encompassed all of modern-day Cambodia, more than half of Thailand, most of Laos, the bulk of South Vietnam, the southern part of Burma, and a portion of Malaysia.



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The days of Khmer glory, extending from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, were ruled by militant, expansionist Hindu "god-kings."

The alternate expansion and shrinking of borders under the "god-kings" set the stage for long-standing friction and animosity between Cambodia and its three neighbors. Cambodia and Thailand have quarreled over boundaries for centuries. They still do. During the colonial period, France was less concerned with Cambodia's size than it was with keeping a buffer zone between Vietnam and Thailand. In the late 1800s France awarded Thailand several provinces that had been in dispute historically. In 1907 these lands were given to Cambodia. Then during World War II, Japan returned these same provinces to Thailand. They reverted to Cambodia when Japan lost the war. It was like a seesaw; without leaving their villages, people in the border areas were citizens of first one and then the other country. Cambodia had similar border disputes with Vietnam and Laos. Today there's no way to sort out who had original claim on the land. However, unless each nation honors the current boundaries, the threat of border conflict or full-scale war will hang over the area just as it does in other parts of the world.

## FRENCH INDOCHINA

During the nineteenth century, European colonialism in Southeast Asia was in full swing. England controlled India and Burma. France claimed Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, calling them collectively "French Indochina." To the south and east of France's holdings, the Dutch, Portuguese, and English competed for control. In Southeast Asia only Siam was never colonized by the West, which is why Siam, when changing its name in 1939, selected "Thailand," meaning "Freeland."

As early as the 1600s, French Catholic missionaries were active in Vietnam. Traders for the French East India Company soon followed. Cambodia was made a protectorate in 1863, and by 1884 all of Vietnam had become a French colony. Nine years later, Laos was also made a protectorate. Laos and Cambodia

enjoyed somewhat more autonomy than did Vietnam, only because they had fewer national resources and, therefore, the French expended less money, manpower, and concern on them. However, had France not intervened in Southeast Asia when it did, Cambodia very likely would have gone the way of the ancient Champa kingdom—it would have been absorbed by powerful neighbors and ceased to be a country at all. French rule in Indochina lasted almost a hundred years, until 1954.

France, like other colonial powers, drained wealth from its colonies and offered little in return. Besides appropriating rice, rubber, gems, teak, and spices, the French controlled Indochina in order to secure trade routes with China. France wanted China's tea and silk without depleting its own gold and silver reserves, so the French encouraged mountain tribal people, especially the Hmong in Vietnam, Laos, and southern China, to grow opium poppies as their only cash crop. France bought all they produced. Cambodia had few suitable poppy-growing areas, so by and large it was spared that plague. Like England, Holland, and Portugal before them, France gained economic power by spreading opium addiction, particularly among the Chinese. Opium grown in India, Indonesia, Turkey, and later in Indochina became the medium of exchange in Asia as well as a lucrative export to Europe. Today the world founders under the legacy of addiction that colonial powers fostered for generations.

Under the French, Cambodia's "god-kings" held only nominal power. In 1904, for political reasons, France backed one line of the royal family—the Sisowath line—moving King Norodom's heirs aside. Less than forty years later, France decided it was expedient—again for political reasons—to switch back. Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, who expected the kingdom one day to be his, was outraged when his eighteen-year-old cousin, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, was declared King in 1941. The French hoped to control this new King because of his youth.

Young and inexperienced, King Sihanouk was handicapped from the start of his reign. Family intrigue and manipulation aimed at his overthrow began almost immediately. Led by

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his cousin, the ousted branch of the family promoted dissension.

Shortly after Sihanouk became King, Japan invaded and conquered Indochina. Japan controlled the area throughout the remainder of World War II, from 1941 to 1945, allowing local rule in Cambodia by the young King under supervision from Japan's allies—the Vichy French government. When Japan lost the war, they also lost Indochina. France (the Vichy government out and the former government in) again moved into Indochina, hoping to control the region as before. However, they faced stiff opposition from the Indochinese and rejection by world powers that now objected to colonialism. Capitalizing on this changed political climate, Sihanouk worked tirelessly from 1945 to 1954, adroitly applying pressure on France through world opinion in an effort to gain independence for his Royal Kingdom of Cambodia (Kampuchea).

## REESTABLISHING THE KINGDOM

Although Sihanouk played a key role Cambodia's successful bid for independence from France after World War II, Vietnam deserves the lion's share of credit. Viet Minh guerrillas were the main force challenging France's claim to Indochina. For decades they fought tenaciously, draining French resources and will. In May 1954 they decisively defeated French soldiers at Diem Bien Phu. Years of guerrilla warfare, coupled with international pressure, finally forced France to give up all claims to Indochina. The Viet Minh and other Indochinese Communists were able to gain local support over the years because citizens were unhappy first with the French, then with their own corrupt and inept governments.

The 1954 Geneva Agreements, which formalized independence for Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, also divided Vietnam along the 17th Parallel, creating two nations. According to this treaty, Vietnam's Communists would withdraw their guerrilla forces from Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam. North Vietnam was to be their domain, with Ho Chi Minh as President. However, the Viet Minh didn't honor the written agreements.

At the time, the West anticipated reunification of the two

Vietnams under a coalition government. Instead, this artificial boundary became an excuse for additional fighting. As the French withdrew, the North Vietnamese ruthlessly advanced. Their aggressive, expansionist behavior alarmed Western leaders, who feared that Russia and China would absorb all of Southeast Asia into the Communist sphere of influence. So with the stated goal of stopping Communist incursions into the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), the United States stepped in to bolster local leadership. Unfortunately they often backed the same corrupt and incompetent men that the French and other colonial powers had supported.

After independence in 1954, King Sihanouk tried to develop a weakened Cambodia into an independent nation. To accomplish this, he needed foreign aid for his projects. His negative experience with French colonialism, however, had left him disenchanted with the West and highly suspicious of U.S. motives in Vietnam. He also feared Thai and Vietnamese efforts to wrest control. Cambodia's population was only about eight million; either Vietnam or Thailand, traditional enemies, could overwhelm Cambodia by sheer numbers. But Sihanouk's lingering dread of colonialism kept him from accepting American backing to keep the two countries at bay. In addition to these concerns, he feared both the left- and right-wing movements within Cambodia.

French-educated Cambodian Communists were being trained in North Vietnam to foment rebellion in Cambodia. The right-wing movement, the Khmer Seri, also wanted to unseat Sihanouk. For many years he successfully steered a middle course in politics so that neither the right- nor the left-leaning factions could gain a majority. But instead of addressing legitimate complaints that these dissidents raised, he severely suppressed all opposition. He failed to remove underlying inequality and government corruption. It was like throwing a woven bamboo mat over a time bomb; it kept agitators from being so visible but did nothing to defuse the cause of their frustration.

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### NORODOM SIHANOUK

Sihanouk's personality was both an asset and a liability to his kingdom. Since he came from a line of the royal family not expecting kingship, he'd not been prepared nor had he prepared himself for responsible leadership. While the world was in the midst of World War II, Sihanouk was a student in Saigon living the life of a royal playboy. When the French recalled him to Cambodia to become King, he was two days shy of his nineteenth birthday. Sihanouk managed to keep Cambodia out of the fierce fighting of that war simply by not resisting Japanese occupation.

He ruled the country with political skill in some areas and completely ignored others. In addition to being King, he found time to be a jazz-band leader, magazine editor, film director, woman chaser, polygamist, and the owner of gambling concessions. He dominated all communications media and managed the foreign press. His violent temper and his spirited, five-hour-long harangues to captive audiences were legendary.

Peasants and tribesmen revered Norodom Sihanouk as a unique form of human being—part man, part god. Even the city-educated couldn't deny his apparent uniqueness. As testimony to his unusual abilities, it was noted that when he returned from travel abroad the weather improved. When he toured the provinces, temperatures moderated. He seemed to walk under a divine parasol of protection. It was said that birds flocked nearby whenever he came to an area. However, some Cambodians suspected that birds were released by aids to impress Sihanouk's naive audiences; that he had the weather monitored and deliberately canceled appearances if a storm threatened.

Even in the minds of those who condemned Sihanouk's regime as corrupt beyond repair, there was still an element of faith in the man. Rather than blaming the charismatic Sihanouk, his would-be critics attributed governmental ills to corrupt advisers and relatives and only peripherally to his inability to control them. But for or against him, no one denies that Sihanouk's cocky personality and mercurial antics brought Cambodia to the

world's attention. Sihanouk, however, is a complex man and he has switched allegiances many times. Although his actions are widely known, his motives may be impossible to unravel.

The Geneva Peace Convention, in addition to giving Cambodia independent status, committed Sihanouk to hold open elections. He procrastinated as long as possible before allowing the first elections in 1955. By then he'd mapped out a clever strategy. In one of the most astute moves in modern political history, King Norodom Sihanouk (sensing he would otherwise lose control of political power and be saddled with a figurehead role) abdicated the throne in favor of his old father. He then turned right around, formed his *own* political party, and won the elections, becoming Cambodia's first Prime Minister. Thus he lost his kingship but retained his power. Now known as "Prince" rather than "King," Sihanouk took the resounding victory at the polls as his mandate from the people. When other politicians challenged him on any point, he asked the people to vote. The majority voted with their Prince. For the next fifteen years, he controlled politics. With the death of his father, the kingship died; Sihanouk then became both Chief-of-State and Prime Minister.

Sihanouk ruled a kingless kingdom, but despite his "mandate" he never totally united the country. Cambodia continued to function as a network of feudal states with warlords, large-land owners, and feudal barons who ruled their fiefdoms and paid tribute for special privileges. Sihanouk's rule was not unlike that of his ancestors or even many of his contemporaries such as Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, but times were changing. Rule by intrigue and manipulation was no longer acceptable to articulate, educated Cambodians. They demanded democratic equality. Their push was for land reform, education, and technology for the masses, coupled with laws and rules that applied equally to all.

In 1958 Sihanouk allowed people to vote on his preselected slate of deputy ministers to the National Assembly. Four years later, he refused to grant even these controlled elections. In-

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stead he appointed the same deputy ministers for another four years. This angered many Cambodians. Pressure for reform built to a point such that in 1966, Sihanouk was forced to permit open elections. To show displeasure for the Prince's dictatorial behavior, many people voted against anyone he'd appointed earlier. Lon Nol, a general in Sihanouk's army, was elected Prime Minister, but Sihanouk, still Chief-of-State, continued to control national policy. He granted Lon Nol and the National Assembly only nominal freedom to make decisions.

While leaders in Cambodia tried to make democracy work, American involvement in the war in Vietnam and Laos continued to expand. During the early days of that war, Sihanouk played the East against the West effectively enough to get aid for his internal programs from both sides. However, the price he paid was turning a blind eye on violations of Cambodia's neutrality. The Ho Chi Minh Trail, used by the North Vietnamese to shuttle military supplies and soldiers from North Vietnam, wound through Cambodia and Laos. In an attempt to block use of Cambodia for this supply route, the United States launched bombing raids on Cambodian villages. These raids killed many villagers and turned others into Communist supporters. Elected officials could not entice Sihanouk to order a stop to the blatant use of Cambodia by the North Vietnamese and their Russian and Chinese backers. Nor would he seek direct United States involvement in the fight against the Communists. Prince Sihanouk's stated philosophy was: "When elephants are fighting, the ant should step aside."

Many government leaders, including Sihanouk's frustrated cousin, Prince Sirik Matak, decided the situation was intolerable and urged Prime Minister Lon Nol to overthrow Sihanouk. These men felt that without a coup, the country could not survive the multiple crises it faced. Many Cambodians believe that the United States encouraged the coup. Some even believe that Sihanouk acquiesced in order to shift responsibility away from his failing regime; he needed a scapegoat.

## THE KHMER REPUBLIC

On March 18, 1970, while Sihanouk was in France, a reluctant Lon Nol claimed leadership and, in a bloodless coup, created the Khmer Republic. In general, city residents supported the change. Many villagers did not. With the Prince ousted, support for the government weakened dramatically in the countryside. Cambodian Communists, who for years had been a relatively well-suppressed minority, suddenly grew powerful enough to overrun outlying villages and challenge the central government.

The fledgling Khmer Republic inherited from Sihanouk overwhelming problems: bankruptcy, famine, corruption, a Communist-backed civil war, Vietnamese aggression, and United States retaliation. President Lon Nol immediately solicited and received greater U.S. financial aid and military involvement. In responding, the United States both helped and hindered; the Khmer Republic eagerly received desperately needed supplies but came to depend too heavily on America's continued support.

The Republic was powerless against the rapidly expanding Vietnam War. The war sucked this supposedly neutral nation deeper and deeper into a maelstrom from which it could not return. After the coup, the North Vietnamese markedly increased supply shipments along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Cambodia. The United States stepped up bombing raids, attacking deep inside Cambodia in efforts to dislodge the elusive Viet Cong. Cambodia's American "friends" laid waste to the land and killed tens of thousands of innocent villagers; in increasing numbers Cambodians joined the Khmer Rouge.

Farmers poured into the cities, fleeing hunger, Khmer Rouge brutality, American bombing, and the Viet Cong. Rice production dropped drastically. Rubber plantations, the major source of foreign currency, were destroyed. Cambodia's traditional economic base collapsed.

And as had been the case under the Prince, many unscrupulous men in the new regime served in positions of leadership for their own profit. Greed undermined reform. For generations, high military posts had been awarded on the basis of favor, not



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aptitude. Graft and corruption in high office was a way of life. The Republic's leaders failed to break this pattern despite efforts by a few outstanding leaders and honest men.

Lon Nol was ineffective in altering Cambodia's fate and perhaps even contributed to the Republic's downfall, but many Cambodians couldn't bring themselves to blame him personally. They doubted that any man or group of men, given the circumstances, could have altered the final outcome. The Republic has been judged harshly for failing to bring peace and stability, but multiple forces were at work beyond the power of any local government to control; Cambodia had become a Ping-Pong ball in someone else's game.

For years the people in Phnom Penh had been isolated and insulated from the reality of war in outlying provinces. Until the end neared, they'd been unaware of the enormity of the problems the country faced. It had been inconceivable, even to most leaders, that the Communists would eventually triumph against a government supplied and backed by the mighty United States.

The Republic waged a losing battle against its neighbor's escalating war, its own civil war, internal corruption, and a collapsing economy. The nation fought without the loyalty of its peasants, many of whom were still angry over the removal of their royal family. Others didn't care which government claimed control in far-off Phnom Penh. The Khmer Republic held out for five terrible years, propped up with massive infusions of aid from the United States and help from Thailand and other countries who feared a Communist takeover of the region.

In mid-1973, America abruptly withdrew from Vietnam and the rest of Indochina because U.S. citizens and Congress demanded it—the results were inevitable.

## COMMUNIST INFLUENCE

Because the Khmer Rouge had attempted since the 1930s with little success to rouse the peasants in Cambodia to revolt, their threat had been discounted. The Communists hadn't been able to appeal to the "landless masses," as they'd done in other underdeveloped countries, because almost ninety percent of Cambodia's