Sheri Prasso was Cambodia bureau chief for Agence France-Presse from September 1991 to January 1994. She is currently on leave at Cambridge University.

Cambodia
A Heritage of Violence
Sheri Prasso

Visiting Cambodia, one cannot help but be beguiled by its almost-constant sunshine, its tranquilly swaying palm trees, and the overt friendliness of its smiling people, who greet each other and everyone else with the words "Sok s'bai?"—"Are you happy?" Indeed, happiness is one of the most valued aspects of Khmer society.

But Cambodia is a master of façade. It has never been a country at peace. Chroniclers from the very beginning of Khmer civilization have documented a "warrior heritage" of battles with neighbors Siam (Thailand), Annam (Vietnam), and Champa (wiped out by Vietnam in the fifteenth century). Internal divisions have allowed Cambodia's neighbors to take advantage of its instability to divide and conquer the country time and time again. Cambodians are further burdened with a brutal history of fratricide, medieval-style torture, summary justice, banditry, decapitation, and human-liver eating. Cambodians have the capacity to turn from seeming passivity to passionate rage in seconds with little reflection on the consequences.

Every one of these violent practices—including decapitation and the cutting out and ingestion of enemies' internal organs—continues in Cambodia today. While this violence is not unique to the Khmer people—such practices are documented in many other Asian and Middle Eastern societies—Cambodia has few socially acceptable outlets for the release of tension and anger and thus, I believe, finds it more difficult than other countries to reconcile its heritage of violence. Often Khmers blame their most raw, embarrassing foibles on foreigners or foreign "minds" in Khmer bodies, never resolving the reasons behind them or trying to find solutions from within. That this society produced one of the most vicious, despotic dictators of the twentieth century, Pol Pot, the man responsible for the deaths of a million people during his reign from 1975 to 1979, should have come as no surprise to those who know Cambodia's brutal history. That a $1.8 billion U.N. peacekeeping operation from 1992 to 1993 could not rectify the fundamental roots of conflict in Cambodia and that the result is a government wracked by infighting in a country still at war should not hold much surprise either.

Blood Brothers

The government that was elected in U.N.-run elections in May 1993 is anything but stable. As the result of a power-sharing agreement forced by the outcome of the vote, in which neither the former Communists nor the royalists won a governing majority, Cambodia is the only country in the world with two prime ministers—three counting the illegal, unrecognized government recently proclaimed by the Khmer Rouge guerrillas, who were supposed to have laid down their weapons and participated in the elections under the 1991 peace accords that formally ended the civil war. The Khmer Rouge refused to cooperate with U.N. peacekeepers and boycotted the peace process, returning the country to war. Still led by Pol Pot, who is rumored to be seriously ill with heart problems, the estimated force of 5,000 to 20,000 people—

spread out "like a leopard's spots," as Cambodians say, in 19 of 21 provinces—has won significant military victories this year.

While the government in Phnom Penh survived a coup attempt in July of this year, it remains threatened from the outside by the Khmer Rouge and from within by its own failings: rampant corruption; inept administrators; a woefully inadequate and undertrained army that rarely receives its wages and secretly sells its ammunition to the enemy; a loose and uneven application of law and order; and destabilizing divisions between its leaders, who put personal interests before national ones in their continuing struggles for power.

The failed putsch was led by Prince Norodom Chakrapong, the half brother of the co–prime minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh, and masterminded by former Communist hard-liners in the Interior Ministry. There has been speculation that the hard-line factions within the government led the men into a trap in order to quell dissent, as well as the theory that the hard-liners were actually attempting to take power from the ruling coalition. Regardless of its motivations, the unrest is an indication of the fragility of the government and yet another example of the deeply rooted disunity and fratricidal tendencies that characterize Cambodian politics.

Prince Chakrapong and Prince Ranariddh, both sons of King Norodom Sihanouk, are sworn enemies. It was Prince Chakrapong who led the secessionist drive against his half brother when the formerly communist Cambodian People's Party (CPP) refused to accept its loss in the May 1993 elections. At that time he had the backing of the CPP, which now makes up half of the coalition but maintains total control over the administration of the country. Whether this year's uprising had outside support is not immediately clear, but the government's announcement that it had arrested 14 Thais in Phnom Penh in connection with the coup plot further highlights Thailand's ambiguous role in Cambodia. Prince Chakrapong fled into exile in Malaysia.

Such behavior among blood relatives has many precedents. In 1970, then Prince Sihanouk was ousted from power in a coup d'état by his cousin, Prince Sirik Matak, and his trusted prime minister, Gen. Lon Nol. During the era Cambodians regard as the glory days of their civilization, the Angkor period in the tenth to fifteenth centuries, a new king on his coronation day would order that all his brothers be mutilated, each losing a finger, nose, or other appendage, to prevent rival bids to the throne. (For Cambodians, a body that is not whole indicates a soul that is incomplete—a belief with devastating social implications for the thousands of land mine victims created every year.) Rivals from other families were decapitated.

Dispassion at Death

Cambodia has a long history of the use of decapitation, both as ritual and as punishment. Khmers of the lowest social status were beheaded to ensure the success of large construction projects during the Angkor period. In the 1960s, Prince Sihanouk's troops decapitated more than a dozen peasants involved in an antigovernment uprising and drove their heads to the capital in the back of a truck to show that the government would tolerate no dissent. When the Khmer Rouge captured the capital in April 1975, they rounded up top military officials and beheaded them on the tennis courts of the downtown sports club where Phnom Penh's elite played.[1] This May, Cambodian government troops decapitated a Khmer Rouge prisoner of war and left his head on display at a military headquarters in northwest Battambang, where Western news photographers spotted it. Soldiers fighting the Khmer Rouge in the province told journalists, with the dispassion of a butcher discussing how to filet a steak, that both sides often cut off their captured foes' heads and, for spite, send them back over enemy lines.

U.N. human rights monitors documented the grisly practices of liver eating and bile ingestion this year by Cambodian government soldiers in Battambang who were kidnapping civilians for ransom and then executing them to eliminate evidence of their misdeeds. One witness told a U.N. official in April that a particular captive in question was "eaten up," meaning that his liver was cut out, grilled, and eaten and his bile consumed. Cambodians have a traditional belief that the liver and bile contain the soul of the individual and that consuming them imbues the killer with the victim's life spirit. Following the Lon Nol coup in 1970, the general's brother was apprehended by a pro-Sihanouk mob in Kompong Cham province; his liver was cut out and eaten in a near-riot scene at a local restaurant. In 1296, Chou Ta-kuan, a Chinese envoy to the court of Angkor, wrote home to Beijing that the court still had a "minister for the collection of bile," although the practice had been officially abolished by that time. This man was charged with dispatching assassins among the population to sneak up on the unsuspecting, slice open their abdomens, and drain their gall bladders. This liquid was presented to the king in a large vat in order to ensure a good harvest. He added that once a Chinese had been forced to contribute to the collection and that his bile had spoiled the vat and thus the harvest. From then on, the Chinese population of Cambodia was left alone. Chou also documented the live burial outside the city gates of people accused of serious crimes and limb amputations of those accused of lesser crimes.

In Cambodia today, prisons are rife with disease, including tuberculosis, scurvy, and beriberi. Although the U.N. peacekeeping operation succeeded in getting the government to abolish the use of shackles to hold prisoners in their cells, barbaric, medieval-like punishments continue. The United Nations in 1993 tried to arrest a prison warden nicknamed the "Battambang barbequer," who allegedly strung up his victims and inflicted third-degree burns on their bodies, including on their genitals, in order to extract confessions. He eluded capture. I have met men kept for nearly two years in solitary confinement, shackled to a wall for 23 hours a day, hours in which they were ravaged by mosquitoes and vermin and bugs crawled over their legs and gnawed at their deadened toes. Another man was forced to soak in his own excrement in a large water vat for 14 days. Still worse, two men I knew, one a dissident and the other a controversial journalist, turned up dead of severe blows to the head in what the police ruled were traffic accidents. Cambodians have a belief similar to the West's "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" axiom, except that the consequences are always expected to be deadly. The fool who sticks out his neck will have his head chopped off, they say.

Anger seems to lurk just below the surface in Cambodia, and is evident in the folk tradition. Folk tales, in which Cambodians allow violent passions to overrule common sense, draw no moral conclusions and end abruptly. They show that violence is part of life, that violence begets more violence, and that cruelty goes unpunished. When I first arrived in 1991, a colleague told me to be acutely aware of clues indicating impatience or anger on the part of Cambodians, because unlike in the West, or even in East Asian cultures, where there are emotional pressure valves to let off tension, a Cambodian "will smile right up to the moment he kills you." This is an exaggeration, but unlike in neighboring Vietnam, where a traffic accident will usually result in a vulgar shouting match as good as one can find anywhere in New York, in Cambodia there is silence and then, if justice isn't done with cash on the spot, revenge. Shouting is frowned upon and anger is swallowed. To raise one's voice in Cambodia is to be called "crazy," and to call someone crazy is to use a provocation equal to the ugliest epithet imaginable in the English language.

So outlets come in other forms: children hurl cats by their tails against walls, a teenage boy empties an AK-47 magazine into a tree, young men kick around a mutt as if it were a soccer ball. By adulthood, the outlets are fewer. The deaths of strangers are met with what appears to be complete dispassion. Cambodians who have just witnessed or even committed murder recount it with sobering detail and without emotion. A Khmer Rouge defector confessed in a shockingly matter-of-fact manner to U.N. peacekeepers that he had helped massacre a score of ethnic Vietnamese men, women, and children in central Kompong Chhnang province in late 1992 under orders from his commander. He did not realize that this was a criminal act until the United Nations placed him in custody, charging him with mass murder. (He later died of a heart ailment in detention.)

Foreigners tell another story with startling repetitiveness, and I have witnessed it myself: at a traffic accident scene, people will gather around, shrug their shoulders, and observe to each other, "Look, the wheels are still spinning," while a victim lies in the road bleeding of a head wound. Again and again, foreigners intervene to administer first aid and take the wounded to a hospital.

The Consequences of Salvation

Expecting foreigners to save the day is a theme repeated over and over in Cambodia. The people were ecstatic when the United Nations arrived in 1992, thinking salvation had come at last. It was an old refrain, however, and one that has had serious consequences for the country's sovereignty. The Khmer Empire at its height encompassed much of mainland Southeast Asia, incorporating the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam and most of Thailand, including the present-day Thai capital, Bangkok, and the Laotian capital, Vientiane. In order to hold on to power, Cambodian leaders throughout the centuries have appealed to outside powers for help in conquering their internal enemies without realizing, or perhaps without caring, that foreign domination is a double-edged sword: it makes the whole country weaker as it makes one faction strong.

Such a house divided in the face of neighbors Thailand and Vietnam, countries that throughout history have attempted to divide and conquer the Khmer people, has led to an irreparable loss of territory, contributing to the Cambodians' present-day sense of wounded pride and fear of racial extinction. A realistic concern about encroachment by neighbors is one of the key factors motivating Cambodia's foreign and domestic policies today.

Cambodia is a country of tremendous natural resources and, most important to its neighbors, vast empty stretches of arable land. Overpopulated and expansionist, Thailand and Vietnam cannot help but be tempted by Cambodia's ongoing vulnerability, particularly given the historical context: both countries have occupied large portions of Cambodia within the last 50 years. Moscow-backed Vietnam invaded to oust the Chinese-supported Khmer Rouge from power in 1978 and occupied the country for the next decade. U.S. diplomatic recognition of Vietnam and Vietnam's desire to protect its growing trade ties with Asian countries that opposed U.S. involvement in Cambodia—trade crucial to the country's economy following the collapse of the Soviet Union—rule out any immediate expansionist policies; in the long run, however, Vietnamese expansionism is not unlikely. Thailand continues to carry out annual, 12-day military exercises on its border with Cambodia, training against the threat of Vietnamese invasion.

Vietnam is keeping well out of the Cambodian conflict for the moment. Phnom Penh envoys sent to contact their old allies in Hanoi in February in order to buy arms were refused "even a single bullet" by President Le Duc Anh, in what was perhaps a concession to the mistakes of the past but also perhaps an omen for the future.[2]

The Thais have no clearer conscience. The Cambodian capital at the magnificent temples of Angkor moved elsewhere after the Siamese sacked it in 1353 and again in 1431. The French colonial government in 1863 granted protection to the Cambodian royal court, threatened with domination from competing Thai and Vietnamese interests, then recovered what are now parts of Cambodia's three northwestern provinces from Thai annexation, once in 1907 and again following the Second World War.

Despite Cambodia's official sovereignty over its northwest provinces, Khmer residents there watch Thai television, buy imported Thai clothing and household goods, and plaster the walls of their wooden homes with posters of Thai pop stars. To say that a Cambodian woman "looks like a Thai" is a compliment. The United Nations fostered this cultural domination by sending 700 Thai soldiers to these northwest provinces, where another Thai group had already been doing road repairs under a bilateral agreement. The commanders of the U.N. Thai contingent opened a Thai restaurant in Battambang and reaped substantial profit during the U.N. presence.

Thailand has every interest in keeping a buffer between itself and Vietnam and then using that buffer to develop its own economic interests: the logging of Cambodia's hardwood forests and mining of its gems through concessions with the Khmer Rouge. The resulting overlap of political and economic interests frequently leads to accusations by Cambodian government officials—backed by U.S. diplomatic pressure—that Thailand is still supporting the Khmer Rouge in the ongoing civil conflict. Without recourse to Thai territory from which to regroup in order to mount new attacks, a recurring event within the last year, the Khmer Rouge would have quickly dissolved into isolated pockets, some of which easily could have succumbed to government forces. In response to a new law passed by the Cambodian National Assembly in July that declared the Khmer Rouge illegal and their passports invalid, Thailand pledged to stop allowing Khmer Rouge leaders to leave Cambodia through Thai territory.

The government in Bangkok has made such claims about full support for the Phnom Penh government before, only to have been caught red-handed helping the Khmer Rouge. It is important here to distinguish between the military and the civilian parts of the Thai government. Thailand's generals exert enormous power, particularly in business dealings, along the country's borders with Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. Thai diplomats concede that central control over the military fringes is tenuous at best. Foreign correspondents were invited by the Thai Foreign Ministry to the Thai-Cambodian border this year to clarify Thailand's position; they were briefed with a map showing Cambodia as "Democratic Kampuchea," the name of the country when it was under Khmer Rouge rule—to the embarrassment of ministry officials escorting the journalists.

Cambodian officials usually make their allegations against Thailand in the throes of anger and to deflect criticism of their own mismanagement. Most of these charges lack proof, but evidence of Thai support for the Khmer Rouge was uncovered in December 1993 when Thai police (rivals of the Thai military) found 1,500 tons of Chinese-made weapons, enough to defend a small country, stockpiled and guarded by the Cambodian guerrillas inside Thailand. The seizure came during a routine police check as some of the weapons were being transported in rice sacks by a Khmer Rouge driver who admitted he had been ordered to truck the weapons across the border to Pailin. (Pailin is the symbolic Khmer Rouge headquarters in western Cambodia, a pretty town in a Cardamon Mountain valley full of the ruby and sapphire mines that keep the guerrilla operation funded through Thai business concessions. Its capture by the Cambodian army in March and subsequent recapture by the Khmer Rouge in April were the highlights

of the 1994 dry season offensive, which ended in May. As a result of their military victories, the Khmer Rouge now hold more territory than during the U.N. peacekeeping operation, most of it along the border with Thailand. The Khmer Rouge have declared their zone a separate country.)

When U.N. peacekeepers were in Cambodia, they documented many Thai infringements of Cambodian sovereignty, all of which were denied by Bangkok. When the Khmer Rouge captured a government-held crossing point into Thailand on Cambodia's northern border in August 1993, the attack was launched "from three to four directions, including the Thai side of the checkpoint," and during the attack U.N. peacekeepers assigned to the checkpoint were "detained in Thai territory by [the Khmer Rouge]," according to the United Nations. (From this same checkpoint I witnessed and photographed the crossing of 140 trucks carrying an average of five logs each in violation of the U.N. moratorium of January 2, 1993, on log exports from Cambodia. The Thai government denied the violation, but the United Nations later named Thailand as the biggest violator of the ban on log exports from Cambodia.) During a government offensive against the Khmer Rouge in the northwest province of Banteay Meanchey in August 1993, "there [was] absolutely no doubt that [Khmer Rouge] forces and civilians...were allowed by Thailand to cross the border and seek refuge on its territory."[3]

Cambodia is not without means to retaliate if Thai support for the Khmer Rouge continues. Only half joking, a senior Cambodian military official told me it would be relatively easy to begin arms shipments to Muslim separatists in southern Thailand or to stir up unrest among the four million ethnic Khmers living in Thailand's Surin province.

The China Hand

It is impossible to understand the destabilizing foreign influences in Cambodia without looking at China as well. For more than 20 years, China supplied arms to Cambodia's Communists. Beijing announced in 1991, just ahead of the signing of the peace accords, that it would supply no more military aid to Cambodia. After all, Chinese diplomats quickly pointed out, it was the fanatics of the Cultural Revolution in China who funded the fanaticism of the Maoists in Cambodia, and it is a new era in both countries. U.S. diplomats say their intelligence has not detected any Chinese arms shipments since 1991. In fact, Prince Ranariddh said in May that when the Cambodian government tried to order Chinese ammunition through a Singapore company "the Chinese government blocked the delivery."[4]

That does not mean China is no longer interested in Cambodia's affairs. Rather, Beijing wants to keep Cambodia as a thorn in the side of Vietnam, its historical nemesis, which contests China's claim to the Spratly Island chain. The less stable Cambodia, the more powerful China.

Beijing—where King Sihanouk has sought refuge and support over the years, maintains a residence, and has undergone treatment for cancer—holds considerable influence over the actions of the monarch. It surely has been at China's insistence that King Sihanouk has pounded the theme of peace talks with the Khmer Rouge rather than advocating a military solution—as most Western observers and diplomats do—that would turn them into a manageable insurgency along the lines of those currently existing in the Philippines or Peru. Including the untrustworthy Khmer Rouge, who have violated every international covenant they have been asked to uphold, in the government could only lead to further destabilization of the country. While chairing roundtable peace negotiations with the Khmer Rouge earlier this year, King Sihanouk admitted that the Khmer Rouge were only attending as a stalling tactic in their attempt to regain total power over Cambodia. "They are not sincere," he told a group of journal-

ists gathered at his Royal Palace in May. "Even with 100 roundtables there will be no peace. The prospect is very bleak."

The Paths of History

The king, nearly 72 years old and suffering from cancer that has spread to his bone marrow, could have launched his country on a new path of stability and independence following the U.N. operation. Instead, he started again down the same mistaken paths of history by appealing anew for foreign intervention, which could only destabilize the government over which he presides but does not control. Expressing desperation over his inability to bring peace to Cambodia before his death, he made moves to retake the reins of power from the elected prime ministers in what is probably a sincere belief that his rule is the best for the country, and called for help from abroad to "save Cambodia from the yoke of the Khmer Rouge." He cited Australia, France, and the United States, saying he wanted those countries to come in to train and arm royal units under his command.

Washington and Paris have provided limited aid to the Cambodian government, in the form of technical advisers and mine clearers, and have considered stronger forms of lethal assistance, a move publicly opposed by Thailand. The needs are great, particularly in terms of the air power necessary to gain the upper hand against the Khmer Rouge. Of 21 MiG-21 fighter jets donated to the former Phnom Penh regime by the Soviet Union, only two are in flying condition. Australia also considered lethal aid but stated that Cambodia's army is in such disarray that weapons would be wasted without complete retraining of the armed forces.

Cambodia's 100,000-strong military force is unusually top heavy, with 2,000 generals and 10,000 colonels. Rank usually has more to do with political favor or wealth than ability on the battlefield. Half of the ammunition sent to the battlefront at Pailin in March and April this year disappeared from stockpiles and was sold off to the enemy or on the black market, according to Western diplomats. Undisciplined soldiers (as well as Khmer Rouge guerrillas) routinely kidnap people for ransom, exact "tolls" from passing motorists, and rob markets in the cities of Battambang and Siem Reap. The government's loss of Pailin after it had held it for only four weeks was directly attributable to the greedy commanding officers' concentration on collecting loot rather than defending the territory. Nonetheless, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) decided in late July that the Cambodian government should receive lethal aid to fight the Khmer Rouge.

Given Cambodia's history, more weapons will not bring a long-term solution. For without the Khmer Rouge threat to rally against, the government would likely turn in on itself in an endless circle of factionalism and division. The true solution must come from within the Khmer society at the behest of fair, unified rulers who have Cambodia's greater interests at heart. But before that can happen there must be the one fundamental change advocated by Thun Saray, a dissident who spent 17 months in prison before founding a local human rights group in 1992. It is his belief that unless every opposing group can trust that the men in power will not persecute them, they will continue the bloody struggle to take power for themselves, for their very survival is at stake. Unless there are basic human rights in Cambodia, there can never be peace.●

Notes

1. Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 84.

2. Nate Thayer and Nayan Chanda, "Things Fall Apart...," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 19, 1994, p. 17.

3. UNTAC Interoffice Memorandum, August 24, 1993.

4. Thayer and Chanda, "Things Fall Apart," p.17.