
A Spiritual Journey to the Homeland:

CERI Clients and Staff Confront Past Traumas and Current Poverty in Cambodia



In October of 2010, Clinical Director Mona Afary organized a trip to Cambodia with 13 clients, CERI's staff therapist, Hamid Shafiezadeh, and CERI's interpreter, Sandra Pech.

Most of the clients who travelled to Cambodia had not visited their homeland since they were forced to flee from Pol Pot's genocidal regime. For years since, they have struggled to acclimate to the wider Oakland community, facing not only cultural, linguistic and social isolation but serious psychological symptoms. For five years, in weekly support groups at CERI, they had shared their fears, anger, and despair related to their horrific experiences under the Khmer Rouge. The compassionate space created over the years wove a strong bond among these men and women. With love as its foundation, at the scene of the genocide, this group was able to grieve their losses collectively, without drowning in their own sorrow.

Our group first visited Tuol Sleng Museum, also known as the S-21 Prison. Out of the 30,000 prisoners incarcerated here, 7 survived. The Khmer Rouge General in charge of this prison, known as Duch, had compulsively kept detailed records: names and pictures of the prisoners, their alleged crimes, the tortures implemented to force confessions, and finally, how they were killed.

Our group of fifteen inspected it all. As we exited, a senior member of our CERI community, whispered in my ear in her broken English: "I never know where my husband

killed. I looked at every man's picture in Tuol Sleng. I so happy not find his picture. I know, he not killed here."

Next, we drove towards the Pnom Penh Killing Field where those who had not been killed at Tuol Sleng, were taken, beaten to death, and buried in mass graves. Amidst the magnificently beautiful countryside was a three-story high memorial pagoda with piles upon piles of skulls stacked according to age and gender. At the entrance to the mass graves towered a large glass box with the clothes and shoes of the men, and women, and children who died there. As we left, we looked at our Cambodian clients wondering how they were going to cope, being witnesses to this memorial. Some silently cried on the ride back to the hotel; others looked lost in their thoughts. One man said in his broken English: "Mona, I never thought I could live anymore if I go Killing Fields. Talking to you, Chhom Chhuy, Hamid, Sandra, Jon, Dr. Gracer made me very strong. I happy to live and hope for future." I held him in my arms and we both cried.

The opportunity to return to Cambodia has proved to be a great source of healing and inspiration. It is greatly empowering for a survivor of torture to have the power to return to the site of trauma - to stand at the prison gates or the killing fields and to see them as historical fixtures, long non-operational, and devoid of all power.

The serious poverty and struggles facing those who remain in Cambodia provided a source of awakening as well. Our group returned to their homes in Oakland, grateful for having one another, their CERI family, and hope about their future. Many re-committed to take difficult yet positive steps to heal themselves and their families so that they would be better able to support loved ones living in horrible poverty in rural Cambodia.
