

"IT IS INDEED THAT RAREST THING:  
AN ORIGINAL CLASSIC" **John le Carré**

*François Bizot*



THE GATE

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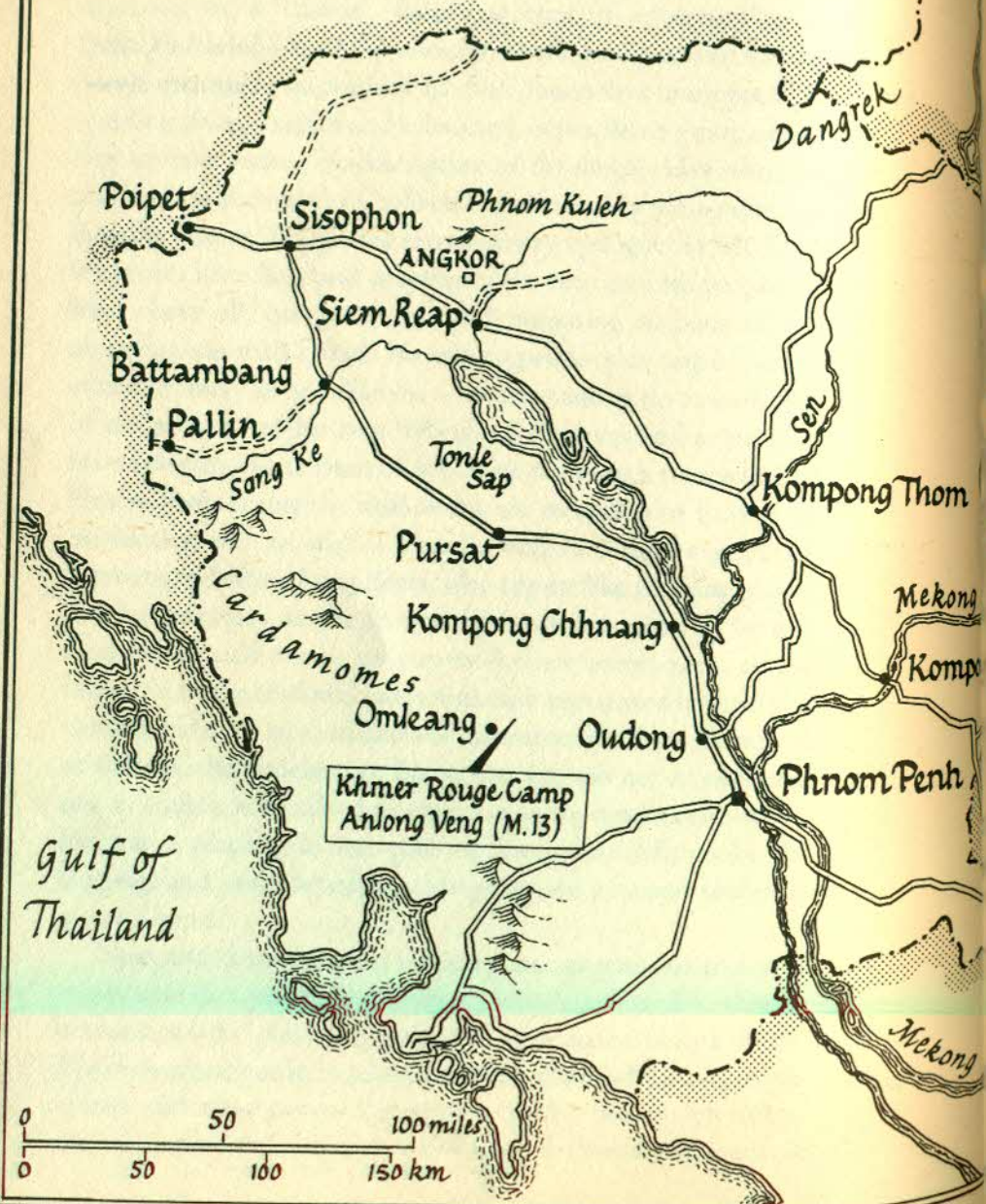
*Translated from the French by Euan Cameron*

*With a Foreword by John Le Carré*

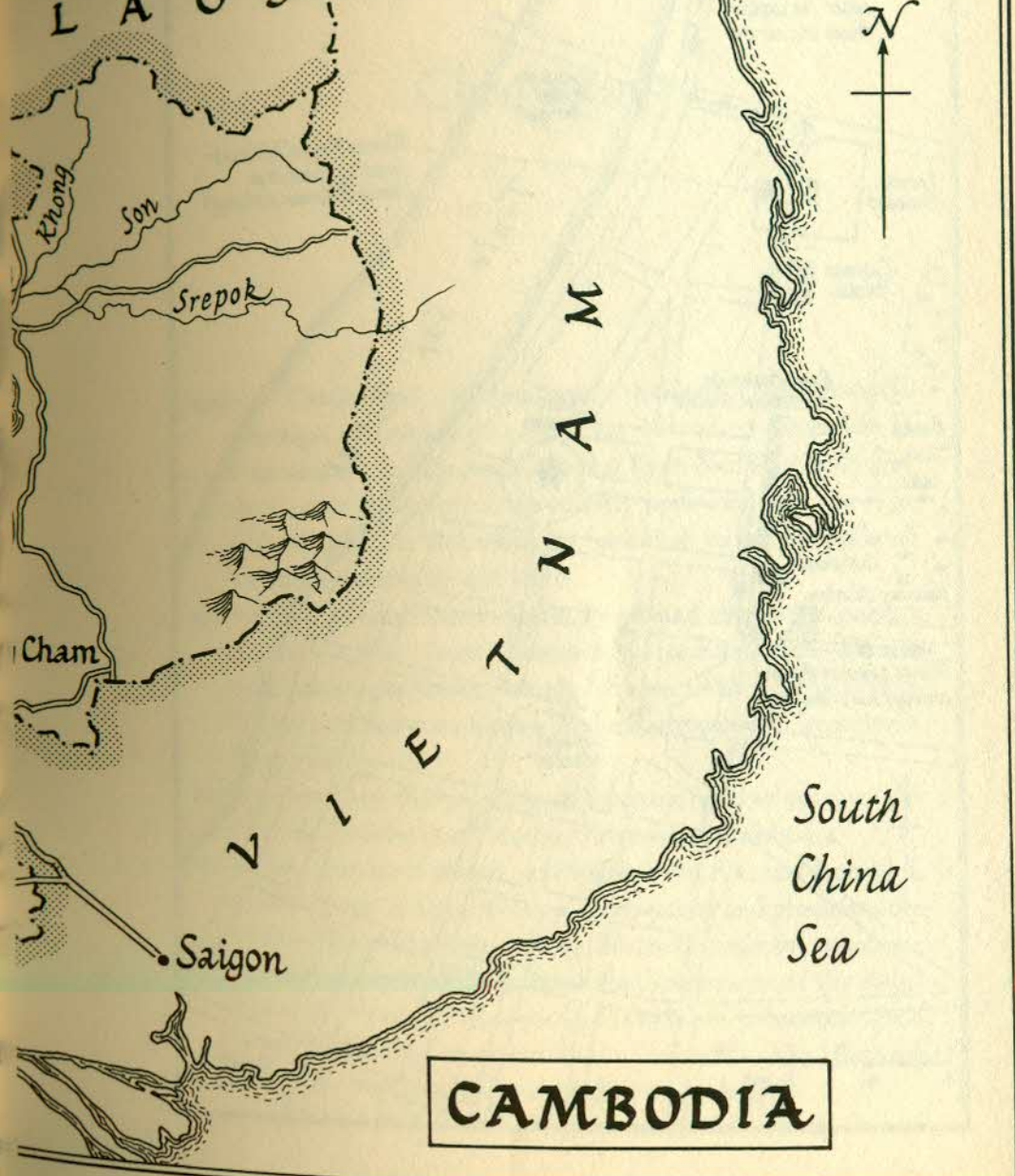


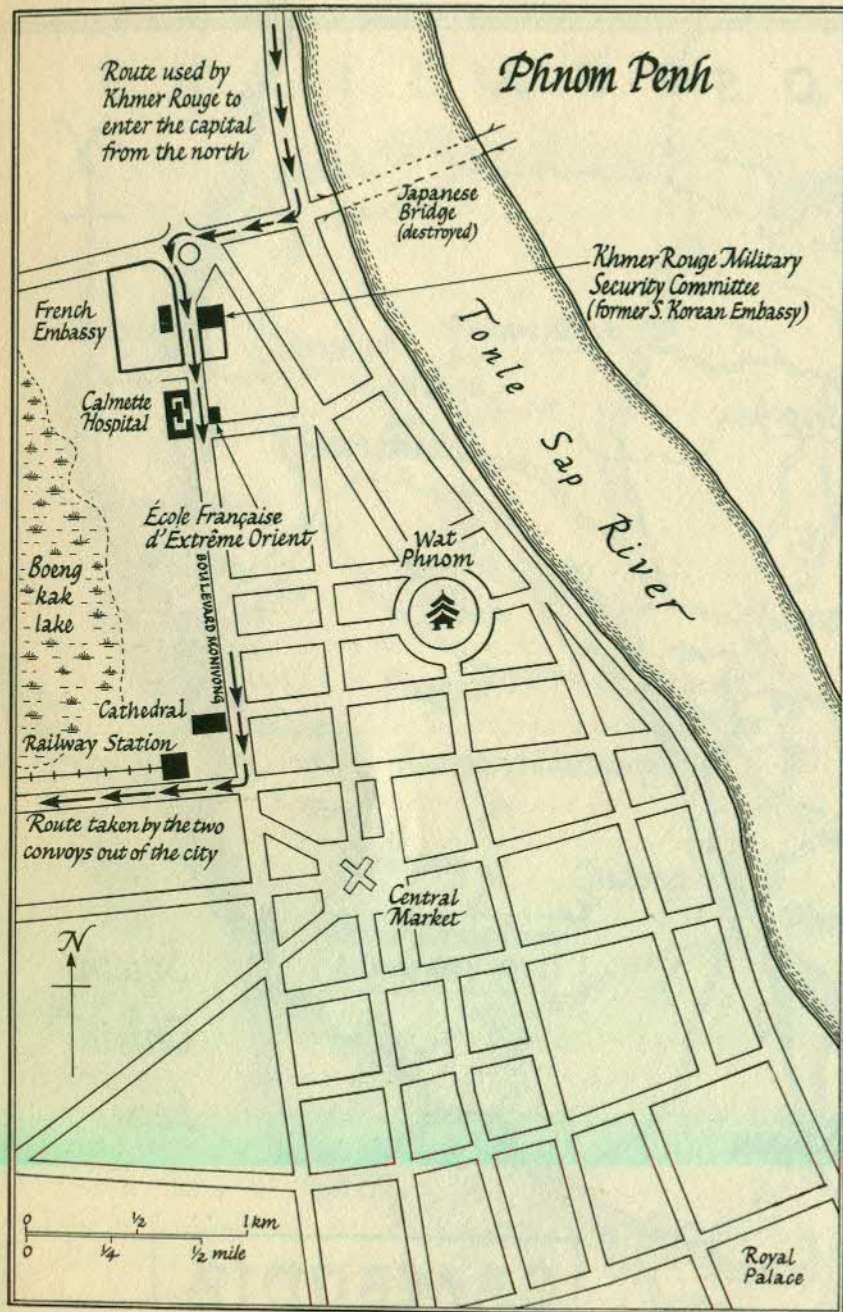
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## Chronology

- 1953-4 Cambodian independence declared. Full national sovereignty transferred to the king, Norodom Sihanouk. In Vietnam, the French are defeated at Dien Bien Phu; following the Geneva Agreements, the country is divided into two. The end of French Indochina, a colonial entity comprising Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.
- 1965-6 The United States sends in ground troops to protect South Vietnam from Communist invasion. The Khmer Communist movement, founded in 1951, sends a delegation to Peking and becomes known as the Kampuchean Communist Party (KCP).
- 1968-9 American troops in South Vietnam number 550,000. US air raids launched on Vietcong hideouts in Cambodia.
- 1969 *Coup d'état* on 18 March, in Phnom Penh. General Lon Nol, who supports US intervention, seizes power and proclaims the Khmer Republic. From Peking, Sihanouk calls for resistance and announces the formation of the Government of the Royal National Union of Kampuchea (GRNUK). American and South Vietnamese troops infiltrate Cambodia. The Vietcong invade the territory and occupy the site of Angkor.
- 1973 Signing of the Paris Agreements and withdrawal of

- American troops. The KCP forces young peasants to enlist in the Revolutionary Army of Liberation.
- 1974 Start of the Khmer Rouge offensive against Phnom Penh (December).
- 1975 France recognises GRNUK (12 April). On 17 April, the capital falls. Evacuation of the towns and the beginning of the "purification" of all strata of the population. Opening of the Tuol Sleng torture camp at Phnom Penh (S. 21).
- 1976 Sihanouk resigns as head of state. Proclamation of Democratic Kampuchea, under the presidency of Khieu Samphan; Pol Pot is prime minister. Attempted putsch at Phnom Penh. Disbanding of the "Pro-Vietnamese network".
- 1977 Kampuchea's economy supported entirely by China. Diplomatic relations between Kampuchea and Vietnam broken off.
- 1978 Following a series of Khmer incursions into Vietnamese territory, Vietnamese divisions occupy the provinces to the east of the Mekong River.
- 1978–80 Major Vietnamese offensive (25 December 1978); Phnom Penh captured on 7 January 1979. Government formed under Vietnamese military protection. Proclamation of the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Famine causes Khmer Rouge fighting units to disband, and their headquarters withdraw to Thailand. The rest of the armed forces retreat to bases in the forest and along the frontier with Thailand. Resumption of guerrilla fighting.
- 1985–93 Vietnamese troops capture several Khmer Rouge positions on the frontier with Thailand. Formal withdrawal of Vietnamese expeditionary force (1989). International peace agreement signed in Paris (1991). Numerous defections among Khmer Rouge ranks after elections organised by the United Nations.
- 1998 Death of Pol Pot. Collapse of the Khmer Rouge movement.

## The Gate

*When I arrived in Cambodia in 1965, the gibbons' exasperated complaint would cut through the muffled hum of the villages every morning. Sunlight hovered on the still pools streaked with green and gold, dispersing the sleepy vapours of the night. I thought this renewal was ineluctable.*

*The land was rich and beautiful, enamelled with paddy fields, dotted with temples. This was a country of peace and simplicity. Reflections upon the nature of existence were common currency to all its inhabitants. Festivities, divine service, ordinary rituals — nothing was conceived without art, and poetry, and mystery; for always, the spirits of the dead breathed over the turning of the seasons.*

*No peasant was so poor that he could not offer the finest fruits from his garden to the inmates of the monasteries and hermitages, wherein the sons of each family were called upon to serve. Every male child would take a vow to lead the austere life of a mendicant monk for a few years; there would be sumptuous ceremonies, for which the family would prepare gold, ornaments, fine clothes, lamps and flowers long in advance.*

*The countryside echoed with the vibration of gongs, and we knew the joyful shouts we heard were to accompany the dead to the place of their rebirth. But most of all I loved to listen to the rasping resonance of the chapay singers, whose crude, harsh blues, floating over the rice fields, expressed all the tonality of the Khmer soul.*

*At places where narrow pathways intersected the perimeter of the villages — beside a termite mound, in a sacred wood, at the foot of an aged tree — we would*

find little altars dedicated to divinities of the soil. Sometimes these guardians of the bounds would be ancient sculptures, exhumed by the rains; sometimes they would be crudely carved out of wood; sometimes they were simply a stone. The passing peasants would pay their homage with a handful of fresh leaves.

That is how, in my own way, I remember this country. The past still projects its distant images in me, and these images bring back to life all that bewitched me when I was twenty-five. Something less forgiving than time, however, keeps them at a distance. My melancholy has given way to a definitive and uncompromising sense of revolt. I look on those pre-war years as I would the smile of "a dead loved one resting deep in the earth". \*

What oppresses me, more still than the unclosed eyes of the dead who fill the sandy paddy fields, is the way the West applauded the Khmer Rouge, hailing their victory over their brothers in 1975. The ovation was so frenzied as to drown out the protracted wailing of the millions being massacred.

When I arrived in Siem Reap in 1965, Cambodia was dwelling rather peacefully alongside a Vietnam that had been plunged into war; in the hinterland, despite occasional frontier disputes, the villagers seemed to exist outside time. In neighbouring China, the Cultural Revolution was brewing. All Europe was full of encouragement for those who were working to overthrow the old feudal societies and bring about a better world. The intelligentsia of every country denounced American involvement in Vietnam.

I myself was neither for nor against: my thoughts lay elsewhere. I was drawn to the mysteries of the Far East, and fascinated by the gestures and secular rituals of a people that clung to its traditions. My wanderings protected me from the spectres of the anti-Americanism that had taken hold of people everywhere at the time. Although I had never formulated it before, I realised that my only gods were in fact American: Saul Steinberg and Charlie Parker. So when I came to Indochina I had little reason to share the hostility towards the United States shown by most of the French community.

On the contrary, it seemed to me that the peasants around me, whose repetitive existence I was about to share as I established myself in a remote village

\*Ernst Jünger, *On the Marble Cliffs*.

in Angkor, had everything to lose from the arrival of the Communists. In my passion for the religions and customs of the past, which I wanted to see perpetuated, I would have more readily opted for the very opposite of the ideologies then in vogue. Torn in every direction and immediately confronted with the most absurd contradictions, I was reduced to despair. When the Americans arrived in Cambodia, I saw them as allies in my impossible quest. But their irresponsibility, their colossal tactlessness, their inexcusable naivety, even their cynicism, frequently aroused more fury and outrage in me than did the lies of the Communists. Throughout those years of war, as I frantically scoured the hinterland for the old manuscripts that the heads of monasteries had secreted in lacquered chests, I witnessed the Americans' imperviousness to the realities of Cambodia. Yet today I do not know what I reproach them for more, their intervention or their withdrawal.

This situation favoured the Khmer Rouge, who knew how to turn its side effects to their own advantage. In the outlying districts, which the central authorities had never bothered to govern, they were a model of order, imposing morality as the basis for revolutionary action, while Lon Nol's soldiers were spreading theft and corruption. Locally, however, one heard of the Khmer Rouge committing some of the vilest deeds of which man is capable (killing children with their bare hands, decapitating people with the sinews of palm leaves, mass murder . . .). But fear of appearing to support the Americans so froze minds that nowhere in Europe were people free enough to voice their indignation and denounce the lies. Popular wisdom had quickly decided that it was on the side of liberty and non-intervention. In 1975, bolstered by international opinion, the revolutionaries defeated an enemy in a state of complete physical and moral collapse.

From that moment on, more blood than ever was shed. After the horrors of the Vietnam War had overflowed onto its soil, this unhappy country endured post-revolutionary terror. Once in power, the Khmer Rouge set about destroying the population, systematically eliminating whole classes of society, starting with the peasants. Those who were not moved from their villages and herded into forced labour camps were decimated by hunger, disease and torture.

The genocide ended only in 1979, after four long years. With no regard for ideological consistency, Vietnamese troops put an end to it by invading Cambodia

and "liberating" the country a second time, not from American imperialism but from the cruelty and incompetence of their Khmer Rouge "brothers".

When the appalling horrors were at last "discovered", a time of contrition began for many. It makes my blood boil to see that nobody, now, is prepared to uphold the ideology in whose name this evil was methodically accomplished.

Yet there were those witnesses who, many years earlier, had condemned the horror being plotted in the shelter of the forests. A turn of bad luck made me one of them. On 10 October 1971, while conducting research at a monastery in the region of Oudong, thirty kilometres north of Phnom Penh, I was arrested and then chained up in a Khmer Rouge detention camp. For three months, I saw the abomination spread its cloak over the countryside. As soon as I was released, the French Embassy asked me to translate a booklet on the "Political Programme of the United National Front of Kampuchea" that I had brought with me from the bush. Its contents foreshadowed the horror: already there was mention of the evacuation of the towns and the establishment of a state-controlled collectivism based on a reduced population. But these warnings, duly relayed to Paris, had fallen on deaf ears, and France stubbornly maintained its support for the Khmer Rouge.

I returned to Cambodia as soon as the wave of terror had receded. I realised at that point that what had happened was irreparable and that I could never again live in this land. What my eyes were seeing was incompatible with the image in my mind. This constant split vision pulled me apart like some schizophrenic illness.

I have written this book in a bitterness that knows no limit. A sense of hopelessness runs through it. I now believe only in things; the spirit can detect what is eternal beneath their outward appearance. Does not the most enlightened philosophy teach us to mistrust man? The optimal being, the supreme creature, the natural aristocrat of the living world? Man who — when, exceptionally, he becomes his true self — can bring about excellence, yet also bring about the worst. A slayer of monsters, and forever a monster himself . . .

So I ask myself the question: could the religions I study teach us the art of killing the dragon in our flesh? This diabolical presence, buried within us yet constantly surfacing: is this the original sin I was taught about as a child?

I detest the notion of a new dawn in which Homo sapiens would live in harmony. The hope this Utopia engenders has justified the bloodiest exterminations in history.

Can we never learn this lesson and recall it in fear every time we stop and look at ourselves? Our tragedy on earth is that life is subject to influences from above, and we can no more revisit the mistakes of yesterday than the sand can avoid being wiped clean as the tide pours in upon it.



# I

From among my memories there comes up today the image of a gate. It appears before me and I recognise the pathetic hinge which was both a beginning and an end in my life. It is made of two swinging panels, which haunt my dreams, and wire mesh welded on to a tubular frame. It closed off the main entrance to the French Embassy when the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh in April 1975.

I saw it again thirteen years later, when I first returned to Cambodia. That was in 1988, at the onset of the rainy season. This gate seemed much smaller and flimsier. I let my eyes and my hands wander blindly over it, immediately startled by my own temerity, not at all sure what I was looking for and not suspecting what I would find. A lock, slightly askew; evidence of welding; reinforcement plates at each corner: all these scars suddenly seemed to me vitally important. My eyes had always looked past them, never at them. An unexpected blend of confusion and fear overcame me. As the gate became real, and took on an existence of its own, it gave me a sense of pleasure, at the same time as horror welled up inside me.

This was not just the pleasure of the release of tears. It was a new reality, overlaying my memories, which made me think of the workmen who had indifferently welded the metal grille to the

framework, and the builders who had pushed the hinges into the cement. Could they ever have imagined that this assemblage would one day be the instrument of such dramatic events? I couldn't understand why an embassy should have such a shoddy gate, or how such fragile mesh could have resisted so many strong hopes or opened itself to so many heavy wrongs. I remembered a far more imposing structure, heavy and impassable, built to restrain and repulse. I saw – almost with embarrassment – the wrought ironwork suddenly exposed before me: its substance, its lesions, its points of distress struck me as laughable.

An unexpected sweetness came into me at the same time as the horror welled up again – a fusion that will forever flow in my veins. It made me totter, but did not dispel my stifling unease. I was overwhelmed by the mockery of time, by the shallow nature of things.

The same feelings affected me inside the former embassy, in the chancellery. Both floors of the building had been taken over by an orphanage for girls. The warden was sitting in the corner of an empty room on the ground floor. He accompanied me to our former offices, now converted into bedrooms. Little girls, as if from some abyss, were there, silent, sitting on mats on the floor. Some of them were doing their hair. They had been born shortly before or after 1975; their parents had been massacred when the Khmer Rouge had seized power. The image of their tranquil faces still moves me deeply. I was immediately overcome by suppressed sobbing and ridiculous bubbles formed at the corners of my mouth. Was it the undisguised hardship, the peaceful masks of these young people who had been spared; or these empty walls, with no doors or shutters – which had framed hours of fear, where my distress had taken refuge, from 17 April to 8 May 1975 – that caused me such bodily pain?

My whole Cambodian past was just waking in me, and now it ran up against an image of a present with no memory. Until then, it had been no more than signs; now the drama of the Khmer

country was suddenly and bluntly revealed to me, in this very inconsistency. A drama “without importance”,\* as it were, unceremoniously pinned up in my imagination; all its tangible traces melting away as things evolved, sealed off beneath the marks left behind, movingly distorted on the surface of time.

Crossing the courtyard to leave the embassy, I examined the asphalt: unchanged, with its old pattern of cracks, and yet, to my eyes, it seemed to be coated with the deposit of events. I looked for places where I had set foot twenty years earlier, and my gaze fell on the very spot where Ung Bun Hor, the last president of the National Assembly, had stood, legs trembling, stubbornly and mechanically undoing his trousers. The two French gendarmes who accompanied him and lent support – for the poor man had collapsed at the sight of the Khmers Rouges waiting for him on the other side of the gate – had hesitated for a long time before realising that he was losing his mind. A jeep and two covered trucks were parked outside. Princess Manivane, Sihanouk's third wife, had already climbed into the back of one of the vehicles, accompanied by her daughter, her son-in-law and her grandchildren, who had merrily come out of their hiding place . . .

I will come back to these moments later on. What is more urgent is to pin down where my thoughts lie; they leap about, pressed upon from all sides. To do this I must think back to the beginning. Back to my father's death, which my thoughts still dwell on. Because the void it carved out left me so alone and so destitute that I had to rebuild my way of thinking, using only basic elements, like a nomad who will not load himself down with anything superfluous. The day my father died, I realised that he had taken with him the masks of protection that I used to put on. To live, to overcome my suffering, I was going to have to erase the slate of the past, just as the revolutionary does, and choose, one by one, whatever gestures promised to be the most

\* William Shawcross, *Sideshow* (*Une tragédie sans importance* in French).

immediately effective. It was such a fundamental manoeuvre that even today – and ever since the day of his death – nothing can be decided, and nothing concluded, without referral to this new point of origin.

At the same time, even though my father's passing left an inextinguishable rage in me, it reminds me of a love which I often find happiness in thinking about.

The loss of Cambodia, on the other hand, of the villages hidden among foliage, of the copse-lined paddy fields scattered with tufts of *Borassus* palms, only makes me feel despondent. I spoke so much about this to the same friends during the shameful years after 1975 – remember them – when the “peasants' liberation” shone in the West with the fire of revolution; the words were expelled from my mouth by the ignominy I felt, yet gradually the life force ran out of them. As it is for words, so it is, oddly, for the touches and precise strokes of love: one dares not give the same caress to a woman too often. And so, for years now, I no longer speak about my father or about Cambodia, in order to preserve – as a foundered junk is preserved in peat – the life of the monsters I carry. Moving in me, even if deep inside, their hellish call fuels the memory.

So the gate does not open on to the agonised cries of the tortured in Tuol Sleng prison, but on to absurdity and despair. It is not the events themselves, the brutal facts or their dates that matter. What matters is the weight of the life that gave rise to them, reappearing suddenly out of the silence of things, in the everyday object where those who have borne the events on their flesh can read, thirty years later, the traces of a destiny. This soldier, lying there beneath the stone, is the son or the uncle of someone you know, the lover of the woman you came across, blown to pieces by the side of the road, wearing the new sarong she so carefully chose at the market this morning. Is this not the only reality, this emotion, this link with life and with beings, shut up inside things?

The south panel of the gate is preserved at the far end of the grounds of the French Embassy, which has been rebuilt on the same spot, like a little altar erected to the spirits of the dead. The several million dead. If you hold your breath, you can still hear the heavy footsteps of the exiles as they make their way along the old boulevard with their bundles. The rust that has eaten into the panel has not, in my eyes, affected its radiance. With time, it has taken on a surprising beauty. Like anything beautiful, or accomplished, or enduring – anything finally worthwhile – it has become simple, and the mesh has become regular: like a line in a Matisse drawing. It expresses, in an instant, so many things about the roots of life that you feel all at once like crying, and dying, and living.

I wrote the lines that follow in discomfort, bent forward, with my forehead pressed against that mesh. The Khmer Rouge, some time after 1975, or perhaps the orphan girls who took over the premises in 1980, have treated it to a coat of green cellulose paint; now it is chipped, but beneath it you can, here and there, make out the original grey.

## 2

At the beginning of the war, in 1970, I was in Angkor. The United States had just created the conditions for a successful *coup d'état* against Prince Sihanouk and had set up its own headquarters in Phnom Penh, installing General Lon Nol as the head of a new republic.

Reconnaissance planes loaded with electric machine guns circled overhead, in a sky heavy with rain and golden-brown reflections. Their terrifying sound would clutch at you and make you want to be sick. Surrounded by troops commanded by Hanoi, the little town of Siem Reap, which adjoins the temples of Angkor, could be supplied only through the airport. Soldiers were encamped on the sports field to the north of the Grand Hotel, firing volleys of 105mm shells at the surrounding villages. The targets had been chosen from the map at random by a general staff in contact with Phnom Penh, and each shell ruthlessly achieved its aim: the uncomprehending victims died on the spot. In the morning, the peasants arrived in small groups to buy salt and a few provisions; they were forbidden to buy medical supplies. Upon their return, they were roughly searched, for the military security staff suspected them of being Communist spies. The local authorities focused their full attention on the passing of information.

I knew someone at headquarters whose job it was to sort out the rare pieces of information that came from outside. He was a former peasant who had become a driver at the Auberge des Temples (the old colonial hotel in the site of Angkor) and whose wife came from the village where my house was. He had let me know that very little information was getting through from the occupied zones. Yet one day, towards evening, I observed him taking off his uniform and well-bulged combat boots and putting on baggy shorts and a shirt: his wife had fallen ill, and he was leaving to be with her. Dusk was falling. He was going to pass through the town's defences at night, skirt the mines, cross the enemy lines, avoid the lookouts, keep clear of the roadblocks, bypass any possible military encampments – whose whereabouts he would have to guess – and then walk as far as the village, enter it without being fired at, and finally return the next evening, taking the same risks. He came back without having noted the enemy's positions, which he had walked right by, and without even the slightest sense that he had an obligation to communicate them; his superiors, who knew about his foray, asked him nothing. He served for the money, not for the cause. Despite his profound hatred for the North Vietnamese, who now controlled the site of Angkor, taking the inhabitants (and the temples) hostage and lodging in the very places where he himself had spent his childhood, he made no connection between his own motivations and the army's objectives. He did not see that the military, with whom he could not begin to identify himself, might defend the interests of the peasants. What he was interested in was his own tranquillity, the lost monotony of the days repeating over centuries on the enamel patchwork of the fields. It had nothing to do with the ideals brandished by the city-dwellers of Phnom Penh, who had always been cut off from the countryside. This war was totally foreign to him.

Traditionally, the Khmers have been warriors. At the time of French Indochina, the commando sections were composed entirely of these loyal, upright men, who never waver and are not afraid to die; they have an innate sense of the terrain and an instinct for camouflage and ambush. The Americans, unfortunately, were about to transform them into maladjusted soldiers, impossible to bend to the rules of technological warfare or to mobilise against a Vietnamese enemy who, though possibly less naturally talented, was perfectly trained. The Phnom Penh government, at great cost, did its best to ready an army of brave young men disguised as GIs, rigged out in heavy helmets and thick combat boots.

The night of 6 June 1970 had been trying. From the village of Srah Srang, where I lived in the centre of the site of Angkor, thirteen kilometres north-east of Siem Reap, we had heard a number of explosions. Some seemed very close. The muffled ringing of cannon fire reached us from the town's defences, then the shells came straight up above our heads, their shrill whistling fading bit by bit into the depths of the forests. H el ene, my daughter, who slept between her mother and me, was disturbed in her sleep, and kept suckling until morning came. For several days now, the advance of North Vietnamese troops had been commented upon by the villagers, who did not know what to think, and their approach gave rise to the most unbelievable stories: the invader was driving hordes of elephants ahead of his army; he was employing sections of naked female commando troops to attack Khmer positions and unsettle the soldiers . . . the villagers' boundless imagination drew plentifully from their colourful mythology.

Very early in the morning I had taken the "little circuit", as I did every day, to reach the Angkor Conservation Office, where I worked restoring ceramics and bronzes, unaware that Siem Reap was already surrounded. On the way out of the village, an

overturned truck, ripped apart by a B-40, blocked the road. Dead passengers lay in every direction around it. I loaded three wounded into the Citro en 2CV van and rushed back to the village. I was met with mute unconcern; no-one wanted to help me, and H el ene's mother – the "little one's mother", as they used to say in Cambodia – categorically refused to have the wounded in our house for fear of eventual reprisals. They were a soldier with a bullet in his stomach and two grown-up boys, sons of soldiers, who had been horribly mutilated, with lacerated abdomens and several open fractures. I improvised a panel out of a cardboard box, painted a red cross on it in Mercurochrome, fixed it on the bonnet of my van, and we set off again for Siem Reap. As I drew near Angkor Vat, at the corner running along the east of the old dyke, two heavily armed soldiers wearing helmets stood in front of us and ordered me to stop. I braked immediately, causing one of my passengers to cry out; I leaped out and dashed towards them, shouting at them in Khmer not to shoot. At that moment, thirty or more men emerged from the bushes bordering the lower side of the road and resumed their march, single file, scarcely giving us a glance. They were all young and tired and wore dismal expressions.

The two Vietnamese soldiers searched me and looked with astonishment at the "magic scarf", printed with diagrams and Buddhist formulae for protection against bullets, which I wore conscientiously crossed over my chest. I had been presented with it at a public ceremony where the men of the village were each tattooed on the tongue and on the top of the skull. Quite clearly, neither of the soldiers spoke Khmer. The van was examined from top to bottom, and the injured, whose wounds were inked with excreta and gave off a strong smell, were prodded and turned over where they lay. The two men clung on as best they could to the front mudguards of the vehicle and led me to understand that I should set off slowly with my human cargo. I turned the ignition key, but – disaster! – the van wouldn't start. The battery was dead.

I cursed Berteloot, the manager of the conservation office's garage, who had handed the vehicle over to me without checking it. The Vietnamese sitting on the bonnet watched me grumbling without reacting. I signalled to them to push as I buttressed myself against the side of the 2CV with one hand on the steering wheel. One of the injured boys was moaning noisily. Mortar shells, fired from Siem Reap, were falling close to us. More soldiers were walking along the road, all equally unperturbed by the danger; I did my best to remain similarly detached. My two warriors began to push, unconcerned about the explosions. The van inched forward with a grating sound. In my rear-view mirror I could see the men, harnessed with weapons and grenades, moving heavily, their arms outstretched against the back of the 2CV, their heads between their shoulders, as they advanced, one slow stride after another.

We drew up beside a shelter that protected one of the electrical transformers serving the Auberge des Temples. There, I was told to sit on the ground and wait. Shells were exploding here and there and no-one was paying much attention. More columns of soldiers were advancing in the distance, towards the town. It was hot. The van had been left on the roadside, and I could imagine how those shut inside would be suffering, deprived of fresh air. Several long hours passed before I was given permission to stand up. Finally a man approached me, walking briskly, accompanied by an interpreter. He was unarmed and wore a simple cap; on his chest, a bag containing maps was held in place by broad straps that crossed at the back. Despite – or because of – his modest attire, I understood that he was a high-ranking officer. His eyes were sharp, his features well delineated, and he spoke with assurance in a clear, precise voice. He asked me via the interpreter to write my name on the ground with my finger and explain what I was doing. I told him that I worked at the Angkor Conservation Office, that I lived in the village to the north of the pond, where the circuit turned at a right angle. Having listened,

he instructed me to return to where I had come from and to remain there. I was forbidden to leave my house. He added that we would immediately have been blown to pieces by machine gunners on the town's defence lines had our van not been intercepted by his men.

"They fire in continuous bursts, indiscriminately, on anything that moves or comes near them," he told me in an almost amused tone.

The officer questioned me further about the two wounded boys, the older of whom was apparently already a soldier. Then he took from his front pouch a sheet of paper, folded in four, and hastily scribbled a few words in Vietnamese, addressed to his men, taking care to check the spelling of my name, still visible in the sand.

*Elder Brother Bizot is transporting wounded children, but he has been unable to reach the town. Permission is given for him to return to his village. This statement is brought to the attention of all comrades so that they may allow Elder Brother Bizot to pass freely.*

*Tám*

Ten years later, this high-ranking North Vietnamese officer, who had commanded the attack on Siem Reap, was sent back to the region to conduct further operations. When he reached Angkor, he found the road that led to Srah Srang and, surrounded by bodyguards, entered the village to ask what had become of the Frenchman he had once arrested. He was met only by empty, toothless, starving faces. Hélène's mother, who had just returned to the village, was fetched. She had fled, like thousands of other Khmers, from the camp where she had slaved for three years with virtually nothing to eat. That same evening, he ordered a fifty-kilogram sack of rice to be delivered to her.

I did not venture out again without this pass, which I kept in my pocket as a lucky charm.

The North Vietnamese had seized upon Lon Nol's *coup d'état* as their pretext to cross the frontier from 1970 onwards. The international public was totally unaware of their presence in Cambodia. The French press glossed over it, concentrating instead on Prince Sihanouk, who had been so sickened by his expulsion and forced exile in Peking with his long-standing friend Chou En-lai. Of course, there was no alternative but to save face and drag out some of the slogans of the anti-American left. The Khmer prince's "struggle" against American "imperialism" could not, however, disguise his hereditary hatred of the Vietnamese, much less extend to open solidarity with the historical enemy. He would never have regained his people's trust if they had suspected such an alliance to exist. The "Resistance" movement could only rely on the Khmers!

This Cambodian paradox, which consisted in never being able to admit foreign complicity in the defence of the nation, and this taciturn people's deep-rooted pride, would result, five years later, in the colossal contradiction – an incomprehensible mystery to the outside world – of a nation perpetrating genocide on itself. It would also allow the West to justify, in the name of non-intervention, its failure to lift a finger to prevent the massacre.

Shortly after Siem Reap was surrounded (6 June 1970), I experienced this Western incomprehension at first hand. I had been required to escort a convoy of about fifteen heavy-duty vehicles to Phnom Penh; they had been removed from the construction sites we had abandoned at Angkor and loaded with chests full of statues to be delivered to the National Museum. The moment I reached the capital, Jean Rémy, the manager of the Choup plantation, invited me to dinner at the head office of the Compagnie des Terres-Rouges. Present that evening were several planters, people I had met a few years earlier in their beautiful colonial homes amid the hevea groves. Some of them

must have withdrawn with their families to Phnom Penh because of the fighting. Jean Lacouture,\* who was passing through Cambodia, was the guest of honour that night. Ten of us were seated around the large dining-room table. Throughout the meal, the conversation was concerned with the latest news from the front, the military situation, and the commando raids that were growing more intense everywhere. The country had fallen into total dependence on American aid.

One of the guests questioned me about working conditions at the Angkor Conservation Office. He asked precise questions about the condition of the road I had taken to come. Not wanting to go into detail, I described how the Viets had attacked a bridge before Battambang.

"You mean the Khmer Rouge," said Jean Lacouture. "I don't think there are many North Vietnamese in Cambodia! Even if this theory may suit Lon Nol . . ."

All eyes looked back to me.

"I saw only Vietnamese, North Vietnamese."

A tight silence gave me to understand that the Parisian journalist took me for a naive victim of anti-Communist propaganda. As a matter of fact, the planter who had put the question was not innocent. Like many observers living in the countryside, he despised the positions Lacouture adopted in his articles.

Indeed, the French intelligentsia, for the most part, still stuck to the stereotypical views of the Vietnam War, and saw these commando raids against the government army as a spontaneous and independent popular rebellion. I was young, and it was not surprising that a man of years whose authority was generally recognised should not pay too much attention to conversation over cocktails. Yet the things I had said should have enabled him

\*Jean Lacouture, the well-known French writer and biographer. He was foreign editor of *Le Monde* from 1957 to 1975. [Tr.]

to understand that he was not dealing with some conscript aid worker freshly arrived from the capital.

"Don't be fooled," he stressed with the tone of an expert. "It's very hard to tell them apart, you know. And the ambiguity is widely exploited."

I swallowed my words. In Lacouture's eyes, I had fallen prey to the official discourse. I took out my pass and handed it to him.

"Here's a safe-conduct pass issued to me on the spot, in Angkor. It's written in Vietnamese, and it's also very useful when moving about in other parts of the country!"

The paper was passed around the table. Lacouture, still showing his scepticism, looked at it without saying anything; and he apparently drew no conclusion from it, as demonstrated by the articles that he continued to write, several months afterwards, without changing his views.

After this short interruption, the conversation resumed more vigorously. I got to describing the incredible battle I had witnessed as we had approached Battambang, when our convoy found itself blocked by the attack on the bridge. This violent incident had made a lasting impression: it brought about a real awareness in me. My vague intuition of the events I happened to have been involved in was turned into a clear perception of what was at stake, on the human and the strategic level, in the war that was beginning.

Towards dusk, we had run into a military roadblock, near to where a large monastery, wedged into a paddy field, threw its dark profile up against the sun. The sergeant commanding the section appointed to guard the bridge had come out to meet us.

"You'll have to turn back!" he said loudly, from a distance. "The bridge is going to be attacked. I don't want you getting in my way. Beat it!"

The man who spoke had the black skin of the Khmers, very dark and coppery. He had a hard look, square jaw, short teeth like

small, worn blocks; and the three furrows in his neck, stacked horizontally, so characteristic and so elegant in young women that they used to be taken for one of the hieratic attributes of beauty in wall paintings. Beneath his open shirt you could see the ritual tattoos. He wore a mass of necklaces, adorned with Buddhas, tigers' teeth and amulets, which we were to hear clinking together protectively throughout the night.

There was not enough space to turn the trucks around. The sergeant had already run off, shouting orders to his men. We had no choice; with the agreement of the monks, we decided to park at least the lighter vehicles in the courtyard of the monastery. The half-moon, lying on its back, was already visible: a sickle of light against the blue sky.

I walked up to the bridge, which was about five metres wide, and leaned over the edge. Behind the first bushes that cluttered the bottom of the muddy riverbed, I noticed a soldier, bare from the waist up, about twenty years old, hurriedly digging a hole in the ground where the sergeant had told him to do so; I saw others doing the same a little further away. My stomach froze when I realised that he was digging the pit in which he was to conceal himself, below the level of the road, a good twenty metres from the bridge's brickwork supports. His face betrayed a deep fear; I can still feel the grip of my own fear at the mere thought of taking his place. A huge clump of bamboo growing nearby now concealed the setting sun. The sergeant was bustling about giving instructions, getting inside each of the holes to check its sides, and talking very firmly to the young men under his command. All of them obeyed without a word and followed him with their eyes. While he was issuing orders, his hands fixed several pairs of loaded magazines to his chest, held together head to tail by pieces of inner tubing.

Night fell within a few moments, giving the go-ahead to the frogs' disinterested, monotonous croaking. The coppiced bushes around the embankment marked out slow dark ripples under the



moon. The landscape lost its colours. Noticing my presence on the bridge, the sergeant sharply urged me to go back. I had scarcely reached the vehicles filling the courtyard when the sputtering of automatic gunfire sounded out, damped by the soundproofing of the surrounding plots. The shadows of the drivers chatting with the monks disappeared beneath the trucks. I ran to shelter behind a low wall, where I remained awake all night.

A brittle silence fell over the bridge. Nothing stirred. The sergeant was lying on his back against the parapet. The moon continued its slow movement across the sky, drowning the relief below with a flat light. The bullfrogs added their prosaic hoot to the night's creaking. It was the start of an interminable wait.

It was not until a few hours before dawn that we could perceive quite clearly, at the edges of the still vibrant serenade, the crumpling of branches: the bushes along the far side of the embankment were moving. My attention was caught on the crawling movements advancing beneath the foliage, when suddenly words were being shouted through a loudhailer:

"Sihanouk! Long live Sihanouk!"

However unusual in the circumstances, this evocation of the prince was no surprise. Citing the destruction by the Americans of their sanctuaries over the border in Cambodia, Hanoi's troops had penetrated to the heart of Khmer country with impunity, with cigarettes as their only viaticum, and Sihanouk's name as their open sesame. At every village, before every peasant they met on their way, the same scenario occurred: from the tired columns along the track, one or two men would split off to meet the inhabitants, a packet of cigarettes in their outstretched hands and this name on their lips: "Sihanouk!"

This is how the invader, presenting himself as "liberator", cut an easy path into hostile territory; and the prince, delivering a daily harangue on Radio Peking, served as backer.

"Comrades," the loudhailer started up again, "we are brothers!

We are fighting for Sihanouk and to liberate the beloved country!"

Crouching in their holes, the Khmers were thrown by this; they scanned the dappled horizon, whose outline was already changing by the growing moon. The man who was speaking had a Phnom Penh accent.

"Comrade! There you are lying in your uncomfortable hole, while Lon Nol sleeps with his wife in a bed."

Suddenly the sergeant stood up – he was no longer on the bridge, but in a protected spot against the embankment – and fired three or four crisp, short, precise shots; their impetuosity shook my mind from the hypnotic stupor into which it was slipping. After a silence, the same almost mocking voice spoke again.

"Comrade Tuoy! Neither you nor your men have the slightest chance of escaping. There are many of us, and we are well armed. What is the point of firing at your brothers? Give yourselves up! No harm will come to you."

I felt fear take hold of me, and I cursed the misfortune that had led us into this trap.

"Li! Chhè! Akhlok! And all of you," our dangerous distorter went on, "we know you well, you and your families. Don't be fools, you'll all be dead before daybreak . . . Give yourselves up, it's your last chance. Li! Do you really want your son to become an orphan?"

Our assailants uttered the names of some of the new recruits who had been commandeered to defend the bridge; all of them came from neighbouring villages, and the information had been easy to obtain. The subterfuge had proved successful in a number of places, and they did not expect much resistance. But this was overlooking the doggedness of the sergeant. He kept leaping from one hole to another, rallying his men, who were paralysed with fear, climbing back on to the bridge, disappearing into the thicket and reappearing again in the moonlight.

Then we heard the first orders for attack being shouted through the loudhailer:

"Commandos seven and nine: Advance! Commandos one, two and four: Advance!"

Each order was punctuated with blasts of a whistle, and under the branches we could see the rapid movements of the attacking soldiers advancing towards us in a succession of bounds. To communicate their orders amid the noise of an attack, their commanders used whistles. The rather soft sound, produced by three metal tubes set side by side like pan pipes, resembled the simple chord of an electric organ. Combatants would report that in the night this mournful moaning also had the merit of freezing the enemy in a state of cataleptic fright.

These movements had tightened the circle around us in the darkness, the whistles signalling to us the dramatic progression; then the voice sounded out again, with yet more audacity:

"Comrades, look at me! I am your brother! Let us talk together! I stand before you without any weapons. Don't shoot. Look!"

I was about to witness an incredible spectacle: a man stood up, fifty metres away, his right arm outstretched, his left shining the light from a pocket torch on himself . . .

Bewitched by his bravery, nobody dared move.

In the seconds that followed, a violent explosion rent the air. The sergeant had hurled a grenade directly at the phantasmagoric apparition. All around us, violent shooting started crackling in every direction, and didn't stop. A shell from a B-40 damaged the outside of the bridge. A shower of bullets hit one of the tractors.

Day was beginning to break. The landscape recovered the outlines that the moonlight had altered. The first light of the dawn filtered through the undergrowth, putting the attackers to flight, and the firing gradually, almost regretfully, came to a stop. After a while, the sergeant, who had returned to his recumbent position, began to speak in a loud voice, calling out the names of his men. Just then we saw a shadowy shape swaying heavily at the top of the bamboos. The stems were bending under his weight.

Tangled up among the offshoots, or perhaps having climbed up there too late, the daylight had caught him out. The sergeant took aim and fired, and the body fell listlessly through the criss-crossing trunks. Unscathed and very excited, the young men emerged from their holes, yelling out cries of victory and commenting on the fear that still gripped them. The monks and the drivers came running to join them. Then the dislocated bodies were hauled out of the undergrowth and dragged to the bridge.

"So what were they?" asked Rémy. "Khmer or Vietnamese?"

"The one in the bamboos must have been a Khmer," I replied. "But the three others, who were torn to pieces by the grenade, were Vietnamese."

To my great regret, Jean Lacouture, involved in a conversation with his neighbours at the far end of the table, heard virtually nothing of what I had just related.

A year later, however, I was to see for myself how much the Khmer Rouge, still hiding out in the forests, had discreetly grown more powerful. In contrast to the North Vietnamese, whose mission was to fight the republican army, their role was to sow terror, under the cover of the forests, slyly at first, in small doses, so as to paralyse the villagers by destroying their nerve. Then, like a spider spinning its web, they wove a dense network of strands that would eventually subjugate them, removing any resisters at the first tremor. The effectiveness of this hidden organisation, which like a venom was to spread progressively throughout the entire hinterland, depended on a whole apparatus of internal security. The Khmer Rouge cultivated a veritable paranoia, which led them to introduce measures of control and surveillance of the peasantry in the "liberated" territories, aimed at thwarting any hypothetical enemy infiltration.