



Physical Anthropology Section – 2007

H71 The Current and Potential Role of Forensic Anthropology in Cambodia

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After attending this presentation, attendees will become familiarized with the potential role of forensic anthropologists in investigating human rights violations committed in Cambodia during the period of the Khmer Rouge regime.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by highlighting the role that forensic anthropological research can play in Cambodia, despite a number of challenges that make this area unique from other geographical locations.

From April 1975 to January 1979, Cambodia was taken over by a radical faction of communists known as the Khmer Rouge (KR). This regime sought to transform the entire population of the country into rural peasant farmers, and to this end, they relocated vast portions of the country's urban population into collective farming communities. As part of the take over, and continuing throughout their rule, the KR regime particularly targeted certain members of society such as intellectuals, former government officials, and social elites for harsh treatment and often execution; however, men, women, and children from all walks of life were potential targets for persecution. By the time the KR's rule in Cambodia ended, approximately 1.5 million Cambodians were dead from execution, ruthless forced work conditions, disease, and starvation.

In the decades since the dismantling of the KR regime, there has been much discussion about prosecuting the KR leaders most responsible for atrocities. Largely because of complicated domestic and international politics, it was not until the late 1990s that the possibility of trials became a realistic expectation. International tribunals similar to those established for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia have yet to be realized, despite continuing efforts at negotiation between the United Nations, the Cambodian government, and other international representatives.

Forensic anthropologists have, to date, conducted limited work towards investigating human rights violations dating to the mid-to-late 1970s in Cambodia. Research has focused on identifying locations of mass graves and analyzing patterns of trauma on previously exhumed skeletal remains. Forensic anthropological research in Cambodia has been limited for a number of reasons. First, there has been little demand for the collection of forensic evidence because of the slow-moving negotiations for criminal tribunals. Second, some exceptionally damning evidence has come from the KR's own records, which include documents detailing torture and execution; therefore, evidence collected from skeletal remains might not be considered as crucial as it would be in the absence of written sources of data. Finally, for a variety of reasons the goal of individual identification of skeletal remains is, in most cases, unrealistic.

Nevertheless, forensic anthropologists have the potential to play an important role in Cambodia. Forensic investigation of mass graves and previously exhumed skeletal material has added detail to an historical record that is only partially being filled out by memoirs, witness testimony, and Khmer Rouge documents. As the flow of foreign tourists to Cambodia continues to expand, forensic anthropologists can play a valuable role in improving the education of the international public about this part of the history of Cambodia. For example, two of the most popular destinations for visitors in Phnom Penh are the Tuol Sleng museum and the Choeung Ek memorial stupa. Forensic anthropologists have played a small role in improving and refining interpretive displays in both locations, but a great deal more work can be done, particularly, in the case of Choeung Ek, where poor curation conditions are endangering the preservation of human remains, and a detailed interpretative display is sorely needed.

Forensic anthropologists can go a long way in helping to describe human rights violations that occurred in Cambodia during 1975-1979, even if there is limited opportunity to identify victims and prosecute perpetrators. The potential role they can play in the improvement and refinement of public education should not be overlooked, and the value of such education should not be underrated.

Forensic Anthropology, Cambodia, Human Rights Violations