

Cambodian Memories, Kingdom Movements: An Anthropological Tale of Identity

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Abstract

The effect of the political story in Cambodia upon the personal story of Moses Samol Seth is uncovered in the narrative of his life, which reveals the marker events that influence his present identity: "If not for the war, I would not be who I am."

"If not for the war, I would not be who I am." Telling words spoken after the formal interview, in casual conversation over lunch at a local, very American, "Home Town Buffet" in Stockton, California. In his own estimation, the war in Cambodia unequivocally altered the course of his life in all areas, from socioeconomic status to geographic location. Some areas changed literally, others by perspective. The two stories--that of Samol Seth and of his country--converge and diverge until his arrival in the United States in 1981. The influence of the political story upon the personal story reveals the marker events influential upon his present identity. The war, however, was the catalyst for launching him into yet another life and was the impetus for forming who he is today. Seth's story differs from that of any other Cambodian's only in that it is his. In hearing it, his story has affected my own unlike that of any other Cambodian.

Cambodia survived colonization for nearly 5000 years before it entered into agreement with Napoleon III in 1863 to become part of the French Indochinese Union, which lasted until 1954. Internal fighting since then has more than torn it apart: it has shredded the country, perhaps into pieces too small and fragments too fragile to be pieced together. To which war does Seth refer? The civil war which occurred from 1975 to 1979, the war story of *The Killing Fields* and *Haing Ngor: A Cambodian Odyssey*; media stories too tame, any survivor will tell you. The horror, the atrocities, the torture and slaughter of more than 3.3 million Cambodians, are more terrifying in real life than even American media can portray. But Seth's story begins before this.

The Cambodia of Seth's childhood was more tranquil. He was born during the return of French rule after World War II, on October 9, 1945, in Battambang Province, according to official records, but in actuality in Ang Ta Som, Takeo Province. (His records had been lost and his brother-in-law took him to register in the other province.) Educated but connected with the land, Seth's family

operated a business in southern Cambodia. His father, a law school graduate, eventually was granted twenty square kilometers by the King, who gave the land to the people to teach them to live independently. The period of relative peace under Sihanouk allowed Seth's parents to raise their family of twelve in moderate wealth and status and with a strong traditional heritage. Seth, raised to respect family and tradition, was honored to become a Buddhist monk and enjoyed his nine years of study at the Buddhist University. An educated man, he speaks seven languages, including Khmer, French, English, Bali, and Thai. Perhaps his father had a foreboding of the future his son would face, for he insisted that his well-educated son return to the family farm after graduating from the College of Pedagogy in 1966 and learn to farm before leaving the next year to fulfill his military obligation. "You will need to know this someday," he told his reluctant offspring. This act saved Seth years later from the massacre by Pol Pot's regime of the educated and the military in Cambodia. The farming implements became the first piece of his armor as a refugee.

More foreshadowing had occurred during Seth's studies at the Buddhist University. While a student, he had agreed to meet with the son of a missionary from Holland for mutual educational benefit. "I want to improve my French language, but he want to improve his Cambodian. We just go and talk. . . . We have special time." Through this encounter with the west, Seth discovered the Christianity he had previously only studied: "But what he gave me--he's smart guy. He gave me a tract and booklet. I thought Christianity was Western religion; it was ridiculous at the time. But he gave me--I like to read, of course. . . . And I read and then later on, I got a Bible, and I read. I understood . . . I understood completely and I ask Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior." His conversion produced one radical change in Seth's life: he left the Buddhist priesthood. However, he claims he was "just Christian only, like everyone in America. Just Christian only," or in

other words, a nominal Christian. Nominal or not, his Christian faith became his second piece of armor.

On March 18, 1970, Sihanouk was overthrown by the Congress of Cambodia. Seth's mother, sensing the force of the winds of political change, asked her son to marry: "I don't know how long I will live, and I would like to see you married." Respectful of his mother's wish, Seth approved of his parent's choice for his bride. Somaly Thuch was "beautiful, quiet, and from a good family." They were married less than three weeks later, on April 7, foregoing even the traditional Cambodian wedding ceremony in their haste. Still his Christianity remained dormant, weak enough not to draw wrath from his Buddhist parents nor from the military of which he was a part during the five years of the Khmer Republic. Only after his conversion did Seth's parents reveal to him their own Western heritage, families which had emigrated four or five generations earlier along separate routes: one from Russia to China, to South Vietnam, to Cambodia; the other from Germany to Japan, to Thailand, to Cambodia. "And my father and my mother met each other over there." They would not otherwise have told him their own family secret that protected their reputation and position.

Reputation and position were liabilities in Democratic Kampuchea. Seth's position as educator and soldier labeled him a target for Pol Pot's destruction. The pogrom of Cambodia's elite extended to the murder of secondary school students, dying alongside the teachers. How did Seth survive the fate of the 3,314,768 killed directly and indirectly by starvation in just three years, eight months, and twenty days? He changed his name and occupation. In response to his insistent pleas that he was a farmer, the Khmer Rouge demanded that he pass a battery of tests to prove his ability. His father's words proved as true as had his mother's. "I worked as a farmer. . . . During this time my family was targeted for execution. My family had been separated. The Communist was always trying to find some reason for killing. In the end seventy-two members of my family of ninety people lost their lives. In January, 1979, I was able to get my wife and child together with me. I worked with others to form a group called Anti-Communists, trying to reverse what was happening in our country. In April, the Vietnamese Communist General ordered my death and that of my wife and child (Seth n.d.: 2)." After fleeing for four years, Seth and his wife and daughter reached Thailand in 1979, and were imprisoned in Khao I Dang camp, the largest of the refugee camps.

Haing Ngor recounts this Cambodian odyssey, a journey traveled by thousands. Ngor, the doctor who

later starred in *The Killing Fields*, rivetingly describes the horrors of escape in the early days of evacuation: the plans of reunion, the torture, the malnutrition. Ngor, however, did not leave with his wife, Huoy, who died in childbirth while in prison (Noble 1996). In America, Ngor worked for Cambodian ex-patriates, first in the anonymity of his job in the Chinatown Service Center, where he would occasionally meet with Samol Seth. Later, he used the fame of his Oscar for Best Supporting Actor to publicize the plight of the Cambodians still in refugee camps. Yet, he admits, "When I am in the refugee camp hospitals and I see that almost nothing changed, I feel powerless too. Because nothing I have done, from my medical work to my acting in *The Killing Fields* to my fundraising, has been able to change the basic conditions along the border" (1987: 464).

Samol Seth found his own way to help his people: he became a preacher. In Khao I Dang camp the intellectual truth of Christianity became lifeblood for him: "I like politics; I like everything as people in the world like. . . . But after everything was destroyed by the war, then I feel that I was guilty. Then from that time I decide it was better to live apart of politics, to stop working by my own strength and go through under God's direction." Rejecting the request of his people to be an administrative leader, Seth joined with a team of people to share the good news of salvation with their fellow refugees. "If you work together, you can bring success. That's why we start and many people receive Jesus Christ at the refugee camp, and fifty-four churches have been established at the refugee camp." Over 25,000 Cambodians were converted in one year.

Life themes merge here in Khao I Dang: Seth has always been a leader of Cambodians, now he will lead them into relationship with his Lord; Seth, the teacher, becomes Seth, the teacher of Christian leaders; Seth, the soldier, becomes Seth, the Christian warrior. At the same time, Samol Seth, the refugee in Thailand becomes Moses Samol Seth, the refugee in America. After arrival in America with his family, through the joint effort of the International Disaster Emergency Service and the Southeast Asia Evangelizing Mission, Seth enrolled in Cincinnati Bible Seminary. His first name, Samol, would translate to Samuel in English, but the parallels between his role and that of the Old Testament leader led his sponsors to offer the name Moses instead as his American name. "After I came to America, I had many people who need help. They call, they wrote many hundreds of these letter and they need help. And when they need help, I help them and try the best I could. But

when people have everything, they complain--the same as Moses in the Old Testament and that's why. They cause trouble about me and I didn't say anything. I feel like I didn't like to speak also, like I'm poor in speech. They say, "Yeah, this guy looks like Moses in the Old Testament." When they need help, they go to Moses, but when they have everything, they cry. They decide, well, we better change his name from Samuel to Moses."

More than merely an interesting anecdote, this new name signals the monumental changes in Seth's life. His autobiographical account reads more like a testimony. No amount of probing can set Seth on a retrospective journey, revisiting the pain of earlier years. An example is his response to a very direct question about his past tragedies: "I just use as illustration: Suppose you have a cloth, an old one you have to throw away, put a new one--better. That is like through Jesus: he says to be born again. In Christ, all things new. The key is to forgive and forget . . . forgive and forget. Forget because "Garbage In." You put garbage in your house. You cannot get odor or bad smell out because the smell still . . . you have to throw away. Your clothes the same, if you just put old clothes. Okay, bad smell, you have to wash clean. Number one, they had to clean . . . their mind, their heart, their soul: put new one, then become clean." Nowhere does he mention the crocodiles, tigers, elephants, snakes, mines, bombs, or robbers they encountered in their escape (Seth n.d.: 2). He would not elaborate on the atrocities witnessed or suffered. However, there is the sense that this is more than denial: Moses truly believes that life in Christ removes the past and the present is the place of hope. He does not credit God with the war in Cambodia nor believe that God planned for his life to be drastically changed. Instead, he preaches a message of forgiveness that releases the individual to live in freedom: "A lot of people, they didn't: they say they forgive but they didn't. So you say you have something. All people, all have sinned; nobody is perfect. But some thing wrong, the people come to confess: 'I'm sorry. I did this, that, I'm wrong.' So when you forgive, you have to forgive, forgive, forget. Not remind, 'Yesterday, you did,' and the day after, 'You did!' The one thing: when you forgive, forgive. But no more, do not do that again. In the same way, the people in Cambodia, when you put everything new, number one: you have yourself. But if you not going to forgive. . . . who get hurt? Yourself."

Haing Ngor, on the other hand, allows himself to remain in the pain of his past: "The Cambodian holocaust ripped through our lives, tossing us randomly, *leaving none of us the way we were*. You can blame who you

want, the outside powers for interfering, or our own internal flaws like corruption and *kum*, but when the talking is over we still do not know why it had to happen. The country is still in ruins, millions have died and those of us who survived are not done with our grieving" (1987: 465; italics added).

"Leaving none of us the way we were." Haunting words, and for Ngor, full of ghosts. Seth, unquestionably altered, emerged all the more determined in the role of leader, but on a different path than before. Since his arrival in California in 1985 he has founded and pastored churches, taught for San Jose Christian College in both San Jose and Stockton, is Director General of Agape International Missions and founder of Agape International University in Stockton. His desire is to train leaders who can carry the understanding of the truth of Scripture, which he believes touches all aspects of life, back to the people. Forty-five Cambodians have graduated from San Jose Christian College and are now in the field. Fifty-two have been ordained (Seth 1996:1). For Seth, his Cambodian memories are filtered through the lens of today's Kingdom movements. No longer a soldier, educator, and leader in the Kingdom of Cambodia, he is now soldier, educator, and leader in the Kingdom of Christ. Truly, "if not for the war, I would not be who I am."

The events of the life of Moses Samol Seth are in many ways no different from those of other Cambodian survivors. One could easily confuse the episodes read in *A Cambodian Odyssey* with the personal accounts recorded on tape. Yet a striking difference is the insights of the authors: Ngor speaks activism, Seth speaks forgiveness. As the narrative unfolds, a theme emerges from the memory of the episodes of Seth's life, and meaning begins to appear through the story of the leader Seth that remains in every circumstance. Out of what is at first an assortment of multiple episodes not even recounted in chronological order--training as a Buddhist monk, son of benevolent and successful father, dutiful son, Army officer, refugee in Thailand, refugee in America, teacher, church planter, University director, and consultant in other countries--a single theme emerges. No matter the circumstance, this man arises to be a leader of his people. The name assigned to this non-fictional character is as intentional a choice as that by any fiction writer: his name describes his role, his destiny. However, his reluctance to claim the title of leader may be more a matter of cultural humility than of ignorance of his position. In an entry for the book *The First Five Hundred*, Seth states that his desire is "To reach the Cambodian people all around the world and to build strong leaders to

lead our people and especially back in Cambodia." On nearly every page of the transcript of our conversation, leadership appears. Two types of leadership can be discerned: vested, that related to his titles and positions; and dynamic, which arises from his genuine concern for his people. "Because a lot of Cambodian people, they lost everything. Now, even they came to America, they are still lost, because they lost their soul."

The person Moses Samol Seth has been presented in this paper through the weaving of history, memory, and narrative. More than a story, more than an interview, this product reveals a person, a self formed by experiences within a specific historical context. The episodes included in the narrative, however, were not always volunteered by Seth himself. This was not a premeditated, prepackaged story, dished out one more time. Or, was it? Many of Seth's comments he had made before; he has shared his story many times, perhaps hundreds of times, and it is available in written form. He is comfortable with the testimony he has prepared and would have shared that in this conversation, offering to take a few notes into another room and dictate his story into the tape recorder while I visited with his wife and guests. Assured that I was interested in hearing from him personally, to ask questions of my own, he seemed surprised and pleased. He remained the experienced speaker throughout, however, sometimes speaking for fifteen minutes without interruption. Often he preached and shared his theology. His intention was never to present himself as Leader; he prefers that the story of his life present Christ as Lord. The episodic dimension of the narrative had centered on the Christian faith that Seth possesses today. He did not undertake this retrospective journey for his benefit but mine. Therefore, his experience could not be described in the same way as does Freeman (1993: 29): "Memory . . . which often has to do not merely with recounting the past but with making sense of it--from above, as it were--is an interpretive act the end of which is an enlarged understanding of the self."

Seth's memories of his personal and national history correspond to the first step in philosopher Paul Ricoeur's circle of mimesis, a hermeneutic of narrative in which the internal configuration of a work produces an external refiguration of the reader's life. The movement from life to text to life in another person is recounted in three stages. Prefiguration is the beginning: the episodic dimension of the story which involves a choice of details to highlight. However, only in the telling did a theme emerge, one perhaps different from the one Seth had expected. I provided the plot, Ricoeur (1991: 426) would say, for "plot

is not a static structure but an operation, an integrative process which . . . does not come to fruition other than in the living receiver of the story being told." In the second part of mimesis, the narrative itself finds a scheme in emplotment as I saw a theme in the stories. The plot of Seth as a leader in any circumstance came from my interpretation of the events, as I was required "to extract a configuration from a succession" of events (Ricoeur 1981: 278). Furthermore, that conclusion was drawn only after interaction with details within the text of our conversation. The powerful and unexpected affect of Seth's story on me personally is not explained until the final stage in the circle of mimesis, when "the meaning or the significance of a story wells up from *the intersection of the world of text and the world of the reader*" (Ricoeur 1991: 430; italics original).

My preparation to speak with Moses Samol Seth about the effect of marker events in Cambodian history and their influence on his sense of self included reading background information on Cambodia. Mine was not the neat, methodical approach of a scientific researcher, but better described by the picture of a kettle, simmering on the stove, into which one tosses ingredients occasionally. A little Cambodian history by David Chandler and the story of one family's plight by Criddle and Mam² were first into the pot. The account of a trip taken to Cambodia by American educators to offer advice and help in rebuilding the ruins of the country's educational system stirred my interest. A newspaper account of the murder of Haing Ngor, so strangely added the same week as reading his gripping tale of a Cambodian odyssey. The pot begins to bubble. A visit to my colleague, Moses Samol Seth, in Stockton for assistance in learning about Cambodian weddings stirred more conversation. How did he survive? Why was he not killed? I had been acquainted with Moses for years; we had joined the faculty of the College the same year, a decade ago. I had heard his history before. I had never heard his story. The pot boiled over. I found myself in a strange state of grieving for the loss of talented and gifted people I had never met and now never would. I had read newspapers and had watched television news accounts about Cambodia during the pogrom, but I was in high school and college, too intent on the minutiae of my own life to be touched by such a distant atrocity. Why had these people died? How did thoughts of my husband's experience as a Cuban refugee thirty-five years ago figure in my response? Stray lines of a poem by Wordsworth enter my thoughts:

To her fair works did Nature link
 The human soul that through me ran;
 And much it grieved my heart to think
 What man has made of man.

That haunting refrain, "What man has made of man," taunted me with the greed and power and destruction that are as universal as the suffering of Seth, and Ngor, and millions of Cambodians, and millions of others. "Have I not reason to lament/What man has made of man?" "The country is still in ruins, millions have died and those of us who survived are not done with our grieving," Ngor whispers again. Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer would say I had achieved a "fusion of horizons," an enriched and enlarged experience of the world: "Only through others do we gain true knowledge of ourselves" (1979: 107).

Through the thick darkness of the horror I was experiencing, came hope. Men like Haing Ngor and Moses Samol Seth *had* survived. People who would commit their lives to change the basic conditions of the Cambodians, those scattered in over twenty countries of the world and those who remain in Cambodia and along the Thai border. Leaders. More than survivors, there were some who were committed to a cause and to a people and, for Moses Samol Seth, to a Lord. Haing Ngor wished for the opportunity to return to Cambodia to honor his wife and family. "Then maybe their souls will be at peace. And maybe mine will be too" (1987:466). Moses Samol Seth did not have to wait for his peace. "When you have Jesus Christ, you have peace because He is the Prince of Peace." Moses is a leader who would lead his people to the peace they could not find at home.

Notes

1. Kay Llovio is chair of the Christian Education Department at San Jose Christian College. She is an Ed.D. candidate at the University of San Francisco, Organization and Leadership program, Pacific Leadership International emphasis.

2. The works referred to are by David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) and by Joan D. Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987).

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