

SHAPING THE NEXT PHASE TOGETHER

THEIR HISTORY, *our future*



Their History, Our Future

Shaping the next phase together

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AN INTRODUCTION

HISTORY DEFINES THE PRESENT

After years of analyzing interethnic tension in Cambodia that often pits one group against “the other”, we made several observations related to driving factors that contribute to dividing people. One very clear finding that we have seen time and time again has been the interpretation of historical narratives playing out in conversations between our “Listeners” and our “Sharers.” Stories of war, repression, and shifts of racial and ethnic dominance come out in both storytelling and the broader framing of how people see their contexts of today. With these learnings in mind, our team set out to tackle history. At first, it seemed to be a simple task of learning about a dark period of our national story. The years of the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979 are taught to us in different ways, both formally and informally. Some of us talk to our families more in detail about their experiences while others never dare touch the subject that continues to stir up fear and negative feelings for our parents or grandparents. Our journey began by exploring what we understood as “our” history, and moving step-by-step to explore how others defined “their” history. What was collectively shared and what was different? Did Chinese Cambodians see history as different from Khmer Cambodians? Did Indigenous Cambodians or ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia have distinct narratives? Did Cham and Khmer Islam Cambodians have something new to add to our understanding of what happened in what many consider to be one of the darkest times in our history?

The findings of our work were complex and often difficult to generalize. Our participants and young researchers immediately noticed that their perceptions of other ethnic groups were largely shaped by their upbringings and related to what they had heard about “them” from their parents, grandparents, and communities. Their understanding of history was similarly influenced by what they heard from elders, but even more strongly associated with what was learned at school. As the group dug deeper into their own perceptions, there was a similar realization that few had ever questioned their own assumption toward “the other.” Throughout the process of listening, sharing, and supporting one another, we learned about a far more diverse collection of historical narratives. Their experiences shared through their historical perspectives helped us to see things in a new way.

Their History, Our Future became a journey that connected our past, present, and future. Our passion for history grew stronger and guided us in exploring today's contemporary issues in Cambodia. We incorporated three tools to better understand our communities, and eventually ourselves. Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) was used to gather information from different communities specifically about our elders' experiences during the Khmer Rouge regime. Through FLD, we not only improved our ability to listen, conduct research, and analyze information, but we worked with someone of a different ethnicity and heard the stories of another ethnic group. Accompanying the entire journey was the engagement in therapeutic arts, a tailored programme led by an established international Creative Arts Therapist. Her intervention provided a welcoming space combining both arts and psychological support to guide us through the complexity of what we were hearing from others, and what we began to hear from within ourselves. Lastly, we tried out our film producing and directing skills in a participant-led short documentary activity to listen through a camera lens. Listeners became film crews and went into ethnic minority communities with their partners. Not only did they experience a homestay with their partners' families, but they filmed their experiences, reflected on the culture of other Cambodians, and shared their stories of transformation with the public.

Our learnings have shown us that listening is vital in understanding both our past and our present. As we listened to those around us, we found that we have the ability to shape our future together, regardless of which version of history we choose to acknowledge.

IN CONTEXT

WHOSE HISTORY?

UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF HISTORICAL FRAMING

History deeply affects how each one of us sees the world. It shapes how we see our lives, where we come from, and how we view “the other.” History is nothing more than a collection of facts that historians have chosen to explore. It is a discipline of interpretive pieces that is affected by the person and the time.¹ Although history might be shaped by historians, each person holds onto their own narrative of historical events – both in interpreting the past and in understanding the present – which eventually becomes a point in history at some time in the future.

Cambodia is infamously known for its relatively recent conflict involving genocide and mass atrocities that were put under the spotlight in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, established in 1997. Much access to understanding the Khmer Rouge regime years from 1975 to 1979 was found limited in official education² and more substantiated through informal sources such as oral histories and storytelling³ that has centered on the generalization of victim experiences during the war years in a post-conflict context. Through a strong collective historical narrative, some academics⁴ note that despite widespread public attention on the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, the conflict has not had a lot of focus in everyday discussion in Cambodian life, and has even been vehemently denied in some contexts. Time and time again, a concrete narrative available to the public was that “teachers, doctors and other intellectuals (including those who wore glasses and spoke foreign languages) were systematically killed, and as many as two million people were put to death by execution, starvation, forced labor, torture, and sickness without medical treatment.”⁵

Some academics have challenged the status quo by assessing how the past is framed by different groups that have been distinctly affected by historical events in Cambodia’s history and how different narratives are conveyed through memory transmission to subsequent generations. In such work, these scholars hypothesize that the first generation who experienced the conflict has passed on its attitudes about the past, present, and future. This includes a transfer of patterns of unquestioning obedience to authority and socio-psychological traumatization to the younger

1 Carr, E. H. (1961). *What is history?* New York: Vintage.

2 Dy, K. (2013, January 01). Clark University. Retrieved December 14, 2020, from *Teaching Genocide in Cambodia: Challenges, Analyses, and Recommendations*: http://ticambodia.org/library/wp-content/files_mf/1436954165ChallengesofteachingGenocideinCambodiainsecondaryschool.pdf

3 Din, D. (2020). Chapter 2 Cambodian Identity, Culture, and Legacy. In D. S. Udom, B. J. Murg, O. Virak, & M. Renfrew (Eds.), *Cambodian 2040 Culture and Society* (Vol. 2 Culture and Society). Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

4 Kanavou, A., Path, K., & Doll, K. (2016). Breaking the Cycles of Repetition?: The Cambodian Genocide across Generations in Anlong Veng. In Gobodo-Madikizela P. (Ed.), *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory* (pp. 174-193). Opladen; Berlin; Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich. doi:10.2307/j.ctvdF03jc.15

5 Dy, K. (2013, January 01). Clark University. Retrieved December 14, 2020, from *Teaching Genocide in Cambodia: Challenges, Analyses, and Recommendations*; p. 1: http://ticambodia.org/library/wp-content/files_mf/1436954165ChallengesofteachingGenocideinCambodiainsecondaryschool.pdf

generations.⁶ In such a framing, different narratives could speak the truth that include individuals in what have been referred to as “memory communities” where members choose which aspects to remember according to what makes sense to them. Former cadres of the Khmer Rouge living in Anlong Veng, for example, demonstrate strong emotional historical narratives that employ pieces of what is known as historical fact but can also incorporate unsubstantiated claims.⁷

In the context of leveraging memories of individuals for understanding historical narratives and opening up to other angles of different experiences of minorities and Indigenous people in Cambodia from a researcher’s point of view, other inquiry shows that during the Khmer Rouge regime, Cham people were not allowed to pray or abstain from pork in accordance with Islamic law. Cham Muslim men were targeted and killed because they rebelled against the Khmer Rouge openly and because of their background in the public sphere.⁸ Even with specific lenses into ethnic perceptions of history, most historians agree that the majority of all Cambodians certainly lived with unimaginable hardship. Everyone had to dress in black peasant clothing, were stripped of basic freedoms, and were prohibited from protesting. All Cambodian people - of Khmer, Cham, Chinese, Vietnamese, and other Indigenous ethnic backgrounds - suffered immensely under the Khmer Rouge regime. Likewise, other historians have revealed much more information from the stories and survival experiences in their genocide research beyond the traditional textbook approach through personal interviews with Cambodian ethnic minorities, and have also taken into account the voices of Thai, Lao, and Kola (Shan) ethnic groups.⁹

In spite of a shared national experience of largely suffering and persecution by the majority of those under the power of the Khmer Rouge, there are variances of historical recollection and personal interpretations of the events that unfolded from 1975 to 1979. The understanding of history through diverse lenses of ethnicity and ethnic background paint a fuller picture of how past events affected individuals and even contributed to how today’s Cambodians of all ages see their past, present, and future.

6 Kanavou, A., Path, K., & Doll, K. (2016). Breaking the Cycles of Repetition? The Cambodian Genocide across Generations in Anlong Veng. In Gobodo-Madikizela P. (Ed.), *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory* (pp. 179). Opladen; Berlin; Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich. doi:10.2307/j.ctvdf03jc.15

7 Weltzer (2010) cited in Kanavou, A., Path, K., & Doll, K. (2016). Breaking the Cycles of Repetition? The Cambodian Genocide across Generations in Anlong Veng. In Gobodo-Madikizela P. (Ed.), *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory* (pp. 174-193). Opladen; Berlin; Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich. doi:10.2307/j.ctvdf03jc.15

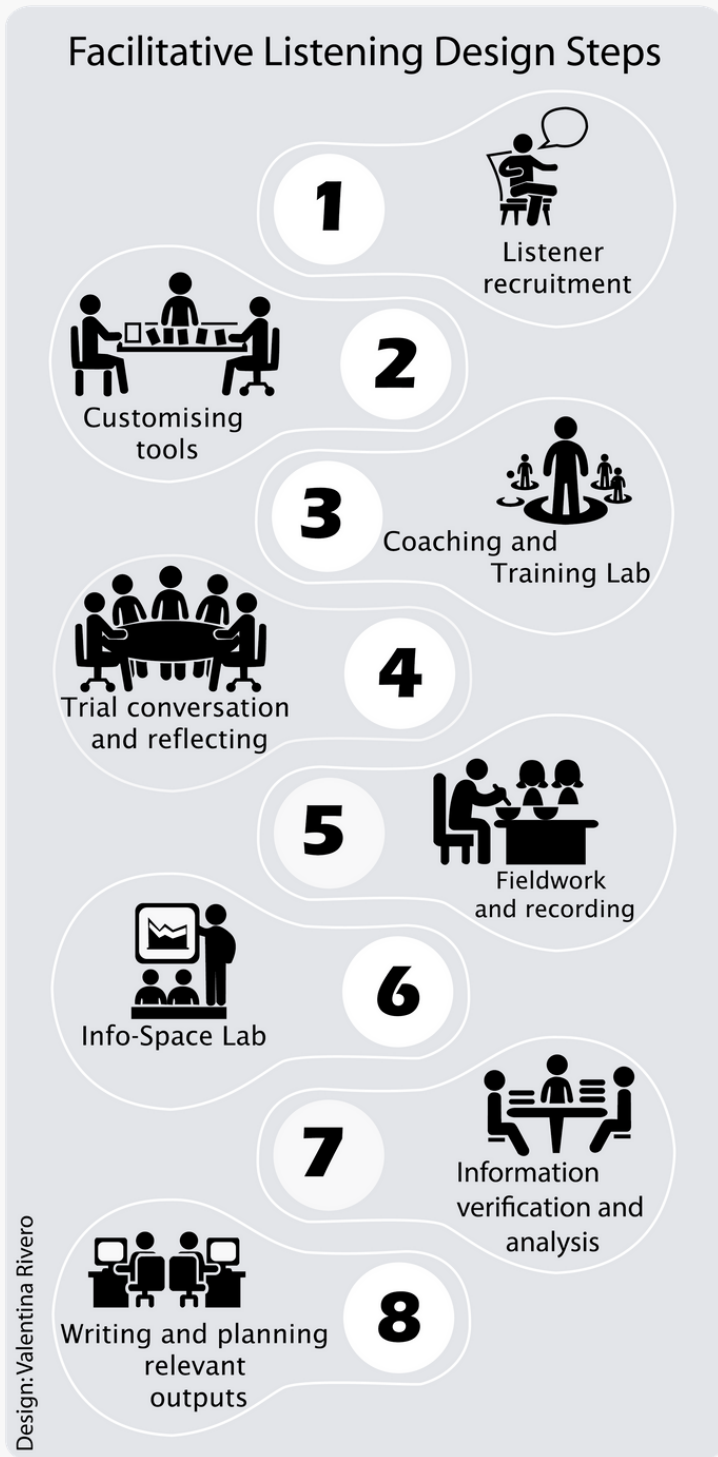
8 So, F. (2011). *The Hijab of Cambodia Memories of Cham Muslim Women after the Khmer Rouge* (Vol.16).

9 Ben, K. (1999, September). *The Survival of Cambodia's Ethnic Minorities*. (C. S. Magazine, Producer) Retrieved December 13, 2020, from Cultural Survival: <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/survival-cambodias-ethnic-minorities>

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Facilitative Listening Design is an innovative adaptation of Listening Methodology. It is an “insider” human-to-human centered approach to better understand prevailing dynamics and explore sensitive topics that make for difficult conversations. It encourages deeper critical thinking and leverages the process to bring together groups at odds with each other and find solutions to protracted negative attitudes, stereotypes, or sentiment. It maintains the rigorous procedural and information-checking steps in conducting listening research, but puts a stronger emphasis on gaining relatively in-depth insight into a topic as a snapshot at a given moment. The advantage in this context is that it can be carried out quickly and respond to situations in a timely manner. It is also discrete. Conversations can happen in private or can be informal in nature to provide anonymity to the participants. There is no need to connect any recorded information to the individuals who participated as all documentation happens after and away from where conversations took place.

The conversational style of information-gathering can be employed nearly anywhere, even in extremely sensitive environments where conducting more traditional research, using audio recording or questionnaires, may not be feasible. With no need for papers or devices, participants can blend into different environments and engage with people simply as people rather than research participants. It can also be adapted to a range of cultural needs and communication styles depending on the context and the groups involved. Eight general steps guided the process from design to implementation.



This initiative incorporated the same traditional steps of FLD but diverted from one main aspect; the focus on listening solely to one's own community. Normally, FLD Listeners are paired from the same community and engage in fieldwork in their own communities, speaking their own languages, and navigating their own cultural contexts. This allows them to collect information they are most often already familiar with and usually share the same or similar perceptions. However, *Their History, Our Future* participants paired off with a member of a different ethnic community. Six Khmer participants from the mainstream majority ethnic group each partnered with a member from a Cambodian ethnic minority group. The pair visited each of their communities, listened to people from those communities, and had an opportunity to hear what they might be most accustomed to as well as perhaps something new or different. The purpose of this adaptation to FLD was two-fold. Firstly, it provided the opportunity to observe biases by bringing together two participants who likely already had different perceptions of history stemming from their backgrounds and ethnic communities. Secondly, it allowed the Listeners to listen to another side, learn from a distinct community, and find out whether history was indeed static or if it was constructed in a way that suited individuals and groups differently.

This initiative also incorporated two other components to explore innovative ways of listening. The first consisted of therapeutic arts which were used among the Listeners throughout the year to step back from the listening of others and focus more on listening to each other as a group and ultimately to listen to oneself. This psychological-based intervention pulled on creative arts to hold key conversations as Listeners were hearing the traumatic stories from their elders and exploring how those experiences may be affecting their own lives through post-generational trauma. The second was the use of documentary storytelling through film and media in which Listeners returned to the communities they had listened to and recorded their experiences in a different culture, including those of minority communities throughout the country. This work culminated in the community screenings of their work to host dialogue with minority communities as well as a public discussion that took place in Phnom Penh. Through different methods of listening, the group was able to put FLD to practice and incorporate innovative and creative ways to provide the space for listening and fostering two-way exchange.



THE HUMAN PROCESS

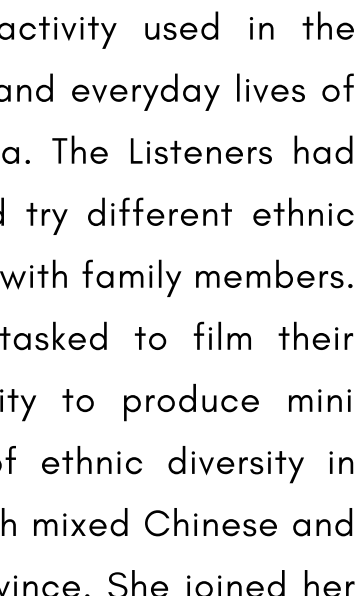
Therapeutic arts accompaniment



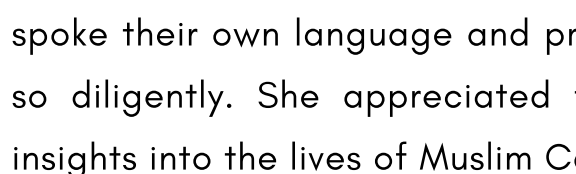
In this project, therapeutic arts were used to accompany the Listeners during the process. Therapeutic arts employ creative arts and activities to help participants express themselves, work through trauma, and heal. This part of the project was developed and carried out by a professional arts psychotherapist with longstanding experience accompanying Cambodians through trauma. Marika, a Khmer-Islam highschool student who participated as a Listener in the project had never had an experience with psychology before. She said that therapeutic arts greatly helped Listeners to navigate difficult conversations and potentially traumatic topics. This empowered them to carry out their conversations with Sharers with more awareness on empathy and mental health support. It also helped Listeners themselves to understand their own feelings and those of the Sharers as they expressed hardships through stories. Marika also said that on a personal level, therapeutic arts helped her to look at her own trauma and see herself more clearly.



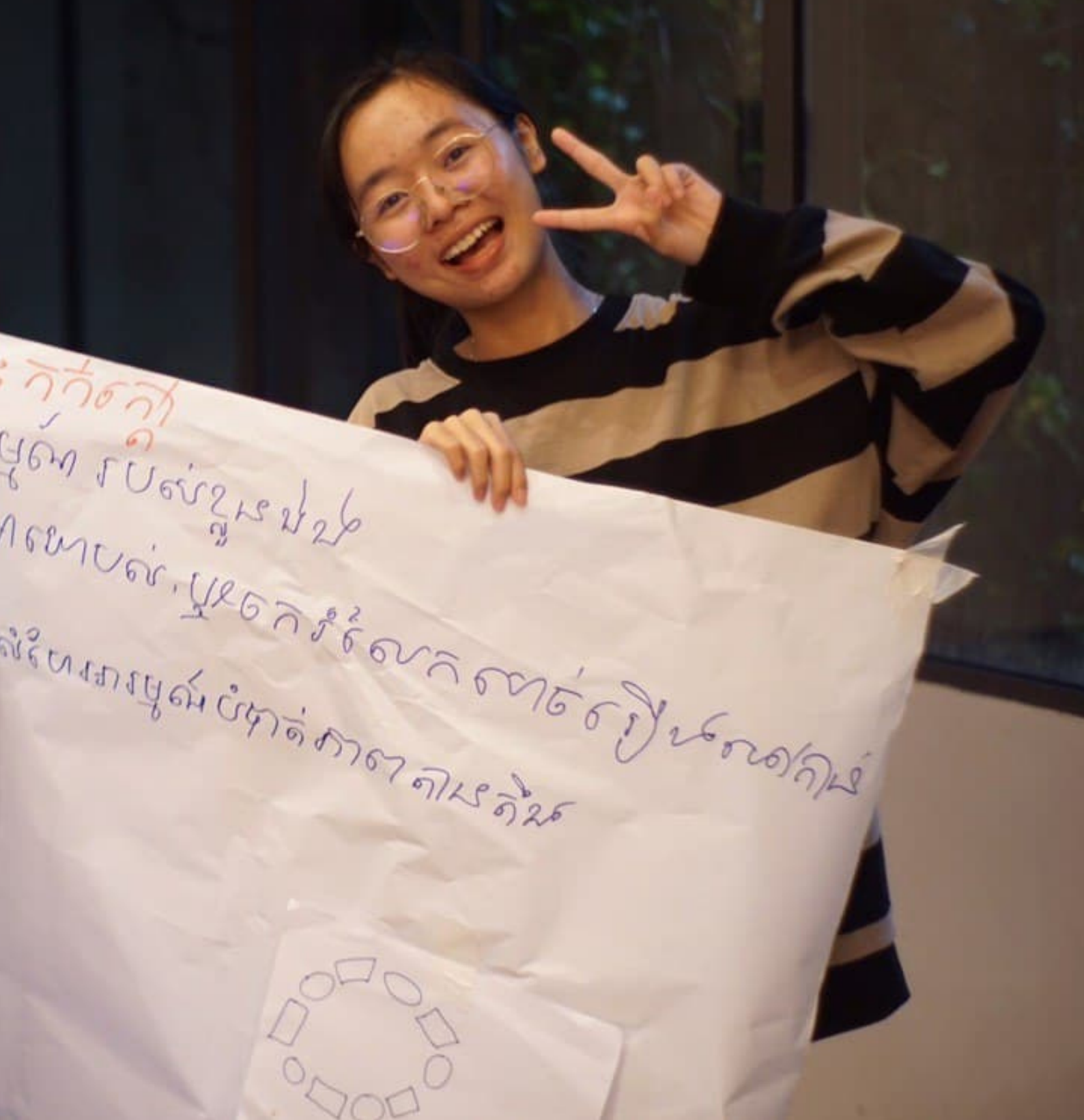
Homestays with other ethnic groups



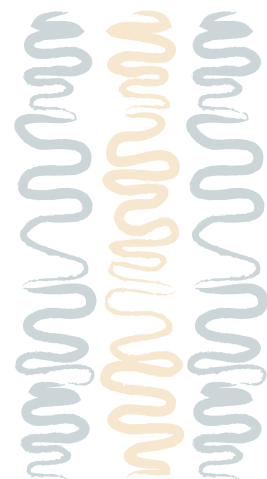
Interethnic homestays were an important activity used in the project to bring participants into the homes and everyday lives of different ethnic groups throughout Cambodia. The Listeners had the chance to stay with fellow listeners and try different ethnic foods, hear other languages spoken, and talk with family members. During the homestays, the Listeners were tasked to film their experiences and the lives of the community to produce mini documentaries to show different aspects of ethnic diversity in country. Eanghun is a Cambodian student with mixed Chinese and Khmer ethnic heritage from Preah Vihear province. She joined her Listening partner in Kampong Chhnang province from a Cham community.

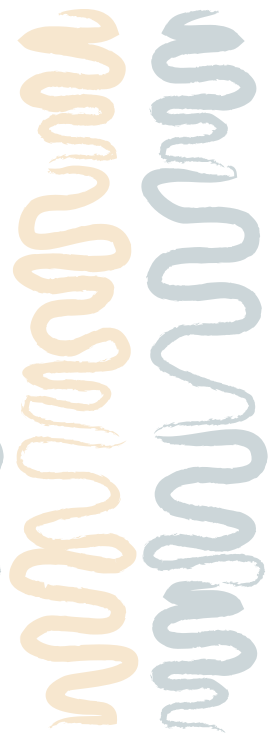


Eanghun said she learned so much about the religion of Islam during her stay. Not only did she have the chance to have conversations with eight Cham Sharers during the fieldwork, but the homestay allowed her to speak intimately with the grandparents of her Listening partner. She was surprised they spoke their own language and practiced their culture and religion so diligently. She appreciated their customs and gained deep insights into the lives of Muslim Cambodians.



Shaping the future together

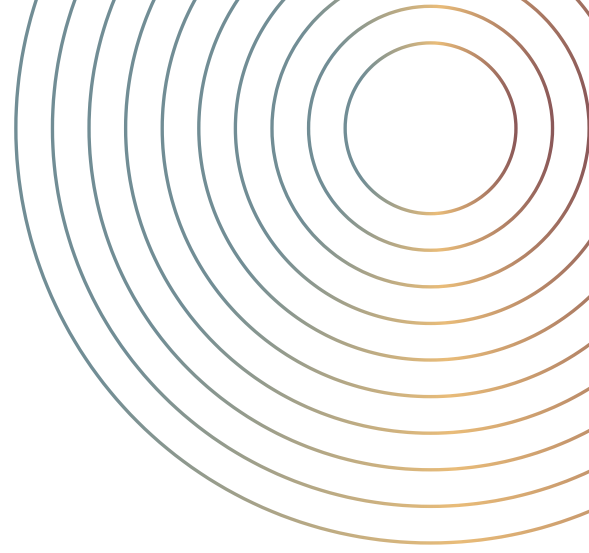




As in all FLD projects, space and opportunity are given to the participating Listeners to not only reflect on their experience, but to get creative and think about designing a future project and intervention that they see beneficial after such deep listening to others. Listeners most often provide new ideas and insights for the next initiative and are key stakeholders in inspiring and influencing the next line of programming. Sreynak, a Cambodian law student with Chinese, Vietnamese, and Khmer ethnic heritage from Sihanoukville province, shared that she could clearly see how the tragic Khmer Rouge regime history affected her own generation long after the conflict.

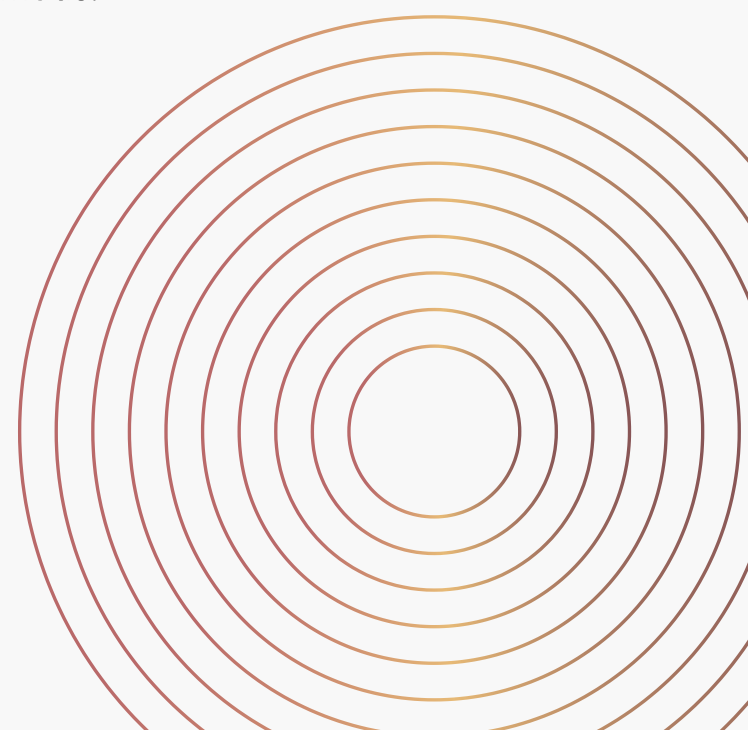
Sreynak said that peace education is key to exploring the root causes of social conflict in Cambodia and that history needs to be incorporated in a curriculum that helps students understand relationships and dynamics around them. She also wants to see more programs that help young people to learn how to do research, see history from different angles, and hold dialogues for more discussion with the next generation to shape a future that really puts peace as a priority. In addition, she said that it is vital to include older generations and teachers in any efforts and incorporate psychologists to work through deeper issues that everyone holds onto. Sreynak's dream for a broader uptake of peace education for all Cambodians is already a work in progress and part of a future initiative stemming from this work!

Learning new skills

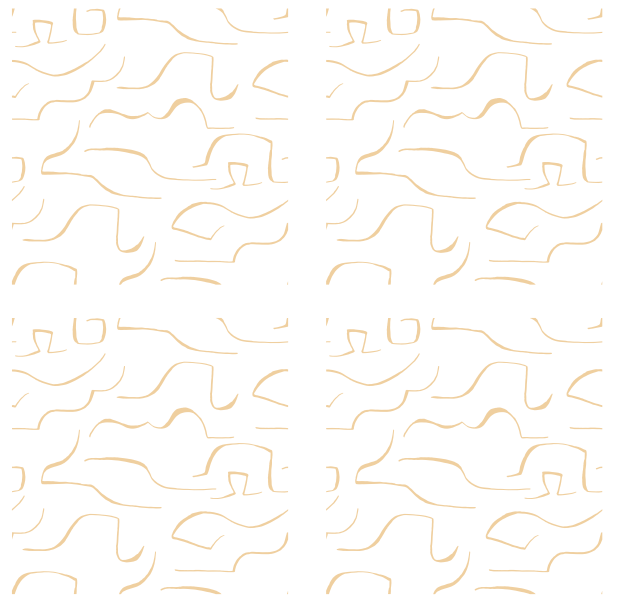




In addition to gathering new information, the training of FLD to young people also aims to build their capacity and provide them with new research skills they can use in their professional development. For this initiative, all Listeners were students in different fields and went through an intensive FLD Coaching and Training Lab to learn how to transform listening into data. Marina, a mixed Cambodian-Lao young woman from Prey Veng province said that the year-long experience was life-changing for her, especially in terms of developing new skills. As a student of social work, she felt that the therapeutic arts that accompanied the FLD training and implementation was incredibly relevant and gave her new tools and strategies to reach out to people using psychologically-grounded methods.



Different narratives in looking at history



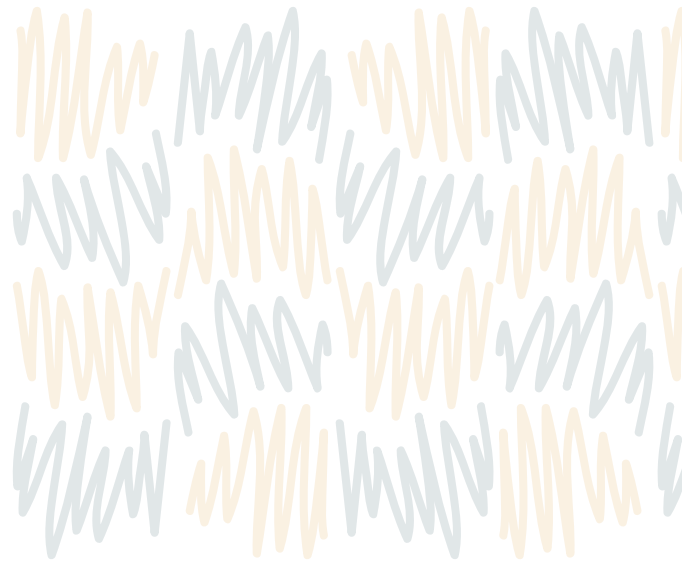


This project was focused on trying to understand different narratives in history, especially through the eyes and ears of diverse ethnic groups. History is an interpretation of events and can be written or orally recounted in many ways. One of the important lessons for the implementation team and the participants was to acknowledge their own narratives of history and to explore whether they were flexible or unchangeable. Vibol, a Bunong Indigenous law student originally from Stung Treng, was a Listener in the project.

Vibol said that he had previously only ever considered history as something he read in school books. However, through the project, he said he heard history being told directly through people's stories, which was very different from what he had studied. His FLD conversations greatly added to his understanding of historical events and provided very unique details and perspectives compared to books that had been written to share historical accounts.



History from a perpetrator's perspective

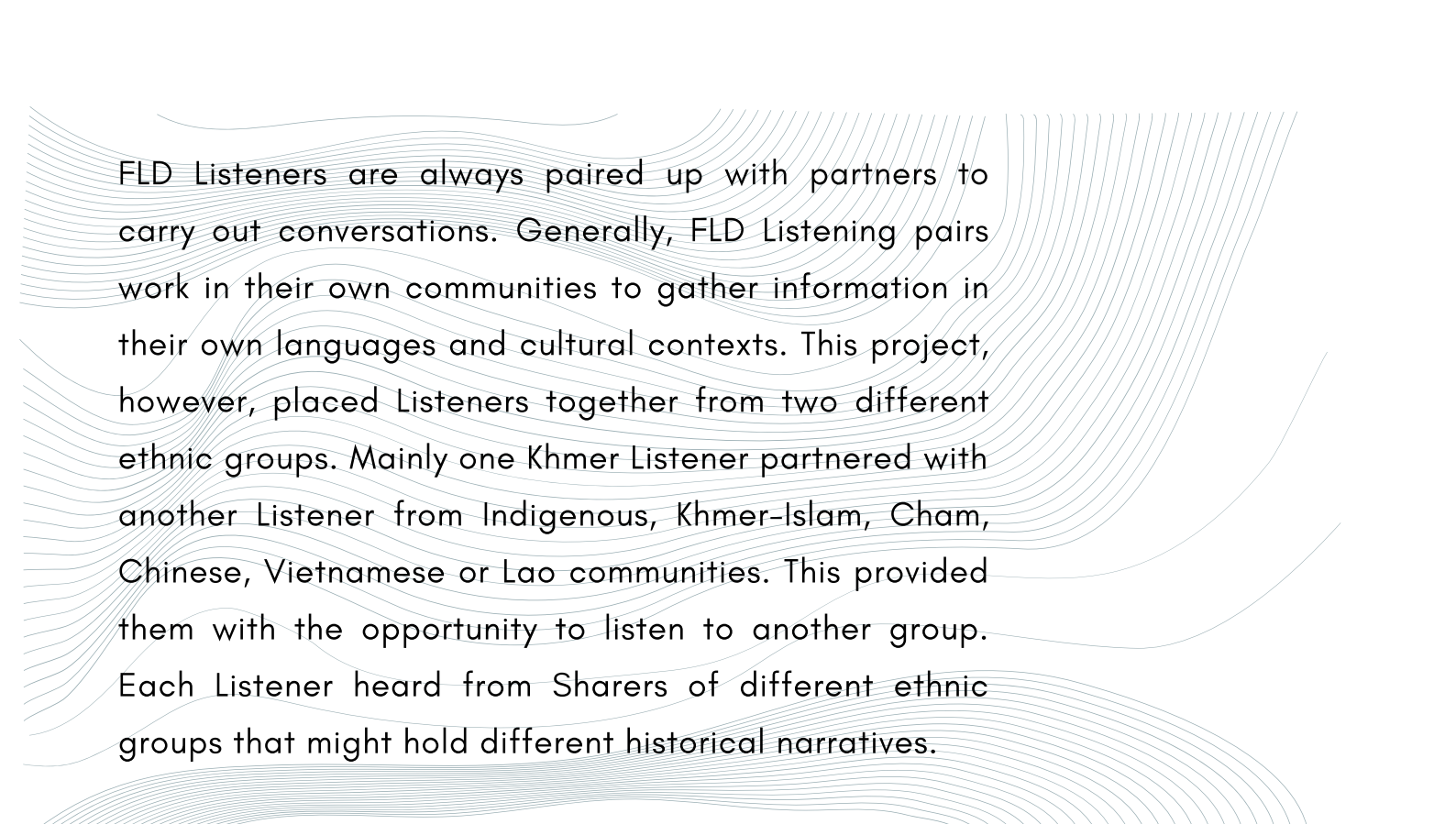


As part of the project's learning component, Listeners participated in an organised study tour of Anlong Veng, the last stronghold of the Khmer Rouge regime. Khmer Rouge soldiers, including the leader Pol Pot himself, remained in Anlong Veng until 1998 in continuing conflict with the government in Phnom Penh. The objective of the study tour was to try to look at history from a completely different perspective; that of the perpetrator. It was a difficult experience and deeply personal to look into the eyes of the perpetrator and hear the story.

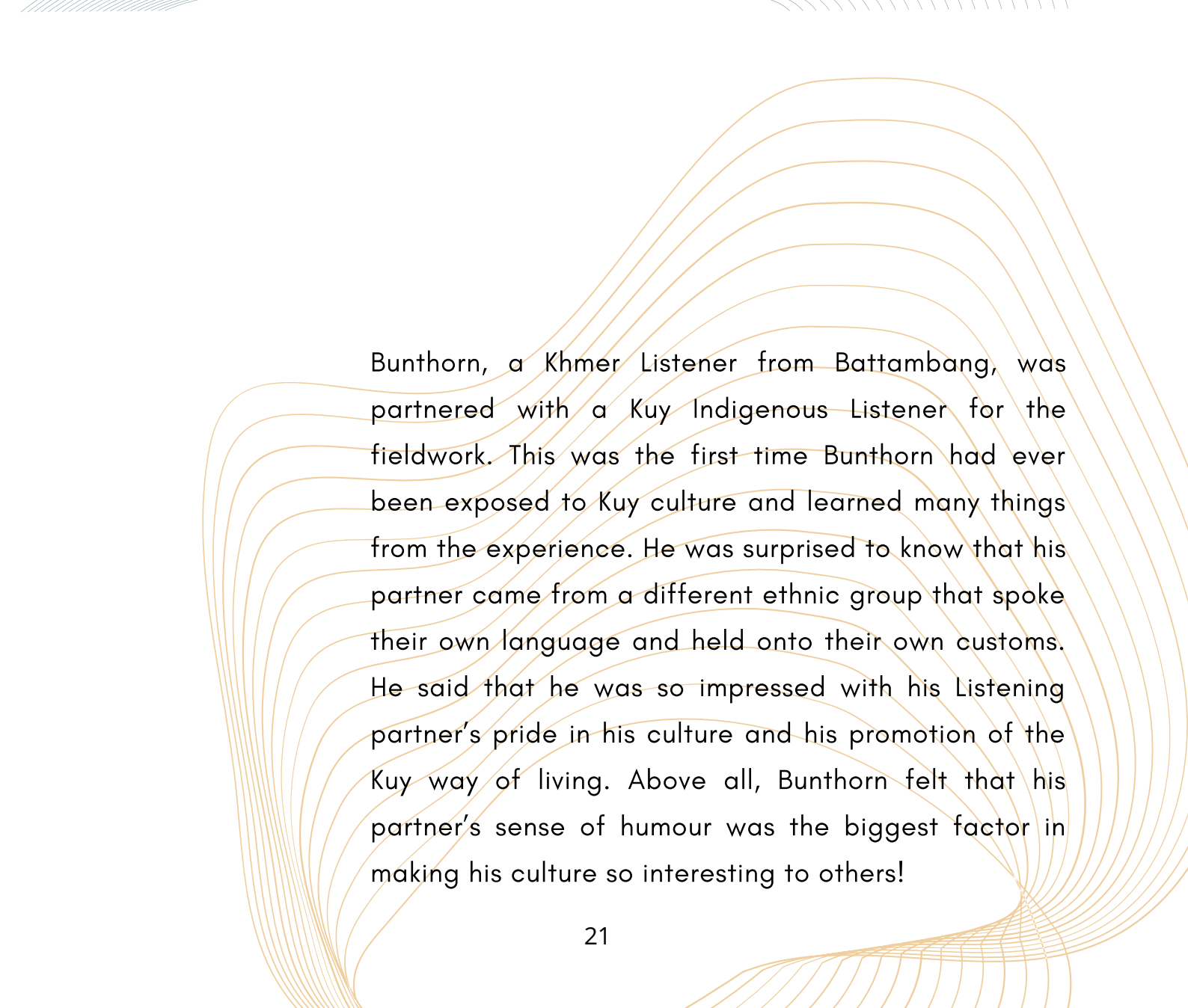
Chantha, a Kuy Indigenous Listener, was deeply affected by the study tour in Anlong Veng. Visiting the Pol Pot cremation site, the house of Ta Mok, a Khmer Rouge military chief, and the Anlong Veng Peace Centre gave Chantha a very different version of history from what he had learned. He said that the visit provided him with a new understanding of how leaders have the potential to control others. Above all, he felt that the new information he received were like pieces of a puzzle, and that it helped him to improve his own analysis of history.

Listeners in pairs





FLD Listeners are always paired up with partners to carry out conversations. Generally, FLD Listening pairs work in their own communities to gather information in their own languages and cultural contexts. This project, however, placed Listeners together from two different ethnic groups. Mainly one Khmer Listener partnered with another Listener from Indigenous, Khmer-Islam, Cham, Chinese, Vietnamese or Lao communities. This provided them with the opportunity to listen to another group. Each Listener heard from Sharers of different ethnic groups that might hold different historical narratives.



Bunthorn, a Khmer Listener from Battambang, was partnered with a Kuy Indigenous Listener for the fieldwork. This was the first time Bunthorn had ever been exposed to Kuy culture and learned many things from the experience. He was surprised to know that his partner came from a different ethnic group that spoke their own language and held onto their own customs. He said that he was so impressed with his Listening partner's pride in his culture and his promotion of the Kuy way of living. Above all, Bunthorn felt that his partner's sense of humour was the biggest factor in making his culture so interesting to others!

The power of a story



FLD focuses on people's stories and uses them to understand broader themes in communities. Stories are everything for the people that tell them. They express memories, feelings, emotions, perceptions, opinions, and much more. Listeners are often impacted by the stories they hear. Whether it changes their own opinion, stories are imprinted into the minds of the Listeners for the rest of their lives.

Vanti, an ethnic Vietnamese-Cambodian, participated in this project as a Listener. He said that he was particularly impacted by one story he heard from a 66-year-old ethnic Vietnamese woman born in Kampong Chhnang. He said that she spoke in such detail and in a way that made her story feel like a movie for the Listeners. Her attempt to escape from Cambodia to Vietnam during the beginning of the Khmer Rouge regime was complex and tragic. As she embarked on a ferry ride through the river, she watched people dying in front of her, thrown into the river waters along the way. Those images stayed within her mind for decades later, right up to present. Her memories became Vanti's new memories, and are part of a collective memory that continues.

Shared themes in FLD



FLD allows Listeners to collect information from a group of Sharers. They engage in conversations with many people on the same topic. One of the goals in analysis is to seek out any common themes or messages that more than one person shares. Is there something that every person said in their conversation? Did all women say one thing and men another? The advantage of this type of methodology is that details come out without necessarily asking a specific question. This provides strong and robust findings that put the Sharer in charge of the direction and the research subjects as owners of their own voices.

Lyhour, a mixed ethnic Khmer/Chinese/Vietnamese Cambodian who studies in high school said that her group of Sharers collectively told an interesting story. She said that all of her Sharers, who were elderly, had very strong messages for the younger generation of today. They said that young people must keep studying hard, work together to develop the country, never allow the past events to happen again, and most importantly, to acknowledge that what happened in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime was a REAL story and TRULY took place in their lifetime.

Different ways to listen

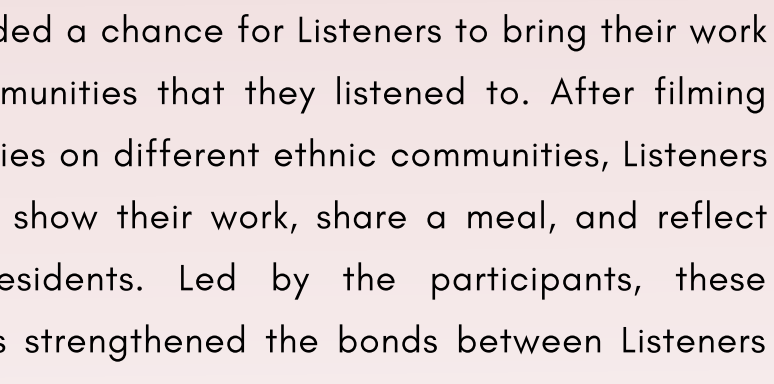


Listening can be done in many ways. As a methodology, this project incorporated two activities with very different forms of listening. The first was FLD, using conversations in a community-led participatory research framework to collect information from the field. The second was mini documentary production with participants going on homestays to film the lives of different ethnic groups and their stories through the lens of a camera.

Thary, a mixed ethnic Khmer and Chinese Cambodian and an LGBT activist, talked about the difference of listening through FLD research and mini documentary filming. In FLD, his purpose was very clearly to listen to the story and help the Sharer tell their own story. In producing his documentary, however, he had to set everything up with the goal of making something that would be presented to the public. The audience was very different. Filming allows the Sharer to perfect their story; anything that does not feel right can be erased and re-recorded. FLD, on the other hand, is so open without the presence of cameras or recorders, allowing the Sharer to speak more intimately and “off-camera” about their most personal details.



Going back to
the community



This project included a chance for Listeners to bring their work back to the communities that they listened to. After filming short documentaries on different ethnic communities, Listeners held an event to show their work, share a meal, and reflect together with residents. Led by the participants, these community events strengthened the bonds between Listeners and Sharers and served as a chance to celebrate all the efforts made to collect real stories about communities and history.



Pisey, a project officer who worked with everyone during the initiative, joined the community events to support the Listeners. She said the community events were very significant in all the places they were held. Returning to the communities where she had worked was rewarding and gave her the chance to reflect on the impact the group had contributed to and see the genuine friendships that had developed over the year. "Research doesn't have to be just about getting information from people," she said. "It can be about building relationships and connecting people in a journey to better understand, together."

DEMOGRAPHICS

LISTENERS

Recruited to work in pairs, 12 Listeners from diverse ethnic backgrounds came from different provinces to conduct FLD conversations in Phnom Penh, Kandal, Kampong Speu, Kampong Chhnang, Tbong Kmum, Prey Veng, Battambang, Preah Vihear and Stung Treng. The 12 Listeners included six ethnic Khmer and six ethnic minority and mixed-race individuals. The minority participants came from communities including Cambodian Chinese, Lao, ethnic Vietnamese, and Indigenous from the Bunong and Kuy groups.

SHARERS

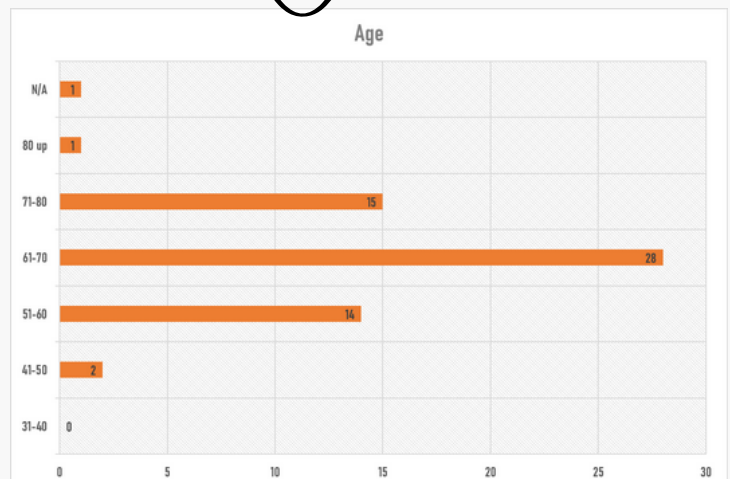
In total, 61 Sharers engaged with Listeners in conversations, mainly about their experiences during the Khmer Rouge regime. The Sharers came from all walks of life and were located across the country.

Gender



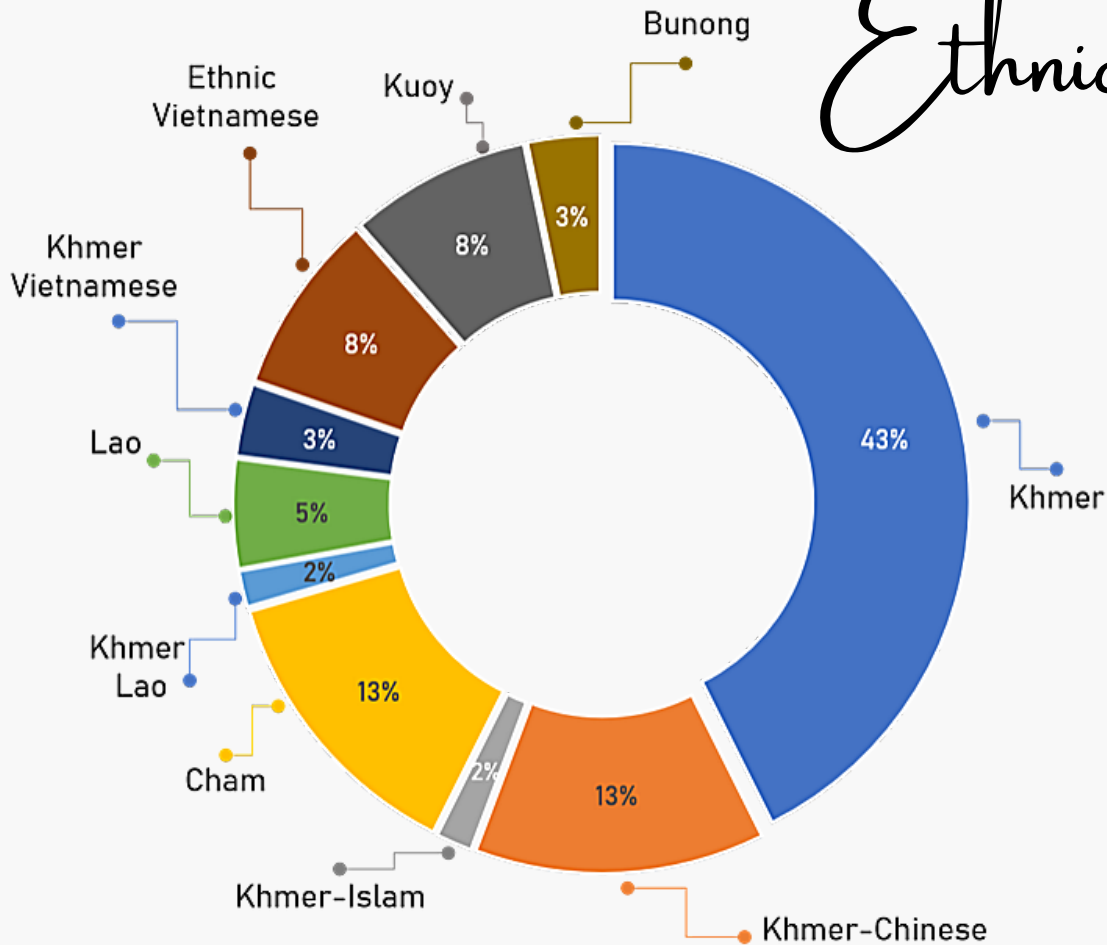
There was a slight majority of female Sharers as 34 of the 61 were women (56%). The 27 remaining Sharers were men (44%).

Age



Given that the Listeners wished to engage survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, all Sharers were above the age of 40. Although the majority of the Sharers were between the ages of 61 to 70, many Sharers also included those in the age ranges of 51 to 60 and 71 to 80. The oldest Sharer was 81.

Ethnicity



Of the 61 Sharers, 26 self-identified as Khmer. Some also identified as mixed-race, including those that said they were Khmer mixed with another ethnicity. Muslim Cambodians included both the Cham and the Khmer Islam groups, which often self-identity as distinct groups. Eight were Cham while one was Khmer Islam. Eight Sharers identified themselves as Cambodian Chinese or mixed Khmer-Chinese, often referring to Cambodians with Chinese backgrounds. One Sharer identified himself as Khmer Lao, whose grandparents were mixed Lao and Khmer. Another identified as ethnic Lao. Two Sharers identified themselves as mixed Khmer-Vietnamese while five others stated their heritage as ethnic Vietnamese born in Cambodia. There were also seven Indigenous Sharers including five from the Kuy ethnic group in Preah Vihear and two from the Bunong community in Stung Treng

MOST HEARD THEMES

Initial findings of FLD were analyzed by the Listeners themselves based on the data they collected and the themes they heard the most during their fieldwork. The Listening pairs had daily analysis activities during the data collection and discussed together what they heard in more than one conversation. Finally after finishing all their work, they reunited with the whole group and looked at the information from a broader context across all Sharers. Through a process of early analysis and group data processing, the following findings emerged among the conversations had between Listeners and Sharers.

1. We all suffered from starvation, illness, and overwork, regardless of our ethnic identity.
2. Fear was used by soldiers as a tool of control among the masses.
3. Although ethnic practices were threatened with punishment, some minority groups continued their traditions.
4. Survival was a top priority and ethnic backgrounds were not always relevant or even visible in daily interaction among people.
5. Ethnic minority groups were specific targets of discrimination by the Khmer Rouge.
6. We returned to our homes and rebuilt our culture and traditions following the end of the war.
7. Death and disappearance of family members was a tragedy for everyone regardless of ethnic backgrounds.
8. History should never be repeated and the next generation holds the key through understanding what happened.
9. Some ethnic groups hid their identities in order to escape persecution by the Khmer Rouge.

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The suffer and struggle of us and them

We could eat only two times a day. It was not enough at all. There was only porridge and rice grains about two to three tablespoons per meal. I have a cousin who lost his life due to overworking. In that regime, gold is worthless compared to rice.

-A 77-year-old Khmer man from Preah Vihear province

Born during or before the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979, Cambodians and other ethnic minorities living in Cambodia have recalled going through unforgettable hardships and suffering as they were forced to work days and nights in camps across the country. History recounts that thousands of people died from overwork, starvation or disease. Survivors have shared stories about working from dawn to dark at work sites with very little food. Many people continued to have to work even when they fell sick. And if it got seriously sick, only a small black pill known as "Thnam Ach Ton Say" or "Thnam Rik Reay" would be provided to all kinds of illness and diseases. Despite ethnicity, they all underwent this brutal regime.

Many Sharers sadly expressed that when they got so sick and asked for the treatment, community leaders only gave them one little black pill. When they got sick, they would be treated with skepticism as they were not convinced enough. Because it was believed that getting sick might be associated with being lazy.

Given that a majority of Cambodian suffered from starvation and overwork, many Sharers sadly shared that they were forced to work from and only had a small pot of porridge twice a day. A small pot with a handful of rice cooked for four to five people per meal. They never had a chance to eat rice. Some Sharers told our Listeners that those who were Chinese or mixed from the city had a very hard time to adapt themselves with overburden as they got used to living comfortably. Many of them were starving to death.

I struggled to work
without enough food,
every time I got sick,
I was accused of
pretending.

-A 65-year-old Indigenous man of the Bunong
community from Stung Treng province

The means to take control

I do not dare steal them because I am afraid they will kill me.

-A 67-year-old Cambodian-Chinese woman from Prey Veng province

The Khmer Rouge is infamously known as a brutal regime that dominated Cambodian life from 1978 to 1979. There is no doubt that the majority of the population living under the regime dared not to defy the power and authority imposed upon them. Survivors of the regime recount that once the Khmer Rouge took control of the whole country, they targeted everyone, including the King, government workers, and especially soldiers who had served the previous government. Anyone opposed to the “Angkar,” the term used for the regime’s newly imposed government which was what the Khmer Rouge called themselves, could be tortured, and even. Those that survived such torture often recall various methods and devices used to threaten people and gain control.

During the processing of the data collected, the Listeners spoke in detail about common themes they heard during their FLD field work in different ethnic communities. Many talked about Sharers who brought up the word “Kor Sang,” a term used to refer to “re-education.” In reality, however, it was a word used any time that someone was accused of doing anything against the Khmer Rouge. The Listeners said that Sharers talked in detail about people who were sent for “Kor Seng” and were never seen or heard from again. For example, In spite of starving, many people would never even consider risking their lives to steal food or eat any fruits and vegetables that were banned by the Angkar for fear of re-education. Some people could never even visit their family members despite longing to see each other because they could be sent for “Kor Sang” if caught.

Although nearly all Sharers had fearful and traumatic experiences during the Khmer Rouge period, certain ethnic groups shared different stories based on their memories. Many Indigenous Sharers from Stung Treng province told Listeners that they had constant fear recalling daily killings during their time in Khmer Rouge work camps. Some talked about seeing cadres walking Indigenous villagers out in rows who were never seen again.

Moreover, a few of ethnic Lao Sharers also mentioned that they lived in fear and misery. They said they had to be extremely careful and felt that their lives were in danger ever waking second during that time.

At that time, there were no protesters or anyone openly opposed for fear of being killed by the Khmer Rouge.

-A 69-year-old Khmer man from Battambang

The secret practices of ethnic minorities

I did not practice my religion as I used to do, like going to a mosque to pray, but I did pray in my heart, not daring to do it in public for fear of being arrested and killed.

-A 64-year-old Cham woman from Kampong Chhnang province

Beside the ethnic majority Khmer, indigenous ethnic minorities and non-indigenous ethnic minorities are classified in the Cambodian society. The northern part of the country, which is the mountainous area, is concentrated by the indigenous ethnic minorities with different ethnic groups while the non-indigenous ethnic minorities live in various areas including the Chinese Cambodians, Vietnamese, Cham, and Tai peoples. All of these ethnicities have their own languages and cultures where they were suppressed to practice during the Khmer Rouge regime. The Cham peoples who follow Islam do not eat pork and do wear Hijab. The Indigenous people who have their own culture identities follow their traditional animist beliefs. The ethnic Chinese or Vietnamese or mixed Chinese or Vietnamese who speak their own language spoke Khmer with an accent. These people were not able to practice any of their cultures and traditions. It was a must to follow the Khmer majority.

Many Sharers express their sadness that being unable to be themselves and practice your own culture is the most painful part. Some had to keep speaking their own language and practiced their culture and religion secretly otherwise they would be killed.

A shared hardship across ethnic identity

During the Khmer Rouge regime, I also lived with some Khmer people. There was no discrimination among us but it was the Khmer Rouge who discriminated against all of us. All ethnic groups were facing the same hardship.

-A 76-year-old woman from Kampong Chhnang province

War and disaster trigger survival among humans. Our lives and those of our loved ones suddenly become the clear priority in situations where life and death become real. During the Khmer Rouge regime, everyday people experienced intense starvation, overwork, loss of family members, and many more unimaginable challenges which enormously affected them and made every other aspect of life irrelevant. From an ethnic identity perspective, for many ethnic differences were no longer apparent. Many people saw each other simply as surviving human beings rather than seeing one ethnicity over another.

Many Sharers from Cham and Khmer Islam communities talked to Listeners about a shared traumatic experience in which ethnic Khmer people at that time in Cambodia suffered the same hardships as Muslims. Muslim Cambodians no longer had the right or freedom to practice their religion and had to work harder than was humanly possible. Sharers noted that there was no visible discrimination between Cham Cambodians and other ethnic groups because everyone was focused on mere survival.

In addition, most Cham Sharers also mentioned that they loved each other as Cambodians, took care of each other and there was no discrimination on the basis of race or color. The exception, however, was the Khmer Rouge who suppressed and starved everyone who were under their control.

At that time, we loved each other very much and took care of each other. There was no discrimination on the basis of ethnic background or color, we respected each other, except for the people in power who restricted our movement and did provide us with enough food.

-An elderly Cham man

Ethnic targets

During that time, as a kitchen maid, I was forced to raise pigs and I was pushed to eat pork when it came to meals.

-A Listener reflects on what she heard a Cham Sharer tell her

Khmer Rouge did actively target specific minority groups in Cambodia who similarly faced the same fate as many mainstream ethnic Khmer people including persecution and execution. Ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese and Cham Cambodians were largely targeted for their ethnic background while Indigenous Cambodians were generally treated in the same way as ethnic Khmer Cambodians.

Some Sharers claimed that those with lighter skin were accused of being Chinese or people from the city who were rich and had exploited the poor, common targets of the Khmer Rouge. Many lighter skinned people were included among those who were executed. Some Cham Sharers said that Cham and Khmer Islam Cambodians were specific targets of Khmer Rouge and were forced to eat pork, a product which is explicitly forbidden by those practicing Islam. Many female Sharers from the Cham community also claimed that the Khmer Rouge used coercion and targeted those who wore a hijab head covering. They said that any Muslim worship was also banned during the regime years.

The restoration of culture and tradition

When I returned in 1980, I went back to work, reunited with my family, and practiced my religion as usual. I decided to return to Cambodia because in Vietnam it was difficult for us to do any business, and we were not used to living on land.

-A 53-year-old ethnic Vietnamese man

During the war years, racial policies had been implemented to serve the Khmer Rouge's purpose of imposing uniformity by forcing a general standard of culture centered on a Khmer identity. This led to a form of "Khmerization", a process of ethnic conformity forced upon minority groups in which they had to abandon their distinct culture, religion and language to become Khmer. After the fall of Khmer Rouge and its end of power in 1979, most people, including the minority groups all over the country, returned home or to a safe settlement to meet their family and relatives. Some started a new life in other places across the country. It was time for many the minority groups to return to their communities to resume their own culture, traditions and way of life after 3 years 8 months and 20 days of the complete shutdown of freedom.

Some Indigenous Sharers recalled returning to their communities and experiencing the first gatherings led by the community chiefs as well as remembering their first occasions to build their homes or go out to hunt animals. They also recalled being able to celebrate their ancestor day for rice farming or harvesting period which they had done every year in their lives prior to the Khmer Rouge regime. In the Muslim community, most of the female Cham and Khmer Islam Sharers talked about reclaiming their Hijab head scarves and returning to and worship. Muslim male Sharers recalled returning to their mosques again after the fall of the regime.

Many ethnic Vietnamese Sharers from floating communities who lived along the riverway of the Tonle Sap shared that they were able to continue to worship their Mother Goddess or "Preah Mae Kong Im" when they returned to Cambodia.

The tragedy of us and them

It was a huge loss for me during the regime. I lost more than 20 relatives like my aunts and uncles.

-A 65-year-old Chinese-Cambodian from Phnom Penh

When the Khmer Rouge soldiers took full control of the whole country, thousands of people were evacuated to work in labor camps in the countryside throughout the country. During the evacuation process, many people's family members died along the way from lack of food and water, while some were separated into different areas. Some people lost their family members through execution while others never gained any access to information about their family after the separation.

Nearly all Sharers in conversations with Listeners said that they had lost family members or relatives during the Khmer Rouge regime through execution, starvation or illness. Some discussed the hopelessness they felt about ever reuniting with their loved ones again.

Then I knew that one
of my sons died because
he was executed by the
Khmer Rouge. I
didn't even know where
he was killed.

-A 67-year-old ethnic Lao man in Stung Treng province

A crucial message for the next generation

I want to tell the next generation that you must never let war happen again, because it was very difficult. We will lose everything, family, relatives, property, and our homes.

-A 76-year-old member of the Cham community

During the period of the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodians of all walks of life suffered the most inhumane torture and killing in the most destructive and lethal period of Cambodian history. The regime left hundreds of thousands of survivors with deep emotional scars and trauma. Innumerable families were torn apart by genocide. The mere mention of the name of Pol Pot or the Khmer Rouge regime triggers nightmares of a time which they fervently hope will never happen again.

During conversations, nearly all Sharers asked the Listeners to continue learning and studying hard to understand what happened in the past so that history may never repeat itself.

In addition, Sharers more concretely said that in order to prevent war, the younger generation has to stand in solidarity to keep the country in continual peace and foster development so that everyone can live peacefully.

I don't have anything specific say to the younger generation. I just only want them to study hard, not like grandma who doesn't have any knowledge. They have to try to stand up, to struggle and to be united.

-A 65-year-old Khmer man from Battambang province

Hiding identity to escape persecution

The Khmer Rouge strategically targeted very particular groups of people during its fearful reign. Educated people, Buddhist monks, and specific ethnic minorities including Cham, Vietnamese, and Chinese were some of the selected groups. The Khmer Rouge strongly discriminated against racial lines and sought to eliminate ethnic minority groups who were seen as potential traitors that could disrupt the goals of revolution. To escape from being singled out, many people from ethnic minority groups had to try to hide their identities, including their accents, culture and other aspects that connected them to their heritage.

Many ethnically mixed Chinese Sharers told Listeners that hiding their Chinese ancestry was very important to survive during the conflict years. They said, for example, that they could not refer to other family members in their traditional Chinese way to avoid being accused of being foreign. If they were identified as Chinese, they would face targeted discrimination from the Khmer Rouge authority and likely face execution. Cham community members who had survived the war shared that females removed their Hijab head scarves and stopped praying to Allah in fear of being reported and persecuted.



**SHAPING THE NEXT
PHASE TOGETHER**

The Future

The intensive process of listening to others can be both incredibly fascinating as well as deeply exhausting. Listening to others takes energy and a keen sense of concentration throughout. As a concluding practice, FLD always finishes with the space to listen to the Listeners, to provide them the opportunity to be listened to, and to share together what could contribute to changing the future.

The team of Listeners experienced a journey of wide-ranging emotions, new learnings, and a sense of kinship developed among the interethnic group with individuals from many diverse backgrounds. On reflection, Listeners looked at their present lives and thought about challenges they faced. Many discussions turned toward education, particularly the high school years when they were most influenced. Listeners considered the possibility of peace education, awareness, and sharing on the ethnic diversity of Cambodia. A consensus was built around the need for stronger discussion and practices of everyday peace in school and the importance of listening, dialogue, and mediation among peers.

History is an important part of education and how we see the world. In looking forward, beyond history, we take what we learned from our elders who survived unimaginable hardships, and we think about how we live today in relation to those around us. We all are part of shaping the next phase together.

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Their History, Our Future is the journey of 12 young Cambodians from different ethnic backgrounds that came together to explore a very difficult part of their country's history. Not only were they interested in learning historical facts, but they also delved into understanding how perceptions of history shape the way we see the world today, and ultimately the future.

Through community-based field research, the team implemented Facilitative Listening Design (FLD), a conflict transformation approach to collecting data and exploring how those involved are affected by what they uncover. Working in pairs, they visited diverse ethnic groups and leveraged their activities to listen to perspectives from people they had not heard from before.

Throughout the journey, the team was supported by an accompanying intervention using therapeutic arts to explore their own interpretations of history, post-generational trauma, and tap into their creativity from within. They concluded the work they started by returning to the communities and co-creating short films on the stories and lives of minority groups living in the country.

This work provides both findings and a reflection on methodologies to work through difficult issues as a community of intergenerational youth committed to shaping the next phase together.

