

Adapting Psychological Services for Muslim Khmer Rouge Survivors

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When TPO staff arranged their first self-help group in 2015 for Muslim survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, they encountered challenges that were new to them. Men and women did not feel comfortable sitting together, and many were very hesitant to share their sensitive experiences of forced marriage, torture and imprisonment in a group.

“They told us that they usually speak about these things in their prayers to Allah, not with other people,” explains Bun Lemhour, a clinical psychologist at TPO. It was then, that the team of

Buddhist psychologists decided they needed to learn more about Islam and adapt pre-existing therapies in order to provide effective treatment.



Self Help Group of Civil Parties visited Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum

The assessments of TPO staff showed that there was a need for mental health services among Cambodian Muslims, who were disproportionately targeted for persecution and extermination under the Khmer Rouge. Many of the survivors carry unresolved grief about missing family members or suffer from the impact of imprisonment and torture.

From 2015 until now, TPO staff has actively worked with Muslim communities through the project “Justice and Relief for Khmer Rouge Survivors” in order to identify individual and community needs and provide culturally-sensitive psychological treatment. This project is part of the larger reparations efforts undertaken by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

Given these preliminary experiences and field trips to Muslim communities, TPO psychologists began to conduct interviews and assessments related to psychological needs and the experiences of Muslims under the Khmer Rouge. The team also gathered information related to the Muslim minority and their history and culture through searching articles, films, newspapers, and other type of information sources for several months.

From 1975-1979, the Khmer Rouge regime was responsible for the deaths of approximately 2 million Cambodians, including Khmer, Vietnamese, Cambodian Muslims, Chinese and other foreigners who lived in Cambodia. Out of the roughly 200,000 Muslims living in Cambodia in 1975, an estimated 70,000 were killed under the Khmer Rouge or died due to forced labor, starvation or medical neglect. In order to obliterate any kind of religious belief, the Khmer

Rouge destroyed all places of worship or turned them into prisons. Many Muslims were systematically deported or killed because they attempted to practice their faith in secret. Muslims were also forced by the regime to marry outside their religion and many women were raped, sexually enslaved and tortured.

As part of the greater effort to destroy religious customs, the Khmer Rouge also prohibited women from wearing traditional head coverings and forced Muslims to eat foods banned by religious restrictions.

“Cambodian Muslims do not eat pork, but during the Khmer Rouge they were forced to eat it,” said Math Ly, a police chief in Kampong Tralach district who attended one of TPO’s “testimonial therapy” events. “If they did not eat it, they would be killed.” Although there were several incidents of Muslim collective resistance to Khmer Rouge communal kitchens, they resulted in many deaths. For the most part, people did not dare defy the regime’s orders.

In April 2015, the ECCC opened the second phase of Case 002 against Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, focusing on crimes committed against Cham and Vietnamese minorities.

Through their experiences working with and adapting therapies for Cambodian Muslims, TPO staff learned that there are actually diverse practices within the Muslim communities. Although the vast majority of Cambodia’s 16 million inhabitants follow Theravada Buddhism, the official state religion, around 500,000 Muslims call Cambodia home as well.

Overall, the staff identified four groups of Muslims in the country and they worked to adjust therapies for each group.

The Cham Sot (pure Cham) or *Imam Sann Cham* claim to descend from the former Kingdoms of Champa in central Vietnam and are followers of the Imam San teachings. They have their own cultural practices and their own ancient scriptures. Their religious practices are influenced by Brahmanism, which delegates more religious duties to religious authorities and less to the ordinary believer. Imam Sann Cham pray only once per week in the mosque instead of 5 times daily.

Imam Souly, Head of the Mosque at Chan Keak village, Kampong Chhnang province, said after praying in the mosque together with a selected group of purified believers, the Imam shares the blessings of Allah with ordinary believers who are waiting outside the mosque. Women will then bring food for those who prayed for a shared meal. The women will always pray in their home. They live in Kampong Chhnang, Pursat, Kandal and Battambang provinces.

Cham Sunnis with a more Salafist orientation practice their belief with 5 basic principles of Islam: They accept Allah as almighty entity who determines the fate of all creations; they refer to the Koran as their only holy book; they adhere to daily prayers; they give a percentage of their income to the poor; they fast during Ramadan and go at least once on a pilgrimage to Mecca. This group also claims descent from the Kingdoms of Champa. They speak Cham, but compared to the Cham Sot, their lifestyle is more influenced by an orthodox Muslim code of conduct.

Cham Sunnis have good relations with traders in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. They mostly live in Kampong Cham, Tbong Khmum, Kratie, Koh Kong and Phnom Penh.

Chvea or Chea originate from Indonesia and arrived in Cambodia as traders some hundred years ago, settling with Khmer women in the areas around Kampot, Kampong Som and Koh Kong provinces. Their integrative marriage practice drew them close to Khmer culture and Khmer language, but as Muslims they intensified trading ties with Malaysia and Southern Thailand. Chvea pray five times daily, men at the mosque, women at home. On special occasions men and women pray together in the mosque, but are separated by a large cloth so as not to see each other.

Nget Yusos, head of a mosque in Kampot province, said “Chvea only speak Khmer.”

Khmer-Islam are those who are ethnically Khmer, but converted to Islam in order to marry a Muslim partner. They grew up with Buddhist beliefs and practices but adapted their lifestyles after converting to Islam.

Despite the variation between Muslim groups, TPO psychologists have also found some commonalities. Few had ever accessed mental health services as they generally confront traumatic experiences and daily life problems by praying privately to Allah, rather than by sharing them with others. Many Muslims told TPO staff that they believe Allah will hear and accept their suffering and will bless them.

“Muslims share their sensitive feelings such as sadness, guilt, grief or shame with Allah by praying,” according to TPO psychologist Sun Solida. “Allah is like a good parent, who speaks to them. This gives them strength to cope with their problems and distress.”

Staff decided in 2015 to conduct testimonial therapy, self-help groups, telephone counseling and psychological support during hearings and verdicts of the ECCC with Cambodian Muslims. Since then the project has engaged 80 survivors (50 of them female) in psychotherapeutic activities with 700 secondary beneficiaries in Kampot, Kampong Cham, Tbong Khmum and Kampong Chhnang provinces.

TPO staff altered their approach given the needs of the participants. For example, Muslim survivors would only talk openly about their traumatic experiences in separate gender groups.



Illiterate participants needed specific interventions and facilitators had to be of the same gender as the participants. Otherwise they would not trust the emotional support during the most sensitive conversations. Communication and interaction was not always easy. Sometimes, participants and facilitators would reach a limit of understanding one another and facilitators would have to find various ways to connect, explain and implement activities. For instance,

Testimony Therapy ceremony at Tuol O Pi village, Thmor Pich commune, Tbong Khmum district, Tbong Khmum province.

they would ask what certain feelings look like when words were hard to find, or they would work with physical pain first before proceeding to work with emotions.

In general, Muslim beneficiaries responded well to the offered treatments and praised them as “a gift from Allah.”

Mr. Chouk Tam, a civil party and one of the participants in testimonial therapy said, "For these 5 days, I felt total relief, no tension or worry about anything. The string that I tied, I could be able to untie it to Angkar (TPO). My story has been documented, to remember and it will be always with me."

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