Introduction

The calamitous events narrated in the prologue occurred in the village I call O’Thmaa in southwestern Kompong Speu Province, Cambodia, in the early 1970s, during the time of the Khmer Rouge revolution and civil war. O’Thmaa is located in a mountainous region that was known between early 1970 and late 1998 as the Forest of the Struggle (Prei Brâyut). The Khmer Rouge used these mountains as a base, both before installing their regime, Democratic Kampuchea (DK; 1975–1979), and after DK’s downfall during the civil war that followed. The Khmer Rouge were in fact following a tradition set by the Issarak (independence) movement, which had waged attacks against the French colonial government from these same mountains in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The communities living in this area suffered innumerable hardships through these periods of terror, violence, and dislocation. During the Issarak period, most of the villagers had been able to move to safer locales. However, they were not so fortunate during the Khmer Rouge revolution, which had devastating consequences for them.

This book is, broadly, about the impacts of the Khmer Rouge on this village. O’Thmaa and its surrounding communities were “base areas” (moulâtdîhan) for the Khmer Rouge—that is, places that the Khmer Rouge “liberated” early on in their revolution, at least from the early 1970s. These “base areas” provided them with the human and material support crucial to their success in seizing control of the nation in 1975. To the best of my knowledge, there is no other ethnographic study of the impact of the revolution on “base people,” either in terms of the revolution itself or its aftereffects in the present. While there are numerous accounts of the “new people”—that is, the people who were “liberated” from the cities in 1975—the voices of the “old people” or “base people” (neak moulâtdîhan) are not heard. Many of the “new people,” who moved to France, Australia, and the United States as refugees, and a number of those who remained in Cambodia later wrote about their
experience during the Khmer Rouge period (e.g., Oeur 1998; Pin and Man 2000; Someth and Fenton 1986). Those in the areas like O’Thmaa, however, have not had the means to tell their story in this way. Most of the adult population from that time is illiterate, as is a significant portion of the younger adult population today.

The anthropologist James Fernandez has observed that it “is the unsettlement and uncertainty of any moral order that is the constant challenge to the moral imagination” (2002, 38). For Cambodians who lived through the upheaval of their moral order as it existed prior to the Khmer Rouge revolution, this statement takes on new meanings and proportions. When some of the villagers with whom I spoke tried to imagine what their future would be like, they expressed this uncertainty with statements such as, “Society changed before, when the Khmer Rouge came, and it may change again.” One of the aims of this book is to show how this commonsense observation in fact implies a deeper practical wisdom that enables people to live with dignity and virtue in a world that is subject to ambiguity.

Having survived thirty years of war, terror, genocide, and displacement, O’Thmaa’s villagers had only begun to return to their village three years before I came to live with them in September 2002. Along with their clothes, dishes, tools, pots, and pans they also brought back with them their memories of the village’s past, a knowledge of other places and ideas, and their hopes and aspirations for the future. With these possessions, the villagers set about “remaking their world” (Das et al. 2001). But what was this world composed of, and what conceptual models were villagers using to construct it? What were their ideas on how people should live with one another, and how would they create and sustain these relations?

When I arrived in O’Thmaa, I was unaware of the village’s particular history, but it was immediately clear to me that there was something tragic and peculiar about the place. The overall mood was sombre and distrustful. It might have been attributable to the extreme poverty endured by these people and the constant presence of malaria and other illnesses. But hardship did not entirely explain it. There was no apparent correlation of dourness and distrust with poverty and disease. Some of the most socially engaging of the villagers were extremely poor and suffered substantially. I soon became aware, too, that there was little social intercourse among a number of the families, and sometimes there was even hostility. However, this was not the image of the village that the villagers themselves wished to convey to me. From the earliest days of my fieldwork I was repeatedly told that the people of O’Thmaa “loved one another” (srolanh knea), and it was beyond doubt that the individ-
uals who said this wanted me to believe it. The point was frequently underlined by the commune chief, the village chief, and others when they pointed out that the majority of O’Thmaa’s families were related to one another. This insistence on fraternal love led me to wonder why the villagers seemed to find it so important that I have this impression. Clearly, there seemed to be a disconnect between relatedness as an ideal and relatedness in practice, as I had encountered it. I wanted to learn more about these two forms of relatedness, what they implied, and how they were articulated and performed.

The gap between what villagers said about their relations with one another and what I observed was not the only feature that made this village seem different from other Cambodian communities. The majority of O’Thmaa villagers also claimed to have little knowledge of the traditional practices that were not only practiced in the neighboring commune, but also, some people said, used to be practiced in O’Thmaa itself before the Khmer Rouge revolution. What were the reasons for this disjunction, and how did the villagers explain the difference? Had they “forgotten” this knowledge, or did they simply no longer care? And was there any relationship between the professed lack of traditional knowledge and the aura of suspicion and uncertainty, on the one hand, and the lack of sociality among the villagers on the other?

I knew that the area as a whole was widely considered to be former Khmer Rouge territory, so I wondered what impact that history might be having on the present and why there was such evident variation in social climate among the communities that shared this area. It seemed to me that a closer look at the village’s past was needed in order to illuminate the discrepancies I was observing between O’Thmaa and other villages in the area. I knew that all of them would have suffered in the Khmer Rouge era, as had other parts of Cambodia, and that the long duration of civil war in the region would have brought additional hardships. But was there more?

Thon’s stories about the terror and violence that occurred in the old village—recounted in the prologue—hint at the terrible events that took place in O’Thmaa in the 1970s. Villagers had joined different sides, but, more detrimentally, accusations among the villagers led to a significant number of executions. Among those who survived, these events seemed to be where the most painful memories of the Khmer Rouge past lay. The accusations and betrayals of the past had produced tensions for the villagers, who had to contend with the wrongdoings of the past generation while reestablishing relatedness in the present in a manner that allowed them to build a future together.

This book is concerned, in a general sense, with how communities negotiate the memories associated with difficult pasts and come together again
to rebuild their lives. The explanatory themes that I bring to the questions arising out of these concerns come from the subject areas of morality and “social memory.” Neither of these framing devices is without its drawbacks, which I will outline briefly below, but they are effective in weaving together the concepts of difficult pasts, relatedness, and the making of a future. Of course, O’Thmaa is only one instance where these issues are played out. Making it the focus of the study raises the question of whether it is a unique case or whether it shares some features with other communities with similar, if not identical, pasts.1 Within the scope of this study, for comparative purposes I have included the wider commune of which O’Thmaa is a part (Prei Phnom), as well as the neighboring commune (Doung Srae). While there are certainly differences among the communities, I believe that it is precisely within these differences that wider lessons can be learned because they demonstrate variations within a much broader cultural framework.

There is of course a vast literature on the topics of morality and social memory. Rather than discussing it here, I will call on these theoretical themes in the body of the book in the context of specific ethnographic examples, attempting to draw the themes together in the conclusion. Nonetheless, a few words need to be said at this point regarding “morality” and “memory.”

In recent years, we have seen the emergence of an “anthropology of morality” that was heralded by Jennifer Cole (2003), Michael Lambek (1996, 2000), and Signe Howell (1997) and is evident in other recent scholarship (e.g., Bayley 2004; Fernandez 2002; Mayblin 2010; Robbins 2004, 2007; Zigon 2007). These works seek to bring morality—in its varied forms—into ethnographic gaze and practice. But what is meant by “morality,” or simply by the word “moral,” and how are these terms used? Joel Robbins summarizes the problem: “Many authors concur in pointing to one important reason that the development of an anthropology of morality appears to be almost permanently stunted: the anthropological tendency to treat all of culture or collective life as morally charged leaves morality as a domain of study woefully unspecified” (2007, 293).

Drawing on the argument of James Laidlaw,2 Robbins states the problem is rooted in a Durkheimian tradition that sees a moral basis in all societal institutions, making it too vague and diffuse to harbor any real and definable substance (2007, 293–294).3 In an effort to get around these difficulties, a number of scholars have embraced a view that associates morality with conscious action, and therefore concepts such as the freedom to make moral choices come into play. Jennifer Cole, for example, examines what she calls “moral projects” that are “local visions of what makes a good, just community,
and the ways in which these conceptions of community reciprocally engage people’s notions of what constitutes a good life, and their efforts to attain that life” (2003, 99). Not dissimilarly Michael Lambeck uses the term “moral practice,” in a sense associated with the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, to refer to the reasoned actions taken by people to achieve particular moral ends (1996, 2000). As will be clear later on, this interplay between the ideal and what people really do resonates strongly with much of the ethnography here, as was already hinted at in the example concerning relatedness at the beginning of this chapter. However, a word needs to be added here. Robbins (2007) argues that a version of Louis Dumont’s system of values, infused with Weber’s idea that these values are in conflict with one another, should be a part of any theory of morality and is particularly salient when addressing situations of extreme social change. Inserting values into the equation allows us to include situations where the moral issue at stake is not making a choice but rather adhering to a social norm (Robbins 2007, 396), and these norms are cultural and may change and come into conflict through periods of radical social change. The interplay between the everyday unreflective form of morality and moments of moral choice and reflection is also taken up by Jarrett Zigon, who argues that precisely during periods of moral breakdown individuals must take ethical action that will allow them to return to an unreflective (everyday) morality. He posits: “In studying the performance of ethics in the moments of moral breakdown, we not only witness how individuals and social groups respond to the breakdown but, perhaps more importantly, we are better able to see the ways in which the moral dispositions themselves are shaped and reshaped” (2007, 148). As we will see in the chapters that follow, O’Thmaa villagers and their neighbors respond individually and socially to the moral challenges wrought by violent social change and moral breakdown. At times some individuals made reasoned ethical choices in their changing circumstances and even consciously considered the underlying moral bonds of society. However, others seem to have had more difficulty in adapting their ethical practices to the radical social changes occurring in the years of the Khmer Rouge revolution.

In Khmer, the primary language spoken by Cambodians, the term “moral” is used a number of ways. For example, in the prologue Thon said that one of his neighbors was killed on the charge of “immorality” or false morality (səyəltəbəmm koh). The word səyl (from Pali sīla) is generally used to mean what is good or right and refers to the Buddhist precepts. It also can be used to imply that someone has a good or virtuous moral character, neak səyl (virtuous person), which is similar to neak bon, which means a good person.
Another term for moral or morality is \textit{plauv chett}, meaning the path of the heart/mind. This form often appears as \textit{tam plauv chett}, meaning “according to one’s view of right and wrong.” \textit{Chett} (heart/mind), used together with \textit{akrok} (bad) or \textit{laor} (good), is used to indicate someone’s moral character. In the course of my fieldwork the terms used most commonly to convey the morality of acts were \textit{thvoe bon} and \textit{thvoe bap}—that is, a “good/right act” and a “bad/wrong act.”

Like “morality,” employing the term “memory” in theoretical applications is also not without its pitfalls, as noted by a number of scholars.\textsuperscript{7} Partly as a result of the influence of Maurice Halbwachs, a Durkheimian who developed the theory of “collective memory” (1980; Halbwachs 1992), “memory” has become a popular label in the social sciences and humanities when discussing the social narratives that people produce about the past. A number of problems stem from Halbwachs’s analysis, including the complete occlusion of individual memory or agency that is borne out of his insistence on making memory an entirely collective phenomenon (Cole 2003, 94–96; Sorabji 2006, 2–3). Maurice Bloch has described the problem as follows:

Perhaps because of the influence of Durkheim and because he fails to make clearly the distinction between recalling and remembering, Halbwachs wants to go so much further in his argument as to deny any epistemological role to the mechanisms of the individual brain. Such a stance leads him to make patently false assertions such as that memories which are not shared are soon forgotten. For him, therefore, there is no such thing between autobiographical memory and collective memory since autobiographical memory is also the product of social contact. (1998a, 117)

Therefore the confusion over the usage of the term “memory” derives at least partially from Halbwachs, who used the term to refer to the social recall of past events. In any case, I will avoid using the term where possible, but where I do use it, I will assume not only that memory is a part of a person’s cognitive processes, but also that memories may be shared with others through the social production of narratives and other evocations, which may in turn produce a new memory or change an existing one (see Bloch 1998a). Moreover, while this work is not about how individuals contend with their autobiographical memories, it is nonetheless implicit that social representations of the past are products of people’s memories that become to some extent socially synthesized through shared narratives and experiences but also retain features unique to the individual.
A final point needs to be made here regarding the reconciliation or resolution of violent pasts. Just as there is no simple “before and after picture” in which innocence is lost “by a destructive act of violence” (Antze and Lambek 1996, xiv), so too is there no simple resolution in its aftermath. Numerous works suggest that it is not clear when or if violent pasts are ever completely “repaired” or “reconciled” and that these pasts may “haunt” the present in unpredictable ways for an indeterminate time, even into generations who never lived through the violent episodes themselves (e.g., Kidron 2004; Linke 2002; Mueggler 2001). Therefore, while focusing on the ways in which people “get on” with their lives, we must also be aware that terrible episodes in the past may continue to impact their perceptions and choices in the present.

As indicated above, many of the studies that address the social and cultural issues arising in the aftermath of violence or trauma are bundled under the label of “social memory” (e.g., Antze and Lambek 1996; Jing 1996; N. White 1998; Zur 1998). Most of them argue that the violence and trauma of the past continue to permeate people’s lives as individuals and/or communities or nations, and they examine how people reinterpret their memories in efforts to cope with the violence of the past. By bringing such questions into relation with issues of morality and moral order, I seek to broaden the frame of analysis to include not only the persistence of the past in the present, but also the promise of the future. Through this effort, I hope to cast some light on ways in which people negotiate the impact of the violence they endured while remaking their lives and their communities in ways that a primarily “social memory”–based study may overlook. By emphasizing the remaking of the moral order, we gain a sense not only of people’s implicit and explicit understandings of what social relations ought to be, but also of how these ideals may absorb and help settle the cataclysmic rupture of the past.

Cambodian Ethnography on Morality and Memory

This book is part of an emerging body of ethnographic studies that mostly began in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when long-term fieldwork in Cambodia became possible again after nearly thirty years of war. These studies were undertaken alongside a growing body of works by anthropologists with prior experience in Cambodia or with Khmer communities abroad and by others, like myself, who were entering the field. In the discussion of these works below, my intention is to situate my study within, and provide a brief
overview of, some of the key works relevant to my own. The list is in no way exhaustive, and I am sure there are some that I may have overlooked.

The subject matter of these long-term ethnographic studies included the following: displaced Cambodians on the Thai border between 1989 and 1991 (French 1996); language and politics during the United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC) period (Marston 1999); causes of genocide in Cambodia (Hinton 2005); children and human rights (Greene 2007); tourism in the former Khmer Rouge area of Anlong Veng (Wood 2009); the history of medicine in colonial Cambodia (Ovesen and Trankell 2010); and forced marriage under the Khmer Rouge (LeVine 2011). In addition to these studies, works were published on a variety of topics by anthropologists working on Cambodia or by Cambodianists from other fields (e.g., Chouléan 1986, 1988; Ebihara, Mortland, and Ledgerwood 1994; Eisenbruch 1992; Forest 1992, Hansen and Ledgerwood 2008; Kent and Chandler 2008; Ledgerwood 1995, 1996, 1997, 2002; Luco 2008; Kim 2001; Kobayashi 2005; Marston 2006, 2011; Népote 1992; Ovesen, Trankell, and Öjendal 1996).

In sum, these studies address a variety of topics, including Khmer Buddhism, gender, the Cambodian genocide, politics, economics, village solidarity, social organization, and Khmer Rouge memorial sites. A number of them are concerned directly or indirectly with the “recovery” of Cambodian culture and communities in the post–Khmer Rouge era, but few focus on memory at the village level, and these few do so only partially as they tend to be short articles rather than lengthy studies. One exception would be Ebihara’s work on the village of Svay, taken up initially in 1959–1960 and continued by Ebihara and then Ledgerwood in the 1980s to today. Taking their work as a whole provides a before and after picture of the genocide and provides a useful comparison to other villages and communities in Cambodia and beyond.

It is heartening to see this growing body of anthropological literature on Cambodia, but there are still very few studies based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, which is the hallmark of anthropology, and even fewer focus on village communities. The long-term participant-observation village studies in Cambodia within the last hundred years are May Ebihara’s classic dissertation (1968), Gabrielle Martel’s study of an Angkorean village (1975), a village study in Kompong Cham by Malada Kalab (1968), and more recently the work of Satoru Kobayashi. Apart from the Ebihara, Martel, and Kalab studies, there was little substantial ethnographic fieldwork in Cambodia during the decades before the 1970s, with three notable exceptions. These are François Bizot (1976, 1981, 1988), who worked on tantric Buddhist practices; Marie Martin (1997), who conducted a primarily
ethno-botanical study of the indigenous highland Khmers in Cambodia and Thailand; and Éveline Porée-Maspero (1962), who recorded a wide range of data on ritual practices, clothing, and livelihoods across several regions of Cambodia. There are also some interesting studies outside of anthropology, such as geographer Timothy Conway’s study of rural development (1999); however, the methodologies used and the types of data collected in studies such as these are of a different genre.

This study contributes to the emerging body of ethnographic literature addressing Cambodian culture in general and village Cambodia in particular. To the best of my knowledge, at the time of my research I was one of only two people conducting long-term village fieldwork. The opportunity to conduct long-term fieldwork in one place, combined with the lack of available knowledge, led me to pursue the research from a “bottom-up” perspective. I started by looking at the most basic forms of sociality—kinship, food, commensality, life-cycle and other ritual practices—and I studied stories and myths. This approach allowed me to evaluate what I observed within the village with what I had learned already about Cambodian people through time I spent in Phnom Penh and visits I made around the country and compare it with the studies I had read. The experience of living in the village also gave me an opportunity to gain an understanding of how Cambodian relatedness was made and maintained in the particular time and location of my fieldwork and how that related to villagers’ understandings of how the world ought to be. This “classical” ethnographic approach also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which villagers negotiated the past in the present and what their concerns were for the future.

Underlying these immediate questions were larger research issues concerning morality, memory, sociality, violence, and trauma. How is the world morally divided into good and bad, right and wrong, us and them? When is this order violated, and what happens then? In Cambodian studies the question of the moral order has been dealt with in quite some depth, especially by historian David Chandler (1973, 1998a), who has focused on the nineteenth-century period of war and chaos, a time he describes as “the darkest portion of Cambodia’s dark ages before the Armageddon of the 1970s” (2008, 141). Using archival material from that time, Chandler investigated a wide range of topics that deal with Khmer perceptions of moral order, including notions of the wild and the civil and the practice of naming both places and persons. In a similar vein, the Catholic missionary François Ponchaud wrote about the categories and social structures that form the basis of Khmer society, focusing on notions of the wild and the civil, kinship, and other aspects of the moral order
that were reinvented out of the preexisting order in the Khmer Rouge revolution (1989). More recently, the topic of moral order has been taken up by a number of other scholars of Cambodia (Edwards 2004, 2008; Hansen 2003, 2004; Hansen and Ledgerwood 2005, 2008). Anne Hansen’s work on early twentieth-century Buddhism (2003, 2004, 2007) is particularly salient to my own project because it explores changes in the ideas of how to live morally to meet the contingencies of modernity. In Cambodian ethnography, the topic of moral order has been mostly explored through studies of Buddhist institutions and practices (Kent 2005; Ledgerwood 2005; Marston 2006, 2008; Kobayashi 2005) but also has been explored in terms of gender and storytelling (Ledgerwood 1990, 1996). Alexander Hinton’s (2005) work on the motivations of perpetrators of the Cambodian genocide also deals with some issues of morality, and Saveros Pou (1988) provides us with a full accounting of the normative code of behavior.

This book builds on these studies but differs from them in a number of ways. First, I focus on analyses of morality through the categories of the wild and civil, kinship, and naming—topics that are fundamental to understanding the usually implicit ways in which the moral basis of society is construed. I discuss these topics at some length in chapter 6 and expand the dialogue on relatedness and alterity by including a discussion of consumption, commensality, and food, topics that have received only passing attention in the Cambodian anthropological literature despite their centrality in making sociality (and otherness) (Bloch 2005; Carsten 1995; Overing and Passes 2000). Second, my work does not use the approach of several of my colleagues who spent substantial time at Buddhist institutions, but it does include descriptions and analysis of a number of religious practices and traditions, their variations across the two communes, and an extensive analysis of the harvest festival Bon Dalien in chapter 8. It also contributes to the existing literature on stories and myths relating to the topic of morality. While other studies (Chandler 1998d; Ledgerwood 1990) tend to draw heavily on moral proverbs, folktales, normative poems, and didactic rules for proper behavior, my approach in chapter 7 connects local stories, history, myth, and landscape to interpretations that see them in terms of ordering the past and present.

Because of the need to impose some limitations on this study, I do not address in any depth the topic of gender in O’Thmaa, although there are instances of this topic, as in chapter 3, which deal with trust and distrust. Likewise, my work discusses power and politics only in a very limited fashion due to the circumstances of my fieldwork, as well as a need to keep the study within reasonable boundaries. In Cambodia, politics is a very sensitive topic,
especially in national election years, which often feature widespread violence. Not wanting to raise any further anxiety in the village over my presence there or put anyone at risk, I opted to remove myself from any direct association with politics.

Because it is essential to understand what happened to the villagers during the Khmer Rouge period in order to understand the present, at times my study focuses on that period. In doing so, I examine some of the issues that have been the subject matter in Hinton’s work on the Cambodian genocide—for instance, in chapter 5, where I draw on a number of themes also discussed by Hinton but to a different end. This book (in particular that chapter), however, is both different and complementary to Hinton’s work, for it addresses different aspects of the genocide and uses different theoretical tools and methodology.

One of the key contributions this study seeks to make is directed toward the nascent body of literature on social memory in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge. It is perhaps peculiar that a number of studies address morality and moral order in Cambodia while very few address the topic of social memory per se. To date, only a few articles have been written on the topic. Judy Ledgerwood (1997) has written about the construction of national state narratives around the Khmer Rouge prison and torture center S-21; May Ebihara and Judy Ledgerwood (2002) have discussed social memory in a rural village in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge; John Marston (2006) has written about the facilitation of social memory through mortuary rituals; Timothy Wood (2006), about Khmer Rouge memorial sites and tourism; Rachel Hughes (2004), on local level Khmer Rouge memorial sites; and I have written on ritual (2006), former collaborators (2008, 2009, 2011a), trust (2011b), and modernity (forthcoming). With the advent of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal there has also been more work written of late by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), whose works deal with victims’ trauma and memory. This study aims to provide a more extensive and nuanced account of memory practices in Cambodia with the hope that it will lead to a greater understanding of violence, social change, and recovery in Cambodia and beyond.

PREPARATION, FIELDWORK, AND METHODOLOGY

The Beginning

In March 1994, I flew from Bangkok as a tourist to Phnom Penh. It was just six months after UNTAC had administered the 1993 election, which
turned power over to a newly elected coalition government. The plane landed and I, with about ten other passengers, disembarked into the heat and silence. Outside a small wooden building—the international terminal—a cluster of taxi drivers, mostly with moto-taxis, stood poised in hopes of securing a passenger. Moments later I was riding toward Phnom Penh, legs akimbo, along a narrow two-lane road bordered by vibrant green rice paddies. The air was silent beyond the sound of the motorbike’s engine. The verdant landscape vanished as we entered the city, gutted and blackened by war. People were everywhere, especially children, but no one seemed to have anything much to do. There were virtually no cars on the wide boulevards, just a few moto-taxis and several bikes and pedicabs. The civil war between the government and the Khmer Rouge continued in several parts of the countryside, while in the city life seemed suspended, as though its inhabitants were waiting for something to happen. Later on that day a local pharmacist confided to me, “We are afraid that any day the Khmer Rouge may reenter the city.” Life appeared to hang in the balance. There was a possibility that the situation would spill over again into terror and chaos, yet alternatively there was a suggestion that the civil war with the Khmer Rouge might finally come to an end and reconstruction would move forward. This moment of possibilities arrested me. The horrors of the past were everywhere: from the blackened, decayed buildings; the bands of orphaned street children; the uniform-clad amputees; and the bloodstained floors at the former prison and torture center, Tuol Sleng; to the twisted bundles of mostly currentless electrical wires. At times the proximity to the horror was terrifying. But something else was going on as well. There were signs that a better future was being ushered in. The proliferation of English schools, the burgeoning of small businesses—pharmacies, tailors’ shops, drink shops, laundry houses, and guesthouses were sprouting up everywhere—indicated that people were also looking forward.

The image of that precarious moment in 1994 stayed with me, leading me to eventually pursue a graduate school education in socio-cultural anthropology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and later at the London School of Economics. This book is a product of the research project that was born out of my experiences in Cambodia in 1994, 1997–1998, and 2001–2003, as well as the vistas of knowledge and insight I gained through my professors, classmates, and the many great thinkers whose books and articles helped hone my thinking. In 2010, I returned to Cambodia and my fieldsite, in part to follow up on the earlier research. A portion of these findings is in the epilogue of this text.
First Year of Study and Fieldwork in Phnom Penh: September 2001–August 2002

In late 2001, I embarked on a two-year course of fieldwork in Cambodia. This time when I arrived, my plane was nearly full—packed with business people and tourists—and the taxicab I took from the airport had to fight the traffic along the newly widened road into Phnom Penh. The sounds and sites of reconstruction were everywhere, as businesses and residents fought for space for houses, businesses, cars, and motorbikes.

The first year was taken up with improving my rudimentary Khmer language skills, finding a fieldsite, obtaining permissions from the appropriate government agencies, and conducting qualitative and quantitative research that would provide me with the necessary background for the participant-observation research later on. During this time I read and translated archive documents, including Khmer Rouge cadre notebooks and policy documents, interviews of former Khmer Rouge, and Khmer literature and folktales. I took several field trips in and around Phnom Penh and to other provinces to locate a fieldsite, as well as to visit memorial sites, attend religious ritual festivities in the countryside, meet with former Khmer Rouge leaders, and observe post-conflict peace-training development programs in rural communities. I also visited and conducted research and interviews with a wide range of development institutions whose work held some relation to my own, representatives from relevant government ministries, and academics. I scoured the National Archives and conducted library research at the Buddhist Institute, the École Française d'Extrême-Orient, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DCCAM), and the Museum of Genocide (S-21) archives.

I also found my fieldsite. The Lutheran World Foundation (LWF) generously offered to assist me in my search, and with its help I was able to narrow the choice to three different communes in upland areas in Kompong Speu. The first village I visited was in Prei Phnom Commune. It was the last village in the commune, located at the point where the road ended, with nothing but the vast Cardamom Mountains and wilderness to the west. This was the village I call O’Thmaa. The village itself, nestled in a cradle of hills, is picturesque. But its people had clearly suffered enormously, and life was apparently still very difficult for them. In one of the poorest villages in the region and in Cambodia as a whole, these people’s lives are not easy. I was not met with the gaiety and warm-heartedness to which I was accustomed when visiting Cambodian villages, and I realized that doing fieldwork in such a place could be difficult. The following day I visited Doung Srae Commune. The place was an ethnographic treasure trove. Within an hour there I had rich ethnographic
data beyond anything I had read. But what I found there made me wonder more about O’Thmaa. Why was it that the two communes, Doung Srae and Prei Phnom, were so different? Why did so many of the people with whom I talked in O’Thmaa claim to know nothing or little about the traditions of the past—or even the practices in existence only a few kilometres away in Doung Srae? I decided to take up the challenge: I would base myself in O’Thmaa, with the expectation that I would also be making visits to Doung Srae.

After securing permissions from the Ministry of Interior to present to the Ministry of the Environment and provincial and district offices, I was able to begin my research. Without these permissions, it is highly unlikely that I would have been able to live in O’Thmaa for two significant reasons. First, my stay there meant possible interference of the local government and police given the profitable illegal trade in forest goods, and second, the villagers themselves did not trust outsiders and few would have been willing to help me stay there, especially against the will of the police and local authorities. In the end, the permissions meant that the local commune administration was compelled to help me establish residence in the village as best it could. However, they also meant that I was now the responsibility of the local administration, a situation that entailed an undue amount of security and one that initially threatened to handicap my fieldwork.

Second Year in and around O’Thmaa: September 2002–October 2003

In September 2002, in the midst of the rainy season, I arrived with my belongings, accompanied by my Khmer language teacher’s niece, who was to join me for the first couple of weeks to help me settle in. We were to spend these weeks in the home of a young couple and their baby while arrangements were made to find me a more permanent home. In an effort to familiarize myself with the villagers, and allow them to do the same with me, I had informal meetings with the local leaders and made visits to households. I also started providing English lessons, requested by a number of the young adults in the village. Teaching English provided me with a means of building relationships with some of the villagers and allowed me to contribute in some meaningful way.

It soon became evident that there was nowhere for me to stay for the duration of my fieldwork. The people in this area were not accustomed to foreigners and were generally distrustful and fearful of outsiders. Moreover, there was little room in the villagers’ small houses, which were in most cases already filled to capacity. The one serious offer I had of a house for rent in the
neighboring village turned out to be one man’s attempt to salvage something from a house he had built but could not inhabit because “it was haunted by a ghost.” Several people warned me not to take the house. They explained that the house was probably haunted because some of the wood used to build it might have come from a tree that had previously been the home of a spirit. It was clear then that the best option was for me to pay to have a house built that would later belong to the village.

When the building plan was ready, I left the village, returning a couple of weeks later to move into my new house on my own. My fiancé, Karl, stayed with me the first couple of days while I settled in, but he soon returned to his work in Phnom Penh. However, I was not alone. The police hut had been relocated from the end of the road bordering the wilderness to right beside my house. No doubt part of the surveillance and protection that the forces of officialdom felt my presence in the village required, this relocation proved to be both a blessing and a curse. Initially, the police forbade me to go anywhere on my own, including to bathe, for fear that something might happen to me. It seemed that they were trying to interfere with my ability to establish any sort of rapport with the villagers. However, over time, they relaxed. In the meantime, I worked around this obstacle by making visits to Doung Srae (outside of their range of authority), conducting interviews with senior laypeople from the Buddhist temple there and other officials within the commune, and using the opportunity to learn from the police themselves. Of course, some villagers, bolder and perhaps more curious than others, made a point of interacting with me, and these initial interactions helped me to establish wider relations within the village later on. Occasional visits from Karl also added new dimensions to my fieldwork. Our relationship brought out a number of topics of discussion with the villagers: marriage, family, children, and relationships. But the villagers and the police also interacted differently with Karl, especially the men, who would enjoy bantering with him and generally shared a male camaraderie.

Soon after settling into the village, I began making visits to Doung Srae, where I interviewed community religious and secular leaders and elders about their history and traditions. Through these visits, I gained a better understanding of both the violent historic periods and the prewar past of Prei Phnom Commune. People in Doung Srae Commune were generally very open in talking about the past, their traditions, and their religious practices and beliefs. I was invited to attend a wedding and an engagement ceremony, and I was provided with numerous guided tours of sacred and historic sites in a number of villages. These experiences, of course, were immensely helpful
in providing me with the background knowledge to ask more precise questions and achieve greater understanding of the people’s lives in Prei Phnom Commune in general and O’Thmaa village in particular. During these first months, I also began a series of recorded interviews with the senior Buddhist layman (achar) at the Prei Phnom temple. As it turned out, this achar was originally from O’Thmaa and was able to share his knowledge and insights on local customs and practices, both in general terms and with reference to O’Thmaa in particular.

I continued to interview people and hold informal conversations in Prei Phnom Commune while observing and participating in the rice harvests, bamboo cutting, and other local activities. My neighbors across the road opened a canteen that received steady business from the police, me, and other villagers, as well as a stream of outsiders who came to the village in order to profit from the forest’s bounty through the collection and sale of forest products. At the canteen I was able to learn much about the local affairs of the village and its surrounding communities.

In April 2003 I took a leave of absence from the field to get married. When I returned in May, I had enough data to begin constructing a lengthy questionnaire that would be the guide in structured interviews of ten families in three different villages in each of the two communes (sixty interviews in all). The decision to conduct such a formal study grew out of a sense of unease with the happenstance of information I had been gathering up until then. I wanted to get a broader sense of the local cultural practices and the area’s past and felt that I needed a more systematic approach. Within O’Thmaa a handful of villagers had been very open and helpful, but it was hard to situate their stories. I needed more information. Therefore, with a research assistant employed full time to help with the logistics, I visited the commune offices and the village leaders to obtain village statistics. From these lists I did a blind draw of ten households for the interviews in each village. The interviews included questions on kinship, identity, food, livelihood, history (before, during, and after the Pol Pot era [samay Pol Pot]), religious rituals and practices, perspectives on social change, conceptualizations of the forest, and many other topics. These questions allowed me to gain a sense of the past as well as the present. They allowed me to learn what was important to these people and what was not. The findings from this part of the research helped inform and support much of the ethnography contained in what follows, but they were also useful in gaining a broad picture of people’s thoughts on food, kinship relations, and traditional practices. These interviews allowed me to meet and talk with a wide range of people I may have otherwise never met, let alone interviewed.
The interviews themselves lasted between one and one-half and three and one-half hours and were recorded onto minidisks. Generally an interview followed the questionnaire, but it was conducted loosely enough to allow me to ask further questions for clarification purposes or when an account was of particular interest. The style of the interview was such that it encouraged informants to give vivid detailed accounts and express their views; sometimes an interview led to an entire story being told before an audience of people who were not involved in the interview. The combination of such ethnographically rich accounts with the ability to make comparisons across households, villages, and communes made this lengthy methodology both useful and enlightening and provided an abundant harvest of data—far beyond the limits and scope of this book.

The knowledge obtained from the interviews filled in many of the gaps in the research and opened the door to many more questions on a more refined level. For example, it was only during the final month of the project that I was finally able to interview the old man who was held accountable by villagers for the deaths of several of their kinfolk. I was told during earlier interviews that he had been a village leader in the early years of the revolution and had betrayed his community by filing complaints with the Khmer Rouge regarding various members of the village, who were then taken to the forest and killed. Before I was aware of these facts, I had tried to interview him after an initial casual meeting very early on because he was one of the only remaining old men in the village. By the time he finally made himself available for interview, I had heard of his past and was therefore able to put questions to him that incorporated this knowledge. The interview and its background are key components of this story, especially in chapters 4 and 5, where they are presented and analyzed together with the broader ethnographic findings.

After this interview I was given a more complete vision of the horror of the past by another villager. Visiting all the sites of the houses of the pre-war time, as described in the prologue, I was given a household-by-household account of the grisly fate of most of the village members. But when I first arrived, the villagers emphasized that the people of O’Thmaa did not have any problems among themselves and that they all loved one another (srolanh knea). The old man I interviewed was their kinsman and part of their community.

Thus I learned that the village maintained what Taussig calls a “public secret” (1999, 2). A public secret is the knowledge of what not to know. The secret in O’Thmaa was that many of the deaths that occurred during the Khmer Rouge revolution were instigated by instances where some vil-
lagers accused others of traitorous activities to the Khmer Rouge. This village “secret” is masked in the present-day discourse of village fraternal love; it surfaces at the juxtaposition of their statements: “The villagers in the past generation loved one another” and (the counterstatement) “[The old generation] did bad things to each other.” This moral duality is also evident in other genocide and mass violence literature (e.g., Kidron 2009; Theidon 2006). I suggest that the duality allows individuals and communities to engage in everyday social life in the present and build a future.

Protecting the identity of the people who shared their lives and stories with me is paramount, given the emotionally and politically delicate nature of many of the topics that I discuss. To this end I have changed the names of the villagers, as well as the names of the villages and communes where they live, to provide sufficient anonymity. I have also tried to present the people who are the subjects of this research, several of whom became dear friends, with the respect and consideration that I would wish to be accorded had the roles been reversed.