

ADVANCING HUMANITY IN CAMBODIA

Learning Community

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THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE CAMBODIA PROJECT

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From 1975 to 1979 Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge liquidated some 20 per- cent of Cambodia’s population including virtually the entire bourgeois class. During this period Cambodian society became what survivors have come to describe as “the prison without walls.” As Cambodians undertake the difficult process of re-establishing their nation in the 21st century, it is appropriate that American students understand Cambodia’s past and help prepare it for its future. It was there that the human condition was subjected to one of the greatest threats in modern history – the threat of genocide. The Fellows and Scholars of the McMaster School for Advancing Humanity have been uniquely positioned to study this remarkable phenomenon in the land where it occurred. Representatives from Defiance College once again took advantage of this opportunity in January 2007.

I worked with McMaster Fellows, Dr. JoAnn Burkhardt and Prof. Jeff Weaner, in Cambodia to serve as history consultant to the McMaster Scholars. I researched background materials about Cambodia’s culture to help prepare the McMaster team for the country that they were about to encounter. As in previous years, McMaster Fellows, Associate Fellows, and

Scholars formed a learning community and spent months preparing for the trip to Cambodia in December 2006-January 2007. As we worked together, it became apparent that first-time travelers to Cambodia might need to know something of the nation's current political tendencies. To this end, my colleagues and I developed a project known as "Indicators of Democracy" in which McMaster Scholars are taught to recognize the existence or the absence of democratic practices in developing countries. This project will be ongoing for future trips to Cambodia.

PROJECT FEATURES

Since 1994, the Cambodian Genocide Program at the Yale Center for International and Area Studies has been investigating the Pol Pot regime. In 1996 it obtained access to the 100,000-page archive of its security police, the *Santebal*. This material has been microfilmed and made available to scholars worldwide. As of January 2006, it has compiled and published thousands of biographic and bibliographic records, photographs, documents, translations, maps, and an extensive list of books and research papers on the genocide. There is now an interactive Cambodian Geographic Database which includes data on Cambodia's 13,000 villages, the 115,000 sites targeted in U.S. bombing sorties flown over Cambodia in 1965-75, the 158 prisons run during 1975-1979, the 309 mass-grave sites with an estimated total of 19,000 grave pits, and the 76 sites of post-1979 memorials to victims of the Khmer Rouge. The Yale Center provided valuable information for our pre-trip study.

McMaster Scholars travel to Cambodia only after having studied the country's culture and traditions. While doing research on the features of Khmer culture here and while working in Cambodia, the Scholars develop their understanding of a culture that is different from their own. In addition, they will stretch their own undergraduate research and communication skills as they help develop presentation materials based on their experiences. These materials are then shared with the Defiance College student body and the general public during the McMaster Symposium.

Over the course of our learning community, I had the pleasure of helping our McMaster Scholars develop a number of projects and activities designed to aid communities in Cambodia. These ranged from discovering the value of one's photograph to learning about the impact that a sewing machine can have on a person's livelihood. Initially, morbid fascination compels one to investigate the years 1975 to 1979 in Cambodia. Although this fascination is understandable, I have come to understand that what is historically spectacular is not necessarily most significant. The Cambodian people with the McMaster School has worked with over the years are less interested in

Pol Pot than they are in making ends meet.

The goals of the McMaster School are rooted broadly in global cultural literacy. This includes developing young men and women who, when going overseas, respond well to international challenges, are culturally sophisticated, and demonstrate the capacity to truly become citizens of the world. Since visiting Cambodia my own perception has changed about how best to approach study abroad as it relates to advancing humanity. A pre-departure learning community is essential to the McMaster model of study abroad. McMaster learning communities strip away the social barriers of titles, age, and degrees to create an atmosphere of egalitarianism that supports every member's research project.

