



## Hunting Sorcerers in Cambodia

Ivan FRANCESCHINI

'Sorcerer' Rocham Kin with his family in front of the makeshift accommodation that the local police had put at their disposal. Borkeo district, Ratanakiri, 2015. PC: Ivan Franceschini.

*Over the past decade, Cambodia has seen dozens of witchcraft-related cases in which people were harassed or even killed because their neighbours suspected them of engaging in black magic. Through interviews with survivors and family members of the victims, this essay traces some of these cases and argues that such occurrences are linked not only to poverty and exclusion, but also to a more fundamental collision between two worlds.*

In January 2014, I had been in Cambodia for only a few weeks when a headline in a local newspaper attracted my attention: 'Mob Decapitates 55-year-old Accused of Sorcery' (Eang 2014). It was a fairly short article that recounted how, a couple of days earlier, a traditional healer called Khieu Porn had been hacked to death in the middle of the night, while on his way back home from the celebrations for the rice harvest festival in his village. According to the reporter, the man had been stabbed no less than 10 times and then beheaded, his head thrown far away from the body. Apparently, his fellow villagers suspected him of being a sorcerer (*thmup*) and had decided to take matters into their own hands.

Having spent almost a decade in relatively secular Beijing, I often had that kind of nagging feeling of disenchantment that the

Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani (2010, 236) describes in his diaries from New York, another global city: 'I feel more and more how this civilisation is foreign. I walk in the streets and there is never any sign of the divine, never any procession, never any celebration, any god passing by. Never a sign of anything that goes beyond the absurd appearances.' At once horrified and curious, I immediately hired a translator and set off for the village where the murder had taken place. I did not think too much about what I would do there—my main hope was to have a glimpse into that 'something' that goes beyond appearances.

Trapaing Chuk was an anonymous hamlet in Kompong Speu province, not too far from Phnom Penh. It was a little cluster of wooden houses dispersed amid the same dusty roads, palm trees, rice fields, and wooden houses with which I would become familiar in the following years, but being my first foray in the Cambodian countryside, everything was brimming with promise. When we arrived, the funeral of the victim had just ended and the whole family was assembled. Khieu's son took it upon himself to accompany us to the scene of the crime. There, in a quiet clearing hidden by some trees, he pointed at a long stretch of grass muddied by a dark-brown stain of dried blood, a stark contrast with the surrounding greenery. Bending down, he picked up a couple of white fragments that lay hidden among the stalks and casually handed them to me—they were a tooth and a fragment of the skull of his father. In this way I found another part of the story that had gone unreported: not only had the man been beheaded, but the head had also been split in two parts, one of which had not been retrieved yet.

On that day, I managed to talk to a few more villagers. Most of my interviewees agreed that Khieu had been a practitioner of black magic and were happy that he had been killed. Lornng Youm, an elderly woman with gums stained by betel, had no doubt that the man had been a sorcerer who had caused the sudden death of many people in the village: 'A man died the day

after he had read his hand, another one soon after meeting him.' Despite people's hopes, the murder had not done much to rid the villagers of their problem. Quite the opposite—now they had to reckon with the ghost (*khmauch*) of the dead sorcerer, who was roaming the village at night looking for his missing head. People were terrified to go out after dark and monks had been called to place protective spells around some houses, but the effectiveness of such measures remained to be seen.

## At the Intersection of Field and Forest

This was my first brush with the world of the supernatural in Cambodia, a fascination that I have kept up—although not in a systematic manner—ever since. I was interested in how the supernatural permeated all aspects of everyday life there, and, in particular, I was attracted by the dark side of these beliefs, in all their manifestations. There were so many trails I could have followed. As Philip Coggan (2015, 37) wrote in his popular book on spirits in Cambodia:

True black magic exists, everyone [in Cambodia] knows it. The most horrific forms involve nails from coffins, oil distilled from corpses and fetuses torn from the wombs of living women. These confer powers on the owner, the dead bound to the will of the living. The black magician can cause razor blades and needles to enter the body of an enemy, or a buffalo skin that will swell up in the stomach. The person so attacked becomes ill, and will die if not helped by white magic.

More generally, I was curious about how these traditional beliefs played out in a rapidly modernising country such as Cambodia. In his extraordinary study of Khmer funeral rituals, Erik Davis (2016, 83) has argued

that in Cambodia the relationship between spirits and people—as well as between people themselves—is determined by the perception of the surrounding nature as fundamentally hostile:

The Khmer imagine the world into distinct and opposed geographic and moral spheres—the field and the forest, *sruk* and *brai* (a.w. *srok* and *prei*). The violence of historical relationships between upland and lowland and the dialectical relationship that lowlanders have with the forests marks them as places of death and rebirth, dangerous places of spiritual transformation and seemingly limitless but uncertain moral potency.

It is the remnant of this metaphoric forest that I set out to explore.

In the months that followed my visit to Trapaing Chuk, Cambodian media regularly reported stories of villagers getting murdered for alleged sorcery. The most dramatic instance occurred in April 2014, when Pov Sovann, a traditional healer in Prey Chonlounh village, Takeo province, was lynched by a mob of several hundred people (Kim 2014). When I managed to visit the place in July 2015, villagers were eager to share what had happened that fateful day. According to the village chief, an elderly man named Kae Yaw, Sovann had a history of erratic behaviour, which culminated in his decision to set up a ceremonial altar at home. At the end of April, faced with his refusal to remove the altar—which many in the village held he used to practice black magic—the villagers had had enough and several of them converged on his house, where they started shouting abuse and throwing stones at the man. The news spread like wildfire on Facebook and people from neighbouring villages started streaming in, with the crowd rapidly growing to a mob of several hundred people. An ambulance arrived at the scene but was not allowed to intervene; the police were also present but could not—or, according to some, would not—do anything. In

the evening, after an ordeal of eight hours, the tragic epilogue: Sovann was thrown out of his house and beaten to death by the rabid crowd, heedless of the desperate pleadings of his aunt and a few other relatives.

While the village chief was telling us this story, a couple dozen villagers gathered around me and my interpreter. They were mostly women and children, but there were also some young men carrying long knives—an ordinary view in a Cambodian village, but which assumed disquieting connotations in that specific context. We asked them if, with the benefit of hindsight, any of them had any regret about Sovann's fate, but nobody responded. Only one woman in her thirties broke the silence to say that he had it coming, to which the onlookers expressed general approval. At that point, the situation took a worrying turn. The villagers pleaded with us to help them with the ongoing police investigation—a request that turned out to be superfluous, considering that the only two people who had been detained in relation to the massacre would be released within a couple of months—and, seeing my hesitation, began to openly question whether we were siding with them or with their victim.

Eventually, one woman in the crowd agreed to take us to the scene of the crime, which was only a few hundred metres away. Although we had been assured that all the family had left the village after the murder, once there, we found that several of Sovann's relatives were still living nearby, with the exception of the widow, who had moved to Phnom Penh to work in a garment factory. They were still assiduously fighting for justice, but held out very little hope of ever receiving redress. Tired of reliving the tragedy every day, Sovann's father-in-law by then had demolished the old house where the man had been besieged. With barely suppressed fury, glaring at the woman who accompanied us, he relayed all the threats he had received from the villagers in his quest for justice for his slaughtered relative and complained: 'They told me that nothing prevents them from targeting another one. There is no justice in this country.'



(Left) Rocham Kin. (Right) An amulet protecting the village from which Rocham Kin had to escape after being accused of sorcery. Chrung village, Borkeo district, Ratanakiri, 2015. PC: Ivan Franceschini.

## Survivors

Not all ‘sorcerers’ get murdered—some of them manage to escape from their villages, leaving behind their land, possessions, and occasionally even their family. Over the years, I encountered a few of these survivors. In the summer of 2015, I travelled to Ratanakiri, a once-remote province on the border with Vietnam and Laos. Populated by ethnic minorities that maintain strong animistic beliefs, the area is often taken as the epitome of that metaphoric ‘forest’ that looms so large in the Cambodian imaginary—although in reality the jungle today has almost completely disappeared, replaced with the uniform rows of rubber trees of Vietnamese and Chinese-owned plantations.

In Ratanakiri, I learned how exiled ‘sorcerers’ represent a political problem in Cambodia. Years earlier, the Cambodian media had reported about Saleav, an entire village

in Borkeo district where, for a quarter of a century, ‘sorcerers’ banished by their fellow villagers had settled (May and Boyle 2012). When I visited in 2015, I could not locate the village and verify this story, but representatives of local NGOs confirmed that the provincial government was indeed trying to find a location to resettle all the exiled ‘sorcerers’—the only problem was that land was in high demand and it was nearly impossible to find a suitable location. In the course of my inquiries, I also managed to unearth a couple more tragedies.

In a miserable hut in the back of the police station in Borkeo, I met Rocham Kin, a man of Jarai ethnicity who was then in his mid-forties. In early April he had escaped from his village after his neighbours had accused him of killing six people with a magical plant that he had picked up in the forest. For two weeks, he had survived alone in what was left of the jungle, an experience he would rather forget: ‘I didn’t have any rice, water, blankets, mosquito





'Sorcerer' Sovann Thy in his temporary shelter on the grounds of the local police station. Oyadav district, Ratanakiri, 2015. PC: Ivan Franceschini.

nets, food, or cigarettes.' It was then that the head of the local police had taken pity on him and offered him, his wife, and eight of their children a temporary place to stay. In spite of the early involvement of national media (Cuddy and Phak 2015), finding safe accommodation had proven much harder than expected—word travelled fast from village to village and nobody wanted to have a sorcerer for a neighbour. I stayed in touch with Kim, and one year later he was still living at the police station, scared to leave the safety of his shelter lest he be killed. After that, he changed his phone number and I lost all contact.

Through word of mouth, I discovered that another 'sorcerer' had found refuge in a shed in the police station of Oyadav district, near the Vietnamese border. Sovann Thy, himself Jarai, was around 50 years old and had lost both arms in a mine explosion decades earlier. One day, while drunk, he had made an infelicitous joke about spirits, and his fellow villagers had begun suspecting him of being a sorcerer. One

month earlier, they had forced him to leave the village. 'They threatened to kill my sister and my niece,' he told us, but not his wife and their six children, who had stayed behind in the family house, siding with the people who had banished him. Only in September that year, after months of negotiation between the police and the villagers, would he be granted permission to move on to a piece of land that he owned not too far from the village. While his life was no longer in danger, in the process he had lost his family and all his possessions.

## A Glimpse into Cambodian Society

While the hounding and killing of sorcerers in Cambodia appear to be decreasing, the phenomenon remains relatively common. In a report on 'popular justice' released in 2019, the Office of the United Nations High

Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented 49 witchcraft-related cases in Cambodia between 2012 and 2018, among which 35 involved killings and 14 attempted killings or harassment (OHCHR 2019, 10). These episodes constituted the largest part of 73 reported cases of mob violence in the same period, which had resulted in a total of 57 people being killed. That the phenomenon remains fairly common is demonstrated by the fact that between January 2017 and June 2019, the Cambodian Ministry of the Interior reported no less than 16 cases of mob violence and eight killings following accusations of practising witchcraft (OHCHR 2019, 5).

Stories such as these provide grim insights into Cambodian society. Facing the impossibility of ascertaining how many of these cases are related to venal matters such as disputes over land ownership—NGO activists in Ratanakiri pointed out to me at least one case in which sorcery had been used as a pretext to exile a family and strip them of their land, and the case of Sovann Thy himself seemed fairly dubious in this regard—usually the emphasis falls on the social causes of the killings. The OHCHR report underlines how these murders might be linked to poverty and exclusion, with ‘cases [happening] more in specific geographical locations linked to a lower level of economic and social development or that are less accessible’ (OHCHR 2019, 14). Indeed, visiting those villages, it is hard not to reach the conclusion that poor sanitary conditions, lack of access to proper health services, and low levels of education play a fundamental role in creating the conditions for these tragedies.

However, the roots of the matter run far deeper than immediate material deprivation. I remember my befuddlement when, in Phnom Penh in 2014, I attempted to discuss the matter with a young university graduate who had studied abroad and was then working in an organisation that promoted the education of rural children. When I asked him what he thought the Cambodian authorities should do to prevent these killings, his response was that they should have trained teams of

Buddhist monks to travel from village to village to teach villagers how to collect proper evidence of sorcery to hand over to the police for prosecution according to the law. No matter the level of education or prosperity of my interlocutors, on several occasions I found myself facing similar responses that—each one in its own way—betrayed the adherence to worldviews very different from my own.

According to Somchan Sovandara, a professor at the Royal University of Phnom Penh who has conducted extensive research on traditional healers in Cambodia, all these killings hark back to the primordial conflict between fields and forests that underlies much of Cambodian culture. When I interviewed him in January 2014, he stressed how sorcery had roots in both the real and the metaphorical forest: ‘*Thmup* (sorcerers) have always existed in Cambodia. In the past, they retired in the forest and lived isolated from the rest of the community. Whomever needed to curse someone just went into the wild and asked for their assistance.’ The problem is that with the forests rapidly succumbing to economic development—Cambodia lost almost 2.2 million hectares of tree cover between 2001 and 2018, with an annual rate of loss increasing almost threefold in the same period (Kressek 2019)—sorcerers, witches, and other supernatural beings now have no place left to go.

In light of all this, one might argue that it is the perverse dynamics of deforestation and exploitation of natural resources that are causing a collision between two worlds—the magic one of the forest and the ‘civilised’ one of the fields. If we accept this view, the murders of Cambodian ‘sorcerers’ then provide a glimpse into such a primordial clash. It is in this conflict that that much-craved ‘something’ that goes beyond appearances spills out into the everyday life of both victims and executioners, wreaking havoc in a final act of defiance in the face of the onslaught of ‘civilisation’. ■

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