The Social Implications of Forced Marriage in Cambodia:

Prior to, During and After the Genocide

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Marriage is often the basis of cultural, economic, and social structures, but what happens when this is destroyed? This is what the Khmer Rouge did with their forced marriage policy during the Cambodian genocide. The Cambodian genocide occurred between 1975 and 1979 and killed one-fifth to one-quarter of the country’s population or about 2 million people.[[1]](#footnote-0) These deaths were attributed to the government run by the Communist Party of Kampuchea, or the Khmer Rouge.[[2]](#footnote-1) In addition to the killing of millions of people, this genocide and the regime of the Khmer Rouge worked to destroy the traditional family structure.[[3]](#footnote-2) One method in which this was done was through forced marriages. During the genocide, 400,000 men and women were forced into marriages.[[4]](#footnote-3) Forced marriages, also called conscripted marriages, involved an individual being forced to marry someone who they or their family had not chosen, or in more rare instances, a Khmer Rouge cadre.[[5]](#footnote-4) This policy drew on Cambodian traditions of arranged marriages but was a non-traditional, and non-consensual version of this. The objective of this policy was to increase the population of Cambodia, increase agricultural production, and replace the traditional family with a socialist-aligned and loyal family.[[6]](#footnote-5) This paper will examine how the regime drew on traditional Cambodian marriage customs, how this policy was implemented and what the more recent effects of it are on genocide survivors and their families.

**Marriage in Cambodia Prior to the Genocide**

Prior to the genocide, the typical marriage in Cambodia was an arranged marriage. There were three key aspects of these arranged marriages; they were done through consent, they were based on tradition and religion, and the suitability of each match was considered. This is a marked difference from the system of forced marriage built during the genocide. Despite their flaws, these traditional marriages were seen to be relatively well-liked and served the social purpose of aligning a couple and connecting their families.

These marriages, unlike forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge, were consensual. While arranged marriages were not love matches created by the couple themselves, they were agreed to by both the marrying parties and their families.[[7]](#footnote-6) Additionally, there were cultural rituals which would guide the spiritual and physical relationships with one another.[[8]](#footnote-7) Although women did have some rights and privileges, husbands were viewed as having authority over their wives.[[9]](#footnote-8) The suitability of the bride and groom was also taken into consideration, and traditionally mothers, elder women, and an elderly religious man called an achar, were consulted to determine the compatibility of potential couples and to arrange the marriages.[[10]](#footnote-9) These marriages were based on a culture of consent, family and tradition.

These arranged marriages involved more than just the couple, and were also community-based, signifying a joining of families. Thus, the compatibility of these families would be considered by the couple’s parents prior to arranging a marriage. This coming together of families would serve both economic and social functions. Economically, the couple would often live and work with the wife’s family and thus would contribute to this family’s resource acquisition.[[11]](#footnote-10) These marriages also served social functions, as the two families would now be joined through marriage.[[12]](#footnote-11) Family connections would have been culturally and socially important as they connected communities together. One example of this connection is when people such as grandparents would help with care for children.[[13]](#footnote-12) While the nuclear family created by these arranged marriages was important, the newly created extended family played a large role in economic and social life.

While marriage structures prior to the genocide would not have been perfect, they were notably different from the cruelty of forced marriage policies during the genocide. The Khmer Rouge prevented many of these marriage traditions and stopped the arrangement of marriages by family and community members. Their new system of forced marriage exploited the traditions of arranged marriage, and unions were instead forced in order to achieve their political policy objectives

**Marriage in Cambodia During the Genocide**

During the genocide, the Khmer Rouge altered the structure of marriage in Cambodia significantly. Starting in 1978, they restructured it and created a forced marriage policy to better suit their political goals of enacting a communist state, resulting in forced marriages and sexual assault within these unions.[[14]](#footnote-13) The situation in Cambodia was unique to other instances of forced marriage. In typical cases of forced marriage, women are forced to marry soldiers.[[15]](#footnote-14) While this did occasionally occur in Cambodia, the majority of forced marriages were between two civilians.[[16]](#footnote-15) This means that in the Cambodian case, there are both female and male victims of forced marriage. The policy of forced marriage during this genocide was a perversion of traditional Cambodian marriages and arranged marriage practices, and was used in a way that the Khmer Rouge could promote their ideas of population growth, and the destruction of the traditional family.

The two main objectives of the regime’s marriage policies were to destroy the traditional family structure and to promote population growth. The intention of these policies was to decrease family loyalty and to replace non-revolutionary families with revolutionary ones.[[17]](#footnote-16) They dismantled traditional values, social networks and the family unit because they were viewed as a threat to the revolution.[[18]](#footnote-17) During the genocide, all family relationships that were not state-approved were banned, and communication between family members who were separated was punishable by death.[[19]](#footnote-18) Personal relationships and displays of affection were discouraged, families were split up through relocating family members between different communes, and children were turned against their parents.[[20]](#footnote-19) They also dissolved traditional family units in favour of collectivist living.[[21]](#footnote-20) By eliminating traditional marriage practices, which were a foundation for Cambodian communities, and forcing families together to create a socialist web of connection, the Khmer Rouge was able to destroy this traditional family model and connections within it. This is a demonstration of the cultural destruction that is part of genocides. These traditional practices were then replaced by Khmer Rouge arranged marriages, which were created on the basis of population creation, rather than family bonds.

The second objective of this policy was to increase the country’s population. They attempted to increase the population from 7 million to 20 million within 10-15 years, something that could only be done by creating more children and additional marriages.[[22]](#footnote-21) Couples would be paired up, and instructed to consummate their marriages in order to produce children. These children would then be part of a new revolutionary generation, securing population growth for the Khmer Rouge and creating more workers for the country.

Despite the Khmer Rouge’s efforts, the marriages that they created were often not viewed as legitimate by the couple and their families due to the lack of tradition surrounding them, and community approval of them. Couples were typically married through mass ceremonies with one to two hundred couples.[[23]](#footnote-22) They had to make vows to accept each other and achieve the objectives of the communist party.[[24]](#footnote-23) After the ceremony, they would be sent to a shared long house divided into many rooms, one for each of the newlywed couples.[[25]](#footnote-24) They would then be instructed to “get along,” a common phrasing for instructing them to consummate their marriage.[[26]](#footnote-25) After a few nights, the couple would be separated and sent back to their own work units.[[27]](#footnote-26) They would often be brought back together every few weeks or months to have sex again, in order to create more children.[[28]](#footnote-27) Men and women between 15 and 35 were eligible for these forced marriages.[[29]](#footnote-28) Who, when, and where they would get married would be determined by the Khmer Rouge, although sometimes base people, those who had been peasant families prior to the revolution, were given the right to reject a marriage, or the right to propose to marry someone.[[30]](#footnote-29) For individuals who had their partners selected for them, this process would involve a Khmer Rouge official looking at the biographies of the people in the village and pairing them up.[[31]](#footnote-30) This was typically done at random, however, special attention was paid to their revolutionary status, ethnic background, and religious beliefs.[[32]](#footnote-31) Additionally, there were some stories of particularly beautiful women being saved for marriage to Khmer Rouge soldiers who were handicapped fighting, as a gift for them.[[33]](#footnote-32)

One testimony given regarding this system of forced marriage comes from Preap Sokhoeurn, one of the witnesses in a trial on forced marriage. She says that prior to the marriage she was not informed that the marriage would be occurring.[[34]](#footnote-33) Additionally, as her parents were absent, she did not view her marriage as legitimate and thus refused to consummate this marriage.[[35]](#footnote-34) To legitimate the marriage in the eyes of the community, traditional Cambodian weddings involved family and religious ceremonies.[[36]](#footnote-35) When the Khmer Rouge Regime came to power, forced marriages were performed with no religious ceremony, families were excluded, and there was no legitimate consent to these unions. Many couples viewed them as illegitimate.

Despite not viewing these marriages as legitimate, there were few means by which Cambodian people could oppose their marriages. This is primarily due to a fear of violence or death.[[37]](#footnote-36) This meant that individuals who did not wish to get married had a very limited number of options, which included; accepting a marriage begrudgingly, accepting torture or death, or committing suicide.[[38]](#footnote-37) Sokhoeurn speaks of friends being “disappeared” or sent for re-education after refusing to get married or consummate their marriage.[[39]](#footnote-38) This coerced people into getting married as they did not want to be harmed or sent away. One particular person who discusses this fear is Nget Chat, another witness in the trial on forced marriage, who reported that she felt she was unable to protest her marriage, and thus allowed this ceremony to happen.[[40]](#footnote-39) The experiences of Cambodian women directly contradict the official statements and policy of the Khmer Rouge officials, who argued that couples were given the opportunity to walk away if they did not agree to this marriage.[[41]](#footnote-40) While they may have in theory been able to not agree to these marriages, the fear and coercion surrounding this decision made the couples feel unable to protest or resist their marriages.

However, it is important to note that not all couples viewed themselves as victims, or viewed their marriages as forced. Some viewed their marriages as conscripted marriages. Perhaps they did not choose to get married, but they viewed it as part of a larger movement within Cambodia of which their marriage was a part.[[42]](#footnote-41) While courts, such as the ECCC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia) tribunal of 002/02 viewed these marriages as forced and wrong, not all those married felt the same way.

Additionally, the experiences of women and men in their marriages were different, as women would often bear a larger risk of social death for a marriage their community did not approve of, and the risk of an unwanted pregnancy. [[43]](#footnote-42) Women were tortured and raped if they refused to marry.[[44]](#footnote-43) As men were also forced into these marriages, they also faced risks, including a disproportionate risk if they did not create children, as well as the burden of being forced to have an unwanted child.[[45]](#footnote-44) Resistance to marriage or failure to consummate was taken as an offence against revolution and was punishable by sexual assault, hard labour, or death.[[46]](#footnote-45) While both women and men experienced forced marriage and its consequences, their experiences were vastly different.

Sexual assault, and the children resulting from it, was one of the most visible consequences of forced marriages. Individuals in the couple would feel forced to have intercourse with their new spouse and would do so against their will.[[47]](#footnote-46) Forced marriages and sexual relations perpetuated a state-enforced nature of rape and abuse.[[48]](#footnote-47) They were told that they needed to consummate the marriage and produce as many children as possible.[[49]](#footnote-48) The couples were often not aware of the larger plan to increase population through these marriages.[[50]](#footnote-49) One way in which the Khmer Rouge forced couples to have sex was through surveillance. The couple would be informed that they need to consummate their marriage, and then on the wedding night Khmer Rouge spies were placed in the huts to make sure the marriages were consummated, thus couples refusing to do so would be punished.[[51]](#footnote-50) Lawyers involved in the prosecution for forced marriages have argued that scenarios where couples were pressured to have sex through spying or threats amount to forced impregnation and sexual assault.[[52]](#footnote-51) Orders to consummate the marriage would also result in sexual assault within a marriage. The survival of the young man would depend on the sexual availability of their wives.[[53]](#footnote-52) This often resulted in them raping or sexually assaulting their wives in order to impregnate them and avoid torture or death.[[54]](#footnote-53) Sokhoeurn states that her husband had a fear of being killed if he did not force her to consummate and produce children out of this marriage.[[55]](#footnote-54) The party would engineer sexual assault for their own goals of population growth. Once married, any visits between the couple would also be during their fertile period, in order to increase the chances of pregnancy.[[56]](#footnote-55) These policies and practices all resulted in state-based, or state-promoted sexual abuse in order to fuel their objective of rapidly increasing Cambodia’s population.

Overall, policies of forced marriage and sexual abuse were created to increase the population of Cambodia and create people that would be loyal to the Khmer Rouge’s revolutionary goals. As a part of achieving these goals, the party created a cruel system of forced marriage, where couples were unable to refuse to be married, and were forced to have sex for procreative purposes. This created a culture of state-promoted sexual abuse and created problems within Cambodian marriage and family structures.

**Marriage in Cambodia After the Genocide**

In the post-genocide period, there were many ways in which trauma from a forced marriage policy has affected Cambodian society. The genocide ended in 1979 and with it, the policy of forced marriages.[[57]](#footnote-56) However, this did not mean that the effects of these marriages or the marriages themselves ended with the genocide. In fact, many couples stayed together, often due to finding love within their relationship, a feeling of obligation, or the social consequences of ending a marriage.[[58]](#footnote-57) After the genocide, there were experiences of individual trauma, collective trauma, and attempts to address the atrocities through the legal system.

Prior to the genocide, there had been a traditional and religious aspect to marriage, and for the most part, these practices returned after the genocide.[[59]](#footnote-58) However, in Cambodia today, sex and sexuality are taboo to discuss, and this affects how Cambodians frame and talk about their experiences during the genocide.[[60]](#footnote-59) It means that there is not currently a movement in Cambodia to break the silence surrounding gender-based violence like there has been in many other countries around the world in the last ten years.[[61]](#footnote-60) Instead, healing and communication about gender-based violence in Cambodia today tends to be through indirect, embodied or performative means.[[62]](#footnote-61) Examples of this include the film Red Wedding by Lida Chan and Guillaume P. Suon which focuses on the issue of forced marriage and rape.[[63]](#footnote-62) The language used surrounding gender-based violence and forced marriage is culturally specific and valid, however, it does play into a culture of impunity where those who commit crimes are not held responsible for their actions.[[64]](#footnote-63) Even after the genocide, Khmer Rouge cadres are still interspersed throughout Cambodian society. They are married to those they had subjugated, whose family members they killed, and they still exert power over their victims.[[65]](#footnote-64) This culture of impunity is further perpetuated by the fact that many members and co-conspirators of the Khmer Rouge were never prosecuted. Additionally, this culture has spread to people who perpetrate domestic violence, meaning current abusers are not prosecuted.[[66]](#footnote-65) However, there were major symbolic acts in the 2000s, such as an exhibit on forced marriage and the Minister of Culture’s declaration of her personal experience with forced marriage.[[67]](#footnote-66) If these continue, this may affect narratives around this aspect of collective trauma and could promote healing.

There have been some ways in which Cambodians have been able to experience collective healing through legal processes. This has mostly occurred through the ECCC Tribunal 002/02, which addressed Khmer Rouge policies of forced marriage during the genocide. Through this, individuals who were affected by forced marriage were able to give testimony, which may have been healing. As well, it resulted in the convictions of Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan.[[68]](#footnote-67) This trial found the defendants guilty of genocide, as well as forced marriage, and rape in forced marriage.[[69]](#footnote-68) The ECCC also recognized that forced marriage is a crime against humanity, and this was the first time people were convicted of this.[[70]](#footnote-69) Within the ECCC, marital rape has been included alongside forced marriage as a crime against humanity, which included unwanted pregnancies.[[71]](#footnote-70) However, despite progress made in this tribunal, they were also restrictive and had a limited scope. They used very restrictive language in the trials, meaning that not all cases of gender-based violence and forced marriage were viewed as meeting this legal bar.[[72]](#footnote-71) This would have resulted in some people's trauma not being legitimized.

Individual and family trauma, while not always legitimized through legal processes, is an important part of the experience of Cambodians after the genocide. Many couples stayed in their marriages and thus continued to experience the effects on their family lives. This is often due to the barriers faced in getting divorced, including cultural barriers, social stigma, concerns regarding financial instability and the difficulty of remarrying.[[73]](#footnote-72) Women whose marriages dissolved after 1979 faced increased social precarity, discrimination for having a failed marriage, and vulnerability to sexual assault.[[74]](#footnote-73) Couples who remained together may have also experienced economic hardship and emotional isolation, as their marriages were not always recognized by their communities, or one partner in the marriage was a member of the Khmer Rouge.[[75]](#footnote-74) The marital bond was intended to bind the couple for a lifetime. An overwhelming majority of survivors viewed the marriages as valid, and many remained in these marriages after the genocide.[[76]](#footnote-75) Khmer Rouge cadres are still interspersed throughout Cambodian society and continue to be married to people they had subjected.[[77]](#footnote-76) The continuation of these marriages means that for many Cambodians, the genocidal policy of forced marriage is still ongoing.

There were also a variety of mental health concerns and relationship problems that emerged in the aftermath of the genocide. This includes an increase in abandonment, polygamy, sexual violence, abuse, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[[78]](#footnote-77) Additionally, they often experience higher levels of domestic violence.[[79]](#footnote-78) Much of the torture and executions were carried out by young people who are now parents, thus affecting their parenting practices and abilities.[[80]](#footnote-79) Children were also produced in these marriages, which were often unhealthy, and thus the parenting these children received was affected. Survivors perpetrated vulnerability, violence and abuse against children and their spouses, resulting in the children of genocide survivors tending to be anxious with difficulty controlling aggression.[[81]](#footnote-80) Children were often deprived of early education and stable role models for healthy sexual and emotional relationships.[[82]](#footnote-81) Mental health and family life were, and continue to be affected by the genocide, and forced marriage policies.

For many in Cambodia, policies of forced marriage are not over. They are still married to their partners or suffering the consequences of divorce. They are children created in these unhealthy families. A lack of discussion of these harms has led to a lack of healing and acknowledgment of gender-based violence. However, there is some hope that with court cases such as the ECCC, cultural movements, and increased media awareness, individual, and communal healing from these policies can occur.

**Conclusion**

The genocide in Cambodia greatly affected marriages, individuals, family relationships, and social structures in the country. Prior to the genocide, marriages were based on consent, religion, tradition, and were approved of and arranged by family and community members. Those who got married under these systems viewed their marriages as legitimate, and these marriages tied communities and families together. During the genocide, the Khmer Rouge monopolized the previous structures of arranged marriages, but bastardized them for their own policy objectives, including replacing the traditional family with a revolutionary one and increasing population growth. Post-genocide, the traumas of these forced marriages lives on in the lives of individuals, their families and the overall community. While there have been some efforts in recent years, including with increased media attention and court cases such as the ECCC 002/02 to address the impacts and legacy of the forced marriage policies of the Khmer Rouge, these efforts do not go far enough in terms of healing the community from this genocidal practice. Thus, moving forward, efforts need to be made to open up the conversation further surrounding forced marriage to all people who were affected by it and to help and protect those who would like to escape abusive or dangerous marriages or family lives. While healing the population from this policy will take generations, and Cambodia may never fully return to the family structure it had before the genocide, aiding this current generation in healing their traumas and escaping their current situation can help to stop perpetuating the pain of the genocide.

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