TO DESTROY YOU IS NO LOSS
The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family

JOAN D. CRIDDLE and TEEDA BUTT MAM

THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS, New York

KIRKWOOD COMMUNITY COLLEGE
LEARNING RESOURCES CENTER
Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52406
I was tired of constantly being admonished to emulate the docile water buffalo. Water buffalo made no demands. They worked hard all day, yet never complained and seldom got sick. They subsisted on grass. Unthinking, they did the bidding of their masters. These dim-witted animals were more highly esteemed by Angka than any villager.

I was also weary of being compared unfavorably with bamboo; so versatile, pliable, and useful. And I resented being likened to a single grain of rice—insignificant.

According to Angka Loeu, each person should aspire to be like one grain of rice in a huge bowl—no different from any other grain and insignificant by itself. No one was to esteem himself above another. No one was irreplaceable. Only in being part of the whole did one have value. Remove one grain of rice and the bowl would be just as full.

Unsubtle allusions to the “eyes of the pineapple” insured that everyone would endeavor to remain indistinguishable from all others. No one wanted one of Angka’s many eyes focused on him.

Though talkative and friendly by nature, I had become wary and silent since coming to Khum Speu. I mentally reviewed everything before I spoke. It was best to play dumb. I tried never to stand out except by working extra hard. I never volunteered for anything or complained where it could be heard by those outside my family, or my closest friends. I took no initiative. Whenever I was asked a question, I answered, “I don’t know,” even when I knew the answer or had an opinion. I acted impressed by everything the leaders told me, as though their thoughts were profound. I dutifully sang the Communist songs, did my work in silence, watched old village girls, and tried to act as they did.

I found that it was not even wise to show any intelligence about Communist matters. When a passage was read from Chairman Mao’s “Little Red Book,” I just looked blank and asked, “Oh, what does that mean?” Even when the meaning was readily apparent, village leaders preferred to believe that only they could comprehend the deep meanings of this profound manual.

If the Khmer Rouge praised cowlike behavior, I vowed to appear as docile and unthinking as the oxen that plowed the fields. I tried to will my mind to shut down, so that I could go about my work like a dim ox. My mind refused.

I’d catch myself reliving childhood scenes or deriding some inane slogan. I, too, joined in the dangerous habit of singing insulting ditties under my breath.

Communist leaders who understood the play on words in an innocuous lyric still had difficulty justifying punishment of those who sang it, especially the punishment of little children. Many old villagers, ignorant of the second meaning, sang the words aloud in all innocence as they worked.

One song would not leave my head; it popped unbidden into my thoughts whenever I was not on guard. I feared Angka’s leaders could sense when I was thinking this song, or that out of carelessness I would sing it out loud where they could hear. They seemed to have the uncanny ability to know everything about a person. On the surface, it was a song about planting, but
ling-go, meaning sesame, is similar to the word for stupid, and kor, the kapok tree, also means silent or mute. The song’s lyric said: “You know you must plant trees./To do well you must plant ling-go and kor.” The double meaning was: “You know you must plant trees./To stay alive you must be stupid and mute.”

Slogans. Endless, endless slogans were repeated over loudspeakers throughout the day and in the evening at the interminable meetings. I wanted to clap my hands over my ears to shut out the unwelcome words. “Forget all you learned. Hate the former regimes. Hate American imperialists.”

Even China and Russia came under attack for faulty implementation of communism. Lon Nol and Prince Sihanouk were vilified. Yet, in the same breath, we were told that hate was evil and had no place in the new society. Angka was the people and now that everything belonged to Angka, hate and envy should cease. We were free; we were happy.

“Give your whole life to Angka.” “Be prepared to sacrifice yourself.” “Be like the water buffalo; contribute but make no demands on society.”

It was hard to keep track of time; life was the same from day to day, month to month: work and fear. In dry weather, I labored on dam projects with my youth crew and often lived away from home. In the rainy season, I worked closer to Speu. There were few days or experiences that stand out.

During evenings when we camped at the dam site, I wove hats from palm fronds for my family or as barter items. Usually, however, I was too spent to do anything not required. At least away from the village we were not subjected to nightly indoctrination sessions. They were far more oppressive than work. To come back to the village muddy and exhausted after a long day in the fields, I dreaded the nightly meetings where the entire village of several hundred people met for three or four hours of numbing speeches and confessions. I dared not be absent, nor let my head nod or my eyelids droop as I sat on the hard, backless benches in the communal dining pavilion.

Meetings began with a few rousing Communist songs, that no one dared refuse to sing with gusto. In Phnom Penh, I’d loved to sing along with records or the radio. I’d known all the popular American and English songs by heart. Now I limited my singing to the requirements of evening meetings or to humming a satiric refrain while I worked.

After the songs, evening meetings settled into the first order of business—kosang, a formal warning that a person had displeased Angka. Anyone could charge another with real or supposed failings. Old villagers had some opportunity to discuss their alleged crimes before being punished. New villagers were expected to “confess” without knowing the charges. It was a dictum of Angka that in our society of comrades, the faults of another were only pointed out to help that person improve; therefore, the “guilty” were expected to submit to the humiliation of a kosang, then “reconstruct themselves” into good people by confessing and repenting. Most often it was new villagers who needed reconstructing.

For a minor infraction, a kosang usually brought denial of food for the next day, reduced rations, or extra work. A person was “called to see Angka” or sent for “reeducation” if they committed a “serious crime” or after they’d received several kosangs. Prisons and work camps for intractable citizens were almost nonexistent. Either a person was an asset, or he was an expendable liability. Old villagers were usually deemed capable of mending their ways; new villagers were often ruled incorrigible.

Children were encouraged to report failings in their parents and other adults; their word was taken as fact. An envious neighbor, or one harboring a grudge, could cause trouble or even death by accusing his enemy of failure to live by some Khmer Rouge rule. Seldom did anyone receive more than a couple of kosangs of a serious nature. The most common serious crimes
were stealing food, keeping a private hoard of rice, or dwelling on the past. Even asking to stay home when ill could bring the serious accusation of laziness.

In addition to facing accusations by others, we were expected to confess areas in which we had failed to do our best for Angka. If a person did not stand up often and admit his own failings, he could be certain others would point them out. My family actively sought for trivial things we had failed to do well, so we would have something to confess that would not bring serious repercussions, yet would show that we were trying to improve.

During the final part of the meetings, we were bombarded with local lectures or broadcasts from Phnom Penh. Often our illiterate leaders, not expected to think for themselves or offer original ideas, simply spewed forth strings of Communist sayings about the need to increase production.

Another favorite lecture theme was renunciation of personal desires for group goals. Renunciation of material goods, wealth, education, family ties, and religion were all recurring subjects. Angka wanted all villagers to cease to be concerned with themselves, to strip away pride and envy. Individualism was to succumb to collectivism.

Sometimes there were theatrical performances by children at evening meetings. We were expected to give these productions our solemn attention. These embarrassingly amateur plays depicted gory scenes in which loyal, valiant Khmer Rouge were beaten and tortured by diabolical Lon Nol soldiers, with the Khmer Rouge always triumphing in the end. Villains wore black moustaches and made awful grimaces to indicate their wicked nature. Other revolutionary themes were similarly treated. I had no firsthand knowledge regarding the inhumane treatment of Khmer Rouge soldiers or villagers by Lon Nol’s army, but the barbaric acts they committed in these plays were identical to those the Khmer Rouge perpetrated against us.

I joined a group of villagers one evening in a jungle clearing to watch a propaganda film extolling the close ties between Cambodia and China. It featured Pol Pot and other leaders who had traveled to Peking, and I was curious to see just what the men behind the awesome Angka Locu looked like. To my surprise, they were ordinary-looking men, about the age of my father. I felt an emotional letdown when I saw how unexceptional they looked. The incessant propaganda had led me to believe that The High Organization was composed of superhumans. Looking at these griming men, it was hard to imagine any of them willfully ordering the backbreaking labor, suffering, and death I saw each day.

No matter how hard we worked, we never received any praise for our efforts. Respite and rewards were nonexistent. Lack of punishment was the most we could hope for. There seemed no way for a new villager to win favor, no way to negotiate the system, only punishment for any infraction no matter how minor. Fear for my life was so constant that I had to force myself to block it from my mind. More and more I felt I would welcome death.

I probably would have killed myself if I hadn’t known my family would be punished harshly for my act. Suicide was considered criticism of the regime. Angka reasoned that if a person killed himself, he had a negative attitude, which was most likely shared by his family. I decided I would will myself to live at least until Mum died. When Soorsdey married, there would be just the two of us in the hut, so it was not likely that my sisters and their families would still be considered part of my family.

A favorite slogan of the evening meetings was “You are responsible for yourself.” “Self-responsibility.” The innocent words had a sinister implication under Angka.

Work crews, for instance, were divided into several small
units. Each unit, of four or five people, was given an assignment for the day, along with the admonition that we were responsible for ourselves, meaning work did not end until the assigned goal was reached. Excuses were not accepted, and supervision was unnecessary. Either we remained in the fields until completion of the task or suffered the consequences.

On one work assignment the first year I was in the village, my crew of five girls was camped near a dam site and given an assignment to transport five cubic meters of dirt to the dam each day. If we finished early, we were through. If not, we remained until the work was done, no matter how long it took. Though I was very ill at the time, I dared not quit or slow my pace. I did not want to be called lazy and reported for a kosang. Besides, everyone in this crew was a friend, and I did not want to let them down or they, too, would be in trouble. I knew that the girls wanted to finish early so we could sleep during the heat of the day. However, if we finished early consistently, our leaders assumed our workload was too light and added more.

It was hard to do my share the first day that I was sick. I had a slight fever, and although I was ravenously hungry, I was unable to eat. All through the next day, I fought fever and nausea. At night, I took a bath in a jungle stream. At first, the cold water felt good, then chills set in. I was extremely ill and unable to sleep. I'd just dozed off when it was time to work again. My crew wanted to beat the unbearable afternoon heat by starting at 2:00 A.M. A full moon lit our way as we hauled dirt.

I had asked the "nurse" for some medicine to settle my stomach and reduce my fever, and was given a routine folk cure. After the second full day of work, still unable to eat or sleep, I was desperately ill. Returning to the nurse a second time, I obtained the poisonous sleng seed that served as our antibiotic. Throughout the day, I worked and nibbled on pieces of this bitter seed, finally taking five sections of it at once. I would either be cured or killed in the process and didn't care which.

Still the fever rose. The third day was the worst. Much of the day I worked in a state of delirium. I thought I would be dead before nightfall, but at least it couldn't be called suicide.

Day after day, I worked in spite of the fever, eating piece after piece of the seed. Eventually, my illness subsided. I never lost a day's work, thanks to friends who made up for my slowness by working extra hard themselves.

Since thousands of doctors and medical personnel had been found and liquidated, the "doctors" and "nurses" now available were untrained. They were merely soldiers who had been assigned these titles and functions. The nurse I went to see was a sixteen-year-old village girl turned soldier. She could neither write, nor read to know what was in the bottles she dispensed. Reading was not essential, however; under the Pol Pot system of medicine, each patient diagnosed his own symptoms and requested a specific treatment. The nurse unquestioningly gave it. Medicines for stomach upsets, diarrhea, and fever were most in demand. Angka's doctors and nurses administered intravenous feedings using green coconut milk for serum; needles were reused repeatedly without sterilization.

The only other source of medical help available to villagers was the krou Khmer, who used a combination of herbal cures and charms to treat patients and exorcise ghosts. At least these native doctors had spent years as apprentices to learn the collected wisdom of past generations. The longer we lived in Khum Speu, the less we scoffed at the krou Khmers' potions and chants. However, people in most villages did not even have the luxury of a well-trained witch doctor to consult.

Angka scorned Western medicines, claiming that herbal cures were sufficient—except, of course, for high-ranking leaders. Angka retained fully qualified doctors to treat top leaders, using modern antibiotics and techniques. The attitude seemed to be that the average peasant should either be strong enough to function without medical attention or, quite properly, should die, and thus relieve the state of supporting a nonproducer.

The second time my fever flared, I was so faint that I
that by eating the bile duct of a victim, they would become staunch enough not to require wine. Dried, powdered bile duct was therefore added to their alcoholic drinks. Eventually, some soldiers were able to kill without being intoxicated. Some even learned to relish it and bragged about it afterward.

An entirely new malady was chhoeu sattel, “memory sickness,” suffered by those who longed for the past or complained about how bleak life was now. Anyone with photos or heirlooms could be accused of memory sickness. A special symptom was failure to report for a full day’s work. Rather than force a person to work against his will, or to work in poor health, a solicitous leader simply dropped by the person’s hut and casually said, “Don’t worry. Worry only makes you get worse. If you worry, you might think about the old days.” The implied threat that the person might be accused of memory sickness was usually enough to get the worker back on his feet and into the fields—sometimes only to die on the job. Those with acute or chronic memory sickness were sent to see Angka.

There was no harm in keeping photos that depicted old village ways, but if they showed a person wearing Western clothing or indicated other signs of “wealth or contamination by the West,” it was dangerous to have them. What few photos we had certainly were damning by Khmer Rouge standards. Possession of family letters, such as the last note from my father, showed an unhealthy concern for the past. In addition, it obviously indicated that we could read. Also, the items my father had asked for identified him as a “wealthy” man, and a traitor to Cambodia by virtue of having been detained. Yet we refused to part with these cherished, damning objects of remembrance.

Except for annual bouts of nausea and fever, I was seldom seriously ill. The supplemental food, which our carefully husbanded resources allowed us to buy, maintained my basic health. Only one further serious illness plagued me. It was brought on by the poison spray I was assigned to spread over
TO DESTROY YOU IS NO LOSS

Premarital or extramarital sex brought the death penalty. Not many were killed for adultery; most people were too tired to find or be a willing partner.

Repeated quarreling with a spouse brought enforced separation or possible death. But there wasn't much quarreling either. All a person wanted was to eat and sleep after an exhausting day of work. It takes energy to fight or make love, and few had the stamina for either.

Along with the awesome words "Angka Loeu," which had come to imply some godlike creature who capriciously meted out death and seemed to know my every thought and action, there was another phrase that filled me with fear and a sense of helplessness.

The dreaded phrase was lut-dom. Lut is the part of metal processing in which a rod of metal is placed in a fire until it is red-hot and pliable. Dom means the hammering—when the hot metal is put on the anvil and pounded into shape, any shape desired. Lut-dom described the way people were expected to be molded by Angka into the pure Communists of the future. If, after heating and hammering into shape, they still refused to conform, they were either "reheated" in the fire of evening political meetings and everyday struggle, or disposed of.

Whenever leaders referred to the Wheel of History—implying that the inevitable era of communism had arrived—I could not help but conjure up the awful image of a huge wheel grinding me under as it rolled slowly but relentlessly forward. "The new Cambodia is like a train gathering speed," we were told. "Nothing you do will stop it. If you try to step down or stop the rushing train, you will be crushed under its powerful wheels." I had become unwilling baggage aboard the train of this alien ideology, yet I could find no way to get off. After almost two years under Angka, the future seemed a gaping, black tunnel rushing to swallow me.

Dreams were my escape—a way to bend without break-
TO DESTROY YOU IS NO LOSS

ing. Every night, I relived happy family parties, school events, or childhood games. The worse my daylight existence, the sweeter my dreams.

I seldom thought about the future; it seemed nonexistent. However, while I worked in silence, I often dwelled on the past—a sure sign of “memory sickness.”

I mourned the passing of time. The Communists were robbing me of the many occasions that traditionally had marked a girl’s developing maturity. It made me sad that unlike my mother and sisters, I’d never learned to cook. Under the Khmer Rouge, only trusted old villagers were allowed to prepare food, though it took no special talent to boil huge vats of gritty rice that was often raw on top and burned on the bottom. Cooking had lost all semblance of the art my mother and sisters had practiced.

The best meals I ate after we arrived in Khum Speu were some my work crew helped provide. There was the snake we grabbed and the time we caught some fish. In the process of building dikes across the tributary of a small canal, we had created a pond. Forming bucket brigades, we passed bamboo buckets down the serpentine lines and dumped the water across the dike into the stream below. Hour after exhausting hour we bailed. By evening, the pond was almost dry. Schools of small fish were trapped in the remaining water. The leaders had allowed us to catch the fish for the communal kitchen. Some were eaten that night; others were pickled, then soaked with rice for several days. After aging, the fish were fried as a special treat to accompany the usual portion of rice. In memory, I savored those delicious meals.

Some days as I worked I thought of cheese, a food foreign to the Cambodian diet. When Papa had taken us to a French restaurant, I had sometimes tried it. Mum had even bought the rubbery stuff from an import shop once in a while. It was a funny, chewy food, but I had liked it for breakfast on French

bread with a little sugar sprinkled over it. Knowing I would most likely never taste cheese again, I found myself thinking of it often. I constantly thought about food, or its lack.

Several times a year, when I was young, my father had rounded up our family, his two sisters’ families, and any other relatives that were handy and had taken everyone to a nice restaurant for a grand banquet. Oh, how I missed my father, who had loved to please and surprise us.

Each New Year’s Day, he had played cards with all the children: his own as well as nieces and nephews and his friends’ children. He’d stacked a pile of riels on the table and paid the winner of each game. He paid the loser; he paid the second best; and before the day was over, he found an excuse to let every child win a hundred-riels note for his very own.

Ironically, as the days became more nightmarish, my dreams became increasingly delightful. I often dreamed of times Papa had taken us to ballets, where beautiful girls with long fingernails executed intricate movements. Their graceful bodies swayed to the music like bamboo in the wind. In dance, they told the eternal stories of good versus evil—stories from our Buddhist scriptures. These professional dance troupes were remnants of old court days, when dancing girls were trained from infancy to entertain the god-kings.

By the time I was born, those days of opulence were already dying out rapidly. Prince Sihanouk had moved from his father’s sumptuous palace and lived in the government-built official residence of Chamcar Mon. After the coup, Lon Nol also had lived in the Chamcar Mon villa. The old royal palace had been turned into a national museum, filled with jewels, gold-covered Buddhas, and beautiful thrones. My school class had gone there. The Khmer Rouge had looted and vandalized the beautiful building shortly after they entered Phnom Penh.

When I was about twelve years old, the villa of Chamcar Mon had been bombed by a disgruntled military officer—the
lover of one of Prince Sihanouk's relatives. The officer had hijacked a small fighter-bomber and attacked the villa because he felt his career was being thwarted. My school was about a mile from the villa, so when we heard the bombs explode, all the girls had run up to the rooftop patio to get a better look. Most of the bombs had fallen on Chamcar Mon's manicured grounds. Lon Nol suffered only superficial cuts, but forty-three people had been killed in the attack. By prearrangement, the pilot had flown to a part of Cambodia controlled by the Khmer Rouge.

That bombing incident had been the first time I'd focused on the Khmer Rouge. I'd decided then and there that they must be bad people to have allowed that pilot a haven after he'd killed so many people. I had joined the national outcry for his return.

Oh how naïve I had been—we all had been. Obviously, the death of a few dozen people had little meaning to Pol Pot and his colleagues, who not only bombarded us nightly with a full repertoire of frightening slogans and veiled threats, but who actually killed people over minor infractions of their impossible rules. We'd almost grown accustomed to being told:

"To keep you is no benefit. To destroy you is no loss."
"Even the slightest infraction can lead to disappearance."
"We may have to send you to see Angka."
"I wonder if you are suffering from memory sickness?"

I tried to accept the fact that life might never revert to the ways I'd known. If so, the only school certificate that I would ever earn had been the one the neary took away—the one that showed I'd graduated from grade school. Because of my father's plan for me to master English, I'd been transferred to an English school when I was ten. The transfer put me two years behind other girls my age. We'd now lived under the Khmer Rouge for almost two years, which put me further behind my age level, and there was no indication that schools would reopen soon, if ever.

Discouraged over my lost education and bleak future,