

***Cambodia's Trials: Contrasting Visions of Truth, Transitional Justice, and National Recovery.* Edited by Robin Biddulph and Alexandra Kent. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Asian Topics, no. 81. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2023. Softcover: 400pp.**

This edited volume is a comprehensive examination of Cambodia's experiments with "transitional justice" following the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. It delves into the complexities and challenges of applying transitional justice—a concept that "justice, truth and healing" after a mass atrocity are "integrally linked to the establishment of liberal democracy" (p. 7)—in a country with a deeply entrenched system of governance that is resistant to democratic or human rights norms. Through contributions from numerous experts and analysts, *Cambodia's Trials* focuses on how the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), a special United Nations-backed court established in 2001 to prosecute the principal leaders of the Khmer Rouge, interacted with Cambodia's post-conflict society and justice system, as well as the broader historical and cultural context of the country in which these trials occurred.

The volume is structured into three main sections: "Context", "Interactions" and "Beyond". Collectively, they offer a nuanced critique of the ECCC's effectiveness, its impact on Cambodian society and the ongoing struggle for truth and justice beyond the tribunal's scope. The chapters in each of these three sections employ a range of perspectives, from legal analysis to ethnographic studies, to piece together a more comprehensive understanding of Cambodia's trials and tribulations in the aftermath of genocide. Significantly, the book highlights the limitations of the ECCC and the broader international justice system in accommodating Cambodia's complex sociopolitical and cultural realities. It also sheds light on the innovative ways Cambodians have sought to come to terms with their past by highlighting the importance of looking beyond conventional transitional justice mechanisms to truly understand and support a nation's recovery process.

*Cambodia's Trials* emerges as a pivotal text in the discourse on transitional justice, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia's tumultuous history. It not only scrutinizes the trials of the Khmer Rouge leadership under the ECCC but also critically examines the broader implications of these trials on the national psyche, societal reconciliation and the complex fabric of Cambodian governance.

The volume begins by providing a comprehensive backdrop, detailing Cambodia's historical, cultural and political landscapes that predated the ECCC. This section illuminates the intricate dynamics between global justice mandates and local realities, emphasizing the uniqueness of the Cambodian context. The nuanced exploration of Cambodia's past, including colonial legacies, civil conflict and the devastating reign of the Khmer Rouge, provides a solid foundation for understanding the complexities of the subsequent trials. The analysis is multifaceted, exploring how the ECCC's legal proceedings impacted victims' communities, the role of civil society organizations in navigating the justice process and the public's perception and engagement with the trials. Through this lens, the volume critiques the ECCC's limitations in achieving comprehensive justice and reconciliation, pointing out the gaps between international legal standards and local expectations of justice.

However, it also transcends the courtroom to explore the broader implications of the ECCC on Cambodia's national recovery and the ongoing quest for truth and memory. It critically assesses the role of memorialization processes, educational reforms and community-based initiatives in healing the wounds of the past. The final parts of the volume underscore the importance of local narratives and practices in the broader framework of transitional justice, suggesting that true reconciliation extends far beyond legal judgements. Throughout, *Cambodia's Trials* offers critical perspectives on the efficacy of transitional justice mechanisms in countries like Cambodia, where historical injustices are deeply interwoven with contemporary political and social realities. The contributors collectively advocate for a more nuanced, context-sensitive approach to justice and reconciliation, one that accommodates the complexities of individual and collective memory, cultural practices and political constraints. Its conclusions offer reflections on the lessons learned from Cambodia's experience in the field of transitional justice and provide examples that could be useful for other societies emerging from periods of conflict and repression. As such, the Cambodian case study offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of implementing transitional justice in a meaningful and transformative way for affected communities.

At the same time, the critical analysis in this volume encourages a rethinking of transitional justice paradigms and advocates for approaches that are more inclusive of local contexts and that support the multifaceted processes of national healing and recovery. According to Laura McGrew, one of the contributors, while time may heal some

wounds, “Cambodians’ deference to Buddhism and karmic justice (in the next life) and their beliefs in ancestral spirits, must also be acknowledged as pathways to local healing and reconciliation” (p. 168). Indeed, whether through Buddhism, Brahmanism or Western notions of norm penetration, Cambodians have sought to reconcile their own truths and justice, especially during a time when, after the 1990s, the country rapidly underwent the processes of modernization, urbanization and industrialization. For instance, Eve Zucker, in Chapter 12, makes the fascinating argument that when people began to perceive an image of a female Khmer Rouge soldier that had been carved onto a boulder instead as a portrayal of the Cambodian tutelary spirit Yeay Mao, it could have been an appeal to Brahmanism “in response to a need to cope with the rapidity of social change wrought by modernity” (p. 343).

While *Cambodia’s Trials* offers comprehensive insights into transitional justice in Cambodia, one could argue that its critical analysis leans heavily towards the limitations and challenges of the ECCC, potentially underrepresenting its achievements and the positive impacts of international legal interventions. (However, this reviewer, having written extensively about the ECCC’s failings as a recognized civil party, feels that such critical analysis is essential.) Additionally, the book’s focus on broader societal and political implications could be seen as insufficiently detailed in discussing the legal intricacies and procedural aspects of the trials themselves. As such, one might reason that there is also the need for a more balanced examination that equally highlights the successes alongside the critiques. Nonetheless, *Cambodia’s Trials* is an essential read for scholars, policymakers and practitioners engaged in transitional justice, Southeast Asian studies and human rights. Its comprehensive analysis, critical insights and forward-looking perspectives significantly contribute to understanding the complexities of reconciling with a troubled past. It not only enriches the academic discourse on transitional justice but also serves as a guide for future efforts to address historical injustices in Cambodia and beyond.

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