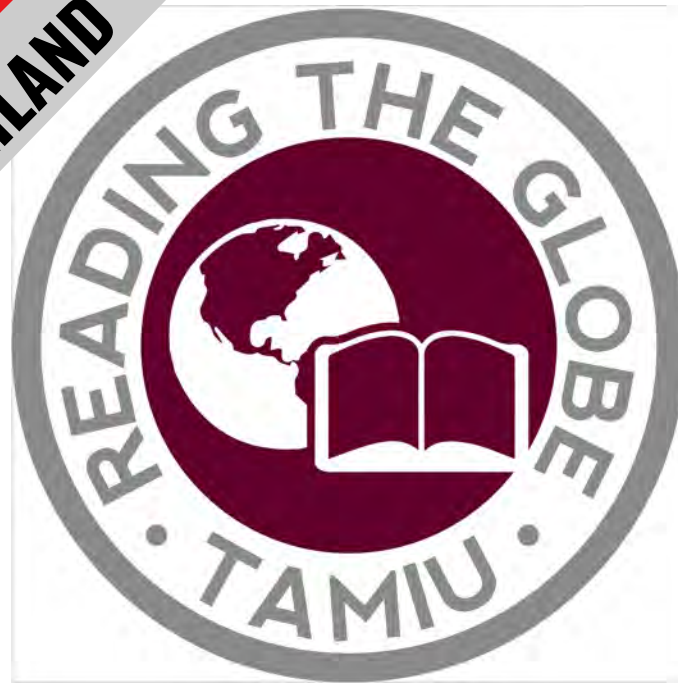


**CAMBODIA & THAILAND**



**2018-2019**

**Common Read**

***First They Killed My Father:  
A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers***





On December 28, a select group of 15 Texas A&M International University students will travel to Cambodia as part of the University's "Reading the Globe Program."

Students participating in the program include: Jhoana Ángeles, Marianna Canales, Fernanda Nuñez Cazares, Brandon Cienfuegos, Andrea Flores, Nicholas Gabrillo, Yazmin Garcilazo, Agustín Gonzalez, Katya Guadiola, Carolina Herrera, Estefania Magallanes, Mariana Ponce, Lesdy Posadas, Astrid Veliz, and Chelsea Villarreal.

Their time in Cambodia is highly structured with academic classes, guest lectures, related tours and a service-learning opportunity.

Take a look at pictures and and blog entries from the RTG Ambassadors during their trip. Visit [www.instagram.com/tamiureadingtheglobe](http://www.instagram.com/tamiureadingtheglobe) for more blog entries.



As I stared at the barbed wire at the top of the fence, I imagine the immense pain the prisoners at that jail, that was once a high school, must have felt.

A school. A place that is meant to nourish the minds of the young generations to lead the country in the future, but unfortunately became a place where thousands of people lost their lives in the most horrible ways that can not even be imagined.

Before entering the worn down buildings at the prison, I felt a strong pain on my chest as I recalled the research I made on this place. I knew what I was facing, I saw it and read it on line, so I knew exactly what I was going to see... Or so I thought.

Horrible is not even close enough to describe how I felt the moment I stepped inside the cells that those innocent people were tortured in, and gave there last breath in agony. The pain of walking through the hallways of the buildings is like nothing I've ever experienced before. Looking at the pictures of the inmates with horrible injuries of torture, and old stains of blood on the floor created a knot on my stomach. Looking at the paintings that describe the way children were torn from their mothers and used as a bullseye for the soldiers infuriated me.

But seeing the human remains that were found in the prison pierced directly through my heart. The cruelty that surrounded these innocent people was so strong that it could still be felt. It is a feeling so strong that I was no longer able to breathe as I kept ascending the floors of the buildings.

It is unbelievable how much cruelty there has to be in a person in order to be able to mistreat their own people in such a horrible way, and it is even worst to think that all of these events did in fact happen.



On our second day in Phnom Penh we arrived at the DC-CAM, an organization that have a mission to promote memory, justice, and reconciliation after the tragic events that occurred in the late 1970's.

We had the pleasure to enjoy a documentary about the history of Rock n' Roll in Cambodia and the effects many singers encountered during the Khmer Rouge regime. We watched as many singers told their tragic story of their encounter with the Khmer Rouge soldiers and the emotion they felt when music was torn away from them.



While watching the documentary we were surrounded by many works of art that portrayed students imagination about the possibility of what Phnom Penh could have been if the genocide had not occurred. The detail work on the artwork showed the talent that students in Cambodia have and the hope they have for the reconstruction of Phnom Penh. The works of art were breathtaking and made us ponder of the grave effects that the Khmer Rouge had on Cambodia. We as well learned the significance that an urn has on Khmer culture.

The traditional urns are made of either metal or ceramic with a pointed top to symbolize a higher place, signifying a prosperous transition of the dead from earth to a sacred place.



Yesterday we had the rare opportunity to visit and speak with both a survivor and perpetrator of the Khmer Rouge Regime. Spending a semester reading and learning about Cambodia and its history does not compare to exchanging words with people who experienced these horrors firsthand. I will admit, I was most apprehensive about meeting with the perpetrator. Before going in I prepared a few questions for myself and tried to envision what exactly a former Khmer Rouge soldier would be like. Would he be regretful of his actions? Would he be open to speaking about his experiences? Does his family know about his past? All of these questions and more stormed throughout my mind; however, when he stepped into the room, we were seen face-to-face with a local elderly man, which without prior knowledge, I would more than likely be oblivious to his past.

While speaking to him I learned that before the Khmer Rouge Regime, he was a farmer, and when the Khmer Rouge took over was forced to join to avoid execution. He was a prison guard at S-21 in Phnom Penh and did what he was told to protect his family. Now, he is open about sharing his experiences as a soldier with his family - including his next door neighbor!

Next we sat down and spoke with a survivor and former prisoner of the S-21 prison. He shared the cruelty endured during his time at S-21 and how he unfortunately lost his entire family to the Khmer Rouge Genocide. Despite everything, he even wrote a book describing his life before and after the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and dedicates his time to sharing his story at the S-21 Museum. Although reliving his time at S-21 is difficult, he feels it is his duty and obligation to find a light amongst the darkness and come forth with his story. He hopes that his resilience and experiences can bring awareness to the Khmer Rouge Genocide and be a voice to the millions of silent survivors living around the world today.



Today we learned about the local Muslim community and their experiences before and after the ruling of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Farina So presented on the background and context of the village we were about to experience. The Khmer Rouge sought to eliminate education and religion as they felt threatened by both fields.

As we reflected on the unfathomable truth of their stances during the genocide, it was overwhelming to comprehend their ability to preserve their religion throughout their circumstances.

This presentation then led to our visit to the Cham village, a community of Cambodian Muslims. We took a seat with the chief leader and three other elders of that village. The chief walked us through his personal experiences during the genocide. It's notable to mention the joy the community possessed greeting foreigners with a diverse set of religions. Despite growing up as a practicing Catholic, the Muslim community made me feel as if I belonged in that village. Their dedication to their religious beliefs is admirable and reflected in the eyes of the children present in the community

A visit to Cham, a Muslim community near Phnom Penh. RTG Ambassadors met with village elders who talked about how they rebuilt their community after the Khmer Rouge.



After saying goodbye to Phnom Penh, we traveled north to the Kampong Thom province to visit the ancient Pre-Angkorian ruins of Sambor Prei Kuk.

These ruins date back to the 7th century in which the Chenla Kingdom reigned, and it is believed that they established the temples as a central royal sanctuary and capital.

These temple ruins were dedicated to the Hindu gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, so their images are carved in various places all around the ruins, and in the many details on the ruins that pertain to the Hindu culture. Hinduism was brought into Cambodia from northern India through the marriage of a Cambodian princess to an Indian prince.



An example of Hindu influence in Sambor Prei Kuk was in one of the temple ruins that contained a carving depicting what is known in Hinduism as the "Floating Palace" or heaven. This carved image portrays how the world is viewed in Hinduism. There are three levels of the world: Heaven, Limbo, and Hell.

This usage of the number three is used everywhere in the temple including the depictions of the Floating Palace, the trinity of the gods and the steps at the entrances of the temples. The symbolism and meticulous details in these ruins leaves me in awe and appreciation of the amazing things humankind has been capable of. I am very thankful for having been given the opportunity to experience an incredible historical site that exemplifies and celebrates a part of the wonderfully rich Cambodian culture.





Only 3 days after leaving for Cambodia, we were able to experience what the locals call "International New Year" which is the New Year celebrated around the world. The Cambodian New Year is in the month of April, but they also celebrate New Year on January 1st. Celebrating in a foreign country was exciting, beautiful, and definitely an experience we will never forget.

The streets were filled with men, women, and children of all ages walking around on their bare feet eating food sold by the vendors that lined the sidewalk. Motorbikes squeezed in between and managed to drive through the large crowds of people. Men managing tuk tuks repeatedly asked the adults passing by if they needed rides. There was a concert taking place farther along the river with spotlights shining everywhere and colorful lights flashing to the beat of the music.

About 30 minutes before midnight, swarms of people sat by the river popping fireworks randomly waiting for the new year. Boats with colorful lights filled the river each blasting their own music while people danced on the deck. Right before midnight everyone began to count down. As the clock hit 12:00 AM, from the street, to the river, to the concert in the distance, fireworks exploded into the air.

We looked at the sky and the sight was absolutely beautiful. The night sky was now filled with all kinds of colors of fireworks and the environment was filled with happiness and gratefulness for another year. Celebrating this holiday in Phnom Penh, Cambodia was definitely a once in a lifetime experience that we will forever cherish and never forget.



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