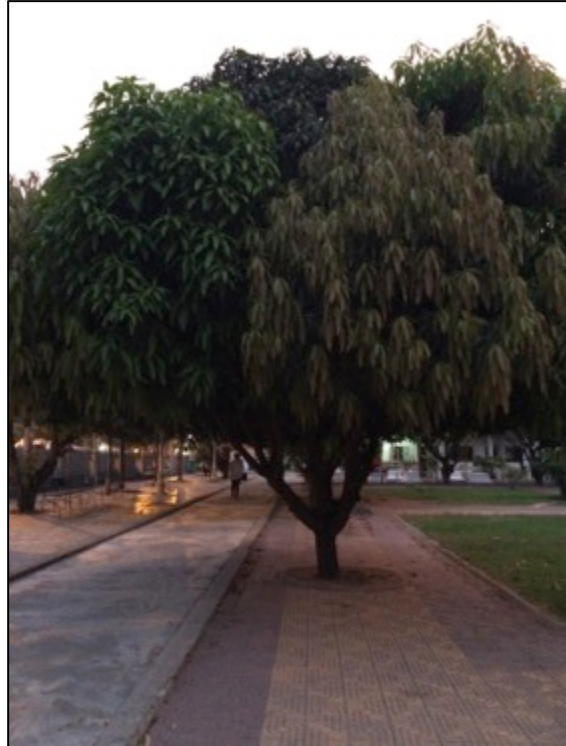


*Sirtii Canbaha (The secret of the mango tree)*

Jama Musse Jama, 2017

The whisper comes to my ears like the bleak and disturbing buzzing of a mosquito in the summer nights. "Do not turn on that tape," the otherwise friendly voice says, and pauses for a moment, then it sighs deep and continues: "... listen to me, I can tell you much more than him". I looked around and I failed to see anyone. "My name is *Sway*, I am the never-born-daughter of those two motionless giants behind you," the voice concludes. Silence follows, I remained lost for a while, and then I asked the invisible presence "who are the giants you are talking about?" "Those big and motionless mango trees", the voice replied.

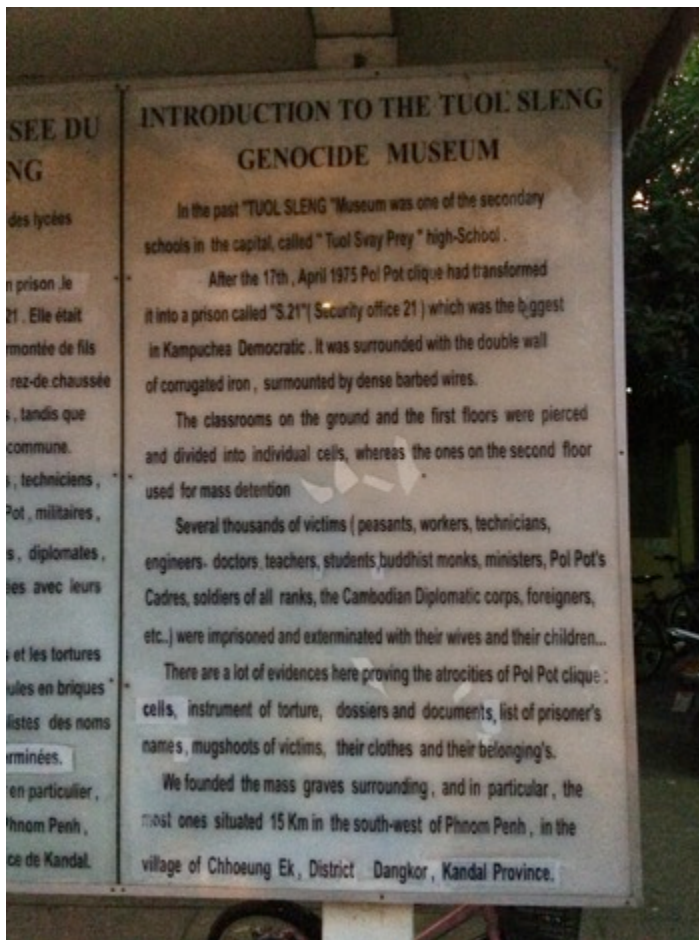


Shocked on the one hand, but at the same time a little puzzled by my believe in talking to an invisible entity; my absurd conversation with the voice takes up again. In the meantime, I have switched on the electronic-audio-guide device, and I am listening the male voice that escorts me to my visit to the museum. The dialogue continues alternating with my listening of the audio-guide of the museum.

"Hello, my name is Rosal Kosal. I would like to thank you, first of all, for coming to the Cheoung Ek Genocidal Center, known to many as the *Killing Fields*. I know this is not an easy place to visit unlike our beautiful National Museum or Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. But we are grateful that you have come here today to see this place of memory and not one of fear. Before we get going please make sure you know how to work your audio player."

The voice of Rosal Kosal is of a survivor of the Khmer Rouge. "I was born in Phnom Penh and I am Cambodian. Every one of us suffered in one way or another, on to what happened in our beautiful country on 17 April 1975. That day the fanatical leader, Pol Pot destroyed our world and replaced with his [...] regime of pure communist society. I was lucky, I managed to escape from the killing fields."

Hearing this while visiting this place is absolutely horrible. You see the scares



of the crime in every angle of the building. You watch the scenes of the perpetrators through these walls that for a long time keep such deep secrets. The trees growing inside the garden tells you more, and the cold wind coming from the north brings a message of grief. The mango trees are four. They are always green. Only if your heart is able to listen the invisible voices, I thought. The trees feeding the sand and the souls of the dead is a

belief that transcends religious and cultural borders. Placing a branch of palm tree on the graves is a habit of the Somalis and elsewhere. The magnitude of the mango tree and its shade calmed down my tension.

I walked slowly to the building all the while hearing the digital guide: "Under Pol Pot, as many as three millions Cambodian died, out of eight million, where ever you come from, imagine if more than one out every four people in your country was killed, and by your own people. That is what happened in

Cambodia. Over 20,000 people were murdered right here at Cheoung. This was only one of more than three hundred killing fields through out the country. Today it is our main memorial site to all who perished. They were all executed in cold blood because hatred, ignorance and fear of all false cause. Stop number 2 is symbol sign marking that was once a truck stop. Before you listen to it, if you want to hear about how this place came to be the killing field, press 101. You may want to sit to listen.”



I sit down under the shade of one of the four mango trees placed in front of building B. I did not identify which two of the four my voice friend was talking about. All four Mangos are more or less the same size. They are big and motionless. Three white people, apparently Western European nationals, two women and man, wearing shorts and beach dressing, are walking and laughing loudly for no apparent reason. They are invisible to me, and the initially annoying voice, the invisible speaker, now is closer to me than these three people. I saw from long distance the face of Ruth, the grass-root activist who comes from Manchester, and that of Ksenia Tsoy from China, both guests of Cambodian Living Arts Forum, like me. They are both moved,

touched by the story of this place. I relate to them from distance while sitting under the mango tree.

Before I press 101, I hear again the invisible voice sobbing. The strange dialog takes again up:

“Why are you here?” I asked the invisible presence around me.

“To feed the soil of the deaths” she answered me softly.

“What?”

“With good, ... a..an..an... and good food, .... rice, it should be rice and should be white. We will add separate dish of full of *aping*. They like. Souls of death like the food they used to eat when they were in the bodies of the death.”

“Tell me who were the Khmer regime”, I asked.

“The Cambodian communist guerrilla group trained by the North Vietnamese with Chinese and Soviet weaponry. But why are you asking, please hear what I have to say in silence. Help me to find one spoon of rice, white rice it should be, for every one of the 20000 souls killed here”.



I am in total disbelief and astonished, I pretended initially not to hear what the voice was telling me, and I went along with listening to the radio. Death and ghosts that believe themselves to be the daughter of a mango tree convinced me to open my heart and learn to control my anxiety. I think of what happened in Rwanda. I thought of Somaliland.

In silence, I remained, and I did learn from this invisible voice sort of pieces of history. Cambodia became a French colonial in 1864 and remained until monarch, Prince Sihanouk, prided himself on the fact that Cambodia was not anymore a colonial. This was happening mid 1950ies, and the Prince successfully negotiated Cambodia's independence in 1953. In the cold war the country remained nonaligned until mid 1960ies Cambodia was dragged into the Vietnam War. The Americans secretly bombarded the country and they denied doing so for long time. Lon Noi overthrows the monarchy while the Prince is in abroad in 1970. In 1975 Lon Noi loses against Vietnamese's Khmer Rouge and the country goes into chaos. In 1977, Khmer Rouge cadres from the Southwest Zone took over the whole country on behalf of Pol Pot central leadership. Pol Pot becomes a prime minister and he puts his brother-in-law as vice prime minister. From that date Cambodia was plunged into an abyss of darkness that invested with hunger, disease and indiscriminate killings.



The school where I found myself today is sort of house of ghosts; a scary place of fear and discomfort. Now as national museum at Phnom Penh, these buildings used to host students, the secondary school for this city, before they became a prison and butchers' house where the criminals of the Pol Pot

regime perpetrated their inhuman misdoings. 20,000 people were arrested, interrogated, tortured and then killed in this place. Men, women, children of all profession and age, dehumanized and killed.

My invisible friend wants to tell me more about the killings these mango trees witnessed. She has to do quickly. I want to know more about the history of this haunted place, so peaceful today and with people who love life and welcoming. My friend insists to tell me about the torture, the rape that had taken place here in this horrible place. She says witnessing is a huge responsibility on my shoulders. I want to resist. I need more time to digest what she told me.

The voice of my invisible friend came back to cry for Cambodia. She says she came back to stay in peace with the past, and she promises she will disappear for good when she relates the story to me. "This time for good I will" she says.

I sat down at the first floor. I imagine my friend close to me, this time physically. We are in front of the classrooms transformed into torture place. I closed my eyes, sensed the smelt of death. The photos hanged on the walls relate the story of horror. The beds of torture and killings in front of us smell of death in the rooms. My friend wants to tell the story quickly. I resist. I need time. More time to digest.

Drums in African rhythm come from the third floor. We interrupt the conversation.

Bardom, bardum, bum, bum.

Silence.

In silence, meditating.