

**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

# NEW YEAR BABY

A DOCUMENTARY BY SOCHEATA POEUV

Born in a Thai refugee camp on Cambodian New Year, filmmaker Socheata Poeuv grew up in the United States never knowing that her family had survived the Khmer Rouge genocide. In *NEW YEAR BABY*, she embarks on a journey to Cambodia in search of the truth and why her family's history had been buried in secrecy for so long.



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**INDEPENDENTLENS** 

## FROM THE FILMMAKER

Dear Viewers,

Thank you so much for bringing this film, NEW YEAR BABY, into your heart and into your community. Thank you so much for allowing me to share my family's story with you.

I started making this film out of a curiosity about my family's history. At that stage it was still a "glorified home video." The film soon grew bigger out of a desire to share the story as widely as possible because I believed it was a powerful story that could inspire, entertain and bring a new consciousness to audiences.

Before finishing the film, what I became most interested in is how this film can be used in the world.

Thanks to the ITVS Community Cinema program, we're able to bring NEW YEAR BABY to audiences that would most benefit from the discussions that the film sparks. There is a culture of silence surrounding the Cambodian genocide. And we're taking steps to break that silence.

Here in America, all too often, Cambodian parents don't tell their children about what happened to them during the time of the Khmer Rouge. Understandably, they feel a desire to protect their children and themselves. But, the cost of this silence is that the next generation and further generations may not truly understand their legacy. And neither will the world.

This phenomenon is even more pronounced in Cambodia where schools don't really teach the history of the Khmer Rouge. The generation born after the genocide has a hard time believing what happened to their parents.

This year, a UN tribunal to prosecute the Khmer Rouge has started. My hope is that we take this opportunity to really engage the country and the survivor community in a process of healing and education.

I believe that Cambodians have a responsibility to teach the larger world about the impact of these kind of catastrophes. Without understanding the human costs, we do not really understand the legacy of war and mass atrocities at all. But first, we must speak the truth ourselves.

NEW YEAR BABY, and my new project, Khmer Legacies are about taking a conversation of shame and denial and transforming it into one of honor and heroism.

I encourage you to learn more at [www.newyearbaby.net](http://www.newyearbaby.net) and [www.khmerlegacies.org](http://www.khmerlegacies.org).

Thank you,

Socheata Poeuv



## THE FILM

NEW YEAR BABY starts with a question that many children ask their parents: “How did you meet and how did you know you wanted to get married?” The answer often supplies an important foundation for family identity. But what happens when the answer is that your parents met in a labor camp, forced together by a brutal regime that attempted to obliterate class differences by mandating marriages between people who, in normal circumstances, would not have ended up together?

That is the Poeuv’s family story, revealed gradually in this 53-minute long documentary. As filmmaker Socheata Poeuv tries to understand her parents’ experience, she finds herself on a journey to understand her own identity as a Cambodian refugee living in the United States. Her questions take her to Cambodia and back, to the place where she was born, to homes of relatives she has never met, to a meeting with former Khmer Rouge, and, perhaps most importantly, into the deeply buried histories held by her mother and father.

Through Socheata’s search, viewers are challenged to think about the impact of war atrocities as they ripple through subsequent generations. The resulting film is a poignant examination of family bonds and the process of resettlement and healing for survivors of genocide.

### The Poeuv Family

Socheata Poeuv – The filmmaker

Mala and Leakhena – Socheata’s sisters/cousins

Scott – Socheata’s half-brother

Ma – Socheata’s mother; daughter of a banker of ethnic Chinese heritage

Pa – Socheata’s father; former soldier in the Cambodian army



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### **Cambodia**

Cambodia has been a Buddhist kingdom since the twelfth century. In modern times, the nation was colonized by France and remained a French protectorate from 1863 until the end of World War II. Cambodia gained full independence in 1953, though drawing boundaries would place the country in an ongoing border dispute with neighboring Vietnam.

Today, the Southeast Asian nation, which is about the size of Missouri, is a multiparty democracy under a constitutional monarchy. The population of approximately 14 million people is 95 percent Buddhist. Ethnically, most citizens are Khmer, with a small minority of ethnic Chinese.

### **Khmer Rouge**

In the 1960s, when the Cold War extended into the region surrounding Cambodia, and the U.S. military came to the aid of South Vietnam, King Norodom Sihanouk tried to remain neutral. The U.S., unhappy with the uncooperative King, cut off economic aid and backed a failed right wing coup attempt. In the meantime, North Vietnamese troops used Cambodian territory to hide and launch attacks against South Vietnamese and American troops. In response, the United States bombed Cambodia.

Historian Ben Kiernan has argued that anger about the bombing (and the resulting deaths of Cambodian civilians), as well as American attempts to economically and politically de-stabilize the Cambodian government, produced sympathy for previously marginal communist insurgents and paved the way for a successful coup by the Khmer Rouge. Other historians dispute the role of the U.S., but whatever the circumstances, Khmer Rouge forces led by the Marxist Pol Pot eventually toppled the weakened Cambodian government.

From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia, intending to make the nation into a classless, agrarian utopia. They forced city dwellers into rural labor camps and abolished private property, money and religion. As a result of the Khmer Rouge's coercive tactics, an estimated 1.5 to 2.5 million people died from starvation, disease, torture, overwork or execution. In the four years of Khmer Rouge rule, Cambodia lost a quarter of its population.

Khmer Rouge rule ended in 1979, when the Vietnamese army invaded. More than a decade of occupation and civil war followed. Small remnants of the Khmer Rouge military continued to battle the newly installed government. Eventually, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen offered immunity to any fighter who defected from the group. Infighting further weakened the Khmer Rouge and today the group has dwindled to an estimated 500 to 2,000.

In the late 1990s, the United Nations began investigating the possibility of forming a tribunal to bring former Khmer Rouge to trial as war criminals. Some former Khmer Rouge leaders were arrested, but inconsistent cooperation by the Cambodian government delayed efforts to bring the detainees to trial. By the time the tribunal was finally convened in 2004, top Khmer Rouge leaders were aging or sick, and many, including Pol Pot, died before they could be prosecuted. No one has yet been convicted.

### **Cambodian Americans**

The rule of the Khmer Rouge resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of Cambodians. Approximately 150,000 of those refugees made their way to the United States. Today, those refugees and their descendants number an estimated 240,000. Most live in California, but Cambodian Americans have also established communities numbering several thousand in many major cities across the U.S., including Dallas, where the filmmaker was raised.



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

### General

- If you could ask anyone in the Poeuv family a question, who would you ask, what would you ask and why?
- Describe a moment in the film that you found particularly moving or particularly troubling. What was it about that moment or scene that was especially meaningful for you?

### Ideology

- Prior to viewing the film, what did you know about Cambodia or Cambodians? Where did you learn what you know? In what ways did the film challenge or affirm your ideas?
- The goal of the Khmer Rouge was to create a classless society. In your view, is this possible? Would it be desirable if it were possible? Why or why not?
- Consider the following Principles of the Khmer Rouge cited in the film. How did they serve or detract from the goal of creating a classless, agrarian utopia? In what ways did the filmmaker's parents fulfill these principles and in what ways did they challenge them?
  - o "If you preserve secrecy, half the battle is won."
  - o "Let us at once make a clean sweep of the past."
  - o "Renounce your father, your mother, all your family."
- Ma and Pa talk about skin color as one of the ways that they distinguish the differences in their family background. Looking at them, would you have made that distinction? What did you learn about classism or prejudice from this reference to skin color?

### Survival

- How did the filmmaker's parents answer her question "Why did you survive?" How might their respective socioeconomic class backgrounds relate to their differing responses? How might gender have influenced their perspectives and experiences?
- Socheata's parents tried to give their family a normal American life in Texas, but she points out that, "They never left Cambodia." What do you think she meant? What did you learn from the film about the process of acculturation?

### Healing

- The filmmaker says, "Most Cambodians went on with their lives like nothing happened. It was as if the life had been squeezed out of them until there was nothing left, not even outrage." Her father says of those who remained in the country, "The bad karma cannot see bad karma." What do you think he meant? How would you respond to Socheata's observation that, "I didn't understand how a whole country can suffer through this and not demand justice."
- Were you satisfied by the recounting of events by the Khmer Rouge cadre Son Soeum (former district chief for the region of the labor camps in which the Poeuvs were imprisoned)? What did it reveal to you about how perpetrators deal with past atrocities? In what ways are the coping strategies of perpetrators and victims similar? In what ways do they differ?
- Some Cambodians have championed the idea of convening a war crimes tribunal for Khmer Rouge leaders while the Cambodian Prime Minister has said that it is time for Cambodians to "dig a hole to bury the past." In your view, which strategy would best help people move on and why? Who is well-served by each approach? If you were an advisor to the Cambodian government, what would you recommend they do to help people heal? What factors would you consider in making your recommendation?



## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

- Arrange a family gathering dedicated to elders telling the stories of how they met, how they (or their elders) came to the United States, etc. Record the stories to share with future generations.
- Convene a study group on Cambodian history and culture. Share findings with local school districts, hospitals and municipal agencies that serve Cambodian Americans.
- Research local resources for people to discuss their experiences with genocide and receive related support.
- Identify local organizations or local chapters of national organizations working to preserve human rights and find out how you can help.
- Encourage local educators to show NEW YEAR BABY to their students and discuss the issues brought forth in the film.

For additional outreach ideas, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens). For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit yourself to pursuing one item from the brainstorm list.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY & ACTION

### To Start

[www.pbs.org/independentlens/newyearbaby/getinvolved.html](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newyearbaby/getinvolved.html) - The community engagement website for NEW YEAR BABY offers Community Cinema screening event information and resources related to the film.

[www.newyearbaby.net](http://www.newyearbaby.net) - The official website of the film includes background information on making the film as well as the filmmaker's blog. DVDs of the film will be available for purchase on this site in May 2008.

[www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/cambodia/links.html](http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/cambodia/links.html) - The website for an episode about Pol Pot in the PBS series, Frontline: World, includes excellent links to resources about Cambodia, the violence of the Khmer Rouge, genocide and human rights.

### Cambodia

[www.yale.edu/cgp/](http://www.yale.edu/cgp/) - The Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University provides a variety of documents related to the history of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge, including maps and links to Cambodian tribunal justice proceedings. Many documents are available in both English and Khmer.

[www.dccam.org/Archives/Interviews/Sample\\_Interviews/Former\\_Kh\\_Rouge/Former\\_Kh\\_Rouge.htm](http://www.dccam.org/Archives/Interviews/Sample_Interviews/Former_Kh_Rouge/Former_Kh_Rouge.htm) - Among the resources on the website of the Documentation Center of Cambodia are some extraordinary

interviews with former Khmer Rouge cadre.

[www.cambodia.org/](http://www.cambodia.org/) - In addition to general information about the country, the non-profit, non-partisan website of the Cambodian Information Center includes a set of links to several dozen video clips, movies and music related to the Khmer Rouge.

[www.cambodia.gov.kh](http://www.cambodia.gov.kh) - The official website of the Cambodian government includes profiles of the country's leaders and organizations written from the government's perspective.

### Human Rights

[www.genocidewatch.org/8stages.htm](http://www.genocidewatch.org/8stages.htm) - Genocide Watch provides this overview of eight steps leading to genocide.

<http://hrw.org/doc/?t=asia&c=cambod> - The website of Human Rights Watch provides reports on the current status of human rights in Cambodia, as well as documents related to bringing those who have committed atrocities to justice.

[www.licadho.org](http://www.licadho.org) - The Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights is a non-governmental organization dedicated to protecting human rights in Cambodia and promoting respect for civil and political rights by the Cambodian government. The website is a good source for news releases on current human rights issues in Cambodia.

[www.cambodiatribunal.org](http://www.cambodiatribunal.org) - The Cambodia Tribunal Monitor is the leading source for news, webcasts, information and expert commentaries on the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

### Take Action

[www.khmerlegacies.org](http://www.khmerlegacies.org) - Khmer Legacies is creating a video history archive about the Cambodian genocide from the perspective of survivors. The organization has a goal of videotaping thousands of testimonies of Cambodian survivors by having children interview their parents. The archive will then be used as an educational tool to deepen understanding about the Khmer Rouge genocide for researchers, students, and the world.

### NEW YEAR BABY WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES INDEPENDENT LENS ON MAY 27, 2008. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

NEW YEAR BABY is a co-production of Broken English Productions and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), in association with the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series Independent Lens to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved).

