

Distrusting the Standard Total View: A Tribute to Michael Vickery

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On 29 June 2017, Michael Vickery, the legendary historian on Southeast Asia and perhaps the very best expert on ancient Khmer (Cambodian) civilization, passed away. He was, as one writer put it, *a historian's historian*. I knew Vickery (or Michael no. 1 as I kiddingly referred to him when his name came up) for over two decades. I had the privilege of spending hundreds of hours with him. We talked about history and politics, but mostly about the pre-Khmer Rouge period when he first came to Cambodia, his research on the Khmer Rouge period (formally known as Democratic Kampuchea – “DK”), which generated several articles and perhaps one of the most lucid texts on that period, *Cambodia 1975-1982*, and the post-DK / post-Paris Peace Accords (1991) Cambodia. Vickery was my friend, my teacher, and when it came to critical historical analysis from which credible conclusions could be drawn, my mentor.

Vickery was also my expert historian in the Ieng Sary case (Mr. Ieng Sary was the former DK Foreign Minister) at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (“ECCC”). And it is through this experience of working with him, watching and listening to him carry on with Ieng Sary, reviewing his research, analyzing the works of other historians and journalists who wrote on the DK period, and dissecting the statements and testimonies of witnesses, that I began to fully appreciate the hazards of what he characterized as the *Standard Total View*, or STV as he commonly referred to it. I had read several of his books, most notably *Cambodia 1975-1982*, where he devotes a good part of a chapter to discussing and showing the STV, but it was not until I began having lengthy conversations with Vickery – where he would mercilessly go through a text by some celebrated historian, pointing out the inadequacies of critical and well accepted assertions and conclusions – that I fully understood why he would get all worked-up about certain historians, chroniclers, and journalists who had written on the DK period. It was through these discussions that my approach, my analysis, and my assessment of data, chronicles, reports, assertions and conclusions by the “experts” took a turn – for the better.

When Vickery passed away, a journalist writing an obituary asked me to comment. And I did. Aside from stating the usual about Vickery known to anyone who had come across him (his brilliant mind, knack for languages, adventurous spirit), I mentioned his disdain for sloppy historical analysis and his penchant for unvarnishingly exposing untested and unsupported mythology posing as fact or irrefutable truth. Naturally, in my email to the journalist, I mentioned Vickery's theory of the STV:

[H]e could be acerbic when dissecting historical facts and what he claimed as the Standard Total View, where unsubstantiated facts are repeated from text to text as if true with no real analysis or proof of credible authority, just regurgitation by historians and journalists claiming to be writing history. Michael thought that history should be written based on hard, provable facts from which well-reasoned conclusions could be drawn after rigorous analysis, unpeeling the onion as it were.

Disappointingly, the journalist offered a partially misleading description of Vickery's STV:

Most relevant to the trials was Vickery's rejection of what he called the "Standard Total View": the body of widely accepted – and, in his view, insufficiently rigorous – scholarship that suggested the Khmer Rouge was a monolithic entity. Vickery set a high bar for analysing historical facts, and challenged the popular version of Khmer Rouge history on such issues as death totals, sexual violence and how fragmented the regime was.

Vickery's STV theory has nothing to do with the trials at the ECCC, though one cannot ignore its significance if the primary purpose of the trials is to get as close to the truth as possible in affixing responsibility and accountability. While the STV is featured in the context of the events in Cambodia from 1975 to 1982, Vickery's theory is much more than what has been written by historians, pseudo-academics, chroniclers, journalists, and *old Cambodian hands*.

The STV is not limited to Cambodia or to many of those who claim to have written authoritatively about the DK period. Vickery brought this theory to our attention in writing *Cambodia 1975-1982*, but a close reading of his cogent exposition on the STV shows that Vickery was talking in a much broader context, his thoughts having been shaped by the many years of intellectual rigor he applied (and saw others – many of whom enjoyed accolades – decline) in analyzing original source material, carefully reaching nuanced and, when appropriate, qualified conclusions and/or suppositions.

Reading what the journalist printed on the STV moved me to re-read *Cambodia 1975-1982* and to revisit what Vickery wrote as opposed to relying on my memory from my countless talks with him. This was perhaps my fourth or fifth time reading this book, and every time I read it I am left in awe of his lucid analysis. For anyone interested in this period of Cambodia, it is one of the must-read books.

I have cited Vickery's STV in a chapter I wrote on *The Role of the Defense in the Trial Stage*, so this is not the first time I am drawing attention to the STV and how relevant it is in defending war crimes and mass atrocity cases. I have also cautioned against using the international(ized) criminal tribunals and courts as a venue to establish the historical truth – even though establishing historical facts beyond a reasonable doubt is achievable. However, far too often, and easily, experts and so-called experts of history or of historical events waltz into courtrooms to give evidence based on their research, their published works, or their journalistic accounts, with little heed being paid to the authoritativeness of their work, their accounts, their sources, or their conclusions; hence the value of Vickery's contribution to our critical thinking in piercing the veil of enticing yet junk historical claims and mythologies masquerading as historical truths.

With Michael Vickery's passing away, I can think of no better way to pay tribute to my friend and extraordinary historian than by discussing his STV theory and the critical thinking tools he left us for challenging historical conventional wisdom that too often is based on anecdotal and apocryphal stories that never suffered the scrutiny deserved and demanded.

Let no orthodoxy go unchallenged

If Vickery taught me anything, it was as he would put it: "let no orthodoxy go unchallenged." He was, after all, a polemicist extraordinaire. But it was more than just that. From his own rigorous analysis of historical documents in his research, even pre-dating his PhD studies at Yale University, he had discovered that many of the great and near-great historians occasionally got things wrong. And

unchallenged, those wrongs were never righted because who would dare to think, let alone take on a peerless peer, a lionized giant historian with an impeccable pedigree. Vickery, however, believed in going to the well and drinking from the original sources, challenging, testing, and critically dissecting the sources and interpretive methodology applied in drawing conclusions. The road less traveled. The road that frequently led him to draw different conclusions in debunking long-held sacred views. And whenever he did, he could be blunt to a fault in unmasking the errors and decrying how a more prudent approach in handling sources would have avoided such errors, which to him appeared plain and elemental.

When Vickery took a respite from his primary interest of pre-Angkorian and Angkorian history and ventured into the DK and post-DK periods (1975-1982), he did so with the same academic rigor expected of a serious historian. Musing:

What is the point of prodding [refugees] to reveal exculpatory aspects of the regime which tormented them, and in the process insinuate that they must be lying? Such is indeed the attitude of the refugees themselves – if one accepts that DK was bad, as I do, there is no point in analyzing it further or relativizing its evil. They were bad people who did bad things, and that was that. (p. 54)

Vickery retorted:

[A]s an historian, one of whose special interest is Cambodia, it is incumbent on me, if I choose to write about it at all, to search for as much of the entire truth as possible, wherever that may lead. A chronicler, or journalist, may simply repeat stories as they are handed to him, even when he knows they may be less than honest, but an historian may not. If he thinks they are less than honest, or incomplete, or imply certain things not expressly stated, it is his duty to draw out these aspects, break down the stories, reorder their details, and fit them into wider contexts. (pp. 54-55, footnotes omitted)

Vintage Vickery.

Vickery was criticized for supposedly relativizing the Pol Pot regime, for challenging the *body of widely accepted views* that it was an intrinsically genocidal regime. Vickery challenged this orthodoxy, this article of faith that many experts have come to assume without fully and objectively gathering and analyzing the facts within the proper context, and without considering the challenges of securing unadulterated accounts from survivors or scrutinizing the purveyors of chronicles and reports for any biases, agendas, or misconceptions. Recognizing the mass suffering and deaths that resulted from the “radical social and economic experiments in which Cambodia’s first generation of revolutionaries indulged,” Vickery considered that “the total picture” of the DK “required a historical treatment as though viewed from a distance, in the manner in which the horrors of the Thirty-Years War (1618-1648) or the Napoleonic wars are studied by historians.” (p. v)

Simply, Vickery did not suffer fools. Intolerant of those who cherry-picked facts, relied on rumors or *gossipy conversations*, third-hand writings or commentaries on the works of those who dealt with primary sources, which he characterized as *exegesis of exeges*, Vickery demanded proof, contextualization, nuance, and intellectual integrity. In his view, “a major fault of most writings about the [DK] events has been its *ahistorical* character, ignoring all that happened before 1970, 1975, or even 1979.” (p. 3, emphasis added) But, as we will see, Vickery found other critical faults in the

narratives that make up *the body of widely accepted views*, faults which, in my opinion, are endemic in much of what is paraded before the international(ized) criminal tribunals and courts by historians, chroniclers, and journalists as historical facts.

Vickery gave little credence to discussions on the “Khmer personality” or “Khmer psychology” in explaining the “DK phenomenon,” (p. 8) though if anyone was qualified to opine on these traits – at least in a general sense based on experience and cultural understanding – Vickery was well placed, having lived and worked in Cambodia in both urban and rural areas in the 1960s and being an astute student of Khmer history and civilization, and fluent in Khmer. Vickery stressed that historical context, inclusive of which are clues to behavior and attitudes which may help explain cause and effect, is essential to any analysis.

But for Vickery, his starting point above all was the source material used to establish historical facts from which reasonable and nuanced (as opposed to dogmatic and rigid) conclusions could be drawn.

Much of what has been written on the DK period, especially early on when *Cambodia 1975-1982* was written (published in 1984), was based on accounts of refugees/survivors who managed to cross over to the Thai border during and after the DK period where most settled in refugee camps. Vickery recognized, however, the intrinsic risks and pitfalls of these accounts, which is why he demanded brutal scrutiny and intellectual integrity from those taking and relying on these accounts.

These are the people who, by the nature of the circumstances, have been the main object of study for most post-1975 research on contemporary Cambodia, and also until late 1980 the main source of information about conditions inside the country. Even without conscious misinformation or exaggeration their portrayal of those five years could not help but be very one-sided; and the straight reporting of what they wish to say will inevitably give a distorted, sometimes even false, picture, of little use in understanding the revolutionary regime or for situating it properly within wider contemporary history. The bias in their stories would already be serious enough if they were again working at their old occupations, or some other useful task, on post-DK Cambodia; but it has been compounded by the frustrations and tensions of life in the refugee camps, and treated with insufficient perspicacity by many investigators, subjects to which we shall now turn. (p. 28)

Many of the accounts from the refugees were accepted as “irrefutable evidence,” and this, in Vickery’s opinion, and based on his field studies and interviews, often shaped a skewed or even false narrative that has now become an article of faith. “The STV has permeated public consciousness to such an extent that it has become conventional wisdom and may be forced on evidence which does not support it.” (p. 40) And anyone who dared challenge the STV conventional wisdom was either ignored, marginalized, or branded an apologist or relativist.

Anything written about Communist atrocities, however unhistoric, uncritical, or dishonest, was immediately taken up by the press, pushed through large printings, excerpted and reviewed, and taken as authoritative even if its author ... was completely unknown and devoid of scholarly or journalistic credentials. Writers on the other side, who took a sympathetic view of the revolution and its difficulties, had little chance of a hearing, and when the purveyors of the STV took notice of their work at all it was to vilify the authors rather than to examine and discuss the evidence. (p. 51)

Vickery came to his conclusions primarily from conducting meticulous interviews, testing and verifying to the extent possible the accounts, reviewing primary sources, discussing with others doing field research, and critically analyzing the works of some who were in his opinion the instigators and inventors of the STV. Vickery was “convinced that all the worst atrocities which have been reported occurred at some place at some time, but not as the STV would have it, everywhere all the time.” (p. 54) In his view, getting to the more accurate account behind the STV required careful questioning and careful listening “as people become loquacious and freely associate, for some of the more interesting details comes out accidentally and unexpectedly.” (p. 54)

Consider the source

According to Vickery, the starting point for any study of a social or historical situation begins with a description and evaluation of the sources, being mindful that “preconceived notions of outsiders may be imposed on the evidence, or equally serious, how sources may be coached, or influenced by their environment to produce information different from what they might have offered spontaneously.” (p. 44) In the case of extracting information from refugees, Vickery rightly points to the remarks of Charles Twining, an experienced United States Foreign Service Officer who specialized in Cambodia: “you must talk to a refugee as soon as he comes out for the story may become exaggerated.” He also found credible what another experienced Foreign Service Officer observed, that in making an assessment on information provided by a refugee, one must discount everything that is not from first-hand experience – what the refugee saw or experienced, as opposed to what he or she may have been told by others. (p. 44) Sound advice. Elementary.

Doing his own research and meeting with refugees, Vickery noticed that the picture was much more complex, much more nuanced than presented in the press by journalists or researchers, in part because of their handling or mishandling of the sources, preconceptions, and biases. According to Vickery:

Less attention has been given to the bias of the reporter or researcher; and this gets us into a very complex area. Even though investigations post-1975 Cambodia have generally been motivated by anything but intellectual objectivity, the very nature of the Cambodian question is such that a certain amount of subjective value judgment seems inevitable. At the very least each observer has certain views about what measures are permissible in order to effect social change and necessary to cope with political and social crises; and these views will invariably color interpretations of even the most objective facts. So let no one imagine that any writer on contemporary Cambodia is merely searching for objective historical truth in the manner of one writing, say, about twelfth century Angkor. ... All of us have certain preconceptions – sometimes well researched and thought out – ... and we are in a way hoping to discover information to justify those – in most cases erroneous – preconceptions. (p. 45)

....

Neither should a writer, or reader, accept that a simple, unqualified claim to interest in the welfare of the *people* is sufficient to justify any interpretation, for given the clear and deep divisions among Cambodians manifest since 1970 at the latest, any such stance involves implicit assumptions about who the real people are and which of them deserve most sympathy. (p. 45)

Vickery reasoned that to fully appreciate the events in Cambodia during the 1975-1979 DK period one must look at the precursors, recognizing, however, that inherent ideological biases do get in the way in

the selection of information to fit these biases, and in part because of preconceived notions. Vickery correctly observed that among other things, the conflict in Cambodia that swept the Khmer Rouge into power “was also, if not first of all, a war between town and countryside in which the town’s battle was increasingly for the sole purpose of preserving its privileges while the rural areas suffered.” (p. 46, footnotes omitted). Which is why in pressing the point on how ideological biases consciously or subconsciously influence the selection of information to fit these biases, he reasoned:

Any account which, from the vantage point of the present and assuming the information presented to be factual, casts blame on one camp while showing sympathy for the other must be based, not on any objective assessment of their works, but on preconceptions of the observer about the proper organization of society or the inherent morality of particular points of view. (p. 46)

Vickery also recognized that “[o]ccasionally, apparently reliable accounts contain clear contradictions,” which is why he emphasized the need to take great care in analyzing this information. (p. 58)

Beating the STV traps

Vickery’s observations are as relevant to historians, chroniclers, and journalists in the Cambodian context as they are to those of us who are involved in mass atrocity trials. I have yet to come across a case where establishing the historical context that led to certain events is not relevant and where some sort of historical expert testimony is not taken. The lesson to be drawn: *the historical narrative is only as reliable as the quality of the source.*

I have written in the past about the importance of not tampering, even inadvertently, with the source of the evidence from witnesses – their memories. The questioning has to be careful and meticulous, avoiding leading questions that suggest the answers, or showing documents to witnesses that are unknown to them and then asking the witnesses to comment, or providing information to witnesses as to what is believed to have happened or what others may have recounted. Such sloppy questioning, let alone outright attempts to manipulate and taint the source of the evidence, is rampant at the international(ized) criminal tribunals and courts – by all parties. This is partly due to inexperience in investigating, though I hazard to suggest that much of it is a purposeful attempt to shape a witness’s memory to fit a desired narrative. Unethical but inherent.

And it is not limited to just the parties.

At the ECCC, the Co-Investigating Judges in Case 001 brazenly invited the accused, Duch, to answer written questions and provide opinions beyond the ken of his knowledge and well outside his experience, by providing him or allowing him to refer to texts written on the DK period (where the STV abounds), much like an open-book test. Duch, by his own accounts, was a minnow confined within the radius of where he worked, the now infamous S-21 torturing center, commonly referred to as Tuol Sleng. He acknowledged the strict secrecy and compartmentalization of information, especially in matters dealing with the administration at the highest level of the regime (which is widely accepted). Yet, having studied the texts, having reviewed original source material to which he was never privy during the DK period, and having been led to believe that telling the truth and assisting the judges in understanding how the DK functioned, who held which positions and what their remit would have

been, etc., Duch abided: he testified as a factual witness and effectively as an expert witness on matters he assuredly would have been clueless about during the DK period.

When considering that the source of much of Duch's memory was implanted by the Co-Investigating Judges, coupled by Duch's desire to get a reduced sentence for his cooperation (invariably telling the Trial Chamber what it wished to hear – self-evident from reading the charging documents of the accused in Case 002), it begs the question: just how reliable is Duch as a source of historical facts? More disturbingly, it begs the question why would the Co-Investigating Judges, whose duty was to objectively investigate and search for the truth without passion or prejudice, employ such methods (or less generously, tactics), which, assuredly, irrevocably contaminated the source, Duch – a master manipulator and unscrupulous chameleon. A fine example of a variance of the STV: *priming a witness by exposing him to much of the STV found in books, only to have the witness repeat the STV at trial for the purpose of establishing the truth.*

Parting thoughts

Michael Vickery will mostly be remembered by his fellow historians for his enormous contributions from his detailed research and writings on the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries of Cambodia and on Siam – a legacy that is virtually unrivaled. But his legacy on modern Cambodia, especially his writings on the DK and post-DK periods, cannot be underestimated.

In the span of a few pages where he lays out his thesis on the STV, which he followed with concrete analysis debunking or devaluing much of what was accepted as conventional wisdom, Vickery prescribes how historical sources should be handled, scrutinized, and appreciated. He exposes how sources of evidence may have intrinsic biases that, if not accounted for, may lead to wrong conclusions; how preconceptions and ideological biases, if unchecked, can lead the historian, chronicler, or journalist to selectively use sources to fit and validate preconceptions and biases; how when interviewing sources it is important not to impose information and contaminate the source; how historical context is essential in understanding cause and effect; and how essential it is to question and test conventional wisdom, to let no orthodoxy go unchallenged – however sacred or well accepted.

Vickery's thesis on the STV is relevant not just for historians or chroniclers, but also for those who are involved in prosecuting, defending, and judging cases before the international(ized) criminal tribunals and courts, where alleged crimes are invariably related to a set of complex events which often far precede the alleged criminal activity.

Conscious doubt cannot be assumed to be in the repertoire of historians, analysts, journalists or observers coming to testify as "objective" witnesses. Once fixated on a thesis, confirmation bias assuredly drives their search, analysis, and conclusions; i.e. they generally conduct a deliberate search to confirm evidence compatible to their beliefs and thesis. It thus becomes necessary to isolate the sources of information and examine them independent of each other with the goal of identifying whether the dominant narrative of certain witnesses is the product of a collaborative, biased or redundant source of information which, when dissected and exposed reduces the total value of the information. What may appear at first glance to be an established fact or truth may occasionally prove to be nothing more than a repetition or adoption of a false narrative based on a false premise,

inconclusive evidence, supposition or bias. All proclaimed orthodoxies of factual “truths” must be chased *down the rabbit hole*.

Perhaps much of this is already known intuitively but, even so, Vickery cogently elucidated it in *Cambodia 1975-1982*, where he warns us to distrust the STV.