

COTLOW FIELD RESEARCH FUND

Department of Anthropology
The George Washington University
Washington, DC 20052

2007 Project Description Form

Applicant: Geoffrey Cain

Title of Project:

“Poverty, Free Markets, and the Body as Commodity: Rumors of Transplant Tourism and Organ Stealing in a Phnom Penh Suburb”

The Lewis Cotlow Field Research Fund is a GW Anthropology Department fund, established in 1990 as a bequest by the explorer Lewis N. Cotlow to further field work and exploration. All undergraduate or graduate students at The George Washington University are eligible to apply, but preference is given to those in anthropology programs. Funds are to be used for travel, research assistance, and other expenses related to field research.

The deadline for application is the first Friday in March of the year for which support is requested.

I. Personal Information

Name: Geoffrey Cain

Permanent Address:

Current Address:

Phone:

E-mail:

Degree Sought: B.A., Anthropology and International Affairs

Expected Date of Graduation: May, 2008

Faculty Advisors: Dr. Robert Shepherd, Dr. Barbara Miller, Dr. K. Nambiar

Does your proposal involve the use of a “field language?” If so, state what it is, and note your degree of fluency in speaking or writing.

Most residents of Stung Mean Chey speak both Khmer and English due to state-sponsored initiatives in English education. Some Cambodians are also French speakers. I am proficient in French and will be able to communicate effectively with them. In the past year, I have been studying Khmer on my own. Because my skills in Khmer will be rudimentary, the NGO I will be working with, *A New Day Cambodia*, will assist me in finding a native-speaking translator for \$8-10 a day. I have learned from the NGO's field director that English is widely spoken in Stung Mean Chey. It is likely that I will not require a translator for most of my research.

II. Brief Abstract of the Project

Title of Project: Poverty, Free Markets, and the Body as Commodity: Rumors of Transplant Tourism and Organ Stealing in a Phnom Penh Suburb

Amount Requested: \$1800

Research Objectives

In recent years, the Phnom Penh suburb of Stung Mean Chey has experienced rapid economic growth as a result of neoliberal globalization and industrialization. At the same time, changing market realities have introduced a new level of poverty never before seen in the area. With economic hardship has come an identifiable spike in rumors of “transplant tourism,” narratives about impoverished and desperate local people dangerously selling their organs to wealthy, foreign patients. My research objectives are to identify, collect and understand these widespread rumors. I will seek to link the rumors with key socioeconomic forces behind them. Stung Mean Chey is a microcosm of globalization, and the proposed project will illustrate how it fits into the global network of transplant rumors, and how such rumors are localized according to the situations of impoverished Cambodians.

III. Significance of the Project to Anthropology

The proposed project is significant to numerous areas of cultural anthropology, including the anthropology of globalization and neoliberalism, medical anthropology, the anthropology of Southeast Asia, and theories of structural violence and agency.

This project builds on the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes, with whom I have been in contact recently. Scheper-Hughes, a critical medical anthropologist, has conducted cross-cultural fieldwork on transplant tourism and organ-stealing rumors in Brazil, South Africa, Pakistan and India (1992, 1996, 2000, 2002). She examines the organ trade as intertwined with neoliberal globalization and its new social realities. She points to a flow of organs from the impoverished South to the developed North, terming it “the ultimate commodity fetishism” (2000).

The work of Margaret Lock, another medical anthropologist, has also influenced this project. Unlike Scheper-Hughes’s work, her book, *Twice Dead: Organ Transplants and the Reinvention of Death* (2001), focuses on the “demand side” of the international organ trade rather than the providers and supplies. She has studied organ receivers in developed societies such as North America, Europe, and Japan. She, too, has identified a clear trend: that wealthy patients from North America and Europe engage in “transplant tourism” primarily in India, Pakistan, and China. In the case of China, the government has only recently pledged to stop harvesting and selling organs from executed prisoners.

To date, anthropologists have studied the illegal organ trade only in the Americas, Europe, South Africa, India, Pakistan and China. Thus, my project will provide information on an understudied part of the global market in human organs. As far as I know, the culture of organ selling has *never* been studied in Southeast Asia. Given the fact that the Chinese government has recently cracked down on transplant tourism, neighboring Southeast Asia and India may see a rise in demand from “organ consumers” in the future.

Transplant tourism is a known, discussed problem in Cambodia, supplanted by rumors of Westerners stealing organs from local children. The chaotic nature of Cambodian politics, combined with neoliberal globalization, may foster a thriving environment for organ-stealing rumors. As such, my research will uncover how such narratives help locals make sense of their anarchic surroundings.

According to Scheper-Hughes (2000), organ-selling narratives in various countries take on local characteristics, depending on the political and socioeconomic situations of their poorest citizens. In South Africa, Scheper-Hughes observed that the rumors rose out of Apartheid fears (2000). In the 1980s, wealthy Afrikaaners often viewed poor blacks as “carriers of spare parts” for them. In Latin America, organ-stealing rumors began and flourished in the 1980s in the form of “child kidnapping and body stealing by ‘medical agents’ from the United States and Japan” (2000: p. 201). In India, which journalist Prakash Chandra labeled the “organs bazaar of the world” (1991: p. 1), wealthy Saudi Arabians engage in transplant tourism in the southern part of the country, reinforcing notions of a lighter-skinned elite viewing darker-skinned “untouchables” as a source of market scarcities.

This project, while focusing on organ trade rumors and narratives, contributes more widely to theory in cultural anthropology. Specifically, it builds on the theory of structural violence (Farmer 2004) versus human agency. The project is located at the interstices of the dire poverty that is linked to the growing illegal trade in organs and local people's creative attempts to make sense of this new commoditization through their narratives.

IV. Methodology

I will combine participant observation in Stung Mean Chey with interviews of 20 to 30 impoverished men and women. To enhance my participant observation method, I will live with a local family for three months.

The neighborhood consists of approximately 1200 residents, whose economic vitality rests on the nearby Stung Mean Chey Disposal Site. Since 1965, this landfill has operated nearly unregulated, having received 700 tons of waste per day (Phnom Penh Municipality: 1). With the rapid urbanization of Phnom Penh, Stung Mean Chey's poor residential district is slowly being crammed into the landfill and now sits only 100 meters away. Local residents, likewise, earn their livings of 50 U.S. cents a day by scavenging the dump for sellable scraps (Varney: *A New Day Cambodia*).

For in-depth interviews, I will identify possible interviewees by demographics [mothers with multiple children are the primary target of such rumors], through *A New Day Cambodia* and the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, and by casual conversation with local residents. Typically, Cambodian mothers prepare dinner for 3-4 hours in the afternoon and evening, and, as such, this is traditionally a time for conversation and bonding between friends and family. Thus, informal interviews with women will be in the mid-afternoon hours. Men, on the other hand, are often absent from the daily happenings of Cambodian family life due to labor migration to the inner city, and might only be available for interview on the weekends when they have returned home (Varney: *A New Day Cambodia*).

After informing interviewees of the nature and scope of the project and of their anonymity in my research, I will tape them if they consent. My voice recorder will be clearly visible at all times. Moreover, in Cambodia, it is customary to pay interviewees or casual informants \$1-2. My assistant, Hanh Nguyen, will aid in the transcription of these interviews.

In particular, I plan to answer the following questions in my research:

- Where and when do locals typically hear organ-selling rumors? Do they typically believe them?
- What do the rumors typically entail?
- By what means do locals hear about these rumors? Through word-of-mouth, the media, or another overlooked source?
- Are residents fearful of these rumors? Are the rumors mostly about organ *theft*, or organ *sales*?

- How do locals react to rumors that Prime Minister Hun Sen's wife bought a kidney on the black market?
- Are the rumors grounded in fact? Do locals of Stung Mean Chey often sell their organs?
- Who do locals think is the primary buyer? Where do they think the organs are going?
- Have residents ever considered selling organs?
- How much do residents think they could make from selling organs?
- What do residents think happens to the supposed sellers after they sell their organs?

V. Ethics

In accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American Anthropological Association, I will ensure that this project involves no risk for the participants, and I will fully inform each participant of the scope of the project. The project is a case study, and not intended to produce generalizable findings; thus, per GW's OSR/IRB, it fits in the category of "excluded" research.

In order to protect the anonymity of my research participants, I will create pseudonyms for people and local places in the suburb of Phnom Penh where I will do the study.

I will never reveal any personal information about the research participants, and I will keep any tape recorded material in a secure location and coded according to the pseudonyms. Likewise, I will not photograph the research participants in any revealing way; all photos and video footage will be highly generic.

VI. Product

I will present highlights of my research at the Anthropology Student Research Conference in the spring of 2008. I also hope to present a paper at the AAA meetings, on a student panel, and to develop my findings into a scholarly journal article.

I plan to write an in-depth feature story and prepare a photographic exhibit for possible publication on the website of *Voice of America*. I have been in contact with VoA editor, Deborah Block, who has a background in anthropology and is interested in this project. Should this become a reality, I will make certain my news article will strictly adhere to AAA and GWU's ethical standards, and will not differ from my completed academic work, except that it will be written in a more public-friendly voice.

I hope to publicize this issue beyond scholarly circles. For example, I will publicize this research through my NGO, the Institute for the Elimination of Global Organs Trafficking (IEGOT), my blog, and through openDemocracy.net, a human-rights news source.

VII. Schedule

May 26 – August 26 (approximately 12 weeks).

Weeks 1-2: Make contacts in Stung Mean Chey and surrounding area. Become a “participant observer” and start building social contacts in Stung Mean Chey. I will do this primarily through contacts with *A New Day Cambodia* and through casual conversation with residents.

Week 3-6: First formal interviews. Focus on mothers with many children. If possible, find mothers in deep debt since they are most likely to sell an organ.

Weeks 5-12: By gathering various contacts from mothers, “branch out” to other demographic groups, especially fathers and health workers. I feel it’s important to start with mothers as a “base pool” since they’re the most vulnerable population to organ trade and organ-theft narrative. Because fathers are usually away from their immediate families, they might have heard variations of rumors or might give an alternate view on organ selling. Health workers are also important since they probably hear organ-theft rumors, but, at the same time, deal face-to-face with transplant patients on an everyday basis. Thus, they may give an intriguing viewpoint on the validity of rumors and why patients often believe them.

VIII. Budget

Local travel	100
Meals \$10 per day for 80 days	800
Supplies Paper, tapes, film	300
Translator \$10 a day, for 14 days	140
Honorarium for shelter \$50 per month It is customary to pay family hosts a monthly honorarium for their hospitality.	150
Honorarium to interviewees \$2 for formal and informal interviews Note: It is customary to pay a small fee to local people for interviews, directions, and any tidbits of information.	30
Total:	\$1800

Note: my round trip airfare is being paid for by Dr. Thomas Cain.

IX. Staff

- Research Assistant: Hanh Nguyen, medical student at University of Arizona; self-funded. Primary roles will include transcribing interviews, researching local NGO and healthcare-related contacts (hospitals, clinics, offices), aiding in photography and videography, and helping research local histories of Stung Mean Chey as preparation before our trip. Born in Vietnam and raised in Cambodia, she has extensive living experience in Phnom Penh and can bring a “local person’s mindset” to this project. (Unfortunately, she will not be able to translate because her Khmer skills are not proficient anymore).
- Translator and driver: to be hired on arrival through contacts at *A New Day Cambodia*.

X. Outside Support

- Personal funds: \$1500 for a roundtrip airline ticket.

XI. Select Bibliography

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XII. Transcript

See attached.

XIII. Permits

Research Visa: Currently being processed. Available in April.