

New Year's Reception 2022

Voltaire Prize - Laudation Prof. Dr. Ottmar Ette | Transcript

The Voltaire Prize of the University of Potsdam is about those working to find out how we want to live together in this world peacefully and with mutual respect for one another. Consequently, it is about conviviality (translator's note: in the sense of living together with difference). After the end of the Cold War and after the waning of the past phase of accelerated globalization we have experienced for more than three decades since the mid-1980s, we now live in a world that is in a transitional phase and on the way from a clear dominance of a single superpower, the United States, to a global situation of multipolarity. It is precisely in such times, which have been known to evoke the dangers of major wars, and in view of growing nationalisms, increasing chauvinistic resentments, economic protectionisms, and a world political situation that seems to confirm Hamlet's dictum of *The time is out of joint*, that it is quite essential to work on the knowledge and values of peacefully living together amid differences.

Nothing would be better suited to lay the foundations for this conviviality than, on the one hand, to come to terms with one's own history, one's own past, and to introduce it to public discussion with as little sugar-coating as possible. On the other hand, it is important, in light of the past future, to prospectively create new conditions for future history that will allow different nations, different ethnic groups, different cultures and languages to live together and in mutual exchange, and to make sure that this way of living together is based on respect and regard for the other and, in particular, for minorities.

This year's recipient of the Voltaire Prize of the University of Potsdam fulfills both conditions in an ideal way and at an early stage of his academic career. For one thing, he addressed a history of extreme nationalism and horrifying mass murder in his homeland in a book publication released in 2018 by a university publishing house in Bangkok: the history of the infamous Khmer Rouge. We can all still recall images of the *Killing Fields* which, according to estimates, claimed the lives of more than two million people out of a total population of just over seven million in the seventies of the last century: Victims of a Maoist-nationalist stone-age communism that, like German National Socialism, shows how thin and fragile the varnish is that hides the underlying barbarism with a coating of civilization. The mass murders committed under Pol Pot have been documented as precisely by the perpetrators themselves as was the case with the Nazis under what was characterized as the banality of evil. However, the historical assessment of these mass murders remains a process, whose end is not foreseeable.

KEO Duong, or Duong Keo in western order, was born in the Cambodian countryside and took an early interest in and became involved in researching the history of his homeland. Among other things, he had been working as a young researcher for *Youth for Peace* since 2009, a year after he graduated with a *Bachelor of Arts in History* from the Royal University of Phnom Penh. A multitude of socio-political activities, as well as activities for NGOs, are part of the path of this young researcher's life, who has made his social commitment his object of research, without letting up in this same commitment. This is how he made a name for himself early on.

In addition – and this is the second important aspect of his research and work – KEO Duong has stood out through a variety of political activities for conviviality in his home region and has been able to establish relationships between the most diverse social groups in a number of projects. In particular, he works

vehemently for the integration of the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia and tries to build bridges to this minority, which is disadvantaged in society, and to promote tolerance, respect, and active conviviality. He is preparing a doctoral thesis on this topic at the *Universität der Bundeswehr* in Munich under Prof. Dr. Timothy Williams, which is highly innovative in many areas and breaks new scientific ground. For what it is about is nothing less than to gain a body of knowledge of conviviality.

For KEO Duong's approach, a multi-perspective orientation is crucial, interviewing not only the surviving victims of the terror regime, but also their former tormentors and torturers, with a view to the history of the Khmer Rouge as well as the integration of the Vietnamese minority. He has learned that it is important to bring together different points of view. The use of individual life accounts at the level of *Oral History* plays a role here alongside the attempt to combine academic research and public dissemination and discussion in an integrative manner. Many young Cambodians today are not adequately informed about the Khmer Rouge and thus, a dark episode of their country's past. This year's winner of the Voltaire Prize works with the utmost intensity at this central intersection between the public and academia, actively advocating for it with all his strength in various civil society and non-governmental organizations.

Since his involvement with *Youth for Peace* in Cambodia, his commitment has extended beyond university work to include direct cooperation with ministries and educational institutions in his home country in order to change school curricula and promote an examination and evaluation of Cambodia's recent history. It requires not only precise academic research and the smart conveyance of information supported by audiovisual media, but, above all, a great deal of personal commitment, moral courage, and the courage to speak out publicly about the problems of the current Vietnamese minority in Cambodia. This is a highly dangerous ethnopolitical issue that has become – as is often the case – a pawn in Cambodian politics. We do not only live in a time of nationalistic and racially motivated prejudices in Germany and Europe. In such an environment, academia has a clearly defined task: *Enlightenment* – in the spirit of Voltaire.

This second area in particular, along with the study of Khmer Rouge history, is even more crucial to any work on international understanding and is a prominent part of a conviviality research that is of central importance in our world. The deep-seated resentment against the Vietnamese ethnic minority that exists in Cambodia is an enormous social problem. KEO Duong primarily addresses prejudices with racial overtones in order to defuse them as potential triggers of interethnic conflict and promote mutual respect. This respect for others is to be fostered not least through life stories of Cambodian Vietnamese, which can help raise awareness of a common history among the general population. KEO Duong devoted a lot of time to field research. But he knows: Conviviality research always has to deal with such acts of racism and must try to debunk racist attitudes from a scholarly point of view. This enlightening reasoning must be brought to the public in a way that takes the wind out of the sails of political agitators.

KEO Duong's CV shows us a young man from the Cambodian countryside who was the first person from his village to be able to study at a university. He earned his bachelor's degree in Phnom Penh and then continued his studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand. So his path to a doctorate in Germany – which was, I might add, funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation – was by no means mapped out for him, but had to be paved through hard work. Above all, it is an enthusiasm for the cause of conviviality that drives this young man. As he examines the history of the Vietnamese in Cambodia from the pre-colonial period to the present day, it is always the goal of this historical research to promote conviviality in the present and the future through the scholarly elucidation of origins and not to leave the field clear for all those who derive their political advantages from interethnic conflicts.

In his career to date, KEO Duong has played a significant role in various projects and undertakings relating to his two main topics mentioned above. The doctorate he intends to obtain in Germany will certainly not be the last milestone in a dedicated academic career for this young researcher. The fact that the Voltaire Prize was awarded to this young, fascinating researcher should enable KEO Duong to pursue this path at an accelerated pace with his inherent energy and enthusiasm.