KHMER-AMERICANS:
THE SHAPING OF A DIASPORIC IDENTITY
THROUGH TRAUMATIC MEMORY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
IN
HISTORY
AUGUST 2007

By
Ryan Jonathan Koo

Thesis Committee:
Liam Kelley, Chairperson
Vina Lanzona
Mathew Lauzon
We certify that we have read this thesis and that, in our opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of the Master of Arts in History.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Liam Kelley, professor of Southeast Asian history at the University of Hawaii. This paper would not have been possible without his patient guidance and invaluable insight. I also want to thank my parents for their love and understanding and their unending support. I must also thank Seang, my original Cambodian inspiration, for his friendship and advice. Anna Peterson has helped me more than she will ever know. For that, I am eternally grateful. Finally, I would like to dedicate this paper to my grandparents, Papa and Grandma Dorothy. Their love and wisdom made everything possible. This is for you.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .................................................................................. iii

Introduction ........................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: From Angkor to Anka:
A Brief History of Cambodia ................................................................. 6
   Cambodge................................................. 10
   From Sihanouk to Lon Nol. ......................................................... 15
   Saloth Sar.................................................. 24
   Dormancy and Deliverance......................................................... 30
   Khmer Rouge............................................. 32
   First Death............................................................................. 36
   Second Life? ....................................................................... 37

Chapter Two: Strangers in a New Land:
American Challenges to Diasporic Khmer Identity............................... 41
   Refugees and Refugee Camps................................................. 42
   Strange Land......................................................................... 46
   Khmer Identity......................................................... 51
   Buddhism........................................................................... 54
   Language............................................................................. 57
   Gender Roles, Sexual Relationships, and Marriage.................... 59
   The Next Generation....................................................... 63

Chapter Three: Khmer Americans
Trauma, Memory, and Identity ............................................................. 67
   Old Traumas....................................................................... 68
      Civil War....................................................................... 68
      Forced Exodus......................................................... 71
      Life in the Cooperatives........................................... 73
      Torture......................................................................... 75
   New Traumas................................................................... 77
   Collective Memory............................................................... 81
   Traumatic Memory and Identity........................................... 84

Chapter Four: Memorializing Khmer Trauma:
Representations of Cambodian Historical Trauma in Genocidal Museums and Memorials ......................................................... 89
   Museums.......................................................................... 93
Tuol Sleng ..................................................................... 95
Choeung Ek ................................................................... 100
Interpreting Genocide Memorial ..................................... 102
Memorials as Representations of Identity ......................... 105
The Symbols of Genocide ................................................ 112

Chapter Five: Collecting Khmer Memories
Reshaping Identity through Autobiographical Literature ........ 115
Rescuing the Khmer Past .................................................. 117
Khmer Memory in Autobiography ...................................... 120
The Younger Generation Remembers .................................. 124
Accessing the Khmer Past ................................................... 128
Autobiography as an Archetype for Collective Memory ........ 132
Autobiography as Articulations of Identity .......................... 140
Legitimacy, Authority, and Representation ......................... 144

Conclusion ........................................................................ 151

Bibliography ..................................................................... 154
Introduction

The questions that lead me to write this paper originated in a conversation that I had with a friend many years ago. Seang grew up in southern California and moved to Oahu when he was twenty years old, which is when I first became acquainted with him at a restaurant where we both worked. On the surface, he appeared to be a typical young American from the west coast, a slightly rebellious, guitar-wielding surfer who had moved to Hawaii in search of the proverbial perfect wave. At that time, I was just beginning to study Southeast Asian history, a hobby that would later turn into a passion for Cambodian history. Although Seang had grown up in America, he was actually born in a small refugee camp along the border of Thailand and Cambodia. Eager to know about his past but hesitant to ask him about it, it was almost a year before I found out anything detailed about where Seang had come from, or how he had come to be in America.

Like thousands of other Khmers, Seang’s family had relocated to the United States in the early 1980s after his country had been torn apart by war. Between 1975 and 1979, a period sometimes referred to as Cambodia’s genocide, a communist organization popularly known as the Khmer Rouge caused the deaths of nearly two million Cambodians. Democratic Kampuchea (DK), the government set up by the Khmer Rouge’s top party member, Pol Pot, sought to transform Cambodia’s society and economy into a socialist’s utopia. But through the direct and indirect actions of the Khmer Rouge, hundreds of thousands of innocent Cambodians died from execution, starvation, or disease. This is the tragedy of Cambodia’s past.
When I had finally built up enough courage to ask Seang about his past, I was shocked to find out how little he knew about his home country’s history, culture, or politics. In fact, Seang barely knew anything at all about Cambodia. Considering that I was then taking classes in Southeast Asian history, I knew enough about Cambodia to realize that something did not seem right about Seang’s apparent lack of knowledge or interest in the subject. Over the span of our friendship, which still continues to this day, I found out that he knew basically nothing about Cambodia’s religion, customs, traditions, or history. Although he knew a few words and phrases in Khmer, especially the names of his favorite Khmer meals, he could barely hold a conversation with his parents in their native language. That said, there was something that Seang definitely did know about Cambodia. He knew that there had been a terrible tragedy that caused millions of deaths, a tragedy which forced his parents to flee their beloved homeland for a new life in a foreign country. He recognized the name Khmer Rouge as the perpetrators of incredible violence and destruction in Cambodia’s history. And he knew that the only reason he was living in America was because of the Khmer Rouge.

Now, as I sit in front of my computer, trying to remember how this paper all started, my thoughts keep drifting back to my first conversation with Seang. The fundamental question that drove me to write this thesis would not have occurred to me without Seang. For that, I feel that I owe him a great deal of thanks. For it was Seang who led me to this simple question: how does a diasporic community—especially one that is created during the aftermath of incredible trauma and suffering—define itself? More specifically, how do the diasporic Khmers define
themselves? This, of course, led to other questions. For instance, have the diasporic community of Khmers living in the United States lost a sense of their traditional identity? Have they created a new one? And if so, what are the markers of the new Khmer-American identity? If I only had Seang as a resource, the answer would seem relatively clear. Khmer-Americans have reconstructed their identity to center around the tragedy of Cambodia’s past.

Yet, as a historian, I am compelled to look for answers to these types of questions through the texts of the past. As tempted as I might be to use Seang’s situation as a general statement of all Khmer-Americans, I am bound by the laws of history to search for proof. But where does one find information about an individual’s identity, or for that matter, a group’s identity? How can one investigate Khmer-American identity? As I will argue, the answers lie in Khmer-American biographical literature. Since the end of the Khmer Rouge period, there has been an increasing number of Khmer-Americans who have chosen to share their traumatic memory with the rest of the world through the production of Khmer-American survivor stories and autobiographies. And it is within this literature, I argue, that the changing nature of Khmer-American identity can be located.

This paper represents my search for an understanding of how the diasporic community of Khmers living within the United States has reconstructed its identity since the end of the Democratic Kampuchea period. I argue that the trauma of the Khmer Rouge period caused an irreversible break with traditional understandings of Khmer identity, a rupture of Khmer identity that was further compounded by the often traumatic experience of relocating to the United States. Furthermore, although
the older generation of survivors has held on to traditional markers of Khmer identity, the younger generation has increasingly been in danger of losing this Khmer identity. But, as we will later see, some members of the younger generation are attempting to remedy this situation through the production of autobiographical literature dedicated to the traumatic memory of the Khmer Rouge period. As a result, a new identity—one that has increasingly used the tragedy of Cambodia's past as a central, definitive marker—is being created within the diasporic community in the United States: a Khmer-American identity.

This paper is broken down into five chapters. Chapter one is designed to provide the reader with a historical background of Cambodia. In order to understand how and why the Khmer Rouge came to power, we must travel back in time to the colonial era, when a distant imperial France ruled over the Khmers. Chapter Two then looks at the Khmer diaspora in the United States, how it began, and some of the difficulties that Cambodian refugees experienced upon arrival. Chapter Three turns to a more analytical discussion of the role of Khmer-American trauma with respect to the construction and articulation of Khmer-American collective memory and identity. In Chapter Four, I shift the focus back to Cambodia in order to look at two particular sites of memory that were reconstructed as a memorial to the Cambodian genocide. As I will argue, there were distinctive political and social motivations behind the efforts to label what had happened in Cambodia as genocide. Furthermore, although the genocide memorial and museums were constructed in Cambodia, I will argue that international recognition of Cambodia as a site of genocide has influenced the reconstruction of Khmer identity in the United States. Finally, in Chapter Five, I look
at the various relationships between the production of Khmer-American autobiography and the formation of Khmer-American identity. Specifically, I will argue that a dialogue has opened within the diasporic community concerning the desired image of Khmer-American identity, the accuracy of survivor memory, and who should be considered as legitimate representatives of Khmer-American identity. But before we can do any of this, we must travel far back in time, to one of the oldest markers of Khmer history and one of today’s most recognized symbols of Khmer identity: the ruins of Angkor Wat.
Chapter One

From Angkor to Angka:
A Brief History of Cambodia

Centered in the region of what is now known as Cambodia, the ancient Khmer empire of Angkor dominated most of mainland Southeast Asia from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. At its peak during the twelfth century, the rulers of Angkor controlled vast territories of land that included parts of modern day Thailand, Laos, southern Vietnam, and even a few sections of Myanmar (Burma).¹ Heavily influenced by various Indic religions and myths, the kings of Angkor ordered the construction of hundreds of temple complexes and religious monuments throughout their domain. Today, these enormous relics stand as a testament to the power and accomplishments of the ancient Khmer. The magnificent towers and elaborate bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat, located in Siem Riep province just north of the great Tonle Sap lake in central Cambodia, are now some of the most recognizable symbols of Cambodian history and Khmer identity. Traveling through Cambodia today, one is barraged by an omnipresent reminder of the importance of Angkor Wat to the perceptions of Khmer national identity. Its silhouette decorates storefronts and government buildings alike, and its image can be found in all forms of Cambodian popular culture. Given the predominance of the symbolism of Angkor in Cambodian history and identity, it is hard to imagine that a little over a century ago most average Khmers had probably never seen or even heard of Angkor Wat.

The currently accepted narrative in Cambodian historiography—one that traces the origins of the Khmer and Cambodia to the Angkorian period and acknowledges the importance of Angkorian symbolism in the construction a Cambodian national history—has recently been challenged by a few scholars of Cambodian studies. Although these scholars agree Angkor was indeed a Khmer empire and deserved its celebrated status as an integral part of Cambodian history, they argue that the recognition of Angkor as a symbol of Khmer history and identity was a relatively recent phenomenon. Southeast Asian scholar Penny Edwards, author of *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*, argues that the reconstruction and reconfiguration of Angkor as a site of Khmer historical memory and identity was a process that began with the arrival of the French.\(^2\)

When the French arrived in Southeast Asia in the middle of the nineteenth century, the mighty empire of Angkor had long since disappeared. Although the empire had suffered a slow decline in power and regional influence since the late twelfth century, losing parts of its expansive territory including what is now Thailand and southern Vietnam, the rulers of Angkor were dealt an unrecoverable blow when an invading army of Siamese from the neighboring kingdom of Ayutthaya sacked Angkor in 1431. As a result, the ancient cities of Angkor were abandoned and the Khmer kings were forced to move their capital city from Angkor Thom to a location close to Phnom Penh, the sight of Cambodia's current capital city.\(^3\) Throughout the centuries between the fall of Angkor and the arrival of the French, the memory of

---


Angkor gradually disappeared from most sections of Khmer society. It would return, however, with the arrival of the French.

Guided by the desire for empire and overseas territory, during the 1860s France increasingly became involved in the political and economic affairs of the regions along the Mekong River (what is now Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos). Faced with growing military pressure from Siam to the west and from the Nguyen Dynasty (Vietnam) to the east, the Khmer monarchy accepted French “protection,” and in 1863 the French protectorate of “Cambodge” was officially established. Together with the areas now known as Vietnam and Laos, Cambodia would remain under French authority until the middle of the 1950s. Although France’s initial interest in Cambodge was based on the region’s strategic position as a buffer between Siam and France’s valuable colony of Cochinchina (now southern Vietnam), France soon discovered that her new protectorate offered something that her other colonies lacked: the monumental ruins of Angkor. Under the initial guidance and direction of French archaeologists and orientalists, the rediscovered ruins of Angkor were examined, refurbished, and reconstructed in efforts to “save” ancient Khmer architecture and artwork from the fate that had befallen the Khmer people. As Edwards explains, the French transformed Angkor Wat into a dual symbol of French imperial power and France’s ability to fulfill the “white man’s burden” of rescuing and civilizing the Khmer noble savage. But as the twentieth century progressed, the image of Angkor was increasingly adopted by Khmer nationalists and revolutionaries.

---

4 Ibid., 235.
who transformed the memory Angkor into a symbol of Cambodian national history and identity.

Along side the image of Angkor, since 1979, Cambodians remember and are increasingly recognized by another aspect of their past. Unlike the imagery of Angkor Wat that conjures up memories of Cambodia’s glorious past and historical accomplishments, this new image of Cambodia is one of tragedy, suffering, and death. Between 1975 and 1979, a communist group popularly known as the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia after years of armed conflict and civil war. Once in power, the central party of the Khmer Rouge sought to destroy any remnants of the previous social, economic, and political structures in order to transform Cambodia into a socialist utopia. Through their oppressive ideology and violent methods of enforcement, the Khmer Rouge government was ultimately responsible for the deaths of nearly two million Cambodians—most of whom were ethnically Khmer—through execution, starvation, and disease. This is the tragedy of Cambodia’s past. As I will argue in the following chapters, this period of Cambodian history has redefined the parameters of Khmer identity to such an extent that “being Cambodian” is often reduced to “surviving the Khmer Rouge.” But similar to the process of social reconstruction that had transformed Angkorian imagery into a marker of Cambodian national identity, the memory of the Khmer Rouge period has been collectivized into a new fundamental symbol of Khmer identity.

This chapter looks at the history of the Khmer Rouge, from their origins in pre-World War II Cambodia and France to their official disintegration in the late 1990s. Before we can begin to look at how and why the Khmer Rouge period has
been solidified as a marker of Khmer identity, it is necessary to become familiar with
the historical context of Cambodia from which the Khmer Rouge arose. It is a
complex history that involved many actors, several different nations, and covered
nearly three quarters of the twentieth century. The story of their rise to power is not a
new area of study. Indeed, over the past three decades numerous historians and
journalists have gone to great lengths to document and explain the Khmer Rouge
period. This chapter, then, also functions as a brief historiography of the scholarship
dedicated to Cambodia's tragic past.

Cambodge

After the French established the protectorate of Cambodge in 1863, they
quickly took control over and reorganized Cambodia's administration, foreign
policies, financial and legal systems, and eventually most commercial activity
throughout the region. The colonial era in Cambodia had begun. Although the
French left the Cambodian monarchy relatively intact, Khmer rulers soon realized
that their former power had been methodically usurped by their new colonial
overlords.

By the 1930s it was clear that Cambodia would never return to its former self.
Throughout the decades following their initial conquest, the French had literally
transformed the landscape of Cambodia through the implementation of a modern
infrastructure including roads, European inspired urban architecture, hospitals, and
Western style schools. Plantations dedicated to the production of rubber and cash
crops soon littered the countryside of Cambodia, but most of the revenue flowed out of the country and into the pockets of European industries and entrepreneurs. Yet despite the modern infrastructural developments throughout Cambodia and France’s imperial discourse of *le mission civilisatrice*, most of the indigenous population suffered economic and social hardships under French rule.

Discontent and dissatisfaction with French imperial rule—although present since the protectorate was established in 1863—did not make a public appearance until the late 1930s, and even then it was relatively moderate and confined to a miniscule group of French educated Khmer elites and Buddhist monks. One such Khmer elite, Son Ngoc Thanh, who is now considered by many Khmers to be the “father of Cambodian nationalism,” began to publish anti-colonial sentiments in his Phnom Penh based newspaper *Nagaravatta*. Thanh would go on to play several critical roles in the development of independent Cambodia, including his participation in an anti-colonial, Thailand based paramilitary group known as the Khmer Issarak, as well as a two month stint as Prime Minister of Cambodia in 1945. Besides his later individual actions in Cambodia’s social and political spheres, Thanh’s initial ideas and writings during the late 1930s and early 1940s strongly influenced the growth of numerous nationalist and revolutionary movements, including the organizations that housed the original members of the Khmer Rouge.

With respect to movements towards independence, World War II was a watershed in Southeast Asian history. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was rise of anti-colonial sentiment throughout most of Southeast

---

6 Gottesman, 15-16.
7 Ibid., 15.
Asia. As the twentieth century progressed, an increasing number of individuals began to adopt nationalist and communist ideologies in order to resist European colonial authority. But by the 1930s, most of Southeast Asia’s anti-colonial, nationalist, and communist movements had been crushed by European colonial powers. As such, when the Japanese arrived in Southeast Asia in late 1941, many of Southeast Asia’s leading nationalist and communist revolutionaries were either in prison or exile. The Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia changed everything. Not only did the Japanese defeat European colonial powers in Southeast Asia within a few months of fighting, thus proving to the colonized that Europeans could be defeated by an Asian power, the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia allowed for the uninhibited rise of revolutionary leaders throughout the colonies and broke down barriers that had formerly blocked independence movements prior to the war.8

In addition to dismantling Europe’s colonial authority, Japan also released many revolutionaries and welcomed back hundreds of exiled intellectuals, a few of whom would go on to play key roles in Southeast Asian independence movements during the aftermath of World War II.9 Meanwhile, Japan’s rhetoric of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere—Japan’s wartime slogan which sought to justify Japanese occupation by arguing that Japan was “liberating” Southeast Asia from European colonialism—helped convince many Southeast Asians to fight for independence from European imperialism. However, Cambodian independence was not won through armed conflict or revolutionary struggle. Instead, independence in

---

Cambodia, while heavily influenced by the Japanese occupation, was achieved through relatively peaceful negotiations between Cambodian political leaders and the French colonial authorities nearly a decade after the War.

When the Japanese arrived in Southeast Asia, most European powers fought desperately to hold on to their colonial possessions. Indigenous reaction to the occupation varied greatly between different groups. Some Southeast Asians resisted the Japanese invasion and fought alongside their colonial masters. Some other groups collaborated with the Japanese and interpreted the occupation as an opportunity to rid Southeast Asia of European colonial authority. In Cambodia, unlike the British, Dutch, and American colonies whose military forces violently resisted the Japanese invasion, the French colonial government collaborated with the Japanese during most of World War II. As a result, French colonial system was left relatively intact for most of the war, leaving little room for Cambodians to resist either the Japanese or the French authority. Even before the outbreak of armed conflict in Southeast Asia, the French colonial government under orders from Vichy France—the cooperative government established after France fell to Nazi forces in 1939—allowed the Japanese military to occupy certain areas of Indochina (France’s tripartite colonial possession that included Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) in return for France’s continued administrative control over the region. As historian David Chandler explains, the policies and actions of Vichy France during the Japanese occupation—particularly their ceding of eastern territory to Thailand in 1941—further exacerbated the already tense situation in Cambodia and catalyzed the growth of resistance
movements throughout the relinquished regions. But these resistance movements did not win Cambodia’s independence. Instead, Cambodian independence was achieved through the somewhat surprising actions of Cambodia’s young, newly enthroned king.

In April 1941, after a 28 year rule as a puppet king under the French colonial authorities, King Sisowath Monivong passed away. Although the deceased king’s eldest son, Monireth Sisowath, was the logical and most likely choice to take his father’s place as king, the governor general of Indochina, Admiral Decoux, wanted to avoid appointing an heir to Cambodia’s thrown that might prove insubordinate or disloyal to the French empire. With this strategy in mind the governor general looked to Monireth’s nephew, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, only 18 years old at the time and well known for his European tastes and playful demeanor, as a safer and more reliable alternative. In September of 1941, having passed over the old king’s rightful heir, the French colonial authorities crowned young Norodom Sihanouk as king of Cambodge. But as the French would later realize, young King Norodom Sihanouk proved to be a capable and cunning ruler who eventually won the loyalty and devotion of millions of Cambodians. Towards the end of World War II, developments within Japanese controlled Cambodia propelled Sihanouk into the center of Cambodian politics, a space he would occupy for the next thirty years.

Towards the end of 1945, the Japanese forces in Southeast Asia realized that their hopes of winning the war in the Pacific were rapidly disappearing. Faced with

---

the combined forces of European, American, and indigenous Southeast Asian forces, the Japanese in Indochina were forced to take radical action. On 9 March, 1945, the Japanese staged a coup de force throughout all of Indochina and turned against their former allies of Vichy France. French military and administrative personnel, as well as most of the French civilian population, were imprisoned throughout Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Bolstered by the radical move by the Japanese to disarm the remaining French units, on 12 March the twenty-two year old King Norodom Sihanouk proclaimed that the French protectorate established in 1863 had ended, and for a period of two months the famous nationalist Son Ngoc Thanh became the prime minister of an independent Cambodia. But with the Japanese defeat five months later in August 1945, and as the French returned to Indochina and attempted to regain control over their former colonies, the hope for an easily obtained independence began to crumble.

From Sihanouk to Lon Nol

Soon after the Japanese surrendered, the French returned to Cambodia and attempted to reestablish the pre-war colonial situation. In no way prepared to give up their precious Southeast Asian possessions, the French busied themselves with the repatriation of former French colonial citizens, the reinstallation of French colonial administration, and the rebuilding of various commercial enterprises that had existed

---

12 Chandler, Brother, 20.
before the war.\textsuperscript{14} While violence increased in neighboring Vietnam between the communist Viet Minh forces under Ho Chi Minh and the returning French military, internal political tensions between the Cambodian elites and the French colonial government intensified. Although Sihanouk’s declaration of independence was little more than lip service given the reality of the return of French authority, Cambodians made some progress in the political arena since the end of the war.

After his brief stint as prime minister, Son Ngoc Thanh was exiled to France under accusations of treason, and the French placed Prince Monireth Sisowath—the prince who the French had earlier passed over as heir apparent in favor of his nephew Norodom Sihanouk—as the new prime minister of the reformed Cambodge. As historian David Chandler explains, the French had reached an agreement with Prime Minister Monireth in 1946 that allowed Cambodians to draft a constitution and form a national assembly, and even granted them the right to develop political parties in Cambodge. The Democratic Party, the largest and most innovative political party of the 1940s and 1950s, had roots in the nationalist tradition of Thanh’s \textit{Nagaravatta}, and was the only Cambodian political party that sought a possible future without the French.\textsuperscript{15} Scattered amongst its membership were the future leaders of various revolutionary groups, including the Khmer Rouge.

Meanwhile, several uprisings and armed resistance movements against the French began to erupt throughout the Cambodian countryside near the Thai and Vietnamese borders. The Khmer Issarak rebel group (literally “liberated Khmer”), who would later be joined by Son Ngoc Thanh, resisted French power in the west,

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{15} Chandler, \textit{Brother}, 22.
while several bandit groups and a few Khmer offshoots of Vietnam’s communist parties engaged the French in the east. In particular, Tou Samouth and Son Ngoc Minh, both of whom would become instrumental in the formation of the Cambodian communist party during the 1950s, participated in armed conflict in eastern Cambodge under the direction of Vietnamese communists. But at this early stage in Cambodia’s progress towards independence, most educated and inspiring Khmer nationalists pushed for political change through democratic channels instead of military ones, particularly through newly established political organizations like the Democratic Party.

From 1945 to 1954, while the First Indochinese War was being fought in neighboring Vietnam, King Sihanouk increasingly attempted to play the various competing powers—Cambodian rebels, the Democratic Party, France, and Vietnam—against each other. Although the king played relatively little part in the political developments directly after World War II, by the beginning of the 1950s, Sihanouk had proven himself a capable and cunning ruler. In 1951, the Democratic Party won the overwhelming majority of seats in the newly established National Assembly, an event that persuaded the then exiled Son Ngoc Thanh to return to Phnom Penh as prime minister of Cambodge. Many Cambodians believed that Thanh was the only man capable of gaining full independence from the French. But a few months after returning in 1952, Thanh grew frustrated with the Cambodian leadership’s seemingly growing complacency with French political concessions that always stopped short of granting Cambodia full independence. On the seventh anniversary of Japan’s coup de force, Thanh disappeared into the countryside to join the Khmer Issarak rebel group.

\[16\] Ibid., 24.
and began an ultimately unsuccessful armed resistance movement against the French. Once there, Thanh hoped to gain the support of the various anti-French rebel groups scattered across the rural areas, including a failed attempt to win support from Cambodia's small group of Vietnamese backed communists—the forerunners to the later Khmer Rouge. This outraged both conservative Democrats and Sihanouk, who took the opportunity to defile the image of Son Ngoc Thanh. With the help of government troops supplied by the French, Sihanouk made his first real contribution to the political scene by dissolving the National Assembly and beginning to rule by decree. Sihanouk, more confident than ever, bolstered his image and his role as the "father of Cambodia" by announcing he would achieve independence within three years. The diplomatic and political lessons Sihanouk learned during the early years of his rule would prove invaluable during the next two decades of his political career. By 1953, after successful political maneuvers against the French and various Cambodian groups, Sihanouk succeeded in his promise and declared independence for Cambodia, officially ending nearly 100 years French "protection."

Cambodian politics after World War II was dominated by a one party system. Before Sihanouk dissolved the National Assembly in 1952, the Democratic Party held nearly 70 percent of the elected seats. Then in 1955, frustrated with the limits the newly drafted constitution put on monarchial power, Sihanouk renounced his thrown in order to participate more actively in Cambodia's political arena. That same year the Democratic Party and the new leftist party Pracheachon, which included a small group of Cambodian Communists, experienced a humiliating defeat by the hands of

---

17 Ibid., 36-37
18 Chandler, Tragedy, 84.
Sihanouk's newly founded Sangkum Reastr Niyum party—an umbrella political organization created by Sihanouk as a strategy to dominate the elections—which ended up winning almost 100 percent of the elected seats. From 1955 to 1970, Sihanouk's careful political maneuvers allowed the Sangkum to monopolize political power throughout Cambodia. The charismatic and influential Sihanouk, now in a position to rule single-handedly without the interference from hostile political parties like the Democrats or the leftist Pracheachon, continued to exert relatively unopposed authority for more than a decade, and remained firmly in power until 1970. That said, such an image of Cambodian "one-party-rule" politics hides the complex nature of internal resistance to the Sangkum. Indeed, the period between 1945 and 1970 also witnessed the birth and consolidation of a plethora of political parties, religious organizations, and various ethnic groups that unsuccessfully resisted the hegemony of Sihanouk's regime. Located amongst these scattered groups were the future founders of the communist Khmer Rouge.

During the 1960s, the United States became increasingly involved in the civil war in neighboring Vietnam. The political strategies adopted by Sihanouk's government during this period set the stage for the tragedy of 1975 through 1978. According to historian Michael Vickery, Sihanouk adopted a strategy to play each side—the Americans and the Vietnamese—against the other in order to keep Cambodia out of the war. By the early sixties, Sihanouk had established tactical alliances with the Cambodian left as well as with Communist China in order to avoid a direct confrontation with the growing power in North Vietnam. But up until the

---

19 Etcheson, 43.
early 1960s, Sihanouk also accepted a considerable amount of economic and military aide from the United States, and he repeatedly suppressed communist activity throughout Cambodia.  

Chandler explains that Sihanouk’s political maneuvers had two extremely important consequences for Cambodia’s future. First, Sihanouk’s government effectively cut off previously acquired U.S. economic and military assistance and instead designed a program to nationalize Cambodia’s banks and import-export trade in order to convince anti-imperialists members of Cambodia’s government that he was not a “lackey of American imperialism.” In fact, during the mid 1950s, Sihanouk anti-Western position caused many of the more right-wing, pro-Western members of the Cambodian society to be incarcerated or even killed. Second, in efforts suppress the growing popularity and influence of Cambodia’s left and maintain his outward appearance of political neutrality, Sihanouk initiated an anti-communist campaign throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s that resulted in the arrests of many of Cambodia’s leading communist members, forcing many of the remaining communist members—including the future leaders of Democratic Kampuchea—to seek refuge in the countryside.  

Although Chandler argues that Sihanouk’s policies during this period probably saved thousands of Cambodian lives by keeping Cambodia in a neutral position, the Vietnam conflict nonetheless destabilized the country’s economy to such an extent that Sihanouk was eventually driven out of office. A combination of bureaucratic corruption, irresponsible management of state-controlled industry,

—

21 Chandler, A History of Cambodia, 192.
22 Ibid., 193.
military spending, and Sihanouk’s own extravagant expenditures, lead to an economic crisis in the final years of the 1960s. Compounded with Cambodia’s economic difficulties was the apparent lack of interest that Sihanouk displayed in ruling his country. Increasingly, Sihanouk turned over the control of his country to eager military leaders and government officials such as Lon Nol and Sirik Matak. Meanwhile, widespread dissatisfaction with the political and economic state of affairs in Cambodia provided the perfect incentive for impoverished villagers and outcast intellectuals to rally to the cause of the various rebel groups rapidly growing throughout the country.23

During the early 1960s, Cambodia’s communists were busy trying to sustain an underground movement after Sihanouk’s aggressive anti-communist campaigns of the late 1950s targeted and arrested many members of the leftist Pracheachon party. In 1962, after rumors had circulated of Sihanouk’s ordered execution of Tou Samouth, the prominent leader of the Cambodian communists who was intimately connected with the wider Indochina communist movement based in North Vietnam, many Cambodian communists chose to move their operations into the countryside and jungles of Cambodia.24

Throughout the next few years, Cambodian communists continued to form a tenuous relationship with the much more developed and experienced Vietnamese communists. Between 1963 and 1967, the future core members of the communist Khmer Rouge were scattered along the Cambodia’s eastern border under the protection of the Vietnamese. Located amongst the communist groups was a former

24 Chandler, Brother. 55-61.
teacher by the name of Saloth Sar, the party’s charismatic leader and future mastermind behind Democratic Kampuchea.\textsuperscript{25} Then, in 1968, just as the Vietnamese Communists struck a devastating blow to American forces in neighboring Vietnam and after years of patient waiting for an opportune moment, Cambodian communists launched a military campaign against the Cambodian government headed by Sihanouk. As Chandler describes, what started out as a relatively insignificant armed conflict movement quickly gained momentum over the subsequent years, and by 1970 much of Cambodia’s rural countryside was under the control of insurgent forces, depriving Sihanouk of almost one fifth of Cambodia’s territory.\textsuperscript{26}

1970 marked another watershed in Cambodia’s history. Dissatisfied with Sihanouk’s lack of cooperation with the United State’s objectives in neighboring Vietnam, the U.S. government backed a coup d’etat in 1970—orchestrated by Sihanouk’s cousin Sirik Matak and signed by general Lon Nol—which wrested power away from the former king and firmly placed Lon Nol as the acting Prime Minister of Cambodia. Prior to this, Lon Nol had been the general formally in charge of suppressing the communist insurrection throughout Cambodia. Because of his longstanding rightist political views and his history of harboring a pro-American stance, American support rallied behind Lon Nol and U.S. economic and military aide once again flooded into Cambodia. An outraged and surprised Sihanouk, in Beijing at the time of the bloodless coup, had few options. In an incredibly ironic twist of fate, Sihanouk began to hold discussions with the various Cambodian communist leaders whom he had previously been at war with. After a series of tactical agreements were


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 202.
made, Sihanouk agreed to head an exiled united government allied to North Vietnam and the very same Cambodian communists who just months before had called for Sihanouk's destruction.\textsuperscript{27} With the new addition of Sihanouk to the Cambodian communist movement, waves of popular support for the communist led insurgency swept through the country. Lon Nol's incredibly unpopular pro-American government thereupon ushered in a period of civil war that ultimately won popular support for the very communists they were trying to suppress and set the stage for the Khmer Rouge's rise to power.

By 1971, bitter factional conflicts arose between the two largest political parties in Phnom Penh, but Lon Nol, "felt himself above political groupings" and was able to withstand the conflicts of the two groups.\textsuperscript{28} Outside of the government and elite intellectual circles, most Cambodians did not notice the political changes. What they did notice was their lifestyle and country quickly slipping into a state of chaos and bloodshed. Unconcerned with whom power actually rested, the average Cambodian lived with the threat of constant social upheaval and revolutionary violence propagated by the eclectic cornucopia of rebel troops that endlessly circulated through the countryside.\textsuperscript{29}

In the eyes of most Cambodians, the Lon Nol government represented everything that was wrong with Cambodia: political corruption, civil war, social paranoia, and economic failure. In addition, in return for economic and military support from the United States, Lon Nol allowed the continuation of American bombing campaigns—directed at the flow of North Vietnamese supplies and troops

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 205.
\textsuperscript{28} Chandler, \textit{Tragedy}, 210.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 211.
via the Ho Chi Minh Trail—to be conducted in Cambodia along the Vietnamese border areas. Given the addition of Sihanouk as the new head of a united Cambodian front, who in the opinion of most Khmers still held enormous symbolic power as the "father of Cambodia," Lon Nol had little hope for popular support and ultimately little chance for success. As hundreds of thousands of refugees poured into Phnom Penh to escape the escalating warfare in Cambodia's rural areas, Lon Nol increasingly became identified with the problems and turmoil facing Cambodia. Unfortunately, the rebel force that eventually drove Lon Nol to flee from Cambodia in 1975 would set up a government that was exponentially more brutal and oppressive than Lon Nol's or Sihanouk's regimes.

Saloth Sar

This new government and the new society that it sought to create was masterminded by the communist leader, Saloth Sar, a man millions would eventually come to know as Pol Pot. Saloth Sar was born in March 1925 to a relatively wealthy farming family in a small, remote village of Prek Sbauv near the Tonle Sap in central Cambodia. As a young man Sar moved to the city of Kompong Cham in order to attend the European style schools set up by the French colonial administration. As journalist and Pol Pot expert Philip Short explains, Sar's early educational career at the Ecole Miche and the College Preah Sihanouk was at best mediocre, as he often fell behind the abilities of his friends and family members. Then, in 1945, his years

---

30 Ibid., 215.
at college were fatefully interrupted by the Japanese *coup de force* which imprisoned Sar's French teachers and replaced them with Khmer instructors instead. This event had a radical influence on Sar and his fellow students in Kompong Cham—some of whom would later become leading members of the Khmer Rouge organization—as it was the first time any of them had experienced the political realities of Cambodia first hand.\(^\text{32}\) For many individuals in Sar’s generation, the Japanese occupation offered a glimpse of what life might be like without the French.

Although most of his classmates from Kompong Cham went on to attend Phnom Penh’s prestigious Lycée Sisowath, in 1948 Sar enrolled as a carpentry student at the Ecole Technique located on the northern outskirts of the capital city.\(^\text{33}\) Yet despite a series of academic failures and defeats, Sar eventually earned the opportunity in 1949 to travel and study in France where he and his acquaintances from Lycée Sisowath, who had also earned scholarships to study in France, were introduced to socialist and communist ideologies. It was in the streets and cafés of Paris where Sar and several other notable Cambodian communists met and discussed revolution and Cambodia’s possible future. For the most part, communism in Cambodia during the late 1940s and early 1950s was relatively nonexistent. Most communist activity in the region originated within Vietnamese based communist organizations located to the north and east of Cambodia.\(^\text{34}\) As such, many Cambodians who would one day occupy the upper echelon of Khmer Rouge leadership received their initial training and indoctrination outside of Cambodia. Nonetheless, while Sihanouk and his companions honed their communist ideologies

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 22-23.
\(^{34}\) Short, 40-45.
in Paris, there were some modest developments within the communist movement in
Cambodia which were crucial to the later rise of the Khmer Rouge.

Cambodia’s first communist organization was officially established in 1951
under the guidance of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), the Vietnamese based
and largest communist party in mainland Southeast Asia. From its earliest
conception, the communist movement in Cambodia was intimately linked with
developments in neighboring Vietnam, a distinction that later Cambodian communists
would attempt to conceal. The Vietnamese leadership singled out two Cambodians,
Son Ngoc Minh (whose name honored Cambodia’s first nationalist Son Ngoc Thanh
and the famous Vietnamese communist Ho Chi Minh) and Tou Samouth (who was
later reportedly tortured and executed by Sihanouk), to head the communist
movement inside Cambodia. To the Vietnamese leaders, the communist party in
Cambodia was to function as an extension of the Vietnamese communist movement.
But to the Cambodian members, the assistance of the Vietnamese was a necessary
evil that for the time being had to be tolerated.

Throughout the early 1950s, Cambodians worked closely with their
Vietnamese mentors to shore up popular support and maintain alliances with anti-
French insurgent forces, such as the Khmer Issarak based in neighboring Thailand.
After Sihanouk beat the communists to the prize of independence, many of the old
alliances began to fall apart and most party members were faced with the uncertain
and unlikely future of Cambodian communism. Indeed, throughout the late 1950s
and early 1960s, the communist movement in Cambodia involved only a small group

---

35 Chandler, Brother, 50-56.
of members who were increasingly forced to conceal their activities and ideas in the face of Sihanouk's anti-communist campaigns.\textsuperscript{36}

While the structure of communism and revolution in Vietnam and Cambodia were beginning to take form in the early 1950s, Sar was busy forming his own revolutionary ideas in Paris. He was not alone. Many of his old friends from school had journeyed to France on their own, and it was there where Sar and his compatriots began to be submerged in the discourse and ideology of socialism and communism. Their enthusiasm led them to join the French Communist Party (PFC) and inspired them to articulate their own ideas about the future of Cambodian politics. Among the participants in these discussions were some of the leading members of the later Khmer Rouge organization, including Ieng Sary, one of Sar's most trusted and dedicated followers.\textsuperscript{37}

During his stay in Paris, Sar was invited to join the Cercle Marxiste, a secret communist based organization which was founded by a small group of Cambodian students and intellectuals, one of whom was Sar's close friend and future Khmer Rouge leader, Ieng Sary. In the early days of dialogue there was much disagreement over the correct course of action to achieve independence and revolution. Sar, for example, believed the future of Cambodia rested with former the Khmer nationalist—then exiled in France—Son Ngoc Thanh. Ieng Sary, on the other hand, thought that their countries destiny lay with the Vietnamese communists.\textsuperscript{38} But regardless of such initial disputes, the Cambodians associated with Saloth Sar agreed that a communist revolution was a necessary step towards Cambodian independence.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 58-60.
\textsuperscript{37} Short, 63.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 59.
The discovery of socialism and communism—especially Stalinism which called for a communist revolution on a global scale—provided the Khmer students in the Cercle with a sense of group solidarity and a clear goal: they were suddenly a part of a worldwide movement that included such superpowers as the Soviet Union and China. As Short explains, it is likely that some members of the Cercle Marxiste did not entirely understand or care about the fundamental tenants of Marxism or Stalinism. Rather, they saw the revolutionary atmosphere that surrounded communist organizations as means to achieve independence and success over evil. Whatever the initial attractions that communism in France offered, by the time Sar and his contemporaries left France they had wholeheartedly adopted communism as the ideology of freedom from oppression and were prepared to pledge their lives to the attainment of that goal.

In 1953 Saloth Sar returned home to Cambodia. Upon his arrival, Sar soon realized that during his three year absence Cambodia had devolved into a state of political corruption and armed conflict. The First Indochina War across their border spilled into Cambodian territory where several military factions fought the French as well as each other over control of Cambodia’s independence movement. Although there were several Cambodian entities that competed for power, including a rebel forced backed by the extremely popular and recently returned Son Ngoc Thanh, to the chagrin of Sar it was King Norodom Sihanouk who finally declared Cambodia independent. Out of all the contesting groups, Soloth Sar had mistakenly recognized the Cambodian communists—headed by Son Ngoc Minh and Tou Samouth under the guidance of Vietnam’s communist party—as the only group capable of realizing the

30 Ibid., 65
goal of revolution and independence. Yet despite Sihanouk’s accomplishment of independence, during the following years Sar and his like minded compatriots moved further away from Sihanouk due to the king’s oppressive actions to crush the power of Son Ngoc Thanh and the Cambodian communists.40 To these future Khmer Rouge cadres, Sihanouk “was just a lackey—a chieftan of the feudalist and imperialists [wreaking] terror on the Cambodian people...a legitimate target.”41 It soon became clear to Sar that something radical had to be done if Cambodia wanted to see a communist revolution.

During the following two decades, the incredibly complex story of the rise of the Khmer Rouge unfolded. Unsatisfied with the state of independent Cambodia, many Cambodian communists still looked towards the day when Cambodia would go through a communist revolution. Sar and his companions eventually decided that their only chance for revolution lay in cooperation with the Vietnamese communists. Shortly before Sihanouk achieved official recognition of independence from France following the 1954 Geneva Accords, Sar quietly departed Phnom Penh and headed to the liberated zone near the Vietnam border.42 The future Khmer Rouge leader spent these formative months training with Vietnamese soldiers and spreading revolutionary messages and communist propaganda throughout Cambodia and in neighboring Vietnam.

His life during these months was characterized by the harshest of environments and the barest of necessities, experiences that Sar would later use during Cambodia’s civil war and a reality that Sar probably incorporated into his later

40 Ibid., 87.
41 Ibid., 147.
42 Etcheson, p. 56-58.
vision of Cambodia’s utopia as defined by Khmer Rouge ideology. The time Sar spent living and working with the Viet Minh transformed him and his compatriots into experienced revolutionaries. Gone were the days of peaceful deliberations and debates while living in Paris. It was in the thick, hot jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia that Sar and his fellow communists honed their skills and perfected the future language, rhetoric, and social ideology of the revolution. But the time for revolution was not yet at hand. A few months after the official declaration of Cambodian independence by Sihanouk, Vietnamese communists forces relocated back to Vietnam, while Sar and the small group of Khmer communists reluctantly returned to Phnom Penh.

Dormancy and Deliverance

Between 1955 and 1962, the political atmosphere of Cambodia became increasingly hostile and corrupt. As Short explains, during this period Sar lived a double life. On the surface, Sar’s life seemed relatively normal. He married a former acquaintance named Khieu Ponnary and worked for a while as a teacher in Phnom Penh. But behind this exterior façade lay the secretive organizer who helped maintain the underground communist movement in communication with former Cambodian communist revolutionaries. It was during this period that Sar and his top cadres crystallized their particular doctrine of communist ideology and formulated the structure of the organization, or Angka—a term that referred to the mysterious party, led by Sar, that directed the actions of the Khmer Rouge. Especially in the rural
areas, the party instigated a strategy of political indoctrination of communist ideology and a program of mass recruitment from the villages in order to build popular support throughout the countryside. At the same time, Sar and his fellow communists continued to maintain covert struggle within Phnom Penh’s political arena.\textsuperscript{43} To the growing frustration of Sihanouk, it was clear that the communist party’s popularity was steadily on rise.

1962 marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of the Khmer Rouge. As mentioned above, Sihanouk’s conflict with Cambodia’s communists steadily rose during the late 1950s and early 1960s. He repeatedly arrested and imprisoned suspected communists and socialist sympathizers, many of whom mysteriously “disappeared.” For example, 1962 was the year that the Cambodian communist party’s former leader, Tou Samouth, was secretly arrested, tortured and executed by Sihanouk’s secret police (thus solidifying Sar’s top position in the party’s hierarchy).\textsuperscript{44} Sihanouk’s anti-communist politics convinced many of the remaining communist leaders to retreat underground, including Sar and his close associates.\textsuperscript{45} Yet Sihanouk’s aggression towards communism caused unexpected collateral effects. Given that a number of the top communist leaders, such as Tou Samouth, were either arrested or mysteriously disappeared under the anti-communist policies enforced by Sihanouk, Sihanouk’s actions actually propelled Sar and his old acquaintances from Paris up the hierarchy of Cambodia’s communist party. Faced with possible internment or death, Saloth Sar, Ieng Sary, and a few other top party members once again fled across the eastern Cambodian border to southern Vietnamese communist

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 58-60.  
\textsuperscript{44} Chandler, \textit{Brother}, 60.  
\textsuperscript{45} Etcheson, 59.
territory. After nine years of covert political struggle in Phnom Penh, Sar and his associates once again entered the forests to regroup and reorganize. This time, however, the man who would return to Phnom Penh nearly 13 years later as the head of the Khmer Rouge would not be Saloth Sar. He had become Pol Pot, the head of a well-trained and disciplined communist rebel. That group, the Khmer Rouge, saw its fortunes change dramatically in the 1970s after Lon Nol overthrew Sihanouk. Over the course of the following years, the Khmer Rouge gained in strength until finally, on April 17, 1975, they captured the capital, Phnom Penh, and established Democratic Kampuchea.\(^{46}\) On that day, the fate of millions of Cambodians was suddenly transferred into the hands of the Khmer Rouge.

**Khmer Rouge**

On April 17, 1975, black clad individuals carrying menacing automatic rifles, many of whom were shoeless and donned traditional Khmer *kramas* (scarfs), steadily and quietly moved into the capital of Phnom Penh. Greeted with cheers, the urban population initially took their arrival as a good sign, that the long years of war were finally over. But not all were optimistic about the appearance of these strangers to the city. Soon the eerily subdued nature of the new arrivals led many of the city’s inhabitants to question the intention of these youthful warriors. The Khmer Rouge immediately began to organize the inhabitants and evacuate the city. Many of those who worked for the government or who were educated were separated off from the

general population and most of these were never heard from again. The rest were carefully and systematically led away from the city into the countryside where a new life awaited, one that would be characterized by brutal oppression, enforced labor, fear of execution, and starvation. Over the course two days, nearly two million Cambodians were forcibly relocated from the urban centers of Cambodia to the countryside without any justification or reason, driven on not by their own accord, but by the barrel of a gun.

The Khmer Rouge evacuated the cities one by one, beginning with Phnom Penh, then Battambang, followed by the few others that remained to be liberated. The populations of the cities were then separated into different groups according to their former rank or occupation. Those who had served under the Lon Nol government, especially the soldiers of the republican army, soon realized their horrific fate. For example, Etcheson describes how more than 300 officers were told to don their finest uniforms and all their decorations, as they were supposed to greet the glorious return of Sihanouk. Instead, they were machine gunned down from all sides. But the soldiers were not the only ones executed. Many Western educated individuals and non-ethnic Khmer were executed as well. The minutest flaw could spell death during the first few days of the takeover, even having bad eyesight, as some Khmer Rouge soldiers interpreted the wearing of glasses as a sign of devotion to the “vanity of imperialism.”

Historian Michael Vickery has argued that the deliberate relocation of the urban populations to the countryside can be rationalized in a number of ways. First, it

---

47 Etcheson, 190-200.
48 Etcheson, 145.
49 Chandler, Tragedy, 116.
may be seen as a strategy to overcome the problem of food supply: there was not
eough food left in the cities to feed the huge refugee populations. Second, there was
a necessity to put everyone to productive work in order to rebuild the infrastructure of
Cambodia. Finally, given the internal conflicts of Cambodia that led up to the civil
war, it was necessary to "neutralize" political opposition. But the rationality of
Khmer Rouge actions did not meet the reality of the situation. For example, half the
people in Phnom Penh were villagers who fled the war and who could easily resume
their productive work at home. But for the million or so genuine urban dwellers, this
was a difficult task indeed. Many had never worked in a field or planted seed. As
Vickery explains, although the strategy of collectivizing the population in order to
raise productivity appeared rational, the implementation of it was economically
irrational. Forcing inexperienced city dwellers to practice intensive agriculture
without proper tools or guidance, without sufficient nourishment or medical supplies,
was a program destined for disaster. In successive years, death from either starvation
or disease claimed the lives of millions of innocent Cambodians. Although the
concentrated efforts of the workers were geared to the production of food, rarely was
it enough to feed the entire population and many had to get by with only a few
calories per day.51

According to Angka, the mysterious organization behind the Khmer Rouge,
Cambodia's past was to be erased so that a new era of utopia could begin.
Cambodia's entire society and culture was thus targeted for reorganization.
Education, religion, social relationships, hierarchies, and family dynamics were just

---

50 Vickery, 153-4.
51 Ibid., 156.
some of the largest arenas of change. The DK government abolished all literary
education and the only schooling was in the form of nightly “revolutionary” sessions
where villagers were indoctrinated in the ideology and rhetoric of Angka. Families
were separated and the traditional language used when addressing ones elders was
forbidden. Children no longer addressed their parents as ma (mother) or pok (father).
Instead, children under the Khmer Rouge were to address their parents as ming (aunt)
or boo (uncle), or even better, simply as comrade. The very seat of human
consciousness itself seemed to be targeted. Etcheson argues that this type of forced
change was “genuine totalitarianism.” Angka aimed to transform the very language
of the Khmer culture so that every trace of the former Cambodia would be erased.
Only in this way could the Khmer Rouge hope to restructure the Khmer society into a
classless, truly egalitarian society, one where traditional patterns of Khmer thought
and rationality no longer existed.

Although historians blessed with the gift of hindsight are able to describe the
rationale and origins of the Khmer Rouge’s ideology, the average Khmer who lived
through the DK period confronted incredible difficulty when they tried to assign
meaning and reason to their experiences. The loss of society, government, and
familial bonds often proved impossible to endure. Combined with widespread
starvation and disease, the violence inflicted on the Cambodian population seemed
beyond rationality or reason. Furthermore, resistance to Democratic Kampuchea’s
indoctrination or instruction could prove fatal. Executions, rape, and torture were

52 Ibid., 171.
54 Etcheson, 157-8.
among the most prevalent types of punishments performed by Khmer Rouge soldiers which provided more than enough incentive to convince most Cambodians not to resist the instructions of Angka.

First Death

The end of the DK period occurred both as a result of the internal conflicts between the leaders of the DK as well as external conflicts with its eastern neighbor, Vietnam. Although the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese communists had remained allies during the years leading up to Pol Pot's victory over Lon Nol, sporadic fighting between the Vietnamese and DK began as early as 1975. Bitter at their subservient position in relation to the Vietnamese communist party and resentful of the instructive role the Vietnamese played in the creation of the Khmer Rouge, many members of the upper echelons of Democratic Kampuchea severed ties with Vietnam as soon as they came to power. After a few border skirmishes broke out between Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese forces, and especially after Khmer Rouge soldiers massacred a Vietnamese village in 1977, tensions finally gave way in 1978. Fueled by cold war geopolitics that positioned Vietnam and the Soviet Union against the United States and China (and by extension Cambodia, a chosen ally), Vietnam invaded Cambodia in late 1978. But the Vietnamese were not alone. From 1975 through 1978, thousands of Cambodian refugees had fled across the Vietnamese border, many of
whom later helped liberate Cambodia by joining organizations such as the Khmer National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS)\textsuperscript{55}

Second Life

Near the end of 1979, unable to resist invading Vietnamese and Cambodian forces, Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea finally collapsed. As Kelvin Rowley of Swinburne University explains, although the central leadership of the Khmer Rouge remained relatively intact, power struggles between various regional generals had crippled their ability to resist the incoming Vietnamese. The remnants of the central government of Democratic Kampuchea, including Pol Pot, were forced to flee to the west towards the Thai border.\textsuperscript{56} As Vietnamese forces “liberated” former Khmer Rouge territories, tens of thousands of refugees traveled across the countryside. Most looked for relatives and friends in Vietnamese or non-Khmer Rouge controlled regions. In a perhaps fitting twist of fate, the Khmer Rouge leadership was once again forced to return to the jungles as they had in the early days of the revolution. Although they lost most of their support and resources, the Khmer Rouge still had 35,000 soldiers as well as a population base of nearly 100,000 people under their control.\textsuperscript{57} Backed into the rural edges of western Cambodia, the crippled Khmer Rouge faced the newly formed, Vietnamese backed government in Phnom Penh.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 192.
renamed as the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), as well as about 100,000 Vietnamese troops still inside Cambodia.

Yet the Khmer Rouge movement did not die. Surprisingly, the Khmer Rouge was able to gain international as well as minimal local support after the Vietnamese invaded in 1979. As Rowley explains, from the vantage point of the Khmer Rouge, the invasion of Vietnam was unprovoked, an act of outright hostility driven by Vietnam’s desire to expand across mainland Southeast Asia. The Khmer Rouge, after all, had earned the right to rule Cambodia through armed struggle and personal sacrifice, a victory that was viciously robbed from them through the invasion of their traditional enemies, the Vietnamese. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the remaining Khmer Rouge forces fought hard politically and militarily to gain international recognition as the rightful heirs to Cambodian sovereignty. Incredibly, China, Thailand, as well as the United Nations and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), supported the Khmer Rouge call for self-representation. International support boomed as the U.S., China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand funneled US$1.3 billion in economic and military aide to the Khmer Rouge and their allies. As a result, during the 1980s, the Khmer Rouge, the masterminds behind a socio-political system that caused close to two million Cambodian deaths, got a second breath of life. But eventually, Rowley explains, international support crumbled after the Vietnamese relinquished control of Cambodia in 1989.58

However, although the armed nature of the Khmer Rouge actions eventually ceased by the late 1990s, the members of DK never really disappeared. As Rowley has explained, the lingering existence of the Khmer Rouge can be explained by the

58 Ibid., 192.
increasing number of Khmer Rouge leaders who defected to Phnom Penh’s government after 1979. Although Khmer Rouge rebels carried on an armed resistance throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, a growing number of Khmer Rouge soldier grew tired of the endless conflict in Cambodia. As such, the internal cohesion of the Khmer Rouge organization slowly descended into chaos during the course of the last quarter of the twentieth century. In 1993, a schism that occurred between Pol Pot and his longtime associate, Ieng Sary, who finally defected to the side of Phnom Penh’s government, signaled the beginning of the end for the remaining active members of the Khmer Rouge. Ironically, Democratic Kampuchea’s last breaths of life were extinguished by Pol Pot’s own actions. In 1997, Pol Pot initiated one final purge of the Khmer Rouge leadership which severed all ties between Pol Pot and his enduring loyal followers. Shortly after the purge, Pol Pot was captured by his last remaining general, Ta Mok, who held a humiliating “people’s trial” on July 25, 1997. Sentenced to house arrest as a “murderer” and a “tyrant,” on April 15, 1998, almost 28 years to the day after the fall of Phnom Penh to Khmer Rouge forces, the mastermind behind the tragedy of Cambodia’s past away peacefully in his sleep.\footnote{Rowley, 191-209.}

For many survivors the end of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1975 left them with few options for the future. Although the majority of Khmers remained in Cambodia with hopes to start their lives over, some survivors opted to leave Cambodia forever. Most of these wanted to escape a country that for decades had been associated with political corruption and armed conflict. Most also interpreted the arrival of the Vietnamese as an ill omen for the future. Longstanding historical enemies in the minds of many Khmers, the Vietnamese were hardly the welcomed
saviors that they described themselves to be. As Gottesman explains, there were mixed accounts of the behavior of the invading Vietnamese troops. Some refugees recalled that the Vietnamese soldiers were helpful, but most reported that the invading troops were indifferent, at points even hostile. Still others described acts of cruelty and looting by the Vietnamese forces. But whatever actions the Vietnamese did take, most interpreted their arrival in Cambodia as another reason to get out. For all these reasons, tens of thousands migrated across the western Cambodian border into Thailand.

---

60 Gottesman, 41.
Chapter Two

Strangers in a New Land:
American Challenges to Diasporic Khmer Identity

After the fall of Democratic Kampuchea in 1979, hundreds of thousands of Khmer refugees chose to leave the once beloved homeland in order to start a new life in a foreign land. Many of these refugees, especially those who had connections to America, were relocated to the United States. Most believed that the United States represented the solution to all their problems. In many respects, they were right. They no longer had to fear the Khmer Rouge, Vietnamese invasions, political oppression, or the threat of starvation. But upon their arrival, most Khmers discovered a whole new set of difficult challenges. Some knew no English, others had no one other than their American sponsor to turn to, and everyone had to deal with the seemingly impossible task of adjusting to American society and culture. To make matters worse, in this foreign land, a new type of danger lurked. Although the older generation of survivors held on to traditional markers of Khmer identity, those who had been mere children during Khmer Rouge rule were suddenly forced to grow up without the culture and customs that defined their parents and grandparents. Gradually, the younger generation lost touch with everything that was traditionally Khmer. To the horror of the older generation, the very elements that the Khmer Rouge had tried to eliminate—tradition, religion, family relationships—were rapidly disappearing within the younger generation of diasporic Khmers living in the United States.
This chapter looks at the origins of the Khmer diaspora, when and why it happened, and how living in the United States has changed the diasporic Khmer. The first half of the chapter is dedicated to the history of the diaspora itself, how they got to America, and what difficulties they endured trying to get out of Cambodia. The second part of the chapter looks at the members of the diaspora themselves, how Cambodia’s tragic past has affected the refugee community’s sense of self, and some of the challenges American society offered. In particular, I will try to show how the younger generation of refugees period, who were mere children during the Khmer Rouge period, are slowly losing touch with traditional markers of Khmer identity. We are not quite ready to look at how they are constructing a new identity, something that must be left for later chapters. Instead, let us return to 1979, the year Democratic Kampuchea fell.

Refugees and Refugee Camps

In 1979 the world glimpsed some of the first images of Cambodia since 1975. Conveyed by television and print media, the image of tens of thousands of Cambodian refugees crossing over to neighboring Thailand was received by millions throughout the international community. Because of the trauma experienced by those who lived through it, many of the refugees opted to leave their once beloved homeland for a new start somewhere else. Their stories of life under the Khmer Rouge were first revealed in the refugee camps but continued to be articulated by survivors in the following decades within newly established diasporic communities.
For many Khmers the outside world became their new haven and sanctuary. As a result, hundreds of thousands opted to take a chance abroad rather than risk returning to the highly unstable interior of Cambodia. Many refugees had grown tired of living in Cambodia, but not everyone was lucky enough to make it out of Southeast Asia. For many, the United States represented the best option for life overseas. Educated people and former city dwellers, some of whom had family or friends in the West, were the most likely candidates for resettlement.\footnote{Gottesman, 41.} Regardless of their ties to the Western world and their personal reasons for leaving Cambodia, most refugees believed that Thailand was the gateway to the outside world. However, many survivors soon discovered that life in the Thai refugee camps was far from the salvation they had envisioned.

The diasporic process first involved getting out of Cambodia proper. This journey would lead most Cambodians west towards the Thai border in search of refuge. But the exodus from Cambodia was incredibly dangerous and the atmosphere on the Thai border was often far from welcoming. Refugees faced threats from newly formed militia groups, Khmer Rouge soldiers, bandits, and even Thai soldiers. Initially, the Thais were reluctant to accept Cambodian refugees and many of the new arrivals were not allowed to enter the Thai border. At times the confrontation could get hostile. For instance, in June 1979, under orders to halt the flow of refugees arriving from Cambodia, the Thai army literally pushed the tens of thousands of Cambodians over the cliffs of Isan (northeast Thailand) into a vast stretch of minefields located in Cambodia’s remote province of Preah Vihear.\footnote{Ibid.}
Fearing the possibility that a permanent Cambodian refugee population would remain in Thailand, the Thai government's official policy directly after the fall of DK was to forcibly repatriate Khmer refugees back to Cambodia. In fact, only after countries like the U.S. and Australia agreed to share the burden of resettling Cambodians did Thailand announce that it would accept Khmer refugees. 63

The Thai government had been anything but supportive throughout the Khmer Rouge period. As researcher Puangthong Rungswasdisab explains, Thailand had long been aware of Cambodia's situation. Despite its repetitive claims of neutrality, from the very beginning Bangkok had been involved in the internal conflicts of her eastern neighbor. Thailand repeatedly gave diplomatic, economic and military aide to various rebel factions inside Cambodia, including the Khmer Rouge. As Pol Pot was building up his communist base during the 1960s, Thailand supplied him with weapons and transportation, as well as refuge inside Thailand's borders, in order to ensure that the political situation in Cambodia remained unstable. 64

Like most other countries, the specifics of the atrocities carried out by the DK regime were not completely known to the Thais during the Khmer Rouge period. But even after the Khmer Rouge fell and their actions were made known, the Thais made little sign that they cared. Although the Thai government interpreted the establishment of communist powers in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos by 1975 to be a possible threat to Thailand, soon after Pol Pot fell from power Thailand once again became the military and political ally of the Khmer Rouge in order to check the


expanding power of Vietnam and the new Vietnamese backed government in Phnom Penh. In an era that was increasingly dictated and defined by the global politics of the Cold War, Thailand’s fear of the creation of an Indochinese union led by Vietnamese communists drove the Thai’s to side with the displaced Khmer Rouge in order to prevent Vietnam’s advance throughout Southeast Asia.

It is with these interests that the Thai government allowed the United Nations to set up refugee camps along the Cambodian/Thai border in 1979. But although free from Khmer Rouge oppression, the refugee camps were often the sight of continued atrocity and exploitation by Thai soldiers and opportunistic Khmers. The refugees were corralled into secured areas that, at least in the beginning, were poorly supplied and inadequately staffed. Most of the aide came later when international aide groups began to get involved. Furthermore, as scholar of the Khmer-American diaspora, Nancy Smith-Hefner, explains, the lack of established order and social organization in the refugee camps created a situation ripe for corruption, exploitation, and violence. “Paramilitary thugs,” former Khmer Rouge soldiers, and even Thai officials often intimidated the traumatized refugee population, who were routinely the subjects of rape, robbery and extortion.

Survivor Someth May, whose story is told in the autobiography Cambodian Witness, recalled his experiences while living the Thai refugee camps. For Someth, life in the camps could be just as dangerous as in the Khmer Rouge collectives. The camps, situated almost on the border between Cambodia and Thailand, were in constant peril as Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge forces clashed within earshot.

---

65 Ibid., 73.
66 Smith-Hefner, 7.
67 Ibid., 6-7.
Furthermore, as Someth described the situation at the camp, “I could see that Camp 007 was not run for the benefit of the refugees. It was like Phnom Penh on a small scale, corrupt from head to toe… almost half of the aid received went to the smugglers.”68 Remembering a brutal rape, Someth described the “woman, when we saw her, was staggering naked in the direction of the camp. You could see the impression the bark of the tree had made against her back. There were bite marks on her shoulders.”69 Eventually, even Someth became a smuggler of supplies and foreign aide materials in order to stay alive.

Despite hardships associated with the Thai border, the refugee camps remained in the eyes of most refugees the only viable option left for survival. At the same time, they were also a chance to move on to a much better life. With help from American sponsors and overseas Khmer, many refugees ended up in the United States.

Strange Land

There were three main waves of migration from Cambodia to the United States. According to Smith-Hefner, since 1979, there have been over 250,000 Cambodians who have settled abroad, with some 152,000 settling in the U.S. alone. The amount of refugees in the first two waves were far less numerous than the last during the 1980s, with around 4,600 arriving in the United States in 1975 and nearly

---

69 Ibid., 265.
10,000 in 1978. These cohorts were part of a larger migration of Southeast Asians in general that included many Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and Mien, who in the aftermath of the Vietnam War called upon their wartime American allies to provide sanctuary and refuge. The last significant migration began in 1980 following the passing of the Refugee Act which allowed for the resettlement of 50,000 refugees in the United States each year until 1983. Between 1980 and 1982, more than 60,000 Khmer entered the U.S. with significant numbers following in the next several years.71

Based on statistics compiled by the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), as of 2000 there were 145,149 Cambodian refugees living within the United States. As with Smith-Hefner's reported results, most of these refugees arrived between 1979 and 1983, with an increasingly lower amount arriving each consecutive year. Yet from 1975 to 2000, only 62,475 Cambodians were naturalized as US citizens. Although statistics such as these can often be misleading or misrepresentative, the fact that more than half of the refugees were unable to obtain naturalized status hints at the difficulties many Cambodians faced in America. According to the official 2000 US census, there were 206,052 individuals living within the U.S. that claimed they were Cambodian. Pennsylvania, Washington, Massachusetts, all claim to have a Cambodian population over ten thousand, while California statistics reported to have 84,559 Cambodian residents—almost half of the total population of Cambodians living within the United States.72

---

70 Smith-Hefner, 8.
71 Ibid., 9.
the term Cambodian might be with respect to being Khmer given the various different ethnicities that actually live in Cambodia, the figures offer a better concept of how many Khmers might live in the United States today.

Although the Khmers who made it to the United States were far better off in the eyes of those who stayed behind, their problems were far from over. For many newly arrived Khmer the hardships of adjusting to American culture and society were present in all aspects of their new lives. The barriers to assimilation and acceptance were enormous. Differences in language, customs, gender roles, and religion were only the most obvious obstacles. As we shall see later, raising a new generation of Khmers in America would prove to be the most daunting challenge yet.

Yet despite these challenges, Carol A. Mortland explains that most diasporic Khmers initially considered themselves lucky. She writes, “in their view, they had escaped a destroyed Cambodia and the terrible camps, exchanging dangerous conditions in Southeast Asia for a new life in the richest country on earth.” Indeed, the Khmer population that arrived in the United States was in many respects “better off” than the majority who did not, or could not, leave Cambodia. But she also argues that this initial feeling eventually faded. Through years of difficult resettlement and the challenges inherent in assimilating to American culture, many diasporic Khmers began seeing themselves as extremely unlucky. Everything they had once known and cherished was destroyed under the Khmer Rouge, including friends and family members. Their entire existence had been violently uprooted and

---


74 Ibid., 152.
obliterated. Once in America, they were expected to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives and start anew. It is of little wonder why so many Khmer refugees proved unable to cope with their reality.

Americans and Cambodians shared several points of ignorance. Cambodian and American culture, religion, language, morals, and society could not be more different. Each group had particular ways of viewing itself, others, and the world in which they lived. During the initial years of Khmer resettlement, the vast majority of Americans held little knowledge of circumstances in Cambodia. Despite what the average American might have known about Cambodia through news reports, the reality of the DK period could only be truly understood by one who experienced it, and even then probably not. It would be some years before popular information about Cambodia was circulated through American society in the form of memoirs, films, and journalism, all of which helped spread public awareness of Khmer Rouge atrocities. The unthinkable horrors Cambodians were forced to experience were most likely impossible to describe considering culture and language barriers, as well as the nature of the events themselves. At least in the early years, neither group realized the extent to which Khmers had been scarred by their traumatic past.

Due to the absence of a preexisting Khmer population to serve as sponsors, most newly arrived refugees were placed with American patrons, which meant that Khmers were dispersed to almost every corner of the United States. Smith-Hefner reports that “groups between 300 and 1,200 Khmer were placed in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Columbus, Dallas, Houston, Jacksonville, New York City,  

75 Ibid., 151.
Scattered and often alone, Khmer refugees were forced to adjust to both urban and rural environments. The vast difference between the physical environments of monsoon Southeast Asia and North America also contributed to the difficulties of the Khmer. With the possible exception of California, the frigid temperatures of North American winters added another difficult obstacle to the adjustment process.

Under the pseudonym Bun Thab, one Khmer refugee recalled his initial experiences after arriving in America. Typical of most accounts I have read, Bun arrived in America during the winter of 1981 and was immediately relocated to several different temporary refugee camps in the United States. Bun soon found out that he was the only Cambodian from his group of refugees that was destined to go to Oregon. About a week later, terrified and alone, Bun went to meet his sponsor family in northern Oregon. Although he remembered his sponsors to be kind and gentle, adjusting to radically different environment seemed nearly impossible. Remembering the first night, Bun wrote that his sponsor “gave me hamburgers, but they tasted so funny, I couldn’t eat them. I had only eaten Cambodian food my whole life, and I couldn’t eat the new food. So here I was in America, the ‘freedom country,’ where I thought I would live well with a lot of food to eat, and I was still hungry. I was miserable too, because of the cold.” Bun struggled to learn English at night while working for his sponsor family during the day. It would be years before he was able

76 Smith-Hefner, 11.
78 Usha Welianarta, Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America (California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 130.
to find a decent job or meet any other Cambodians. At least during the early years, Bun’s memories were defined by being cold, alone, and afraid.

The extent to which individual Khmer refugees experienced radical change as they arrived in the United States was determined by several factors: employment opportunities, level of education, socioeconomic class before 1975, gender, resettlement location, the identity of their sponsors, and their age at the time of arrival in the United States. Obviously, the higher their previous status and education level had been, the more opportunities would be open to them once in America. Younger men had more options than older women given that in America and Cambodia there existed a long tradition of male dominance in both domestic and public spheres. Yet despite the differences of individual characteristics, every single refugee shared one common trait: the memory of Democratic Kampuchea.

Khmer Identity

Despite the scattered nature of the Khmer diaspora in the United States, most Khmers, particularly the older generation of Khmer refugees, brought with them a strong sense of Khmer identity and culture. But their ability to hold onto traditional markers of Khmer identity and culture was often tested as they adjusted to American society. Khmer refugees, especially the younger generations, found that it was increasingly difficult to maintain their traditional customs and beliefs. Faced with the trauma received from living under Pol Pot and the difficult relocation process to the United States, many diasporic Khmers transformed the memory of the Khmer Rouge

---

79 Mortland, “Legacies,” 154
into a new symbol of their identity. But before we can look at how the identity of the
diasporic community shifted while living in the United States, we must first examine
the traditional markers of Khmer identity. Only then can we begin to see how their
identity began to change.

According to Benedict Anderson, the idea of the national identity is at best a
historical construct, imagined, articulated and bound by the context of the past in
which it was developed. The rise of the nation and nationalism was not a “natural”
phenomenon. In the colonial context, the development of nationalistic ideologies and
identities was a reciprocal process of exchange and adaptation between the colonized
and the colonizer. But despite these analytical shifts, nationalist historiography and
Western post-colonial scholarship of Cambodia tells the story of the Khmer nation, a
strong and vibrant people whose history began during the pre-Angkorian past and
continued unbroken into the present. This accepted scholarship also contends that
Cambodia’s near one hundred years of colonial rule under the French was a minute
and relatively insignificant episode with respect to the Khmers’ long historical and
cultural development. In other words, the foundations of the Khmer nation—its
language, history, and religion, its very identity—had always existed.

Recently, scholars of Cambodian studies have begun to challenge the timeless
quality of “traditional” Khmer identity. Penny Edward’s recent book *Cambodge: The
Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*, questions the currently accepted historiography
of Cambodia that defends the nationalistic perception of an Angkorian spawned
Khmer identity and history. In stark contrast to this trend, Edwards argues that

---

80 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of
Cambodia’s colonial period—far from being an insignificant interruption of the Khmer nation’s longue durée—was responsible for the formation of Khmer identity and nationalism. Edwards argues “the very notion of a national culture, let alone its inner core, were products of the colonial encounter.... In Cambodge, nationalists did not produce a national culture. Rather, the elaboration of a national culture by French and Cambodian literati eventually produced nationalists.” According to Edwards, Khmer identity, history, and religion, as articulated by current nationalists and Western scholars alike, are ideas that were constructed during the colonial period through the dialectical discourse between the misguided imagination of French colonial enthusiasts and a burgeoning group of Khmer literati who increasingly saw the need for a redefinition of proper “Khmer-ness.”

What is important here is the notion that the process of identity formation is by its very nature a historically constructed phenomenon, bound by the political and social contexts of the past. Identity is always contestable; it is never fixed. Yet for those who participate in constructing identity, the contestability of a particular identity does not make it any less real. Although Anderson argued that the nation was created through a process of imagination, for those who participated in its articulation, it was accepted as reality. Why else, Anderson asked, would so many nationalists be willing to die for the cause of the nation? In a similar vein, regardless of how the identity of the Khmer was articulated and imagined, the reality that most Khmers believed that their identity was real is what is important for the present.

---

81 Edwards, Cambodge, 7.
82 Anderson, 141-155.
argument. Putting the imagination factor aside, how did most Khmers characterize their identity?

Buddhism

There is an old Khmer proverb that states, “to be Khmer is to be Buddhist (Khmae preah putesasna).” If there was one aspect of Khmer identity that most Khmer could agree on (other than their historical connection to Angkor), their devotion to Buddhism would probably be it. Theravada Buddhism, since it was introduction to Cambodia during the ancient Angkorian period, has been the most popular and most practiced religion in Cambodia, and is even today the official national religion of Cambodia. For centuries Buddhism stood as a central fixture in Khmer culture and society. The Buddhist temple located in almost every village throughout Cambodia functioned as a religious shrine, source of education and schooling, a place of refuge and solace, and often served as a social center for the wider village community. Furthermore, the moral teachings and stories of the Buddha were vital for constructing social rules of conduct and moral daily behavior.

During the revolutionary period in Cambodia, Khmer temples were destroyed, religious images were stolen or defaced, and the population of Buddhist monks fell dramatically from an estimated 60,000 in 1970 to a mere 5,000 in 1982. But even in the face of the destruction of the sangha and the Khmer Rouge’s anti-religious policies, Buddhism seemed to survive in the hearts and minds of Khmer.

---

83 Smith-Hefner, 32.
84 Ibid., 21.
85 Ibid., 22.
the early years of refugee migration to the United States, especially within the older generation of Khmers, the devotion to Khmer Buddhism held strong. Although some scholars suggest there were large numbers of Khmer who converted to Christianity in the refugee camps and in America, most of the research I have done points to the Khmer’s initially strong devotion to Buddhist doctrine.  

For the majority of newly arrived Khmer refugees, practicing the Buddhist religion in the United States proved to be a difficult task. For example, as Smith-Hefner writes of the Khmer in Boston, “even if some Khmer had wanted to attend a Buddhist religious service, they would have faced daunting physical obstacles to doing so in the early years of Khmer resettlement. Although Khmer refugees who arrived before 1975 had established a rudimentary Khmer Buddhist temple in Providence, Rhode Island (fifty miles southwest of Boston), it was located in a small, cramped, rented apartment.” Further, while there was a major effort in the early years of resettlement to create a Khmer sangha (Buddhist community) in the United States, the later generations of Khmer born in the diaspora would drift away from their Buddhist identity.

Carol Mortland’s essay “Khmer Buddhism in the United States” attempts to answer why some Khmer in the diaspora turned in increasing numbers away from their traditional religion during the last three decades. For those who converted to another religion in the first years of relocation, causes seem to vary. Mortland describes how some felt that Buddhism had failed them during the Khmer Rouge era and were unable to reconcile their experiences with Buddhist teachings. Others

---

87 Smith-Hefner, 24.
converted in hopes that a Christian Khmer would have a better chance to resettle in America. Some were persuaded by the Western missionaries in the refugee camps, while others believed that assimilation into American society would be much easier if they were Christian. But by far, most of the Khmer who turned away from Buddhism were the children and grandchildren of Khmer refugees.

Smith-Hefner's research among the Khmer diasporic community in Boston reveals that younger Khmer who left Southeast Asia when they were small children or those who were born in the United States have little or no recollection of Cambodia, its culture, or its traditions. Their identity was formed either during the relocation process or entirely in a Western atmosphere. She states that many young Khmer-Americans have only a vague understanding of Buddhism's social and historical connection to Khmer identity. Resettlement in the U.S. usually meant living without a Buddhist temple in day to day life and most children did not understand the former importance of Buddhism in Khmer society. Without the temple as a central feature of Khmer social interactions, young Khmers were unable to be naturalized to the tenants, morals, and doctrine of Khmer Buddhism. In addition, the younger generations of diasporic Khmer were constantly exposed to American culture in all aspects of their new lives. Through school, friendships, television, radio, and literature, young Khmer refugees could not escape the omnipresent influence of Western culture. Whatever the reasons were, it is clear that identities among the diasporic Khmer identity went through a constant state of

---

89 Smith-Hefner, 34.
90 Smith-Hefner, 35.
upheaval, confusion, and re-designation, even in the face of one of the longest standing Khmer traditions: Buddhism.

Language

Yet Buddhism was not the only traditional marker of Khmer identity that was disappearing. Many of the older generation of Khmer who resettled in the United States were quick to realize the enormous influence American culture could have on their children and grandchildren. Most abhorred the fact that their children were becoming far more American than they were Khmer. As Mortland describes, those Khmer young enough to have spent a few years in American schools were forced to create a dual identity, utilizing both American and Khmer culture, in order to satisfy those that surrounded them. For example, Khmer students accommodated American customs—especially by speaking the English language—to appeal and relate to their school environment, teachers, peers, and neighbors. But upon returning home, these same students were expected to act as a traditional Khmer to satisfy their parents, relatives, and the wider Khmer community. As Mortland argues, the younger the Khmer student was, the more likely it was that they would gear their customs and practices primarily to a future in America, thus abandoning some of their Khmer heritage. 91

As Khmer children became more Americanized, it was particularly easy for their native language to disappear. Mortland describes how “ruefully, sadly, angrily, parents talk of children who cannot read or write Cambodian and do not know any of

the traditional literature beyond a bare story outline here or there... Men tell of trying
to teach their children to read and write Cambodian, but most give up after some
months or years of struggle." With their inability to speak Khmer, the youngest
generation was in the greatest danger of losing its Khmer identity. As most of the
older generation saw it, the younger generation had truly become American. They
spoke English, knew little of Cambodian ways, and were unable to conceive of
futures anywhere but in America.93

This loss of language becomes particularly noticeable when one considers the
increasing lack of the Khmer vernacular within recent productions of Khmer
literature. In a fascinating article entitled "Khmer Literature Since 1975," Khing Hoc
Dy traced the production of Khmer vernacular literature since the beginning of the
DK period, both in Cambodia and within various diasporic communities. Khing
explained that during the revolutionary period in Cambodia, the production of Khmer
literature had basically ceased. But Cambodian refugees in the diaspora began to
write extensively between 1975 and 1979, a phenomenon that only increased since
the early 1980s.94 After 1979, the production Khmer vernacular literature increased
within Cambodia and the various diasporic communities—most notably in Thailand
and France. Although most of the vernacular literature was produced outside the US,
there were some exceptions. For example, in 1987 the Khmer Association of the
United States helped establish the Cambodian Foundation in Texas, which organized

92 Ibid., 165.
93 Ibid., 172.
94 Khing Hoc Dy, "Khmer Literature Since 1975," in Cambodian Culture Since 1975:
Homeland and Exile, eds., May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithica: Cornell
a literary competition to encourage Cambodians to write in their own language.  These works focused predominantly on Khmer-American’s experiences during the Khmer Rouge period that took the form of poems, short stories, and full length novels. But whereas literature in Cambodia upheld many traditional Khmer characteristics, Khmer literature produced abroad was heavily influenced by Western literary genres and techniques, which rarely resembled traditional Khmer literary style. Particularly in the United States, young Khmer writers increasingly opted to write in English rather than in Khmer. Although this decision was often based understandably on financial and readership issues, the growing shift away from the Khmer vernacular has resulted in the disappearance of the Khmer language within the diasporic community living in the United States. We will return to issues surrounding the production of Khmer autobiographical literature in Chapter Five, as it pertains to the creation of Khmer-American identity. For now let us turn to some other markers of traditional Khmer identity.

Gender Roles, Sexual Relationships, and Marriage

We have already seen how Khmer Buddhism and language were in danger of disappearing within the diasporic Khmer population living in the United States. However, these were not the only markers of Khmer identity that were threatened. In fact, most aspects of Khmer identity were probably in some amount of danger. Like all cultures around the world, Khmers had unique understandings of gender,

95 Ibid., 29.
96 Ibid., 34.
sexuality, and marriage, and each of these themes had specific customs and beliefs to which they were associated. Just as it had done to Khmer religion and language, American culture and society eventually challenged Khmer conceptions of gender, sexuality, and marriage as well.

Historians and anthropologists have long understood that social and cultural aspects of a given society can be extrapolated from the literature that it produces. Traditional Khmer literature was often imagined and written with the intention to teach Cambodian society certain ideal behaviors and gender roles. In “Gender Symbolism and Cultural Change,” Judy Ledgerwood analyzes a Khmer folk tale, “Mea Yoeng,” in order to illustrate traditional Khmer conceptions of gender and to show how these perceptions create a system of symbols that inform Khmer social interactions. On a basic level, the Khmer story of “Mea Yoeng” can be used to construct the image of the ideal, traditional Khmer woman, and by extension, the ideal Khmer man. As becomes clear through the story, Khmer women were expected to be skilled at cooking, washing clothes, and most importantly, raising children. However, the ideal Khmer woman should also be intelligent enough to advise her husband in his actions and endeavors. In addition, the ideal Khmer woman should be beautiful, chaste, and obedient. But nowhere does it mention that she should be independent or have a job. The ideal man, on the other hand, should be strong, independent, industrious, educated, and able to provide for his family. Although it is potentially dangerous to use these literary ideals as normative characteristics of all

98 Ibid., 121
Khmer women and men, it can at least be said that Khmer society held these traits to be ideal.

When Khmers arrived in the United States, they often found their Khmer identity challenged, especially that of traditional gender roles. Due to their traumatic experiences while living under Democratic Kampuchea and the difficult process of resettlement in the United States, many Khmer refugees were concerned with maintaining traditional “Khmerness,” an anxiety that led many diasporic Khmers to talk about and define the “moral order” of their new society.99 Cambodian men were initially expected to support themselves or their families when they arrived in America. But soon many women were forced or opted to take employment in American society, a reality that clashed with traditionally accepted women’s roles. Some sponsor communities even emphasized that women be presented with as many training and economic opportunities as men.100 But before coming to America, most Khmer women were not expected to enter the work force, as that was traditionally reserved for men. Instead, Khmer women were expected to uphold traditional Khmer morality, pass on morals and proper conduct to their children and grandchildren, and create a traditional domestic atmosphere that catered to the needs of their husbands and children.101 With a number of women entering the American work force, many of the traditional roles of women were replaced with new, American defined duties.

As with gender roles, traditional ideals of sexual relationships and marriage were challenged within the diasporic community. In traditional Khmer culture, marriage was rarely a prerogative solely of the bride and groom. Instead, like most

99 Ibid., 124.
101 Ibid., 155.
Asian customs, the Khmer marriage process was foremost in the interest of the respective families. Arranged marriages were decided based on each family's status, wealth, and public appearance. Marriage was the system that regulated sexual relations; premarital sexual relations, although not uncommon, was a practice heavily frowned upon in Khmer culture. Weddings were elaborate celebrations and expensive occasions where ritual and custom honored and venerated the cycles of life. In America, Khmers found out that couples arranged the marriage, not the parents. Even more shocking, premarital sex, although frowned upon, did not receive the same degree of negative social stigma than it had in traditional Khmer culture. As with most other markers of Khmer identity, marriage and sexual practices eventually changed within the Khmer diaspora.

Like the shift in Buddhism and language, the younger generations of Khmer-Americans were usually at the forefront of social change with respect to marriage and sex. Although both sexes participated in this shift in social conduct, it was often the Khmer women who were blamed for the crumbling status of marriage and traditional values. As Smith-Hefner explains, a Khmer daughter's sexuality was incredibly important in traditional Khmer custom, not only for the young woman, but for her entire family. The loss of virginity before marriage could severely damage a family's social standing. Such an indiscretion could also affect the entire family's economic stability, as the family could lose the bride-wealth that the groom's family usually paid to the bride. The sanctity of virginity was therefore a concern not only of an individual woman, but her family and community as well. Yet American culture

---

102 Smith-Hefner, 151.
103 Ibid., 19.
in the late twentieth-century did not exactly produce the most “chaste” society in the world. Young Khmer women were often introduced to a vision of sexuality and marriage that clashed with traditional Khmer customs and beliefs. As such, the older generation of Khmers in America increasingly interpreted sexual misconduct of young Khmer women (and to a lesser extent Khmer men) as evidence of the “Americanization” of Khmer youths and the loss of control that Khmer parents used to hold over their children.104

The Next Generation

As we have seen, most issues surrounding the loss of Khmer identity within the diasporic community living in the United States were associated with the younger generation of Khmer refugees, especially the second generation born in the United States who had no direct memories of Cambodia or Khmer society. Indeed, as Mortland, Ledgerwood, and Smith-Hefner agree, the older generation of diasporic Khmer did everything they could to hold on to traditional notions of Khmerness.105 For example, many of the older generation moved to establish institutions and Khmer community connections that would ensure the survival of their identity. Based on the situation in Cambodia after 1979, most diasporic Khmers incorrectly—but understandably—assumed that the duty to save Khmer culture rested on their shoulders. Many would try quite unsuccessfully to establish Buddhist temples, preserve the study of Khmer language, and maintain Khmer oral history and dance.

104 Ibid., 185.
105 Mortland, “Legacies,” 15
Some would even travel many miles to obtain music, clothing, and Khmer foods for weddings and other Khmer celebrations. But despite their efforts, traditional markers of Khmer identity continued to disappear. In this battle to save Khmer identity and culture, the older generation of Khmer faced the most unlikely of enemies: their own children.

As already mentioned, the issue that seemed to be on the minds of every older generation Khmer was the apparent loss of their children to American culture and customs. In almost every aspect of Khmer culture—Buddhism, language, customs, gender roles, social relationships—there was an apparent lack of interest within the younger populations. In order to illuminate how devastating this phenomenon could be, I have included below an excerpt of a conversation between Khmer parents living in the U.S. discussing their children's lives. Although the names have been changed, the content of the dialogue remains the same.

"The Schools in America offer a lot of classes and equipment," Sam says, "but the children themselves are careless. They have the attitude: Who cares? Instead of listening to the teacher, they sleep."

"I see a real difference between Cambodian children and American children," one parent says. "The ones raised in Cambodia have a respect towards their parents, the teacher, older people."

"And there is discipline in the class," says another. "You cannot put your leg on the table, you have to listen very good."

"It's hard to raise the children because of drugs," says Sokhary. "I'm so worried. You don't know—some day they might get into that. In Cambodia people worry about food. But here in the U.S., it's a rich country, people have so much money that they don't know what to do. So they think only about having fun."

"We're having a hard time with discipline with our kids now," says Sokhary. "They're Americanized. They don't act like Cambodian children. I'll give you an example. My son says, 'I want to go to a movie.' I say, 'no.' He says, 'What's the matter, Ma? We're having fun. What's the matter with having fun?' He argues

---

with us. When I grew up, if my dad said no, I just shut up and walked away.”

“Another thing, here in the U.S. they talk about having freedom,” says Sam. “Well, freedom is good, but I think it should be limited. Someone should be able to say, ‘You can only go this far.’ The parents, and the law, should be able to say this.”

But at the end of the discussion, the parents agree, “Our children belong here in the United States. This is their country.”

Most Khmer-American parents seemed to feel that the traditional methods of raising their children were incapable of functioning correctly in the United States. The older generation wanted nothing more than the next generation to respect and preserve their culture and identity. But as so many have argued above, convincing the younger generations to cherish their past is a difficult challenge indeed.

I have chosen to focus to on Khmer Buddhism and Khmer language because out of all the markers of Khmer identity, Buddhism and language seemed to be the traditions that were kept most powerfully alive in the diasporic community. Khmers could lose their art or their music, but their language and their devotion to Khmer Buddhism were essential. Throughout my research I found that the leading scholars in Khmer studies, such as Ebihara, Ledgerwood, Chandler, Etcheson, and Smith-Hefner, all seem to agree that Khmer language and Buddhism were “universal” markers of Khmer identity. But these were not the only traditional markers of Khmerness that were vanishing within the diaspora. I also have argued that traditional understandings of gender roles, marriage customs, and sexual relationships were being challenged in America as well. In fact, as Ledgerwood, Ebihara, and Mortland have pointed out in the introduction to *Cambodian Culture Since 1975*, most traditional markers of

---

107 Streed, p. 92.
Khmer identity—art, folklore, music, and dance—are in danger of vanishing. Yet if it is true that even these aspects of Khmer culture are slipping away as definite identity characteristics within the diasporic Khmer community—particularly the younger generations—then what is it that constitutes Khmerness in the United States? Is there some other idea or common thread that the diasporic community recognizes as truly Khmer? I argue here that there is a growing acknowledgment—both external and internal—that the identity of the diasporic Khmer community in the United States is being reduced and redefined by a new characteristic: surviving the Khmer Rouge.

---

To say that Khmers were traumatized from their experiences living under Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea is quite an understatement. But for those who sought refuge in the United States, a new level of trauma was experienced. The Khmer-American predicament was twofold: not only did they have to live with and try to understand the traumatic memories of their past, they also had to abandon their former society and culture, and adjust to the often difficult physical and social environment of the United States. The internalization of their difficult past and the challenges of adjusting to a new environment ultimately forced Khmer Americans to redefine themselves, their past, and their identity.

The goal of this chapter is to document the types of trauma that were experienced by the diasporic Khmers living in the United States, and to analyze how their collective trauma has affected the conception of Khmer-American identity. First, by looking at survivor accounts, autobiographies, and psychological studies, I attempt to categorize the various types of traumas associated with Khmer-Americans. Second, through an analysis of recent literature devoted to the relationships between memory, trauma, and identity, I will argue that the trauma experienced by Khmer-Americans shattered traditional understandings of Khmer identity, forcing the diasporic community to question traditional conceptions of Khmerness. However, the very same trauma that caused a rupture of Khmer identity was ultimately transformed
into a central and universal symbol of a new, reconstructed identity. Given the fact that many older Khmer-Americans are concerned that traditional symbols of Khmer culture are disappearing within the United States, I argue that young Khmer-Americans are constructing a *Khmer-American* identity, one that is increasingly associated with surviving the Khmer Rouge.

**Old Traumas**

*Civil War*

With the possible exception of the relatively small pockets of the urban population, most Khmer began to experience trauma well before the Khmer Rouge came to power. The war torn years leading up to 1975 brought armed conflict and American bombing campaigns to much of the countryside where tens of thousands of rural Khmer were subjected to the sorrows of war. Clashes between Lon Nol's government forces and the various rebel groups brought early tragedy to many blameless villages and towns. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, armed conflict remained outside the major cities where the rural population, which made up the majority of Cambodia’s population, was subjected to the sorrows of war. For many Cambodians, then, the trauma began around 1970 when Cambodia erupted into civil war.

By comparing the structure of a few published survivor stories, the moment when Khmer trauma began becomes clear. I have included below a few different memories of Cambodia’s survivors that have been collected and transcribed in print.
The following stories were all taken from those Khmer who had lived in the rural areas of Cambodian in 1970. As they were the first of the population to experience the trauma of the civil war, it is possible to find out when their suffering began. In each story, it is quite telling that the moment of trauma arrives around 1970 with the rise of Khmer Rouge activities in the countryside.

In 1970, survivor Sophy Coade, who now resides in the American Midwest, was living in a small village named Stung Treng in eastern Cambodia. Her memories before 1970 are quite normal as she recalls playing with friends and helping her family around her home. But in 1970, her story switches from one of fondness to one of sorrow. She remembers these early years as particularly traumatizing. Only a young girl at the time, she was forced to experience the realities of war before she was old enough to understand what was going on. By the end of 1970, Vietcong, or South Vietnamese insurgent, troops had invaded her village, forcing family to flee to the countryside. While Sophy and her family took refuge, their village was bombed by B-52s. Nothing remained of her village or her home, only rubble and a few scattered bodies. Sophy and her family were forced to walk a number of miles out of dangerous territory, only to be once again uprooted two weeks later by more American bombing raids.¹⁰⁹

Another survivor, Thavery, grew up in a village named Kdanh that consisted of around thirty families. Up until 1970, life was relatively peaceful and uneventful in Kdanh. Like Sophy, her first memories of Cambodia are filled with nostalgia and longing. But as Thavery’s memory reveals, everything changed once her village was

taken over by the Khmer Rouge during the early part of 1970. After chasing the Lon Nol troops out of the area, the Khmer Rouge reorganized her village into a collective in the same manner as they would do on a countrywide scale five years later.

Separated from her parents and siblings at a tender age, Thavery remembers this traumatic moment as a critical point in her life. Everything began to change under the Khmer Rouge. Her school was closed, private property was confiscated, entire families were separated, and she was forced to spend exhausting hours in the fields working for the Khmer Rouge. Out of the over 400 children in her collective, only 100 were alive in 1979.\textsuperscript{110}

Someth May, whose memories appear in the autobiography \textit{Cambodian Witness}, describes the situation in the countryside during the early 1970s. As he recalls, this period coincided with the rise of insurgent conflict throughout the rural areas of Cambodia. The Americans, were bombing Vietcong positions along the eastern border, actually invaded Cambodia in pursuit of the Vietnamese communists. He remembers that life was relatively peaceful before 1970. But soon after, various armed forces were wreaking havoc all around him. American troops, North and South Vietnamese armies, Lon Nol soldiers, and the Khmer Rouge made it impossible to escape the violence and chaos. As the country was being torn apart, Cambodian’s trauma was just beginning.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{110} Carol Wagner, \textit{Soul Survivors: Stories of Women and Children in Cambodia} (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Co., 2002), 104.

Forced Exodus

Whereas rural inhabitants of Cambodia began to suffer from the civil war starting around 1970, most urban dwellers' trauma coincided with the takeover of the cities which began in April of 1975, a fact that becomes clear through the survivor story presented below. Although other cities such as Battambang shared a similar fate, the mass exodus of urban folk out of Phnom Penh stood as the most vivid example of the hardships the urban class were forced to endure. As the Khmer Rouge troops marched into Phnom Penh, most inhabitants welcomed them as a symbol of the end of the civil war. But their optimism was soon crushed as hundreds of thousands of urbanites and village refugees were forced out of the city and into the countryside.

Bopha, who took this pseudonym for her interview and now lives on the west coast of the United States, recalls her experiences of forced evacuation from Phnom Penh in 1975. When the soldiers entered the city, a loud speaker announced that everyone in the city was to leave their valuables behind and to leave the city immediately. Bopha hid in her cousin's house for three days along with a few of the city's other frightened residents. On the third day the soldiers finally found her. Although Bopha agreed to go quietly, a Chinese businessman was not so willing to depart. As soon as he refused to leave, the Khmer Rouge soldiers shot him. Then they kicked and beat his wife, saying, "If you don't go immediately with your children we will kill you too."112 As the accounts of "lessons" such as this spread

rapidly through the city, people realized just how brutal the Khmer Rouge could be. Resistance, as it seemed, was futile.

Once outside, Bopha soon realized the dangerous extent of the situation. Thousands of city folk and rural refugees were slowly marching out of the city under the hot sun of the April sky. Bopha quickly joined the massive sea of people who were headed towards the outskirts of the city. She recalled seeing mothers who had just given birth and still in an incredible amount of pain being carried out in makeshift hammocks by frightened family members. The crowd moved along at an eerily slow pace, covering only a few miles over several hours. Further down the road, Bopha stopped at an abandoned orphanage. The only noise that emanated from the old building was the muffled cries of deserted infants. As she entered, she saw that most of the babies were already dead. In one particular crib she found twins; one was alive, the other one was dead. In the middle of the floor lay what looked like a dead baby, but as she tried to move it onto a blanket, it suddenly shivered. Startled, Bopha ran out of the orphanage. As she told her interviewer, “I left him there, but oh, God, I felt so bad. I will never forget that baby or that orphanage as long as I live!”

Although the exodus itself was incredibly traumatizing, the unexpected horrors encountered along the way are the memories that will never disappear, that are too traumatic to forget. Along with thousands of other Cambodians, Bopha had little other choice but to continue towards the outskirts of the city, not knowing what lay ahead.

---

\[113\] Ibid., 72.
Life in the Cooperatives

For those that survived the initial days of the Khmer Rouge regime, their suffering and trauma was just beginning. Once outside the city, the Khmer Rouge soldiers began to direct the masses to seemingly random village units throughout the countryside. Democratic Kampuchea determined to build up an agrarian society from scratch using the labor of thousands of the recently conquered Cambodian population. The populace was divided into “new people,” or “April 17 people”—those who lived in the cities, towns, and larger villages—and “old people,” or “base people”—those who had permanently lived in the rural locations under Khmer Rouge control before the fall of Phnom Penh. Most of the old people were cared for and protected, while the new people were put to work in the cooperatives. Understandably, most city people had no experience or training in planting and harvesting crops, digging irrigation ditches, or excavating the countryside. To make matters worse, the Khmer Rouge did not supply the cooperatives with adequate food or agricultural supplies. Most villagers were given only a few bowls of watery rice gruel each day, hardly enough to supply enough energy for the amount of work life in the cooperatives demanded. Exhaustion and starvation were rampant, but there were far greater dangers lurking in the camps and cooperatives.114

Survivor Daran, who now lives in the northwestern United States and whose memories are presented in *Music Through the Dark: A Tale of Survival in Cambodia*, remembers that life the cooperative as constantly traumatic. Upon his arrival, the villagers were sent to “study,” which consisted of sitting on the bare ground and listening to the rhetorical indoctrination of the cooperative’s leaders. The villagers

114 Gottesman, 26-28.
sat together in the dark so that they could not see their teachers; they could only hear the steady voice of the cooperative’s leading member. There, under the cover of night, Daran was instructed not to gather in groups of more than two people. Such gatherings were dangerous as people could share “old ideas.” The villagers were expected to “allow themselves to be killed” if they did not follow the instructions of Angka.115 Almost every night for the following three years Daran would be subjected to the reeducation of the Khmer Rouge cadres.

Although the nights were always unpleasant, the days were even worse. Each day was filled with exhausting labor as Daran worked in the fields for twelve to fourteen hours at a time. With barely any food, the work could prove deadly in itself. Daran remembers thinking that the Khmer Rouge expected the impossible. Placing millions of inexperienced Cambodians in barren locations, forcing them to break up dry soil that was unfit to produce a good harvest, none of it made any sense to those who lived through it and only added to the trauma of life in the cooperatives. No one laughed. No one talked. Everyone was dressed in black. Life had become a hopeless routine of nightly indoctrination and daily exhaustion. As Daran poetically describes, “The people did not talk or smile or cry. Clothed in black, they worked silently, raising their hoes in the air and letting them fall to the earth with a thud.”116

Life might have been more bearable if not for the restriction against family and friends. As Daran explains, in the cooperatives, families were separated and duties were assigned according to age. The elderly were put to work in the collectives kitchens and they were also responsible for caring for the youngest

116 Ibid., 79.
children. The older children were taken from their families and placed in Khmer Rouge schools, which were basically child labor camps where the youth were indoctrinated with the ideology of *Angka*. Some children, Daran explains, were transformed into something to be feared, as they functioned as spies for the cooperative's leaders. Others had seen their parents murdered in front of them. Most were frightened all the time. But every child in the village cooperatives, in one way or another, lost the innocence of childhood as they were forced to adapt to an increasingly traumatic environment.

*Torture*

In the village cooperatives, beatings, torture, and murder were not uncommon. In fact, most of the survivor stories I have read include at least one situation in which the narrator was beaten or faced with the possibility of death. For most April 17 people, one wrong move could result in torture or even execution. As for women, although the official doctrine of the DK regime frowned on premarital sex, the danger of rape was a possibility as well. Under the Khmer Rouge, almost everyone lived in constant fear for their lives. This omnipresent fear could be considered as a form of torture in itself; a torture that lasted for over three years.

In *Cambodian Witness*, Someth May recalls one of many occasions when he almost lost his life. As was the case with many villagers under the Khmer Rouge, Someth had gotten used to scavenging roots or anything edible while no one was looking in order to stay alive. On one particular day, four Khmer Rouge soldiers

---

117 Ibid., 79.
118 Ibid., 91.
caught him digging for roots, a crime punishable by death. After questioning Someth repeatedly about his reason for being so far away from the fields, the soldiers started to beat him. After a while, he heard one soldier say, “Hey, comrades, what are we going to do with him? To the field behind the village?” That phrase ‘the field behind the village’ meant the killing ground.”119 The soldiers dragged Someth, arms and feet tied, back to the outskirts of the village. After a day of lying tied to a tree, the soldiers returned to finish the job they had started. “Here is your pen!” the soldier said, ‘Go ahead and dig the ground.’”120 Someth, as frightening as it must have been, began to furiously dig his own grave with nothing but his hands and a plastic pin. As he remembers, it was all he could do to avoid getting beaten again. But for reasons still unknown to Someth, the soldiers decided to let him live. But some others were not so lucky. As Someth continued to dig his own grave with a pen, the soldiers returned with a body wrapped in an old mat. They unrolled the body and kicked it into a nearby shallow grave. The body belonged to a young boy who, a few nights before, asked the unit commander the meaning of the word equality. Someth remembered thinking, his answer was his own death.

Daran, a musician before the war, recalled a particularly disturbing instance of rape and execution. During his stay in a cooperative, he met a soldier who was carrying a pianica, a small keyboarded flute instrument. Daran was an accordion instrumentalist by trade, but he picked up the foreign instrument and immediately began to play a popular communist melody. Although Daran realized that his actions could have resulted in his death, he also longed for the life that he once had as a

119 Someth, 201.
120 Ibid., 203.
musician. Fortunately for Daran, the soldiers let him live. But a nearby listener wasn’t so lucky. A young girl, no more than sixteen or seventeen,

"...came and called down to me, ‘When I hear you play, it reminds me of my father. Could you come sometime and play for me and some of the others?’ One of the soldiers heard what she had said. He grabbed her shirt and led her away. I heard him say, ‘Your father? You miss your father? Devotion to your parents is just a capitalist notion.’ I saw him push her into the ditch and then I hid further down in the ditch and heard him rape her. After a half hour or so he took her out of the ditch...In the morning someone said he had found the girl’s dead body against a tree."¹²¹

As Daran and Someth reveal through their memories of living under the Khmer Rouge, trauma was a constant condition of life while in the cooperatives. Whether one experienced beatings, torture, rape, psychological abuse—digging your own grave with a pen—or simply suffered from the omnipresent fear of death, Khmer-American recollections of their past are defined by the experiences of trauma associated with Pol Pot’s regime.

New Traumas

The memories of the Cambodians who survived the Khmer Rouge period, now recorded and published in print, collectively reveal the trauma that is associated with life under Democratic Kampuchea. Although the physical trauma that the survivors endured between 1970 and 1979 mostly ended with the fall of Pol Pot’s regime, the memories of their traumatic experiences continued to haunt Khmers
had happened. But most refugees still felt that their memories were too traumatic to revisit. In order to understand the extent of this lasting trauma, it is necessary to look outside the field of history. Since the early 1980s, a growing number of psychologists in the United States—a few of whom are ethnically Khmer—have worked with the diasporic community in order to help them come to terms with their traumatic past. However, this has often been a difficult endeavor as many survivors have been reluctant or unable to speak about their painful past.

During the 1980s, one such Khmer-American psychologist sought to analyze the various types of traumas experienced by the diasporic community living in the United States. In his study, Dr. Seanglim Bit, who left Cambodia long before 1975 and who has since worked closely with the diasporic Khmer communities in the northwestern U.S., describes how a long history of violence and a sense of helplessness have "psychologically conditioned Cambodians to live with fear" as a chronic condition of their lives. 122 Due to their experiences of civil war, forced labor, loss of family and friends, refugee flight, and resettlement in America, most diasporic Khmer survivors have experienced multiple catastrophic events, any one of which was likely to produce traumatic psychological reactions. Bit's Cambodian patients were found to have experienced an average of sixteen major trauma events, including deprivation (food, shelter, medical care), physical injury and torture, incarceration in prisons or concentration camps, witnessing murder, and torture. Thousands of refugees were subsequently diagnosed with post traumatic stress.

---

disorder, depression, or various conversion disorders—the loss of specific sensory or motor functions without physiological causes.\textsuperscript{123}

During the mid 1980s, a number of surveys concerning the mental health of Khmer refugee communities were conducted in several regions of the United States. In 1986, a survey of 393 Khmers living in Santa Clara County, California, reported that 91\% felt as though their lives had been in danger for the entire three years under DK, over half had a relative die while exiting the country, and at least one third admitted that they were the victims of physical assault.\textsuperscript{124} In 1987, a similar survey in Portland, Oregon, revealed that 80\% of refugees had been separated from their families, 83\% reported living near starvation level, almost half witnessed the death of a relative or friend. And while over 80\% had at least one family member die, on average a Khmer family lost around three members to murder, starvation, or unexplained disappearance.\textsuperscript{125} The incredible loss of family and community was a reality shared by all Khmer refugees, something they all could relate to and remember, a new characteristic of Khmerness in a time and place where the very notion of a Khmer identity was rapidly disappearing.

Having survived the horrific brutality of Democratic Kampuchea, most Khmer refugees believed that the worst was behind them. In most respects, they were correct. But for those who chose to leave Cambodia, new challenges lay ahead of them. Most of the difficulties experienced by the Khmer-American diaspora have already been introduced in Chapter Two. Whereas the trauma experienced under the DK regime was characterized by the constant fear of murder, starvation, and loss of

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 113.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 111.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., p. 111.
society, the new trauma of the diasporic community in the U.S. represented the fear that most Khmer-Americans shared—the eventual disappearance of Khmer identity. Particularly within the generation of older Khmers, this fear was manifested in their attempts to maintain Khmer traditions including Buddhism, language, gender roles, and marriage ceremonies. A heightened awareness of different Khmer communities throughout the U.S., illuminated by the creation of various Khmer-American organizations and associations, further exemplified the growing fear that Khmer identity would be lost. If it is true that the younger generation of Khmer-Americans were losing their traditionally defined identity, as the numerous scholars mentioned above have argued, why is it that there still exists a strong Khmer-American identity today? If the old markers of Khmer identity were vanishing in the United States, what was it that held the diasporic community together, and continues to do so today?

I argue here that the very process of remembering and retelling their traumatic past eventually reshaped the way they viewed themselves, and how the outside world viewed them. In essence, their memories were constructing their history, which in turn redefined their identity. Human beings by their very nature observe themselves and the outside world and use these perceptions to create an identity based on accepted social and cultural images. But for the Khmer, construction and maintenance of their identity was complicated by an array of historical legacies and social factors—war, genocide, forced labor, refugee flight, relocation—which produced a confused sense of identity.¹²⁶ Although most Khmer in the world—whether within the diaspora or in Cambodia proper—increasingly became identified

¹²⁶ Bit, 106.
by their traumatic past, Khmer-American identity was additionally defined by the traumatic memory of living in and adjusting to American society.

But how exactly is traumatic memory associated with conceptions and constructions of identity? It is easy to assume that these issues are closely related, but it is much more difficult to show how they actually interact and inform one another. During the past few decades, historians have paid an increasing amount of attention to the problem of memory with respect to history and identity. Grounded in twentieth-century developments in the fields of psychology and psychoanalytic theory, new insights into the realm of memory and representation have found their way into professional historiography. Although there is still much work to be done in this field, scholars are beginning to realize the multiple problems associated with memory, accuracy, and historical representation. The remainder of this chapter, then, tries to uncover the complex relationships between Khmer-American trauma, memory, and identity.

Collective Memory

The memory of the Khmer Rouge period has proved to be invaluable in the historiography of the Cambodia. As I have done in this chapter, scholars of Cambodia studies have consistently used interviews and survivor stories to supplement their historical research. Even the biggest names in the field—Chandler, Vickery, Kiernan, Gottesman, Etcheson—have become accustomed to using the Khmer traumatic memory in the production of history. But it must be asked: is there
a problem with this? On the surface, the memories of the Khmer—recorded, transcribed, and published in readily accessible literary form—seem to be an excellent resource for investigating the past. But since World War II a growing number of scholars have argued that the production of memory—in particular "collective memory"—is a complex phenomenon that should be approached with the utmost of caution. In order to see how issues of Khmer-American memory production affect the diasporic community's sense of identity, we must look beyond the confines of Cambodian historiography.

The concept of a "collective memory" was initially articulated by the French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs during the mid-twentieth century. On the surface, his argument is simple: all memory is socially constructed. It is in society that individuals receive their memories, and it is in society that individuals recall and construct their memories. Even individual memory, Halbwachs argues, is fundamentally social in that individuals look to society for widely accepted markers of historical understanding in which to frame their individual memories. Collective memory, then, is always constructed in the context of the present; the past is remembered and interpreted to fit the needs of the present.127

The individual memory of Khmer-Americans, if we are to follow Halbwachs' argument, informs the collective memory of the Khmer Rouge period. Khmer-American collective memory is the sum of the individual memories of survivors who lived to tell about their experiences under Democratic Kampuchea. Therefore, the production of literature dedicated to survivors' memories ultimately shapes Khmer-

American collective memory. But individual memory is also constructed around “predominant thoughts of society.” One such predominant thought in the Khmer-American community is the accepted historical narrative of Cambodia. The autobiographers and interviewees who produced the memory-based literature of the Khmer Rouge period adjusted their recollections to conform to the standard narrative of Cambodia’s past. This fact becomes abundantly clear by looking the genre of Khmer Rouge autobiographies. This genre does not just retell the survivors’ life story. The literature also functions as a source of history, where individual authors use accepted events in history to explain their past experiences. For example, the vast majority of survivor stories recall the moment the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh, whether the author was there or not. The political situation of Cambodia in 1975 was not well known to most people during 1975, but most recollected memories locate this moment as crucially important. Thus, the genre of biographical Khmer-American biographical functions as a site for the dual production of individual and collective Khmer-American memory.

As Halbwach also pointed out, memory is always constructed in the present in order to fill the needs of the social/political/economic context of that present. But what were the needs of the “present context” that Khmer-Americans sought to satisfy? Why did they (or those who collected their memories) feel the need to remember the Khmer Rouge period? For many survivors, the need to remember the past was based on the desire to teach the world about the tragedy of Cambodia’s past as a warning and lesson for the present. For example, Chanrithy Him, whose memories are revealed in the autobiography When Broken Glass Floats, explains, “I

\[128\] Ibid., 4.
want to be worthy of the suffering that I endured as a child. I don’t want to let that
pain count for nothing, nor do I want others to endure it... If thousands upon
thousands of children will suffer and are suffering right now in the world, we must be
prepared to help them. But it’s folly to look at the future without an eye to the
past.”

Although this might be an honest and sincere reason why Khmer-Americans
have decided to share their memories with the rest of the world, I argue that there is
another reason why Khmer-Americans are writing down their memories. In the face
of the rapidly disappearing markers of traditional Khmer identity, the memories of the
Khmer Rouge period provides access to information about a new marker of Khmer-
American identity: surviving the Khmer Rouge. But before we can make this
conclusion, we must take a look at how traumatic memory is associated with the
formation of identity.

**Traumatic Memory and Identity**

The memories Khmer-Americans are not typical memories: they are traumatic
memories. As this chapter has hopefully made clear, the memories of Khmer-
Americans are defined by the trauma they experienced while living under Democratic
Kampuchea. Therefore, it stands to reason that an analysis of Khmer-American
memory should incorporate issues of trauma. But how are trauma and history
related? What is the relationship between traumatic memory and the construction of
identity? How has the collective traumatic memory of Khmer-Americans shaped

---

129 Chanrithy Him, *When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge* (New
Khmer-American identity? As I argue, when trauma is experienced on a collective scale, it shatters previous conceptions of identity, forcing the collective to reconstruct a new conception of their identity. For the Khmer-Americans, the dual nature of their trauma—surviving the Khmer Rouge and relocating to the United States—created the need for the diasporic community to reconstruct their sense of identity. But in order to prove any of this, it might be useful once again to look beyond the boundaries of Cambodian scholarship.

Frank R. Ankersmit's article "Trauma and Suffering" is an exploration of how trauma is associated with the concept of history and identity. As Ankersmit argues, Western historical consciousness—and arguably by extension, modern historical consciousness—most likely originated in the traumatic experience of historical events. His fundamental argument is simple, yet powerful. To prove it he explores the nature of reality itself. Grounded in semi-psychoanalytical theory, Ankersmit describes how "nontraumatic" experiences of reality produces a reality already set in the bounds of the "known, the familiar, and the domesticated."130 Therefore, only through trauma can the true possibilities of reality be revealed. Once realized, there is a need for the individual to remember that truth in order to remind him of that reality. In other words, trauma creates the need to remember the past.

---

130 Although Ankersmit is working in a Western historical framework, his arguments should apply to Khmer-Americans. Not only has "Western historical consciousness" become the normative process of interpreting the past around the globe, it must be recalled that Cambodia was colonized by the French for almost 100 years. Frank R. Ankersmit, "Trauma and Suffering: A Forgotten Source of Western Historical Consciousness," in Western Historical Thought: An Intercultural Debate, ed., Jorn Rusen (New York: Berghahn Books, Inc., 2002), 75.
However, when trauma is experienced on a collective level, further considerations must be made. As Ankersmit explains, “collective trauma”\(^\text{131}\) provides a group with shared experience and common knowledge that is accepted as undeniable truth. This truth then can become a basis for a collective memory. The shared pain of collective trauma provides a group with a basis for creating group solidarity and a common past, essentially providing a marker for collective identity.\(^\text{132}\) Collective trauma, therefore, becomes a part of a group’s culture, essential in the articulations and constructions of a groups’ identity.

Holocaust historian, Dominick LaCapra, has also commented on the relationship between collective trauma and collective identity. In several different books, LaCapra argues that theories of collective identity must take into consideration the role of traumatic experience. Trauma, he explains, is fundamental to the construction \textit{and} destruction of identity. Traumatic experiences can cause an individual or group to question their identity, but trauma can also become the basis for constructing a new individual or collective identity.\(^\text{133}\) He explains that the paradoxical nature of trauma becomes especially evident in victims who survive extremely traumatic experiences, such as the Holocaust. For these victims, trauma can create a vicious break with reality and previous understandings of the past, a rupture so intense that it leads the victims to question the very nature of collective identity. However, once the victims’ identity is shattered, the very trauma that

\(^{131}\) Grounded in Kantian theory. Ankersmit argues that, particularly in the West, a shift occurred from collective pain to an awareness of collective pain, which resulted in the West’s capacity for experiencing collective trauma. It is this reason why Ankersmit argues that collective trauma is a particularly Western Phenomenon. see Ibid., 77.

\(^{132}\) Ibid., 77-79.

destroyed the previous identity becomes the basis for a new one. Ultimately, he adds, the process of remembering a traumatic event causes a fundamental shift in the subjects self-perception and identity.\textsuperscript{134}

Using arguments presented by Ankersmit and LaCapra, we begin to see how Khmer-American trauma influences the construction of Khmer-American identity. The brutal reality that was revealed through Khmer-American traumatic experience created a need within surviving population to remember their painful past. Revealed through the production of autobiographies and survivor stories, individual Khmer-American memory slowly created a collective memory within the diaspora. Their traumatic experiences went beyond the individual; Khmer-American trauma was a collective trauma. This collective trauma remembered by the diasporic Khmers shattered traditional conceptions of Khmer identity, calling into question the very markers of Khmerness. But their trauma also became apart of their identity, a collective trauma that was shared by all members of the diasporic Khmer population living in the United States, an identity that was increasingly associated with survival and escape from the Khmer Rouge.

Of course, this becomes especially relevant if we consider the arguments presented in the previous chapter. Judy Ledgerwood, May M. Ebihara, and Carol A. Mortland, all three of whom are leading scholars in Khmer studies, agree that Khmer identity and Khmer culture has at least partially disappeared within the diasporic community living in the United States. The traditional symbols of Khmer identity are

\textsuperscript{134} LaCapra was working with the trauma of the Holocaust, but the similarities here are obvious. His analysis includes psychoanalytic theory that is beyond the scope of this paper. In short, the trauma experienced by victims must be worked out through processes of "working through" and "acting out." For more information see Dominick LaCapra, \textit{History and Memory after Auschwitz} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 9.
vanishing especially within the younger generations of Khmer-Americans. For those who were born in the United States, the loss of identity becomes particularly noticeable. Their Americanization of the youngest generation has led to a further crisis in Khmer-American identity.

Recently, there has been an increase in the production of Khmer-American autobiographies—a phenomenon I argue is directly linked to the present need within the diaspora to remember Cambodia’s tragic past. Yet, this new movement is not lead by those who were adults during the Khmer Rouge period. Instead, those who were mere children under Democratic Kampuchea are now influencing the Khmer-American collective memory by producing survivor stories that have a rather different point of view. Seen through the eyes of a child but recorded decades after the actual event, the memories of this generation are quite different from that of their parents or grandparents. This unique generation faces an interesting dilemma. They are Cambodian, but they have also become Khmer-Americans. As a result, their literature often reflects the struggle between assimilation to American culture and their efforts to keep Khmer traditions alive. They are attempting, through the reconstruction of Khmer-American collective memory, to reconcile their traumatized identity. I will return to these and other issues related to the production of Khmer-American autobiographical literature in Chapter Five, but for now we must turn to a different kind of site that has shaped Khmer-American collective memory and identity, one that has helped add a new theme to Khmer-American identity. But interestingly, it is not located in the United States. To find it, we must journey to the place Khmer trauma all began: Cambodia.
Chapter Four

Memorializing Khmer Trauma:

Representations of Cambodian Historical Trauma

in Genocidal Museums and Memorials

The events that caused the deaths of nearly two million Cambodians between 1975 and 1979 have frequently been referred to as genocide. On the surface it may seem unproblematic to do so. The incomprehensible loss of life and the extreme nature of violence that was perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge do seem to warrant the use of the term genocide. The existence of concentration camp-esque village cooperatives and mass executions of the population are reminiscent of the Holocaust, arguably the most recognizable example of genocide. Historians and journalists, as well as the United Nations, have repeatedly labeled and treated the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia as genocide. Cambodia has also been used as a comparative tool for analyzing more recent genocides, particularly the mass killings in Rwanda and Sudan. But a question must be asked. Should Cambodia’s tragedy be categorized as genocide?

Susan E. Cook, who recently edited a collection of essays which compare the events in Cambodia and Rwanda, explains that in 1948, during the aftermath of World War II, the internationally accepted, U.N. sanctioned, and legally bound definition of genocide was established at the International Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The convention determined

---

that any "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethical, racial, or religious group" should be defined as genocide. If we use this definition with respect to the Khmer Rouge period, certain problems arise. Although it is well documented that the Democratic Kampuchea singled out Vietnamese, Chinese and Cham Muslims for annihilation, Khmer Rouge were also responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Khmers. The term genocide seems to fit the first part of the equation, but not the second. As Susan Cook explains, some members of the scholarly community have recently argued for the expansion of the parameters of genocide definitions in order to include or exclude other events of mass murder that have occurred since the end of World War II. For example, some argue for the inclusion of political groups and social class as categories of genocide victims, while others insist that the victim group must always be a minority—a particularly troublesome issue for the Khmer experience. How, then, should we define what happened to the Khmer victims? Or maybe more importantly, why has this become such an important issue in the modern world?

In a recent article entitled "Letting Sudan Get Away with Murder," Cambodian specialist, Ben Kiernan, argues that the debate over the term genocide is rooted in political and legal issues. International recognition of genocide, he explains, provides legal recourse to victims of genocide which can lead to the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators, a strong incentive for a victim group to seek genocidal classification. Recognition of genocide, as defined by international

---

law, also forces the international community to intervene in acts of genocide, whether it is ongoing or in the past, but only after that recognition has been officially sanctioned by an international committee. But since the Holocaust of the 1940s, as historian Alex Hinton argues, the labeling of genocide also carries with it powerful connotations of evil, moral condemnation, barbarity, and trauma. Thus, the use of the word genocide can help demonize one group while victimizing another, a political and social aspect of genocide that some groups might try to capitalize on.

It is not the intent of this chapter to determine whether or not Cambodia experienced genocide. Rather, I wanted to briefly explain that the use of the term genocide can have political, legal, and social ramifications for both victim and perpetrator groups. Since the fall of Democratic Kampuchea, the term genocide has been increasingly adopted by Cambodians and the international community to describe what happened during the Khmer Rouge period. But as the above scholars have pointed, there are always political and social motivations behind the decision to define an act as genocide.

This chapter looks at how a few physical spaces in Cambodia have been transformed into sites of traumatic memory. Since the fall of Democratic Kampuchea in 1979, efforts have been made to preserve and display former sights of Khmer Rouge atrocity through the establishment of museums and memorials throughout Cambodia. For the Cambodians who lived under Pol Pot, these places bring back painful memories of the past. For the visitors to these sites of Khmer memory, the memorials’ displays offer a glimpse into the traumatic collective memory of the

---

140 Alex Hinton, Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5.
Khmers. In general, I wish to investigate how the Khmer Rouge period has been represented in memorials and museums within Cambodia proper. Through a brief look at the history of the construction of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, the Khmer Rouge's secret prison and mass execution site, respectively, I hope to illustrate the motives behind and consequences of the memorializing of Cambodia's tragic past.

First, in order to understand how historians have interpreted the motives behind the historical production of museums, I look at the current literature concerning the growth of museology in Southeast Asia since the colonial period. Through this literature, the historical relationship between museology and construction of identity is revealed. I then shift my focus towards the construction and implementation of museums and memorials at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. These two sites present interesting case studies of memory reproduced in physical space.

As representations of Khmer traumatic memory and history, the museums and memorials in Cambodia help construct Khmer collective memory and identity. But they also reinforce the idea that Khmers suffered genocide, thereby adding the marker of genocide to their identity. Although originally designed and constructed under the guidance of the Vietnamese to function as tangible proof of genocidal acts, Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek have since become world famous sites that represent Khmer traumatic memory, history, and identity—an identity that was increasingly associated with the politics and moral connotations of genocide. Given the nature of the sites' internationally recognized status, I argue that these sites have ramifications for the perceived identity of Khmers living not only in Cambodia, but also within the larger global diaspora. As such, this chapter represents my search for the relationship
between internationally recognized Cambodian genocide memorials and the ongoing construction of Khmer-American identity.

The Museum

During the past few decades, scholars of Southeast Asia have paid an increasing amount of attention to the historical development of institutions designed to collect, categorize, and display cultural artifacts. In the colonial context, some scholars have argued that exhibitions and museums are sites where the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is revealed, spaces where Foucault’s dialectic of power and knowledge manifests in material form. For example, Paul Alexander Kramer has recently argued that the Philippine exhibition in St. Louis in 1901 functioned as a site where the United States could proudly display its colonial possessions and its civilizing mission, where race and culture could be compartmentalized and scrutinized, and where discipline and control over the colonial subject could be tested and resisted.\textsuperscript{141} For such scholars, the colonial production of the exhibition and the practice of museology in Southeast Asia had little to do with memory or identity. Instead, the sites dedicated to the collection and display of indigenous cultures functioned as tools of empire, allowing the state to control its subjects efficiently and absolutely.

Although most historians have agreed that the colonial museum did indeed illuminate the relationships of power between colonizer and colonized, a few

historians of Southeast Asia have also looked at the relationship between museology and the construction of identity. These scholars have insisted that the colonial production of museums and the preservation of monumental architecture in Southeast Asia, though originally intended to display the conquests of European imperialism, ultimately helped create nationalist symbols and a sense of identity. Benedict Anderson, for instance, has argued that Europeans used the colonial museum as a tool to identify, collect and categorize symbols of indigenous culture, a culture they believed was rapidly disappearing during the colonial era. In efforts to “save” indigenous markers of culture and history, Anderson explains, European colonial enthusiasts began to reconstruct and reinterpret Southeast Asia’s numerous sites of ancient architecture. In the eyes of Europeans, the indigenous people of Southeast Asia—who had once been the designers and architects of monumental temple complexes—had since deteriorated into “savages” who were incapable of recreating or understanding their past accomplishments. Reconstructed temples and collections of ancient artifacts were thus placed on display during the colonial era as symbols of Europe’s imperial accomplishments. Under the direction of European Orientalists, Southeast Asia’s artifacts and architectural sites were transformed into markers of the indigenous populations’ lost culture and identity, an identity only Europeans were capable of saving. Ironically, Anderson argues that the same symbols that marked Europe’s prestigious accomplishments during the colonial era, such as Bagan in Burma and Borobudur in Java, were adopted by Southeast Asian intellectuals and revolutionaries as markers of national identity during the twentieth century.142

142 Anderson, 178-185.
With respect to Cambodia, Penny Edwards has argued that the French colonial effort to reclaim and refurbish Angkor Wat transformed the ancient spiritual center into a symbol not only of French imperial prowess, but of Khmer national identity as well. By the early twentieth century, archaeological spoils from Angkorian excavation sights were proudly displayed in Parisian museums while French imperial exhibitions showcased replicas of Khmer temple complexes and Oriental curiosities to the delight of the European masses. Seen in this light, the museum display and the colonial exhibition were two aspects of a French imperial strategy designed and implemented not only to bring further status and prestige to empire, but also to identify, categorize, and solidify the markers of Khmer identity. As Edwards explains, during the twentieth century Khmer nationalists, revolutionaries, statesmen, and commoners alike increasingly identified themselves with the symbol of Angkor. It would seem, then, that the fashioning of a modern Khmer identity was intimately linked to development of museology and the preservation of ancient architectural sites throughout Cambodia. But what about museums designed not to remember a glorious past, but were created instead to remember a traumatic event? How do sites that memorialize and document genocide affect a victim population’s identity?

Tuol Sleng

In the middle of Cambodia’s bustling capital city of Phnom Penh lie the rather unremarkable remnants of an old school. Yet each year thousands of foreigners and

---

Cambodians alike flock to this location by the busloads, eager to visit one of today's most famous Cambodian tourist attractions: Tuol Sleng. The crumbling remains of this abandoned school complex, once shelter to the inquiring minds of hopeful students before 1975, was transformed during the Khmer Rouge period into the infamous prison center S-21. Behind its thick walls and closed doors, thousands of suspected traitors, most of whom were probably innocent, were forced to confess their crimes and incriminate their acquaintances under the persuasive forces of torture, violence, rape, and death. Of the thousands of individuals who entered its gates during the three short years of Khmer Rouge rule, only seven inmates survived to tell their tales. For those who did survive (only three remain alive today), the structure now functions as a testimony to their collective suffering, a monument to the memories of those who died within its walls, and proof to the world of the atrocities inflicted by the DK government.

On a dark and overcast afternoon in 2002, two grey haired men stand in front of Tuol Sleng, where over two decades earlier they both had been incarcerated, tortured, and traumatized. The taller man puts his arm around his friend's shoulder and whispers something into his ear. Although the shorter man holds his hands together in front of his face in the motion of the Buddhist sompea, it does little to hide his uncontrollable tears and muffled sobs. The taller man tries to comfort his old friend but the memory of this place seems too much for him as well. Once filled with the sounds of suffering and death, the empty halls of the deserted buildings are now eerily silent, the only sounds coming from the hushed voices of the two old men. “I

can't do it Nath,” the shorter man says between sobs. “Don’t think about it,” answers the taller man. “We all suffered, we can’t talk about it.” “When I was here, I made a vow,” cries the shorter man. “If the spirits let me live, I would shave my head and make an offering. Why, Nath, why did it happen like that?” “We survived,” the taller man stoically answers. “We were tremendously lucky.”

The men’s names are Vann Nath and Chum May, two of the seven individuals who survived this former place of torture, rape, and death. For them, as well as for those who worked behind its walls, this place is a site of memory that forces them to recall their painful past. For Chum May, the visit to his former place of incarceration is unbearable. Fighting off the memories that are impossible to ignore, the two men stand in relative silence, attempting to make sense out of their terrible past. As for Vann Nath, who helped rebuild this site as a national memorial of genocide and whose somber paintings of Tuol Sleng inmate suffering now decorate its walls, this place has become a tool to uncover and understand the complexities of human nature.

On 8 January, 1979, two Vietnamese photo-journalists stumbled across the deserted prison while accompanying the Vietnamese invasion force through Phnom Penh. Alerted by the unmistakable stench of decomposing bodies emanating from the vacant compound, the two photographers became the first individuals outside the upper echelons of the DK party to gain knowledge of Pol Pot’s secret torture center. As they maneuvered through the interior of the former school, they were shocked at the carnage and images of brutality that they encountered. Rotting

---


146 Chandler, Voices, 2-5.
corpses still chained to their metal beds of torture littered the lower rooms of the complex, while instruments of torment were discovered throughout the upper levels of the various buildings. To the Vietnamese who first discovered Tuol Sleng, the reality of what had transpired under Pol Pot was starting to become clear.

After 1979, many Khmer, as well as most members of the international community, were unsure of Vietnam’s intentions as occupiers of Cambodia. Some countries believed that Vietnam used Pol Pot’s regime as an excuse to expand their influence over Southeast Asia. As Gottesman explains, the Cold War’s international divisions pitted the world’s leading powers on opposite sides of Cambodia’s conflict. The Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc backed the Vietnamese invasion and the newly established government in Phnom Penh, while the U.S., China, and the capitalist countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) condemned Vietnam’s actions as hostile and Phnom Penh’s government as illegitimate. According to Gottesman, Vietnam needed to justify its actions in Cambodia to the rest of the world. As such, Vietnamese leaders began to use sites like Tuol Sleng to convince the international community that the Khmer Rouge had committed acts of genocide. If Vietnamese officials could prove genocide had occurred in Cambodia, they could defend their invasion of Democratic Kampuchea as an act of liberation. Furthermore, by demonizing the Khmer Rouge through the label of genocide, the Vietnamese also sought to legitimize the newly established, pro-Vietnamese government in Phnom Penh.¹⁴⁷ Tuol Sleng, as seen in this light, became a Vietnamese political tool to label the Khmer Rouge as perpetrators of genocide. But as I argue, by using sites of Khmer traumatic memory as proof of Khmer Rouge

¹⁴⁷ Gottesman, 42-43.
atrocities, the Vietnamese helped add a new, powerful label to the Khmer identity: genocide.

Over the next few years, Cambodia’s new government—renamed the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK)—cooperated with Vietnamese officials to transform the site of Tuol Sleng into a museum that collected, displayed, and documented the horrors of the Khmer Rouge’s secret prison. Mai Lam, a Vietnamese colonel and experienced museologist (he had organized the construction of Vietnam’s Museum of American War Crimes in Ho Chi Minh City), was chosen as one of the directors of the project.\textsuperscript{148} Based on his suggestion, the site was officially renamed as the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. As one of the directors, Mai Lam headed the efforts to transform the former school into a site of genocidal memory and anti-Khmer Rouge propaganda. Hoping to convict Pol Pot and his top cadres of genocide, Mai Lam and his associates began to collect and catalogue thousands of Khmer Rouge documents, prisoner confessions, and photographs. Eventually, the documents were compiled in massive dossiers, some of which were displayed in glass cases on the second floor of the museum, while photographs of Tuol Sleng inmates were mounted on the walls of the upper rooms in the complex.\textsuperscript{149} Although only top-ranking foreigners were allowed to visit the fledgling museum during the first year of restoration, by late 1980 the general public was finally granted access to the museum and its information. Thousands of Cambodians revisited their painful past as they searched for loved ones through the seemingly endless rows of photographs. By October of 1980, over

\textsuperscript{148} Chandeler, \textit{Voices}, 4.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 8-9.
300,000 Cambodians and 11,000 foreigners had passed through the museum.\textsuperscript{150}

During the decades since, millions of tourists from all parts of the world have visited this famous site of Khmer memory. As they left the former school, it is likely that each visitor carried with them an enhanced conception of Khmer identity—one that was increasingly associated with genocide.

\textit{Choeung Ek}

Not far from the former S-21 prison, located about fifteen kilometers outside of Phnom Penh, lies the site of another famous Cambodian national memorial. Like the museum at Tuol Sleng, hundreds of thousands of visitors and locals alike journey to this genocide memorial cum tourist attraction each year. Originally a Chinese burial ground, the “killing fields,” as it is sometimes called, was transformed during the DK period into a site of mass execution and burial. Although much of the killing at Tuol Sleng was carried out at the prison during the early months of Khmer Rouge rule, during later years Choeung Ek became a major site for the execution of Tuol Sleng prisoners and enemies of the state. Constantly tortured and interrogated, prisoners at Tuol Sleng were faced with the inevitability of death once a confession had been given. From 1975 to 1979, condemned prisoners and “traitors” were transported to Choeung Ek by the thousands, never to be heard from again. Lighted by generators that supplied the site with the only 24-hour electricity available in the country, executioners carried out their duty with incredible efficiency and unbelievable cruelty. In order to avoid the waste of ammunition, Khmer Rouge

\footnote{\textsuperscript{150} ibid., 8.}
executioners routinely killed their victims without the use of firearms. Death was usually caused by blunt force trauma, often from the impact of a shovel or the butt of a rifle to the back of the head or neck. Many victims did not die immediately; rather they died slowly from exsanguination, sometimes even buried alive. The remains of those who lost their lives in the killing fields were scattered amongst the thousands of corpses that littered the mass graves at Choeung Ek.

Soon after the discovery of Toul Sleng in Phnom Penh in 1979, Vietnamese soldiers stumbled across the remains of thousands of Cambodians buried at Choeung Ek. Under the orders of Mai Lan, the Vietnamese colonel in charge of the Tuol Sleng project, the massive exhumation of Choeung Ek began in 1980. Throughout that year, 89 of approximately 129 mass graves were disinterred and a reported 8,985 individual bodies were ultimately exhumed. Despite Mai Lan’s urgings that the killing fields should be incorporated into his project of memorializing Khmer Rouge atrocities, large scale construction did not begin until 1988. Eventually Mai Lan oversaw the construction of a concrete and glass stupa designed to display the remains of those murdered at Choeung Ek. The stupa housed the skulls of Choeung Ek’s victims, neatly piled in pyramid behind the glass casing of the stupa, as both a reminder to Cambodians of their tragic past and as a visible justification for Vietnam’s continued involvement in Cambodia’s affairs. As Mai Lam explained in 1995,

---

153 Ibid., 258.
For seven years I studied...to build up the museum...for the Cambodian people to help them study the war and the many aspects of war crimes...For the regular people who cannot understand, the museum can help them. Even though they suffered from the regime, as a researcher I want them to go [into the museum]. Even though it makes them cry...the Cambodian people who suffered the war could not understand the war—and the new generation also cannot understand.154

Mai Lam’s conflict between the desire to teach the current and future generations of Cambodians about their tragic past on the one hand, and his dedication to uphold the rhetoric of Vietnamese political propaganda on the other, ultimately produced structures and displays that simultaneously constructed memory and history. His efforts created memorial sites that eventually became incorporated into the national symbolism of Cambodia. As such, both Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng were transformed into functional markers of a Khmer national identity. But as is the case with so much else in history, the intended effect of the genocide memorial sites on tourists and locals alike was often far different than the actual results.

Interpreting Genocide Memorial

Since the 1980s, numerous scholars repeatedly examined issues surrounding Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. For example, David Chandler’s history of S-21 is a thorough investigation of the motives behind the policies, internal structures, and mechanics of the prison and its personnel.155 By utilizing the many documentary materials collected since the early 1980s, Chandler constructed a thorough analysis of Tuol Sleng’s function and ideology. Judy Ledgerwood, on the other hand, looked at

154 Chandler, Discovering S-21, 8-9.
155 Ibid., see Introduction.
the ways in which Cambodian officials, in trying to make sense out of their violent past, have strategically incorporated the museum into the historical narrative of the nation. As she points out, many Khmer have problems with respect to the authenticity of memorials designed and implemented under the guidance of the Vietnamese. This view has led many in Cambodia to view the museums with uncertainty and suspicion.¹⁵⁶

In the last decade, an increasing amount of scholars have begun to investigate the perpetrators rather than the victims of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. For example, journalist Nic Dunlop’s search for the commandant of the S-21 facility who mysteriously disappeared after 1979 is retold in Dunlop’s history/biography, *The Lost Executioner*. Unlike most scholarship of the Khmer Rouge, Dunlop looked at the DK period and institution at Tuol Sleng through the eyes of a Khmer Rouge soldier, a view that radically differed from the popularly accepted narrative of the period. For the soldiers and guards who worked at these sites, the memorials and museums offer a different interpretation of their past. Their memories were never intended to be represented or displayed in the memorials. Instead, the onlooker is deliberately transported into the eyes of the prisoner, terrified and innocent, who faced the inevitability of death from a homogenized image of a faceless, sadistic killer. But despite Dunlop’s perspective of the perpetrators rather than the victims of Tuol Sleng, his book ultimately resembles the previous scholarship devoted to the Khmer Rouge secret prison in that it likewise attempts to explain how Tuol Sleng happened, and why.

In a fascinating recent article on memorials in Cambodia, Rachel Hughes of the University of Melbourne investigates the motives behind the creation of various national and local sites of memory throughout Cambodia. Although she agreed that the initial purpose of the genocide memorials was based on the dual need to uncover the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge and justify the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia, she diverged with her predecessors over the issue surrounding internal interpretations of the museums by the indigenous population. In general, Hughes argues that a wide range of political motivations directed the original establishment of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek and continue to influence their maintenance. For example, she explains how the implementation of the skeleton-laden glass stupa at Choeung Ek coincided with government policies concerning the restoration of Khmer Buddhism as a national religion. Faced with a lack of popular support from the Cambodian population, the Vietnamese backed government in Phnom Penh had begun to patronize Buddhism in Cambodia—which had been targeted for destruction in the DK period—in order to bolster its legitimacy as Cambodia’s new state authority.157 The government also sponsored the establishment of over 80 local memorial sites throughout Cambodia’s countryside, each one consisting of either a Buddhist stupa or temple to commemorate those who had died during the Khmer Rouge period, as well as to give the deceased a proper Buddhist burial. Although officially organized and directed by government research committees, the actual construction and preservation of the memorials were carried out through the cooperation of local communities and religious leaders. Hughes argued that local Buddhist belief and symbolism functioned

---

157 Hughes, “Memory and Sovereignty,” 261-263.
as a means to interpret and understand Cambodia’s collective trauma.\footnote{ibid., 272-273.} But as with the previously mentioned scholarship of Cambodia’s sites of memory, Hughes pays little attention to how these structures have shaped Khmer identity.

Although there is thus now a considerable amount of scholarship devoted to Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, most scholars have had little to say about the impact of the genocidal museum on the (re)formation of Khmer identity. Considering the amount of literature dedicated to the museology of the colonial period and its relationship to the formation of Southeast Asian national identities, the lack of attention paid to the connection between genocide memorials and Khmer identity is surprising indeed. Moreover, I have found no literature that investigates the genocide museum’s effect on the global perceptions of Khmer identity. Thus, some questions must be asked. How might memorials dedicated to Cambodia’s tragic recent history affect foreign perceptions of Khmer identity? In what way might the displaying of Khmer traumatic memory within Cambodia alter the identity of the diasporic community of Khmers living in the United States? Especially for the younger generations of Khmers born in America since 1979, in what ways might Cambodia’s reproduction of memory in museums and memorials affect their identity?

**Memorials as Representations of Identity**

Soon after its “discovery” by the French naturalist Henri Mouhot in 1860, the temples and architecture of Angkor have increasingly been interpreted as a national symbol of Cambodia and as a basis for a historical narrative of Khmer identity. For
over a century the towers and bas-reliefs of this ancient Khmer site have lured travelers and sojourners from around the globe into the heartland of Cambodia. But since the 1980s, Cambodia has been able to offer its visitors a completely different experience. Instead of offering tourists proud aspects of history and culture, new attractions display and memorialize the tragedy and destruction of Cambodia’s past. Originally designed as a testament of genocidal atrocities and lesson for future generations, the genocide museums at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek have slowly been transformed into tourist attractions, owned and manipulated by the state to enhance the foreign appeal of the nation. Like Angkor before them, the various sites dedicated to the memory of the Khmer Rouge period have been restyled and restructured in order to project a desired vision of Cambodia—a history that was ravaged by national and international conflict, a country that suffered the horrors of genocide by its own people, and a current government that stands for the liberation of Cambodia.

Perhaps, no other country in the world has memorialized death and destruction as fervently and imaginatively as Cambodia. The creation and preservation of local and national sites of memory has become an essential strategy for the Cambodian government—the same government that has ruled Cambodia since the end of the DK period—to justify and legitimate its rule.\textsuperscript{159} These memorial structures have become a constant reminder of the Khmer’s difficult collective past and stand as visual displays of their shared traumatized identity. Moreover, through the help Cambodia’s memorials, the political and social stigmas that genocide carries have been attached to the Khmer identity as well.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 265-273.
For the urban and rural populations of Cambodia that lived through the DK period, the act of remembering what life was like under the Khmer Rouge hardly required the construction of genocide museums or memorials. They are living testaments to it. However, for the younger generations of Khmer who were born in Cambodia after 1979, these structures and sites serve several simultaneous functions. First, the museums and memorials supply them with educational information about their past, adding to an overall understanding of Cambodian history (albeit one that the government sees fit to approve). Second, the museums' visual displays—glass encased skeletons, tools and sites of torture, mass graves—reveal the ruthlessness and barbarity of the older generation, an image that is continually reinforced in the Khmer's collective memory. Third, young Khmers are seeing themselves as the remnants of a broken history and society, forever scarred by an era of death and destruction. Theirs will be a life of rebuilding, an opportunity to correct the mistakes of their parents and grandparents. Finally, the museum displays and memorial sites transform the specter of genocide—both the innocence of victims and the unexplainable barbarity of the perpetrators—into a national symbol of Khmer identity, inescapable and everywhere, reproduced in travel brochures and physical structures, broadcasted in full view of the rest of the world.

It is probably impossible to determine how Cambodia's genocide museums specifically affect foreign perceptions of Cambodia and Khmer identity. But it does not take a far stretch of the imagination to assume that the vast majority of tourists leave Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek with a reinforced understanding that the Khmers suffered genocide. Whether one identifies with the prisoners or the perpetrators, or
maybe no one at all, one can not walk through these sights without experiencing at least some shift in the perception of what it means to be Khmer. The intended vision is quite clear. The Khmer people were subjects of a brutal absolutist state that created a dystopic society where fear, paranoia, and violent oppression ultimately caused the deaths of over a million people. The Khmers were victims, yet paradoxically perpetrators at the same time. The entire country stood as a symbol of failure, destruction, and death.

It is even more difficult to gauge the affects of Cambodian genocidal memorials on the diasporic community of Khmers living in the United States. First of all, I have no access to information pertaining to how many Khmer-Americans have actually visited these sites of memory, or even of the number of former refugees that have returned to Cambodia since 1979. Second, I have discovered no literature that describes the personal experiences or reactions of Khmer-Americans who have visited the former prison and killing field. Third, although I have spoken with a few Khmer-Americans who have traveled back to Cambodia, few seem willing to discuss their thoughts about visiting these painful sites. Finally, it is impossible to judge how external perceptions of Khmer identity, formulated and constructed in the minds of foreigners based on images and information about Cambodia, have altered the internal perceptions of identity within the diasporic community. Nevertheless, regardless of the lack of documented materials or first hand accounts, I argue that a few probable assumptions can be made.

The older generation of Khmer-Americans who survived the Khmer Rouge period, like those who still live in Cambodia today, have little need for memorial
structures or museum displays to remember their traumatic past. Their uprooted existence in the United States serves as a constant reminder of a past that forced them to flee their beloved homeland in search of refuge. Although they are not reminded of the Khmer Rouge in the same manner as those who remained in Cambodia, Khmer-Americans have little opportunity to forget their past. But even if they never set foot in Cambodia again, the existence of the genocide museums in their home country could only serve to bolster the relationship between genocide and Khmer diasporic identity. Millions of individuals from around the world have visited Cambodia during the decades following the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, many of whom were most likely introduced to images and symbols of Khmer Rouge atrocities through tours at Tuol Sleng or Choeung Ek. These visitors have carried away with them symbolic markers of Khmer history and identity—suffering, death, survival, torture, genocide, refuge—that were displayed at museums and memorials under the designed purpose of reinforcing a particular identity of genocide survival. Regardless of whether or not the older generation of Khmer-Americans actually visited these sites of memory, they are understood by the rest of the international community to be the tragic survivors of genocide.

The potential impact of Cambodia’s genocide memorials and museums on the younger generations of Khmer-Americans represents a special case for consideration. In Chapters Two and Three, I argued that the fundamental markers of traditional Khmer identity were rapidly disappearing within the generation of Khmer children born in the United States. The disappearance of Buddhism, the loss of Khmer language, the forgetting of customs and ceremonies, and the shifting understandings
of traditional gender roles all represent this loss of Khmer identity and cultural markers. These cultural ideals and practices, once considered essential in defining what it meant to be Khmer, continue to be ignored or forgotten by young Khmer-Americans. Furthermore, the children of the Khmer-American diaspora have no direct access to the memories and experiences that characterize the older generation of Khmers. I therefore argue that it is highly likely that the combination of a loss of identity and the presence of an environment that reinforces genocidal remembrance creates susceptibility within the younger generation to external influences and ideas.

Let us imagine for a moment a young Khmer-American boy, unequipped with the culture and customs of his or her ancestors, visiting Cambodia for the first time. Landing in Phnom Penh he is struck by the symbolism of Angkor that seems to adorn every part of the capital city. Like most people in the international community, the abundance of Angkorian references on billboards and restaurant windows is of no surprise to our young Khmer-American. Khmers, after all, have been associated with the symbol of Angkor since the colonial period of Cambodia’s history. But he is also aware of the existence of genocidal memorial sites that have become internationally famous since the early 1980s. Although he might have had the opportunity to study the Khmer Rouge period in school, or may have learned about it from family and friends, no secondary source of information can prepare him for what awaits at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. Once there he is barraged by the myriad of disturbing artifacts, images, and human remains. He is at once reminded of his historical connections with these sites of memory, and his identity as a Khmer-American is inescapably confirmed. He finally realizes that he is alive only because

160 See Edwards, Cambodge, Introduction.
his parents were lucky enough to survive this terrible tragedy, and his very existence is violently forced to reconcile this realization. He is a product of genocide.

This hypothetical situation was based on a conversation I had with a Khmer-American friend a few years ago. Before his first trip to Cambodia, he admitted that he possessed only a basic understanding of Khmer history. Although he knew that a terrible tragedy had occurred in Cambodia during the 1970s, he did not know why or how it happened. His professed ignorance even included his own family’s history, as he was relatively unaware of parents’ past sufferings. His journey to Cambodia would change all of that. The genocide museums operated exactly as its designer Mai Lam had planned: the younger generation—epitomized here by my friend’s total lack of understanding of Khmer history—was educated and informed by the memorial and museum in a way that eliminated the complexities of the period and hid the political motivations behind the establishment of Cambodia’s genocide memorials. This young Khmer-American learned much about the Khmer genocide and was introduced to the constructed memory of the older generation. But history lessons and moral guidance were not the only things given to my young friend. His fateful visit to Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek radically altered his perception of being a Khmer-American. Awakened by the knowledge of his people’s suffering and the appreciation for his parent’s struggle to relocate to the United States, this young Khmer-American was forced to restructure his identity based on what he encountered at Cambodia’s genocide memorials.

It should be of no surprise that the genocide museums impacted my friend in such a manner, but I would argue that even young Khmer-Americans who have never
traveled to Cambodia are in some ways affected by the existence of the genocide memorials at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. These sites are visited by millions of individuals throughout the international community each year, the result of which ultimately shapes external perceptions of Khmer identity. Moreover, most documentaries about Cambodia include at least some reference to the genocide memorials as well, such as the film *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, thus compounding the reinforcement of genocide as a marker of Khmer identity.\footnote{Rithy Pan, *S-21.*} Mai Lam and later Khmer government officials designed these memorials as a means to reconstruct genocidal memory and to remind the world of what transpired under the Khmer Rouge. As tourists, Khmers, scholars, and political leaders alike wander through the halls of Tuol Sleng and stare at neatly organized skulls displayed in the glass stupa at Choeung Ek, they undeniably and inescapably reconstruct an understanding of Khmer identity. This vision, based on reality but projected as strategy, informs a general conceptualization of Khmer identity shared by the wider international community. Like the ripple effect, the creation of genocidal memorials in Cambodia forces the world to identify the Khmer with genocide, regardless of what Khmer-Americans might understand. Ultimately, the specter of genocide is impossible to separate from “being Khmer.”

**The Symbols of Genocide**

When looking at Cambodia today, one is therefore presented with two overarching symbols regarding the history and identity of the Khmer. Whether one is
looking at memorials, literature, the internet, travel brochures, or film, the practice of
museology in Cambodia has helped solidify the temple complexes at Angkor Wat and
Cambodia's genocide as permanent markers of Khmer identity. Although both are
supported and funded by the Cambodian government and international organizations
as national historic and cultural sites, and although both have come to represent
critical themes of Khmer identity both inside and outside the country, these two
symbols could not be more different. Angkor Wat—originally constructed in the
twelfth century and rediscovered by the French during Cambodia's colonial era—has
long stood as a symbol of past historical accomplishments in modern conceptions of
Khmer identity. Cambodia's vast stretches of temple complexes adorned with
delicately crafted bas-reliefs and intricately carved statuary was claimed by the
Khmer as a reminder of a glorious past.

Contrary to the strategy of Angkorian preservation that sought to venerate and
idealize a triumphant past, the memorializing of genocide in Cambodia was designed
to remember a particularly horrific event of Cambodian history. Although originally
implemented under questionable Vietnamese propagandist motivations, the
management of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek genocide museums ultimately reinforced
internal and external perceptions of Khmer identity. For those living within the
Khmer diaspora in the United States, such globally recognized sites of memory could
only further incorporate the survival of genocide into the already fractured diasporic
Khmer identity.

Since 1980, millions of Cambodians and foreigners have visited the genocide
museums constructed at Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek. Originally designed to
“destroy” suspected traitors and undesirable portions of Khmer society with brutal efficiency, today these sites welcome tourists to learn about and explore the nature of Khmer history: Entrance fees have been implemented in recent years, when only a short time before there had been only a box for suggested donations. The former central office of the Tuol Sleng administration now houses a gift shop where cheap trinkets and Khmer Rouge souvenirs are displayed alongside photographs of the prison. Tourists can now grab a bite to eat in restaurants across the street while looking over the former prison’s courtyard that used to serve as a holding ground between torture sessions. After a quick bus ride to Choeung Ek, visitor shuffle through the memorial before returning to the riverfront in Phnom Penh in time for an arranged buffet.¹⁶² Through the manipulation of museums and memorial sites, the Cambodian government has succeeded in its efforts to nationalize and monopolize the production of Khmer Rouge memory within Cambodia. Just like Angkor Wat before them, Cambodia has transformed the production of memory into attractions for tourism. These institutions are vital in constructing a national image attractive to the visiting international community. But they also function as efficient producers of Khmer memory and identity by reinforcing the tragedy of Khmer history.

¹⁶² Dunlop, 226.
Chapter Five

Collecting Khmer Memories:
Reshaping Identity through Autobiographical Literature

I have been many things in my life. A trader walking barefoot on paths through the jungles. A medical doctor, driving to his clinic in a shiny Mercedes. In the past few years, to the surprise of many people, and above all myself, I have been a Hollywood actor. But nothing has shaped my life as much as surviving the Pol Pot regime. I am a survivor of the Cambodian holocaust. That's who I am.¹⁶³

Haing Ngor. 1987

This is a story of survival: my own and my family's. Though these events constitute my experience, my story mirrors that of millions of Cambodians. If you had been living in Cambodia during this period, this would be your story too.¹⁶⁴

Loung Ung. 2000

Since 1979, the stories of the survivors of the Khmer Rouge period have been represented in a variety of different mediums. Through the work of foreign journalists and photographers during the years following the fall of Democratic Kampuchea, the international community was first introduced to the violence and destruction of Pol Pot's regime. A few social anthropologists, psychologists, and historians have even built their careers collecting information and producing scholarship based on this fateful period of Cambodian history. But scholars and

journalists have not been the only active participants in the production of a growing body of knowledge based on this Khmer tragedy. Both in Cambodia and within the diaspora, individual Khmers have shared their traumatic memories with the rest of the world. Through the production of histories, memoirs, and autobiographies, Khmer memory has been reproduced in literary form. Although some of this work was done in Cambodia through interviews of survivors conducted by Western scholars, since the late 1980s there has been a growing effort within the Khmer-American diaspora to capture Khmer memory in print.

This chapter investigates the production of biographical literature from the Khmer Rouge period. Since the early 1980s, a number of Khmer-Americans and American “Khmerophile” scholars have collected and reproduced the memories of the Khmer Rouge period in personal memoirs, survivor stories, and autobiographies. This literature—produced and reproduced in the United States under the guidance of a socially mediated Khmer collective memory—functions as a crucial source of history and information for both the diasporic Khmer and American populations, and reveals the desire within the diasporic community to recall and expose their painful past. But it also functions as an essential tool for the ongoing construction of Khmer-American identity. In general, I want to analyze how this genre of literature has shaped the collective memory and identity of the diasporic Khmers living in the United States. By looking at three specific autobiographies—Haing Ngor’s *A Cambodian Odyssey*, Chanrithy Him’s *When Broken Glass Floats*, and Luong Ung’s *First They Killed My Father*—I attempt to show how different reconstructions of the Khmer’s past reveal a social dialogue within the Khmer-American community
concerning the legitimacy and authority of representations of Khmer memory. Ultimately, I hope to show how the recent proliferation in the production of Khmer-American autobiographies and memoirs represents a need within the younger generation of the diaspora to recreate and redefine Khmer-American identity in the face of rapidly disappearing markers of traditional Khmer culture.

**Rescuing the Khmer Past**

As Oren Bach Stier explains in the introduction to *Committed to Memory*, the need of an individual or group to remember its past can be explained in a variety of different ways. Sometimes the desire to remember represents the need of an individual to recount his or her experiences, especially in instances of traumatic events or miraculous survival. At other times the need to remember is driven by a desire to understand a group’s identity, as in the case of a second generation immigrant’s yearning to reconnect with his ancestral roots. Some memories take the form of nostalgia or myth about a group’s past that has been idealized in the present in order to satisfy political or social ideologies. The collective need to remember has even been represented in physical space through artwork and architecture, or more commonly through word and image as in historical literature, personal memoirs, or photography.  

As I have argued in Chapter Three, memory, history, and identity interact with and inform each other in a variety of different ways. To put it simply, individual or group identity is informed and constructed through an understanding of one’s

---

165 Stier, 2.
connected history, which is itself partially derived from individual or collective memory. But the capability of memory to shape conceptions of history and group identity hinges on one important factor—the extent that memory is shared with the greater community. However, individual memory is most commonly revealed and displayed through the production of various physical forms—literature, image, art, etc. Consequently, the cultural and social mediums that are used to represent memory become sites where group identity and collective memory can be (re)negotiated and (re)constructed. As we will see, the biographical literature from the Khmer Rouge period has become a medium where the diasporic Khmer living in the United States have been able to reshape collective memory, and ultimately Khmer-American identity.

Since the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, there has been a growing effort within the United States to document and preserve the memory of the DK period. Shortly after the fall of Pol Pot’s regime, journalists, historians, and biographers began to reproduce and display Khmer memory in a variety of different forms. Fearing that memories of the Khmer Rouge period were in danger of being lost or forgotten, numerous individuals, governments, and organizations became involved in the “rescuing” of Khmer Rouge memory. Through the production of photographs, art, historical literature, physical memorials, and institutions dedicated to the Khmer Rouge period, the memories of individual Khmers were systematically recorded, reproduced, and made available to the wider American and Khmer-American communities. As a result of such efforts, a collective memory of the Khmer Rouge period was slowly formed and maintained through the reproduction of individual
Khmer memory. In the United States, especially for the younger generations of Khmer-Americans, the construction of a collective memory would prove to be a vital key in the imagining of a Khmer-American identity.

The creation of the Cambodian Genocide Program (CGP) is a perfect example of the coordinated and continued efforts intended to "rescue" Khmer memory. In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the Cambodian Genocide Justice Act that was designed to support efforts to bring the leadership of the Khmer Rouge to justice. Based at Yale University, the CGP now stands as the most complete, conclusive, and recognized resource site dedicated to the documentation of atrocities and horrors perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge regime. Conceived and implemented to preserve memory and document Khmer Rouge crimes, the CGP succeeded in solidifying international recognition of Cambodia as a site of genocide (itself a political maneuver), and helped thousands of refugees locate lost family and friends. This enormous site of memory has organized four massive databases that store any relevant information regarding the Khmer Rouge period. For example, the bibliographic database contains over 3,000 primary sources written in Khmer, another database includes almost 11,000 biographical descriptions of Khmer Rouge cadres and their victims, while the last two contain maps, locations of mass graves, and over 5000 photographs of Tuol Sleng inmates.166

The monumental CGP also recorded and documented the personal memories and survival stories of thousands of Khmer refugees. As Susan E. Cook, former

---

director of the CGP explained, the center began to record and compile personal memories of Khmer survivors and refugees in late 1994. For many survivors, this was their first opportunity to share their memories with the wider community since their ordeal ended in 1979. Through institutions like the CGP, Khmer Rouge memory began to be collected and displayed for the education of future generations. But in doing so, their efforts to reproduce the survivors’ memories also helped establish the boundaries and markers of an emerging Khmer-American identity.

Khmer Memory in Autobiography

Large scale and internationally sponsored organizations have not been the only driving force with respect to the collecting of Khmer Rouge memories. In Cambodia and the United States, individual scholars and common Khmers alike have actively participated in the reconstruction of the memories of survival under Pol Pot’s regime. Through collaboration between interviewer and interviewee, Khmer memory has slowly transferred into print. Although foreign scholars and journalists started collecting and documenting the memories of survivors in 1979, it would be almost a decade before Khmers began to publish autobiographies on their own. But since the late 1980s, hundreds of eyewitness accounts and survivor stories have been compiled and transcribed in print, an endeavor that has often been rationalized or interpreted as a need to preserve Khmer memory for the sake of future generations.

The earliest published survivor accounts in English came from the older generation of Khmer refugees. Beginning in the late 1980s, a few Khmer survivors

\[^{167}\text{ibid, 230.}\]
felt the need to share their memories and experiences of survival with the rest of the world. Given the fact that this generation was old enough to vividly recall what had happened to themselves and their country before and during those fateful years, these early autobiographies were quite different from the autobiographies of the younger generation who later followed in their footsteps. The earliest autobiographies, printed in English for a presumably Western audience, were organized and translated from Khmer refugees through interviews and the help of English speaking intermediaries. Exactly as the authors had intended, the autobiographies stood as a testament and a reminder to Khmer populations and the wider world of the pain and sorrow of life during the Khmer Rouge period. Along with earlier, more scholarly attempts to record Khmer Rouge memory, these new works helped shape an emerging collective memory of Cambodia’s past. Although there were a few memories taken from non-Khmer groups—such as the Cham or Vietnamese who suffered as much as, if not more than, the ethnic Khmer under Pol Pot—the vast majority of recollections were taken from ethnic Khmer individuals. 168

Two autobiographies in particular epitomize the type of memory production described above. The 1987 publishing of Stay Alive My Son by Pin Yathay and A Cambodian Odyssey by Haing Ngor marked the beginning of the production of Khmer autobiographical literature. The arrival of these books also signaled the inauguration of a proliferation of Khmer-American autobiographical literature within the United States that continues into the present. Both of these authors were around thirty years of age when the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975, therefore their

168 See Carol Wagner, Soul Survivors: Stories of Women and Children in Cambodia (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 2002)
memories are representative of the older generation of Khmer survivors. Although originally written in French by survivor Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive My Son* was eventually translated into English in 1987 with the help of John Man. Through the pages of the book the reader relives Pin’s memories of survival and eventual escape from Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge in 1977. Similarly, *A Cambodian Odyssey* introduces its readers to Haing Ngor’s tragic story of the loss of friends and family and the memory of his unlikely survival through the Khmer Rouge period. Like all autobiographies that would follow, Haing Ngor and Pin Yathay’s books revealed the oppression and brutality of the Khmer Rouge and informed its readers of experiences shared by many Cambodians, thus shaping the collective memory of the Khmer Rouge period.

In the years following the publication of Haing Ngor and Pin Yathay’s autobiographies, almost as if they had called out for other refugees to follow their lead, an increasing number of autobiographical works by the older generation of Khmer survivors were published throughout the United States. Especially around the turn of the century, numerous scholars began to catalogue and publish individual Khmer works. Some of this literature dealt with the population of survivors that still lived in Cambodia. For example, Carol Wagner, an American sociologist, collected and published the memories of various individuals still living in Cambodia in *Soul Survivors: Stories of Women and Children in Cambodia.* Her work focused specifically on the memories and experiences of women and children under the Khmer Rouge, and unlike most the other autobiographical literature, her book

---

170 Carol Wagner, *Soul Survivors.*
refreshingly revealed the stories of ethnically non-Khmer groups who suffered alongside the far larger population of Khmers.

However, the vast majority of autobiographies and short personal histories produced around the turn of the century were focused on the memories of individual refugees living in America. Sarah Streed, compiler of *Leaving the House of Ghosts: Cambodian Refugees in the American Midwest*, recorded the stories of Khmer who live amongst the diasporic Khmer community in the United States, while Usha Welaratna did similar work with Khmer-Americans in her *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Refugees in America.* Like Haing Ngor and Pim Yathay before them, these individual Khmer-Americans in these volumes were helping to shape the collective memory of the diasporic Khmers living in the United States. Most of the literature was dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives under the Khmer Rouge, and almost all included a stated desire to teach the younger generations to never forget what had transpired in their history. But unlike the full length autobiographies that were produced by Haing Ngor and Pim Yathay, Streed and Welaratna's works were compilations of a number of individual Khmer-American memories. Surprisingly, only a few members of the older generations of Khmer survivors took the initiative to record their memories in the manner that Pim and Haing had done. Nevertheless, regardless of the length and specific content of the various reproductions of memory, the combined efforts of individuals from the

---

older generation Khmer-Americans produced a particular collective memory that was quite different from the memories of the younger generation of Khmer refugees, an issue that we will return to later in this chapter.

The Younger Generation Remembers

So far we have seen that the older generation of Khmer-Americans, who had been alive long enough to remember what life was like in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge period, provided the American public with a variety of stories and recollections of the Khmer Rouge period. Although their writings and memories helped restructure the conception of Khmer identity to include the tragic episode of Cambodia's past, this group of survivors were in less danger of losing traditional markers of traditional Khmer culture than the younger generation of refugees. The vast majority of older Khmer-Americans included in their autobiographies memories of pre-1975 Cambodia, recollections of Cambodia that painted a far different picture of their homeland than the reality of life under Pol Pot's regime. But what about the younger generation of Khmer refugees who were mere children during the DK period? Did they attempt to record and share their memories like their parents and grandparents had done? How did their memories differ from that of the older generation of Khmer-Americans?

Near the dawn of the new millennium, some individuals within the younger generation of Khmer refugees began to share their memories with the rest of the world. Dith Pran, whose story of survival was represented in the 1984 film The
Killing Fields, was one of the first individuals to collect and publish the memories and experiences of the younger generation of Khmer survivors. Although he was a part of the older generation of Khmer survivors, he realized that the younger generation of Khmer refugees possessed the same need as their elders to express and share their memories and experiences with the wider community. His 1994 compilation, *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields*, was a product of Dith's efforts to collect the memories of over thirty young survivors, most of whom had been relocated to the United States after 1979. Some of the contributors to the collection were as young as four years old in 1975, and the oldest, fifteen. Their memories would obviously differ with respect to the individual's gender, age, class, and experience, but the main themes of survival and escape remained relatively consistent. That said, this generation—the same generation who were increasingly in danger of losing their traditional Khmer identity—did offer a different perspective of the Khmer Rouge period. In particular, there was little or no recollection of a pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia within the memories of the younger generation, a fact that became apparently clear only with the publication of their memoirs.

Dith was well aware of the precarious situation that most young Khmer-Americans found themselves in. In the preface to *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields*, Dith explains why he chose to write the book.

*It is important for me that the new generation of Cambodian and Cambodian Americans become active and tell the world what happened to them and their families under the Khmer Rouge. I want them never to forget the faces of their relatives and friends who were killed during that time. The dead are crying out for justice. Their voices speak for those who are unable to speak, in order that the genocide and holocaust will never happen again. The ghosts of the innocent will be on my mind forever. This is why I have compiled...*
these stories. I want future generations to learn about what these survivors, these heroes have gone through and be moved enough to do their part in helping to make the world a better place.\footnote{Dith Pran, Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors, ed. Kim DePaul (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), Preface.}

For Dith Pran, the situation was clear. The children who lived through the Khmer Rouge period possessed valuable memories that should never be forgotten. Their stories and experiences could help future generations of Khmers remember what their parents and grandparents had gone through, and could teach the world about the horrors of the Khmer Rouge “holocaust.” The “future generations” should “never forget” their painful past. But although Dith did not realize it, these stories would also help the younger generations of Khmer-Americans—as well as their American born children who had no direct access to Khmer Rouge memory—create an identity that was centered around the theme of oppression, suffering, and survival. At the same time, the new perspectives of the “children of the killing fields” added another dimension to the collective memory of the Khmer Rouge period: a conception of Khmer-American identity that would increasingly be attached to theme of escape, refuge, and ultimately relocation in the United States.

By the year 2000, a few Khmer-Americans who had grown up during the Khmer Rouge period began to produce full length autobiographies of their own. For example, in 2000 Chanrithy Him’s \textit{When Broken Glass Floats} introduced the American public to the memory of a survivor who was only a child during the Khmer Rouge period. This highly praised and incredibly popular autobiography detailed Him’s experiences while growing up under Democratic Kampuchea. A mere ten
years old when the Pol Pot came to power in 1975, her adolescent years were
shattered under the oppressive social policies of the Khmer Rouge.\textsuperscript{173}

Loung Ung, only six year old in 1975, published her memories in \textit{First They
Killed My Father} a few years after Him’s memoir hit the bookstands. Like Him,
Ung’s autobiography recalled the story of a difficult childhood and an eventual
escape from Cambodia in 1979.\textsuperscript{174} But unlike Haing Ngor and Pim Yathay, who
included sentimental memories and experiences of pre-1975 Cambodia within their
autobiographies, these new autobiographies revealed a noticeable (and
understandable) lack of memory prior to the Khmer Rouge experience. There were
few memories to recall before the Khmer Rouge, and the memories that were
included in the autobiographies were often vague and distorted. Their memory of
Cambodia was the Khmer Rouge. For the younger autobiographers, their identity
was mainly defined by survival, escape, and their eventual arrival in the United
States.

The new autobiographical literature was produced through efforts to recreate
the experiences under the Khmer Rouge from the often traumatized memories of the
younger generation of diasporic Khmers. Unlike the short recollections compiled in
Dith’s collection of survivor accounts, the full length autobiography enabled an
author to reproduce a more vivid image of their experiences, to include much more
detail of tragedy and trauma, and provided the space necessary to comment on
historical causes and consequences of the Khmer Rouge regime. Like Haing Ngor
and Pim Yathay before them, the younger generation used the autobiography in order

\textsuperscript{173} See Him, \textit{When Broken Glass Floats}.
\textsuperscript{174} See Ung, \textit{First They Killed My Father}. 
to teach their audiences not only about the tragedy of Cambodia's past, but also about the often unexplainable nature of humanity.

But unlike the older generation of Khmers, the new autobiographers' memories were inescapably influenced by the collective memory of the Khmer Rouge period that had previously been reshaped by the older generation of survivors. The reproduction of memory through literature, images, memorial structures, and institutions had continued relatively unimpeded since the fall of Pol Pot in 1979. The template for Khmer-American collective memory was already set. As such, the younger generation could not avoid the influences from these popular sites of Khmer collective memory. Moreover, their literary recollections were informed by their childhood memories of the period, vulnerable to the distortions and inconsistencies inherent in the passing of time. Furthermore, the younger generation needed no authorial intermediary in order to produce their works in English. By the time the younger survivors reproduced their memories in print, many young Khmer-Americans were well on their way to becoming “Americanized.”

**Accessing the Khmer Past**

In Chapter Three I explained how the construction of collective memory through the production of historical literature imparts on a particular group a conception of their identity. Whether this literature takes the form of professional scholarship, personal memoir, or autobiography, literary reproductions of memory have the ability to radically alter the image of a particular group's collective identity.
In Chapter Four I argued that the construction and maintenance of museums and memorials throughout Cambodia have not only reinforced an image of genocide and survival within the Khmer population living in Cambodia, they have shaped international perceptions of Khmer identity as well. As a result, the sites of memory in Cambodia proper have had a considerable affect on the perceived identity of diasporic Khmers living within the United States. However, given the indirect nature of the memorials' influence on Khmer-American identity and the spatial distance that separates Cambodia from the United States, Cambodia's sites of memory have not been able to function as the primary source of information about the diasporic Khmer's past. The question must then be asked: from where do Khmer-Americans receive information about their past? Where are the socially mediated sites of Khmer memory in the United States? What about the younger generations who were either too young to remember the incident or who were born in the diaspora? How do they access their history and remember their past?

The most logical assumption is that most young Khmer-Americans obtained the images and understandings of Khmer history and identity from their surviving family members and friends. Even if they possessed some memories of the Khmer Rouge period, the opinions and interpretations of the older generations must have shaped understandings of their traumatic past. But as many scholars have pointed out, convincing a traumatized population to talk about its memories is often a difficult and painful process. As historian Craig Etcheson discovered through his research in the 1980s, most Khmer-American children first learned of the Khmer Rouge through conversations with their parents. However, many members of the older generation
often found it too difficult to discuss their traumatic memories with their children, or if they did, they would rarely include a complete description of their experiences. 175

Unlike Cambodia, where visible markers of Khmer identity were available on an omnipresent scale, the younger generation of Khmer-Americans had little access to sites of Khmer Rouge memory in day to day life. For example, the American school curriculum provided only the slightest mention of Cambodian history or Khmer culture. Even today, there is little attention paid to Cambodia in American academia. A look at a current college level text book is quite revealing. Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past, a popular world history textbook, makes only six references to Cambodia in over 1,100 pages of global history. Moreover, in the textbook Cambodia’s past is represented through two distinct historical periods: first, there is a brief description of the ancient kingdom of Angkor; second, there is a slightly longer section dedicated to the Khmer Rouge period. 176 Although it is understandable why Cambodia does not receive the same amount of attention as a more “influential” vectors of world history (such as Europe or China), it is interesting that the textbook only makes reference to the two most popular symbols of Khmer identity: Angkor Wat and the Khmer Rouge. Other than highly specialized courses in Southeast Asian history or specific fields of area studies, an average member of the younger generation of Khmer-Americans could not expect to find highly accessible information about Cambodia in American academia. What they did find only reinforced their identity’s connection with the Khmer Rouge period.

175 Etcheson, 3.
For memory to be effective on a collective level, it must be easily accessible in order for it to reach a large number of people. Dominick LaCapra, through his investigation of various popular representation of the Holocaust, points out that sites of memory that are too scholarly or that demand a considerable amount of audience participation—such as Thomas Mann's difficult novel *Doctor Faustus* or Claude Lanzmann's complex film *Shoah*—will only have a limited affect on collective memory due to the inaccessible nature of their presentation. By looking at Art Spiegelman's *Maus*—a two volume graphic novel that presents a Holocaust survivor's memories through interviews with his estranged son—LaCapra has demonstrated how representations of memory that are easily digestible and popularly appealing will have the most impact on collective memory and identity.¹⁷⁷

In a similar manner I argue that Khmer-American autobiographies, although not as "popular" in form as Art Spiegelman's pictorial representation of the Holocaust, stand as the most widely available and easily accessible form of literature devoted to the reproduction of Khmer-American memory.¹⁷⁸ Far more than the professional scholarship dedicated to the Khmer Rouge period, the growing genre of refugee autobiography has had the ability to reach a much wider audience than most other sites of Khmer memory previously mentioned in this paper. Professional historiography, although itself an important site for the working through the Khmer's traumatic past, has never received the amount popular attention that some of the refugee's autobiographies have enjoyed. For example, the autobiographies written by

---

¹⁷⁷ LaCapra, *History and Memory*, p. 139-141.
Chanrithy Him and Luong Ung have been publicly praised throughout the scholarly and non-scholarly communities, a distinction publishers emphasize through the display of national awards and critical praise that decorate the covers and sleeves of the autobiographies' paperback editions.

**Autobiography as an Archetype for Collective Memory**

The historiography of the Khmer Rouge period has repeatedly used the autobiographical memory of survivors as a source of information about Cambodia's tragic past. Even the most well respected scholars of Cambodian studies—Chandler, Vickery, Kiernan, Ledgerwood, Etcheson, Smith-Hefner, Ebihara—have utilized survivor stories in the production of their histories without questioning the validity or motives behind the autobiographers. Indeed, the production of Khmer memory through biographical literature has succeeded in even shaping the structure of Cambodian history itself by serving as a resource for historians. No one, as far as I can tell, has actually looked at the autobiographies as a subject of study in and of themselves. Yet as a few scholars have recently pointed out, the genre of autobiographical literature can function as a site in which to analyze historical change with respect to culture, nationalist discourse, or even a group's identity. By using some of the recent scholarship on autobiographical literary criticism, it is possible to begin to analyze Khmer-American autobiography as a subject itself, as a site for the contestation of collective memory, and as a discourse of identity production.
In his introduction to *Of Self an Nation*, a book that investigates the changing nature and meaning of autobiographical representations in Indonesia, author C. W. Watson explains that there are two main methodologies with respect to analyzing autobiographical literature. The first technique views autobiography as a resource of information about a particular group’s culture or identity as understood by the author. This methodology is not concerned with the structure of the autobiography or the intentions of its author, nor is it concerned with how or why it was recorded.179 Rather than seeing the autobiography as a site of memory worthy of study in itself, this approach simply looks at the autobiography in order to locate specific information about a topic that is relevant to the researcher’s argument. So far, this is the methodology in which I have approached Khmer-American Autobiography. For example, in Chapter Three I utilized autobiographies as a source for information about Khmer-American trauma or about their difficult journey to the United States.

But as Watson points out, there is another technique that scholars have used to approach autobiographical literature. This second method requires that modern literary criticism pay closer attention to the relationships between the author and his/her audience, between the author and other writers in his/her genre, between the author and his/her historical context, and between the author and the wider community in which the author belongs. This strategy, then, looks not at the autobiographical text’s relationship to the exterior world, but rather at the text’s relationship to other texts.180 By using the second methodology described by Watson, it is possible to investigate not only the structure and content of Khmer-American

autobiography, but also to uncover what messages and images the author intends for his/her audience, as well as why the author was compelled to write in the first place.

Khmer-American autobiographical literature, arguably more than any other resource, has become virtually indispensable in the effort to facilitate understanding of and compassion towards the Khmer Rouge regime survivors. I argue that it was the eventual proliferation of memoir production, as well as the concentrated efforts of concerned Western scholars to inventory personal histories of the diasporic Khmers, that reinvigorated their sense of identity and connection with the Khmer-American's traumatic past. By looking at how these writers have represented their personal experiences during the Khmer Rouge period, it is possible to glimpse how collective traumatic memory shaped the representations and perceptions of Khmer identity.

Although each autobiography has a particular authorial style and presentation that renders it unique, the vast majority reveal an archetype of chronological structure that could be located across generational and gender distinctions. This chronology, one which has ultimately shaped the collective memory of Khmer-Americans regardless of their sex or age, can be divided into five basic stages. First (although not necessarily presented first), there is a recollection of life before the Khmer Rouge. Although some pre-1975 recollections are filled with fond memories of family and daily routines, most authors chose to remember instances and experiences that foreshadowed the eventual rise of the Khmer Rouge. This is, of course, a rhetorical strategy used by the author in order to prepare the audience for the tragedy that was to come. Raing Ngor, for example, was sure to include the first time he saw someone killed.
The first entire incident I remember was not so peaceful. I was about three years old. The year was probably 1950... We heard a shot nearby, then more shots right outside our house. Something crashed, and glass broke on the tabletop above us, while my mother clutched us tighter and prayed and my father cursed... I pushed my way through the legs of the crowd. I had to see for myself. By the tree in front of our house, in the center of the crowd, a man lay face down in blood... He was a man of the earth, from the countryside. From the very heart of peaceful Cambodia. And he had rebelled. Now, many years later, grown up and living far away, I think: Yes, there was trouble even then. Maybe not revolution but a deep, hidden discontent.181

In the second chronological stage, after recalling what is was like before 1975 (which, of course, varies with the age of the author), the narrative usually describes the arrival of the Khmer Rouge and the forced movement of the Cambodian population from their homes—most commonly an urban home—to the collectives in the countryside. The journey is often remembered tragically, as thousands died along the way due to dehydration, exhaustion, or execution. Most Khmer-American autobiographers had formerly lived or worked in either Phnom Penh or Battambang, the two largest cities in Cambodia. As such, most descriptions of the arrival of the Khmer Rouge are set in the urban centers, where millions of refugees and villages had congregated in the months before the Khmer Rouge victory. But this also tells the reader something about the majority of Khmer-Americans autobiographers. Most come from the upper classes and urban centers in Cambodia. As a result, the collective memory of Khmer-Americans has been constructed and shaped by the experiences of the upper classes of Cambodian society.

The third stage in the archetypal chronology describes what life was like while living under the Khmer Rouge regime and working in the collectives. This is where

181 Haing Ngor, 8-9.
most of the trauma of the author takes place. The author’s experiences of life in the cooperatives varied depending on the narrator’s age, sex, and location. Most of the older generation remember working exhausting hours in the fields under constant supervision, a life defined by a perpetual fear of retaliation from Khmer Rouge soldiers. The survivors who were mere children during Pol Pot’s regime tend to remember Khmer Rouge indoctrination “schools,” assisting their group leaders with cooking or farming, and the loss of parental guidance and support. But regardless of the author’s age, all Khmer-Americans remember what life was like in the rural areas: extremely poor living conditions, a constant lack of food, and the brutal actions of the Khmer Rouge soldiers and cadres.

The fourth universal stage in the chronology of Khmer-American collective memory describes the fall of the Khmer Rouge and arrival of the Vietnamese “liberators.” This is also the point where the similarities between the autobiographies start to diverge, as thousands of remaining survivors fled in all directions to escape the threat of war. Although almost all autobiographers remember feeling relieved that the Vietnamese had overrun the Khmer Rouge, there are also a lot of mixed reactions in the various recollections of Khmer-Americans. In general, I would argue that the older generation—survivors like Haing Ngor and Pim Yathay—questioned the intentions of and motives behind the Vietnamese invasion, a realization that was probably connected to the historical tensions that had existed between Cambodia and Vietnam. For example, Haing Ngor’s comments are quite telling:

Cambodia has two traditional enemies: Vietnam to the east and Thailand (formerly Siam) to the west. Over the centuries we have had wars and border disputes with both of them. At the bottom of our differences is race. “Pure” Khmers have dark brown skin.
Vietnamese and Thai have pale yellow skin. To most Asians, including our neighbors, the lighter the skin color, the higher the status. They look down on Cambodians for having darker skin than themselves. Cambodians, who are shy by nature, sometimes outwardly appear to accept a lower status while inwardly resenting it... Every Cambodian knows the legend of the Vietnamese who used Cambodians’ heads for cooking stones.\textsuperscript{182}

For Haing Ngor, the arrival of the Vietnamese was a bitter liberation, one that was only accomplished through the actions of their age-old historical rivals. However, there is a noticeable lack of this type of anti-Vietnamese sentiment within the reproduced memories of the younger generation. In fact, Chanrithy Him’s first encounter with a Vietnamese soldier is a memory of tenderness and hope. Consider Chanrithy Him’s memory of the arrival of the Vietnamese.

In the morning I’m awakened by voices. A short, thin Vietnamese soldier in a dark lemon-green uniform and helmet is striding along the road with a briefcaselike bag in his hands... The soldier removes tiny fragments of shrapnel embedded in our backs, faces, and arms... Minh and Tranh tell us about Vietnam, about their lives there. About dancing... On cue, the soldier begins to drum on the side of the bucket, creating a soft, chiming upbeat sound. His mouth moves, followed by pretty lyrics in Vietnamese... Their hands dance, swinging in circular motions. They smile, laughing. I’m amused.\textsuperscript{183}

Notice the difference in the different conceptions and memories of the Vietnamese.

Haing Ngor, steeped in traditional Khmer conceptions of history and identity, felt the need to describe to his audience why he had such mixed feelings about the Vietnamese invasion that caused Khmer liberation. Chanrithy Him, a mere child when the Vietnamese arrived, had held no deep-seated animosity towards the Vietnamese soldiers. In fact, she felt no need to comment on any historical ties between Vietnam and Cambodia. The only thing she wanted her readers to

\textsuperscript{182} Haing Ngor, 384.
\textsuperscript{183} Chanrithy Him, p. 264-265.
understand was that the arrival of the Vietnamese was equated to the end of suffering and the beginning of a new life.

The fifth and final stage in the chronology of Khmer-Americans collective memory details the escape from Cambodia, usually to the refugee camps that were set up along the Thai border, and the refugees’ eventual arrival in the United States. But like the arrival of the Vietnamese, the difficult journey from Cambodia to the United States is remembered in often radically different ways. For the older generation of Khmer-Americans, the loss of homeland and culture was especially hard. Unlike the younger generation of survivors, refugees like Haing Ngor could remember a Cambodia before the nightmare of the Khmer Rouge. Furthermore, the thought of leaving everything they knew and loved behind was often terrifying to the older generation. On meeting his first American, Haing Ngor remembered

The van pulled up to the Lumpini gate and I climbed in, my heart beating fast. Except for the Thai driver there was only one person inside, and he was American. There was no way to avoid him. Nowhere to hide. You might think that after being tortured three times and walking out of Cambodia I had nothing left to fear. Not true. From earliest childhood I had learned to be shy toward white people. I wasn’t really afraid of them, but I deferred to them automatically. Most Cambodians did. We called them long-noses. . . . We were shy and passive because it was part of our culture . . . We were also afraid of losing face. It was one thing to be able to speak French well, another to speak English badly. We were afraid the foreigners would look down on us for making mistakes in their language.184

Notice again how Haing Ngor filled his narrative with references to Khmer culture and belief systems. Driven by a need to justify his thoughts and actions to his English speaking readers, Haing Ngor carefully explained why Khmers thought and acted as they did. His expectations of America were only matched by his fear of Americans.

184 Haing Ngor, 409.
The younger generation of Khmer-Americans remember their journey to America quite differently. Unlike Haing Ngor and his generation, most young Khmer-Americans do not feel the need to comment on Khmer culture and traditions to explain their emotions about moving to America. Although some remember feeling some anxiety about leaving Cambodia, the majority recall experiencing only excitement and relief upon hearing the news of a future in America. As Chanrithy Him remembered,

Aunt Eng has asked him [Uncle Leng Seng] to sponsor her family in America, and now he's working on the paperwork from there. And we, Ra is eager to add, can also go to America....I jump up and down like I'm on a spring. I smile, taking this wonderful, unbelievable news hungrily. After all these years of loss and hardship, I reflect, we receive this news—Uncle Seng, Pa's only brother, is alive, and he will bring us to America. Oh, God, thank you. I jump, humming and laughing.185

The Khmer cultural fear of Americans that Haing Ngor had explained all Cambodians shared was noticeably absent from the memory of Chanrithy Him. Instead, there is only laughter, joy, and a feeling of earned salvation. As Chanrithy Him hinted at through her memory, the Khmer-Americans were victims, undeserving of their tragic destiny, who deserved some hope and relief from “years of loss and hardship.” From the vantage point of a survivor who spent most of her life in the United States, the loss of Cambodia, although regrettable, meant the start of a new life.

The last stage in the chronology of Khmer-American memory is fundamental to the creation of the Khmer-American identity. For young Khmer-Americans, the culmination of a successful survival was not finalized until the survivor stepped onto American soil. Only then could the autobiography end, only then was their story

185 Chanrithy Him, 289.
complete. This idea of ultimate success—the escape from war torn Cambodia to the promised land of the United States—illuminates how young Khmer-Americans redefined themselves and their identity. They were no longer only Khmer, they were Khmer-American. Through repeated stories such as these, it is easy to see how a particular way of remembering the DK period has been attached to the diasporic Khmer community’s identity.

What becomes clear is that the older and younger generations of Khmer-Americans have helped create the basic structure of Khmer-American collective memory. All Khmer-Americans have remembered these five chronological stages, although there were understandable differences with respect to individual experience and interpretations. Most of the differences can be found by comparing the two generations’ use of traditional Khmer beliefs and traditions to explain their difficult past. This fact, more than any other, reveals that the younger generation has a different conception of Khmer identity than their elders. Faced with the loss of culture and tradition, the younger generation has attempted to redefine what it means to be Khmer. The shaping of a Khmer-American identity is intimately linked to their memories of surviving the Khmer Rouge.

**Autobiography as Articulations of Identity**

As hinted to in the previous chapter, one of the major differences between the older and younger generations’ representations of Khmer-American memory hinges on the issue of traditional Khmer culture. We have already seen a few examples of
the differences with respect to representations of Khmer traditional culture within the different age groups' recollections of Cambodia. In general, there is a noticeable lack of reference to Khmer traditions in the younger generation's autobiographies. This is not to say that there are none. Indeed, authors like Chanrithy Him and Luong Ung have attempted to include Khmer culture and traditions in their literature. But some of this seems intentionally rhetorical. For example, near the end of Chanrithy Him's memoir the reader is presented with a traditional Khmer poem, written in Khmer, that speaks of hope and love.

Ooy... Excited all my feelings aroused, nervous
On this honey night I regret my body
Hm... Regret, regret, a body that is like a blossoming flower
Now the bee has taken the sweetness, then he flies away
If he really leaves me, my heart will hurt
And there will be only tears
So, this is love, that I've known for the first night
Please be kind, kind to me
Honey, honey, a virgin would only be once,
Not twice.\textsuperscript{186}

The poem was sung by her sister as they feel asleep one night in a refugee camp.

There is no explanation of why she included it, nor does it seek to clarify a Khmer belief system to Him's audience. It almost seems as if this was an attempt to prove that she was indeed Khmer, that she still held onto some remnants of Khmer tradition.

Quite on the contrary, the older generation's autobiographies are jammed packed with references to and explanations of Khmer traditional culture. There seems to be a need within the older generation to explain to their audience the mindset and world view of Khmers. They do not include this information as a

\textsuperscript{186} Chanrithy Him, 287.
rhetorical tool. Instead, they know of no other way to think or write. For example, consider the passage below

Hear me, gods: I never killed anyone. Never, never, never. I saved lives. I was a doctor and I saved the lives of Lon Nol soldiers and Viet Cong and didn't care who they were. So why make me suffer?....How Huoy [deceased wife] would cry if she were here. I am glad she cannot see me. Please, gods, do not punish her. She is innocent. Do not let her know what I am going through. I am one of the damned, a pret. I am already in hell. And I do not know why. I never betrayed the nation. If I killed anybody in a past life, or tortured people, then punish me and get it over with. If this is vengeance finish it, so my next life will come.187

Notice how Haing Ngor's thought process and religious notions are defined by traditional beliefs. It is revealing that an understanding of his suffering is not explained by the oppression of the Khmer Rouge or the political situation surrounding his country. Instead, Haing Ngor rationalizes his experiences within the domain of Buddhist beliefs—he entertains the possibility that his suffering might be justified by his actions in a former life. Notice, too, how feelings of guilt and self-doubt are prevalent throughout Haing Ngor's memories. Most of the older generation, unable to understand why this tragedy had befallen the Khmer people, had questioned themselves and their own role in the traumatic situation. Yet, there is an apparent lack of this type of self-criticism present in the younger generation.

This issue becomes especially clear when further comparisons are made. The radical difference between the older and younger generations lies in issues of fault, guilt, and responsibility, and represents the key to understanding how the two groups define themselves. For the older group, there is a considerable amount of shame and self blame presented in their autobiographies. For example, Haing Ngor writes,

187 Haing Ngor, 246.
A wrinkled old monk made sure that I understood the essential points. “What is holy is divine... If your family is happy, you are happy, then the village will be happy. If all the villages are happy, then the land will be strong and content.” I believe what the old monk taught me. And everything the old monk said came true, only in reverse. My family was unhappy, my village was unhappy, and so was the country. And now I look back at it all and think about the connections, and wonder whether I myself was partly to blame.188

This issue reveals that the older generation wrote about their memories mainly in order to understand what had happened, and why. Because of the Buddhist belief in karma and reincarnation, many older Khmers looked to themselves for the answers.

Most Young Khmer-Americans did not experience this type of guilt. For the children who grew up during the Khmer Rouge period, the situation was clear. The past events had been completely out of their control. What happened in Cambodia was definitely not their fault. How could it be, having been so young? The younger generation of autobiographers do not feel the need explain their experiences in the same manner as their elders. Moreover, due to the shifting conceptions of young Khmer-American identity, there is an overall lack of reference to Buddhism within most of the younger generation’s autobiographical literature. Instead, there is an attempt within the younger generation to construct for themselves a victimized identity, one characterized by suffering, survival, and escape. For the younger generation, the memory of Cambodia seems like a nightmare that ended when they woke up in the United States. Faced with a new culture and society that knew nothing of Cambodia or Khmer culture, many young Khmers lost much of what had traditionally defined Khmer identity. Consequently, the reconstructed memories of surviving the Khmer Rouge period—as represented in the younger generations

---

188 Haing Ngor, 20.
autobiographies—is reinforced as the strongest and clearest remaining marker of Khmer-American identity.

Legitimacy, Authority, and Representation

So far in this chapter I have argued that the biographical literature dedicated to Khmer-American memory has helped construct a collective memory and identity the diasporic Khmer community living in the United States. Through individual memories, the widely accepted markers of Khmer-American collective memory have been reinforced. As such, Khmer-Americans have recreated their identity to "fit" with the standard historical narrative of Cambodia, as well as the traumas that were suffered under the Khmer-Rouge and through the difficult relocation process which brought them to the United States. But I have also worked under the assumption that all Khmer-American literary memory has been accepted as legitimate contributions to the process of identity formation. As such, I have incorrectly assumed that Khmer-American identity is more or less homogenous and uncontested. However, as I will show below, not all survivor stories have been accepted as accurate or legitimate within the diasporic community.

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* investigates the perceptions, politics, cultures, and discourses of different African diasporas. Although his subject is not directly related to the Khmer experience, some of his themes and theories are valuable when discussing the Khmer diasporic community in the United States. Specifically, I have drawn from his discourse on inclusion and authority with respect
to the process of representing and defining diasporic identity. Gilroy brilliantly uses
the music of the African diasporic populations in order to emphasize the divisions
within the diaspora itself. He argues that there is no standard, homogenous, or
uncontested image of the African diaspora, even within closely integrated
populations. There are always issues of authenticity, legitimacy, and ownership
expressed in social discourses within the diasporic community. In other words,
within the African diaspora there exists a social dialogue that is concerned with who
should be the authentic and legitimate representatives of identity, as well as what
should be included as the markers and symbols of identity.

New questions thus emerge. Are all representations of the Khmer-American
memory accepted by the diasporic Khmer community? Are there questions of
legitimacy and authenticity directed at the production of Khmer-American
autobiographies? Can anyone who survived the Khmer Rouge regime become a voice
for Khmer identity? Luong Ung, author of the autobiography First they Killed My
Father, is a perfect example of a survivor who brings these questions to light. But
some final questions must be addressed. How does the Khmer-American community
decide what are appropriate markers of Khmer-American identity? Can anyone who
lived through the Khmer-Rouge represent Khmer-American identity? Are there
fissures within the production of Khmer-American collective memory?

When I first began to research the assortment of autobiographies written by
Khmer-Americans, I was under the assumption that any addition to the diasporic
Khmer “memoriography” would be welcomed and encouraged by the Khmer-

American community. I was wrong. When I originally read Loung Ung’s memoir *First They Killed My Father*, I was not aware of any significant difference in its content or in its ability to represent the Khmer tragedy. On the surface it resembled every other autobiography I had read up to that point. It was only after I had read a number of book reviews written by members of the Khmer-American community that I realized the problems associated with her book. Ung’s autobiography, far more than any other, became an object of discrepancy and disagreement within the diasporic Khmer community in the United States.

Ung’s text, at least on the surface, seems to follow the structure of other memoirs. She even follows the “five stage development” theory introduced above with respect to her content and narrative. But outspoken members of the diasporic Khmer community have radically different opinions of her work. The Khmer Institute, an Khmer-American based website dedicated to Khmer culture and history, has collected a number of scathing reviews and analyses of her piece concerning the validity of her account.

Sody Lay, a lecturer at UCLA, writes:

Instead of providing more ‘evidence’ against the Khmer Rouge, Ung has taken advantage of the Cambodian tragedy to sell her story. She was only five years old when the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, yet purports to remember her experience well enough to write an historically accurate book. While this is certainly not impossible, the author’s narration itself proves that she in fact does not possess a vivid memory of the 1970’s Cambodia, only a vivid imagination. Her alleged memories of life before and during the Khmer Rouge period are so riddled with inconsistencies, improbabilities, and manifestly incorrect information as to be utterly illegitimate—which makes the book little more than poor fiction and its author an opportunistic con-artist... The most offensive aspect of Ung’s book is the racism inherent in her attempts to demonize ethnic Khmers. To make her story more compelling, she insinuates that only light-skinned Sino-Khmers such
as herself were victims of the Khmer Rouge and that most dark skinned ethnic Khmers are somehow to blame for the heinous crimes of the Killing Fields period. ... Ung’s misrepresentation is harmful because it promotes racism and ethnic tension within the Cambodian community and in a sense denies the suffering of millions of Cambodians who were themselves hapless victims of the Khmer Rouge’s draconian policies.  

In another critique, Khmer-American social worker, Soheap Keo, states:

Contrast the poverty level of most Cambodians at the time with Loung’s own background. She describes the luxury of living in an environment just like the west, where everyone respected her father, and everywhere her brothers and sisters wandered people greeted them... The theatre owners give them free admission, etc. I thought to myself, corrupt officials run Cambodia now and then! Do you think fear had something to do with all the greetings and free admission? I remember my elders telling me that in Cambodia it is better to be on the good side of a military or political official. I don’t know enough about Loung’s father to say whether he was a good or bad person; however, given the brutality of Cambodia during that period of time and his direct participation in a regime partly responsible for that brutality, I do question her description of his ‘God-like’ nature that never hurt anyone. I have lost my homeland, friends and family, and my childhood, just like millions of other Cambodians through the Khmer Rouge’s acts of hatred. I think most Cambodians understand why it happened: inequality, exploitation, and racism were some of the things that gave rise to the Khmer Rouge and lead to the Killing Fields. I am quite surprised that many Cambodians of upper class background and Chinese descent still cannot change their attitude after the genocide. It is unfortunate that the lesson to treat one another equally regardless of race or class not only killed millions of Cambodians, but has not taught Loung about ignorance. I am saddened that some individuals of Chinese descent would cash in on anything that relates to Cambodia when possible, but otherwise refuse to say that they are Cambodian when it does not benefit them.

Although there are a number of other reviews that I could have included, I have presented these sections because they bring out the major problems and

---


191 Soheap Keo, review of *First They Killed My Father*, by Luong Ung. *Khmer Institute* (Sept. 2002). <http://www.khmerinstitute.org>
concerns of the diasporic Khmer community with respect to the legitimacy, accuracy, and authority of Khmer-American autobiographical literature. When considered together, the comments introduced above are quite revealing. First of all, all of the reviews point to historical inaccuracies that do not fit the standard and widely accepted historical narrative of Cambodia. This brings a political essence into the dynamics of Khmer memoirs. The memoirs are not only used as tools to help place meaning to the past, as LaCapra has argued in Chapter Three. The memoirs also serve an important political function within the Khmer community, both diasporic and in Cambodia. They act as a kind of evidence, a reminder, not only to Khmers but also to the global community, in hopes that justice and understanding might be obtained. Moreover, the amount of dialogue that is directed at Ung’s book indicates that there is a need within the diasporic Khmer community to represent themselves accurately. These are not just sad stories; they are a testament to the trauma of their collective identity.

Second, the texts bring up the question of ethnicity. Ung is not a “pure” Khmer, and she constantly reminds her reader of this fact. She is a Sino-Khmer, and there seems to be a problem with letting her claim responsibility and representation for diasporic Khmers in general. Although Sody Lay vehemently denies that there is a commotion within the diasporic community concerning Ung’s ethnic background, other reviews and letters point to something else. There does seem to be some discourse directed at her Chinese descent. Although this is a tedious point of discussion, there is a notion brought up in a number of the commentaries that Ung is unable and ill-qualified to speak on behalf of the diasporic Khmer community. Sody
Lay reminds us that although the ethnic Khmers were not the only ones who suffered trauma under the Khmer Rouge (Cambodia’s Vietnamese populations and Cham Muslims had been specifically targeted by the Khmer Rouge), it seems as though some Khmer-Americans have attempted to claim Cambodia’s tragedy as a distinctly Khmer experience and memory by excluding other, equally legitimate representatives of Cambodia’s tragic past.

Third, most of the articles point out that Ung’s father and family were part of the corrupt elite. Her father worked under the Lon Nol government and most diasporic Khmers have a sour memory of Lon Nol’s policies and actions. This leads to further questioning of Ung’s role as a legitimate representative of Khmer identity. There seems to be a consensus that she was not one of “us”; she was one of “them,” corrupt, wealthy, and part of the upper-class society that helped cause the problems for the rest of the population. Even though she seemed to have suffered many of the same traumas that are shared by the diasporic Khmer community, she was much better off than the majority. After all, she is still alive.

To an outsider, these points do not seem to warrant the attacks that have been directed at her. Perhaps it is because as an outsider, I have also become susceptible to the images attached to Khmer-American collective memory and identity. The paradigms of Khmer-American collective memory—Khmers as victims, survivors, and heroes—have become imbedded in the very fabric of Khmer-American identity. The existence of such public discourse and dialogue directed at the autobiographies lends further weight to my argument that the trauma experienced by diasporic
Khmers, during the decades after the Khmer Rouge regime, has become the most important aspect of the Khmer-American identity.

Although I believe that the intentions of most Khmer-American autobiographers are honest and sincere, I also believe that there are unexpected collateral effects that are caused by these types of stories. I argue that for the diasporic Khmer community, the act of remembering their past and writing it down in a fashion such as this, actually helps create a collective memory that informs a sense of identity. With this sense of their past as history, readers of these stories—both Khmer and non-Khmer alike—are introduced to the Cambodian past through the eyes of the survivors. If it is true that memory is always a contested phenomenon, that memory creates history, and history creates identity, then this type of history creates for its readers a contestable image of Khmer identity. It is an identity based on the act of genocide and survival, refuge and salvation, scattered community and the loss of a homeland. In the face of rapidly disappearing marker of traditional Khmer identity, a growing number of young Khmer Americans are reproducing their memories in print in order to hold onto the last quintessential marker of Khmer identity: surviving and escaping the Khmer Rouge.
Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the trauma suffered by those who survived the Khmer Rouge period shattered traditional understandings of Khmer identity. For the Khmer Americans, this trauma was twofold. Not only did the diasporic community have to deal with the trauma received while living under Khmer Rouge, they also had to deal with the often traumatic experiences associated with relocating to the United States. Yet, paradoxically, the very same trauma that forced Khmer-Americans to question traditional markers of Khmer identity has also become the fundamental marker of Khmer-American identity. To complicate matters, most scholars of Cambodian studies and the older generation of Khmer-Americans have reported that the traditional symbols of Khmer identity have been disappearing within the younger generations of the diasporic community, especially within the youngest generation who have no direct memories of Cambodia. As such, the memory of the Khmer-Rouge period has become the strongest marker of Khmer-American identity.

However, since the early 1980s, Cambodians and certain members of the international community have tried—apparently successfully—to label Khmer-Rouge acts as genocide. As a result, Cambodian identity—and by extension, Khmer-American identity—has increasingly become identified with the politics and social stigmas that are attached to the term genocide. But like most things in the world, particular motivations influenced the push for international recognition of Cambodia’s genocide. Yet whatever the motivations, the reality is that Khmer-
Americans have increasingly identified themselves—and have been identified by—the symbolism of genocide, survival, and escape.

Let us review. As I have argued in Chapter Two, although the older generation of survivors have tried to preserve traditional markers of Khmer identity (Buddhism, language, customs, gender roles, marriage), the younger generation of Khmer-Americans have increasingly lost touch with these identity markers. This fear of loss of identity prevalent within the older generation has driven some of them to share their memories in autobiographical form. Then, in Chapter Three, by looking at the types of trauma that Khmer-Americans have suffered both in Cambodia and in the United States, and by using some of the recent scholarship on memory, trauma, and identity, I have argued that the individual memories of the Khmer Rouge period—revealed through the production of Khmer-American biographical literature—have constructed a Khmer-American collective memory and identity, one that is increasingly associated with survival, escape, and refuge in the United States. In Chapter Four, I argued that efforts to characterize the acts perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge as genocide has ultimately branded the Khmer-American population as “victims of genocide,” a connotation that carries with it specific social and political ramifications. Finally, in Chapter Five, by comparing how the older and younger generations of the diasporic community have represented their memories of the Khmer Rouge period, I have tried to reveal the structure of Khmer-American collective memory. By locating the sites of contest between the older and younger Khmer-Americans, I have tried to show how the younger generation of survivors has attempted to reconstruct its identity, one that is increasingly associated with survival
in the United States. Furthermore, through an analysis of the diasporic community’s commentary on Luong Ung’s autobiography, I argue that there is a dialogue within Khmer-American communities with respect to the authority, legitimacy, and accuracy of Khmer-American representations of traumatic memory. Ultimately, this dialogue represents the need within the diaspora to solidify and preserve Khmer-American identity so that it is never forgotten.

Today, there is no doubt that there is a Khmer-American community. Dozens of social organizations can attest to that. Dotted throughout the American countryside, Khmer-Americans have struggled to keep their traditions and culture alive. Recently, it almost seems as though there is a revival of Khmer traditional culture. Khmer music, dance, and artwork are being promoted in cities and universities throughout the United States. Since 2000, there has been a rapid increase in the number of Khmer-American autobiographies and memoirs. Each year, a growing number of young Khmer-Americans—those who were mere children during the Khmer Rouge period—are choosing to retell their memories in print. Why is this happening? I argue that the Khmer-Americans, facing the very real danger of losing Khmer identity—are sharing their memories, in part, to strengthen the concept of a diasporic Khmer community and identity. These writers are hoping that their memories will remind later generations of Khmer-Americans of their traumatic past in Cambodia, and their new identity in America. In the end, it appears that Seang knew much more than he led on. He knew exactly who he was. He was a Khmer-American.
Bibliography


Roth, Michael S. “Remembering Forgetting: Maladies de la Memoire in Nineteenth-Century France.” *Representations, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory,* no. 26 (Spring 1989): 49-68.


**Films**