

Intergenerational Trauma and Young Cambodian Perspectives: Context, Narrative, and Agency.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS	vi
PREFACE	1
CHAPTER ONE	3
Shadows of the Past	3
Methods	5
Possible Extensions in Future Studies	7
Nhean's Story	9
Universality and the Trauma Response	13
Khmer Experiences of Health and Wellbeing	16
Intergenerational Transmission in Cambodia: Current Studies	20
The Present Study	24
CHAPTER TWO	26
Assessing the Impact of Trauma	26
Chea: Difficulty and Sacrifice guiding Values and Direction	29
Family Past: Sources, Knowledge and Perceived Impact	33
Delineating the 'Dark Years' in Cambodia	37
Khmer Rouge as Primary Concern?	40
Listening to Urgent Needs in Context	42
A Broader Lens	44
CHAPTER THREE	45
History, Narrative, And Meaning	45
Trauma and the Transmission of Values	47
The Politics of Memory	49
Explanatory Narratives: Appropriating and Interpreting History	55
How to Define a Nation and a People?	57
Beyond the Expectations of Trauma: Listening to Cambodian Voices ...	59
CHAPTER FOUR	60
Refocusing: Resilience, Hope, and Agency	60
Learning from the Past	62
Trials, Endurance and Margaret Thatcher	63
Cambodia's Youth as Aspirational	64
Emphasising Agency	67
Responding to the Voices of the Next Generations	69
REFERENCES	72
APPENDIX 1: ETHICS APPROVAL	77

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question of intergenerational trauma in Cambodia today. The experience of extreme hardship and loss during the Khmer Rouge regime of 1975-79 was almost ubiquitous. Numerous studies have suggested the potential for ongoing impact upon descendants of trauma survivors, however few have investigated the question within Cambodia itself. The purpose of this paper is to present an emic perspective of whether young Cambodians perceive such a legacy upon themselves or their society. Drawing on ethnographic interviews and participant observation from three months of fieldwork, this paper argues that an exclusively trauma-focused lens is too narrow and that the question must be situated within the context of descendants' lives as a whole. While recognising the effect upon their parents and communities, few respondents saw themselves as experiencing ongoing negative impact themselves and placed an overall higher priority on addressing present-day structural problems. In contrast to the tendency for trauma paradigms to present following generations as passive victims, the young people encountered in this research were found to be highly aspirational for themselves and their society. This paper argues for the importance of recognising the narratives of resilience present within Cambodia, and for supporting and enabling youth to exercise their own agency as a crucial aspect of national healing.

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that the following thesis is my own work, except where acknowledgement has been made to the work or ideas of others. It has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Finis', is written over a horizontal line.

Kenneth Finis.

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សំរាកក្នុងសេចក្តីសុខសាន្ត

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

CNRP – Cambodia National Rescue Party

CPP – Cambodian People’s Party

DK – Democratic Kampuchea

ECCC – Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia.
(Also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal)

GBV – Gender-based violence

KR – Khmer Rouge

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

PCIO – Person-Centred Interviewing and Observation

PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

TPO – Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation

UNTAC – United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

PREFACE

On 7th August 2014, two of the most senior ranked leaders of the Khmer Rouge were found guilty of crimes against humanity and sentenced to life imprisonment (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia 2014). This verdict came some thirty-five years after the regime was driven from power in January 1979, and in the intervening time a majority of its senior leadership had aged and died before being formally brought to account for their actions.

In just over three and a half years, between April 1975 and January 1979, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge (KR) regime had overseen the deaths of almost two million people as a result of starvation, disease, torture and execution (Chandler 2000: 209-225; Hinton 2004: 1). The period marked nothing less than the total disruption of previous social, developmental and familial structures. Almost all who were in Cambodia at that time lost family members or friends and were exposed to hardship, fear and violence (2004: 1-2).

After the fall of the regime there was no sense of reconciliation, as the KR retreated to the border areas and civil war continued. Nor was there a sense of justice being brought against those responsible, it taking decades for an official tribunal to be established. The extensive network of lower-level KR cadre was so large that those who didn't continue fighting merely returned to their communities to go on living amongst the general population.

Some saw the eventual establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)¹ in 2006 as an important step towards healing for the nation. Yet issues such as the length of time that has lapsed since the fall of Democratic Kampuchea (DK), the deaths of a majority of the senior leadership, as well as allegations of corruption

¹ Also known more generally as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

and interference by the government, seem to have troubled the opinions of many locals as to how much the ECCC can be reasonably expected to achieve in this regard (Dicklitch and Malik 2010: 522-533; Kelsall 2009).

In the face of what seems a prolonged and unresolved absence of justice or reconciliation, what has been the impact on society today, and upon survivors being able to come to terms with what happened to them? There have been many studies which have concluded the significant ongoing psychological impact of genocide upon survivors, both in Cambodia and globally (eg. Stammel *et al.* 2012; Chhim 2012; Marshall *et al.* 2005). Yet in the Cambodian context itself there have been few investigations into how the trauma experienced by parents might have affected the following generations (see Münyas 2008; Field *et al.* 2011; Field *et al.* 2013).

This research project was developed with the aim of further studying the question of intergenerational trauma in Cambodia following the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime. Through anthropological fieldwork and ethnographic interviews I explore the perspectives of young Cambodians on whether the trauma that their parents and society experienced has had a continuing impact upon their psycho-social wellbeing. In doing so I aim to offer a balanced understanding of how my respondents see themselves in relation to the KR past, what they view as the most important issues to be addressed in society today, and what characterises their views of themselves and their future.

CHAPTER ONE

SHADOWS OF THE PAST

We walked across the city through streets that during the day would be streaming with traffic, now seeming strangely quiet in the pre-dawn light. It was an early morning towards the end of the dry season in Phnom Penh, and we were heading for the Olympic stadium to join the small crowd of locals who use the public space to exercise before the heat becomes too oppressive.

Nhean, a young man in his early thirties who had more recently moved to the city from his rural village, talked to me about his life in Phnom Penh and what he observed about those around him. We mounted steps that led up the grass embankment to a walkway at the top of the stadium's stands, built in the 1960s and designed in the concrete brutalist-eque New Khmer Architecture style of the time. At the top some walked or jogged while older members participated in Tai Chi. In front of speaker stacks set at a cracking volume gathered large groups of middle-aged men and women, who stood in lines and danced to classic Khmer pop music of the same vintage as the stadium itself. In the surrounding grounds of the complex I saw children taking up positions on dusty soccer pitches, and further along young men faced off against each other across volley ball nets.

From our vantage point we could look out over the surrounding city. In a number of places buildings were under construction, the new developments beginning to tower over their older surroundings as the city continues to undergo what has been fairly rapid urban construction in recent years. Nhean pointed to one tall building prominent on the skyline, and told me it was part of a development project being undertaken by one of the major banks. There had been delays, he explained, as local residents tried to stand up to the land sale by the government. Displacement of poorer residents due to the granting of land to

corporations for development has been a common story for the past decade. Locals generally try to hold out, and protests with varying levels of media exposure may be held, but ultimately those with the money tend to prevail.

Our conversation wove through many topics as the sun rose large and red into a cloudless sky and we walked amongst the motion and activity of the crowd. Nhean discussed the difficulties of moving to the city for work, of being so far from family, and of making new connections in a much less community-oriented setting. We talked about his university studies, taken up more recently with hopes of becoming a teacher, and about the importance he places on education for increasing the opportunities that young people will have for the future.

We walked back south a couple of hours later, the streets now teeming with beat-up scooters and motorcycles in interesting juxtaposition beside the less numerous, but conspicuously-branded, sports utility vehicles of the city's politicians, military chiefs and *nouveau-riche*. The morning activity of the stadium had offered a lively yet unusually peaceful island in what is often a bustling and at times unforgiving city.

Sometime later as I was going through notes about the stadium, I read that it had been a site used by the KR for the execution of political prisoners. I had walked around the complex without a sense of some of its darker past, nor had the topic come up in my conversation with Nhean. No public memorial of the atrocities seemed evident. I wondered how many people that morning were conscious of what had occurred there during the KR period. Were there many for whom that time still cast a shadow, in stark contrast to the enjoyment of the space in its present use? Or is conducting everyday life in such locations without dwelling upon them simply the way society moves on when spaces of violence and death were so widespread?

For many people outside the country, the mention of Cambodia will generally bring to mind this ‘shadow’ of its history - the autogenocide and violence experienced under Pol Pot and the KR regime during their *Democratic Kampuchea* (DK) state between 1975-79. Indeed, it could be argued that this is the lens through which many western eyes view the nation’s present as much as its past. This paper is based on research which seeks to present the perspectives of young Cambodians themselves on the place which history and traumatic legacy have in the context of their contemporary experience.

METHODS

From February to April at the start of 2014 I undertook fieldwork to try and look at the question of intergenerational trauma in the context of Cambodia today - that is, whether or not the trauma suffered by people under the KR regime might be seen to have been transmitted in some form to the generations born after the fall of the regime in 1979. More specifically, I wanted to get an understanding of how young Cambodians might see that period of the past impacting upon themselves and their community, and what importance they place on addressing that history today.

A qualitative, ethnographic approach was used, involving participant observation and detailed open-ended interviewing. Participants were sought who were between the ages of 20-35 years old. This placed them as being born after the fall of the KR in 1979, however all had parents and other family who had lived through the DK period. In addition to information gained through discussions and conversations with members of the target group, key individuals were identified to participate in more detailed in-depth interviews. Interviews were also sought with staff of a number of organisations with focuses on youth, development, education or mental health, in order to gather context and insight from those

working with these issues in Cambodia on a long-term basis. Eleven Khmer respondents participated in the longer personal interviews, with an additional eight local and foreign individuals from identified organisations. The majority of interviews were conducted in English, with each interview session lasting between one and three hours. These were recorded with consent and transcribed by myself for the purposes of analysis. The research was also informed by regular informal discussions with a number of these Khmer respondents throughout the period of fieldwork, with observations being recorded in fieldnotes. Data was analysed for key themes and patterns, with particular attention paid to how individuals framed themselves in relation to the KR past, their family, their society and their future. Findings were compared with wider academic literature on the topics of trauma, intergenerational trauma, and the context and culture of modern Cambodia. The research methods and contingencies received ethics approval through the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (ref:5201300714).

The research approach taken has been informed by Levy & Hollan's (1998) *Person-Centred Interviewing and Observation* (PCIO), which attempts to gain a holistic understanding of a participant's sociocultural world and interrelationships. The concept of intergenerational trauma is predicated upon the relationship between a person's internal wellbeing and the external influences of one's caregiver, family, and greater historical contexts. In trying to assess the claims or assumptions present in the construct of intergenerational trauma in relation to people's experiences, the PCIO focus on the individual-within-context positions the researcher to attend to the active interplay between structure and agency and the individual's internal and external worlds (1998: 333). PCIO also emphasises exploring participants' positions as both informants who provide information about context, and respondents who interact and negotiate those realities in

ways that may be in tension with generalised cultural statements (1993: 336). Thus it is not just an individual's response to a question about cultural-self that is of interest (eg. '*What does it mean to be a Cambodian?*'), but also their reflection on how they perceive and describe themselves - in particular accounting for confluence, conflict and justifying discourses, which can highlight more than a cultural archetype but also one's lived-experience of being an individual, and of the relationship between self and society (1998: 336).

A further benefit of the PCIO approach is in the reflexivity it encourages in the researcher. Adopting a perspective that attends to the relational patterns between the researcher and the *lifeworlds* of participants encourages a stance which helps to guard against the potential for a researcher to overlay or assume their own western categories and ways of experiencing the world in a very different context (cf. Jackson 1998). My own understandings of the dynamics of trauma and the diversity of individual response to adverse experiences has been informed by my background as a social worker, including work in the area of acute trauma. This necessitated a critical, reflexive approach to evaluate my own assumptions and ensure that local modes of experience were not obscured by my prior expectations regarding trauma.

POSSIBLE EXTENSIONS IN FUTURE STUDIES

Due to time constraints and other practicalities the full principles of the PCIO approach, such as on-going interviews over a longer time period and use of local language directly by researcher without an intermediary, were unable to be applied. However aspects such as

the stance and attention of the researcher as well as interview focus areas² were found to be particularly helpful in delving into issues such as self, identity, and individual-response to a collective trauma-past and present. I feel that the approach was also very helpful in beginning to understand the relative presence of KR-past on balance within the everyday lives of the respondents. This ended up highlighting an interesting juxtaposition with outsider-assumptions of intergenerational trauma.

There are a number of limitations to this present study which are worth discussing briefly, as I feel that the nature of the findings demonstrated good potential for an expanded application of this research approach which may provide greater insight and nuance to knowledge about the topic. First, the size of the research sample. Though sufficient for the purposes of this present study, I believe future research would benefit from an expanded sample size to gauge a broader range of youth perspectives. Also, wider applicability of research findings would greatly benefit by drawing more participants from rural areas. A majority of my respondents worked or studied in the capital Phnom Penh, though most had grown up in the provinces and still have family there. It is reasonable to propose that the experience and prospects of youth in rural areas differs significantly from those who have access to the country's urban centre.³

Another factor is that none of the respondents in this study identified as having been from former KR families. Doing research amongst these families is more difficult, as youth may not know their family's past or wish to be identified as such. However considering the significant proportion of the population who fall into this category it will be important for future efforts to seek to understand similarities and differences between

² Some of the broad topics of focus identified and expanded upon by Levy and Hollan are patterns of identification and identity formation, morality, illness and healing, emotion, the body, and aspects of self (1998: 342-347).

³ For a recent long-form ethnographic study of the ongoing processes of a community negotiating memory and healing in a rural Cambodian village, see Zucker (2014).

what these two groups experience.

A further expansion with potential would be to seek the participation of members from the same family, conducting interviews with siblings and parents to explore any differences in interpretation of common elements such as history, parental affect, community and values. The limits of this paper also did not allow fuller exploration of the place that religion in Cambodia has in relation to the themes of mental health and community values.⁴

With the above in mind, the purpose of this present study was not in seeking to claim representation of an entire population, but rather to identify possible forms of self-understanding and begin to present the voices of Cambodian youth - voices which seem missing from current literature on trauma in Cambodia, and for which I feel that literature is therefore lacking. I believe this study represents a small step in this project, and one which I feel highlights the potential for approaches that see youth themselves helping to redefine a healing and empowering narrative for what it means to be Cambodian now and into the future.

NHEAN'S STORY

Nhean was born in the early 1980s in a refugee camp on the border between Thailand and Cambodia. His mother had found work as a cook with one of the aid organisations there, while his father made business by travelling into Thailand to bring back items to sell in the camp. Nhean does not have much memory of his father, as when he was about six years old his father was killed while on one of his trips into Thailand. It was two years before his mother was able to learn what had happened to her husband, and Nhean was eight when

⁴ A recommended collection of papers exploring the of the revival of religion following DK and its place in the contemporary moral, social and political landscape is the volume edited by Kent and Chandler (2008).

his mother explained to him about his father's death.

He remembers his mother working tirelessly as she took on the role of sole breadwinner. 'My mother worked very hard, whatever jobs she could. Without him, my mother became my mother and father.'⁵

Nhean remembers that his grandfather had at one stage taken them away from the camp to live closer to the border, however life was difficult there because of the ongoing factional fighting and his mother decided it would be best to take her son to live back at the camp. Nhean remembers his grandfather had become enraged when she said she wanted to leave and beat her violently. He describes a scene that still remains raw in his memory:

When my mother told my grandfather, "Father, I want to go back to the camp," my grandfather [did] not listen, and hit her, and used violence. I think that he treated her like an animal. He use the words, "If you stay I beat you, I kill you. Now you go away. You go out." I [had to help] my mother afterwards because it was difficult for her to walk.

They eventually made it back to the refugee camp, where they no longer had a house or his mother her job. He remembers her having to go into Thailand to work all day digging up yams, finishing two long rows to earn her twenty baht – about 2000 Cambodian riel⁶. Nhean would help her as he could in the fields, and when she earned enough she was able to buy uncooked rice for them to boil and eat. He remembers them sleeping on the floor of a house with no roof, and looking up together to see the night sky and the moon.

When Nhean speaks of his mother during that time, he seems filled with gratitude at the sacrifices she made for him. Despite their poverty and the difficulty of the work, he feels she shielded him from the brunt of that hardship. 'She work [so] hard, my mother always to take care [of] me. If I want to drink the milk, she always bought for me. I think that... I meet the new life, from my mother.' Nhean's voice broke with audible feeling as

⁵ Throughout this paper quotations from some respondents have been edited for clarity, however care has been taken not to change the meaning or emphasis of the original.

⁶ Equivalent to approximately 50 cents in United States currency.

he remembered this. '[She] was very strong, yeah.' I had decided to stop the recorder while we spoke personally for a time, and I checked whether he was sure he felt okay to talk about these memories with me, or if he would rather we stopped the interview. However Nhean said that he wanted to continue, that he felt it was important for his mother's story to be told.

My mother, she worked hard like this, then [years later] she meet the cancer. I think that she had many hardships that maybe made her ill. She worked very hard, didn't have the time to stop. It was especially difficult for [her] father to say, "if you go now, you are not my daughter." I think the words he said are worse than to kill. [...] Because if the word from another person, it's okay, but like this, the word from parent...

They remained in the camp until 1991 when the Paris Peace Agreement was signed, after which they had to return to Cambodia. His mother asked him if it would be okay for her to remarry, as she had met someone who she said, though poor, was a good man. After they were married they took Nhean to live in the man's hometown in a rural village in the western provinces.

It was very difficult when they returned to Cambodia, as they only had a tent, a little wood, and a very small plot of land. His step-father wanted to plant rice, but this was very difficult as the family did not have a rice field. So his step-father would take Nhean along to try and catch fish, frogs, and snails to sell at market. They also collected bamboo to sell, walking to a forest thirty kilometres from their home town where other people would not go due to the danger from landmines. In one day his step-father could gather thirty kilograms, however one kilogram would only sell for 100 riel - such a low price that if they missed a day they wouldn't be able to buy food. Nhean smiles and calls bamboo a 'second mother' to support the family. He says if it weren't for the bamboo, the family wouldn't have had anything to eat.

When Nhean grew old enough to go to high school his grandparents convinced his

mother send him to stay with them in a province far from home, as Nhean's local high school was a long distance away and there was still some armed conflict remaining in the border provinces. Nhean found those years difficult, as he had to live so far away from his mother and the relationship with his grandparents did not feel close.

When he graduated from high school he had originally hoped to go on to university and study political science. He used to listen to the radio a lot, and when teachers gave a topic for discussion in class he liked to come up with ideas about problems in society such as corruption, and what should be done about them. It was an area he found very interesting, and so thought he might be able to help society in the future by taking on that degree. However, Nhean found that economic realities meant he was unable to pursue this hope. 'When [I] graduated, everything was different. About my dream, I think that living standards [forced] me to change. Because if you don't have the money to learn, you lose the chance. You can't continue; have to find a job.'

After having been away for so long, Nhean did not feel he could move back to his hometown without having found a good job. He thinks he would have returned if he had become a doctor, teacher, or some other professional. As it was, he felt it would be difficult to face his mother and others being unemployed. Instead he moved away from his grandparents to Kampong Cham to find work. Having now been in a stable job for a few years, he has been able to begin his studies at University. When he earns his degree, he dreams of returning to his hometown to help improve the level of education available to children in that rural area. 'Because if I look back at my background, in the countryside [it is] very difficult to find the teacher, however [much you] want to learn. [Even] If they have the teacher, teach one day [but sometimes] then miss many other day. So my plan is to become the teacher, [to help].'

As we got to know each other over the course of my fieldwork Nhean seemed to talk fairly openly about his personal history and background. His time growing up in the refugee camp would often come up in conversations, as would living with his grandparents during high school. I felt he saw these as defining experiences, and in our first formal interview he articulated how they had been important for decisions he has made about his values and his future.

Given space to speak relatively freely about his past and family background, Nhean did not touch upon DK or his family's experience during that period much at all. Though certainly the influence of those years could be seen in creating many aspects of the psycho-social context that he grew up in, Nhean seems to think of his experience more as one of poverty and other hardships rather than that of a post-trauma environment. He sees his own experiences of past difficulty as a big part of what has motivated his desire to help young people back in his home town, so that they might avoid some of those difficult experiences themselves.

UNIVERSALITY AND TRAUMA RESPONSE

In western countries, thinking on trauma has generally been dominated by the psychological or psychiatric approach stemming from clinician-theorists such as Charcot and Janet, Freud's psychoanalytic approach and John Bowlby's attachment theory (Ringel 2011). The 'shell-shock' identified in soldiers returning from the trenches of World War I has developed into the identification of a diagnostic category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which has become an increasingly accepted understanding of the potential for ongoing psychological harm after traumatic events (Ringel 2011; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Herman 1997; American Psychiatric Association [APA] 2013). It seems

that as much as theorists have attempted to form an understanding of the universal features of this phenomenon, overall the trauma paradigm has been developed primarily within a western context and has been influenced by political, social and cultural changes as it has emerged (Ringel 2011; Fassin and Rechtman 2009).

The June 2014 issue of *Transcultural Psychiatry* provides an interesting look into some of the current discussions and critiques surrounding the associated concept of historical trauma, where traumatic events experienced in the past (particularly the experience of colonialism) are theorised to have ongoing effects upon descendants and their communities. Kirmayer *et al.* (2014) analyse the issue in relation to indigenous experiences of colonialism, and argue for the importance of a wider view of the causes of current social and mental distress than solely the psychological effects of trauma. This includes structural injustice and power issues, bringing attention to some of the social determinants of health. One importance of this emphasis is the implications it holds for how psychosocial impacts might be addressed, showing the need to involve structural changes and individual and community agency rather than exclusively psychological interventions (2014: 311). Indeed, in questioning the traditional analogy drawn between the findings of Holocaust studies and situations of historical trauma, Kirmayer *et al.* argue that the persistent suffering of an indigenous people more accurately reflects the impact of ongoing structural violence than past trauma (2014: 301). This comparison is also notable in drawing attention to some of the problems with a universal application of the trauma paradigm and the assumption of ‘predictable forms of psychopathology’ (2014: 303), where factors such as the pre- and post-trauma context as well as the types of violence and loss may result in significantly different outcomes (2014: 303-305).

Kirmayer *et al.* also highlight a rise in popularity of the concept as potentially being

linked to its political utility, and caution that too narrow a focus on historical antecedents of suffering may serve to distract researchers and clinicians from present-day sources of violence (2014: 311-312). Indeed, Maxwell (2014) argues that historical trauma can be understood as a purposed social construct that can potentially work against those who are said to be suffering from its effects (2014: 412,415). She suggests that trauma's development as a biomedical explanation has depoliticized discourse from recognising ongoing structural inequalities, and may act upon the self-identity of indigenous peoples in creating a pathologised view of their familial and social relations (2014: 415,426; cf. Waldram 2014). In contrast Bombay *et al.* (2014) caution against discounting the connection between past-trauma and present-day issues such as cultural identity and mental health, where there is the potential for psychological burdens to have limiting effect upon an individual's capacity and 'contribute to poor health and social outcomes' (2014: 333). Bombay *et al.* even raise emerging literature suggesting a biological aspect to the transmission of trauma (2014: 332), which forms part of the wide range of theories of a potential mechanism of transmission that are proposed by various scholars (cf. Maxwell 2014: 408; Kirmayer *et al.* 2014: 307). However Kirmayer *et al.* point out that despite an abundance of theories, 'studies are necessarily retrospective and constrained by limited data and recall bias' (2014: 307). As a result it is difficult to be able to prove a direct causal link between present day suffering and traumatic events experienced by previous generations even if that is how individuals or communities choose to attribute it (2014: 307). They suggest that the increasing popularity of the concept will result in more people appropriating this framework as an explanatory narrative to interpret their past and present (2014: 307).

Commentators have pointed out the current pervasiveness of the concept of trauma

as a dominant paradigm for understanding human suffering, and suggest the potential for it to obscure local cultural understandings or expressions (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 281). As noted above there is often an assumption of psychopathology attached to historical trauma (Crawford 2014: 343), which may obscure more positive forms of community identifications. As Kirmayer *et al.* discuss, the acknowledgement of suffering and pain should not preclude the recognition of narratives of resilience, which are equally important to be emphasised and may promote positive re-framing (2014: 313; Denham 2008).

Lemelson *et al.* (2007) note that while studies suggest certain universal biological responses to trauma, they also demonstrate that how this manifests can be dependent on contextual and developmental factors (2007: 470). They suggest that the majority of research in regards to post-trauma symptoms has been US- and combat-veteran-based, where the types of violence commonly experienced worldwide can be very different. As such the formation of frameworks such as PTSD could be argued to be culturally grounded in western notions of health and being (2007: 470). In anticipating the question of whether the applicability of such concepts to non-western cultures is therefore limited, Lemelson *et al.* comment that, ‘A conservative response would insist that the question is still open: the salience and usefulness of PTSD in diverse social and cultural contexts is an empirical question that can be resolved only by research in the particular contexts in which it is utilized’ (2007: 470).

KHMER EXPERIENCES OF HEALTH AND WELLBEING

There are a number of studies which suggest that western trauma frameworks may not be sufficient within the Cambodian context. According to Hinton *et al.* (2012), many Khmer report experiencing culturally-specific somatic complaints that are not addressed in the

standard PTSD criteria. Somatic symptoms identified were found to form, ‘a central aspect of the Cambodian trauma ontology, important indicators of clinical state, and key treatment targets’ (2012: 385). These emerge from strong cultural metaphors and interpretation of physical sensations that may not be identified by assessments based on western instruments (2012: 390). While many Cambodians may not be familiar with the concept of PTSD, Khmer are very familiar with these culturally-acknowledged somatic complaints arising from traumatic experience (2012: 400-401).

Chhim (2013) suggests that the nature of the trauma may influence how Cambodians experience its effects. He claims that there is no equivalent Khmer concept to trauma or PTSD, and that the use of PTSD criteria to measure or demonstrate harm caused by the KR may result in an under-identification of affected individuals (2013: 2). Chhim has proposed the Khmer concept of *baksbat* or ‘*broken courage*’ as one which more fully captures the changes many Khmer describe experiencing following distressing or life-threatening circumstances (2013: 3). The paper outlines potential difficulties experienced in three areas – broken courage, psychological distress, and erosion of self – each of which has a number of potential manifestations (2013: 11-12). Some of these are recognisable as similar to common western anxiety responses, while others seem more culturally specific (2013: 11-12). Chhim suggests that *baksbat* identifies behavioural and attitudinal effects of common Khmer responses to trauma, while PTSD focuses mainly on intrusive symptoms and emotional arousal (2013: 3-4; cf. APA 2013). While these also may be experienced to some extent, Chhim reports that *baksbat* may persist chronically where symptoms of PTSD have subsided (2013: 3).

Both these studies demonstrate the pertinence of cultural specificity in understanding Khmer responses to traumatic events. This may be of particular significance

where institutions such as the ECCC are seeking in part to identify and acknowledge the suffering of victims of DK. The pervasiveness of western models of assessing and measuring trauma could potentially have a disenfranchising effect on survivors if their experience of the ongoing impact of that period is not recognised (2013: 8). Lemelson *et al.* (2007) note that for many who experience trauma the impact is usually much broader than just their individual psychological wellbeing – perhaps including social, moral and political dimensions – and comment that it is therefore ‘striking’ that there is an ongoing primacy placed upon applying the psychiatric-PTSD construct in international contexts (2007: 471).

Speaking with a researcher from the Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO), a major non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the delivery of mental health and psychosocial services in Phnom Penh, I was told that they have found many Khmer do not hold to the same understandings of mental health that western interventions are based on. Often a mental health problem may only be identified if it manifests as particularly severe, in which case the person may be labelled as being insane. Experiencing what in the west may be understood as depression or anxiety may not be seen as an aberration, but rather a recognised state that people can enter at various times in their life, manifesting in somatic symptoms such as stomach aches, intestinal problems, or muscle pain. In these situations people are more likely to seek treatment for these physical problems rather than psychological ones.

Good and Good (1981) provide an interesting discussion of the ‘somatization of psychiatric disorders’ and how, in cultures which commonly experience this, the physical symptoms will often be seen as most legitimate. They argue that the grounding of illness experience in culture necessitates that doctors and mental health practitioners engage with

the metaphors and meanings that make sense of the individual's experience if their interventions are to be effective (1981: 174-175). Approaches which ignore a person's present somatic experience may be less effective than those that seek to integrate and engage with that reality (cf. Marcucci 1994; Kirmayer 2007). This is particularly true of psychological interventions, where the effectiveness of the therapeutic process can relate to the legitimacy the recipient perceives in how the clinician locates and addresses the source of the problem.

When speaking with Sothy, a young man in his early twenties, he brought up a particular way that many Khmer view the body in its relation to emotions. He describes his father as someone who has always been kind and helpful, but remembers times in the past that he could also become angry and mean. Sothy suggests that he may have reacted in such ways as a result of learned attitudes and experiences, but that his father has changed to become always gentle and kind since he has more recently taken to Cambodian Buddhist meditation.

I think my father changed because the Buddhism; always to do like this [*clasping hands together*], to meditate. To breath and to pray... make the heart not angry [any]more. [...] By heart, I refer the feeling, the emotion. Khmer mostly relate [to] the heart. That means the feeling, over the brain. European[s] prefer the brain. But Khmer refer [to] the heart; to make beautiful heart, to make peaceful in heart and mind.

Sothy describes how Khmer see actions as arising from the state of a person's heart (*chett*):

For Khmer, what you do, the actions: from your heart. The important thing, for Khmer, [is] the heart. The word angry, *khoeng chett*, because your heart to make you feel angry. And happy, *sabbay chett*, because your heart to make you excited in your brain. So, the important thing [for] Khmer, to effect the heart – you start to breath short or long, [*i.e. meditation*], [this] make the feeling go.

Alexander Hinton writes of the detailed Khmer vocabulary that exists around anger and control which relate back to heart metaphors (2004: 61-62). He notes that though there are similarities between Cambodian and western metaphors of anger, 'Cambodian anger is

linked to a different ethno-physiology, which centers on the notion of equilibrium and has been strongly influenced by Buddhist, animistic, Ayurvedic, and Chinese medical traditions.’ (2004: 62; cf. Hinton *et al.* 2010) Problems arising from a lack of physiological balance, such as uncontrolled anger, have existing culturally-recognised modes of redirection or management through actions and interactions (Hinton 2004: 63-64). Sothy’s comment that, ‘European[s] prefer the brain. But Khmer refer [to] the heart’, is perhaps an example that demonstrates a tension that could exist between western and Khmer modes of addressing emotion. An intervention that does not appear to address what the individual sees as the source of the problem, or which does not engage with a culturally-recognised solution, may be quite limited in its effectiveness.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION IN CAMBODIA: CURRENT STUDIES

As context and culture influence individual responses to adverse events, it seems reasonable to propose that the question of intergenerational transmission may likewise be impacted. There have been a number of studies investigating transmission of aspects of trauma to the descendants of Cambodian refugees settled in western nations (eg. Rousseau *et al.* 1999; Rousseau *et al.* 2003; Sack *et al.* 1994; Kidron 2010; 2012), yet there seems a scarcity of similar studies of the situation of families who remained in Cambodia. While there may be significant cultural similarities between the caregivers of the two groups, the social and political contexts of their children’s upbringing has been very different. For example, the issues of dislocation, adjustment and loss that refugees faced in relation to flight and eventual resettlement in a different culture may leave their own marks upon families which could be difficult to separate from other forms of traumatic experience for the purposes of cross-applicability. A search of the literature currently available found three

primary research studies which focus specifically upon the question of intergenerational trauma within families who remained in Cambodia.

Münyas (2008) conducted surveys with around two hundred Cambodian youth during five months of field research. She highlights the ways in which incomplete or lack of information about the KR period may result in youth experiencing fear and anger over that time, but not prompt them towards seeking a deeper understanding or engagement with reconciliation processes. The author feels that a way forward from this lies in increased educational engagement and forums for dialogue among youth to combat the effects of a lack of information.

In forming her analysis, Münyas refers to the large body of Holocaust studies literature as being appropriate in helping to interpret how Cambodians deal with the experience of genocide (2008: 415-416). This analytic assumption is problematic in light of the findings of Carol Kidron (2010; 2012) who demonstrates significant variance in both the practices of direct survivors and the interpretation and cultural understandings drawn by their children. For example, a fundamental difference Kidron identifies is the interpretation of silence within the survivor household, where children of Holocaust survivors described a tangible presence of the Holocaust within that silence whilst Cambodian descendants describe such silence as a culturally appropriate and even empowering practice for dealing with past difficulties (2010: 210-212). Kidron's findings suggest that the use of Holocaust literature and descendant experience to predict and interpret that of Cambodian descendants is not a valid method.

Münyas' interpretation of her findings are also suggestive of the bias of the trauma-paradigm lens, where these theoretical assumptions may have been applied uncritically. For example, the paper does not attempt to grapple with the possibility of proportionate

anger over knowledge of a family member's past suffering, as opposed to interpreting the presence of anger as being symptomatic of how knowledge of the past has been inadequately transmitted resulting in traumatic distress (cf. 2008: 422). It could be argued that in this way potentially rational emotions are seen as indicative of a particular diagnosis, and a predefined concept of trauma is used to delimit what is considered an appropriate response with little reference to context.

Münyas goes some way to noting structures and institutions outside the family which impact upon how youth understand their family's past, and highlights the important role that both education and the form of commemorative sites may play in shaping youth understanding and response to a violent past (cf. Violi 2012). Overall however, I feel that Münyas paints a disproportionately negative picture of the everyday experience of Cambodian youth. In her conclusion, the author seems to present the young people surveyed as living in fear, hatred and confusion without any counterbalance that might place potential effects of the KR period alongside other aspects of their daily life that youth may not see as connected to that time. No acknowledgement is made as to whether the study's primary interest or the approach of the investigators may have influenced the weight given to the topic of KR atrocities in dialogue with the youth (cf. 2008: 431). We see nothing of the aspirations of the youth interviewed, nor evidence of resilience in this study as it is presented.

Field *et al.* (2011) conducted a psychologically based study which applied six standardised psychological measures to 200 participants in relation to parental styles and youth trauma symptoms. Though the authors are more cautious in their application of Holocaust-based literature to the Cambodian context, problematically they do draw from this base to theorise certain parenting behaviours as being maladaptive and potential

sources of intergenerational transmission (cf. Kidron 2010; 2012, as discussed above). The paper presents a preliminary statistical link identified between severity of trauma experienced by parents and the mental health of their children as young adults, though cautions against drawing conclusions on precise causal relationships pending more in-depth research (Field *et al.* 2011: 624-625).

A potential limitation which is not addressed by the authors is whether the psychological measures used in the study to identify maladaptive parenting styles have been assessed for cultural validity in the Cambodian context (cf. 2011: 617-618). The definition of parenting behaviours constituting rejection, overprotection, or role-reversal, how these are interpreted in a Cambodian context and whether the developmental impact there is consistent with western models might need further investigation.

A subsequent paper (Field *et al.* 2013) sought to replicate the 2011 study whilst making some methodological changes to address some of the recognised shortfalls. Interestingly this new study found results which contradicted the previous findings in relation to the role of “overprotective parenting” as a mode of trauma transmission, and tentatively acknowledges that different cultural practices and expectations may play a role (2013: 492). However despite some of these improvements, overall the study maintains a number of the limitations of the previous work. While the authors demonstrate awareness of some of these, there is again little effort to place the findings or their implications in the context of descendant lives as a whole.

These previous studies present interesting findings on possible links or modes of transmission from survivor-parents to their children. What they appear to lack, however, is an emic or phenomenological understanding of Cambodian youth experience that is not framed within research methods predicated exclusively on western trauma constructs.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The approach I tried to take in my research was to seek as wide an understanding of my respondents' lives and experience as I could, in order to better situate any evidence of the transmission of trauma within the context of their life as a whole (cf. Levy & Hollan 1998). As my fieldwork went on and my relationships with my respondents grew, I began to notice that my initial views of intergenerational trauma and healing were beginning to shift, and indeed be challenged, by what I was finding. A number of issues were raised for me which I believe highlight that intergenerational trauma cannot be properly understood without reference to the experience and interpretations of following generations themselves.

The first is that the lived experience of contemporary youth is much broader in its concerns than a primary focus on the KR period. In fact, though the respondents in this study seem to recognise the significance of those years for their country and family, few spoke of it as an issue which had significant ongoing presence for them personally. A greater relevancy was placed on persistent societal problems that they identified – poverty, a poor education system, and corruption. While it can be argued that the KR period has likely contributed to these problems as they are today, these are structural issues that are generally not satisfactorily addressed in dominant psychotherapeutic models - yet younger generations may view these as having greater impact upon their lives than mental health or affective concerns.

A related issue which emerges is the difficulty of identifying the impacts of trauma stemming from DK upon the following generations as distinct from the ongoing impact of civil war and political violence which persisted in the decades following the fall of the

regime.⁷ Indeed, the impact of structural barriers cited by respondents might be argued to have a present-day distressing impact upon members of the community.

In the conversations I had with my respondents the impression I received was not that of passive victims who were weighed down by their families' past experiences, but rather of individuals who were very aspirational – both for themselves and their future, and for their country in how they hoped it might change. Aspiration and resilience are both areas that I feel study of modern Cambodia in relation to the past could benefit from (cf. Kidron 2010; Denham 2008; Kirmayer 2007).

These observations do not discount the impact of the KR period on youth today, but rather suggest that in such a context of widespread collective violence a broadening of the understanding of impact and mechanisms of transmission is required. The perspectives shared point towards the significance of structural and social factors as key determinants of health, mental health and overall well-being in post-KR Cambodia, and that these factors may also have implications for questions of healing. As psychosocial wellbeing and mental health following trauma can be seen to be influenced by more than just the familial care-giving role, the path to healing may necessitate change on a broader scale than individual psychology – particularly in societies which continue to experience present-day social uncertainty (cf. Kirmayer *et al.* 2014).

⁷ For a fairly comprehensive overview of the major political events that occurred between the Khmer Rouge period and the 1998 coup, see Brown and Timberman (1998).

CHAPTER TWO

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

When approaching the question of the ongoing impact of trauma, one can run into the difficulty of conclusively defining and delineating cause and effect (cf. Kirmayer *et al.* 2014: 307). To look at a clinical perspective on acute trauma by way of illustration, while a certain range of stress-responses have been identified as common reactions in the west, individuals will tend to respond to traumatic situations differently and to different extents depending on a variety of factors. These can range from influences of a person's upbringing and culture, past experiences, the nature of the trauma inflicted, how the trauma is responded to and interpreted by themselves and others, as well as the influence of the post-trauma environment (cf. Droždek 2007: 8-9; Ehlers and Clark 2003; APA 2013). Moreover, studies suggest that a considerable proportion of victims recover in the following weeks and months after trauma without developing long-term or chronic PTSD (Bryant 2003: 789-790; Ehlers and Clark 2003: 817).

However, any potential absence of chronic PTSD-like symptoms should not be taken to detract from the reality of the survivor's experience of suffering or loss. Indeed the absence of PTSD symptoms in victims, quite apart from valid critiques of cultural applicability, should not preclude them from the right to be recognised as having been impacted and had their life effected in other lasting ways that would benefit from access to appropriate reparation or other assistance.⁸ A clinical diagnosis of PTSD is a separate issue from that of whether a person has been impacted by a traumatic event, and difficult or distressing times can have a lasting effect upon many aspects of an individual's life – including grief and loss issues, worldview, trust, opportunity, relationships, physical health,

⁸ See Chhim's discussion of the use of PTSD criteria in evaluating the claims of individual civil party applicants to ECCC proceedings (Chhim 2013).

and life direction, to name a few.

The term ‘trauma’ itself has in many contexts expanded beyond its original use as clinical terminology, being employed in different ways and with perhaps varying degrees of rigour (Erikson 1995: 183).⁹ Trauma is not only used to refer to the psychological state, but is also often applied as a synonym for the distressing event or period itself (1995: 183-185). While responses to such events can vary, where there are ongoing negative psychosocial problems these are often understood as being connected to the original traumatic experience (1995: 184). This link can be drawn as much by the individual as by psychological professionals. Often people may see a traumatic event or period as a defining moment from which their normal lives were disrupted and they were forced to re-evaluate their view of the world (1995: 194-195).

While analogies can be drawn between individual and collective trauma, we need to consider whether there are additional factors that impact upon individual and community recovery. Erikson argues that where a wider community is the victim of such events, the collective trauma response may form a ‘common culture’ that shapes a shared identity, even as the bonds between individuals may be concurrently weakened (1995: 190) – the ‘creation of social climates, common moods, that come to dominate a group’s spirit’ (1995: 190; cf. Eyerman 2001; Halbwachs 1992).

The concept of intergenerational trauma has become an increasingly accepted understanding of the potential for following generations to be impacted by their parents’ experiences of trauma (Connolly 2011: 609-611). Much research surrounding this has been done in relation to families of survivors of the Holocaust, but this has also expanded to other contexts such as following oppressive regimes (2011: 609-611). Proposed

⁹ Connolly goes so far as to suggest that, ‘Increasingly the term trauma has been used in the psychoanalytic literature as a kind of blanket term thus reducing its descriptive usefulness’ (2011: 608)

mechanisms of transmission have included biological, cultural, social, and psychological modes (Maxwell 2014: 408). Having enjoyed fairly widespread acceptance by researchers and clinicians, it is interesting to see critiques of the concept arising which appear to challenge an uncritical universal application of the paradigm (eg. cf. Kidron 2012; Maxwell 2014). Maxwell goes so far as to assert that the transmission of historical trauma has been lacking in empirical validation and has become more a widely accepted hermeneutic tool than a clear diagnostic framework (2014: 412).

Fassin and Rechtman (2009) suggest one reason for an uncritical assumption of trauma is that most researchers tend to adopt an ‘empathic point of view’ towards those they study, and that researchers are vicariously affected themselves (2009: 280). They note this is an understandable situation, but also that it means, ‘few researchers distance themselves sufficiently to avoid taking trauma for granted and seeing victims as what they profess to be’ (2009: 280). It may be that the process whereby ‘trauma’ has become synonymous with the recognition of previously ignored suffering has made questioning the paradigm seem akin to denying the suffering of individuals entirely. Indeed, Fassin and Rechtman make a point to stress that their critique, ‘neither refutes – nor confirms – either the diagnosis of trauma or the status of the victim’ (2009: 280), yet it does present compelling considerations for researchers and clinicians.

Kidron (2012) recounts an initially ‘perplexing’, ‘almost total absence of the violent past’ (2012: 7223) in the Cambodian diaspora communities in Canada where she conducted fieldwork. It was not just the absence of physical reminders or memorials at a place of importance such as the community’s Wat¹⁰, but also the testimony of family members themselves who denied an ongoing, negative presence of the KR period within

¹⁰ Local Buddhist temple

their daily life (2012: 724-725). What Kidron encountered stood in stark contrast to what prevailing hypotheses suggested one should expect to find in the second- and third-generation descendants of survivors. She relates her respondents', 'univocal dismissal of trauma theory and repeated references to what they termed "Asian silence" and the almost total absence of traces of the genocide in everyday family life' (2012: 724). Indeed, her exploration of the particular Cambodian Theravada Buddhist approach to memory and forgetting stands in significant contrast to the conclusions that Münyas comes to in relation to the importance of increasing education and discussion of KR history among Cambodian youth (cf. Kidron 2012: 724; Münyas 2008: 431-434).

CHEA: DIFFICULTY AND SACRIFICE GUIDING VALUES AND DIRECTION

Chea was born in 1980, the year following the ousting of the KR regime. He came from a poor background and spoke to me quite candidly about the difficulties in his family growing up, including his father's infidelity and violence towards his mother. Chea says that he did not have many hopes regarding his future at that time. 'Before, I did not expect I [would] have today,' he admitted.

When his parents finally divorced, he and his siblings stayed with their mother. Before they separated the family struggled to make ends meet financially, but even more so after the divorce. His older sister and brother made the decision to leave school and start working in order to support the family. This happened around the time he was in year six at primary school. The sacrifice of his siblings for the family is what he credits with giving him a future and providing him with the opportunities that he has had today:

I have today because my brother and sister supported me [...] When I saw that my brother and sister abandoned their study to support our family, I didn't want to distress them and tried to continue my study even though I was not always good at it.

Chea told me that growing up, he did not hear a lot about the KR years from his

parents. ‘At first I did not know too much, but I can know [some] from the TV or other report that I have to study before. But my mother also told me some story [relating] to her and my father.’

Chea said that his mother had spoken of that time in explaining to him why she had married his father. Her family had been evacuated from Phnom Penh when the KR troops took over, and she met Chea’s father in the provinces. They were amongst the many other couples who were matched together and married by the KR during those years.¹¹

Chea said that his mother spoke a little about what happened during DK, but also about the years following and the difficulties she had looking after the family with a husband who was often away on business, worried for his safety but also hurt by the knowledge that he had other women in the provinces.

Asking about the past, it is this later period that Chea speaks about rather than DK. The difficulties he speaks of in his family are not those that they endured during the late seventies, but rather the difficult family dynamics that persisted afterwards and of which he had direct experience. The genesis of many of these problems in the KR years seems apparent, even on the basic level of a marriage that wouldn’t have occurred under different circumstances. The connection between trauma from the KR time and the prevalence of domestic violence in many families has also been theorised. Regardless of the source, it is perhaps significant that Chea does not appeal back to the KR to explain his father’s behaviour. He says he was too young at the time to suppose why his father used violence, but Chea also seems to be of the opinion that, first and foremost, his father bears his own responsibility for how he acts towards others. He also believes that community members should take a more active role in reaching out to intervene and talk with people like his

¹¹ The widespread use of forced marriages during the regime is one of the charges to be investigated by the ECCC in Case 002/02.

father about their problems and controlling their anger.

Chea draws on the experience of violence in his family in believing that there is a better way to behave towards others and to deal with any anger or upset between individuals. He also credits his mother and his sister with helping to guide him and instil certain values in him. 'My sister and my mother always advised me that if you want to be a good person, you don't need to destroy others. Just keep yourself as a good person, and then when you have [the] ability, you can help others. If you support yourself, this means that you can help your family, or society.'

This advice was similar to what others reported – That you should first take care of yourself and family, and only after that will you be in a position to help anyone else. 'If you still cannot support yourself and you [try to] support others, you destroy yourself or them because you can't do it all. So first, just only think [of] yourself; make yourself better, try to study. Try to work.'

For Chea this seems to have been a value which has effected his life course, even if initially against his own wishes. He recalls that when he had graduated from High School his hope had been to go to university and major in Law, dreaming that one day he could become a lawyer or an ambassador. However his sister rejected this idea, suggesting he study business or accounting instead because of the better job prospects at the time. 'The first time she told me, I feel angry with her. Because, I don't want to someone to draw me the road. Because I am an adult.[...]But, [later] I decide to study business.'

The plan to study law had been because of his experience of family violence, and he had hoped to make a difference for others in similar situations in the future. His family's discouragement from this path was something he initially took hard, but which he has subsequently taken on as his own, trying to do what he can to be successful and create a

stable life for himself. ‘If I can do it, I will help myself, my friend, my family.’

Chea says he still hopes that one day he will be able to help society, but right now he is focused on securing financial security for himself and his family. ‘I still hope that I can help society, but not right now. Before I reach my goal, I have to run a good business first. Because, when I help myself, I can help others.’

When reflecting on the significance of the KR period to Cambodia today, Chea seems to feel it is important to recognise that time of Cambodia’s history and the reality of its impact. ‘It is serious. Because my family and other people in Cambodia, they really [faced] everything you heard. And other people, they lost their family and get many bad things.’

When asked whether he thinks that what happened in that time still influences today Chea said that there are both positive and negative ways that the past can have an impact, but that now the negative impact is not so much because Cambodia is able to see the mistakes that were made in the past and learn from those experiences. Widening the access to education and knowledge about the outside is a need that Chea sees for helping communities to believe in something better for themselves than what they had to endure in the past:

Even if I didn’t live in the past, I can imagine. It is cruel... cruel man can destroy everything, destroy our society, even the life of the human. So we will not do like before. Right now, we [can] have knowledge. We can go abroad, see other countries improve and develop. We can bring good [ideas] into our community and teach and give advice. This is better than doing like the past.

Overall, Chea seemed to believe that the future prospects for his country will be positive in the future:

I think that our Cambodia will not go worse, it will grow up from now to the future. Because Cambodia joined the ASEAN community, [and] they will cooperate with each other. [With] all the cultures businesses joined together, they will share ideas. Even if we are small country, we can join in and [participate] just like the big countries [too].

FAMILY PAST: SOURCES, KNOWLEDGE AND PERCIEVED IMPACT

The primary source of information about DK for participants was their family. While most young people generally knew of the KR past and their family's experiences, the degree of knowledge differed between participants. When growing up, they told me their parents would discuss difficulties they endured during the period particularly when they felt their children were being unappreciative, as something of a moral lesson. Sothy remembered that when he was a child his family did not always have enough money to include meat or soup with their rice at meal time. In one instance, with only plain rice available, he refused to eat. He remembers his mother saying, 'If you were born in the Pol Pot time, you wouldn't have rice to eat. So you should eat this food now.' Sothy recalls the look of concern on her face, as though she were picturing the past as she spoke. It had made him eat his rice without further complaint. Others told similar stories of being encouraged to study hard and stay in school so that they would have greater opportunities than their parents, who were denied proper schooling during DK.

In addition to the moral framework many stories were emplotted within, stories would also be shared when visitors arrived from far away. As older people gathered, conversations would turn to those years as people swapped stories of where they had been during DK, what they had suffered, and who they had lost. These were stories of shared meaning – the voicing of difficult experiences with those who could understand as they too had been through the same loss. Nhean described how during one of his few visits home during high school he had been interested to ask his parents and the old men of the village about that time. Few hesitated; the stories went into the night over a number of evenings.:

If I wanted to know about the Pol Pot regime, because I didn't know about everything, my parents would always talk. Because in the countryside, we talk at night after the dinner, always tell stories until we go to bed. And tomorrow, if [wanting] to talk about this topic again, they will. Because they want to show the difficulties they had when they were young.

Nhean told me he thinks it is good that parents talk to their children about what happened during DK, but also that if too much detail is given without moral evaluation then it could have a negative impact. He suggests that if parents tell detailed accounts of violence or of having looked after their own interests to survive at the possible expense of others, without moral context or to children not yet mature enough, then the lesson taken might be that this is also an appropriate way to behave in modern society.

Though parents who were themselves very young during DK may not have spoken to their children much about why the atrocities occurred (cf. Münyas 2008), a common recollection was that discussions of these details did come through conversations with older family members or villagers who were alive at the time. It also seems that those who have had involvement with youth-focused NGOs that include education on DK are more able to discuss some of the wider geopolitical context that led to those years, however the number of youth involved in such programmes is necessarily limited due to resources and current capacity.

School was a source of information for some, though the amount that DK was discussed differed. Some teachers sounded quite willing to discuss that time with their students, while others kept to the scarce amount of information that was in the approved curriculum. Only since 2007 has a standardised textbook covering the DK years begun to be introduced to schools (Boulet 2009), and it will be interesting to see the longer term effect of this on student knowledge and opinions in the future as it becomes more consistently taught.¹²

Interestingly, even those who reported not speaking a lot about the past with their families did not express this as a negative thing or one which left them with burning

¹² A preliminary evaluation was conducted by the textbook's author, Khamboly Dy (2012), and speaks to some of the challenges facing the acceptance and effective integration of the new curriculum.

questions. It may be that they feel the amount they know from different sources is sufficient, perhaps also reflecting the relative disconnect that most seemed to make between their parents' past experiences and themselves. The young people interviewed were often able to recognise ongoing emotional or anxiety responses that their parents displayed, which they linked to what had been experienced during the KR regime. These included expressions such as hyper-vigilance, sadness when recalling those times, fear that the KR would return, or vivid memories of specific events. However for the most part they seemed to feel that they themselves were not likewise affected, giving the rationale that because they had not experienced the violence themselves it did not have an impact upon their own emotional wellbeing. Again, it begs emphasising that most expressed quite clearly to me the seriousness of the DK period and the hardship their parents went through, as well as how that time remained with their parents and older family members – And yet it seemed that at least in their own mind they felt the power of DK to impact upon emotional wellbeing was limited to those who experienced those times directly.

One circumstance where this was thought to not be the case was where the experiences of DK affected a parent in such a way that they took it out on their family in the form of domestic violence, the impact of the past thus becoming physically present in the experience of the next generation. Nhean described to me the prevalence of domestic violence within many communities, and particularly what he witnessed of this while growing up in his home town. He tells of a friend whose father drank heavily and was violent towards his wife and children. This friend would run away to hide at Nhean's house some nights, and Nhean observes that the family was in constant fear of the man. He says such situations seemed particularly common if the father was an ex-soldier, especially where a high consumption of alcohol was involved. Nhean believes that some teenagers

who use violence today may have learned to act this way because of their experience of violence in the home:

I think there is a connection. Violence, if the family had not shown them, I think they less likely to do. If the parent to give the good advice, [show] love, to do good things, [then their children also] to do. But the parents that [use violence] like this, I think don't have the good heart [towards] another person. To think [those] around him, is enemy. I think that is don't have heart for love, just only want to use the violence.[...]I think that when was young, when hurt from like the parent, they can't to go anywhere to [escape]. And when they grow up, they maybe also will do.

Nhean says his friend had only stayed in school until grade three before becoming a migrant worker in order to leave the family home. The father died some years ago, but Nhean learned with regret through an acquaintance that years later his friend was also becoming violent towards his own wife and children. Nhean feels that experiencing violence from your parents as a child has a danger of teaching you to act in the same way, that your heart will be affected and influence how you act towards others.¹³ Nhean told me that in his childhood he had heard many stories of the KR past from both family and older community members, including details of the violence and killing. However when I ask him whether he feels that learning of these things whilst young has also affected him too, he indicates that he does not:

‘For me, I think that it has not affected me. Maybe a little affected because of everything that happened, [but] when I stay at home, my mother and my father not use violence. So I think that it effected very little. Just only I heard, I not to see.[...]If I experienced everything [the hardship], I think that maybe I get effect. Then maybe [I'd] have the problem also.’

The assertion from many of my respondents that overall they do not feel directly affected by the KR regime, despite acknowledging their parents being impacted by that time, may appear surprising on the surface. It seems a belief regarding the necessary role

¹³ Gender based violence (GBV) is one area of urgent need that the Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO) has identified within communities relating both to use of GBV against women and children during the Khmer Rouge time as well as its prevalence today. I was told by TPO that many of the clients they work with are experiencing GBV, and the organisation has conducted research and developed programmes specifically aimed at targeting the issue within communities. As is unfortunately common in these situations, there is a significant lack of sufficient resources and funding in this area.

of direct experience is key here, and perhaps why the greatest emphasis in terms of influence on today for individuals such as Nhean and Chea is on difficulties encountered in their own life, which have shaped ways they view the world and what some of their values are. The argument could be made that children of survivors may be impacted in ways of which they are unaware – however even if this is the case, the utility of that assertion as a primary approach to understanding the needs of the following generation is debatable. As will be discussed further in chapter three, how individuals and communities interpret a traumatic past and their connection to it has significant implications for how and to what extent that past continues to influence people in the present. Fassin and Rechtman note that the trauma paradigm can, ‘operate as a screen between the event and its context on the one hand, and the subject and the meaning he or she gives to the situation on the other,’ (2009: 281) reducing the experience and impact of trauma to a set of symptoms or clinical definitions (2009: 281). First taking the time to appreciate how the following generations in a particular context understand their connection to the past, and what their own biggest concerns are, is important if we are to engage with communities and individuals in a meaningful way around issues that matter to them and with methods that have legitimacy in their eyes.

DELINEATING THE ‘DARK YEARS’ IN CAMBODIA

When we consider the question of intergenerational trauma within Cambodia, one problem that seems apparent is the difficulty of identifying what psychosocial problems experienced by children of DK survivors might be conclusively linked to the effect of parental trauma. As noted earlier, even with acute trauma the type of environment that a person will go into following a traumatic experience may have a considerable impact upon their longer-term

ability to cope and adapt to what has happened to them. So also in the context of Cambodia it becomes very difficult to credibly isolate supposed second-generation impact to specific traumatic events.

The violence and fear of the KR years did not occur in a vacuum. We do not come to a context where traumatic events can be consigned to 1975-79. After the fall of the KR, civil war and unrest persisted in the country for over a decade, succeeded by further political instabilities and violence (Chandler 1998: 43-45; Brown and Timberman 1998). Indeed, violence and oppression by leaders of the country can be traced prior to the KR taking power, through the Lon Nol period, aspects of Sihanouk's early era, to the French 'protectorate' period and earlier (Chandler 1998: 43-45; cf. Field *et al.* 2013: 483-484). The question of whether the KR period has continued to have an impact upon the present generation must be considered alongside the reality that violence did not end with the liberation of Phnom Penh. Though the children of DK survivors may not have experienced that specific violence directly themselves, they nevertheless did not grow up in a context removed from conflict where any psychosocial ills can automatically be attributed to the KR.

A number of people I interviewed made reference to a period they called the 'dark years' or 'dark history' in Cambodia's past. I initially assumed they were making reference to the DK years, and indeed this did seem to be a common metaphor employed for that period. In discussing what he felt about the importance of future generations remembering that past, Ponleak explained to me, '[The] three years we call dark sky...you know? Dark clouds? We never saw the sunlight, or had time to relax, because [of] the dark cloud in that time. [...] We have to remember that period [...] This is Khmer history. Bitter history.' Yet I also noticed that others appeared to use the term in a broader sense, encompassing at least

the period of Vietnamese occupation and influence during the 1980s.

This issue of understanding what time periods are seen by individuals as containing those years that were traumatising for their nation is significant if efforts at addressing that time in the present are expected to remedy unhealed psychological or societal wounds. Might healing or reconciliation efforts that are focused solely on addressing the KR past be like a surgeon who does not manage to remove all the cancerous cells from a patient, resulting in the illness continuing to spread and multiply unabated?

Perhaps what time an individual defines Cambodia's 'dark history' as will depend on what they have been told by their elders, how their family was affected, and whether they see a negative impact which they attribute to a wider historical period than merely DK. Their family context of being from a rural area versus the capital may also influence their understanding of the impact of the time, as conditions varied greatly between the two after DK.

While it may be possible to take a psychological inventory with the following generations to survey what emotional or psychological issues may be present¹⁴, the next step of conclusively proving intergenerational causation is problematic because of the wider context in Cambodia. The difficulty is in demonstrating whether a current mental health concern has been caused by parental trauma from DK, the young person's own experiences of growing up during ongoing civil unrest and violence, other societal or familial circumstances, some combination of these, or another reason entirely. If the individual also does not think there is a connection between parental DK trauma and what they themselves are experiencing, then it may be hard to demonstrate that somehow addressing the KR past will have a significant effect on the experience of that individual

¹⁴ Leaving aside for a moment the problem of cross-cultural applicability of western diagnostic criteria, as discussed in chapter one

today.

There is still a considerable amount that remains to be done in terms of reconciliation in Cambodia, and there are many people who lived through the KR period who continue to experience the impact of that time and for whom efforts at healing, justice and the accurate recording of history have much more to accomplish. While these focuses may still offer much for the country as a whole, I found that many of the young people I spoke to felt there are different issues in society today which are much more pressing to address.

KHMER ROUGE AS PRIMARY CONCERN?

Many of my conversations with Nhean seemed to gravitate naturally towards his impression of what life is like in Cambodia today. He would often compare the differences between life in Phnom Penh and the provinces, and perhaps due to experiencing periods of unemployment and extremely low wage work in the past he seemed to maintain sensitivity to the difficulties of those who had to make do with very little. He often spoke to me about the barriers that families encountered, particularly in rural areas. He also seemed quite politically engaged, discussing some of the persistent issues since the 2013 election.

In one of our interviews I asked what he thought the source of the main problems in society today was, and Nhean was fairly clear that it was corruption. He saw this as severely limiting the opportunities particularly of the poor, noting that it was endemic in many areas of society including education. He also spoke about a lack of rights, the fear people have to speak up about injustice they see in society, and that in reality people do not experience equality before the law.

When asked about the place of the KR period in today's society, Nhean said that he

sees value in memorial sites like Tuol Sleng¹⁵ or Choeung Ek¹⁶ being maintained to teach younger generations about the past in the hope that the atrocities of that time are not repeated. However in terms of where most efforts for education and change in society should be focused, he notes the thirty-five years since that time and the nebulous nature of ‘justice’ when it comes to the now elderly individuals who led the regime. To deal with corruption, he comments, would go the furthest towards benefiting people in the present day.

The idea of such structural problems being the most pressing issues for contemporary Cambodian society was not unique to my discussions with Nhean. In each of the interviews I conducted with young Khmer people, as well as in general conversation, common themes emerged in relation to what they saw as the problems faced by Cambodia today – namely: poverty, a poor education system, and corruption. These issues were consistently raised as being the most important, even when the question asked was more directly referencing the concept of ongoing trauma or healing and reconciliation efforts.

They did not appear unaware of the history of the KR period, nor of its impact upon their family. Each had knowledge to different extents, and some acknowledged that certain older members of their family seem to have been affected in ways that endured, which might be identified by western clinicians as related to the PTSD diagnostic category (APA 2013). However none seem to have explicitly identified themselves as experiencing the effects of that period or of their parents’ trauma experiences on their own current psychosocial wellbeing.

¹⁵ Or ‘S21’, a former high school in the centre of Phnom Penh which was used as a major security prison and interrogation centre by the KR.

¹⁶ Known widely as ‘the killing fields’, an area outside of Phnom Penh which was one of many execution and mass-burial sites of the KR.

LISTENING TO URGENT NEEDS IN CONTEXT

When we were speaking together one time, Sothy became quite curious when I mentioned I had spoken to different people about what they saw as being the most important issues that still needed to be addressed in society. We discussed the three common issues of poverty, the education system, and corruption that kept being mentioned. These were issues that Sothy had noted himself in our earlier interview, and he now raised the question as to which of the three might be most important to address first for society to move forward. During our interview, he had voiced one opinion on the matter:

I think the main problem is corruption. If you want your country [to] develop, you need to kill corruption first. If you want to get justice, you [need to] kill corruption first. I think [in Cambodia], corruption in education [is] like a cancer. Destroy[ing] all of the system. Because the main [thing], in order to develop a country, is education. If you have knowledge, you get good work[...][But] now, education is not good [in] a lot of schools. Corruption in education – So [Cambodia is] developing very slowly.

In our subsequent discussion however, after some thought Sothy said he felt that poverty was probably the most crucial issue to address first – that while people are in poverty that is all they can think about, and they won't care about education or corruption. But he also said that education would need to be dealt with as a close second, as he felt this was a way out of poverty for people and thus the two were connected issues. Sothy then also commented on widespread corruption's negative influence on these other two areas in how it impacts upon employment opportunities, international investment and the effectiveness of any attempts at educational reform. He chuckled softly at the difficulty of answering his own question about identifying a single issue to focus on first, as we noted their interconnectedness and how each one fed into the perpetuation of the others.

Nevertheless, Sothy seemed to feel that until poverty and the poor education system were addressed, corruption would not be a priority for the people. I had the impression that he ranked them like this not because he didn't see the impact of corruption on the other

two, but rather because he saw it as an issue that was too difficult for Cambodians to address in the current state of politics. Perhaps he felt the more that the other two could be tackled as far as would be possible without addressing corruption, the more Cambodian society might grow into a place where there was both the capacity and the desire to deal with corruption and its influence.

In one of the provinces near to Phnom Penh I had met Sreyneang, a twenty year old woman who currently lives with her family. She told me that she had enjoyed school, but stopped going in mid-high school to get a garment factory job. She is the only member of her family who currently works, and so it is her salary they live on.

Sreyneang told me there was a history subject at school in which they were taught a lot about Cambodia's ancient past and the kings of Angkor. When asked whether she had been taught much about the Pol Pot years, she said that she did not know much about the KR, only a little from what she saw on television. This seemed to surprise the person who was interpreting for us, who wanted to clarify with her; *'Dəŋ ri min dəŋ?'* ('To know or not know?'), Sreyneang replying, *'Ot dəŋ.'* ('Not know'). I had first asked whether she had learned about the 'Democratic Kampuchea' period, and this was initially misunderstood¹⁷ as asking whether she had learned about democracy in Cambodia. Her answer that she had not was interesting nonetheless, 'Because [I am] interested only in working, so this is why [I] don't care about democracy.' This would seem to speak to poverty being a barrier in more than an economic sense – that those engaged in a frequent struggle for subsistence may not have the space to be concerned about issues such as longer term physical or mental health, or their human rights – let alone about political change.

¹⁷ I found that the official state name of 'Democratic Kampuchea' was not a commonly recognised term for those years amongst the Khmer I spoke to, who usually referred to it as the 'Pol Pot' or 'Khmer Rouge' years instead.

A BROADER LENS

Sreyneang's need to maintain her factory job in order to provide that minimal income support for her entire family's subsistence is an example of the reality that Sothy alludes to, that while a large proportion of society continue to experience uncertainty in the realm of primary needs, they may be unlikely to see the immediate relevance of larger issues such as history or politics to their daily life. Mental health is not separate from structural or societal problems and both can feed into and perpetuate the other if left unchecked (cf. Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010). Yet individuals may be unlikely to seek out or respond to interventions aimed at assisting in their mental health needs if they are worried about the certainty of accessing the essentials of daily life such as food. Thus the impact of trauma cannot be addressed in isolation, but rather should be recognised as a part of a wider psychosocial system which may include other, more immediate, sources of oppression or distress which must be addressed.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORY, NARRATIVE, AND MEANING

Our understanding of history and its implications upon us is not merely a matter of linear or objective causation, but also of our perception of that history (Kirmayer 2007). This perception draws greatly upon the explanatory narratives which we build around experiences to structure and make sense of our relation to the past and its relation to us. (2007: 366-367). The extent to which trauma of the past is experienced as having an ongoing negative psychological impact might be seen as relating, at least in part, to how individuals understand the implications of those events on their sense of self, and more specifically in the interpretive connections they draw between the past event and their current state of wellbeing. While a commonly held assumption is that traumatic events will inevitably lead to psychological ill without appropriate intervention, Konner (2007) asserts that, ‘extensive evidence shows that resilience and/or independent recovery are by far the most common responses to potentially traumatic experiences’ (2007: 300). Alternative paths through trauma may take any number of different forms (Bonanno 2004), and this is not to say that a person will remain unchanged by what has happened to them but rather that there is often the potential and even tendency for individuals and communities to shape the trajectory of that path.

How people view their relationship to the past seems connected with the internalised explanatory narratives we form in trying to understand who we are and our place in the world. Mattingly and Garro state that, ‘Narrative offers what is perhaps our most fundamental way to understand life in time. Through narrative we try to make sense of how things have come to pass and how our actions and the actions of others have helped shape our history; we try to understand who we are becoming by reference to where we

have been.’ (1994: 771) People form narratives around traumatic experience in order to make sense of why it occurred and what the implications of it are to them. This is not necessarily an intentional act, but can be the result of the person trying to process the ‘why’ questions using the cultural and contextual forms that are available to them. In doing so the individual is able to contextualise their experience within their community, culture and understandings of the world (Garro and Mattingly 2000: 24,29). Just as that meaning can be informed by a person’s past experience, so new experiences and interactions over time may lead to subsequent or continual re-envisioning of the explanatory narrative.

The responses I cite in chapter two in which respondents display a greater concern about structural problems in society rather than historical legacy may speak partially to how young people see the KR past in relation to themselves. These responses do not necessarily suggest that history is seen as unimportant, but they may indicate something about the relative priority given to past versus present in how it is perceived to impact upon their daily life. For those who said it was important that young people continue to learn about DK and remember, the reasons given were linked to the significance of the vast loss of life as well as to making sure that future generations do not repeat the same mistakes. It is not that the concept of historical causation or ongoing impact is not an understanding that they might draw.¹⁸ However it was interesting to note that none seemed to draw causal connections between their parents’ trauma and their own emotional wellbeing. Indeed, they appeared to see a clear distinction. Even when I asked the question more directly of them they were likely to offer an equally direct denial of any cross-generational transference on the basis that they had not experienced the events of DK themselves.

One possibility is that transmission of affect may have happened regardless of

¹⁸ As noted above, many were able to identify ways in which they could see their parents as displaying emotional or somatic impact as a result of what they had to endure.

whether the following generation perceived it to have occurred. However equally possible is that where individuals have interpreted a natural break between themselves and a historical source of injury, then that interpretation or narration may have mitigated against the transmission of certain negative impacts. The degree to which either a connection or disconnection with the effects of past trauma becomes the prevailing cultural narrative may therefore determine to what extent it is helpful to appeal back to that past in addressing present-day needs. Drawing on the importance of memory in forming meaning, Jackson notes how the problems and interests of the present day will inevitably cause the past to be reassessed (or interpreted) in light of the present (2005: 356). In this way, how a person or group sees the past may be a flexible process which can be highly influential in perpetuating or mitigating any negative implications of that history.

TRAUMA AND THE TRANSMISSION OF VALUES

One area to which respondents did attribute the influence of DK was in the communication of values from parents to children. Specifically, the particular idea that you must first focus on taking care of yourself, and secondly your own family, before you try to help others. We saw an example of this in chapter two in the advice given to Chea by his mother and older sister, as well as its influence on the subsequent life-choices he found himself making. Others also identified as having been taught this philosophy and explicitly linked its origin to their parents' voiced experience of extreme scarcity of food and resources during DK. What appears to have developed out of necessity as a vital survival tactic - its validity confirmed for these parents through harsh experience - is then instilled by them in their children to try and ensure that they have an approach to life thought needed to be able to likewise survive, and to hopefully avoid having to learn it for themselves 'the hard way'.

The effects of this may appear to go wider than the individual, and some have suggested a link between the development of this value and later changes that have been perceived in the level of community mindedness or cohesion, particularly in the urban context. Ponleak, in describing what he felt defined what it meant to be Khmer, had listed characteristics such as being gentle, faithful and loyal, as well as more external signals such as language, traditional greeting, and traditional clothing. But in terms of today's society, he felt certain things had changed. 'The situation right now, [is that] the people not faithful. Not really faithful. They just think about their own advantage.' Ponleak notes the value discussed above as being commonly held, but also connects changes in society post-UNTAC¹⁹ in 1993 where he sees the sudden influx of foreign money as having led to greed and ambition for more material goods. He also feels there are other contributing factors including a lack of state provision of essential services such as hospital treatment, issues with public safety in the cities, and the media. While it would almost certainly be an over-generalisation to paint an entire society with the one brush in terms of such characteristics, it is interesting to note this narrative being presented by a number of respondents – of seeing a general trend towards individuals and families becoming more insular and less concerned for others, and linking this development to the promotion of that originally survival-based value and an unintended impact upon Khmer identity.

Once again, however, how such values are received and enacted in an individual's life will be dependent on how they interpret them in light of their sense of self and their goals - that is, their emergent life-narrative. Nhean and Sothy both recall being taught this value-perspective by their respective parents when they were growing up, but both also had developed a desire to help their community in the future. Rather than taking the application

¹⁹ United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia. For a useful overview of this time period and following, see Brown and Timberman 1998.

of that particular parental value to mean that they would have to abandon these other aspirations as incompatible, they instead interpreted it as a lesson on how they will need to take measured, practical steps one at a time in order to sustainably reach what they hope to achieve for their community.

THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

The formation of a wider group's identity can be seen as having an inherent connection to a shared memory or understanding of history, regardless of whether this memory is complete or partial, "accurate" or "constructed". Brewer (2006) writes that memories, 'help to mark social boundaries and define collective identity' (2006: 215), and that public commemorations, texts and rituals reinforce what aspects people remember and how they should be interpreted (2006: 216; cf. Eyerman 2001). As these understandings are internalised by the group, the application and implication of the meaning drawn may become distinct from an initial traumatic event in its own right.

This is a dynamic which has the potential for being influenced or appropriated for different purposes. Recalling the memory of a traumatic period is a powerful tool which can be used to define division and 'the other', as well as in efforts of healing and reconciliation (Brewer 2006: 214-216; cf. Bucur 2002; Bagilishya 2000). For this reason there can be certain interests at play in how a traumatic past is remembered, and the emotions associated with this have been used by many leaders around the world for nationalistic or political purposes. (Volkan 2004: 13; Suárez-Orozco and Robben 2000: 30).

It is interesting to observe how the two main political parties in Cambodia, the incumbent Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the opposition Cambodia National Rescue

Party (CNRP), each use the memory of the KR period in different ways for their own purposes. It was noted to me that the CPP will often refer back to the overthrow of the KR regime in 1979 in claiming for themselves an identity as liberators of Cambodia from that dark period. Each year on January 7th “Victory over Genocide Day” is celebrated, with the role of the CPP reportedly being emphasised. The CNRP conversely charge that the CPP is a puppet regime of Vietnam, having been installed by them after the Vietnamese army drove the KR to the border areas. Some charge that the CNRP emphasise this perceived connection in order to play upon a long-held distrust of Vietnam felt by many Cambodian people. More controversial had been certain comments that arose in the lead-up to the 2013 election, where in an audio recording the deputy leader of the CNRP was purported to be heard suggesting that the evidence of torture and execution at the Tuol Sleng prison had possibly been fabricated by the Vietnamese army (and by extension the CPP) after the liberation of Phnom Penh from the KR in 1979, to be used as propaganda to further justify their invasion of Cambodia and later for political purposes by the government. There appeared to be a more widespread public denouncement of this when it emerged, with the CNRP subsequently denying that the recording had been genuine and suggesting that the CPP had edited the tapes thus to use public sentiment around the KR time against the CNRP. The strategies deployed by both political parties may be criticised as attempts to present selective interpretations of history to harness community fears and create support through processes of large-group regression, which Volkan (2004) identifies that leaders may often use as powerful modes of rallying people in their support by appealing to perceived boundaries between the national unity and the enemy “other”.

It had once been a fear held by older community members that Cambodian youth did not believe the stories they had been told by their parents, thinking that the KR history

was at least partially fabricated, perhaps for use as a morality tale. For the most part this was not a doubt I found in my respondents,²⁰ and when I enquired they said they felt most of their peers would also agree that the history of the KR regime was true. In my interview with Heng, however, he did voice some reservations about accepting everything that he had been told about that period.

When he was around fourteen years old Heng learned about some of what happened in the KR time through stories his mother told about her experiences. She had been among the evacuees from Phnom Penh who were sent to labour in the rural provinces. She spoke of the difficult work, of the execution of people deemed to be educated, and that she herself had almost died from lack of food. Before this he had only heard a little about that time – that Pol Pot had killed many people, but without further specific details. Heng discussed his understanding of some of the geopolitical history of that period with me, and particularly the role of Vietnam. As he understands it, the political actions of China and Vietnam at those times, as well as those of Sihanouk, allowed Pol Pot to come to power in Cambodia. Some of this information he says he learned from reading, and also from conversations with ex-KR soldiers that lived in his village. In regards to what the soldiers told him he comments that some of what they said was correct, while some of it was not. In Heng's village there are both non-KR and ex-KR families. He says that the former KR soldiers have said that they did not kill fellow Khmer, but rather only killed Vietnamese. However Heng says that he does not believe this, as vast numbers of Khmer also died during the regime including numerous members of his own family.

Heng feels that not all the history of the KR period has been told. He notes as an example that the former leaders now on trial before the ECCC have questioned why it is

²⁰ Münyas also notes in her study that those she surveyed did not indicate disbelief (2008, pp.419-420).

only they who are being investigated when many others, including current government figures, might be guilty of some of the atrocities of that time. He brought up the comments allegedly made by the CNRP deputy which queried the truth of the evidence at Tuol Sleng. Though Heng had first commented that he was unsure that Tuol Sleng was ‘true’, he later concluded by saying to me that he didn’t really know which view was right.

I had visited Tuol Sleng early on in my fieldwork, and returned once again before I left the country. The former high school – used by the KR as a security prison and interrogation centre, now functioning as a genocide museum – can be a fairly confronting experience. The first building you enter contains rooms that had been used to torture political prisoners, the metal bed frames, sparse objects and fading black stains of blood on the floor apparently left *in situ*. Hanging on the walls are large black and white photos of the rooms on the day they were found, each containing the dead body of a brutalised torture victim who was left behind by the hastily evacuating KR. You move on through classrooms converted into cramped gaol cells, and through rows of boards which display the now infamous collection of photographs that were taken of each prisoner to catalogue their entry.

My second visit was subsequent to my interview with Heng, and so the conversation with him was in my mind as I viewed the site again. Though I did not come to the same position of questioning that Heng had voiced, I noted how elements which I had not noticed before might be read in an alternate way if one felt one had reason to be sceptical. For example, a large sign on that first building explaining what was inside concludes with the following line written in capitals:

NOWADAYS THERE ARE A LOT OF EVIDENCES, REMAINING IN ALL THE
CELLS WHICH PROVE THE ATROCITIES OF POL POT CLIQUE

One might see how this could be read as a simple statement of fact, or alternatively

as a leading propaganda statement, depending on the interpretation of history that the individual is bringing.

Memorial sites such as Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek can stand witness to atrocities of the past, but they also play a role in framing how the past is remembered or forgotten. The choice of these sites and how they are presented, where other sites of equal brutality do not receive any public acknowledgement, can be seen to reflect the desire for a specific message to be understood even as those meanings and politics have shifted over time (Violi 2012; Emde 2013). Violi notes that even a site such as Tuol Sleng, where elements are presented as a virtually untouched preservation of the place as it was found, can only succeed in preserving, 'the physical materiality of these places, not their inherent meanings.' (2012: 42-43) Indeed there is little by way of explanatory material in these main areas of the museum, the scenes leaving impressions in the visitor that speak to the senseless atrocities but not to the reasons why they occurred (2012: 52). A number of writers speak of how from early on Tuol Sleng has been used to present certain messages about the atrocities and responsibilities of the KR, whether directed to a global audience in justifying Vietnam's invasion at the time or in emphasising a separation between the atrocities attributed to those highest leaders "most responsible" and other former KR cadre whether at government or village level (cf. Violi 2012; Emde 2013; Tyner, Alvarez and Colucci 2012). It is not necessarily that what is seen there is incorrect or fabricated, but rather that choices are made about what and how that past is memorialised that emphasise a certain historical understanding of events. These sites having come to form the main locus of symbolic representation of the wider traumatic experience (Violi 2012: 51) may be argued to have been used in obscuring lines of responsibility for that period, and towards presenting a separation and legitimacy for the regime that succeeded it (Tyner *et al.* 2012:

867).

From my conversation with Heng, I wondered if perhaps a reason that he expressed some level of reluctance to commit to the veracity of aspects DK history might have less to do with the amount of information known than with his political sensibilities, particularly a discomfort with how the CPP has used a reading of that history in support of its goals of maintaining power. In recent years, the emerging political factor of the youth of Cambodia has been interesting to observe, and perhaps somewhat worrying for the government. Around sixty percent of the population is now under the age of thirty (Münyas 2008: 413; TICambodia 2014: iv), and the 2013 election saw a much more drastic swing away from the CPP than it appears many had been expecting (Phnom Penh Post 2014). With this emergent youth politics has seemed to come an increasing political awareness, drawing dissatisfaction at the current social and economic situation from many young people who increasingly point to government corruption as its source.

In 2008 Münyas wrote that, 'In addition to perceiving themselves as victims, the youth in the study make several connections between Cambodian society's present-day situation to the Khmer Rouge period' (2008: 423). While we surveyed different samples, I nevertheless find it striking that none of my respondents voiced primary connections between the KR past and the problems of today, instead pointing to current structural issues and corruption as the culprits. I wonder if this is a sign of the emerging youth political awareness that has been observed, as young people begin to question their leaders over the slow pace of reform and development – particularly if they perceive the KR history as having been used to distract from the country's lack of progress in development, justice and human rights commensurate with other countries in the region. I also wonder if this theorised shift to present-day sources as the reason for the problems and inequalities in

society might have an effect on the degree to which young people continue to identify with the DK past in informing their identity, and particularly on the willingness of young people to see themselves as being affected by their parents' trauma experiences.

EXPLANATORY NARRATIVES: APPROPRIATING AND INTERPRETING HISTORY

The explanatory narrative that a person internalises about themselves in relation to the past has the potential to influence their view of their identity. The dynamic nature of narrative suggests that the perceived inevitability of ongoing victim impact from trauma may in fact be more open to creative interpretation than generally appreciated. Jackson hypothesises that the past does not influence the present in objective and unchangeable ways but does provide the opportunity for interpretation and active appropriation (cf. Jackson 2005: 357-358). This intersubjective nature of narrative is important here, where an individual's understanding is not developed in isolation but rather in constant interplay between the self and influences such as community members, social structures, culture, and even metaphysical beliefs. Intersubjectivity, whilst not denying the role of the past, tries to correct disproportionate weight being placed on the explanatory power of origins or a strictly linear, deterministic view of cause and effect (1998: 25). Following Sartre's line of thought, the individual can be seen to be purposeful in their action to preserve or modify that which is given (1998: 27). This is not only in the relationship between the person and their individual background, but also concurrently with the *lifeworlds* of others as they live in close proximity or interact with each other (1998: 21). The process of intersubjectivity can be seen as 'a struggle to adjust opposing interests, imperatives, and identifications. This struggle is inescapable. It defines the human condition' (1998: 192).

Kidron (2004) describes a process whereby children of holocaust survivors who had not previously made a 'causal connection' (2004: 519) between that past trauma and their present-day psychosocial situation were encouraged by facilitators to emplot their personal stories along familiar PTSD frameworks through a process of group sharing and interpretation. Many of these individuals appeared to find the process clarifying, and yet Kidron argues that rather than providing 'closure' the process works to '[entrench] the trauma-related past within the descendant's present and future' (2004: 538). If this is the case then irrespective of whether such connections existed for the person beforehand, the appropriation and assimilation of these understandings by individuals has the potential to cause the trauma-past to become seen as impacting upon their contemporary lived-experience. This may have negative consequences if it imposes a fatalistic view of causality which obscures alternative options that do exist for the individual, however also has the potential to be positive if alternatively they find therein an explanation which makes sense of distressing or difficult aspects of their life and assists them to move forward.

It is important to note that the use of the term 'narrative' is not synonymous with 'fiction'. An interpretation that differs from what others might identify as the source of the problem does not therefore mean that the narrative has no effect or is inconsequential. On the contrary, narrative can have direct impact upon individuals and society, regardless of the perceived accuracy of its assumptions by external observers (Mattingly 1994).

Some may note that narrative re-framing or restructuring is precisely what many western counselling approaches attempt to facilitate (cf. Garro and Mattingly 2000: 7). This is a valid observation, but one also must recognise that the success of these approaches likewise depends very much on the recipient's perception of the validity of the source of

that facilitation. Psychotherapeutic approaches have a history of having developed an understood validity within the western context. While there of course remain sceptics even in these populations, it has the benefit of a generally accepted understanding of its efficacy, helped in western mindsets by associations of a scientific or clinical nature due to its connection to the wider disciplines of psychology and psychiatry. However in a context where a general understanding in the usefulness and efficacy of a counselling approach is not present, such attempts at 'facilitation' may be met with quizzical scepticism, feelings that the approach is powerless to attack the 'real source' of the problem (which may not be seen to lay in the mind or the perceptions), or even seem like impositions which are politely ignored.

In the case of Cambodia, It may be important to question how useful it would be for external actors to insist upon the relevance of the transmitted-trauma explanatory paradigm for young Cambodia if it is an imposed narrative rather than being an association which they make themselves. In the final chapter I will examine how a number of my respondents have demonstrated ways that they appear to have interpreted experiences of difficulty in their past as strengthening formative experiences in order to provide them with a perspective of hope for the future.

HOW TO DEFINE A NATION AND A PEOPLE?

Ledgewood *et al.* (1994) make the observation that, 'The image of the Khmer as "survivors" and as "victims" [...] holds a certain fascination for many westerners. Khmer are viewed as remnants of the killing fields, and our interest is held by the sheer power of their story' (1994: 4-5). One wonders if the seemingly inevitable focus of so many western observers upon the years of the Pol Pot regime might obscure us from being able to

appreciate a greater diversity of expressions of what it means to be Cambodian today, and what that experience is like.

A question that I took to asking people towards the end of our discussions was what message they might want to convey to those outside the country about Cambodia. While responses varied, a common thread which I found interesting was a desire for people to understand something about the real situation in Cambodia today, rather than focusing on the past.

I want them [to] know about the real life in Cambodia now. Not [to] think about the Khmer Rouge, or Angkor Wat[...]. I want them to know about Corruption. I want them to know good, and some not good. Because in Cambodia, there is both.[...] I want to tell that the people [here] want to change society. But because of the current situation, [it is] so difficult. And about the [Cambodian] people too; have good and bad, but mostly is good and friendly people. (Heng)

Heng admitted to me that it made him a bit embarrassed to have people from other countries often thinking about the KR period. For some Khmer that may play into their wish that the perspectives of people in other countries not be dominated by the past atrocities. Yet it also did not seem that they wanted to paint an unbalanced, exclusively positive picture either. They commonly spoke of wanting the issues of poverty and corruption to be known overseas, and I feel that this came from both their political awareness and their interpretation of the issues which were most relevant in impacting upon them today:

In Cambodia there is a lot of corruption or injustice, but I love my homeland, I love my country. So if I have a chance go to study abroad or to work, I think that I would not run away from my country. I want to develop my country. And I want to send message to all you, in the name of I am a Cambodian, I want my Cambodia [to become] a developed country, escaping injustice and corruption. I am also a woman and I think that Cambodian women can help to join in society or they can work as a leader too. So I'm interested in cooperating with other countries[...] And I hope that I and all [Cambodians] can live in the peace and have a high knowledge to develop their country together. (Kanleakhana)

BEYOND THE EXPECTATIONS OF TRAUMA: LISTENING TO CAMBODIAN VOICES

A critical analysis of the trauma-transmission paradigm does not need to deny the suffering of individuals, but rather may seek to recognise that the paradigm is itself culturally and historically formed and cannot provide a complete and accurate picture of the complexity of lived experience; Indeed, a reflexive approach by researchers is required (Prussing 2014: 438). Alexander (2012) contends that:

...events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution. This attribution may be made in real time, as an event unfolds; it may also be made before the event occurs, as an adumbration, or after the event has concluded, as a post-hoc reconstruction. (2012: 13)

This would appear to fit with Kirmayer's thought that, 'The world we live in is constructed not only of brute facts, but equally of imagination. In consequence, our responses to trauma, loss and dislocation are profoundly influenced by what and how we imagine the world to be' (2007: 363-364). If it is not necessarily the memory of events that is a problem but how they are remembered and interpreted, could it be that studies which ignore the narratives of resilience that already exist in favour of an assumed one of victimhood could have a negative impact upon the self-identification of their subjects? The implications of a focus on identifying resilience in populations may have significant importance if the results of research are to shape practice within these contexts. I will examine this in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4

REFOCUSING: RESILIENCE, HOPE, AND AGENCY

In reflecting on the conversations and interactions both formal and informal which I had with young Khmer people during my fieldwork, something I feel is important to recognise is that many of their views about themselves, their community and their future did not reflect that of passive victims who were weighed down by their families' past experiences, but rather of individuals who were very aspirational and full of hope – for themselves in what they wanted to achieve in the future, as well as for their country in where they hoped it would head.

They certainly still spoke about difficulties in their own and their families past and were fairly open with me about their understanding of the KR years. However when our talk was directed by my respondents themselves, it seemed that these periods were by no means the main focus of our conversations. They more often spoke of everyday life in Cambodia, eagerly explaining social and cultural customs and intricacies, and talking about their studies and their goals for what they would become in the future. They spoke of their frustrations with corruption, with the slow rate of development in their country, and a number of how they hoped they could help Cambodia to become a fairer society in the future. Many spoke of challenges, but most often with a sense of optimism that change was possible.

This observation does not deny the weight of such a dark past that Cambodia went through during DK. However I believe it does begin to highlight that though the glaring issue for outsiders coming to the country may be the horrors of the past, for many Cambodians their lived experience is very much broader and more involved. The scale of the devastation of the DK period is beyond the ability of many outsiders such as myself to

comprehend – How can one truly grasp a number as vast as two million lives lost? If we come to Cambodia from a western context of peace and prosperity, how do we make sense of the impact of such widespread violence, fear and loss? Certainly it seems that the impact of the devastation wrought on society by the end of the 1970s can still be seen – For example in the state of education, economy, infrastructure, and aspects of community cohesion. There are also reasons why Cambodia has seemed so slow to address these issues relative to many of its neighbours in South-East Asia (cf. Dicklitch and Malik 2010; Hughes 2007), which has not been for lack of financial aid assistance or intervention . The barriers to justice and equity in Cambodia lie as much in the present as they do in the past. Yet as much as the Cambodian people have been victims of massive abuse of power for decades by different factions, for the youth I encountered ‘victim’ is not the primary label by which I think they are best understood.

The turn towards resilience within the literature on historical trauma is a counterbalancing focus that I feel the study of modern Cambodia could benefit from (cf. Kidron 2010; Denham 2008; Kirmayer 2007; Bonanno 2004). Resilience is more than mere survival. It is the ways in which communities, families and individuals have been able to come to terms with the wounds of the past and begin to move in a positive direction. Kidron claims that there is a clear gap between academic discourse and descendant experience as reported by her Cambodian respondents, and that most literature ignores positive responses such as resilience and has suffered from being confined to psychological approaches (2010: 221). Denham (2008) also suggests that resilience has been a largely neglected area of study in the literature on historical trauma. While conducting a larger ethnographic study with a First Nations family in northern Idaho, he reports noticing a disconnect between what he observed in that family’s dynamics and

what much of the literature on the impact of historical trauma said about the dysfunction which might be expected to be present (Denham 2008: 392). Instead they seemed a cohesive family which drew on understandings of past trauma to successfully navigate present day difficulties (2008: 392). Further discussion with family members indicated that the way in which past traumas were interpreted, framed and passed on between generations allowed the family to emphasise certain lessons and truths which were presented as vital parts of the family identity. This became what Denham terms a ‘resilience process’ where ‘specific resilience strategies’ are communicated to the next generation (2008: 393) It is a culture of forming narratives of strength out of a difficult history which Denham argues had allowed this family to deflect the potential negative aspects of historical trauma.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Nhean told me that he believes the difficulties he encountered throughout his childhood have certainly influenced who he is today, but also that having experienced so many hardships in the past has made him more able to endure such times in the future. Nhean feels that his experiences have helped shape his views about responsibility and what he wants to do in the future:

I think it's experience that explains everything to me. Now I've set my plan. I should work hard; Now you help yourself, maybe later you can help another person. Especially the family. Because all my brothers and sisters, they haven't had the time to learn [like] I have. They work on the farm. I think that if I become the teacher, I can help my family members.

As I asked questions to explore further Nhean's idea of self, he presented an interesting idea of having not yet become the person that he is or wants to be. ‘Everything that I do now, I think is not myself.’ He says that until he has achieved his goals he feels he is ‘not yet Nhean.’ He sees his ‘self’ as something in the future that he aspires to, emphasising the gap between his aspirations and the man today who is still working

towards those goals. Nhean says that he does not care what name he has, rather he cares about what he accomplishes in life. ‘The thing I care [about] is the plan that I have to help someone – okay, I to help one, one. To help two, two. [This is] the name that I need. That [is] important for me – the way that I want to become. Especially that I open the school to help the people in my village.’

In terms of what it means to be Cambodian, Nhean says that some people point to Angkor Wat with pride but that he thinks instead of basing their pride on achievements of the past, Cambodians need to be able to be proud of what they do today, and specifically for the quality of the person that they become.

TRIALS, ENDURANCE AND MARGARET THATCHER

I wondered whether there had been anyone that Nhean had drawn inspiration from while he was growing up, as he was coming to form this worldview. In answer to my question, Nhean surprised me by describing a visit by then-UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to their refugee camp:

For me, when I maybe seven years old, at the camp meet Margaret Thatcher – that is the former prime minister of the UK - I meet one time. I thought that she was very strong, like my mother. She is [the] Iron Woman? I think that, if [asking] about a [well known] person that I would have want to become like, I think her.

Nhean said that he had been struck by the fact that even though she was a woman, she had been able to become prime minister. Norodom Sihanouk, The then prince-in-exile who would later be restored as King of Cambodia, had accompanied her to the Camp and Nhean saw that he acted respectfully towards her, as a host to an honoured guest, and so he thought that she must be very strong. A news reel of the visit shows Sihanouk walking beside Thatcher in front of a clapping and chanting crowd, with an arm extended in front to guide her way as she greets some of the assembled residents of the camp. Other scenes

show them in conversation over tea, and addressing the assembled crowd.

I think that, at that time, for the girl, [it] is difficult to find the job. It was for my mother. I think that Margaret Thatcher [was] older than my mother, so maybe she meet more problems. My mother applied for many jobs, but in the jobs all [the other workers] were men.[...]my mother, only wanted [to] work, but it was hard. But Margaret Thatcher, maybe more difficult for her. For me, I don't know clearly how to become like this. But I just compare a little bit from my mother's experience.

Nhean drew parallels with his own mother's story in seeing Margaret Thatcher as an example of someone who must have overcome many difficulties in their life to become who they were now. The ideas of turning difficult experiences into strength and working towards being in a position to help others are lessons which Nhean has taken on as key values. Though applied through reasoning as a child to Margaret Thatcher as a role model, these fundamentally emerge from his witness of how his own mother endured in extremely hard times. They demonstrate an approach to life emerging from his own context and his mother's difficult past. In this, Nhean has chosen to take on a narrative of resilience rather than one of entrenched victimhood.

Nhean says that he sees experience as the lesson which enables him to pursue his plans. Without these lessons, he says he would not have known what he wanted to do:

I think that for me, the past experiences are [important]. If you not look at the past, you can't look to the future. If your experience is only to get help [from] others, it's not enough. If you meet [difficulty] yourself, I think that is very important. [And] if you throw out experience, forget, not remind – it's not good. I think that the past experience is like the memory of many books.

CAMBODIA'S YOUTH AS ASPIRATIONAL

Not all Cambodians will have the same attitude as Nhean, nor draw the same conclusions from their past experience. However to focus on trauma alone as the primary way in which we interpret their world runs the risk of missing the hope that many young Cambodians do have for a future that has moved beyond the wounds of the past.

I was particularly struck by how a significant proportion of those I spoke to seemed

to have responded to the inequalities they saw in society by aiming to pursue studies or careers that might position them to make a positive difference. Talking to students studying at a university in Phnom Penh, one spoke of wanting to work to improve the lives of street children when he graduated, and another about the need to promote a human rights culture in the nation and his plan to seek a job that will allow him to work towards this on a grass-roots level. He spends his weekends enrolled in an extra-curricular leadership development programme run by a human rights NGO in the hopes of better equipping himself for his future role. Some law students discussed with me some of the problematic issues they saw needing to be addressed for a proper implementation of rule-of-law within Cambodia, such as the lack of an independent judiciary, the need to increase legal and human-rights literacy, and working build a consistent system where the law was respected regardless of wealth or position. One saw the problems of gender inequality and gender-based violence prevalent in society, and seems determined to become a leader who promotes justice and the equal rights of women.

These may sound like fairly grand ambitions, and certainly there are many potential barriers for these young people in pursuing them. But there is also little doubt that such change and engagement is very much needed in Cambodia. Taking a stance that is open to hearing and recognising the narratives of hope that youth are building for themselves is not the same as ignoring the difficulty ahead of them achieving those goals. Rather, it enables us to see youth who are rejecting the hand and role that history and oppressive structures has dealt them in favour of hope in the possibility of something more. It sees intergenerational transmission of trauma, if that is to be a framework we use, not as a fatalistic end but a process whose effect is mediated by levels of interpretation and attribution within the following generations (cf. Bruner, 1986). Indeed, I believe this

recognition adds an even greater impetus to the need for finding ways of addressing those structural barriers that remain.

Mattingly writes that narrative and hope for the future are formed by people as they select, re-imagine and draw from the foundations, values and potentialities that have been passed on or made available to them (2010: 236). When understood in this light, the narratives of hope that I found in my respondents also speak to that question of intergenerational transmission after trauma as evidence that it is not only negative impact that can be passed down.

As noted earlier, a common view from those who spoke of wanting a better future for themselves or their nation was seeing education as key to this. They would often also have stories of parents who repeated to them the importance of working hard and staying in school, who appealed to their own experience of being denied an education to emphasise to their children that being able to go to school should be considered not just a responsibility but a privilege, and that education would give them a chance at a better future. I would contend that in this we see the intergenerational transmission of *hope*, not merely coincidental but intentional on the part of many parents who experienced such pain in the past and saw a way to a different future for their children (cf. Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010). The prominence which education plays in the narratives of hope that were told to me – whether for personal and family development through improving job prospects, or through equipping oneself with the skills to work towards and advocate for development and change – speaks to this positive-values transmission, appropriation and adoption by young Cambodians. It also suggests that Cambodia now finds itself at a crucial time, where the extent to which these hopes are able to be realised or are blocked by prevailing structures and power interests may greatly influence the potential that future

generations see for themselves in these narratives of change.

Hope is not an immaterial thing when it comes to a legacy of trauma. Hope is an empowering alternative beyond the potentially limiting effect of such a history. Hope is not certainty, but speaks to a desire to frustrate a fatalistic resignation to historical determinism (Pavesich 2011; cf. Good 2001; Good and Good 1994), or indeed to intergenerational determinism. Yet neither is hope merely wishful thinking or passivity; hope speaks to a longing not just for what could be but for what *should* be (Pavesich 2011), and its moral strength in such environments is in how it spurs an individual or a community to take active steps towards the change that needs to occur for that future to be reached. Speaking in a post-war context, Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) suggest that such narratives of hope are a process in which people and communities begin to make sense out of contexts of senselessness, and that ‘Arguably, this is what matters most in efforts to promote mental health, psychosocial support, and psychosocial wellbeing’ (2010: 72).

EMPHASISING AGENCY

The concept of intergenerational trauma has the potential to present the following generations as passive victims of historical burden if we do not remain open to other interpretations and identifications which individuals and families may in fact develop for themselves. Insisting on the presence of trauma irrespective of cultural and contextual considerations may produce disempowering rather than healing results.

The interactions I had with young Khmer emphasised to me both the self-identification and potential of youth as future change-agents. Something clear when speaking to individuals from both local and international backgrounds who have worked with young Cambodians over a much longer period was that they appeared to share an

optimism and belief in those they worked with. These included university lecturers and clinical practitioners who saw their students maturing in awareness, depth of knowledge, and skill, and NGO workers engaged in leadership development and education who spoke of the drive and the motivation of young people who hoped to position themselves to influence society and even government on a broad scale. One described to me some of the aspirations of those they knew, and by way of example a particular young woman who had experienced much poverty and disadvantage throughout her life who was nevertheless still determined to become a human rights activist and work with those most in need, believing she can make a difference. Considering this young woman, she voiced the following challenge: ‘...despite every adversity she still manages to have that kind of positive commitment. Who are we to despair about the nation, when she’s *from* Cambodia and is as positive as she is?’

I asked whether they thought these individuals were typical of Cambodian youth today, or exceptions. ‘I think they’re exceptions.’ But exceptions that will have an impact? The answer came without hesitation: ‘Yes. Because they’re the future leaders[...]They will be the moral leaders of the nation.’

One organisation I spoke with in Phnom Penh was Youth for Peace, who run a number of different programmes with youth that aim to develop leadership qualities, citizenship, and promote peace. One such programme which their director described facilitates local communities in memorial and reconciliation projects related to the KR time. These projects involve a speaking and recording of the stories and experiences of both survivors and ex-KR in the hopes of facilitating healing between community members. The final element of the project includes a washing ceremony derived from Buddhist rituals, in which the elder members of the community who have spoken of their

past have water poured over them in a symbolic act of cleansing. What particularly struck me was that it was the youth who performed these ceremonies, pouring the water over the heads their elders, placing these young people in the role of agents of healing in their community rather than as victims. I feel this may be an apt metaphor of the role which the following generations after the genocide can play in actively healing the wounds of their nation.

RESPONDING TO THE VOICES OF THE NEXT GENERATIONS

The stories and the aspirations of the young Cambodians I encountered suggest evidence, at least in this context, that the potential negative impacts of intergenerational trauma are less inevitable than open to other possibilities; that the tendency for humans to build narratives for themselves which seek sense in experiences of otherwise senseless pain provides the processes by which people are able to construct and communicate alternate outlooks of resilience and hope. The seemingly flexible nature of narrative and interpretation is a potentially positive factor, as it provides an avenue through which the following generations can re-imagine their relationship to a trauma-past and indeed even take more control over what the impact of Cambodia's dark history might be in the future. While I am not claiming my sample size as representative, I believe that it does emphasise that other narratives for Cambodia are possible.

This is not about imposing yet another external explanatory framework, but rather allowing the narratives of resilience, that are already present and working, to be heard. It is about acknowledging the next generations their voice and listening to their stories. The more that voices for hope, justice and change are heard by their peers, the more likely that those emancipatory narratives and interpretations, and indeed expectations, will have the

chance to be taken on and appropriated on a wider scale in new formations of young Cambodian identity. This may be particularly true as these young people move into leadership roles within their communities.

The point emphasised about the source of problems being larger than the KR past does not mean that we should ignore the horrors of that period. A focus on resilience should not become a barrier to the recognition of suffering through insensitive application. Yet we must recognise that conversations about healing past trauma need to take a broader view if they are going to address ongoing structural legacies of violence and oppression. The wounds of that time are important to heal while it is seen by Cambodians as a source of rifts and hurt in their communities and families. Yet if it is not the main explanatory narrative of many individuals who are experiencing the direct impact of violence or poverty then, for the problems experienced in communities to start to find resolution, ways must be found to address those structural problems too.

Much as emerging critiques of Historical Trauma are concerned that its overly pathologised construct is ignoring the impact of contemporary oppressive structures, appealing to a narrow understanding of intergenerational trauma to account for the situation of Cambodian youth risks ignoring the very real present-day structural barriers and oppressions which they experience as negatively impacting upon themselves and their society – barriers which need substantial efforts to address. As noted above there is a gap of uncertainty between the hopes young Cambodians have and their realisation.

Dominant trauma paradigms seem to have a tendency to focus on following generations as passive victims of intergenerational burden rather than on resilience or youth as active meaning-makers. Particularly if we are to take a social view of trauma that identifies the power dynamics of domination and denial of agency involved, then a crucial

aspect of healing may be the extent to which young people are able to exercise their own agency within society today. In light of this it seems there are significant implications in regards to the influence of poverty, education and politics upon the psycho-social health of generations following on from mass trauma. The nature of the social and structural determinants of health demands that seeking to address any ongoing psychological impact of the Khmer Rouge years may be of limited effectiveness without also challenging the ongoing presence of numerous fundamental barriers to equity, opportunity and justice in Cambodia today.

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APPENDIX 1: ETHICS APPROVAL



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11 December 2013

Dr Aaron Denham
Department of Anthropology
Faculty of Arts
Macquarie University

Dear Dr Denham

Re: *Intergenerational Trauma, Healing and Resilience in Modern Cambodia*

Thank you for the emails dated 10 December 2013 responding to the issues raised by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Human Sciences and Humanities).

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) delegated review of your response to the Ethics Secretariat. This research meets the requirements set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) (the *National Statement*) and approval is granted.

Details of this approval are as follows:

Reference No: 5201300714

Approval Date: 11 December 2013

This letter constitutes ethical approval only.

The following documentation has been reviewed and approved by the HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities):

Documents reviewed	Version no.	Date
Macquarie University HREC Application Form	2.3	Received 09 Oct 2013
Appendix B of the Macquarie University HREC Application Form		Received 09 Oct 2013
Correspondence from Mr Kenneth Finis addressing the HREC's feedback		Received 10 Dec 2013
MQ Participant Information Sheet (Khmer version)		Received 10 Dec 2013
MQ Participant Information Sheet (English version)		Received 10 Dec 2013
Interview Questions (Cambodian population)		Received 09 Oct 2013

Standard Conditions of Approval:

1. Continuing compliance with the requirements of the *National Statement*, which is available at the following website:

<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research>

2. Approval is for five (5) years, subject to the submission of annual reports.

First Annual Report Due: 1 December 2014

3. All adverse events must be reported to the HREC within 72 hours.

4. Proposed changes to the protocol must be submitted to the Committee for approval before implementation.

It is the responsibility of the Chief investigator to retain a copy of all documentation related to this project and to forward a copy of this approval letter to all personnel listed on the project.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Secretariat should you have any questions regarding your ethics application.

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely



Dr Karolyn White

Director, Research Ethics

Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee (Human Sciences and Humanities)

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) (the National Statement) and the CPMP/ICH Note for Guidance on Good Clinical Practice.