Memory and Identity: Do Khmer Rouge Narratives Influence how Cambodian Millennials Shape their Identity?

Major Project
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INTRODUCTION

A small country in mainland Southeast Asia, Cambodia is known to the world, if at all, by either its significant number of ancient temples or its trauma from a troubled past. To be specific, these two polarized narratives are Cambodia's ancient glory of Angkor Wat temple, and its contemporary genocide¹ of Democratic Kampuchea, known as the Khmer Rouge. From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge genocide claimed the lives of approximately a quarter to a third of the population, around 1.7 million lives, of whom many were intellectuals and artists (Chhang, 2004). Even though the regime ended over four decades ago, Cambodia is still significantly affected by its past, with collective memories and narratives of the genocide remembered, memorialized, used, exploited and politicized in almost every aspect of Cambodian society. For example, the Cambodian People's Party, the dominant political party since the 1980s, has consistently used the Khmer Rouge narrative to inflict fear among the electorate (Strangio, 2014). NGOs often use the narrative in which Cambodian people are victimized in a war-torn country as a means of attracting international donors, mostly in the Western hemisphere (Turnbull, 2016). However, with most of the country's population being under 30 years old (UNFPA, 2015), the question arises as to how relevant these narratives are to young Cambodian society. This younger generation of Cambodians has grown more distant from the Khmer Rouge, a regime that they did not experience, but grew up overwhelmed by the narratives it left behind (Münyas, 2008). There is an underlying assumption that the common version of the Khmer Rouge narrative is the one in which the regime is demonized, diminishing other parts of the story, such as how the regime came to exist, and who was behind it other than a few “genocide clique(s)” (Chandler, 2008). To many young Cambodians, this might be the only narrative they grew up hearing. In her theory of “postmemory”,

¹ Although considered generally accepted, the term “genocide” is used here with a recognition of an argument made by Rosefielde (2010) in Red Holocaust. Rosefielde (2010) argues that the death in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge does not meet the definition of the genocide in Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948). Genocide is an “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” (ibid).
significantly based on the example of the Holocaust, Hirsch (1996) argues that the post-genocide second generation have to grow up with the narratives of the genocide that happened before they were born. This means that their upbringing is shaped by traumatic events that cannot be either fully re-created or understood.

By exploring different narratives of the Khmer Rouge genocide through public school textbooks and films and analyzing how the narratives influence the collective memory regarding the regime among Cambodian millennials, this research aims to examine the influence that the Khmer Rouge narratives and their social representation have on millennials forming their identity as Cambodian citizens.

**Research Questions**

The main question addressed by this research focuses on the degree to which Khmer Rouge narratives influence Cambodian millennials in constructing their identity as Cambodians. To what extent do Cambodian millennials draw upon a collective understanding of the Khmer Rouge in forming their self-identity as Cambodian nationals? In finding answers to this question, I also look at another aspect regarding the perception of millennials as to the power of the Khmer Rouge narrative(s) in representing Cambodia. These will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Before exploring these questions, it is necessary to explore two other relevant and significant aspects related to narration and social representation of historical events and their connection to the construction of collective memory. What narratives are being used to present the history of the Khmer Rouge? Which is the dominant narrative? How do Cambodian millennials construct their collective memory of the Khmer Rouge? What narratives do they bring in the construction process of that collective memory? These questions will be explored in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, respectively.
Rationale

Exploring the abovementioned questions will allow for a better assessment of the significance of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge past for the construction of current Cambodian identities. Hypothetically, what millennials choose to remember and to forget could perhaps reflect where the country is heading, what and how the nation is thinking, and what the younger Cambodian generation has learned from the past. It is about what Cambodians, especially younger people, have come to terms with and what steps are they taking to move forward.

Methodology

The research questions require a multidisciplinary approach drawing from media studies, history, sociology, memory studies and cultural studies. To explore the social representation of the Khmer Rouge history through narratives, extensive secondary resources will be used together with narrative analysis. By narratives, I refer to “social products produced by people within the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations” (Lawler, 2002:242). People use narratives, which contain transformation through change over time, plotlines and characters, to connect together past and present, self and other (ibid). Three Khmer Rouge related films are selected to exemplify this: First They Killed My Father (2017), The Last Reel (2014), and Lost Loves (2010). The rationale behind the selection of film as example is due to its globality and accessibility in general and among millennials.

To understand the reception of these narratives among Cambodian millennials, their perception of the narratives, the films, and their sense of identity, I have chosen the method of audience analysis using qualitative content-based data gathered from semi-structured interviews with six urban millennials from Cambodia. The choice of urban millennials was made because they potentially have access to multiple narratives through various media channels including films. Thus, it can be assumed that their access to
education will have led them to confront the topic of the past, and in addition they may have had opportunities to learn about different perspectives on this matter. Also, by being part of Cambodia’s educated class, it can be assumed that the urban millennials hold high potential to challenge current narratives of the Khmer Rouge and to shape how that part of history should be represented in the future. The interviews were being conducted individually via Skype calls, and each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes. The six interviewees, of whom three were female and three were male, were selected based on their different backgrounds, upbringings, and their current occupations. It is worth noting that not all of them had seen all three target films of the research. Only two of the interviewees had seen all the three films and the other two had seen either one or two of the films. Two interviewees had not seen any of the mentioned films.

Having chosen a qualitative research method, I would like to emphasize that the method cannot claim the same level of representation as quantitative research methods can. However, the interviews allowed me to achieve a more in-depth analysis of contemporary Cambodian identities.
This chapter discusses how the history of the Khmer Rouge is represented and narrated in Cambodia society; explores different narratives; and identifies an official narrative while comparing it to the popular narrative. It was found that the official and popular narratives are not especially different, both focusing on the demonization of Khmer Rouge leaders. The chapter will give a brief overview of the historical context of Democratic Kampuchea followed by a literature review of theories such as collective memories (Halbwachs, 1992; Wertsch, 2002; Burke, 2011; Megill, 2011; Novick, 1999), identity politics (Gillis, 1996), and social representation of history (Hilton and Liu, 2017). They are drawn mostly from the field of memory studies. These theories will be laid out as the theoretical framework for the analytical part of the chapter. Then, a narrative analysis of the Khmer Rouge history will be conducted using examples drawn from three selected films – First They Killed My Father\(^2\) (2017), Lost Loves (2010) and The Last Reel (2014) – woven throughout the whole analysis.

**Historical Context: Democratic Kampuchea**

The Khmer Rouge, officially known as Democratic Kampuchea (DK), is unarguably one of the darkest periods in Cambodia’s recent history. The regime took control of the whole country, conquering the capital city on April 17, 1975 when the Khmer Rouge armies marched into Phnom Penh declaring their victory in defeating the U.S.-supported Khmer Republic (Strangio, 2014). Once in power, the DK leadership declared an end to 2,000

\(^2\) The film premiered in February 2016 in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh at public venues for free of charge. However, the film is not scheduled to air on Netflix until September 2017. Due to this limitation, the film is not accessible from the United Kingdom from where the research is conducted. Since the interviewees have not read the book but some of them have seen the films, the research synthesizes the method by cross referencing between the film and the book.
years of Cambodian history committing to build the country from scratch – they called it ‘year zero’ (Ponchaud, 1978). Phnom Penh’s population was forced to evacuate the city (Strangio, 2014). In the Khmer Rouge’s ‘year zero’, religions were banned, the monetary system was abolished, families were separated, and the people were put into forced labor of agricultural works in the countryside (ibid.). The Khmer Rouge was being run using the most radical version of three elements: Marxism, nationalism and xenophobia (Chandler, 1991). The key ideologists of the DK government were Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Son Sem, Khieu Samphan, all of whom were educated Cambodians (Vickery, 1999). This is perhaps one of the most shocking facts for many Cambodians, who find it hard to believe, and must deal with the question of why the Khmer Rouge killed their own people (Münyas, 2008).

During the regime, the unfathomable number of deaths was largely caused by starvation, overwork, disease and execution (Strangio, 2014). The regime came to an end in January 1979 when the Vietnamese armies invaded and defeated the Khmer Rouge (ibid.). The three years, eight months and twenty days of the regime claimed approximately 1.7 million³ lives, which made it one of the worst genocides in history (Chhang, 2004). The Khmer Rouge regime has left behind a traumatic haunted past, unresolved questions, and anger for the Cambodian survivors and younger generations (see Münyas, 2008; Sonis et al., 2009; Stammel et al., 2013; Field et al., 2013). Due to the limited length and scope of this research, the more detailed political history of Cambodia at the time and the analysis of the events leading up to Pol Pot’s victory cannot be discussed here, as this research would not be an appropriate space for such discussion. Nevertheless, this topic has been undertaken by several writers (see Chandler, 1991; Vickery, 1999; Kiernan, 1996).

After the defeat of DK, a new government known as the Peoples’ Republic of Kampuchea was established, headed by former Khmer Rouge defectors such as Hun Sen, Heng Samrin and Chea Sim (Chandler, 2008). There might have been some conflict of interests

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³ The discussion ranges from 1.5 to 3 million although the 1.7 million figure is commonly used today. For various estimations by different scholars of the death toll, see Sharp (2008).
which have created a paradoxical situation in which the new leadership was challenge in term of how to regard the DK period if they were to stay in power (ibid.). This event significantly shaped how the history of the Khmer Rouge is written and narrated - this will be discussed in the next section.

**Narratives, Collective Memory and History**

When it comes to recounting the past, narratives, collective memory and history take centre stage. These three elements have rather complex interrelationships and they feed off each other in composing past events, as recalled by individuals or societies. Established by French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) the concept of collective memory describes a combined pool of ideas, images and feelings about the past shared by members of social groups. Wertsch (2002: 5) further expands the concept by emphasizing that collective memory is “textually mediated”; subjected to “textual resources” provided by others. By textual resources, he refers to narratives that replace or mediate between events and our making-sense of them (ibid). With this note, Wertsch (2002) suggests that it is important to look at the specific forms of mediation or narratives and to understand the motives behind the production of such texts, along with how individuals and groups consume or use those texts. Based on Wertsch’s argument, it can be understood that collective memory is composed of various pieces of narrative texts, meaning that the more narratives that exist, the more extensive collective memory is and vice versa.

Narratives, collective memory and history can also be considered interconnected through the significant role they play in shaping identities of individuals or nations. History generates narratives that tell us “who we are, where we came from and where we should be going” (Liu and Hilton, 2005:1). Nations, ethnicities and diasporas construct their social identities by producing narratives of their history to help them as a collective to endure the change of time (Hilton and Liu, 2017). Based on Moscovici’s (1963) concept of representations, Liu and Hilton (2005) suggest that the social representation of history has three main functions: to identify who our friends and enemies are; to serve as a
source of collective pride or shame; and to provide a source of shared experiences and narratives. As narratives are drawn from history as textual resources, people form collective memory. It is clear to see that the three elements are linked and cannot be analyzed without one another. The conjunction between history, memory and narratives reflects how individuals form their identities; drawing from collective memory shaped by historical narratives, which can be rather subjective depending on who is telling them. Therefore, in this chapter, I will explore different narratives of the Khmer Rouge and analyze the agenda behind which each narrative is told as they play a crucial role in shaping how the Cambodian millennials collectively form their memories of the regime.

Interestingly, despite being sourced from historical events, Wertsch (2002) advises that it is best to perceive narrative texts as only raw materials used for recreating an account of the past. If this is the case, it is essential to question the accuracy and objectivity of history. Burke (2011) points out that the past is usually presented in very different ways because it is not possible for historians to be completely objective. How history is being presented is subject to different points of view, as well as the origins and cultures of historians. "It is important to ask the question, who wants whom to remember what, and why? Whose version of the past is recorded and preserved?" (Burke, 2011:191). Megill (2011:196) echoes this point of view stating that although history as a discipline is obligated to be objective, unified, orderly and justified, this cannot be achieved completely because "there is always a residue of incomprehensibility behind what is known, and an engagement with subjectivity that cannot be eliminated".

If history cannot be objective and accurate, one might question its similarity with collective memory. On the one hand, Halbwachs (2011) clearly argues that collective memory and history are far from being similar because there is only one history but there are many collective memories formed by many groups that compose them. On the other hand, Wertsch (2002) challenges this argument stating that it is difficult to neatly differentiate the two but recognizes the need to distinguish them. He contends that history supposedly serves as a point of reference which separates the past from the present while collective memory emphasizes the usable past, from which various social
groups draw their significance within the continuously changing sociocultural landscape (ibid.). “Usable past” refers to narratives of events or actors whose purposes can be used in the present (Zamora, 1997).

Both history and collective memory may change over time but for entirely different reasons: history to ensure its accuracy, and collective memory to reassure self-representation and self-understanding, Wertsch (2002) argues based on Novick's (1999) observation on the shifting versions of collective memory of the Holocaust in the United States during the last half of the twentieth century. Along the same line, Gillis (1996) concurs this point stating that the identity of any individual or group, sustained by collective memory, is a subjective representation of reality which we constantly modify to adapt to our present identities. It is important to be aware of the discussion around the differences and similarities shared by history and collective memory because in a context such as the Khmer Rouge genocide, it is hard to distinguish what most people remember and what is written in the history books. This prompts one to question why we are being called upon to remember in the particular ways that we are, and by whom. This will be analyzed in the later section of this chapter.

Additionally, one must not overlook that with remembering comes also forgetting. Today, it could be argued, we are living in a postmodern world in which we belong to many social groups, each of which has its own identity built by collective memory (Gillis, 1996). Therefore, individual needs to constantly revise what should be remembered and while this happens, other memories need to be forgotten so that one may make space for new ones (ibid.). Benedict Anderson (1983) identifies this phenomenon as “collective amnesia” to describe the oscillation of collective remembering and forgetting. Correspondingly, Ryan (2012) argues that collective memory is formed based on the opposing connection between dominant and repressed memory. This argument is echoed by Stone et. al (2017:287) who contend that “every act of remembering is selective”. Hence, by selectively remembering past historical events, the individual may also induce the forgetting of related information from those events (ibid.).
Regarding the concept of collective amnesia, it is worth questioning how people choose what to remember and what not to. Wertsch (2002:9) argues that we unconsciously draw upon textual resources, in such a way that we are often “committed to believing, or not believing them, sometimes in deeply emotional ways having to do with fundamental issues of identity”. So, it is possible that some historical narratives that are rather dominant infiltrate our cognitive thinking process without us knowing about it: “Identities and memories are not things we think about, but things we think with” (Gillis: 1996:5).

Having discussed the relation between narratives, collective memory and history and how they are constructed, I will now apply this to the context of the research and examine what narratives are being formed to represent the history of the Khmer Rouge. I will also determine an official narrative imposed by the state and a popular narrative formed by collective memory and compare their similarities and differences.

**Exploring Narratives: The Framing and Representation of the Khmer Rouge**

The Khmer Rouge has not always been a topic widely discussed in Cambodia. In fact, the history of this period had not been officially made a topic for public dialogue by the Cambodian government until 2007, the year the international Khmer Rouge tribunal was established (Chandler, 2008). This can be observed through the evolution of content on the history of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodian public school textbooks. Jedlowski (2001:30) argues that “the past never remains one and the same, but is constantly selected, filtered and restructured in terms set by questions and necessities of the present”. The official narrative of the Khmer Rouge has been modified constantly by the Cambodian government in power over the years since 1979 (Ngo, 2014). In his study, Ngo (2014) analyzes nine textbooks from three different periods, which he labels as Peoples’ Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) (1979 to 1991), United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (1991 to 2002), and the tribunal period (2003 to present, as of the date of his writing). Based on Ngo’s (2014) findings, each period has a different written history of Democratic Kampuchea. From 1979 to 1991, the history of DK is written in the form of folk tales, which clearly identify Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge leaders as villains to be
hated and feared, evoking sentiments of hatred and revenge. From 1991 to 2002, there was no mention of what happened from 1975 to 1979 in school textbooks until a revision came sometimes between 2000 and 2001. Considering the long-term implications of the Khmer rouge regime onto Cambodian society, the text seems inadequately brief which read:

From April 25 to April 27, 1975, the Khmer Rouge leaders held a special general assembly in order to form a new Constitution and renamed the country “Democratic Kampuchea”. A new government of DK, led by Pol Pot, came into existence, following which of the massacre of Khmer citizens began. (MoEYS, 2000:169)

Then from 2003 to the date of Ngo’s (2014) writing, the first textbook on the history of DK was published in 2007 by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-CAM). The textbook, 75 pages long, has a more detailed account of the sequence of events from 1975 to 1979. Nevertheless, many parts of the text were censored by the government. The censorship reflects the government’s attempt to ignore civil wars and the internal power struggles which took place after the Khmer Rouge, and to erase any mention of the relation between the current leaders in power to their former status as Khmer Rouge soldiers. In relation to this aspect, Jacques (1982 cited in Chandler, 2008) argues that Cambodian people traditionally perceived the writing of history as something produced by people with power without much intervention from outside the country and ordinary people. Also, this echoes Burke’s (2011) argument as to the limited accuracy and objectivity of history, stating that historians’ ability to present history is subject to their origins, perspectives and culture.

Gills (1996) argues that representations of reality are being constantly modified to adapt to our present identities, a process he identifies as part of identity politics. This argument is reflected in Cambodia and in the evolution of the Khmer Rouge official written history as described in the previous paragraph. However, it is important to question whenever

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4 See Ngo (2015:165) for examples of the censorship.
identity enters into the discussion, whose identity is being referred to. Due to past association with DK, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), the party in power during the PRK, enforced the policy of “induced amnesia” which simply demanded that people “dig a hole and bury the past” (Chandler, 2008:356). In this case, it can be argued that the KPRP wanted to maintain the party's identity in such a way that its top leaders were never viewed as being connected to DK in any way. Therefore, one way to achieve that was to create what Hilton and Liu (2017) characterize as the criteria of successful historical narratives, proposing identifiable figures such as heroes, villains, and fools. Also, the KPRP kept the writing of history aligned with its priorities which, at the time were to remain in power, to build the nation and to reconcile with the remaining Khmer Rouge soldiers (Chandler, 2008). It should be noted that memorialization was not one of the priorities.

Despite the efforts to limit discussion of the history of the Khmer Rouge, the harsh and shocking consequences of the regime made it difficult for the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party and the later Cambodian People's Party (both of which were in power in during the PRK and the Kingdom of Cambodia respectively) to contain survivors from recalling their experiences. To many survivors, the Khmer Rouge history is part of the collective memory that can be remembered and conveyed in many different ways (Chandler, 2008). Many memoirs were written and many films were made based on survivors’ accounts of the genocide. Chandler (2008) points out that the popular collective memory of the Khmer Rouge consists of severely painful and emotional experiences which tend to make people overlook a balanced analysis of the series of events. Likewise, Wertsch (2002) argues that we unconsciously draw textual resources to form our collective memory in a deeply emotional way sometimes depending on what our identities are. This is similar to what Gillis (1996) suggests concerning the constant modification of the representation of reality influenced by present identities. Looking at the three films selected for this research, it is plausible to argue that two of the films have demonstrated Chandler's point. In the film Lost Loves we see a portrayal of the struggles in the life of a former Phnom Penh, high-society resident whose loved ones were stripped away from her arms one by one during the Khmer Rouge. Rather similarly, First They Killed
My Father recounts the hardship, loss and anger that a 5-year-old faced during the same period. The only difference is the 5-year-old character grew up in a middle-class family of Chinese descent in Phnom Penh. The irony is the popular collective memory of the Khmer Rouge is more or less a follow-on of the same narrative that the PRK established of DK (Chandler: 2008). Wertsch’s (2002) argument on how we draw upon collective memory and identity also fits into the context of this analysis. Both films are based on true stories of survivors, and they strongly emphasize the violence and cruelty of the Khmer Rouge from the perspectives of city people - in this case those from Phnom Penh. In this respect, The Last Reel also portrays the life of the main character’s mother who used to be an actress from the city. Chandler (2008:359) recognizes discrepancy stating that “nearly all the people who have published memoirs of DK belonged before 1975 to Cambodia's tiny bourgeoisie, and the historiography of DK in western languages has tilted in their direction”. In this regard, it can be argued that the urban Cambodian dominate how the Khmer Rouge is remembered because they have had the means to express their experiences through writing. The rural Cambodians did not express their lives during the regime in the same way because of their limited education; thus, their memories of the Khmer Rouge, usually orally transmitted, do not get the same emphasis (Chandler, 2008).

In addition, it is worth noting that the official narrative of the Khmer Rouge has been excessively enforced annually on “January 7”, labelled as Victory Day over the genocide (Strangio, 2014). During Victory Day, there are documentaries and films shown on television and speeches on radio to commemorate day that marks the fall of Pol Pot regime. However, the day is also perceived as propaganda used by the party in power, Cambodian People’s Party (whose predecessor was the KPRP), to legitimize its long-standing position in ruling the government (ibid). Moreover, Tyner et al. (2012:856) argues that commemoration is very often utilized to construct, omit, or reinvent an official history and collective memory, which can be used to justify current forms of social representation and political presence. Hence, it can be argued that commemoration plays a crucial role in reinforcing what the government wants the people to remember and what they want the Khmer Rouge to represent. This can potentially influence how
Cambodian millennials form their memories of these events, which will be explored in the next chapter.

Furthermore, it can be observed that the official narrative of the demonization of the Khmer Rouge is being challenged by other collective memories as time goes on. This part can be linked to Halbwachs’s (2011) argument that there are many collective memories. This is reflected in two of the films, both of which were produced recently. In *First They Killed My Father*, the film ends in a slightly different way to the book, which is nevertheless significant. In the book, a Khmer Rouge soldier was captured and killed by a group of survivors. In the film, however, the life of the captured soldier was spared. The book's author explained in a press conference⁵ that she was still angry at the time she wrote the book but her anger has subsided as time has passed. She deliberately humanizes the Khmer Rouge soldier in the film because she wants the country to evolve from revenge, for the sake of future generations who are now learning about their past. Ren (2014:102) argues that in order for a post-conflict society to reach reconciliation, the society needs to be healed through the construction of compatible memories between former enemies. In the context of the Khmer Rouge, the two opposing sides are the people who perceived themselves as victims and the perpetrators of violence who are perceived as villains. The two sides need to figure out a set of shared memories instead of clashing ones in order for reconciliation to take place (ibid). The same thing can be observed in *The Last Reel* in which the ending portrays the humanization of the main character's father, a former Khmer Rouge soldier who came to realize his past wrongdoings and asked for forgiveness.

While focusing on school textbooks and films as the main examples through which narratives are circulated, I would like to briefly highlight the role of television in narrating the history of the Khmer Rouge. The Cambodian millennials interviewed in this research relied rather heavily on television to learn about the regime during the 1990s when the internet was not very accessible. However, throughout the history of media in Cambodia,

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⁵ The press conference was hosted by Cambodia Film Commission (CFC) on February 18, 2017 prior to the world premiere of the film in Siem Reap.
Cambodian press has always been under tight government control, especially traditional media such as television and radio (Strangio, 2017). This is reflected in the 2017 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, which ranked Cambodia 132nd out of 180 countries (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). Therefore, it can be assumed that the history of the Khmer Rouge as narrated on television is in line with the official state-sanctioned narrative discussed previously.

To sum up, the narrative demonizing the Khmer Rouge established during the PRK in the 1980s still plays a rather dominant role in the popular collective memory of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodian society today. However, there other collective memories formed by alternative narratives have arisen. The point is one should always question who the collectives are. As Kansteiner (2011) argues, a small group of people who have directly experienced traumatic events are only given a chance to shape the national collective memory if their vision aligns with social or political objectives or preferences among other more important social groups, such as political elites or ruling parties.
Now that I have identified the dominant narrative as well as explored how and why it is being established, a closer look at the influence of the narrative is needed. In this chapter, I will explore the collective memories of Cambodian millennials of the Khmer Rouge and how they are being constructed because that will reflect on how the millennials draw upon those memories to form their identity as Cambodian. I will also examine their perceptions on the role of films in providing narrative for forming of memories of the genocide. I will begin by laying relevant theoretical frameworks of postmemory and collective memory which I will later apply to analyze the results of my interviews with Cambodian millennials.

**The Concept of Postmemory**

Traumatic events such as the Holocaust and the Khmer Rouge can leave a long-lasting impact not only on the survivors but also on the generations that follow, through the collection of memory. This phenomenon is characterized by the term “postmemory” introduced by Marianne Hirsch in the 1990s and used primarily in the context of Holocaust survivors. Postmemory is a concept used to describe “the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by the means of stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch, 2008:106, emphasis in original). Postmemory is generated by the present continuous effects constituted by events that happened in the past (Hirsch, 2008). These effects leave a very dominating narrative that the new generation has to deal with, risking having their own stories and experiences displaced (Hirsch, 2008). Simply put, postmemory describes memories that new generations receive from preceding generations, which become part...
of them although the past was not theirs. Taking the Holocaust postmemory as an example, the children of the survivors always remain in the diaspora away from a home that they have never experienced, although they themselves did not live through the trauma of deportation nor the destruction of home (Hirsch, 1996:662).

**Collective Memory and its Social Dimension**

In the previous chapter, I briefly mentioned collective memory, providing the definition from Halbwachs (1992) and some challenges to the definition posed by Wertsch (2002). As I am going to explore more about the collective memory of Cambodian millennials of the Khmer Rouge and its relation to their identity in the upcoming chapter, I would like to examine the concept of collective memory and its relation to an individual more closely.

Collective memory is about “a totality of thoughts common to a group, the group of people with whom we have a relation at this moment, or with whom we have had a relation on the preceding days or days” (Halbwachs, 1992:52). Simply put, collective memory is individual memories placed in a social dimension. Kansteiner (2011) argues that collective memories arise from shared acts of meaning-making of the past reflecting the lives of individuals who are part of the collectives. Also, it can be understood that social frameworks support and provide meanings to each individual memory which is composed within these frameworks (Halbwachs, 1992). Basically, one's social connections can affect how one interprets the past. For instance, a millennial born abroad from refugee parents who are Khmer Rouge survivors might have a different memory of the regime compared to a millennial born in Cambodia from parents with the same background because of the different social contexts in which they live.

In relation to social context, Poole (2008) contends that the role of memory, either individual or collective, is not only cognitive, but also normative. The role of memory is not only to “supply us with information about the past […], it informs us of the obligations and responsibilities we have acquired in the past and that ought to inform our behavior in the present” (Poole, 2008:152). Interestingly, Novick (1999:3-4) points out that collective
memory is “anti-historical” because it “simplifies, sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes”. However, Megill (2011) provides a nuanced argument stating that memory and history, though seeming very contested in nature, should not be seen as diminishing one another because combined memories do not add up to history and history does not generate an identity or a collective consciousness by itself.

In addition, it is important to note that in the context of collective memory, there is a possible “danger of producing the past as how we would like to remember it rather than as it happened” posed by the challenge of popular memory (Garde-Hansen, 2011:40). Popular memory can be simply described as the reconstruction of the past through popular culture (Popular Memory Group, 1998). Also, Brabazon (2005:76) suggests that “popular culture is a conduit for popular memory, moving words, ideas, ideologies and narratives through time […]. Popular memory, by its very nature, is a fount of consensus and a building block of ‘the mainstream’”.

**Cambodian Millennials Remembering the Khmer Rouge**

It is indisputable that the historical narratives of a traumatic event such as the Khmer Rouge regime influence children and grandchildren of the survivors in how they form their own memory of the event, if not postmemory. The second and third generation after genocide shape their understanding of such events through family narratives, public school textbooks, and the culture in which they grew up (Münya, 2008). The narrative of the past plays a crucial role in how people form their identities (Hall, 1992).

In order to determine what memories Cambodian millennials form of the Khmer Rouge and how those memories are constructed, I conducted interviews via Skype with six Cambodian millennials as described in the methodology section. The interviews provided me with some useful insights into the collective understanding of the Khmer Rouge formed by young Cambodian people. The six interviewees were all aged between 21 and 29 and were university graduates living in the city. I selected them based on the years
they were born, in the 1980s and the 1990s, making them the second and third generation born after the Khmer Rouge. The interviewees perceived the topic to be rather personal and sensitive and, therefore, preferred to remain anonymous.

In this section, I will analyze the interviews focusing on how millennials construct their memories of the Khmer Rouge individually and collectively and the role of films in forming those memories.

*Individual vs. Collective Memories*

To get a comprehensive understanding of what millennials remember as a collective regarding the Khmer Rouge, I first look at how they remember as an individual. I asked them to express what comes to their minds when they hear the terms Khmer Rouge, in order to identify what is the most memorable understanding of the genocide among millennials. Three interviewees quickly responded with the term “genocide”, with one adding the term “inhumane”, hinting at a sense of disbelief over what happened. One interviewee did not use the same term, but she similarly expressed her sadness over the regime and related the Khmer Rouge to the term “cruelty”. Unexpectedly, two interviewees dissociated themselves with the regime identifying it as “a very far past” and “boring”.

Interviewee 2 who associated the Khmer Rouge with “a very far past” explained that she did not hear about the regime much from her family in her childhood and only learned more about the regime as she became older through documentaries. “I don't feel very attached to it because it's past my generation,” she added. Conversely, interviewee 4 stated that she was exposed to too much information about the Khmer Rouge from when she was growing up until the time she went to university. This has made her fed up with that part of history.

*A lot of Khmer movies are all about Khmer Rouge [sic]. My background as a communication student expose me to a lot of studying of the Khmer Rouge, First year*
in university, I spent half a year doing research about the Khmer Rouge. I visited the field, I interviewed the perpetrators [sic]. So, after graduation, I got fed up with it and it's boring to see the same thing reappear again and again (Interviewee 4, female, age 24).

With these short expressions alone, it can be clearly observed that these six individuals, despite their similar age range and social background, draw upon different memories regarding the Khmer Rouge. This reflects Halbwachs’ (1992) argument on individual memory being supported and provided meanings by social frameworks, and that one's social ties can affect how one makes sense of the past. Social frameworks refer to cognitive and emotional frameworks that work simultaneously which are used to select, order and understand the past (ibid.).

Regarding the answer from interviewee 4, it is plausible to argue that she has generated postmemory to some extent because, on the one hand, she has illustrated her irritation at having to deal with an overwhelming amount of information about the Khmer Rouge, such that she feels her own stories and experiences are being uprooted by the dominant narrative of the Khmer Rouge (Hirsch, 2008). On the other hand, as she explained in other questions in the interview, she does not connect deeply to the past of the Khmer Rouge.

When asked to elaborate on why and how they chose those specific terms, five out of six interviewees stated that they have learned about the Khmer Rouge through stories told by their families and relatives who experienced the regime. Only one interviewee (Interview 2, female, age 21) mentioned that her family does not talk a lot about the Khmer Rouge. Consequently, she has built her understanding of what happened during the Khmer Rouge mainly through documentaries and films she saw on television, and through textbooks at school. In comparison to the other responses, this is an exception because other interviewees expressed that they did not remember being taught at length about the history of the Khmer Rouge in public school. Looking at the changing historical narrative of the Khmer Rouge in public school textbooks discussed in Chapter 1, it can be argued that public school is not the primary place through which Cambodian millennials
learned about the Khmer Rouge history. However, the distinctive response from one of the interviewees may reflect the changes in school textbooks that happened after 2007. At the age of 21, interviewee 2 is the youngest compared to other interviewees, meaning that she was possibly still in high school when the book of History of Democratic Kampuchea produced by DC-CAM was published and circulated (Ngo, 2014).

Moreover, a common date can be detected throughout the responses: “January 7”. Half of the interviewees explained that the seventh of January plays a significant part for them in learning about the Khmer Rouge. This is when documentaries and movies about the Khmer Rouge are broadcast all day on mass media, mainly television and radio (Strangio, 2014). Television was their main source of information in the 1990s, the period in which all of the interviewees grew up. This reflects Wertsch’s (2002) argument which states that collective memory is mediated by text created by active agents. Therefore, it can be argued that Cambodia’s government is an active agent who plays a crucial role in building the official narrative text of the Khmer Rouge. They distribute this through different channels such as school textbooks and mass media, which they tightly control (Strangio, 2014). Based on this analysis, the government’s control over textbooks and mass media can be seen as a limitation of narrative with which millennials can construct their memories of the Khmer Rouge.

With the government being an active agent, it is plausible to assume that the official state-sanctioned narrative has a substantial influence on millennials in forming their understanding of the Khmer Rouge. When asked to further describe the Khmer Rouge in their own words, a pattern appeared in some of the interviewees’ responses. Interviewee 2, 4, 5 and 6 gave a rather similar description of the Khmer Rouge consisting of the dates that the regime started and ended, the number of lost lives, starvation, violence and communism. These comparable answers from the three interviewees appear to reflect one thing they share in their background: they have lived in Cambodia their whole lives. This translates into them being subjected to the same official narrative distributed to them through school textbooks and television.
Interviewee 1 and 5 provided different responses compared to the others which illustrate that their understanding of the genocide is not limited to what is being fed to them by the government.

Normally, I would just talk about it [the Khmer Rouge] generally. It was war time, how people suffered and how people were killed etc. [sic] If I was to account the details of the political situation and how it happened, I would find that more interesting to discuss, but normally people don't want to know it that way. They somehow connect Cambodians to the Khmer Rouge and they associate it to S-21 and the violence (Interview 1, male, age 27).

Khmer Rouge in some sense is just political conflict [sic]. Cambodia was affected by the Cold War [...]. Because of that, we had civil war which led to the Khmer Rouge. First, Khmer Rouge was the army formed to liberate the country from Lon Nol\(^6\), but then they turned into something else. It is communism in its purest form in the cruelest way you can imagine (Interview 3, male, age 24).

The response from interviewee 1 illustrates his awareness of the availability of other narratives beyond the official narrative that he learned while growing up. However, he also acknowledged in frustration that people seem to only want to comment based on that dominant narrative. This seems to reflect Novick's (1999) argument of collective memory, which he perceives to provide a simplified and committed perspective on events. As pointed out by interviewee 1 and discussed in the last chapter, the popular collective memory of the Khmer Rouge can be argued to be fairly simplified, focusing only on the hardship and destruction caused by Pol Pot. In addition, the response from interviewee 3 reflects his understanding of the genocide from a more political perspective. What differentiates interviewee 1 and 3 from the others, is not only their distinctive descriptions of the Khmer Rouge, but also their background. Interviewee 1 spent two of his teenage years living abroad. The same applies to interviewee 3 who spent the last three years overseas.

\(^6\) Lon Nol led a military coup against King Norodom Sihanouk and proclaimed himself as the President of the Khmer Republic which lasted from 1970 to 1975 (Strangio, 2014).
Referring back to Halbwachs’ (1992:52) argument on collective memory being a totality of thoughts common to a group, it can be argued that, on the one hand, the six millennials belong to a group of Cambodians because they collectively remember the Khmer Rouge and recognize it as a historical event. On the other hand, as shown in their descriptions of the regime, they can be divided into smaller groups which have distinct interpretations of the event. This reflects various identities that each millennial has. I will return to a discussion on identity in the next chapter.

The different descriptions of the Khmer Rouge also demonstrate that the six millennials do not share the act of meaning-making of the genocide (Kansteiner, 2011). This implies that they do not belong to the same collective. The six interviewees in the research can be divided into two collectives with two distinct collective memories. One collective consists of interviewees 2, 4, 5 and 6 whose memories of the genocide can be argued to be substantially influenced by the official narrative, which was reflected in their descriptions of the Khmer Rouge. The other collective consists of interviewees 1 and 3 whose memories of the Khmer Rouge appear to be more extensive because they reflect on political context and recognize the lack of critical consideration among the popular collective memory. Based on this, I would argue that Cambodian millennials who have lived abroad at some point in their lives have a broader understanding of the Khmer Rouge compared to those that grew up solely in Cambodia, because it can be assumed that being abroad enlarges one's social ties and possibly presents different narratives of past events that one does not usually encounter in one's home country. For example, interview 1 recounted:

I think I am in a position where I have access to more documents that allow me to compare different narratives but it’s hard because most narratives out there are not very critical. You have to really dig around and go to different sources to get some stories out of it.
Observing the analysis above, it can be noted that media plays a crucial role for millennials in constructing their memories. Garde-Hansen (2011:60) argues that the production, storage and consumption of personal and collective memories depends on media. Evidently, some responses from the interviews do reflect the argument that Cambodian millennials relied heavily on television, which presented them with a history of the Khmer Rouge. With today's fast-growing media landscape, it is reasonable to assume they have easier access to other forms of media such as film. When asked about the role of films about the Khmer Rouge in helping them to gain a better understanding of the Khmer Rouge, three interviewees gave positive answers pointing out the power of images over literature. Nevertheless, two interviewees did not think that film helps them to understand the Khmer Rouge any better because films are being produced using the same narrative that they already know, which is the dominant narrative. Distinctively, one interviewee answered yes and no explaining that:

Film is a stronger medium compared to literature as it communicates using images and it also stimulate other senses which makes you feel like you're in the situation. However, if you're thinking about the accuracy itself, it's the reconstruction of the past reflecting the view of the creators. So, it might not communicate the complete message to the audience (Interviewee 5, male, age 25).

To specifically understand millennials' perceptions on films, I presented the three example films discussed in Chapter 1 and asked them to express their opinions on any of those films they have seen. Two of the interviewees had not seen any of the films. Two have seen all three, and the remaining two had seen one or two out of the three. The fact that two interviewees had not seen any of the films, on the one hand, could be interpreted as them not being interested in seeing those films; or on the other hand, it is also possible that those films are not as accessible as I initially assumed.
The interviewees who had seen the films commented that the films are usually about hardship, sadness and separation from loved ones. One interviewee pointed out that “those films don't show deeper details of the Khmer Rouge”. Examining these responses and comparing them to the narratives I examined in the previous chapter, I contend that in the case of the Khmer Rouge, films do not have much influence in how Cambodian millennials construct their memories of the event because they are produced based on the popular memory which relies heavily on personal hardship of the bourgeoisie (Chandler, 2008). This also reflects Garde-Hansen’s (2011) comment stating that when a certain memory becomes too popular, there is a risk of us constructing the past as what we prefer to remember rather than what actually happened. In the case of Cambodian millennials, hardship and violence during the Khmer Rouge regime might not be what they prefer to remember but might be the only thing they are allowed to remember through the dominant narrative. Therefore, I argue that the collective memory of Cambodian millennials, with an exception of some who have experienced living abroad, is generally composed by the official state-sanctioned narrative which focuses on violence during the regime and demonization of the Khmer Rouge. A research by Münyas (2008:423) using bigger and more extensive samples also has a similar finding, stating that second generation post-Khmer Rouge regime of Cambodian youth is exposed to the demonizing narrative in their homes.

With this argument, I do, however, want to further examine perceptions of one specific film, *First They Killed My Father*, because of a contradictory comment provided by interviewee 4. Despite her expressing that she finds the history of the Khmer Rouge boring, she stated that *First They Killed My Father* affected her in a way that it made her feel like she was there and that the past was hers, praising the surroundings of the Angkor Wat temple complex and forest where the film was set. This comment led me to question if the influence the film has on the interviewee is only caused by the surroundings or whether there are other hidden factors involved such as the film producer who happened to be the famous Angelina Jolie, the Netflix flagship promotion or the marketing of the film on social media. As this point does not fall under the scope of this research, this is something to be explored in the future.
To conclude this chapter, Cambodian millennials still very much draw upon the official narrative of the Khmer Rouge as part of their collective memory for that period of history. Despite having better access to other forms of media due to today’s technological advancements and globalization, the popular collective memory, assumed at this point to be very similar to the official state-sanctioned narrative, told to millennials by their families and relatives at home has a very important role in shaping how millennials choose to remember the Khmer Rouge. However, their perceptions as to how they decide to comprehend the regime can potentially shift based on their social contexts and the social groups they belong to.
Having established that Cambodian millennials’ collective memory of the Khmer Rouge does not expand far beyond the official narrative and the popular memory, I will now turn to look at how this narrative influences their identity.

In this chapter, I will analyze how those memories influence their sense of self-identity as Cambodian. Similarly, to the previous chapters, I will begin with a theoretical background of identity and its connection to memories. Then, I will examine their perceptions as to how influential the Khmer Rouge narratives are in representing Cambodia to the outside world, because their identities of being Cambodian are subject to national identity which is formed in conjunction with social representation (Hall, 1992). Lastly, I will analyze their responses on whether they think their identities have been challenged by the narratives of the Khmer Rouge.

The Meaning of Identity

Identity is a rather complex topic of discussion. Its definitions vary depending on the context in which it is being discussed. An individual can have multiple identities depending on how many social groups that person belongs to.

“Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think,” Hall argues (1990:222). He suggests that identity is better thought of as a production constantly being established within representation. Basically, identities reflect various ways in which we are positioned by the narratives of the past and also the ways in which we position ourselves within those narratives (ibid). This can be linked to Zamora’s (1998) idea of the “usable past” provided by memories to seek purposes in the present. There are many forms in which
identity can be claimed and it can be tied to many things such as the need to mourn or to encourage patriotism (Wertsch, 2002).

Additionally, according to Welsch’s (1999:5) concept of “transculturality”, we are cultural hybrids whose identities are formed by multiple cultures. Although perceived as an aftereffect of the “inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures”, transculturality is not a completely new concept specifically assigned to today’s society (ibid). Since 1970s, the notion has been suggested by Berger et al. (1973:77) pointing out that modern day lives should be perceived “as a migration through different social worlds and as a realization of a number of possible identities”. With a similar notion, Bell (1980:243) states that we all have “cross-cutting identities”. It is important, however, to not get cultural identity and national identity mixed up because the cultural construction of an individual should not be determined by that person’s nationality (Welsch, 1990).

In the context of collective memory, it can be argued that identity is the reason that memories are constructed in the first place. As noted by Halbwachs (1997), the primary function of collective memory is to allow for the coherence of a social group and to assure its identity. Collective memory reassures self-representation and self-understanding (Wertsch, 2002) and maintains an individual’s or group’s identity, which is the personalized representation of reality (Gillis, 1996). Assman and Czaplicka (1995) also add that each individual memory is developed in communication with a particular group who share a collective image of the past. Halbwachs (1997) states that these groups range from families to workplaces to nations. Therefore, each person has various identities built from collective self-image and memories because they belong to many groups (Assman and Czaplicka, 1995).

Considering the fluid nature of identity in connection to collective memory, it has proven difficult to characterize an exact identity of an individual without a specific frame of reference. As this research uses Cambodian nationality as a frame of reference for the millennials’ identity, it seems necessary to ground the definition of a nation as well. Anderson (1983) suggests that it is no easy task to define nation, nationality or
nationalism, and trying to analyze them has even increased the level of difficulty. He argues that to understand properly the meaning of nationality, one has to consider how it has come into being historically and how the meaning of nationality has changed over time. With the same line of thought, Gillis (1996:4) argues that “national identities are, like everything historical, constructed and reconstructed; and it is our responsibility to decode them in order to discover the relationships they create and sustain”.

Recognizing the multiplicity of identity and the complexity of the meaning of nationality, I will form my argument using the national identity of ‘Cambodian’ as my frame of reference in the next section. Also, I will ground my argument based on an understanding that being a national of a country reflects a sense of belonging to a community in which people share collective memory of a specific past reflecting pride, regret, responsibility for the country and so on. I would like to use the terms country and community to refer to, instead of a specific geographical space, an “imagined community” whose image is constructed by people who consider themselves part of the group (Anderson, 1983) or “imaginary geographies” which refers to the perception of space constructed through texts and images (Said, 1990).

**Being Cambodian: What Does That Mean?**

Because an individual possesses multiple identities, it can be argued that one can choose to present oneself using any of the identities one has depending on context. It is arguable that all the interviewees are part of the Cambodian collective because nobody rejected or expressed otherwise when asked what being Cambodian means to them. With this notion, I explore the perception that Cambodian millennials have on national identity by asking them what it means for them to be Cambodian. Using Hall’s (1990) argument on identities being the labels we give to various ways that the narratives of the past position us, I explore which narratives of Cambodia’s past the interviewees choose to position themselves within.
Key words that arose from the responses were “rich history”, “religion”, “language” and “culture” from which the interviewees express a sense of gratitude. Only two interviewees referred to the specific past while describing their sense of being Cambodian:

Being a Cambodian, I am someone who lives in a fast-growing society but still dwelling in a glory past. I feel like even though we are trying so hard to strive in the global phenomenon, one that that Cambodian can’t seem to forget is the glory of Angkor era and the painful past of the Khmer Rouge (Interviewee 2, female, age 21).

I’m really proud of the culture this country has […]. As a Cambodian, I really need to do something for my country. I would try to promote my country by presenting different things hoping that it would shadow the Khmer Rouge (Interviewee 4, female, age 24).

Regardless of their references to the Khmer Rouge when asked to reflect on their identities, the same two interviewees later denied that the narrative of the regime’s history influences their identities at all. It appears that the interviewees chose not to focus on the Khmer Rouge period even though it was in the relatively recent past and it drastically changed every aspect of Cambodian society i.e. many intellectuals and artists were killed and infrastructure was destroyed, resulting in the country having to be rebuilt from almost nothing (Strangio, 2014). Yet, when describing themselves as being Cambodian, grateful for their culture and rich history, they ignored, either consciously or unconsciously, the period in which the things they are grateful for were almost completely destroyed. The denial of the Khmer Rouge expressed by the interviewees can be perceived as shifting between the multiple identities that they possess and choosing the one they prefer to be associated with. If being Cambodian means one has to draw upon a collective memory of the Khmer Rouge, it is possible that the interviewees prefer not to draw on such a past. However, Hall (1990) argues that history defines identity. Therefore, it can be contended that the history of the Khmer Rouge defines millennials as far as their national identity is concerned because they characterize themselves as being part of the Cambodian imagined communities.
Furthermore, I examined their responses on how they think Cambodia is perceived in the world today. Their responses can be simply summed up by two main things: Angkor Wat and the Khmer Rouge. If these are what are represented by perceptions of Cambodia, it can be argued that, to some extent, these two main things also represent the people who identify themselves as part of the collective. Gillis (1996) argues that remembering preserves the core meaning of identity, which defines what is remembered, but also reflects is what forgotten.

When asked candidly if the Khmer Rouge historical narrative influences their identity as Cambodian citizens, four out of six interviewees denied that it affects them at all, although two of these four interviewees brought up the Khmer Rouge past when talking about their identity as being Cambodian earlier. Hence, it is plausible to argue that Cambodian millennials enforce what Connerton (2008) identifies as “humiliated silence”. He contends that people can fall silent because they are terrified, panic or because they find the event indescribable. However, Connerton (2008:68) also characterizes some acts of silence as “an attempt to bury things beyond expression and the reach of memory; yet such silencings [sic], while they are a type of repression, can at the same time be a form of survival, and the desire to forget may be an essential ingredient in that process of survival.” Using Connerton's notion of forgetting as a process of survival, it is worth questioning if this applies to the Cambodian millennials. Although they have not experienced the Khmer Rouge regime because they were born after that time, I would like to synthesize Connerton's type of forgetting with Hirsch's concept of postmemory and argue that the Cambodian millennials attempt to forget or deny the influence of the Khmer Rouge history on their identities as a process of surviving having the stories of their generation replaced by the dominant narratives of the Khmer Rouge. The negation of the Khmer Rouge being part of their identity can be perceived as a safety mechanism as it is possible that millennials recognize the politicized status of the dominant narrative and choose to shield themselves from it. Therefore, they are in denial that the historical past of the Khmer Rouge affects them at all while, in fact, it influences them significantly.
For instance, when asked how Cambodia is being represented in the world today, all of the interviewees expressed that one of the main things Cambodian is known for is its tragic past, but that it should not be this way as the country has many other things to offer such as its culture, religion, people and language. These responses echo Hall’s (1992:292) argument which asserts that we were not born with national identities but that our national identities are instead being formed within and in relation to representation, meaning that a nation itself is a system of cultural representation. The interviewees’ responses on the representation of Cambodia illustrate that they do not want the historical narrative of the Khmer Rouge to be part of their representation. However, this representation, driven by political agenda, is being enforced on the nation by its own government as well as by the outside world. Concerning how Cambodia is being represented in the world, one interviewee reflected:

Bad, very bad. Many NGOs working in Cambodia keep using this narrative victimizing Cambodia. Cambodia has been broadcast to the world through different channels but with similar message: corrupt, traumatized and needs development [sic]. NGOs deploy this narrative to attract the funding so they present Cambodia as it was, not as it is today. Another thing is the government. They manipulating [sic] the world and their own people by doing the same thing. This kind of tactic doesn’t just victimize the country but create a misperception toward Cambodia, as the nation, the country and the people (Interviewee 5, male, age 25).

Besides representation, the Khmer Rouge narrative also influences how Cambodian millennials perceive themselves. Research conducted by Münyas (2008:422) has shown that many youths still perceive themselves as victims of the genocide, mainly in emotional, economic and educational ways, asserting that their lives would have been very different and better in many respects if the Khmer Rouge regime had not taken place. This result is reflected in one interviewee’s response regarding the effect the Khmer Rouge has on her identity:
I do think it affects everything, just like a stone being throw into the lake which causes the ripples. My parents would've raised me differently if they weren't traumatized by the hardship and suffering. It also shaped who I am by learning about what happened to us. I can only imagine that if we didn't have KR [sic], life would be different, [...]. People would've carried on with more ease and less poverty, which means we should have been stronger mentally and physically if no wars and killing had taken place (Interviewee 6, female, age 28).

When attempting to relate memory to identity, it is important to note that memory can be contradictory to an identity that an individual wishes to adopt at any moment (Jedlowski, 2001). Thus, it is plausible to argue that the Cambodian millennials are adopting “policies of identity” (Jedlowski, 2001:36) by selectively using the past that maintains their preferred identity; for example, some of the millennials interviewed skipped over the past of the Khmer Rouge to the glorious past of the Angkor empire, and yet define themselves as a generation that is far removed from the Khmer Rouge era, despite the era being much closer to them chronologically. This can also be reflected in Welsch’s (1990) concept of ‘transculturality’ and the multiplicity of identity. While the narrative of the Khmer Rouge is argued to influence the millennials’ national identity, the Angkorian history is being used to form one of the many cultural identities the millennials possess. In this respect, the memory of the Khmer Rouge can possibly be perceived as contradictory to millennials’ cultural identities.

Conclusively, the narrative of the Khmer Rouge past significantly influences how millennials construct their national identity as a Cambodian. However, the Khmer Rouge narrative should not be perceived to influence or enforced upon the millennials’ other identities. “Freedom in cultural formation belongs among one’s basic rights” (Welsch, 1999:6). The act of denial is argued to be a humiliated silence (Connerton, 2008) constituted by the generation of postmemory (Hirsch, 2008).
CONCLUSION

This history of the Khmer Rouge and its narratives significantly influence how millennials shape their national identity of being Cambodian. However, in the process of identity construction, they are limited in terms of what narratives of the past are available for that process. It appears that the social representation of the Khmer Rouge is tightly controlled and kept in check by the government with its own official narrative which emphasizes the demonization of the Khmer Rouge leaders and violence. This official narrative has been imposed since 1979 and is kept in line with the government’s political agenda. Over forty years later, the demonization narrative is still very much in place because no other alternative narratives are allowed to challenge the official one. People are only allowed to shape the national memory if their vision aligns with social and political objectives of the government (Kansteiner, 2011). There is, indeed, a popular collective memory formed by survivors because the destruction caused by the genocide was far too severe for the nation to forget, even when they were asked to. However, the popular collective memory of the Khmer Rouge is rather similar to what is being narrated by the state. Consequently, there are not many narratives from which the Cambodian millennials can draw from to build their memories, to make sense of what happened, and eventually to construct who they are.

It is unfortunate yet understandable that some millennials are denying that their generation is connected to the Khmer Rouge any more. On the one hand, it is due to their limited understanding of the event, restricted by the state-sanctioned narrative imposed through public education and traditional media. On the other hand, they may have experienced postmemory that is so overwhelming that they wish to forget that part of the history altogether and shield themselves from the politicized narrative of the past. It is concerning that some millennials do not even express an interest into digging deeper and seeking alternative narratives. This illustrates how Cambodia deals with a certain aspect of its past. In comparison to other countries like Germany which have had to deal
with the aftereffects of crimes against humanity, Cambodia seems to still have a long way to go. The nation continues dwelling on its tragic past, which is exploited and utilized by political parties, and projects Cambodia itself as a victim. It has been shown that not much has been learned from the Khmer Rouge genocide by Cambodian millennials other than the number of lives lost to a handful of people being prosecuted in the Khmer Rouge tribunal today. The younger generation is still being prevented from asking too many questions, limiting their knowledge of the event altogether. This coincides with the process of forming their other cultural identities that millennials experience, rendered by the transculturality of modern society. In that process, the act of remembering the Khmer Rouge seems to lose its significance from the perspective of the millennials.

Despite of the findings of this research, it should not be assumed that the way in which history is handled will never change in Cambodia and that the dominant narrative will always be in place. It is important to consider other factors such as the role of media and the political situation. Throughout the whole research, the role of media has been discussed although mainly focusing on a few mediums such as school textbooks, television and film. It is evident that media has a crucial role in the construction of memory, which is considered to be textually mediated (Wertsch, 2002). In this respect, the proliferation of the internet, more advanced media technology, and better access to information could potentially shift how the history of the Khmer Rouge is narrated. For example, the first Khmer Rouge history mobile app was recently launched in July 2017, aiming to end the “collective amnesia” of the atrocities among the younger generation (Wright, 2017). Developed by Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Phnom Penh, the app traces the communist movement beginning in the 1950s up to the current ongoing trials of the Khmer Rouge’s surviving leaders (ibid). Taking the changing media landscape into account, more research, possibly in a longitudinal structure, is needed to better trace whether the collective memory among younger Cambodians is shifting over time with more advanced and accessible media technology. Future research is also needed on the same topic if there is a change in Cambodian politics such as a change in government, because, as shown in this research, political agenda plays a very important role in shaping the national memory and social representation of historical events.
REFERENCES


Angelina Jolie (2017), *First They Killed My Father*.


Bora Chhay (2010), *Lost Loves*.


Kulikar Sotho (2014), *The Last Reel*.


Appendix 1 – Interview Information Sheet

You are invited for an interview conducted as part of research project for a postgraduate student’s final MA dissertation. It is necessary that you fully understand the research objective and the role you play in the project before making decision to participate in the interview. Should you have any question, please ask.

Research title

“Memory and Identity: Do Khmer Rouge Narratives Influence how Cambodian Millennials Shape their Identity?”

Research objective

The research aims to examine Cambodian millennials’ collective understanding of Khmer Rouge narratives and analyze to what extent do the narratives become part of their identity of being Cambodian.

Why are you being selected for this?

You are being selected based on your profile as an urban Cambodian young person who has access to the narratives through different media which provide you with wider perspective on the subject, and based on your willingness to participate in the research.

What is to be expected from the interview?

You will be interviewed via a Skype call. The interview will last approximately one hour. You will be asked a series of questions, some of which can potentially cause discomfort due to the sensitive nature of the subject.

What will happen to the data collected?

The interview will be recorded, transcribed and analyzed thematically. Records and transcripts will remain in Darathtey Din’s possession for a year after the day the
interview is conducted. If necessary, the transcripts may be examined by University of Warwick staff members.

All data collected will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be identified by name in the transcripts and a pseudonym can be used, if requested.

**What if you change your mind not to participate?**

Your participation is based totally on your willingness meaning that you are free to withdraw from the interview without providing any reasons should you wish to do so.

**What will be the outcome of the research?**

The whole dissertation will be available in the University of Warwick dissertation archives.

For further information, please contact Darathtey Din at d.din@warwick.ac.uk or via mobile phone: +447565331856
Appendix 2 – Interview Questions

1. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the term "Khmer Rouge"? Why?
2. How do you learn about Khmer Rouge growing up?
3. How would you describe it?
4. Do you think film as a medium help you to understand the time of Khmer Rouge better?
5. Do they tell the same story you already know or something different?
6. Have you seen any of these films: First They Killed My Father, Lost Loves, The Last Reel?
7. What do you think of each of the film you have seen?
8. Do you think you understand the whole story of what happened during the Khmer Rouge in term of why it happened, how it happened and what are the consequences?
9. How do you think Cambodia is being represented in the world today?
10. With regard to the genocide, how do you think Cambodia is being represented or perceived?
11. What does being Cambodian mean to you?
12. Do you think the Khmer Rouge story affect your identity as a Cambodian citizen?
   a. If no, why?
   b. If yes, how and to what extent?
Appendix 3 – Consent Form

Project title:

“Memory and Identity: Do Khmer Rouge Narratives Influence how Cambodian Millennials Shape their Identity?”

Researcher Information: Darathtey Din, candidate of MA Global Media and Communication, Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, University of Warwick

I agree to take part in the above project and am willing to (please tick those as you agree to):

- Be interviewed □
- Have my interview audio recorded □
- Use video camera during the interview □

I understand that my information will be held by the researcher and agree to it being used for the purposes of research in the above MA research project:

- In the production of a written dissertation □
- On the dissertation archives of the Centre for Cultural And Media Policy Studies at University of Warwick □
- I wish for my data to remain anonymous □

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way.

Name of participant __________________________
Date __________________________ Signature __________________________

Name of Researcher __________________________
Date __________________________ Signature __________________________

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