After The Open Cell: 
The Cambodian Refugee Experience

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for another academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Edward D. Yates
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This work is dedicated to the memory of my mother Margaret Yates (1952-2005) who introduced me to the Cambodian community in Melbourne and who started me on this journey.
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Summary

My thesis tells of the Cambodian refugee experience. It is based on the life stories of ten Cambodian refugees who presently live in Melbourne Australia. The stories that people told me were about their experiences of life before the Pol Pot regime, their survival of one of the twentieth century’s totalitarian regimes, then their travel to and life in the Thai refugee camps and more recently their experiences of resettlement and life in Australia. My work explores the profound impact these life experiences had on Cambodian people and how they remembered and told stories about their past. Further, it considers how these experiences shaped the identities of survivors of the Pol Pot years. It is clear that the Cambodian refugee experience tells us that people can do the most terrible things to other people, but it is also clear that human beings can also survive almost any situation. In this regard my work shows that life is a most precious and fragile thing, but it also has an amazing strength and resilience.
Introduction

My first experience with the Cambodian community was in 2001 when I was invited to Cambodian New Year festivities held in a Melbourne suburban backyard. A makeshift Buddhist temple was situated in the rear of the lot encircled by loquat trees. Women washed a statue of the Buddha with marigold flowers. I was told this was to cleanse the past year. At this time I knew very little about Cambodia or the life experiences of people who came from Cambodia to Australia as refugees. That afternoon I met Kheng who identified as an Australian – Cambodian who was born in Cambodia in 1970 in Kompong Cham. On the eve of Chinese New Year in 1974 her family traveled to Vietnam before the fall of the Lon Nol regime where she stayed during the Pol Pot regime. Kheng told me about her separation from her family members still living in Cambodia when she had become a refugee and of the difficulty of reconnecting with her sister after the collapse of the Pol Pot regime. Later I discovered that this was by no means the typical Cambodian refugee experience, if indeed there is one. Later in 2003 I traveled to Cambodia and meet her extended family. Then aboard a bumpy dusty minivan I travel around the country and visited her family’s village in the province of Kompong Cham. During this trip I walked around Angkor Wat, one of the reminders of past societies which are no more, and visited the high school that was transformed into the internal party torture centre of the Khmer Rouge called S-21 or Toul Sleng. I was both fascinated by the stories people told and equally troubled by the silences of unspoken experience.

Returning to Melbourne in 2003, the media was then running with stories of asylum seekers – ‘boat people’ – being locked up in the Maribyrnong and Villawood detention centers as ‘illegal entrants’ and ‘queue jumpers’ (Mares 2001; Marr and Wilkinson 2003). There were protests outside the detention centers and one center was set on fire. Some asylum seekers sewed their lips together in silent protest. To me this seemed to represent a violent attempt to forget the experiences and persistence of the ‘other’ in Australia. While the story of refugees after 1991 got quite entangled in larger issues of terrorism and threat (Marr and Wilkinson 2003, p. 143), the story of Cambodian refugees seemed to belong to an earlier period. Between 1976 and 1991, 2,500 Cambodians and Vietnamese arrived in...
Australia by boat (McMaster 2001, p. 54). This constituted less than two percent of the total refugees from both Cambodia and Vietnam in Australia. Popular reaction represented by the media in the 1980s suggests some resistance to this arrival of people on Australian shores. The Press coined headlines of ‘Yellow Peril’ and predicted an ‘invasion’ or ‘floods’ of boat people (McMaster 2001, pp. 51-2). The usage of such terms as ‘invasion’ seems out of proportion to the number of refugees that arrived by boat at this time. And like the refugees aboard the sinking boat who were rescued by the MV Tampa in August 2001, there were instances in the 1980s of Cambodian and Vietnamese people being left to drown (Marr and Wilkinson 2003, p. 17). Cambodian refugees living in Melbourne Australia are the survivors of one of the late twentieth century’s totalitarian regimes which perpetrated genocidal killing between 1975 and 1978. In the years after 1975 there were some 18,000 people from Cambodia who came to Australia as refugees (Jupp 1994, p. 23). My thesis tells something of their story.

By 2003 the memory of the Cambodian refugee experience in the Australian context had faded into the background and had probably been all but forgotten by most Australians, although this is perhaps part of the simplification process involved in collective remembering (Halbwachs 1992; Wertsch 2002). At the same time there seemed little speaking space for Cambodian people in Australia (Lunn 2004). Storytellers like Bo and Chhon both spoke of the need for the story of the Cambodian refugees who came to Australia to be told. Bo was born in Cambodia in 1968 and now works as a social worker said ‘There are many of us outside, refugees who came to Western countries, but then you look at the documentaries you can hardly see any one of us, and not much written material…I feel Cambodians were left behind or ignored.’ Chhon was born in 1950 and works as an interpreter echoed this remark and said ‘Many Cambodian people when they talking about their own history, their experience during Pol Pot time they just cry tears…because they feel very bad. I reckon many Cambodian people would like to express their experience during Pol Pot, for anyone that is interested to listen.’

The stories told by people from Cambodia about their experiences can contribute to understanding a number of aspects of the refugee experience, including fleeing from violence, facing danger crossing borders and resettling in a third country. The experience could also raise moral questions about our responsibilities to other people. My thesis, then,
is concerned with understanding the experience of Cambodian refugees through the stories that they tell about themselves. Specifically, what was the Cambodian refugee experience? And how has this experience shaped the lives, stories and identities of Cambodian people living in Australia today?

Accounts from survivors of the Pol Pot regime have been used, but with an analytical intent by historians and anthropologists to develop explanations of what happened during the period of Pol Pot’s rule and the years of genocide (Chandler 1992b; Hinton 1998a, 2005; Kiernan 1997; Margolin 1999; Vickery 1999). There has been less attention given to attempting to understand the experiences of survivors and what such experiences have meant for them and their lives. This is not to say that historians and anthropologists have ignored the experiences of survivors. Rather accounts of survivors have been used as texture and illustration of events that occurred in Cambodia from 1975 to 1978, instead of being a focus for understanding the experiences of survivors. Historians have also tended to be more focused on the lives of the elites within Cambodia in relation to the way by which events unfolded, exemplified by David Chandler’s account of Pol Pot’s life (1992a) or his investigation of the ‘attitude toward information that prolonged isolation and clandestinity had fostered among these men and women at the center of the party’ (Chandler 1990, p. 166 *my emphasis*). Nic Dunlop’s (2005) account of the Pol Pot regime’s most senior torturer and executioner, comrade Duch, also draws attention to the elites within the Communist Party of Kampuchea known as the Khmer Rouge. Historical sociology has also been concerned with the description of the Pol Pot regime and how the violence might be understood in relation to other regimes where atrocities and mass killings have occurred (Mann 2005).

In terms of other genres like biography there are significant numbers of biographical accounts by survivors (Him 2000; Ngor 1988; Pran 1997; Seng 2005; Szymusiak 1999; Ung, K 2009; Ung, L 2000; Yathay 1988). It has been Cambodians who were located in the middle classes during the Lon Nol regime from 1970 to 1975 and who settled in the United States of America that have written most of these accounts. However, Richard Lunn (2004) has compiled a selection of five stories of survivors who came to Australia. Survivors’ accounts have largely focused on survival during the Pol Pot regime and do not often deal with refugee or resettlement experiences in a third country with as greater depth,
although Loung Ung (2005) and Alice Pung (2006) have both written about their lives in the US and Australia respectively. In addition, the accounts of survivors rarely connect with larger historical, psychological, sociological or anthropological understandings of social life. This is not to diminish the validity of such life stories. Indeed my thesis is completely reliant upon the stories of survivors and the life stories told by ten people from Cambodia form a basis for my research. But I want to use such powerful first person narratives to attempt to understand the way people experience violent situations, remember the past and use stories to construct their identities. The tension between more removed abstract social analysis and individual narratives is difficult to resolve. This thesis attempts to make a connection between individual lives and some social theory without diminishing the primacy of the stories of the people I worked with. Equally the stories themselves offer clues about how life is both experienced on an individual level, in terms of inwardly making sense, as well as being externally part of an interconnected social life.

Story telling, whether it is oral or textual makes sense of the past and records experience. Life story research as a method, I felt, was an appropriate way to preserve the individual character of each person and grapple with memory, experience, culture and identity (Bruner, J 1996; Linde 1993, 2009; Quinn 2005; Riessman 1993). As Chanfrault-Duchet (1991, p. 77) and Plummer (2001) have proposed, life story research accounts for a narrator’s life until the point at which the interview is done and this offers one invaluable way into our experience. Telling stories is also part of everyday life and throughout time people have told stories to one another. Indeed, as Margaret Somers states, ‘social life is itself storied and…narrative is an ontological condition of social life’ (1994, p. 38, original emphasis). In this case life histories for each storyteller were created by interviewing each person two or more times over several hours and then working with each storyteller to construct their life story which was told in the first person using their own words. To understand each person’s experiences and to grasp the meaning of the Cambodian refugee experience more broadly I interpreted these narratives.

The term ‘experience’ was an appropriate way of conceiving what was contained in the narratives. Edward Bruner, an anthropologist, says that an experience ‘refers to an active self, to a human being who not only engages in but shapes an action…we describe the
behavior of others but we characterize our own experience’ (1986, p. 5). Further, Bruner states

The difficulty with experience, however, is that we can only experience our own life, what is received by our consciousness. We can never know completely another’s experiences, even though we have many clues and make inferences all the time. Others may be willing to share their experiences, but everyone censors or represses, or may not be fully aware of or be able to articulate, certain aspects of what has been experienced (1986, p. 5).

So how is the limitation of individual experience overcome? According to Bruner, we overcome the limitations by interpreting expressions. Expressions are ‘representations, performances, objectifications, or texts’ (Dilthey, 1976: 230 cited in Bruner 1986, p. 5). Hence, understanding the meaning of each person’s experiences was developed via interpretation of each storyteller’s narrative as a text. Interpretation of storyteller’s experiences was done as an inter-textual exchange between narrators’ words and other historical, biographical, psychological, sociological, and anthropological texts. Thus this work is both a dialogue and necessarily interdisciplinary in character.

In their stories Cambodian people spoke with me about a significant range of experiences. All told me about their lives before the April 17th revolution of 1975, their survival of the Pol Pot regime, which was followed by their escape from Cambodia to refugee camps in Thailand and then finally told of their resettlement in Australia. Listening to the stories was an emotionally moving experience. Some stories of past experiences were deeply saddening while other stories were joyous and triumphant. Some stories moved both the narrators and me to tears. All helped me to answer my basic question: what was it like to be a Cambodian who survived the genocidal regime of 1975-1978 and to become a refugee who now lives in Australia?

In Chapter 1 I address three questions that contribute to understanding the Cambodian refugee experience. What was life was like before the Pol Pot regime? How were each of the narrators socially located? And what events led to the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975? This chapter describes Cambodian peoples’ experiences before the Pol Pot regime (known as Democratic Kampuchea) and it does this through the ten narrators stories about their
lives during the years before April 17th 1975. By situating the narratives told by Cambodian narrators alongside historical research, I develop a sense of what social life was like during this time. Chapter 1 identifies each of the ten narrators through a series of stories about their lives. Hence each narrator is socially located via a process of narrative ‘emplotment’ (Ricoeur 1981, 1992, 2004). Through this narration the meanings of the memories of life before Pol Pot time to Cambodian storytellers can begin to be explored. I contend that such remembering contained a longing for what might have been different. The memories people told me about were often fond memories that were tinged with sadness of family and loved ones who later died during the Pol Pot regime. What became clear was that the way historians narrated the time before 1970 was somewhat different to the day-to-day experiences that people told me about. I also argue that a range of factors led to the Khmer Rouge takeover and describe how the narrators remembered violence before the Pol Pot regime.

One factor that led to increased support for the Khmer Rouge was the bombing by US B-52s throughout the country between 1969 and 1970 (Shawcross 1991). The people I spoke with suggested that once people had lost their home, farm and family they would either go to the city or join the communists. However, it is also evident that the war did not necessarily greatly disrupt everyday life for some people living in the cities. Others described how the Lon Nol soldiers were corrupt and often threatening. This behaviour also likely led to increased support for the communists who were ‘very nice speaking’ even if they ‘want to take you to kill’ according to Kien who was born in 1945 and is now a stay at home grandmother. Equally the Cambodian armed forces were not able to control the countryside either before the 1970 coup against Sihanouk or afterward (Corfield 1994). The ousted Prince Sihanouk throwing his support behind the communists (Sihanouk 1973) also contributed towards the more rapid demise of the Lon Nol regime (Chandler 1992b; Kiernan 1997; Vickery 1999). A significant number of events and historical circumstances led to the success of the Khmer Rouge.

Over 2 million people died during the Pol Pot regime from a combination of mass killings, starvation and disease (Kiernan 1997; Mann 2005; Margolin 1999; Vickery 1999). For analytical purposes I discuss the experiences of violence and terror separately in chapter three, although the suffering during the Pol Pot regime also constituted a form of extreme
structural violence (Farmer 1997; Lutz and Nonini 1999). Chapter 2 explores how was social life experienced during the Pol Pot regime? The ‘new people’ who were evacuated from the cities, moved around the country, organized into work groups and often separated from family members found this experience distressing and disorienting. I argue that people deployed a range of strategies to survive during this time, such as stealing food, remaining silent, lying about who they were or even pretending to be sick. I also argue that surviving the Pol Pot regime can be understood as an experience of surviving totalitarianism (Arendt 1951; Todorov 1996). The Pol Pot regime tried to exercise total control over every aspect of social life, including where a person lived, how long they worked and what and how much they ate. Children were separated from their parents and placed into ‘boy unity’ or ‘girl unity’ groups. Nor was the regime content to control people’s behaviour: at night communist cadres lectured the ‘new people’ about communist ideals and correct behaviour. Cambodian people today viewed the regime as a jail with walls made of hunger and dense jungle. During this time, the country became in effect an ‘open cell’ according to Bo. Taking account of scholarly reservations about the extent to which any regime ever achieves a totalitarian effect, at the very least, this was a regime which was totalitarian in its ambitions. Here I take examine Todorov’s (1996) incisive account of the impact of totalitarian ambitions have on moral life and I show that people still acted in moral ways, despite the desperate character of the situation and even though the situation placed people in morally ambiguous positions. The situation which at moments approached Hobbes’ (1651) famous account of a state a nature as a ‘war of all against all’. In this respect the survival of the regime is a testament to ‘ordinary’ moral virtues of dignity, caring for others and maintaining a life of the mind (Todorov 1996). The experience of day-to-day, hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute survival though, likely felt like the ultimate competition for survival for Cambodian people who were at times forced to compete with others.

In Chapter 3 I turn to the experience and character of violence set loose by the collective Democratic Kampuchean regime. What was the experience of violence like during the Pol Pot regime? And, how were the Khmer Rouge able to kill? This chapter examines what the experiences of survivors say about such violence and suggests how the Khmer Rouge able to bring themselves to kill other people. I argue that the violence escalated during the regime and started with symbolic acts of violation like ordering people to kill their dogs.
and became greater and greater until people were killed for merely laughing. The exception to this is the killing of members of the Lon Nol armed forces, who if found were usually killed immediately. The violence of the regime was experienced as arbitrary, confusing, silencing and ambiguous and as scholars have noted this is part of the experience of terror (Arendt 1951; Isla 1998; Taussig 1987). The experience of violence represents an *aporia*, where multiple interpretations are possible and where there is an ambiguity as to how and why the violence occurred. This points to a problem with the long dominant interpretive framework associated with Weber’s rational intent, action and outcome (Abell 1996). This interpretive frame imposes a linear form through the retrospective character of narrative and is, as Alfred Schutz (1974) argued, a problematic way of understanding violence. Chapter 3 also argues that the violence was enacted by ordinary people (Arendt 1963; Browning 1992; Hinton 1998b; Todorov 1996) who were constituted as killers through a raft of social, political and cultural formations. Further, I attempt to understand how people were able to bring themselves to kill, when most often people avoid violence and a bad performing violent actions (Browning 1992; Collins 2008). I contend that the practice of killing was not entirely a product of ideology or the goals of political organization but was brought into being and able to be carried out through a range of circumstances that came into being during the regime, which had social, moral, psychological and cultural elements. Drawing upon the work of a variety of theorists (Adams 2007; Browning 1992; Collins 2008; Foucault 1975; Hinton 1996, 1998a, 2005; Katz 1988; Manjoo 2008; Zimbardo 2007) I argue that the violence can best be understood by examining a range of social influences upon those who killed. These influences include the rapid enjoyment of power, heightened deindividuation and dehumanization. The use of categories like ‘enemies’ and ‘new people’ were capable of constituting violence against such groups as moral acts for the killers. Further, such violence was consonant with Cambodian cultural conceptions of revenge.

In Chapter 4 I examine the difficult paths that people walked to escape from Cambodia. Why did people leave? What risks did they take when they escaped? What was life like in the refugee camps? And how did the experience of leaving Cambodia and becoming a refugee shape Cambodian identity? It is plain that for many people it was very difficult to leave Cambodia even though people treated leaving Cambodia to go to a refugee camp in Thailand as ‘escape’. People who escaped were courageous and took a significant risk
crossing the border. I argue that there were a number of reasons that people wanted to leave Cambodia and that violence and knowledge of such risks did not necessarily deter those who left (CCSDPT 1983; Kiernan 1997; Mortland 1996; Smith-Hefner 1999; Vickery 1999). In this regard one narrator said, ‘Not scared anymore’ and another said, ‘Scared, but not scared like I am now.’ If they had thought leaving Cambodia meant freedom from violence they were mistaken. In the border regions in between Cambodia and Thailand and once they had arrived in the refugee camps Cambodian people experienced further violence. In 1977 Thai soldiers killed approximately a thousand Cambodian refugees seeking safety (Kiernan 1997, p. 368). Many people also suffered the violence of the jow who robbed, assaulted, raped and killed many refugees in the border region. I argue that the border regions were a space where there was a disengagement of ‘normal’ social conventions and represent an instance of a ‘moral holiday’ (Collins 2008, p. 243). Some of the worst violence on the border occurred in 1979 when some forty two thousand refugees were forced back into Cambodia through a minefield in the mountainous region of Phnom-Dong-Raik by a Thai military operation (Chan 2004, pp. 43-4). I offer a detailed description in Chapter 4 of the experience of surviving the horrors of the minefield in Phnom-Dong-Raik through the story one person told me. One contributing factor to the military violence that Cambodian refugees faced was that Thailand was not a signatory to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees (CCSDPT 1983; Chan 2004; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2006), hence Cambodians in the country were accordingly classified as ‘illegal immigrants’ and were not protected under international law. In this respect I aim to make a contribution to the description of forced migration. Narrators also told of the assistance of others (CCSDPT 1983; Elvey 1993; Healy 1993; Maat 1993) which restored some trust in other people. I contend that the experiences of traveling through the border regions and in the refugee camps and transformed Cambodian refugees’ sense of who they are.

In Chapter 5 I explore the experiences of resettling in Melbourne, Australia. What was the experience of resettling in Melbourne Australia like for Cambodian refugees? How did they describe this experience? And what did resettlement mean for them? In this chapter I argue that Cambodian people faced the strangeness of a new country, including misunderstandings by Australians, hard work, marginalization through language and even hostile reactions by some Australians. But they also regained trust, engaged in education
and helped others. People told of being elated upon arrival in Melbourne: one narrator remembered that he saw everything as ‘beautiful’. Others had told that their perception in the refugee camps of going to Western countries was like going to ‘heaven’. In this regard Cambodian refugees had high expectations of their new life in Australia. However, the reality of life in Melbourne meant that narrators recalled a number of ‘shocks’. One narrator told of being ‘disappointed’ when he saw houses surrounded by trees instead of the skyscrapers found in the city of Melbourne. Others said that they found Melbourne ‘cold’ and ‘very quiet’ and if they had known this they would not have come. In the refugee hostels, narrators told of their reactions to the food they were given. One told how her mother began to lose weight after arriving in Australia because of the ‘smell of the butter’ and compared the smell to walking ‘past a sewer’. In this chapter I argue that these reactions informed their feeling of being ‘different’ in Australia and was part of an experience of ‘cultural shock’ (Ting-Toomey 1999). The ten narrators occasionally encountered white Anglo-Saxon Australians who acted in a dominant manner towards them (Hage 1998). These Cambodians drew on pre-existing strengths and culturally appropriate modes of negotiating these hostile encounters and were able to ‘save face’ (Edelmann 1994; Gao 1998; Goffman 1963; Ting-Toomey 1994). People remembered that during resettlement a number of influences shifted their identities, including incorporation in some instances of a ‘Christian’ identity. I argue that religious identities were incorporated into existing Cambodian identities, rather than religious conversion involving the abandonment of cultural identity, as suggested by Smith-Hefner (1999). In this regard I suggest that incorporation of other non-Buddhist religious practices and beliefs may stem from the generous respect offered by Cambodians to other different cultures and in this regard is actually somewhat congruent with Cambodian culture. After coming to Australia it is evident that many Cambodian people set about helping other people. For some this was helping family members, for others it was helping members of the Cambodian refugee community, while for others ‘helping others’ was an existential quest which shaped their desire to become perhaps a nurse and then a social worker. This also marked a transition on a continuum of a person’s sense of being a victim to survivor to active empowered social agent.

In Chapter 6 I reflect on Cambodian refugee identity in Australia. I ask where do certain identities begin and end and how ‘real’ such identities are in the Australian social context?
This discussion rests on notions of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’. Cambodian people are the same in many respects to white Anglo-Saxon Australians and the same as other Cambodians but they are also different to white Anglo-Saxon Australians and different to one another. How can we understand both ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’ contained within an identity? For instance a person changes over time yet also remains the same. How can ‘identity’ then be understood in relation to the Cambodian refugee experience? Conversely and dialectically, how can the ‘Cambodian refugee experience’ contribute to a discussion of identity?

I suggest that Cambodian people spoke through their narratives to make a specific claim about who they were in Australian society. For example, one storyteller Lackanary said ‘I consider myself Cambodian-Australian I mean, technically Cambodia is no longer my country, because I don’t have Cambodian passport.’ These are important claims of identity. They informed a greater understanding of the social formation of multicultural Australian society and the importance of understanding difference to oneself. To some extent the articulation of various ‘ethnic,’ ‘national’ and ‘racial’ identities is discursively influenced and such articulation points to the various discourses available to Cambodian people, national and otherwise, to constitute their identities (Ang 2001; Hage 1998; Hanson 1996; Marr and Wilkinson 2003). Such identities, although socially constructed, may be experienced as being ‘real’ in everyday life (Alcoff 2002; Pettman 1992). Further in this chapter I critically examine a number of theories of ‘ethnic’ identity (Ang 2001; Fook 2001; Ting-Toomey 1999) that are congruent with the articulation of Cambodian identity by narrators.

Here I argue that many theoretical conceptions of identity, despite highlighting the socially and historically contingent, situational, and contextual dynamics of identity formation still rest upon binary, essentialist or fundamental framings of identity even when their proponents are seemingly opposed to these essentialist conception. I also argue that narrative identity (Pucci 1992; Ricoeur 1992, 2004; Somers 1994; Somers and Gibson 1994) may be useful in elaborating upon a non-essentialist conception of ethnic identity as narrative identity is able to take into consideration the raft of experiences that influence and constitute that person’s identity over time. Further, such a configuration for understanding another’s ‘identity’ in this way also depends on certain application of ethical principles.
such as listening to others and engaging in a dialogue across difference, so as to realize the relativity of one’s own culture (Todorov 1999). The representation of such exchanges across difference as dialogue, that does not substitute interpretation in the place of narrative but alongside narrative, is my response to some of the problems with the representation of others (Alcoff 1995; Spivak 1988).

In Chapter 7 I examine the connection between memories, experiences, stories and identities of people from Cambodia living in Melbourne Australia. The social meanings given to Cambodian memories may contribute to the broader discussion of memory, history and morality. Memory is important as it is a medium to apprehend experience (Benjamin 1999). Undoubtedly, memory is our most precious possession as human beings. Without memory we have no sense of who we are and who others are. A life without memory would be unnavigable, indeed unlivable. And although our cells may change millions of times over our memories persist (Rose 1993). This suggests that people have an incredible will to maintain who they are and hold themselves together. Memory then has a social character, more than neurons in the brain (Rose 1993), and can also be shared or collective (Frisch 1990; Halbwachs 1992; Margalit 2002; Rose 1993). This chapter demonstrates that memory of who we are allows us to go on being who we are and perpetuates our identities. Some memories, however, are unwanted and carry or involve a terrible burden. We do not always live particularly well with a memory of atrocity. Some memories, I suggest, have the capacity to destroy us (Angier 2002; Todorov 1996). If the Cambodian association with remembering is ‘re-experiencing’ (Wertsch 2002) then people may attempt to intentionally forget the past as it may be simply too painful to remember. To suggest such forgetting for the sake of moving on with one’s life, however, may not be horrendous (Margalit 2002). But forgetting is a problem for the reproduction and perpetuation of our identities throughout time (Weinrich 1997), nor can forgetting be intentional (Margalit 2002).

This chapter also explores the relationship between memory and history. In many respects my thesis functions as a sort of mnemonic device for the Cambodian memory of atrocity in its attempt to bring into focus past events. From this position I argue we have responsibilities to other people, such as listening to others, attempting to understand others, and helping others. It does seem to be most important to remember past atrocities with those who have experienced such events, who want to remember, or who cannot stop
remembering, as to perhaps share the burden of such memory. As from the memory of the Cambodian experience it is clear that human beings are capable of doing terrible things to other human beings, but from such experience it is also evident that people can survive almost anything. The Cambodian experience also attests to a common humanity through a shared experience of human fragility and precarious ‘grievable’ life (Butler 2004). Life, it seems, is a most fragile thing, but it also has an incredible resilience.
The Storytellers

Bo

Bo was born in Cambodia into a middle class Chinese-Khmer family in 1968, and after surviving the Pol Pot regime she came to Australia in 1982 as a refugee. Today lives in a southeastern suburb of Melbourne with her partner and her two sons. Today she works as a social worker. She still has a connection with Buddhism, even though she converted to Christianity.

Kien

Kien was born in Cambodia in 1945 into a rural Khmer family. She married her Chinese husband in 1964 and lived with his family in the southern coastal city of Kompong Som (now Sihanoukville). She survived the Pol Pot regime and came to Australia in 1982 as a refugee via Thailand with her three children. Today she lives with her husband in a southeastern suburb of Melbourne, and regularly cares for two of her grandchildren. She is a Buddhist and goes to pray at the temple in Springvale.

Chin

Chin was born in Cambodia in 1945 into a large middle class Chinese family located in the coastal city of Kampot. He had 13 brothers and sisters before the Pol Pot regime, and five of them were killed during the Pol Pot regime. He speaks Khmer, Vietnamese, Thai, English and four dialects of Chinese. Chin came to Australia in 1981 with his Vietnamese wife, since then he has run a successful business, lost and found a son, divorced, set himself on fire, served jail time, and found peace living with his daughter looking after his grandchildren.

Long
Long was born in Cambodia in the northern province of Battambang in 1953. His parents came to Cambodia from China in the 1940s. He escaped to Thailand just before the Khmer Rouge took power in April 1975, and stayed on the border of Thailand where he listened attentively to the news of events unfolding inside Cambodia. After resettling in Melbourne in 1978 he married a Thai-Chinese woman, today they have two sons and a daughter. In Melbourne he became a born again Christian. He worked for Holden for 22 years and likes to play ping-pong.

Maly

Maly was born in Cambodia in 1957 into a large Buddhist family, he had eight brothers and sisters in total. He lost three siblings during the Pol Pot regime. He escaped to Thailand in 1978 and was sent back by the Thai government through the minefields in the mountains of Phnom Dong Raik, before successfully getting to a third country. Most of his siblings went to France after 1978, but he arrived in Australia on the 2nd of August 1980. He converted to Christianity, got married in Australia and today has two sons and a daughter. His eldest son is an Australian Rules football fanatic.

Chhon

Chhon was born in Cambodia in 1950. At age eight he fell out of a Guava tree and injured his spine. After he was in a plaster cast, traditional Khmer medicine was rubbed on his legs and was fortunately able to walk again, although the injury left him with a disability. After this event he later became a Buddhist monk, only quitting the monastery after American bombing throughout the countryside. He arrived in Australia on the 28th of February 1985. Today he lives in a northern suburb of Melbourne with his wife and two young rascally sons. He works as a teacher’s aid and Cambodian interpreter.

Kheng

Kheng was born in Cambodia in 1970 in Kompong Cham. Before the fall of the Lon Nol regime, on the eve of Chinese New Year in 1974 she traveled to Vietnam with her family where she stayed throughout the entire Pol Pot regime. In Vietnam her family was exposed
to bombing towards the end of the Vietnam War that ground to a halt in April 30th 1975. Later, the Vietnamese military authority forced her family out from their apartment that they had bought at gunpoint and into a refugee camp. She then traveled back through Cambodia to Thailand and to Khao-I-Dang refugee camp. On the 24th of June 1982, aged twelve, Kheng arrived in Melbourne Australia. She had spent most of her life as a refugee. She then went to high school, then university where she trained to be an engineer. Today she sometimes lives in Northern Melbourne with her partner when she is not caring for her mother in the south east of Melbourne.

Lackanary

Lackanary was born in 1964 into a middle class family based in Phnom Penh. Before 1975 his mother owned a car yard and his father was an officer under general Lon Nol. After the takeover by the Khmer Rouge on April 17th 1975 his father was immediately arrested and killed. He then stayed in his mother’s hometown in Svay Rieng province near the Vietnamese-Cambodian border after people were evacuated from the cities. He witnessed people being killed in the rice fields and was never sure if he was going to be killed next. Then he was a stretcher-bearer during the Khmer Rouge’s war against the Vietnamese communists from 1977 until 1978. After the fall of the Pol Pot regime he worked in a warehouse for some time under the Vietnamese authority. But after being too critical of the Vietnamese authority he left for Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in 1983. In Khao-I-Dang he converted to Catholicism. Lackanary arrived in Australia on the 13th of April 1987 and now lives in a southeastern suburb with his wife and daughter. He works out on his home gym every morning ‘like religion.’

Phuoc

Phuoc was born in 1942 into a large Chinese family based between Phnom Penh and Kompong Som. He married a Khmer woman and as an adult he managed a hotel in Kompong Som that mostly catered for French people before the April 17th takeover by the Khmer Rouge. He was moved around the countryside a number of times throughout the Pol Pot regime and separated repeatedly from his family members. Two of his brothers and his mother died during the Pol Pot regime when they were separated from him. He traveled
to Khao-I-Dang refugee camp after the fall of the Pol Pot regime and arrived in Australia in 1982. In Australia Phuoc has raised a family to adulthood and now cares for his grandchildren and plays with his grandsons almost every afternoon. He speaks the Chinese dialect of Hainan and today strongly identifies being both Chinese and Confucian.

Kim

Kim was born in Cambodia in 1958 in Kandal province which is near Kompong Cham. His parents were duck farmers before the Pol Pot regime. After surviving the Pol Pot regime he left Cambodia in 1979 for Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, and in February 1983 he arrived in Australia. Shortly after his arrival he began work in a factory and to this day works on a factory line. In 1985 he became an Australian citizen and has struggled to get his remaining family members from Cambodia to Australia and his sister was the last member to arrive in 2003. He now lives in a northern suburb with his wife and two children.
Chapter 1: Life in Cambodia 1945-1975

When Lon Nol took power the first year is alright, but when Pol Pot got strong and the Lon Nol soldier come and ask some food, some drink, some money...Sometimes they would take a grenade and roll it on the table in front of you and ask for some money. That was very scary, about '73. Although when Lon Nol had first taken over still not too bad, but worse, worse, worse...The people in the city they wish, and me too, I wish Pol Pot come very soon to finish that thing. But who knows that Pol Pot worse than Lon Nol. – Kien

Every story has a beginning. In many stories, especially like those which will be told here, there is a time before bad things began to happen and when life was good or normal or simply uneventful. This chapter tells of such a time in the lives of the Cambodian people I spoke with. In this chapter I address three questions: What was life in Cambodia like for the people I spoke with before April 17, 1975? What led to the seizure of power by the Khmer Rouge? What kind of positions did the people I spoke with occupy?

These questions deeply matter as they catch some of the essential tensions between the kind of general historical narrative historians produce, and the highly particular accounts which a person might offer of their own life. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Working backwards and forwards between the general and the particular reminds us of Marx’s famous and much cited observation that people make their own history but not under circumstances of their own making. The narratives of individuals tell us that we act on the basis of what we know in circumstances which the general narratives of historians disclose as both influential yet not always knowable by those who act and choose to act in particular ways.

Of the ten people I interviewed, Kien, Chin and Phuoc were born in the early to mid 1940’s and were therefore adults when Cambodia began to slide towards the Pol Pot years. Others like Long, Chhon, Kim and Maly were born in the 1950’s and were teenagers when the Khmer Rouge took over. While another three, Kheng, Bo and Lackanary, were children during the Pol Pot years. Kien, Chhon, Kim, Lackanary and Maly identified more strongly
with Khmer ancestry, while Chin, Long and Phuoc identified strongly with Chinese ancestry. Bo and Kheng identified as being Australian-Cambodians. Although this identity is not clear-cut, for example those who saw themselves as more Khmer also spoke of having some Chinese ancestry. In part my thesis works towards understanding this complexity of identity through the stories people chose to tell about themselves.

In this chapter I describe what life was like in Cambodia before the Pol Pot years through the stories of the ten Cambodian narrators. I link the big picture historical narrative to the lives of the ten people I spoke with using a simple narrative device. It should be noted that this chapter is not an account of the entirety of Cambodian history before 1975. In particular I offer an account of life experienced by people who were not members of the elite. But I say this acknowledging Michael Vickery’s (1999) argument that the history of Cambodia has been biased towards the perspectives of the wealthier Cambodian middle classes. In saying this I do not claim that the ten narrators are therefore somehow representative of the whole of Cambodian social life. The different social locations and experiences of the various narrators reminds us that understanding Cambodian social life and the tensions that existed prior to the Pol Pot regime will need to take into account of different social positions. I also put the storyteller’s narratives in a chronological sequence that more or less follows the order of historic events.

Paul Ricoeur has insisted that understanding an author’s position is one of the central and most valuable points made by those who engage in hermeneutic work. This he says is needed if we are to struggle against misunderstanding (Ricoeur 1981, p. 46). Those who engage in the kind of hermeneutic project Ricoeur has done so much to promote, rely both on general discourses (like the histories of Cambodia, or biographies by Cambodian writers) as well as more particular or ‘individual’ accounts offered in this case by the ten Cambodians I spoke with. Therefore it is important to start somewhat at the beginning of the lives of the people I interviewed so as to begin the process of narrative emplotment that may allow for the development of a character (identity) in text. Ricoeur says that ‘What must be reached is the subjectivity of the one who speaks, the language being forgotten’ (1981, p. 47). This can be accomplished by paying attention to the singular, by which he means the uniqueness of something like a person’s life story. At the same time he points to a tension between general discourse and the nature of individual experiences. Ricoeur
suggests that there is a tension between the ‘sameness’ of identity and the ‘difference’ of identity. A person remains the same over time and their life experience is unique, but they also change and have a diverse range of experiences and have different identities at different points of time. According to Ricoeur this tension is reconciled through narrative itself. He claimed that ‘The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character’ (1992, pp. 147-8). Ricoeur is suggesting that identity formation is a dialectical process, which operates backward into the past and forward into the future, strung together by individual narrative. However, he also warned that ‘We never directly grasp an individuality, but grasp only its difference from others and from ourselves’ (1981, p. 47). One implication of this is that the Cambodian experience can only be grasped in the ways it is different to other people’s experiences. But Ricoeur says that it is because our lives create external forms, like stories, that we offer to others for ‘deciphering’ we also create the possibility of others knowing us and thus how we are different or the same as them (Ricoeur 1981, p. 50).

Recording narratives as life stories is one way that we can interpret other people’s experiences. By listening to other people’s stories about their lives we can attempt to know something of the experiences of people who are different to ourselves. In this regard I contend that learning how the ‘other’ is different and the same as us we can attempt to know the other. By interpreting unique personal narratives alongside much more general historical narratives some suggestions can be made about how the ten Cambodian people who spoke with me experienced life before the Pol Pot regime.

**The decline of French rule and the rise of the Khmer Monarch**

In the late 1800’s French colonial authorities came to hold power in Cambodia. According to David Chandler (1992b) the history of the French presence in Cambodia can be broken into three distinct periods. Between 1883 and 1884 France made Cambodia a French protectorate. The second period began with the suppression of a major rebellion from 1886 until King Norodom’s death in 1904. The Second World War marked the end of the third period. Chandler argues that after 1941 the French were more concerned with maintaining
their presence rather than exerting wider control over the country (1992b, p. 137). But the French influenced the appointment of an 18-year-old Sihanouk to the throne in 1941, in the hope that he would be easily controlled (Corfield 1994, p. 6). This was not to be the case.

Throughout the Second World War Japanese military forces occupied Cambodia alongside the French. The Japanese, unlike the French, had some sympathy with anti-colonial struggles (Chandler 1992b, p. 167). Vichy rule in France (when the French government collaborated with occupying Nazi Germany) also meant decreased French control over Cambodian officials who gained some autonomy, but also meant increased repression in terms of French attempts to suppress Cambodian nationalism. During the years of the Second World War Cambodian school leavers were organized into 500 strong voluntary paramilitary units by the Japanese during the Vichy era called *Yuvan Kampucheat* (Corfield 1994, p. 8). Chandler says the organization of Cambodians into paramilitary units was when Cambodians first experienced a form of belonging outside of their families or the *sangha* – the Buddhist monastic order (1992b, pp. 104, 65).

In 1942 there was a surge of nationalism in Cambodia. This came about because of a number of significant events. A protest rally was organized on the 20th of July 1942 where half the participants were monks because a rebellious monk called Hem Chieu had been arrested by the French authorities. The protest organizers were then quickly rounded up by the French and imprisoned. The nationalist leader Son Ngoc Thanh who helped organize the protest would leave Cambodia to avoid imprisonment (Chandler 1992b, p. 168). This protest arguably signified the presence of nationalist thought and anti-colonial resistance by Cambodians. Chandler argues that there was a growth of nationalism between 1944 and 1945 in reaction to the roman alphabet being pushed onto the country (1992b, p. 170). The intended romanization was halted when the Japanese removed French officials from their posts at gunpoint. Sihanouk then declared Cambodia’s independence from France in March 1945. However, the French under Charles de Gaulle returned to Cambodia at the end of the Second World War.

In 1948 the French tried to regain their influence in Cambodia. They renamed the streets using French names and abolished the public holidays that celebrated the demonstration of monks in 1942 and Sihanouk’s declaration of independence in 1945 (Chandler 1992b, p.
By 1949 the French, under pressure to grant some greater autonomy to Cambodia, signed a treaty. This treaty gave the Cambodian National Assembly and Sihanouk greater control over some foreign affairs as well as a small area of independent military control in Battambang and Siem Reap, although the French remained firmly in control over finance, defense and customs (Chandler 1992b, p. 177).

Chandler argues that from 1950 the left grew in numbers and influence as they promoted resistance to French rule in Cambodia. A process enhanced by the formation of the Cambodian Communist Party (1992b, p. 178). Sihanouk forced the National Assembly to the polls in 1950. Chandler says that Sihanouk attempted to divide the Democrats in the National Assembly and shore up his power by forcing Cambodia to the polls and allowing the leading nationalist Son Ngoc Thanh to return from exile (1992b, p. 179). Despite divisions, infighting and corruption, the Democrats won the election held on the 9th of September 1951. They promised independence but found they could not provide it (Corfield 1994, pp. 12-5). September 1951 also saw the creation of the successor to the Cambodian Communist Party called the Khmer People’s Revolutionary Party (Chandler 1992b, p. 181). Then in 1952 Son Ngoc Thanh fled to the Thai border and joined some of the Issarak rebels accompanied by some high school students. It was unclear if Son Ngoc Thanh thought he could influence the independence movement from the border, as he then arguably became irrelevant to the Cambodian struggle for independence. According to Chandler during this time communist and pro-independence guerrillas came to control up to half the countryside (1992b, pp. 180-1). Sihanouk and the French administration publicly downplayed the popularity of the communists and Issarak who likely numbered five thousand (Chandler 1992b, p. 181).

The Democrats in control National Assembly still continued to resist Sihanouk’s policies. Sihanouk responded by staging a coup against his own government with the assistance of the French. The National Assembly was dissolved at gunpoint in 1952. Students called him a ‘traitor to the nation’ (Chandler 1992b, p. 184). But it would not be long before Sihanouk wrested control of Cambodia away from France.

Between 1945 and 1960 the communist movement in Cambodia grew from radicalized university students returning from France. These radicals included some of the future
leaders of Democratic Kampuchea like Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), Ieng Sary, Son Sen and Khieu Samphan (Chandler 1992b, p. 183). Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) had gone to France to study. There Saloth Sar joined the French communist party before returning home in December 1952 where he then joined the Vietnamese dominated Indochina Communist party (Chandler 1992a, pp. 27-8).

However, the ten people I interviewed told a quite different story to the general history of Cambodia. Their life stories rarely connected with the grander narratives of rebels, princes and the struggle for control of Cambodia. The stories that were told about life before 1953 were predominately about their family’s geographical origins and everyday family life.

Two years before the end of the Second World War and two years after Prince Norodom Sihanouk was crowned King (Sihanouk 1973, p. 268), Phuoc the oldest of the ten storytellers was born in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia. The year was 1943. Phuoc was born into a Hainan-speaking Chinese family. He was the third eldest son in what was to be a family of ten children. He had two older brothers, one younger sister and six younger brothers. Phuoc’s father was born in Cambodia, but his grandparents were settlers from the island of Hainan off the southern coast of mainland China. Phuoc understood his identity in terms of both his religion and his family’s origins in China. He said

I am Confucian, because my grandfather came from Hainan in China, but my father is born on the border of Cambodia and Vietnam. My grandfather may have come via Vietnam, because…I know many people from Hainan go through Vietnam...Because at that time China is very, very poor and so they are coming to find a good life…I don’t know the exact history…I never see the picture of my grandfather, just know the story.

Other storytellers would also identify a connection with Chinese identity, either directly in terms of their parents or grandparents coming to Cambodia from China like Phuoc did, or more indirectly in claiming that they had ‘Chinese ancestors’ or ‘Chinese blood’. Phuoc understood his identity as Chinese in terms of knowing the story of his past. Phuoc’s father spoke French and Khmer as well as the Chinese dialect of Hainan. His father worked for the French administration and briefly in Sihanouk’s palace before 1945 and then after the
end of the Second World War he opened his own restaurant, first in Phnom Penh and then in Kompong Som (now Sihanoukville) that catered for French nationals.

Phuoc began attendance at a private Chinese school in 1950 in the capital city of Phnom Penh. His family paid for his education and he would study until 1960 and age 17. Paying for private schooling during this time would have been only an option for those with some wealth. Most other storytellers stopped their schooling at age 13, around the beginning of secondary education.

In the bustling coastal city of Kampot in 1945 Chin was born into a large middle class Chinese family. He too had a large family of some 13 brothers and sisters before 1975. His father was a tailor who ran a clothes shop in the Chinese business district of Kampot. Chin remarked that during this time ‘Anyone can do very good business, my father, he one person, but do good enough business that he can feed fifteen people’. Chin thought that before 1970 Cambodia was a good country to live in because ‘anyone’ could do good business. How true this was for all Cambodians is problematic and it may only be true to those who belonged to the middle class. It is also apparent that those storytellers who assumed Chinese identity were often also located in the middle class and had some business acumen, like Chin’s father.

Not all of the people I interviewed came from a middle class background. In quite different circumstances in the countryside, in 1945 Kien was born into a rural Khmer family who lived in a small village called Kom Srok, located in Takeo province. Her parents, she said, were mostly rice farmers, but her father also gathered a sort of cotton that grows on a tree, called Kapok. It was common for rice farmers to sell other produce for some cash income (Ebihara 1990, pp. 18-9). Kien had two younger sisters who she helped care for. She said, ‘The older look after the younger and my younger sister is three years younger. But I cannot look after the one just after me because she is nearly the same age’. Before 1975 older brothers and sisters or other family members like Aunts or Grandmas often took care of children. This practice was affected after 1975 as the Pol Pot regime began to forcibly separate family members.
In 1950 Chhon was born in Takeo province. He was the sixth and youngest child to be born into a Khmer family and had two older brothers and three older sisters. Chhon’s mother died in 1954 when he was only four years old. His father would then raise six children by himself. Chhon gave little significance to his mother dying, unlike other friends and family members that died later during the Pol Pot regime. While her death was saddening it was not horrific for Chhon either. Death was just a part of everyday life.

In 1953 Long was born in the northern city of Battambang. He said he was Chinese and told how his parents had come to Cambodia directly from China when Japan had increased their military presence in China in 1940 (Japan had invaded China in 1931). His father had been working as a teacher, but Long said that his family had found doing business in Cambodia earned more income than the wages earned from teaching. So his father had gone into business in the countryside of Battambang.

The experience of day-to-day life rarely connected with general historical narratives about Cambodia before Sihanouk’s reign. Storytellers did not tell me about Cambodian struggles for independence or the rise of the left and they said very little about the French presence in Cambodia. They mostly remembered their family’s activities and where they lived. If historic events do not disrupt day-to-day activities they are not necessarily remembered as part of day-to-day lived experience.

Sihanouk’s reign

The stories that people told me about their lives during Prince Sihanouk’s reign rarely connected with more general historical discourse about the years from 1953 to 1970. No one commented on Cambodia gaining independence from French rule or Sihanouk taking power. However, the stories of everyday life were more connected with the events chronicled by historians after Sihanouk was overthrown in 1970. First I describe how events unfolded between 1953 and 1970 before I turn to the individual stories of how life was experienced during this time.
Sihanouk was Machiavellian-like in his rise to power. He ordered the arrest of several Democrats in January 1953 and declared martial law. Then he left Cambodia and sought an audience with the French government. He gambled on gaining the support of the French government by placing himself as a bulwark between France’s economic interests and the communists in the countryside (Chandler 1992b, pp. 184-5). Chandler argues that ‘In Vietnam, the war was going badly for the French, and it had become increasingly unpopular at home’ (1992b, p. 186). This caused them to consider Sihanouk’s request (Chandler 1992b, p. 186). Then in October 1953 the French granted Sihanouk control over Cambodia’s military, judiciary and foreign affairs (Chandler 1992b, p. 186; Corfield 1994, p. 16). Although the French still retained control of the export sphere which included highly profitable rubber plantations.

After Sihanouk abdicated the throne in 1955 he formed the Sangkum Resastr Niyum – People’s Socialist Community party (Corfield 1994, p. 18). Elections later that year saw the Sangkum win every seat in the National Assembly, although with allegations of fraud and intimidation. The following period of a one party state saw relative stability, economic growth and large infrastructure works (Corfield 1994, pp. 19-21). Sihanouk also set out to change Cambodia’s education system. In 1956 Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) was married to Khieu Ponnary, who he had met in Phnom Penh’s only lycee in the 1930s. She was a woman eight years his senior and also was the first Cambodian woman to earn a baccalaureate (Chandler 1992a, p. 17). Nic Dunlop (2005) argues that Sihanouk’s educational reforms created an educated elite but one with little prospects of finding employment. Furthermore, according to Dunlop, such education facilitated the spread of communism. He argues

The dislocated youth who had left their villages to go to these lycees had broken from the traditional life of their families and felt an increasing detachment from the world of their parents. And yet they found themselves held back by a culture of cronyism and corruption unwilling to accommodate them. The new school system, free of a tainted Sangha, was creating the perfect framework for communism to spread (2005, p. 51).

However, the relationship between increased access to education and increased support for communism in Cambodia is not a simple one. Institutional corruption and incompetence
under Sihanouk also likely led those who were educated to support the coup by Lon Nol that occurred later (Chandler 1992b; Hore 1991).

In the mid 1950s until the late 1960s the nationalist rebel group the Khmer Serei was also funded and armed by the Thais and the South Vietnamese. Sihanouk dealt with this opposition brutally as when ‘any members of the movement were caught inside of Cambodia, they were tried in secret and then executed by firing squad’ and the films of their execution travelled from village to village (Chandler 1992b, p. 197). Charlie Hore (1991) argues that Sihanouk’s one party state tolerated no serious opposition.

Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) took over the leadership of the clandestine communist movement after his predecessor Tou Samouth was assassinated in 1962 (Chandler 1992b, pp. 197-8). Chandler argues that at this time the left also lost momentum and some of their influence amongst the peasantry (1992b, p. 198). This loss of support for the communists in the time of Sihanouk’s reign was consonant with the stability and prosperity that people told me about during this time. The people I interviewed remembered that in the 1960’s Sihanouk referred to Cambodia as a ‘peace island’. This was accurate in relation to the war that was going on in Vietnam and neighbouring Laos. But during this time Cambodia was also a country with increasing political tensions caught between more powerful nations and the left and the right. Sihanouk tolerated the communists in the 1950s and 1960s but jailed or shot many of the nationalists (Chandler 1992b, p. 193). It was in 1966 that Sihanouk made an alliance with the North Vietnamese, which meant that the North Vietnamese communists moved troops into Cambodia (Chandler 1992b, pp. 192-4). Sihanouk played a dangerous game by positioning himself between the North Vietnamese communists and the United States of America. Then in 1967 Sihanouk ordered the killings of some 10,000 rebellious farmers in rural Cambodia who were selling their rice to the North Vietnamese instead of the government (Chandler 1992b, p. 201). This was in response to the failure of a scheme set up for the government to buy the rice and stem the flow of rice to North Vietnam. Chandler claims that the rebellious farmers bothered Sihanouk as he found it ‘inconceivable that his ‘children’ could move against him because of genuine grievances connected with his policies – in this case, the forced collection of rice’ (1992b, p. 201). In this regard Sihanouk’s policies were often contradictory.
While some people I spoke with said that there was some French influence in the Cambodian education system and others told me that the French presence was important to their family business, no one commented on Cambodia gaining independence from French rule. Nor were there stories about Sihanouk gaining control of the Cambodian government. These events it seems, in terms of the total sum of life experience, were given little or no significance by the ten storytellers. Chandler argues

The removal of the French probably meant little to most Cambodians, who continued to pay taxes to finance an indifferent government in Phnom Penh…Because the people in the countryside had never been asked to play a part in any government, they saw few short term rewards in resisting those in power, who were at least Cambodians rather than French or Vietnamese (Chandler 1992b, p. 187).

The following stories that people told about their lives connected in a limited fashion with more general historical discourse about Cambodia. In this regard the events that ordinary people remembered were the ones that had an impact on their day-to-day lives. It could be said that we only remember what matters to us.

Kien said that in 1954, at age nine, she went to live with her Auntie in Kompong Steung so she could go to school. There she looked after her Auntie’s three boys and one girl who were all younger than her. Kien told the following of leaving her village and going to the city.

I stay there for nearly ten years and then I married my husband and then stay with my in-laws… It was a big change going to live with my Auntie because my Auntie lived in the city and my parents lived in the countryside. I only saw my parents a few times a year only on school holidays. I came back home when I finish school, but I only finish four years of high school… At school in the morning we sing the national song and as we sing all the students gather around the flag…I study French as a second language, but all gone now… I study at the government school and we start to learn French at year three. It was hard practicing French, because at home we speak Cambodian, so not very good for speaking.

Kien learned to speak French in the national curriculum of government schools after Cambodia’s independence from France. Learning French for many Khmer-speaking
people like Kien was difficult, perhaps even pointless. It was not commonly used outside of the classroom nor was it necessary to navigate Cambodian social life. In effect, French had only limited influence and impact on the day-to-day lives of most Cambodian people. Kien also pointed out that secondary education was not available outside of the cities. Her experience, as a Khmer woman, who was able to receive an education during this time, was perhaps not typical of broader cultural attitudes towards women receiving an education as part of the next story attests to.

In 1957 Maly was born into a Khmer family in provincial Kompong Speu. He was the youngest in the family and had four older brothers and three older sisters. His father was a small trader. He recalled

My father earned his living as a merchant, he would carry a basket behind his bike and got from village to village trading, buying eggs or coconut or potatoes or vegetables, to take back home and sell in the market…in Cambodia when you have a bike you got lucky.

After his mother died in 1961, Maly remembered being left in his sister’s care for weeks at a time while his father was away doing business. Like Chhon, Maly did not dwell on his mother’s death. Death was a normal aspect of everyday life up to the 1970s and before the Pol Pot regime. Maly’s father was a strong patriarchal figure: Maly remembered his father beating his sister Chhun Sin after the death of his mother when he was living with his father, his two sisters Chhun Sin and Chhun Ngin and his brother Heng. Maly told the following story about this incident

My sister Chhun Sin did not go to school, and she could hardly read and write, because during the period the old generation want to keep their daughters at home, because they don’t want them doing silly things like having boyfriends, as this is offensive to them. I remember one night when my father came back and my sister was ready to go to the night class. They had a night class to teach people how to read and write and my sister talked to her friends around the neighborhood and a few of them decided to go to the evening class. When she was about to leave home and my father got home and asked her ‘Where are your going?’ ‘Oh I am going to the evening class to learn how to read and write’ she said. Then my father was very angry and he beat her up. It was very serious. So she was not allowed
to leave the house at night. This is Cambodian culture. The people who live in the city live in a real civilization, and the people who live in the country just like the old way.

Maly tells of a conflict between traditional authority, in this case associated with his father’s view of what was acceptable for his daughters to be doing, and the desire of his sister to receive something of an education. Maly understands this conflict between his father’s authority and his sister’s aspirations by pointing to the rural – urban divide. The people in the city for Maly are the ones living in ‘a real civilization’ whereas the people in the country are deeply set in tradition and ‘just like the old way’. This story points to a morally conservative aspect of Cambodian culture. Maly’s story emphasized the fact that his father did not want his daughters to have boyfriends or sex out of marriage, as this was morally offensive. Maly’s account provides a stark contrast to Kien’s experience of being sent to live with her Auntie specifically so that she could receive an education. This placed her outside her mother and father’s immediate control. Kien’s experience of education as a Khmer woman was not typical to all Cambodian women, although because she was the eldest of three daughters her family may have pinned their aspirations on her instead of an eldest son.

In 1957 Phuoc’s older brothers went to study in China. Phuoc said that in a Chinese family it was traditionally the eldest son who was responsible for taking care of the family’s interests. As his two older brothers had left Cambodia before April 17th 1975 he said that as the third eldest he became responsible his family’s business affairs and the care of his younger siblings. Phuoc’s brothers going to China also suggests that Phuoc’s family tried to maintain a relationship with China as a place even though his brothers were not born there. Phuoc also said that his father was born in Cambodia but returned to Hainan to seek a wife, rather than marry a local woman. It seems Chinese identity in the Cambodian context was maintained through various acts that sought to maintain some kind of connection with the Chinese mainland.

Kim was born in 1958 in the eastern province of Kompong Cham. He said the following about his family and his early years.
When I was very young, before Pol Pot time, and when we lived in Kompong Cham my parents used to be duck farmers. I went to school in Kompong Cham province, but not in the main town... The main town and the province have the same name of Kompong Cham. I went to school in Phoum Pha Ao. Phoum means ‘village’. The village is named Pha Ao...in Srok Ba Theay. Srok means ‘district’... My mother’s not Chinese, but my father has a Chinese background... My parents are Buddhist, but none of my family are Buddhist monks, because not many people become a monk... To become a monk it’s so special that you really decide I want to be a monk... Altogether I have five brothers and sisters. I have one sister bigger than me, I am the second, then another sister and after two more brothers. When we were living in Kompong Cham I helped look after my brothers and sisters.

When he began going to school Kim’s family were duck farmers. That business proved to be relatively short lived, lasting only one year. As they moved around the countryside they started up business after new business. None were particularly successful. While some Cambodians became very rich, Kim’s family did not. He identified his father as having ‘a Chinese background’ but said his mother was not Chinese, which suggests marriage between Chinese and Khmer people. When Kim told me about his family’s religion he added that he saw it as being uncommon for a person to become a monk and that this was a special status. This was not necessarily true as many Cambodian men spent some time as monks (Ebihara 1990).

In 1958 one storyteller who would later become a Buddhist monk experienced a life-changing event. One day Chhon, at age 8, while climbing a guava tree fell and injured his spine. His older brothers and sisters rushed him to the Russian hospital in Phnom Penh where his torso was wrapped in plaster. Chhon could not move his legs. After three months his family took him home. He remembered that

My sister and brother took me back home...[they] then spent about 100 riel on medicine and just rub me with the coconut oil and the medicine mixed together. They rub it all over my body and my legs and a few weeks later I can walk.

This mishap left Chhon with a fused spine. It also stunted his growth, as he was only five feet tall. He told me that his brothers and sisters wanted to get him out of the Russian hospital as they thought it was not doing him any good. They wanted him to have Khmer
medicine to cure him. Chhon thought that this medicine assisted him to regain feeling in his legs and walk again. The use of traditional medicine to treat a serious injury is noteworthy, as in later chapters narrators commented negatively about the Khmer Rouge’s use of traditional medicine.

In 1960, aged 17, Phuoc finished his schooling at a private Chinese school. He returned to help his father run his business first in Phnom Penh and then later in Kompong Som (now Sihanoukville). Phuoc’s family moved to Kompong Som in 1962 and set up a restaurant called the Goût Celeste which is French for ‘Good Taste’. The restaurant catered for French residents in Cambodia. Phuoc remembered

That is good time, because that is when Cambodia start to develop, they build many factory and road...at that time we are living in Kompong Som, the French, Sihanouk government, and private together, build a petrol refinery. My father gets a job to do the food for the employee, many French who come to build the refinery, so that time, in my father’s life, is the top one, in his whole life he say to me.

French economic interests continued in Cambodia after Sihanouk declared independence. Phuoc said that Cambodia developed during this time under Sihanouk. While there was still poverty and discontent in the country, most Cambodian storytellers said that Sihanouk’s reign was good compared to both the Lon Nol regime 1970-1975 and the Pol Pot regime 1975-1978. Justin Corfield remarks that this period was ‘the golden age of 20th Century Cambodia’ (1994, p. 21).

In 1963 Lackanary was born into an affluent middle class family living in the capital city of Phnom Penh. Lackanary described his parents in the following way.

My father was in the army and my mum had a business...a car yard...selling cars. My dad is real Khmer and my mum has got Chinese blood.’ In regards to his father ‘His rank was Colonel. He was the Svay Rieng province military commander.

Lackanary’s parents both hailed from the province of Svay Rieng and maintained a connection between the capital city of Phnom Penh and the countryside. Lackanary
referred to his ‘mum’s home town’ when talking about the connection with Svay Rieng. According to Jean-Louis Margolin ‘almost all city dwellers had relatives somewhere in the country’ (1999, p. 584). Before 1975 most of the people I spoke with had family connections with people living in the countryside. This connection between the urban and rural dwellers is important to note, as later during the Pol Pot regime a distinction between the city dwellers and those who lived in the countryside would become a significant division that would result in discrimination and death. This also makes problematic any assumption that there was a huge division between those living in the cities and people in the countryside.

Lackanary’s statement that his father was ‘real Khmer’ and his mother has ‘Chinese blood’ again blurred some distinction between the categories of Chinese and Khmer ethnic groups. Intermarriage between Khmer people and those who saw themselves as Chinese did occur. This is also noteworthy as ethnic distinctions, particularly those with a Vietnamese identity, have been claimed to have been a basis upon which people were more likely to be killed during the Pol Pot regime (Kiernan 1997). For the people I spoke with identification with particular ethnic identities was contingent rather than these identities being unambiguous and primordial.

In 1964, the same year Cambodia competed in the Tokyo Olympics, Kien and Phuoc were married. They met through relatives and shared a family connection through their family origins in the province of Takeo. Phuoc identified as being Chinese in many ways, specifically with the Hainan dialect and region, whereas Kien came from a rural Khmer family. Phuoc emphasised his choice about marriage and said ‘The relatives not decide, just me go there and ‘see if you like or not’…and I say ‘okay’ and we organize to engage and then to marry.’ Whereas Kien only said ‘Then I got married in 1964 and live with my husband’s parents until Pol Pot, until ’75.’ Kien did not say that she had any choice about marriage compared to Phuoc who said he got a chance to see if he liked his future wife. This perhaps points to that before 1975 Cambodian women did not have the same degree of choice about who they married compared to Cambodian men. Kien had also learnt to speak French at school and this asset would have made her a more desirable choice to assist Phuoc and his family in their hotel and restaurant, the Goût Celeste, which catered for French workers setting up the refinery off the coast of Kompong Som. Later in 1968 Kien
and Phuoc had a baby girl named Bo. She was born in Phnom Penh and was the second child of Kien and Phuoc.

Long stopped school in 1966, at age 13, and went to help his brother who was a merchant in the city of Battambang. Some other storytellers also stopped school at age 13, for instance Chin in 1958 and Kim in 1971. While some primary education was common it seems that it was less common for people to complete secondary education. In regards to stopping school Long said the following.

I left primary school about thirteen or fourteen, although I complete primary school, I cannot do high school without Cambodian citizenship. It’s not hard to become a Cambodian…my parents just feel that…I don’t know…maybe not necessary. Family is Chinese – the law is not automatic. I don’t know about now, but that time is quite confusing. A little bit different to Thailand, if you are born in Thailand you are Thai straight away. That’s why I think Thai got better control of their population, don’t have much racism, because you are all Thai, so no-one to point finger to. Even though your skin is different you are a Thai.

While there was marriage between people who claimed a Khmer identity and people that thought of themselves as Chinese, there was tension also between ethnic Khmer and Chinese people. Long felt that the national Cambodian identity excluded Chinese people because of the privileging of a Khmer identity.

In the late 1960s, aged between 10 to 12 years old, Maly went to see his sister, Chhun Sin, who had moved out of home when she had married. Maly said that she had moved to another village 7 kilometres away. During this period of his life Maly remembered a world filled with spirits and ghosts. He said

Once a week I used to travel to see my sister and it seemed very far away, as I was about 10 or 12 years old, and I rode the bike myself. Along the way there was a graveyard, and during the evening on a bike it is scary. I was scared of ghosts! I never seen one, but sometimes I feel like there is something like ghosts. We did not know what it was, but scary… Once we went fishing we think some spirit is trying to haunt us. It was a pond about a hundred square metres and the water was about a metre deep. At night we went with a lamp and put it on a
stick so it is glowing and we use it to put the hook in and see the light. Then we heard the sound of someone walking in the water. But when we try to talk to them and said, ‘Who is that?’ It stopped and moved away, but then we heard sounds again. We first thought it was perhaps a fish struggling in the water, but it is not. It is something like human, but when we try to respond to them there was no answer. My brother is never scared, but at that time he just blew out the lamp and run away! We were too scared! We thought it was ghosts or something.

Maly grew up in a world filled with ghosts. For many Cambodians the spirits of the dead, the *nak ta*, inhabited places. Chandler argues that for many rural Cambodians the spirits

...became the symbolic ancestors of people in particular place, or dying in a place they came to patronize its soil. *Nak ta* in inhabited sites could be spoken to and tamed; those in the forest or in abandoned places were thought to be more powerful and more malignant (1992b, p. 19).

Many Cambodians believed in a spirit world. Some blended Buddhism with a belief in spirits. Kien exemplified this blending of religiosity with a belief in spirits when she said she was a Buddhist who also prays for her ancestors for good luck. She said that Cambodians ‘mix’.

In 1967, at age 17, Chhon went to be a Buddhist monk in the monastery of Phnom Je-So in the east of Cambodia. He recalled a disciplined life as a monk and emphasized that it was quite common for men to spend some time as monks during their lives. He said

I went to be a Buddhist monk for twenty month, because in Cambodia about ninety five percent believe in Buddhist way and many of the man when they reach up to sixteen – before twenty – many of them go to the Buddhist monastery for at least three months. Very common to learn about Buddhism – even the king of Cambodia did. The Prince and the King have to do the Buddhist monk, that’s the way they believe it.

Chhon suggests that Buddhism was the dominant religion of Cambodia. The anthropologist May Ebihara estimates that up to seventy-five percent of the men in the village where she stayed, during her pre-1970 fieldwork, had spent some time as Buddhist
monks (1990, p. 21). This would suggest that most men, including the ones who later became Khmer Rouge killers, were exposed to Buddhist teachings at some point of their lives. Chhon described the basic tenets of Buddhism and the life of a monk in the following way.

The Buddhist philosophy just protects people: not to be violent, not to be angry, not to be greedy, not to be drinking, not to steal some people’s wife, there is a lot of rules. 120 rules giving a way of life. There are only 10 rules for monks aged 20 years old or younger, but over 21 years old they have 120 rules. We have to learn them, practice the way, and then they respect... If you break the rules the head monk might make you sit and pray in the middle of the cemetery at night by yourself. Or you might have to fill big jars with water that contain around 1000 litres as punishment. Seven o’clock in the evening all the Buddhists in the monastery have to go to pray all together in the special place...big building and tall tower like a church...for at least one and half hours. After that come back to our own room...to learn by yourself until at least 11 or 12 at night. You have to do that except that you didn’t feel bad otherwise the chief monk not allow you to stay in the monastery if he found anybody do not learn. Four thirty in the morning we have to go out and go to the church to pray all together again. When you wake up: go make your robe properly and go to church to pray.

Chhon emphasized the importance of obediently following the rules. Dunlop (2005) argues that both obedience and the notion of a preordained life stemming from Buddhism would ultimately be used by the Khmer Rouge to control people. Chhon also said that one of the key tenets of Buddhism is ‘not to be violent’. This also raises a number of disturbing questions about what circumstances enable ‘ordinary’ otherwise non-violent people to kill.

The connection between the stories that people told me and the events that historians emphasize become far more closely connected after 1970. What happened after 1970 had a number of profound impacts on the way people could carry out their day-to-day lives.

*The bombing and the coup*
The United States of America began bombing Cambodia on the 18th of March 1969 following orders from President Richard Nixon and his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. The bombing was kept a secret from both the US Congress and American people (Corfield 1994, p. 47; Dunlop 2005, p. 69; Shawcross 1991, p. 92). The object was to bomb the Vietnamese communist ‘sanctuaries’ in Cambodia. Sihanouk made no protest.

In 1970 General Lon Nol staged a coup against Sihanouk. Chandler states the ‘coup itself was an anticlimax’ and claims that Lon Nol was pressured by one of Sihanouk’s advisors Sisowath Sirik Matak to stage the coup (1992b, p. 204). While Sihanouk was away overseas Matak had privatised the banks and shut down the casino that had been a disaster. He then travelled secretly to Hanoi hoping to remove Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. But upon his arrival he discovered that Sihanouk had signed documents that agreed to Vietnamese bases in Cambodia (Chandler 1992b, p. 204). Sihanouk had positioned himself between the Vietnamese and the Americans in the attempt to maintain Cambodia’s apparent commitment to ‘neutrality’. But this now meant that the Vietnamese communists would remain in Cambodia. Matak, frustrated and furious, returned from Hanoi to a rioting Phnom Penh and pressured Lon Nol into staging the coup. Justin Corfield, however, contends that after 1968 there were a number of groups plotting to remove Sihanouk and points out that technically it was not a coup d’état but a dismissal (1994, p. 52).

Chandler states that ‘The coup was popular among educated people in Phnom Penh and in the army, but rural Cambodians were unprepared for it’ (1992b, pp. 204-5). Following the coup Sihanouk broadcast an appeal on radio and threw his support behind the Vietnamese communists and Khmer Rouge in the countryside. The Prince’s ‘children’ had now become his ‘brothers and sisters’ (Chandler 1992b, p. 205). Sihanouk himself claims that on the 4th of April 1970 he advised his supporters ‘to go into the jungle and join the resistance forces already there…where by now arms were available’ (1973, p. 61). While Sihanouk’s declaration was influential it was hardly the only factor that would lead to increased support for the communists within Cambodia. To claim that people automatically and obediently responded to the former Cambodian despot in this way is to overstate of Sihanouk’s influence. The disruption of social life occasioned by the ongoing war in the country had a far greater effect on people’s lives and led some to join the communists in the countryside while others fled to the cities.
Sihanouk claims that the coup was backed by the CIA (1973, p. 56). William Shawcross argues that this is unable to be substantiated, although notes that Lon Nol may have assumed he would be given support by the United States (1991, p. 122). Regardless of whether the relationship between the CIA and Lon Nol predated the coup, violence broke out across the countryside against government officials (Shawcross 1991, p. 127). In his account of events after 1970 Sihanouk was keen to emphasize the use of violence of the Lon Nol regime (Sihanouk 1973, p. 61). This is to forget Sihanouk’s brutal oppression and violence, his fostering of cronyism and corruption that continued into the Lon Nol regime and the weakened state that civil society was in come 1970. Indeed, a thriving civil society (composed of unions and non-government organisations) may have been an outlet for discontent and alternate political leftist movements. But this was not the case. Armed opposition was the predominant form that opposition took to the French, Sihanouk and Lon Nol.

Sihanouk’s deal with the Viet Cong (Vietnamese communists), the secret bombing of Cambodia organized by Kissinger and Nixon, the coup against Sihanouk by Lon Nol, the Vietnamese communists remaining in the county with Sihanouk’s support, and the corruption and incompetence of the Lon Nol regime would lead to the Khmer Rouge to eventually gain control of Cambodia. These events would also plunge the lives of many Cambodian people into chaos. Maly told the following story about life immediately after the 1970 coup

Sihanouk was overthrown and by May, only two months later, the Viet Cong start to be active in Cambodia, fighting all over the place. At first it is not really Khmer Rouge, first Viet Cong and then Khmer Rouge… Khmer Rouge exist since long ago, but after Sihanouk was overthrown Viet Cong was more active than Khmer Rouge… There was lots of gun-fighting in the neighbouring town, so I had to move to my sister’s – Chhun Sin – seven kilometres away. Many people, almost all of them left the town. And lives became very unstable for almost all Khmer people [with] gunfire, artillery, bombing and low flying aircraft.
Maly said that after 1970 most Khmer people found the chaos of war disturbing. He moved to his sister’s house some distance away. Many people were displaced throughout Cambodia over the next five years due to fighting between the communist guerrillas and the Lon Nol government troops. The US bombing campaign through Cambodia also caused further displacement also leading to more Cambodians becoming refugees in their own country.

In early 1970 Chhon was still living as a monk in a monastery in Phnom Je-So, in the east of Cambodia near where the US bombing began. Turning 20 and before he took full Buddhist vows, Chhon left the monastery in March of 1970 and went to Phnom Penh and gave up the life of a monk to be in his words ‘a normal person’. Going to Phnom Penh, Chhon first stayed on Kampuchea Krom Street, near the Olympic Stadium (now Olympic Market), with his older brother who had a Vietnamese wife. Through the interactions with his sister in-law and her family he learnt Vietnamese. Then he went to stay with his sister who lived alone on Charles de Gaulle Street. He remembered watching the bombing of Cambodia

In the afternoon and at nighttime I run up to the roof of my sister’s apartment in Charles de Gaulle Street. It is the fifth floor so it’s easy to see American bomb dropping around the city and the shooting. I can’t see them being killed in the daytime because of the light. It’s terrible to watch…because our country never before had this…but now it’s happened.

Many people experienced the loss of family members during this time. Chhon also told of his sister in-law’s village getting bombed and her father being killed and said

My sister’s house burns and it kill one of her sons and her father in-law, because when it dropped he got injured and can’t move out from the bunker under the house. He actually burn because nobody can come help him, because a lot of bomb coming. Everybody just escape themselves.

Arguably many Cambodian people, before the Pol Pot regime, were traumatised between 1969 and 1975. Freud claimed that it is when we no longer have means of protecting ourselves from certain external experiences that we experience them as traumatic. Freud stated
We describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure (1920, p. 238).

The war in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge takeover arguably provoked a traumatised state in those who witnessed such violence (Burstow 2003; Herman 1992). Chin told of people creating bunkers under their houses, but that the bombs from B-52s were causing holes in the ground up to eight metres deep. Such flimsy fortifications did little against the huge payloads of bombs carried by the B-52 bombers. During this time Chhon also said that a lot of cows and buffalos were also killed. This destruction of livestock, work animals and the means of producing food by the bombing also affected events come April 17th 1975.

But life also continued on as normal for many people in the cities. Indeed as Shawcross argues many members of the Cambodian middle classes in the cities saw the coup against Sihanouk as a good thing (1991, p. 126). Lackanary’s father was an officer with the rank of Colonel in the army under Lon Nol. He was aged seven years old during the coup in 1970 and his narrative did not note any affects of the war in the country. Possibly this is due to his age at this time. Cambodian writer Loung Ung (2000) was similar age to Lackanary in 1970 and her father was also a member of the military under Lon Nol, but despite recounting in great detail life before 1975, she also does not comment about the war or the bombing in the country in her detailed biography. The absence of commentary about the bombing could suggest tacit support for the bombing as a necessary evil to win the war against the communists. It could also suggest that those Cambodian children who grew up in the city were sheltered from much of the war.

Bo, the daughter of Phuoc and Kien, also remembered little of the war and bombing that occurred between 1969 and 1975. She was age two in 1970 and makes no mention of bombing or the war, as this had no effect on her life until the Khmer Rouge takeover in
1975. This is no doubt also due to her age. Bo remembered playing with Khmer children in the street near her family’s hotel in Kompong Som and her grandfather returning from China with gifts. She also remembered going with her mother to Takeo province to visit her relatives. She situated the country and the city as two worlds and remembered, ‘Houses made of grass, poor you know? So we are moving from one world to another.’ She also had fond memories of her Grandma, who was her primary carer, cooking peppered pork for her and she reflected that despite trying to dish herself ‘the memory of Grandma cooking is probably nicer’. Bo had fond memories of her life before 1975 and her stories about this time are very detailed, but she did not remember the war or bombing at all. The only experience of violence she remembered of this time was of a grenade being detonated in a cinema near her Uncle’s house in Phnom Penh. Those who were children before 1975 did not incorporate more general historical narratives of the time before the Pol Pot regime when they remembered their past.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s suggests ‘we have no other resource concerning our reference to the past except memory itself’ and ‘we have nothing better than memory to signify that something has taken place’ (2004, p. 21). Because there were multiple experiences of social life in Cambodia, many different perspectives, memories and narratives of this time are available. Indeed the narratives created by Bo and Lackanary of their lives before 1975 are more detailed than some older storyteller’s narratives of their lives during the Pol Pot regime. However, what the memories of Lackanary and Bo do tell about social life, alongside Cambodian writers like Ung (2000), is that the social position and relative wealth of members of the Cambodian middle classes shielded them, or at least their children, from the worst of the violence that was going on in the country between 1970 and 1975.

In 1970, the youngest narrator featured in this thesis, Kheng was born. Her narrative of this time is through the story of her father’s life. Hence, memories of this time also travelled with family members forward in time. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues that the endurance of ‘collective memories’ is because of the ‘resemblance’ collective memories have with one another, for instance in the memories of members of the same family. Shared memory is one way by which family histories persist through time. So it is possible to know of the life and times of older people through the accounts of younger storytellers.
Kheng began her story by recounting her father’s story. As a young man, Kheng’s father came to Cambodia in the 1940s from China. He escaped from being forced to fight in the army. He then married Kheng’s mother, a Khmer woman from Kompong Cham. By 1970 Kheng’s father was the head of the Chinese community in Kompong Cham and was a government official under Lon Nol, although prior to that under Sihanouk. She also claimed that her father was a friend of the governor of Kompong Cham, Lon Nol’s brother Lon Nil, who was apparently butchered by peasants in Kompong Cham shortly after the coup against Sihanouk. Shawcross says that the peasants killed Lon Nil and then cooked and ate his liver (1991, p. 127). Kheng said that

During that time, after 1970, the Lon Nol government is pretty well not so much in control towards the country area already, but paper works to go to town and things like that, people need to get a document from him. He has to sign for them to go from one town to another town. As my dad was the headman of the Chinese community he dealt with the paperwork and bureaucracy of the old Lon Nol regime. This job was dangerous for my father at that time. My dad in Cambodia used to walk around with a gun in his belt and two bodyguards.

Life for those with a direct connection with the Lon Nol regime became more dangerous as things became more and more unstable in the country. Kheng narrated this danger in the countryside by saying that her father carried a gun and had two bodyguards. Her family was positioned in the Cambodian middle class in Kompong Cham, but she would receive none of the privileges of this position.

In Kompong Cham in 1971 Kim stopped school at age 13 and began to work to help his parents. In 1970 his parents were duck farmers, but they had stopped duck farming after one year and their business had failed. Kim said that they had then moved to Kandal province where he sold ice cream. His family travelled throughout the Cambodian countryside during the Lon Nol regime, although Kim never commented that this was because of the ongoing war in the country. In 1973 his family moved again to Battambang in the north for six months to attempt another business. Then they moved east to Svay Rieng for a year before coming back to Battambang in 1974 where they stayed until 1975. Kim said the following about his life after 1970.
I began selling ice cream in Kandal province to earn money to help my family. Over there they don’t have ice cream truck – they have small cart – so you can walk around with the ice cream and sell it. It’s not easy. It’s not hard. It is just like a normal life, but the rich people – they do nothing. If I look to other people in the same situation as me then I don’t feel like it was a hard life. When I look at rich people some of these people doing their business, but their children like me, the same age, and they never earn any money, they just go to school and come back from school and play around. They don’t do anything for money. They are not very rich, but they don’t worry about money. Their parents have enough money for living east, but me, if I don’t help, if I don’t do anything my family can’t survive. So I have to do.

Kim told a story of a life of relative hardship compared to the ‘rich people’ whose children ‘don’t do anything for money.’ His story indicated a class divide before 1975 between those who had money and those who did not. He was someone outside of the well off Cambodian middle classes and he said he thought this was a ‘normal life’ until he made a comparison with the ‘rich people.’ Perhaps such comparisons of the comfortable life led by the Cambodian middle classes led to envy of such privilege before 1975. Those narrators who were from the middle class and attached to the Lon Nol or Sihanouk governments were eager to pre-emptively deflect accusations of privilege stemming from corruption. For example Kheng talked about her father in the following way.

He used to have medals awarded to him from Prince Sihanouk, but all these things my mum has to bury and everything, before we left the country, because there is no way you could take with you. If these things were found with us at that time it’s a death sentence. Prior to leaving Cambodia my family was having a house built near the river where the shipping port was. So my dad was in a position of influence, but a lot of people think he should be getting a lot of money which he doesn’t do, but while we were in Cambodia at the time my dad has rubber plantations and he has got his house. People’s perceptions that he would have a lot of money were due to that many government officials took bribes, but this is something he doesn’t do.

Kheng’s father was an official attached to the Sihanouk regime and then the Lon Nol regime. He was in a position of some wealth and influence in Kompong Cham as the head of the Chinese community there. She also positioned her father as being immune to
government corruption even though she also said that a lot of government officials took bribes. According to Shawcross corruption and incompetence of both the military and government officials was a common feature of Cambodian life between 1970 and 1975 (1991, pp. 200-8).

Chandler argues that by the end of 1972 there was very little control over the Khmer Republic by the Lon Nol forces, who controlled ‘Phnom Penh, a few provincial capitals, and much of Battambang…The rest of the country was either in Communist hands or unsafe for anyone to administer’ (1992b, p. 207). The ongoing war in the country and the bombing had a number of affects upon the lives of Cambodian people. Chin said that his family had built a bunker under their large family home in 1971. He remembered his father’s house being big enough to fit all fourteen children. In 1972, two years after the coup, the war between the Lon Nol government forces and the communists displaced his family from their home in Kampot. He told the following story about his family’s experience of the destruction of Kampot.

My house burn down…when the Lon Nol army come in fighting…when the fighting over my house burn. I think the communists do that when they fight and take the city. Before he go home he burn whole city, house burn, to the ground. Fire burn everything, including the city, not just my house, the whole city of Kampot. I cannot go back to Kampot as I remember all my family and my family’s house. Today it all gone.

Chin’s story went back and forth between the past and the present and his stories were always contrasted between different times that seemed to exist without integration into a singular linear life narrative. For instance Chin compared the war in Cambodia to the ongoing war in Iraq in 2005 and in both instances he saw the United States of America as the cause of the war. He said

Now sometimes I look at TV and I see Iraq war, I very upset! Sometimes I angry and upset too…I always thinking for my family, the same thing in Iraq…America very bad country, always make war…people trouble. It makes me think about America bombing Cambodia and I’m sad that the same thing is happening again in another country. It makes me remember what happened in Kampot.
The images he saw of war in Iraq on television in Australia twenty years later took him back to Cambodia to Kampot where his life was disrupted by war, almost as a form of ‘flashback.’ Judith Herman claims that part of ‘recovery’ from trauma is telling the story of the trauma. She states

In the second stage of recovery, the survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story... Janet described normal memory as ‘the action of telling a story.’ Traumatic memory, by contrast, is wordless and static. The survivor’s initial account of the event may be repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless. One observer describes the trauma story in its untransformed state as ‘prenarrative’ (1992, p. 175).

Chin stories about his life before April 17th 1975 connected with his stories about his life in 2005. In Herman’s sense Chin’s narrative always seemed to be a struggle for integration of the past that could never be quite reached. The connection between the past and the present seemed to be a narrative device he used to connect his past experiences with his present life. The loss of his family home in Kampot was traumatic and deeply saddening for him. He narrated the coup in 1970 and ongoing war as marking the decline of his good life in Cambodia. The loss of his family home in flames in 1972 signified the beginning of great hardship for him and his family. Symbolically his family home represented a part of himself that was also destroyed in Kampot, as for Chin his family living in Kampot doing business in the Chinese community was a way by which he told me of his identity. One identity located in place and a community ceased to exist because of war. Significantly, setting himself on fire would be the way that Chin would later attempt to kill himself in Australia years later. His scars of memory became embodied. Chin was a veritable phoenix and his stories of destruction and rebirth existed in tension in his life narrative. His pasts and his presents were blurred together in an ever-evolving dialectic that never quite reached synthesis. For Chin the loss of life from the war in the countryside meant one of two things for Cambodian people. He said
I remember the people who had lost several of their family members to American bomb, if they did not go to the city, they would join the communists. I think this was because that they had nothing left. No house, no field, no family. Even in Cambodia today people who live in the countryside still don’t like Americans… My family had to go to Phnom Penh to find work so that they could survive. Whole family got to find something to do for eating….I worked making clothes in a small factory… During this time in Phnom Penh my father was so upset and unhappy about losing his house, losing his business in Kampot that he became sick and died in 1973. He sad, he sick, he die, because he upset.

Chin told me about the opposition to the Lon Nol regime that was created by the US bombing of the countryside. After his family lost their home in Kampot they went to the capital where his father died. Chin said he became sick and died because he was so sad. It is possible that some traumatic events can kill us afterwards. Trauma is never a singular instance, but a process. Chin then left Phnom Penh and became a trader on a small boat operating out of Kompong Som. During this time he learnt some Thai and Vietnamese, before he returned to Phnom Penh. At the end of the Khmer Republic, as the Khmer Rouge closed in, Phnom Penh was deluged by some 2 million refugees (Chandler 1992b, p. 208).

Elsewhere in Kompong Som, in 1973, Kien was not getting along with her mother-in-law. She recalled that her mother-in-law complained about how she did things and put their conflict down to them being jealous of each other. So she set up her own small business a few blocks away from her husband’s family’s hotel and restaurant. There she sold pens and wine. She said that the gunfire at night scared her and remembered that ‘The Lon Nol soldiers fire their guns for fun’. She remembered this time:

I don’t like the war because when I sell things the soldier wants a bottle of wine for free. If I don’t give the bottle to him he would roll a grenade on the table and scare me! This did not just happen once, many time! Sometimes I negotiate with him and say ‘No business today.’ Or if he ask for money I give him less.

Kien said that the Lon Nol soldiers extracted money and goods from the local population and recklessly shot their weapons in the air for fun. The ongoing war and the corrupt government soldiers were not popular with Cambodian people. Kien said
When Lon Nol took power the first year is alright…but when Pol Pot got strong and if you
got some business the Lon Nol soldier come and ask some food, some drink, some money.
After you put food on the table they ask for money. Ask you for anything. And sometimes
they would take a grenade and roll it on the table in front of you and ask for some money.
That was very scary. That about ‘73. Although when Lon Nol had first taken over still not
too bad, but worse, worse, worse. I saw the people in the city, they wish, and me too, I
wish Pol Pot come very soon to finish that thing. But who knows that Pol Pot worse than
Lon Nol.

The bombing of Cambodia would cease only in July 1973 (Shawcross 1991, pp. 284-7).
No ceasefire between the US backed Lon Nol armed forces and the communists was ever
agreed upon.

Under the cover of darkness during Chinese New Year of 1974, Kheng’s father would flee
into the night eastwards towards Vietnam with his family. Kheng was only four years old.
She was not the only one to leave the country before the start of the Pol Pot regime and
Long was be sent westwards to Bangkok in Thailand. By 1974 the lives of most
Cambodians were severely disrupted by the war in the country between the Lon Nol armed
forces and the communists, the bombing and the increasing corruption in the few remaining
cities under the Lon Nol government’s control. According to Phuoc, after 1973 you could
only get from Phnom Penh in the centre of Cambodia to Kompong Som on the coast by
airplane. His daughter, Bo, remembered going by helicopter on one trip and her mother
carrying a durian.

In the northern city of Battambang Long remembered that ‘At the end the students have a
rally or a riot’ that turned into the looting of Chinese shops. He felt very angry towards
Khmers who he said were ‘barbarians who just want to fight.’ The demonstration was
allegedly over a Chinese newspaper article that called the Khmers ‘monkeys.’ But Long
thought ‘They just want to make things mixed up.’ He also recounted that a Lon Nol
officer who was Khmer protected him and his brothers, and said ‘He is the one we can
trust’. This account of protection by a Khmer Lon Nol officer contradicted aspects of his
narrative that suggested resentment towards Khmers. Long’s narrative of this time
indicated that it was difficult for him to make sense of some of his experiences. As he put
it, ‘Very confusing that time is!’ After the rally and the looting of Chinese shops in Battambang, Long’s father sent him to Bangkok where he worked before going to a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border. Long said that his father ‘does not like Cambodia any more because they treat Chinese like that.’ Before the fall of the Khmer Republic Chinese and Vietnamese shops were targeted by mob violence. Sihanouk notes that his supporters’ protests were dispersed by Lon Nol government forces in 1970 and that the Vietnamese were killed in large numbers by the Lon Nol forces (1973, pp. 61,72).

After staying with his sister with a view to avoid the bombing and the fighting, Maly then went to stay with his brothers, first in the Western mining town of Som Loh, then in Pailin close to the border of Thailand. His brothers were miners searching for precious stones, in particular rubies. Maly stayed in Pailin, close to the Thai border until the fall of Phnom Penh. In the days before the takeover, he recounted that soldiers from the Lon Nol armed forces began arriving in Pailin and quickly heading towards the Thai border. Some townsfolk pleaded with them to stay and fight the Khmer Rouge. They did not.

**Life before the ‘open cell’**

Before 1970 the stories that the people I spoke with told about their lives rarely connected with the events emphasized by historians. The stories about life before 1975 were full of longing for what might have been different as well as of memories of those friends, family and loved ones who died during this time or during the Pol Pot years. Before the Pol Pot regime many Cambodian people experienced violence and the affects of war upon their lives. They also lost friends and family or were displaced by the effects of US B-52 bombing. Arguably people were traumatized in the cause of the war in the country. It was also a confusing experience and people felt very uncertain about their future. This uncertainty meant that some Cambodians left Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge takeover. As the Lon Nol regime crumbled some Cambodians came to see the Lon Nol soldiers as corrupt, violent and a nuisance, while others saw the Lon Nol armed forces as trustworthy and the last bastion of defence before the fall of the old regime. The war between the Lon Nol government forces and the communist guerrillas in the countryside in combination with US B-52 bombing through Cambodia inclined many people to want the Khmer Rouge
to take power, as that would mean the end of the war. While Cambodian people experienced violence, chaos and fear before April 17th 1975, the following chapters will demonstrate it was nothing compared to the maelstrom that enveloped their lives during Pol Pot years.
Chapter 2: The Open Cell 1975-1978

There were masses of people in this gathering, so I just walked into the clearing and then I saw my mum! Just like that! And then I meet my dad, my younger brother, my older brother and my other cousins. After this massive meeting they split us up again! It’s just incredible. It was part of their technique to move people to disorient them and we lost consciousness of the time and day. During this period of time we were run by routine and time did not matter. It was an open cell. - Bo

How should we understand life in Cambodia during the Pol Pot regime of Democratic Kampuchea from 1975 to 1978? In particular, how was social life experienced during the Pol Pot regime? Here I respond to this question by describing the conditions within the country and the experiences of some Cambodian people. Our stories make experience accessible while interpretation enables us to make sense of these narratives. The narratives in this chapter are contextualized by the histories of Cambodia written by historians such as Chandler (1990; 1992a; 1992b), Kiernan (1997), Vickery (1999), Margolin (1999) and Hinton (2005) as well as by the biographies written by Cambodian writers such as Ngor (1988), Szymusiak (1999), Ung (2000) and Him (2000). This work supplements and resonates with the people who told me their stories.

In the next chapter I discuss the nature of the violence perpetrated by the Pol Pot regime. However, the conditions of social life during the Pol Pot regime more broadly represent a form of extreme structural violence, as the suffering and hardship experienced by Cambodian people resulted in damage being done to them (Farmer 1997) and the violence was intrinsic to the emergent political economy (Lutz and Nonini 1999) that shaped social relations during this period. In this sense the division between narratives of social life and narratives of violence is somewhat arbitrary. The distinction is an analytic one enabling me to grapple with some of the problems of understanding violence using various theoretical frames in relation to the narratives of Cambodian people.
The narratives I discuss here detail a range of experiences in the period of time between 1975 and 1978. However, there are limitations. Two narrators, Kheng and Long, had escaped to Vietnam and Thailand respectively. So while their narratives tell what it was like for Cambodian refugees who escaped before the Pol Pot regime was established, they cannot tell of conditions within Cambodia. Two other narrators, Kim and Chin, were not able to talk about their experiences of the Pol Pot regime in detail. Chin became very upset when he tried and although he could construct detailed accounts about life before and life after all he would say about the Pol Pot regime was ‘No thinking during that time.’ Kim on the other hand avoided speaking about his life during the Pol Pot regime at every opportunity and gave very general descriptions like ‘We all suffered during that time.’ Equally I did not press him to reveal more than he wanted. It is possible that despite some Cambodians like Chin and Kim wanting to tell their stories about their life during the Pol Pot regime their traumatic experiences of this time are very difficult, if not impossible to put into words. Other storytellers like Chhon and Lackanary recounted more general narratives of the experiences of many Cambodians during the Pol Pot regime and were less focused on the details of their own experiences. In this sense some narrator’s words and stories represent more general discourse about life during the Pol Pot regime. Maly, Phuoc, Kien and Bo described social life in detail in relation to their personal accounts of this time.

Here I also draw on the work of the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov to develop an approach to interpreting ‘ordinary’ life during the Pol Pot regime. Todorov makes a distinction between ‘heroic’ and ‘ordinary’ values. Heroic values are situated upon the willingness to sacrifice ones own life to an abstraction such as for ‘the nation’ or ‘communism’. He states

To sacrifice one's life is to put all one's courage into a single definitive act, whereas staying alive can require a daily, moment-by-moment kind of courage. Life, too, is sometimes a sacrifice, but it is not a flamboyant one: to sacrifice my time and energy, if that is what is demanded of me, I have to stay alive. In this sense, it can be more difficult to live than to die (1996, p. 11).

In this sense the survivors of the Pol Pot regime demonstrate an ordinary courage and will to survive. Todorov notes three ‘ordinary virtues’ in particular, which define the possibilities of moral life in extreme situations. These are ‘dignity,’ ‘caring’ and ‘the life of
the mind,’ possibilities which I will elaborate in this chapter. These moral virtues help to understand the experiences of Cambodian narrators in regard to the possibilities of moral life during the Pol Pot regime. However, any interpretation of Cambodian people’s experiences must begin with their own narratives of social life. This chapter first turns to the evacuation of the cities that occurred immediately after the takeover by the Khmer Rouge in 1975.

**Evacuation**

After the Khmer Rouge took over the capital city of Phnom Penh on April 17th 1975 they forced people into the countryside. Men dressed in black, from the countryside, walked from street to street yelling at people to leave the city. What was the experience of evacuation into the countryside by those living in the cities? As a young girl living in the city of Kompong Som Bo’s parents had managed to shield her from the effects of war in the country. Bo recalled that

> I could not tell whether there was a gradual difference or the sense of security, or what the adults are seeing or feeling, they never let us know. But the only time that I knew there was something was wrong was all of a sudden we had to pack up and put our things on a cart. As we have just been asked to move out from our homes and hundreds and hundreds of other people do the same thing…I remember along the way I could see a lot of people in the same situation as us with heaps of stuff – so chaotic!

Bo’s narrative highlights the urgency that the command to pack their belongings set loose, while her experience of ‘hundreds and hundreds’ of people leaving the city was ‘chaotic’. This event was narrated as occurring unexpectedly and the experience of suddenly being forced to leave the life that they knew in the towns and cities came as a profound shock to the urban dwellers. Cambodian writer Chanrithy Him remembers her family slowly moving out of Phnom Penh on the 21st of April 1975, four days after the takeover (2000, pp. 63-5). Loung Ung, also a Cambodian writer, remembers being told that America was going to bomb the city by the Khmer Rouge (2000, p. 22). Given the US bombing of the countryside, the idea that the US would bomb of Phnom Penh no doubt seemed plausible. However, the bombing of Phnom Penh and other provincial capitals never came to pass.
The Khmer Rouge soldiers also told people that the evacuation would only be for three days. However, according to Vickery the Khmer Rouge soldiers knew this was a lie to get people to move into the countryside (1999, p. 75). So the Khmer Rouge soldiers used a number of plausible stories to assist them to move people out of the cities. Bo’s mother, Kien remembered what it was like leaving the city:

The first day I feel very happy! I say ‘Oh the war finish and the peace come’ because in the radio… The third day Pol Pot come and they speak with the microphone ‘All the people must go to the countryside!’ … Some people they don’t want to go out to the countryside and the Pol Pot come with a gun and force. So we go about twenty days by foot and we walk with the trolley with some food and some clothes and when the night come we sleep by the side of the road… thousands of people lying by the side of the road. People must go out to the country, empty city, empty… We cannot choose where to stay, we just move out. [One] group stay here, another group keep going. We ended up in a place we call Ojumnah [where] we stayed for one year. It’s about twenty or thirty kilometres from Kompong Som where I live before. It was difficult moving the trolley in Kompong Som because of the hill, but when down is all right… I don’t know how long it took to get out to the village… long time… maybe twenty day because we not hurry and walk slowly and when night comes we sleep and cook. When we hungry we cook some rice [to] eat… We don’t know where we are going. We just hope that we can go back home.

Kien remembered how happy she was that the war was over. Many Cambodians were glad the war was finally over and greeted the Khmer Rouge in a ‘holiday mood’ (Chandler 1977a, p. 2). Her happiness that the war had ended was short-lived, as she had not expected to be asked to leave the coastal city of Kompong Som for the countryside by the Khmer Rouge. Those who initially resisted, she tells, were threatened at gunpoint. Kien, her husband and her three children moved slowly along the road into the Cambodian countryside. She remembered that they moved slowly and deliberately, taking their time as they hoped that they could soon return to the city. In this way her family passively resisted the upheaval of their lives.

Prior to the Khmer Rouge takeover, Kien’s husband Phuoc had sent one of his younger brothers and his younger sister to Thailand. Phuoc also recalled of another younger brother studying in France and two older brothers studying in China. So in total he had five of his
ten siblings outside of the country on the April 17th takeover. Phuoc’s mother and two youngest brothers, Teng and Tong, remained with him, while his father was elsewhere in Phnom Penh with Phuoc’s uncle. Another brother, Ming, married with wife and child, also remained in Cambodia, along with one sister. He told of his attempt to send his youngest brother to France and the failure to send one brother to Thailand before the Khmer Rouge takeover of the country.

First you have to fill in the paper; then you have to have someone sponsor you. You have money and you ask the Lon Nol the Cambodian government if they allow you to go or not. One goes to study and other want to go too, but unfortunately Cambodian government not sign the paper to get him out... My younger sister and younger brother escape to Thailand. Another younger brother want to go too, but we don’t know how they go through there and how they live. They get to go first then maybe later on, but these two brothers, the luck.

The story of his attempt to send his youngest brother Tong to France and Teng to Thailand was important to Phuoc. This act perhaps demonstrated his care towards his siblings as the older brother. Sending his younger brothers away and staying behind in uncertain times was one way he could care for others. For Todorov sacrifice is not commensurable, however, with caring (1996, p. 85), although he clarifies that ‘If one makes a sacrifice, one wants others to feel it too, to know how much it has cost. Caring is its own reward, for it makes the giver happy’ (1996, p. 86). Feelings of regret and impotence are also conveyed within Phuoc’s narrative in his failure to save his younger brother from the Pol Pot regime. However, arguably regret and impotence also indicates his caring for others, as these emotions seem connected with feeling responsible for his younger brother.

Phuoc said that he viewed the takeover by the Khmer Rouge with trepidation because some friends and relatives had told him life would be harder under the communists, but not too much worse. Others friends and relatives told him, ‘You have to run away when the communist come in.’ However he decided to stay and said, ‘So I stayed, because we think a few years later it would be okay.’ His story differs from Kien’s, in that he noted that first they went to Phnom Penh for three days after the takeover before they headed back to Kompong Som.
We think it just a few year maybe become normal. We come to Phnom Penh for a few days, then we have to move out, because he says he had to come in and ‘clean up.’ He asked all the people to ‘go outside and later on we come back.’ That’s what they said. Some people don’t want to go but the Khmer Rouge soldiers use force to move them. My family, my mother, two brothers and I were in Kompong Som that time. My father live in Phnom Penh with my Uncle, at that time we separate, and in Phnom Penh they move to somewhere I don’t know, just run away from Phnom Penh… To Ojunnah we went. I think we spend a week from Sihanoukville to Ojunnah, maybe ten days and we stopped there. At that time they don’t say anything… First the Khmer Rouge say ‘just move out a few day and come back,’ they want to ‘clean up the city.’ Then we move out, later on nothing.

The evacuation relied on a combination of lies and armed force to move millions of people from the cities into the country. The experience was confusing for urban dwelling Cambodians, like Phuoc and Kien, as they wanted to believe that they would soon be returning to the cities. The language used by the Khmer Rouge from the very start spoke of cleansing. For instance they informed Phuoc that they had to ‘clean up’ the cities, hence wiping the slate clean from year zero and the beginning of the Cambodian utopia.

Elsewhere in the west of Cambodia on the Thai border in the mining town of Pailin Maly remembered hearing the announcement over the radio that Phnom Penh had been taken over. He ran to tell his brothers and sisters on their farm about half a mile out of town.

I told them ‘Peace has arrived in Cambodia because the war has stopped!’

We all reckoned when Cambodia was taken over, the Khmer Rouge is going to have Sihanouk come back to the throne and we will be in peace. But it wasn’t that. Then by the evening many cars and trucks came through our village. Battambang province had its own military and all those people were going from Battambang to escape to Thailand. They knew that if they stayed they would be killed.

I said, ‘We are having peace now. No more war. Why are they trying to run away?’

And my brother told me ‘You don’t understand anything about the politics of it, just shut up.’

Then I ask my brother ‘I said are we going with them or are we staying?’
It was a big decision for my oldest brother, if we leave we have to leave together, if we stay we have to stay together.

He said, ‘We are such a big family, if we go there what are we going to do? How are we going to live in Thailand?’

Maly and his family had the opportunity to flee the relatively short distance to the Thai border. Instead they chose to stay in Cambodia. It was not clear to the people living in the towns what exactly the Khmer Rouge was going to do after they took over. As the communists had often said that they were fighting for Sihanouk (Bizot 2000, pp. 24-5) many people may have believed, like Maly did, that the prince would be returned to power. According to Maly it was four days after the takeover of Phnom Penh, on April 21st 1975, when the Khmer Rouge reached the town of Pailin. People in Pailin were then told to pack their belongings and move to the countryside. The Khmer Rouge evacuated not only the major provincial cities but the smaller rural towns as well. Before 1975 the population in many towns had swollen due to US bombing and the fighting throughout the countryside between the Khmer Rouge and the Lon Nol armed forces. Maly recalled that the population of Pailin had grown to be much larger just before the April 17th takeover. Immediately after the fall of Phnom Penh there was a flood of people towards the Thai border, a great proportion of which were members of Lon Nol’s armed forces and their families. Maly noted that those in the armed forces thought they would be killed, but his brother was also a soldier under Lon Nol, although not a ranking officer, and he did not flee to Thailand despite his proximity to the border. It was not certain if the Khmer Rouge would try to kill all people with any connection with the old Lon Nol regime. However, Maly reasoned that the Khmer Rouge moved people away from Pailin in the far west of Cambodia because they did not want people to escape to Thailand. This suggests that the regime was paranoid and controlling from the very outset. Alex Hinton, an anthropologist, suggests that the paranoia stemmed from searching for ‘the ‘sickness’ that was ‘rotting society’’ rapidly grew within the Party Center and was catalysed by forced confessions in torture centers like Toul Sleng (2005, p. 96). Chandler argues that the party leadership was paranoid and distrusted the ‘people’, further he claims that rapid forced collectivization was
intended to ‘to expose its enemies and prevent the old society from reemerging’ (1990, p. 167).

The unexpected and sudden action of emptying the cities provoked shock and dismay amongst many people. Why did the Khmer Rouge empty the cities? Vickery (1999) argues that the countryside had been destroyed by a combination of US bombing and incessant war and the towns and the cities were overflowing with refugees displaced by this fighting. Vickery claims that the destruction of the means of producing food in Cambodia meant that when the Khmer Rouge seized control there was already a situation of not enough food to feed the entire population and this was the case even during the Lon Nol regime (1999, p. 84). Additionally if the Khmer Rouge did not move the population to the countryside and reengage production then Cambodia would face starvation (Vickery 1999, p. 85).

At the time of the April 17th takeover the Khmer Rouge numbered 120,000 and only half were soldiers (Margolin 1999, p. 584). How then did such a relatively small group force millions of people into the countryside? One explanation is that the Khmer Rouge soldiers were the ones with guns. Without needing to shoot a person, any order by a group with guns seems more likely to be obeyed than not. Many people also supported of the Khmer Rouge and they were happy that the war was at an end. Indeed Kiernan argues that there was widespread support for the Khmer Rouge (1997, p. 167). At this time the Khmer Rouge were also treated by many Cambodian people as heroic revolutionaries and were greeted with cheering in the streets. Chandler claims that many people from the cities were happy to begin the process of rebuilding Cambodia after the war (1992b, p. 211). The Cambodian experience does suggest that large numbers of people do acquiesce to the commands of an armed few. However, while the evacuation of the cities was forced upon the population, the town dwellers also participated in the evacuation in their submission. Participation perhaps formed one aspect of survival of a regime that used the threat of violence to gain compliance. Todorov (1996) claims that in extreme situations it takes only a little time before soldiers come to enjoy their power over others. Arguably when the Khmer Rouge soldiers and cadres emptied the cities and had their orders obeyed they realized their power over other people when they submitted to their commands. In addition Todorov proposes
There is a particular type of instrumentalism and depersonalization, however, that merits special consideration, the type in which I remain the end of my action while only the other becomes a means, not a means to accomplish some more or less abstract project – the victory of Communism, for example, or cleansing the earth of its inferior races – but a means to realize the satisfaction of a particular individual, me. This kind of satisfaction is fed by one thing only: my cognizance that the other has submitted to me. The power I enjoy over him is direct, unmediated by rationalizing concepts such as law, duty, or the word of the leader. The phenomenon I am describing is that of the libido dominandi (1996, p. 179).

Todorov claims, as does psychologist Philip Zimbardo (2007), that exercising power over others can be experienced as enjoyable. Furthermore, it does not matter if the exercise of power brings about the happiness or sadness in others. It only matters that the experience of those subjected to it is dependent on the person exercising power in a given situation (1996, p. 180). The evacuation of the cities was the beginning of an escalation of practices of domination by the Khmer Rouge soldiers and cadres over the rest of the Cambodian population. The evacuation may also suggest that the soldiers and cadres came to enjoy their exercise of power almost immediately after the April 17\textsuperscript{th} takeover. When city dwellers obeyed their orders to evacuate their power was recognized and confirmed. Indeed Hinton suggests, ‘powerful individuals who have ‘potent saliva’ (\textit{teu moat brei}) are sometimes described as having etthipol, in the sense that their words or orders are listened to and obeyed’ (2005, p. 99).

After he was evacuated, Maly said that when he travelled from Pailin to Treng he went through the remnants of a battlefield from war between the Lon Nol armed forces and the Khmer Rouge. There he saw several corpses, which at first, because of the smell, he mistakenly thought were dead animals. He narrated that ‘The hair. I thought it was a horse because it had hair, and we could not see it clearly.’ He found this horrifying and said ‘I was feeling sick when I saw it.’ The mutilated bodies lay in the fields some ten metres from the road that the evacuees from Pailin walked. Moving people into the countryside had immediate traumatic consequences. Maly’s first experience of horror during the regime was from the remains of war.
The Western media claimed that the situation was ‘genocide’ in 1975 before there was evidence of atrocities occurring. According to Jefferson Lee the ‘horrors of the war became the horrors of genocide’ and immediately after April 1975 the Australian media began to represent the conditions inside of Cambodia as ‘a bloodbath’ and ‘genocide’ ‘well in advance of any substantial evidence to support such claims’ (1995, p. 13). So although mass killings occurred during the Pol Pot regime it was not clear what actions the Khmer Rouge were going to take from the outset, despite the claims in the media of genocide occurring immediately after the takeover.

Because people could also only take with them what they could carry, a redistribution of wealth took effect immediately during the evacuation of the towns and cities. Maly remembered that many people left Pailin in cars and trucks with their belongings, but they were then told to leave their vehicles behind. Maly’s brother had a motorbike was ordered to leave it on the side of the road near Treng, halfway between Pailin and Battambang. Others like Cambodian writer Loung Ung remembered her family leaving their sleek black Mazda sedan behind in Phnom Penh because it identified them as being from the middle class (Ung, L 2000, p. 20). Leaving their homes behind the city dwellers were stranded with only a few belongings in the countryside.

The evacuation of the towns and cities following the April 17\textsuperscript{th} takeover also led to immediate family members being separated. Maly recounted that after his family moved out of Pailin they separated into three groups, his sister and brother in-law went to Treng, his two older brothers went to Kompong Kol while his father, brother and him moved to do rice farming near Battambang. Being separated from family members was a common experience during this time. While family members were separated at the behest of the Pol Pot regime, the separation of family members into different groups was also a strategic response to the regime. Maly narrated that there were ‘two heads of the family,’ consisting of his eldest brother and his father who headed in opposite directions. Likewise Phuoc was immediately separated from his father and uncle, but later would be separated from his brothers and immediate family members. Chhon, staying with his sister in Phnom Penh, was separated from his two brothers and their Vietnamese wives who were evacuated to Battambang. He was later separated from his sister. During evacuation Lackanary was
separated from his father, a Lon Nol officer, who was arrested and presumably killed shortly after April 17th although Lackanary did not know exactly how his father died.

**Separation and Disorientation**

After people were forced from the cities and the towns into the countryside some people went to stay with their relatives while others were able to occupy abandoned dwellings within villages. Chhon stated, ‘When people left the cities you can go to live anywhere, but near your place of birth is better.’ People chose to go to villages where they had a family connection. For instance Lackarnary narrated that

So they just came into your house and told you ‘You have to move.’ If not you got killed. In Svay Rieng my family and I were in my mum’s home town. She was born in a town fifteen kilometres from the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. My mum’s home town, where she was born, is called Chipuket and is on the number one highway.

While the Khmer Rouge could force people from the cities and towns, they could not force them to any particular location during the initial evacuation. This was due to the relatively small number of cadres and soldiers compared to the rest of the population after the takeover (Margolin 1999). Many people who were internally displaced inside the country due to US bombing and the destruction of their homes sought to return to where they were born. Jean-Louis Margolin argued

Cambodia is neither big nor densely populated, and almost all city dwellers had relatives somewhere in the country. Many simply went to join them, and thus vastly increased their chances of survival, provided they were not deported again (1999, p. 584).

Bo’s family first settled near one of her mother’s friends in the countryside where they lived before being shifted deeper into the jungle. Bo remembered

At nighttime we came to this particular place we settle in and our house was not far from a tarseal road. I remember our farmhouse was in front of a big pond. I remember that my grandmother had her hot water bottle and flask. One of my Aunties, who is now living in
Australia, she must have broken her hot water bottle and grandmother was so upset with her that they had a fight and shortly after that I did not see my Auntie anymore. I remember that grandmother was sad. Sometime I [went] to the main road just to walk along and after the rain I would catch little tadpoles and put into our pond. Then months later we have big-big frogs in the pond.

Bo remembered playing near a pond filled with tadpoles near their farmhouse, so it seems immediately after evacuation and settlement in the countryside there was still time for Bo to play. Despite the shock of evacuation, the initial conditions of life in some instances were not terrible if the evacuees were able to move in with friends and family living in the countryside. However, Kien’s initial experiences of being in the countryside were remembered as

…very, very bad. Suffer during that time. When we run out of food we eat less and less every day. The water is not fit to drink. We pick the water from the field. When the rice run out we pick the potato. Not enough food. Some people bring some food when we run out we take the gold to change for rice… Some people live with Pol Pot long time got the rice. We have some gold and we change, because no more money. Money like blank paper… No market, we go with gold and change [for] rice in secret. Some people have rice, live with Pol Pot from the beginning. They say the ‘old people’ live with Pol Pot long time. The ‘new people’ like us – ‘new people’ in ‘75 – people who live with Pol Pot we call ‘old people’. They have more power than us and more freedom than us. They can do anything. They have power to do more thing than us. And sometimes those people control us.

The immediate situation in the countryside for Kien and her family meant that they slowly ran out of food that they had brought with them. Unlike her daughter Bo, she recalled that they suffered during their time in Ojumnah. After running out of food they then secretly traded gold for rice. Access to food was partly dependent on having gold and therefore the ability to trade for rice or else was dependent upon access to resources in the village before the arrival of the people from the cities. Kien notes an important division between people from the cities and people from the countryside. The evacuees from the cities, who had not joined the Khmer Rouge before 1975, were called ‘new people’, whereas those who lived in the countryside alongside the Khmer Rouge before 1975 were called ‘old people’. Kiernan claims that ‘new people’ or neak themey, also called ‘depositees’ or neak phnoe,
made up 30 percent of the population, whereas the ‘old people’ or *neak chas*, also called ‘base people’ or *neak moulanh*, had lived in insurgent areas called ‘bases’ for several years (1997, p. 164). Kien understood the power relationship between these two groups as one where the ‘old people’ could ‘do anything’. During the Pol Pot regime the subject identities of ‘old people’ and ‘new people’ were constituted by a dividing practice based upon the kind of story that a person could tell about where they were from. The practices of identification kept people in separate groups. Hence ‘old people’ and ‘new people’, as identities, involved a form of solidarity. Todorov claims the following about solidarity:

Solidarity with our own implies the exclusion of all others. Its victims thus are foreigners, strangers, those who are different. Even in the camps, newcomers first run up against the hostility of the group that has already formed. The group is not sure it wants the newcomers to share in the benefits of its solidarity, and they are kept outside the circle, lest they jeopardize whatever advantages the group has already won for itself (1996, p. 82).

This description seems to fit the relationship between the ‘old people’ who had some privileges and resources and the ‘new people’ who were the strangers from the cities. It seems important to keep this relationship in mind in terms of later developments during the regime such as starvation and mass killing. The solidarity of the ‘old people’ meant that ‘new people’ could be excluded from access to food. Kien stated that while one of the ‘new people’ would be friendly to the face of one of the ‘old people’ there could be no friendship or trust between the two groups.

People were also separated into groups based on age and gender. Phuoc understood the experience of separation into groups in terms of age and gender.

In the fields at Ojumnah they form many group: children group, an older one, all women one, all girl one. The women go to work at the job, men at the job, girl job – many people different job. That time very hard time – no food. When we go to work in the fields we catch fish or crab in the field – any animal we can eat. That is a very hard time. Many people starve. I live in Ojumnah about a year and they want to move some people, I think maybe they make too many people in that place or that place had enough people so they say ‘We need some people to move to another place.’
Phuoc recalled another form of separation that came to exist during the regime as people were split up into work teams based on age and gender. Before the Pol Pot regime people worked the fields in family groups with people performing different tasks based on ability. After 1975 most of the smaller family farming groups were amalgamated into much larger work teams. In these teams people had individual, rather than collective, daily targets for production (Kiernan 1997, p. 167). The experience of being broken into work teams for the urban dwellers was both isolating and worrying, as they could no longer keep track of their other family members.

There was also not enough food available in Ojumnah according to Kien, while Phuoc noted people starving. After a year Bo, her two brothers and her parents Kien and Phuoc moved to a village in Kompong Speu, which had better work conditions. According to Kien it was not raining all the time, there were fewer leeches in the fields, and more food was available.

In the north Maly and his father were forced to build houses in new settlements after their initial evacuation. In the meantime they used whatever they could for shelter. Maly told they used plastic mats as shelter, before they built huts using thick Spung grass. There was also an expectation that people in these new settlements would be able to become quickly self-sufficient and live off the land around them. This often involved scavenging for edible plants and wildlife. Maly remembered

> We stay at that place, not allowed to go anywhere, no trade, no nothing. They give us nothing (and) that is why many people die. They reckon you can eat the earth or eat the leaves from the trees. It’s terrible. But we have a bit of our own food supply and we stay there and we try to eat everything that we could. From the tree as hard as oak and it produce a fruit and a small seed and it’s hard as rock. The only way to use it as food is to roast the seed, then boil it for half a day, and then we eat it. It doesn’t taste or anything. We go around the buildings to find some small crabs…

People try to eat anything. You might hear that ‘Cambodian eat anything’ and it’s true. They eat anything that they could. I heard some people kill their own kids and eat. I heard about that, but I didn’t see. I heard because so many people die they go to the place where the dead person is living and cut their flesh and eat. I heard of that one. Then later on in 1975 they
supply some rice for eating and some for planting as well, but it is never enough to eat. It’s the one with the shell that you clean yourself. Called srow, it is very hard to separate with the grinder…

At that time money was useless. Money all over the street and no trading. Anyone caught trading will be in trouble, but people still interested if you can. Some people already living there during the war, and they have plenty of rice, and plenty of food because it is their own village and because they have their own storage. They didn’t have to move like us from Pailin to that place. We had nothing to carry, but they just move from the highway only a few kilometres from the highway where they live. So they could build their own second house – their home away from home – and we are just like travellers (with) no belongings.

Maly felt that settlement in the countryside was a difficult experience for people from elsewhere. He believed that the Khmer Rouge government supplied the village with some food where he first stayed near Battambang, but that hunger soon set in. According to Maly people began to get desperate and eat anything they could. He began to hear of people eating the dead, although he emphasised that he never personally saw this happen. Like elsewhere in the country Maly told of the local people from where the village was established had their own resources, in particular their own food resources. But like other parts of the country, trading still occurred. Like Kien he noted that a person could trade gold for food, but discovered that gold had a diminishing value as people could not wear gold and other goods like clothing and medicine were also used to trade for rice. Maly told of taking clothing through a swamp to another village where he traded for a bag of rice. He was then shifted elsewhere. This meant that the existing housing that had been built by the ‘new people’ from the city was left behind, further depleting their resources even more. ‘Deporting’ people again after evacuation may have reduced their chances of survival (Margolin 1999). The family of Cambodian writer Molyda Szymusiak ran out of food after the evacuation from the city and her parents attempted to trade with the villagers in a neighbouring village, some declined the offer to trade silver and possessions whereas others traded most generously and one woman pointed out that someday she may not have anything (1999, pp. 29-30). It seems that some weeks after the initial evacuation from the cities that many city dwellers experienced a shortage of food. The consequences of food shortage had dire affects, Chhon recalled that some people accidentally ate plants that were poisonous and died.
As dire but more puzzling was the decision taken by some to kill themselves. Chhon remembered thinking that some people who hanged themselves may have felt that resettlement in the countryside was too much to bear. Chhon remembered some people hanging themselves as they thought everything that they had dreamt about their future had come to an end. He also thought that such suicides were due to people being separated from their children. Being dumped in the countryside and separated from their home and position in Cambodian society also was a loss of dignity. Todorov reminds us that human dignity is an important ordinary human virtue (1996, p. 16) and argues that some suicides are an attempt to reclaim dignity, but even though a ‘suicide that has the assertion of dignity as its goal is not always, from the perspective of ordinary virtues, a truly admirable act’ (1996, p. 16). For Todorov a virtuous act must also contribute to the welfare of others! Suicide in this instance fails to meet this test. Perhaps the case of people committing suicide after the Khmer Rouge takeover was to protect their children if they were later recognized as being part of the old regime. Or such suicide was to reclaim the dignity associated with their lost comfortable middle class status. The former, but not the latter, seems commensurate with Todorov’s sense of a virtuous act.

Asking to think about the motives of the Khmer Rouge Chhon suggested that the Khmer Rouge evacuated people from the towns and then proceeded to move people around the countryside to break any claim they might make to private ownership of land or housing. But he also understood that the land was not publicly owned. Chhon noted that the word ‘public’ or saa-tee-a-ra-nah connoted a fundamentally different meaning. Instead it all belonged to Angkar or ‘the organization’.

After moving city dwellers to the countryside the Khmer Rouge set about separating people from their immediate family members into either ‘mobile groups’ or ‘youth camps’ in which people were separated on the basis of age and gender. Chhon remembered the youth camps were either ‘boy unity groups’ or ‘girl unity groups’. Despite her separation from her parents Bo said that she was still able to return to where her parents stayed at night for a while. Husbands and wives were also separated for much of the time and the regime amplified pre-existing Buddhist morally conservative attitudes regarding sexual relations. Dunlop observes that
Sex was forbidden and all marriages were arranged by the Organisation. Sex was only permitted between wives and husbands; outside of marriage the punishment for such crimes was death. The regime was obsessed with the notion of purity, and sexual abstinence, as it had been for monks, was part of this new regimen (2005, p. 136).

The move to regulate sexual life was just one aspect of a more ambitious attempt by the Pol Pot regime to control all aspects of social life. The moral values of the regime meant for Chhon ‘During that time everybody not allowed love each other – they separate.’ This aspect of the Pol Pot regime was not derived from communist ideology but instead reproduced from life before 1975 as suggested in Chapter One. The moral values of those in power forbid the expression of love. The public expression of emotion was undesirable and punishable by the Khmer Rouge during this period of time. Separation of people involved not only a spatial project it also was invested with an emotional and moral significance. However, Bo also recounted being terrorized at night by the village chief’s son who would lift up the girls’ dresses in their communal hut at night. She also remembered being chased by another man in a field once while she was alone. The official line may have been sexually repressive, but this did not mean that men with some power or authority did not attempt to rape women either.

Separation from family members made it more difficult for some people to survive during this period of time. Bo’s father pushed her forward with her brother and her cousin to join a different group to her parents. Her life in the mobile group involved moving earth to build a dam which almost killed her. She still feels angry with her father for splitting them up, but understands that his decision was based on a gamble that conditions might be better elsewhere. She believes now this action by her father was done out of care for her, not out of neglect. Phuoc was also separated by chance from his two brothers, Teng and Tong, and his mother. He remembered

When we separate, my wife with me and children and my mother with two younger brothers together, they separate too, I don’t know where they go, just the direction, but don’t know exactly where they are.
The experience of family separation was a profound source of anxiety and sadness for Cambodian storytellers. Maly’s family split up initially into three groups after initial evacuation from the city. Later he was separated from his father and brother but accompanied by a friend of his brother. Later still, terribly sick in hospital, he found himself alone. It seems that survival during the Pol Pot regime meant working together as much as possible but also knowing when it was best to split up, even if it meant that one person might be far more likely to die alone. Todorov observes that those who survive totalitarian regimes are far more likely to survive if they have either friends or family to care for them or for them to care about (1996, p. 17). Indeed

Concern for others carries with it certain rewards. There are things we can do for others that we are incapable of doing solely for ourselves, and so concern for others can keep us from giving up (Todorov 1996, p. 17).

Bo knew her parents were elsewhere, and Maly thought that he might not see his father, when he was in hospital, before he died. Caring about another, even when separated from them, provided a moral and emotional basis for living.

**Work and Transformation**

People were worked to death by the Pol Pot regime. The amount of food that was provided in relation to the amount of work that people were forced to do was not enough to sustain life. A common theme in the stories was epitomized by Bo’s remarks that, ‘Our bodies were breaking down, psychologically and physically.’ The Khmer Rouge forced the ‘new people’ from the cities to work to extract a surplus from their labour. In this way the surplus was transferred upwards in a hierarchical fashion from one class to another class. In this regard the Pol Pot regime (Democratic Kampuchea 1975 to 1978) had a class system. This was in contrast with what people were told by the Khmer Rouge cadres. For instance Bo remembered being told that ‘now we have to be equal.’ And Kien said, ‘What he do and what he say not the same!’ This surplus was extracted from the energy stored in the very fat, bones, and blood of the people from the cities. It was common during this
time for people to become emaciated bags of skin and bones. This energy was translated into both building infrastructure and into creating a food surplus.

The historian Ben Kiernan argues that Cambodia produced enough food to feed the entire population during the years between 1975 and 1978 (1997, pp. 378-83). So there was a surplus produced in Democratic Kampuchea in relation to the labour that produced it. This food surplus was exported and used to buy trucks, bicycles and weapons from China. China benefited greatly from having access to huge amounts of Cambodian commodities that were traded by the Khmer Rouge at well below world prices (Kiernan 1997). This surplus kept the elite communist cadres (Angkar) well fed and enabled them to buy weapons and transportation.

The experience of bodily breakdown was both numbing and terrifying for storytellers. People did not understand the purpose of the work that they did during the Pol Pot regime, though some narrators said that later they were very angry about being made to work so hard. Bo made this point

The thing we used to carry the soil was like a huge basket. We worked day and we worked up to really dark and you can’t see, then we come back and we eat, and after we eat we go to work. I can’t understand what for? And the food portion was just a little bit and the amount of work they made me do. I was starving – really starving. Two times a day I was getting a meal. Work from morning, 5 o’clock get up and go to work. Today I feel angry, extremely angry, because to me what is the purpose? If you work for a purpose then you can understand, but it wasn’t for a purpose, and I’m very angry at the treatment I received – that we all received – that we were made to work like slave. Even more than slave... 5-6 o’clock go to work. It’s freezing cold because it’s near the mountain and…there is nothing to wear, just a normal cloth shirt…and I have no shoes to wear. Just go to work every day, for how long I could not tell you, just day in day out, work until 1 o’clock in the morning and then come back 6 o’clock.

For Bo shifting dirt and digging holes had no comprehensible purpose as an activity. Work with no purpose and with no beginning or end, was demoralizing for her. Todorov (1996) argues that under totalitarian regimes, as with work done in more liberal regimes, building or crafting something well engenders a feeling of self-respect. Equally, Todorov states
...meaningless work, such as carrying sand back and forth, or digging a hole and then filling it up again, is particularly degrading. It is impossible to do it well, and impossible therefore to keep one's self-respect (1996, p. 67).

In this regard those Cambodian people from the cities, like Bo, who did not understand the purpose of building dams and who worked for twelve hours a day or more, recalled that she felt very angry about the degrading character of being forced to work ‘more than a slave.’ The Khmer Rouge arguably saw work as transformative and people would ‘learn’ from doing rather than from intellectual processes of re-education. Equally the massive scale projects, like dam building, likely reduced support for the regime amongst people who were forced to work on them.

**The Invisible Chain**

The Khmer Rouge organized work by putting people into ‘mobile’ work teams. Kien, Maly and Bo were broken off into ‘mobile groups’ that were moved around the countryside working on projects like dams and irrigation infrastructure works. Bo said that she had no idea where her parents were and that she had no sense of where she was as she was shifted around the countryside to work. The constant shifting around the countryside was very disorienting, and perhaps served to make it more difficult for them to escape to either Vietnam or Thailand. Haing Ngor, a Cambodian writer, remembered that his wife and he were selected to go to the ‘frontline’ because they were childless (1988, p. 195). The experience of being formed into mobile groups to work on irrigation projects was an experience shared by many Cambodian refugees.

Maly described being broken into a group consisting of nine people and a group leader, which was further broken into three groups of three people. Within each group of three each person was held responsible for watching the other two people in their group. For example, if one of their group members went missing then it was the responsibility of the two remaining group members to inform the group leader of this. Maly aptly called this surveillance an ‘invisible chain’. Each group of ten was part of a larger group of three
groups. The three group leaders reported to a Khmer Rouge cadre. Maly described the ‘invisible chain’ worked as a larger aggregate

We have a group of 30 people, and 30 people got 3 leaders, that leader plus the other 9. 10 is the group. You were not allowed to discuss anything except with your own group, for example you go anywhere you have to tell your group leader. The group leader is for 10 people, like a group of soldier, a battalion: one big group has 100 people. 90 and 3 leaders, 90 divided in 3, 30 each, and then 30 divided in 3, to make small group [of] 10, is like multiply. So all in the smallest one is 3. 3 you look after each other.

In this respect work discipline was enforced and policed by a process of surveillance engendering a paranoid process or ethos. Order was made possible by members of each group of three ‘look[ing] after each other’. Maly compared it to a battalion, which established a sense of military-like discipline. The metaphor of ‘the invisible chain’ points to the profound lack of freedom and autonomy experienced by many Cambodian people during the Pol Pot regime and how the regime established a form of totalitarian control which reached down to each individual. It is arguable whether the Khmer Rouge actually ever accomplished total control, but the character of individual surveillance, described by Maly, does indicate the intention to establish total control of people by the Pol Pot regime. In this regard it could be argued that the regime approached totalitarianism in seeking this level of control over its subjects. Todorov states that in the instance of totalitarianism

The party (communist or National Socialist) is not content to seize political power in the narrow sense (a classical dictatorship would) by eliminating the opposition and taking over the government. Rather, it extends its control over the entire public sphere of each person’s life and encroaches substantially on his private life as well. It controls what work the individual does, where he lives, what he owns, his children’s education and leisure, even his family life and his love affairs. In this way the state secures its subject’s submission; in a totalitarian system, there is no refuge, no escaping the state’s control (1996, p. 128).

In this respect the Pol Pot regime could be said to be totalitarian in the sense of a desire to control where a person worked, lived and who they could have relationships with. The Cambodian writer Ngor claims that the Khmer Rouge set about to abolish many aspects of former Cambodian society, which included the removal of belongings from the ‘new
people’ which might remind them of the past, the destruction of the social position which the Buddhist monks had enjoyed and even individual meals were replaced by collective eating arrangements (1988, pp. 198-9).

And yet as the people I spoke with suggest the Pol Pot regime while total in many respects, was never complete. That is the Cambodian experience of the Pol Pot regime was of totalitarianism. Yet if the concept of totalitarianism is to have any meaning beyond Nazi Germany and Stalin’s USSR it must be understood that such a state never achieves total control but approaches it an attempt at domination of all of social life. Totalitarianism is experienced as ‘chaos’ for those who suffer it and as ‘order’ by those who wield power. This is to suggest that totalitarianism occurs where the state’s attempt at social control is as total as can be possibly experienced. Thus the Pol Pot regime could be considered one of the 20th Century’s totalitarian regimes.

But while the regime possessed aspects that sought total control over social life, on the village level discipline and work regime were very uneven across the country (Kiernan 2008, p. 10; Vickery 1999). For instance, Chhon was given lighter work due to his disability and worked alone. Chhon’s experience poses a problem for understanding the Pol Pot regime as being unsympathetic to all city dwellers, and, in Chhon’s case, unsympathetic to all former Buddhist monks. First he told that he looked after two cows from 1975 until 1977 and then the Khmer Rouge set him to work looking after five hundred ducks. During this time Chhon said that he could sit and think and was in many respects an observer and not a participant in the work regime to the same extent as other narrators

Because I got a disability they do not ask me to do a hard job, they just ask me to look after two cows. For about two years I look after two cows. After that they thought it is maybe hard for me so they ask me to look after the ducks. Because each cooperative kitchen should have their own things like ducks, hens and pigs for food. About mid ’77 I look after five hundred ducks instead.

Chhon’s experience of work reminds us of the variation of experiences throughout the regime. It also points to a puzzling ‘moral’ quality in the regime as the Khmer Rouge cadres gave Chhon much easier work specifically due to his disability. Chhon specifically
claimed that looking after the ducks was ‘easy’. During this time Chhon saw the terrible conditions under which people worked. He said that he did not work hard, but said he ‘didn’t feel good in life’ during this time. Chhon also said that he wished that he would die during the Pol Pot regime, although did not attempt to kill himself. Instead he said he prayed that

Please, all the disease come in my body and kill me please, because I did not want to stay. I used to live a normal life, and I want to do all the things that I can. And during that time I can’t do anything. We have no time to go anywhere at all! Just, work, work, work – all the time. I was looking after the duck during that time, I got a lot of spare time to sit. So I did not work hard, but I didn’t feel good in life, in myself, because of the way that they treat us.

The conditions that Chhon saw around him during the Pol Pot regime, in particular watching other people suffer, was so upsetting that he wished to die. So while the conditions of life for some individuals were relatively privileged compared to others this did not mean that they viewed the regime favourably. The suffering witnessed by Chhon evoked a strong moral response. How could he go on living after witnessing such suffering? Todorov (1996) asserts that the desire to die is not necessarily incompatible with the will to live, but instead may form part of a desire to take control of one’s destiny in extreme situations of suffering and violence. Todorov puts it

The preservation of dignity requires transforming a situation of constraint into one of freedom; where the constraint is extreme, such a transformation can amount to choosing to do something one is forced to do…minimum dignity, the only dignity possible in situations in which one no longer has any choice, means going of one’s own accord to the death that others have prepared for you; it is, for example, the suicide of one who awaits execution – the difference between the two is infinitesimal yet sufficient (1996, pp. 61-2).

Perhaps wanting to die from disease enabled Chhon to reclaim some dignity in a setting where conditions of life could not be chosen. Conditions within different areas within Cambodia varied greatly and his brothers were sent to Battambang where they died. Chhon offered two possible reasons why this happened. They may have died from exposure and from lack of shelter. The other possibility was that they might have been killed due to being married to ethnic Vietnamese women. He never knew how they died exactly.
Kiernan reminds us that the ethnic Vietnamese population were specifically targeted by the Khmer Rouge (1997, p. 296), along with people from the east of Cambodia (1997, pp. 369-71; 2008, p. 11) where Chhon and his brothers were from. This point aside for a moment, it is also possible that Chhon’s reasoning behind the logic of the regime in killing ethnic Vietnamese may have come from his reading of the literature produced about the Pol Pot regime rather than directly from his experiences of the regime. He also clearly said that he did not know what happened to them, so perhaps because he was left wanting answers he also sought further knowledge about the regime. While the agents of the Pol Pot regime killed many people, starvation and disease also played a large part in the overall number of people who died. Hunger and starvation exacerbated the suffering of many people.

**Hunger**

The Nestles can of condensed milk, which contained 250 grams of rice, became the standard measure of rice during the regime of Democratic Kampuchea (Kiernan 1997, p. 164). Chhon described receiving varying amounts of rice that depended upon the time of the year in relation to the rice harvest. Rice rations varied from month to month. From November to March a person could eat as much hard rice as they could, but in other months of the year as the rice harvest ripened they were rationed to one cup of watery rice porridge. The three months from August to October were particularly bad due to receiving barely one cup of watery rice. Haing Ngor remembers periods of food shortages and eating watery rice, yet he also recounts one happy occasion where ‘We ate so much it hurt, and we were still happy’ (1988, p. 192). He also notes the dissatisfaction by the ‘old people’ in one village about the amount of food being produced and annoyance at not being able to eat what they wanted (Ngor 1988, p. 194). Hunger it seems not only affected the ‘new people’ from the cities but also took a toll on the Khmer Rouge’s favoured class, the peasantry.

This hunger was experienced at a time when extraordinary amounts of food commodities were also produced and exported, which included 5000 tons of rice to China in 1978 (Kiernan 1997, p. 381). Why then were Cambodian people starving? Storytellers cite poor planning as influencing the dire rationing, along with area leaders claiming that they had produced more rice than they had to their superiors, which meant that there was far less for
the people who had actually produced it. For example, Phuoc noted that one village leader claimed greater production than had occurred. Phuoc described this as having a ‘big face’ in front of the Khmer Rouge regional leaders. Sorting through records of exports to China during this time, Kiernan argues that huge amounts of Cambodian resources were traded to China in a series of vastly one-sided deals that favoured China (1997, p. 382). It seems that there was likely enough food to feed the Cambodian population, but instead it was exported to China, Yugoslavia and Japan. This trade was used to buy arms to support one of the worst totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.

How did people manage this situation combined with a very heavy work routine? Eating at home was officially banned towards the end of 1975 and ‘communal kitchens’ were established. However, most storytellers commented that the ‘old people’ were still eating outside the communal kitchens, as the ‘old people’ did not lose weight like the ‘new people’ did. This was compounded by the fact that the ‘new people’ from the cities were forced to work harder than the Khmer Rouge’s favoured peasant class (Kiernan 1997, pp. 174-6). Kiernan says that communal eating and reduction in food in 1976 and 1977 caused widespread resentment (2008, p. 16). Chandler claims that the 1977 policy of collective eating was ‘the most unpopular one in Democratic Kampuchea, depriving families of food, and opportunities for cooking and casual conversation’ (1992a, p. 126). In this regard Kien said

> The first year ’75 not in the canteen – cook at home – after ’75 we start to eat in the canteen and after meet and go to work. Is a lot of work and the weather is not good and the leech suck the blood in the rice field. The big one alright but small one come up and go into your vagina or bottom. I think the work is not very hard, but the food not enough and no medicine! How can we work? … The ‘new people’ is skinny and the ‘old people’ look normal, not skinny. We eat with them, but maybe behind us they eat, they can get more food, because we eat they same, why we so skinny? And why they still okay? They still healthy and we scared to speak with them…

Bo also told of being forced into competition with other children when they ate communally.
I think food was a main challenge for us. We always had to fight among ourselves to eat and compete with other kids to be fed. Sometimes they put a bowl in the middle of the table and six people need to share that. You have to be fast otherwise they just take all of it! It was competing. I don’t know if I was eating slowly then, but today I still eat very slowly. If I sit and eat the whole family is finished I’m still eating. I must be very slow. That was a disadvantage in that situation, because the time people go for two spoons and you only go for one spoon. They give you spoon, but sometimes some people make their own spoon, so it becomes bigger, like a ladle – huge you know! If you listen to it now it sound like a petty thing, but it was about survival. It was survival. People fight over food. The bowl is not big – just a small one – and if people have that big kind of spoon, each one of them go two times and it’s finished!

Bo said that children had to be fast when they ate otherwise they would miss out on getting enough food. She said this was because of the intense competition. Bo recalled that some made themselves bigger spoons, so that the amount they would take from the collective bowl would be greater than the others. She says that this sounds petty today, but that doing this was all about survival. In this way children were forced into intense competition with other children for food and there was increased competition between people during the period of collectivised cooking. Would this experience suggest to those who survived it that fundamentally all human beings were at war against one another and that all were caught up in a fight for survival?

Three and a half centuries before Thomas Hobbes had, perhaps ironically, pointed to an ultimate equality among people when individuals are forced into equally fierce competition against all others. He points to a peculiar kind of equality based on approximate equal ability in what he called the ‘state of nature’

From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our Ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their End, (which is principally their owne conservation, and sometimes the delectation only,) endeavour to destroy, or subdued one an other (1651, p. 184).
Forcing children to compete for food because of the pain of hunger placed them in such competition, thus making two or more children compete in a struggle for their own survival or ‘conservation’. Hobbes’ ‘war of all against all’ occurred when there was no common power to hold people in ‘awe’ and said

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man against every man. For WARRE, consisteth not in Battell onely, or in the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known (1651, p. 185).

If people were to live without any other form of security other than their own strength, where every individual is at war with every other individual, then life, as Hobbes put it becomes ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short’ (1651, p. 186). Hobbes believed that people form societies out of self-interest for their own protection against the war of all against all. The situation of ultimate competition seems to have been somewhat paradoxically created by the attempt to bring about ultimate equality in the Cambodian communist utopia. But were conditions in Cambodia during the Pol Pot regime like Hobbes’ war of all against all?

During this time Bo said she shared food with her younger brother, but recalled she was annoyed when she shared her portion with her younger brother because she was so hungry at the time. Nevertheless she still shared with her brother despite this tension. Sharing food with those who were not family, however, was perhaps a different matter. Todorov notes that some people cheered in the Nazi death camps when others arrived to be killed, as their arrival also meant more food and a better chance of survival (1996). Constant hunger produced odd circumstances as people competed with one another trying to gain enough food increasing the need to pursue pure self-interest as part of a process of everyday survival. Before her grandmother was deported to a village in Kompong Speu, Bo spoke of sharing her food portion with her. She said

My grandmother was living in the second settlement, not very far away, with her two youngest children, and they would go to work and I would be her main contact. I would go and collect the rice and the food from the communal kitchen. So and I go and collect it for
her and I would collect mine and I would sit down with her and share. I always remember that I never liked fish. But fish was our main diet. I hate fish. Even now I never eat fish, so I would just bring my cup and share with her. I remember I would always give her my portion of fish and I would just have the soup and the vegetables.

Bo’s grandmother was the primary carer for her as a child. During the time of communal eating Bo would take her piece of fish from her rice soup and give this to her grandmother. Bo claimed that she ‘hates fish’ but sharing her food suggests that caring for others was still possible during this time. Todorov (1996) maintains that one ordinary virtue important for survival during extreme circumstances is caring for others. So, despite the extraordinary conditions set loose by the regime, caring for other people was not extinguished.

Different people had very different access to food from area to area. Maly had relatively good access to food compared to other Cambodian storytellers. For instance he told of eating rice and pork parcels wrapped with banana leaves, of eating as many bananas as he could, and later being on a special program in hospital in the Battambang capital called Um-bpoing which meant ‘to be well fed’. Historian Michael Vickery notes that areas around Battambang had some of the best land where the amounts of food production were quite good all year round (1999, pp. 89, 107). However only one of five areas in Battambang was considered to have generally good conditions (Vickery 1999, pp. 109-10). Maly remembered his family’s initial settlement in a new area of Battambang was very difficult because they had poor access to food and no real shelter. Whereas Chhon thought that being sent to Battambang was a ‘death sentence’ because of conditions of that region. The conditions around the country were very uneven and this is why it is difficult to contextualize different peoples’ experiences of this time.

What kinds of effects did lack of food have? As Chhon notes much of the population was suffering from malnutrition and vitamin B deficiency by the end of 1977, brought on by hunger and starvation. Many people were skin and bone. People’s appearances had so radically changed that they were no longer even recognized by loved ones. To see loved ones transformed into yellow-skinned skeletal figures was clearly deeply upsetting. Maly’s father and the other old people broke down and wept when he returned to his father’s village a yellow-skinned skeletal figure, after being in Battambang hospital. Bo recalled
that her brother at first hid from her parents Kien and Phuoc, as he did not want them to see how he looked. It is not entirely clear if such horrific famine was intended or not by the Khmer Rouge. There is evidence to suggest that in part Khmer Rouge policy in regards to food was a consequence of people escaping to Vietnam and Thailand (Kiernan 1997). Equally a weakened population is much more compliant and easier to control. Needless to say peoples’ experience of lack of food and of watching others die or suffer from starvation was experienced as a very upsetting and traumatic experience (Blair 2001). During the Pol Pot regime hunger dominated people’s waking hours as people worked out ways of getting enough food to survive, as the amount allocated by the Khmer Rouge in most instances was simply not enough to sustain life. People became incredibly driven by their hunger, so much so that their hunger, in a sense, possessed them and reduced them to two primal urges – to eat and to rest. Nothing else mattered. So how did people survive this time?

Hunger made people take risks that they perhaps might not otherwise take. People stole food. But food stealing was a dangerous activity. Hunger changed people’s decision-making. While narrators said that if they were caught stealing they would be most likely punished, beaten or killed, their hunger had a tendency to override such risks and made them take action. While some people were killed for food stealing, some were beaten with sticks, or tied up in a painful stress position. Although some got off lightly with a warning. Vickery observes:

Almost no two regions were alike with respect to conditions of life. The amount of food, its distribution, work discipline, and general hardship, numbers of executions and execution policy, even the content and extent of political education differed among zones and regions; while execution policy and food distribution sometimes differed even among contiguous villages (1999, p. 74).

In terms of punishment the regime was very uneven, so evacuees from the city might have got away with stealing at the village level in one area, but when shifted elsewhere they might be killed.

**Illness**
One well documented effect of starvation (Sen 1981, pp. 203-6) is a weakening of the immune system. As a consequence many people became sick or died. Medicine in this context was of limited use if someone was suffering the advanced affects of starvation. Chhon portrayed the Pol Pot regime’s health system thus:

In the Pol Pot era they don’t have a proper hospital, they close the hospital because all nurse and doctor has been killed, just choose their own people who believe in the communist way to be a doctor. Some of them (were) sent to train in Beijing for one year (then) come back and be a doctor and nurse. All the Western medicine they destroy, they don’t allow to use because they don’t know how to use. Many of them don’t read or write, just read Cambodian, but not French or English so they couldn’t read to know which one to use. Destroy with gasoline and burn.

Chhon, however, had relatively positive experiences of traditional Khmer medicine before the Pol Pot regime. It had been used to assist him regain feeling in his legs after a spinal injury. Other storytellers like Maly also remembered using traditional Khmer medicine prior to 1975. In Maly’s case bark from a tree was used to make an anti-malarial. Traditional medicine was used quite often prior to the Pol Pot era. Some storytellers like Phuoc said that seeking medical assistance in the Khmer Rouge hospitals was dangerous, perhaps because of the ‘training’ that some cadres received in Beijing. Kien however said that the Khmer Rouge made pills out of potatoes that they distributed to the sick at home. Maly told the following story of his experiences of hospitalization that occurred in the countryside and then in the city of Battambang. His narrative gives rare insight into the medical practices during the Pol Pot regime and for that reason I present it here in an extended form.

Later on I was sent to hospital and I stay there a few months. And distressing thing happened there. I got there and many young people they were just like me: yellow and skinny like skeleton. One of the guys also had malaria, but he came from the other village I never knew, and he was friendly with me and we talked often. Talked about life. At the hospital you could just sit down and talk together and no one blame you, because you don’t have to work. So we just sit down and we don’t talk anything against Angkar or anything. We talk about life and I ask him what happened to him, he said he was sick and his wife also sick and in the other department the other side, not allowed to mix males and females. And he said his wife
was four or five months pregnant. This was in 1976 almost 1977. Not long before we heard the Vietnamese starting to invade Cambodia in 1977, it not only a few months before they take over, its one or two years before they took over Cambodia. By the border there were conflicts. It’s not long after the guy and his wife left there for a few months. Just a few days later he told me they took – you could call ambulance, but not really ambulance – a car or ute to transport the sick people who are getting worse, as they could not treat them at that hospital, to the highest hospital in the capital in Battambang. His wife was taken there, but she did not survive, she died on the way, and he could not even see his wife, and he is just crying and crying. I cry myself, I cry too. He was left all alone and his wife was gone…

Later on I was getting worse and worse and many of my friends die in that hospital…and then I was just by myself. I was dreaming of going to hospital in the capital, because they probably have treatment. They have more equipment over there. Where I stay there is nothing, only syringe that they inject coconut milk.

I asked them if I could go to the capital and they said I’m not sick enough. One day I heard that one man they sent to the capital to have operation on his hernia. Then I claimed that I had hernia too. I did not know what hernia is like: they said there is a lump. So I said I had hernia too, as I want to go there too. But then they ask to see and I show them and they said it’s hernia. So they sent me there not because of my yellow skin and malnutrition, but because of hernia. So I was sent there, and at the capital of Battambang in the hospital there are three stages: one stage is for some who were not very ill, yellow skin [and] they didn’t mind giving a little benefit and then they would get better and they would go home. Another area is just for people who were more seriously ill. And the last area was for the people just about to die. Then I stay at the first one for about three months and I was getting worse and worse… You get a plate of rice and a bowl of soup or whatever they use, the main thing is dried fish…the vegetable is something like zucchini…and then you share the soup. It’s not hygienic [as] everyone has to share the same bowl of food. A traditional way to eat is share amongst family. But share amongst sick people is terrible. I was getting worse, they send me to another department, they call, Umbpoing. They give you more food, more nutrition.

I was almost to the last stage and I stay there. You just lose you breath, you can’t breath properly… Even if you walk a few steps you lose your breath already. You can’t breathe [as] it’s very weak, very weak. In the morning they would give you tablets and lots of modern medicine, but they could not use it properly. They give anything they think is okay. Sometime they gave me about 8 tablets, I never seen anything like this, but you have to take.
Not really anyone is a specific doctor; some of them could not even read. There was one doctor at Battambang hospital.

The first time I went to the hospital in the capital of Battambang, they call P1 – Por Moy. I went there when the rain started…in April or May when I went there and I stayed the first stage about three months and then they put me into the second department, and I stayed there till January, until the Vietnamese took over Cambodia. The first one I stay in for about three months and another one about four months, so I stay there about seven months. While I was there at the second stage they try to put me to the room where people close to death. But I refuse, I just came out and I said I could not stay there I was too scared. They put me there it’s like they put me in the grave. I felt like they put me in the grave and I’m still alive. Put me into a ghost house. Everyone close to death and groaning and people die every day. You see them in the morning; they use a cart, a cart, and load with some old timber. When they throw people out of town they demolish their houses and they keep all those timber planks [to] use as firewood to cremate people. Once you see this you have seen everything. They load the old planks of wood on the cart and just put the body on top of that, push to the crematorium: in a block of land with coconut trees behind the hospital. I heard that sometimes they put the body there on the burning wood, if it burn off okay, but if it not burn off okay, then they have to go and start the fire again, so things were not properly done. It’s the most terrible thing that you could imagine. I hate to see them, but they transport the body by the window where I stay. It become normal, but it’s a terrible thing to see that people die and the way they take their bodies away. I feel that today is their turn, could be tomorrow my turn, because many of my friends they die, they gone before me, and they send me closer and closer to the death room.

Maly’s story tells of significant numbers of people presenting themselves to the Khmer Rouge hospital system in Battambang in a state of malnutrition, which he referred to as being ‘yellow and skinny like skeleton.’ Maly befriended a fellow patient in the hospital and said that this was one of the few instances where one person could just sit and talk about life with another person during the regime. Todorov argues that one ordinary moral virtue, which we all possess, is ‘the life of the mind.’ This is where people create a precious island retreat within a sea of suffering. It can be solitary, but it can also be shared amongst people within their collective attempt to remember the past. Furthermore, the life of the mind can both save and distract (1996, pp. 92-104). In this regard Maly’s experience of sitting and talking about life with a man in the hospital represented one of the few
instances of evidence that the life of the mind was still possible during the Pol Pot regime. It cannot be claimed that ‘the life of the mind’ did not ever exist during the reign of Democratic Kampuchea, but there is all too little evidence of this ordinary virtue amongst the narratives of other Cambodian survivors.

The experience of being in hospital during the Pol Pot regime was arguably a deeply distressing experience for many Cambodian people. Maly tells how the man he befriended lost his wife when she was transferred to the provincial capital (or centre of the regional zone that included the old province) of Battambang. The man Maly befriended started to cry upon learning of the loss of his pregnant wife. Maly then showed he cared for others, in Todorov’s (1996) sense, when he cried too, with the man over his loss. In this way caring for others, as a moral virtue, was not extinguished during the Pol Pot regime, on this occasion at least Hobbes’ war of all against all, in competition for survival, was suspended albeit briefly.

Maly’s narrative also demonstrates that people were not entirely passive in the face of the oppressiveness of the regime. Maly specifically requested to go to the hospital in the capital where he believed he would receive better treatment but this initial request was denied. In response he then claimed that he had a hernia like another man, hoping that he could then go to the larger hospital, a ploy which apparently worked and he was sent to the hospital in the city.

The Khmer Rouge did appear to attempt to provide somewhat better healthcare in the larger hospital in Battambang. For instance, Maly recalled that he received more food on a program that meant ‘to be well fed’. This is a historical tension in that the actions of the regime meant that people were starving, becoming ill and in some instances dying, yet the regime also attempted to provide some form of healthcare. Maly also told that the hospital in the city of Battambang had one ‘real’ doctor trained before the Khmer Rouge takeover, who had joined the Communist Party of Kampuchea before April 17th. The doctor in the Battambang city hospital was well educated. This runs contrary to other aspects of Maly’s narrative which suggests that the Khmer Rouge killed anyone who was educated. The following chapter will argue there was no one simple factor that led to a person being killed during the Pol Pot regime, but does suggests that ‘new people’ from the cities, who were
more likely to be educated, were more likely to be killed as outsiders as violence escalated over time.

The Khmer Rouge nurses in the hospital did not necessarily treat the patients badly or cruelly. Maly recalled having enough energy to wash dishes alongside one nurse after they had eaten a meal. But the nurses, due to their status as privileged wives of Khmer Rouge cadres could also not be spoken back to. They were not necessarily at all educated in the use of Western medicine, as Chhon’s narrative attests. Chandler points out that the Khmer Rouge assigned illiterate peasants to posts where there were people who were more qualified (1977a, p. 3). Maly told that on one occasion he was given eight or more tablets of Western medicine by one of the nurses who had no idea what she was administering to him. It seems that in some parts of the country there was a total rejection of all Western things as being part of the capitalist class, whereas elsewhere this was not the case. Self-diagnosing his shit, Maly noticed thread-like worms and requested a worming tablet called Mintezol from one of the nurses who then thoroughly rebuked him. He then requested the same tablets from another nurse who he was friendlier with and managed to get two tablets just before he was ordered to leave the hospital before the Vietnamese invasion.

Overall Maly found his experiences in the hospital distressing as he saw people dying all around him. In particular he remembers bodies being carried past his window to a funeral pyre, a process which seldom proved all that effective. He also remembered sleeping in the hallway of the hospital one night as one of the men sharing his room was crying all night and eventually shit himself in the bed adjacent to Maly’s when he died. Maly’s narrative of his time in the hospital suggests that he moved closer and closer towards death as it progressed, a story he told in terms of being sent ‘closer and closer to the death room’. This experience in the hospital was inherently traumatic. But as he waited to die Battambang came to life as the Vietnamese pushed the Khmer Rouge back to the border. Maly was told to go back home before he died.

Illness was a constant threat during the Pol Pot regime, a consequence of the combination of malnutrition, neglect and incompetence on the part of the regime, illness could also be somewhat strategically used as Maly’s narrative initially suggests with him claiming
greater illness so as to get to a better-equipped hospital. Bo told the following tale of faking the severity of her illness to return to her parent’s village.

I pretend to be sicker. In Cambodia you put rice in a bamboo tray and squish it round and any maggot in the rice you pick out. I make a plan already that I’m going. So one day I chose this little maggot, from the rice, because I got an open wound on my leg, and I implant this maggot in my leg wound and then I show it to my leader. I say ‘Oh look at my wound! It is getting infected and getting nastier. It’s got a maggot in there.’

She said, ‘Okay you can take a few more days off.’

So once they all gone to work I left. I just disappear and I never turn back. On the way to where I was staying I did pass two villages during my travels from one place to another. I travel maybe five nights. Don’t ask me how I got direction, because I could not know, I just travel and I guess my direction. My guide was the most frequently used road. So I just follow the most worn road and I came across this town and I ask ‘Do you know this family? Do you know the names of my mum and dad?’

And they say, ‘No. Maybe you can go to the next town.’

Then they ask, ‘Do you have a pass for travel?’

I say, ‘Oh yeah, I talk to my leader at the back there, I have to go and get.’

I just disappear, but one day later I just came across these rows of huts and I saw a little boy right in front of a hut and recognized him. He was a chubby little boy, and he must be five, my younger brother. I remember him. He did not have any clothes on and he was naked playing in front of the hut. I got reunited with my family and I was the last person to arrive, my older brother was already there, how I don’t know, but he was already there.

Bo used her illness strategically to get out of doing work and to give her time to plan her escape from her ‘mobile group’ to find her parents. Her account also shows that people were not passive in the face of an oppressive regime. In this way she became a trickster character in her tale much like the trickster character of the hare present in a number of Cambodian folk tales (Chandler 1977b). Once she found her parents, it became apparent
that the rest of her family was faring somewhat better than she had done during her time in the mobile group. As she said that her younger brother was a ‘chubby little boy’. Vickery (1999) claims that later in the regime people that left one village or mobile group for another were often welcomed rather than rejected, as there was an overall shortage of labour in many villages.

Bo’s father, however, told a far more dire story about the conditions. Phuoc recalled getting sick during the Pol Pot regime earlier when they were in Ojumnah and first in Kompong Speu.

Before Pol Pot time when I went to hospital, doctor says ‘drink water.’ At that time no medicine, I remember drink lot water, I lucky I still alive. I had diarrhoea with mucus and sometimes blood. Before Pol Pot my son is sick same me, and I remember the doctor tell me to give my son a lot of water. So I remember before that I was sick, I know how to keep alive. So when I got the same I remember doctor say drink water. Drink water. Kien got my son and me two tablets for some gold to make us better. Diarrhoea is normal it’s just I want to eat everything, because I so hungry! You go to toilet a lot during the day and the body has lost the water. I was in a house, not in a hospital. The hospital is a dangerous place during that time. When I was sick the Khmer Rouge take some medicine to you, it’s just the medicine – not medicine – I think is not medicine. Many illness there, malaria and diarrhoea.

Phuoc’s memory of a doctor’s advice before the Pol Pot regime ‘to drink water’ possibly saved his life as he became increasingly dehydrated from diarrhoea combined with malaria. He complained that during that time there was no medicine. He then adjusted this aspect of his narrative twice, the first time in relation to his wife Kien saving his life. His story is, amongst other things, also a love story. Kien was the stronger one in their relationship, by Phuoc’s own admission, and she managed to obtain two tablets to help her husband and son. This demonstrated her caring for others during the regime. This also indicated that the bonds of family were not broken by the other acts of the Pol Pot regime and the increased chances of survival if one had someone to care for and who cared for them. There was also enough opportunity, despite the paranoia and oppressiveness of the regime, for Kien to buy two tablets with some gold. Phuoc explained that diarrhoea became ‘normal’ for him because of eating anything that he could. He also notes that the Khmer Rouge did take
tablets to people when they were sick, but this medicine was not medicine. Vickery (1999) and Kiernan (1997) both note that the regime attempted to make their own medicines from indigenous plant products, but those making the medicine did not know what they were doing as they were selected on the basis of being the children of Khmer Rouge cadres, not on the basis of any actual knowledge of traditional Khmer medicine. The tension in Phuoc’s narrative within his three separate claims about medicine during the regime: of no medicine being available, of having illicitly acquired medicine, and being given medicine by the Khmer Rouge that was not actually medicine, is resolved by his narrative which can account for all three statements about medicine over time during the reign of Democratic Kampuchea as being true.

**The Open Cell**

There are many metaphors that could be, and were, used to describe the experiences of the Pol Pot regime. One Cambodian metaphor can be drawn from Bo’s narrative of her experiences of the regime.

They must have a system somewhere, because when they first bought us all in together and then they split us up and years later they bought us back and we did not have a clue where our parents are. And all of a sudden they bought us back into this gathering again. So surely there must be a system. They brought us back to this big clearing, at that time I did not know where my mum was and I didn’t expect to see my parents. There were masses of people in this gathering, so I just walked into the clearing and then I saw my mum! Just like that! And then I meet my dad, my younger brother, my older brother and my other cousins. After this massive meeting they split us up again! It’s just incredible. It was part of their technique to move people to disorient them and we lost consciousness of the time and day. During this period of time we were run by routine and time did not matter. It was an open cell.

‘The open cell’ is an appropriate metaphor for understanding the regime of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1978 as it adequately captures the separation and disorientation experienced by many Cambodians, furthermore the use of ‘open’ describes the situation of being fundamentally unfree within a country where the walls are made of hunger, illness and dense jungle. Bo also notes that people lost track of time during the Pol Pot regime,
this is similar to the experiences of those who survive totalitarian regimes like the ones in Nazi Germany or Stalin’s USSR (Todorov 1996), as the day-in day-out pressure of work routine coupled with severe hunger and terrible fear ruled people.

**Mad Dogs and Zombies**

Work was seen as transformative of the mind by the Khmer Rouge, a project directed at the minds of the people from the cities based on work and indoctrination. This project was arguably a way of constituting ‘good peasant’ subjects via the positioning each person time and space and disciplining the body (Foucault 1975) through various work practices like long hours in the fields. Indoctrination, for example, would be complete if people who worked over 12 hours a day saw themselves as ‘lazy’. After working all day and the later during the night, the Khmer Rouge lectured the ‘new people’ from the cities. Bo noted with great anger that they were told that they were ‘lazy people’ and ‘used to life of comfort’ and ‘now we have to be equal’. For a person to be told that they were lazy after working over 12 hours a day and not be able to rebuke this accusation was both a humiliating and demoralizing experience. If a person is working over 12 hours a day and the Khmer Rouge could label their experience as ‘laziness’ it seems there was a denial of the experiences of the ‘new people’ by the regime, substituted with fantasy drawn from the Khmer Rouge’s ideology. Bo says

> They wanted the revenge on the people who lived in the city for sure. I don’t think they were educated people, they just run on propaganda and either they just stupid themselves, really stupid, and just believe what their leaders tell them. Or they really believe in it. Really believe that they are doing right like psychopaths. They are psychopaths, nothing more than that. They just talk about education. Surely people who have got education can see they are really mad. I would say that they are like a ‘mad dog’ – mad dog leading us to their utopia.

Bo was very angry about what happened to her and dismissive of the Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers as human subjects. Within this anger she claimed that there were two sorts of cadres and soldiers. First were those that went along with what the leaders told them. In Bo’s words these people are ‘stupid’ and ‘run on propaganda’. It might be said that a person who obeyed the Khmer Rouge’s orders or went along with the party ‘propaganda’
was able to turn an act that was morally wrong, or at the very least morally ambiguous, into an act they could consider moral through the ideological justification given by the leaders. Or perhaps they could treat what they were doing as simply doing a job. In this regard this first group was much like the guards that Todorov describes as ‘a conformist, willing to serve whoever wielded power and more concerned with his own welfare than with the triumph of doctrine’ (1996, pp. 123-4). Second are those that truly believed that what they were doing was right and moral. In Bo’s words the ‘mad dog leading us to their utopia’.

Bo sees the Khmer Rouge that really believed in what they were doing as more dangerous, hence ‘mad dogs’, than those who just went along with what the leaders told them.

It was not enough for the Pol Pot regime to merely have control over the bodies of the people from the cities. There was also attempt to control the minds of the ‘new people’ as well. They made people, for example, attend ‘mass meetings’ at night where they were lectured about the evils of capitalism and their former lives. However, Bo says that she largely ignored what was said in the mass meetings. Instead she thought of ways to try and get enough sleep or plan to steal food. In this way perhaps Bo attempted to preserve her ‘life of the mind’ which Todorov (1996) treats as an ordinary moral virtue in extreme circumstances. But there were no stories that could be treated as clear evidence of ‘the life of the mind’ of the kinds that Todorov specifies, like the singing of songs or remembering stories from the time before with other people. Either such expressions during the Pol Pot era would have perhaps got a person killed, or perhaps the silence of survival created rich inner worlds. Possibly such silence also eventually reduced people to a zombie-like state of being. For example, Bo said that if she actually came to believe what the Khmer Rouge told her she would be ‘like a zombie’. Some other storytellers like Chin said that there was ‘No thinking’ during his experience of the Pol Pot regime. Overall there were very few instances in Cambodian storyteller’s narratives that offer much evidence of ‘the life of the mind’. An alternative explanation perhaps could be that planning to sleep and steal food was an ordinary reaction in such oppressive circumstances and a reminder the exercise of power never fully completing its task.

**Vietnam Invades Cambodia**
In 1977 the Khmer Rouge sent soldiers into Vietnam and massacred a number of villages. The Vietnamese then retaliated along the eastern border of Cambodia. At this time the Vietnamese had the world’s largest battle-hardened standing army. Vietnam then later responded to Khmer Rouge aggression by invading Cambodia in 1978. Lackanary said of his experiences of the Vietnamese invasion in the east

I was in Svay Rieng from May 1975 to late 1977. At that time it was a war between Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese forces in late ‘77. As far as I remember, Khmer Rouge started first, because I was in the war zone. I was assigned as what you call ‘the stretcher man’ to carry wounded soldiers. I think Khmer Rouge started to invade Vietnam first and after that Vietnamese forces push them back out from Vietnam. I think October ‘77 Vietnam invaded Cambodia. So they stay there for a month, because it was illegal for them to be there. So when they started to withdraw, they told us, ‘Now people if you want to survive and be alive you have to move to Vietnam.’ Where there was a camp for Cambodian refugees. So my family and I knew if we did not move to Vietnam when Khmer Rouge came they would kill us. So we just went.

Lackanary would later stay in a Vietnamese refugee camp with his family until the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1978 and put an end to the Pol Pot regime. It seems those Cambodians that ended up behind the Vietnamese lines had little option to stay in Cambodia.

Before the invasion Bo remembered first hearing gunfire in the distance. The people in her mother’s work team were happy and smiling when they heard the gunfire in the distance as they realized this meant that the Vietnamese had invaded and perhaps there might be a chance for freedom. Because they had reacted this way, the Khmer Rouge summarily executed the women in Kien’s work team. Kien luckily avoided execution because she was away visiting her husband Phuoc who was sick. Smiling or laughing towards the end of the Pol Pot regime was enough for dangerous accusations to be made. After the executions occurred the Vietnamese quickly sweep through the area where Bo and her family were located only several days later. Some people were executed just days before the fall of the Pol Pot regime.
In late 1978 Maly was in hospital in the northern capital of Battambang, when suddenly the Khmer Rouge, all dressed in black, flooded Battambang. He discovered that Phnom Penh had been taken over by the Vietnamese army and he was soon discharged from the hospital and told to make his way home. In a terribly weakened state he made his way to the village where his father lived. His father and the other elderly people in the village began to cry when they saw what state he was in. Shortly after his arrival there was an opportunity to run to the highway with a large group of people. At first it seems that people were more concerned with getting away from Khmer Rouge rather than wanting to stay with the Vietnamese. Peoples’ experiences of the Pol Pot regime were so bad that despite the chance that the Vietnamese army could kill them, people were willing to take that risk. Cambodian writer Molyda Szymusiak claims she was actually disappointed when she did not at first come across the Vietnamese army (1999, p. 201). Finally after seeing soldiers with grey uniforms sitting on the tanks Maly told, ‘We were safe from Khmer Rouge.’ Located in the east of Cambodia Chhon narrated the following about his experiences of the invasion.

After the Vietnamese troop invaded in Cambodia and fight with the Pol Pot troop I was still near the Vietnamese border at this stage. Then I went in the camp with the refugee… I walk from there to my hometown for two days. I was very exhausted, just walked about thirty kilometres in two days. Hot, not enough food, there is no water, in summertime it very difficult. I came with a friend and he climbed a palm tree and got the palm juice and we drank that. Then I arrived at the place where I was born and the Vietnamese troop in my village. I speak Vietnamese, the reason I speak Vietnamese is my brother was married with Vietnamese wife. I live with them since I was young. The soldiers were asking me if I was Vietnamese as my Vietnamese accent very good, so they thought I was Vietnamese not a Cambodian. I told them the truth, ‘No. I used to be with my sister in-law, she was Vietnamese.’ They use me as an interpreter, to deal with all the villagers to ask them to come back to their homes and stay there as a normal life. I do that and they appoint me to work as a supply worker in the district. The Vietnamese supplied rice, clothes and oil, because all of them have got nothing left they live in the camp. So I deliver things and ask that they come and share and go to a refugee camp there. Because I know the people and knew their names and list each village: how many families; how many each family; how many relatives.
The Vietnamese troops by Chhon’s account gave the starving Cambodians food and supplies. Despite the Vietnamese military also driving the Khmer Rouge back by force and despite the hazards of people who were not Khmer Rouge getting caught in the crossfire, they also initially acted to help many Cambodian people in a desperate situation. They also appointed Cambodians, like Chhon, to assist in distribution of food and interpret for them. Chhon felt proud to be able to help the people around him after such a long period of feeling helpless and watching many people die. The invasion by the Vietnamese communists of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1978 may have brought about a problematic military occupation, but the actions of the Vietnamese communists also brought about freedom for many people and if they had not invaded when they did arguably many more Cambodian people would have died as the Pol Pot regime collapsed upon itself with mass killings and starvation.

After the invasion Phuoc returned to Kompong Som from Kompong Speu to search for his brothers and his mother only to discover that his brothers Teng and Tong had died along with his mother. He remembered

> When the Vietnam soldiers come we went straight there. We know they die, die by people who know them, they sent together with some friend, and the friend lies to us…they all die.

Phuoc’s friends, it seems, could not bring themselves to tell him that his brothers and mother had died, so at first they lied to him. He reflected that no information was ever available about how they had died and he still struggles with not knowing their fate to this day, even though he does know from people who were sent with them that they all died. All three died somewhere in Kompong Som, but where exactly Phuoc does not know. He said

> We don’t know whether they go to Kompong Som – Sihanoukville, but we’d like to know exactly. We know the friend are gone too, so when I go back to Cambodia, I went to ask them where exactly my mother live in the camp, die exactly, but nobody know. We don’t know who can know. We asked many people. Many people because at the time the friend all die.
The numbers of deaths meant that there wasn’t anyone alive from where Phuoc could get first hand eyewitness testimony to the fate of his mother and brothers. The Vietnamese invasion brought freedom to those who were dying during the Pol Pot regime and it also brought terrible news to those who hoped that their family members were still alive throughout the regime. Phuoc’s narrative revealed a longing to end his search for his lost family, but alongside an impossibility of ever knowing indicated by his use of ‘exactly’.

The takeover of Cambodia led to a small elite who consolidated their power through the use of violence against the rest of the population. But violence was only part of the regime’s power over others and the exercise of practices such as work discipline and spatial separation from family members, alongside relative constant hunger that constituted the experience of social life meant that the operation of power by the regime was diffuse and also targeted minds through spatial positioning of bodies. The effect of such power, although never complete and which never reached complete dominion over all people, approached totalitarianism in that the Khmer Rouge attempted to control every aspect of social life.

People were humiliated and worked to death during Pol Pot time. The experiences of separation and displacement, forced labour, hunger and starvation, accompanied by illness, had a profound effect upon Cambodian people, and while experiences of this time occurred over twenty years ago they have not been forgotten. This period of time between 1975 and 1978 historically represents the memory of experiences of great suffering for many Cambodian people.

However, as I have shown, people were not always passive victims in the face of such overwhelming oppression. To have survived the Pol Pot regime meant having taken some risks such as stealing food to survive. In some instances survival meant swallowing ones pride, loss of dignity and losing face. At other moments reclaiming dignity through disobedience, which was at odds with survival, was worth the risk of punishment. Survival also meant caring for others as this made people carry on and at times caring was demonstrated by sharing what little people had. Emotions like sadness, anger or love were something that people could not openly express and were seen as undesirable by the Khmer
Rouge. There are few instances where there is evidence of ‘the life of the mind’ in Todorov’s (1996) sense. Maly claims to have survived the Pol Pot regime a person had to ‘be like a tree and be mute’ but he also spoke of befriending a stranger in hospital and sitting and talking with him about life.

The experiences characterized in this chapter constitute what social life was like for many people during the Pol Pot regime. However, also vital for understanding the experiences of the Pol Pot regime is attempting to understand the violence and killings that occurred during this time. The following chapter specifically deals with narratives of violence in Cambodia from 1975 to 1978 and suggests that such narratives present several problems for us if we want to understand violence.
Chapter 3: Genocidal Violence in Cambodia
1975-1978

In the hot afternoon one-day, probably 3 or 4 o’clock…one jeep came carrying a guy tied at
the back of his arms. They ordered him down from the jeep and they walk up the road. It's
not far, fifty metres, from where we stay. I was near the grass huts. One of them said, ‘Walk
that way!’ That guy tied at the back of his arms walked that way. They were about twenty
metres from the dirt road. Then we hear BANG! BANG! BANG! That guy is dead. – Maly

There is now agreement that between 1975 and 1978 the Pol Pot regime of Democratic
Kampuchea sponsored one of the most striking cases of mass killing in the twentieth
century. There is substantial and growing literature which seeks to either engage in
typological or explanatory exercises addressing issues like to what extent was this a case of
genocide (Kiernan 1997; Vickery 1999), ‘politicide’ (Harff and Gurr 1988; Mann 2005),
political murder explained by communist ideology (Margolin 1999) or utopianism that
entwined nationalist and socialist ideas (Chirot 1994) or totalitarianism (Rubenstein 2004).

Equally the number of people who died during the Pol Pot regime is unclear and historians
continue to dispute the number of people killed (Kiernan 1997; Margolin 1999; Vickery
1999). Dunlop (2005) and Lunn (2004) continue to estimate that over 2 million people
died during the Pol Pot regime. Kiernan argues that at a minimum 1.5 million people died
(1997, p. 457). Chandler claims that over 1 million people died ‘as a direct result of DK
policies’ (1992b, p. 212). However, Vickery (1999) claims that only 740,000 people died,
claiming his position is one that involves ‘neither blame nor exculpation’ (1999, p. 154).
Margolin favors a figure of above 2 million dead, although he also refers to the highest
figures of 3.1 million ‘used in Vietnamese propaganda and by the PRPK (People's
Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea)’ as well as the 3.8 million ‘deficit’ calculated by the
CIA which incorporates ‘the fall in the birth rate as a result of the situation’ (1999, p. 589).
This is part of a much larger historiography debating the numbers of people killed by
murderous regimes in scholarly writing.
In many ways debating the numbers gets in the way of the much bigger ‘problem’ of understanding the circumstances where mass killings occur and how people bring themselves to kill. There is also the issue of disbelief that something serious did occur in Cambodia. As Craig Etcheson (2005) points out, the majority of the Cambodian population was born after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 and many do not believe what happened. He points out that this disbelief flies in the face of evidence of mass killing where 660 ‘genocide sites’ have been identified and at these sites there are ‘19,521 mass grave pits, containing the remains of an estimated 1,100,000 victims of execution by the Khmer Rouge security services’ (Etcheson 2005, p. 60).

The Pol Pot regime lasted a mere three and a half years. If 2 million people died, the percentage of Cambodian victims was greater than the percentage killed in either Rwanda or Nazi Germany combined (Dunlop 2005, p. 190). This thus makes the Khmer Rouge the most ‘efficient’ killers of the twentieth century. However, while the Pol Pot regime had centers of torture and death it did not have modern factory death camps like Nazi Germany. Much of the killing in Cambodia between 1975 and 1978 was carried out in rice fields. In this regard far greater numbers of the Cambodian population may be directly implicated in the killings than in Nazi Germany that had production line killing mechanisms like gas chambers.

Less attention has been given to the experiential qualities of this episode of mass killing. In this chapter I attempt to understand Cambodian storytellers’ experiences of violence. What was the experience of violence like during the Pol Pot regime? How were the Khmer Rouge cadres able to kill other people? Using the narratives of the people I spoke with I try to describe the experience of surviving a totalitarian regime. While attempting to understand violence may be fraught with misconceptions, I take the position that any attempt to understand the killings and those who killed is not a moral justification of the actions of those who killed.

Violence and killing is not necessarily easily done. The narratives in this chapter demonstrate those in charge sometimes avoided violence, and in some accounts of killing the violence was ambiguous, or was carried out in a fearful manner that avoided direct confrontation with the victim. But I also argue that, with the exception of the killing of Lon
Nol soldiers and officials, violence escalated over time during the Pol Pot regime, starting with symbolic violence in the months after evacuation of the cities, like forcing people to kill their dogs, but by 1978 people were killed for infringements like laughing while at work.

The narratives offered here present a challenge to understanding violence especially if we rely on any assumption that people behave as rational actors. I argue that the linear connection between intent, action and outcome is an illusion created by narrative, which gives rise to the possibility of retrospectively fitting intent, action and outcome to a pattern of goal oriented human behaviour. Indeed as will be clear some stories told here are intensely problematic if we seek to understand violence resting on a theory of ‘rational action’ or ‘rational choice’ (Abell 1996). For understanding such murky situations a number of suggestions are drawn from those who have sought to understand how the subjective (Katz 1988), the contextual (Browning 1992; Collins 2008) and the situational (Zimbardo 2007) influence the possibilities of enabling a transformation of subjectivities which facilitates violence. As I argue, it is important to focus on the social circumstances in which acts of violence took place.

In what follows I focus first upon the upsetting experience some Cambodians had when ordered to kill their dogs. I then turn to the ubiquitous practice of stealing food like rice. How do we make sense of this activity and the variety of responses to food thieves? This opens up a range of issues about memory, narrative and social action which in turn open up larger issues about the nature of the genocidal violence associated with the Pol Pot years. I then go on to examine three stories of killing.

*The Killing of the Dogs*

Before the Pol Pot regime took power on April 17th 1975 Chhon’s family were Khmer middle class Cambodian city dwellers located in Phnom Penh. Chhon’s brother had married a Vietnamese woman and their children were the pride of his family as they were considered by the rest of the community to be ‘very pretty’. After the Khmer Rouge
takeover Chhon remembered his brother being ordered to kill their pet dogs two months after the evacuation of the city. He said

Cambodia has no dogs at all. Kill the dogs and they ate. Because Angkar not allow people to have dogs, if we got dogs they can’t go to inspect somebody at nighttime – the dogs going to bark. Even if they have dogs – dogs no food to eat – dogs can’t survive. They not allow people to have dogs after they evacuated people from the city, after two months no dogs in Cambodia. So everybody who got their own dogs they have to kill, otherwise you going to be killed yourself. One of my brothers got a pair of dogs from the city we call ‘French dogs’ because they got long fur. My brother has French dogs and his son and daughters love the dogs very much and were crying, but my cousin said to his children ‘Not to do that!’ Because when they see you crying because of the dog, they are going to kill you as well. So everybody think maybe everything that they thought for the future would finish. After they kill the dogs many people they ate because they have no food.

The children were very upset about the loss of their much-loved pets. Chhon offered pragmatic reasons why they were ordered to kill their dogs, such as not having food to feed the dogs and making it easier for the Khmer Rouge to inspect people’s houses at night. As people were hungry many people also apparently ate their dogs, although eating dog was quite uncommon in Cambodia prior to the Pol Pot regime according to Cambodian writer Loung Ung (2000). Chhon told this story in tears because it signified the beginning of the end of the life that he knew and preceded the death of his brother’s entire family.

The killing of the ‘French dogs’ two months after the takeover demonstrates that the Pol Pot regime quickly attempted to destroyed the symbols of the old regime. The ‘French dogs’ were an extension of the identities of their owner as a valuable middle class possession. In this sense the killing of the dogs was part of the destruction of the symbols of middle class city dwelling identities. Chhon’s narrative points to the destruction of a key symbol by violence that was aimed at destruction of what the dogs signified: the old regime, the middle class and the comfortable life of those in the cities. In this sense ordering someone to kill their pets was akin to ordering them to kill part of themselves. Acts of violation like the killing of the dogs heralded in the new regime.
Chhon also told that some people took their own lives when they were evacuated to areas where they were ordered to build housing from nothing. The killing of the dogs was antecedent in Chhon’s narrative to people hanging themselves, and his brother, Vietnamese sister-in-law and their three children being killed in Battambang. This violence with a symbolic character was a precursor to both suicide and then escalating violence of varying forms carried out by the Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers.

The violating message transmitted to the middle class by ordering them to kill their pets was not that the dogs were the targets of the new regime, but that they were the intended targets. Chhon recalled that his nieces and nephew experienced it as deeply upsetting and they began to cry. But then Chhon’s cousin told the children to ‘be quiet’ and ‘not to cry’ else they might all be killed. Terror is a technique central to totalitarianism, and one of its first effects is to silence its victims. This silence, enforced by its own victims was terrors’ first harbinger (Taussig 1987).

**Punish the Thief!**

Throughout the Pol Pot years people stole food to survive. It is clear that stealing food posed varying degrees of risk of violence as storytellers’ recalled that they faced dire warnings, highly variable punishment or even the possibility of death. Kim claimed that at the very end of the Pol Pot regime there was very little value placed on life. He said

> When people live in the poor situation and hard life, they don’t feel their life is so valuable and they are also used to the Pol Pot regime. In the Pol Pot regime everybody steal! Because if you not steal you still might die, because you hungry you nearly die. You rather go to steal to have a little bit of food to eat. If you don’t steal you still die, so everybody steal. If you get caught, if you not die, if they not kill you, they hit you – nearly die – but still people do it. So people get used to the not expensive life. Life is not so expensive. Not that important. And then they are used to it, normal like that.

Stealing food to survive was apparently widespread because of chronic hunger. Kim specifically noted that the experience of hunger made people willing to face the risk of punishment and death because if they did not, then they faced death from starvation.
Furthermore he argued that the value placed upon life diminished over the course of the regime as people became used to the loss of life, as death became ‘normal’. In this way he argued that there was an escalation of violence that increasingly became part of ‘normal’ life during the regime of Democratic Kampuchea. As I show here there is evidence of an escalation of violence narrated by storytellers over the course of the Pol Pot regime and the narrating of the experiences of violence increased in intensity as people recounted their life between 1975 and 1978. The exception was people with attachment to the old Lon Nol regime, in particular military officers and government officials, who were often subject to immediate arrest and execution, like Lackanary’s father. But not all Lon Nol soldiers were executed, nor were all Lon Nol officers’ family members necessarily at risk provided that they had close family ties with the village that they went to after the evacuation, as Lackanary’s mother had in Svay Rieng province.

Kim’s story suggested that food stealing was universal throughout the Pol Pot years and was largely because of widespread hunger. The following narratives, however, demonstrate that the act of food stealing occurred in quite specific social circumstances while the punishment meted out to thieves who were caught varied greatly. Violent punishment was very uneven across the Pol Pot regime, as argued elsewhere by Vickery (1999) and Kiernan (1997). These stories pose a number of problems for understanding violence in respect to the severity of punishment. This begins to open up larger questions about the intentions at work in the experience of violence under Pol Pot.

Phuoc, for example, recalled attempting to steal rice and then getting caught. However, instead of being punished he was let off with a warning by his team leader. In his case this was enough to scare him into not stealing again.

Sometimes they send me to the rice store where they keep rice. When they look to heaven we put some rice in the cuffs of our pants. I put little bit and they catch me! That time we are very hungry, we need some food to eat… If I can get a little bit of rice, go home, next time get little bit more, if I get more I can get food. When I work there I just pretend to work, not allow them to see I steal the rice. But I not lucky, he catch me. The team leader maybe is good, but not too... His name was Sieng. My wife, Kien, still remembers his name. He just take me to tell not allowed to do that again. Maybe next time get in trouble, this just
warning... I only tried to do it just one time. I get caught, that time he warns me – one warning is good, but if I do again I’m in trouble.

Phuoc’s story tells us that he knowingly placed himself in a position to steal leaving him open to the risk of being punished. He said that when he stole rice he was accompanied by others who also stole rice in the same way as he had done. Perhaps it was the fact that more than one person stealing rice gave him greater courage to engage in this illicit activity. When his team leader noticed him stealing rice he took him aside and warned him not to steal again, for if he did he would be in trouble. Phuoc reflected that his team leader was maybe ‘good’. In some cases where punishment for stealing rice was normal, the Khmer Rouge did not punish the thief. In Phuoc’s case his team leader made a judgment and took him aside and warned him about his behaviour. Other than hesitantly narrating that his team leader ‘is maybe good’, Phuoc’s story is not all that clear about why this situation had not led to punishment and violence.

Equally it could be argued that the warning either worked or was severe enough, because Phuoc noted after that he did not attempt to steal again. This warning was also humiliating. Phuoc’s wife Kien also claimed that some group leaders ‘turned one eye’ to hungry people stealing food. Therefore the circumstances under which food stealing occurred and punishment from violence depended upon who was in charge. No doubt this made the activity of stealing more dangerous because of unpredictable punishment. If a person was deported from one village run by those willing to ‘turn one eye’ to food stealing to another village that was run by Khmer Rouge soldiers or ‘team leaders’ who were more eager to punish the hungry city dwellers, then violent punishment for those caught stealing was arguably more likely to occur. The other possibility that this narrative suggests was that there was also a reluctance on the part of many people in positions of authority to do violence to others, as much as there were those who were somehow able to engage in violent action.

Something of the indeterminacy of action and reaction in this context of revolutionary violence is suggested by a story told by Maly about his theft of food. Here we confront necessarily complex issues about both the nature of social action and our use of narratives.
and memory to both record and understand that action. Let me begin by outlining the story told by Maly.

Maly recalled that while in the north of the country in 1976 he was assigned a job of making fertilizer using a mixture of plants, ash and human waste. Initially he had not wanted to do this work and said he was not very healthy. However, he was told that he could not refuse any job he was set by Angkar. He told this story about making fertilizer and how stealing was a strategy to regain some power.

The first day I had to carry poo out of the toilet. They use 200 litre drum cut in half and make the handle and put under the thing they use as toilet. It’s very hard to work there and the next day they sent to cut the plants. Plant called *ton-treang-khet* and they use that one as fertilizer. It’s a sort of plant, but it might give the soil nutrition like compost. It grows like bush and we just tie them in bundle and put on cart and bring back to the production area. They have a building where we had to chop that up and mix in with ashes. The shell of the rice they call *angkarm* and they burn and use mixed with human waste and that sort of plant. They then take it to the rice field and feed the ground. But it gave me an idea. Those plants for fertilizer grow in the banana farm. The guy Angkar sack from my job making fertilizer when he went to cut those plants he brought bananas back for his family and he was caught. It’s an offence, but it’s not serious enough to be executed, but they stop him from doing that job. So they just take him out of that job and put me into that job. I thought, ‘That guy stole bananas and they took him out that job and now he has got a good job, if I did the same thing they would take me out of that job too.’ So I had to do it, if they kill me or anything there is no other choice, I’m not going to stay another day in this job. The next day I come back home, I put a bunch of banana in the plant that they use for fertilizer and then when we brought those plants to the production shelter. I took those bananas to the place where we stay, but I didn’t take to our huts, I just throw it in the bush. Then the guys who I work with criticized me and reported me to the group leader. They steal themselves too, but just for themselves, but they are in charge, they could do anything because no one keeps an eye on them. No one reported them. But I was happy that they reported me. I made them report by doing something hopefully they would report, so they would take me out of that job. We are not allowed to steal, but say if you don’t steal you can’t survive. Anyone who has got time has got to steal. We live just like mice, if they don’t steal the food they can’t survive, so that’s the way we live. I had no intention to bring the bananas home, because I have no one to feed. In the farm while I cut the plant I could eat as much as I like, because the bananas ripe on the trees already. I ate a
lot of bananas. If you just eat there and not bring home they would not take me out of that job, so I had to do it. And then they call for a meeting and they point out to me, they said I was, ‘Stealing bananas from the farm from the people. It is people’s property I had stolen, against the law, and they would not put me there again.’ So I was taken out of that job, and they put me back to a normal job doing farming. I work with the other people like normal, not doing special work like making fertilizer or anything like that.

This story poses a number of issues for understanding the practices of food stealing and punishment during the Pol Pot regime. It fluctuates between particular circumstances experienced in the village where Maly lived and more general circumstances experienced throughout the countryside during the Pol Pot years. Equally it is a story about his disobedience to authority and a way for him to reclaim his dignity, which Todorov (1996) insists is an ordinary moral virtue within extreme circumstances.

Maly said that making fertilizer provided him with an opportunity to eat food that he would not have access to while working in the fields. In this respect making fertilizer, although contrary to maintaining his dignity, also had some benefits. Maly said that he calculated the possible outcomes of being caught stealing food. From his past experience he said he knew that one man caught stealing bananas had been removed from making fertilizer. However, his story also emphasized the danger of stealing food and he said that he was willing to risk punishment and death. It was unknown how the Khmer Rouge would react to his food stealing. Further, he did not risk returning to his hut with the bananas and instead, perhaps in a panic, he threw them in a bush. This suggests that Maly feared greater punishment than merely being removed from making fertilizer. It is possible that his story imposed a ‘fictive rationality’ to his intentions in a situation that was very unclear and unpredictable. Experience can be transformed by narrative, as narrative has the capacity to make our intentions, actions and outcomes seem connected. But our intentions, actions and the outcomes we experience are far more disconnected, unknown, unpredictable and irrational.

Ordering one’s experiences into a story poses serious problems for theories of rational action. One proponent of ‘rational choice theory’ Peter Abell, drawing on Weber, states ‘Sociology...is a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in
order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects.’ As Weber insisted, ‘action is social when it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course’ (Weber, 1947 cited in Abell 1996, p. 252). That is to say that behind every action is intent. Elaborating further Abell claims that ‘individual actions’ have a ‘casual impact’ on ‘macro social phenomena’ and such actions are ‘optimally chosen’ to fit with an individuals’ preferences (1996, p. 260). Further, Abell claims ‘individuals’ actions and social actions are entirely concerned with their own welfare’ (1996, p. 260). So Abell contends that individuals make rational choices about the ways that they act and their actions have a causal relationship with the social outcomes they experience.

The narratives of violence in this chapter form a messy picture of what occurred during the Pol Pot regime. An individual’s intentions may not be clear to them when they act. An individual’s actions may also be irrational and unconsciously shaped by social and psychological forces. The actions of an individual do not necessarily have a clear relationship with their intentions. Further, the range of possible outcomes is not always clear before someone acts. Indeed in many instances the outcomes of social action are unknown to us. Social action is messy, complicated and retrospectively connected by narration.

In regards to examining violence, Hannah Arendt argued ‘Since the end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals’ (1969, p. 4). Arendt suggests that our attention should be focused upon human action, not upon the intentions of the actors involved.

The following story suggests that people acted without them thinking through the social situation that they were involved in. Bo remembered the following about what happened when a group of people caught a person stealing food. She said

I remember my first experience with food stealing. I was sitting under a tree with another person and there was this commotion going on in the distance and I heard them chanting ‘Oh, we caught a thief! We caught a thief! We caught a thief who stole potato!’ I’m ashamed I must say, because I was getting into the excitement of it all. ‘Punish the thief! Punish the
“Thief!” I was just going along with the crowd and it turned out to be my older brother who was caught stealing potato. The punishment was that they make him eat the potato including the skin and the dirt. It was punishment – humiliation. I don’t know if he knew or not that I was cheering in the crowd. But I did not know it was him. So I guess that was a hard lesson to learn and from then on I never cheered in any crowd. If I see people stealing I just am quite. There is no need to say anything, because every day is about survival.

To her horror Bo discovered that it was her older brother who had been caught! He was then punished for stealing food by being forced to eat the raw dirt-covered potato that he had stolen. This punishment was not fatal, but it was humiliating. Being forced to eat the dirt-covered potato in front of a jeering crowd of people can be considered a form of violence. Bo’s older brother was perhaps also lucky to avoid more serious violence. Randall Collins argues that when a larger group is attacking a weaker victim (2008, pp. 115-28, 141-55) or when a crowd is cheering in support (2008, p. 203) more serious violence is quite likely to result. Bo found this punishment of her brother very upsetting, not so much because of her brother’s humiliation at being forced to eat the raw dirt-cover potato, but because she participated in the chanting of ‘Punish the thief! Punish the thief!’

This punishment was both symbolic and violent and attests to the power of the Khmer Rouge to make someone do something unpleasant and humiliating against his or her will. Moreover the power to involve bystanders into participating with punishments meted out by the regime by watching someone eat a raw dirt covered potato leading to their humiliation. This case suggests how the Pol Pot regime had the capacity to force people to act against those who they deeply cared for, whether it was participation in the humiliation of a family member, or competition for food that meant a friend went hungry. Bo participated before she realized what she was doing and after that she did not participate in the Pol Pot regime in that way. In this regard her non-participation, as a form of passive disobedience, took on a moral character in both caring for others and upholding the principle of dignity. Furthermore this experience represented a terrible lesson for Bo in regards to discovering what people were capable of doing without thinking.

Others also were drawn into participating with the regime because they were scared of the violence all around them. For example Maly remembered being interrogated by a Khmer
Rouge official about a calf that was killed by the villagers. His account is instructive about the effects of living in terror. He recalled that one day a Khmer Rouge cadre selected him for questioning. He first thought it was because he was not at work and still in the village as he was sick with malaria. The Khmer Rouge soldier carried a rifle and Maly remembered that he immediately thought he was going to shoot him. Maly was so scared that he began to cry. When questioned about the disappearance of a calf he told the official everything he knew about the killing of a calf that had been eaten in his village, including telling the official the identity of the man he thought had killed the calf. However, the man who killed the calf was not punished as some of the Khmer Rouge had also eaten the beef! In effect Maly became an informer in this instance because of complete terror.

The terror spread by fear of violence amongst the population was useful for the Khmer Rouge as it made people more compliant. Terror was one way of forcing those who might not support in the regime to do so. When Maly told the Khmer Rouge cadre everything he knew, he illustrated the coercive power of such terror and the way many people were compromised. Remaining silent might ensure one’s survival, just as informing on others might also ensure one’s survival. This seems an instance of intimidation and acquiescence due to terror, but an ambiguous instance of violence. This story reminds us that the fear of violence can be as effective as actual violence in providing obedience or conformity. Even though Maly experienced no physical violence during this terrifying ordeal, it made him deeply upset when he spoke about because of his complicity with a Khmer Rouge official. The social situation deeply matters in this regard in terms of the way by which it made people act.

Bo also stole food to survive and was punished on a number of occasions for doing so. Her story indicates her thoughts about stealing food for survival. She said

I had my share of stealing as well. I stole food. I never stole food from any individual but from the community. I was caught. Four years we live in that hellhole, and if I really fight to survive and start fighting include looking for extra food. If you just rely on what they give you: you will never survive. I’m not embarrassed by that and I don’t think I should be, because it’s about survival. In a general situation you don’t go and steal. You don’t. It is a shameful act to do, but in that time I think a hundred percent of people participate in some
sort of extra curricular activity! Nighttime or daytime, you have to. If you don’t do it just kaput! There is no way you can survive. You survive by pure luck. So I had my share of stealing and I was caught many times.

Stealing from the community was Bo’s way of retaining her moral integrity in extreme circumstances. She noted the absolute necessity of stealing food, but also said ‘In a general situation you don’t go and steal’. The change of moral values during the Pol Pot regime shows how much life changed for city-dwellers during the regime. However, Bo was also punished for stealing when she was caught. One punishment was to have her feet and arms tied to rods of bamboo in a painful position, hence immobilizing her. This punishment broke her little toe and permanently damaged it that reminds her of her experience of punishment during the Pol Pot regime until this day.

In some instances people caught stealing food were warned first before actual punishment began. As their hunger increased people continued to steal food from the village. This perhaps provoked increased anger and frustration on the part of the Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers who escalated the severity of their punishment. This was parallel with the Khmer Rouge taking a morally righteous position towards the ‘new people’ from the cities. As the preceding narratives show, there was some reluctance to treat food thieves violently particularly in the early years of the regime. Bo’s mother Kien remembered three instances of punishment through the years of the Pol Pot regime. She told

During communist I was ‘tied’ three times…punished. One time I stole the banana at nighttime in Kompong Speu. I was tied one more because we work at nighttime and we come home earlier. That time we were tied and sit the whole night and when the morning time they untie and go to work…whole night not sleep. And one time, in Kompong Som, I steal my own potato; they tie my legs. In Kompong Speu tie behind arms, very painful cuffed, legs tied not pain, but if tied by arms, very painful. My husband not steal. Everyone must steal because not enough food. Some was faster, I too slow to steal. I’m not good for stealing and my husband scared, but I don’t want him to steal too because he’s a man, if he steal and they catch him maybe punish until die.

Kien told of being punished twice when she was caught stealing food. She also told of more violent punishment after 1976 when she was in Kompong Speu. One punishment that
she experienced was part of a collective punishment of the women on her team was when they came home early from work. This painful punishment deprived them of much needed sleep. Sleep deprivation seems an inventive method of punishment of already exhausted ‘new people’ adopted by the Khmer Rouge.

Kien also said that ‘Everyone must steal’ to survive but also said that she did not want her husband to steal as they ‘maybe punish until die’ because he was a man. Todorov suggests that women pose less threat to the authority of the guards and men were generally treated more brutally (1996, p. 77). This may partly explain why Kien said that she did not want her husband to steal. Todorov also suggests that women are more likely to help one another in extreme situations (1996, p. 77). There is some evidence of women acting in unison to help each other in Kien’s narrative when she said that her all woman work team returned home from work early one night. This was also one of the very few instances of collective resistance to the heavy work regime that the Cambodians who spoke to me talked about.

Stealing and the responses to thieves varied greatly from village to village during the Pol Pot years. Stories of food stealing told that virtually everyone participated. Each story also told of the specific social circumstances of stealing food and punishments at the village level. Punishment for stealing food ranged from dire warnings, humiliation, torture or possibly being killed. Narrators recalled more violent punishments for food stealing happening after 1976. It seems people acted irrationally in the risks they took and the situation was chaotic and difficult to gauge. Food stealing or the severity of the punishment meted out varied greatly. If the relatively straightforward scenarios involving the theft of food and a range of punishments are susceptible to a number of interpretations, what are we to make of the disposition to murderous violence which has come to be associated with the Pol Pot regime?

The experiences of more serious violence presented in the following accounts demonstrate the chaotic character social life took on during this period of time for ordinary people. But no doubt such violence and chaos also gave ultimate control and order for some, while removing any sense of it from others. The following narratives demonstrate an escalation of violence occurring over the life of the Pol Pot regime.
A Shooting in the Field

Not long after being moved into the countryside Maly witnessed a jeep pull up. Aboard the jeep were Khmer Rouge soldiers and a man with his hands bound behind his back. Maly told the following story about what then happened.

In the hot afternoon one-day, probably 3 or 4 o’clock…one jeep came carrying a guy tied at the back of his arms. They ordered him down from the jeep and they walk up the road. It’s not far, fifty metres, from where we stay. I was near the grass huts. One of them said, ‘Walk that way!’ That guy tied at the back of his arms walked that way. They were about twenty metres from the dirt road. Then we hear BANG! BANG! BANG! That guy is dead. Then all of them came back to the jeep and drove off. Leave the dead person. They must be a ‘suspect’. The guy they killed must be an official or someone that worked for the old government that they want to get rid of. Any kind of person they feel is educated or someone who is famous. They don’t want any smart people they just want someone and their brain only to work. No one could do anything to prevent this from happening to the ‘suspect’. Everyone was frightened, many children were just screaming and crying, and ran to their parents. It was terrible. Later on one of the soldiers was walking along and they saw the dead body there. The soldier who killed the ‘suspect’ was from somewhere far away, we did not know where. But this guy is sort of the person who controls the area, like municipality. The guy came straight to us and said, ‘Are you Chinese or are you Cambodian?’

Because our skin is a bit lighter than the real Cambodian, most of them have darker skin. We have Chinese background, three generations before Chinese, but in Cambodian we would say ‘Chinese grandchildren’. It means we have a bit of Chinese blood. We said, ‘Oh we are Cambodian.’

‘Oh you are Cambodian, so you could understand Cambodian well eh?’

We say, ‘Yes we do understand Cambodian.’

Then he said, ‘Do you see what it is there?’
We say, ‘Yes we saw it.’

‘What you leave it there for? You want me to bring it here for you? Do you want me to keep it here with you?’

‘No. What you want us to do?’

‘Why don’t you bury it? Why don’t you bury that corpse?’

We say, ‘Oh we couldn’t do it, because we scared that probably the government like to just keep like this to scare the people, like an example.’

They might blame us for moving the corpse. Then he wanted to shoot us and told us to bury the corpse. I didn’t do it, I was about 18, but not brave enough to do that sort of thing. We could not believe it.

In this case a group of soldiers not known to the villagers entered the village and ordered a man with his arms tied behind him to get out of the jeep. They then walked shot him dead. Maly was an observer to this violence in close proximity from the nearby grass huts. The soldiers then drove away leaving the body in the rice field. Children began to scream and cry. No one in Maly’s village knew the name of the man nor did they know the soldiers. This was a public execution of a complete stranger by unknown soldiers. Maly first reasoned that the man executed must have been a ‘suspect’ of some kind, perhaps a Lon Nol officer. This was possible given that historian Michael Vickery (1999) has argued that those at highest risk of being killed during the Pol Pot years were former Lon Nol soldiers and government officials. Maly told his story in terms of the way the regime operated. He claimed if someone was killed then they must have been ‘suspected’ of something due to his use of the word ‘suspect’ and not ‘man’. Yet Maly offered alternate understanding of the killing and suggested that the Khmer Rouge killed anyone who was educated or famous. The specific and the universal practices of the regime exist in tension in storytellers’ accounts. Indeed it seems that many Cambodian people simply did not know why other people were being killed. Maly also applied a universal understanding of the Khmer Rouge’s practices retrospectively to his narrative of his experiences. The killing was both public and seemingly at random. The unknown qualities of the man who was shot
and the unknown disposition of the soldiers gave this act its arbitrary character. The experience of violence during the Pol Pot regime, which was of a seemingly arbitrary and chaotic nature, especially to the ‘new people’ in the villages from the cities, created conditions of terror and uncertainty that Arendt points to as being characteristics of totalitarian regimes (1969, p. 4).

Later one of the Khmer Rouge soldiers from the area where Maly lived saw the rotting body still lying in the field and approached those in the village. He was very angry because they had not buried the corpse. Maly said that the villagers thought that the Khmer Rouge wanted them to leave the body lying in the field to scare them. The effects of terror caused by witnessing violence meant that those who suffered it did not know how to react. Perhaps this suggests that the villagers had grasped the intent of the regime. While no doubt the corpse lying in the rice field was horrific, people interpreted this killing designed to scare them, because that was certainly the effect it had. The techniques of terror profoundly influenced those who witnessed the violence carried out by the regime. Once they had been subjected to such terror it seems that people could not easily break away from the entrainment of this relationship between themselves and the perpetrators. In this regard terror removed some of the capacity for people to act independently of orders given by the Khmer Rouge. Living in terror also meant people found the wishes of the regime unpredictable. While some violence was experienced as arbitrary it was able to be interpreted as being intentionally designed to scare people, however some stories told of violence that was experienced as far more ambiguous. Many accounts suggest that the Khmer Rouge’s violence was intentional, ruthless and part of a totalitarian impulse (Kiernan 1997; Mann 2005; Margolin 1999; Ngor 1988; Rubenstein 2004; Ung, L 2000; Yathay 1988). Does this mean that every killing was simply an expression of a structural logic? A story, told at length here by Maly, points to ambiguity in some instances of violence.

**The Hunter**

Maly remembered sitting around a campfire at night and cooking some food with three other ‘new people’ from the cities. He said
It was my turn as a watchman that night. Watching for intruder or enemies or anything. Every night every group has to have someone watching. Every group of ten people one person has to be awake every hour. Is not necessary, but the group leader have a watch and they knock a pot to remind it is time to change the watchman. I was the one who was a watchman at that time and it’s about seven o’clock and quite dark. I was sitting by the fire where they cook the *un-som*. A soldier had two young men along with him hunting. Hunting means they go around the camp and see if they could get any animal for food, like a possum or even a tiger or a deer. They would hunt any wild thing. When he walked past me he said, ‘You watch your stuff there, otherwise I come and steal it!’

Anyone would be scared of those officials, they have gun, we have to be careful when we talk to them otherwise if one word wrong you could be executed. That’s the communist way. I just said, ‘Oh yeah, that’s okay.’

I just was laughing a little bit. Then he walked across the bridge with the small trees tied together with twine in the middle of the camp. And then he went up the field where we plant cotton and along the creek where there is a few coconut trees. I saw the torchlight he used to spot animals. He put on his head and he look around and the light go where he looks. I could see the spotlight directed straight up the coconut trees. He looking for a type of animal similar to possum, but they have skin between the hind legs and the front legs and they glide – a gliding possum.

Then the light came down and went straight to where I sat. At that time there are three people with me around the fire. One of the guys came from the village where I was born and he was my brother’s friend. That man asked me about my brother and I told him where he is now and we had a bit of a talk together. Another guy brought cassava. Cassava is a sort of bulb like potato. He brought that and he put in the fire to roast it on the charcoal. And that guy use glasses to see. We were all sitting around the fire. I was there chatting with the friend who was opposite me and the other guy was to my left. The three guys who went hunting walk along the other side of the creek. A few coconut trees were on that side and they were fifty metres away… Then I saw the spotlight come straight to us and it stays in one place. That’s the way they hunt. When you spot the animal, stay still because they concentrate on the animal. I asked myself ‘Why is the spotlight straight to us like that?’

Then BANG! The gunshot.
I jump back a few steps and said to my brother’s friend, ‘Phahla why are they shooting at us?’
In Cambodia my brother had a gun and he went hunting and I could recognize the sound of the gun if the gun came straight at me.

Then I said, ‘Phahla what is happening? They are shooting straight at us!’

He said, ‘Don’t be stupid.’ And then BANG! The other guy cooking the cassava fell backwards.

Then I said, ‘Tell them to stop!’

‘Hey stop! Stop brother!’ We call bong or ‘brother’, we don’t normally call name like in English.

We yelled, ‘Chop-banh! Stop shooting! Someone got shot. Stop! Stop! Someone got shot.’

‘Oh I shot someone did I?’ said the hunter with the gun.

I said, ‘Yeah.’

The guy who got shot could not say a word, he just groaned. OHHH! OHHH! Like that. It was terrible to see. It could have been me. He shot two shot and got one. The first shot I don’t know where it went. I think perhaps they were shooting this guy because of the glasses that might reflect and when you go hunting with the spotlight you can’t see the animal itself – only the eyes. You try with a cat or a dog at night you see the blue reflection of their eyes. And I think that guy’s glasses, I reckon, cause reflection to the hunter. No one knows if it was an accident or on purpose. In that camp we have a few soldiers staying there to guard us. They said they are coming to protect us, but in fact I think they just come to guard us in case someone tries to run away. They make it sound good. The guy who got shot died in about two minutes and not much blood coming out of his back, only a few drops wet his shirt. Just straight into his heart. The hunter came over and the soldiers stay just next to the creek so they heard what happened, and then they came and took the hunter away. The hunter is government, like a high official. The man who was shot was same as me, the same as my family. We were all mobile group. His body was still warm and we get stretchers made out of the rice sack, the sack we keep the rice called bao. In Cambodia they keep rice in there to
transport and we use them as hammock to sleep at night. Then we use to bury the body. We couldn’t dig enough, just enough to put in and put all the soil on top of his body. It might disturb you, it’s horrible, but it’s part of the story. It’s over twenty years ago. I feel indescribable. One of the guy he just run away, he scared someone might tell us to come and get the body to bury. Funeral is like big ceremony or something. This man we just bury. How cheap and how low are peoples’ lives, that when you dead you just bury like animals?

This story of a man being shot by a Khmer Rouge soldier who was hunting on the edge of the village is an example of a kind of ambiguous violence that occurred during the Pol Pot years. Maly was uncertain whether the shooting he witnessed was an intentional or accidental killing. The man who was shot as he sat by a campfire wore glasses that plainly identified him as a city dweller and one of the ‘new people’. There was animosity between the ‘new people’ from the cities and the rural dwelling ‘old people’, so was this shooting by the Khmer Rouge soldier intentional violence or an accident? Maly said that the hunter’s spotlight reflected off the man’s glasses at night and made him appear as a possible target for the hunter. Despite having every reason to condemn the actions of the Khmer Rouge soldier in this situation, Maly did not. Instead he said that the shooting could have been an accident. Historical accounts of the Pol Pot regime have often removed situational ambiguity. From Maly’s account, some violence perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge was ambiguous. Regardless no one said anything after the shooting to the soldier that could be viewed as an accusation. The power the Khmer Rouge possessed compared to the ‘new people’ was such that they could kill ‘new people’ without them having recourse to any form of amends. But Maly also stated that the soldiers then ‘came and took the hunter away’ which alluded to the hunter either needing protection from people taking revenge against him or him being upset by the killing or the hunter being punished or criticized by the other two Khmer Rouge soldiers.

It is also possible that the Khmer Rouge soldier sought to only scare the men sitting around the campfire. However, if this shooting was an instance of calculated killing the Khmer Rouge soldier avoided direct face-to-face confrontation with the man he killed. Instead he killed at night, at a distance and he missed on his first shot! Furthermore the soldier’s target remained oblivious of this attempt to kill him. This violence appears to have been done fearfully and with the odds stacked against successfully killing the man sitting by the
campfire. Randall Collins argues that some violent situations are shaped by fear (2008, p. 19) and claims that it is difficult for an attacker to face a weaker victim as their eyes are a deterrent to attack. Thus the attacker seeks to avoid confrontational fear by avoiding facing the victim (Collins 2008, p. 174). This corresponds with aspects of Maly’s narrative as the hunter placed himself fifty metres away from his target at night and the victim was unknowing of the attack. He also has two supporters with him to back him up, hence employing a way of overcoming his fear of confronting the victim.

Interpreting this account further, this killing is also congruent with the particular Cambodian form of revenge called *Kum*. The Cambodian writer Haing Ngor says that *Kum* involves ‘a long standing grudge leading to revenge much more damaging than the original injury’ (1988, p. 9). In this respect the killing of one of the ‘new people’ by one of the Khmer Rouge was perhaps revenge by one of the rural dwellers for past humiliations against the city dwellers. The anthropologist Alex Hinton describes *Kum* as ‘a head for an eye’ or ‘disproportionate’ revenge (2005, p. 47). When a Cambodian is angry they are seen to be in a ‘hot’ state and there is a large vocabulary according to Hinton that relates to emotional control with sayings like to ‘cool one’s anger’…*rosay kamhoeng/chett*’ (2005, p. 61). When it comes to anger Hinton claims that Cambodians have a number of ways of mutually saving face, while avoiding public exposure to shame and avoiding direct confrontation (2005, p. 63). Hence there is perhaps even greater reason for the hunter not directly facing his victim as it involves the least amount of confrontation. Importantly Hinton argues that Cambodians have a range of ways of negotiating anger, but when honor is at stake people ‘may come to harbor a ‘grudge’ (*kum, kumkuon, kumnun, kongkuon*) against their foes that lasts until they exact revenge (*karsângsoek*)’ (2005, p. 64). Moreover, Hinton says ‘By hiding their animosity from a foe, people who hold a grudge may be able to maintain an element of surprise and prevent their adversary from taking the initiative’ (2005, p. 65). In this regard Maly’s story does fit with the Cambodian meta-narrative of *Kum*. The notions of revenge and humiliation will be returned to later in this chapter.

Maly’s story of his experience with the hunter suggests that narratives of violence can be open ended and provide a basis for a variety of understandings. Situational ambiguity, however, does not necessarily lend itself well to creating accounts that fit with the
dominant stories about Pol Pot time. In this regard perhaps the ambiguity around situations that involved violence may actually also be silencing to some Cambodians wanting to speak about their experience. I now turn to an example of more extreme violence that towards the end of the Khmer Rouge years in 1978, which opens up some important interpretive issues.

**Killed for Laughing**

Bo witnessed the killing of a group of people shortly before the Vietnamese takeover in 1978. At that stage she told that she was in the east of Cambodia towards the Vietnamese border and the Khmer Rouge had her watching for enemies during the night. This is her story of what happened.

We were working in a youth camp not far away from home and my mum goes and cuts the rice from the stalk. We are the young ones who when they cut the rice stalks stack them together and let them dry. We guard the rice at night time...not that anyone would steal it...but from then on we heard a lot of noise. A lot of gun fighting. We just assume that there was just a lot of fighting, but we did not know it was the Vietnamese soldiers coming. My team leader then was a lady. I think she must have suffered from osteo-arthritis because her knee was always swollen. One of my tasks was to get this oil with animal left in it. She would ask me to rub it in her knees for her, because it was swollen. One of my tasks was to remember to go and get her medication and massage in the oil for her. One night I was on guard with another person and all of a sudden I heard a scream. I look at the direction of where the scream came from and I saw a trickle of blood, I’m not sure, but a bit of blood. By then they had already told us ‘We have enemies coming into the village, if you see anything abnormal report to your supervisor!’ So I reported to her and a few of the people crawled to the location that I told them I saw the blood. When they came back they said, ‘There was nothing, just some enemy.’

They just say ‘enemy’. But I knew something was not right. So during that night I didn’t sleep and I sneak back into town...and I looked for my mum, because I knew something wasn’t right. She was so nervous. During that night I was in and out of the village, something was telling me that something just wasn’t right. The next morning my mum told me that the noise I heard was our neighbours who had been executed. At night they killed
seven of them. They took away a girl and a boy and five adults. The reason they were killed was that the family were working and they were laughing and enjoying themselves. They bump off the kids because they wanted to go with their parents. So they were killed for being happy. The story in the village was that people in my mum’s group heard the sound of the fighting and were happy, so they killed them. The noise that I heard that night was somebody being killed. So I was so scared. They were looking for my mum and dad too, but because my mum was sick at that time maybe someone said ‘She doesn’t need to be among them. You don’t need. You can’t take her as well because she doesn’t want to go.’ Whatever they saw that night it was corpse on the ground.

During the daytime, we went to work and we were walking along the field with my leader. I carry a few of the shovels and she said, ‘Why don’t you put the shovels down and we just walk along and you come back later?’

Because they try to play trick with me I was scared, because I know that when we walk past there is going to be a grave. So they wanted to force me to come back and get the shovels by myself. So for some reason, out of maturity, out of insight, out of fear, I said, ‘Don’t worry I can carry a few of them.’

I carried all of them, so I did not have to leave them there and come back and get it. They said, ‘Oh it is too heavy, so put it down.’

I said, ‘Oh not to worry.’

When we were walking I saw pieces of fabrics, sarong, and pieces of other items along the road. Then we just round a corner and the thing that attracted my attention was the big green blowfly. We walked past and a BUUUUUUUU sound came from the flies. I look at the direction and saw the feet of people laying there in not much of a grave, just a bit of straw from the rice covering the bodies. I would say that they take me there to scare. Because I remember she told me to put my shovels down and come back and get them later on. But I reckon they are fascinated themselves because they are not directly involved in the killing, but to know, just to see. So they knew where the place is, because they are the one who took us to walk past. I don’t know how many people walk past. But I remember I was there. When I walk in it was on my left, when we came round the corner, was on the left side. So the sound of the fly caught our attention. BUUUUUUU! I did not know what the story was until later on mum filled in the story. It must be intuition or a sense of danger. Why did I
keep on checking? Why did I just keep coming to check on my mum and dad during the nighttime? Why? Is it something guiding? I don’t know if it is a high power, heaven guiding us or if it is pure luck.

Bo was aged ten years old in 1978 when she saw members of her mother’s work team killed as the Pol Pot regime crumbled. The violence of the regime appears to have escalated by the time the regime was collapsing, with the exception of many immediate killings of people who were former Lon Nol soldiers or government officials (Vickery 1999). During 1978 Bo remembered that there was increased noise from gunfire as the Vietnamese had invaded Cambodia. It was not clear if ‘enemies’ were hungry people who were stealing food or if the ‘enemies’ were Vietnamese soldiers. Regardless a degree of paranoia had set in amongst the Khmer Rouge. Bo recalled having a sense that ‘something was not right’ and went back and forth several times from the rice field to the village to check up on her mother and father during the night. Her recollection of the killings that night is more like a series of incomplete images rather than concrete descriptions. This seems to be something like the observation made by the psychologist Judith Herman of traumatic events remaining as a series of ‘static’ images before a person expresses such experiences as a narrative (1992, p. 175). Bo’s narrative suggests that she observed the killing of five adults and two children belonging to her mother’s work team. But all she remembered of the actual killing was seeing the blood.

Bo remembers that these killings were justified by the Khmer Rouge as being against kmang or ‘enemies’ of the Pol Pot regime. This indicates a substantial discursive shift from the earlier years of the regime. People in 1978 were killed for laughing and being happy as this signified that they were ‘enemies’. Earlier between 1975 and 1976 there had been a symbolic violence that accompanied enjoyment of power, like ordering people to kill their dogs. And people were first warned before they were punished and tortured for stealing food. During the middle years the violence against the ‘new people’ was in some instances ambiguous and fearful. Finally the practices of violence had become more carefully honed and people were executed. It also appears that some Khmer Rouge team leaders, supervisors, cadres and soldiers, like Bo’s superior or the Khmer Rouge nurse that Maly would talk with in Battambang hospital when they did the dishes, did not kill and were not directly involved with the killing. This suggests a difference between those who did kill
and those who could not. Furthermore, this also implies that it was less likely to be women who killed and that men predominantly carried out the violence.

The next day Bo discovered that the seven people had been killed for being happy and laughing on hearing the sounds of gunfire in the distance, as it indicated to them that the Vietnamese were attacking the Khmer Rouge. If silence is an effect of totalitarianism then laughter is its enemy and heralded the crumbling of the power of the regime. The following day Bo remembered her group leader then took her past the dead bodies as part of a procession. She remembered the sound of flies before she saw the bodies in broad daylight. The corpses were covered with only rice chaff and the feet were still visible. The impression that she gives is that they had been brutally smashed apart, as she noted pieces of cloth and pieces of items lying on the ground nearby. Bo’s group leader took them past the bodies of her mother’s work team as a lesson. Laughter and happiness over the possible collapse of the Pol Pot regime was not to be tolerated. The intended affect seems to be to terrorize the ‘new people’. But Bo also said that her group leader was also ‘fascinated’ by the killings, as she was not directly involved. Was it then purely curiosity? Bo seems to think that the intention was to play a cruel ‘joke’ on her and make her walk past the bodies twice by forcing her to go back and get the shovels.

The regime seems to have used violence not just to eliminate a vast number of ‘new people’ and their political opponents but as a mechanism to create terror and hence attempt to control the population through fear. There have been a significant number of responses that attempted to address why the violence took place. I turn to these responses next.

**The Why of Violence**

The question ‘Why did the Khmer Rouge kill?’ has been explained in many ways. Some writers have seen it as motivated by a desire to eliminate of old enemies who were a threat to the new regime (Vickery 1999). Others have argued that the killings in Cambodia had an ethnic character while also pointing out that more Khmers died in the attempt to ‘purify’ the country than ethnic Vietnamese (Kiernan 1997, 2007, pp. 539, 51). Others have pointed to the ideology of communism (Margolin 1999; Staub 1989). Michael Mann
claims that the Pol Pot regime was genocidal in targeting some ethnic groups like the ethnic Vietnamese. Yet he also points to other motives suggesting that the killing went far beyond elimination of rival groups because ‘since most of the victims were defined as enemy classes, this was essentially classicide, though the Khmer Rouge view of class was very broad, entwining regional and even ethnic identities with class’ (2005, p. 340). In essence the struggles to explain the character of the violence of the Pol Pot regime also become struggles over naming the violence of the regime. An answer to the question ‘Why did they kill?’ cannot easily be arrived at and is certainly not easily deduced from the stories that I have been told or from the accounts of other Cambodian writers who lived through this time. Dunlop claims that asking a Cambodian person ‘why’ is treated as a moral accusation, whereas ‘how’ leads to reflection (2005, p. 287). ‘Why’ also presupposes a set of reasons that led to ‘how’ someone acted. Even then, the answers to ‘Why did they kill?’ do not seem very satisfactory, as the explanation is often reduced to a singular abstraction such as ‘class’ or ‘ethnicity’ or ‘communism’.

So who were the killers during the Pol Pot regime? They were mostly men, although not exclusively, who were exposed to other competing ideas during their lifetimes like those contained in Theravada Buddhism which has an injunction against killing living creatures. It was also common for men to have spent some time as Buddhist monks pre-1970 (Ebihara 1990, p. 21). The killers spoke the same language as those they killed and despite the privileging of a Khmer identity and language many would have also spoken Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, or perhaps even French if they were at all educated. Many Khmer Rouge killers had Chinese ancestry like comrade Duch who ran the internal party torture centre S-21 (Dunlop 2005, p. 32) and for all intents and purposes the killers had been part of the same pre-1975 culture as those they killed. Like a great deal of the Cambodian population the Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers were exposed to violence, war and US bombing before 1975. Equally the Khmer Rouge soldiers may have had more traumatic experiences prior to 1975 than the urban population because of their experience of fighting a guerrilla war in the countryside.

The Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers were not monsters. Making them into monsters and making them pathological does not further an understanding of how they came to kill. Insisting on their status as monsters also denies the uncomfortable situation of accepting the
ways by which those people who killed are the same as those who did not. The killers were ‘ordinary’ people just like those they killed. Of course there is some paradox in calling anybody ‘ordinary’ as all people could be considered equally ‘extraordinary’. The act of killing another human being is also exceptional, but as Hannah Arendt suggests, the evil of killing millions of people also has a ‘banality’ to the circumstances under which such acts take place. Such killers, Arendt claims, are ‘neither perverted nor sadistic’ and are ‘terribly and terrifyingly normal’ (1963, p. 276). Todorov elaborates this point and says to ‘call this evil banal is not to trivialize it: precisely what made this evil so dangerous was that it was so easy, that no exceptional human qualities were required for it to come into being’ (1996, p. 125). Like other mass murderers the Khmer Rouge were, for all intents and purposes, ‘normal’ (Arendt 1963, p. 25).

The number of people who killed is also the other problem with viewing the killers as either monsters, sadists, or pathological. Thousands killed millions. If Margolin’s estimate of 120,000 Khmer Rouge on April 17th 1975 (1999, p. 584) is used there were simply too many people who killed for them to all be monsters, psychopaths and sadists. However, not all Khmer Rouge killed or always resorted to violence. In this regard Michael Mann problematically suggests that ‘The Khmer rouge soldiers had numbered 68,000 in 1975, and there were 14,000 party members…since many were stationed in areas that saw little killing, the actual murderers must have engaged in truly serial killing.’ (2005, p. 346). Hence, if not all of the Khmer Rouge killed, the actual numbers of killers is possibly less than 82,000 people. Hinton notes in the case of the killing centre of Phnom Bros between 5,000 and 10,000 people were killed in little over a month, killing adults with a blow to the back of the head and babies and children were apparently bashed to death against a tree (2005, p. 40). Most of this was, remarkably enough, carried out by a relatively small execution squad of twelve people.

As far as I know I did not interview anyone who was a member of the Khmer Rouge. But it seems unlikely that anyone would admit to being a member of the Khmer Rouge or participating in the violence of the regime in terms of ‘punishing’ others or killing other people. This is because it is seen today as being very shameful. Thousands of people were involved in killing. So where did all the Khmer Rouge go? Some of the Khmer Rouge
came to Australia as refugees. Maly, for example, talked about running into a Khmer Rouge nurse in the supermarket, and said

I still see one of the nurses living here in Melbourne. She worked at the hospital every day. They try to cover up and they try not to show anyone. But one day I heard her voice, because at the hospital I have enough energy after the meal to help them wash the dishes. I work with that lady every day, so she was in my mind. I hear her voice when I think of Pol Pot’s time and she is the first one I think of when I was in hospital. She tried to cover up the fact she was part of the Khmer Rouge, because her father was one of the Khmer Rouge officials, that’s why they never want anyone to know. But I said, ‘I know! I know her name. I know everything.’ Then she says, ‘Yes, she was a Khmer Rouge.’ Her husband was former Khmer Rouge too. I can’t take revenge here, but she should not try to hide. People don’t want to be recognized as part of the Khmer Rouge, because every one, even young kid, have blood on their hands, because even young kids would kill if they were told to. They wouldn’t care: they just killed because they said they had to kill their enemies.

In Maly’s eyes at least, the nurse he encountered in a supermarket is guilty, part of a mechanism of mass killing. And in a slide into generalisation which all of us can make, the fact that she was part of the Khmer Rouge indicts her as a killer: after all as Maly says, ‘…because every one…have blood on their hands, because even young kids would kill if they were told to’!

This observation warrants further close attention. I have already argued that in the case of the punishments meted out to those who stole food that there was no inevitable or predictable sequence of events, no necessary structured pattern of violence. How should we think about the patterns at work in the case of mass killing?

**Thinking about Violence**

In Cambodia a person would have likely been either shot in the back of the head, or their skull caved in by a hoe, or suffocated with a plastic bag, or their throat slashed with knife or machete. All killing was done in close proximity. While no doubt some people were strangers to their killers, many would have known their killers at the village level before
they were taken away and killed. How then did the Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers bring themselves to kill? What social and psychological processes would one of the killers have to undergo to carry out the task of killing another person? And under what social circumstances could someone kill another person during the Pol Pot regime?

My starting point is that violence and killing is not necessarily easily done. As the narratives in this chapter demonstrate violence was sometimes avoided by those in charge, and in some accounts of killing the violence was ambiguous, or was carried out in a fearful manner that avoided direct confrontation with the victim. But I have also shown that, with the possible exception of the killing of Lon Nol soldiers and officials, violence escalated over time during the Pol Pot regime, starting with symbolic violence in the months after evacuation of the cities, like forcing people to kill their dogs, but by 1978 people were killed for infringements like laughing while at work. I have also claimed that narratives of violence are ambiguous and it is problematic to understand violence as a product of ‘rational action’ as a narrative applied retrospectively creates the illusion of intent, action and effect neatly lining up. So if the Khmer Rouge killers were ‘ordinary men’ similar in many ways to their victims, and violence is ambiguous and not easily performed, nor simple ‘rational action’, then how can the mass killings during Pol Pot time be understood?

While some writers like Joanna Bourke (1999) see a disposition to kill, especially on the part of men, as an inevitable biological or psychological imperative, indeed as a ‘pleasurable’ and ‘orgasmic’ experience (Bourke 1999, pp. 14-5), there is disconcerting evidence presented by Grossman (1995; 2000a; 2000b) that killing does not come easily or naturally. Grossman draws on a wide range of evidence from the American Civil War, World War I and World War II to show that remarkably few soldiers on a battlefield fired their weapons at the enemy. Indeed the number of soldiers who did not fire their weapons in World War II could be as high as 80 to 85 percent (Grossman 1995, p. 15). During the American Civil War at least half of soldiers did not fire and those who did shot over the heads of their enemies (Grossman 1995, p. 24). Drawing upon the work of S. L. A. Marshall who studied soldiers during World War II Grossman argues that normal civil life makes purposeful killing a difficult and uncommon activity especially when soldiers are in close proximity. Grossman writes ‘We may never understand the nature of this force in man that causes him to strongly resist killing his fellow man, but we can give praise for it to
whatever force we hold responsible for our existence’ (1995, p. 39). He argues that the murderous toll of modern wars is best explained by killing at a distance from high altitude bombing or artillery fire, which weakens the restraints on killing. After World War II a number of ‘conditioning’ and ‘programming’ techniques were introduced which increased the fire rate in the Vietnam War up to 90 to 95 percent (Grossman 1995, p. 35). So according to Grossman despite the inherent resistance to kill, people can kill others under certain circumstances. There is other no less troubling research on this question.

Christopher Browning’s (1992) study of the killing of Jews by Reserve Police Battalion 101 in Poland poses a number of questions about a case of genocidal killing in which men in uniforms kill large numbers of defenceless men, women and children. Browning documents the large numbers Jews killed in Europe before 1945 in ‘clearing’ of the cities (1992, p. 17) and in transportation to labour camps (1992, pp. 26-36). He then focuses upon the mass killing of Jews in the town of Józefów. Extraordinarily the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were given the opportunity by their commanding officer to opt out of the killings in Józefów and perform other duties if they so desired. Only twelve men did so (Browning 1992, p. 57). Once the killings had begun, the men doing the killing avoided killing children, could not face their victims who they shot in the back of the head lying face down and some men after they had killed once could no longer continue and requested reassignment (Browning 1992, pp. 59-62). Browning demonstrates that the task of killing was extraordinarily traumatic and difficult for many of the men who killed (1992, pp. 64-8). He argues that the men participated in the killings due to a number of social influences, such as the task of killing being suddenly sprung upon them combined with a sense of conformity with rest of the group and opting out being seen as cowardly (1992, pp. 71-2). Of those who did step out, they did not harbour careerist ambitions and had pre-existing opposition to Nazi practices (1992, p. 75). In summary, Browning suggests that violence is difficult to perform, traumatic when it is carried out, and people do it badly reacting in horror and being unable to continue killing. Yet somehow the ability of people to do violence is enabled by the social circumstances in which it takes place, though what those circumstances are may not be all that clear.

Randall Collins (2008) argues that violence is not easily performed and is messy when people do manage to act violently. Collins writes
Fighters are mostly fearful and incompetent in their exercise of violence; when they are evenly matched, they tend to be particularly incompetent. It is when the strong attack the weak that most violence is successful (2008, p. 40).

Moreover Collins argues that violence takes place in a state of ‘confrontational tension’ resultant from fear and people exercise violence in a state of fear. Collins argues that there are social circumstances that allow a person to bypass their fear and act violently. Collins argues that most people are loathe to perform violence and claims that, like Grossman (1995), there have always been low rates of soldiers firing their weapons in modern wars, but higher rates of fire achieved at a distance and working in teams (2008, pp. 57-9).

These understandings pose problems for understanding instances where mass killings have taken place. If violence is difficult to do and people do it badly then how was it possible for 2 million people to be killed over a period of three years between 1975 and 1978 in Cambodia?

For the social psychologist Phillip Zimbardo (2007) the social situation determines to a large extent how people can act. He says

Any deed that any human being has ever committed, however horrible, is possible for any of us – under the right or wrong situational circumstances. That knowledge does not excuse evil; rather, it democratizes it, sharing its blame among ordinary actors rather than declaring it the province only of deviants and despots – of Them but not Us (2007, p. 211).

Zimbardo (2007) and others (Leon 2000) argue that an escalation of violence occurs over time as people assume particular ‘roles’ shaped by the social situation they are in. These roles are shaped by people wanting to belong to the dominant in-group and their fear of rejection by this group (Zimbardo 2007, pp. 259-65). Zimbardo also points to a tendency of people to obey people in positions of authority and says that if authority figures lend their support to violent action then this support creates situations where violence can take place (2007, pp. 266-87). Zimbardo claims there is nothing exceptional about people who commit violence, rather that it is the social situations that allow this to occur. Zimbardo
says there are several important social situations that facilitate violence, which are also relevant for understanding violence in Cambodia from 1975 to 1978. First of these is ‘deindividuation’ where a person is anonymous or assumes another identity that allows them to become anonymous. Zimbardo says ‘any situation, that makes people feel anonymous, as though no one knows who they are or cares to know, reduces their sense of personal accountability, thereby creating the potential for evil action’ particularly when coupled with permission to engage in violent action (2007, p. 301). Then there is the process of dehumanization, where ‘some human beings consider other human beings to be excluded from the moral order of being a human person’ (Zimbardo 2007, p. 307). Zimbardo never goes as far to say that people are only or purely products of their social environments. Rather he sees people as both producing and capable of transforming their social environments as well as being profoundly influenced by their social environments (2007, pp. 319-20). These situational influences are important clues as to how members of the Khmer Rouge became able to kill people.

Zimbardo is only mistaken on one point in claiming that morality can be disengaged. He says ‘Individuals and groups can maintain their sense of moral standards by simply disengaging their usual moral functioning at certain times, in certain situations, for certain purposes’ (2007, p. 310) and implies that people then return to ‘higher’ moral ground. Zimbardo suggests that morality can be suspended and is a fixed point that people return to. This makes sense in a number of situations. But what if violence can be socially constituted as a ‘moral good’? What if the Khmer Rouge were able to transform their exercise of violence into moral action? For example, Frantz Fanon (1963), the psychoanalyst turned Marxist revolutionary, claims that revolutionary violence can be ‘cleansing’ of past wrongs. So perhaps those who carry out violence can treat it as moral.

From the very first moments of the coming of Democratic Kampuchea a relatively small number of Khmer Rouge moved millions of people from the cities to the countryside in what was a mass evacuation. Parallels could be drawn with Nazi Germany where the Nazi state first decided where Jewish people could and could not live from September 1939 and established ghettos prior to implementing the ‘Final Solution’ which resulted in the death of 5.7 million Jews and higher numbers of non-Jewish victims (Reitlinger 1953, p. 533). In Cambodia it seems likely that one group of people ‘realized’ their power over another
group of people from the very inception of the Pol Pot regime on April 17th 1975, after millions of people obeyed orders yelled at them to leave the towns and the cities. Todorov notes that guards in concentration camps usually took only days before they started enjoying their power over the lives of others (1996, p. 184). One group of people must experience the enjoyment of power over others before they can kill another group of people. Hinton suggests that in the Cambodian cultural context a network of signs constitute a person as being powerful (2004, p. 152; 2005, pp. 103-5). Cambodians look for particular signs, for example feats of prowess in battle or magical talismans, to know if a person is powerful as to ‘avoid offending these potentially dangerous beings and because they may hope to increase their own power and status through association with them’ (Hinton 2005, p. 105). This suggests that the deference given by the city-dwellers to the Khmer Rouge may have allowed the killers to quickly realize their power. However, the realization and enjoyment of power alone are not enough to explain how the Khmer Rouge were able to kill.

The mass evacuation of the cities meant that the rural communities were suddenly exposed to large numbers of ‘outsiders’ from the cities. Zimbardo apropos his famous study of subjects playing the roles of prisoners and guards writes that ‘research participants who were ‘deindividuated’ more readily inflicted pain on others than did those who felt more individuated’ (2007, p. 24) and says

...conditions that make us feel anonymous, when we think that others do not know us or care to, can foster anti-social, self interested behaviors. My earlier research highlighted the power of masking one’s identity to unleash aggressive acts against other people in situations that gave permission to violate the usual taboos against interpersonal violence (2007, p. 25).

Many ‘new people’ with a connection to the Lon Nol regime deliberately went to villages where they knew they would not be immediately recognised, like Cambodian writer Loung Ung’s family did (2000). After the evacuation of the cities, life in villages was a situation where many people became at least somewhat anonymous. For that reason, perhaps those who killed were able to do so because they felt a degree of anonymity in a situation that engendered deindividuation.
Those killed were dehumanised by the Pol Pot regime. Todorov suggests that stripping people naked by totalitarian regimes, like Nazi Germany, is one way to make people appear less than human, hence dehumanise them. This makes it easier for the killers to kill people, as they cannot be as easily recognized as human beings (1996, p. 160). In the Cambodian instance Maly and others spoke at length about the transformation of their appearance, where they became skinny, yellow and looked like ‘skeletons’. This change in appearance meant that the Khmer Rouge could have far more easily treated those they were about to kill as less than human. Dehumanisation was also achieved through making all people wear only black clothing and adopt a similar style of haircut. The loss of personal identifiers made people less able to be viewed as human beings, and thus could again be more easily viewed as less than human. But the loss of human signifiers still does not seem enough to approach an understanding of how one group of people were able to kill others.

The Nazis referred to the Jews being transported to the death camps as ‘the cargo’ or ‘the items’ (Todorov 1996, p. 161). By using such terms the transportation of Jews to the death camps was transformed into a logistical and quantitative problem to be solved. Zygmunt Bauman (2002) views this sort of modern bureaucratic process which transforms people into objects and numbers is a form of dehumanization. Bauman argues that this strips people of their humanity and their capacity to make moral demands (2002, pp. 128-9). The Khmer Rouge also deployed a vocabulary in a similar fashion to the Nazis. The language used during the Pol Pot regime centred on a number of binaries.

‘New people’ and ‘old people’ were the words used to describe the relationship between the city dwellers and the rural dwellers in the countryside. This binary relationship indicated a form of solidarity between those who were ‘old people’ which distinguished the killers from the ‘new people’ they killed. ‘Old’ is also an interesting choice of word to be used as ‘old’ age has high value in Cambodian culture. Kien also used the term ‘original people’ synonymously with ‘old people’. ‘Original people’ seems to be in this sense indicative of ‘belonging’ to a place before other ‘new people’ have come to live there as outsiders. Kien also used the phrase ‘April 17th people who live with Pol Pot for a long time’ and in this sense it seems to be clear that the rural dwellers or ‘old people’ in this category had an ownership over the revolutionary project that the ‘new people’ from the cities did not or could not have. Maly also said that the Khmer Rouge were looking for Kmang or
‘enemies’. The Khmer Rouge used the word ‘enemy’ (*kmang*), rather than ‘people’ (*koun lok*) (Chandler 1977b). The use of the terms ‘new people’ and ‘enemies’ constituted those killed as being different to those who did the killing. Some have argued that certain identities as markers of difference can come to carry meanings like ‘traitors’ which justifies the killing of those who hold such identities by the killers (Jok and Hutchinson 1999, p. 138). Whereas Robert Hayden (2002) argues that mass killings occur when certain identities don’t fit within particular imagined communities. Mass killing resolves the tension between ‘life as lived’ in a heterogenous community and ‘life as it suddenly must be lived’ to create a more homogenous community (Hayden 2002, p. 233). The ‘new people’ in this respect did not fit with the Khmer Rouge’s imagined community.

According to Bo the Khmer Rouge lectured the ‘new people’ at night in mass meetings. The ‘new people’ were told that they were ‘lazy people’ and ‘used to life of comfort’ and ‘now we have to be equal’. Lectures were perhaps intended to transform the minds of the ‘new people’, as the Khmer Rouge were not content to only have dominion over the bodies of Cambodian people. However, this lecturing also reveals a set of moral justifications for the ‘old people’ and Khmer Rouge to treat the ‘new people’ differently. Before 1975 the peasants saw themselves as ‘hard working’ and ‘downtrodden’ but ‘morally superior’ because they were peasants and they viewed the city folk as ‘corrupt’ and ‘idle’. Kim, for example, was born into a poor family and grew up in rural Cambodia. The narrative of his childhood prior to 1975 is evidence of the way that the city dwelling middle class city folk were viewed by the poor rural dwellers. He says

> Because I was in the poor family I stopped school at thirteen. Looking back at that time it doesn’t feel very bad, but I don’t feel good too, because I stopped school to help my parent. I got stuck with many things because I got low education. Before Pol Pot time I was helping my parent growing duck in Kompong Cham and after that we moved to Kandal province…I began selling ice cream in Kandal province to earn money to help my family. Over there they don’t have ice cream truck – they have small cart – so you walk around with the ice cream and sell it. It’s not easy. It’s not hard. It’s just a normal life, but the rich people do nothing. If I look to other people in the same situation as me then I don’t feel like it was a hard life. When I look at rich people: their children are the same age and they never earn any money, they just go to school and come back from school and play around. They don’t do anything for money. They are not very rich, but they don’t worry about money. Their parents have
enough money for living easy, but if I don’t do anything – my family can’t survive. So I have

to do.

Kim regarded the ‘rich people’ in pre-1975 Cambodian social life were people who ‘do
nothing’ and their children were able to ‘play around’ because their parents had ‘enough
money’ for ‘living easy’. He drew a comparison with his own ‘hard life’ and others who
shared this position who had to work for their family’s survival. In a sense, as a rural
Khmer adolescent, Kim stared jealously in on the lives of those better off than his family
whose children were able to enjoy a ‘childhood’ without working hard. After April 1975
the ‘new people’ were constructed by the Pol Pot regime as ‘lazy’ and ‘idle’. But before
1975 the city dwellers were also seen as people who ‘do nothing’ by rural dwellers. The
antagonisms and jealousies between poor rural dwellers and middle-class Cambodians pre-
existed the Pol Pot regime and they could potentially be harnessed as a ‘class grudge’
(Hinton 1998a, p. 366). What might such antagonisms and jealousies suggest about the
violence that occurred during the Pol Pot regime?

Writing about men who kill their intimate partners David Adams suggests that many men
who kill their partners have several characteristics. They are jealous and suspicious (2007,
pp. 37-42), are contemptuous towards their victims (2007, pp. 70-2) and have a history of
abusive behaviour towards their victims (2007, pp. 23-32). The Khmer Rouge engaged in
abusive behaviour of the ‘new people’ and expressed contempt for the new people from the
cities who they called ‘lazy’. The Khmer Rouge’s devaluing of their victims lives is
somewhat similar to the way abusive men who kill in Adams’ research denigrate the worth
of their intimate partners which serves to elevate ‘their own virtues and worth’ (2007, p.
28). One group of men Adams identifies as being much more likely to kill are men who are
jealous, possessive, suicidal and depressed. This group of men often killed when their
victims sought to leave them (2007, p. 116). Kien told that the women in her work team
were killed for being happy about the Vietnamese invasion, as this meant they might soon
be free from the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge perhaps had a number of the same
emotional qualities as men who kill in other situations. Jealously was felt towards the
comfortable lives of the former city dwellers. Adams claims that men who kill often feel a
sense of ownership over the lives of those they kill else they would only kill themselves
(2007, p. 117). The Khmer Rouge also felt some sense of ownership over the lives of those
who they killed expressed in the saying of ‘sparing them is no profit and losing them is no loss’ (Chandler 1990). Additionally Adams found that many of the men who had killed their intimate partners had either witnessed violence or suffered violence within their prior relationships (2007, pp. 120-37). Prior to 1975 the Khmer Rouge soldiers also experienced a great deal of violence in fighting a civil war. Perhaps violence is never complete in its effects upon people and in many instances people unconsciously act out as a kind of repetition their past experiences in an attempt to resolve or integrate such experiences.

Cultural artefacts like Cambodian folklore can also assist in attempting to understand violence during the Pol Pot regime. The tales of Cambodian folklore, called the Gatiloke are moral tales, not unlike The Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales (1906). Dunlop treats Cambodian folklore as transmitting a culturally embedded Cambodian fatalism and argues that the Gatiloke ‘reinforced a deep rooted belief in a preordained life a time honoured acceptance of the status quo, which provided a useful means of social control to numerous regimes – including, ultimately, the Khmer Rouge’ (2005, p. 44). The tales in David Chandler’s collection and translation of Cambodian folklore in The Friends Who Tried to Empty the Sea do for the most part correspond with Dunlop’s analysis. Many of the tales are fatalistic with the central characters experiencing a loss of control over their destinies, because they have violated some part of a moral code, which in many cases leads to their deaths. However, not all of the tales presented in Chandler’s (1977b) collection (originally published between 1951 and 1974) are fatalistic. Indeed the folktales belong to two distinct narrative types. In some tales the central characters are the victims of fate, but in others the characters are tricksters and architects of their own destinies. Needless to say there is a danger of reducing complex cultural formations to a binary between ‘fatalism’ and ‘agency’.

Many of the folktales contain a moral teaching worth examining. The first tale in Chandler’s collection, from which the collection draws its name, tells of a man and his ‘virtuous obedient’ wife attempting to empty the sea. By working hard each day bucketing out the sea the couple scare the king of the fishes who eventually pays them to stop emptying the sea with gold. The man’s best friend who had a wife ‘with no virtues at all’ (1977b, p. 2) then also attempts to empty the sea but due to his wife’s laziness, their lack of discipline and then arguing with one another they do not succeed at scaring the king of the
fishes into giving them gold. They fall onto the beach after ripping each other’s clothes in argument and say, ‘We’ve always been slaves…And we always will be. Let’s stop this scooping’ (1977b, p. 3). The fish then leapt out of the water and laughed at the couple. The tale ends with one couple accepting their fate that they will ‘always be slaves’. Their fate is morally justified in the folktale because of their laziness, lack of discipline and the man’s ‘disobedient’ wife who questions and argues with him instead of remaining silent. Working hard and being obedient in this Cambodian story is morally virtuous. But neither couple had any control over the wealth or poverty that they received. The gold was gifted to one couple for being virtuous, not for actually standing any chance of emptying the sea. Dunlop argues Cambodian people tend to view themselves as having no control over what happens to them and states ‘belief in a preordained life, where an individual is powerless to act, is deeply rooted’ (2005, p. 286). It is arguable that older Cambodian cultural texts influenced moral life during the Pol Pot regime, but of course it is impossible to posit a causal relationship between cultural texts, moral justification and the actual killing of people.

In regard to the men who carried out the killing in Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags Todorov points out that

The predominant type was a different sort altogether: a conformist, willing to serve whoever wielded power and more concerned with his own welfare than with the triumph of doctrine. Up and down the ladder of power, one finds only ‘pragmatists’ and cynics. For such men, especially after they seize power, ideology (although not irrelevant) is a pretext rather than a motive (1996, pp. 123-4).

Was the killing by Cambodians shaped by an impulse of conformity? That is if the killings were already being carried out, did those who killed conform to the situation they were placed in when they received orders? The killing was at least somewhat informed by conformity of the killers in their willingness to serve those more powerful than themselves. Hinton (2005) points out that Cambodia has a history client-patron relationships that fit with the notion of the killers obediently ‘conforming’ to the wishes of those deemed more powerful than themselves.
Bo remembered that they were told ‘now we have to be equal’. In this way ‘old people’ were equally prompted to act upon making them equal, as much as such statements were directed at the ‘new people’ from the cities. It also indicates the view that the ‘old people’ felt themselves to be unequal prior to 1975. Therefore it is arguable that those who killed in Cambodian 1975-1978 most likely felt that their actions were morally justified. They were not killing one of their own. They were killing someone constituted either as less moral than themselves or perhaps even less human. The ‘new people’ were seen as people who had ‘enough money for easy living’, who ‘do nothing’ hence were ‘lazy’ and ‘used to a life of comfort’, whereas the ‘old people’ and Khmer Rouge could view themselves as ‘hardworking’ peasants. Vickery argues that the rural dwellers resented the city dwellers prior to 1975 and this resentment often became hostility (1999, pp. 1-4). It seems then the language was used to constitute the ‘new people’ as human subjects who were more morally deserving of death than the ‘old people’, or at least less deserving of life than the morally righteous peasants. Cambodians interviewed after the collapse of the regime recalled that it was often said of the ‘new people’ that ‘sparing them’s no profit; losing them’s no loss’ (Chandler 1990, p. 167) or ‘To keep you is no gain; to destroy you is no loss’ (Hinton 1998a, p. 366). Once again this observation does not explain why or how the Khmer Rouge killed.

Returning to a particular Cambodian concept of revenge called *Kum* may offer some understanding of the killing carried out by the Khmer Rouge. Haing Ngor states

*Kum* is a Cambodian word for a particularly Cambodian mentality of revenge – to be precise, a long standing grudge leading to revenge much more damaging than the original injury. If I hit you with my fist and you wait five years and then shoot me in the back one dark night, that is *kum* (1988, p. 9).

Many have argued that revenge is a powerful motivating force behind collective violence which is quite often entwined with ideas of justice (Hinton 1998a, 2005; Jacoby 1983; Kalyvas 2006; Sievers and Mersky 2006; Tabbara 1979). The Khmer Rouge could understand the killings as morally justified revenge for past wrongs (Hinton 2002, p. 269). In this way the Khmer Rouge could perhaps see themselves as enacting or giving effect to ‘justice’ when they killed. In this way the killers could re-constitute the wrong of killing as
When it came to killing people the Khmer Rouge referred to them as ‘enemies’ or *kmang*, according to Maly, who had to be ‘destroyed’. In the eyes of the Khmer Rouge they were then killing morally deserving ‘enemies’. Thus what they were doing could be seen in their own eyes as a good, both in terms of justice for past wrongs and in terms of furthering the revolutionary project. For the Khmer Rouge it is possible that they viewed themselves as heroes, doing hard work, making hard decisions, which included ‘destroying enemies’.

By itself language is not enough to bring someone to kill unless that vocabulary also serves as a conduit or medium for a moral code that allows a person to view their actions as a good. Our language use can create a distance between the killer and the person they kill by constituting the victim as less than human, or as Maly said, a person whose ‘life is worth less than an animal’. The Khmer Rouge killers were possibly able to do both. The killing of the ‘new people’ from the cities could be morally justified and starving skinny people dressed uniformly in black could be seen as less than human. This moral viewpoint combined with a culturally embedded obedience to authority meant that the Khmer Rouge were able to act upon orders from above and kill. Perhaps the Khmer Rouge were also able to treat their actions as not merely moral, but also heroic.

Jack Katz (1988) suggests that when a person engages in some kind of violent action they must ‘pacify’ their subjectivities. Katz points to a shift that occurs in a person’s being and understanding of ‘who’ they are, which he says occurs as a sort of transformation. The Khmer Rouge’s attempt at pacifying their subjectivities, hence bypassing the pre-existing social moral order, was signified by them taking on *noms de guerre*, such as Saloth Sar taking the name ‘Pol Pot’ and his chief executioner taking the name of ‘Comrade Duch’. The killers shifted their sense of being by re-naming themselves, much in the same way the gang members Katz (1988) interviewed positioned themselves and become ‘bad-asses’. In this regard the personal narratives that the killers had about themselves perhaps merged with the kind of person they now saw themselves to be.

Cambodians view themselves as being in a ‘hot state’ when angered, which they can chose to either dissipate or decide to continue as a form of revenge or grudge (*Kum*). Hinton claims that those Cambodians who engage in *Kum* come to see themselves as being caught
in a state of malice between themselves and their victims (2005, p. 68) and that to avoid further retaliation a person must ‘completely defeat the enemy’ (2005, p. 69). Hinton describes such revenge as ‘disproportionate’ and as ‘a head for an eye’ (1998a, p. 353). The fear of retaliation supports Collins’ (2008) view that violence is often done in a fearful state. The total destruction of an ‘enemy’ might be one way Cambodian killers were able to shift beyond a fearful state. However for Katz (1988), Kum would perhaps to be a way for a person to pacify their subjectivities and shift into an enraged state. According to Katz (1988) an enraged state combined with moral righteousness allows the exercise of violence in some instances. He states that one feature of some killing ‘is its character as a self righteous act undertaken within the form of defending communal values’ (Katz 1988, p. 18). Violence can have a moral dimension of upholding the good from the perspective of the killers. But for Katz such self-righteous violence is usually performed spontaneously, rather than being premeditated. Moreover, killing in a state of rage for Katz is a shift that occurs from humiliation, where rage has the capacity to smoothly transform humiliation (1988, p. 23). In the case of the Khmer Rouge killers this enraged state could have potentially come from a feeling of class humiliation and from the humiliation that they suffered during the civil war against the US bombing. In the case of Bo and Kien’s stories about Kien’s work team being killed for laughing it seems possible that the Khmer Rouge took offence at being laughed at by the ‘new people’ and felt humiliated before they killed. Katz also claims that both rage and humiliation as emotions are beyond the control of those who experience them (1988, p. 24), although humiliation can be long lasting ‘while rage searches for a target to extinguish itself…In emotional logic, rage has already found its perfect target in humiliation’ (Katz 1988, p. 29). The jealousy or envy of the rural dwellers towards the well off city dwellers may have been one outward sign or expression of the humiliation of peasant poverty. However when coupled with institutional support by the Khmer Rouge as moral righteousness to act against the ‘lazy’ city dwellers, perhaps humiliation could then be shifted to an enraged hate-filled state capable of killing. This is not to diminish the moral accountability of those who killed but an attempt to respond to the question of how were the Khmer Rouge able to bring themselves to kill?

It is clear that Cambodian people experienced terror, desensitisation, silence, and chaos as the Pol Pot regime unleashed seemingly arbitrary death and violence. The effects of the experiences of the Pol Pot regime varied greatly between individuals but were universally
traumatic. The ambiguities in Cambodian narratives about violence have been highlighted in this chapter. From these experiences I have argued that the violence might be better understood not simply as a product of ideology, but as being shaped by a range of social circumstances and imperatives. These social circumstances include the enjoyment of power by the killers, a long standing resentment between rural and urban dwellers, dehumanisation of the killer’s victims from the bodily effects of starvation, the use of language to distance the killers from those they killed, dehumanization through removing individuality through black uniforms and unvarying haircuts, the experience of deindividuation through a sudden experience of anonymity, plus moral justification that was supported by various cultural texts such as Kum, as well as the institutional power of Khmer Rouge rhetoric that devalued the worth of the ‘new people’, all contributed to enabling the killings to take place. Next I turn to the experiences of those who escaped Cambodia and became refugees. I describe some of the reasons they gave for leaving, the risks they were willing to take to escape and their experiences within the archipelago of refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border.
Chapter 4: Leaving Cambodia – Becoming a Refugee 1975-1991

My good memory [is] always when I was in Khao-I-Dang, because it was full of sadness – full of happiness. Full of sadness, it was worse than you can imagine. Full of happiness when I was told, ‘Your application to come to Australia is accepted.’ We just waited for that day for years. It was like you are in middle of ocean by yourself, you can’t see anything except the water and the sky, and suddenly after you waited and waited there is a plane [that] comes and picks you up. That is, I would say, the most happiness in my life. I arrived in Australia on the 13th of April 1987. – Lackanary

Crossing the border and becoming a refugee was an important life experience for the people who told me their stories. People told of how they risked their lives in becoming refugees to come to Australia. In this chapter I focus on the experiences of people who left Cambodia to become refugees in Thailand. Here I address a number of important questions about the Cambodian experience of becoming a refugee. Why did people leave Cambodia? What obstacles did they face and what risks did they take when they escaped? What was life like in the refugee camps? And how did the experience of leaving Cambodia and becoming a refugee shape Cambodian identity?

There is less written about Cambodian people’s experiences of leaving Cambodia and their life in the refugee camps than what has been written about people’s experiences during the Pol Pot regime. There are some who have written about the experiences of the refugee camps and crossing the border. Sucheng Chan (2004) describes the experiences of becoming a refugee as part of her study of the experiences of resettlement of Cambodian refugees in the United States. Chan’s focus, however, is on how events in Thailand, Cambodia and the United States led towards Cambodian refugees coming to the United States. Nancy Smith-Hefner (1999) very briefly describes the events that led to people leaving Cambodia to become a refugee and her focus is upon the experiences of resettlement by Khmers in the United States of America. The CCSDPT Handbook
Preparing to Escape

After telling me about their experiences of life during the Pol Pot regime, the people I spoke with told me about their lives after the Vietnamese invasion in 1978. Kiernan claims that the Khmer Rouge initiated the conflict by killing hundreds of people in Vietnamese villages along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border in mid-1977 (1997, p. 360). Kiernan (1997) argues that the years of 1977 and 1978 saw the Khmer Rouge shift from killing people who were seen as ‘internal dissidents’ to killing ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, ‘new people’ and Chams. Kiernan suggests that the intention of the Pol Pot regime was to eliminate all people from the eastern region of Cambodia as those people were seen as ‘tainted’ by their proximity to Vietnam (1997, pp. 408-13). In 1977 Lackanary told of...
being conscripted as a ‘stretcher-bearer’ and carrying wounded away from battles against the Vietnamese, before he was eventually captured and taken into Vietnam where he then lived for a period of time with another four hundred thousand Cambodian refugees (Kiernan 1997). Maly told how he decided to cross to the other side of a highway where the Vietnamese forces were. He said

It’s true – the Vietnamese – they are a different nation, but Pol Pot – Khmer Rouge they only kill us. Doesn’t matter if we go to the Vietnamese and they kill us at least we make a decision to go. Instead of staying with Khmer Rouge, we been with them three years and always suffering, so we decide to stay with the Vietnamese, nothing worse than Khmer Rouge, so we escape to the Vietnamese side, to the highway.

The suffering that people experienced during the Pol Pot years no doubt made them want to escape from the Khmer Rouge at any cost. But Maly also said he did not trust in the Vietnamese. He saw his distrust stemming from age-old aggression between the Vietnamese and Khmer empires and told a story about Vietnamese soldiers burying three Cambodians up to their necks, lighting a fire in the middle, and using their heads to support a cooking pot. His use of this story signified the way that many Cambodians saw the Vietnamese army as being a threat towards their personal safety by virtue of the fact they were Vietnamese. The invasion may have freed people, who likely would have died if the Pol Pot regime continued, but the Vietnamese were also seen as possible violent oppressors driven by age-old animosity. Cambodians viewed the Vietnamese with trepidation.

There were a number of reasons given for leaving Cambodia. Each person said that the poor conditions of life in the country and the presence of the Vietnamese armed forces influenced their decision to leave. Kim was living in Battambang, in the north of Cambodia, after the Vietnamese invasion. He said the following about his reasons to leave

There were a few reasons why I decided to go to Thailand. At this stage Vietnam had invaded-liberated Cambodia by January 7th 1979. Cambodia at that time still just was really completely nothing – everything destroyed – really bad situation at that time. Plus after the Vietnamese invasion we don’t see anything different at all – it’s all still the same, not like nowadays. People said in 1980 ‘There is a camp in Thailand called Khao-I-Dang and you can live there, United Nations provide us food to eat, so you don’t have to worry if you have
food to eat there. You can learn English. You can apply to go to a third country.’ I thought ‘This is my choice now. If I live in Cambodia I haven’t got any business, I just could earn [enough] for living for one day...if I can even do that, maybe earn for one day – can’t even live for one day!’ So that’s why I thought there’s no future in Cambodia for me then. I decided to try to come to the camp. Adventure...to see if it is any better... Just to try. If not better at least I try.

Earning only enough to live from one day to the next Kim could not imagine a future life for himself in Cambodia after the collapse of the Pol Pot regime. Despite the relative freedom he experienced after the Vietnamese invasion he saw life as ‘still the same’ as before. The people travelling back and forth from the border, as well as radio broadcasts, brought news of opportunities in the refugee camps in Thailand. Kim also gave an impression that going to the refugee camps was somewhat of an ‘adventure’ for him as a young man in his twenties without a wife or children to look after.

People had also begun trading in Phnom Penh as well as along the Thai-Cambodian border and some storytellers were relatively successful at trading, like Maly, Kien and Phuoc. Bo recalled her fascination with marketplaces during this time and said she would become lost wandering through them as she was caught up in the swirl of passers by. Others like Chhon worked with the Vietnamese military as interpreters for a time. Lackanary worked in a warehouse distributing goods under the direction of the Vietnamese government authorities. Lackanary said he had ‘a good job’ for some time and he left Cambodia later than other narrators in 1983. Significantly, part of the trading that people undertook was in preparation for their escape to Thailand. For people not located near the Thai border they also had to travel northwest towards the border. Kien told the following story about her family’s actions after the invasion and the preparations they made to leave Cambodia. She said

The first day we heard the gun and the rocket and war is very strong. At night time we hear that and next...morning we saw a lot of people from Phnom Penh pass the place I live, maybe to Thai border. But I stay with Pol Pot longer...I escape from Pol Pot in February, because Vietnamese come there late... In ‘79 Vietnam comes and Pol Pot runs away and we walk to Phnom Penh. A lot of people walked to Phnom Penh. People can go anywhere they want when Vietnam come... During that time...we collect some rice...my children come to
see me and we come to outskirts of Kompong Speu together… We got the cart that uses the cow…and we put our rice in the cart. My older son controls the cart and the two cow and we all walk, because we thought we keep the cow good…We did not go inside the town, but around the town. I think no people in town only maybe Vietnam army and the government army as well – Hun Sen forces. Stay there for a month.

Then we move to about ten kilometres from the airport. We stay there nearly one year and one relative ask ‘You want to escape to Thailand?’ We want to escape to Thailand, because all my relatives…live in France. They escape before me…So I say ‘Okay go.’ …We stayed next to the airport for a year because we don’t know where to go. We live where we want [and] move in to empty house. Not strange living in someone else’s house because we used to live in the bush and live like animal…during that time we do what we want, so my older son go to collect rice from [what is] left. We saw where they got rice and we took it…but not enough meat, only rice. Vegetable alright, because we know which vegetable [we] can eat and we pick it.

We worry because the Vietnamese communist too during that time, we worry maybe happen like Pol Pot again, so we find way to run and we run. Vietnamese communists rescue us, but still communists…we still fear them because all communist [although] the way they rule people is better… Then we run to Thai border… The first time I come by truck and about fifty kilometres from Phnom Penh the truck stop we hop off the truck to find something to eat and my daughter, Bo, she walks off! I lost her! Bo missing when time to continue, I cannot find her, so I take everything off the truck and then I looking for her and come back to Phnom Penh. The second time I come by train and sit on the top, because inside the train is full, to Battambang. We get off there and we meet one friend from my parent’s town and I stay with her for a few nights and then we continue to town called Sway Sisophon, near border of Thai by motorbike. We sit on the motorbike with the trolley out the back and we stay in Sway Sisophon about a week. Because we want to know the news from the border how it looks there and what is going on because a lot of fighting! During that time Vietnamese and Hun Sen fight with the liberation rebels…called Khmer Srei…Pol Pot fights too…sometimes they fight in the Thai border…We must listen to news [of] what’s going on there…

Kien’s family immediately collected rice after the Vietnamese invasion, which meant they had both food to eat and something to trade. Once in Phnom Penh her son went to gather rice from outside of the city, and the impression she gives is that there was something of a
free for all after the invasion and people took what they wanted. The trade of rice was necessary as it gave her family resources that could be later used in getting through to the refugee camps. Her husband and son also collected empty artillery shells from battlefields that they sold back to the Vietnamese army. While she claimed there was enough rice Kien also pointed out that there were not many other sources of food. Life in Cambodia, although better than during the Pol Pot years, was still difficult for her family between 1979 and 1980. When making the decision to leave Cambodia she said that knowing they had relatives in France influenced their decision.

Kien’s two attempts to travel to the border indicated the part of the difficulty of organizing transport to the border and the finality of their decision to leave Cambodia. Once near the border they had to wait and listen for news about the fighting before they made the hazardous crossing. Being informed of what was going on along the border was of vital importance to refugees. In this regard communications between people along the border played a large part in the spread of information. It also appears that it was hard to assess the potential dangers that were likely to be encountered as they fled Cambodia, as information was difficult to obtain and some of it was as likely to be rumour or speculation as accurate information. However, despite the stories about the dangers involved in escaping, these Cambodians recalled that they had decided to go anyway. A friend of Kien’s in Battambang who was forced back into Cambodia via the minefields by the Thai military warned Kien not to attempt to get to the refugee camps in Thailand, but Kien said

If you listen too much you cannot come. And I decide to come. I listen but still decide, because I sold everything.

Her point was that despite having been warned of the dangers, once she had made her decision to leave it was final. Information on the border about the fighting was important to people trying to escape, but it also had other effects. According to Kien when a person listened ‘too much’ to the stories at the border they might become too scared to attempt to leave. Kien’s courage and determination were evident when she said that she listened to stories about the dangers but still decided to leave Cambodia. She added that since she had also sold everything at that stage, she had nothing left in Cambodia to keep her.
Some Cambodian people crossed into Vietnam just before the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975. In other cases they had ended up in Vietnam after the conflict on the eastern border after 1977. Kheng’s story was different in that her family had entered Vietnam just before the Khmer Rouge takeover.

Up until 1978 we were living and working in Vietnam, firstly in the town of Tay Ninh near the Cambodian border, then within the city of Saigon. In 1978-1979 many Cambodians entered Vietnam. In the meantime in Vietnam – because the Vietnamese government actually liberate Cambodia already – they round all the Cambodian up. There was an influx of Cambodian people in Vietnam in 1979-’78. So they round us up to put in a camp they call the camp Song-Be…because they want to show the international governments or the Red Cross…they got refugee in the country! So, the International Red Cross and the UN had to give them food relief, because they have a lot of people to feed. So the house that we bought to live in, the flat that we lived, they just took over the flat. They round us up and put in camp and then flat become theirs… They round us up at night! Forced removal! The Vietnamese knew how many Cambodian people lived in the flats in Saigon, as they lived in the city of Saigon from 1977. So they know…where we bought the house to live. Canned food and things like that they give us, however, much that is left over from whatever the Vietnamese government took out. Before we had been captured by the Vietnamese, my dad already took one of my sisters and two of my brother…through Cambodia to go to Thailand. So there is only my third sister and one brother and me because my other brother ran away to Cambodia to go to Thailand himself, because he couldn’t wait anymore. At the time my grandfather was sick in Cambodia, so my mum went to see her father, so there was only my dad, myself, my brother and my sister left in Vietnam. When they come during the middle of the night nobody know, so my dad – in that time it was flats – went down the drain pipe along the house, like you see in James Bond movie that sort of thing. So he climbed down the pipe to run away from the Vietnamese men with guns. The Vietnamese men with guns took me and her older brother and sister to the refugee camp called Song Be. My mum was in Cambodia visiting her parents, so only my two older siblings and I were in Song-Be refugee camp. I was seven years old then. My mum’s journey back to Cambodia would also be the last time she would see my grandfather alive. My dad knows that if he is out he can help us. If he comes with us he can’t do anything. So he arranged for people to take us out of the camp and he had to bribe people to take us out of the camp. When they round us up: they don’t give us anything, they just take everything. Lost and lost and lost. So many time.
That’s what we had to do. There is no choice. So we were rounded up and put in refugee camp.

Kheng’s Chinese-Cambodian middle class family left their house in Kompong Cham behind when they fled before the Khmer Rouge takeover. They had then saved and bought a flat in Saigon and had already resettled in Vietnam before the collapse of the Pol Pot regime. When the Vietnamese government acted to force all the Cambodian refugees into Song-Be refugee camp Kheng’s family, unlike many other Cambodians in Vietnam, were forced to become refugees after they had already resettled. For instance, Kheng was going to school and had learnt to speak Vietnamese. Furthermore, while other narrators who had survived the Pol Pot regime understood leaving Cambodia as their ‘choice,’ Kheng stated that ‘There is no choice.’ So while some Cambodian refugees saw their decisions after the collapse of the regime influencing the course their lives took next, others like Kheng understood themselves as powerless in the process of becoming a refugee.

Many Cambodians fled into Thailand and Vietnam between 1975 and 1979. Between 34,000 and 35,000 fled to Thailand (Chan 2004, p. 39; Mortland 1996, p. 238) and 150,000 fled to Vietnam in 1975 (Mortland 1996, p. 238) just before the April 17th takeover by the Khmer Rouge. After the Vietnamese invasion and the collapse of the Pol Pot significant numbers fled to the Thai border. These figures are difficult to accurately gauge. According to some 600,000 fled to the Thai border in the months following the invasion (Ebihara 1985 p. 133-4 cited in Smith-Hefner 1999, p. 6). Others favour smaller figures of 100,000 moving towards the border after the Vietnamese invasion between December 1978 and early 1979 (Mortland 1996, p. 238). Mortland suggests in the early months of 1980 after the United Nations built a ‘land bridge’ between Cambodia and Thailand, refugee numbers on the border then increased to perhaps 1 million (1996, p. 239).

However, Vickery (1990) claims far less Cambodians flocked to the border after the Vietnamese invasion. According to Vickery at most there were 200,000 refugees in the camps in mid-1980 along the Thai-Cambodian border (1990, p. 295). He argues that the refugee ‘problem’ was created by Thailand, building camps and then advertising the existence of the camps on the ‘Voice of America’ radio. Vickery suggests that while those running the camps may have had ‘humanitarian motives’ (1990, p. 295) there were political
reasons for the existence of the ‘Volag archipelago’ and once a person had entered the camps they were ‘no longer a free agent’ (1990, p. 296). Vickery points out that the movement of refugees was very profitable for some and millions of dollars per day (30-40 million Thai baht) was deposited in Thai banks on the border from the black market (1990, p. 294). He also argues that the Thai policy towards refugees changed over time and suggests that in June 1979 when the Thai government sent 42,000 refugees back into Cambodia they selected only those who were opposed to the Khmer Rouge and left 40,000 Khmer Rouge on the border (Vickery 1990, pp. 303-4). Vickery suggests that the Thai government then changed its stance after 1979 and sought to attract a sizeable proportion of the Cambodian population to Khao-I-Dang refugee camp as to give them greater sway over the Vietnamese administration in Phnom Penh (1990, p. 306). Vickery points out far less people arrived in Khao-I-Dang than expected. According to Vickery some had suggested that up to a million people, or a quarter of the estimated Cambodian population, might arrive in Thailand (1990, p. 307). Vickery contends that both the building of Khao-I-Dang and this overstatement of the numbers waiting on the border was a political manoeuvre by the Thai government to give them a political advantage to ‘influence future developments within Cambodia’ (1990, pp. 306-7). He points out that after only 110,000 arrived by January 24 1980, the Thai government ordered Khao-I-Dang closed to further entry (Vickery 1990, p. 308).

It is difficult to generalise about a process as large, complex and varied as the process whereby hundreds of thousands of Cambodians became refugees. The sheer number of impulses, the diversity of circumstances and the number of ways by which Cambodians became refugees militates against easy generalisations. But what frequently comes out of the stories that Cambodians have to tell is the scale of difficulty, which called for extraordinary resilience, courage and fortitude. The experiences of those Cambodians who survived both the Pol Pot years and the no-less scarifying refugee exodus is a valuable reminder of what ordinary people are capable of when facing extraordinary challenges. This is made clear when the difficulties and hazards faced by Cambodians who crossed the Thai border are considered.
Robbers, Minefields and the Thai Military: Crossing the Border

Cambodian people dared to hope that they might be successful in their attempt to leave the country. But they faced overwhelming difficulties on the Thai border. Robbers, Khmer Rouge, the nationalist resistance fighters and the Thai military operated along the Thai-Cambodian border. It was dangerous to travel from Cambodia into Thailand, because of the chance of being robbed, raped or killed by one of these groups. Chhon described the border region in the following way and said

It’s fierce place. Lot of what we call ‘robber’ – Jow in Cambodian. Jow just take your stuff and you had to be killed... Ex-Khmer Rouge came from those people and some of them from the paramilitary they call ‘Son San’ people. Because they have no food, not enough things to provide for their families, they just do that. I feel the reason that they kill people because they do not want those people to take revenge on them.

He added that ‘I did not see the robbers – it was good for me’ when he crossed the border. Failure to get safely to a refugee camp was a well known problem for all Cambodians. Crossing the border was a risk as people were often subjected to violent assaults, robbery and rape. Kim remembered his experiences of crossing the border

There were two guides, my brother, other friends and me. When we decide to go we decided to go with more than ten people, a small group of fifteen or sixteen people. For men like me it is not scary to walk through the jungle at night after what I have been through. But for girl – a young girl – teenager girl, that’s scary because there were sometimes robbers. Thai robbers if they catch you they try to take any money and anything else you have from you. Plus if they catch the young girl they would rape her. They have guns and you can’t do nothing. If you have a girl in the family they take the girl from you. They take one of you family members. You can’t do nothing then how you feel? That make people worried.

Kim’s story suggests that crossing the border was terrifying for women because of the chance of being raped. He pointed out that accompanying family members would be unable to stop the robbers from doing this. It is possible that the stories of rape deterred women from escaping Cambodia. It was also not in the Thai government’s interest to curb the activities of the robbers as they provided a deterrent to Cambodian refugees crossing
into Thailand. Preying upon the stream of refugees from Cambodia also nourished the various armed oppositional groups in the border region (Vickery 1990, p. 294). The refugees crossing the border were not entirely helpless victims though. Kien spoke about being robbed and being searched for valuables by a group of ‘rebels’ that they stayed with. However, she said was hiding gold and money ‘up the bottom,’ which she says was a very common thing to do to make sure that you did not lose all your valuables.

Chhon first went through several smaller border camps before making his way to the much larger Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, before arriving at Chon Buri which is closer to Bangkok. In this respect the camps formed a sort of archipelago that refugees moved towards and through with the hope of making it to a third country. Chhon said that

I was in Nong Chan camp during that night. I went to beg a meal from a couple who live there. They used to cook dried fish from the UN brogue. They roast that dried fish and I ask him for food and he says, ‘I ask my wife first.’

His wife said ‘Just give it to him.’ Then I joined with them for dinner and then I had no place to sleep, so I ask them ‘Could I sleep close to your place here?’ It been raining all night and he said ‘Yes.’ Because they got ox to carry a cart they need to make a fire. It good for ox to sleep, otherwise it’s going to be bit cold. The smoke keeps away some of the mosquitos. I slept there and I woke up early in the morning...I asked the couple ‘Could you point to me where Rithy-Sein camp is?’

They point ‘Go through there and just keep [going] straight.’

Then I go through jungle. Only one person can get through the pathway. I was scared. Then another woman with her son came after me and I walk with them. I reach Rithy-Sein and then I ask for my friend’s neighbour. His neighbour is a bit famous in the camp and he just points the place to meet... I remember I hurt my foot walking through the jungle. I never walk like this in my life, a long, long way and because I while I walking a lot of people [were] walking very fast, scared of we call ‘wild animal,’ and some people ask ‘Give me the money!’ If not they kill. I did not see the robbers it was good for me...

My friend called Vorn...when I reach there about half-past eleven in the morning they provide me with...three or four kinds of food...and I ate a lot because I was really hungry
and I didn’t eat enough, rice, fish, chicken, beef… [In] April 1980 I left Rithy-Sein to camp in Thailand. First I stayed in the border camp between Thailand and Cambodia. I go down south, because they got Pol Pot camps and liberation front…Sihanouk and another person we call ‘Son San’… I live there until the end of ‘82… I got enough food to eat during that time because I know some…friend at the camp. The reason I have not got the dictionary that I refreshed my English from is because that chief of the camp wanted to learn English and I just give it to him…to make him happy. It’s very hard because we live in the forest and they have no law, they can do everything in the camp. He will not kill. He wouldn’t kill me, but just to please him. He said he would ‘just like to borrow.’ I said, ‘Please just take it’.

Khao-I-Dang in 1983…the 22nd of October…and I stayed there about five months [before] I got allowed to go to Chon Buri. During that time it was okay, but after I left, about two months, a lot of things getting worse like a lot of robbery. The Rithy-Sein camp, [where] I used to stay, Vietnamese troop invaded and destroyed the camp. No more camp after that. The Vietnamese destroyed the whole town…They shelled the camp, and they killed a lot of people, injured a lot of people as well, they brought these people to Khao-I-Dang camp during that time I was in Khao-I-Dang.

In Nong Chan refugee camp two strangers gave Chhon some food and a place to stay for the night. Despite the harshness of life on the border it appears that people were still willing to help others. The paradoxes of ‘the border’ as a place juxtaposed kindness alongside extreme acts of violence. It is also apparent that those who ‘protected’ the refugees in the non-UN run camps lorded it over others as Chhon gave the ‘chief’ of one camp his precious English dictionary to please him. Chan describes such men as ‘warlords’ in her description of camp life (2004, p. 57). Chhon described the absolute power that these individuals had in the camps and said, ‘It is very hard because we live in the forest and they have no law, they can do everything in the camp.’ Chhon was not certain that the ‘chief’ would not kill people in the camp when he claimed, ‘He will not kill’ and then rephrased this statement and said, ‘He wouldn’t kill me.’ Chhon gave a sense that the situation in that camp was unpredictable. The border regions were places that saw a disengagement of social rules and represent an instance of a ‘moral holiday.’ Collins explains that a ‘moral holiday’ occurs when ‘There is a temporary breakdown in normal social controls; police authorities are absent, or they are actively ignored or actively disrespected by the crowd’ (2008, p. 243). Collins adds that
A moral holiday comprises a free zone in time and space, an occasion and a place where the feeling prevails that everyday restraints are off; individuals feel protected by the crowd, and are encouraged in normally forbidden acts. Often there is an atmosphere of celebration, or at least exhilaration; it is a heady feeling of entering a special reality, separate and extraordinary, where there is little thought for the future and no concern for being called to account (2008, p. 243).

The stories Cambodians told about the border regions do seem to fit this conception of a ‘moral holiday. For instance Chhon referred to the border region as being ‘a fierce place.’ This may indicate that the experience of entering the border region was akin to entering a ‘special reality’ as Collins suggests. Widespread robbery and the breaking of Buddhist sexual mores as large numbers of men raped women also fits with the collective character of a ‘moral holiday.’

Robbery by the jow made people seek the assistance of guides to take them through the border. To make their escape Kien and her family hired a guide to escort them to a refugee camp in 1980. Kien remembered the following about travelling to Khao-I-Dang refugee camp.

We got the guide and we walk carefully – everywhere the mine – [through] the jungle. But during that time I don’t know what is ‘scared’. We stay in the border with the fighters who fight against the Vietnamese army for [a] few days… Thai soldiers guard the camp. Not allowed to go freely into the camp because they don’t want anymore refugee let in. The guide takes me and my husband there at night-time. We left the fighter camp at night-time and I remember we pay the guide 100 baht per person. The guide tells us ‘When you see my hand like this you must lie down! Don’t let the Thai soldiers see us!’ Before we left the camp the fighters check along the seams of [our] clothes. They say they check for bullet [that] maybe we hide somewhere, but they try to find gold! A lot of people hide necklace of gold around the shirt collar seam. I hide gold before we left Cambodia up the bottom. Khao-I-Dang, during that time, [had] no fence yet. We run, run and lie down – run, run and lie down. My husband carried the younger one in the back and I remember when he lie [down] some sharp spike poked my son. He wanted to scream, but he didn’t, as the soldiers would have heard. Very, very painful, he cry, but no noise. I arrive in camp in March 1980.
The escape to refugee camps in Thailand was a terrifying experience because of the dangers of the journey. Yet Kien also said that she no longer knew what being ‘scared’ was. Arguably some level of desensitization may have occurred after the experience of the Pol Pot regime, which perhaps made crossing the border less terrifying. Equally some attempts to cross the border were incredibly horrific experiences for Cambodians as Maly’s story attests.

After crossing the Thai border Maly, his sister, his cousin and the other refugees they were travelling with were robbed at gunpoint. Then they were rounded up by the Thai military and placed on trucks and taken to a refugee camp. To the horror of the refugees on board, however, they discovered that the Khmer Rouge ran the refugee camp where they had been taken. The refugees, despite being terribly frightened of the Khmer Rouge, refused to go to the camp with them and ran away. Maly said this was a Khmer Rouge stronghold called Phnom Chum. The refugees were likely deposited at Phnom Chum because of the Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanand’s deal with the Chinese communists that allowed Khmer Rouge military bases on Thai soil in an attempt by the government to create a buffer zone between Thailand and the Vietnamese military using the Cambodian communists (Chan 2004, pp. 41-2). Maly said the Thai soldiers ‘made a deal with Khmer Rouge’ then began to fire their guns in the air, which caused the refugees to disperse into the surrounding forest. The refugees then stumbled across a Thai village where they were searched and robbed once more, this time by the Thai villagers. Then they walked down a dirt road and came to another village where Maly said that they were robbed yet again. However, they were able to stay at the village leader’s house for a week. Maly recalled

There were some Chinese people who live in Thailand who are the same as us…they took pity on us and they gave us free food and medicine…and we could stay there at least a week.

The refugees did experience help from strangers at various points on their journey to a third country. If not for the kindness of strangers their journey may have been impossible. In the continuation of his attempt to leave Cambodia Maly and his family members were then taken from this village to a Buddhist temple where a thousand other refugees were staying in crowded conditions. They stayed there for a number of weeks before the Thai military moved them once more.
In June 1979 many refugees were placed on buses, taken north, and forced back into Cambodia. Maly’s following story of his experience of the minefields provides a detailed account of the results of the actions that the Thai government initiated to deter refugees.

Then one day the Thai soldier came and told us that they are going to take us away [to] a ‘third country,’ and we believe them. Some of the people did not believe…Some refuse to go. They had a lot of buses coming to pick us up. I don’t know how many buses in that convoy. In that place probably…a few thousand people. Thousands go through the Dong Raik Mountain… There are many places where refugees stay, but they organize the same exact time, the same date to take those people on that same trip. We got on the bus. We could not refuse, they hit us, [and] they force us on the bus… We get ready in the morning but the bus actually left that place in the afternoon, probably about one o’clock. We did not know where they were taking us.

Then it was the longest trip throughout the night. Where they pick us up (from) and where they drop us off were hundreds of kilometres apart. On the way the bus stops… We are not allowed to get off the bus. My sister was very sick and she had a baby with her on the bus. She wanted to use the toilet and she has to use the toilet from the bus by using a plastic bag. We had many stops and a lot of Thai people carry food and water and they say, ‘Take as much as you like. It is not a short trip, it is a long trip.’

I say to them, ‘Where are they taking us to?’

They say, ‘We are not allowed to talk about it. All we can do to help you is to give you food.’

They are very generous. One lady asked my sister for her baby and said, ‘You have no future. Give me you baby. Give me you baby.’

I said to my sister ‘Come on, hand over the baby.’

She was crying and said, ‘No. No matter dead or alive I have to be with my baby.’ And she did not give them. The bus was going on and on until it would be about 7 o’clock in the
morning. It amazed me that in the jungle and there was a highway with a nice road in
Thailand…They stopped there and said, ‘Get off the bus and go that way.’

There were soldiers along the track and they had got tribal people who wore decorative
necklaces. They are like Bushmen in Cambodia living in a tribe but they have guns…They
say, ‘Never go back – if you go back you get shot.’

I thought ‘We escape from Pol Pot and the situation is not any better!’ We could see we were
on top of the mountain. We could see down the bottom thousands of people already there.
They make fire for cooking and the smoke just stays there like a cloud between the two hills.

Every few minutes we heard an explosion – the mines – because people try to cross that area
which is a minefield…It is not a nice track to travel, for sometimes we have to hand the kids
down, hold their hand, and drop them down the rock. It’s like a cliff. Why didn’t they let us
travel out on flat land? Why they drop us off there? Drop us off the cliff? I think they try to
make us die. I find it very cruel. Walking through the mountains the bomb explodes about
every five or ten minutes and you would hear an echo all over the jungle. It is really hell.
Where there is a place for you to sit down…you would not go…because you scared there
could be a bomb.

People get water from an old dry stream. We dug a hole there to get the water…and we
drained the muddy water into a bucket. When the rain comes everyone get wet, as there was
no shelter in the jungle – in hell. When the rain came and the stream starts flowing and it is
milky water with rubbish…Someone got a plastic sheet and [we] collect the rainwater from
that.

You can’t go anywhere because of the landmines. People have to walk on the same track [in]
the same footsteps. If [someone] got off the track they would step on the bomb and the bomb
would explode and would kill them [or] injure them. Then the people who were behind them
would have to find another way and avoid [where] they think the bomb might be. Hundreds
of thousands of people walk the same track. It took months to get out and people were still
coming after us. There [were] people in front of us and people behind us. On the way I
faced the [most] horrible thing. I saw a few corpses. They were staying there with a plastic
sheet as a roof. Flies buzzed around the bodies and [they] smelled! You can’t go fast. You
move a few metres at a time with your luggage. It’s really, really bad. You have to stay
there for a long time with the dead bodies on the side. It’s just horrible...
Most storytellers spoke of the possibility of being put on a bus and dumped in a minefield when crossing the border. But only Maly had direct experience with this, although Long said that his brother and sister were bussed to Phnom-Dong-Raik and dumped in the minefield at gunpoint. While Long’s sister made a second attempt the experience was terrible enough to put his brother off crossing the border again. The fact that people were willing to make a second attempt to seek refuge in Thailand after this experience indicates the poor conditions in Cambodia and people’s determination to leave the country behind.

Phnom Dong Raik was the mountainous area on the northern border of Cambodia and Thailand where a minefield had been laid through the jungle. Raik in Khmer refers to the stick used to carry two buckets of water, so Phnom Dong Raik was what Cambodians named the mountains that look like the shape of the raik carrying water. The Thai government took this action in June 1979 to deter Cambodian refugees by forcing them back into Cambodia via the minefields. Some forty-two thousand people were tricked into boarding the buses which took them there (Chan 2004, pp. 43-4). At the time Thailand was not a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (CCSDPT 1983) when the government ordered the military to carry out this atrocity, hence the Thai government constituted the Cambodian refugees as ‘illegal immigrants’ in Thailand.

Maly remembered that the Thai military authorities told the refugees they were going to be taken to a third country. The refugees were likely told this to ensure their compliance. The lie, however, seems particularly cruel, as it was one that people wanted to believe. Some people did not believe what they were told as they had heard the Thai authority had taken refugees from the encampment on the border at Aranya Prathet but they did not know where. According to Maly the exercise seemed to be well planned due to taking tens of thousands of Cambodian refugees from all over the country at the same time. This action was a premeditated military operation, not a random military act of violence carried out at a local level. This atrocity, however, did not necessarily reflect the views of the Thai population towards the Cambodian refugees, as Maly told that the local Thai population knew where the refugees were being taken and they gave those on the buses food and water in an act of kindness. Maly also remembered that one woman offered to take his sister’s baby when they had stopped. This stranger offered to save the baby as she thought the
refugees on the bus had ‘no future.’ In tears and great distress Maly recounted to me that at the time he had told to his sister to give the woman her baby but his sister refused to do so. When he remembered this event he was very upset because he felt guilty about telling his sister to give up her baby. Telling his sister to give her baby to a complete stranger made him feel bad about what this event had revealed about him and how close the situation came to his sister losing her child due to him. How could he forgive himself if he had forced his sister to give up her child to a stranger and this meant she never saw her child again?

Acts of survival cannot easily be judged outside the extreme circumstances in which they occur. On the one hand giving the stranger the baby would be a caring and morally virtuous act if it meant the child was able to live instead of dying in the minefield. On the other hand it was not known if Maly and his sister were going to live or die and forcing a mother to give up her baby seems less morally virtuous in the face of the unknown. Refugees were placed in situations where it was difficult to foresee a clear course of action.

After the refugees arrived at the top of the mountain where Thai soldiers awaited Maly remembered tribal people with necklaces and rifles working with the Thai army. The impression he gave was that these tribal people had been brought to further intimidate the refugees. The refugees were then told to walk down the mountain and were warned that if they headed back they would be shot. At this point Maly said he remembered seeing the smoke from cooking fires coming from groups of refugees further down the mountain. Maly questioned why the Thai government put the refugees there and why they did not return them to a safe point on the border or just let them pass through Thailand to another country. The actions of the Thai government seemed senseless violence to him. Returning the refugees to a safer point on the border was an option for the Thai government, but it would not have sent the same kind of message to deter other refugees from attempting to escape to Thailand. Instead the Thai government chose to indirectly kill Cambodian refugees by sending them through a minefield.

The northern mountainous region on the Thai-Cambodian border was a long way from the point at which many refugees had entered Thailand. The refugees may have been taken there so as to disorient them. It seems that the Thai government’s intent was to send a
message to the Cambodian population that if they cross the border into Thailand they will not necessarily find resettlement in another country and could die in the jungle. The journey through Phnom Dong Raik was traumatic because of the terror created by the intermittent explosions that signalled the death of another person and the rotting corpses on the trail.

Maly’s failure to escape Cambodia had such a profound effect that he was ashamed to tell people back in Cambodia what he had experienced in Phnom Dong Raik. However, after this initial failure to find a refugee camp and resettlement in a third country he crossed the border for a second time and would eventually resettlement in Australia. The act of forcing Cambodian refugees at gunpoint through the minefield in Phnom Dong Raik did not necessarily mean that survivors spread terrifying stories like Thai government may have wanted them to. Maly did not talk about his experiences to other people. Some outcomes of state violence are not predictable. Nor was such violence successful at deterring all who were sent through Phnom Dong Raik as Maly sought refuge in Thailand for a second time. Yet the horrors of Phnom Dong Raik did deter some Cambodians (Vickery 1990, pp. 303-4).

The Thai government’s response of forcing refugees back into Cambodia was only one of their many responses to Cambodian refugees. Prior to the collapse of the Pol Pot regime the Thai government had not sent back or attempted to deter refugees. From 1975 to 1977 Cambodian refugees were free to move around the country (Chan 2004, p. 40; Vickery 1990, p. 298). After 1977 the Thai government then detained an estimated 35,000 Cambodian refugees in five refugee camps (Vickery 1990, p. 298).

After Thai government’s atrocities in Phnom Dong Raik they changed their approach towards refugees in late-1979. Vickery claims that this change of approach sought to create large Cambodian refugee population that they thought would give them influence in Cambodia against the Vietnamese backed government in Phnom Penh (1990, p. 306). According to Vickery, when the desired numbers did not arrive they closed Khao-I-Dang to further entry in January 1980 (1990, p. 308). The CCSDPT (The Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand) claim that after closing entry to Khao-I-Dang the Thai government adopted a ‘humane deterrence’ programme in mid-1981.
This approach meant that services in unofficial camps were kept to a minimum and no resettlement from such camps was allowed. This was aimed at preventing what the Thai government saw as a ‘magnet effect’ of resettlement programmes (CCSDPT 1983, p. 13). For the refugees, however, ‘humane deterrence’ meant greater hardship. Chin and his wife, for example, said they did not receive enough food or water living in NW9 after 1981.

Thailand was not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (see Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2006), or ‘the 1967 Protocol which extended the scope of the original agreement’ (CCSDPT 1983, p. 22). Chan argues that this meant that the Thai government felt it could act autonomously towards refugees (2004, p. 40) and outside of United Nations guidelines (2004, p. 41). Cambodian people did not have valid passports and were classed as ‘illegal entrants’ to Thailand (CCSDPT 1983, p. 22). Therefore, in relation to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of refugees, Cambodian refugees had no protection under international law. In this regard if Thailand had been a signatory to the 1951 Convention, the atrocities that occurred in Phnom Dong Raik may not have happened.

Despite varied experiences, crossing the border was an important trial for Cambodian refugees. The people I spoke with all told me how dangerous it was. For Cambodian refugees the dangers they faced and the risks that they told of seemed to signify their determination to leave their lives in Cambodia behind. Leaving their lives behind, facing such danger, and stepping into the unknown was an act that undoubtedly took courage. Life in the camps would be another test of the courage and resilience of those who left Cambodia.

**Life in the Refugee Camps**

By 1983 there were approximately two hundred thousand people in refugee camps and official ‘holding centres’. The majority of these refugees had come from north of Aranya Prathet on the border, they were not aligned with the Khmer Rouge, and were dissatisfied with Vietnamese rule in Cambodia (CCSDPT 1983, p. 6). Between the years of 1975 and 1991 some three hundred thousand Cambodians in total passed through the camp system in
Thailand (Chan 2004, p. 79). The number of people in the camps fluctuated over the years because of ‘voluntary movement’ back to Cambodia, military actions in the border regions, and refugees resettling in the United States, France, Canada and Australia (CCSDPT 1983, p. 8). Because of the length of time that the camps were in operation it is difficult to generalize as to what life was like in the camps. There was also differences between the larger official ‘holding centres’ like Khao-I-Dang and the smaller refugee camps along the border in terms of the range of services provided to refugees (CCSDPT 1983; Chan 2004; Vickery 1990), although storytellers did not differentiate between official ‘holding centres’ and other camps them and just called them all ‘camps’.

While narrators said that crossing the border and getting into the camps was a dangerous exercise, they also said that the camps were dangerous places. Juxtaposed to the danger, the refugee camps also seemed to be places where people experienced a transformation in themselves. I begin by attempting to describe some of the violence experienced in the camp system and then go on to describe some of the other facets of camp life. In the camps there was the possibility of being robbed, beaten, shot or raped by the Thai soldiers. Some refugees in the camps also preyed upon fellow refugees. Kheng recalled that after arriving in Khao-I-Dang, her family was robbed by other refugees, who threatened to turn them in to the Thai guards if they did not hand over their valuables. She said

The Thai border was closed to refugees from Cambodia by the time my family got there early 1980. So we actually have to try and sneak in at night, when the guard wasn’t looking. We had no idea that the camp is sectioned: Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese or mix. We went in the area we don’t know whether it is Cambodian or Chinese. When we went in there they know we sneak in! When we get inside the camp we have no idea where we are. These people take us into their house and they come and demand money from us. The other refugees told my family ‘If you don’t give us the money or gold we will call the Thai guards and they will take you out!’

My dad said, ‘Look I have got absolutely nothing now to give you okay? If you want to, bring me out, as I know that I have got friends in here.’ Because my dad is quite well known by a lot of people, he went out see a few people and come back with the money for them. Then he brings us into the Cambodian-Chinese section of the camp.
Some refugees in the camp opportunistically extorted money out of Kheng’s family after they arrived in Khao-I-Dang after it had closed to new entrants in 1980. This situation was perhaps attributable to the desperate situation some refugees experienced in the camp. Her father was able to find someone willing to give him money to pay off those threatening to inform the guards and have Kheng’s family removed. This also suggests that some refugees were willing to help others.

According to Chan there were more than twenty sections in Khao-I-Dang (2004, p. 53). The camp was divided of into sections like Cambodian-Chinese or Vietnamese. In this regard the camp sections were partly based on ‘ethnic’ identities. Living in particular sections of the camp based on ‘ethnic’ identity may have meant that part of the process of becoming a refugee also meant claiming a particular ‘ethnic’ identity in the camp system. Ethnic identities in this regard are contextual and change depending on the time and place. For instance Phuoc and Kien married across culture and religion but shared the same hometown. In this regard their ‘ethnic’ identity positions as Chinese-Hainan and Khmer-Cambodian respectively were secondary to the local context that their marriage occurred within and obviously their love for one another.

Kheng could have positioned herself in the camp as being either Chinese because of her father’s heritage, Khmer from her mother’s heritage or even Vietnamese due to fluently speaking the language. But it was her father’s connections which meant they went into the Cambodian-Chinese section of the camp. Janis Fook (2001) suggests that ethnicity is emergent, contingent and situational. Living in sections of the camp based on ethnic identity may have influenced refugees to take on such ethnicities. Further, the experience of living in ‘ethnic’ camp sections may have led refugees to continue to use these concepts of identity after they left the camp system even though they might have only end up living in a particular section by chance.

Most storytellers made the journey from Cambodia to Thailand after 1978. However Long had been in the refugee camps in Thailand since 1975 when the Khmer Rouge had come to power in Cambodia. He remembered setting up a street stall with his brother, selling things and becoming friends with Thai-Chinese people living near the border and playing ping-pong at their house. During this time Long worried about his family members who were
still inside Cambodia. The news that he kept getting from escaped refugees about the Pol Pot regime while living on the Thai border was never good. He came to Melbourne in 1978, before most Cambodian refugees. Later, living in Australia, Long married a Thai-Chinese woman and reaffirmed his connection with Thailand. Long quite fondly remembers Thailand and offered a different perspective to the tales of other storytellers because of the period of time he lived there. He said the following about Thai identity.

If you are born in Thailand you are Thai, straight away. That’s why I think Thai got better control of their population, don’t have much racism because you are all Thai, so no-one to point finger to…Even though you skin is different, but you a Thai.

Long identified with both Chinese and Thai identities more strongly than a Cambodian identity. His experience of being a refugee in Thailand seems to have profoundly influenced his views. Long said the following about the Thai government’s attempt at deterrence in 1979.

I suppose it work. After a lot of people die in the mountain the message is sent across Cambodia, slow them down, otherwise maybe the whole of Cambodia come in. Definitely slow them down but can’t stop them…Thai making very bad decision, but it is very hard…if they send the some back where they come from, maybe not effective

Even though his brother was sent back to Cambodia via Phnom Dong Raik, Long saw the actions taken to deter Cambodian refugees as somewhat understandable from the Thai government’s perspective. His views of Thai national identity and the Thai government were contrary to other stories. For example, Kim thought the Thai soldiers were violent and cruel and said

After I decided to escape to Thailand we walk through the jungle at night with someone who knows how to get into the camp. We get to the camp at night…I still remember the fence and the wire, it looked like a prison. You can’t get in or out. If [we] try and get into Khao-I-Dang directly the Thai soldier would see us and they would do anything they like… They hit you. They kick you. So we crawl inside through the drains and under the fence. It dirty and stink. When we get inside of the camp we have to hide until daytime. Then we look for the people who are in charge there to register our names and say that we just arrived and so we
can have some food from the United Nations. This way you make sure that the Thai army
not catch you. Some people they get caught and they do whatever they like. The Thai army
don’t want you going in and out, but…the Thai government not lose anything by the refugees
staying there. They even make more money… The Thai government not feed us. The
United Nations feed us. The United Nations pay for anything that the Thai people deliver to
the camp – nothing for them to loose. The Thai army should not worry if we go there or not
go there – they just cruel. Their country doesn’t have war so they look to us as too low
rubbish people. They look down on you so much.

Like many Cambodians he had to sneak into Khao-I-Dang while trying to avoid members
of the Thai military who would shoot first and ask questions later. Kim recalled feeling
stigmatised as a Cambodian refugee and said that the Thai soldiers looked down on
refugees. For Cambodians, the process of becoming a refugee may have meant that they
felt like they were ‘rubbish’. Storytellers often spoke about the violence of the Thai
soldiers towards Cambodian refugees. Kim remembered

In Khao-I-Dang camp the Thai army go around at night time inside the camp and stir you up.
If they see some girl they wanted they go there and take the girl from the family at night. In
Mairut and Chon Buri they don’t do that, much more safety camp, but Khao-I-Dang is a
camp without rule – without law. Like if you were a prisoner they can do anything they
like...

For Kim Khao-I-Dang was brutal and lawless. He said that people were scared while living
in the camp that they would be taken to the Thai soldiers. He also told of women being
raped by the Thai soldiers. However, there were exceptions to the narrative of cruelty
about the Thai soldiers too. Chin experienced a small act of kindness.

Then I made it to a refugee camp called NW9. I stay there I think three or four months. This
camp very, very bad camp and very poor camp. Nothing to eat, no water, no anything. I
made friend with a Thai guard in NW9 because I can speak a bit of Thai at that stage. One
day my wife says she want a Coke. She is craving Coca-Cola [because she was pregnant]. I
told my friend the Thai guard that my wife say she want a Coke, so he got one big bottle of
Coca-Cola for her and he gave it to me. I say to him ‘I pay you.’ He says ‘No. You take,
you take. Friend.’ My son born in NW9 – very bad condition to be born in.
Chin’s account of this act of kindness and friendship from one Thai guard was the only story of its kind. It is possible that because he could speak Thai he was also not viewed in the same way as other Cambodian refugees by the Thai guards.

The violence employed by the Thai guards may have been exacerbated by almost all Cambodian refugees being classified as ‘illegal immigrants’ under Thai law. Thailand was not a signatory ‘either to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (see Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2006), or to the 1967 Protocol which extended the scope of the original agreement’ (CCSDPT 1983, p. 22). Cambodian people were considered by the Thai government as not protected under international law. The status of Cambodian refugees as ‘illegal immigrants’ may have fostered an attitude in the Thai guards that the Cambodian refugees were breaking the law in coming to the camps, so if they were found outside of the camps they were deserving of punishment.

All people talked about food in the camp and their experiences of often not having enough food even while under the care of the UN. Kim talked about the UNHCR and food and said

We say ‘We just come and would you register our name to the UNHCR, so we can have some food.’ They say ‘Okay. We will enrol you name.’ Then we have a card to say we are legal refugees. If you just got in you haven’t got that card that number…In Khao-I-Dang they give us some rice and some dried yellow peas with chicken to eat. They give us dry salted fish – in Cambodian this is called trey-pla-tu – fish almost no taste…the salt take away all the taste…but the food not really enough food to eat. Not really a big concern because from the Pol Pot regime I worked so hard all day. During Pol Pot time we have much less rice and not enough salt to eat…In Khao-I-Dang there enough rice to eat, but just not enough food…and it not have any good taste, but…at least the stomach still full… So, you don’t have good food to eat, you don’t have enough food to eat, but enough to still fill up the stomach with rice. In the camp at least they gave us enough rice to eat… Life was not bad there. I would not say that the United Nations not give enough food. They give enough rice, but just not the food you want. Not enough meat, not enough fish, not enough bread, but the rice is enough for fill up the stomach. But, nothing taste good. Then some people thought
‘Come out and get something to sell to make some more money.’ Over there when you really, really have no money, even if you make twenty cents…fifty cents you still feel that’s good… They don’t make good money…but they risk their life. They go in and out, I don’t think they’d make twenty dollar, maybe ten dollar and they risk their life… Maybe even less than ten dollars – one life just cheaper than ten dollars!

Kim did not openly criticise the United Nations, as he probably did not want to seem ungrateful to their assistance. He also pointed out however that while rice does fill the stomach it doesn’t offer much nutrition. Kim said that conditions inside Khao-I-Dang were desperate enough that Cambodian refugees left the camp to trade along the Thai-Cambodian border in an attempt to increase their resources inside the camp. He commented that people risked their lives for very little money when trading along the border. In short despite the improvement of conditions of life in some ways life in the refugee camps was still desperate. Kheng also told of a lack of food and said that instant noodles would have been ‘like abalone’ while her family was in the camp. She said the following about conditions

It is really unhappy and there is a shortage of food. You are living in practically straw houses put together. The toilet is covered by flies and you can see maggots when you go to the toilet. The living condition was bad.

The lack of food and poor conditions in the camp may have led to the refugees inside leaving the camps to trade for food and gold. The holding centres of Khao-I-Dang were supposed to be sealed and the refugees inside were not allowed to leave, but there was refugee movement from the camps back to the Thai-Cambodia border. It is not possible to gauge the frequency of such movement back and forth by Cambodian refugees. Storytellers were aware that doing so was dangerous and only one narrator told of doing this. It is also possible that people who left the camp to trade for goods did not want to contradict themselves after telling of how very dangerous it was for them to get into refugee camps in the first place. Kim talked about leaving the camp and said that he travelled back into Cambodia in April in 1981, for Cambodian New Year, to see his mum. Upon his return he had to steal back into the camp at night. His narrative offered a unique
perspective on the operation of power on a local level in the camps between the Thai guards, the refugees who cooperated with them and the refugees who left the camp.

I get past one fence, but my friend...he’s not past one fence yet. I pass one, but I need to pass another one. In 1981 if the Thai army catch you they can shoot you if you are outside the gate! … Inside the gate they can’t do it. Then the United Nation blames them and asks ‘Why you kill the people?’ … I pass through one gate and I start to go into the second gate. I hear the soldier’s boots...I hear that they running forward towards me! I was so scared. I know they catch me this time. I try to get through the second gate…and I got stuck. The wire got caught on my legs [and] cut my legs open and they are bleeding... I move as fast as I can… The Thai army say to me ‘Where you come from?’

I say, ‘I live in here.’

‘But where you go?’

I say, ‘I go out and visit my mum and come back.’

They say, ‘You buying and selling gold?’

‘No. I’m not doing any business like that.’

He told me ‘Come back to the middle.’

I say ‘Look I brought some dried fish with me. If you want you take! I can give you the dried fish so long as you let me go. I got nothing else to give you!’

Then he says, ‘Come out and I check you.’

I say ‘You can check me like this.’ I stand very close to the wire gate but I don’t want to go back out, as I’ll be in more trouble than I am already in. I say, ‘You can check.’ He did not check because I talk very brave. I pretend that…I got nothing and I’m not scared of him, he can check whatever he likes. If I acted scared he would think that I have gold or have hidden something... When I went back to Cambodia I took some gold from my mum. I put the gold in my shoe because in the camp no money means you’ve got nothing. So I took about one
ounce of gold, but I talk to him like I don’t have any gold at all. ‘You can check me, if you find any gold, you can kill me! You can shoot me down here! You can take the gold and shoot me because I tell you lie!’ I talk very brave…I can speak Thai a bit, not very well, but he can understand… We Cambodian know some magic stuff. You can say the words and it helps you. Say if I join the army, if I know all the word, I would get away from bullets... I got one talisman full of magic words...I have one sixteenth of an ounce of gold in my pocket…The other gold in my shoe is bigger than one ounce... The Thai soldier says to me ‘What is in your pocket?’

I think to myself ‘Oh shit. I have a little bit of gold here. When I pull out my magical talisman he will see my gold.’ It was under the light from the streetlight. Incredibly bright! He says ‘Give to me.’

I pull out my magic cloth and the gold drops into my hand. My hand was still at my waist... I decide if the gold drops on the ground I still not look, because if I look he knows. Tomorrow I could come to find, but it was in my pocket, that small piece of gold. He did not see the gold, he just see the money and he took the money. That’s quite magic too. Under the bright light he did not see anything. That time I would say my friend and I were very lucky, because I have not got one hit, one kick, nothing.

Kim said he was different to people who ‘get stuff in and out all the time.’ He may have said this trying to avoid contradicting himself when he told me how dangerous it was to get into Khao-I-Dang refugee camp. Kim claimed that he was not regularly trading goods or gold outside of the camp, yet he also revealed that he was carrying gold from outside the camp into Khao-I-Dang. In this way Kim was making money inside the refugee camp from trading but did not consider himself as a ‘trader’. Stories told by Cambodians about their lives in the camps are a pertinent reminder that refugees are not helpless and do engage in activities like trading. Bringing gold and food back into the camps was one way that Cambodian refugees sought to make the conditions they experienced in the camps better.

Hinton (Hinton 2004, 2005) and others (Kiernan 1997; Vickery 1999) have argued that magical talismans were quite commonly used by both the Khmer Rouge and Lon Nol soldiers as a source of protection. Carrying them was also considered by Cambodians to indicate a sign that a person is powerful and to be avoided. After Kim was searched by the...
Thai guard, he was then approached by some refugees in the camp. He recalled the following encounter about his return to Khao-I-Dang.

Some Cambodians in the camp they catch you they send you back to the Thai army. That time I was stopped by two men…I have just walked about a hundred metres from where the Thai army catch me, going towards my place. These men want to catch me. I say to them ‘Don’t come close to me. If you come close to me you see what happen! Don’t walk close. Be far away!’ These people work for the Thai people… These people have power – like a big boss – the Thai people give them power. They are Khmer people. Some people when they got a bit of power they forget why they do this – they just do because they got power. I talk very, very strong…I say, ‘Don’t come. Stay there! Don’t you walk in to me any more! If you walk in any more – you see what happen! You see now? Look! My trouser all broken from top to bottom! Everything the Thai army take from me I got nothing left! If you want to take me to Thai soldier again, you come and you see what happen. You’d better go away. You leave me alone you’ll be alright.’ …I walk to my place… If I’m not strong like that he catches me and brings me to Thai army. I was twenty-two years old. That time was the strong time… If you do something wrong to me…I don’t really care what happen. If I can hit you I will hit you, because if you do wrong to me like this, I can’t stop, can’t control, I was young too. The Thai already ‘fixed’ me up like this. I say, ‘You’re Khmer. You’re Cambodian. Why you? What for? Why would you bring me to Thai army to make me suffer again? It’s wrong!’

Chan (2004) claims that the Thai soldiers were violent towards refugees they caught leaving the camps, but were not necessarily also violent towards those who followed the rules. Chan (2004) also claims that it is likely that the Thai soldiers cooperated with robbers who terrorized the refugees in the camps at night. The camps had a complicated spatial dimension between being outside the camp, between in the wire fence and inside the camp. The relationships between guards and different refugees were contested and negotiated. Violence in the camps took place depending on a variety of factors and the situation intensely mattered. Kim told that he avoided the violence from the Thai guards through a combination of factors, such as luckily being through one fence when they were discovered by the guards, appeasement by giving the guard money and dried fish, and from protection by magical talismans. Whereas he told of appearing aggressive to other refugees in the camp and appealing to their morality on the basis that they were all Cambodian.
refugees, as being why they left him alone and did not try and rob him or take him back to the guards.

Alongside hardship the camps also provided an opportunity for people to learn English or French, depending on where they wanted to go to as a ‘third country’, before resettlement. Kim told his story about learning English.

In the camp we did not work and there was nothing to do there, just study. I started to learn English in Khao-I-Dang. I try to learn very hard... I was trying to learn English for most of the day every day; this was because if I could speak English I could perhaps work with the Americans in the camp. I also did this in preparation to coming to a third country. My teacher in the camp was Cambodian and he was a good teacher... When I went to the camp I did not know English at all. I start from A, B, C, and learn the alphabet. Then I try to learn so hard within three year in the camp. Then I can speak English, I can write English. I catch up a lot at that time...

He recalled his time in the camp as a time for learning and felt like he had an opportunity to ‘catch up’ after his experiences during the Pol Pot regime. Like many others Kim felt that life during the Pol Pot regime had been wasted. Kim also told of his desire to work with Americans if he learnt English and in this regard learning a language was valued because it increased opportunity for contact with English speaking Westerners. Possession of these language skills in the camp made a person feel valued once more, after life had come to be seen as valueless during the Pol Pot regime. In this regard learning a new language was one aspect of the transformative process in becoming a refugee and such learning seemed to indicate a change in the way Cambodian people in the camps thought of themselves. For the Cambodians who acted as interpreters or volunteers in other capacities for Non-Government Organizations such recognition was empowering.

There were a number of Non-Government Organizations that operated along the border in Thailand after 1975 until the mid-80s. The CCSDPT Handbook of Refugee Services in Thailand lists fifty-two agencies in operation in 1981 (1983, p. 26). Most storytellers tended to talk more about the ‘UN’ or the ‘UNHCR’ rather than it’s affiliate programs like The World Food Programme, which was responsible for providing food for refugees in
Thailand (CCSDPT 1983, p. 23). Overall the UN had a far greater profile in narratives than any other organization, as the UN and its operatives likely had the most prominent profile within the refugee camps in Thailand during this time. A number of storytellers mentioned the role of Christian organizations in the camps, but those storytellers who did not convert to Christianity noticeably do not mention these organizations at all. Some storytellers worked with aid agencies and Non Government Organizations while they were in the camp. Working with NGOs arguably made refugees feel valued. One storyteller, Chhon describes how he came to work in the health centre as an interpreter and then later came to work as a dentist and said

I train to be a dentist. First I just interpreting in dental clinic, then he thought it was better for me to learn to be a dentist and [said], ‘I am going to give you all of these instruments and you go back to live in Cambodia.’ Because they training people to go back to field, so they train me to work as a dentist. I used to learn every day and then about half a year later he asked me to do the injection, pull out the teeth, and do the root canal, everything. So I learnt to do that and he thought that I [was] experienced he said, ‘You can do it...Just go and see people now.’ I train some other Cambodian to do that, and I teach people about dentistry…

Acting as an interpreter, learning new skills and helping other refugees influenced Chhon in becoming an interpreter and teacher’s aid later in Australia. Chhon was proud of learning dentistry and helping other refugees. But he had no intention to return to Cambodia like his instructor wanted him to. His desire to leave the place that had caused him so much sadness ran contrary to the expectations of his dentistry instructor in the camp. This raises the issue of two different ideas about being a refugee. For Chhon’s instructor being a refugee meant eventually returning to Cambodia, but for Chhon being a refugee meant leaving and never coming back.

Significantly Chhon told of an aid worker telling him what he should do with his life. This suggests that aid workers, whether working for Non Government Organizations or working for the UN, felt that they had the right to tell Cambodian refugees what they should do with their lives. The aid workers in the camps occupied a very powerful place in Cambodian refugees’ lives. They were the ones who distributed money from relatives overseas, or employed a refugee for interpreting purposes in the camps, or decided to train a refugee to
do a job like dentistry. As Hinton (2005) and others (Chandler 1992b) have noted
cambodia has a long history of patron-client relationships. Many Cambodians may have
treated the aid workers as possible new powerful patrons from which they could seek
assistance. The power exercised by foreign aid workers in the refugee camps meant that
they felt empowered to tell the refugees what they should do. Their power in the camp
made them seem almost magical to Bo. She compared a Christian aid worker with Santa
Claus.

There was this old man, he’s a priest, and in the camp they call him ‘Father Michael.’ I don’t
know what association he has, but he is this big man with a white beard just like a Santa
Claus and he is from France. He speaks Khmer and some people think he did not know how
to. He would go back to France, and relatives would send money with him, so when he
comes back he would distribute, so we go and ask him ‘Have you got present for us? Did our
family send us anything?’ And he would look through the name on the list… He actually
looks like Santa Claus with a very big white beard. We always got chocolate, so now when
my relatives go to Cambodia I always send chocolate.

Bo used the figure of Santa Claus to explain the seemingly magical quality this aid worker
had in the camp situation. His actions to help refugees made him powerful in the camp
situation. But she also told of the power this man had over the lives of the refugees in the
camp. While the narrators told of the power of various aid workers, some aid workers
viewed the refugees with a combination of pity, compassion, hopelessness, and sometimes
as having blood on their hands. Some of the writing of aid workers tells us a little about
how the refugees were seen by aid workers. While working in the refugee camps Bob Maat
wrote the following.

It is that sadness we feel while struggling with the political complexities that cause these folk
to be refugees – still. Or the sadness we feel on realising that no one’s hands are clean…On
this border we learn that there is something terribly wrong out there, something that leaves
people in such a state that they will never be whole again – be they minus a leg or broken

Maat wrote that ‘no one’s hands are clean’ and in doing so he constitutes the refugees as
‘tainted.’ Further he says ‘they will never be whole again’ and are ‘broken’ both physically
and psychologically. This suggests that some aid workers saw Cambodian refugees as ‘damaged’ from their experiences. Maat adopts a position of pity towards the refugees. In the camps the aid workers can pity refugees, but the refugees cannot pity the more powerful aid workers. This suggests that people may treat a refugee as ‘damaged’ or ‘tainted’ and there may be some stigma in becoming a refugee. Another aid worker Frank Elvey wrote about hope in the camp and the rejection of refugees by the authorities of third countries.

The idea was to help those who were interested to gain a little confidence in using English, and also some practice in speaking with foreigners, before the daunting process of interviews. It was…an expression of support… But even support can be ambiguous. We were reluctant to offer even this help, knowing that it could increase the hopes of the people quite unrealistically… There was a certain solidarity afterwards among those rejected. They had attended class together, helped each other, and finally had sat outside the office waiting to be called in for the interview. At least they found out straight away what the outcome was…by the end people went in expecting to be rejected… Hopes are precious and fragile in a refugee camp. They can be raised quickly and are easily destroyed. For most of the people I met, the past held tragic memories. Yet there was a remarkable resilient hope of something better in the future. Matching this hope was the fear that things would become worse or simply would not change. Supporting people in their hopes, and accepting those who knew rejection, were basic aspects of our own work in the camp (1993, pp. 67-8).

Elvey claims that the refugees’ hopes could develop ‘unrealistically’ in the camps if aid workers gave them support. In this regard refugees are constituted as being people in a hopeless situation. He also says that the refugees’ hopes are ‘fragile’ yet also ‘resilient’. Some treated the refugees as being both fragile and resilient.

Others like Joan Healy during her time in the refugee camps wrote about how women suffered in the camps. She writes about a Khmer woman called Thavy who gave birth to a baby girl.

Everybody crowded into the tiny hut to admire the new one and to learn that Sopheak means ‘the straight true path’. Her daughter's name is very significant to Thavy, who is particularly aware of the injustices done to women in this camp, where rule is by military violence and the law of the jungle. Typically, women are possessions to be used by a man as
he wishes. Thavy leads a group of eleven women who are presently suffering violence. She stands courageously with women before the justice committees, knowing that too often it is the victim who suffers there. This situation may read as not much different from the position of women in developed countries, but here there is not even the semblance of law to protect women from injustice. Until very recently, divorce cases were initiated only by men. Following divorce, the first child of the marriage, and the third and fifth also, are always given into the custody of the father, even though the separation may have been caused by his violence (1993, p. 69).

Healy portrays Cambodian women both as fighting against injustice and as ‘victims’ of men’s violence. Her narrative about life in the refugee camps, despite her relative power as an aid worker, represents Cambodian women in the refugee camps as equal subjects in relation to herself and not ‘much different from the position of women in developed countries’. She writes of her ‘friends’ and of ‘women’ instead of ‘refugees’ or ‘Cambodians’ or ‘people’. In this way Healy comes perilously close to obliterating the all too real differences between herself and the women in the refugee camps. Yet she also observes

The journey to reconciliation will be a Khmer journey. The word I hear most is ‘mending’. I find myself wanting to say, ‘But mending applies to what is broken, and in fact it’s still breaking!’ My friends know that better than I do (1993, p. 71).

Healy accepts the difference between cultures and on this occasion avoids prescription. The aid workers constituted the Cambodian refugees as people very differently depending upon their subjectivities and beliefs. This discussion points to how identity is both internal and external. Identity rests upon how we see ourselves and how others see us. In this regard refugees have been treated as people who have a ‘problem’ identity.

In the preamble of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights says that refugees are a ‘problem.’ The preamble states

Considering that the grant of asylum may place unduly heavy burdens on certain countries, and that a satisfactory solution of a problem of which the United Nations has recognized the
international scope and nature cannot therefore be achieved without international co-
operation… Expressing the wish that all States, recognizing the social and humanitarian nature of the problem of refugees, will do everything within their power to prevent this problem from becoming a cause of tension between States (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2006)

Refugees are constituted as a ‘problem’ from the very beginning of this key legal document regarding refugees’ rights. The emphasis is on the role of states and the preamble claims that refugees cause a ‘heavy burden’ and bring about ‘tension’ between states. Hence refugees are constituted as a ‘problem’ for states to ‘solve’. While no doubt being a refugee is a real problem for those who become refugees, from a limited perspective of legal discourse, this indicates that people who hold a ‘refugee’ identity are also imbued with a ‘problem’ identity.

The obvious differences between the attributes storytellers spoke of in becoming a refugee and the attributes ascribed to refugees by those who worked for Non Government Organizations and the UN preamble suggests that refugee identity is relational to both internal conceptions and outside influences. The stories in this chapter tell of what it was like to become a refugee from the perspective of those who acted to do so.

The stories told of escape, facing danger, the desperate conditions in the refugee camps and learning new skills tell that the experience of the camps was transformative of Cambodian refugees’ identity. Remembering the camps, Cambodian narrators viewed their experience as being both a good and a bad experience. For example, Lackanary said

My good memory [is] always when I was in Khao-I-Dang, because it was full of sadness – full of happiness. Full of sadness, it was worse than you can imagine. Full of happiness when I was told, ‘Your application to come to Australia is accepted.’ We just waited for that day for years. It was like you are in middle of ocean by yourself, you can’t see anything except the water and the sky, and suddenly after you waited and waited there is a plane [that] comes and picks you up. That is, I would say, the most happiness in my life. I arrived in Australia on the 13th of April 1987.
Lackanary viewed his experiences of the refugee camps as being amongst both his happiest and saddest moments of his life. Lackanary used a metaphor of being in the middle of the ocean without any land in sight, as what life was like for him to be in the refugee camps. The camps offered the chance of a new life, but the life in the camps was also a very uncertain and difficult time for people. Being a refugee was talked about in terms of being both a good and bad experience. Kim reflected upon the meaning of his experiences of being a refugee in the camp in the following way.

Not really scared about die. Scared, but not scared like I am now. No have nothing. Empty hand. I’m not married. If I die no wife to cry. No children to cry. No nothing behind me… It’s different now. Here really different too. Really different. Go to work, it change my life, it change my mind, because when you go to work you have to put your gloves on, don’t cut yourself, don’t hurt your back, everything safety, safety, safety… A lot of thing can change your life. Looking back on this time today if you look at the way I’m living in Australia that was a really terrible life, but if you look further – when it was the Pol Pot regime – it was much, much worse!

Life in the camps on the Thai border was seen as relative to life in Australia and Cambodia respectively. Telling stories about being a refugee also perhaps lent a perspective to storytellers about how their lives changed over time and how they made their lives change by becoming a refugee.

From one perspective to be a ‘refugee’ is to be seen to hold a ‘problem’ identity, such as being ‘statelessness’ and ‘being a burden’ and ‘cause of tension’, in relation to nation-states. In this regard refugee identity is a ‘problem’ for nation-states in that refugee populations pose a direct challenge to the idea of national identity as being natural and eternal. According to Erving Goffman documents that verify the bearers identity in relation to nation-states, like birth certificates and passports, are important in maintaining particular social identities (1963, pp. 60-1). From the perspective of aid workers being a refugee is to be ‘fragile,’ ‘tainted’ and ‘damaged’. Whereas from the perspective of Cambodian storytellers being a refugee was to have great courage, to have taken risks and faced danger, to be resourceful and to have had an opportunity to have learned new skills, as well as suffering in desperate conditions in a refugee camp. Goffman suggested that ‘naming’ is a
part of constructing identity and claimed ‘A name, then, is a very common but not very reliable way of fixing identity’ (1963, p. 59). Personal and social identities are entwined for Goffman. In constructing the personal identities of others Goffman claims that we make use of aspects of a person’s social identity (1963, p. 65). Goffman states

Discovery prejudices not only the current social situation, but established relationships as well; not only the current image others present have of him, but also the one they will have in the future; not only appearances, but also reputation. The stigma and the effort to conceal it or remedy it become ‘fixed’ as part of personal identity (1963, p. 65).

Goffman suggests that certain ‘stigmas’ can become part of our personal identity. Being a refugee leaves an indelible mark upon a person, which perhaps carries with it a certain stigma. As I have argued refugee identity can be constituted in a number of ways, from being hopeless, to resilient, to damaged and tainted, to pitiful, to being a problem. In this regard it could be said some aspects externally attributed to refugee identity could carry with them a certain stigma. I have also argued that Cambodian people who became refugees saw themselves as resourceful and useful as well as being suffering victims trapped in an unfair and violent situation. There seems to be some differences between the social identity of being a refugee, which may be unreliable as Goffman suggests, and the way refugees saw themselves and their experiences. Cambodian refugee stories highlight a vast range of experiences in the processes involved in becoming a refugee. The range of stories also point to problems with ascribing common characteristics to any refugee group, although undoubtedly the experience of becoming a refugee profoundly influenced those Cambodian people who crossed the border and came to Australia.
Chapter 5: Cambodian Resettlement in Australia 1978-2005

We stayed [at the hostel] for over one year, because my cousin sponsored us and she still had no house, nothing. We have to stay in the hostel to save some money to rent a house, as we have to pay a deposit. During the summer I go to pick some strawberries. Because I stayed in the camp for two years – no more back pain – and when we went to pick the strawberries I feel very painful! – Kien

Out of the jungle, onto a plane in Bangkok headed to Australia, Cambodian refugees were then bussed to hostels in the suburbs of Melbourne. This chapter asks, what was the experience of resettling in Melbourne? What did resettlement mean for Cambodian refugees? How have experiences of resettlement in Australia shaped Cambodian identity? In asking these questions I examine the dialectic between the range of new and strange experiences that life in Australia presented Cambodian refugees with and how the experiences of resettlement reminded Cambodian refugees of their past experiences. This connects with a larger discussion of the historicity of identity and the tension between living forwards while understanding backwards.

In this chapter I first describe some of the experiences that Cambodian refugees had when they arrived in Melbourne. I then describe what the experience of staying in the hostels was like before finding more permanent housing. I go on to examine the working life of Cambodian refugees and look at some of the challenges and successes of work in Australia. Some of the younger narrators’ experiences of going to school are then outlined before I examine leisure activities and religious life in Australia. Lastly, I address how Cambodians sought to help fellow refugees and other people in Australian society. Following the approach taken in earlier chapters, I again make use of the stories that ten Cambodians told me about their experiences of living in Australia.
Arrival in Australia

The idea that refugees come to Australia aboard small battered boats swirls around many refugees (Mares 2001; Marr and Wilkinson 2003). While this may be true of some, most Cambodian refugees travelled to Australia on an aeroplane and not by boat. McMaster observes that refugees who arrived by boat were only ‘1.58 per cent of Vietnamese and Cambodians who arrived in Australia’ (2001, p. 54). So it was not exceptional that all of the Cambodian people I spoke with had come to Australia by aeroplane. For most Cambodian people this was their first experience of travel on an aeroplane. On their arrival at Melbourne airport the refugees were then bussed to hostels spread over the suburbs of Melbourne. Some, however, were greeted and picked up by relatives already in Australia and went to live elsewhere.

All narrators spoke of their excitement and joy at finally arriving in Australia. Long, for example, remembered his arrival in May 1978 in the following way.

I remember it’s fresh; it’s early in the morning, four-five o’clock and cold. I arrive in May, but freedom is always in the mind in the refugee camp, so after many years we step out of the plane to freedom, fresh air, very exciting, very happy. Ride through the city is very nice. All the lights we haven’t seen for a long, long time...

Long said that he experienced his first moments in Australia as ‘freedom’. Arrival in Australia represented the end of one journey and the beginning of another for most Cambodian storytellers. Some saw this as a journey from imprisonment to freedom. Storytellers said they had high expectations of what Western countries would be like when they were living in refugee camps. Kien said, ‘We call third country heaven. Australia is heaven for us.’ People were highly elated at leaving the refugee camps and were similarly elated at arriving in Australia which was equated metaphorically to going to ‘heaven’.

However, the people I interviewed said that their first experiences of life in Australia were different to their expectations. Some felt disappointed and in some instances initially doubted the wisdom of their decision to come to a third country. Kim said the following about arriving in Melbourne in February 1983.
I felt very excited when I saw Melbourne airport – so beautiful. Then I left the airport by bus that early morning and I saw the streetlight, road, houses and trees – also beautiful. Everywhere look very clean.

Kim said that he was so elated that he initially saw all things around him as ‘beautiful’ from the airport to the trees. He then said that Melbourne’s beauty faded when he got to the hostel.

When I got to Eastbridge hostel I thought they let us live in the apartment instead of the unit surrounded by trees. In my mind when I first arrived I preferred to live in an apartment rather than a unit… I thought Australia was a developed country and everywhere like Melbourne city, because in Cambodia or most Asian countries people like to live in apartments or flats… It was very different to what I expected. I was a little disappointed. Not very exciting, because my mind never see Australia like that, but now I like the house with trees and backyard.

Disappointment struck home when Kim saw units surrounded by trees. What he had imagined in the camp abruptly unravelled. The trees that encircled the units possibly also reminded him of the jungle from where he had just come. All I spoke with told that their first experiences of Australia shattered what they had imagined in different ways. For example, Chhon described his first experiences after his arrival in Australia on the 28th of February 1985 in the following way.

February is hot for over here. But it was cold for me! They used short sleeve I used long sleeve. So I recall I was cold during that time. I don’t know why because the weather is warmer in February. I used to living in Thailand so similar to Cambodia, so hot all the time. I was cold and at nighttime I was very, very cold. In summertime it was cold, crazy for me. During that time not many Cambodia here in Australia, ‘85 not many here. I thought if I knew that Australia is very quiet country I would not want to come.

Chhon said that had he known Australia was a quiet, cold country with less people than he thought he would not have wanted to come. Chhon expressed that he felt different being a refugee from the hot jungle in Thailand when he saw people wearing short sleeve clothing
during February when he felt cold. Bo also commented on how cold Melbourne was when she arrived and said ‘It was very, very different’. Chan (2004, p. 89) says that the shock of the cold for Cambodian refugees in the United States was such that people were drawn to warmer states. Melbourne was experienced as being a very different place for Cambodian refugees. A different place can also make us realize our own relative difference to others. A large part of Chhon’s disappointment was because he saw dim prospects for a busy social life amongst many Cambodians in Australia. He had hoped that he would still be able to have a rich social life in Australia like he had experienced before the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. It is clear that this expectation about communal life was drawn from his previous experience in Cambodia and from his experience in the camps in Thailand. Our prior experiences can often be useful in navigating the world around us, but sometimes they can lead us to have expectations that cannot be met.

The hostels and finding housing

After arrival in Melbourne most of the people I spoke with stayed in refugee hostels that included Enterprise, Midway, Eastbridge, Northbridge, or Wiltona, which were set up to specifically accommodate refugees. The hostels were located in the suburbs of Springvale, Footscray, Nunawading, and near Altona. So what were storyteller’s experiences of the hostels like? And what was it like finding housing of one’s own? Kien used the words ‘hostel’ and ‘hotel’ interchangeably when she talked about her time in the refugee hostels. Prior to 1975 Kien’s life had revolved around a hotel in Kompong Som (now called Sihanoukville). Her choice of the word ‘hotel’ on the surface may suggest that this accommodation was ‘temporary’ but for her ‘hotel’ also signified a ‘home’ with connotations of ‘stability’ which had characterized in her past life in Cambodia. Most people referred to the hostels just by the particular hostel’s name, such as ‘Enterprise’ or ‘Eastbridge’. Kien said the following about her time spent in the Enterprise hostel between 1982 and 1983

It was good living in the hostel, because from forest to town everything is good, but we not used to the kind of food Australian cook… Some people not like smell of the hostel food, but that depend on people, because my parent in-law got the restaurant and they sell Western food, so I used to eat butter, so it alright for me, but the way [they] cook is very different in
the canteen and we are not allowed to cook for ourselves… [When] we eat rice at home it is completely cooked, one hundred percent…here rice is half cooked. We don’t eat uncooked. We cook slow-slow until cooked. But the rice in the hostel was bad; we cannot eat; because the middle is still hard. I don’t know how people eat that one. A lot of people cannot eat at all… We cook food to eat but the hostel security takes our rice cooker. When we move they give to us back. They don’t take forever, just go around because the smell. Because all the room in there maybe cook make smell. So we like to eat bread and ham, because the rice not cooked and they put something else like butter in there.

Kien said the hostels were significantly better than the refugee camps in the jungle. She claimed that the food was ‘alright’ yet also said that the rice was not cooked properly and that some refugees did not like the smell of the food. The way rice was cooked signified a point of major cultural difference between herself and Australians and a realization of the strangeness of a new place. The way that rice is cooked may seem unimportant, but for Cambodians rice and the way it is cooked is very important. The importance of rice is illustrated by the way Cambodians ask someone to have a meal with them. Bo explained, ‘Rice is our main solid food accompanied by other dishes, we ask you to ‘come and have rice’ rather than say ‘come and have meal.’” The word ‘rice’ is used in the place of a ‘meal’ and in this way ‘eating rice’ signifies the sitting down and eating a meal with other people. The people I interviewed noted that the rice was ‘half cooked’ and suggested that butter was added to the rice.

Kien’s experiences in the hostel also had a resonance with her experiences of Pol Pot time where people had to eat in a communal canteen and were not allowed to cook at home and were formed into groups. The experiences of being formed into a group, when staying in the hostels, mirrored in some respects past experiences of being grouped together during the Pol Pot regime into large organizational units, where the family unit ceased to be the primary unit of organization. In this way some experiences of life in Australia inadvertently served to remind people of past lives during the Pol Pot years.

Cambodian refugees’ experiences with food in the hostel connected with their past experiences of lack of control over food during the Pol Pot regime and in the refugee camps, in particular how they could cook and prepare rice. Kien said that hostel security
took away her rice cooker. This act resonated with her past experiences during the Pol Pot regime where private possessions were taken away from the city dwellers. She emphasized that her rice cooker was given back to her later when she left the hostel. While some of Kien’s experiences at the hostel connected with her past life, she emphasized that the hostel’s security staff returned her rice cooker. Actions like this may have helped her establish some trust in the people around her.

Kheng described her reaction to the smells of the hostel and told of her mum losing weight, as she could not bring herself to eat the food in the hostel. After their arrival on the 24\textsuperscript{th} of June 1982 Kheng recalled

\begin{quote}
A lot of people don’t realize that it is really shocking to us to come here and smell the butter. My mum barely had eaten anything. My mum began to lose a lot of weight as she could not bare the smell of the food cooked in the hostel. For us children it was not as bad as we were very hungry. My mum lost several kilos in a few weeks. When we are in the hostel we had to get my sister to get a small electric rice cooker. We plug it in and we get some rice. In the hostel we were not supposed to have any cooking done. Anyway we cook some porridge to eat, because my mum can’t stand the food. Too much! The smell of butter is not the best smell, it is like you go to Cambodia and you walk past a sewer. We have plain bread and nothing else, but now I really enjoy all food, but before it was pretty shocking to us.
\end{quote}

Like other Cambodians Kheng experienced the strangeness of coming to another country by noting the different food and how it was ‘shocking’. It appears that her mother coped less well in the Enterprise hostel and could not eat at all. After coming to Australia people experienced a sort of ‘shock’ to the strangeness of the place. Stella Ting-Toomey suggests that ‘culture shock’ may lead to a loss of sense of identity, or a strain upon identity as a person is forced to adapt, or ‘identity rejection by members of new culture’ or feelings of confusion or impotence about who they are (1999, p. 245). Culture shock may also feel overwhelming for people due to the distance between cultures and be a stressful and disorienting experience (Ting-Toomey 1999, pp. 238, 45). While some like Chhon liked the hostel food and said, ‘Anything is okay for me,’ he also noted that his friends found adjusting to the food in the hostel difficult because of the smell.
Cambodians also began to work again while at the hostels. Being able to work while staying in the hostels enabled people living in the hostels to move out because it allowed them to save some money to rent. During her stay in the hostel Kien began working on a farm picking strawberries. She said

We stayed [at the hostel] for over one year, because my cousin sponsored us and she still had no house, nothing. We have to stay in the hostel to save some money to rent a house, as we have to pay a deposit. During the summer I go to pick some strawberries. Because I stayed in the camp for two years – no more back pain – and when we went to pick the strawberries I feel very painful! Back pain, because we do nothing for two years! Just for the first week, when we get the money [the pain] is better! We got paid and then we save some money.

Like other Cambodians Kien said that she found the work very difficult. But getting paid and seeing the possibility of getting her own place made the pain she experienced more tolerable. Collective life in the hostel and farm work resonated with memories of life during the Pol Pot years. In this way resettlement also had the possibility of reconnecting people to traumatic past experiences, but also renewed Cambodian peoples’ trust in other people. For instance, Kien emphasized getting ‘paid’ for what she did and recognition of her work. Work in Australia was both painful and rewarding for Cambodian people. Kien said this about her transition that work in the hostel to rental housing

The bus come behind the hotel and we go to pick fruit and the children get the food from the canteen and the bus come and pick them up. Then we were looking for a unit when we left the hostel. The first time we have no money to buy. So we rented a house at Westall. Westall nearly two years, we save some money, and during that time the house not very expensive like now and we put some deposit and we buy a house in Springvale on Springvale road and we live there for 10 years and then we build this one.

Many people spoke of sharing accommodation with their extended family or with friends. Kheng recalled that after her family left the hostel.

We rent a place in Knox Street Prahran and my family lived in a small two bedroom flat. When we had just got here and my sister has got children with her. We were worried about the rental thing, so we try to save as much as we can, so six of us, plus one kid [and] one
baby, were living in a two bedroom flat. We live there for a few months and then the real estate property management realized that there were so many people living in the house. They kick us out. So at the time my dad arranges a place for us to stay. We know there are government houses available for people. So we put an application through. A friend of my father told my dad, ‘The guy who looks after the housing is very easy; if you bring him a bottle of whiskey he’ll push the application right up for you.’ Call it bribery or call it luck I don’t know. So my dad bought a couple of bottles of whiskey for the housing officer…and he got a flat in South Yarra in the housing commission.

Kheng’s family shared housing to save money because of their worry about financial security. Her experience of losing their flat recalled her past experiences of losing her home during the Khmer Rouge takeover and then later again in Saigon after the Vietnamese military forced the Cambodian refugees out of their accommodation. Kheng’s story suggests it was initially difficult for Cambodian people, as refugees, to find stable housing after they moved out from the hostels in the 1980s. Equally, when I interviewed them most of the Cambodians were house owners who had managed to pay off their mortgages some twenty years later.

**Work and School in Australia**

What was life like for Cambodian people after they left the hostels? The men I interviewed talked more about work than the women I interviewed and tended to refer to their jobs as a key source of identity. It is of course possible that the storytellers who were men found talking about work easier with me than talking about other activities. Women tended to talk about paid work in relation to other activities to do with their family or education, whereas the men treated their work as an end in itself. This could be due to the gendered expectations of Cambodian women being centered around the home and the gendered expectations of Cambodian men being associated with public independence (Smith-Hefner 1999, pp. 18-9, 96-122).

The people I spoke with did not claim that it was difficult to find work in Australia. Perhaps this was a point of pride. Equally every person could remember a variety of difficulties they experienced at work. Their work was seen both a source of pride, a form
of hardship and offering a stable point of reference. Lackanary described finding his first job in Australia in the following way.

When I first came here in 1987 it was booming in Australia. I heard people say to go Toyota factory. So I went to the personnel office. At that time my English was a little bit limited. I ask for a job and he said ‘Okay you get a job.’ Jobs were just everywhere. ‘87 to ‘88 it was booming. If you don’t like your job you can get a new job just across the road. It was not hard to find a job then. When I left Toyota, I worked in the paint shop near Monash University. So I stay there two years then they close the factory. Early nineties the recession came. But lucky I had a job where I now work. I’ve been there nearly 14 years – still there today. At the moment I work in a warehouse as a forklift driver. I like my job, as I don’t just do one job. I do a bit of everything. Driving the forklift I load and unload the trucks. I do packaging, I do a bit of deliveries, and if the boss is not around I pick up the phone and answer the phone. I like my job.

Lackanary traced his experiences of work through different economic periods, using terms like ‘booming’ and ‘the recession’. In this way his narrative about his working life uses terms popularly used by economists to describe phases in the Australian economic cycle. His pride in his record of continuous employment was evident. Lackanary was forthright in his claim that he liked his job and repeated this and also stated how long he had been working at that particular job.

Continuity of work provided a sense of stability for storytellers. Other storytellers like Kim had worked at the same job for fifteen years and Long had been working at the same job for twenty-two years. Both men commented that they did not like change, which is not difficult to understand. In relation to their turbulent lives as refugees, their working life in Australia provided an anchor point, and a point from which part of their identity was derived.

Other storytellers experienced their working lives as frustrating. For instance Kheng who studied in Australia to be an engineer put part of her struggles in the field of engineering down to being an ‘Asian’ woman working in a ‘man’s field.’ She described her work in the following way.
Somehow I can’t stay in a job for too long because I find it frustrating. First you are a female, you’re Asian that’s even worse, and engineering work is a man’s field. It takes a very strong person to be able to stand up and survive in that sort of field.

Kheng experienced both gender and racial discrimination in her working life in Australia. She said that being seen as ‘Asian’ was a ‘worse’ factor in her working life than being a woman. In this regard Kheng cited the idea that ‘race’ was a more powerful influence on her working life than ‘gender’. Yet she also specified that engineering was ‘a man’s field’.

For Kien work in Australia was relatively inconsequential to her life story compared to talking about her family life. For example, Kien told me that being ‘a mother’ made her decide to work at home as an outworker, so she could keep an eye on her teenage daughter Bo because she worried about her. Smith-Hefner claims that Khmer mothers sometimes intensify their campaigns to ‘make daughters behave in a proper, virtuous manner’ (1999, p. 105). The insistence of virtuous correct behavior on the part of both young Cambodian men and women is to do with prevention of their parent’s embarrassment and a family’s ‘face and honor’ in the social world (Smith-Hefner 1999, pp. 92, 121).

Kim told me of a white Anglo-Saxon man who treated him badly when he worked at one job. Other Cambodian storytellers also noted similar encounters with white Anglo-Saxon Australians to Kim’s experience. The following describes the way by which some Australians encountered Cambodian refugees as ‘other’ as much as it describes the experiences of one narrator. Kim spoke of the following situation in a plastics factory which he began working in after he had worked at a tyre yard for fifteen years

> When I start at the plastics factory the man I work with give me a hard time… Doesn’t matter if I do this – doesn’t matter if I do that – he yell at me! Blame me! It was so hard! People say to me ‘This man, anybody come to work with him, one or two day, he blame to the boss and the boss kick the person out.’

> He gave me such a hard time, but I cool down and did not get angry with him. It does not matter what he say I keep doing my job… When I start the second day there, I tell the boss ‘Look the agency sent me here for just two days so today my last day. Could you help me to have a job and I continue to work here?’ He says ‘No worries. I will help you.’ Because they
have seen me for two days and they are happy with me and with the way that I work…but the other man my work partner he still doesn’t like me. Only two men work together. He is a smart arse. He likes to do less and put a lot of work onto me and yell at me and give me a hard time. I try to soften him. Does not matter what I do, I try to make him feel ‘No. I have to stop.’ I like to change his mind, to change his heart…

I think to myself ‘If I argue with him or if I try to find my right, I can’t win with him, because he’s worked there four, five, six years. He can just tell the boss…that I not good enough. I lose my job again. So I can’t win with him, I can’t do anything, I can’t say anything. The only thing I can do is make friend with him. Try to do the best I can, and try and talk nice to him, doesn’t matter what he says I still try to be very polite with him.’

It would not be the same situation for white people. For you, if you find that way, still you find less than me. If they look at you, they look at your education, or they look at you ‘Oh Australian!’ But before they do to you they look too you know. They can’t do to you, but for me when they see I don’t speak good English, I not look like a white Australian, they just want to put you down. If I was you I don’t have that much pressure I think. Bad person still bad, but he do a bit less. But if he look to you and see that you are Chinese…and doesn’t speak good English he put you more down. People a little bit like that. He smart too. He’s not dumb. He’s shifty and he’s smart too. He knows if he can eat you he will eat, if he cannot eat you he will not eat.

I work about three week and he says to the boss ‘Kim is a very good worker.’ And he says to me ‘You ask the boss…Ask him. Many people come to work with me one or two day and that’s it, but you, I’m happy with you as you’re a very good worker.’ He says to me like this in front of the boss. Then I start to realize I win now. Many people they lose as he make them lose their job. But I still only work there for four weeks…

Kim recalled that a white Anglo-Saxon Australian man – a fellow worker in the same factory – bullied him. Kim characterized this bully as being ‘shifty’ and ‘smart’. He also said that he did not have the same influence with ‘the boss’ as the bully he had to work with. Kim felt he had none of the same power to act as the white man who called him names, made him work harder, and gave him a hard time. In Kim’s story the white Australian man was empowered to act and treated him badly and in this regard he acted in a spatially dominant manner in the workplace. Kim remembered how the white Australian
man expressed his dominance by saying how in the past he had been able to make people leave after only ‘one or two days.’

Kim remembered the bully addressing him as ‘you’ when he said ‘but you, I’m happy with you’. The way Kim described the white Anglo-Saxon man acted conforms to the anthropologist Ghassan Hage’s (1998) claim that white Australian people think of themselves to be ‘managers of the national space’. Hage argues

> One cannot define and act on others as undesirable in just any national space. Such space has to be perceived as one’s own national space…This is evident in the very categories used by the nationalist which treat the ‘other’ as an object to be managed (in the case we are examining, an object to be removed from the space of the nation), while treating the self as spatially empowered to position/remove this other (1998, p. 42).

This suggests that the white Australian man Kim worked with employed a form of classification and acted in a way that saw him attempt to ‘manage’ Kim who was contextually disempowered in a new workplace. The white man’s use of ‘you’ is transformative in distancing self from ‘other’ and arguably shifting a person towards being an ‘object’ that can be ‘managed’. This white Anglo-Saxon Australian man inhabits his workplace, somewhat like the nation, in a privileged fashion.

However, Kim also said that he employed a number of strategies of resistance to the bully. Contextually for him, but unbeknownst to the white man, he had been through much worse abuse at the hands of the Khmer Rouge and the Thai military in the refugee camps. Kim drew on his previous experiences and remained silent. Remaining silent during Pol Pot time was one way for a person to minimize their chances of being killed by the Khmer Rouge. Cambodian people have a saying about the Pol Pot years: ‘You have to be like a tree – and be mute.’ In this way Kim used his past experience of survival during the Pol Pot regime as a way that was helpful for him years later in Australia. I contend that the past experiences of the Pol Pot regime were of use for Cambodian people in some situations in Australia. It could be claimed that the same strategies which people used to help them survive the Pol Pot regime such as ‘self-reliance, patience and persistence – are what helped them survive during the years that followed’ (Chan 2004, p. 240).
Alexander Hinton suggests that in Cambodian culture ‘heat’ is associated with anger (2005, pp. 61-2). This metaphor is at work when Kim said ‘but I cool down.’ Hinton also claims that Khmer language and culture provides a variety of ways to overcome anger when people talk about the need to ‘calm the heart’ and ‘cleanse one’s heart’ (2005, p. 61). As someone who identified as being Khmer-Chinese, Kim said that he tried to ‘to change his heart’ and in this regard he viewed his white Anglo-Saxon co-worker as being angry. Such strategies for Cambodians are part of ‘mutual face saving, avoiding public exposure and shame, observing Buddhist moral codes…’ and ‘…having friendly relations with others’ according to Hinton (2005, p. 63). Stella Ting-Toomey states the following about ‘face’.

Face is a claimed sense of self-respect in an interactive situation. It has been viewed, alternatively, as a symbolic resource, as social status, as projected identity issue, and as a fundamental communication phenomenon. Facework involves the enactment of face strategies, verbal and nonverbal moves, self-presentation acts, and impression management interaction (1994, p. 1).

Ting-Toomey indicates face has both culturally universal and culturally specific dimensions that relate to a broad range of social phenomena such as shame, pride, embarrassment, deference, justice and honor (1994, pp. 3-4). Notably Kim engaged various strategies of face saving. He tried to be polite to the white Anglo-Saxon man, he avoided conflict and acted in a deferential manner, before face-saving by escaping from persecution by leaving for another job in a factory elsewhere after ‘only four weeks.’ Robert Edelmann, drawing on the work of Erving Goffman, says that we attempt to manage the impressions of others in social interactions so as to avoid the discomfort of giving an ‘undesired impression’ which can result in embarrassment (1994, p. 231). Edelmann suggests people can employ a number of ‘face-saving’ strategies to ‘restore a desired identity’ (1994, p. 232) when they find themselves in a ‘undesired and unintentional social predicament’ (1994, p. 233), like Kim did when working with a man who yelled at him, blamed him and was a ‘smart arse’ towards him. Kim defined his role as a ‘hard worker’. But in this workplace situation the bully he had to work with created a disturbance and loss of this moral identity. It seems that when the bully told the boss that he thought Kim was a hard worker, some restoration of face and a desired moral identity took place. Throughout his description Kim positions
himself as avoiding conflict and trying to change the white Anglo-Saxon man’s view of
him. Finally he leaves the particular workplace for another job elsewhere. This is
congruent with several face-saving strategies suggested by Edelmann such as offering an
apology, or giving an account of what happened to another, avoidance, escape, and
describing the incident (1994, p. 239). While not a direct apology to him, the white man’s
acknowledgement of Kim being a hard worker in front of the boss seemed to constitute part
of a remediation to the abuse (Edelmann 1994, p. 252). Kim was also able to give an
account of events that ‘denied the negative consequences’ and ‘denial of victim’ (Edelmann
1994, pp. 240-1). Kim also avoided conflict in his attempt to manage the man, but as
Edelmann suggests avoidance may create greater attention and abuse (1994, p. 242). Here I
suggest that one of the problems of being a victim is that sooner or later, consciously or
unconsciously, people start treating you as one. Finally Kim was able to describe the
incident to me as an outsider and present himself in a positive manner in relation to this
past experience, in this regard giving this account may have also constituted part of a ‘face
saving’ strategy.

In other instances Cambodian storytellers related that they had regained trust in the world
through their experiences of work in Australia. For example, Kim said that the attention to
safety in the factories that he had worked in had changed his life.

It’s different now...Really different. Go to work, it change my life, it change my mind,
because when you go to work you have to put your gloves on, don’t cut yourself, don’t hurt
your back, everything safety, safety, safety. In Cambodia not just cut your finger, it can cut
your whole head. Nobody say ‘Don’t do it maybe you cut your head.’ No. Nobody say that,
because not that worried.

Working life in Australia also had the possibility to restore some of Cambodian
storytellers’ trust in others and the world around them after their experiences during the Pol
Pot years. Equally, Kim told of limitations placed on his working life in Australia.

Because of my English I would become maybe boss or manager already by the way that I
work. I work so hard. For example, I am a good worker, [but] because I don’t know
anything, even if they say ‘Put in an application’ and even if they is a vacancy for a position, I
can’t apply, because [of] my English. Because no education. The position is there but you
can’t go. If sometimes you start to write some word you don’t know how to spell or you
don’t write the correct word you can’t be a boss. If it is past your capacity and you can’t do
that thing, you should not go to do that thing… Easy job, good job available, [but] I can’t get.
So…I have to stay…a labourer for the rest of my life. It’s a different life between who got
education and who got no education.

Kim lamented his situation at work. There was also a certain resignation about the state of
his working life and lack of opportunity to change. Smith-Hefner suggests that the Khmer
concept of ‘fate’ plays an important role in Cambodian people’s understanding of their
place in the world, while allowing for the possibility that fate can be shifted under certain
circumstances (1999, p. 40). However, Kim also felt he was marginalized by his lack of
mastery of English in Australia, which he saw as directly limiting what he could achieve in
his working life. The lack of opportunity on arrival in Australia, marginalization through
language, and oppression through repetitive and stressful factory work influenced Kim’s
view of life, as much as his experiences during the Pol Pot regime in many respects.
Resettlement and life in Australia seemed to be not all that he had hoped it might be.

Kim also said that he took very little time off from work and had taken virtually no
holidays for over his twenty years of work in Australia. Other storytellers also worked long
hours, at least when they first arrived in Australia, which kept them occupied for the most
part of each day. It is understandable that people wanted to generate income when they
arrived in Australia after losing everything as refugees. But it is also possible that
storytellers used activities like work to keep themselves busy so as to occupy their minds
and not to think about their past experiences. However, it is difficult to distinguish the line
between keeping busy with work as being necessary for economic survival and keeping
busy with work and other activities as a form of psychological management of traumatic
past experiences and memories. Many storytellers worked long hours and most said they
took paid overtime if it was ever offered to them. Kim recounted that if he was ever
offered paid overtime he would always work it, as he wanted to stay on his boss’s good
side. Chin and his wife worked back-to-back twelve-hour shifts in factories for the first
three years of their resettlement in Australia and he told me that during this time they
usually would only see each other on a public holiday or sick day. They did this so that one
of them would always be home and able to care for their children. Other storytellers like
Phuoc worked two jobs, in a factory during the day and in a restaurant during the night. While some Cambodian people sought work almost immediately upon resettlement some storytellers went to high school in Melbourne Australia. I turn to these stories next.

Most of the people I interviewed began work almost immediately after leaving the hostels or in many instances while they were still staying at the hostels. Some of the people I spoke with were teenagers when they arrived in Australia and so went to secondary school instead of starting fulltime work. What was secondary school in Australia like? How did the Cambodian narrators describe their experiences of the education system in Australia? And what can such narratives tell about the social relationships between Cambodian refugees and other Australians?

One challenge was to learn English before facing the social context of Australian high school. ‘So we go to language centres for six months and then I start year eight at Prahran high,’ said Kheng talking about the first years after her arrival in Australia in 1982. In her six months of study at an English language centre before she went to Prahran High School Kheng claimed that because she had already learnt some French that this helped her ‘pick up English a bit faster.’ She contrasted learning English with what she saw as the ‘Greek’ character of Prahran high school observing that ‘even the principal was Greek.’ Kheng introduced her awareness of Greek, Vietnamese and Chinese communities in Australia into her story at the point when she went to school in Australia. At High School ‘Greek kids’ bullied her. However, she viewed this as ‘not horrific’ but not a happy time in her life either. But she also claimed that she was not one to take being pushed around when bullied and that she stood up for herself; again saying this may be one way of ‘saving face’.

Going to school was a point of social contact with other Australians who were not necessarily welcoming to Cambodian refugees. Her past experiences of being a refugee made Kheng more capable of withstanding experiences of bullying. She stated ‘So I mean it wasn’t horrific for me, this sort of thing is no big deal, it’s just that it wasn’t that happier time.’ Bullying after being a refugee for much of her life was ‘no big deal.’ So past experiences of being a refugee may have offered a sharp contrast to other life experiences and a vantage point for her to view experiences such as bullying from. Equally Edelmann has argued ‘saving face’ means that a social predicament is accounted for in a way that
‘denies it has negative consequences attached to it’ (1994, p. 240). Kheng made much of the fact that she became friends with the Chinese and Vietnamese students. This was possibly because they could empathize with her experiences. Kheng had spent some of her earlier years in Vietnam and sometimes identified herself as a Chinese-Cambodian person.

Kheng’s experience of bullying in secondary school points to some conflict in public national spaces. Previously Kheng had not experienced her identity as being at all marginal. Indeed there is nothing to suggest that she thought of herself as a Chinese-Cambodian until this point in her narrative when other Australian citizens, ‘the Greek kids’ in this instance, asserted their dominance by bullying her. I contend that ‘ethnicity’ emerged because of the social context that allowed for the experiencing of difference and claiming of particular identities like ‘Greek’ or ‘Chinese-Cambodian’. Ethnicity could be said to emerge when a social situation allows for the relative differences between groups of people to be experienced by them. Of course not all groups of people experience ‘ethnicity’ equally. The majority ethnic group, if placed in a dominant social position, can reject their ethnicity and categorize ‘others’ as being ‘ethnic’. In this regard ‘ethnic’ identity is entwined with the social context and the power to categorize others. ‘Ethnicity’ as an aspect of identity can be seen as emergent due to being contextually located. Janis Fook makes a case that ethnicity is experienced as emergent.

The idea of emergent ethnicity became attractive to me because it recognised that one's ethnic identity did not have to fit into preconceived classifications, defined through centuries of history and shared nationhood. Rather, ethnicity is constantly changing and developing as it takes account of new conditions. It also provides a label for my own ethnicity, one that is not fully conceived but in a process of construction as I discover, discount and reconceptualise new and old experiences. It is acceptable for me to be uncertain about my ethnic identity, to not have to claim that I am either Chinese, or Australian, or even Chinese-Australian. Sometimes I may be all, or any one of them, or none depending on the context and situation of the time (2001, p. 16).

Fook’s account of emergent ethnicity situates our ethnicity as being fluid, dynamic and situational. Further it might be said that the practices of others create the social context in which we understand our social location. So other people can make our ‘ethnicity’ felt and likewise make us claim other identities in a given situation. Cambodian storytellers’ told
how white Anglo-Saxon Australians acted in ways that both seemed to assert their spatial dominance and make a point of the perceived difference between themselves and the people I spoke with. For example Bo said that when she was going to high school she experienced verbal abuse by a white Anglo-Saxon Australian girl who was a similar age to her.

I remember one time I was using a public toilet in Springvale, and I went in this public toilet and there was this girl. And she pushed the [toilet cubicle] door open and she scared me yelling ‘Chinese – Asian whatever!’ She was a high school student herself and I thought ‘What a reaction!’ I mean I did not say anything to her. I just say ‘Oh okay.’ It was my first derogatory comment and it was in a public toilet from a girl in a school uniform. She was definitely not from a high school from our area, because the uniform is different.

Bo’s experience tells as much about white Anglo-Saxon Australians’ reactions to people who they see as different to them, as it does about her own life. The white Australian girl hurled abuse, whereas Bo did not. Bo said ‘Asian whatever’ rather than repeat word-for-word what the girl said to her. Significantly the white Australian girl, who pushed open the cubicle door, classified Bo as ‘Asian’. Hage (1998) argues that the categories used by white Anglo-Saxon Australians indicate that they conceive of non-white people as objects to be managed in the national space. He says

This is evident in the very categories used by the nationalist which treat the ‘other’ as an object to be managed…an object to be removed from the space of the nation…while treating the self as spatially empowered to position/remove this other (1998, p. 42).

The white Australian girl’s empowerment is evident in opening the toilet door and yelling abuse at Bo in a public space. Her use of the term ‘Asian’ in her treatment of Bo suggests that she regarded her as an ‘object’ to be positioned or removed from the national space. In this regard such actions again seem congruent with Hage’s theory that white Australian people see the national space as being structured around ‘white culture’ and non-white people as ‘objects’ to be moved or removed. Bo’s encounter also obviously made her feel different to the dominant white Anglo-Saxon culture. Encounters that attested to Cambodian refugees’ difference may have created a sense of ethnic identity that in Fook’s (2001) terms was ‘emergent’.
While going through high school Kheng experienced pressure on her to get an education by going to secondary school and to university, as well as juggling other roles in her family. She said, ‘Because I never had any stable education in my life it was different.’ Stable and ongoing education was quite different to her past experiences as a refugee. There was pressure on her to be her family’s envoy to English-speaking Australia, although initially her family used interpreting services.

Once we got here, and my English already workable, my dad didn’t use any services or anything like that at all! Every time he go somewhere he just take me along, to do all these sort of things. So I found that I had to mature very quickly, to grow up very quickly, to do so many things with him. I had to go shopping with him. I practically do everything for him. Like he will go somewhere and I will go along with him because of the English areas…I acted as banker and interpreter and everything for him…going to the bank, the phone and things, filling out form, everywhere I go, I have to do all these things. Due to this we barely use any interpreting service.

As a young woman Kheng was forced to become responsible for negotiating English-speaking Australia for her parents. She said that she had adapted quickly to speaking English because she already spoke some French. In this respect some of her past experiences were useful for her adapting to speaking a new language. Kheng helped her family as well as others in the Cambodian community. Yet she felt that being responsible for interpreting and negotiating for her parents was somewhat of a burden. This also suggests that she walked in both the world of Cambodian refugees and in the world of English speaking Australia.

*Religion and Communal Life*

Work and formal education, while involving a lot of time and energy, were not the only things Cambodian people did after they resettled in Australia. They also engaged in leisure time activities and religious activities. How can some of these activities be understood as part of life in Australia? First I turn to some of the leisure activities that people sometimes
talked about, but more usually showed me when I visited them. I then examine religious life in Australia.

I propose here that some so-called ‘leisure’ activities were actually significant ways that Cambodian people were using to manage traumatic past experiences intruding on their lives. I noticed that many activities outside of work seemed overwhelmingly repetitive in nature, like gardening, ping-pong, tai chi and exercises on gym equipment. My claim that these activities are repetitive is not to claim that repetition is intrinsic to these activities, but that Cambodian storytellers structured these activities into their lives to keep them busy when not at work. For instance, Lackanary said his workout on the gym equipment every morning was ‘like religion’. Working out on gym equipment may be sporadic but the way Lackanary did it every morning was as repetitive action and part of his routine to keep him busy. Let me elaborate further.

After one interview Kim showed me hundreds of Aloe-vera succulents planted row after row in his garden. He explained the propagation of them and told me how he worked in the garden every weekend. When Kim mentioned that he occasionally sold his Aloe-vera cactuses I asked him if he did this for money. He responded by saying, ‘Not everything is about money.’ When he was not at work Kim kept himself busy through gardening activities that had a component of relaxation and also formed a way by which he distracted himself from his memories of the Pol Pot regime. In this way narrators used certain activities to keep themselves busy when not at work and work activities.

According to Chan Cambodians see ‘Khmer illness’ as being resultant of ‘thinking too much’ (2004, p. 237). Chan also suggests that boredom or having nothing to do is not conducive to ‘healing’ (2004, pp. 237-8). In this regard keeping busy through long hours at work and through repetitive non-work activities may actually be a way of Cambodian people managing painful memories intruding on their lives in Australia.

Religion was a significant part the lives of the people who I spoke with. I concur with Smith-Hefner’s (1999, p. 37) suggestion Cambodians have a ‘practical’ Buddhism that integrates beliefs in spirits, ghosts and ancestor worship; it is ‘practical’ in that it is not necessary to go to pray at the wat regularly to be a Buddhist. However, Smith-Hefner also
emphasizes the relationship between Buddhist identity and Khmer identity in her research in the United States, and claims that rejection of Buddhism is seen to be a rejection of more broadly a Khmer cultural identity (Smith-Hefner 1999, p. 33). Furthermore she claims that 90% of Khmer are Buddhist (Smith-Hefner 1999, p. 32) and in this regard gives primacy to the relationship between a Buddhist identity and Khmer cultural identity.

In my research in Australia only half of the Cambodians I spoke with said that they considered themselves to be Buddhists. There was a far more complicated and contingent set of religious identities expressed by narrators than simply being Buddhist or Christian. Those who had converted to Christianity cited a number of reasons for their conversions. Lackanary said the following about becoming Catholic.

I became Catholic for too many reasons you know. Back in the camp Khao-I-Dang, Catholic Church used to help me quite a lot. Khao-I-Dang for example, it was terrible camp. There was not enough food, there was not enough water, and Catholic Church used to give me some money and help me a bit, a lot, not a bit a lot, so that’s how I became Catholic. Without them I would be in bad situation, they used to help me a lot.

This is congruent with Smith-Hefner’s (1999) claim that some aid workers attempted to convert Cambodian refugees to Christianity in the refugee camps. Long said he converted to Christianity while in the refugee camps on the Thai border. He said

When we come here one Australian family is member of the Kew Baptist church, they look after us and they take us to church and we feel that is the right thing to do, can’t see anything wrong with Christian [and] they are helping the refugee. They hand out, they go out overseas and help refugee, also we compare Buddhism in Thailand, although the refugees there, they never come and help. Like the Buddhists always stay in the wat and they don’t really come out and preach and help the poor people – us – like the Christian do, mind different I think. Because Buddhism…is like self sufficient, look after your self [and] don’t leave the wat to help people...

In this regard Long referred to the lack of help from Buddhists in the refugee camps as much as the assistance of Christians as being the reason why he converted. Cambodian refugees were active interpreters of the world around them rather and not passive vessels to
be filled with a new religion. Maly, on the other hand, put his conversion to Christianity down to a miracle of survival during the end of Pol Pot regime where he fell down to the ground exhausted and dying, then questioned if Jesus Christ was the ‘true god’ and miraculously he found himself able to stand and go on once more. He said

I was lying on the ground asking my father to help me, to take carry me to the shelter. I started to pray to god help me. They told me to hop up and move to the west. I couldn’t believe it, but I could get up, I had strength, I could pack up my things and carry them with a stick on my shoulder and one pack each side. I don’t know where the strength came from. I thought I was going to die! But instead of dying, I was able to carry things too. I wondered where the strength came from, but I didn’t know. I said ‘Please I used to believe in Buddha and the other spirits, but no-one would help me. I ask for the true-true god. Is it Jesus? Is it Jesus? Help please.’ Nothing else I ask for before, but this time I ask for help then I am strong again.

Maly prayed when he thought he was going to die and then found himself able to stand once more and go on. It also seemed that Maly felt that Buddha and the spirits had abandoned him. Phuoc said he was Confucian, whereas his wife Kien expressed an active Buddhist practice of going to the wat in Springvale to pray. For Phuoc his religion was lived everyday through his behaviour, in particular by helping others around him. Kien’s daughter, Bo said that she was Christian but still gave money to the wat in Springvale via her mother. Bo said this about religion

I was first baptised in the camp, but I don’t practice any one them exclusively, I go to temple as well. My mum is a practicing Buddhist and my dad is Confucian, but I am baptised Christian. I have to bring the candle when mum does her celebration and goes to the temple and on a special occasion she asks for donation, so I just give her my donation because I don’t go there often, but she does, and she takes my donation and puts it in on my behalf. In terms of Buddhism I guess they don’t care if you go to the temple or not, if you just donated it is counted.

In this respect Bo mixed the elements of each religion to her liking rather than seeing herself as exclusively Christian or Buddhist. Other people I spoke with told me that despite their conversion to Christianity they still had some connection with Buddhism. For
example, Lackanary said he was Catholic, but when he was visiting Cambodia he would give money to the monks if they came to his mother’s house. He still thought Buddhism was a ‘good religion’, as he said

I still like Buddhist. The whole family is still Buddhist and even if I go to Cambodia, if mum want to invite monks come to the house and offer them money, I give them, I still respect them. I’m not real fanatic now. Of course I am now Catholic but I still respect you know Buddhist monks, it’s still a good religion. Every now and then if I go to the temple I still offer some donation, like ten dollars, twenty dollars.

For Cambodian refugees it seems that religious identity was somewhat contingent, situational and temporal rather than a simple or fixed aspect of their lived identities. What I would tentatively suggest is that Cambodian narrators took on aspects of other religious identities as part of their generous respect to another culture’s belief systems and integrated ‘Christianity’ into a raft of identity formations. In this regard it is not that Khmer or Khmer-Chinese refugees who converted to Christianity became suddenly less culturally Cambodian, which is an extrapolation of Smith-Hefner’s position, but that they integrated Christian belief systems because of their generous respect towards others that stems from Cambodian cultural forms of respect and deference influenced by Buddhist teachings. Kien’s narrative elaborates upon this conception. When asked about her religious commitment she said

Still Buddhist, I don’t know if Buddhist, but I used to pray for my two ancestors. Pray for two when the Chinese New Year or they got this time of year and I cooking and pray for my ancestors to help me – for good luck something like that. Sometime I go to Pagoda – Pagoda is temple, but a lot of Cambodian I don’t know what the sort…mix…Ancestor and Buddhist. Not like Christian only go to church, nothing else, but we do all! Moslem only nothing else but we mix. I don’t care! I don’t care Moslem or Christian I don’t mind you know. I pray for ancestor, cooking for ancestor and sometime I go to Buddhist temple. Are you solo? Alone – solo, all now like that, they don’t care about, like my son.

Her view was that a lot of Cambodians ‘mix’ praying to their ancestors with Buddhism, therefore it seems not unreasonable that Cambodians would continue to ‘mix’ religious
beliefs and practices, including Christian ones, and integrate them into a raft of lived religious practice in Australia.

Some of the people I spoke with said that their religious practices were part of their reason behind them helping other people in Australia. However, I suggest that helping people was more than purely religiously motivated. As part of establishing their lives once more in Australia Cambodian narrators also told how they helped other people. The stories that people told about them helping others seemed to signify their transition from needing the help of others to then being in a position where they were able to help others. For example, Kim helped all of his remaining family members to emigrate from Cambodia to Australia.

All the rest of the family was back in Cambodia, then they slowly, slowly come to Australia. My last sister who is bigger than me, she come last. She came on ANZAC day on the twenty fifth of April 2003. So now my sister not even live two years in Australia yet… One by one they have come to Australia… I came here in February 1983 – more than twenty two years ago now, but slowly, slowly I have waited until my last family member just arrived. I feel so successful that it doesn’t matter that they just come – at least I sponsor them all. I am very successful.

Having found safety in Australia Kim set about helping his remaining family members. Although Kim expressed a complicated array of emotions towards his own lot in life, such as his resignation to his fate as a labourer in Australia, he saw himself as ‘successful’ in his struggle to help his family leave Cambodia. For Kim helping others was one of his successes in life. This was also part of Kim both forming his community and assisting the wider Cambodian community. Kheng also tried to sponsor her sister but was not successful. She also said that she helped others in Cambodian-Chinese community

My dad helped establish a social organization, which acted as a means of social support for the Chinese-Cambodian community in Melbourne... Initially it was the South Yarra Indo-Chinese association. So I was in there helping him as well, as sometimes they need people to pitch in. Sometime if I am free I will take the local people to see the doctors – talk to them and things like that.
Kheng spoke specifically about helping other Chinese-Cambodian refugees. She was not alone in this regard. Phuoc told of being part of Cambodian-Chinese committee

I am a member of the Cambodian-Chinese Association committee. It is a not for profit organisation. The committee aim is to help Cambodian-Chinese from Cambodia – also all the Chinese group can join in the community, because the community not so many. We can get a place permanently, but now is only in my house, sometimes in another friend’s house to run this committee. So maybe this year or next year we get some money and build a house for the community, for the Cambodian-Chinese, maybe next year we can establish. Just help people – gather them together place – because we come here long time…more than twenty years and as we get old we have the gather together.

Phuoc saw the role of the Cambodian-Chinese Association as helping more broadly Chinese people and playing an important part in the social activities of the aging Chinese-speaking community in Melbourne. Helping Chinese-Cambodians was part of Phuoc’s Confucian practice and part of him being a part of the wider Chinese speaking community in Melbourne. Some Cambodians discussed how they acted to both assist other Cambodians and other groups in Australian society. Chhon spoke about his work in the following way.

I do volunteer work with…Cambodian Association in Richmond. I work during in the day time and I go to the English class and continue advanced English classes at RMIT in the city for about two years and when I finish that one I apply to do an interpreting job at RMIT as well…I passed that one and I apply for interpreting and I get a job, that I do now as well two days a week. I got accreditation from RMIT…one from Canberra and one from RMIT while I was there in 1989. Still working part time at Jika-Jika [an indigenous community group] and part time at school, but I also register with TIS [Telephone Interpreting Service] doing interpreting but telephone only.

Chhon shifted roles from ‘refugee’ to ‘unemployed’ to ‘volunteer’ to ‘scholar’ to an ‘interpreter’ that helped Cambodians and then to a ‘worker’ that also helped indigenous people. There seemed a shift from relative powerlessness in Chhon’s narrative to an active engagement with the social world aimed at helping others. This also suggests that perhaps that past experiences of the Pol Pot regime and of being a refugee led Cambodian people to
question the meaning of that experience and transform themselves into roles to help others. Bo talked about trying to find a more general role for helping others as first a nurse and then as a social worker. She said

I knew that I wanted to help people…and work with people and I thought that being a nurse was the only way of working with people. Of course there are other professions, and later on I get to know Lew and he introduce me to social work and this is another option to work with people. I didn’t like nursing. The work experience make me hate nursing actually, because I did a lot of work experience in nursing home, and the attitude of people was bad. I was the second group of student that went through uni, because nursing training then was mainly done in hospital. Later on they introduce it to uni level and I was the second group of student to go into uni. And of course there was a lot of resentment from the older staff. ‘What do you know about nursing?’ ‘What do you know from school?’ ‘We work from the practical side!’ ‘Hands on!’ That kind of attitude and I didn’t like it, so I went to work with Lew in the welfare community centre as a volunteer, then later on I got a paid job as a welfare worker

In this regard Bo’s question is not how can I help Cambodian survivors? But instead, how can I help people? Some Cambodian people transformed themselves from being survivors of a violent regime to making it their aim to act to help others. This is similar to Judith Herman’s (1992) proposition that part of recovery from traumatic and violent past experiences is signified by a shift towards helping others who have experienced similar experiences. Although I do not want to suggest that ‘recovery’ in Herman’s (1992) sense of ‘stages of recovery’ had occurred. However, stories of helping others did indicate a sense of change in the way each storyteller saw himself or herself. Additionally, talking about the past did perhaps offer a way by which Cambodian people could take stock of their lives.

In this chapter I have outlined a range of experiences in Australia, and although some of these experiences seem to be common to narrators, there also seemed to be great differences between each narrator’s life experiences. The hostels were a place of both renewal and where narrators felt their initial ‘culture shock’ about the strangeness of another country. It was difficult starting again after losing everything, so Cambodian refugees worked long hours. This was partly to survive economically, but perhaps the hours worked were also a way of keeping busy and were one way of managing traumatic
past experiences. Resettlement also drew on Cambodian people’s pre-existing strengths, some of which came from their experiences of survival during the Pol Pot regime and some of which came from their experiences as refugees. But this is not to say that resettlement was not difficult, nor does it diminish the lasting and profound traumatic affect that the Pol Pot regime had upon them as people. It also seemed that certain aspects of Australian society did not stand up to narrators’ expectations. Australia was found to be not always a welcoming place. This is a comment as much about the conceptions of Australia as a nation held by white Australians, or in Hage’s (1998) terms ‘white nationalists’, as what it is about Cambodian peoples’ experience of resettlement. Cambodian narrators also experienced white Anglo-Saxon people asserting their spatial dominance in certain situations. Contextually this meant that in part a sense of ‘Cambodian identity’ emerged from Cambodian people’s experience with others who treated them as being different. If others treat a person as being different then this is formative of a sense of that person feeling that they are different! For Cambodian people resettlement was partly to also recognize difference in oneself through encountering the difference in others. Resettlement was a dialectical process where a person’s past experiences connected and resonated with their new experiences in another country. This process profoundly influenced a person’s identity. The following chapter examines the idea of ‘Cambodian identity’ in relation to the ten narrators’ life experiences.
Chapter 6: Identity and Narrative

If somebody ask me ‘Where are you from?’ I normally tell them ‘I came from Cambodia’ but I consider myself Cambodian-Australian. I mean, technically Cambodia is no longer my country… – Lackanary

In the previous chapters I have begun to elucidate the experiences of survivors of the Pol Pot years who became refugees. In doing this I have had to deal with the differences and similarities of the experiences of Cambodian refugees. There has necessarily been a tension between the uniqueness of each person’s experiences and view of the world and the shared nature of such experiences and viewpoints, that is to say the push and pull between difference and sameness. When Chin described his experience of moving to Phnom Penh after his family home was destroyed in American bombing, he said, ‘A lot of people, a lot of house, a lot of family the same as me.’ Narrators made other claims like ‘Everyone stole food’ during the Pol Pot regime. The people I interviewed insisted on the shared nature of their experiences. Yet each narrator was obviously unique, but I did not want to obliterate the shared nature, or sameness, of many experiences of Cambodian refugees by emphasising the singularity or individual qualities of each experience. How then can ‘identity’ be understood in relation to the Cambodian refugee experience? Conversely and dialectically, how might the ‘Cambodian refugee experience’ contribute to a discussion of identity?

Cambodian narrator’s conceptions of identity

I begin this chapter with a discussion of how Cambodian narrators described themselves. In this regard, people positioned themselves in these descriptions as they spoke about themselves. Implicit in each story was an identity, a story of self in social settings. In telling these stories we are again and again confronted with the puzzles of identity and narrative.
The descriptions by Cambodians of themselves tell of the possible ways by which Cambodian refugees could access various discourses of race, ethnicity, multiculturalism and national identity in Australian society. In this way the conceptions of identity spelled out by the people I interviewed also spoke to the conception by Cambodian refugees of their relationship to the dominant white Anglo-Saxon culture. Kim, for example, told me ‘people like to know’ where a person is from, and stated

My mother’s not Chinese, but my father has a Chinese background. Today I would say that I am an Australian citizen and I originally came from Cambodia. I am Australian now, as in 1985 I became an Australian citizen. If asked I say I am from Cambodia, as I can’t say I born in Australia, because I’m from Cambodia. Sometimes people like to know, because all Asian people they don’t know who you are or where you are from. Could be China. Could be from Vietnam. Could be from Thailand. Could be from Japan.

We see here how Kim initially structured his story around his Khmer-Chinese ancestry. In doing this he emphasised how important his past was to his sense of self. He then spoke about the impact that becoming an Australian citizen in 1985 had on his articulation of identity but also told of the limitations of national identity because he could not say he was born in Australia. He then asserted a Cambodian identity against the racial abstraction of ‘Asian’ and within a constellation of other ‘ethnic’ identities like Chinese, Thai or Vietnamese in multicultural Australia. Lackanary talked about Australia being a ‘multicultural country’ and said

If somebody ask me ‘Where are you from?’ I normally tell them ‘I came from Cambodia’ but I consider myself Cambodian-Australian I mean, technically Cambodia is no longer my country, because I don’t have Cambodian passport. I’m happy here, I work, and I got a house, my daughter born here. So of course Cambodia is my native country, I was born over there, I still got family over there. So it is still part of my life, but also because you live here, you work here, you belong to this country. So I always admire the country, what the country does for me you know? … Australia is a multicultural country. At work I got all sort different nationalities in the team so every now and then we talk about culture – religion. I think this is the best part of this country.
Lackanary considered himself a ‘Cambodian-Australian’ and in this regard constructed a hybrid identity as someone who was both Cambodian and Australian. He had an Australian passport, he owned a house and his daughter was born in Australia, all of which signified that he had acquired an ‘Australian’ aspect to his identity and noted that ‘technically’ he was no longer Cambodian in terms of his citizenship. This exposes the tension between national and cultural conceptions of identity for Cambodians who came to Melbourne as refugees. Lackanary understood that Australia was a multicultural country when he noted differences between his experience with other people at work when they talked about culture and religion and in this regard he conflated national and cultural identities.

It is obviously difficult to conceive of any meaningful discussion of Cambodian identity in Australia without placing such discussion in the larger context of the discourses of multiculturalism, the history of White Australia policy and the recent resurgence of anxiety about ‘race’. In the following discussion I attempt to provide some context for understand Cambodian expressions of identity and more broadly some context for the life experiences of those I spoke with in Australia.

At Federation in 1901, the new national government developed an immigration policy which excluded non-white immigrants. On the 1st of January 1901 Australia enshrined what would come to be known as the ‘White Australia policy’ by passing legislation that enabled the Commonwealth Government to exclude prospective migrants by using language tests (McMaster 2001, pp. 40-1). The tests were given to prospective migrants in a language they could not speak. The aim of the policy was to keep out non-White immigrants. Yet there were over 100,000 Chinese people in Australia who continued to live out their lives during the ‘White Australia’ years (Fitzgerald 2007, p. xii). Indeed, Fitzgerald argues that Chinese peoples’ lives during the White Australia era have been excluded from history by many historians (2007, pp. 5-7).

The policy aimed at restricting non-White immigration came to a slow shuddering demise. While some 15,000 Jewish refugees were accepted after World War II (McMaster 2001, p. 42) the language test component of the Act was only removed in the 1958 Migration Act (Jupp 2002, pp. 8-9). The policy was then modified in the 1960s but it would be the Whitlam government in 1972 that would remove ‘race, colour or creed’ as the basis for
immigration control (Jupp 2002, p. 10). Then in 1977 170,000 Indochinese refugees were admitted to Australia in the context of ‘boat people’ arriving on Australia’s northern shores (McMaster 2001, p. 52). Despite the demise of the White Australia policy The Courier Mail newspaper responded with headlines in 1977 of ‘It’s the Yellow Peril Again’ (McMaster 2001, p. 52). Don McMaster claims that the Vietnamese boat people, by their unorthodox direct arrival in Australia, appeared to challenge many fundamental tenets of Australia’s migration, quarantine, customs and even defence policy. The initial fears of an ‘invasion’ from the north dissipated as fewer than 2500 Vietnamese and Cambodian arrived by boat from 1976 until 1991. (2001, p. 52).

In this regard there is some evidence of anxiety about the arrival of non-white peoples to Australia. McMaster claims that ‘In the 1970s Australia implemented a ‘multicultural’ policy that recognised and celebrated cultural diversity within the Australian nation and identity. However, acceptance of multiculturalism was neither uniform nor smooth’ (2001, p. 6). Others like Stephen Castles argue that multiculturalism in Australia occurred as part of a gradual ‘cultural acceptance’ of an ‘ethnic’ middle class (1988, p. 67). Castles argues that ‘far from developing a fully-articulated ideology of state sponsored cultural pluralism, the Whitlam Government merely provided the preconditions for the emergence of such an ideology’ (1988, p. 57). Although several significant ideas did come out of the Whitlam era such as non-discriminatory immigration policy, an explicit rejection of assimilationism and reference to equity by Grassby (Castles 1988, p. 59).

Many people would point to the Whitlam era as the beginnings of Australian multiculturalism, in particular the policy direction under the Labor Minister of Immigration Al Grassby. But most people from Cambodia would arrive in the early 1980s after the Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser had ‘adopted’ multiculturalism. However, Fraser arguably moved towards accepting Vietnamese and Cambodian ‘boat people’ only because of public pressure (Gunn and Lee 1991). In this regard there were some obvious differences in the reactions by the Australians to ‘boat people’ fleeing Vietnam and Cambodia. The public outcry at the plight of Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees, which placed pressure on Fraser, suggests that not all Australians were hostile to Asian immigration.
James Jupp argues that although support for multiculturalism existed within the Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke governments, multiculturalism ‘as official policy has gone through a number of phases, corresponding to partisan reinterpretation and politicians’ assessment of public opinion’ (1991, p. 101). However ‘public opinion’ about non-white immigration may have also led to the rise of the nationalist party called One Nation in the ‘90s. Michel Wieviorka, although writing in a European context, argues that any reference to multiculturalism is not fixed and can refer to ‘multiculturalism as sociological fact,’ that is society is actually multicultural, or ‘multiculturalism as ideology’ and therefore as an ideal, or ‘multiculturalism as both political expression and effect’ generated out of particular historical and political circumstances (1998, p. 883). The many different stories about multiculturalism in Australia suggest that multiculturalism as an idea is contested.

Closer to when I interviewed people Australia had seen the rise and fall of the nationalist One Nation party, led by Pauline Hanson, which may have influenced interviewees’ narratives. Ien Ang says that the ‘spectre of Asianization’ arises ‘whenever the future of the nation is discussed – which is central to the politics of fear expressed in the discourse of Hansonism’ (2001, p. 133). Hanson’s maiden speech claimed

We have only 10 to 15 years left to turn things around. Because of our resources and our position in the world, we will not have a say because neighbouring countries such as Japan, with 125 million people; China, with 1.2 billion people; India, with 846 million people; Indonesia, with 178 million people; and Malaysia, with 20 million people are well aware of our resources and potential. Wake up Australia, before it is too late (1996).

Hanson (1996) would also claim that immigration was responsible for creating higher youth unemployment and divisions within cities, hence unless immigration was stopped Australia would no longer be ‘one nation.’ Amongst other things Hanson (1996) called for a rejection of ‘unskilled’ migrants ‘not fluent in the English language’ which would have targeted refugees. Ang (2001) sees Hanson’s speech as expressing an Australian racial and spatial anxiety. However, it is difficult to assess whether the views espoused by Hanson represent a ‘Redneck’ minority viewpoint or a much broader undercurrent in Australian life like Ang claims.
The story of refugees then got entangled in issues of terrorism and threat (Marr and Wilkinson 2003, p. 143). This entanglement occurred after the standoff between the Australian government and the Norwegian cargo vessel the MV Tampa. The MV Tampa had rescued 438 asylum seekers aboard a small sinking boat bound for Christmas Island on the 26th of August 2001 (Marr and Wilkinson 2003, pp. 8-9). Marr and Wilkinson argue that the then Federal government sought to link the Tampa incident with terrorism after the terrorist acts that saw two planes fly into the Twin Towers (2003, p. 154). Indeed Liberal Minister Peter Reith said in a radio interview ‘We cannot make assumptions’ about ‘Bin Laden appointees’ being aboard the boats (Marr and Wilkinson 2003, p. 154). The context in Australia likely influenced the views of the people I interviewed between 2003 and 2006.

Kien’s narrative reflected a conception of being Cambodian and being a refugee in relation to what she alluded to being a stigmatised identity position. She said

‘I am from Cambodia and we come here as the refugees.’ I told like that. Because some like friend and some refugee I told people like that. Because the government ask to come here we don’t have to pay nothing because we are very suitable. Nothing to hide, nothing to cover, because if you cover maybe people know, know now because…during my time I don’t know where is Australia, but now if I tell where I come from somewhere else, people don’t believe me maybe, and why not? Nothing to hide.

Kien first stated that if asked she’d say she was ‘from Cambodia and we come here as the refugees.’ Significantly Kien’s narrative suggested a stigmatised discourse about refugees, which was indicated by her stating that ‘we don’t have to pay nothing because we are very suitable,’ and ‘Nothing to hide, nothing to cover,’ and finally her repetition once more of ‘Nothing to hide.’ In one sense she is rejecting that Cambodian refugees are stigmatised, but in another sense her refutation indicates a felt stigma attached to being a Cambodian refugee. Compare this to Ang’s claim about the ‘desirable’ other in the more recent period of Australian immigration. She states

The Asianness imagined and represented here is one which is useful and flattering for Australia’s self-image and projected future: not quite the same but almost. To put it
differently, I am not a dispossessed refugee with no job and no proper linguistic skills living on welfare, but a westernised, highly educated professional whose English is almost fluent, a presentable and articulate Asian whose presence is arguably of economic and social benefit to the nation (Ang 2001, p. 148, original emphasis).

Ang points out that it is the specific qualities of immigrants that can make them either desirable ‘others’ or unwanted ‘others’ like ‘dispossessed refugees’. Ang argues identities are always historically located and in this case dependent on the ‘desire’ for a certain kind of ‘ideal’ immigrant where distinctions are made between different kinds of immigrants. Erving Goffman describes the reaction to a ‘less desirable’ identity manifest in perceptions of stigma where the person is ‘tainted’ or ‘discounted’ either by their own reckoning or in the eyes of others (1963, p. 3). In his account of ‘stigma’ Goffman allowed for complex possibilities including straight out discrimination by others through to internalised stigma in which we anticipate rejection or discrimination by others even when there is none on offer. Stigma can result in defensive behaviour or shame or attempts at concealment by those who are stigmatised according to Goffman (1963, pp. 6-9). People can also oscillate between accepting a stigmatised category and the opportunities for socializing with that group and rejecting the category and other people who are also stigmatised (Goffman 1963, p. 38).

Goffman differentiates between the imputed characteristics of social identity and that of personal identity. Social identity for Goffman (1963) relies on and is informed by certain information about individuals that then determines a range of reactions to that person, sometimes before they are known to them, as people are alerted to particular social identities from various signs. Such signs can give rise to either prestige or stigma depending on the context (Goffman 1963, pp. 43-6). In this regard when Kien said she had ‘nothing to hide’ she was refuting what she saw as a perceived quality of refugees as people with ‘something to hide’. In doing so she was ‘managing’ the stigma attached to being a refugee.

It is possible that some Cambodian people sought to reposition themselves in various ways in Australia that no longer made either their past as refugees or their ‘Cambodian’ identity the primary source of identity. Less than half of narrators claimed a ‘Khmer’ or ‘Cambodian’ identity, and even those who did sometimes pointed to one parent having a ‘Chinese’ background. For example, Lackanary said, ‘My dad he is real Khmer and my
mum has got Chinese blood.’ So a significant number of narrators said they had Chinese ‘ancestry’ but some claimed a more direct link to being Chinese. Phuoc for example asserted his Chinese identity very strongly throughout his life narrative. For instance when talking about his present life in Australia he told me about working for the Cambodian-Chinese Association. He said

I am a member of the Cambodian-Chinese Association committee, it is a not for profit organisation. The committee aim is to help ‘Cambodian-Chinese’ from Cambodia – also all the [other] Chinese groups can join in the community, because the community not so many.

So Phuoc emphasised his connection with the Chinese-Cambodian and Chinese communities via his committee work and by doing so positioned his identity as contingently Chinese in relation to these activities. Then telling his story about his early life in Cambodia before the Pol Pot years he said

I study in Phnom Penh for ten years, because I learn Chinese in Chinese school. I am sixteen…seventeen years…eighteen years when I finish high school, and then go to help my father look after restaurant.

Phuoc emphasised the point that his schooling was different to Cambodian schooling because it was distinctively Chinese. Specifically he said that he learnt Chinese as a language in a Chinese school, helping to make his point that speaking Chinese was part of his identity. Later when talking about the refugee camps Phuoc told me about the Chinese section of the camp which he contrasted to the Vietnamese section.

The Chinese section and Cambodian section were a metre apart, and the Vietnamese separate. Chinese and Cambodian-Chinese and Cambodians can mix together, Vietnamese separate. The fence surrounds the section and in the middle there was a waterway.

In this way Phuoc noted the separation of his identity as a Chinese refugee from Vietnamese refugees, a separation grounded in the physical separation in the camps. So he positioned himself as being different to the Vietnamese refugees, despite both groups of
people being in the same situation. Later Phuoc told me about his son’s wedding and reflected on the cultural differences between ‘Cambodian’ and ‘Chinese’ weddings.

The Chinese people wedding compared to Cambodian wedding [is a] little bit different. Many people come and gather together and celebrate, Chinese just like that. Cambodian must get the monk: people who wear the yellow [and] live in Pagoda. Cambodian wedding people cut the hair. They don’t have the monk in the Chinese wedding. Chinese don’t do the hair cutting.

In pointing out the differences to me he took ownership of Chinese culture by specifying the differences between a Cambodian wedding and a Chinese wedding. Phuoc also told me that he spoke the Hainanese Chinese dialect at home, but that they ‘sometimes speak Khmer as their son’s wife is Cambodian’. Again he seemed to be claiming a Chinese identity that rested both on language and in his family origins in the island of Hainan. Phuoc’s Chinese identity was not just broadly national but it was also grounded in a specific place in China, and hence regional.

Phuoc strongly asserted a Chinese identity, even though he was born in Cambodia, survived the Pol Pot regime and fluently spoke Khmer. This was part of who he was. Equally having access to a Chinese identity also allowed him shape his identity as being Chinese instead of being a Cambodian refugee. In this regard Phuoc could say that he was Chinese and originally from Hainan if someone asked rather than saying he was a Cambodian refugee. It is possible that being able to legitimately claim another identity was a way that Phuoc sought to manage a stigmatised refugee past.

Claiming other identities may be a way that some Cambodian storytellers engaged in actively shaping how others people saw them as. For instance, Kheng’s narrative rejected an ‘Asian’ identity and claimed an ‘Australian’ identity. She said

You have to face the fact even in Australian society – as we are multicultural country, but every one of us have a bit of racism in our background, but they can’t help it. They see you and say ‘What nationality are you?’ I say to them ‘I’m Australian.’ And then they’ll say ‘I know you’re Australian, but where did you come from before that?’ If I am in a good mood
then I say ‘I come from Cambodia.’ Now I’m a little bit more matured I’m used to this sort of thing. I’m not so aggressive, whereas before I used to be very aggressive, when people asked me ‘Where are you from?’ My next answer would be – I get very cheeky – and say ‘I come from Oakleigh.’ That’s what I do to people when I’m being cheeky, but normally I say I come from Cambodia. I couldn’t be bothered with it anymore. I live in this country and I pay taxes. I study here. I grew up here. If you ask everyone ‘Would you really want to leave the country?’ I’d say no, but where you cannot live there anymore, you have to go. Like if you have got a good home same thing with a country. I see that there is something that they ask. Initially when I come to this country I get really offended, but now that I have grown older and understand a bit more, bit more matured, I just sort of assume that other people are ignorant. White people are considered real ‘Australians’. The fact that we are different in the sense that being different doesn’t mean that we are bad, it is just that we are different. So as soon as we go somewhere we get noticed instantly that we are different. Whereas you can have a hundred of Italian or Greek or whatever that can come in and they will be able to blend in. Whereas for us and the fact that we are so different to the expectation of the ‘Australian’ – the white Australian, so they just pick us out like that. Dutch and Ukrainian immigrants didn’t face the same racism as Cambodian people. They don’t have the same problem. Because they, they have the fair complexion and they got their colour they can mix in! They can come here one day and they still think that they are Australian. I think the good conclusion, because I live here so long, I get used to the life here, so I consider myself an Australian, but what do you qualify as an Australian in this country is my question?

Kheng rejected the attempt of others to name her identity altogether by humorously subverting the question of national identity by answering questions about where she came from by saying ‘I come from Oakleigh’ the suburb that she lived in. She asserted her Australianness as a national identity, signified in part by saying that she paid taxes and had completed her secondary and tertiary study in Australia. Her narrative was assertive and funny and designed to shift others’ perception of her identity. She saw Cambodian refugees as standing out because in her words they were ‘so different’. This could also be because of feeling that being a Cambodian refugee was to hold a stigmatised identity position. Additionally Kheng claimed a sense of being different in relation to ‘the White Australian’ and noted the inability of Cambodians to blend in like Dutch or Ukrainian immigrants have been able to because of their white skin. In this regard she noted how
‘real’ the experience of ‘race’ was for her in Australia, despite being critically aware of the socially constructed character of various national, racial and cultural identities. This left Kheng wondering what she should ground her Australian identity in, and in this respect her use of ‘what’ and not ‘who’ was significant as she questioned the particular qualities that constitute an Australian identity.

In many ways storytellers used terms like Chinese, Cambodian, Khmer and Australian quite strategically. This is not to concede the ontological reality of ethnic or national identities, but rather to acknowledge that many storytellers did claim particular identities through their life stories. In making sense of these stories about ethnic identity how much can we rely on or use the theoretical literature on identity? I will argue that it seems that the various theoretical conceptions of identity, despite highlighting the socially and historically contingent, situational, and contextual dynamics of identity formation still rest upon binary, essentialist or fundamental framings of identity even when their proponents are seemingly opposed to these essentialist conception in their taking opposition to them. I go on to suggest that a narrative conception of identity may be useful and contribute a more useful account identity and that along with this viewpoint comes a certain moral responsibility to simply listen to others.

**Theories of identity**

The literature on identity is vast. The purpose of the discussion within this chapter is not to address all of the literature on identity, but discuss some ideas about identity which have a resonance with Cambodian storyteller’s accounts and conceptions of themselves. It has been noted that ‘identity’ often is conflated with ‘essentialist (pre-political) singular categories (Somers 1994, p. 605). I contend that a narrative conception of identity may be of great use as an understanding of identity that avoids reductionist, universal, singular, or essentialist and primordial conceptions of identity. Such an understanding may also provide a theoretical bridge between existing theories of ‘ethnic’ identity and personal identity, as it is able to account for the idea that experience shapes identity. Such work can also contribute towards understanding the identities of Cambodian refugees in Australia. In
In this regard, my use of ‘Cambodian refugees’ thus far has been a problematic, but necessary, narrative device. So, what theories have a resonance with ‘Cambodian’ narratives?

Ien Ang, drawing on her own experience, contends that ‘Chineseness’ then, at the time, to me was an imposed identity, one that I desperately wanted to get rid of’ (2001, p. 28). She says ‘it is the very question of ‘where are you from?’ – a question so easily thrown up as the bottom line of cultural identity (thereby equating cultural identity with national identity) – which is a problem for people like me, as it lacks transparency’ (Ang 2001, p. 30). In this regard Ang expresses the entanglement of cultural and national identity as being problematic, although elsewhere she favours ‘mutual entanglement’ as a process of hybridisation (2001, p. 87). The key difference for Ang seems to be the social situation, where entanglement between cultural and national identities is imposed in the former instance and selected in the latter. The problem of the entanglement between national and cultural identity expressed by many Cambodian narrators is consonant with Ang’s thinking. She argues for an ‘undoing’ of both the diaspora and ‘Chineseness’ and sees such discourses owing their existence to globalization and the erosion of the nation state (Ang 2001, p. 76) and also the maintenance of an essentialist conception of identity (2001, p. 92).

Ang favours examining the shifting borders of culture, nation and diaspora and ‘the processes of hybridisation’ (2001, p. 87) because Chinese immigration has led ‘to a blurring of the original limits of ‘the Chinese’: it is no longer possible to say with any certainty where the Chinese end and the non-Chinese begin’ and such a line ‘would amount to a form of discursive reductionism, if not symbolic violence’ (2001, p. 88). But then also claims

> It is in these border zones that the fuzziness of the identity line, the fundamental uncertainty about where the Chinese end and the non-Chinese begins, can best be recognized and empirically examined (Ang 2001, p. 88).

Ang’s point is that there is, or at least there should be, a fundamental uncertainty about ascribing national, cultural or ethnic identity. The people I spoke with share some of this uncertainty. However, Ang’s work still relies on a notion of ‘Chinese identity’ even though she says she is opposed to any singular or fundamental idea about Chinese identity. Ang at least has opened up the possibility of exploring of the limits of ethnic identity and where it
ends and where it can be ‘recognized’, but also paradoxically closes it off by claiming that
drawing such a line involves ‘discursive reductionism, if not symbolic violence’ (2001, p. 88). The tensions this conception of ‘identity’ point to the problem of integrating
conceptions of both ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’ within a singular conception of hybrid
identity.

Janis Fook (2001) has argued for a conception of ‘emergent ethnicity’ which is congruent
with Cambodian narrators’ stories of themselves and their accounts of their identities. She
states

The idea of emergent ethnicity became attractive to me because it recognised that one's
ethnic identity did not have to fit into preconceived classifications, defined through
centuries of history and shared nationhood. Rather, ethnicity is constantly changing and
developing as it takes account of new conditions. It also provides a label for my own
ethnicity, one that is not fully conceived but in a process of construction as I discover,
discount and reconceptualise new and old experiences. It is acceptable for me to be
uncertain about my ethnic identity, to not have to claim that I am either Chinese, or
Australian, or even Chinese-Australian. Sometimes I may be all, or any one of them, or
none depending on the context and situation of the time (Fook 2001, p. 16).

Here Fook emphasizes the contingent and socially situated character of ‘ethnic identity.’
As I have argued, the people who spoke with me told me about some experiences in
Australia that led them to feel ‘different’. In this regard it can be suggested that their
‘ethnicity’ emerged in the course of their experience with other Australians. However,
again the idea of ‘emergent’ and situational identity still depends on a notion of being
‘Chinese’ or ‘Australian’ even if it is socially situational, contextual, contingent and
uncertain. In this regard, while ‘emergent ethnicity’ is set up in opposition to essentialist,
primordial and universal categories of identity, it still remains dependent on them. That is
‘emergent ethnicity’ depends on the point which ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’ is
experienced. Therefore it may be most useful when describing the moments at which
‘ethnic identity’ is experienced, rather than dealing with a person’s continuing identity in
their social world; after all narrative must still be resorted to when locating the ‘emergent'
moment. ‘Emergent ethnicity’ and narrative identity I go on to argue are somewhat closely aligned.

Stella Ting-Toomey makes the point apropos intercultural adaptation and identity that when

…conceptualizing the intercultural adaptation process, the theme of identity being – identity becoming can best serve as a metaphor that reflects the oscillating movements of the newcomer’s identity change process (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 234).

Ting-Toomey’s conception of identity suggests it is both a process as a person experiences another culture, and a residual effect based on previous cultural identity. In this respect the idea of intercultural adaptation takes into consideration changes in a person’s conception of identity over time. Ting-Toomey suggests a person goes through a number of stages when they encounter a new culture, which engages them in adaptation and management of identity change (1999, pp. 248-50). Ting-Toomey’s conception of intercultural adaptation is resonant with Cambodian narrator’s experiences of change over time. This experience is caught in some simple ways. Kim spoke about his initial disappointment with the appearance of the Melbourne suburbs, but then said, ‘now I like the house with trees and backyard.’ Kim also told of his conception of his national identity changing over time after he became an Australian citizen in 1985. He said that when asked he would say, ‘I am an Australian citizen and I originally came from Cambodia.’ The people I spoke with could all tell stories about how their conceptions of identity shifted over time in a process of intercultural adaptation much as Ting-Toomey suggests. The account of the process of intercultural adaptation is as Ting-Toomey suggests, only possible when grounded in a notion of ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’ as people encounter another culture different to their own and begin to make decisions about what they take on board. Ting-Toomey’s (1999) work takes temporality into account when thinking about identity change. However this historical sensibility must necessarily use a narrative to conceive of the possible differences in a person’s sense of who they are over time. In this respect, Ting-Toomey’s (1999) thinking approaches and implicitly incorporates aspects of narrative identity. Again Ting-Toomey’s conception of identity, despite being dynamic and its ability to account for change still rests upon the premise that there is an ‘ethnic identity’ which is then exposed to another culture, which forces it to undergo ‘change’. As she states
As a specific phenomenon, ethnic identity encompasses the unique history, traditions, values, rituals, and symbols of a particular ethnic group. As a general phenomenon, ethnic identity in a pluralistic society is a composite construct that involves ethnic group belonging and the larger cultural identity issues (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 256).

There seems no doubt about the existence of ‘ethnic identity’ for Ting-Toomey, as she posits the ‘realness’ of the experience of having such an identity. This suggests a lived ‘reality’ to the experience of holding ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ identity. The people I spoke with seemed to rely on some conception of ‘race’. For instance, Kheng used the term ‘Asian’ and Bo used the term ‘Caucasian’, although both used these terms as if they were problematic ones. Jan Pettman for one has observed that in Australia although ‘race as a biological concept was…officially discredited, those groups that had been previously racialised were now constituted as cultural groups’ (1992, p. 12). She adds that the ‘old boundaries remained the same, this often meant the cultural referents continued to signify race, and to validate the boundaries that had been drawn in dominance and for the purposes of control’ (1992, p. 12). Pettman’s (1992) suggestion that ‘racial’ categories were simply relabelled as ‘ethnic’ categories suggests that in the Australian social context, ‘racial’ and ‘ethnic’ identities have become entwined as markers of difference. ‘Race’ can be transformed into ‘ethnicity’ and both can be seen as ‘real’ or conversely as ‘not real’. Pettman’s account of the shifting categories of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ in Australia certainly suggests an ongoing change in identity formations over time. It also points to shifts in the ways in which such conceptions of identity operate discursively and further points to the importance of the ways by which identity can be socially narrated. Linda Martin-Alcoff (2002) goes so far as to confer ontological status on ‘race’ given its sheer persistence over time. She argues that

Refusing the reality of racial categories as elements within our current social ontology only exacerbates racism, because it helps conceal the myriad effects that racializing practices have had and continue to have on social life, including philosophy. In claiming that race is an ontological category, I do not mean to say that we should begin by treating it as such, but that we must begin by acknowledging the fact that race has been real for a long time. And I am not putting this forward as strategic essentialism: the claim that race is philosophically salient is not merely a strategic claim but a truth claim (Alcoff 2002, p. 16).
Alcoff seems to be highlighting the ways in which despite the ‘socially constructed’ character of racial or ethnic identities people still experience such identities as ‘real’. That is to say such categories of ‘identity’ constitute a fundamental assumption about the social world made by people going about their day-to-day lives. Alcoff claims that ‘race’ is experienced differently by different people depending upon the cultural context (2002, p. 17). This does not mean of course that ‘race’ is experienced in a singular fashion. But that

The problem with the social constructionist, anti-essentialist view that we should give up the language game of ontology altogether is that we are then left with a reduced ability to offer deep descriptions of reality; descriptions which can differentiate between more and less significant and persisting features of reality. The weakness of a strict social constructionist approach is that it tends towards flattening out all descriptive categories as having equal (non-)metaphysical status (Alcoff 2002, p. 17, original emphasis).

In this regard there is a danger of treating ‘identity’ in ways that render it non-real, abstract, disembodied and disconnected from ‘reality’. How might then ‘identity’ be understood better in relation to the ‘reality’ of ‘ethnicity’ or ‘race’ without ending up in reductionist and essentialist framings? In the following section I propose that ‘narrative identity’ offers a solution to this problem. The preceding chapters have placed Cambodian narrators’ descriptions of their experiences in their social, political and historical context. However, such experiences have also undoubtedly shown each narrator’s life to be individual and their experiences unique. In this regard there is a plurality of experience and differences manifest in the lives of these people, despite the fact that they lived in and made choices in a shared social, political and historical context. This points to some problems with simply describing a narrator as ‘Cambodian-Australian’ or ‘Khmer-Chinese’ if this implies a singular ‘identity’ based on ‘sameness’.

**Narrative identity**

That is to say that there is a problem if we treat ‘identity’ in ways that imply ‘sameness’. For instance, if Phuoc claims a Chinese identity this implies some ‘sameness’ between him and others who also claim a ‘Chinese’ identity. It is possible, that in the same way that
some people from Mainland China who met Ien Ang (2001) did not regard her as ‘Chinese’, that Phuoc might not be seen as being Chinese by others who see also themselves as Chinese. After all he was born in Cambodia, now lives in Australia, speaks Hainan in preference to Cantonese or Mandarin, and is married to a non-Chinese person who identifies as Khmer – Cambodian. Phuoc also differs from many other Australians who identify as ‘Chinese’ because he lived through the Pol Pot regime. The Cambodian refugees I interviewed clearly demonstrated the plurality of their identities when they spoke about their own lives. One way to deal with the issue of identity has been proposed by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1992), who articulated the problems of what qualities constitute ‘identity’ and pointed to the idea of ‘narrative identity’.

It has been claimed that the social sciences after the 1960s experienced a turn to narrative (Somers 1994; Somers and Gibson 1994; White and Epston 1989) and incorporated narrative into various epistemological frameworks grounded in disciplines like anthropology and psychology. Margaret Somers, for example, argues that there has been a shift from narrative as a representational form towards narrative as ontology (Somers 1994; Somers and Gibson 1994). This is only to say that narrativity and storytelling are a fundamental part of social life. Somers and Gibson claim that ‘social life is itself storied and narrative is an ontological condition of social life’ (1994, p. 38 original emphasis). The shift towards narrative occurred partly because that metanarratives, like ‘progress’ or the Marxist story about the transition from feudalism to capitalism to communism, came under increased critical scrutiny as part of what the postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard called ‘the postmodern condition’ (1979, p. xxiv). Lyotard’s challenge to metanarrative was less about narrative and more about reliance on essentialist or universal conceptions of identity. Lyotard nonetheless treated this narrative form optimistically in its ability to describe social life compared to science.

In the first place, scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity…I do not mean to say that narrative knowledge can prevail over science, but its model is related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality next to which contemporary scientific knowledge cuts
a poor figure, especially if it is to undergo an exteriorization with respect to the ‘knower’ and an alienation from its user even greater than has been the case (1979, p. 7).

In short, the social can be carved out using narrative forms. While essentialist notions of identity are problematic there is still a reality to the lived experience of identity. What is needed is not the complete destruction of ‘identity’ but rather some account of the ways in which ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’ can be considered within a framework of ‘identity’ that is not dependent on universal or essentialist premises.

This is the value of the work of Paul Ricoeur (1992) who attempted to overcome the paradoxes of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ while preserving some idea of identity. He makes problematic the notion of personal identity. How, he asks, can one be at once different to others and with oneself and have a singularity and sameness with oneself? For example, as people we are completely different to ourselves when we are five years old, to when we are twenty years old, to when we are eighty years old, yet we are also the same and singular.

Time then, for Ricoeur, poses a basic challenge to any claim about ‘sameness’ and identity (1992, p. 117). An example of this is when Kim talked about his life being really different now compared to back in the Thai refugee camps. He said

It’s different now. Here really different too. Really different. Go to work, it change my life, it change my mind, because when you go to work you have to put your gloves on, don’t cut yourself, don’t hurt your back, everything safety, safety, safety. In Cambodia not just cut your finger, it can cut your whole head. Nobody say ‘Don’t do it maybe you cut your head.’ No. Nobody say that, because not that worry.

Living in historical time means simply that Kim changed his life and his mind. In this respect he is a different person today, but also the same person that experienced the refugee camps. For Ricoeur the maintenance of ‘character’ as identity may occur through ‘the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same’ through time (1992, p. 119). Further, a ‘character’ is what makes one person distinguishable from another (Ricoeur 1992, p. 121). Ricouer addresses the paradoxical relation between the notion of ‘identity results from comparison’ or difference and the ‘singular idea of identity of a thing with itself’ or sameness (1992, p. 125). In other words
he has addressed the question of what constitutes ‘identity’? He argues that the criterion of identity grounded in memory of oneself is problematic (1992, p. 126). He is also sceptical of the ‘reductionist thesis’ which treats identity in terms of the connectedness between life events belonging to a person, in either physical or mental ways, to a ‘mineness’ of experience. He finds this troublesome because of the necessary split between body and mind and the separation of the person from their brain and their experiences (1992, pp. 131-2). Ricoeur insists on the ambiguity of a person’s experiences in their belonging to them. In this regard he contrasts the ‘mineness’ of ‘my’ identity with the connectedness of a life to others (1992, p. 138). In other words the very shared nature of experience in social life calls into the question ‘who’ that ‘experience’ belongs to. He says ‘if my identity were to lose all importance in every respect, would not the question of others also cease to matter?’ (1992, p. 139). In summary his concern is with the ascription of identity or more specifically the ways we impute to ‘identity’ certain qualities of memory or selfhood. Most critically he has argued that our identities as human beings only matter in relation to others.

We can now return to the problems suggested by the dilemma involved in the articulation by Cambodian narrators of their identity in a non-reductionist and non-essentialist manner. Conceptions of identity that rest upon an essential or universal and singular conception, often taken as unifying connections, such as cultural and national identities like ‘Cambodian-Australian’ or ‘Chinese’ or even ‘class’ or ‘gender’ cannot necessarily take into consideration the differences and contradictions that a person may experience as part of their day to day identity in the social world. Yet people are not entirely different from each other, in the sense of being fundamentally alien to one another, evident in the fact that we can communicate with one another. Ricoeur has argued the need to constitute identity in narrative terms so as to overcome the problems of treating identity in terms of either ‘difference’ or ‘sameness’.

Understand in narrative terms, identity can be called, by linguistic convention, the identity of the character. This identity will later be placed back into the sphere of the dialectic of the same and the self. But before this, I shall show how the identity of the character is constructed in connection with that of the plot (1992, p. 141).
From this simple reminder of the notion of emplotment, and before any consideration of the
dialectic of characters which is its corollary, it results that the narrative operation has
developed an entirely original concept of dynamic identity which reconciles the same
categories that Locke took as contraries: identity and diversity (Ricoeur 1992, p. 143).

In this regard Ricoeur treats the ‘character’ and the ‘plot’ as caught in a dialectical tension.
We ascribe certain attributes to a character and the character ascribes certain attributes to
the ‘plot’. In this respect Ricoeur attempts to reconcile identity and diversity or in other
words ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ by means of the very form of narrative.

The decisive step in the direction of a narrative conception of person identity is taken when
one passes from the action to the character. A character is the one who performs the action
in the narrative. The category of character is therefore a narrative category as well, and its
role in the narrative involves the same narrative understanding as the plot itself. The
question is then to determine what the narrative category of character contributes to the
discussion of personal identity. The thesis supported here will be that the identity of the
character is comprehensible through the transfer to the character of the operation of
emplotment, first applied to the action recounted; characters, we will say, are themselves
plots (Ricoeur 1992, p. 143).

In other words the character (and their identity) can only be understood through
emplotment in a story. Vitally for Ricoeur, it is in the narrative that the attribution of
certain characteristics to a character or an identity is (re)established. The character is given
the initiative to act by the term of the plot and so they ascribe a beginning, a middle and an
end to their actions within their narrative, which shifts the power, for Ricoeur, from the
narrative determining their actions to the character (Ricoeur 1992, p. 147). As he notes

Because of the concordant-discordant synthesis, the contingency of the event contributes to
the necessity, retroactive so to speak, of the history of a life, to which is equated the identity
of the character. Thus chance is transmuted into fate. And the identity of the character
emploted, so to speak, can be understood only in terms of this dialectic… The narrative
constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in
constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of
the character (Ricoeur 1992, pp. 147-8).
Simply put, it is the story told by the character that ‘constitutes’ their identity. In this respect my work here has attempted to tell the story of the Cambodian narrators through their stories of themselves. While narrative constitutes identity, experience is constitutive of narrative. In this regard when Ricouer points to the identity of the character, this is, in part, done by the narrative plot. He claims life experiences, as events, are vital to the ‘plot’ and hence to the character and the attributes given to their identity. To avoid any determinism he also introduced the radical notion that a ‘character’ is given the ‘initiative’ to act as an agent, but admits that there are both agents and ‘sufferers’ who experience the power of those who act (1992, p. 145).

What I propose is that ‘identity’ in a ‘real’ or ontological sense can only be known, although obviously in a limited fashion, through narrative. Hence the ‘identity’ of ‘Cambodian refugees’ can be described through narrative in a way that avoids ‘identity’ becoming an abstract category detached from the lives of those who it seeks to describe. In summary, narrative identity can take into consideration how identity changes over time as a process (Ting-Toomey 1999) as well as a contingent, situational and emergent character of identity (Fook 2001), as well as taking into account the indeterminacy of identity in the process of hybridisation (Ang 2001). Narrative identity can also tell of the social and historic ‘reality’ of identity, while maintaining a critical stance towards reductionist and essentialist categories of identity. This, I contend, is due to the potential of narrative to integrate ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ within the same subject position. Ricoeur interwove the shared character of the stories of our lives when he wrote

[I]n our experience the life history of each of us is caught up in the histories of others. Whole sections of my life are part of the life history of others - of my parents, my friends, my companions in work and in leisure. What we said above about practices and about the relations of apprenticeship, cooperation, and competition that they include confirms this entanglement of the history of each person in the histories of numerous others (1992, p. 161).

In this way it is possible to insist upon the collective, shared nature of the experiences of survival of the Pol Pot regime by Cambodian narrators, and indeed perhaps the shared
character of the history of atrocity within the 20th century. However, obviously positing a non-essentialist conception of identity by means of narrative identity does not alleviate the problematic questions of representation of ‘others’ that are different to oneself. But ‘narrative identity’ does seem to advance the idea that one must listen to another’s experiences of the world and engage in a dialogue across differences, perhaps through the shared qualities of human vulnerability and the fragility of life that we all surely experience. Undoubtedly, Cambodian refugee narratives speak of the strength and resilience of human beings, but they also tell of how fragile we are.

**Representation, responsibility and dialogue**

In the preceding chapters I have presented some small part of the Cambodian refugee experience in narrative form. Through this method I have attempted to plot out a non-essentialist character of Cambodian refugee identity through the layering of narratives one after another. In doing this I addressed some questions of identity and representation. I argue that such narrative and descriptive detail was necessary to grasp the possibility of a non-essentialist (non-reductionist) thesis of identity, as developed in this chapter. Questions of representation of how to represent social life, relations and action adequately are vitally important in the social sciences. The question of the adequacy of representation (mine and others) is not of course solved by appealing to Ricoeur’s account of narrative identity. As any number of critics have pointed out who tells the story continues to matter.

Alcoff (1995), for example, suggests that progressive voices have been silenced because of questions of who has the authority to represent. She says while ‘the prerogative of speaking for others remains unquestioned in the citadels of colonial administration, among activists and in the academy it elicits a growing unease and, in some communities of discourse, it is being rejected’ (1995, p. 97). Critics have challenged the legitimacy of representation by largely white Anglo-Saxon English-speaking Western academics pointing to the reductionist and essentialist categories of identity employed by such academics, often with lasting and damaging consequences. Is there a basic problem with representation of others different to oneself?
Alcoff (1995) observes that there are two widely accepted claims. First ‘that where an individual speaks from affects both the meaning and truth of what she says and thus she cannot assume an ability to transcend her location’ (1995, p. 98). That is to say the social identity of the speaker ‘has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claims and can serve to authorize or de-authorize her speech’ (1995, p. 98). She also notes that it is widely accepted that a discursive danger within some positions of privilege ‘actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for’ (Alcoff 1995, p. 99). The effect has been a silencing of subordinated voices.

Spivak however points to the ways that two senses of representation can be tangled together. There is ‘representation as ‘speaking for,’ as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation,’ as in art or philosophy’ and that since ‘theory is also only ‘action’ the theoretician does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group’ (1988, p. 275). In the case of my project which involved representation of the experiences of storytellers, it was not entirely clear to me that I could disentangle both senses of representation Spivak points to. Spivak might well treat the representations of Cambodian narrators in the preceding chapters as merely a representation of my own devising. However, I have attempted to counter this tendency by placing the narratives of the people I interviewed in such a way that, to borrow Todorov’s words, the narratives can defend themselves. Spivak’s comments regarding the speaking position of ‘intellectuals’ in relation to ‘others’ is a relevant reminder of the relationships embedded in research across unequal speaking positions. She states

>[T]he other side of the international division of labor, the subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation, even if the absurdity of the intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved (Spivak 1988, p. 288).

Spivak’s comments on the speaking position of the ‘other’ in relation to the position of the intellectual still seem salient to me today. Avoiding representation will not result in dialogue across difference, nor is it conducive to the formation of relationships across difference. Spivak’s thinking seems to point towards the need for dialogue across difference, as for Spivak, the ‘other’, at moments, cannot speak, as they do not necessarily
even know the language to speak of their oppression across difference. In this regard, it could also be questioned if the ‘other’ can ever truly be known to the self.

Tzvetan Todorov (1999) in his challenging work on the question of the ‘other’ has usefully suggested that there are a number of ways in which people encounter and ‘know’ the other. Todorov suggests that it is possible to start from a point of putative equality that leads to see the other as identical to oneself. This can lead to assimilationism and the projection of one’s own values onto an other. Equally it is possible to start from a point of presumed difference that is then translated into terms of superiority and inferiority (1999, p. 43). There is also a danger of not seeing the other as ‘human and different at the same time’, as the other then becomes less than human or an object (Todorov 1999, p. 76). Another way is to become the other to understand oneself but at the cost of the destruction of one’s self (Todorov 1999, p. 101). Yet another way for people to encounter the other is to take pleasure in their power over the lives of that other, even if one finds the other to be ‘admirable’ in many ways (Todorov 1999, pp. 127-43). Todorov suggests that perhaps what is needed is an understanding of the other from the perspective of the other, in an anthropological sense (1999, pp. 219-26). He suggests that interpretation be put alongside the words of the ‘other’ rather than a replacement of their words by interpretation (Todorov 1999, p. 226), and it is in this moment that there is potential for dialogue between positions of difference (Todorov 1999, p. 239).

My hope is that I have engaged in dialogue across difference, and that I have presented such dialogue in a respectful manner. The challenge, declares Todorov, is for the other to be ‘discovered’. In this regard my hope is that I have not substituted my values and judgements for the values of others or that I invaded the world and absorbed or annihilated the other’s position. After all Todorov puts it

For the other remains to be discovered. The fact is worthy of astonishment, for man is never alone, and would not be what he is without his social dimension. And yet this is the call: for the newborn child, his world is the world, and growth is an apprenticeship in exteriority and sociality; we might say, somewhat cavalierly, that human life is confined between these two extremes, one where the I invades the world, and one where the world ultimately absorbs the I in the form of a corpse or of ashes. And just as the discovery of the
other knows several degrees, from the other-as-object, identified with the surrounding world, to the other-as-subject, equal to I but different from it, with an infinity of intermediary nuances, we can indeed live our lives without ever achieving a full discovery of the other (supposing that such a discovery can be made). Each of us must begin it over again in turn; the previous experiments do not relieve us of our responsibility, but they can teach us the effects of misreading the facts (1999, p. 247 original emphasis).

In this regard, my work, contributes towards an understanding of the lives of others who are both different to me and the same as me, and in this regard a little of the process of discovery of the ‘other’ that has made me more aware of the relative position of my own culture and subjectivity. To do this there must be a preparedness to listen, and a preparedness to hear something that we might not like to hear, both about the other and about ourselves. Todorov suggests that ‘to become conscious of the relativity (hence of the arbitrariness) of any feature of our culture is already to shift it a little, and that history (not the science but its object) is nothing more than a series of imperceptible shifts’ (1999, p. 254). Following this, my work has been transformative to my perception of myself as being ‘different’ and the ‘same’ as ‘others’ and of my ‘memory’ which now contains a little something of the memories of ten Cambodian storytellers.

In this way it is important to remember the past and speak of the ways that such memory constitutes who we are as people – as part of humanity. This memory should not just be a memory of our own unique pasts, nor of the specific past only of our society, but a historic memory of the experiences of the other, of their suffering and of the atrocities which they may have faced as people. As alongside this recognition comes the realization of them having the same rights as the privileged few relatively safe inside Western liberal democracies, who experience no pressure to know the other as people the same as themselves and different to themselves. In the following chapter I explore the character of moral memory in light of the Cambodian experience detailed in the preceding chapters.
Chapter 7: Memory and Experience

_I reckon many Cambodian people would like to express their experience during Pol Pot, for anyone that is interested to listen._ - Chhon

Our memories can evoke a powerful range of emotions. Some memories pain us, like sharpened knives in our guts. Other memories are murderous and come at us in the middle of the night to strangle us in our sleep. Other memories are like precious gemstones in the crowns of our personal histories. And some memories are scars.

In this chapter I explore some of the meanings that are connected to memory for the Cambodian people who spoke with me. This discussion of memory relates to the previous chapter as memories of experience inform both narrative and identity. In this regard my thesis also acts mnemonically as a way of recording Cambodian memories and the memory of atrocity in the twentieth century. Further, the discussion of memory from the perspective of Cambodian narrators, may also contribute to thinking about the puzzles set loose when we talk of the social character of memory. I also respond to several questions about memory. What is memory? How reliable is memory? How do we remember? And how do we live with painful memories?

Why is memory important? Memory is a way of both apprehending experience and a way of knowing what happened to Cambodian refugees living in Melbourne at the beginning of the twenty first century. If the people who I spoke with were interviewed again twenty years later the way they remember and tell their story may have changed. Rose suggests that processes of recording memory change the memorial process and ‘freeze it, and imposing a fixed linear sequence upon it, they simultaneously preserve it and prevent it from evolving and transforming itself with time’ (1993, p. 61). Memories may change if the same narrators were interviewed again at a later time because the social meanings available to narrators that shape memories may have also changed.
However, this is not to deny the incredible capacity and persistent nature of human memory despite ‘our cells changing a million times over’ as suggested by Rose (1993, p. 3). Cambodian peoples’ memory suggests both an incredible will to remember and persistence of memory. Equally it suggests the impossibility of forgetting atrocity, despite perhaps the desire to do so. Those who survived undoubtedly had an incredible will to go on that was connected to their capacity to remember.

**Memory**

What is memory? Memory is far more than collections of neurons in our brains that change as we experience the world around us (Rose 1993, pp. 50-3). Margalit argues that remembering is a form of knowing and says that ‘to know is to believes something to be true’ (2002, p. 14). In this regard he argues that memory can be treated as knowledge from the past, not necessarily knowledge about the past, because of our learning in between (Margalit 2002, p. 14). Further, Margalit suggests our memories can be tied to our emotions and our ‘emotional memory’ may motivate our moral and ethical conduct (2002, pp. 107-9). Halbwachs (1992) and many others (Frisch 1990; Margalit 2002, p. 52; Rose 1993; Wertsch 2002) claim that memory can be shared and collective. In this work I treat memory as being dialectical in character and shaping who we are. This is because the social meanings available to us as humans shape our memories and conversely our memories shape the meanings and sense making that we do as we interpret the world around us. What is remembered, in terms of form and substance, tells as much of the social meanings that shape memory as it does of memory. Memory is our most precious asset as human beings. Memory is who we are and without it we would not be able to function and act in the world (Rose 1993, pp. 1-8). Our memories of past experiences form our sense of self. In this way some memories seemed to inform Cambodian narrators of who they once were and were also an important part of making sense of who they are now. For example, Bo told of her Grandma’s cooking which returned her to who she once was. She said

I remember how she used to marinate pork with a lot of pepper and it’s beautiful you know! She always marinates the meat with pepper and she fries it and she makes sure I have a piece with less pepper. But I always try to eat the other one as well. Today the pork never
tastes the same as in my memory. Even sometimes when I marinate the pork and put peppers and cook, it doesn’t seem to taste the same as back then. I don’t know, I guess that can be accounted for now we have so much to eat. Even though we live in affluent family things are not that free like they are in Australia. More free in the sense if you open the cupboard and there you are! But if you go to a poor family you see that there is nothing there, but in our family you can open up the cupboard and see things, but is not plentiful, like here you leave for a few days still sitting there. Back then it’s always eaten up. Could be a lot of reasons things taste different, but I end up thinking that the memory of grandma cooking for you is always nicer. Probably she has her own recipe, but I’ll never know. Bit of tender love.

Bo’s Grandma had died during the Pol Pot years in a place unknown to her but somewhere in the province renamed Kompong Som. The memories of loved ones lost are sometimes all that we have left to tell us what that person meant to us. Such memory was precious for Bo as it tells of her being cared for and being loved. The memory of Grandma’s cooking did more than tell Bo who she once was as a child. Her memory is a way of saying who she is presently and the ways she should live her life like trying to cook the way her Grandma used to. Memory and the act of cooking peppered pork, keeps the memory intact, but cannot be a substitute for the experiences that formed the memory in the first place. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who died in a Nazi concentration camp, once wrote

Memories of each epoch in our lives…are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated. But precisely because these memories are repetitions, because they are successively engaged in very different systems of notions, at different periods of our lives, they have lost the form and the appearance they once had (1992, p. 47).

In this regard memory enables us to go on being who we are each time we summon up a memory, but because this takes place at different moments in our lives so our memories change as time passes by.

Walter Benjamin thought of memory as a medium for exploring history rather than an instrument, and stated ‘It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried’ (1999, p. 576). In this regard memory is a way
of connecting with past experiences. Benjamin also insisted upon the importance of establishing the exact location of our experiences and how they were unearthed (1999, p. 576). The social location and identity of the narrator matters a great deal in understanding what their memories of their experiences mean for them. I have made a case for understanding identity through narrative: narrative is one way we store memory. The narrative of a person’s experiences relies on their memory and as I have argued the narrative of a person’s life experiences constitutes their identity. For instance, Bo remembered her Grandma’s cooking presenting it as an artefact of who she is. Our memories always involve other people and in this regard it is because memory is social that its social and human qualities are revealed.

There is also something quite exceptional about Bo’s memory of her Grandma in that she has kept such memory alive without the usual mnemonic devices like photos or other ‘inherited’ objects. Indeed, many photos and other objects were lost during the Pol Pot years as they signified belonging to the privileged middle class. Those few remaining photos of lost loved ones are understandably important for the survivors of the Pol Pot regime. Such photos, as mnemonic devices, usually had pride of place in the homes of interviewees. Kheng said the following about the loss of some of her father’s objects

He used to have medals awarded to him from Prince Sihanouk, but all these things my mum has to bury and everything, before we left the country, because there is no way you could take with you. All these things there is no evidence, this is only hearsay. If these things were found with us at that time it’s a death sentence.

Her father’s medals for Kheng signified her father’s status and role in the Cambodian-Chinese community of Kompong Cham, and so were also part of who she was and what she had lost. Objects provide us with reference points for memory to be held and without such reference points we can feel diminished (Kidron 2009; Rose 1993, p. 34). If we lose objects with a fire or if our house is burgled we typically say they have ‘sentimental value.’ We say this because the value of these objects lies in the fact that they hold or focus our memories. When I read my mother’s handwriting or look at photos of her after she died memories of her surface that I had thought forgotten. Memory and remembering, then,
could be seen as a practice that we engage, whether it is through looking at old photos or if it is practicing what someone else taught us, like cooking for Bo.

The deaths of family members also was clearly experienced as a loss by Cambodian narrators of who they were, who they are, and perhaps through the projecting of the past into the future who they might be (Rose 1993). The death of a parent or grandparent meant that they lost their ‘memory keepers’, like Bo’s Grandma, the people who knew them and remembered who they were. And if the loss of a parent is a profound loss in this regard, the loss of many family members and friends and acquaintances can only be considered the wholesale destruction of collective memory. The philosopher Harald Weinrich, suggests that the act of genocide against the Jews constituted an attack upon the memory of what came before, and of the ‘cultural memory of humanity, as a millionfold memoricide’ (1997, p. 185). The attempt at the destruction of the ‘new people’ from the cities and of the ethnic mixture present in Cambodian society during the Pol Pot regime (Kiernan 1997) was then also an attack upon the collective memory of cultural and social life before the regime.

**The contribution of the Cambodian memory**

The memories of the experiences of the Cambodian refugees I interviewed contribute to a much broader discussion about memory. What, if anything, does the Cambodian refugee experience say about memory? And how do we remember atrocities like Cambodian people witnessed that occurred in the twentieth century? The Cambodian memory of the Pol Pot regime and of survival speaks of both the necessity of remembering and also of the desire to forget the past. The ten narrators who told me their life stories very much wanted to speak about the past with me. For instance Chhon said

With many Cambodian people when they talking about their own history, their experience during Pol Pot time, they very upset they just cry tears, the tears just coming because they feel very bad. I reckon many Cambodian people would like to express their experience during Pol Pot, for anyone that is interested to listen.
There was often some tension between the desire to talk about their experiences to another person and the emotional responses that the telling might evoke. The Cambodian memory speaks of a need for recognition of such memory, but also of some of the emotional response brought up by remembering through talking about the past. Bo said the following about wanting to talk about what happened to her

I do a lot of reading and if you look at wars or conflicts in any country there is a lot of written materials done on it; and lot of people who are victims of that conflict have written materials or are interviewed; and there is a lot of recorded material. I find it fascinating that Cambodia went through a conflict like that, but apart from what was written about Pol Pot and ‘the Killing Fields’ there are no actual interviews with the victims. I find occasionally you see films, documentaries, once in a while, but they mostly interview people who are living in Cambodia. It is an interesting observation, so I think it would be good to talk. There are many of us outside; refugees who came to Western countries, but then you look at the documentaries you can hardly see any one of us, and not much written material. I feel Cambodians were left behind or ignored. There was so much talk about [what happened to] Jewish people during the Holocaust and war. Very well documented and in museums and everywhere you know? And people are not afraid to say it, so why are we? Why don’t we talk the same? We are the victims as well. In any situation there is a politics involved in it, but people still need to be heard.

Bo suggests is that there is a desperate need for acknowledging memories of atrocity. But she also asked, ‘Why don’t we speak the same?’ Some people do obviously feel the need to tell other people what happened to them. Bo points to the focus being on those survivors in Cambodia, rather than the refugees who came to Western countries, which she thinks have not received the same acknowledgement. This has left her feeling ‘ignored’ in Australia and points to a fundamental lack of recognition by others of the memories of those who survived the Pol Pot years. Cambodian refugees may not have had an opportunity to memorialise their memories. Other survivors of atrocities have had statues and memorials erected in the countries that they came to as refugees as sites of public memory and perhaps more importantly have had public recognition of their loss (Young 1993, pp. 2-3), whereas Cambodian people have not. This suggests that the society where people settle who have experienced violence and loss of loved ones has an obligation to such refugees to try to acknowledge their memories and thus assist in memorialization.
This obligation is not necessarily an easy undertaking. I can only suggest that this moral obligation stems from that acknowledging someone else’s past requires that we work towards acceptance of who they are. This is a moral act. This does not require the exercise of heroic virtue but accords more with Todorov’s (1996) account of ordinary moral virtues like caring for others. Acknowledging this obligation speaks to a human desire to be understood, because it is the narratives of our past that we present to others as artefacts of who we are.

The desire to speak about the past can be frustrated by being a community of witnesses to some of the worst aspects of human beings. Kim’s account of the reactions of some Cambodians when he had tried to talk to them was illuminating.

They like ‘Oh I know the story, I already know.’ They don’t say ‘not interested’ but like when you already know you already know you don’t need to hear again. You know? ‘I know already, I know already.’

If the people around you have also been witness to atrocities, then in spite of all their empathy, they do not necessarily want to listen because this involves or requires emotional disturbance. Other Cambodian narrators, like Maly, would simply say that a situation was ‘indescribable’ even though Maly was a masterful storyteller. I came to realize that this was less of a comment about his ability as a narrator, and was more a comment about the problem of describing atrocities and other terrible things he had seen. What makes these situations so horrific, in part, is the inability to find words adequate to the task of description. The ‘indescribable’ is, in part, a definition of such sorts of situations. Situations where atrocities take place thus, in Maly’s words, are ‘unbelievable’ situations as words can only grasp at the reality of the situation compared to the experience of it. The philosopher Avishai Margalit, however, argues that it is the ability to ‘describe this’ (2002, p. 168) that is one defining quality of being a ‘moral witness’ to atrocities. Conversely the feeling of an inability to describe or to do justice to what happened then would likely be silencing.

If we return to Bo’s notion that ‘I think it would be good to talk’ is to suggest that talk about the past is necessary in Margalit’s terms to ‘uncover the evil’ (2002, p. 165). Talking
about experiences of atrocities and survival is a moral good. Speaking about the memories of atrocities has the ability to transform such experiences and also marks a shift from the Cambodian strategy of survival during the Pol Pot regime of ‘you must be mute’ to becoming a ‘moral witness’ to ordinary human evil. This community of witnesses is also situated amongst a continuum of perpetrators, perpetuators, participants, and resisters. This suggests that there is an added issue of who Cambodian people are speaking for and about and with. My small contribution to resolving this dilemma is to suggest that there is perhaps some hope to the role of outsiders in listening to the experiences of those who survived regimes in which terror, violence and mass killings took place. Margalit puts the hope at stake in this exercise:

The hope with which I credit moral witnesses is a rather sober hope: that in another place or another time there exists, or will exist, a moral community that will listen to their testimony. What is so heroic in this hope is the fact that people who are subject to evil regimes intent on destroying the fabric of their moral community easily come to see the regime as invincible and indestructible and stop believing in the very possibility of a moral community (2002, p. 165).

In this respect Cambodian people who can describe what happened to them, in a second language no less, are an incredible testament to the ability of some people to describe what happened to them. Such storytellers are no longer merely survivors. The telling of their stories also speaks of a human will, when facing evil situations, to persist against all odds, and to hope to later find people that will listen to them and of a community that exists beyond such violent regimes. In this regard the ability of Cambodians I spoke with to describe what happened to them tells of their hope in the face of overwhelming and seemingly crushing odds. This hope to find such a moral community of persons or perhaps even only one another individual who would listen to such a story, places a moral obligation to the society where refugees resettle to be that moral community for them. However, life in Australia seems to have left little space for Cambodian ‘moral witnesses’ to engage with a ‘moral community’.

Bo located the Cambodian memory alongside the memory of the Nazi’s Final Solution. The Final Solution can ‘never be forgiven or forgotten’ and presents an instance where
‘Forgetting is no longer allowed’ (Weinrich 1997, pp. 172, 84). For the Jewish survivors of the Final Solution the approach to life afterwards has been ‘Never shall I forget’ (Weinrich 1997, p. 183). In this regard Bo claimed that the memory of the Cambodian genocide cannot and should not be forgotten in the same way. The memory of Cambodians makes them witnesses to the possibilities of human evil. Recognition of Cambodian storytellers as moral witnesses may also be one way of restoring dignity (Todorov 1996) and indeed possibly restore ‘face’ as a person can offer their own account of what happened to them (Edelmann 1994).

It is perhaps understandable that the memories of experiences of atrocity also led some narrators to view the human condition pessimistically. Recounting her experiences of the Pol Pot regime, Bo said at one point

> Our bodies were already exhausted – skin and bone – then to sit down and listen to this garbage was ridiculous. And they criticise us about how we ‘are lazy people’ and ‘used to life of comfort’ and ‘now we have to be equal’. If you think about it they never will be equal. There is nothing in this life that is equal you know? Don’t tell me one thing that they eat the same thing as us otherwise their bodies would be the same as ours you know? The leader did not do the same amount of work that we did. The leader of the youth group, they all have the authority – they have guns.

At times, the actions of the Pol Pot regime encouraged a Hobbesian (1651) view of the world, where equality was an impossible goal and where violence and suffering became nearly ubiquitous. But such memories in this regard are also in tension with narrators’ other views and desire to help others. I do treat Bo’s account as an inevitable response on her part, but as a result of remembering what human beings are capable of doing to each other in the attempt to change their world. Such memories of ordinary human evil undoubtedly can have a profound effect on a person’s worldview and on their faith in humanity. In this regard memory can shape politics. The Cambodian memory of what can happen during periods of revolutionary change, especially when there is a want to create a utopia from scratch, is also a warning for the left of politics. The assertion of notions of ‘purity’ of class and ethnic identities which led to great bloodshed speaks of problems with
valorising particular identities such as ‘peasants’ or ‘workers’ or ‘Khmer’ that set up oppositional ‘enemy’ identities also suggest that much can be learned from this exercise.

Ken Plummer has argued that some theories of ‘collective memory’ view life stories as only being able to be told once a ‘framework becomes available for them to be told’ and many ‘stories and histories simply cannot be told when the social frameworks are not there’ (Plummer 2001, p. 235). Plummer also argues that ‘local community, and sense of belonging to a culture, may become keys to unlocking such ‘frames’’ (2001, p. 235). Plummer suggests that particular experiences are ‘memorialized’ on the basis of shared experience or existence like ‘film and documentary evidence around the Vietnam War, or the creation of monuments and museums’ (2001, p. 235). In this regard certain social and political mnemonic devices can bring memories into focus. It is then noteworthy, then, that Cambodian people do not seem to have had the same chance in Australia to memorialize their experiences as War Veterans or survivors of the Nazi Final Solution have had, but have still held onto their memories in great detail. There is also a cost, however, of hanging on to memories, which I shall discuss later.

While fading of once intense and clear memories can be accepted, as can individual memory being socially situated, memories of atrocity are perhaps something quite different. What is important and of value is the preservation of the memory itself. The memories of atrocity also might be somewhat more resilient than other memories. On the resilience of memory Freud wrote

> Our memory deals with material of the impressions which impinge on us in later life by making a selection among them. It retains what is of any importance and drops what is unimportant (1978, p. 236).

This is to suggest that memory involves a selection of various life experiences. Freud (1978) and others (Frisch 1990, p. 16) claim that memory retains what is of importance. Memory of atrocity cannot be simply forgotten like many other life experiences. Therefore some memories can fade but other memories are socially or politically reinforced and will be held in place. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it
To remember is not to bring into the focus of consciousness a self-subservient picture of the past; it is to thrust deeply into the horizon of the past and take apart step by step the interlocked perspectives until the experiences which [memory] epitomizes are as if relived in their temporal setting (1962, p. 26).

Merleau-Ponty describes a conceptual relationship between memory, perception and experience. For Merleau-Ponty remembering is a process that involves perception and he emphasizes that key experiences are brought back to the present as if it was to return to the very time at which such experiences occurred. So a person can remember specific details, but forget other details. The forgetting perhaps also points to what is important. For instance, Bo said

I was too young to remember the names. But I can smell; I can still sense, but not the names, not the faces, because it is just like a passing image, but I have experienced it and it is entrenched with me.

Bo’s experience of the Pol Pot regime is more important than the names or the faces. In regard to Bo’s claim that ‘I was too young to remember the names’ I might draw on Proust who once wrote

Words present to us little pictures of things, lucid and normal, like the pictures that hung on the walls of schoolrooms to give children an illustration of what is meant by a carpenter’s bench, a bird, an anthill; things chosen as typical of everything else of the same sort. But names present to us – of persons and of towns which they accustom us to regard as individual, as unique, like persons – a confused picture, which draws from the names, from the brightness or darkness of their sound, the colour in which it is uniformly painted (1922, p. 235 my emphasis).

Proust understood that names, as opposed to words with an object associated with them, have the power to evoke not just an image but vivid emotions and experiences. Bo is able to recall in specific detail events, textures, sounds and images, but by her own admission she is neither able to recall the names of all the places she stayed in Cambodia, nor the names of ‘the torturers’. Freud said the following about forgetting of names
The forgetting of proper names and foreign names, as well as of foreign words, can similarly be traced back to a counter intention which is aimed either directly or indirectly against the name concerned…the memory’s disinclination to remembering anything which is connected with feelings of unpleasure and reproduction of which would renew the unpleasure (1978, pp. 102-3).

Freud suggests that there is a disinclination to remember names with unpleasant associations, which for Bo included the names of towns where she was shifted to during the Pol Pot regime and the names of ‘the torturers’. Therefore, there seems to be some imperative to forget the past even amongst those who want to remember.

Thus Bo claimed both a limit to her memory and maintained that her experiences are ‘entrenched’ within her. In this way it seems that some human experiences are embedded deep within memory. This sort of experience is perhaps related to trauma. Cathy Caruth observes that the word ‘trauma’ is taken from the Greek and originally referred to an injury or wound inflicted on the body, but

In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature and most centrally in Freud's text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not on the body but the mind (1996, p. 3, original emphasis).

Traumatic memory, then, is somewhat like a scar. However, Bo’s statement that such experiences are ‘like a passing image’ perhaps indicates that the memory of some experiences float closely between the waters of the conscious and unconscious self. Freud suggested that there was a ‘shield’ that mediated the experiences of the outside world against the ‘inner world’ of people and protected their psyche. He wrote that

We describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure (1920, p. 238).
Traumatic experience, then, is an experience capable of breaking through people’s defenses and has quite extraordinary affect upon people, as such sorts of experience cannot be processed in the same way as other experiences. Caruth notes that in situations of trauma ‘the outside has gone inside without any mediation’ (1996, p. 59). But Freud was also cautiously optimistic about the possibility of human ‘cathexis’ in that he saw the greater the breach in the shield the greater the energies summoned up from a person to ‘bind’ such an experience psychically (1920, pp. 238-9). Cambodian people who survived the Pol Pot regime are an extraordinary testament to Freud’s suggestion of cathartic binding of experiences that placed people, often repeatedly, close to death.

Memories can also be embodied. For instance Bo also told me how her little toes were permanently damaged when she was punished and tied up in a stress position using bamboo during the Pol Pot regime. Seeing her damaged little toes every morning makes her remember. In this regard such experiences are connected to a person’s body and memories can be inscribed upon the body as scars. How then does one live each day with the memory of atrocities?

**Living with memory**

At times it was clear that remembering the past was painful for the people I interviewed. Despite this these people still wanted to talk. Indeed some said that ‘many Cambodian people would like to express their experience’ and that it was ‘good to talk.’ People want their stories to be heard. Conversely at moments I said I was ‘sorry to hear that’ when I found out that a storyteller had lost family members or friends during the Pol Pot regime, each and every person would tell me ‘it is okay.’ At times a person comforted me as a researcher. And at times we both wept. The stories invaded my thoughts and occasionally my dreams. I often wondered how can one go on living with the memory of the Killing Fields? And, what does living with memories of the Cambodian refugee experience say about us as human beings?

Although different in many ways there is some comparison to be made between the Killing Fields and the Final Solution in terms of living with the memory of atrocities. After the
suicide of Primo Levi, the great Jewish writer and survivor of Auschwitz (Angier 2002; Todorov 1996; Weinrich 1997), it is arguable that memories of atrocities and knowledge of what humans are capable of doing to others is a difficult thing to live with, especially if there is a realization that anyone is capable of causing such suffering as Levi did (Todorov 1996). For one Cambodian narrator it seems less than coincidental to me that Chin told me how his family home in Kampot burnt to the ground during the fighting between the Khmer Rouge and the US backed Lon Nol soldiers and then told me how he attempted to kill himself and another man who owed him money by immolation. Fire for Chin had meaning in memory. His body was covered in scars from the burns he received to his body. Hinton notes the Cambodian association of anger with ‘heat’ (2005, p. 62). It seems culturally congruent then that Chin would attempt to use fire to burn himself and another man to death and leave such a scar. Memories, it seems, can sometimes also destroy us.

Some memories are unwanted and come back to haunt us when we least expect them to. Bo told me ‘I fear reliving it in old age’ and said that one of her greatest fears was of losing control in old age and reliving her experiences from Pol Pot time. The prospect of reliving her experiences was arguably terrifying for her. She related her fear to the following memory.

I remember that I cared for a lady who had lost all her family during the Khmer Rouge, so she came here by herself and she was functioning well when she was still in her early age. But the moment she hit 60-70 she become frail, disabled, and had a stroke, all those age conditions multiply and she got really, really paranoid. In her bedroom she would close all her blinds and have a cupboard to shield the window and that room is never open. She lives by herself and by four and five o’clock she would start to pull all the curtains closed and lock the door. And she would bring her food to her bedroom to eat and lock herself in there and once it starts to darken she wouldn’t leave her bedroom. And I ask her ‘Why you doing all these things?’ And she says ‘Oh I hear noises.’ Of course she could hear noises, because it is a compound area. And she says ‘I see light and I don’t know if it is a tiger or if it is something you know?’ She is reliving that experience, because in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge night time is when they come and take you out to kill, so that is the time we fear the most, as that is when they come to collect you and take you away and kill you or whatever they do to you. Night time was the most fearful time of all. I could understand (this), but an Australian-Caucasian provider could not understand her, as she was
experiencing emotions they could not understand. I could understand her because I speak the language and I went through that experience, so I knew what she was describing. It has controlled part of her life.

It appears that the memory of the Killing Fields is not always lived with easily. Through the experiences of an older woman, Bo imagined her future. There is an imperative to forget a horrific past and a fear that the past, no matter how well it is contained, will come streaming back and be beyond conscious control. When I interviewed Bo I felt the interviews had a ‘dreamlike quality’. I asked Bo if she ever dreamt about the past and she replied that she ‘never dreamt about the past’ because she ‘talks freely about what happened.’ This is quite different to her father, Phuoc, who still has nightmares. Kien said of her husband ‘He is still scared.’

James Wertsch (2002) has suggested that remembering and re-experiencing are different and need to be separated. Wertsch claims that a distancing from the creation of a text or narrative from the past is one attribute of remembering, compared to re-experiencing something when events from the past are brought back to the present and in the most extreme form, there is no textual mediation and ‘the distance between the observer and the event dissolves’ (2002, p. 46). Wertsch suggests that re-experiencing is not subject to voluntary control unlike remembering that involves textual mediation. He notes that ‘anthropological and sociological accounts tend to focus on re-experiencing through the use of cultural tools like spoken language and enacted rituals’ (2002, p. 49). When I interviewed Cambodian narrators it simply was not clear whether sometimes they were remembering or were re-experiencing the past. It is possible that remembering the past through telling the story of their life became something like re-experiencing the past.

If remembering meant re-experiencing then it is no wonder there is a desire to forget the past for Cambodians living in Melbourne. It is also possible that this pathway to re-experiencing by remembering was fully realized by Cambodian people and hence talking about the past could be construed as re-experiencing the past. Two people declined to be interviewed. Although both had initially agreed, one said when he declined ‘I have had enough pain.’ To remember for some people was clearly akin to re-experiencing a painful past. Memory can create problems for living because of the desire to forget horrific
memories while lacking the ability to do so. However, forgetting may also be useful for the sake of moving on with one’s life. But the Cambodian experience also suggests that memories come back to us, unwanted, and unexpectedly. So some people want to forget, but it cannot be voluntary. In terms of living with her memories, Bo for example said that today she was angry about what happened.

Today I feel angry. Extremely angry, because to me what is the purpose? If you work for a purpose then you can understand, but it wasn’t for a purpose, and I’m very angry at the treatment I received – that we all received – that we were made to work like slave. Even more than slave you know?

Memories of being wronged can make us angry, vengeful, sad and disappointed. Alex Hinton in discussing a Cambodian conception of disproportionate revenge compares this conception of revenge as being ‘a head for an eye’ (1998a, p. 353). However, Hinton also says that Cambodians will not ‘automatically seek disproportionate revenge’ and that this is premised upon an internalized cultural model and knowledge of revenge which may make a person inclined to act under certain circumstances (1998a, p. 353). There are also a variety of ways for a person to dissipate their anger. This form of revenge seems to suggest the persistence of an intensity of memory about being wronged over time. This runs against the notion of forgiving and forgetting or forgiving so as to forget for the sake of moving on with one’s life. Indeed *kum* seems to suggest that memory can held burning and vivid. How can the memory of being wronged then be understood in light of this conception of revenge? The Cambodian memory of being wronged during the Pol Pot regime may be burning still with great intensity for those who suffered the abuses of the regime. Memories then perhaps have the capacity to burn with such intensity that they can never be forgotten. Thus while forgiving may allow for forgetting (Margalit 2002, p. 189), such remembering may not allow for forgiveness without justice. This is congruent with Margalit’s suggestion that

If it occurs through simple forgetfulness, it is not real forgiveness. Forgiveness is a conscious decision to change one's attitude and to overcome anger and vengefulness. Forgetfulness may in the last analysis be the most effective method of overcoming anger and vengefulness, but since it is an omission rather than a decision, it is not forgiveness.
But then, like in the case of remembering, there is an indirect way by which forgiveness as a decision can bring about forgetting and thereby complete the process of forgiveness. The decision to forgive makes one stop brooding on the past wrong, stop telling it to other people, with the end result of forgetting it or forgetting that it once mattered to you greatly. Such a case of forgetting should matter a great deal both morally and ethically (2002, p. 193).

Is forgiveness in the Cambodian instance possible? Or is Margalit’s (2002) right to suggest that we forget for the sake of moving on with one’s life? I am inclined to agree that forgetting for the sake of moving on with one’s life is perhaps not such a bad thing to try to do. However, moving beyond anger and vengefulness, forgetting seems difficult without justice for those who were wronged. The need to seek justice for the survivors of the Pol Pot regime may perhaps allow for moving on with life. Bo suggested the need for justice, but also pointed to some of the problems doing this.

Recently they just approve some sort of international court in Cambodia to try the leaders and it’s how many years now? The old ones are dying, memories are fading and the ones who were responsible for the atrocities just got away free. They didn’t bother to change their identity and they just live like us you know? And look at Jewish people; the Nazis try to change their identity and live in another country, yet they were tracked down and bought to justice. Why couldn’t we do the same? The government questioned them; they already know all we need to bring them to justice.

Bo rightly points out that the older members of the Khmer Rouge are dying. Indeed one of the Khmer Rouge leaders, Ta Mok, died in 2006 awaiting his trial (ABC News 2006) while I was carrying out my research. Memory is involved when we seek justice for past wrongs. Or rather memory persists to tell a truth about the past, in the Cambodian case, perhaps that people are capable of great violence, but that there is an incredible resilience and will to survive. In this case memory tells us that people are both fragile and incredibly resilient.

This history of the experience of Cambodian refugees living in Melbourne is a history of the memories of a group of people who have experienced significant trauma. The Cambodian refugees I spoke with are ordinary human beings, but they are also extraordinary human beings who have experienced incredible and traumatic life changing.
events. In relation to history Caruth claims that trauma is more than a wound of the psyche, ‘it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us a reality of a truth that is not otherwise available’ (1996, p. 4).

The memories recalled by Cambodian storytellers speak of a ‘truth’ about humanity that perhaps most people would not otherwise like to recall or think about. Living with the memory of the Killing Fields would, I think, takes an everyday courage that is difficult to imagine. In this way the stories present in this work are ones that were crying out to be heard. Perhaps wanting to tell of traumatic experience is seeking a way to ‘bind’ such experience psychically, as possibly having memories recorded meant people would no longer feel the need to hold on to them as tightly as such memories were placed, in writing, on a page. What does the Cambodian refugee experience contribute to the discussion of human memory and social history?

The Cambodian refugee experience suggests that people have an incredible capacity to remember what happened to them and thus have an incredible will to hold onto past experiences. Life-history is vitally important for Cambodian people living in Western countries as it tells them who they are and can be offered up as an artefact for others, so as to have themselves understood, which is what all human beings want of other human beings around them – to be understood. Such understanding is both effective communication and is also a way to know about another and hence works towards accepting a person as different to us but as having the same rights and human subjects (Todorov 1999). It is through the dialogue between subject positions that one comes to know ‘others’ and of oneself.

The history presented in this work is a human project. Maly, after we had talked together for some time, said that I was ‘a bit kru’. Kru in Khmer is to be knowledgeable and is used for speaking of teachers, gurus and shamans (Dunlop 2005, p. 41). In this regard it was through dialogue across cultural difference that I had become knowledgeable, both of another group of peoples’ past and of my own relative subject position. From this I learnt that we have a responsibility to remember the past with people, for all history speaks of a social interconnectedness between people. Such history is composed of life stories that tell
both of the speaker and of their experiences with others. Arendt claimed the following
about such life stories.

Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the world through action and
speech, nobody is author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the
results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer.
Somebody began it and its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely its actor and
sufferer, but nobody is its author. That every individual life between birth and death can
eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical
condition of history, the great story without beginning and end (1958, p. 184).

Our memory is who we are, in the sense of I remember. In this way memory constitutes
our identities in the sense of this is me. Further, who remembers who we are, is who we
are, in the sense of I remember you. Collective memory, stemming from the nature shared
social experience, constitutes who we are. In this way there can be both similar and
different memories of what happened and of what was experienced. To hold onto
memories of certain experiences is for people to hold onto certain parts of who they are and
who they once were. Cambodian refugees by recalling their memories have spoken of what
it was like to survive and to witness the suffering of other human beings and in this regard
those who have spoken with me are quite extraordinary in that they have been able to put
their experiences into words. They have been courageous in their keeping alive their
memories as witnesses to human created evil. This says a great deal about both the human
will to persist and for our capacity to remember. However, the keeping of such memory
come no doubt at some cost to the bearer, and has been done to keep the possibility of
recognition of such memories by a moral community, or at least by other individual moral
human beings, at a later stage. Memory persists, seeking truth and justice. We need to
recognize the importance of memories of atrocities. The citizens of countries where
refugees have resettled have both a capacity and an obligation to become a moral
community. In this sense the burden of the memory of what humans can potentially do to
others can be shared a little, both in the sense of sharing one’s experience with another and
analogous to sharing the burden of carrying a heavy load. In this regard there is a moral
obligation for the recognition of the past experiences of refugees by citizens of the
countries where they resettle. I doubt the possibility of intentional forgetting, but perhaps
the unburdening and recognition of such memories may allow them to be set aside, not blotted out and destroyed but covered and memorialized. However, individuals remembering past atrocities still may mean that their memories of this are, as Bo suggests, ‘ignored’ and public reactions to such memories may be to deny or deflect when such memories threaten to make a difference to contemporary social life (Frisch 1990, p. 18). Remembering another’s past with them in some instances is a moral act. Ignoring the presence of others in our midst is both a more powerful position and in some instances immoral. In this respect I hope the memories that have been recorded here travel much further than the individuals who told them to me can.

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