Negotiating Memories
Survivor Narratives of Victimhood in Post-Conflict Cambodia

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This thesis seeks to deepen our understanding of the complexity of victimhood as constructed in narratives. To this end, it explores how people who have been socially and politically ascribed as perpetrators construct and negotiate victimhood through narratives after a period of war and mass atrocity and how they are represented in narratives and practices of memorialization. Based on fieldworks conducted at various sites in Cambodia, this thesis examines former Khmer Rouge (KR) memories and their claims of victimhood and analyzes how images of victims are represented in narratives and practices of memorialization in post-conflict Cambodia.

The thesis contributes theoretically and empirically to knowledge in the body of literature of victimhood and memorialization, as well as the Cambodian scholarship on survivor narratives. Firstly, the thesis contributes theoretically to research on victimhood and temporality in transitional justice by illuminating how multiple temporalities and time collapse may be employed to better encapsulate the continuity of violence and suffering and the co-existence of these experiences in the past, present, and future. Secondly, the thesis offers insight into the various ways in which people construct victimhood. Rather than focusing on resisting the image of the ideal victim or maintain discourses that might have victimized them, the study finds that people draw on the attributions of the ideal victim, among other things, to construct victimhood, negotiate their KR identity and the perpetrator label. Thirdly, the study provides insights of the ambivalence of representing identities of people who were simultaneously victimized and participated in atrocities. While efforts to include individual narratives of former KR in the memorials and exhibitions are evidenced, the representation of their experiences and identities remain limited to the image of ideal victim. This practice has resulted in an obfuscation of the complex and diverse nature of the experiences of former Khmer Rouge during the DK regime, including their roles supporting the regime, as well as their victimization, heroism, and survival. Finally, the study also adds new empirical insights to the literature of post-genocide Cambodia by providing detailed and rich narratives of former KR survivors concerning their claims of victimhood, as well as exploring representations of victims in multiple sites of memorialization.

Keywords: Khmer Rouge, Cambodia, Memory, Narratives, Victimhood, Victims, Survivors, Complexity, Memorialization