



Death, Survival and Victimhood Under the Khmer Rouge Regime

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Abstract. *In this article, I discuss how the survivors of the Cambodian genocide explain victimhood under Democratic Kampuchea (DK) by engaging stories about death and survival. I argue against the victim-agent dichotomy and claim that both a sense of helplessness and an ability to act independently can be part of the same story. I also argue that agency plays an important role in ascribing groups and individuals victimhood only when their victimhood is seen as debatable (if individuals belonged to the Khmer Rouge). Death and survival are often viewed as stemming from the same social, political, and cultural rationale. People die because of certain biographical facts (being educated, rich, having been abroad, having served Lon Nol's regime), physical living conditions (hard work, absence of food), various acts and decisions made without the approval of Angkar (the structures of the Khmer Rouge leadership and surveillance), illness, location and time. Concealing dangerous biographical facts, being obedient to Angkar, or simply being lucky with the location (being sent to good versus bad locations) and work (being given work that allowed an individual greater access to food) contributed to an individual's survival. While interviewees usually portray themselves and others as passive, they also discuss smaller or bigger independent actions. Rather than necessarily causing death, these actions help individuals to survive and save others' lives.*

Keywords: *victimhood, death, survival, agency, Democratic Kampuchea.*

Democratic Kampuchea (DK), established on April 17, 1975, as a result of the Khmer Rouge (KR) movement, was led by the Communist Party of Cambodia (CPK) with Pol Pot as its leader. The new regime soon emptied the cities and towns, “evacuating” their populations to rural areas, claiming to have information about upcoming city bombings by US aircraft. Schools were closed, religion and money were banned. Most types and forms of media and communication were shut down, providing access to some of it only to the selected few. The borders were also closed (Kiernan 2008). The KR highly prioritised the country's self-sufficiency, which, among other factors, caused famine and shortages in various sectors, including medicine (Guillou 2004).

The KR sought to control the Cambodian population down to minor details of people's daily lives. Everybody had to wear black, relinquish all their possessions, eat communally, and marry partners chosen by the state. Day-to-day communication among people became very limited, "reduced to daily instructions and orders" (Kiernan 2013, 320, 339)¹. The regime, which had lasted for three years, eight months and twenty days, was overthrown by the Vietnamese on January 17th, 1979. It cost around two million lives. Starvation, illnesses, and mass killings were common causes. After the fall of Democratic Kampuchea, the KR retreated to the mountainous areas along the Thai border and continued military actions, which caused further losses (Rowley 2006). The KR controlled some parts of Cambodia until the end of the civil war in 1997 (Rowley 2006)².

There have been a few publications on the death under DK. Patrick Heuveline provides statistical information about the dead, such as sex, age and the causes of death (Heuveline 1998). Khatharya Um discusses how violence and death occurred under the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime. According to the scholar, location, period, class, age, gender, local and higher-level leadership, "and above all, one's sociopolitical classification" had important effects (Um 2015). Henri Locard puts the "enemies" of the regime into three categories based on their perception by the leaders: enemies of the past, enemies of the present, and enemies of the future (Locard 2005). However, there is little scholarship on how Cambodian people perceive the DK period, the death and the victimhood. One of the few examples is Eve Monique Zucker's article about 2 KR cadre and their interpretations of their participation in the violence. According to Zucker, the cadre reinterpret their biographies in the light of the current political situation (Zucker 2017). Lisa J. Arensen and Anne Yvonne Guillou discuss how Cambodian people relate to the human remains from DK. Arensen writes about the perceptions of both physical and spiritual remains, the regime's effects on the dead (Arensen 2017). Guillou writes about the treatment of human remains and the dead by the government and local people after the end of the DK regime, changing relations with the dead, memory construction processes and the role of tradition and religion in the process of healing (Guillou 2012).

In this article, I discuss how Cambodian people perceived victimhood under the DK regime. The term "victim" has been criticised for inflicting

1 Communication was often limited both in public and in private. Even when people were allowed a level of privacy (which was not always the case, as people often had to share their sleeping spaces with multiple strangers), there was a danger of spies lurking nearby.

2 It is worth noting that there is no clear consensus about this date. Most of the KR leaders and soldiers had defected by 1998, effectively ending the possibility of effective military action. However, the last of the KR surrendered their arms in 1999.

images of passivity and helplessness, which are deemed demeaning (van Dijk 2009). However, I would argue that “victimhood” still has its uses, that it may be highly instrumental in reflecting the lived experiences of the survivors of criminal acts. Relying on my research among the 1st generation survivors of the Cambodian genocide (those who experienced the genocide directly), I will try to show that a sense of victimisation does not necessarily take away from the individual’s ability to act independently.

Zucker is one of the few scholars who wrote about victimhood in relation to DK history. She briefly described the perception of personal victimhood among the KR cadre. I chose to discuss the more general perceptions of victimhood under DK. I focus on the stories of death and survival. I write about how interviewees explain different instances of victimisation under DK, drawing on their knowledge of the regime as well as their understanding of other times and contexts. In the article, I will argue that agency plays a crucial role in ascribing victimhood to groups and individuals only when their victimhood is seen as debatable. The level of control one had during DK matters greatly when discussing former KR, but not as much for individuals in less ambiguous positions. The first section of the article is devoted to the historical context. I then discuss how interviewees explain how and why people died and survived. I group these explanations into categories: biographical facts, independent action and obedience, time and place, physical living conditions, illness, deaths interviewees could not explain, and survival that did not fall under the perceived rationale of the DK regime (outside and divine intervention, independent action). I contribute the last two sections to the discussion of victimhood in relation to agency. I discuss the different levels of agency individuals are perceived to have had under DK, the role agency plays in the perceptions of responsibility and victimhood in the situations of death.

This article is based on twenty semi-structured interviews with first-generation survivors of the KR genocide. Most of the interviews were conducted in one of the districts of Kandal province (Kandal 1). However, they were also conducted in other locations of Kandal province, in Kampong Cham province, Prey Veng, Kampong Speu, Phnom Penh city, and Battambang city. Most of the interviewees were found using personal connections. Many of them were friends and acquaintances of my colleagues at school in Kandal, where I volunteered as an English teacher as part of my research. Some were introduced to me by other acquaintances or the interviewees. Some were people I knew personally. Most of the interviews were done in Khmer with the help of interpreters. With some exceptions, I conducted interviews at the interviewees’ homes. Most of the interviewees were villagers who lived together with their children and grandchildren, as is common among the elderly in Cambodia. Most no longer worked. Quite a few of the interviewees were formerly teachers

or farmers. Some were sellers, some had small businesses. Most of the interviewees were in their 60s and above.³

The interviews with the 1st generation were designed to explore how they remembered and spoke about the DK regime, how they understood it, and whether they communicated their memories and ways of thinking to other people, especially younger generations. I usually started the interviews by asking about the interviewee's background, such as the province where they were born and their parents' occupations. Such background became very important after the KR victory in 1979. It could determine the fate of a person and their whole family. I later asked the interviewees to describe their experiences during the civil war, specifically whether people in their environment, in their villages, were supportive of the KR. Questions about the interviewees' experiences during DK followed. There were also questions about the reasons for the emergence of DK, national holidays related to DK's history, locations associated with the KR, and whether the interviewees had discussed DK's history and personal experiences with others. Stories of death and near-death experiences usually emerged naturally as an inseparable part of everyday lived realities during DK. However, I did ask a few questions about death. I would ask about family members that died during DK and about the commemorative practices of the deceased (usually towards the end of the interview), about victimhood and responsibility for what happened during DK, the former KR living in village (it is a well-known fact that KR died in great numbers during the purges towards the end of DK as well as because of revenge killings after DK fell).

Democratic Kampuchea

KR history was marked with violence and ambiguity. One of the most notable outbreaks of violence was the civil war during Sathieron Ruoth Khmai (or Khmer Republic) (1970 – 1975). The war caused around 150,000 deaths (Heuveline 1998) and eventually resulted in the establishment of DK. The civil war was fought between General Lon Nol (the leader of the Sathieron Ruoth Khmai regime) and the supporters of the reinstatement of the leader of the former regime (Sangkum Reastr Niyum), King Norodom Sihanouk. The latter party was led by CPK (Chandler 2008). Armed conflicts did not end on 17 April 1975. All three of the neighbouring countries (Vietnam, Thailand and Laos) were soon attacked (Kiernan 2013). Tensions were particularly

3 The interviews were conducted from January 2022 to May 2023 as part of a broader doctoral research project on the transmission of DK memory between generations.

strong with Vietnam (Chandler 2008). The Vietnamese and Vietnam were seen as “hereditary enemies” (Kiernan 2013, 344).

There was considerable ambiguity regarding the leadership of the regime. According to David Chandler, “[t]he CPK monitored every step of the revolution but concealed its existence from outsiders and did not reveal its socialist agenda or the names of its leaders” (Chandler 2008, 256). The leaders of the regime instead called themselves Angkar, a Khmer word meaning “organisation.” The secrecy surrounding the regime leadership and the lack of explanations of what Angkar created led to conflicting understandings. It was thought to be the leadership of the regime, Pol Pot (who was revealed to be the leader of the country in March 1976) (Chandler 2008), or even the entire society, with its members observing and reporting one another (Clegg, Pina e Cunha and Rego 2012).⁴ The existence of CPK was made public only in September 1977 (Chandler 2008).

Certain groups of people were labeled the enemies of the regime and systematically exterminated. According to Heuveline, executions were the leading cause of death during DK (Heuveline 1998). The majority of the victims were Khmer. Locard classifies the regime’s “enemies” into two main categories: enemies of the past and enemies of the present. Enemies of the past and the present are, in turn, categorised into internal and external enemies. Internal enemies of the past were the ruling elite of Lon Nol’s regime and Sangkum Reatr Niyum, leaders of their militaries, “the commercial and the professional classes, together with so-called intellectuals, the main figures of the Buddhist clergy” (Locard 2005, 123). The external past enemies were citizens of other countries and ethnic groups such as the Vietnamese, Chinese, Americans, and Thai (a fact that was almost never mentioned by the interviewees). The enemies of the present were also numerous. They were the so called “new people”, those who could not adjust to the collectivisation, as well as the “sick, accused of malingering, the runaway, accused of betraying the nation, and anyone who voiced—or who seemed to voice— any form of opposition” (Locard 2005, 124). There were also hidden enemies, those within the Khmer Rouge and the party itself. The last category Locard lists is the enemies of the future. They were those who might develop counterrevolutionary beliefs and needed to be weeded out in advance (Locard 2005).⁵

4 Angkar pnek manuos - Angkar - pineapple’s eyes was a common saying during DK. Anyone and everyone could have been spies.

5 Around 75% of teachers, 91% university faculty members, around 77% primary to post-secondary school students died during DK (Procknow 2009) as well as around 100% of Vietnamese, 50% of Chinese, 40% of Lao, 36% of Cham (a Muslim minority in Cambodia), and 40% of Thai people (Kiernan 2008). Heuveline (1998) estimates that there were 2 to 4 times more men among the dead than women (most likely because of the gender disparity in the “enemy” groups).

Some of the mentioned “enemy” groups were not targeted with the purpose of complete extermination but were rather systemically oppressed. Such was the fate of the “new people.” The “new people” were one of the two main classes during DK. While the “old people” (also known as the “base people”; they were primarily poor farmers from rural areas) were considered to be the basis of the revolution and the new society, the “new people” or the “17th of April people” (who were those “evacuated” from city areas after Khmer Rouge took power) were seen as unreliable.⁶ Khatharya Um compares the treatment of the “new people” to slavery. They were “stripped not just of their rights but of their humanity, to be exploited and discarded at will” (Um 2015, 29). While most of the Cambodians were forced to do hard labor with little rest and food, the conditions were especially harsh for the “new people”. Unsurprisingly, they were those who died from starvation the most.⁷

The treatment of the massive amounts of dead bodies greatly differed from the traditional funeral and commemorative practices during previous regimes.⁸ Instead of funeral rites, the bodies were often buried in mass graves, thrown into river water, or simply left on the roadsides, in forests and other places. Chamroeun (60, female, a restaurant owner, Kandal) recalls getting so frightened by corpses she saw floating down the Mekong river that she had to tie herself at night to prevent herself from running away if she had a nightmare. In Cambodian culture, both the manner of death and the physical treatment of the corpse are crucial to the fate of the soul of the deceased (Arensen 2017). Violent death and a lack of a proper funeral are believed to result in the trapping of the spirit in the world of the living. The trapped spirit may terrorise and endanger the living (ibid). Arensen and Guillou discuss the great increase

6 Cities generally remained under Lon Nol’s control for longer than provinces, and city dwellers rarely participated in the KR revolution. They were also believed to have been affected by Western influences.

7 The “new people” often received less food and were forced to work harder than the “old people”. However, living conditions and levels of violence differed from region to region. According to Khatharya Um (2015), in some areas, not only the original residents but also the “new people” would receive sufficient amounts of food. It made heavy labour more manageable.

8 Khmer funeral typically follows a Theravada Buddhist tradition. The funeral rites are performed by Buddhist monks and people, usually the elderly, who serve at temples. Khmer people tend to cremate their deceased, while the local Chinese and Sino-Khmer bury their dead. The bones that remain after the cremation are usually placed in urns, which are eventually left at the local temples or family stupas. The remains of the deceased play a part in the later commemorative practices. Death anniversaries tend to be held at the temples where the remains rest. Like funerals, they are led by the monks. It is also customary for the family members of the deceased to give gifts, such as food and money, to monks to earn merit for the deceased. Merit can be collected not only during the person’s lifetime, but also gained through funeral or commemorative rites, or children of the deceased becoming monks (Davis 2016). The deceased are similarly commemorated during annual festivals, such as Pchum Ben (a Buddhist festival for commemorating the deceased, celebrated in early to mid-autumn) and Khmer New Year.

in hauntings and wandering spirits because of the killings and treatment of the dead during DK (Arensen 2017; Guillou 2012).

PRK, which was established after the fall of DK in 1979 (and later SOC), was led by former KR military officers (which included the long-term prime minister Hun Sen, replaced by his son in 2023, and many others who continue to stay in power),⁹ the ethnic Khmer who lived in Vietnam since 1950 and members of ethnic minorities that did not join the Khmer Rouge (Chandler 2008). PRK was not recognised internationally. The Khmer Rouge occupied Cambodia's UN seat for 12 more years (Kiernan 2013). The People's Republic of Kampuchea was seen as subservient to Vietnam and established as a result of the Vietnamese occupation. It is one of the reasons why the first serious push for legal action against the perpetrators of the genocide only came in 1993 when the UN organised the first democratic election. The tribunal, known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), was established in its physical form and commenced the court process in 2006 (Kiernan 2013). ECCC played a crucial role in constructing a desired meta-narrative on DK by the current regime (Baaz 2015). ECCC's jurisdiction was limited to the crimes committed during 1975–1979 and to those individuals deemed the most responsible. This meant ignoring severe human rights violations and mass killings that happened before and after DK (crimes committed by the Lon Nol regime, PRK or the Hun Sen Regime) (Lambourne 2014) as well as limiting the accountability to a few top-level leaders (only five people were charged).

Explaining death and survival

All lived experiences, including those of victimisation, have to be integrated into “a stable, unified conceptual system” (Janoff-Bulman 1992, 27). Events are meaningfully placed and comprehended as part of, and in relation to, broader cultural contexts. One of these contexts was, and continues to be, knowledge about the DK regime and about the situations in its administrative units, as well as the position the endangered individuals had within it. Genocides are rational acts that are committed with specific purposes in mind (Lemarchand 1995). Perceptions of this rationale were and continue to be used to comprehend the violence and how it was and could be “controlled” as well as the victimhood itself (Keel, et al. 2023). This is reflected in the stories about

9 These Khmer Rouge officers defected to Vietnam in 1978 and requested Vietnamese military aid against DK (Chandler 2008). Hun Sen was one of the officers. He was recently replaced by his son Hun Manet. Hun Sen held the position of Prime Minister from 1985 to 2023.

death and survival, alongside other past and contemporary understandings and meaning systems.

Most explanations of the causes of death the interviewees provide can be placed under these categories: certain biographical facts (being educated, rich, having been abroad, having served Lon Nol's regime), physical living conditions (hard work, absence of food), various acts and decisions made without the approval of Angkar, illness, location and time. Khmer Rouge sometimes died because of allegiance, as it happened after the arrest of Sao Phim. Successfully managing these threats or being lucky in relation to them could mean survival. Concealing dangerous biographical facts, obedience, unlike independent actions, "good" locations, unlike "bad" locations, and certain times, unlike other times, could contribute to chances of staying alive. As we will see, some death is portrayed as outside of an individual's ability to understand or explain. Even when interviewees believe the events to have followed a certain rationale, they are unable to meaningfully place those deaths in their understanding, knowledge of the DK regime, their own and other people's life-stories. On the other hand, survival is always explained. However, while death, even when it is beyond one's capability to understand, seems to follow a certain rationale characteristic of DK, survival sometimes falls outside of it (and thus is explained by employing other types of historical, social, and cultural knowledge). Individuals survive because of outside intervention, help from others, and their own independent actions.

Biographical facts

Certain biographical facts are often mentioned as likely causes of death. Educated, rich individuals, those who worked for and were part of Loh Nol's regime, had connections with or had lived abroad, were very likely to die if these parts of their biographies became known to the Khmer Rouge. Sometimes (however, very rarely) minorities are mentioned among those who were more likely to die too. In one of the interviews, it was indicated that being Vietnamese brought a greater likelihood of death. According to Makara, his mother was Vietnamese, but she was not killed, just treated worse. Former city dwellers, labelled as the "new people," were also in greater danger, as they were often discriminated against, received less food, and had larger workloads than locals. Chamroeun claims that only two out of the twelve "new people" taken from her living location to Battambang survived. Being knowledgeable is also seen as having been dangerous. Not only being educated, but also knowing certain facts related to the regime (such as locations of mass killing places) could bring deaths.

Concealing these facts about oneself then meant possible survival. One of Chamroeun's aunts secretly escaped from Phnom Penh (where she attended school) to her home village after Phnom Penh was seized. Because of this, she was considered and treated as an "old person". Makara believes that he was lucky to have been moved from Kandal to Battambang. Nobody knew him there. During the Khmer Republic, Makara lived in Phnom Penh and worked for his father-in-law, a well-off businessman who sold cows. If he had stayed in Kandal province, he would have been killed. Nary (62, female, a former teacher, Kandal), who was also relocated to the current Battambang province, tells a similar story. There were no killings of former members of Lon Nol's administration in Battambang (unlike in Kandal, where she lives now). People were sent to Battambang from various locations. It was not easy to trace who they were.

Independent actions and obedience

Nary tells a story about how a digression from DK morale caused death. Most of the marriages during DK were forced, acts of procreation monitored, marital relationships were often limited to rare meetings, and acts of disobedience were punished (often by killing). Nary describes romantic relationships outside of Angkar-approved marriage as dangerous, done mostly by the cadre.¹⁰ According to her, ordinary people didn't dare to have such relationships. She tells about a male KR and a woman from the local medical personnel:

At that time, there was a cadre who loved a member of medical staff [pet]. ... After she became pregnant, the cadre arranged for a man to marry her. Do you understand the story? After only a few months of marriage, the woman gave birth. When she gave birth, she was questioned. ... The story was like from a song, 'six months after getting married, my wife gives birth.' It was like this. [After trying to] find out reasons from her, she said she had a relationship with someone else [before the wedding]. ... The second man was fine; he was not a part of this issue. ... After asking, she was identified as a partner of the first man, so both of them were brought to be killed. (Nary, female, 62, Kandal)

As various types of independent actions could be dangerous, passivity and obedience tend to be associated with survival. Khmer Rouge soldiers had to follow orders to survive (even if it meant that they had to kill people); regular people had to do strictly what they were told. Making small mistakes, such as not planting rice seedlings well, could cost one's life. Saying what one thought, or any sort of complaining, could bring death too. Kosal (80, male, a former

10 According to some of my interviewees, even talking to the opposite sex if they were not one's spouse was dangerous. Courting was not permitted.

teacher, Prey Veng) recounts the stories of people he knew who disappeared during the DK period because they spoke their minds. He contrasts them with himself, stating that unlike those people, he kept his mouth shut. According to Dara (76, male, a former market seller, Kampong Speu), if people were asked about their well-being, they had to say they were okay if they wanted to stay alive.

Physical living conditions, locations, and time

Physical living conditions that determine life and death are often linked to access to food and the type of work the individual does. In most of Cambodia, people ate collectively, and kitchen workers distributed food. Access to food depended not only on class, but also on location, specific period, and other individual circumstances, such as the type of work individuals did and their age. Certain locations (other than those directly associated with death, such as Tuol Sleng prison, the killing fields of Choeung Eik, and various other killing and imprisonment places)¹¹, and certain times in those locations are seen as having caused death more than others.

A few interviewees mentioned exceptionally harsh conditions in the current Battambang province, large numbers of people dying because of starvation, and numerous mass killings happening just before the fall of the regime. Khatharya Um provides a similar description of the Northwest zone, most of which came to belong to Battambang province after the fall of DK: “Impacted by larger resettlement of evacuees than other parts of the country, the zone came to be associated with some of the early and greatest instances of deprivation and brutality. In the ultimate confrontation with social abandonment, survivors described many of the new settlements as places where they were “discarded to die” (kravat chaol oy slab), where famine, draconian discipline, and illness, especially malaria, exacted their toll. Left without adequate provisions, tools, or seeds to sustain themselves, many of the “new” people, especially from the cities, perished soon after arrival” (Um 2015, 31–32). Prey Veng (or the former Eastern zone) is often described as a place with relatively good living conditions and better food compared to most other zones. However, the arrest of Sao Phim, the leader of the Eastern Zone, brought mass killings. Bouppha (71, female, a former market seller, Kandal) remembers entire villages being murdered. Interviewees who stayed in Kandal province during the DK also speak about the violent purges after the arrest of Sao Phim. Class situation and treatment greatly depended on the location and time as well. In some

11 S-21 prison (Tuol Sleng), meant mostly for political prisoners, and the killing fields of Choeung Ek were discovered soon after Phnom Penh was taken by the Vietnamese. Both places became an important part of memory politics during the PRK and the later regimes.

places, class did not play an important role. Class treatment and levels of class polarisation varied over time. While “base” people rarely became targets of violence early or in the middle of the regime, such violence (partially because of decreasing class polarisation) became common in many locations from 1977 (Owens 2014).

The type of work an individual did was also very important. Makara had greater access to food compared to other people because he was a fisherman. He could catch and eat fish, wild animals, and larvae of honeybees. The fishermen were also provided with rice and were allowed to cook it on their own, unmonitored. Because of that, despite being a “new person” in Battambang (where people were dying from starvation in large numbers), he had enough food to eat and sometimes secretly brought some to his family, from whom he was separated. Being unable to work because of illness or other reasons meant no food. Sopheak, who was around seventeen when he was taken to Battambang in 1975, volunteered to work in a mobile unit believing he would be able to receive more food. But the work was really hard, and he injured his legs and was no longer able to work. Because of that, he would not receive any food. Sopheak had little choice but to start to live with his blind and sickly mother. His mother shared her small rations with him. Soon she died from starvation.

When I stayed [at home] for two years, my mother died. Because she was starving when I stayed with her. . . . [I moved to stay with my mother] when I left the hospital, where I was not welcomed. . . . My mother was sick. And when I moved to stay with her after around two months, she died. . . . She died because of starvation. She kept pleading for someone to give her food. She wanted to get a spoonful of food before she died. She knew that she would die. She was really hungry, and she spoke like this. I always remember [this]. She said, ‘My child, please find some food for me. I want to eat at least one spoon.’ After she spoke like this, she died. [I often] think about her dying from hunger. (Sopheak, male, 64, Kandal)

According to the death statistics presented by Heuveline, age was also a significant factor. For example, children up to 10 years old were the least likely to be executed. However, rates of deaths from starvation were relatively high. 30–40-year-olds were the most likely to be executed, but deaths from starvation were relatively few. Some of the interviewees also mentioned age as a factor. According to Sopheak, small children were monitored less strictly; they could have a greater amount of freedom to move. Because of that, his younger siblings, who were four to six years old, were able to go around looking for food without drawing much attention.

Illness

Illnesses or other medical conditions were among the major causes of death during DK. Interviewees mention their family members and relatives dying or being endangered by both illnesses and medical malpractice. The medical system that existed before DK was almost completely destroyed. All medical personnel were “evacuated”, a lot of the medical equipment was destroyed, and medical libraries were burned. KR attempted to create a new socialist and ideologically “pure” medical system (Tyner 2012). Hospitals and medicine production were entrusted to people who had little to no training in these fields. Each cooperative had to produce its own medicine. The medicine was often produced using local plants (Guillou 2004). According to Guillou, the production of modern chemical medicine, as well as hospitals with highly trained physicians (some of whom were sent from China), existed only in Phnom Penh and served “high and subaltern officials who worked in the city” (Guillou 2004, 5–6).

Sopheak’s story about his leg injury shows how greatly medical indifference could affect one’s chances of survival. Sopheak’s supervisor sent him to see a doctor. However, the doctor deemed him healthy enough to work and told him to return to his workplace. This resulted in Sopheak being bedridden at his mother’s home. Kannitha (61, female, a farmer, Kandal) describes her little brother being taken to the hospital because of illness. He was left in his bed, untreated, screaming “Mother! Mother!” until he died. Nary tells a story about the deaths of family members because of severe diarrhea caused by medicine made from palm fruit juice. They received this medicine at the local hospital.

Deaths that could not be explained

While deaths (and the general living reality) under DK seems to generally be associated with senselessness (Cambodian people are often unable to fully understand why they and other people were treated so cruelly), some of the deaths are portrayed as particularly hard to comprehend. Sopheak mentions hearing that near the end of the regime, some of the KR were asked to give up their guns and then taken somewhere never to be seen again. An acquaintance of Sopheak told him that they were all killed. According to the interviewee, nobody knows why. Vanna (83, female, a former farmer, Kandal) emphasised there being no prior notice or explanation for her husband’s arrest and later death. Some of the interviewees expressed an inability

to understand why the Khmer Rouge starved the people, even though there was enough food.¹²

In contrast to the narratives about the Khmer Rouge period, deaths before and after it, even when they are violent, appear to be easier to comprehend. Many of the deaths before DK are related to the civil war. Some gunfights and bombings forced people to migrate. Chamroeun remembers seeing corpses of people and cows. She also mentions regular people being killed in her living area by the marine forces at the riverside. The interviewee believes these deaths to have been accidental. The Marines were there to fight against the Khmer Rouge. They didn't intend to kill regular people. Sopheak describes almost dying at the hands of the Vietnamese army because of an accident. He and his siblings unintentionally damaged wires laid on the ground, cutting off communication for the army. The Vietnamese were convinced that the interviewee and his siblings belonged to the Khmer Rouge. Interviewees also present themselves and other people as much less passive when discussing periods before and after DK. They are rarely helpless; they are active agents in their lives (even in those cases when passivity dominated their stories about DK).

Other ways people survived

Sometimes, survival does not follow the rationale of the regime, but rather depends on factors outside of its regulative capacity. Such things are outside intervention (both human and divine), human kindness and independent action. Most of the stories about outside intervention involve the Vietnamese army entering Cambodia. Sometimes the current Prime Minister, Hun Sen, is mentioned, too. An excerpt from the interview with Boupha contains both:

That night, they took us away. . . . They brought us to kill, because [according to them] we destroyed something. . . . Sao Phim betrayed, they said. And Sao Phim, who was [the leader of the] Eastern Zone [where the interviewee was during DK], had a Youn [Vietnamese] head and a Khmer body. They accused people of things like this. . . . [They] were the Southwestern people. . . . When the Southwestern people came here [Prey Veng], [we] had it really hard. They killed almost all of the people in many villages. . . . The Southwestern people were very brutal; they

12 Interviewees usually meant that enough food was produced during DK (such as rice). However, the people were often given just watery porridge, if even that. There is a common belief that KR traded rice with China for weapons, vehicles and such, even if it caused the population to starve. There is some truth to these beliefs. Angkar required each of its administrative units to reach set production norms. In cases of failure to do so, local leaders often chose to supplement the portion of harvest meant for Angkar with rice (and other foods) meant for the sustenance of the local communities (Mertha 2014). DK indeed traded rice (and other agricultural goods) with China, as well as with a few other countries, in exchange for other goods (Bashi 2008). China supplied KR with weapons, among other things.

wanted to kill all the people in the village. They evacuated [took to kill] almost all of the people of villages nearby. But when they arrived at my village, there was Soviet aircraft. . . . Soviet aircraft bombed the Bet River [in order to] cut off [support for the Khmer Rouge]. . . . In 1978, Hun Sen went and requested Youn [Vietnamese] to rescue us. . . . [They] came and rescued us, [they also] brought Soviet aircraft to bomb and destroy the Kizuna bridge. . . . I could survive because of the bombing. Otherwise, I would be dead. (Boupha, female, 71, Kandal)

In the interview quoted above, it is not only the Vietnamese and Hun Sen that are considered the rescuers, but also the Soviets (who were known to be allies of Vietnam) as brought by the Vietnamese and Hun Sen. It is important to note that Hun Sen is seen as the original, primary rescuer. It was because of him that the Vietnamese decided to help Cambodia, which resulted in the Soviet aircraft bombing the river, and the interviewee and other people surviving. Later in the interview, Boupha gives another explanation for her survival – a divine being *tevada* (often compared to the Christian angels) rescued the people and the interviewee.

Makara also talks about escaping from a near-death experience. He and other people in his location were about to be killed during a meeting. Only 1 000 women were to be left alive. People learned about that because of a cadre who warned their family members and relatives not to attend the meeting. Around 2 000 people, including the interviewee, escaped to the jungle where they struggled to survive. They would sometimes attack the Khmer Rouge to get food or other necessities. After spending two to three months in the woods, people learned about the liberation of Siem Reap. They went to Siem Reap by killing ten Khmer Rouge and stealing their boat. In Makara's story, Hun Sen and the Vietnamese are portrayed as the main reason for survival due to their role in the liberation of Siem Reap and later other provinces.

People in nearby environments can also become sources of survival. Sopheak managed to survive because his mother shared her meals with him and because his siblings brought him food they had stolen or caught (such as crabs, snails, and fish). Two interviewees, both of whom lived in Kandal province during DK, describe the help they and their families received from the people (in the form of food, lighter work or general looking after) because of the good name of their parents. Phirun (69, male, a former farmer, Kandal) expresses a belief that this good name, as well as divine intervention, made it so that he didn't experience much hardship during the DK regime. In the interview with Kannitha (wife of Sopheak), the help is not only received but also provided. Kannitha's family receives fish from the villagers; her father saves people's lives. When the interviewee was about to be taken to be killed (a pile of corn under her responsibility went missing), her father intervened

just in time. He helped other people to escape executions on two different occasions: a woman who had already escaped from the execution site and a group of people he was transporting to be killed. When Kannitha's father realized where he was taking the people, he turned his cart around and went into hiding; however, it is implied that her father's life was already in danger, which was one of the reasons for this choice. The interviewee herself had shared her food with her father (before he went into hiding) and fell ill as a result. Kannitha also speaks about adding more rice to porridge when she was assigned to work in the kitchen. As a result, she was relocated to another location and assigned a different job. In the next section, I will discuss how people employed their agency to ensure their survival.

Agency and victimhood

Despite the common critique of "victimhood", the term seems to correspond to many of the portrayals of self and other people under DK in the interviews with the 1st generation survivors. DK survivors (as well as survivors of organized violence in other locations) often adopt passive positions and present themselves as helpless and weak in the presence of the ruthlessness of the regime. However, I disagree with "victimhood's" conflation with passivity. Like David A Chappell, I argue against the victim-agent dichotomy. According to Chappell, "(v)ictims need not be passive, nor the passive weak, nor actors free agents, for history to happen" (Chappell 1995, 315). Individuals can feel deeply victimized while also adopting an active stance in relation to the experience. The stories about the DK regime told by my interviewees are often full of unjust suffering. Nevertheless, people may be portrayed as trying to survive and to help others. Sometimes they are victimized because of their independent actions. Adopting an active position does not take away from their victimhood. The suffering (and often the feeling of helplessness) remains. In fact, most of the survivors consider the whole Khmer nation to be a victim of the DK regime. Many survivors also see passivity as an effective survival strategy, and as such, it is a form of agency rather than an absence of it. For the reasons mentioned here, shying away from portraying passivity might serve to disempower victims rather than empower them.

As we saw in the previous section, interviewees rarely felt they and other people had any control over their fate. Both death and survival usually simply happened to them. Their fate greatly depended on such factors as locations to which they were deported, times in those locations, jobs they were assigned to do, health and the healthcare system, their biographies and how easy it was to track their identities. Survival is often determined by luck rather than agency.

Boupha's story is a good example of it. It is dominated by passivity. She survived the DK period only because of outside intervention by Hun Sen, the Vietnamese, the Soviets and tevada. Other people are also mostly passive. They get starved to the point of dying; they get killed because of small mistakes. An active stance is also largely absent in the interview with Sopheak. Sopheak's fate, as well as the fate of his family members, was determined by an injury. An attempt to take action (i.e., applying for a job in a mobile working unit) during DK appears to be associated with failure, as well as a sense of helplessness, and is often portrayed as having had very adverse outcomes. As we saw in one of the previous sub-sections, Sopheak's survival after his injury entirely depended on other people - his mother and his siblings. Such dependence and a lack of ability to take action in the interview closely go together with a sense of guilt. Even though Sopheak was not the oldest son, he was seen and treated as such. Sopheak was supposed to be the one responsible for his siblings and mother. The injury and inability to work reversed the roles. Sopheak seems to believe that his mother's death was at least partially a result of his dependence and lack of ability to provide. The rare descriptions of active engagement in Boupha's and Sopheak's interviews mostly fall outside the temporal frames of DK. Passivity seems to dominate stories about DK, partly because of its connection to existing perceptions about the unwritten rules that governed life under DK.¹³

However, the DK rationale sometimes allowed small amounts of control. I already mentioned attempts to find extra food (which sometimes could be seen as stealing from Angkar by the KR and punished severely) - the "new people" had to survive on small prawns; the fisherman ate some of the fish he caught, wild animals and honeybee larva; small children looked for crabs, fish, snails for themselves and their families. Nary, who was fourteen when the regime started, speaks about severe starvation in Battambang province in 1976 that caused a significant number of deaths. People had rice to eat only during and after the harvesting season. Later, they would receive porridge, which became increasingly watery until there was no rice left to make porridge at all. To survive, people had to find food for themselves, such as tree leaves, potatoes, and other types of food. Chamroeun, who was in Kandal province during the DK, also mentions looking for extra food while working, as people were provided only with watery porridge and soup. Evgeny Finkel describes similar survival strategies (both people helping one another and breaking some of the rules to get food and other necessities, job positions) during the Holocaust and categorises them as coping. According to Finkel (2017), compliance (a more

13 In contrast to the memories of DK survivors, independent actions and small acts of resistance were quite common in my interviews with the Lithuanian soviet deportees. Moments of active agency existed even during periods of greatest passivity, such as the arrest and the journey to the deportation locations (Grickevičiūtė 2016).

passive position of greater obedience) as well as coping turned out to be not the best survival strategies as most of those who stuck to them died. Coping, however, seems to have been the most common survival strategy under DK. Day-to-day life under the DK and the scarcity of food and other necessities in most locations required people to “cope” by employing different means outside of those officially approved by Angkar.

Some groups and individuals were granted significantly higher levels of independence in their actions and decision-making. Romantic love and having romantic relationships outside of marriage approved by Angkar was described as dangerous by a few interviewees. However, certain conditions allowed a greater level of agency. Chamroeun recalls her aunt marrying the person she was in a romantic relationship with before DK, as his family had connections with an influential Khmer Rouge cadre. Phirun states that he could not have a sexual or romantic relationship during DK because he was not a powerful person. These types of relationships cost lives. However, according to him, local leaders were able to hold orgies.

The unwritten rules that governed life under the DK dictated that obedience and passivity, with some exceptions, were necessary for survival. However, sometimes interviewees speak about situations in which individuals survived by adopting highly active positions. Chamroun talks about siblings who managed to continue living together by pretending to be husband and wife. A very educated person survived by pretending to be insane. Makara tells multiple stories of personal survival, which mainly depend on his own actions. According to him, he and around 2000 other people escaped killings by leaving for a forest. Before escaping, the interviewee and four others stole five guns from the Khmer Rouge.

It was noon. The big people [adults] [of the Khmer Rouge] were taking a nap, but the small ones [children of the Khmer Rouge] did not. . . . They rested their guns at a coconut tree. [I/we] boiled a bag of eggs and gave them to them [the young Khmer Rouge]. When they ate the eggs, I strangled them. I strangled their necks. They were three, and we were five. I was an adult, and they were young. I strangled them until they died. Then I strangled them and [we] took the guns and ran. You know, one of them didn't die. When they woke up, they shot into the jungle. They chased after us and shot at us. The Khmer Rouge stayed at the [name] village. It was near a flooded forest [Prey Roneam] of Tunley Sab [lake]. They chased after us and shot at us. They chased after us, chased after us, [but] when we were halfway, we went into the jungle and they couldn't find us. [We] escaped into the jungle with five guns. (Makara, male, 68, Kandal)

Life in the woods was very hard for Makara and for the other people. They had little to no food, no shelter, and no way to protect themselves against swarms of mosquitoes. However, Makara managed to take two barrels of corn from the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge put chemicals in the corn to poison those who ate them, but Makara and his comrades managed to wash it out. They could fend off starvation (even if barely) by eating the corn for three months. After learning of the liberation of Siem Reap through a radio, the interviewee and the others stole a boat from the Khmer Rouge, killing ten of them in the process. They used the boat to travel to Siem Reap, where they surrendered their guns and received a bag of rice each. Makara and around 100 other men decided to return to Battambang to search for their families. When they were walking through Oddar Meanchey, the group encountered the Khmer Rouge (the KR were still strong in that area). Six of them, including Makara, managed to run to the nearby river, jump in the water and hide under the water plants. Those six people survived while others were all killed.

Survival due to such high levels of independent action and control over one's fate (especially among individuals who did not belong to the KR) clearly falls outside the usual perceptions of the DK rationale. Despite that, the sense of victimisation and injustice remains present. The stories about Chamroun's acquaintances either contain or imply suffering. The highly educated person had to live in fear and pretend to be insane. The brother in the story about the two siblings ends up dying while attempting to escape to Thailand. Makara's story is not free from unjust suffering either. It was usually fear and suffering, rather than their absence, that moved these individuals to act.¹⁴ The ability to act independently, however limited, coexists with a sense of helplessness and numerous hardships as part of the same story. While it is important not to strip the survivors of their agency, it is equally important to recognise the injustice and the helplessness that they experienced and continue to remember.

Agency, death, and responsibility

In some of the interviews, individuals can be seen as having a certain level of decision-making power over the lives and deaths of others. In the interview with Kannitha, an active position is mainly expressed through actions of her father (even though both she and her father are portrayed as victims, who suffered unjustly). Her father not only releases a turtle into the river instead of killing and eating it (and spends a day in prison without food or water because of it), but he also makes decisions about the lives of people. It was her

14 Daria Khlevnyuk (2023) describes similar patterns when discussing heroic victimhood among the victims of soviet repressions in the Russian collective memory.

father who rescued the interviewee by lying to the local Khmer Rouge, helped a woman to escape an execution, and turned his cart around after realising that he was taking people to be killed. He could do his job and bring his cart to the killing place, or he could turn back (Kannitha indicates that her father's compassion was the primary reason why he chose to disobey). There seems to be a level of identification between Kannitha and this idealised image of her father as an active, good person, as a rescuer. Through this identification, it is not only the 'goodness' of her father, but also his active position that is ascribed to Kannitha. In an attempt to secure guns, Makara and four others kill children¹⁵ working for the Khmer Rouge. They later kill more Khmer Rouge to steal the boat. Sometimes people have a high level of agency in their own deaths as well. A grandfather of one of the high school students I interviewed committed suicide, hoping to protect his family. He believed that his high position in Loh Nol's administration put his family in danger. In his book, Rithy Panh, a well-known Cambodian film director, tells a story of his father's choice to die by refusing to eat when under the DK. Rithy Panh believes that his father's choice was a form of resistance against the dehumanising regime rather than an attempt to protect (Panh and Bataille 2013).

While ordinary people are sometimes portrayed to have had certain power over death in different ways, those who belonged to the Khmer Rouge could lack such power. The Khmer Rouge were victims of mass killings too. However, they are often seen as passive participants even when they commit the killings (it is important to note that there are interviewees who see all of the Khmer Rouge as fully or partially responsible). Initially, Nary avoids providing a clear answer to a question regarding victimhood and responsibility for the DK crimes. She claims that she does not know who made decisions regarding the executions, and that regular people knew very little about the politics. She only knows that these decisions were not made by those who participated in the killings directly. Despite that, she later states:

We, the ordinary people, are the victims, and they [the Khmer Rouge] are victims just like us, too, because they also didn't know [anything about the politics], just like today. Today is just like it was back then; commune leaders and sub-district leaders simply follow the orders of leaders [like] Hun Sen, right? (Nary, female, 62, Kandal)

A few other interviewees express similar views. Makara, for example, believes that everybody but the main leaders were victims. According to him,

15 It was common for children to be recruited by the KR, drafted into the KR army. They would often carry guns and participate in executions. There is a common belief that these KR children would betray their parents to the KR, sometimes even execute them with their own hands.

lower-level leaders like Nuon Chea (who is officially thought to have been second in command to Pol Pot) and Duch (who managed the infamous Tuol Sleng prison) should not have been tried by the tribunal because they were merely following orders. Phirun also believes that most of the Khmer Rouge were victims. If they did not follow orders, they would have been killed. Chamroun questions if Pol Pot could have known and sanctioned the killings – why would he want to kill other Khmer?¹⁶ On the other hand, direct participation in the Holocaust killings is almost never justified in Lithuania. Both those who killed the Jews and those who took their property are seen very negatively (Šutinienė 2004).

We can see here that active participation in Cambodia is not always seen as the opposite of passivity. While KR kill, they are not independent actors. They are seen as passive because of the perceived absence of any real control over death. It is through this passivity that they are ascribed both victimhood and a level of innocence. Eve Monique Zucker observes similar tendencies among the KR. Former KR cadre reinterpret their life stories from the perspective of victimhood in response to the current political realities. They claim that they had little knowledge about what was really happening under the DK, and did not participate in the killings (which fits the statements made by my interviewees who used to belong to the KR). They also emphasise the absence of the power to make decisions and speak of the violence that befell KR and their family members under the DK (Zucker 2017).

The relations between victimhood and innocence have been a topic of scholarly discussion for quite some time. According to Nils Christie (1986), an ideal victim is typically a little old lady. Among other things, she is helpless and innocent, blameless in her victimisation. Imagery of victims of Socialist regimes, as innocent in their passivity, became common in Eastern Europe (Chappell 1995). Passive victimhood has become a source of moral authority (Vassileva-Karagyozova 2020). Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood discuss how a level of helplessness and hence victimhood are ascribed to the perpetrators of violence during the armed conflict in Ireland (1969–1998). Similarly to Cambodia, all of the Irish are seen as victims of an “abnormal society” of the time (even if not equally). It is because of this “abnormal society” that “normal” people who would never have come to the attention of the legal justice system in a normal society, engaged in politically motivated violence which victimized the wider society” (Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood 2010, 873).

16 This is not an uncommon view in Cambodia. A substantial portion of the society believes that DK leadership had nothing to do with the killings, and sometimes that they did not know about the killings at all. At times, these beliefs are intertwined with conspiracy theories about foreign forces (such as Vietnam or China) attempting to empty the Cambodian lands for their own purposes by carrying out executions and causing starvation.

To sum it up, there is a diversity of ways in which agency in death is perceived by my interviewees. Passivity is generally associated with full or partial victimhood. Passivity does not refer to the absence of active participation as much as the absence of control and helplessness. Great amounts of control in situations of death are either associated with responsibility (while there is no clear consensus over who was responsible for the genocide, the level of control is usually used as the main criterion) or seen as heroic depending on the circumstances. Even the act of taking other people's lives can be seen positively if the cause justified it and if the said people worked for the KR. The lack of consensus regarding responsibility may be partially caused by the scarcity of DK representations in the media, as DK history is rarely discussed on television and elsewhere. However, DK and, especially, the responsibility for what happened during DK are still seen as dangerous topics. Nary was not the only interviewee who was reluctant to answer this question. The perceived danger, undoubtedly, had an impact on some of the other interviews. The current political situation may also have contributed to the prevalence of passivity in the interviews. It is possible that some of the interviewees consciously or subconsciously adopted a passive stance because of its associations with victimhood and innocence, just as Zucker's interviewees did.

Conclusions

While there is certain diversity in how people talk about death, its reasons, and survival during the Khmer Rouge period, common patterns do emerge: certain types of biographies, various actions without the approval of Angkar, physical living conditions and illness, certain locations and times are seen as potentially causing death. These reasons often do not exist separately but overlap. People are labelled as "new people" because of their biographies, get less access to food, and have to work harder. Physical living conditions, treatment of misbehaviour and class are different in different locations and at different times. Death and survival are not simply binary opposites; they coexist in the same places, at the same times, and in the same situations, as integral parts of the same reality, and as likely possibilities for individuals at all times. Both death and survival are typically viewed as stemming from the same social, political, and cultural rationale. Obedience and successful concealment of one's biography are often associated with survival, while their opposites are associated with death. However, individuals employ a diverse range of knowledge when interpreting life-and-death situations, as well as victimhood, under DK. In addition to their memories about DK, they draw from their religious/spiritual beliefs, historical knowledge they acquired after the regime ended (such as Hun Sen's

role in the liberation), their beliefs about people and inter-personal relations (people selflessly helping one another), about their (and other) selves and the level of control they had over their circumstances etc. Sometimes survival falls outside of the perceived DK rationale completely.

Agency plays a crucial role in ascribing groups and individuals victimhood only when their victimhood is seen as debatable. It matters greatly when discussing the responsibility and victimhood among the KR, but it is much less important for individuals with less ambiguous positions. The tendency to focus on the level of agency among the KR may partially exist due to the ideas of accountability promoted by the ECCC and the Cambodian government. High levels of support the KR had in Cambodia before DK might also be an important factor. The tribunal chose to prosecute those most responsible and suggested that lower-level KR were also victims. While passivity is generally associated with victimhood, high levels of control do not always take away from the victimhood of individuals who did not belong to the KR. The ability to take independent actions may come together with great suffering, a sense of injustice and helplessness. People flee when their lives are unjustly endangered (like in the case of Kannitha's father), commit suicide to protect others or are killed for disobedience. Victimhood is also rarely fully passive. The DK rationale allows a small amount of control. Passivity itself is employed as a survival strategy.

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DOVILĖ GRICKEVIČIŪTĖ

Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas

Mirtis, išgyvenimas ir buvimas auka valdant raudonųjų khmerų režimui

Santrauka

Analizuodama pasakojimus apie mirtį ir išgyvenimą, šiame straipsnyje nagrinėju, kaip išgyvenusieji Kambodžos genocidą aiškina buvimą auka Demokratinėje Kampučijoje. Prieštaraudama aukos-veikėjo dichotomijai, aš teigiu, kad tame pačiame pasakojime gali būti sutinkamas ir bejėgiškumo pojūtis, ir gebėjimas veikti savarankiškai. Taip pat teigiu, kad įvardijant grupes ir asmenis aukomis veikmė svarbų vaidmenį atlieka tikrai tada, kai jų buvimas aukomis suprantamas kaip ginčytinas (jeigu asmenys priklausė raudoniesiems khmerams). Mirtis ir išgyvenimas dažnai suprantami kaip nulemti tų pačių socialinių, politinių ir kultūrinių priežasčių. Žmonės miršta dėl tam tikrų biografijos faktų (buvimo išsilavinusiam, turtingam, lankymosi užsienyje, tarnavimo Lon Nolo režimui), fizinių gyvenimo sąlygų (sunkaus darbo, maisto trūkumo), įvairių veiksmų ir

sprendimų, atliktų be *Angkar* (raudonųjų khmerų vadovybės ir sekimo struktūros) pritarimo, ligos, vietos ir laiko. Asmeniui išgyventi padėdavo pavojingų biografijos faktų nuslėpimas, paklusnumas *Angkar* ar paprasčiausia sėkmė atsidurti geroje vietovėje ir gauti darbą, kuris užtikrindavo geresnę prieigą prie maisto. Informantai paprastai save ir kitus vaizduoja kaip pasyvius, bet taip pat aptaria mažesnius ar didesnius savarankiškus veiksmus. Šie veiksmai nebūtinai lemia mirtį – jie gali padėti išgyventi ir išsaugoti kitų žmonių gyvybes.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: buvimas auka, mirtis, išgyvenimas, veikmė, Demokratinė Kampučija.