

REFUSAL OR (RE-)CONSTRUCTION: THE CURRENT STATUS OF COLLECTIVE REMEMBRANCE AMONG URBAN CAMBODIAN YOUTH

DANIEL POLOMSKI 5738485 HPHR/M

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THESIS ADVISORY COMMITTEE : MATTHEW MULLEN, Ph.D., MICHAEL GEORGE HAYES, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study was to advance the understanding of post-conflict generations' realities with regard to the design of transitional justice mechanisms and efforts of collective remembrance in the aftermath of mass atrocities.

The study aimed to include voices of the Cambodian youth into the academic discourse, and was therefore designed in terms of a constructivist grounded theory. Hence, the field was approached only through an initial interest in the question of why individual Cambodian students respond differently to transitional justice mechanisms, such as the so-called Khmer Rouge Tribunal, and without a hypothesis. In order to provide the scope, the (auto-) genocide, as well as approaches to transitional justice and debates around remembrance in Cambodia were discussed. Within this framework, the data brought into light four obstacles to remembrance. In addition, various mixed signals around remembrance were revealed as closely connected to the obstacles. Lastly, the data unfolded that the Cambodian youth were aware of a contested collective remembrance that was used by the current government as a strategy to gain political leverage. Taking such findings into account the study argued that the Cambodian youth were refusing the recent form of top down remembrance, as practiced by the government and taught in schools, in favor of a bottom up construction of collective remembrance. Such a construction is negotiated by means that are inclusive, acknowledging rights-holding, and which are open to questioning. The main findings of the thesis were established on the basis of an inductive and qualitative, three-stage process of semi-structured interviews among (n=20) respondents. The convenience sample included Cambodian university students and young professionals between 18 and 26 years of age, who were based in Phnom Penh during the research. The interviews were recorded and digital transcripts were analyzed based on grounded theory methods.

This study showed that acts of indifference among the Cambodian youth towards the Khmer Rouge Tribunal were not only expressions of their rejection of national constructions of remembrance, but also their refusal to acknowledge international constructions in the form of transitional justice mechanisms.

KEY WORDS: TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE / REMEMBRANCE / KHMER ROUGE / POST-CONFLICT YOUTH / EXTRAORDINARY CHAMBERS IN THE COURTS OF CAMBODIA (ECCC)

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