

# GENDERING LEGITIMACY THROUGH THE REPRODUCTION OF MEMORIES AND VIOLENT DISCOURSES IN CAMBODIA

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*This article argues that the legitimacy of both male and female politicians in Cambodia is partly built on discourses of violence and reconstructed memories of the past. From this standpoint, this article looks at how women's and men's relation to violence—and memories of violence—creates and undermines their legitimacy as political leaders. Additionally, it relates how women use memories of violence in their strategies to increase their political authority. Based on interviews with fifty-two female and male politicians and nongovernmental workers in Cambodia, this article addresses how discourses on politics rely on notions of “then” and “now” of violence and the images of identity emerging from these.*

**Key words:** Cambodia, East Asian politics, Democracy–East Asia, Gender Studies

## **Introduction**

During the last several years, “space” seems to have become a magic word. In feminist discourse, the word repeatedly turns

up in various titles and contemporary discussions.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it symbolizes a space in itself or it appears as a metaphor that may be associated with “whatever one may imagine can have some kind of ‘spatial’ meaning—directions, places, centers and margins, houses, caves, oceans . . .”<sup>2</sup> However, other currents prevail when one reviews the feminist studies research field. One contrary pattern is seen in the call to “revisit” the concept of time.<sup>3</sup> In the contemporary world, it is forgotten that gender is a social relation imbued with time, not a space to visit or a thing to be understood. While watching the gendered surfaces of bodies in action, we forget to make the temporality visible.<sup>4</sup>

This critique can be expanded to include how we think about political power. Put in a time perspective it becomes interesting to observe not only how the discourses of legitimacy that frame the political space are created over time, but also what role memories play in the process. How is the legitimacy of male and female politicians built on reconstructed memories of the past? How is gendered discourse of legitimacy informed by (re)constructed normalities?

The memory/time/legitimacy nexus becomes even more prevalent when discussing war-torn societies such as Cambodia. As I will show, Cambodia provides an example of how memories of violence are used as constructed borders that define legitimate leaders. The political discourses of today evoke memories of the violent period of Khmer Rouge rule when a border was constructed between “real” and “false” Cambodians. To be a Cambodian leader one must be a “real” Cambodian who has the same experiences as the people, has suffered with the people, and has learned from this suffering. The discourses about violence thus, in this

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1. See Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), and Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

2. Halldis Valestrand, “Spatial Metaphors in Feminist Discourse,” *Nordic Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 8, No. 2 (2000), pp. 117-20.

3. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006); Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); and Kath Weston, *Gender in Real Time: Power and Transience in a Visual Time* (London: Routledge, 2002).

4. Weston, *Gender in Real Time*.

case, compose the belief “by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige.”<sup>5</sup> It constitutes the very groundwork from which individuals exercise their leadership. And while this reasoning can be broadened and put into a gendered perspective, the nexus between time, memory, political legitimacy, and the discourses of violence should be elaborated.

### **Memory and Democracy**

Recently, the connection between memory and democracy has entered the debate. The interest is fuelled by a number of events. First, recent public political apologies for past wrongdoings (e.g., the Pope’s apologies to Jews and to Aboriginals, and the Japanese prime minister’s apologies to Korea and China for his country’s World War II crimes) have put memory on the agenda.<sup>6</sup> Second, new attention has been given to the relationship between trauma, time, and memory.<sup>7</sup> A third reason that memory is increasingly emphasized is the post-cold war expansion of a “human rights language” as well as the increased search for identities and authentic cultures. The “third wave of democratization” has also helped give visibility to the relationship between memory and democracy. How to reconcile with a violent past is part of the public agenda of many newly democratized countries. Since the 1980s many nations have begun to seek justice for past violations through truth commissions or, as in Cambodia, through juridical procedures.

Barbara Misztal’s work cited above embraces a number of for-and-against arguments that are usually put forward within the debate. One argument often repeated is that collective memory is a condition for justice in healthy democratic nations to be sustained. A nation must acknowledge and reconcile past pathologies and crimes so as not to repeat them, censor history, or forget victims.

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5. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1964), p. 382.

6. Misztal, “Memory and Democracy,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 48, No. 10 (June, 2005), pp. 1320-36.

7. See Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

However, the notion of bringing together justice, memory, and democracy also has potential risks. Remembering may create rage, desire for revenge, and instability, while forgetting implies going beyond anger and hatred, thus offering the democratic system a fresh start. Remembering everything can be a threat to national cohesion and self-image as the writing of a shared historical narrative necessarily involves the elimination of certain memories.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the use of politicized memories of ethnic or national identities and their narratives of suffering or glorified pasts can easily lead to conflicts between different groups. As elaborated below, this pattern can, to some degree, be spotted within a Cambodian context.

Any analysis of remembering must, however, involve the unpacking of the very concept of memory. In this regard Jenny Edkins concludes in her book, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, that “memory is a performative practice, and inevitably social.”<sup>9</sup> Barbara Misztal agrees that remembering is mainly a collective practice:

Collective memory is social in origin and influenced by dominant discourses, but memory is also the faculty of individual minds. Although it is the individual who remembers, remembering is more than a personal act, as even the most personal memories are embedded in social context and shaped by social factors that make social remembering possible, such as language, rituals, and commemoration practices.<sup>10</sup>

Personal memories are thus imbued and formed by dominant discourses as well as formed by practices that make remembering possible.<sup>11</sup>

Remembering is thus simultaneously to be seen as an individual and a collective practice, one that is to be connected to political practices as well as political legitimacy. Or as Misztal poses the question: What kind of memory is compatible with just, pluralist, and cohesive democracies? That question becomes, of course, even more problematic if one considers the construc-

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8. Misztal, “Memory and Democracy.”

9. Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*.

10. Misztal, “Memory and Democracy,” p. 1321.

11. *Ibid.*

tion of the Cambodian political system as a hybrid, that is, a mix of liberal democracy (as implemented by the United Nations) and traditional notions of power and decision making.<sup>12</sup> Caroline Hughes states that the Cambodian elites have a tendency to “pick and mix” from a wide range of legitimizing discourses.<sup>13</sup> This becomes interesting from the standpoint of memory and hybrid democracy. How is legitimacy established within a hybrid democracy? Are male and female politicians seeking legitimacy within the new “liberal democracy” or are they leaning on reconstructed memories of traditional power sharing and decision making?

### The History of Violence

Contrary to the gender roles in many other countries, women in Cambodia are, in general, the holders of their family’s wealth and very active in the economic sector.<sup>14</sup> However, Judy Ledgerwood states that while “Cambodian women were and are extremely active in economic affairs, it was not considered appropriate for women to be active in politics.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, women’s shouldering of economic responsibilities is not reflected in their share of space in the political arena.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, women are often seen as non-political while men are assigned various characteristics that

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12. Un Kheang, “Patronage Politics and Hybrid Democracy: Political Change in Cambodia, 1993-2003,” *Asian Perspective*, vol. 29, No. 2 (2005), pp. 203-30, and Mona Lilja, *Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia: Discourses of Emancipation* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2008).
  13. Caroline Hughes, “Reconstructing Political Authority through Elections,” in Joakim Öjendal and Mona Lilja, eds., *Imaging Political Legitimacy in Cambodia: Reconstruction in a Post-Conflict Society* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2008).
  14. Kate Frieson, *In the Shadow: Women, Power and Politics in Cambodia*, Occasional Paper No. 26 (2001), Victoria Centre for Asian-Pacific Initiatives; Mona Norrlind, *Kvinnor och bistånd: En Landsbygdsstudie från Kambodja* (“Women and Aid: A Study of the Rural Areas of Cambodia”), Paper (1996), Göteborg University; Jan Ovesen, Ing-Britt Trankell, and Joakim Öjendal, “When Every Household Is an Island,” *Uppsala Research Reports in Cultural Anthropology*, No. 15 (1996), pp. 70-71.
  15. Judy Ledgerwood, “Analysis of the Situation of Women in Cambodia,” paper (Phnom Penh, 1992), p. 15; Frieson, *In the Shadow*, p. 6.
  16. Frieson, *In the Shadow*.

are considered proper for decision making.

The gap between the image of a leader and the representation of women's identity should be related to women's relationship with violence and suffering. The history of Cambodia carries with it memories of killing and destruction. The U.S. bombings of Cambodia in the period that followed the Indochina war aimed at destroying North Vietnamese troops entering the country from Vietnam. Thereafter, the communist Khmer Rouge gained ground by seizing power by 1975 and forcing Cambodians into farming collectives in an attempt to create an agrarian utopia. During the years they ruled the country, more than 1.7 million people probably died of starvation, overwork, disease, and executions before Vietnam invaded the country in 1979 and ejected the more radical communists from power.<sup>17</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Vietnamese established the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).

The PRK held on to power until the late 1980s, when the Phnom Penh government carried out substantial political, economic, and social reforms that moved the country a step away from the Soviet-style authoritarian, planned economy. Among other things, the UN organized and, in large part, carried out a national parliamentary election in 1993. The next election in 1998 was preceded by a new outbreak of violence when Hun Sen from the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the Second Prime Minister at that time, ousted First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh from power in a military coup. Nonetheless, the election was held.<sup>18</sup>

Since that time, the country has been marked by political violence. For example, the UN has expressed its concerns about the killings at times of elections. For instance, in a resolution of May 2003 (E/CN.4/2003/L.81), the UN Commission for Human Rights criticized the violations of human rights and the political violence in Cambodia, including killings of political activists in the run-up to the election.<sup>19</sup> In December 2005, the new UN human

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17. See Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004).

18. P. Pierre Lizée, "Testing the Limits of Change: Cambodia's Politics after the July Election," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1999* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), pp. 79-91.

19. Camnews, [camnews@cambodia.org](mailto:camnews@cambodia.org), from: "Supharidh Hy," at [hy@un.org](mailto:hy@un.org), [camnews@cambodia.org](mailto:camnews@cambodia.org), May 1, 2003.

rights envoy to Cambodia said that in relation to the political practices of Cambodia, one must worry about the human rights situation in the country.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the Human Rights Watch's *World Report 2006* drew the conclusion that "2005 saw a sharp reversal in progress Cambodia had made in observing human rights and developing political pluralism since the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords."<sup>21</sup> Some political opposition politicians had their immunity lifted, were arrested, or in other ways were threatened. According to the report, not only political activists but also journalists who spoke out about land rights, illegal logging, or a controversial border treaty with Vietnam, were arrested, physically attacked, threatened with death, imprisoned, or prosecuted. Many fled the country and some still remain in self-imposed exile.

Political violence is also still reflected in the interviews of current politicians and in the documents and books that focus on contemporary Cambodia.<sup>22</sup> The ways of thinking and talking—the ways of constructing knowledge and discourse—about the violent past in general and the violence in relation to politics in particular, to some degree decide how political legitimacy is generated in the prevailing political culture of Cambodia. In Cambodia discourses of violence and politics mutually influence each other in creating a number of subject positions of legitimate politicians. This is due to the close relationship between the discourse and identity. Or as Stuart Hall expresses it: "discourses themselves construct the subject-positions from which they become meaningful and have effects."<sup>23</sup> In this sense, discourses decide not only what can be said but also suggest different subject positions: the *who* of saying *what*.<sup>24</sup> The caring, peaceful, female politi-

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20. Ibid.; Guy De Launey, "UN Envoy Sounds Cambodia Alarm," BBC News, Phnom Penh, December 6, 2005.

21. *World Report 2006*, January 18, 2006, from: "Supharidh Hy," hy@un.org, Mailing-List: camnews@googlegroups.com, January 18, 2006.

22. Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*; Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, [1996] 2002); Alexandrine Marie Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1994).

23. Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997).

24. Göran Bergström and Kristina Boréus, "Diskursanalys," in Göran,

cian and the “strong man” are only two of the subject positions that women and men are assumed to inhabit and speak from. The text below reflects entanglement in the nexus of subject positions, political discourses, and the discourses of violence.

## Women Subject Positions, Violence, and Political Legitimacy

### *The Ideal Woman*

Women are to talk slowly and softly, to be so quiet in their movement that one can hear the sound of their silk skirt rustling. While she is shy and must be protected, before marriage ideally never leaving the company of her relatives, she is also industrious.<sup>25</sup>

Ledgerwood describes this image as “the notion of the ideal women,” which Cambodians relate to in various ways, either as a point of reference or as a gender symbolism to use in political rhetoric. The ideal woman is the “perfectly virtuous woman” who controls her speech, is silent, or speaks sweetly to her husband; she never disputes him even if he is angry and is cursing her.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, in interviews, the Cambodian women described themselves as shy, honest, gentle, active, hard-working, humble, economical, and unenlightened.<sup>27</sup> One respondent stated that “women are born more close to their feelings. They are easily sad and scared. Men and women are born different.”<sup>28</sup> This image and the gender

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Bergström, and Kristina Boreus, eds., *Textens mening och makt: metodbok I samhällsvetenskaplig text—och diskursanalys* (Meaning and Power of the Text: Methods for Analyzing Text and Discourse in Social Sciences) (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2000), p. 226.

25. Ledgerwood, “Analysis of the Situation of Women in Cambodia,” paper (Phnom Penh, 1992), p. 4.

26. Judy Ledgerwood, “Politics and Gender: Negotiating Conceptions of the Ideal Women in Present Day Cambodia,” in *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 37, No. 2 (1996), pp. 139-52.

27. Mona Norrlind, *Kvinnor och bistånd*.

28. Interview No. 1C. This is one of fifty-two interviews conducted by the author from 1997 to 2007 among male and female politicians from the three main parties and nongovernmental organization members in Cambodia. To protect their identities, the interviews are simply numbered and labelled according to the year they were done—A (1999), B

hierarchies that it nourishes were also reaffirmed in other interviews of Cambodian women:

We cannot take full responsibility; we are only women. Women always speak out less than the men. The men seem to dominate the women. We feel afraid to speak out and when we speak out we feel afraid that what we say is wrong because women don't know how to speak. . . . Girls are weaker than boys, mentally weaker.<sup>29</sup>

Some women in the countryside have the idea that women are mentally weaker than men. Women don't think that women can be leaders. When we tell them that women are smarter than men, they say "Ohhh."<sup>30</sup>

Both men and women believe that women are mentally weaker than men.<sup>31</sup>

These citations can be understood by quoting Petre Santry. She found in the 1990s that most Cambodian women were "subjugated to males and occupying a relatively low status, with many traditional ideas repressing their advancement."<sup>32</sup> In the end, she concluded that multiple gendered-power relations work at different levels of society, imbuing women's lives and contributing to their low representation in education and public decision making, as well as leading to sexual exploitation and domestic violence.

However, there are some ambiguities that must be brought out. In present-day Cambodia there is a pattern of keeping the traditional gender imagery alive; still, the gender imagery also contains images and values other than the traditional ones. According to Ledgerwood, the ideal woman in contemporary Cambodia can simultaneously be "a shy, quiet, and obedient servant and a strong, manipulating, vocal village woman."<sup>33</sup> There is also some tension between the image of the "perfect" woman and the experi-

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(1997), C (1995), E (2002), and F (2007).

29. Interview No. 1E.

30. Interview No. 2B.

31. Interview No. 17B.

32. Petre Ann Santry, "When Asaras Smile," in *Women and Development in Cambodia 1990-2000: Cultural Barriers to Change* (Melbourne: Victoria University, Faculty of Human Development, 2005), p. 109.

33. Ledgerwood, "Politics and Gender," pp. 139-52.

ences, knowledge, and practices of actual women. In this, Frieson argues that “the disjuncture between the mythologized female role celebrating temerity and docility on the one hand, and hard-headed business acumen on the other, is a source of social tension and conflict.”<sup>34</sup>

While arguing for the existence of ambivalence and social tension, both Frieson and Ledgerwood point to the traditional stereotypical image of the perfect woman as being highly visible in today’s Cambodia. This image is also connected to various security issues and the notion of women in need of protection.<sup>35</sup> And, as we will see, the image of women as fragile prevents them from engaging in political action. For example, one respondent commented that “a big problem with women and politics is that women cannot live by themselves in town.”<sup>36</sup> Another woman stated that “Women can’t bear violence. They cannot lead and are too busy with their families.” Likewise, the participants in a workshop at the Women’s Media Centre (WMC) discussed some of the obstacles for women’s political participation: “Women in politics are easily frightened, are not brave, suffer from much oppression, and can be selfish.”<sup>37</sup>

The image of the “anxious woman” thus creates difficulties for women who want to become political leaders since women do not, in such an image, correspond with the idea of a leader and protector. The image of the woman in need of protection seems to have been strengthened in times of fear. Under insecure conditions, the increased demand for defense assigns leaders a special responsibility for local and national security issues, in which the defenders—leaders, guards, and soldiers—are all men. One female village chief recounted the difficulties of being a woman leader:

There is conflict in the village, and sometimes as a woman it’s difficult to organize the guard at night. . . . For a male head of village, it’s easier than for a female one, because of transport and security. It’s easier to leave home. Somehow at night, in the daytime. . . .

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34. Frieson, *In the Shadow*, pp. 2-3

35. Santry, “When Asaras Smile,” p. 57.

36. Interview No. 12B.

37. Women’s Media Centre, *Report from Workshop on Women and Politics* (Phnom Penh: Women’s Media Centre, 1997).

And also another family member told me, "Please stop, because you're a woman. Please stay at home at night, do not go around the village."<sup>38</sup>

### *Women as Leaders*

It seems that maleness, violence, and security issues have been entwined with the image of a leader and politician. This provides women with political obstacles, since it is not considered appropriate for them to handle security issues. Moreover, they often have their freedom of movement limited. While men are considered to be the representatives of the outwardly public domain, in spite of the danger, women are assigned another, more passive and timid role. Politics becomes a matter of gender and the recruitment of women to that arena becomes problematic.

Yet another woman leader emphasized the connections between the role of a leader and that of a guard or soldier carrying arms. She stated that for her, it has been difficult to shoulder the responsibilities of protecting her village:

At that time, I was appointed by the government at provincial level. They wanted me because of my education, reputation, and how I worked. They wanted to see me become head of the commune, but at that time, as head of a commune, I would have to have a gun in my hand. At that time it was unsafe in my village and all over the commune, but it is not good for me to have a gun in my hand.<sup>39</sup>

From this quotation, one may draw the conclusion that women are seen as vulnerable and not capable of dealing with security issues.

This image is not superficial, and many women have internalized a relationship to violence that conforms to the prevailing gender dichotomy. Imbedded in men's and women's different identifications is the question of how to react to insecurity. As women are considered weak and anxious in relation to physical violence, it is legitimate for them to avoid danger, and they prefer to stay out of politics. Women are not entrusted with the

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38. Interview No. 14A.

39. Interview No. 13A.

ability to handle security issues:

In 1993, there were many women who wanted to be candidates. People in Cambodia do not believe in women's capacity and therefore they are not selected as candidates. People do not think women can make it in politics. In the CPP, they believe in women as long as they have a lower position than men. The woman is number two if the man is number one. Men and women *do not believe in the capacity of women to create stability*.<sup>40</sup>

Being in need of protection, the idea of women as protectors becomes a paradox and women often do not gain political credibility as leaders. However, while women are occasionally addressed as children and stripped of any leadership abilities, in their symbolic force of peace angels they gain political authority. One woman said: "Men have big egos. They can sacrifice innocent people to save their egos if they are afraid to 'lose their face.' More women in the government would create a change—a less violent and a more honest political system. Women behave better."<sup>41</sup>

Correspondingly, a recent report stated: "Countering a culture of violence, women are at the forefront of promoting peaceful resolutions of local disputes."<sup>42</sup> Women thus lose authority as vulnerable citizens, exposed to violence with no capability to protect but in need of protection and almost child-like. But at the same time their relation to violence adds to their political trustworthiness by representing peace and, paradoxically, also a sense of security. Women's relation to violence is interpreted as and related to not only insecurity but also security. Women's disconnection from violence both reduces as well as increases their political legitimacy.

### **Time and the Image of Women as National Objects**

This analysis closely relates to the concepts of nationalism and nation, which is often a gendered construct; the construc-

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40. Interview No. 12B.

41. Interview No. 18B.

42. Laura McGrew, Kate Frieson, and Sambath Chan, *Good Governance from the Ground Up: Women's Role in Post-Conflict Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Women Waging Peace, 2004).

tion of patriotic manhood often goes hand-in-hand with glorious motherhood and women as the icons of nationalist ideology. This “puzzle” also includes the designation of gendered “places” for men and women. Nationalism works hand-in-hand with the gender system to assign different national roles to men and women. While men are supposed to be the representatives and defenders of the nation, sacrificing their interests, their strength, and, if necessary, their lives for the sake of the nation, women should ideally take care of the nation’s internal relations, including relations with the nation’s past and future. They should act out the nation’s traditions as a way of keeping alive and relevant the links with the mythological past of the nation. In their capacity as the mothers and child-raisers of future generations, moreover, women are viewed as critical to the future fate of the nation.

In all of this, women are to be defended; but the real actors are men who are defending not only their freedom, their honor, and their homeland, but also their women.<sup>43</sup> This pattern is illustrated by Queen Norodom Monineath Sihanouk, who describes Norodom Sihanouk as the protecting father of his daughters:

I am very glad about the effort made by government institutions at all levels to enhance the status of Cambodian women regardless of belief, religion, race, and class. These committed initiatives are informed by His Majesty’s philosophy that women, whom His Majesty, the King, regards as his daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters, are of great worth. He believed this in the past (The Royal People Regime) and still believes this today.<sup>44</sup>

This quotation is to be read through discourses of nationalism that assign men and women different duties, places, and status. It

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43. See, for example, Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London: Pandora Press, 1989); Eduardo Mendieta, “Afterword—Identities: Postcolonial and Global,” in Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003); Maria Stern, *Naming Security—Constructing Identity: “Mayan-women” in Guatemala on the Eve of “Peace”* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 62.

44. Speech by Her Majesty the Queen Norodom Monineath Sihanouk, March 8, 2002, Cambodian Women’s Declaration on the 92nd Anniversary of International Women’s Day, Phnom Penh, at [www.camnet.com.kh/ocm/government/government118.htm](http://www.camnet.com.kh/ocm/government/government118.htm).

must also be understood through the notion of time. How do we view time? The idea that time is linear—the past is separate from the present and comes before it—has been taken for granted in European cultures. Edkins argues: “time appears as a succession of ‘nows,’ a sequence of presents, and the existence of something is confirmed by its continuing presence through a series of such moments.”<sup>45</sup> This notion of time affects how we use memories as well as how we remember the “nows.” Or as Maria Stern expresses it: “memory (and thus remembering stories) are as much a part of the present as they are a part of the past. They are also shaped by expectations for the future.”<sup>46</sup> One common logic drawn from this is that what was true then is true now, and will probably be true in the future.

In line with this, the above quotation stretches between the past and the present in order to encourage the political initiative to enhance the status of Cambodian women. Norodom Sihanouk believed in women in the past and thus still believes. The past is used to emphasize the truth of the current belief and the political initiatives he encourages. This rhetoric was also used by the queen when she portrayed Cambodian women:

Women have strived against famine and illiteracy to improve their family’s welfare and increase their participation in national development. Women have, throughout the ages, achieved greatness and they should be acknowledged and honored so they become role models for Cambodian women today and in the future. In spite of the above effort, women still face constraints in their lives such as poverty, vulnerability to domestic violence, physical and psychological abuses, trafficking, and family economic pressures. These pressures have caused a decrease in women’s and girls’ status, integrity, and hopes, and have also caused the breakup of families, ruining their children’s future.<sup>47</sup>

In this quotation the queen uses a linear time perspective to argue for women’s greatness then, now, and therefore, in the future. There is also a veil of national symbolism that portrays women as exemplary mothers and daughters of the nation. How-

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45. Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*.

46. Stern, *Naming Security—Constructing Identity*, p. 62.

47. Speech by Her Majesty the Queen Norodom Monineath Sihanouk, at [www.camnet.com.kh/ocm/government/government118.htm](http://www.camnet.com.kh/ocm/government/government118.htm).

ever, this picture shows ambivalence between women as active-passive, indispensable, but still vulnerable.

### **Men Protecting from Men**

As indicated above, it seems as if different public discourses, resources, and practices (state power, nationalism, militarism) are offered in which different roles (armed forces, soldiers, bodyguards) are embedded and mainly constructed for men and masculinity. In this regard, the violent history has evoked men as subjects who exercise national violence. One former female politician described the image of the violent male politicians:

Women are emotional, yes. We are emotional. We want to avoid any fighting. We think about the long run. We don't want to, you know, right away. We see the consequences. They think we are emotional, unlike men, who take steps, right away, who decide right away. . . . We turn these emotions into a process of negotiation, into collaboration. We trade with our emotions. You know, we found peace during the emotional process unlike men. They are not emotional. They don't cry. You don't see tears in their eyes ever. They are strong and they fight. That's why this country is fighting all the time, because they don't have emotions.<sup>48</sup>

However, not only does masculinity relate to violence within the public, but domestic violence, rape, gang rape, violence against sex workers, and trafficking are major concerns in Cambodia and involve a significant number of women. Today, one in four women experiences violence in the home, and there are some indicators suggesting that the number of cases is increasing.<sup>49</sup> Ms. Ing Kantha Phavi, Minister of Women's Affairs, has explained that the "belief that men were the heads of families and had the right to discipline women and children with violence continued to be widely held."<sup>50</sup>

One of the paradoxes that emerges from this is that men are implied to be violent, uncontrolled, and destructive while at the

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48. Interview No. 2A.

49. See [www.mwva.gov.kh/about\\_mwva.htm](http://www.mwva.gov.kh/about_mwva.htm), November 14, 2005.

50. "Women's Anti-Discrimination Committee Considers Cambodia's Report."

same time being considered the protectors from violence. A declaration of the Ministry of Women's Affairs stated:

Cambodian women, 52 percent of the population, are concerned about violence against women and children, and on behalf of all women we would like to appeal to leaders at all levels to recognize that the elimination of violence and discrimination against women and children is essential to develop a foundation based on respect for women's and children's human rights. The elimination of violence is the foundation for development on the basis of equality, equity, and peace.<sup>51</sup>

Nowhere in the quotation are men referred to as those who practice the violence. Instead, violence is addressed so as to hide the people who exercise or invoke the violence. The quotation also describes how all women should appeal to the leaders, thus separating the women from the leaders. This indicates that leaders are men, not women. In addition, the quotation combines "women and children" so as to be one category, in contrast to violence and protection from men.<sup>52</sup>

The image of the protecting man appeared also in a speech of Mu Sochua, in which she addressed the prime minister as the main guardian in the protection of women:

On this occasion, on behalf of the Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs and the Cambodian women's network, I also would like to thank you, Samdech Prime Minister, for your intervention, coordination, and advice in protecting the rights and worth of women and children as well as striving to eliminate violence against women and children.<sup>53</sup>

In contemporary Cambodia, men are typically seen as those producing violence, but also as those protecting from violence. They thereby lose legitimacy due to memories imbued with violence; yet in the next moment they gain legitimacy—for the very

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51. Cambodian Women's Declaration on the 92nd Anniversary of International Women's Day, Phnom Penh, March 8, 2002, at [www.camnet.com.kh/ocm/government/government118.htm](http://www.camnet.com.kh/ocm/government/government118.htm).

52. Cynthia Enloe, "Women and Children: Making Feminist Sense of the Persian Gulf Crisis," in *The Village Voice* (New York), September 25, 1990.

53. Cambodian Women's Declaration at [www.camnet.com.kh/ocm/government/government118.htm](http://www.camnet.com.kh/ocm/government/government118.htm).

same memories—in the search for security. This ambivalent perception of men as safe but threatening might have to do with what Edkins describes in her book, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. She argues that it can be difficult, even devastating, when the very power that we are convinced will protect us and give us security becomes our tormentors. In that moment, the community in which we entrust our safety turns against us. We have to redefine not only ourselves but also the very social order that we are a part of.<sup>54</sup> In this case, the image of the protective men seems to be under negotiation in the light of memories of violence.

### Women and Family-Oriented Politics

The national symbolism of women in combination with memories of a violent past are probably the main reasons why the political arena is currently organized along family ties.<sup>55</sup> One woman explained how marriages and political affiliation go hand-in-hand: “I don’t see any woman, you know, who is in Sam Rainsy Party, for example, and the husband in Hun Sen Party or something. Both of them, husband and wife, are in the same political party.”<sup>56</sup> Kate Frieson similarly states: “Women’s prominence in the economic sphere has no equivalent in politics. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, high profile political roles for women in Cambodia are rare, occurring only when they dovetail with the careers of male spouses or fathers.”<sup>57</sup>

There are probably many explanations as to why political participation is a family affair in Cambodia. One may approach the issue by asking in what ways the double identities of women politicians, as women and as politicians, are made sense of in Cambodia.<sup>58</sup> These double identities exist in light of the previously discussed strict division of gender roles, where masculine

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54. Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*.

55. This reasoning has been presented in an earlier text of Mona Lilja published by the UN in March 2006, at [www.un-instraw.org/en/images/stories/NewVoices/nv-lilja.pdf](http://www.un-instraw.org/en/images/stories/NewVoices/nv-lilja.pdf).

56. Interview No. 1A.

57. Frieson, *In the Shadow*, pp. 2-3.

58. Mona Lilja, “*Speakings of Resistance: Women Politicians Negotiating Discursive Power in Cambodia*” (Ph.D. dissertation, Göteborg University, 2007).

attributes are thought to be necessary in order to protect and defend national security, and women are seen as domestic beings in need of protection because of their weak and fragile nature.<sup>59</sup> Women are also, in fact, associated with security by being associated with a nonviolent society.

From this analysis, one may draw the conclusion that the symbolism attached to politically active wives may complement and enhance the image of the male politician. Bringing their wives into politics may be a way for husbands to add soft values such as honesty and peacefulness to their image without losing masculinity in the process. This may be one of the key reasons why politicians' wives and daughters often become politically active.<sup>60</sup> One female politician explained why women follow their husbands to become politicians: "It's about the traditions you know. Following . . . to be obedient."<sup>61</sup> The expectation of women is to be passive and loyal, and then encourage them to follow their men to the political field where they are expected to occupy various positions. For example, one female politician explained why she became politically involved after the collapse of the Pol Pot regime in 1979:

I never wanted to become politically active. I had my children, my life in France. But my husband decided that he should travel to China and join the exile regime. What was I to do? Stay by myself in France? No, we Cambodian women are very family-oriented. So I went with him to China and became politically active.<sup>62</sup>

This woman's main interest was to stay in her home with her children. However, while her husband decided to join the exile regime, she stayed loyal and docile, went with him, and became politically active against her will. This implies that women have to take on an active role ("So I went with him to China and became politically active") in order to gain status as passive and obedient. In the end, a paradox prevails as the gendered expectations of wives as docile, assigning the family a

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59. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1983); Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, p. 54.

60. Lilja, *Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia*.

61. Interview No. 1A.

62. Interview No. 1A.

central role, encourage women to become public non-family-oriented political actors.<sup>63</sup>

### **The Invention of the “Real” Cambodian**

One argument that is often promoted in regard to memory and democracy is that nations need memories of a past to establish an idea of a historical continuity of a people, which in turn contributes significantly to national stability and a stable democracy. The construction of collective memories then becomes the basis for democratic practices as well as for statehood.<sup>64</sup> These constructions or collective memories, however, are occasionally used to close boundaries of other identities as they accept particular versions of the past as true. This appears to be the strategy of some of my respondents, who argued that only those who share the “Cambodian” history, experience, and identity are allowed to represent the people politically.

As stated above, the Khmer Rouge represented a radical kind of communism that promoted a new agrarian society designed after the notion of the ancient Angkor civilization. They ruled the country for almost four years, during which they emptied the cities, forced inhabitants to work as slaves, and eliminated schools and hospitals. Millions of people died during this period, partly by manslaughter, partly by starvation, and partly by medical neglect. Searching the interviews for frequently promoted “truths,” one seems to be that the real Cambodian, who may be seen as a legitimate leader, is someone who has learned from the Khmer Rouge period and knows what “we” have suffered and thus has knowledge about suffering. One woman returnee explained why she experienced some difficulties entering the political stage: “Since I lived in France, I missed the Pol Pot period. This makes it harder for me to have a political career. I don’t know how people have suffered. I haven’t suffered like they have.”<sup>65</sup>

This quotation helps us to understand how memories of violence and the construction of the “who” and “when” of violence

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63. Lilja, *Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia*.

64. Misztal, “Memory and Democracy.”

65. Interview No. 19B.

contribute to the understanding of the “who” of political legitimacy. Political legitimacy is offered to those who experienced the violence and this experience forms, in turn, the base from which the society is reconstructed. Those lacking certain memories—those who were not present in the past—are accused of not having the “right” experience (of violence and war) and thereby being unable to become one of “us.” This implies that in war-torn societies, in the aftermath of violence, the nexus time-space becomes highly relevant. Those who were not present in the past are not allowed to assume and perform the image of a contemporary Cambodian. Thus, they do not stand a real chance to gain political legitimacy.

This way of approaching politics has been increasingly criticized in recent years. The idea that a joint history, experience, and identity provide a better ground for democracy and democratic participation has been increasingly abandoned. Globalization produces societies characterized by the fragmentation of social interests and a diversification of social identities. States increasingly divorce from nations and the collective nation-state memory vanishes.<sup>66</sup>

Within the prior quotation a border is constructed between “they” (the Cambodian people) and the respondent as a returnee. In this, the very concept of a returnee tells us something not only about space, but about space imbued with time—how a past of repeated journeys is classified as a marker of an important difference. In this, time becomes implicit in space as we watch the Cambodian memorial tower made of skulls, the images of Khmer Rouge victims soon to be executed, or the sustained prison floors of the Toul Sleng museum in Phnom Penh.<sup>67</sup>

### **Violence as a Cause for Female Political Participation**

Earlier events can be reconstructed in the process of remembering, as they are retrospectively imbued with new meaning. In other words, “the past is not preserved, but is reconstructed on the basis of the present.”<sup>68</sup> This was evident in the interviews.

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66. Misztal, “Memory and Democracy.”

67. Lilja, *Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia*.

68. Halbwaches in Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p. 32.

The respondents remembered events in the past by connecting these with current systems of meaning. These “reconstructed” memories not only strengthen the gendered divide, which contributes to few women in political positions; they also created incentives for some women to enter politics. One woman told her story:

Because, you see, after Pol Pot there are a lot of educated persons who, especially the people who can speak highly of themselves, do not report to the authority or to the government that they know a foreign language. That is because they had the experiences of Pol Pot. Because the ones who were educated got killed. So they say: Oh, I am the seller, I am the person this and that. [But] I told them the truth. That is why I was in prison. Just to wait for the death to come and be killed like the others.

Despite the fact that this woman was in prison for many years, she managed to survive. In light of the events of the last decades, she concluded that politics involves everyone:

So, these are the things that made me get involved in politics. Understand? . . . I got a scholarship from the government in July, but Pol Pot came, so, you see . . . at that time there were a lot of students involved in politics. But not me! I was selfish, selfish. Politics is just the affair or work of our leader, I thought. We are simple; simple people don't need to care about that. But it is not like that. When something happens, every citizen, every person is affected by this policy of the government. Because I promised myself not to get involved in anything, really. When my friends, . . . in 1970, they went to strike with the students, workers, government officials against the Lon Nol regime. But as for me: No! I said it is not for me. My task must be to study, not to try to play politics. That happened to me. This is my experience. . . . We can help a lot. It doesn't mean that you cannot help only yourself, your friends, but the whole society. You are the whole society, you cannot separate . . . , there is no clear-cut line between you and the society. This is my own experience. I take this time with you and talk about my background, the reasons why I participate now in politics, whereas before, I was scared like the other women, like all the people. For politics is very dangerous, especially in developing countries. You see, you must accept that, it is very dangerous.<sup>69</sup>

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69. Interview No. 16A.

Before the Khmer Rouge era, this woman considered herself uninterested in politics; but the Khmer Rouge era made her realize that political actions affect everybody's lives, and that "there is no clear cut line between you and the society." Earlier events in her life were thus given new meaning as they were interpreted through her memories of violence.<sup>70</sup> Giving the past new meaning, she came to the conclusion that everybody is affected by political action. In the end she decided to become politically involved. The political responsibility she experienced seems to be greater than the fear she felt. She connects fear with being a woman, implying that women have internalized an image of identity-embracing traits such as anxiety and fear. However, in the end she felt that politics no longer can be organized around the axis of gender, but also that women such as she must carry the burden of political issues. Thus, this woman who experienced the Khmer Rouge period tried to alter the sharp division between the genders by turning to politics. From her standpoint, the public sphere was the only means to accomplish peace. And there seem to be more women advancing the very same strategy. Another woman interviewee said: "Women take part in politics partly because they have this feeling of revenge. After Pol Pot, many died. Afterwards many felt a strong feeling of: I want to make a change."<sup>71</sup>

We can understand this sentiment better by using the concept of subjectivity. Subjectivity denotes, among other things, the way in which an individual organizes her or his multiple identities and arranges them into an understandable self-identity. The implication is that subjectivity involves a feeling that one is in relation and in interaction with others, with societal discourses, with representations, and with the images of identity.<sup>72</sup> Among others, if we want to assume one identity while we are expected to correspond to another, the tension between different subject positions makes us negotiate these. Remembering is an important aspect in this regard, because in one sense we "compose

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70. Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*.

71. Interview No. 2C.

72. See Donald E. Hall, *Subjectivity: The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Kathryn Woodward, "Concepts of Identity and Difference," in Woodward, ed., *Identity and Difference* (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 7-59.

memories that help us feel relatively comfortable with our lives and identities, that give us a feeling of composure.”<sup>73</sup> This corresponds to the politically active women quoted above who, despite the fact that women are not considered political, try to make sense of a gendered, apolitical female identity, memories of suffering, and feelings of political responsibility. This implies the reconstruction of memories as well as the negotiation of different images of identity in order to organize an understandable self-identity.

### **Reconstructing Normality by Traveling Through Time**

Memories, like concrete representations, are often referred to as “proofs”—evidence of what “really” happened.<sup>74</sup> Thus, in the aftermath of violence, people draw on memories of violence and normalities when justifying the existing subject positions of the “legitimate politician.” In Cambodia, such memories have contributed to the political legitimacy of “patrons” both on a local and a national level.

According to my interviews, some key structures of social organization were temporarily destroyed during the Khmer Rouge era, among them the traditional patron-client relations. As war-torn countries reach stability, if they do, new normalities are constructed that build partly on memories of previous times. In this process the traditional patron-client relations in Cambodia have been evoked and some images of identity related to these relations are today performed and re-performed by women seeking political legitimacy. As I will elaborate on in this section, women have been called into an image of identity—an image that has been constructed from memories of the past—and responded to the call by performing and internalizing the identity of a “patron.”<sup>75</sup>

Identities mutually imbue and interact with each other. The identity position of “woman” infuses also political images of

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73. Thomson in Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p. 29.

74. Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*.

75. Judith Butler is one researcher who discusses Althusser’s concept of interpellation and the subject being called into different subject positions.

identity with meaning. For example, as stated above, the image of the need-oriented, gentle, peaceful woman often informs the image of a female politician, creating the hybrid image of the “caring-female-politician.” But not only do the positions of identity permeate each other; the different images of identities may have conflicting elements, making it difficult to gather these identities into a coherent “self.” The identity position of “women” of contemporary Cambodia repeatedly contradicts the image of a politician, the former still occasionally imbuing the latter with meaning.<sup>76</sup> The shifting identities of women politicians are thus created in interaction with other positions of identity and in relation to the boundaries and conflicting notions of these identities.<sup>77</sup>

What becomes interesting in the context of gender and politics is therefore whether the different identities are prioritized, overlap, or integrated. The interviews show that it is possible for women to give weight to certain images of identities while downplaying others, a practice that can be interpreted in terms of resistance. In this sense, a system of patron-client relations has created political possibilities for a number of women.

Before the Khmer Rouge era, peasant society and local decision-making processes in Cambodia were shaped by so-called patron-client relations. These relations appear to be highly prevalent within the current political system of Cambodia. Today, there is a general lack of interest in different political and ideological party programs, and the patron-client relationships continue to determine voting patterns.<sup>78</sup> For example, in the 1993 and 1998 elections, the Khmers voted to “ensure a leader would reward them for their loyalty in much the same way as they would under the traditional *khsae* [the mutual gift exchanges from the elite in return for loyalty from villagers] networks.”<sup>79</sup> Hence, the formal liberal western democratic system of today’s Cambodia is in fact built upon patron-client relations.

The impact of patron-client relations on the democratic sys-

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76. Lilja, *Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia*.

77. Stern, *Naming Security—Constructing Identity*, p. 62.

78. Asia Foundation, *Democracy in Cambodia: A Survey of the Cambodian Electorate* (draft), Phnom Penh, May 16, 2003.

79. W. David Roberts, *Political Transition in Cambodia 1991-99: Power, Elitism and Democracy* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 204.

tem has enabled some women to gain political positions, starting at the village level. During the years that the Khmer Rouge dominated the Cambodian society, many patron families were largely exterminated. In general, more men than women were killed. In the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge period, when people went back to their home villages to restore “normality,” a number of women from traditionally dominant upper-class families also returned as the sole survivors of these families. As the patron-client relations were reestablished in accordance with what they used to be, some of these women suddenly found themselves expected to assume the position, role, and ultimately the identity of village leaders. For example, one female politician recalled how she returned to her village to find that within her family of forty people, only she and her sister were still alive. The villagers’ support became the starting point of her political career at the communal level: “I had a better reputation [than the other candidates]. Besides my education, my parents used to help everyone, and those people remembered my parents. When my parents weren’t alive anymore they supported the children instead.”<sup>80</sup>

Thus, some Cambodian female politicians have built their power base on the reconstructed “client-ness” of previous eras, leaning heavily on their, and others’, interpretations of pre-Khmer Rouge memories. Women have been called into another identity position in addition to their female one, which is laid aside (but still present) in favor of a patron-leader identity. When it comes to the image of a patron, and the performance of this image, the family connection and reputation of the woman are thus far more important than her sex. Her family identity has been privileged and given priority over her female identity. It is all a matter of the ordering of one’s identities and what it means in terms of political power and legitimacy.<sup>81</sup> Still, as argued above, the tension between the role of a leader and that of a woman remains centered around guns, guards, security, and stability.

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80. Interview No. 13A.

81. Lilja, *Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia*.

## Conclusion

Decades of insecurity, violence, and war have shaped a situation where violence and memories of violence have created obstacles as well as political possibilities for Cambodian women. The longing for normality and stability both add to and detract from the legitimacy of men and women politicians. In addition, the moving in time and space turns out to have an impact on the political legitimacy of women in Cambodia. In the end, it is a matter of what political subject positions women are allowed to assume and speak from.

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