Finding Meaning in Oral History Sources through Storytelling and Religion: Case Study of Three Cambodian Refugees

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Abstract

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Summary: This research is based on three oral life stories narrative of Cambodian refugees living in Montreal. Careful observation of the narrative form and the religious framing of these interviews allowed for a better understanding of the meaning that is assigned to events by their narrators and the potential for the uses of narrative analysis in oral history research. Analysis of these life story interviews was done on three levels: isolated stories, life stories and cultural and historical context. At the level of isolated stories, interviewees transformed the events of their lives into narrative in order to give them meaning, a meaning often shaped by religious beliefs. In life stories as a whole, they created links between stories and between disparate events of their lives and thus reinforced a sense of coherent identity. In this task, religion provided a framework through which the meaning of life could be understood and conveyed. However, the experience of genocide often proved a challenge both for the creation of a coherent life narrative and for the religious framework through which these individuals perceived their lives. Furthermore, the narrative structure of the interviews reflected how these individuals related to their community – by speaking about the community, and to the community – and how they situated themselves in time.

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I owe my deepest gratitude to Prof. Steven High for his support throughout this project, and for introducing me to oral history on my first semester at Concordia University. This thesis would also not have been possible without the help of many other professors and students who exchanged ideas, challenged me and allowed me to develop the ideas that made this thesis possible.

I would also like to thank all those involved in the CURA life stories project, particularly the Cambodian working group, whose enthusiasm and support are a constant source of inspiration. I am especially indebted to the individuals who have graciously agreed to share their life stories with me. It was my intention to treat these personal stories with the utmost respect and I hope this work will do them justice.

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Introduction

> "J'avais autrefois 11 frères et sœurs. Et en 1975, dix étaient déjà mariés et... ont 41 enfants... le 17 avril 1975 les 62 plus ma mère, ça fait 63... Le 17 avril 1975, les 63 quittent Phnom Penh ensemble et après le retour... la chute de Pol Pot, parmi les 63, il n'y a que 12 survivants."
>
> -- Mrs. Ven Runnath

When Mrs. Runnath, a 73 year old Cambodian refugee, told that story, we were in her daughter's living room in Lasalle, Qc. She was just beginning to recount her life story. From this opening statement, I could already see that what Mrs. Runnath was recounting was a story of great loss and miraculous survival. I met Mrs. Runnath in the fall of 2009 in the course of my research with the CURA Life Stories project.[1] Between then and August 2010, we had three interview sessions together, for a total of nine hours of interview. Much of her life story revolved around her experience under the Khmer Rouge regime – from 1975 to 1979 – and the impact of this violent time on her life. Throughout her interviews, religious beliefs had a profound influence on the framing of her life story: a devout Buddhist from a very young age, Mrs. Runnath converted to Christianity in 1985.

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[1] "Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and other Human Rights Violations is an oral history project exploring Montrealers' experiences and memories of mass violence and displacement." This project, hosted by Concordia University, divided into six working groups, including the Cambodian working group. "Life Stories Montreal" (Accessed September 29, 2010) http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/

By themselves, the eyewitness accounts of individual Cambodian refugees, recorded through life story interviews, are of great historical interest. These refugees have either lived through, or been profoundly affected by the Khmer Rouge, a radical communist regime which took over Cambodia in 1975 after the country had suffered through five years of civil war. What these refugees recount, from their memories of Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge to their experiences under Pol Pot's regime, their lives as refugees and their migration to Canada are a variety of personal narrative revolving around historically significant times. However, these interviews are much more than a simple retelling of events. Besides being reflections of lived events or eyewitness testimonies to historical circumstances, these life stories are, before anything else, stories. It is through the act of storytelling that interviewees can, in Portelli's words, "tell us less about *events* than about their *meanings*."[2] More than the number of relatives who fell victim to the Khmer Rouge, what makes Mrs. Runnath's opening story interesting is the importance it holds for her as a central story to her life and the manner in which she conveys the importance of such events.

In his study of the politics of storytelling, Michael Jackson argued that storytelling is a particularly important and empowering tool which gives agency to individuals. More than shaping events into a unit that is easier to communicate, storytelling gives meaning to one's life. According to Jackson, stories:

> aid and abet our need to believe that *we* may discern and determine the meaning of *our* journey through life: where we came from and where we are going. In making and telling stories we rework reality in order to make it

[2] Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State of New York Press, 1991), 50.

bearable.[3]

Stories told during oral history interviews are therefore more than the vessel though which factual information is communicated: they show the manner in which individuals make sense of their lives.

This argument is similar to that of narrativist historians such as Hayden White who argued that the historical narrative does more than reflect past events. Instead, it "reveals to us a world that is putatively 'finished,' done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart. In this world, reality wears the mask of a meaning the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience."[4] The meaning is not to be found in the events themselves but in the narrative that encompasses them. By turning their life into a life story, interviewees thus assign it meaning.

In the face of genocide, the idea of making sense of events through storytelling is made much more challenging by the overwhelming violence. Jackson argued for a view of storytelling as "a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances."[5] For survivors of genocide, however, finding the words that will properly communicate their experience may be difficult. As Greenspan found in his work with Holocaust survivors: "to recount the Holocaust means most essentially, to try to employ the terms of one world (the world survivors share with all of us) to describe the terms and negation of terms of the other. It is always a translation, and it is always ultimately futile."[6] Whether successful or not, however, efforts at storytelling reflect the

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[3] Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, transgression and intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002), 16.

[4] Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 21.

[5] Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling,* 14-15.

[6] Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History* (Westport:

individual's attempt at making sense of events, and at integrating them into their life stories.

In a study of Cambodian refugees in the United States, Carol Mortland found that the question of *why* the genocide happened loomed large in the lives of survivors of the Khmer Rouge and in their religious outlook. She posits that for many refugees, these experiences often remained "inexplicable:"

> I mean the term "inexplicable" to indicate a type of response among Khmer to vital questions and the chimera of answers – the sense of events overwhelming an individual or group, the sense that traditional ways of conceptualizing answers to such events are no longer suitable but lead to confusion and anxiety. Answers to the inexplicable do not have the force and permanence of earlier answers: the issues return, the questions do not rest, the answer are insufficient, and additional ones need to be piled on.[7]

The experience of genocide had a profound impact on survivors' religious outlook and on their belief that life can be explained.

When observing attempts to make sense of events through religion, we should keep in mind that religion is not merely a set of ideas that is separate from other aspects of life. According to Geertz, religion stands above everyday knowledge and experience in the realm of conceptual frameworks. He defines it as:

> a system of symbols which acts to... establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by... formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and... clothing these conceptions with such aura of factuality that... the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[8]

Based on this definition, religion can therefore shape the way people perceive and explain

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Praeger, 1998), 9.

[7] Carol A. Mortland, "Khmer Buddhists in the United States: Ultimate Questions," in *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile,* eds. May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland and Judy Ledgerwood Ebihara (London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 72-73.

[8] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (London: Hutchison, 1975), 90.

their lives.

Faced with the experience of extreme violence, this religious framework may be shaken. As Geertz explained it, religion should help us cope with difficulties by providing tools that allow us to understand and accept our suffering:

> As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering, but how to suffer, how to make physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable or something, as we say, sufferable.[9]

In cases where the suffering is of an unusual force, however, the conceptual framework of religion may no longer be suitable. As Mortland found: "the Democratic Kampuchea years were of such extraordinary horror that usual explanation for the extraordinary did not always suffice."[10] For some, the tools available through the Cambodian religious framework to explain suffering no longer brought a satisfactory explanation for the traumatic experience of the Khmer Rouge. As Mrs. Runnath, for example, demonstrates in her interview, a religious framework may be challenged, destabilized, or even rejected as a result of an experience of extreme suffering. She felt that her attempt to explain her experience through Buddhism had only led to more anxiety for the future. Taking its place, Christian religious beliefs provided an alternate explanation, one which Mrs. Runnath would more easily accept. In life stories of other Cambodian refugees, the religious framework usually remains a Buddhist one but it is often modified and questioned in the face of the challenge to explain *why*.

The religious framework to be found in life stories is not to be defined only by scriptures or as handed down to individuals who passively accept them. In their recent

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[9] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 104

[10] Mortland, "Khmer Buddhists in the United States," 72.

research, Meredith McGuire and Robert Orsi put more emphasis on the interactive, lived aspect of religion. Orsi argues that "The study of lived religion situates all religious creativity within culture and approaches all religion as lived experience, theology no less than lighting a candle for a trouble loved one."[11] McGuire defines lived religion as "*constituted by the practices* people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live. And it comes into being through the often mundane practices people use to transform these meaningful interpretations into everyday action."[12] Without removing religion from the realm of conceptual frameworks, these definitions also allow for an individualized, interactive definition of a person's and a community's religion: religion is present in and shaped by everyday practice and storytelling. These definitions are also consistent with anthropological research on Cambodian religion: Cambodian religion is deeply ingrained in most aspects of everyday life and in the social structure of the country.[13]

Like storytelling, then, religion gives tools to explain, not simply reflect, events and to create links between disparate events of one's life. As Charlotte Linde posited, religion may be used as a "coherence system," which she defines as a "system of beliefs and relations between beliefs that are used to structure life stories, explanation and (presumably) other discourse types as well."[14] Likewise, Mark Ledbetter found a relation between the processes of narrating the religious experience: "Narrative has religious

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[11] Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xix.

[12] Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 98.

[13] See for example Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, eds., *History, Buddhism and New Religious Movements in Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

[14] Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 192.

meaning and function, and is motivated by desire, in particular a desire for an ordered and coherent world. Narrative technique is the process of discovering ordered existence or of dealing with the frustration of the inability to order existence."[15] Thus the manner in which people recount their own stories is closely linked with their attempt to understand reality and make sense of the world. To those who assign a great deal of importance to religion, the religious framework may have a large influence on the shaping of a life narrative.

In this thesis, I will put forth the argument that if oral history analysis goes beyond observing *what* people recount to scrutinize *how* they recount, we may arrive at a deeper understanding of the subjective experience of interviewees. In this context, religion can provide a uniquely useful window into the meaning given to events by providing a framework through which individuals may try to explain all aspects of life. When one's life story must integrate and explain the experience of genocide, the religious framework of storytelling can draw attention to an interviewee's attempt at making sense of these experiences and to the challenges that violent experiences can bring to one's world view.

In order to maintain a depth of analysis, I will study only a small number of life story interviews, all conducted in the context of the Cambodian Working Group of the CURA Life Stories project. Like Daniel James, who analyzed a single life story in search of meaning, I will look in my research not for a wide range of examples, but for the "rich, multilayered, often puzzling narrative"[16] found in a small number of interviews. Most of my analysis will center on my interview with Mrs. Runnath, with some examples drawn

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[15] Mark Ledbetter, *Virtuous Intentions: The Religious Dimension of Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 5.

[16] Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), 121.

from the life stories of two other Cambodian refugees living in Montreal: Mrs. X (fictional name) and Mr. Muy Len Pong. In order to understand the meaning these individuals assign to their lives, I will look at how stories are structured, how they are linked together to form a coherent life story and how they relate to the historical and cultural context in which events are lived and stories told.

With the use of detailed narrative analysis, however, comes the danger of losing sight of the person telling the story. Therefore, before delving into how stories are told and how meaning is assigned through narrative, I will look, in Chapter one, at the individuals behind the interviews as they presented themselves. By considering the interview context and with a survey of the life story these interviewees were recounting, this general overview will offer a certain understanding of the individuals whose life stories will be analyzed. Thus we may consider the whole life story before trying to assign it meaning.

In Chapter 2, by looking at *how* stories are shaped, I will be better able to understand *why* interviewees may choose one or another way of telling their stories. As Paul Ricoeur argued, "A story is *made out* of events to the extent that plot *makes* events *into* a story."[17] By distinguishing events from the stories told about them, oral history analysis can observe the choices made by interviewees during storytelling. The manner in which plots and other narrative tools are used allow us to see the meaning that is assigned to these events. I will therefore draw from isolated stories from the life story interviews and examine the way in which events and memories become stories. Because individuals' religious beliefs provide a framework through which they view their lives, these values

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[17] Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time" in *On Narrative,* ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 167.

will be expressed in these choices of storytelling and will affect the way they present these events as stories. This will be the first step in the deep analysis of storytelling.

In the third chapter, I will widen the analysis to look at how isolated stories are linked together to form a life story. As Charlotte Linde defined it,

> A life story consists of all the stories and associated discourse units, such as explanations and chronicles, and the connections between them, told by an individual during the course of his/her lifetime that satisfy the following two criteria:
> 1. The stories and associated discourse units contained in the life story have as their primary evaluation a point about the speaker, not a general point about the way the world is.
> 2. The stories and associated discourse units have extended reportability; that is, they are tellable and are told and retold over the course of a long period of time.[18]

More than a disparate collection of stories about one's life, the life story is also a coherent linguistic unit in itself. As Linde stated, "Coherence in this sense is a property of texts: it derives from the relation that the parts of a text bear to another and to the whole text, and that the text bears to other texts of its type."[19] Through the links established between stories and events, the life story is given coherence and the wide variety of events is explained through this whole unit. In addition to shaping the events of their lives by assigning them meaning through storytelling, interviewees also attempt to tell coherent life stories that incorporate all the important events of their lives into a whole. In this process, individuals may express their religious beliefs in the way in which they tell their stories and such beliefs may also assist them by creating a framework for their whole life story. In doing so, interviewees also define their identity: "there is a dialectical relationship between... the narrating self and the narrated self. As humans, we draw on

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[18] Linde, *Life Stories,* 21.
[19] Linde, *Life Stories,* 220.

our experiences to shape narratives about our lives, but equally, our identity and character are shaped by our narratives."[20] This chapter will explore how, through storytelling, individuals define who they are and what their lives mean. In addition, I will look at the manners in which individuals attempt, successfully or not, to define a coherent life narrative in the face of the experience of genocide.

In the last chapter, I will explore how despite being a very individual process, the life story is also linked with the cultural, social and historical context in which people lived the events of their lives and in which they told their stories. "These stories... are individual creations but never simply individual creations; they are told in historically specific times and places and draw on the rules and models and other narratives in circulation that govern how story elements link together in a temporal logic."[21] In this chapter, I will observe the social and cultural aspects of storytelling by scrutinizing how individuals situate themselves in relation to their community through their life stories. I will also look at how, as Ricoeur posited: "narrativity and temporality are closely related... temporality [is] that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal."[22]

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[20] Michael Lambek and PaulAntze, "Introduction: Forecasting Memory" in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory,* eds Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), xviii.

[21] Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 4.

[22] Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 165.

Chapter 1

Life Stories

In his seminal book on oral history, Alessandro Portelli posited that one of the characteristics that differentiate oral sources from other historical documents is that it is "always the result of a relationship, of a shared project in which both the interviewer and interviewee are involved together."[23] This feature of oral history adds a layer of complexity to the truism that historical sources are shaped by – and a reflection of – the context in which they were created. While clearly not meant as a representative sample of the Khmer refugee community in Montreal, the interviewees considered in this thesis were coming from a particular social context and were interviewed for a specific purpose. This context is crucial to the understanding of the interviews.

The CURA Life Stories project was created in 2007, with a goal to collect interviews with Montrealers who had been displaced by war, genocide or other human rights violation.[24] The project's approach to oral history was based on in-depth interviewing and community involvement. With members from academic and community backgrounds, the project has collected, as of 2010, over 250 interviews. The CURA project was divided into six working groups: Holocaust, Education, Haiti, Great Lakes

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[23] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli,* 54.

[24] Life Stories Montreal, "About the Project," http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/en/about-the-project (Accessed March 4, 2011)

Region (with an emphasis on Rwanda), Cambodia and Oral history performance. All working groups included both university and community partners, but the Cambodian working group had a particularly strong level of community involvement: the role of university researchers – be they students or professors – was limited. Most interviews were conducted by members of the Cambodian community and the activities of the group were shaped by the needs of the community.

The emphasis on in-depth life stories in the CURA project was inspired by the work Henry Greenspan has done with Holocaust survivors. Greenspan declared that "A good interview is a process in which two people work hard to understand the views and experiences of one person: the interviewee."[25] In the CURA project, the term "life story interview" is meant to emphasize the idea that interviews with survivors of genocide should not ask only about their life under a genocidal regime, but should instead be open and allow the recording of everything that the interviewee would like to share about his or her life. The length of the interviews, ranging from under an hour to over 20 hours, was determined by how much the interviewee wished to share. The questions asked were typically open and flexible.

In my own research, the idea of life stories is also inspired by Charlotte Linde's work on life stories as linguistic units. She defines life stories as "discontinuous units, told in separate pieces over a long period of time."[26] According to this definition, any story told about oneself can be considered as part of an ongoing effort to tell one's life story. Like Greenspan, Linde considers life stories as developing through time and constantly being retold and repeated as one tries to figure out the meaning of his or her

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[25] Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors,* xvii.
[26] Linde, *Life Stories,* 4.

life story.[27] From a conceptual standpoint, I will consider those stories interviewees tell about themselves to be part of this lifelong process of shaping their life story. However, I will usually be limited in my sources to the interviews collected – a small subset of the stories people tell about themselves. Nevertheless, the life story interview remains an important tool for collecting such stories and understanding where they fit into a greater life story.

Historical Context

All the interviewees here have in common the fact that they have experienced, or been affected by, the Khmer Rouge regime, which ruled over Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. In the years preceding the reign of this radical communist regime, Cambodians had been suffering through a civil war between Prince Sihanouk's supporters and Lon Nol's government's forces. This civil unrest was further aggravated by the United States bombing of Cambodia during their war in Southeast Asia.

In 1975, the Khmer Rouge was able to take advantage of the popular dissatisfaction with the removal of Prince Sihanouk from power in 1970 and the instability of the country to take over the countryside and finally move into Phnom Penh, the capital, on April 17, 1975. The Khmer Rouge troops immediately evacuated the city's population to the countryside. In the following years, the Khmer Rouge enforced a strict policy of forced communal labour and radical communism. The deteriorating living conditions, causing famine and disease, coupled with systematic execution of former

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[27] Presenting a similar argument, Portelli argued that despite human memory's fallibility, oral history sources remain invaluable because they "compensate chronological distance with a much closer personal involvement." thus showing memory acts not as "a passive depository of facts, but an active creation of meanings." Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli,* 52.

government workers and soldiers, intellectuals, and others considered as enemies, caused the death of over a million and a half individuals.[28] During these years, many of the social and cultural institutions of Cambodia, including religion, family and education were forcibly removed from everyday life. In 1979, the Khmer Rouge was defeated by Vietnamese forces. The country was however still a long ways away from recovery. A large number of Cambodians fled to refugee camps in Thailand and Vietnam and many migrated to Europe, North America and others.

With a population of over 8,000 individuals[29], Montreal has one of the largest concentration of Cambodians in Canada. Most Cambodian refugees arrived in Canada between 1978 and the early 1980s. These refugees were escaping the Khmer Rouge regime and its aftermath or joining their family already in Canada.[30] The community now also counts a large number of second generation refugees, many of which were born in refugee camps or in Canada.

The Interviewees

This thesis will explore the life stories of three first generation Cambodian refugees: Mrs. Ven Runnath, Mrs. X and Mr. Muy Len Pong. These interviews were conducted between January 2009 and August 2010 in Montreal, in the context of the CURA Life Stories Project and ranged in length between an hour and a half and 14 hours. These life stories, recorded either in English or in French (or both), were selected from the 18 interviews collected by the CURA life story project's Cambodian Working group as

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[28] Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?,* 1.
[29] Manuel Litalien and Francois Thibeault, "Grimer: Les bouddhistes cambodgiens de Montreal en contexte," (Montreal: UQAM, 2005), 6.
[30] Ibid., 5.

of 2010.

The interviews in the Cambodian working group's collection spanned a wide spectrum of the Cambodian community in Montreal. Most interviewees were middle-aged or senior citizens and a few were young adults. When I joined the Cambodian working group in 2009, I sought interviewees who were particularly interested in sharing their religious beliefs. That is how I found my two main interviewees: Mrs. Ven Runnath and Mrs. X. I contacted Mrs. X by calling on individuals who had already been interviewed but who were willing to do a second interview specifically on the topic of religion.

Mrs. Runnath was referred to me by her daughter. Mrs. Runnath had formerly been a very practising Buddhist and was now a devout Christian. She therefore felt that religion was a very important part of her life story. I also listened carefully to the other interviews collected by the Cambodian Working Group but found that few interviewees spoke openly about religion. This might be due to their perception of religious beliefs as too personal to share publicly, the lack of importance of religion in their lives, or the assumptions that their interviewers – fellow Cambodians – shared their religious outlook and did not need to have it explained to them. The question of religion was, however, present in some of the stories they told. Of particular interest to me was the interview with Mr. Muy Len Pong, whose value system was present in many parts of his life story.

Mrs. Ven Runnath

"It's a miracle my life."
--Mrs. Ven Runnath

I first met Mrs. Ven Runnath for a pre-interview meeting in mid-October 2009.

Our first interview session was held on October 27 and the second one week later. Our last session came in August 2010, after Mrs. Runnath returned from spending the winter in Cambodia. We conducted the interviews in Ravann's living room, with Paul Tom acting as my videographer for the first two sessions. In total, we recorded nine hours of interview with her so far. She usually spoke in English but many passages from her interview were in French. After our first interview session, Mrs. Runnath gave me a copy of a testimony she had written in 1999 to explain her conversion to Christianity.

Mrs. Runnath recounted her life mostly in chronological order, from her childhood in Phnom Penh to her current life in Canada. Of particular importance in her story was the period of the Khmer Rouge. From a religious point of view, her faith was always crucial to her, but was deeply shaken by her suffering during the years of the Khmer Rouge. Her subsequent conversion to Christianity coloured her whole life story, even her explanation of events that preceded the said conversion.

The story of her early life was one of great success and was marked by the importance of her family. Mrs. Runnath studied law, banking and accounting and worked at the Cambodian bank. She was also very charitable and helped a great deal of people in need by offering them food, clothes, medical expenses and shelter. She was married in 1962 and had 7 children, 6 of whom were born before the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975. Her youngest daughter, Ravann, was born in 1977. Four of her children are still alive today. She had 11 brothers and sisters and was particularly close to her father, who passed away in 1975, just a few weeks before the fall of Phnom Penh.

The period of 1975 to 1979 loomed large in her life story. She described in great detail the difficulties she faced during those years of forced labour and the pain of being

separated from her family. The Democratic Kampuchea years were also times of danger where she felt constantly threatened. She knew she needed to work hard and keep quiet to avoid the threat of execution. She nevertheless found herself in imminent danger and was miraculously saved from death on many occasions.

Her religious beliefs and the value she assigned to family were defining features of her life story and especially present in her tale of the Khmer Rouge era. In one instance, as she recounts being miraculously reunited with her children before being taken away, probably to be executed, she showed great happiness: “even if we die, we die together.” The idea that her family ought to stay together no matter what their fate might be was of great importance. Her stories also often show how her earlier religious beliefs, for example the belief that by the laws of karma, her charity would be rewarded, failed to give the desired result or to provide the comfort she sought. Although the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge era happened years before she converted to Christianity, her present religious outlook coloured her telling of these stories and the idea of being saved by a Christian God was present in many of these stories.

When recounting the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge era, she speaks of her great love for Cambodia and her efforts to assist in its rebuilding, but also of great personal difficulties and danger to herself and her family. Until 1985, she worked in the Cambodian public sector in an effort to rebuild the country but left for a refugee camp in Thailand when the situation became too dangerous. She explained her conversion to Christianity as a result of her rational study of both Buddhism and Christianity: “Depuis l'âge de 10 ans, I had been Buddhist. So I know very well. When I study, this one is the

real and true God, so I take only one. Since then, until now and forever."[31] Her preference for Christianity was also influenced by the difficulties she had faced in the previous years and the uncertainty of her fate under the laws of karma. Compared with Buddhism, Christianity offered a more certain future: "since I believe God, I trust in God and I am sure of my faith in God... I have become really happy until now. Because.... I'm sure that after my life... here, I will go to heaven to have eternal life there."[32]

Although her life is much better now that she is in Canada, she continues to face trials in her life. She expressed a deep desire for all her family to be in Canada with her. While she is actively involved in an orphanage in Cambodia, she is also very pained by the fate of elderly Cambodians and wishes she had the resources to help them. Her change in religious beliefs did not seem to have affected her charitable spirit.

Overall, Mrs. Runnath showed great interest in sharing her life story. After our third interview session, she asked to see the recordings we had so far in order to insure that her life story was complete. By sharing her life story, she was hoping that she could affect change in her community: "that's why I like CURA project, because I want... no more genocide. No more... step on each other... we have to obey each other."[33] At the time of writing this thesis, I do not yet know if there will be a fourth interview session.

Mrs. X

> "On a besoin de croire, mais bien une croyance justifiée... en notre religion ou n'importe quelle religion... C'est utile. Toutes les religions sont utiles, de bien pratiquer, de bien croire, de bien

[31] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author, August 6, 2010.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

comprendre."
--- Mrs. X

I met Mrs. X when I was looking for interviewees who were willing to share their religious outlook with me.[34] I interviewed her in her home, in the Fall of 2009. She had already shared her life story with the CURA Life Stories project, so our interview was centred on her religious beliefs and the story of her religious life. Because of this context, and also due to the fact of being interviewed by a non-Buddhist, Mrs. X spent much time explaining her religious point of view and her practice. Throughout her interview, she expressed the importance and constancy of her inquisitive spirit and took me through the evolution of her religious outlook, from her childhood in Phnom Penh to her current life in Canada, as her understanding of Buddhism grew deeper.

We began the interview with her early religious experiences and moved on to the evolution of her religious beliefs to this day. Mrs. X identified herself as a Buddhist and her approach to religion was to a great extent intellectual. She made every effort to learn as much as she could about the true teachings of Buddha and about meditation: "au fur et à mesure du temps, je fais la recherche personnelle... et puis je trouve les différentes choses que je n'ai pas compris dans le temps en étant jeune... j'ai lu beaucoup de livres, je voudrais comprendre la culture, le culte, la croyance et le Bouddhisme. En vrai dire."[35] Putting so much importance on authenticity, she was critical of the traditional Cambodian approach to Buddhism which she thought was erring from "true" Buddhism: "je trouve que tout ce qu'on a vu comme pratique dans une pagode, personnellement, je trouve que... ce sont plus des coutumes... et ce sont des cultes qui n'a... pas du tout le lien avec le

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[34] Since she asked to remain confidential, I will not give further biographical details that might identify her.

[35] Mrs. X (pseud.), interviewed by author, October 28, 2009.

Bouddhisme."[36] She continued to practice traditional Cambodian rituals related to ancestors but considered those separate from her Buddhist practice.

When asked about whether her religious beliefs had changed, she emphasized the continuity of her practice, but also admitted that her understanding of Buddhism had changed with her studies. She did not associate those changes to her difficult experience surrounding the Khmer Rouge era but to her efforts at learning about Buddhism and Cambodian traditions. Her experience related to the genocide has been extremely difficult and she still struggles to explain it through her religious beliefs. She had not yet found a clear answer to these questions. However, she saw the lack of satisfactory explanation as caused by her lack of understanding of Buddhism, not by a failure of Buddhism. She felt confident that the explanation could be found within a Buddhist framework to those who fully understand the religion.

Muy Len Pong

Finally, Mr. Muy Len Pong was interviewed for the CURA project by Davith Bolin and Santepheap Lim in January and February 2009. In two interview sessions, he talked for a total of 14 hours. Usually with little prompting or intervention by interviewers, he spoke of his childhood in Cambodia, his experience as a teenager and young adult during the civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime and his subsequent departure to Canada. He describes how, once in Canada, he built a new life and became a prominent member of the Cambodian community.

Throughout his interview, he showed great attention to detail, particularly in his

[36] Mrs. X

description of his early life in Cambodia. He thoroughly described the neighbourhood where he grew up, the games he played as a child and his early ventures into business. His experiences in the years surrounding the Khmer Rouge era had a great impact on his life. It was as a teenager that he first encountered, before 1975, the human consequences of war. During his life under the Khmer Rouge he was separated from his family and frequently had to risk disobeying orders to find enough food to survive. Despite the profound impact of these events, most of his interview covered his life before Khmer Rouge and his new life in Canada.

The range of topics covered in his 14 hours of interview was understandably wide, but what was most interesting for my purposes was the consistency of his value of compassion: even when explaining very difficult situations he and the Cambodian community faced, he showed a great understanding for other peoples' motivations. Without approving of their actions, he understood why many people were drawn to the Khmer Rouge and why they did some of the things they did.

Although his personal values were made evident in the stories he told, he spoke very little of other aspects of his religious life. He hinted at the importance of religion in his life, but never explicitly explained it. Thus I will not explore the whole life story in the same way I do with Mrs. Runnath or Mrs. X. Nevertheless, some isolated stories from his life will be very useful to this analysis of religious beliefs and storytelling.

Chapter 2

Giving Meaning to Events

Viewed as a whole, the life story interviews with Mrs. Runnath, Mrs. X and Mr. Muy Len Pong tell stories of survival, crisis of faith and new lives in Canada. As linguistic units, they are a complex narrative with many intermingling stories. More than a simple re-telling of events, the stories told by these refugees assign meanings to events of their lives. Stories "often contain a message that the narrator wishes to communicate to a wider audience – a message that is moral rather than empirical."[37] Therefore, a deep analysis of the ways in which people tell and organize their stories can help us uncover the role of religion in the life story of these interviewees and the way in which people make sense of their lives. If storytelling is an act of giving meaning to events, then the way in which people tell stories can be very meaningful to an analysis of oral history.

Life stories, before being a whole, are a series of isolated stories individuals tell about the events they lived through or witnessed. As oral historians, we are not privy to the events themselves, but by studying the structure of storytelling, we can begin to decipher the meanings interviewees assign to their lives. Since interviewees attempt to convey a message about the events in their lives, the manner in which they recount those events may help us decipher this message.

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[37] Pamela Sugiman, "'Life is Sweet': Vulnerability and Composure in the Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadians," *Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue d'études canadiennes* 43:1 (Winter 2009): 191.

From Events to Stories

Regarding the link between stories and events, Hayden White wrote that "in historical discourse, the narrative serves to transform into a story a list of historical events that would otherwise be only a chronicle."[38] Interviewees, if considered as historians of their own lives,[39] do likewise. What we hear as oral historians are stories rather than a list of events. In his statement, White was making a distinction between events and narratives: events are what actually happened and the historical narrative arranges these events into a story.[40] In the field of religious studies, David Yamane argued, likewise, that "when we study religious experience we cannot study "experiencing" – religious experience in real time and its physical, mental and emotional constituents – and therefore we must study retrospective accounts – linguistic representations – of religious experience."[41] The narrative thus stands as separate from the event or experience: a representation in another form, not an exact reflection.

What is missing from this distinction is the process, the question of *how* events and religious experiences become stories. Of course, oral history narratives, as historical sources often come to us for analysis as finished products.[42] The mental process of

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38 White, *The Content of the Form,* 43.

39 As oral historian Ronald J. Grele explained, it is "necessary to see interviewees, if not as direct voices from the past, as in some manner their own historians, capable of elaborate and sometimes confusing methods of constructing and narrating their own histories." Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 49.

40 Hayden White uses the term "narrative" whereas I will mostly look at "stories." Although these terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, I will consider "stories" to include sequences of events arranged into plots with a beginning, middle and end.

41 David Yamane, "Narrative and Religious Experience," *Sociology of Religion* 61:2 (2000), 173.

42 This perception of oral histories interviews as finished products is however, as Portelli argued, artificial. According to him, "a life story is a living thing. It is always a work in progress, in which narrators revise the image of their own past as they go along." Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli,* 61. The "finished" oral recording is therefore an artificial result of oral history methodology: "the very technology of our

recalling events and organizing them into stories is not directly visible to the interviewer. Nevertheless, the analysis of isolated stories can assist our understanding of the process through which events become stories and the choices involved in creating a particular story. This will allow us to understand the meaning of stories and the implication they have for forming identity and relating to the culture in which they are told.

When looking at stories told by Cambodian refugees, what we can see are not simply the events of their lives but the result of a transformation of those events into stories. As he was recounting his experience during the civil war, for instance, Muy Len Pong told the story of his adventure as a teenager following soldiers in battle:

> Le commandant veut reprendre un village. C'est une aventure…. On s'habille en militaire et on est derrière le commandant… On voit vraiment comme un spectacle… Quand ils réussissent à reprendre le village, on rentre et on voit… moi je n'ai pas vu les cadavres… mais quand je suis arrivé avec mes copains… on voit que c'est triste de voir parce que on voit les maisons… on voit le feu qui est encore là, la marmite… le riz… C'est un Cambodgien qui habite là… C'est une autre famille, une autre personne. Qu'est-ce qu'il a fait pour que nous autres on vienne le pousser, le tuer, le massacrer comme ça… Les soldats sont très fiers… moi je vois… une certaine tristesse… On voit plein de restants de la guerre.[43]

The events that inspired this story, the battle and the desolated village, are things of the past and no longer accessible to the narrator. The battle is no longer physically present and therefore the story told is by definition different from the events that inspired it. Through the years, Mr. Pong has stored the memory of the events, and recounted them to himself and to others many times. In this particular retelling, the events of Mr. Pong's youth are put together into a coherent story with a beginning, a middle and an end, using

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work is... to freeze fluid material at an arbitrary point in time." Ibid., 63.

[43] Mr. Muy Len Pong, Interviewed by Davith Bolin and Santpheap Lim, January 31 and February 8, 2009.

an accepted story type and conveying a message that goes beyond relating a series of events.

The main tool used in this transformation of events into stories is emplotment, through which "goals, causes and chance are brought together within a temporal unity of the whole and completed action."[44] Paul Ricoeur defines plots as "the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events into a story."[45] Plot types include tragedy, comedy, romance, satire[46] and variations of these. By taking events and working them into a recognizable plot,[47] the storyteller is able to influence the way in which events are perceived.

In Mr. Pong's story of war adventure, the innocent curiosity of a young boy is confronted by the reality of war, which led him to discover the human consequences of the conflict that affected his country. The insertion of these events into a tragic plot has shaped the way in which these events are perceived and recounted – turning them into a story. It is the use of this tragic plot that defines the relation between Mr. Pong's childhood and the war.

This distinction between events and stories is crucial to understanding what oral

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[44] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), ix.

[45] Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 167.

[46] As listed by Hayden White, *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), x.

[47] As Hayden White considers them, story types are provided by culture. What historical narratives do is "test the capacity of a cutlure's fiction to endow real events with the kinds of meanings that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of 'imaginary' events." (White, *The content of the form*, 45.) Similarly, Elizabeth Tonkin talks about "genres" which are used by oral history interviewees to recount events. According to her, "Genres provide a 'horizon of expectations' to a knowledgeable audience that cannot be derived from the semantic content of a discourse alone."(Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 2.) Although my work will not explore in depth the nature of the culturally specific expectations of genre and plot, it is useful to keep in mind the culturally constructed nature of these narrative tools used by interviewees.

history sources can teach us. By observing individuals trying to make sense of their lives, oral history brings attention to the process happening in between events and historical narratives. In doing this, it breaks the dichotomy assumed by narrativist historians. In between the events themselves and the historical narrative there lies, for the oral historian, memory. According to Portelli, "memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process in the creation of meanings."[48] Events of our pasts – and the stories we tell about them – are not stored in our memory without change, but are instead gradually transformed in the course of our lives. "[T]he telling of one's life is *part* of one's life... the problem is not what is the relation *between* life and story; but, rather, what is the place of the story within life."[49] At its best, what oral history can bring to the forefront is the process through which individuals remember past events and use narrative to make sense of these memories. As Frisch explained:

> By showing people trying to make sense of their lives at a variety of points in time and in a variety of ways, by opening this individual process to view, the oral history reveals patterns and choices that, taken together, begin to define the reinforcing and screening apparatus of the general culture, and the ways in which it encourages us to digest experience.[50]

As such, oral history favours a theory of narrative that integrates a dynamic, interactive role for the narrator and for the act of narrating. In Mr. Pong's story, the innocent of his curiosity is put in deliberate juxtaposition with the tragedy of the war. The shape of the story is a matter of choice made by the narrator. Therefore, if we take experience and meaning into account in our analysis of narratives, we can see that the stories told about

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[48] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli,* 52.
[49] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli,* 118.
[50] Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 11.

the past are constantly being negotiated by those who tell them and live them.

In the field of narrative theory, David Carr argued that narratives are not separate from the world they describe, but that "narrative structure pervades our very experience of time and social existence."[51] Structures of plot and links between events are not created only in a story told independently of lived experience, but narrative "is our way of experiencing, of acting, and of living both as individuals and communities. It is our way of being in and dealing with time."[52] This is not to say that the events of our lives necessarily take the shape of a particular story type, but what Carr argued is that we create stories when we live and assess our everyday experience. Based on this theory, the narrative form is not only present in the recorded oral history but also in the manner in which individuals lived events and re-lived them in their memory over the years.

To say that the narrative form is present before its expression in the interview space does not mean that it is unchanging. Changing circumstances, failing memory or the context of the interview may affect the content and the form of what is being recounted. The process of the interview therefore records not the events of one's life or a definitive story about them, but the way in which these events are remembered at the time of the interview. Although the memory itself is not accessible to the interviewer, the narration of the interview is an outward expression of how the events have been stored and organized into memory. For instance, when she was recounting the help she had received from a friend of her husband in the later years of the Khmer Rouge regime, Mrs. Runnath said she had prayed just like she had done all the time since she was young: "do good, do good" and when she explained that her prayers were answered, she stated "God

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[51] David Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 9.
[52] Carr, *Time, Narrative and History,* 185.

is really very mighty."[53] This implied that although the prayer was a Buddhist prayer ("do good, do good" being consistent with the Buddhist concept of karma), the end of her story had an altogether different focus: she now attributes these events to the agency of a Christian God. These events occurred before she converted to Christianity, but the story about them changed as a result of Mrs. Runnath's new religious outlook.

As Mrs. Runnath's and Mr. Pong's stories show, the particular story told about any events is not inherent in the events themselves. Rather, it is constructed by the storyteller and is the result of a choice. Hayden White holds that "The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries."[54] Clearly, White sees the transformation of historical events into narratives as a constructed interpretation of the events of history, not as a reflection of the nature of the events themselves. The storyteller has some flexibility in choosing which events to retell, in inserting those events into a particular plot and relating them to other events. The events lived are thus transformed by the memory of the person who lived them and shaped into the story that is then recounted. The question that remains is what precisely is gained by this process; what does the act of remembering and storytelling add to the events?

Giving Moral and Religious meaning to events

Hayden White argued that the narrative form of historical discourse is not an empty vessel through which information about events is conveyed but a tool that adds information. In fact, he asserts that the narrative form "already possesses content prior to

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[53] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, November 3, 2009.
[54] White, *The Content of the Form,* 24.

any given actualization of it in speech or writing."[55] He refers to this process as "explanation by emplotment" by which "The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end."[56] The form of the plot thus adds content to the history being told, making the narrative more than the events themselves. Likewise, Ricoeur explained that one of the functions of plots is to add a nonchronological dimension to a succession of events (which he labelled a "configurational dimension") and the plot thus "construes significant wholes out of scattered events."[57] In Mr. Pong's story of war, for instance, the form of the tragic plot is not a neutral shape in which events are inserted but in itself contains meaning.

My analysis of life story interviews will therefore be based on the idea that, as Bamberg argued, "narrative is the ordering principle that gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless life."[58] The act of telling a story about one's life takes events and organizes them into a plot in order to underline the meaning assigned to those events. Michael Jackson goes further by explaining that it is not enough to say that stories give meaning to events "if by 'meaning' we imply an intellectual grasp of events. For storytelling does not necessarily help us understand the world conceptually or cognitively; rather, it seems to work at a "protolinguistic" level, changing our *experience* of events that have befallen us

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55 White, *The Content of the Form,* xi.
56 White, *Metahistory,* 2.
57 Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 174.
58 Michael Bamberg, Anna de Fina and Deborah Schiffrin, *Selves and identities in narrative and discourse* (Philadephia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007), 5.

by symbolically restructuring them."[59] Therefore, storytelling becomes a part of life itself and by looking at the stories told during an oral history interview, one can know not only about past events, but also about how these past events are composed into one's ongoing life in an effort to give life meaning. If, as Yamane argued, what we study is the narration of a religious experience and not the experience itself, "we do not study phenomenological description of experiences but how an experience is made meaningful."[60]

During my first interview session with Mrs. Runnath, as she was in the process of recounting her life during the first few years of the Khmer Rouge era and after expressing how difficult life was for her, she linked these difficulties to certain earlier events:

> At night, my tears came because as many people know... I was very good. I helped the poor, sometimes, someone sick... I pay for the hospital... you know... I tried to be good. But during Pol Pot time, the people I used to help made worst to me. The poor become chief, the people who have no knowledge become chief...[61]

I would argue that this story is the story of what she perceived as the failure of karma - a religious belief that had been instilled in her since she was a child but later rejected in favour of Christianity. Although she does not use the word karma, she expresses an expectation that good actions will lead to positive results. As Nancy Smith-Hefner explained in her study of Cambodians living in the United States, the usual perception of karma in Cambodian culture is that "the individual is always free to choose whether to engage in meritorious or demeritorious acts, thereby directing his or her future in a

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[59] Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, 15-16.

[60] Yamane, "Narrative and Religious Experience," 173.

[61] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, October 27, 2009.

negative or positive way."[62] Based on this idea, Mrs. Runnath had expected that her lifetime of generosity would lead to positive results and felt betrayed when it did not.

Given that she explained that her life was made difficult by the very same people she had tried to help, the story told here is a form of tragic irony.[63] This story plot was chosen by Mrs. Runnath to express the meaning she had attributed to these events. As White argued, "the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological."[64] Her telling this story in such a way was based on her own perception of the significance of the events rather than on them being inherently tragic or ironic.[65] In this case, she tells the story in this frame in order to emphasize the difficulties she was facing and by linking them to her earlier attempts to gather good karma, she seemed to be setting up for her later rejection of Buddhism in favour of Christianity.

To illustrate how she may have framed the story differently, and how the shape of a story is always, to a certain extent, a choice, I would like to compare this story with another instance in which she talks about the people she used to help before the Khmer Rouge era. On the second time when she was almost killed by the Khmer Rouge, she was told to go to a particular building at night where she would be picked up by Khmer Rouge people, probably to be executed:

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[62] Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1999), 35.

[63] Defined in Daniel James' book as "the contrast between the individual and her hopes, wishes, and actions on the one hand, and the working of a dark unyielding power of fate on the other." (James, *Doña María's Story,* 165.)

[64] Hayden White, *Metahistory*, xii.

[65] Please note that I use the word "tragedy" to refer to a certain story type. By saying that events were "not inherently tragic", I do not wish to make light of the genocide, only to illustrate the way in which the interviewees tell their stories.

> I arrive at that place... I didn't see anyone at that place and one old lady came and... cried because she knows very well... that I help the poor, [that I did] many things for the school, for the pagoda... for old people I bought material and [gave] them one lunch, good lunch and then with clothes and also money. And so old people didn't forget... they want to try to help me but no way. She tried to hide something to give me to eat too.[66]

In this instance, she talks about the kindness of an old woman towards her – a kindness based on Mrs. Runnath's status as a benefactor of this community. I would argue that it is quite significant to see that she chose to frame the story of her generosity as a tragic irony by talking about it in relation to the difficulties she was facing – rather than in relation to the compassion she received. Furthermore, instead of associating her eventual survival to the work of karma, she describes it as a miracle – therefore choosing a Christian framework over a Buddhist one to explain these events.[67] The fact that she has chosen to create a link between events that were separated chronologically (her hard life under the Khmer Rouge and her charity work years earlier) also demonstrates a choice in creating the structure of the story she told here. The moral meaning of the story comes from this link: the tragic irony is defined by the contrast between her past generosity and her later suffering and it also demonstrates what she saw as a failure of the laws of cause and effect dictated by karma.

In these stories, religion provides the standard to define the moral meaning of the events. It was Mrs Runnath's belief in Christianity and her rejection of Buddhism that defined the relationship between the events in her story. Through storytelling, she

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[66] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, November 3, 2009.

[67] This choice can also be linked to her perception of the concept of class. As will become apparent in other stories, Mrs. Runnath saw the context of the Khmer Rouge era as a reversal of the social order in which the lower class gained power. According to this view, the rich and powerful were in such a position as a result of good karma and owed it to use their advantage to help the less fortunate. The poor, in return, owed respect and gratitude to their benefactors. (Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism,* 50.) It was this social order, as much as a spiritual sense of justice, that was turned upside down in Mrs. Runnath's life.

established a moral order that gave sense to her life. As Robert Orsi defined them, religions are not sets of beliefs that individuals accept as they are, but they

> Provide men and women with existential vocabularies with which they may construe fundamental matters, such as the... sources of joy, the borders of acceptable reality, the nature of human destiny... it is through these various religious idioms that the necessary material realities of existence—pain, death, hunger, sexuality—are experienced, transformed, and endured, for better or worse.[68]

With this vocabulary of idioms, individuals are often able to make sense of their lives and create stories that render events meaningful. In Mrs. Runnath's story, the idioms of Buddhism provide the basis for the tragic irony of her suffering during the Khmer Rouge.

While Mrs. Runnath eventually rejected the validity of Buddhist idioms to properly explain her life, most Cambodian refugees, when they allude to religion, continue to use the religious framework that was instilled in them as children – Cambodian Buddhism – when attempting to make sense of their lives.[69] The process of making sense of difficult events, however, remains a challenge for many. In regards to the extreme suffering under the Khmer Rouge, Carol Mortland found that

> When extraordinary events occur... the very essence of a social group's otherworldly explanations become problematic. So while Khmer have for centuries utilized karmic theory to explain unusual or threatening events, the Democratic Kampuchea years were of such extraordinary horror that usual explanations for the extraordinary did not always suffice.[70]

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[68] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 169.

[69] Many researchers have found that attempts to find explanations for the Khmer Rouge, from its victims, usually draw on Cambodian Buddhist concepts, including collective Karma (Mortland, "Khmer Buddhists in the United States, 80.) and failure of the country leaders to follow the teachings of Buddhism (Sucheng Chan, *Not Just Victims: Conversations with Cambodian Community Leaders in the United States* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 75-76.) While these explanations were not satisfactory for all, conversions to another religion (usually Christianity) are exceptional, particularly in first generation Cambodian refugees (Mortland, "Khmer Buddhists in the United States," 77.)

[70] Mortland, "Khmer Buddhists in the United States," 72.

When listening to individual genocide survivors, however, we often find that the events that are difficult to explain are not necessarily the ones we expect. In Muy Len Pong's case, it was not the genocide itself but the aftermath that proved difficult to integrate into his life story. In the following story, he recounts an instance in which he felt particularly betrayed. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, Mr. Pong tried to rebuild his life by trading goods from one city to another. One of his sources of revenue was trading fish, until he was arrested outside of a city by government officials for having too much fish with him:

> Ils m'ont arrêté, et ils ont pris le poisson pour mettre dans le poste de contrôle… eux autres disent qu'ils ont reçu l'ordre des supérieurs d'arrêter les gens… mais qu'est-ce qu'ils vont faire après, ils ne le savent pas… Tôt le matin, le lendemain, je suis allé le voir... Le contrôle était encore la... Ils sont trois, dans la vingtaine… un peu plus âgés que moi. Ils sont des Cambodgiens comme moi, ils sont sortis de la famine comme moi… Le gars qui m'a arrêté… il m'a regardé droit dans les yeux, et il a dit 'de quoi vous parlez ?'… Moi j'étais hors de moi. Je n'arrive pas à croire que les trois gars-là ont réussi à faire ça… comme si rien ne s'était passe…. Et c'est des survivants des Khmer Rouges comme moi… Je retourne chez moi, à Siem Riep a la pagode. J'étais choque. J'arrive pas à comprendre comment un être humain peut faire des choses pareilles. À 19 ans, faire face à tout les épreuves ça c'est correcte parce que les communistes, les doctrines, on travaille mais cette fois ci on vient de sortir du pétrin comme tout le monde, et ils réussissent à faire ça… j'étais choqué…. j'ai resté une semaine, jour et nuit, couché en dessous de Bouddha me poser la question comment des êtres humains… peuvent être aussi sans cœur…J'ai demande à Bouddha 'comment, comment est-ce que le monde est aussi cruel avec moi… Et je pose toute sorte de questions… j'étais frustré. C'est à partir de une semaine que je commence à calmer, apprendre à respirer, méditer en dessous de Bouddha… accepter le fait que oui, y'en a des gens qui sont méchants, qui sont capables de faire des choses pour leur bien…
> J'étais triste. En sortant du régime… c'était une leçon amère pour moi à avaler à 19 ans, pour voir cette injustice là. Surtout après avoir vécu… le génocide… maintenant on recommence notre vie et voilà, paf, il est capable de faire ça. Voilà. Moi après une semaine, j'ai avalé mon pilule et… on tourne la page et continue

notre vie.[71]

Although his lesson from these events seems unsatisfactory: “Y'a des gens qui sont méchants” in the face of his great sense of betrayal, his effort to find a conclusion to his story speaks to the importance of finding meaning to events. His way of coping with the events at the time – lying under the Buddha statue – reflects the idea of embodied religious practice or ritual in which “Our material bodies come to be linked with spirituality through social senses and through ritual restructuring of our senses of space and time.”[72] By linking the spiritual and physical world, he attempted to find an explanation or comfort in the face of injustice in this world. By retelling the events into a story, he might also have been attempting to link his current material and spiritual worlds. As Ledbetter argued, different elements of literary texts can have religious significance, for instance, “plot is the prime mover of narrative towards wholeness. Plot makes fragmented moments of action and creates order. Plot takes open-ended situations and brings them to a close. While these actions are not unique to religion, they do have religious implications.” Therefore, the process of creating a coherent story, of attempting to explain unexplainable tragedies and trying to find meaning to the events of one's life can be considered religious endeavours – dealing with realities that are beyond human control and understanding. As we have seen through Muy Len Pong's story, however, finding the meaning to a difficult event can be an ongoing process and the explanation given can change as it is developed and influenced by the interviewee's ongoing experience. As Carr described it, “The actions and sufferings of life can be viewed as a

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[71] Muy Len Pong

[72] McGuire, *Lived Religion,* 118.

process of telling ourselves stories, listening to those stories and acting them out or living them through."[73] Our ongoing life and the stories we tell about it are therefore not separate but inherently linked.

In conclusion, it is possible to decipher much information about the stories people tell from the manner in which they recount and organize these stories. By looking at how Mrs. Runnath linked the events of her life and how Muy Len Pong attempted to give his story a satisfying conclusion we were able to see a lot about the meaning that these events had for those interviewees. Of course, extracts from oral history by themselves can be relatively uninformative or even misleading unless it is put in the context of whole life stories and of the cultural and historical context in which interviewees lived and recounted their life stories. In the following chapters, I will therefore broaden my analysis of these interviews by looking at stories in relation to the whole life story and to the cultural and historical context in which they are told.

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[73] Carr, *Time, Narrative and History,* 61.

Chapter 3

Giving Meaning to Life Stories

In his oral history work, Daniel James found that the construction of a life story that can stand as a whole, coherent unit is of great importance for its narrator:

> The wider life story must succeed not only in terms of meeting certain social criteria but in terms ultimately of cohering for the narrator herself. The process of achieving personal coherence, of staving off epistemological crisis, is nearly always far more complex than analysis of a single story would indicate.[74]

Although much can be discovered from analysis of individual stories, from the choice of plot and the links created between events through storytelling, our understanding of oral history sources would be limited without consideration of whole life stories. This analysis allows us to see how isolated events in one's life are linked through storytelling. Going beyond the meaning of specific events in one's life, oral history can also further our discernment of how an individual perceives the meaning of his or her whole life. Through this analysis, we can observe the narrative tools used to create links within a life story and create coherence. Like religion, permeating through all aspects of life to give a meaning and an explanation for all things, the coherent life story is an act of synthesis: it integrates all aspects of one's life and leaves no significant event unexplained. Although never perfectly achieved, this goal is visible in the efforts made by interviewees to create coherence in the disparate events of their life stories.

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[74] James, *Doña María's Story,* 206.

Moreover, the quest for coherence in a life story is linked in a reciprocal relationship with the quest for identity, including religious identity. In a sense, individuals 'compose' their life story and the identity through narrative.[75] By creating a coherent life story, individuals define a consistent identity or an evolution of their identity which makes sense to the narrator and the audience. The presence of a well-defined identity for the interviewee and protagonist helps in the creation of a coherent life story.

Even in the best circumstances, however, communicating a coherent life story and identity poses challenges. In the case of genocide survivors, the question of integrating the experience of genocide into a flowing life narrative may prove extremely difficult. Attempts to explain these events in a manner that is acceptable to both the speaker and the listener, and the difficulties encountered may illustrate the significance of extreme violence in the life of its victims and witnesses.

Creating Coherence

More than being the sum of all the narratives people use to talk about themselves during the course of their lives, a life story is also, as Linde defined it, a unit in itself: "life story is not simply a collection of stories, explanations, and so on; instead, it also involves the relations among them."[76] Therefore, in order to create a coherent life story out of isolated events and stories, interviewees need to create links between stories such that they fit into a greater whole. By observing how these links are created, we can

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[75] The concept of 'composure' was used for example by Pamela Sugiman in her analysis of how Japanese Canadians tell the stories of the difficulties they faced during the second world war: "Narrators attempt to compose themselves are in part a response to the discomposure that I have brought about in asking them to remember what for some were cruel and unjust times." (Sugiman, "Life is Sweet," 199.) This was one of the ways in which "people try to bring the empirical content of their narratives in line with the moral message that defines their life experience." (Ibid., 210).

[76] Linde, *Life Stories,* 25.

decipher the significance of a particular event within a life story and begin to discover the meaning interviewees assign to their lives. Narrative analysis of life stories uncover strategies used to create coherence and thus the choices made by interviewees to define the relation between the events and their lives.

One way of creating such links is through repetition. By uttering a same story on different occasions, an individual can emphasize the importance of this story and create a thematic link between different parts of a life story. In some instances, Mrs. Runnath repeated the same stories at different times during her interview. Of course, some of the repetition may be accidental – and quite normal for nine hours of recorded interview over a nine month period. However, in the following example, the repetition has a deeper meaning. As she was talking about her work in the forest during the Khmer Rouge regime, she recounted the following story:

> I used to talk to the chickens when I'm alone. I saw the hen with the chicken and... I cry, I say that now, you are luckier than me. You could be near your kids, near your children all the time. For me, I have no right at all to keep my children near me.[77]

This touching story spoke to the importance of her family by pointing out how unnatural and cruel it seemed to her to be separated from her children. In my second interview session with her, as she was talking about later events during the Khmer Rouge era, she once again referred to the same story:

> My husband was taken already. And all my children go away... no one with me. That's why you remember that I got jealous with the hen. The hen have all right to live with their chicken, their baby. But for me... no one with me.[78]

Mrs Runnath was aware that she was repeating the story. She felt it was an important

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[77] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, October 27, 2009.
[78] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, November 3, 2009.

story that made a point that was relevant to many parts of her life story. She may have had this conversation with her chickens only once, but by telling it twice, she was creating what Gabrielle Goudreau called a "récit répétitif": "raconter *n* fois ce qui s'est passé une fois"[79] which is often used in narratives to retell a marking story. Although accidental repetition also speaks to the importance of an event, by doing it on purpose, Mrs. Runnath was doing more than emphasizing the salience of the story with her chickens, she was intentionally creating a thematic link between events, underlining the importance of her family and speaking to the consistency of this value throughout her life.

Without repeating a particular story, individuals may also emphasize an important aspect of their life by repeatedly referring to an important concept. In Mrs. Runnath's life story, the theme of miracle was ever present when we discussed her survival from the Khmer Rouge. In her early time under the Khmer Rouge, she was sent to the forest near her husband's natal village to cultivate rice. Her survival depended on her ability to have a good harvest:

> After the harvest, oh, thank God, it's a miracle. That was all field. And many people try to grow rice there. But no result. But while I went to grow there, a very good harvest…. I had a very big quantity of rice. And for the others in the village, the harvest was not as good as mine. Oh so, everyone said that 'oh, you are lucky, you have very good harvest there…' Thank God. So I had rice for the whole year.[80]

While villagers attributed her good harvest to luck, Mrs. Runnath instead explained it as a miracle, for which she is thankful to God.

In the following years, local Khmer Rouge leaders wanted to take Mrs. Runnath

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[79] Gabrielle Gourdeau, *Analyse du discours narratif* (Boucherville: Magnard, 1993), 29.
[80] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, October 27, 2009.

away to execute her, but each time, she survived:

> After Ravann's birth, they made a program to kill. For me they want to kill for the first time when they take my husband away. … For the first time, in around two or three days, before getting me to kill, the chief made… prostitution with the new arrival… so the chief got to the prison and everyone tried not to remember about killing me, take me away.[81]

After surviving this first attempt at her life, she survived a second one when conflicts between Khmer Rouge factions distracted local leaders. When recounting her third close encounter with death, the miracle was not only her survival, but the fact that she was finally reunited, against all hope, with her daughter:

> You know, it's a miracle for my life. An old lady came to tell me again… on December 30, they had to take [us] away. The word 'to take away' is to kill but during then we could not know exactly… I prayed God. Anywhere I go, I want… all my children around me… For the second [child], I think that I will go to take him because it's around seven or eight kilometers from me. But for the oldest, my daughter, she worked around… one hundred kilometers from me… I was very sad because I have no hope to see my eldest daughter. On December 30th… I think that it's the last day for all of us. And while the ox walked, one lady on the sidewalk called me… 'sister… I took… your daughter Ravi home'… when I arrive home, I call my daughter… Thank God. Now the thing that I didn't hope now appeared in front of me…. I am very happy… and I think 'ah yes, my daughter won't be slave to the others. If [we] die, we'll die all together.[82]

In all these stories, Mrs. Runnath faced alarming situations – the threat of death or separation from her children – and against all odds, she overcame these circumstances. Repeatedly, she used the concept of a miracle to explain the positive outcomes. She could have put the emphasis on luck, or her own agency, but by consistently focusing on miracles, she linked these stories together and created a meaning to a crucial aspect of her life story.

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[81] Ibid.
[82] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, November 3, 2009.

More than simply repeating miracles as a theme, Mrs. Runnath even created a story type she could use to encompass a wide range of events: miracle stories. The creation of a story type is a common tool people use in telling their stories. For instance, Cecilia Castillo Ayometzi saw that "religious conversion" stories in a community of Mexican immigrants in the southern United States followed a standard story, with fairly rigid steps but enough flexibility for each individual to be able to fit their particular circumstances to the story type.[83] Similarly, Westerman saw a common structure to personal stories told by Central American refugees.[84] In both these cases, the story types were used across a community and for a specific purpose – for Mexican immigrants, to establish their place in a respected community and for Central American refugees to shape American popular opinion for political purposes. I would argue that the same process can be used in an individual life story to create coherence. In Mrs. Runnath's interview, her "miracle stories" follow a standard sequence: dire and hopeless circumstance which will most likely lead to her death, from which she was miraculously saved. This is similar to the process Daniel James saw in Dona Maria's story, as she would tell stories that followed particular themes: standing up to authority, helping other workers and being a rebel.[85] In the case of Mrs. Runnath's miracle stories, an important aspect of her argument in favour of the influence of miracles in her life comes from the repetition: by telling a great number of stories of "miraculous survival," she decreases the chance that the influence of miracles will be disregarded as "luck." In telling these

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[83] Cecilia Castillo Ayometzi, "Storying as becoming: Identity through the telling of conversion" In *Selves and Identities in Narrative and Discourse*, eds. Bamberg, Michael, Anna De Fina and Deborah Schiffrin (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub., 2007), 41–70.

[84] William Westerman, "Central American Refugee Testimonies and Performed Life Stories in the Sanctuary Movement," in *Oral History Reader,* ed. Robert Perks and Allistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 498.

[85] James, *Doña María's Story*, 164.

stories, she was therefore making a point about her whole life story – not only about the specific events that inspired these stories. Emphasis on a particular theme thus contributed to the coherence of her life story.

Another tool used to create a life story that is acceptable to the person telling it and the people listening to it is the use of a coherence system, defined by Linde as a "system that claims to provide a means for understanding, evaluating, and constructing accounts of experience."[86] A set of religious beliefs can be used as one such coherence system by providing a system for making sense of all aspects of life. When considering religion as a coherence system within life stories, we should not look to the scriptures of a particular religion to provide coherence to the stories told, but instead look for the value system and the set of explanations that each individual constructs in telling their life stories and uses to make sense of their experience. Like Meredith McGuire, who approached people's beliefs as "religion-as-practice" consideration of beliefs as coherence systems should look at "how multifaceted, diverse, and malleable are the beliefs, values, and practices that make up many (perhaps most) persons' own religion."[87]

In much of the stories drawn from Mrs. Runnath's life story, she was using her current belief system as a source of coherence. In these stories, she does not associate her survival to her own agency (except sometimes through prayer or wish) or to random luck, but sees the agency to save her life in the hands of a Christian God. As she told of events that happened near the end of the Khmer Rouge era, when she was heading back to Phnom Penh with her family, she said of one of those instances of miraculous survival, "God saved me." At that point in the interview, I pointed out that she was not a Christian

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[86] Linde, *Life Stories,* 163.
[87] McGuire, *Lived Religion,* 5.

at the time, to which she answered “that's right... I did not know it yet, but God saved me.”[88] Clearly, the meaning to the story was assigned long after these events happened. The formation of her life story was thus clearly an ongoing process through which she assigned meaning to the events in her life in order to create a cohesive life story. Of particular influence in this process was the adoption of a new system of belief, which gave an explanation to her life that she could more easily accept: rather than having to live with the failure of her past beliefs and practice to lead to a good life, she can now see these beliefs as misguided and tell the story of being saved by God – saved from her previous beliefs, but mostly saved from difficult circumstances that she could not change herself.

In another example, in which she uses Christianity as a framework of interpretation, Mrs. Runnath used an isolated incident to make a point about wider themes that pervaded her whole life story. In this story, Mrs. Runnath recounts how her difficult life during the Khmer Rouge, which drove her to try to end her life:

> So all the time I want to suicide, but not alone... If I die, I like that all my children will die all together... Because if one of my children still alive, he... will be slave to the other. And I don't want that my children be slave to the other. If they still alive, I have to be alive... to take care of them. And while people told me don't go near that very high tree because a very famous witch is there. Oh, I was very happy because I have a way to die all together. So, I cut trees to build a house near that big tree. And people 'no, not to go.'.. I pretend not to know anything about the witch. I pretend not to know...
> So I go to build a house... at last, some people say that 'you know, that big tree, the witch of that big tree is very infamous. You will die all together.' It's my main purpose [laugh] but I pretend not to know about that and I say... 'I don't believe at all.' but really I believe...
> After I see that no one near my house, I try to talk with the witch. I say, 'oh witch, everyone told me you are very famous. Me too. I

[88] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, November 3, 2009.

> agree. So, now, I give the life of all my family. Take all. But one condition: no one left. If one left, you could not take. If you want to take, all. Me, my husband, all my children. Ok? no one left... when we sleep take all our soul. Don't let us... have pain.'
> Then, after a few days, not the witch of the Indian witch who came.... they came in my own eye. I still awake... one man, dressed in white and with a white scarf and with a walk stick... he came in front of me. My eye were still open and talked with in the language of a king. He said that daughter, you want to die. Now have patience. It's not like this forever. And not only you. The whole country... be patient. You have to be back to your own natal village in 3 years, 10 months and 7 days. You will be back to your own natal village.[89]

Later during my interview with her, she mentioned that the man who had appeared to her was, in her opinion, Jesus Christ. Based on the structure of the story, I believe that this story can be considered as a subset of Mrs. Runnath's overall life story: she tried to use her old beliefs to her "advantage" when faced with difficult circumstances and when her attempt failed, she was saved by something she did not fully understand at the time.[90]

While the failure of this agency through the world of spirit can be linked with her later rejection of her old belief system, being saved from hopelessness by a mysterious prophecy (defined later as a Christian prophecy) provides the set up for her later adoption of a new belief system. This story therefore stands for more than the events it recounts, it is a subset of an important aspect of her life. By linking these events with an overarching theme of her life, her rejection of Buddhism and conversion to Christianity, Mrs. Runnath

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[89] Mrs. Ven Runnath, Interviewed by author and Paul Tom, November 3, 2009.

[90] The story of the spirit (or witch) in the tree is consistent with the belief in spirit described by scholars of Cambodian religion. As Ian Harris explained in regards to neak ta –Cambodian spirits associated with a particular place: "They are mundate deities – that is, gods of the realm of men... and cannot intervene in the process of final salvation, but they may be induced to bring about significant change in the human and physical realm." (Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 55; see also Alain Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge: Analyse et traduction d'un corpus de textes sur les* neak ta (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992))The effect of these spirits can be much more immediate than that of karma.(Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American,* 41.) The way Mrs. Runnath tried to use that spirit is consistent with this definition: she was using the spirit to an immediate end and trying to get around the long term effect of karma, which had brought her to this difficult life.

created a link with her life story and confirmed the coherence of her religious evolution.

Life Story and Identity

Considering the mechanisms used to create coherence out of disparate events, oral history can give us information about how individuals construct their life story and what prominent themes and values they seek to emphasize. The central themes thus created define not only the life story but the identity of the individual telling the story. In fact, the creation of a consistent identity is an important motivation for efforts put towards the creation of a coherent life story. As Linde explained, "Life stories express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way."[91] More than being an expression of the identity of the storyteller, the life story also contributes to the development of said identity: "there is a dialectical relationship between... the narrating self and the narrated self. As humans, we draw on our experiences to shape narratives about our lives, but equally, our identity and character are shaped by our narratives."[92] Creating a coherent life narrative is thus a process of defining a sense of self that is coherent and encompasses the evolution of one's life:

> a personal narrative can document a subjectivity that has evolved along with and within a memory embodied in an individual who has constructed him- or herself in a specific social context through interpersonal relationships and psychodynamic processes. That self has been constructed through self-narratives, culturally shaped and interactive forms that yield operative self-understandings that evolve over time.[93]

What an individual recounts in a life story is therefore not simply a succession of events but also the evolution of their identity and their ongoing effort to define themselves.

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[91] Linde, *Life Stories,* 3.
[92] Antze, *Tense Past,* xviii.
[93] Maynes et al., *Telling Stories,* 41-42.

In much of the research on Cambodian religion, scholars have discovered a strong link between ethnic and religious identity. According to these researchers, many Cambodians thought that to be Cambodian is to be Buddhist.[94] This may explain in part why most interviewees, being interviewed by fellow Khmer, do not feel the need to explain their religious beliefs: they assume such religious beliefs are shared. In my interviews with Mrs. X and Mrs. Runnath, however, the question of identity was openly discussed – in part due to their own interest in explaining their difference from the Cambodian community and in part due to my own questioning. Mrs. Runnath identified as a Christian and Mrs. X continued to see herself as a Buddhist but also saw her approach to religion as rational and based on the true teachings of Buddha.

In Mrs. X's explanation of her religious beliefs, one theme that came up constantly was the importance of what we could describe as an intellectual approach to religion: a constant attempt to understand the rituals that are part of her culture and to do extensive research to define clearly what is Buddhism as what is not.

> ...au fur et à mesure du temps, je fais la recherche personelle et puis je trouve les différentes choses que je n'ai pas compris dans le temps en étant jeune. Je commence cette recherche [en] 84-85... j'ai lu beaucoup de livres, je voudrais comprendre la culture, le culte, la

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[94] In the context of refugee populations, particularly, the continuation of one's religious identity is important to the sense of belonging to the Khmer community. As Smith-Hefner found, for instance, "to identify oneself as a Buddhist says less about participation in temple rituals or belief in specific dogmas than about a sense of community and solidarity. Adult refugees commonly emphasize the need to maintain Khmer solidarity in the face of pressure to assimilate. This moral identification appears to reinforce or even strengthen their association between being Khmer and being Buddhist." (Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American,* 32). In their study of religious identity among Khmer refugees in Montreal, Francois Thibeault and Mathieu Boisvert found that all their interviewees identified as Cambodian Buddhists and often saw a strong link between their ethnic and religious identities. They do state, however, that "in analysing the transcripts, we did not find any solid ground to support the claim that the Cambodian interviewees live by the motto "to be Khmer (or Cambodian) is to be Buddhists."" (Francois Thibeault and Mathieu Boisvert, "Weaving Cambodian Buddhist Identity Through Ritual in Montreal" Unpublished article, 2010) In Cambodia, researchers have also found a strong link between Buddhism and Khmer identity, particularly in the late colonial period (Anne Hansen, "Khmer Identity and Theravada Buddhism" in *History, Buddhism and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, 40-61.) and after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. (Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism,* 205.)

croyance et le Bouddhisme. En vrai dire.[95]

This concern with understanding religion was not a call for an authentic Cambodian practice like many researchers have found within the Cambodian community in the diaspora.[96] It was not either a rejection of all traditions that did not fit into the "true" Buddhist teachings: she continued to practice ancestor worship even if she insisted on separating these cults from Buddhism proper.[97] Rather, Mrs. X seemed to be constructing her approach to religion as rational and at the same time defining her identity as a rational person who values learning and understanding. Like Daniel James, who talks about his interviewee, Dona Maria, as showing herself as "still a rebel'[98] throughout her life story, the story Mrs.X conveys about her religious life reflects a constant sense of identity. Although she dates her concern with research on Buddhism to the 1980s, after she left Cambodia, it also colors the way in which she talks about her religious life during her youth in Cambodia. She speaks of her early religious education in terms of the gaps in the knowledge that was transmitted to her – gaps that she is now filling through her own personal research. In the very beginning of my interview with her, she recounts that during her childhood, "je pratiquais sans le savoir parce ce que on suit les parents. Nos parents nous ammènent à la Pagode..."[99] Later, she described some of the practices that she was required to do when she was young: "ils nous demandaient d'apprendre par coeur des paroles en sanskrit.... J'ai quand même apris pas mal par coeur. Et... c'est nous, on a

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95 Mrs. X.

96 See for example Chen, *Not Just Victims,* 73 and Milada Kalap, "Cambodian Buddhist Monasteries in Paris: Continuing Tradition and Changing Patterns" in *Cambodian Culture since 1975,* 57.

97 In fact, she made a point to keep her shrines to Buddha and to her ancestors physically separate. This runs quite contrary to the usual description of ancestor worship and Buddhism as closely tied in Cambodian religion. (John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, 'Introduction,' in *History, Buddhism and New Religious Movements in Cambodia,* 4-5.; Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American,* 34.)

98 James, *Doña María's Story,* 164.

99 Mrs. X.

cherché nous-même, eux ils ont jamais expliqué ça." By situating her inquisitive spirit in the face of lack of explanation in her early life – long before she began her profound research – she shows a sense of identity that pervades throughout her life. The changes in her religious outlook that are the result of her research are thus not shown as an inconsistency or a sudden shift. They are instead a logical development of the sort of person that she is, and always has been. She also sets up her identity as the result of her subjective experience and assigns to herself an agency in defining her response to this experience and the creation of who she is today.

In Mrs. Runnath's interview, it is her change in religious identity which defines the way her life story is told. As Gay Becker argued, "A biography tends to reorder the significance of a life, reading that life backward and using past events as explanations for the current state of affairs."[100] Mrs. Runnath's current Christian identity influenced how her whole life story is recounted. Her Christian beliefs have a great impact on the way in which she interprets the events of her life and links them into a coherent whole. By creating this sense of coherence, she is reinforcing her own Christian identity: her Christian beliefs seem to explain the events of her life in a way that Buddhism could not, thus justifying her own belief in Christianity.

In her written testimony, Mrs. Runnath wrote that although she originally associated her extreme suffering with bad actions she may have done in previous lives, she eventually reached a breaking point: "I saw that is very unjust for me on earth, to try my best and receive the worst without knowing what I had done and not knowing what

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[100] Gay Becker, *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 27.

my next life will be like."[101] However, this breaking point came many years after the events of the Khmer Rouge era (in 1985 when she was in a refugee camp in Thailand) and she recounts in the same written testimony that until then she had been trying her best to continue to accumulate positive karma and follow Buddhist teachingss. She remembers that while she was a refugee: "The only thing that consoled me was that I could go to the Pagoda to receive the Eight Commandments of the Buddha there."[102] In her interview, she also explains that she did not leave Buddhism until she decided to become a Christian. She may have already been having some doubts about the fairness of the events she had been living through, but she had not yet adopted another set of religious beliefs nor had she rejected Buddhism. Her life story and her identity have therefore changed greatly through the years: before her conversion, her story would have been shaped by Buddhist ideas and her explanation of events have surely changed greatly once based on a Christian framework.

The story of Mrs. Runnath's conversion also points to the fact that a life story and a personal identity is an ongoing process, constantly being retold and reworked. While this is difficult to observe from a single interview, or even from a small number of interviews which tell different parts of a life story, this constant evolution remains an important aspect of life stories to keep in mind. In Mrs. Runnath's case, the manner in which she explained her conversion in her written testimony and her more recent interview show a slight contrast of emphasis. In her written testimony, she put more emphasis on the doubts she had in regards to Buddhism:

> I saw that is very unjust for me on earth, to try my best and receive the worst without knowing what I had done and not knowing what

[101] Ven Runnath, "Witness of Mrs. Hang Vanthoeun *called* Mrs. Ven Runnath *or* Mom Ven," July 1999, 2.
[102] Ven Runnath, "Witness," 2.

> my next life will be like. One night at about 3:00 AM, I stood at my window admiring the blue and beautiful sky filled with bright stars and the full moon. I said to Buddha, 'I am sorry Buddha, I have no more hope in you, and from now on, I will accept one God who can save my life and help me have my next life in heaven.' Then, I went to sleep in peace.[103]

This episode of doubt was not present in her oral testimony. Instead, the conversion was explained only in terms of a rational decision:

> I had to study, study, study. And not study alone. During then, I took the 8 commandments of Buddha. And I went to the chief of Buddha and I said 'don't be angry. I try to study all together because I knew this, this, this... you, you know better than me. Please tell me... At last he said [about Christian teachings] 'very good'... and at last I decide to get baptized, to become Christian.[104]

She explained her preference for Christianity in those terms: "they [Christianity and Buddhism] are all good. All God are good. To teach to do good. But the only one difference is that Jesus could help us to save our sins and we could go to heaven. For me, I want to go to heaven. I don't want to be human anymore."[105] Although not incompatible, the two stories of conversion show a different emphasis. Mrs. Runnath, in her written testimony, also talks about her rational approach alongside the story of her doubts towards Buddhism brought about by her difficult experiences since 1975. In her oral testimony, the emphasis was clearly on the rational decision. After telling the story of her conversion, she talked about her rational side on many occasions: "Before doing something, I have to study how to do to get the most through. The most... to get success... I always study first."[106] She was not then talking about any particular instance of her need to study but was rather presenting it as a constant in her life.

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[103] Ven Runnath, "Witness," 2.
[104] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author, August 6, 2010.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.

Nevertheless, her doubts towards Buddhism were hinted at in many of her statements: “depuis ce temps là, je deviendrai... Chrétien, parce que j'aime bien aller au paradis.”[107] Her conversion to Christianity was motivated by her desire to go to heaven, thus implying that she did not believe she would achieve this goal through Buddhism. Earlier in the interview, she explained her refusal to take stolen goods after her return to Phnom Penh in this way: “we could take everything that we want. Everywhere... I'd love a plate... to eat rice. During then... we had to eat with the leaves of the tree. So it's really nice. But I did not take anything. Because I say that in Buddhism... I had sin to live in the trial. So I don't want more sin.”[108] Buddhism had left her uncertain or her fate: she did not know how much more trials she would have to face due to her past sins. Christianity gave her the possibility of instant forgiveness and a clear, controllable path to heaven.

This complex relationship between life stories and identity contributes to the complexity of religious identity. Although most religious individuals identify with one particular religion, their relationship to these religious traditions is complex. Mrs. X identified herself as a Cambodian Buddhist throughout her life but her approach to this religion has changed over the years. When I asked her if she was still practising Cambodian religious rites that she did not consider to be part of true Buddhism, such as ancestor worship, she answered:

> Moi j'ai continué à les pratiquer... Mais, la façon que je crois, ça diffère. Voyez-vous? Je suis le culte, je suis l'acte, mais la façon dont je crois c'est deux choses différentes. Je peux pas vous dire que j'accepte tout ce qu'on croit, à ce qui est associe aux cultes, y'a certaines choses que je refuse... Par example, une phrase 'je prie le Bouddha pour qu'il me donne du bien.' je crois pas ça.[109]

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Mrs. X.

Although the label she assigns to her religious identity has remained the same, her approach to this religion has evolved with time. She does not, however, see them as a change of beliefs so much as a deeper understanding of the religious identity she always had: "je commençais à explorer dans le domaine de... on appèlle ça le Dhamma, c'est... ce que le Bouddha a enseigné."[110]

In Muy Len Pong's interview, although he does not go into details regarding his religious beliefs, he shows a similar change in his approach to religion: he remains a Buddhist but his view of this religion has changed with time. As he began to work in health care, he became more thoughtful in regards to human existence:

> je commence à voir... poser des questions... existentielles... pourquoi on vit... la compréhension d'autrui, et le Bouddhisme, aussi. De plus en plus... toutes les paroles de Buddha, avant j'ai écouté les moines faire les sermons... j'ai écouté, j'ai entendu, mais je ne fais pas beaucoup attention mais ça reste... ça vient de temps en temps, et je vois à ce moment-là dans la vie quotidienne des gens, le karma, les péchés qu'on fait... questions existence, philosophiques...[111]

As Barbara Keller found in her study of religious change in individuals' lives, an evolution in religious beliefs may be seen as a natural unfolding over a lifetime or as the result of adaptation to one's life situation.[112] In the case of Cambodian refugees, however, the question of the Cambodian genocide – survival, the loss of loved ones and witnessing the destruction of one's country—looms large. As a result, adaptation may explain much of the changes in religious beliefs. When faced with events that are difficult to integrate into a religious identity, an individual is left with the choice of either changing his or her

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[110] Mrs. X.
[111] Muy Len Pong
[112] Barbara Keller, "Toward a Multidimensional Concept of Faith Development: Deconversion Narratives in Biographical Context," in eds. Jacob A. Belzen and Antoon Geels, *Autobiography and the Psychological Study of Religious Lives* (New York: Rodopi, 2008), 76-79.

religious identity, adapt it to the circumstances or accept a certain degree of mystery or inconsistency. In the case of Mrs. X, her religious beliefs were particularly challenged by the fact that she lost many family members to the Khmer Rouge genocide:

> la difficulté qu'on a rencontré à cette période-là, on se demande aussi, pourquoi. Pourquoi? Un moment donne on dit, 'on n'a jamais fait de mal. Pourquoi on s'est séparé de nos parents? Pourquoi nos parents sont tués?... Des fois... y'a pas de réponse... On est déçus de certains concepts. Hors... tout au début je pense à peu près comme ça aussi, mais quand je fais ma poussée de recherche, je dis, nous ne savons rien. Malgré que nous ne faisons rien, on reçoit ça.[113]

These events have clearly challenged her religious world view. But defining herself against those "qui ont des doutes evers la religion Bouddhiste. Qui ont même dit... ils ne croient plus" she maintains her religious identity, with the faith that there is an explanation to these events, and that this explanation can be found in Buddhism. Until she can understand these events, she accepts a certain degree of mystery, and lives with the fact that part of her life story remains unexplained, in order to maintain her religious identity. Although Mrs. X's changing religious outlook is also explained by a natural evolution of her inquisitive and rational approach, her experience of the genocide nevertheless required a certain degree of adaptation. Just like Mr. Pong who had grown to adopt a more personal approach to Buddhism, Mrs. X, saw her religious identity evolve as she matured and as the events of her life led her to question her approach to life.

In Mrs. Runnath's life story, on the contrary, the radical change in her belief system was not a natural evolution of her earlier beliefs but a reaction to the suffering that befallen her. However, just like constancy in the doctrine adopted does not necessarily mean an unchanging approach to religion, a conversion to a new doctrine may not erase all previous beliefs. Mrs. Runnath explained that when she converted to Christianity, she

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[113] Mrs.X

stopped being a Buddhist altogether: "C'est mon charactère, c'est comme ça… une [religion] ça suffit pour moi."[114] However, in many of her other statements, she hints to the idea that she had not rejected Buddhist ideas as completely false. As she explained, regarding her current life, "I am the soldier of Jesus Christ. Finish my life, *my last life* for Jesus."[115] The idea of this being her "last life" is consistent with a Buddhist approach to reincarnation: Mrs. Runnath seemed to believe that as a Buddhist, she had reincarnated and would have continued to reincarnate is she had not chosen a different path. What Christianity seemed to provide for Mrs. Runnath was both an alternate explanation for the events in her life and a new path for her future. As explained earlier, the Christian framework gave an explanation for why she survived the Khmer Rouge era—she had been saved by a Christian God – while Buddhism, to her, put the emphasis on the reasons why she suffered. Because of sins in her past lives, Mrs. Runnath faced extremely difficult trials during the Khmer Rouge era and she did not know if such trials were over. By choosing a Christian identity, she felt she eliminated the uncertain path of karma and found a clear path to heaven by being forgiven for all her sins and dedicating her life to a Christian God.

By providing a set of explanation for all aspects of life, a religious framework can be especially useful for an individual to shape his/her life story, create coherence and communicate the meaning of their life. It allows some to express the mystery of the unexplained events and others to link together stories of tragedy, salvation, and doubt. As such, it contributes to defining one's identity. More than being a label people assign to themselves – "Buddhist" or "Christian" – religious identity consists of an individual

[114] Mrs. Runnath, interviewed by author, August 6, 2010.
[115] Ibid., emphasis added.

approach to religious traditions and values. Never purely individual concepts, however, religious identities and life stories are always in close relation to the social, cultural and historical context in which events are lived and stories recounted. Even the tools found in religious concepts, although deeply personal, are provided by the culture and transformed by individuals.

Coherence and Identity in the Face of Genocide

A great number of tools are therefore available to interviewees to create a coherent life story and acceptable identity. By repeating stories, repeating themes, creating story types or framing their story by using religion as a coherence system, for example, individuals create links between events of their lives and turn them into a cohesive whole. Despite the desirability of a coherent life story—psychologically and socially—such coherence cannot always be achieved. As Greenspan found in his study of Holocaust survivors: "the stories survivors tell are made, in large part out of meanings and memories that persist *in spite of* the destruction. Other pains, other tales, and other graves give form to *those* pains and to that absence of stories and graves."[116] Although the life stories of the Holocaust survivors he interviewed included stories about what happened during the Holocaust, Greenspan found that his interviewees could never fully convey their experience and what was communicated were only "tellable beginnings."[117] The process of creating a coherent life story in that context was therefore especially difficult:

> narrative unfolding stops, and instead of a plot's trajectory through foreground and background, we hear a staccato of snapshot

[116] Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors,* 165-166.
[117] Ibid., 14,

> images... it is as though these memories each make their own claim and, together, start to *re*claim the recounter... The dissolution of narrative in survivors' recounting, then, tends to signal the rekindling of the recounter's personal dissolution, of a slide back toward the "deepness." But even narrative and personal dissolution taken together only point to a wider circle of remembered destruction.[118]

Similarly, Becker argued that "Following a disruption, people experience a period of limbo before they can begin to restore a sense of order to their lives."[119] The act of storytelling is important to the recovery from this disruption, including in the case of Cambodian refugees: "The narrative process enables the narrator to develop creative ways of interpreting disruption and to draw together disparate aspects of the disruption into a cohesive whole."[120] Difficult events of the Khmer Rouge era may have created for some individuals a disruption in their life story and affected their belief that life makes sense. As Carol Mortland found in her study of Khmer refugees in the United States, Buddhism did not always provide answers to the questions people had regarding the Khmer Rouge era: "while Khmer have for centuries utilized karmic theory to explain unusual or threatening events, the Democratic Kampuchea years were of such extraordinary horror that usual explanations for the extraordinary did not always suffice."[121]

In some of the interviews collected by the Cambodian Working Group of the CURA Life Stories project, some events recounted could not be properly explained by one's values or belief system. For instance, in regards to Muy Len Pong's story of betrayal

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[118] Henry Greenspan, "Lives as Texts: Symptoms as Modes of Recounting in the Life Histories of Holocaust Survivors" in *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding),* 149.
[119] Becker, *Disrupted Lives,* 119.
[120] Gay Becker, Yewoubdar Beyene and Pauline Ken, "Memory, Trauma and Embodied Distress: The Management of Disruption in the Stories of Cambodians in Exile," *Ethos* 28:3 (September 2000): 323.
[121] Mortland, "Khmer Buddhism in the United States," 72.

by local officials (as discussed in Chapter 2), Mr. Pong's difficulty in reaching a satisfying conclusion from this episode seems to be due to the inconsistency of these events with his value system. Throughout his interviews, Muy Len Pong gave the impression of being a man with a lot of empathy who could generally understand people's motivations. Even when talking about the Khmer Rouge, while he was horrified by their later actions, he explained that he understood why people were attracted to this communist group:

> Je commence à lire aussi des livres des Khmer Rouge… on voit que oui, leur doctrine est bien, les gens veulent partager la richesse, veulent avoir le droit, égalité, toute des bonnes valeurs en principe. Pour moi je vois ces gens-là comme des victimes… c'est une question de survie… souvent ils sont des victimes indirectes ou directes… ils rentrent dans le Khmer Rouge pour soit venger ou soit vraiment reconstruire le pays, ou vraiment changer le régime… Pour moi, je n'ai pas de rancune en vers eux autres, c'est même la pitié, parce qu'ils n'ont pas la chance de vivre une belle vie... Si j'étais à leur place, peut-être je serais comme eux autres aussi… parfois avec la rancune… on devient bien méchant… ces gens-là se battent avec la rage… pour moi, je les vois comme des victimes de guerre.[122]

In another instance, he explains how he viewed early executions by the Khmer Rouge: "dès le premier jour... on sait déjà qu'il y a quelque chose qui ne va pas bien. Oui on voit que... à cause des militaires y'a une rencune. A cause de la guerre, peut-être ils veulent éliminer tout les forces... capable de se battre comme eux autres. On comprend un peu ça..."[123] Without supporting the Khmer Rouge in either situation, Mr. Pong was able to understand the motivation for their actions. However, as he was not able to understand the government officials' motivations in taking his fish, this situation was difficult for him to accept. As a result, while the value of empathy is a constant throughout his life story

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[122] Muy Len Pong
[123] Muy Len Pong

and gives some coherence to his view of events, this story stands out as an inconsistency. Mr. Pong seemed to expect that even in difficult circumstances, people acted with good intentions and the cause of their actions could be understood. As Geertz explained, religion shows people "how to suffer" not necessarily how to avoid suffering. In the example of the story of his encounter with these corrupt government officials, religion did provide a way to cope with the suffering—through meditation and lying under the Buddha—but not a way to explain the reasons for these difficulties—at least none that he found yet.. This would also explain why Mr. Pong felt the need to explain this event, and his reaction to it, at length. His retelling of the story is part of ongoing his effort to integrate this story into his view of the world. Even in cases when coherence is not yet achieved, the efforts put into the search for a coherent life story speak to the desirability of presenting a life story that stands as a whole, coherent unit. This desire for coherence may be partly psychological and partly social, but it is always connected with a desire for a stable, consistent identity.

Chapter 4

Storytelling in a Cultural and Historical Context

Although the process of life story interviewing is always geared towards the individual subjective experience, the social aspect of the life story interview is ever-present. It may be downplayed (for example in biographical interview research) or exaggerated (by treating individual interviewees as examples of a larger historical or social phenomenon) but it may never be completely ignored. As Maynes, Pierce and Laslett argued, in their work about the role of life stories in social sciences and history:

> These stories... are individual creations but never simply individual creations; they are told in historically specific times and place and draw on the rules and models and other narratives in circulation that govern how story elements link together in a temporal logic.[124]

This is precisely why oral history interviews are uniquely useful: they allow us to glance at the link between the individual and the social. While oral history brings the dangerous temptation to draw conclusions about a large population from an analysis of a small number of interviews, the remedy to this is not necessarily to study a greater number of individuals. Doing so would risk reducing interviewees to mere examples of a larger social group. Rather, we should use oral history to look at how the subjective experience of an individual can be put in relation with the social, historical and cultural realities that surround that individual.

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[124] Maynes,, *Telling Stories,* 4.

> *analyzing personal narrative evidence demands attention to historical contextualization.* Conversely, personal narrative analysis *can illuminate the operation of historical forces and of public and historical narratives as they influence people's motivations and their self-understanding as historical agents.* We argue that personal narrative analyses that attend to historical context and problematize intersections between individual life stories and larger historical dynamics offer the most significant contributions to the reconceptualization of structure and agency, and their relationship.[125]

This may not lead us to definitive conclusions about a large group of individuals, but it allows us to see how individuals relate to these large groups and how human experience is related to history.

Thus, when looking at interviews from Cambodian refugees living in Montreal, we need to keep in mind the complex cultural forces that are at play in their lives in order to understand the life stories not only as individual tales but as narratives that are created both by their author and by the social and historical context in which these stories are experienced, remembered, and recounted. The religious beliefs and values of these refugees—and therefore the way in which they retell and understand their stories – are deeply influenced by the cultural history of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge genocide, the refugee experience and the culture of the country of adoption. This cultural context should not be oversimplified:

> One needs to abandon a view of Khmer refugees are biculturals, people who come from one culture and now live in a second, and exchange it for a perspective that sees war, flight, camp life, and resettlement as a series of distinctive cultural experiences that have far-reaching impact on refugees.[126]

Given the complexity of the life stories studied and the multi-dimensional cultural

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[125] Maynes, *Telling Stories,* 44-45.

[126] Ledgerwood, Ebihara and Mortland, "Introduction," in Ebihara et al. *Cambodian Culture since 1975,* 18-19.

context, the interaction between the individual and the social narratives will necessarily be a rich field. In order to begin to decipher this intricate relationship, I will look at how individuals relate, through storytelling to their community. Furthermore, I will observe how these interviewees situate their life stories in relation to time and history.

Situating Life Stories in Communities

When considering life stories of individuals, one must remember that lives are not lived, and life stories not told, in a vacuum. Individuals are, in all aspects of their lives, part of a community and their lives are shaped by forces larger than themselves. The life story is not a story about the individual life, but a story about the community and often addressed to the community. The definition of the community is however always fluid and dependent on the context, the individual and the desired effect of the story.[127]

Although I have rejected the definition of religion as merely a set of beliefs or scriptures imposed by a particular religion, in favour of a view of religion that gives individuals a more active role in shaping their religious world view, this does not mean that religion is a purely individual creation. As Orsi argues, "[r]eligious cultures function as one of the primary mediators between historical circumstances and individual experience and response"[128] and "religion arises at the intersection of inner experience and the outer world."[129] Just like life stories, therefore, religious outlooks can also be described as "individual creations but never simply individual creations." In determining

[127] The goal of this research is not to define the concept of community nor to delineate the boundaries of the Cambodian community. The focus lies instead on the individuals and the subjective relation to the community.
[128] Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth,* 169.
[129] Orsi, *The Madonna on 115th street,* xxii.

the meaning of their lives and the values that define their life stories, individuals draw from their cultural context to construct their personal point of view.

In the context of Cambodia, the official religion is Theravada Buddhism, with over 95% of the population of Cambodia identifying as Theravada Buddhist. However, traditional Cambodian religious practice is in actuality a complex mixture of Theravada Buddhism, ancestor worship and Brahmanism.[130] Many of the practices that are not strictly Buddhist, such as belief in spirits, ancestor worship, have however been integrated into the practices and beliefs of Theravada Buddhism. For instance, in his study of *neak ta,* or ancestor spirits associated with specific places, Alain Forest stated: "le bouddhisme theravada, loin d'être une religion molle ou invertébrée, imprégnée de tolérance ou de détachement au point de coexister dans l'indifférence avec les autres expressions religieuses a su au moins produire un discours de réorientation et de normalisation du culte des *neak ta*."[131] According to him, Buddhism has integrated, and in the process, also redefined, other beliefs so at to make them indistinguishable to most Cambodians. As a result, most Cambodians perceive all these practices as part of a singular Cambodian Religion.[132]

In recent anthropological studies of Cambodia, researchers have found religion to be deeply ingrained in most aspects of life.[133] Notably, it plays an important role in Cambodian concepts of social standing and class. The notions of karma, the idea that good deeds will lead to good consequences and bad deeds to suffering, is used to explain

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[130] John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, "Introduction" in John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, eds, *History, Buddhism and New Religious Movements in Cambodia,* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004, 4-5.

[131] Alain Forest, *Le Culte des Génies Protecteurs au Cambodge*, 77.

[132] Marston and Guthrie, "Intro," 5.

[133] See for instance Alexandre Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*; and Marston, "Cambodian Religion and the Historical Construction of Nation." in *History, Buddhism and New Religious Movements in Cambodia.*

one's standing. This concept is therefore widely used to normalize hierarchy and power relationships: those of a higher social standing are assumed to have reached this standing through good, moral actions in this life or in previous lives.[134] Therefore, religion is usually viewed by Cambodians not as a separate aspect of their lives but as the explanation and the framework for all facets of life.

When the Khmer Rouge took over the country in 1975, the radical communist regime took apart much of the social, cultural and economic institutions of Cambodia. The religious institutions and practices were no exception

> When the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975 they were confronted everywhere by the physical presence of the past in the *wats* and shrines found in every village as well as in Phnom Penh and others towns. They did not ignore these icons of a Buddhist world, but set out literally to remove them from the Cambodian landscape or to convert them to non-religious purposes. But in the very act of doing so, they made the world they pointed to more significant for many people. In becoming self-conscious about the rupture with the old *wat*-centered world they had known, they found the vision of the Khmer Rouge one not of order but of chaos.[135]

Everyday practice of Buddhism was also forbidden: "Former Buddhist monks were forbidden to chant, light incense sticks, shave their heads, or meditate. They, as well as laypeople, had "no right to practice Buddhism." They would be reprimanded or taken away if they were doing anything resembling Buddhist practice."[136]

In the years following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, the majority of Cambodians moved, either within the country or to refugee camps in surrounding countries. Families

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[134] Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?,* 186.

[135] Charles F. Keyes, "Communist Revolution and the Buddhist Past in Cambodia, " in *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia,* Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall and Helen Hardacre, eds. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 66.

[136] Chanthou Boua, "Genocide of a Religious Group: Pol Pot and Cambodia's Buddhist Monks," in *State Organized Terror: The Case of Violent Internal Repression,* eds. P. Timothy Bushness, Vladimir Shapentokh, Christopher K. Vanderpool and Jeyeratnam Sundram (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 235.

often spent years in refugee camps before returning to Cambodia or migrating to a third country, including Canada, the United States, Australia and some European countries. These refugees and their families account for most of the Cambodian community in Montreal, and the great majority of interviewees for the CURA project. Most Canadians of Cambodian origin identify themselves as Buddhist[137] and in Montreal alone, there are two Cambodian Buddhist pagodas, which are only some of the ways in which Cambodian Buddhists "re-establish a culture, religion and tradition that were almost completely destroyed through the social and political events that have devastated the Cambodian landscape over the past 30 years."[138]

In establishing their religious practice in Canada, Cambodian refugees found themselves in a cultural environment where Buddhism is not the only, or predominant, religious framework. When recounting their life story, interviewees thus not only try to reflect their cultural experience but also try to explain Cambodian culture to outsiders. Their narrative was not only about themselves but also about the community. For example, although Mrs. X portrayed her religious life mostly in regards to her own personal view and experience, she also felt the need to explain to me the religious practices of her country: "Par example, pour la fête des morts... on amène le plat, on offre au bonze [moine], le bonze recite des prières, pour envoyer tout ce qu'il mange, cette nourriture la a nos ancètres."[139] By describing the specific practices surrounding religious festivals, she was going beyond the purely personal experience to explain the cultural

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[137] "Plus des deux tiers des Cambodgiens [au Canada] se sont déclaré bouddhistes en 2001." (Manuel Litalien et Francois Thibeault, "Grimer: Les bouddhistes cambodgiens de Montreal en contexte," 6.)

[138] Wayne A. Kennedy, "Religious Imagery at the Khmer Pagoda of Canada: The Significance of Images for Education" (M.A. Diss., Concordia University, 2000), 107.

[139] Mrs. X

context of her life.

This type of explanation can also be found outside of the interview space. As one of the few non-Cambodian in the Cambodian working group, Khmer individuals within our group often took the time to explain to me the cultural context of Cambodia to insure that I understood the importance of a certain concept or their interest in a specific topic or project. Although they knew that I had done research on Cambodia, they felt that as members of the Cambodian community, they could communicate a different kind of knowledge. This was another example of individuals speaking about the community, a process often very important for members of minority groups when speaking to outsiders.

In the face of a Canadian cultural environment which is often ignorant of Cambodian customs and beliefs, individual Khmer see themselves as ambassadors to their country and the community, as examples of a culture that needs to be known and preserved. While Mrs. X's description of a religious festival may have been left untold if she had been addressing herself to a fellow Cambodian, the fact that she was speaking to an outsider to her community put her in a different role. In the process of talking about a community, individuals often shift from a personal to a communal narrative – from an "I" to a "we." Similarly, when Mrs. Runnath explained the rituals she should have done for her father, who died shortly before the fall of Phnom Penh, she stated: "Et en realité en Cambodgien, le cinquième jour nous faisons encore une célébration et chaque année pour l'anniversaire de sa mort."[140] The was here describing not only her experience of the death of her father, but also the cultural rules that surrounded death in Cambodia.

While narratives of representation are not defining features of life stories and quite

[140] Mrs. Runnath, interviewed by author, August 6, 2010.

dependent on the context of the interview, the CURA Life Stories project lended itself very well to these narratives. In explaining their interest in participating in the project, some interviewees talked about a need for such collective stories. As Mr. Pong recognized, his story of survival and loss during the Khmer Rouge era was not unique:

> on est tous des survivants... chacun a son histoire à raconter, y'a toujours des parentés qui sont morts, soit par maladie, ou exécutés ou, tout le monde, chaque familles on a tous des histoires à raconter... on raconte un peu de nos histoires et ça se ressemble pas mal... À ce moment-là on a... un sentiment commun entre nous autres, on survit maintenant... on essaie de s'entraider et on essaie de trouver un avenir meilleur.[141]

Shortly after the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, already, Muy Len Pong felt a sense of common history and shared experience with other survivors. The narrative told was not simply an individual story, but was part of a communal narrative—beyond telling the story of the genocide as "what happened to me," interviewees wanted to do their part in telling what happened to Cambodians.

Presenting themselves as examplars of a culture that needs to be taught and transmitted, individuals within the Khmer refugee community also address themselves to their own community and their own culture by speaking to the cultural tradition they inherited either by advocating its continuation, criticizing some practices or justifying their own difference. As is common amongst Cambodian refugees, both Mrs. X and Muy Len Pong advocate for a continuation of Cambodian values through their transmission to younger generations. When asked if it was important to transmit her Cambodian religion to younger generations, Mrs. X explained "Je pense que c'est utile... pour nous qui sont

[141] Muy Len Pong

des... rapatriés, des refugiés... c'est encore plus important de transmettre."[142]

In their country of adoption, Cambodian-born immigrants often attempt to reproduce the cultural and religious practices of their home country and by holding rituals, prayers and festivals in the same way they were done in Cambodia.[143] The push towards authenticity in cultural and religious practice stems from a desire to return to an idealized past:

> In their dreams, many refugees return to Cambodia, to a time before the Khmer Rouge. While many are plagued with nightmares of death, destruction and flight, they also dream of home villages, orchards full of fruit-bearing trees, flourishing rice paddies, and large families. To their way of thinking, this was a time when they were real Cambodians.[144]

However, because of changes in the physical and social environment – and because the idea of "authenticity" is often contested within Cambodian refugee communities – refugees need to adjust some of their religious practices. For instance, the rules of behaviour for monks have been changed in some cases to make it possible for them to live in a North American context.[145] Likewise, many rituals involving spirits have become less popular – partly due to the belief that such spirits are attached to a particular geographical area and therefore not present in the country of adoption.[146] In both Mrs. X and Mr. Pong's interviews, the need for the preservation of Cambodian culture is

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[142] Mrs. X

[143] Milada Kalab, "Cambodian Buddhist Monasteries in Paris: Continuing Tradition and Changing Patterns" in *Cambodian Culture since 1975,* 57; Mortland, "Khmer Buddhists in the United States," in *Cambodian Culture since 1975,* 77; Catrina Alissa McKinlay, "Of laughter and Remembering: Violence, displacement and teh trials of 'moving on' for Vancouver's Cambodians" (M.A. diss., Concordia University, 2006), 101-103.

[144] Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America (*Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 29.

[145] Chan, *Not Just Victims*, 218-219.

[146] Chean Rithy Men, "Changing Religious Beliefs and Ritual Practices among Cambodians in Diaspora" *Journal of Refugee Studies,* 15:2 (2002), 229.

contrasted with the need for cultural adaptation:

> C'est très difficile, vous savez? Les enfants, ils font toujours comme leurs copains font... Au Cambodge, les copains font pareils, y'a pas de difficulté. Mais ici non.... Oui vous amenez à la Pagode, mais non, aujourd'hui les copains ils font ci, ils font ça. Non... mais il faut être vigilant, et assez... un peu rigide. Oui. Pour les enfants. Petit à petit laisser libre choix... on peut pas... forcer. Il faut laisser libre choix personnellement, adapter, il le faut, mais pas forcer.[147]

This discussion of the obstacles to the continuation of Cambodian culture only reinforces the importance of preserving these beliefs and tradition. The life story interview is thus used as a tool to advocate to the community in favour of continued efforts to preserve tradition.

In other cases, individuals feel the need to justify their difference towards the traditions they inherited from the community, be it a different interpretation of those traditions or a rejection of them. In the context of Canadian culture, individuals can find themselves with a greater array of choice of religious beliefs. Whereas Cambodia is predominantly Buddhist, the multicultural context of Canada can introduce more hybridity and more varieties of interpretations for Cambodian refugees. For example, while she continues to practice Cambodian rituals, Mrs. X has an interpretation that is different from the one she was taught:

> Moi j'ai continué à les pratiquer parce que certains cultes. Mais, la façon que je crois, ca diffère... je suis le culte, je suis l'acte, mais la façon dont je crois c'est deux choses différentes. Je veux pas dire que... j'accepte tout ce qu'on croit, a ce qui est associe aux cultes, y'a certaines choses que je refuse... Par exemple, la phrase “je prie le Bouddha pour qu'il me donne du bien.” Je ne crois pas ça.[148]

Her religious view combines a continuity of practice and a new understanding of religious

[147] Mrs. X
[148] Mrs. X

beliefs. Since her beliefs are somewhat different from those she was taught as a child – based more on Buddhist scriptures and less on tradition – she felt the need to explain her views.

In her life story, on the contrary, Mrs. Runnath does not attempt to show a continuity in beliefs but defines her religious evolution as a break away from the traditions of the Cambodian community. This sort of conversion, though rare, is not unheard of in the Cambodian community after the Khmer Rouge. It is especially frequent in second generation Cambodian refugees – who often lack the cultural context to see their parents' religion as relevant to their lives – but conversion is not unheard of in the first generation as well. Although many researchers explained these conversions by the practical benefits – in terms of access to resources and integration to a new country, [149] on a spiritual level, Christianity also offers different answers to the difficult situations lived by the refugees. For instance, one refugee interviewed by Sucheng Chan:

> found comfort in Christianity because Christians believe that their sins can be forgiven. The notion of finding salvation or being forgiven is quite different from the Theravada Buddhist tenet that says individuals bear full responsibility for all their actions... Buddhism does not offer its believers the possibility of instantaneous redemption.[150]

Similarly, Aihwa Ong found that many Cambodian refugees found comfort in the Mormon teachings because it put forward the idea that families would be reunited in heaven and thus it "resonated with the traditional Buddhist need to worship ancestors, but also created new desires for an afterlife that one can control... and for making permanent

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[149] Ong, *Buddha is Hiding,* 62; Chan, *Not Just Victims*, 216; Men, "The Changing Religious Beliefs and Ritual Practices among Cambodians in Diaspora," 228.
[150] Chan, *Survivors*, 172.

the family relations that are so easily threatened in this uncertain world."[151]

In both her oral and written testimonies, Mrs. Runnath explained her conversion to Christianity by what she perceived to be the strength of this religion: "Jesus could help us to save our sins and we could go to heaven."[152] She was not openly critical of Buddhism, except to the extent that she felt unable to continue down the uncertain path that Buddhism had laid out for her.

Nevertheless, she saw herself as part of the Cambodian *Christian* community. When I asked her about her relation with the Cambodian community in Montreal, she answered in terms of the Cambodian Christian group. Her conversion to Christianity was therefore shown as a personal choice, one that influences the community with which she associated. Nevertheless, she did not wish to present a criticism of the wider Cambodian community and she continued to proudly identify as a Cambodian herself.

Whatever the stance interviewees decide to take, whether it is advocating a continuation of tradition, criticizing the community or rejecting Cambodian religion through conversion, their cultural roles are not simply a result of the interviewee's personality, but are made towards a community and towards the social context of their lives. In telling their life stories, individuals may hardly avoid placing themselves in relation to the community by telling a story that parallels or runs counter to a community narrative.

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[151] Ong, *Buddha is Hiding,* 209.
[152] Mrs. Runnath, interviewed by author, August 6, 2010.

Situating Life Stories in Historical Time

As Ricoeur argued, the process of narrating is a process of placing oneself in time. According to him, "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; a narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience."[153] More than creating a personal timeline, the narratives of oral history interviewees deal with public time:

> the time of narrative is public time, but not in the sense of ordinary time, indifferent to human beings, to their acting and their suffering. Narrative time is public time in the same sense that within-time-ness is, before it is levelled by ordinary time. Moreover, the art of storytelling retains this public character of time while keeping it from falling into anonymity. It does so, first, as time common to the actors, as time is woven in common by their interaction.[154]

When telling their life stories, individuals therefore place themselves and the events of their lives on a timeline other than a purely personal one. When we look at how individuals locate themselves in time through narrative, we should not consider time only in its abstract form where, as Chakrabarty said of historical time: "events happen in time but time is not affected by them."[155] What a personal narrative does is locate the individual in his or her own experience of time, what Ricoeur refers to as within-time-ness. This experience of time is especially visible in narrative as it intersects sometimes simultaneously with a historical timeline, cultural time markers and defining events in the life story. For instance, when she was asked about the evacuation of Phnom Penh in 1975, Mrs. Runnath situated the event in time in more than one way:

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[153] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3.
[154] Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 171.
[155] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton Universtiy Press, 2000), 73.

> En 1975, le 17 avril, c'est encore un congé du nouvel an Cambodgien. Donc à partir du 13 avril nous étions tous dans la maison.
> après la sortie de la maison, des foules.... pour une heure nous ne pouvons marcher que quelques mètres parce que tous les habitants doivent sortir ensemble... mais nous ne pouvons pas retourner[156]

After a few minutes of explaining the evacuation, she changed the subject:

> I forgot to tell you... my dad passed away 3 weeks before the fall of Phnom Penh... it's a miracle... my dad helped many people... [one week] before passed away... he told me that in a week, he will die. I... cry, because he loved me the best. He told only me, and he said that... 'I pray I don't want to see hard situation. To live in a hard situation.' And really, the seven days, he pass away. And, so we, for the funeral ceremony [for one week]... and after two week, the fall of Phnom Penh.[157]

The events of the fall of Phnom Penh – a defining moment in Cambodian history – are located through this narrative in a personal timeline (three weeks after the death of her father), in relation to cultural events (during the New Year festival) in addition to the historical timeline. It is the intersection of the personal experience with the historical or cultural events experienced by the whole country that create the public time in the personal narrative. As Maynes et al. argued, "Historical time contextualizes a life course, even while the narrator's moment in the life course affects how he or she experiences, remembers, and interprets historical events."[158]

A common question in oral history research, "where were you when X happened?" can lead not only to locating the individual in a larger historical event, but also locating this event in an experience of time and events that is deeply personal. As Jackson argued, storytelling gives the narrator some agency: "storytelling gives us a sense

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[156] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, October 27, 2010.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Maynes et al., *Telling Stories,* 3.

that though we do not exactly determine the course of our lives we at least have a hand in defining their meaning."[159] This agency does not come only from retrospectively redefining the events of one's life, but also locating historical events – those often perceived as beyond personal influence – in a narrative based on one's subjective experience of time.

The time of life story narrative is typically linear time. While in Cambodian Buddhist thought time may be considered as cyclical as well, based on the concept of reincarnation, the life story narrative seemed to lend itself to a linear trajectory, telling the story of one's life as a trajectory from its beginning to its end, leaving aside, for the most part, the possibility of previous or future lives. By converting to Christianity, however, Mrs. Runnath explicitly rejected her position in the cycle of reincarnation. In this sense, she made her life even more linear by defining its finality with the end of this current life and her arrival in a Christian heaven.

Most of the interviewees studied here were middle aged adults or a little older at the time of the interview, and were therefore either teenagers or young adults during the years of the Khmer Rouge. Mrs. Runnath, the eldest, remembers the last few years of the French protectorate and the independence of Cambodia, in 1953. She also clearly remembers World War II, which greatly affected her as a child. Others, such as Muy Len Pong are younger and were only aware of the civil war of 1970-1975. At the time of the civil war, Mr. Pong was still a child and his role was mostly to observe and try to understand. Mrs. Runnath, already an adult, was able to take a more active role by providing help to people displaced by the war. After explaining that the civil war affected

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[159] Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling,* 16.

other regions first, and moved to Phnom Penh only at the very end, she told about how she helped those who came to Phnom Penh for refuge:

> Et moi j'avais beaucoup de terrains…et les gens de la campagne, quand ils… [arrivent à] Phnom Penh… et j'avais bâti beaucoup de petites maisons, et les nourrir aussi. Parce que, they fled from the war and they had nothing. So I went to help them...[160]

Although historical time is usually seen as linear, universal and independent of our subjective experience of it, through storytelling, individuals may modify their timeline—by compressing it or stretching it, for example, to better reflect their own experience. In their study of narratives by Cambodians in exile, Gay Becker, Yewoubdar Beyene and Pauline Ken found that "Narratives of the present have the past woven through them. Even a simple question about how many children someone has brings up the past."[161] The continued presence of the past was also evident in the life stories studied here. In Mrs. Runnath's life story, she showed that her past experience still affect her to this day. When speaking of the difficulties she faced on her way to the refugee camp, in the midst of much bombing, she stated: "C'est pour cela, je hais les fireworks. Parce que j'aime bien voir, mais j'aime pas le bruit parce que... ca me rappelle pendant les obuts, les bombes."[162] The continued impact of her past is also felt in her justification for her current religious beliefs. Her unwillingness to continue on the path of Buddhism, which could have led to more lifetimes of hardship, shows a continued impact of her suffering.

Similarly, stories of premonitions may create a situation where the future (in relation to the events told) is present in the events. For instance, as Mrs. Runnath was talking about her early encounter with the Khmer Rouge regime, at a time when she was

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[160] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, October 27, 2009.
[161] Becker et al., "Memory, Trauma, and Embodied Distress," 332.
[162] Mrs. Runnath, interviewed by author, Augsut 6, 2010.

being evacuated from Phnom Penh and was unaware of the difficulties ahead, she told a story about being escorted, along with her family, by Khmer Rouge soldiers.

> [Khmer Rouge soldiers] let us go to live in a Pagoda... during then... we were Buddhist... it's a chance to live in a Pagoda... but really that Pagoda was a prison. We didn't know that it's a prison... they order us to go to work. But once, I was in the other room I saw like blood at the door... I saw blood, so tried to go to see near and there was a writing in Cambodian with blood [tries to find the translation]... suffering... the worst... and then I wonder why this is blood... and "the most suffering, Oh God" it's "hell on earth"... At night, the relation of my husband brought something to let us eat. I remember... they said that you have to do what they order. Don't go away even one step more than they order. And they say that, don't talk.[163]

These events illustrate not only her experience at the pagoda but also the first signs she encountered of the difficulties to come. The full significance of the writing on the door – here translated as "hell on earth" – and the seriousness of the warning she received was only known to her later. This story was made significant by future events and therefore shows Mrs. Runnath manipulating the historical timeline to reflect her experience of these events: her ignorance of the seriousness of the situation and the difficulties she later faced. Similarly, in the story of her encounter with Jesus, after her failed attempt at suicide, Mrs. Runnath's story compressed time by making her future return to Phnom Penh present in the premonition.

Mortland explained that survivors of the Cambodian genocide often found their religious explanation for the genocide in premonitions.[164] Although these do not necessarily provide a satisfying justification for the suffering endured during those years,

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[163] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, October 27, 2010.

[164] Mortland found that refugees referred to a number of prophecies in regards to the Khmer Rouge era: "In addition to describing the end as an era characterized by the suppression of Buddhism and much killing, other predictions are commonly cited by Khmer: the uneducated will rise to power, houses and streets will be emptied after a social and ecological catastrophe, and Buddhists will be persecuted by atheistic "enemies of religion"" (Mortland, "Khmer Buddhists in the United States," 82.

a prophecy creates a sense of community, a smoother timeline where the years of the Khmer Rouge are not completely incongruent with previous events. Contrary to the perception of historical time as "unenchanted" where "Gods, spirits, and other 'supernatural' forces can claim no agency in our narratives."[165] The realm of religious figures in such compressing of time have an agency in determining events and creating a timeline where the future is known, or at least would be knowable to one who understood the premonition.

The historical timeline is therefore not simply an empty vessel in which interviewees will insert the story of their lives. Instead, the events of history and individuals' role in them will have an influence on the stories told. As Greenspan found, the historical events of the Holocaust had an impact on the narrative of survivors. Likewise, the quest for coherence and identity in a life story is deeply affected by the nature of the events lived.

Similarly, in the literature on trauma narratives, the concept of trauma is defined as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive, appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."[166] Although I do not wish to assume that the interviewees I am studying are traumatized, nor to explore the possible symptoms of psychological distress,[167] these theories can help us understand how violence may affect

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[165] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 73.

[166] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (London The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

[167] There is no doubt that a genocide can easily be defined as a traumatic event at least based on the social definition of the term as something that "takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community in which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger. " (Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

one's experience of time and the stories one may tell of these events. Of particular interest, in Caruth's definition, is the idea of delayed experience: "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is fully experienced at all."[168] After learning that her husband and father-in-law had both been executed, Mrs. Runnath suffered a breakdown:

> So it's very clear that they all were killed. And I [shake]… and my tears, like a waterfall. And I [drop] Ravann on the floor. I could not hold anything… I couldn't say anything…
> Some people… hold me to the cart and brought me and Ravann to the hospital. I could not sleep. … And after I could be okay, but I could not remember very well. So now I have experience in getting crazy. It's like a dream… when it come up, we could sing, we could dance, we could laugh… when we come back, we wake up, we didn't know what we did. And, my mom tried to find the best time to talk with me. 'Be strong.' Your husband passed away. So only you to take care all the children…
> So then I try… for a few months, I try to keep my mind not to go in dream again… [169]

She also explained that during her breakdown, she would return, in her mind, to Phnom Penh. The breakdown deeply affected her awareness of where she was and what was happening around her. The effects of this breakdown were present even two years later, in 1979, when she really returned to Phnom Penh:

> While I'm in the new market at Phnom Penh... I cry and I ask God

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2003), 4.) However, I hesitate to look at the life narratives of Cambodian refugees as "trauma narratives" for many reasons. First, I am not qualified to diagnose individuals with such a psychological problem. Second, I do not wish to reduce their life experience to a trauma or to their status as survivors of genocide. Jackson warned us, in his analysis on the importance of refugee stories "against our impulse to exoticise trauma, making it the latest object of the ethnographic gaze, and by extension, our habit of constructing the refugee as victim and seeing oneself as rescuer or saviour. In both cases, an unequal power relation is implied and perpetuated between 'them' – the objects of our concern – and 'us' – the source of their salvation. At the same time, the refugee is likened to a martyr, someone whose suffering and pain have moral value, whose survival is providential and even implies some saving grace." (Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling,* 82.)

[168] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 17.

[169] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, October 27, 2009

> 'why let me dream about Phnom Penh again. Because when I was crazy, I used to have a dream to live in Phnom Penh just like before. And then I woke up, I cry. I don't want to remember because during then I was in a hard situation, I had to try and forget the things before. And when I saw the real new market, I cry and say again 'why let me dream again' and... the mother and the father... shake me. 'no, you have no more... trial. You are free now. Now it's the truth that we arrive in Phnom Penh.'[170]

This event seemed to mark for Mrs. Runnath a sort of finality to her breakdown: she finally returned home, as she had been dreaming about all these years. Nevertheless, the time of the breakdown has not yet been clearly defined in the story. This is quite similar to Roger and Leydersdorff's definition of trauma stories:

> Stories and life histories of traumatized individuals rarely reflect continuity: typically they are structured in terms of a 'before' and an 'after', hinging on one or several ruptures that have permanently affected these lives. In this respect trauma is not an isolated event in a life story but may in itself often play a decisive role in a person's perception of life afterwards, interpretation of subsequent events, and consequently, memories of preceding experiences.[171]

Likewise, as shown previously, Mrs. Runnath initially presented the story of her family's experience under the Khmer Rouge in a "before and after" fashion, defining it by the contrast between the number of people who left Phnom Penh in 1975 and the number of those who returned in 1979. The time between, although generally well defined in terms of her personal narrative, makes only passing mention of the fate of her family, reflecting the limited knowledge she had of their fate.

If trauma narrative is defined by the disruption of narrative, some have also suggested that recovery from trauma implies the reintegration of the traumatic event into a coherent life narrative. As Antze theorized, "survivors are condemned to reenact their

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[170] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, November 3, 2009.
[171] Kim Lacy Rogers and Selma Leydesdorff, eds. *Trauma: Life Stories of Survivors* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 15.

stories until they begin the work of interpretation…"[172] It is therefore only by finding closure and coherence to their story that victims of trauma can, according to this theory, recover. However, if trauma cannot be diagnosed through oral history interviews, neither should it be assumed that the interviewing process possesses therapeutic properties. Nevertheless, looking at the narrative disruption in difficult narratives and the efforts to redefine them can help us see the impact of historical events on the individual and the manner in which interviewees attempt to successfully or not – integrate those events in a narrative of their personal timeline. The story of Mrs. Runnath's survival, for example, shows us her efforts at reintegrating difficult events into more easily acceptable narrative. Although we do not have access to her initial survival story, the one she would have told in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, her integration of these events into a Christian miracle story would arguably have come later, as a way of explaining events in terms that were now more acceptable to her.

Another way in which violent events such as the Khmer Rouge regime can influence a personal narrative is by turning a life story into a story of disruption. What characterizes disruption is the break it creates in one's projected life: "When expectations about the course of life are not met, people experience inner chaos and disruption. Such disruptions represent loss of the future. Restoring order to life necessitates reworking understandings of the self and the world, redefining the disruption and life itself."[173] More than simply recounting where they were and what they did during these difficult years, interviewees also frequently spoke of the impact these events had on their lives, how it disrupted the flow of events that *should* have happened. In her story of her difficult life

[172] Antze, *Tense Past,* xix.

[173] Becker, *Disrupted Lives,* 4.

under the Khmer Rouge, for example, Mrs. Runnath explained how this situation pre-empted the projects she had for her family from unfolding.

> I tried to save money to build villa, big big villa so that my children I planned to have each one one villa. All my children. And I have enough money to let them go to learn abroad, to France to USA. I have enough money… so I hope that my children will have good knowledge, will be in high rank in the government… but now, we were in the field and not as good as them… not enough to eat.[174]

This, again, illustrates the distinction that needs to be made between the "objective" historical timeline and the manner in which individuals experience time and convey it through their life stories. Although survivors may tell their stories in a mostly chronological order, their experience of the Khmer Rouge era as a disruption illustrates that they had an idea, before these events, of how their lives should unfold. The future, although it may not have been clearly defined, was supposed to follow a certain path or fall within certain parameters: "People expect stories to have a beginning, a middle and an end; and, in their telling, stories, even when in completely anticipate subsequent phases. People expect the event that precipitated a sense of chaos to be followed by a gradual resumption of normalcy."[175]

These parameters of what ought to happen are often what religions provide for people. For instance, when Mrs. Runnath showed dismay at the failure of karma to reward her for her past generosity, it was the promise of a predictable future that was betrayed for her. Likewise, in regards to the difficulty of explaining the Holocaust through religion, Ricoeur explained

> should we go so far as to say that unjust suffering is a scandal only

[174] Mrs. Ven Runnath, interviewed by author and Paul Tom, October 27, 2009.
[175] Ibid, 38.

> for those who expect from God that God be only the source of all good? In this sense, it is the very faith in God that generates indignation. Consequently, it is in spite of evil that we believe in God, rather than we believe in God in order to explain evil. Evil – and by evil I mean exactly unjust, undeserved suffering – remains what is and ought not to be. And what says that it ought not to be, if not the Torah?[176]

Just like the Holocaust, the Cambodian genocide has been defined by many of its survivors as "unjust, undeserved suffering" which they struggle to explain in the face of a religion that defines suffering as being deserved, according to the laws of karma. This is one of the main difficulties for survivors trying to explain the genocide: "Why did the communists kill people? Most of the people were obedient of the *dharma*. Especially babies who were just born; why did the communists throw them against the rock to shatter their skull? Most Cambodians say 'because we had bad karma.' But we have to ask questions about this understanding. How could three million people have bad karma at the same time?"[177] In terms of personal experience, it was also difficult for people to believe they had accumulated so much bad karma, even if the personal timelines allowed for karmic cause to extend to previous lifetimes. The narratives of genocide survivors thus retell not only the timeline of events that happened, but also the projected future that was betrayed by those circumstances and the gap between what happened and what ought to have happened.

If religion could define what ought (or ought not) happen as a consequence of one's actions, it also provides rituals that mark life's important events and which through their regular repetition create a sense of continuation in individual and communal

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[176] Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 292.

[177] Hansen and Path, unpublished paper, quoted in Mortland, "Khmer Buddhists in the United States," 85-86.

timelines. By forcibly eliminating religious practices, the Khmer Rouge imposed another disruption of how things ought to have happened during those years. It eliminated the public rituals – and to a large extent, the private ones – which marked the continuation of normal life in the Cambodian community. When she returned to her house in Phnom Penh in 1979 and found a picture of her father, for instance, Mrs. Runnath was reminded of the rituals that were abandoned during the years of the Democratic Kampuchea:

> La photo de mon père... je me rappelle de mon père... passed away en 1975, seulement 3 semaines avant la chute de mon pays…. So I see... la photo de mon père. J'étais à genou, et je pleure. Papa, nous n'avons rien fait pour toi. Mais si vous savez... je pleure toute la journée. J'ai manqué la fête pour mon père... chaque anniversaire, je pleure. Non seulement une nuit, mais beaucoup de nuits... j'ai dit ça à mon père.[178]

Although she had not forgotten the anniversary of her father's death, the fact of not being able to mark it in the proper fashion caused her great distress and rendered her mourning all the more difficult. The Khmer Rouge had caused a disruption of normal life and prevented the practice of tradition.

The subjective experience of time portrayed in the life story narratives of these individuals is therefore not limited to placing the events of one's life on a timeline. Consideration for what happened, alongside what could or should have happened and what will happen in the future are often present in these narratives. Asking people to tell their story from beginning to end may create an expectation of linearity for the speaker and the listener, but deviations from this chronological linearity are nevertheless frequent and often telling. When people tell the stories of their lives, they do not retell events in a manner that will fit them in objective time. What they retell instead are their subjective

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[178] Mrs. Runnath, interviewed by author, August 6, 2010.

experience of time and events and the way in which their lives intersect with historical circumstances.

Though focused on the subjective experience, the personal life story speaks to more than the individual. The subjective is constantly put into relation with their cultural and historical context. By examining the intersection of the individual and the social, analysis of oral history interviews can show how, for instance, an individual may situate his or her life in relation to the Cambodian genocide, how these events have affected their lives and continue to be present in their outlook on life. Rather than seeing individuals as examples of a cultural group, this analysis encourages oral historians to look at the interview as an intersection between the subjective experience of the individuals and the cultural context in which they live.

Conclusion

When defining the relation between oral history sources and historical knowledge, Daniel James rejected the idea of treating his interviewee, Doña María, only as a source of historical information: "One reason for the problems, the limit confronted in using this narrative primarily as a source of empirical knowledge, is that it involves a largely passive role for Doña María, as simply a repository of more or less coherent, more or less available, historical data."[179] To mine oral history interviews for historical information is to ignore the agency of interviewees in reflecting their own subjective experience in their retelling of events. Similarly, Portelli had argued that "Oral sources… become unique and necessary because of their *plot* – the way in which the story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell the story. The organization of the narrative reveals a great deal of the speaker's relationship to their history"[180] These statements are characteristic of a recent trend in oral history towards a subjective, narrative based approach. Although this view of oral history has become the defining theory of the field since the last few decades, its application to the study of oral history interviews has been slow to take hold.

As this thesis has shown, the act of recounting their lives is one in which interviewees shape the events of their lives by assigning meaning through storytelling. The role of oral historians is not to extract verifiable information from these stories, but to

[179] James, *Doña María's Story*, 123.
[180] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli,* 50.

observe the narrative form for what it tells us about the interviewee and his or her place in history. In order to put this theory into practice the fields of narrative analysis and linguistics provide many useful tools to aid in our understanding of the meaning conveyed through storytelling.

If storytelling equips interviewees with the means with which they shape and convey the significance of the events of their lives, religion can often provide the ideas through which they understand their world. Like storytelling, religion offers a framework of meaning which encompasses events into a more easily assimilated whole. When looking at oral history as an act of storytelling and meaning-making, an observation of the narrator's religious outlook may yield a greater understanding of the meaning of the life story. Both the religious framework and the structure of storytelling show the interviewees' efforts in recounting their lives in a manner that is meaningful to them and comprehensible to the listener. Whether events are explained by the agency of a higher power, by the laws of karma or by a prophecy is highly significant to our understanding of people's subjective experience of these events.

In their life story interviews, Mrs. Runnath, Mrs. X and Mr. Pong conveyed not only the events of their lives or the historical circumstances they witnessed, but the stories they have formed based on these. By inserting events into the shape of plots, they were able to convey the moral meaning they assigned to what had happened. At this level of analysis, already, the narrative of isolated stories went beyond a simple recounting of facts and allowed for interviewees to convey their subjective experience of events. For the oral historian, observation of the choices made by the interviewees – for instance the selection of a specific plot type – conveys valuable information about how the storyteller

relates to the events in question.

As telling as the study of single stories might be, oral historians can draw a better understanding of the meaning of an interview by looking at the context of the whole life story. By creating a relation between the various stories of their lives, interviewees go beyond giving meaning to events and work towards giving meaning to their lives as a whole. Here again, observing narrative tools used proves useful to the oral historian in deciphering meaning: repetition, link between stories and the overall narrative of one's life show how an interviewee creates a coherent and meaningful whole out of the disparate events of his or her life. In this task, religion was particularly useful by providing the interviewee with ideas and vocabulary to make sense of all aspects of life. As Geertz's definition had posited, religion can be considered as a framework standing above otherwise disparate ideas and eases the task of creating a coherent whole. This search for coherence, through narrative tools or through a religious framework is also closely linked, according to Linde, to the desire for a coherent identity. In the telling of their life stories, interviewees were trying to show the constancy and/or the logical evolution of their own identity.

By widening the lens of oral history once more, analysis of narrative form and of religious outlooks allow us to observe how interviewees portrayed their relation to the community and their subjective experience of time. Interviewees defined the relation to the community by addressing themselves *to* their community – through praise, advocacy or criticism – and by talking *about* the community in a narrative aimed at outsiders. Without treating these narratives as sources of objective information about the Cambodian community – nor rejecting the truth value of this information – narrative

analysis situates the subjective experience of the individual in regards to the community.

Placing themselves in historical time meant that the interviewees rejected, in their narrative, the concept of a purely objective, independent time. Their narrative instead reflected a subjective experience of time and history, what Ricoeur called 'within-time-ness.' Interviewees showed their relation to time by slowing down or speeding up narrative time, placing themselves in relation to historical events and cultural time markers, and by blurring the distinction between present, future and past in the narrative. Although the context of a life story interview encouraged a chronological approach, what interviewees conveyed was not a straightforward account of historical events. Their manipulation of historical time showed their agency in shaping their place in time and in history. By doing so, they went beyond the simple eyewitness testimony to give a deeply personal account of the historical circumstances in which they lived.

If interviewees have agency over the events of their lives through storytelling, the events through which they lived also have an effect on their storytelling. In interviews with Cambodian refugees, the Khmer Rouge genocide loomed large in the life stories recounted. More than being the content of the narratives, the events of the genocide had an effect on the manner in which lives are recounted and meaning is shaped. As Greenspan found of survivors of the Holocaust, extreme violence can resist integration into a narrative form and this failure of narrative may itself reflect the manner in which survivors relate to their experience. Although the oral histories studied here did not show the same difficulty in creating coherent narratives, some events proved challenging to integration into a meaningful narrative. This challenge was, in itself, meaningful to our understanding of interviewee's lives.

Similarly, the violence of the genocide had a profound impact on the religious framework people used to understand and explain their lives. These extremely difficult circumstances challenged their understanding of what ought to happen, and why. Specifically, the idea of karma was confronted by the perceived unfairness of the suffering endured during the genocide. This challenge to one's world view was visible in the stories told by these survivors. Going beyond the question of whether individuals changed religion or not, a narrative approach to oral history shows an individual's effort at reintegrating events into a coherent whole through the adoption of a new religious framework or a reinterpretation of one's religion. It also allows us to see the difficulty involved in integrating events into a religion's teachings.

As some oral historians would fear, looking at interviews through a theoretical lens has the danger of taking us away from what the individual recounted. However, it is through this analysis that I was able to explore the subjective experience of individuals and their agency in choosing the story that best reflects their point of view. It is through this narrative form that we can see the agency of individuals in assigning meaning to what happened. Without delving deeply into the fields of narrative analysis or linguistics, this thesis aimed at exploring how these intellectual tools could assist in deciphering the meaning of oral history narratives. The goal of this approach is therefore not to take us away from the individual but on the contrary, to allow us to arrive at a deeper understanding of the interviewee's role in shaping their place in history and the meaning of their lives. By shifting the analysis from facts to meaning, oral history becomes uniquely useful in allowing us to see beyond what happened and explore the meaning of historical and personal events.

Without rejecting oral history as accounts of empirical data – for example, as testimonies to the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge – this approach to oral history underlines the fact that this field can give us more than historical facts. This thesis does not give an exhaustive report of the potential for cross-disciplinary collaboration between oral history and narrative analysis or linguistics but instead points to the potential benefits of such an approach. Further enquiry should be made into the relationship between the narrative form, events and individuals. For instance, theories of agency and subjectivity would be needed to further our understanding of the place of the individual in relation to the narrative and the events.

Additionally, an interdisciplinary approach to oral history and theory should explore the ways in which oral history can further our understanding of other fields of study, including narrative analysis, linguistics and religion. While my own research into these fields is not thorough enough to allow me to comment on the potential theoretical advances, the manner in which interviewees communicate their story has implications for our understanding of how narratives relate to events and how religious frameworks are made significant by individuals as they use them to relate to the world around them and the events of their lives.

In my research leading to this thesis, I have had the chance to listen to many life stories from Cambodian refugees and hear many touching and meaningful stories. I make no pretence to have, in this thesis, represented all – or even nearly all – the complexity of the tales told in these interviews. My goal here was to show how being more than victims of the Cambodian genocide or refugees, Mrs. Runnath, Mrs. X and Mr. Pong presented stories of suffering, survival and strong religious beliefs.

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