

**Cambodia, from then to now:  
memory and plural identities in the aftermath of genocide  
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**Sereikhourch ENG**

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Telling the Cambodian Story:

The Role of Possessions in Identity Construction of the 1970s-1980s Cambodian Generation

Sereikhuoch Eng

Doctoral Program, College of Business Administration, University of Rhode Island

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*"If I am what I have and what I have is lost, who then am I?"*

*Fromm (1976, p.76)*

An individual's identity comprises the "personal and social characteristics of people as understood by themselves and others" (Dittmar 1992, p. 73). These personal and social characteristics are often expressed, to oneself and others, through material possessions (Gentry et al 1995). Recent research on the self and self-conception suggests that a sense of past is essential to a sense of self, and possessions play a crucial role in creating and maintaining a sense of past. The self extends not only into the present material environment, but also extends forward and backward in time (Belk 1990). Possessions remain after one dies, and may be used to filter out the negative experiences of the past and stimulate only positive memories. For instance, Belk (1991, p. 30) discusses the manner in which family photos are constructed, reconstructed, and edited out of any unappealing results. "In doing so, we fashion our pasts as we would like to remember them without sickness, anger, pain, or death." Like Proust (1981) realizes that it is himself and not the magic potion of the tea that contains his memories, we must realize that our things are the incarnation of our pasts only to the extent that we can illuminate them through the reflections and interpretations that they stimulate.

In response to the discursive progression and development of the Cambodian society and people aftermath the Khmer Rouge regime, the current research proposes to study individual (and to a lesser extent family) identity of the 1970s-1980s birth-year generational cohort through their possessions and their narratives of those possessions. Possessions may be any combinations of family photos, heirlooms, collections, and any other significant possessions.

In the current work, identity is represented not as a construct that resides in the minds of individuals, but as co-constructed in action through such mediums as narratives, possessions, rituals, and intergenerational transfers (Ebb and Price 2008, p. 52). Linde (1993) suggests that narratives/stories help organize our experiences into coherent packages that, when socially enacted, serve to negotiate and stabilize both our individual and relational identities. While stories may be retold numerous times, they function to inform/remind members, especially children, of a common past and shared values, hence enhancing feelings of identity as a group (Norrick 1997).

The present research seeks to identify emerging themes in the construction of identities of the 1970s-1980s Cambodian generation. Fieldwork is expected to take place in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and Rhode Island, USA during the months of December 2010 and January-February 2011.

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