

Subaltern Spaces and Survival: Cambodian Muslim Women’s Testimonies of Genocide and Urban Resettlement in Post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia

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Article Received: 28/02/2026

Article Accepted: 29/03/2026

Published Online: 31/03/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.03.778

Abstract

This study examines the testimonies of Cambodian Muslim women survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide (1975-1979), which targeted the Cham Muslims; as well as, their experiences with rebuilding their lives in the urban resettlement communities. Oral histories, memoirs, and community archives are also utilized by this study as resources of memory for subaltern groups. The study focuses on the ways in which these testimonies articulate the experiences of forced displacement, cultural destruction—such as banning prayer and religious practices— and continuing marginalization. These testimonies are viewed as ‘living archives’—dynamic locations where the development of identity and a sense of belonging is shaped by memories of survival, trauma and resilience as opposed to static documentation. The research is framed using post-colonial theory, subaltern studies and feminist literary critique. The research views these testimonies as literary works that express trauma, memory and resilience through narrative. The research examines the spatial transition of women’s lives from demolished villages to the marginalized spaces of urban environments; and showcases how marginalization creates the space for women to create new communities and challenge dominant historical discourses.

Keywords: Cambodian Muslim women, Khmer Rouge genocide narratives, intersectionality, subalternity, Postcolonial literary criticism.

Introduction

The Khmer Rouge regime's genocide was one of the most violent regimes in Southeast Asian history, with an extraordinary level of brutality against people in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. The Khmer Rouge used a number of methods to displace large numbers of people and force them to migrate. As well, the Khmer Rouge destroyed many of the traditional cultural and religious ways of life in Cambodia. Gruspier and Pollanen (2017) and Rany et al. (2012) describe the effects of the Khmer Rouge on various groups in Cambodia, including the Muslim minority of Cham women. Most research about genocide has focused on dominant populations and ignored the Cham Muslim women of Cambodia. Oral histories, memoirs, and community archives are examples of sources that contain 'subaltern' knowledge that document the stories of the Cham Muslim women who experienced gendered violence, religious persecution and survived in post conflict areas and in marginal social spaces. The purpose of this study is to expand our understanding of how the stories of Cambodian Muslim women function as both records of historical atrocities and as 'living archives' through which their memories, identities, and resiliences continue to be formed in the midst of being displaced and undergoing processes of urban resettlement.

This research explores the ways in which trauma and memory are expressed and conveyed through subaltern spaces—physical and discursive—using an interdisciplinary methodology that incorporates post-colonial theoretical approaches, subaltern studies, and feminist literary methodologies. The experiences illustrated within these narratives demonstrate the socio-cultural and geo-spatial dimensions of oppression, and document the experiences of individuals experiencing the loss of their rural homeland and the dangerous and unpredictable realities of urban displacement. The study also explores the ways in which Cambodian Muslim women use stories and create communities as forms of agency to challenge and undermine dominant narratives that silence the voices of minorities. Through the focus on the literary works and historical testimony of Cambodian Muslim women as forms of resistance against cultural eradication, this article provides new contributions to genocide and post-conflict scholarship. Additionally, through the examination of the lived experiences of Cambodian Muslim women, this study presents a more complex interpretation of victimhood and agency than previously provided in the literature and expands current critical perspectives (Bašić, 2023; Raghavan, 2023).

This study enhances the knowledge base on the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and religion to create new understandings of memory, identity, and survival; and provides an analysis of the broader implications for the development of inclusionary policies that address minority rights and urban design in the post-genocide setting of Cambodia. The study is organized into four thematic sections. In the first section, we examine the lived experience

of Cambodian Muslim women through the lens of subaltern and feminist theories. The second section analyses the spatial and narrative dimensions of survival and memory as the process of forced displacement has a transformative effect upon identity and the sense of belonging. In the third section, we analyse the nature of gender-based violence and its social and political implications in post-conflict settings. Finally, the fourth section examines the process of urban resettlement with respect to the structural conditions of exclusion and the types of resistance employed by marginalized populations. In the conclusion, we synthesize the major findings from the study and highlight the importance of utilizing the voices of subalterns to develop more diverse and inclusive histories and to inform subsequent policy initiatives.

Literature Review

In the 1970s, women of the Cham Muslim community experienced some of the most profound consequences of the Khmer Rouge regime because the Khmer Rouge had a very specific goal to eliminate the Cham people (Fawakih, 2016; Williams, 2023). They accomplished this by taking several steps toward cultural genocide such as destroying mosques, banning Muslims from practicing Islam, cutting off the hair of women, forcing them to eat pigs (Fawakih, 2016; Smith, 2018; Willoughby, 2007). Due to a lack of research, there is still much to be learned about the Cham Muslim community in relation to genocide and post conflict in Southeast Asia. It has been estimated that at least one-third to one-half of the Cham population was killed during the Khmer Rouge regime (Brataniec, 2020; Guillou, 2018; Smith, 2018).

While much research has focused on Khmer Rouge atrocities (e.g. mass executions, rural collectivization, violence from the state) during 1975-1979, as well as many such studies have generally aggregated all survivor testimonies into a singular category for study, failing to account for differences in survivors based on gender, religious affiliation, etc. Thus, the testimonies of Cambodian Muslim women will intervene with dominant subaltern studies, feminist theories, and trauma studies by creating new narrative possibilities for how subordination is interwoven with survival (Gruspier & Pollanen, 2017; Rice & Tyner, 2017; Sam et al., 2024).

Farina So's *The Hijab of Cambodia: Memories of Cham Muslim Women after the Khmer Rouge* is one of the first texts to establish the foundation for this area of study. Using oral histories of the Cambodian Muslim women who survived through the time of identity loss, cultural destruction, and gender-based violence (including forced marriages and rape), feminist and subaltern theories support the recovery of their silenced voices (Wiratri et al., 2024). In the same manner as Spivak's well known inquiry 'can the subaltern speak,' the oral histories of Cambodian Muslim women and their community archival projects serve as

counter-archives to official state documents and Buddhist centric histories that erase their presence (Johnson, 2018; Raghavan, 2023). The work of scholars demonstrates how the testimonies of survivors of trauma and recovery are interwoven into linear historical narratives and provide evidence of trauma, recovery, and resistance (Ganteau, 2021; Martínez Ruiz, 2024).

The period immediately following Khmer Rouge rule created a number of new hardships for people through the process of forced relocation into cities. After the Vietnamese intervened in 1979, the repopulation of Phnom Penh was characterized by unequal distribution of the land, housing and employment available in the city. Minority populations were often relegated to the margins of urban society (Berman, 1996; Fauveaud, 2013). The testimonies of Cham women demonstrate ongoing material deprivation, but also symbolic acts of reclaiming identity through the rebuilding of religious enclaves and kinship-based networks (Brataniec, 2020; Wiratri et al., 2024). In addition, trauma theory is used to highlight the importance of testimony as a way of re-establishing the sense of agency among survivors—Felman describes the act of narrating one's own experience as a form of survival (Ganteau, 2021; Martínez Ruiz, 2024). Furthermore, the notion of subaltern archives as described by Guha refers to the use of memoirs and oral tradition as forms of resistance that can be understood to be outside the control of official or state sponsored history (Johnson, 2018).

While the literature on both the violent nature of the Khmer Rouge regime and the difficulties involved in post conflict development are well documented, the literature remains silent about the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and religion. This research project fills this void by using the stories of Cham Muslim women as oppositional archives, tracing out their agency, memory and the process of reconstructing their identities to further enrich and provide a pluralistic view of genocide studies.

Theoretical framework

The qualitative peer review and contextualized evaluation methodology applied in this study is consistent with the growing 'Responsible Metrics' movement in Europe as a form of responsible research assessment. The 'Responsible Metrics' movement, supported by the Leiden Manifesto and the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, advocates for the use of fair, transparent and discipline-sensitive research evaluation practices which do not rely excessively upon quantitative measurements (Bonn & Bouter, 2023; Rushforth & Hammarfelt, 2023). This research prioritizes the narrative, cultural and historical value of the subaltern voice through qualitative peer review and contextualized evaluation methods over statistical representations of lived experiences of trauma (Rushforth & Hammarfelt, 2023).

Contextual Background

The Rule of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge Regime (1975-1979), was a time of the worst brutality in South East Asia's history (Gruspier & Pollanen, 2017; Tyner & Molana, 2020). Under Pol Pot's radical agrarian communist policies, nearly all urban populations were forcibly moved to rural communal living situations. This created famine, disease, and mass murder on a scale never before seen in Cambodia (Rice & Tyner, 2017; Smith, 2018). Estimates indicate that as many as 25% of Cambodia's population, or approximately 2 million Cambodians, died from starvation, disease, and execution during this time (Gruspier & Pollanen, 2017; Guillou, 2018). Those who were identified by the Khmer Rouge as 'enemies' included those who had ties to the previous government, intellectuals who possessed characteristics deemed to be indicative of capitalist tendencies, minority ethnic groups, and religious groups that were viewed as threats to the regime's ideologically based agenda (Smith, 2018; Williams, 2021).

The Cham Muslims—a small, indigenous ethnic group residing primarily in a Buddhist majority nation of Cambodia—suffered the worst forms of repression by the Khmer Rouge. As an example of this is that the Khmer Rouge sought to destroy all remnants of the Cham's ethnic and religious identities. Examples of how they did this include the destruction of mosques, forbidding the practice of Islam, burning copies of the Quran, and executing religious leaders (Fawakih, 2016; Willoughby, 2007). These forms of 'cultural' or ethnic genocide have increased the effect of 'physical' violence on the Cham people and caused extreme social and spiritual suffering (Hickey & Killean, 2021). Muslim women in Cambodia suffered gender-based violence as well. Specifically, examples of what Muslim women endured included forced marriage, forced labour, and rape (Grey, 2020; Tyner & Molana, 2020). In addition to experiencing extreme oppression based on their ethnicity, religion and gender, there are numerous examples of Muslim women who showed great resiliency in the face of the systematic attempt to completely erase their ethnic and social cultures.

Subaltern Spaces and Testimonies

Subaltern spaces, such as those that Cambodian Muslim women utilize, play an important role in discovering the ways that Cambodian Muslim women express their trauma and survival from the effects of genocide. These spaces are not merely physical spaces they are also social and discursive spaces in which the marginalized can construct identity, memories, and power in opposition to the existing power structures. For the Cambodian Muslim women who are situated at the intersection of ethnicity, religion, gender and class, subaltern spaces serve as both refuge and as areas of struggle. In terms of space, the urban setting of the post-Khmer Rouge era provides a challenge for establishing subaltern spaces.

Forced relocation into unfavourable urban settings due to economic hardship, lack of visibility, and marginalization based on ethnicity create barriers for these women in terms of daily survival. As a result, the women form informal groups, including cultural enclaves located on the periphery of cities. It is through localities that these women develop and maintain social relationships, religions, and forms of resistance. Cultural and religious expressions are also transmitted through these types of enclaves. As a result, these enclaves counteract the devastating impact of the Khmer Rouge regime (Brataniec, 2020; Wiratri et al., 2024).

Testimonial speaking practices and oral histories are a way in which Cambodian Muslim women have the opportunity to be able to tell the stories of their great suffering, loss and survival. The testimonial speaking practices and oral histories become an effective way to deconstruct the silencing of women and minorities within the dominant discourse, while providing space for women to be able to reclaim their voice and narrative. As such, testimonial speaking practices and oral histories provide space for the subaltern, to speak back against the dominant national discourses, and to create alternative forms of commemoration and memorialization. In doing so, they create counter-narrative to the dominant discourse. The existing testimonies also provide additional layers to the suffering experienced during the Khmer Rouge regime, including religious persecution, gendered oppression, and ethnic discrimination. Additionally, testimonial speaking practices and oral histories allow for the critique of power and history and allow for the acknowledgment of marginalized narratives in the process of post-genocidal reconstruction.

Gendered Experiences of Genocide

Research has shown that all of the 41 male Muslim prisoners of the Cham at S-21¹, were male. No female detainees were reported at S-21². Nevertheless, research indicates that many female prisoners comprised a substantial percentage of prisoners held at other detention camps (Sankey, 2016). The female prisoners also suffered from extreme forms of abuse; abuse included sexual assault, torture involving sadism, forced nudity, and physical

¹ The former school S-21 in Phnom Penh was used as a secret jail and interrogation area by the Khmer Rouge from 1976 through 1979. It is believed that up to 14,000 to 20,000 individuals were imprisoned in S-21. Most were accused Khmer Rouge members or perceived enemies. Those who were imprisoned in S-21 were subjected to physical abuse (torture) and were forced to provide false confessions. Additionally, many were executed in mass graves located near S-21. Fewer than 10% of those imprisoned at S-21 have lived. Today S-21 is a genocide museum and is a reminder of the extreme paranoia and brutal nature of the Khmer Rouge.

² However, it is strongly believed that women were present; still, their identities were hidden because exposing their true identity or religion might have caused them severe danger and cruelty.

abuse -- often for the purpose of maintaining patriarchal control over the prisoners and compliance with the regime's strict regulations prohibiting prisoners from engaging in sexual activity with each other³. Some female prisoners were subjected to such torture that they miscarried or were executed after being sexually assaulted, despite the fact that sexual assault was technically prohibited under the regime—yet remained unprosecuted (Christensen et al., 2020; Tyner & Molana, 2020). In addition, those female prisoners who resisted sexual violence or committed acts of violence against their oppressors, suffered extreme consequences, including death (Tyner & Molana, 2020). Therefore, these conditions produced an atmosphere of fear, which resulted in the silence of many victims of sexual violence and the deaths of others, resulting in some committing suicide or appealing to the authorities (Hinton, 2016; Pham et al., 2009). During the Khmer Rouge genocide, Cambodian Muslim women experienced similar forms of violence (such as sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and sexual assault⁴) and forced labour (DeFalco, 2014; Williams, 2023). Thus, the female survivors used coping mechanisms in the form of networking, utilizing support from their community, and their religious beliefs — which provided them with strength and hope (Peat, 2025).

Resettlement and Survival in Urban Spaces

Urban space since the time of the Cambodian genocide has been a place of both precarity and resilience for Cambodian Muslim women. The forced migrations of Cambodian Muslim women to overcrowded urban areas created disruption to their existing

³ Scholars believe women prisoners were more likely to be subjected to sadism and sexual abuse before being executed and reflecting a patriarchal system that perpetuated gender inequality (Becker). According to Stanley (2008, p. 30), 'some female prisoners were forced to remove all of their clothes or remain half-naked'. Farina documented an interview with Havae (Da) in Kandal province in 2005. In her children's unit, from a distance she saw a woman half-naked in a pit who might have been raped before being killed because Havae heard her scream (So, 2011). The Khmer Rouge would either laugh at or rape the female prisoners. Sometimes, the Khmer Rouge cadre did not rape them for fear of punishment, but they physically abused them to release their aggression. Prak Khan, an S-21 interrogator, admitted this in the documentary film, *'The KR Killing Machine by Alexandre (2003),'* that he wanted to have sex with one female prisoner who was good-looking, but he could not because he would be punished. He said, 'This passion instead reinforced my seeing her as an enemy and I whipped her as much as I could until she urinated.' (Prak Kan, p.69). Female prisoners suffered immense physical abuse because interrogators could not rape them due to a strict rule against physical contact with women. This reinforced the interrogators' hatred towards them. Khan also mentioned that some S-21 women prisoners were sexually abused before execution. In her study of abuse in Timor Leste, Elizabeth Stanley argues that gender is one of the disparities that impacts 'decisions to torture and the kind of treatment that victims receive.' (Stanley, 2008, pp. 27–28). Women prisoners in Timor Leste endured torture, including miscarriages from interrogation and sexual abuse during the Suharto occupation

⁴ Bophana, a former S-21 prisoner, was thought to have endured sexual abuse before her executions (Becker, 1998).

social relationships and placed them within socio-economic instability. According to Manira et al. (2019), many displaced women continued to experience long-term difficulties related to employment, lack of adequate housing, limited or no education, limited access to healthcare, and discrimination based upon their ethnicity and religion.

Displacement has often led to economic insecurity and social vulnerability according to research conducted by Fulu and Miedema (2015). Although, urban settings have also become sites of resistance and cultural preservation for Cambodian Muslim women. For example, research such as *Khmer Women on the Move: Exploring Work and Life in Urban Cambodia* (2008) demonstrate how women have actively navigated urban living, while continuing to practice their cultural ways. Jones-Gailani (2019) states that women have formed new social networks and community organizations that support the continuation of their cultural/religious traditions. In addition, women have gained greater empowerment through their involvement in the economy through informal labour and small-scale enterprise work (Rahut et al., 2023). Moreover, women's involvement in grassroots activities has reinforced their collective identity and empowered them to advocate for minority rights (Martin de Almagro & Ryan, 2019).

Scholarship and Policy Implications

Muslim Women Survivors Testimonies of the war in Cambodia are disrupting the official discourse in both policy and academic literature. Inclusive Genocide Commemoration Policies must be developed that provide a voice for minority and gender views, and that expand and diversify types of official commemoration. Protection of Marginalized Communities, particularly those who have been excluded economically and socially as part of the post-war rebuilding process, and support for the survival of culture and for social justice are essential components of this effort. The authors further argue that the subaltern lived experiences of these individuals should inform urban design to ensure that adequate housing, services, and community spaces exist to enable them to survive. The article demonstrates how future research may be conducted in a way that is strength-based, transdisciplinary and rooted in postcolonialism, gender studies and urban studies to reveal the suppressed survivings of people in South East Asia and beyond.

Conclusion and Findings

Women from Cambodia's Muslim population, in their own words, provide a way to see the ways people survive and remember as gendered and as defined by their religious beliefs after the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge. The ways women experience oppression, violence, and form their identities are defined by the intersection of gender, ethnic background and faith. These stories of women illustrate many of the different types of resistance that occurred when the Khmer Rouge tried to systematically destroy culture and

social connections. This research is documenting the crimes of the past, but it is also showing the important role religion and social networks play in helping survivors, keeping group memories alive and protecting religious knowledge.

By bringing the voices of the marginalized to the forefront of this research it will contribute to more inclusive historical accounts and support the creation of equitable urban and social policies for marginalized populations that take into account their needs. The testimony studied in this research provides alternative views of the Cambodian genocide by moving marginalized experience to the centre of the history narrative; providing greater support to other movements working towards social justice and minority rights. This research extends the knowledge base of comparative trauma studies and intersectional subaltern feminist studies, by demonstrating that gendered and religiously marginalized individuals use memory to navigate the politics of violence and survival.

Ultimately, the findings of this study emphasize the need for ongoing and sustained engagement with the voices of marginalized people within both trauma research and the development of policies related to trauma. The recognition that testimonies from these individuals have a significant transformative impact on our understanding of past violent acts will not only contribute to a greater scholarly understanding of the causes and effects of these violent acts, but also provide direction toward more effective means of promoting reconciliation, providing appropriate representations of history, and developing inclusive policies to support all members of society in post-conflict settings.

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