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Power and Political Culture in Cambodia

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The Asia Research Institute (ARI) was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

Power and Political Culture in Cambodia

The 2013 Cambodian elections mark two decades since the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) supervised the first democratic election to be held under the country's current constitution. Unlike the first, the results of this fourth parliamentary election were never in doubt. Everyone, from world-weary western political analysts to the *moto-dup* drivers who convey them to their favourite expatriate bars, tipped the incumbent leader, Hun Sen, and his party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), to win by a landslide. What has been remarkable about these 20 years is that, despite the outlay of tens of millions of dollars in educating Cambodians on the benefits of transparency, accountability, and democratic processes, political power is still exercised in 'traditional' ways. As a result, in the words of one commentator, 'Cambodia's contemporary political regime [remains] a hybrid of largely rhetorical and symbolic acquiescence to democratic norms built on the foundation of a patrimonial and highly predatory state structure'.¹

Cambodia is not alone in succumbing to patrimonialism: In Laos, Marxist political institutions have been similarly subverted.² But in Laos the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party has since 1975 enjoyed a complete monopoly of power: no political opposition is tolerated. In Cambodia the CPP was forced to share power, and faced the challenge of regaining the former monopoly it enjoyed as the ruling party during the period of the Peoples' Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) from 1979 to 1993. How the CPP has regained its former political dominance in a political system designed to give citizens the right to vote for the party of their choice is central to an understanding of contemporary Cambodian history.

To explain the CPP's success, many scholars fall back on cultural explanations, referring to 'Khmer political culture' to account for the apparent acquiescence of the Cambodian electorate to the re-emergence of patrimonialism. The danger in such an approach is that the concept of 'political culture' becomes essentialised and treated as an invariable determinant reaching back to the time of Angkor,³ with the implication that Cambodia can never change. But Cambodian culture more broadly has been changing rapidly, under the impact of foreign investment, new technologies and globalisation, to which Cambodian politics have had to adapt. Moreover, as culture is to an extent a product of power, the relationship between the two is more dynamic than reference to an unchanging 'Khmer political culture' would suggest.⁴

In this paper we examine the Cambodian conception of power in order to shed light on the nature and functioning of Khmer political culture. This is not to make the point that the Cambodian language has a number of words for different aspects of power (as does English), but rather to explicate how Cambodians understand the personal basis of social power, how social power obligates individuals, and how this understanding translates into political power through the influence it has on individual (and group) behaviour towards holders of power. We set this

¹ A. R. Cock, 'External actors and the relative autonomy of the ruling elite in post-UNTAC Cambodia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 41 (2010), pp. 241–265, at p. 243.

² M. Stuart-Fox, 'Political culture and power in the Lao People's Democratic Republic', *Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 52 (2009), pp. 222–254.

³ See for example O. Mehmet, 'Development in a war-torn society: What's next for Cambodia?', *Third World Quarterly*, 18 (1997), pp. 673–686.

⁴ C. Hughes and J. Öjendal, 'Reassessing tradition in times of political change: Post-war Cambodia reconsidered', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 37 (2006), pp. 415–420.

understanding of power within the context of an evolutionary account of cultural change, and show how it facilitates the persistence of core elements of the patrimonialism that lies at the heart of Khmer politics. We begin, however, by backgrounding the events to be explained.

MODERN CAMBODIAN POLITICAL HISTORY

Modern Cambodian political history begins with the country's independence from France in 1953. For this the young king Norodom Sihanouk took personal credit. To this day, Cambodians acknowledge Sihanouk as the 'father of independence'. The adulation he received at the time reinforced his conviction that he alone had the foresight and wisdom to assume the political guidance of his country. This belief lay behind his decision to place his father on the throne and to create and lead his own political movement, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Drawing on popular belief in his possession of semi-divine power, Sihanouk and the Sangkum dominated Cambodian politics for the next 15 years. The Sangkum masqueraded as a political party, but in reality it functioned as a royal patronage network whose lofty purpose may have been to unify the nation, but whose modus operandi was to marginalise all political opposition in order to concentrate power in the hands of Sihanouk alone. Its success signalled the demise of multi-party democracy in Cambodia – and made it a model for the consolidation of power for all subsequent regimes.

Sihanouk's demise marked not only the end of the monarchy with the establishment of the Khmer Republic, but also the end of Cambodia's insulation from events in South Vietnam. As the country descended into civil war, democratic processes established under a new constitution were progressively eroded by elite factionalism and infighting, as politicians manoeuvred to build competing support networks.⁵ The end came in April 1975, with the victory of the Khmer Rouge. We know now that due to poor communications and inherent regionalism, the insurgency was not the unified force it appeared to be.⁶ Pol Pot set out to consolidate the ruling Communist Party of Kampuchea as an organisational hierarchy with himself at the apex. When this proved difficult, his response was to treat whole branches, like the Eastern Zone, as networks of loyalty to his opponents, which had to be rooted out and destroyed down to the last member⁷ – a response that seriously weakened the regime and opened the way for the Vietnamese invasion of December 1978.

Both the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and its ruling Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party were modelled on their Vietnamese counterparts as orthodox Marxist-Leninist institutions; but that did not prevent senior figures like Heng Samrin, Hun Sen and Chea Sim building support networks within the party. With the backing of the Vietnamese, Hun Sen was able to consolidate his position through his promotion to prime minister in 1985 – a position he retained even as

⁵ General Lon Nol was never able to build an inclusive patronage network beyond the military, and had to resort to rigging his presidential election. The stroke that left him partly paralysed subsequently prevented him from using his office to consolidate political power. J. Corfield, *Khmers Stand Up! A history of the Cambodian government 1970-1975*, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, 1994.

⁶ M. Vickery, *Cambodia 1975-1982*, George Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, 1984; B. Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, power and genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1996.

⁷ M. Stuart-Fox and B. Ung, *The Murderous Revolution: Life and death in Pol Pot's Kampuchea*, Orchid Press, Bangkok, 1998; D. Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and history in Pol Pot's secret prison*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999.

Vietnamese forces withdrew and the United Nations took charge of negotiations for a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the 'Cambodian problem'.

The Paris Agreements of October 1991 recreated the Kingdom of Cambodia as a constitutional monarchy, with Sihanouk once again king.⁸ The new state was designed to be a liberal, multi-party democracy with free and fair elections and a full set of fundamental rights and freedoms. The initial elections of May 1993, held under the supervision of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), were contested by 19 political parties.⁹ Of these only two – the newly named Cambodian People's Party led by Hun Sen, and the royalist Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique Et Coopérative (FUNCINPEC) led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh – were serious contenders for power. To the consternation of its leaders, the CPP was comprehensively outpolled by FUNCINPEC with 45 per cent to 38 per cent of the vote. But FUNCINPEC fell short of the two-thirds majority of seats it needed under the Constitution to govern alone. Under pressure from King Sihanouk, and the implicit threat of a return to civil war, a compromise coalition was agreed upon, which effectively split power on a 50:50 basis. Ministerial portfolios were divided between the parties, with CPP and FUNCINPEC co-ministers in several cases.

Coalition government sharpened competition between the two parties. After the elections, both resorted to non-institutional means to win new supporters through what Caroline Hughes has called 'the politics of gifts',¹⁰ along with promised benefits. While competition was relatively even in urban areas, particularly Phnom Penh where FUNCINPEC support was concentrated, the CPP enjoyed an advantage in rural areas, where 80 per cent of the electorate lived, through its control over most appointments at the district and village level, and its use of state funds for village development projects to reward its loyal followers.¹¹ As rural FUNCINPEC supporters gained little or nothing in return for their votes, many concluded it was in their interest to switch to the CPP.¹²

⁸ Sihanouk was first crowned King of Cambodia in 1941 under the auspices of the French colonial administration. Building on the success of his 'Royal Crusade for Independence' in 1953, he abdicated two years later in favour of his father, Norodom Suramarit, in order to create and lead his own political movement. He remained prime minister until deposed by the coup of March 1970. Although the Khmer Rouge briefly appointed him Head of State, Sihanouk did not ascend the throne of Cambodia again until 23 September 1993. On 7 October 2004, Sihanouk abdicated a second time, on the grounds of ill health, making way for his son, Norodom Sihamoni. Over the next eight years Sihanouk frequently received medical treatment in Beijing, and it was there he died on 15 October 2012. His body was immediately returned to Phnom Penh where a lavish royal cremation was held on 4 February 2013.

⁹ The Khmer Rouge was one of the original contenders but withdrew from the electoral process in early 1993 claiming that the UN was extending privilege to 'Vietnamese' stakeholders.

¹⁰ C. Hughes, 'The politics of gifts: Tradition and regimentation in contemporary Cambodia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 37 (2006), pp. 469-489.

¹¹ D. Roberts, 'From 'communism' to 'democracy' in Cambodia: A decade of transition and beyond', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 36 (2003), pp. 245-58.

¹² The extent to which both governing parties were buying support was revealed when the FUNCINPEC finance minister, Sam Rainsy was dismissed in October 1994, with the agreement of both Hun Sen and Ranariddh, for attempting to limit the haemorrhage of funds, which he estimated at almost half the budget of US\$410 million. See M. Brown and J. Zasloff, *Cambodia confounds the peacemakers 1979-1998*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1998, p. 241).

FUNCINPEC attempted to counter CPP rural dominance by seeking the support of elements of the disintegrating Khmer Rouge, a move which threatened to tip the balance of power in FUNCINPEC's favour in the lead-up to the 1998 elections. In mid-1997 the CPP, which still had control over its own armed forces and the police, responded by mounting a pre-emptive coup. Some fifty key FUNCINPEC officials were killed, and many others fled the country, including Prince Ranariddh, so disrupting FUNCINPEC's election preparations.¹³ The coup served notice that the CPP was prepared to use any means to win the struggle for power with FUNCINPEC. Following the coup, business figures who had backed FUNCINPEC began to patch up relations with the CPP. The CPP narrowly won the election of 1998 (with 64 of the 122 seats) and again entered into coalition with FUNCINPEC, though this time FUNCINPEC was definitely the junior partner. The CPP then went on decisively to demonstrate its dominance in rural areas by winning control of almost 99 per cent of all commune councils in local elections in 2002. In the National Assembly elections of the following year, the CPP increased its representation to 73 out of 123 seats, a figure that increased to 90 seats in the 2008 election. Since the upper house Senate is elected by commune councillors (apart from two senators appointed by the king and two nominated by the National Assembly), it too is overwhelmingly dominated by the CPP (with 46 out of 57 seats as a result of the 2012 election).¹⁴

The pattern of the last 20 years is clear: despite its initial electoral defeat, the CPP has become overwhelmingly the dominant party in Cambodian politics. Judging by election results, as it points out to its critics, its rise and rise reflects the will of the people. In fact it reflects a dual process that has effectively reduced electoral contests to little more than a convenient veneer: the consolidation of patrimonial networks of power; along with the diversion of a substantial proportion of the resources of the state to support them. The CPP has steadily consolidated its position through drawing the increasingly wealthy business community into its patrimonial networks, while reinforcing relations with powerful provincial families and military commanders – not least by allowing them a free hand in the plunder of Cambodia's forestry resources.¹⁵ In the process it has created a political-economic ruling elite enjoying monopoly control over both political power and economic assets.

The cost to the country has been enormous, as every institution has become corrupted – from education to what passes for the justice system.¹⁶ No Cambodian is able to achieve success in any area of endeavour through initiative and talent alone. Personal advantage depends on the favour of some patron in a superior position of power: the more powerful one's patron, the greater one's opportunities. Patronage may take many forms, but all depend ultimately on possession of both political influence and wealth. Examples of the benefits of patronage range from intervention to

¹³ See C. Hughes, *The political economy of Cambodia's transition, 1999-2001*, Routledge Curzon, London, 2003.

¹⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) at http://www.ipu.org/parline/reports/2365_E.htm [accessed 28 February 2013].

¹⁵ Global Witness, *Cambodia's Family Trees: Illegal logging and the stripping of public assets by Cambodia's elite*, Global Witness, 31 May 2007, http://www.globalwitness.org/media_library_detail.php/546/en/cambodias_family_trees [accessed 28 February 2013].

¹⁶ See for example 'Corruption in Cambodia's education system sparks concern', *Asian Economic News*, 10 May 2004, <http://business.highbeam.com/435556/article-1G1-116414383/feature-corruption-cambodia-education-system-sparks> [accessed 28 February 2013]; Asian Human Rights Commission, 'UN HR Council/Cambodia: Land grabbing, corruption and the absence of rule of law in Cambodia', *AHRC, Human Rights Solidarity*, vol. 16-17, no. 2, March 2006-March 2007, <http://www.hrsolidarity.net/mainfile.php/2006vol16no02/2505> [accessed 28 February 2013].

secure a job or win a court case or get a loan, to the award of government contracts and facilitation of business deals. In return, clients are expected to be loyal and give political support – and, of course, make payment for favours received.

Individuals may consider it to be in their interests to be included in patron-client networks, but the result has been to concentrate wealth in the hands of the powerful at the expense of the vast majority of Cambodians. So why does the CPP continue to enjoy such widespread popular support? It is true that continued participation in patronage networks is not entirely voluntary: the obligations that membership entails carry with them an aura of threat if not complied with.¹⁷ But this patrimonial system has not been forced upon people through naked coercion: it depends for its legitimation on how the nature of individual and social power is understood, an explication of which is essential if reference to Khmer political culture is to have any explanatory content.

METHODOLOGY

Material for this paper was collected through interviews with 87 people conducted by the lead author between September 2005 and March 2006 as part of a larger project on gender and Buddhism at the Buddhist Institute.¹⁸ The survey was necessary as no adequate explanation of ‘power’ existed in any literature on Cambodia. It was impossible, therefore, to explain how gender perceptions, which are grounded in power relations, related to Buddhist practice. Members of the research team at the Buddhist Institute each had different ways of describing power, using a range of different words, but these were insufficient to provide the basis for an understanding of how power functioned in Cambodian society and culture. As a result, a project was devised that the team was able to use as a learning exercise in project management before beginning their fieldwork on gender and Buddhism. Team members designed a sampling and recruitment strategy, wrote an explanatory statement, identified categories for informants, negotiated issues of consent, and then applied the model to their own research.

Four categories of informants were interviewed: those engaged in ‘blue-collar’ work requiring little formal education (*moto-dup* drivers, hospitality workers, vendors), white-collar workers (NGO workers, journalists, civil servants) monks and *daun chi* (Cambodian ‘nuns’) and students enrolled in secondary school or attending university. Ages of respondents varied from 15 to 77 years.¹⁹ Sampling was location-driven. Blue-collar informants were sourced from two locations in Phnom Penh, Psar Chhah (‘Old Market’ in Sangkat Daun Penh) on weekday mornings and along the riverside on Sunday afternoons. Informants self-selected by approaching the researcher and initiating a conversation. When the conversation inevitably turned to why the researcher was in Cambodia, the researcher explained the project and asked if the potential informant would be interested in participating. If they agreed, the informant received a more detailed explanation and information as to how their responses would be used. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were also discussed.²⁰ They were then offered a choice of when and where to conduct an interview. The same

¹⁷ Hughes, ‘Politics of gifts’, pp. 469-489.

¹⁸ The final report of this project is published as *The Situation of Daun Chi in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute/HBF-Asia, 2006).

¹⁹ No institutional review board existed at the Buddhist Institute at the time of the project, so no formal ethics clearance was obtained.

²⁰ The same explanatory statement was read to each informant as there was no guarantee that they would be literate. This avoided any potential embarrassment for the informants.

approach was taken with informants in the student category, recruited at the entrances to schools and universities in Phnom Penh.

White-collar workers also self-selected although the recruitment process used was the snowball technique. Members of the Gender and Buddhism team at the Buddhist Institute sent the explanatory statement to informants they had worked with on previous projects; those who were interested in participating responded to an email address or called a telephone number to indicate their willingness to participate and a time and place were arranged for the interview itself. Monks and *daun chi* present during the researcher's visit to *wats* in Phnom Penh (Wat Phnom, Wat Mohamontrei, Wat Ounalom, Wat Bo) were approached during the afternoon hours when they were congregating outdoors in the shade for social activities and asked if they would be interested in participating. Those who acquiesced had the explanatory statement read to them.

People were interviewed at their place of work, including *wat* precincts, or at popular recreational areas in Phnom Penh. A combination of structured and open-ended questions was used. At the beginning of each interview, the explanatory statement was read again, and informants given the option to continue or decline. A decision to continue was taken as implied consent. Due to the uncertainty surrounding literacy and the mistrust Cambodians have toward signing or "thumbprinting" documents (which might later be used against them), no consent forms were used. Responses were written down by the researcher. No specialist software was used in the processing of the data; the qualitative approach of the project did not require it.

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations and paraphrased opinions are taken from field notes from these interviews. All informants, without exception, found discerning the difference between forms of power extremely problematic; for most it was the first occasion they had thought critically about concepts whose use they took for granted. This paper is not meant to be a snapshot of how Cambodians viewed power at the time of research, but as providing a comprehensive view of the impact that thirty years' of conflict have had upon how power is understood in the context of Buddhist beliefs.

CAMBODIAN CONCEPTIONS OF POWER

In Khmer, 'power' can be translated in different ways. English-speaking informants usually translated 'power' as *omnaich* or *komlang*, the consensus being that *omnaich* refers to influence or authority over others, whereas *komlang* is more coercive, although not necessarily in a purely physical sense. Thus *komlang prajnya* means 'intelligence', and *komlang cett* is 'virtue', both of which can compel people to act. As one informant put it: '*Omnaich* is influence over someone. *Komlang* actually makes them move'. Another expressed the difference in this way: *omnaich* is 'unlimited and incalculable', whereas *komlang* is 'physical and measurable'. The power of the state to force compliance, via the army or police, is *komlang*. *Omnaich*, by contrast, penetrates throughout Cambodian society.

Powerful people are usually described as *neak thom*, literally ‘big person’, corresponding to the ‘person of prowess’ often referred to in discussions of power in Southeast Asian contexts.²¹ Those possessing power may also be referred to as *neak mean omnaich*, ‘person with *omnaich*’. *Neak thom* are politically and socially significant people, whereas *neak mean omnaich* has wider reference and includes those who have power because of their specialized knowledge, such as *kru khmei*, practitioners of traditional healing. *Neak thom* are identifiable through their external attributes. An obvious manifestation of *omnaich* is wealth, as indicated by the conspicuous consumption of luxury items and a lavish lifestyle. Respondents listed the latest mobile phone, current model cars, trendy western clothes, a large villa or apartment plus a ‘country house’ (even if modest), dining at expensive restaurants, wearing lots of jewellery, using an ATM or credit card, owning a passport and travelling abroad, and having retainers and servants, such as bodyguards, maids and drivers, as manifestations of wealth indicating *omnaich*.

Another external characteristic of *omnaich*, apart from wealth, is *bunn sak*, social status or rank, also described as *saktapulheap*, ‘the state of being of high rank’. Status is obtained through the possession of a government position or royal title, the location of one’s principal residence (the closer a house is to the compound of the Prime Minister, Hun Sen, the more important one is considered to be), with whom one associates (notably other *neak thom* and foreigners), how one behaves towards ‘low status’ people, and how subject one is to the law. An extreme example of being above the law, which has happened more than once in Cambodia, is when a *neak thom* deliberately shoots someone in the presence of witnesses, secure in the knowledge that nobody will dare to give evidence to investigating police. In effect, being above the law is to claim state power. The state will not act against the perpetrator because the perpetrator represents the state. Refusal to purchase car license plates is another version of the same syndrome. The parking lots of the more expensive karaoke places, hotels and nightclubs in Phnom Penh are littered with shiny new Lexus, Mercedes and Audi four-wheel drives sporting all manner of decoration – stuffed toys, curtains, undercarriage lights in different colours – but no license plates, because the owner of the car is so important that he or she does not have to conform to laws which apply to others. The space that *neak thom* occupy is also important in defining status. Patrons at some popular Cambodian nightclubs are not permitted to sit in the upper gallery unless they are *neak thom*. Places usually frequented by a foreign clientele reserve space for *neak thom*. Such areas are not roped off as would be common in the West; instead, venue security personnel maintain an invisible barrier excluding other patrons.

A complicated social framework exists in Cambodia within which everyone recognises their place according to certain markers. Cambodians know within a few minutes of meeting each other where they fit, in relation to others present. Alexander Hinton listed ‘age, sex, familial background, birth order, occupation, political position, influence, education, personal character, and financial benevolence’ as the markers by which position in the schema of personal interaction is read.²² For this reason, many first meetings consist of a series of questions that Westerners may consider an affront, as people attempt to determine these markers. Although relative positions may shift in relation to circumstances, refusing to accept one’s ‘proper’ place is almost universally condemned. Cambodian traditional literature is full of references to the need to accept one’s social position. People are advised:

²¹ See for example O.W. Wolters, *History, culture, and region in Southeast Asian perspectives*, rev. ed., Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, Ithaca, New York, 1999.

²² A. L. Hinton, ‘Why did you kill? The Cambodian genocide and the dark side of face and honor’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57 (1998), pp. 93-122, at p. 98.

Do not be haughty or put on airs and puff up, do not be arrogant in your conduct. In walking, copy the snake, keep yourself down low, in prudence, Conform to the *cbpab* [codes of conduct] that are proper to follow without fail.²³

A third component of *omnaich* is possession of charismatic powers of persuasion, known as *baramei*. In Cambodia this is considered to be a key component of power. ‘*Neak kru* [people who are learned] make people believe them through *baramei*’. One has only to look at the key players in Cambodian politics throughout the twentieth century for evidence. Sihanouk was able to whip crowds into a frenzy of adulation at public rallies during the 1950s and 1960s. Pol Pot had enormous charisma and a persuasive manner of speaking.²⁴ Hun Sen is remembered in his home village as a clever, quiet boy, who nonetheless demonstrated an exceptional ability to persuade others.²⁵ Effusive and unnecessary speech is not indicative of *omnaich*, however. Maintaining silence until there is a need for speech is a sign of personal control and appropriate timing. *Neak mean omnaich* are described as being silent in public compared to those of lesser status who talk and laugh ‘about stupid things’. One can observe this at weddings and in nightclubs. The *neak mean omnaich* sits silently, pushing his glass forward to be filled, making a discrete comment in the ear of his wife or nearest crony. If a member of the younger generation, he sits back against the wall while the rest of the group presses forward around the table. Yet when a *neak mean omnaich* does speak, everyone else falls silent: ‘Someone with *omnaich* is someone who people listen to when they speak’.

Those with *baramei* are widely believed to be able to empower speech through a form of *mantakhum*, or magic. This is not achieved simply through speaking persuasively. Words have force and can induce people to act in certain ways through the way they are used: ‘The person with *omnaich* can oppress people with their words’. Some respondents said that those with *omnaich* ‘make people afraid’ through the power they possess to influence people’s minds. This power should not be confused with superior intelligence, however; for as a civil servant explained, ‘even ignorant persons may be in a high position over others’.

There is a definite sense that *neak thom* have a ‘right’ to exert power over others because it is felt they must possess superior qualities: ‘*Omnaich* is given to someone with more capacity than us [the common people]’. That capacity, expressed outwardly in the form of wealth, rank, and a charismatic way with words (*baramei*), depends upon the possession of *bunn*, usually translated as ‘merit’ acquired through performing morally commendable activities (although it may also be obtained by other means, such as ascetic practices and magic). According to prevalent ideas of reincarnation, if someone is born into a wealthy and high-ranking family, it is because they must have accumulated a large amount of *bunn* in their former lives through the working of karma (*kamm*).²⁶

For all Cambodians, karma acts as a universal natural law, by which good deeds cancel out bad ones, and vice versa. The sum of this moral bookkeeping determines the conditions of rebirth. Karma inevitably leads to rebirth, so none can escape its effects: one’s deeds will inevitably be rewarded or

²³ P. N. Jenner and S. Pou, ‘Les cpap ou <<codes de conduite>> khmers II: *cpap prus*’, *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient* 63 (1976), pp. 313–350.

²⁴ See for example P. Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a nightmare*, Henry Holt Books, New York, 2005.

²⁵ T. McCarthy, ‘Survival of the paranoid: Cambodia’s leader talks to TIME about power’, *Time Magazine*, 26 March 1999, pp. 56-57, at p. 57.

²⁶ Religious belief, not only Buddhism but also the all but universal propitiation of spirits (known collectively as *neak ta* in Cambodia), was a target of the Khmer Rouge. Monks were forcibly disrobed or executed, images were smashed and monasteries vandalized. This harsh repression was relaxed under the PRK, and today Buddhism again shapes the worldview of the majority of Cambodians.

punished, if not in this lifetime, then in the next, or the next. No Cambodian doubts that everyone will eventually suffer for their sins) – which is one reason why there is widespread lack of interest in the trial of Khmer Rouge leaders.²⁷ Belief in karma has significant social and political implications. If rebirth is in accordance with karma, then the rich and powerful have a moral right to their wealth and power – even if they are venal and corrupt. Karma also explains why people are evidently not born equal, and why, in accordance with orthodox Buddhist belief, women are not equal to men (though they do have an equal chance of being reborn male!) Karma thus both undermines any principle of social equality, and reinforces acceptance of social hierarchy.²⁸ The perquisites of power are the just deserts of those born to it. Karma thus traditionally reinforced not just monarchy, but also acceptance of the social and political leadership of *neak thom*. And as Penny Edwards has shown, this acceptance also applied to the new category of *neak thom* that emerged during the late colonial period in Cambodia, the *neak che doeung*, ‘people knowing knowledge’, who owed their education and their elevated social status to the colonial administration.²⁹

Almost universally in Cambodia, people believe that those possessing large amounts of *bunn* will live prosperous and untroubled lives, enjoy good fortune, not have to work hard, and even enjoy good looks. In a very real sense, *bunn* determines destiny. A large store of *bunn* is said to shield people against bad luck, and enable them to avoid the dire consequences of adverse events. Prominent politicians are believed to be able to escape multiple assassination attempts (as Sihanouk did in the 1960s and Hun Sen in the 1990s) because of the high levels of *bunn* they possess. If a person is poor, on the other hand, it is widely believed ‘they have little *bunn* – that is why they have problems’. People are born with a certain amount of *bunn*, but this may be augmented during their lives through *twer l’or* (literally ‘doing good’), the performance of acts that accrue *bunn*. Such acts include feeding monks and making donations to religious establishments, building schools, contributing to the community through volunteer work, providing for poor people and parents, being generous, participating in ceremonies, observing the (secular) law, and obeying social rules (one informant specifically mentioned observance of the *Cbpab Srei*, traditional codes of conduct for women, as also necessary).³⁰ Cambodian Buddhists believe that to accept one’s lot and to live in accordance with the moral precepts of Buddhism will increase one’s *bunn* – hence the ‘fatalistic outlook’ that Cambodians are sometimes criticised for having.³¹

Since *bunn* is considered to be “the fruit of any kind of action”, it is not limited just to meritorious acts in a Buddhist sense. Practices such as making offerings to *neak ta*, spirits associated with specific locations, and the performance of certain rituals (such as those carried out at childbirth: burying the placenta, and placing heated stones under the bed of the new mother) are also acts of

²⁷ T. Jacobsen, ‘Paying through the nose: Punishment in the Cambodian past and lessons for the present’, *South East Asia Research*, 13 (2005), pp. 235-256.

²⁸ Social hierarchy has deep historical roots in both Lao and Cambodian cultures. In traditional Tai societies, a large social gap separated the ruling aristocracy from their subjects, with below them non-Tai ethnic minorities and slaves (both known as *kha*). In Cambodia, the social order consisted of king, nobility and peasantry. In both countries this ‘pyramidal’ structure encourages ‘authoritarian and paternalistic’ rule and popular passivity (A. Peang-Meth, ‘Understanding the Khmer: Sociological-Cultural observations’, *Asian Survey* 31 (1991), pp. 442-55).

²⁹ P. Edwards, *Cambodge: The cultivation of a nation*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2007, p. 136.

³⁰ This continues to regulate women’s ability to participate in public life. See for example T. Jacobsen, ‘Riding a buffalo to cross a muddy field’: Heuristic approaches to feminism in Cambodia’, in M. Roces and L. Edwards (eds), *Women’s movements in Asia: Feminism and transnational activism*, Routledge, London, 2010, pp. 207-223.

³¹ See A. Peang-Meth, ‘Understanding the Khmer’.

bunn. Even the most secular and prosaic places, such as the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology or the Extraordinary Chambers of the Court of Cambodia (see Fig. 2), require recognition of their respective supernatural patrons so that the work performed therein is appropriately sanctioned. *Bunn*, then, results from the performance of morally commendable acts. The benefit may not necessarily accrue to the actor, however: *bunn* may be directed to another person. There is no support for transference of *bunn* in Buddhist scripture, but in popular belief *bunn* can be transferred when a person performs an action specifically for the benefit of someone else. Thus people will often pay for ceremonies for family members, living or dead, in the hope that the resulting *bunn* will bring them good luck or a better rebirth.

Some people, Sihanouk and Hun Sen among them, are popularly believed to have such high levels of *omnaich* that the accumulation of *bunn* alone cannot explain it. One explanation is that they are reincarnations of powerful former kings. Thus Sihanouk not only claimed direct descent from Jayavarman VII, but through frequent reference allowed himself to be seen as the great king's incarnation; while Hun Sen has encouraged the belief that he is the reincarnation of a legendary hero of humble origin, Sdech Kan, whose personal prowess and merit allowed him to seize the throne from an unpopular king.³² Popular beliefs about magical powers may also be invoked that have nothing to do with Buddhist moral precepts. One bizarre rumour that has circulated in Phnom Penh for some years is that Hun Sen has a store of *koan kroach*, preserved foetuses removed from their mothers by force between the fifth and ninth month of gestation that if worn around the neck provide protection from harm, because the spirit of the mother will prevent anything from injuring her unborn child.³³

One difficulty in translating *bunn* as 'merit' is the existence of another word, *sel*, which also describes something people 'make' through their actions. In fact, an act of *bunn* may also generate *sel* – though the two are not synonymous. *Bunn* is about action. *Sel* involves the mind and heart. Although *bunn* derives from the performance of actions specifically designed to provide benefits, for oneself or others, a person obtains *sel* by performing actions expressing altruistic intentions, without thought of deliberately increasing their *bunn*: 'A person with *sel* likes to do good deeds', said one informant. Another said that 'a person with *sel* will never try to take advantage of a lower-status person, but someone with *bunn* may'. *Sel* is acquired through meditation, overcoming desire, following the five, eight or ten Buddhist moral precepts, and studying with teachers who can impart secret knowledge. *Sel* is the basis of *selathoa*, morality that is pure and therefore admirable, but it has no direct relationship to or impact upon *omnaich*. Being moral does not equate to being powerful. Similarly, possessing *sel* makes someone a 'good' person, but it does not make him a 'successful' one – for that, *bunn* is required, as success is measured in material wealth and status.³⁴

Sel does, however, contribute to *baramei*, because of the association between *sel* and the mind, and between speech and knowledge. One informant said that if she had more *sel* she would not have to be afraid of ghosts: 'If I have *sel*, ... my mind will be strong and I will not see them'. Like *bunn*, *sel* does not pertain only to Buddhist moral principles and practice. *Kru*, popularly translated as 'teacher' but really implying access to knowledge others do not possess, obtain power through concentrating their minds in ways that augment their *sel*. When asked to name the person with the

³² A. Norén-Nilsson, 'Performance as (re)incarnation: The Sdech Kân narrative' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44 (2013), 4-23.

³³ T. Jacobsen, *Lost goddesses: The denial of female power in Cambodian history*, NIAS Press, Copenhagen, 2008, p. 97.

³⁴ T. Jacobsen, 'Being Broh: Masculinities in 21st century Cambodia', in Michele Ford and Lenore Lyons (eds), *Masculinities in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 86-102.

most *sel* in Cambodia, more than two thirds named Buddhist monks or nuns, or persons revered for observing Buddhist precepts.

Both *sel* and *bunn* emanate from *anupheap*, which encompasses both true belief and complete understanding:

The *kru* and the monk have *anupheap* so they know everything about the things they talk about. So they believe completely. Because they know everything and can teach other people and explain, they have *anupheap*. They know all about it, so they have to believe it.

Consulting a *kru* or a monk can result in the acquisition of *bunn* and *sel*, for such persons can direct their *anupheap* towards others or into specific objects through the power of their minds and the performance of rituals. Thus monks write incantations on pieces of cloth or paper, which can then be worn around the neck for protection (by soldiers, among others). Threads that have been blessed by monks can be bound about the wrists in order to increase the *bunn* of, for example, a student waiting for exam results. A water ritual known as *srauch dteuk* is also beneficial. In this ceremony, people can increase their *bunn* by being ritually bathed in water that has been blessed by a monk. Cham *kru* are believed to be able to create images of people out of clay and bind them together in a love spell that will increase the potential *bunn* of a young woman attempting to attract the attention of a young man. A thief may even seek to acquire *bunn* to increase his chances of being invisible.

The power of *anupheap* is derived from *dhammapul*. Although the presence of the word *dhamm* may make it appear that this power is specifically Buddhist, *dhamm* (from the Sanskrit *dharma*) can mean duty, order, or custom – evident in the etymology of Cambodian words like *dhammada*, meaning ‘that which is usual’. *Dhammapul* was described by one participant as an energy or force related to earthly things: ‘Nature comes from *dhammapul*’. Others said that *komlang* was the expression of *dhammapul* in a physical form. *Dhammapul*, therefore, is a source of power that contributes to both *anupheap* and *komlang*. Yet it is not the ultimate source of power. Behind *dhammapul* is a boundless, limitless, immeasurable power called *adtthepul*. Explanations for the nature of this ultimate, abstract power were very problematic for informants. One said this power was ‘like an invisible cloud that stretches over the world’; another that it was a ‘wild energy’ which cannot be drawn upon directly. *Dhammapul* is perhaps best understood as *adtthepul* that has been ‘channelled’ into obeying certain natural laws, which make it accessible.

The taxonomy of power as understood by Cambodians is depicted in Fig. 1. Power, in the form of a cosmic reservoir, exists as *adtthepul*. When this obeys somewhat predictable ‘rules’ (for example, in the weather) it takes the form of *dhammapul*. Those who possess *anupheap*, the power of belief and understanding, are able to channel *dhammapul* into *bunn* and *sel*. Both of these are necessary in order to have *baramei*, which, in addition to *bunn sak* (social status) and *mean* (wealth), are signs of *omnaich*. The degree of *omnaich* possessed by a *neak thom* is a measure of the *bunn* he has accumulated. *Sel* is also accumulated through good deeds: it comprises the basis of *selathoa*, ‘morality’. *Selathoa* does not, however, bear any direct relationship to *omnaich*. One must have *baramei*, *bunn sak* and *mean* in order to be regarded by others as possessing *omnaich*. Being a person of good morality or *selathoa* has little, if anything, to do with being ‘powerful’ in Cambodian society.

Two political implications should be noted about the Cambodian conception of power. The first is that because power inheres in individuals due to the *bunn* they possess, the positions they hold in government or other institutions provide the means to exercise power that is theirs by right: the institutions are not the source of that power. Elected politicians, for example, believe they owe their

power not to the democratic mandate given them by the people, but to their personal qualities.³⁵ The second point is that power is not something that is negotiable, or that derives from mundane circumstances. Rather power is part of the natural order: it has cosmic significance. To challenge power, therefore, is thus not just risky, even futile, but inherently dangerous. Power may be contested from time to time, but once a dominant hierarchy becomes established, it must be accepted as ordained.

POWER AND GENDER

In Cambodian society men are perceived as having more *omnaich* than women. This is partly due to the patriarchal social mores that have been structurally reinforced since the middle of the nineteenth century.³⁶ Many Cambodians, including women, see women as timid and shy and therefore unfit to compete with men in the political sphere; others see male-female competition as upsetting a 'natural' hierarchy exemplified by relations within the family.³⁷ As Linda Richter has remarked in connection with other Southeast Asian societies, the 'proper' role of women in the private sphere of the family 'formed part of the basis for making them 'ineligible' for political roles' after independence.³⁸ There is, however, another contributing factor that explains why this attitude is so prevalent in Cambodia: the association of men with merit-making activities, and therefore with *bunn*.

Nearly half of all participants believed that levels of *bunn* are not determined by gender (one in four participants surveyed thought that men overall have higher levels, while one in five thought the same of women). As one informant put it:

We can't define or judge by gender, [*bunn*] is difficult to identify. Both men and women have *bunn*, but we can say on average men have more because women are rarely seen in a high position or rank.

When asked to explain why men have higher levels of *bunn*, answers tended to centre on the fact that men are involved in economic activities – 'the man is the earner for the household, looks after his wife during her delivery period by doing housework and takes care of the wife'; they 'have more *bunn* than women because man is the giver of life'.³⁹ Those who believed that women have more *bunn* also cited their involvement in activities beyond the home: 'Women have more time than men for making offerings [to *neak ta*]'. Moreover, the male-dominated world beyond the home holds dangers and temptations, which may decrease *bunn* for men who succumb to them. Women, by contrast, 'work inside the house and have no opportunity to commit bad deeds, to harm or oppress others in society'.

³⁵ Hughes, 'Politics of gifts', pp. 469-489.

³⁶ Jacobsen, *Lost goddesses*, p. 288.

³⁷ M. Lilja and T. Prom, 'Female politicians in Cambodia', in J. Vijghen (ed.), *People and the 1998 national elections in Cambodia: Their voices, roles and impact on democracy*, Experts for Community Research, Phnom Penh, 2002, pp. 45-58.

³⁸ L. Richter, 'Exploring theories of female leadership in South and Southeast Asia', *Pacific Affairs* 4 (1990-1991), pp. 524-40, at p. 526.

³⁹ This is a reference to the belief that sperm animates the egg, therefore that men are active and women passive, not the act of giving birth.

More than a third of respondents thought that women had more *sel* than men, but a similar number pointed out that *sel* does not depend on gender but on the mind and heart of the individual. Even the 20.9 per cent who said that men had more *sel* than women did so on the grounds that monks are male: 'Men [have more *sel*] because there are more monks than nuns'. By contrast, explanations as to why women have more *sel* than men associated *sel* with good intention: 'Women have more *sel* than men because they like to do good and men don't'; 'Women have more *sel* because most Khmer women follow a moral code of conduct and practise Buddhist precepts much earlier than men'. Respondents noted that women eschew violence, and have more compassion and forgiveness whereas men tend toward violence and irrational anger, and bear grudges. Some doubted that men have the same purity of intention when participating in religious ceremonies. One participant said: 'Men rarely exert themselves to make offerings like women during ceremonies, because from observation men go to join ceremonies [only when there is] drinking alcohol or dancing.' Women, therefore, are in a better position to accumulate *sel*, which leads to *selathoa*; though in 21st century Cambodia (as in other countries) morality does not translate into power (*omnaich*).

Women closely associated with male *neak thom*, whether as wives or mistresses, may possess *omnaich*.⁴⁰ This is not to say that Cambodian women cannot possess *omnaich* in their own right. Some women hold senior government positions and are ranked as *neak thom*. Such women are identified by possession of a car, which they drive themselves, by their costly jewellery and western clothes, or by having poor relations or live-in servants to do the domestic chores. They frequent beauty salons, shop at supermarkets, and accompany their boyfriends and husbands to nightclubs and karaoke bars. None of the informants mentioned observance of the *cbpab srei* as necessary requirements for women to possess *omnaich*. What does provide women with access to *omnaich* is a close relationship to a father or husband who possesses *omnaich*. Lilja and Prom found that many female politicians had one or more family members engaged in politics and that this made their own participation more acceptable.⁴¹ Moreover they were connected to families with *bunn sak*. The women themselves believed that these relationships 'had contributed in some way to their power in politics'. Again, this is a common phenomenon in Southeast Asia. All female heads of state, for example, have been members of powerful political families.⁴² The incidence of female politicians in Cambodia should not be read as a lessening of entrenched attitudes toward the presence of women in politics, but as a result of the way that *omnaich* is perceived as residing in the hands of *neak thom* and the networks of power they create.

NETWORKS OF POWER

The background taxonomy of power outlined above explains not just why power is personalised in Cambodian political culture, but also why personal power is able to usurp and co-opt state power. For as Foucault noted,

relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the state – in two senses. First of all, because the state, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the

⁴⁰ Almost every respondent interviewed mentioned mistresses or 'girlfriends' in the list of accoutrements marking a *neak thom*, or said that 'many girls love him', or some variation thereon.

⁴¹ Lilja and Prom, 'Female politicians', p. 50.

⁴² M. Thompson, 'Female leadership of democratic transitions in Asia', *Pacific Affairs*, 75 (2002/2003), pp. 535–55, at p. 538.

whole field of actual power relations; and, further, because the state can only operate on the basis of other, already-existing power relations.⁴³

The relations of power that extend beyond state institutions in Cambodia take the form of networks of social relationships known as *khsae* (meaning ‘strings’ or ‘connections’). These networks may depend on familial, institutional, or political associations. They are often cemented through marriage linking influential families, including families in the capital to families in the provinces, and often extend from one generation to the next.⁴⁴ Cementing alliances through marriage has always been a favoured means for the preservation of power amongst elite families. Different branches of the Cambodian royal family, for example, were allied through the marriages of Princess Bopha Devi to three of her cousins in the 1950s and 1960s (although not, it must be said, simultaneously). Institutional *khsae*, for example in a government ministry, link employees to those further up the hierarchy who were instrumental in obtaining their position – right up to the minister. Political *khsae* overlap the other two. As noted above, Sihanouk’s Sangkum Reastr Niyum functioned not as a political party, but as a royal patronage network, an extended *khsae* with Sihanouk at its apex.

Whilst it is true that the Khmer Rouge attempted to destroy traditional power relationships, *khsae* still remained crucial. Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, brothers in ideology, were married to sisters, Khieu Ponnary and Khieu Thirith. Similarly, Ta Mok, one of the Khmer Rouge’s most infamous regional leaders, married his daughters to men who looked likely to reach the upper echelons of the Khmer Rouge political and military hierarchy, in order to expand his own influence.⁴⁵ More malevolently, a principal purpose of the torture of prisoners at Tuol Sleng under the Khmer Rouge was to trace their *khsae* in order to eradicate all opposition to the Pol Pot clique.⁴⁶

During the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), Vietnamese control limited the extent to which Cambodians could appoint their clients to positions in government service, but within the Cambodian People’s Party the struggle for power took personalized form as Hun Sen wrested power from Heng Samrin.⁴⁷ The resistance forces were similarly organised (based on loyalty to Sihanouk, Son Sann, or Pol Pot). With the departure of the Vietnamese in 1989 and the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991, the *khsae* system quickly returned as contending political groups competed to build support. The success of the CPP has been reinforced by linking the *khsae* networks of top party leaders. At the beginning of 2006 Hun Sen’s adopted son married the daughter of Hok Lundy, at the time regarded as one of the most powerful *neak mean omnaich* in Cambodia.⁴⁸

Individual links in a *khsae* network are established through face-to-face contact along the ‘string’. Once *khsae* relations are in place, certain expectations must be met. The patron (*knorng*) will expect his clients to pass on a portion of any benefit they receive from favours done. A portion of this will then be passed on to the patron’s own patron, higher up the *khsae* network. So, for example, a client given a position in the public service will offer a proportion of their salary to the patron who

⁴³ M. Foucault, ‘Truth and power’ [1976], in P. Rabinow (ed.), *Essential works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol 3, *Power*, The New Press, New York, 2000, pp. 122-123.

⁴⁴ M. A. Martin, ‘Social rules and political power in Cambodia’, *Indochina Report*, No. 22, Jan-March 1990, p. 4.

⁴⁵ M. Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975-1982*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, New South Wales, 1984, p. 99.

⁴⁶ See Chandler, *Voices from S-21*.

⁴⁷ E. Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the politics of nation building*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2003.

⁴⁸ Hok Lundy was killed in a helicopter crash in November 2008.

secured him the job. *Khsae* link the countryside with the towns. A village fruit farmer will send a portion of his mango harvest to his patron in the district town, who will take some and convey the rest to his or her patron in the provincial capital, who in turn, having received similar tokens of esteem and goodwill from several clients, will convey a selection to his patron in Phnom Penh. Percentages of unofficial fines collected by police for traffic infractions are conveyed upward to superiors in the same fashion. Larger payments for substantial benefits, such as government contracts, are usually made (in a discreet manner) directly to the *neak thom* whose influence obtained them.

Clients may also meet their *khsae* obligations by creating *bunn* for their patrons. Making donations to religious establishments in the name of a higher status person has been a common practice in Cambodian life for centuries. The *Cbpab Kram*, a text dating probably to the late seventeenth century but based upon earlier models, advises novice monks to act in accordance with the rules of the *Sangha* so that merit they acquired could benefit their spiritual tutor and parents.⁴⁹ Clients may pay for religious ceremonies to which the patron is invited as the recipient of honour.

In return, the patron is expected to extend protection to clients in matters of law (for example, by writing a letter of reference to be read at court proceedings, or by speaking directly to the judiciary on a client's behalf), elevate their client's status in the latter's community by making an appearance at the client's significant ceremonies (weddings, funerals, graduation ceremonies of family members) and giving generous presents at Khmer New Year and other important festivals, assist clients to obtain employment or government contracts, and protect them from adversity (which Cambodians believe can strike at any time). There is always a quid pro quo. For politicians faced with elections, the *khsae* system provides a means of garnering votes. Most people, certainly at the grassroots level, are members of political parties not because they support the party platform but because of the *khsae* that link them to patrons within the party. If a *neak thom* at the district level is swayed by the *baramei* of a politician at the provincial level and changes parties, most of his clients in the *khsae* system will follow him rather than risk losing the benefits their relationship brings. *Khsae* networks thus bear out Foucault's contention noted above: if we want to understand how power is exercised in Cambodia, then we need to look beyond the institutions of the state.

Though patronage networks require recognition of obligations on both sides, there is no expectation that obligations must be equally fulfilled. Clients must demonstrate their loyalty and act as clients. In return patrons are only expected to do what they can, for it is recognized that patrons must juggle competing demands from their many clients. Patrons cannot fail to deliver at all, but the relationship does not immediately break down if they do not provide all that a client hopes to gain. Politicians are thus seen as both superior and different, their difference being due to the *omnaich* they possess. Cambodians in our survey overwhelmingly agreed that: 'One must have *omnaich* in order to be a politician'.

Khsae networks have been central to Cambodian politics for well over a thousand years and have long been seen as a major obstacle to a more modern and effective system of government. Yet this is one area in which Cambodians strongly resist outside pressure. One of the causes of the rebellions against the Vietnamese administration in Cambodia in the 1830s and 1840s was because proposed reforms would have prevented the Cambodian elite from benefiting financially from state activities, such as tax collection, which would have affected all members of their *khsae* networks.⁵⁰ For the

⁴⁹ S. Pou and P. N. Jenner 'Les *cpap*' ou <codes de conduite> Khmers V: *Cpap' Kram*', *BEFEO* 66 (1979), pp. 129-60.

⁵⁰ D. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th ed., Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 2008, p. 152.

same reason the ruling elite in Cambodia today vigorously resists the demands of international aid donors for greater transparency, since this might limit their access to resources.

Resources are required because political patrons are not just expected to be generous to their clients: they must also demonstrate that their high levels of *bunn* are actually, in order to reinforce, and so legitimise, their right to power. This may be done through ostentatious visits to temples to distribute gifts to monks, nuns and lay persons; but it can also be demonstrated by taking credit for government projects (a health clinic, a school building), or by presiding over some significant occasion, such as a graduation or ground breaking ceremony. Those present are attentive and grateful, clustering around the politician and making gestures of subservience and respect (bowing when he greets them, performing the *sompeah* multiple times). The politician's *bunn* is proven by three attributes: he must have *mean* (wealth), or he could not afford to disburse funds to those less fortunate or deserving; he must have *bunn sak*, or people would not humble themselves before him; and he must have *baramei* or people would not listen attentively to him when he speaks, or follow his commands. If he can demonstrate *bunn* in these ways, he is entitled to his position. This is why criticism of a politician is likely to produce a vitriolic and often violent response, for it is interpreted as questioning his *bunn*, and so must be emphatically quashed lest his clients suspect he may not possess the requisite personal qualities to hold on to his position and power, and seek another patron. When a *neak thom's khsae* begins to unravel, his power is lost.

Powerful political leaders like Hun Sen actively cultivate the image of the *saborachon*, the meritorious benefactor who gains *bunn* through selfless acts of public generosity.⁵¹ Hun Sen and other political *neak thom* personally fund communal development projects, or preside over the inauguration of projects funded by the state or foreign donors (which they take credit for), accounts of which are carried ad nauseam by state television. In the eyes of villagers, such actions redound to their personal merit however. They both confirm and augment the *omnaich* of the political elite, and so legitimise their right to power. Recognition of Prime Minister Hun Sen's right to rule is not grudgingly given in response to the implicit threat of his *komlang*, his power to impose his will through coercive means. It is freely given because his actions indicate that the real source of his *omnaich* is his superior *bunn*. And the longer Hun Sen remains in office, the more convinced of this people become.

THE PERSISTENCE OF CAMBODIAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Political culture refers to the set of beliefs, values and orientations informing political behaviour that are broadly shared by members of a defined group (in the case of Khmer political culture, the majority Khmer Buddhist population).⁵² Political behaviour reflects not just the understanding of how power is organized and exercised, but also its nature and sources. In other words, to a large extent political behaviour reflects worldview. Political culture is a dimension of culture broadly conceived, and shares its dynamic of change. We conceive of cultures as population phenomena.⁵³

⁵¹ Hughes, 'Politics of gifts', pp. 469-489.

⁵² This definition picks up on Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's original concept, which defined political culture as the set of 'orientations' towards political activities and events on the basis of which people act in political ways (see G. Almond and S. Verba, *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1963), a definition endorsed by Harry Eckstein in 'Culture as a foundation concept for the social sciences', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 8 (1996), pp. 471-497).

⁵³ Which is how biologists understand species. E. Mayr, *What Evolution is*, Phoenix Books, London, 2002.

Cultures evolve when the frequencies of behaviours change; that is, when sufficient numbers of group members behave in new and different ways that alter social relationships and material production; for example, by creating new institution or using new technologies. In this evolutionary perspective, culture is a dynamic system.

The frequencies of cultural behaviours change in response to selective pressures on three interacting levels: individual cognition, individual behaviour, and social group action.⁵⁴ At each level, selective pressure is primarily applied through social power: through how power is conceived to exist and function on the cognitive level (as outlined above); through the influence and actions of significant individuals (parents, teachers) and the expectations exerted through social group membership on the behavioural level; and through competition between organisations, where this exists (between political parties, business firms, nation states), on the group level. Each higher level exerts selective pressure on those below it through the effect the sum of individual and group behaviours have in creating the material and social environments to which both individuals and groups must continuously adapt.

That cultures continuously evolve is evidenced by the way that Cambodian culture is currently changing through the impact of foreign investment and new technologies. Change is most rapid in urban areas, particularly in Phnom Penh, though much of it is superficial; a response to the demands of foreigners. Somewhat more significant is the influence of Cambodians who have spent time abroad. In the rural areas change is much less apparent. As a dimension of culture writ large, political culture also changes: it is not some static feature of Cambodian life, acting like inertia to slow the pace of transformation to modernity.

Systems can only evolve provided there exists a pool of available variation. Species, the paradigm example of an evolving system, cannot respond to altered environmental conditions if the breeding population is too small for there to be sufficient genetic variation. Similarly, decisions to behave in new and different ways require variant options not just to be incorporated into the structure of cognition, but also to be expressed in the face of social pressure. Whether or not this happens depends on whether variants are compatible with existing cognitive and social structures:⁵⁵ a variant behaviour may be considered a fit alternative for Cambodians, or dismissed as something that only foreigners do. Whether or not a new idea and its associated behaviour is regarded as a real option depends on how it (and its envisaged impact or implications) fits into the worldview of the actor; that is, whether it is consistent with the overriding cognitive structure of belief about how the natural and sociocultural worlds work, and how the self as agent relates to them. Those that do not are not acted upon – which is why Cambodians educated abroad may find that the ideas the ideas they bring back have little or no traction in Cambodian society.

Worldview is formed through the socialization and enculturation of a child into the community of which it is a member, by transmission of knowledge about the material world, about social relationships and group identity, and about the powers and forces believed to influence people's lives. Transmission is from parents (vertical), teachers (oblique) and peers (horizontal). The belief structure (worldview) so formed is hierarchical, with higher level components more deeply embedded, and so more impervious to modification. But the whole is not static. The model of the

⁵⁴ M. Stuart-Fox, 'On W. G. Runciman's *The theory of cultural and social selection*: Constructing a selectionist paradigm', *History and Theory* 50 (2011), pp. 229-242.

⁵⁵ Dean Simonton, "Creativity as variation and selection: Some critical constraints" in Runco, Mark A. (Ed), (2003). *Critical creative processes. Perspectives on creativity research*. Cresskill, NJ, US: Hampton Press, pp. 3-18.

world constructed in mind continuously takes account of personal experience and social learning, but always within the constraints imposed by the (hierarchical) structure already in place.

The second key component of an evolving system, besides variation, is selection. In the evolution of species, natural selection is exerted by changes in the natural environment. Natural events still impact on the evolution of cultures (as, for instance, through desertification of the Sahara), but as the sociocultural environment created by social relationships and material production has become more extensive (in the form of urban conglomerations), so it has come to exert ever greater selective pressure.⁵⁶ And the means of exerting selective pressure in sociocultural environments is through the application of social power, not just directly on choice of behavior, but also in shaping cognition.

Power exerts selective pressure on both individual levels: on the cognitive level, influencing whether or not an agent will decide to perform one behaviour or another; and on the behavioural level once behaviours (including speech acts) are performed, the effect of which is to make it more or less likely that a behaviour will be repeated by the actor or imitated by others. Social power may be political (including social pressure to conform), economic (the offer of gifts and incentives), coercive (through force or the threat of force or retribution), ideological (through transmission and incorporation of ideas and information), and charismatic⁵⁷ – the last two of which combine in the Cambodian concept of *baramei*. When some or all of these forms of social power are combined, sociocultural selective pressures are magnified. In Cambodia the CPP has amassed political, economic and coercive power through using patrimonial *khsae* to white-wash democratic institutions, combining these with the plunder of state resources, while preventing opposition by maintaining control over the security forces and the justice system.

In any patrimonial system power is personalized to a high degree. But the patronage networks that sustain the power of individuals beyond the family are unstable in that they can rapidly disintegrate if a patron is eliminated from the political contest, or be redirected to an alternative, more powerful, patron. Networks may be cemented through friendship or marriage, but they are not institutionalized. They are hierarchical structures of personal, not state, power, even though they may draw upon state power to sustain them. The lack of institutionalisation of patrimonial systems is a source of instability, however, where powerful networks are in competition. Opposing networks pose a political threat. Patrimonial power is only secure when it is able to isolate and neutralize all alternative power networks that might challenge it. Its logical goal is to embrace the entire socio-political order, which occurs when the superior *omnaich* of a single supreme ruler enjoys universal recognition. At this point coercive power can be reduced to a threat, for the outward evidence of *baramei*, *bunn sak* and *mean* reinforces belief in the ruler's possession of reserves of *bunn* that none can match. In this way, the Cambodian conception of power provides its own supporting ideology of legitimation for Hun Sen and the CPP.

Political culture refers to those sociocultural processes, cognitive and behavioural, that determine how political power is conceptualized and exercised. It comprises two interacting components: one individual and cognitive, colored by values and emotion, in which cognitive structure biases the selection of political behaviour (so legitimizing some forms while delegitimizing others); and the other social and organizational, exerting selective pressure to coordinate individual and group

⁵⁶ The technical term for environmental modification that alters selective pressures is 'niche construction'. See F. C. Odling-Smee, K. N. Laland and M. W. Feldman, *Niche Construction: The Neglected Process in Evolution*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2003.

⁵⁷ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, Vol. 1. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1986.

decision making and action. Political culture, in other words, comprises neither a fixed state of mind nor a set of habitual political behaviours, but rather a set of variable selection biases acting on three levels – of cognition, behaviour and group action. These biases determine the choice of political behaviour in the face of what Antonio Gramsci referred to as the hegemony of the ruling elite, and the ‘régime of truth’ that legitimizes it.⁵⁸

The political culture of any social group has deep historical roots encoded in the meaning of language and expressed in historically validated behaviour, which determines, among other things, the extent to which power is conceived of as personal or institutional; that is, whether power is possessed by individuals by virtue of personal qualities and attributes (as in Cambodia), or due to the positions they occupy in political or social organizations and institutions (as in both East Asia and the West). Of course the two may overlap: kings, in Cambodia and elsewhere, depended for their power on the institution of monarchy, even if it was believed that only their special qualities (whether due to merit or prowess or divine endowment) gained them the throne in the first place.⁵⁹

Political culture persists because it is embedded in worldview, in the cognitive structure built up through parental guidance, education and experience of what works best for an individual in his or her social circumstances in order to realise his or her interests, goals and desires. As we have seen, language plays a major role in shaping the way power is understood. So too does religion, which deeply influences not just conceptions of the meaning and purpose of life, but of how individuals stand in relation to whatever unseen spirits and forces are believed to control the natural world. We have shown above how the Theravada concepts of karma and rebirth, and the popular conception of *bunn*, are central to the Khmer understanding of power as a personal attribute, and to the recognition and acceptance (that is, legitimation) of such power.

A third shaping influence on political culture is history: not history as revealed by historical research, but history as it is talked about in the family, taught in schools and monasteries, and popularly understood. Cambodians are proud of their charismatic and powerful kings who ruled the empire of Angkor and built its palaces and temples. They do not doubt that these kings owed their power to their *bunn*. Kings – and by extension, all political leaders – can only exercise royal authority if they possess the merit to do so – which is why their decisions and edicts are popularly accepted as in the best interests of their people. Once their *bunn* is depleted, however, signs may appear, such as natural disasters, or defeat on the battlefield, which embolden contenders to challenge for power.

The great kings of Angkor exercised absolute power, but they did so through favoured court retainers and military commanders. The power of a strong king depended on developing a comprehensive network of loyal supporters, who were convinced by his *baramei*, bound by the reach of his *omnaich*, and awed by what he achieved through his *komlang*. This model of power exercised by kings and rulers persisted right through the colonial interlude, reinforced by a colonial historiography that glorified the greatness and power of Angkor in order to stress that its decline in the face of Thai and Vietnamese expansionism necessitated French protection. It was what all educated Cambodians were taught and believed.

The conception of the king as semi-divine also continued throughout the colonial period. Even after Cambodia gained independence, the 1953 Cambodian constitution proclaimed the king’s person ‘sacred and inviolable’. Sihanouk’s rejection of the role of constitutional monarch reflected his belief,

⁵⁸ M. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.

M. Sheridan Smith, Vintage, New York, 1975, pp. 80-82.

⁵⁹ I. W. Mabbett, ‘Kingship in Angkor’, *Journal of the Siam Society*, 66, no. 2 (1978), pp. 1-58.

widely shared, that the king stood at the apex of political power. But in abdicating and forming the Sangkum, Sihanouk destroyed any hope that Cambodia might become a parliamentary democracy; for the Sangkum functioned not as a political party, but as a mass patronage network that set out to quash all opposition. When Sihanouk was overthrown in 1970, politics in Lon Nol's Khmer Republic were reduced to competition between powerful personalities and their loyalty networks. The Khmer Rouge leadership too was highly personalized and centralized, focused on the figure of Pol Pot. And in the decade that followed the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, not only were resistance forces organized in a personalized way (loyal to Sihanouk, Son Sann, or Pol Pot), but on the other side the struggle for power within the Cambodian People's Party took similar form.⁶⁰ For most Cambodians the lesson of history is clear: Cambodia has been strong when the personal power of the ruler was unchallenged, when his *omnaich* was universally recognized and endorsed through *khsae* conveying personal loyalty in return for political and economic favours. Moreover, for many Cambodians, especially in rural areas, a return to the chaos and conflict of the recent past can only be prevented by a political leader possessing superior merit and power. Hun Sen portrays himself, and increasingly has come to be seen, as just such a leader.

Finally, Cambodian social structure has also contributed to the persistence of Khmer political culture. Society was never highly structured in rural Cambodian villages.⁶¹ In China and Vietnam, ancestor worship and filial piety structured relationships within the family, but not in Cambodia. Nor were villages in Cambodia as internally organized and integrated in a corporate sense, as in Vietnam where the emperor's writ stopped at the village gate. In Cambodia individuals were responsible for their own welfare and could expect little support from outside the family.

Cambodian society was never marked by high levels of public trust, because patronage has no institutional basis: it was personal and in times of crisis unreliable. Years of war and revolution destroyed what little trust there was at the village level. Under the Khmer Rouge, the poorest of the poor were favoured, and encouraged to turn upon their neighbours. All were urged to spy on each other, and to report any word or action that might be construed as lack of loyalty to the regime. Those denounced were arrested and punished, often never to be seen again. With the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, and during the years of civil conflict that followed, Cambodians were forced to fend for themselves. Trust was seldom extended beyond the family. Only patronage offered some protection.

The obverse effect of the political turmoil of the previous decades is the value accorded to social harmony and order. Cambodians do not want any more social experiments. But social order requires everyone to know and accept his or her place in the social hierarchy. Acceptance of the prevailing social structure is reinforced by Buddhism, which prizes social order for the opportunity it provides for individuals to pursue their own paths to spiritual Enlightenment. Those who criticize the social order may be reprimanded, even censured. In the context of the prevailing understanding of how power functions, these social forces bias the selection of behaviour towards acceptance of the existing power structure, expressed as a deeply ingrained reluctance to provoke confrontation with powerful superiors. So what appears to be passive acceptance of flawed political institutions more likely reflects a considered preference for political stability.

⁶⁰ See Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*.

⁶¹ M. Ebihara, *Svay, a Kmer village in Cambodia*, PhD diss., Columbia University, New York, 1968.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As we have seen, no regime that ruled Cambodia prior to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991 did anything to prepare Cambodians for democracy. Institutions that claimed to be democratic were consistently undermined, whether by Sihanouk's Sangkum or the squabbling politicians who followed him. Democratic Kampuchea was an oxymoronic travesty with respect to democratic processes, and the Vietnamese-backed PRK was little better. Restoration of the Kingdom of Cambodia as a multi-party democracy won self-congratulatory praise from UN members, but opened an arena for a contest for power that favoured a reversion to traditional methods to gain political support. Even at the time informed observers warned that any hope that a new democratic political culture would take root would turn out to be an 'illusion'.⁶²

The two parties contending for power in 1993 were led by very different elites. The leadership of the CPP had been exercising political power since 1979. Most came from peasant backgrounds, and had learned their politics first under Sihanouk, and then within the Khmer Rouge. FUNCINPEC officials mostly came from the former educated class who had held positions in government prior to 1975. Though many had spent the intervening years overseas, they too were steeped in Khmer political culture. For the leaders of both parties, building party membership and an electoral support base was not primarily a matter of crafting a political platform designed to appeal to a majority of voters, but rather of drafting 'followers' into their respective *khsae*. In other words, competition was not between political ideologies or platforms, but between the benefits of joining alternative patronage networks – because that was how the real nature of power was understood.

Over time the balance of advantage swung in favour of Hun Sen and the CPP. We can explain their success by referring to the CPP's rural power base, to its control over the military and police, to its ruthlessness in carrying out the 1997 coup, and to the disunity of its political opposition, in particular the mistakes and failures of FUNCINPEC and its leaders. All these were factors, but there has been more to what has been going on in Cambodia over the last 20 years than this. Opposition parties still contest Cambodian elections, and in the privacy of the voting booth people are free to register their displeasure with the CPP. But they won't. And the reason they won't is not because they cannot envisage better government or a more just society, nor because they have been duped and coerced into submission, but because of how they understand the nature of power. Cambodians accept that the well-oiled patronage network of the CPP that now extends throughout Cambodian society cannot be challenged. The 'strings' are too many and too strong. Moreover they converge on men (and they are virtually all men) recognised as *neak thom*, whose personal claims to power rest solidly on a moral order (*bunn* as the basis of *omnaich* and *komlang*) conceived as a law of nature. At the apex stands Hun Sen, who has risen in status from one among a number of *neak thom* to *bang thom*, 'big brother' to all Cambodians. Legitimation of his power depends not on the complicity of a cowed population, but rather on the understanding Cambodians have of the source of his power, which results both from his personal qualities (his *bunn*), and from the obligations of loyalty demanded of all those who form part of the *khsae* that constitute the power base of the CPP. The majority of Cambodians who now support the party have made their political choice in their own interests, in response to the sociocultural pressures they have encountered, and how these have been interpreted through the prism of their own worldview. Their understanding and behaviour together constitute Khmer political culture, whose selective influence creates the conditions for its continuing replication.

⁶² P. Lizée, 'The challenge of conflict resolution in Cambodia', *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, 23 (1993), pp. 35-44.

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Figure 1. Taxonomy of Cambodian Power(s)

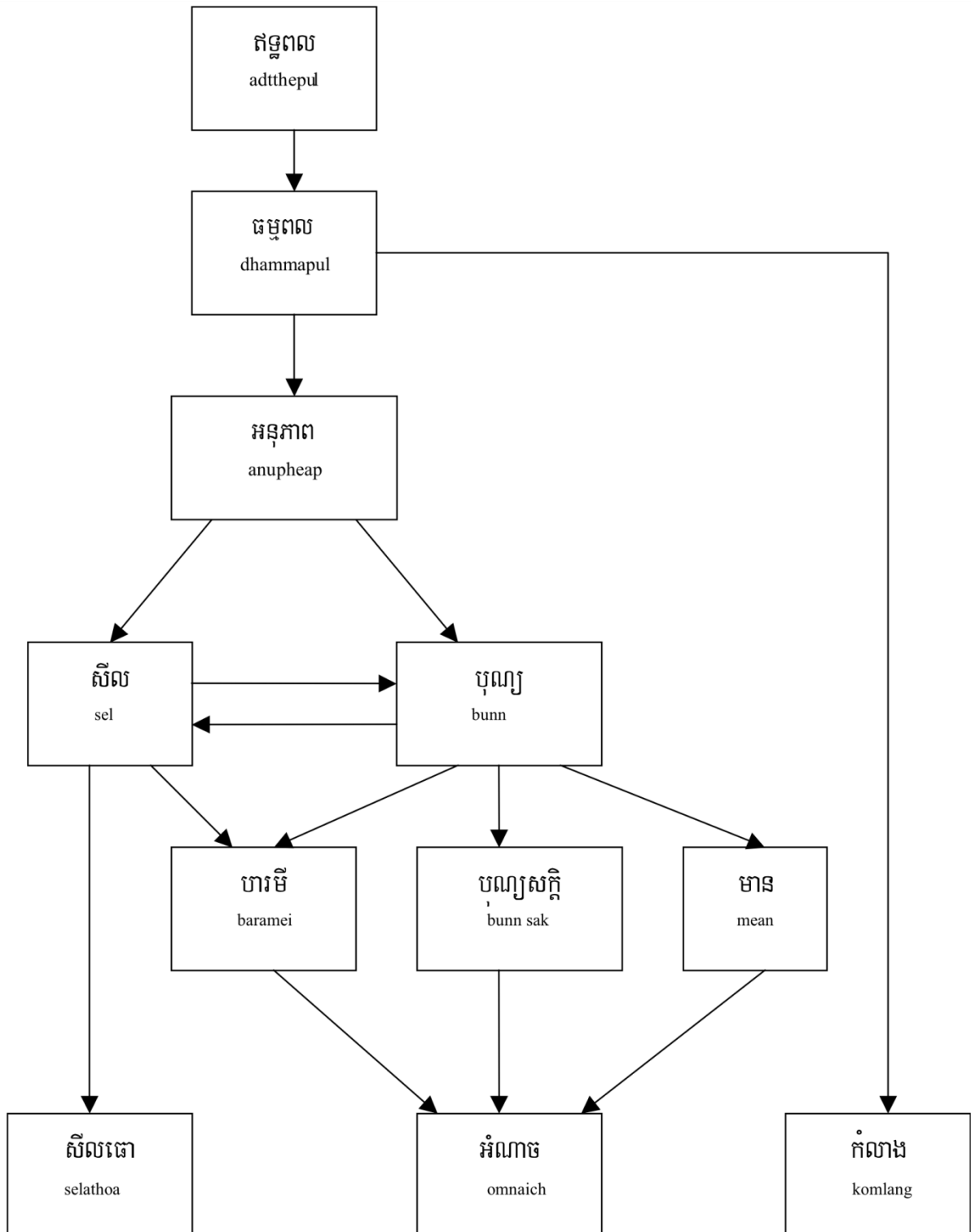


Figure 2. A statue of the *neak ta* presiding over the compound at which the former leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime are being tried in the Extraordinary Chambers of the Court of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.

