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Writing the Postcolonial City:
Phnom Penh and Modernity during *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, 1955-1970

by
Siti Galang Keo

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
History
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor Peter B. Zinoman, Chair
Professor Kerwin Klein
Professor Penelope Edwards

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Abstract

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University of California, Berkeley

Professor Peter B. Zinoman, Chair

This dissertation examines novels, essays, films and songs of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* period, 1955-1970, to explore the layers of meanings Cambodians held of Phnom Penh. After the Geneva Accords in 1954, Phnom Penh emerged as the capital city of a newly independent nation-state, the Kingdom of Cambodia. The city under French colonial rule was secondary to Hanoi and Saigon, but once Indochina dissolved, its population exponentially increased. Phnom Penh was at the center of Cambodia's road networks, its banking system, and was home to the best universities and schools. The many jobs and opportunities attracted rural migrants to the city. The population boom was one of the many ways Phnom Penh transformed. Norodom Sihanouk, then the head of state, made Phnom Penh the epicenter of government modernization projects. Under his watch, the capital transformed from being a marshy, provincial hub into an exciting scene of cosmopolitan innovation. Urban Cambodians combined ideas from Le Corbusier with traditional Khmer architectural details to design their "modern" buildings. Their songs were influenced by the French singer Johnny Halliday and the American Wilson Pickett. They wrote novels that built upon the ideas found in Buddhism and French Existentialism. Through their works, urban intellectuals sought to define a Cambodian identity independent of French colonialism. Phnom Penh, with its new roads, many schools, bars and publishing houses, was a space where Cambodians became modern and developed new identities, such as the *neary samey tmey* and the *pannavoan*.

These changes to the landscape and social composition of Phnom Penh engendered a new consciousness amongst Cambodian intellectuals. Their writings expressed a concern over changes in heterosexual relationships and the behavior of Cambodians in public spaces. To some, not all the changes were good. They mourned the marshes and wooden shacks that asphalt and concrete had replaced. They were aware of ruptures, loss, and fragmentation. This consciousness of the new amongst urban Cambodian intellectuals is what I term postcolonial modernity. This study contributes to the history of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* by taking seriously the historical value of Cambodian writings and focuses the lives of everyday urban Cambodians. It describes the *Sangkum* period as a time of unprecedented change that witnessed the emergence of a new urban middle class.

*To Nara and Phumarin,
whose stories of scooters and short skirts, Sihanouk and Lon Nol
influence my own.*

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Introduction

Sangkum Reastr Niyum, literally “community favored by the people,” spans the period between 1955 to 1970.¹ During this era, Cambodia realized its independence from France and became a recognized nation-state. For Cambodians, the phrase *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* has three distinct but layered meanings: first, it invokes Norodom Sihanouk and his ambiguously defined government; second, it refers to a political movement led by Sihanouk that is commonly translated into English as the Popular Socialist Community; lastly, the phrase denotes a historical period (what Cambodians term *Samey Sangkum*²) that is often fondly remembered. Many who lived through the period recall it as a “golden era” when Cambodia was prosperous and peaceful. Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital, was at the epicenter of the country’s prosperity and peace. Starting in the 1950s, the state engaged in rapid modernization projects and used Phnom Penh to showcase its achievements. The city was to be a modern, clean capital of a newly independent Southeast Asian state. Because of the city’s importance to the period, this dissertation uses Phnom Penh as a lens to better view the place of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* within Cambodian history and imagination.

At different moments in its history, Phnom Penh has been known as a shelter for sacred Buddhist relics, a marginalized hub within the French empire, and a capital for a newly independent nation. The emptying of Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge takeover and its current rebuilding are yet more moments in this story. As this dissertation studies the efforts to construct a modern capital from the 1950s to the 1970s, it unpacks the layers of cultural and historical meanings inhabitants held of Phnom Penh. The key sources of this dissertation are the writings, primarily in Khmer and sometimes in French, of urban intellectuals. Examining the writings of urban intellectuals offers insights into the tensions, conflicts, and contradictions that emerged as the capital expanded. Novelists, journalists and scholars argued over the use of technology in their neighborhoods, behaviors on public roads, and the very representation of the city itself. In these debates, Phnom Penh became a landscape to examine the possibilities of a postcolonial Cambodian modernity. Rather than contribute to politically simplistic views of the city as a site of either oppression or progress, this dissertation exposes Phnom Penh’s complex and transformative abilities: Cambodians became new men and women as they worked, wrote, rode and walked through city spaces. Via interactions with Phnom Penh, urbanites fashioned their identities and rendered visible what it entailed to be modern. Through their texts of the city, intellectuals expressed their anxieties and thoughts about their changing urban realities and its ruptures. Modernity in postcolonial Cambodia was not as much a top-down process accomplished by the state as it was an often-time conflicted and rich awareness (សតិសម្បជញ្ញៈ)

amongst men and women who discussed the meanings of their new identities and estranged realities.

The *Sangkum* period is one of the more discussed epochs in Cambodian historiography, although the volume of publications on *Sangkum* pales in comparison to the many monographs

¹ Sophearith Siyonn first mentioned this translation of *Sangkum* to me. After reviewing *Sangkum* statues and Sihanouk’s memoir on its founding, I agree with Sophearith. The populist character of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* is explored later in chapter 1. I want to thank him for introducing me to this understanding of *Sangkum*.

² *Samey* (សម័យ) in Khmer means period or era. It is a segment of time. So, *Samey Sangkum* means Sangkum Era.

written on the Khmer Rouge period. The one person who dominates the narratives of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* is Norodom Sihanouk.³ Scholars have written of Sihanouk's canny ability to revive—some may say manipulate—previous conceptions of *devaraja*⁴ to maintain power. In so doing, he transformed the definition of royalty and kingship in Cambodia. This type of scholarship on *Sangkum* has caused the period to be seen as one of top-down, political maneuverings amongst an elite class. For this reason, the so-called “Coup of 1970,”⁵ when Sihanouk was removed as head of state and the monarchy was abolished, appears as a shock or as a product of external forces.⁶ The *devaraja*, loved by his people, maintained peace and guided Cambodia through the chaos of the Vietnam War, until the country fell victim to American bombings and foreign interference.⁷

³ See Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Milton Osborne, *Politics and power in Cambodia: The Sihanouk Years*, (Camberwell, Australia: Longman, 1973); Milton Osborne, *Before Kampuchea: Preludes to Tragedy*, (London: Boston : G. Allen & Unwin, 1979); Margaret Slocumb, "The Nature and Role of Ideology in the Modern Cambodian State," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (2006): 375-95, accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20071782>; Astrid Norén-Nilsson, "The Demise of Cambodian Royalism and the Legacy of Sihanouk," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31, no. 1 (2016): 1-36, accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24779787>; Michael Leifer, "The Failure of Political Institutionalization in Cambodia," *Modern Asian Studies* 2, no. 2 (1968): 125-40, accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/311513>; Abdoul Carime Nasir, "Le pouvoir en scène dans le processus du Verbe sihanoukien ", Bulletin n° 18 de l'AEFEK, Janvier 2012, accessed at <https://www.aefek.fr/page76.html>.

⁴ Robert Heine-Geldern discussed how kings of ancient Southeast Asia, from Champa to Java, were often depicted as reincarnations of the god Siva. Likewise, in Angkor, Heine-Geldern noted that “the monarchy was intimately bound up with the cult of a lingam which was considered the seat of the divine essence of kingship. As we have seen, in Cambodia this lingam, representing the Devaraja, the "God King," was adored in the temple in the center of the capital. The actual king was considered to be a manifestation of the divine power of the Devaraja and therefore, as the latter's visible form, the lingam, implies, obviously of Siva himself.” Robert Heine-Geldern, “Conceptions State and Kingship in Southeast Asia,” *Far Eastern Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Nov., 1942), 22. Khmer kings through his being as a king and holding of power was seen as divine. Oliver Wolters called this divine essence as the “soul stuff” that allowed others to recognize “a person's spiritual identity and capacity for leadership.” Wolter used an example of early 17th century Tagalog society, where individuals “who had distinguished themselves would attribute their valour to divine forces.” Oliver Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 19, accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/59950>. Another example, used by Heine Geldern, was the 10th century Burmese king, Nyaung-u Sawrahan, who was a farmer turned king despite his wishes. Nyaung-u Sawrahan “attained even the kingship simply by a strong karma of his good acts done in the past.” Heine-Geldern, “Conceptions of State and Kingship,” 25. The *devaraja* is a not person who became king because he communicates with the divine, meaning the divine is outside of his being. Instead, he is a manifestation of the divine. He becomes a king and holds power because of this divine essence, “the soul stuff,” within him. The health of the empire depends on his divinity. The essence can dissipate. I.W. Mabbett noted that “this divinity of the king is now not an exclusive and innate quality; it is something which a king, to a greater extent than other men, may hope to attain by the correct performance of his ritual functions and of those of his success.” I. W. Mabbett, “Devarāja,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10, no. 2 (1969): 220, accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20067742>. If the essence is lost, then the kingdom decays and a new king, who is now the new manifestation of the divine, rises. The state and kingship in early Southeast Asia are not static entities. They are fluid, very much reliant upon perception and spectacle. It is important that others see the manifestations of sacred either located in kings and states.

⁵ David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 204.

⁶ See Abdoul Carime Nasir, “Réflexion sur le régime Sihanoukien : la monopolisation du Verbe par le pouvoir royal,” *Péninsule* 31, 1995 (2).

⁷ See William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*, (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002).

Such a characterization of the *Sangkum* period has ripple effects upon the rest of postcolonial Cambodian history. The Republican period (1970-1975) led by Lon Nol is understood as time of decline that would end in the Khmer Rouge takeover.⁸ The Khmer Rouge in turn are a perversion of Khmer Buddhist values, something Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought brought to Cambodian society and history.⁹ Michael Vickery is perhaps the one scholar who has located the root of Khmer Rouge ideology in the Cambodian past, namely in the period of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (1955-1970). He observes that Cambodia, long before it was divided into “new” and “old” people, was deeply fragmented along two groups: urban and rural. He believes that a “major fault of most writings about recent [Cambodian] events has been its ahistorical character, ignoring all that happened before 1970, 1975, or even 1979.” His work traces Khmer Rouge attitudes within a view of an earlier Cambodian society.¹⁰ The violence of the Khmer Rouge, he says, was not abnormal. Vickery believes Khmer communist attitudes could be traced directly to the *Sangkum* period. This dissertation takes up Vickery’s call to study Cambodia “as an interesting variation among the many paths engaged by the formerly colonized Third World after independence, not condemned as a unique aberration.”¹¹

Armed with the goal to properly historicize postcolonial Cambodian history, my dissertation aims to correct an oversight found in previous histories of power, kingship and *Sangkum*: the missing experiences of common Cambodians. This dissertation is not a story of rural peoples and the countryside during the *Sangkum*.¹² Rather, it focuses on the practices and attitudes of a growing urban middle class, as expressed through the writings of intellectuals and journalists. In so doing, it broadens the narratives of the *Sangkum* beyond that of elite politics. Although Sihanouk and communist leaders do not disappear from the story told in this dissertation, they are minimized. Foregrounded are the accounts of the everyday people who

⁸ David Chandler described the Lon Nol years as one of “Sliding in Chaos.” David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 192.

⁹ See John Barron and Anthony Paul, *Murder of a Gentle Land: The Untold Story of a Communist Genocide in Cambodia*, (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1977); Gregory Stanton, “Why the Khmer Rouge Murdered Two Million People?,” (Genocide Watch, 2013), accessed at http://www.genocidewatch.org/images/Why_the_Khmer_Rouge_Murdered_Two_Million_People_by_Gregory_Stanton.pdf.

¹⁰ Michael Vickery, *Cambodia, 1975-1982* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹² The most cited work on rural life during this period is May Ebihara’s dissertation. She spent almost a year (April 1959-March 1960) in West Sabay, a village near Phnom Penh, doing participant-observation work. The ethnography she produced at Columbia University covered a wide-range range of topics, such as family structure, religious practices, and village organization. Due its comprehensive nature, her dissertation is often cited by other scholars when talking about rural life in 1950s and 1960s Cambodia. For instance, Alexander Hinton cited her when he claimed that “many peasants felt disconnected from and wary of cities. Structurally, there were few institutional links between the urban and rural population.” While correctly cited by Hinton, May also mentioned the various ways villagers interacted with the surrounding area, such as how villagers got their news and the reliance upon the radio. On page 549, she noted that “villagers are very much conscious of ‘we Khmer as a distinct nation and culture,’ and feel moreover that it is an important one.” The invocation of the phrase “we Khmer” suggests that the villagers in Ebihara’s dissertation saw themselves as member of a larger Cambodian nation, one that included Khmers in the cities. The rural-urban relationship should perhaps be reevaluated and the actual lives of rural Cambodians during this period should be further studied before any concrete statements can be made. See May Ebihara, *Svay, A Khmer Village in Cambodia*, (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1968); May Ebihara, “Return to a Khmer Village,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Jul 31, 1990, 67, accessed at <https://search.proquest.com/docview/197444920?accountid=14496>; Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 77-78.

lived in the city: a modern woman who traveled extensively, a disgruntled writer who bemoaned current affairs, a construction worker who built Phnom Penh and many others. In turning to cultural history and seriously examining the many texts produced in the period, including essays, novels, journalistic accounts, movies, and songs, this dissertation examines the multiple layers of postcolonial Phnom Penh. It was a city of freedoms, alienation, ruptures and optimism. The peace, development and harmony projected by Sihanouk via his robust propaganda apparatus were only some of Phnom Penh's many faces during this period.

Another face of Phnom Penh was one of fragmentation and rupture. Those living in Phnom Penh felt a growing isolation and alienation, even as more and more people came into the city. The rural/urban divide spoken of by Vickery was not a sentiment found only in the countryside. It was also keenly felt and expressed by urban dwellers. Phnom Penh writers, however, lamented the loss of freedoms and community they believed existed only in the countryside. They wanted to return to the village. In contrast, villagers saw urban inhabitants as "spoiled, pretentious, contentious, status conscious."¹³ The division between rural and urban spaces was felt by urbanites and rural persons alike. It was, however, only one of the many ruptures Cambodian urbanites encountered. Set against the backdrop of an intensely changing urban landscape, city writings captured other oppositions: old versus new, colonial and postcolonial, modern against traditions, sacred and secular, masculine and feminine. Vickery, in his fascination with the Khmer Rouge, was as susceptible to the very ahistorical thoughts he accused others of expressing. He ignored the diverse and multifaceted lives of Phnom Penh inhabitants—not all were rich or pretentious or status conscious. Some of Phnom Penh's strongest critics lived in the city.

Despite the fact that Phnom Penh inhabitants often complained about their urban environments and neighbors, the perception of the city as a space for the rich, spoiled, and foreign persisted within Cambodian thought and in scholarship about Cambodia.¹⁴ French geographer, Jean Delvert described 1950s Cambodians as peasants and cities as foreign

¹³ Vickery, *Cambodia*, 28.

¹⁴ For quick summary, refer to Jacques Nepote, "La Presse au Cambodge: des consensus traditionnels aux expressions divergentes d'opinion publique moderne," *Péninsule*, no. 53, 2006, 23. Jacques Nepote writes against this idea of the city. He believes the birth of the Cambodian public sphere began in the city. Also, see Charles Meyer, *Derrière le sourire khmer*, (Paris: Plon, 1971).

occupied.¹⁵ “To study Cambodia,” he writes, “is to study the Cambodian peasantry.”¹⁶ Cambodian communist intellectuals of the time also saw the city as a source of foreign influence and rural oppression.¹⁷ Hou Youn, a leading member of the Khmer Rouge, wrote in 1964 that “cities and market towns actively oppress the rural areas – the tree grows in the rural areas, but the fruit goes to the towns.”¹⁸ The city profited from rural labor. This rural-urban dichotomy hardened as the Khmer Rouge established their regime. They believed the enemy existed in the cities, while the countryside was supposedly the lifeblood of the country.¹⁹ As a result of the regime’s policies, Khmer Rouge attitudes towards cities have dominated contemporary understandings of Cambodian urbanism. Relying on political tracts and radio addresses, Alexander Hinton argued that for the Khmer Rouge, the cities “were havens for the oppressors and therefore symbolic centers of Cambodia’s corruption...Modern buildings and homes, commercial centers, foreign cars and products, long hair, colorful cosmopolitan clothes...served

¹⁵ “Les villes sont donc en grande partie de population étrangère.” Jean Delvert, *Le paysan cambodgien* (Paris: Mouton & Co, 1961), 31. To support this claim about Cambodian cities, Jean Delvert relied on population figures. Although he does not provide a source or footnote, in the next lines, he says that Cambodians were in the minority in 1950 Phnom Penh. Out of a population of 363,000, Cambodians numbered 150,000. In 1958, Cambodians were estimated to be more than 200,000 out of 450,000, but he says that this number includes Cambodians who were seasonal workers, meaning their real homes were not in Phnom Penh, but rather in the countryside. Christian Goulin, a former professor at the Royal Faculty of Letters in Phnom Penh, provided another perspective in his urban study of Phnom Penh, published in 1966. His study was partially supported by the la Direction de l’Urbanisme et de l’Habitat and Le Centre National de Documentation et d’Edition. He notes that the numbers given by the l’Annuaire Statistique du Cambodge in 1950 were absurd. In 1941, Cambodians in Phnom Penh numbered 51,000, Vietnamese 35,000 and Chinese 34,000. If in 1951, the Cambodian population had grown to 150,000, the Vietnamese to 100,000 and the Chinese to 110,000, then most of the city growth had to be due to Vietnamese and Chinese migration. Goulin noted that the opposite was true. The growth in urban population was due to an internal migration, from rural areas to the city. He argued that the numbers given in 1958 were likely more accurate. The city of Phnom Penh, namely la Direction de la Statistique, hired a U.N. expert to conduct a survey of the city. Goulin cited these 1958 numbers. The numbers determined by the U.N. expert had the city’s total population at 355,180, with 234,220 Cambodians, 53,500 Vietnamese, 62,720 Chinese, and 4,740 others. These revised numbers supported Goulin’s argument that urban expansion in postcolonial Cambodia included a growing number of Cambodians: “l’évolution en cours est caractéristique d’un changement qui s’interpénètre ville et campagnes jusqu’ici séparées. Par suite elle fait participer à la vie urbaine une plus large fraction de la population cambodgienne.” Christian Goulin, *Phnom-Penh : étude de géographie urbaine*, (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: La Faculté Royale Des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 1966), 142-162.

¹⁶ “*Le Cambodgien est un paysan...Les villes sont donc en grande partie de population étrangère...Etudier les Cambodgiens c’est donc étudier le paysan cambodgien.* [Emphasis original]” Delvert, *Le paysan cambodgien*, 31-32.

¹⁷ Ben Kiernan, “External and Indigenous Sources of Khmer Rouge Ideology,” in *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*, edited by Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge, (London: Routledge, 2006), 7, found at: <http://www.yale.edu/cgp/resources.html>.

¹⁸ Hou Youn, *The Cooperative Question*, as quoted in Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 208.

¹⁹ In a speech celebrating the 17th anniversary of the Party’s founding, Pol Pot explained why the Khmer Rouge favored the countryside over the cities: “The cities could not be the support base. True, the population there was large, but the city was small, the enemy was all over it. The Assembly, the courts, the prisons, the police, the Army – they were all there. The networks of the enemy’s repressive apparatus were concentrated there, and the social composition of the cities was very complex. By contrast, the countryside was vast. The enemy was spread thin there. In some villages, there was not even the shadow of the enemy, militarily or otherwise. In some communes, there were only one or two soldiers or police. The peasants there were very numerous. The class composition was good.” *Speech by Comrade Pol Pot, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea* (Montreal: Red Flag Publication, 1978), 28.

as material reminders of foreign influence, exploitation, and class inequalities.”²⁰ Rarely examined, however, are the thoughts and feelings of those who called those modern buildings home, who drove those cars and wore the trendy clothes. To them, were these aspects of city life viewed simply as reminders of foreign influence and exploitations?

This dissertation provides some answers to this question. Some urbanites echoed the thoughts of Khmer Rouge intellectuals: the fancy clothes and mannerisms were corrupting products of foreign ideas. Others, disregarding communist thought, saw and mourned those modern buildings and cars as reminders of what no longer existed. Others still celebrated these cars as instruments of liberation, a means to escape the city and parental gazes. The idea that the “city is foreign” is too narrow to capture the fragmented, contesting meanings urbanites read upon their city and its spaces. Phnom Penh to its inhabitants, therefore, was not simply a site of foreign influence and class inequalities. It was a space where French Existentialism co-mingled with Buddhist and communist thought, where memories and loss of a wooden shack tempered excitement over air-conditioned buildings, where “men danced like monkeys” at the very moment of progress.

Another aspect of urban life overlooked by Khmer communist views is how the city contributed to the formation and maturation of new identities. Annuska Derks, in her ethnography on reconstructed Phnom Penh, notes the ways leisure time (*dae leeng*) and the city manner of dress and behavior changed young rural women who came to Phnom Penh in search of work during the 1990s and early 200s.²¹ New urban groups were a byproduct of Cambodia’s modernization.²² *Sangkum* actively implemented laws to foster female education and gender equality. Because of the government’s actions, images of modern women crystallized within pop culture, novels, newspaper and government documents. These women held office jobs and moved freely in the city. These new women also formed a new educated class. A secular scholar, the *pannavoan*, emerged in Phnom Penh, home to the greatest number of schools and publishing houses in the country. These new social classes only added to the sense of change in a city where both individuals and ideas came and went; here the new fought with the old, the secular coated on top of the sacred, and women traveled more freely in intellectual and public

²⁰ Hinton, “Purity and Contamination in the Cambodian Genocide,” in *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, edited by Judy Ledgerwood, (DeKalb, IL: Southeast Asia Publications, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 2002), 64.

²¹ Derks writes that “working and living in Phnom Penh gives these young people the opportunity to become, if only temporarily and to a limited extent, part of a ‘modern’ urban world. This ‘modern’ experience plays an important role in young rural women’s perceptions of their work, life, and position in the city. Yet, in their desire to be modern women (*srey samay*), they struggle to find a proper balance between what they consider to be ‘old’ or ‘traditional’ in village life and what they see as ‘too modern’ in the city.” Annuska Derks, *Khmer Women on the Move*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 17.

²² “The modern bourgeois society,” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote, “sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, and new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Communist Manifesto,” in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Jodi Dean, *The Communist Manifesto*, (Pluto Press, 2017), 50, accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1k85dmc>. Marx considered the bourgeois, a social class that coalesced within feudal society, to be the main agents of the industrial revolution, which in turn created the working class. The emergence of a new social class is a part of modernization and industrialization. At this time, Cambodia remained a largely agricultural society. The *Sangkum* state actively pursued modernizing policies and new social groups emerged from this modernization.

spaces. This constant movement of individuals and ideas gave rise to a consciousness I term postcolonial Cambodian modernity.²³

The modernity described in this dissertation is an awareness expressed by Cambodian urban intellectuals of the ruptures, shifts, or loss they experienced in their current conditions. In their desire to be independent, they created and defined new forms: “modern” Khmer literature as opposed to “traditional” literature, rock n’ roll music instead of *champeï*, “modern” Khmer architecture versus “classical” designs. Through their complaints, essays, novels and editorials, Cambodian urban intellectuals recognized the new as distinct from what previously existed. Jürgen Habermas termed this awareness of rupture between the new and the old as “modernity.” He stressed modernity’s consciousness, the self-awareness that something new has occurred or changed.²⁴ Cambodian urban intellectuals throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were profoundly aware of the changes Khmer society underwent as a result of state policies. The wise were no longer revered, concrete buildings replaced ponds, and new forms of social interactions emerged out of new technologies. Whether their writings cheered or mocked such changes, these intellectuals were intensely conscious that something new was taking place. Ly Team

²³ The relationship between modernity and cities is a topic currently explored in Southeast Asian scholarship. Su-lin Lewis in her recent work on Penang, Bangkok and Rangoon states that “the city was the locus of modernity, a place where Asians came to feel, and become, modern.” In her 2011 article, Sylvia Nam considered the Cambodian capital to be “a key site of experimentation in what Paul Rabinow has called the ‘norms and forms’ of the modern condition. Within French colonial urbanism, Gwendolyn Wright has also identified the city as a privilege experimental terrain and a laboratory of modernity.” Su-Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 17 and Sylvia Nam, “From the Politics of Ruin to the Possibilities of Return,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (FALL 2011), 56-57, accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41758883>.

²⁴ Habermas stated that “the expression ‘modernity’ repeatedly articulates the consciousness of an era that refers back to the past of classical antiquity precisely in order to comprehend itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new.” Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity: An Unfinished Project,” in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, edited by Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib, (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1997), 39. He articulated this definition of modernity when he received the Adorno Prize in 1980, well after the *Sangkum* period had ended in Cambodia. He was not the first European scholar to ascribe a change in consciousness to his definition of modernity. As noted by Marshall Berman, Karl Marx described the ever emerging new as an important characteristic of bourgeois society: “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify.” Habermas also pointed to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Mind* as the origins of modernity’s consciousness when Hegel wrote that “It is surely not difficult to see that our time is a birth to a new period. The Spirit has broken with what was hitherto the world of its existence and imagination and is about to submerge this in the past; it is at work giving itself as well as the boredom that open up in the indeterminate apprehension of something unknown are harbingers of a forthcoming change. This gradual crumbling . . . is interrupted by the break of day, that like lightning, all at once reveals the edifice of the new world.” Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. by Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1992), 6. What makes Habermas’ articulation of modernity unique is not so much the idea of modernity as the consciousness of the new, but rather his insistence on using the word “modernity” (as opposed to “modernism” or “modernization”) to describe this self-awareness. Habermas cited Adorno, who wrote: “without the characteristic subjective mentality inspired by the New no objective modernity can crystallize at all.” So, for Habermas, “subjective mentality inspired by the New” is the defining characteristic of modernity since it allows for modernity’s coming into being. Habermas’s understanding invokes the Cartesian “I think therefore I am.” Modernity thought of itself as new, therefore it existed. I share in Habermas’ emphasis on using “modernity” to encapsulate this awareness of the new. While structural changes are important to its development, the consciousness or self-awareness of individuals experiencing these structural changes as something new and different from what has come before is crucial to modernity. Modernity is not only about the public sphere, factory lines, or print capitalism. It comes into being when people experience it and are aware of it as such.

Teng, a *Sangkum*-era literary critic, noted, “When we speak of a ‘new Cambodia,’ we are also speaking of an ‘old Cambodia’ or of a new historical period in our Cambodia.”²⁵ Therefore, because of the growing awareness amongst urban intellectuals of the new and the old, what occurred in Phnom Penh during *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* is best understood as “modernity.”

A Literature Review of *Sangkum*

How scholars and other commentators have understood *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* varies according to their projects. Scholars who have wanted to understand the rise of the Khmer Rouge regard *Sangkum* to be a period of dictatorial suppression at the hands of a mercurial Sihanouk. Commentators who wish to demonstrate the evils of American policies in Southeast Asia cast Sihanouk’s Cambodia in shining light. To the children of diasporic Cambodians, who needed to uncover the lost world of their parents, *Sangkum* has become a golden era of cosmopolitan experimentation and nation-building. This dissertation complicates, incorporates and reconciles these various images of *Sangkum*.

Steven Heder presented a particular vision of *Sangkum* in his monograph, *Cambodian Communism and the Vietnamese Model*. He examines the reasons why Cambodian communist leaders (Saloth Sar, Noun Chea, and Ieng Sary) agreed to engage in armed struggle rather than continue to take part in *Sangkum* politics while they gradually implemented their revolution. In explaining this shift in Cambodian communist thinking, Heder reinterprets the relationship between the Cambodian and Vietnamese communist parties. Vietnamese communist attitudes towards Cambodia have traditionally been described by historians as colonial and, more importantly, Cambodian communists also saw this as such, which explain the animus Khmer Communist leaders had towards Vietnam.²⁶ Instead of describing this relationship in terms of colonialism or antagonism, Heder suggests that imitation is a better word to illustrate the close relationship the Cambodian communist party had with the Vietnamese communist party up until 1966-1967, when the decision was made by Cambodian leaders to engage in violence. His narrative showed that even when Saloth Sar, Noun Chea, and Ieng Sary ignored Le Duan and other communist leaders’ advice to work with Sihanouk and co-opt his regime, they followed the logic Vietnamese communists used to justify their armed struggle in South Vietnam. Heder drew similarities between points made by Troung Chinh and the decision of Khmer communists to engage in armed struggle. Troung Chinh argued that revolutionary violence was the only path when the “movement was suppressed in an extremely cruel manner.”²⁷ Like the South

²⁵ យើងពេលពាក្យ << កម្ពុជាថ្មី >> ដូច្នេះ នាំឱ្យឃើញថាមាន << កម្ពុជាចាស់ >> ឬថាមានប្រវត្តិក្នុងកម្ពុជាយើង ។ Ly Team Teng,

“Literature in the Period of a New Cambodia (អក្សរសាស្ត្រក្នុងសម័យកម្ពុជាថ្មី),” *Kambuja Suriya*, no. 4, 1970.

²⁶ An example is one of Pol Pot’s speeches. In 1978, Pol Pot said “Vietnam has always dreamed of taking possession of Kampuchea since 1930, following its strategy of ‘Indochina Federation’ and its policy aiming at creating ‘only one country, one people under the leadership of one sole party’ in an ‘Indochina’ belonging to Vietnam. It wants to be become a big power in ‘Indochina’ and in Southeast Asia.” *Speech by Pol Pot Given on the 18th Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, (Phnom Penh: Depart of Press and Information: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1978), 9.

²⁷ Steve Heder, *Cambodian Communism and the Vietnamese Model: Volume 1 Imitation and Independence, 1930-1975*, (Bangkok: Silkworm Press, 2004), 125.

Vietnamese communists, Cambodian communists during the *Sangkum* period also faced a cruel regime. Heder described the period in this way:

The entire course of events since the early 1960s suggested there was no other option: the suppression of the Party's electoral bid and murder of Tou Samut in 1962, threats against Sar, Sary, Son Sen, and the KWP leaders in early 1963; exclusion of Khieu Samphan and other progressives from the government later that year; repeated waves of arrests of underground activists in the capital since 1965; the bloody suppression of rural uprising in Batdambang and the threat of imprisonment or worse against leftist intellectuals from the beginning of 1967. All this proved that the Sihanouk regime, and particularly its hard Lon Nol security core, was intensifying the kind of cruel terror, slaughter and extermination that signaled the regime's political bankruptcy.²⁸

The above description captured Heder's perception of the *Sangkum* period. It was a time of intense repression with little political freedoms and means of expression. While his monograph is not on the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, Heder's description of Sihanouk's regime matched how other historians have understood this period.

Like Heder, Ben Kiernan's scholarship is mostly concerned with describing how Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge came to control Cambodia. Since he worked with the same sources as Heder, Kiernan also characterizes the *Sangkum* as a regime that tolerated very little dissent. He described the harassment that communists often encountered during the time: "Non Suon and the others arrested with him were condemned to death; the sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. Chou Chet and his colleague received one-year goal terms."²⁹ The main difference between the narratives of Heder and Kiernan is their representation of the Party. Heder presents a unified party, one that agrees to follow or deviates from Vietnamese advice together. Kiernan, on the other hand, reveals the conflicts that resulted from members' contending interpretations of nationalism, colonialism and communism. He notes that one of the key cleavages that "distinguished most of the French-education radicals from the veterans of the independence struggle was, as before, their conception of the Sihanouk regime. The Pol Pot Group tended to be implacably opposed to it, as a backward, dictatorial monarchy." Kiernan believed that Saloth Sar, Ieng Sary, Hu Nim and Khieu Samphan were "infuriated by Sihanouk's 'feudal' characteristics, his personalized autocracy, and the fawning praise of him that was required of everyone in public life." The older group of Khmer communists, who joined the party in the early 1940s and had a closer relationship with the rural masses, "appreciated the fact of Sihanouk's popularity, and the fact that independence did actually mean something concrete for the peasants."³⁰ In spite of the real differences in their histories of Cambodian communism, Ben Kiernan and Steve Heder are remarkably similar in their periodization of *Sangkum*. Both start their histories in 1930 and believe 1966-1967 was a turning point in the history of Sihanouk's regime and Cambodian communism. It was the year that the Party decided to engage in armed revolt and when *Sangkum* devolved into violence. David Chandler in his work *The*

²⁸ Ibid., 125-126.

²⁹ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 197.

³⁰ Ibid., 191.

Tragedy of Cambodian History also marked 1966-1967 as a crucial moment in *Sangkum* history.³¹

The reason for these similarities between these scholars was their reliance on similar source materials. Scholars, such as Steve Heder, Ben Kiernan and David Chandler, have written about *Sangkum* en route to their explanation of the rise of the Khmer Rouge. The sources for their histories were unpublished and published autobiographies of Communist leaders, official documents written and published during the Khmer Rouge period, and the testimonies of tortured prisoners found in the Toul Sleng archives, as well as oral histories from refugees and communist soldiers. Because of their reliance on such sources, the representation and periodization of the *Sangkum* period found in the histories written by Heder, Kiernan and Chandler tilt towards how Khmer communists—a relatively small part of the country's entire population—experienced the period. Missing from the narratives of postcolonial Cambodia by Heder, Kiernan, Chandler and others who rely on the similar sources are the experiences of non-communist Cambodians, such as those who supported the Lon Nol regime or those who simply did not care about politics. The communist experience during the *Sangkum* era is only one part of a larger story.

In addition to Cambodian communists, another important group who shaped the historiography of *Sangkum* were American journalists who lived or visited Cambodia when they reported on Vietnam War. Because of Cambodia's proximity to Vietnam and its relative peace, journalists flocked to Phnom Penh. Once the war ended and the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975, these same journalists attempted to understand what had happened. Two such individuals were Anthony Paul and William Shawcross. Anthony Paul visited Cambodia in the waning days of the War and was evacuated a few days before Phnom Penh fell. He, along with John Barron, published one of the earliest accounts of the Killing Fields. *Murder in a Gentle Land* was published in 1977, when the Khmer Rouge were still in control of Cambodia. It was based on interviews of refugees who escaped to Thailand. The book tried to convey to the American public that something very bad was happening in Cambodia.

Barron and Paul presents pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia as an idyllic country torn apart by war: "The war had disrupted the economy, ravaged the countryside, visited chaos on the cities and uprooted much of the population and generally benighted a serene little country, which by many standards was delightful."³² Phnom Penh was also a special place. It was, they wrote, "one of the most beguiling and friendly cities in all of Asia, felicitously combining the distinctive charms of France and Cambodia...Phnom Penh had been a city of tranquility and orderliness, a city of gentle, laughing people, a city of striking women and good cuisine, a city of easy days and amiable nights."³³ William Shawcross echoes Barron and Paul in his description of Cambodia, "which held a special appeal to foreigners. Many of the journalists, tourists, and diplomats who visited it in 1950s and 1960s wrote of an idyllic, antique land unsullied by the brutalities of the modern world."³⁴ This version of pre-war Cambodia is markedly different from the experiences of Cambodian communists described in the works of Heder and Kiernan.

Another difference between the histories of Shawcross, Heder and Kiernan is the origins of violence during the *Sangkum*. Heder argues that the Khmer Rouge pursued violence as a means of resistance once they were confronted with Sihanouk's repressive regime. Kiernan

³¹ Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 159-191.

³² Barron and Paul, *Murder in a Gentle Land*, 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

³⁴ Shawcross, *Sideshow*, 36.

suggests that the removal of Sihanouk was always an objective amongst a subgroup of communist leaders, especially those who were educated in France. Shawcross, unlike Kiernan and Heder, locates the origins of the *Sangkum* decline in external forces. Although he acknowledged that Sihanouk's autocracy forced men and women to flee to Paris or the forest, Shawcross believed Sihanouk was faring well nonetheless.³⁵ It was American bombing that precipitated the March Coup and the decline. He maintains that "Sihanouk's balance of right against left became more precarious. The bombing was destabilizing him."³⁶ Shawcross' conclusion is based on his thorough examination of declassified documents from the United States Department of State, Department of Defense and the National Security Council. Because Shawcross did not read Khmer language materials, his history of Cambodia from 1950 to 1970 diverges from the narratives of Heder and Kiernan.

Although Shawcross, Heder and Kiernan provide competing narratives on the decline of *Sangkum*, some similarities exist between their works. All three showed the various ways foreign actors and ideas affected Cambodians' decisions. Heder effectively reveals how Cambodian communist leaders borrowed Vietnamese ideas of revolution and violence in charting their path. Kiernan argues that the ideas Khmer students absorbed in France influenced their understanding of democracy and monarchy. Shawcross shows how decisions made at the White House or Pentagon influenced the fate of the regime. Lastly, Shawcross, Heder and Kiernan write what I consider to be political history. The communist leaders, in Kiernan's and Heder's monographs, used and translated French and Vietnamese ideas to diagnose their society. They did so, however, to determine the best political strategy for a successful revolution. Likewise, Sihanouk, Kissinger or Nixon were concerned with how to maintain peace or win a war. The questions and preoccupations found in the works of Heder, Kiernan and Shawcross were overwhelmingly political.

In recent years, scholarship on the *Sangkum* has moved away from political history towards a study of arts and culture. The work that triggered this shift was *Cultures of Independence*, published in 2001 as part of a broader project to explore Cambodian cultural history through publications and exhibitions at the Reyum gallery.³⁷ The work is best described as a collection of primary source materials and interviews meticulously curated, edited and completed by Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan. It contains little narrative or analysis in keeping with Reyum's goal to showcase Khmer voices and sources. Readers are exposed to full-length articles from *Sangkum*-era newspapers and transcribed interviews with architects, filmmakers, producers, theater performers and musicians of the time. *Cultures of Independence* is in Khmer, French and English. With chapters entitled "New Khmer Architecture," "Modern Music" and "Modern Painting," the goal of the work is to invite others so that they "will be interested in the topics proposed here, and will pursue them in greater detail."³⁸ To Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, the *Sangkum* was a period "marked by a willingness to expand and incorporate new elements, looking both outside and inside the new independent nation for available methods and materials with which to build a modern culture."³⁹ When Sihanouk was mentioned by an interviewee, the focus was on his role as an advocate for Cambodian arts, a lover of music, or a

³⁵ Ibid., 51.

³⁶ Ibid., 113.

³⁷ Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, editors, *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2001).

³⁸ Ibid., viii.

³⁹ Ibid., vii.

director of films. Sihanouk, who appeared in the histories of Heder, Chandler and Kiernan and who jailed and assassinated opponents, was not seen. The work also did not mention Communist leaders, such as Saloth Sar, Noun Chea or Ieng Sary, or other political leaders, like Lon Nol or Sim Var. A careful reading of the sources provided hints of an oppressive state, but Sihanouk was not directly connected to its security apparatus. For instance, Chheng Pon described various political problems he encountered as a screenplay writer. The critical content of playwrights caused the police to often wait outside and monitor their work. Despite these types of clues littered throughout the work, *Cultures of Independence* showcases an animated Cambodian arts community that existed during *Sangkum*. This depiction is very different than the *Sangkum* found in the monographs by Kiernan, Heder, and Chandler. With the slight exception of Kiernan,⁴⁰ historians of postcolonial Cambodia have rarely mentioned the copious amount of art, films, or writings and other non-communist intellectual works Cambodians produced at this time.

Following up on Ingrid Muan and Ly Daravuth's focus on Cambodian art production during the 1950s and 1960s are two documentaries, Davy Chou's *Golden Slumbers* (2013) and John Pirozzi's *Don't Think I've Forgotten* (2014).⁴¹ The first documentary, *Golden Slumbers*, covers the popularity Cambodian cinema enjoyed during the periods before 1975 and highlights technical advances made by filmmakers of the time. It reveals how the director Yvon Hem was inspired to open his production company because of his time spent on the set of Marcel Camus' *L'oiseau de paradis* (1962) and how Ly Bun Yim regularly traveled to Hong Kong to purchase film equipment. These gems of information contribute to the overall image of *Sangkum* as a period of cosmopolitan experimentation. Any violence or loss that appears in the film are associated with the Khmer Rouge, the war, and the contemporary period. While *Golden Slumbers* concentrates on film, John Pirozzi's *Don't Think I've Forgotten* is interested in the development Cambodian rock n' roll, a genre that emerged during *Sangkum*. This film traced various types of rock n' roll musicians found in Cambodia, from soulful singers to guitar bands, such as Sinn Sisamouth and Drakkar Band, as well as their inspirations, such as the French singer Johnny Halliday, Afro-Cuban beats and the American Wilson Pickett. The documentary attempts to connect *Sangkum* society with its music. An eloquent scene was when Thida Mam, who grew up in Cambodia during the 60s and 70s, said, "There is no question that the new generation of music let me express the energy and all these wild things that I had in...in me. If I think of Pen Ron, the first image is of her singing the Monkiss. Ha. Ha. It's just free."

These two recent documentaries contributed to the image of the *Sangkum* as a golden age. Both films showed that the experimentation and vibrancy of *Sangkum* cinema and music

⁴⁰ In *How Pol Pot Comes to Power*, Kiernan described a play written and produced by a group of students outside of Phnom Penh. The play, titled the *Awakening of the Khmer Conscience*, "treated bolder social themes, in particular the gulf, so wide in Cambodia, between rich and poor. This theme was illustrated by a scene in which a beggar and a large dog (live) competed for crumbs thrown from a rich man's table...was really a series of sketches with running commentary from an old Khmer servitor. When he repeated such maxims as, 'All work is good,' and, 'Science is the great thing,' there was approving whispers among the audience and even applause..." Kiernan does not follow this vignette with an exploration of theater or on the apparent belief in science. In the next paragraph, he wrote that play's meaning "had become distorted and the respect for modern science had largely been abandoned along the way," connecting the significance of the play to only the Khmer Rouge. Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Comes to Power*, 175-176.

⁴¹ *Golden Slumbers*, or *Le sommeil d'or* (original title), directed by Davy Chou, featuring Yvon Hem, Dy Saveth, Liv Sreng (Vycky Films, Bophana Production, Araucania Films, 2011); *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock & Roll*, directed by John Pirozzi, featuring Norodom Sirivudh, Norodom Sihanouk, Sisowath Kossamak (Primitive Nerd, Harmony Productions, Pearl City, 2014).

came to a screeching halt in 1975, when the Khmer Rouge came to power. Both films juxtaposed scenes of guns, falling bombs and men in fatigues with crowded theaters, long-haired men, and dancing women. When describing his motivation of naming his documentary *Golden Slumbers*, Davy Chou explained, “There was this golden age of film that they wanted to destroy, but it was not completely dead. It’s just sleeping and waiting to be awakened.”⁴² For Davy Chou, who is the grandson to the famous Cambodian film producer, Vann Chan, the original intent of his film was to trace his family heritage. In capturing the rich history of Cambodian music and film during 50s, 60s and 70s, which both directors described as “lost” or “forgotten,” Davy Chou and John Pirozzi open up another avenue in the study of *Sangkum*.

Historians have yet to pursue these topics, but LinDa Saphan, a sociologist and visual artist, has written several scholarly articles examining 1960s music and Khmer society.⁴³ Her articles built upon the research she completed as an associate producer of *Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten*. While the film did not make this connection, Saphan links the rock n’roll music with modernity, which she defines as “the affair of the state.”⁴⁴ She posits that modern music could not have emerged without Sihanouk:

[His] modernization program provided a social context for musicians to thrive, creating new sounds and experimenting in new musical territory. Having the head of the government supporting and playing modern music himself gave it social value among the population. Without Norodom Sihanouk’s love for music, there certainly would not have been such a thriving scene then.

For Saphan, modern music was intertwined with and was an instrument of the state. In an article that compared the music from the 60s with that produced in contemporary Cambodia, she makes a captivating point about differences between urban dwellers and villagers, who had unequal access to music and its production during the *Sangkum* period. Saphan characterized the “Rocker” as a phenomenon found only within the community of urban bourgeois youth. Phnom Penh, according to her, was a hub for innovative music. Because of its recording studio, and large numbers of bars, universities and nightclubs, a musician had a greater opportunities to perform and make a living.⁴⁵ The high price of musical instruments, microphones, amplifiers, and records meant that musicians were more likely to come from the upper middle class of Khmer urban society.⁴⁶ Because Khmer rock n’ roll was tied to the urban middle class, Saphan determined that “Cambodian modernity followed the Euro-American path of being led by the

⁴² Brian Brooks, “Discover: Davy Chou Recovers a Lost Golden Age of Cinema,” *Retrospective*, April 18, 2013, accessed at <https://www.filmlinc.org/daily/discover-davy-chou-golden-slumbers-cambodia-cinema-khmer-rouge/>.

⁴³ LinDa Saphan, “Norodom Sihanouk and the Political Agenda of Cambodian Music, 1955–1970” (paper presented at the 64th annual International Institute for Asian Studies, June 2013), accessed at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281750696_Prince_Norodom_Sihanouk_and_the_Political_Agenda_of_Cambodian_Music_1955-1970; LinDa Saphan, “From Modern Rock to Postmodern Hard Rock: Cambodian Alternative Music Voices,” *Ethnic Studies Review* 35, nos. 1 and 2 (spring 2015): 23–40, accessed at <https://esr.ucpress.edu/content/35/1/23.full.pdf+html>; LinDa Saphan, “Gendered Modernity in Cambodia: The Rise of Women in the Music Industry,” *Khmer Scholar Journal*, accessed at <http://khmerscholar.com/gendered-modernity-in-cambodia-the-rise-of-women-in-the-music-industry/>.

⁴⁴ LinDa Saphan, “From Modern Rock to Postmodern Hard Rock,” 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁶ “Mol Kagmol from the band Baksei Chamkrung recounted that a guitar and a microphone cost the same as two motorcycles at that time.” *Ibid.*, 28.

bourgeoisie.”⁴⁷ Saphan’s recent body of works demonstrate a new direction in scholarship on the *Sangkum*, one more concerned with arts and culture than with the rise of Cambodian communism.⁴⁸ She casts the historical role of Sihanouk in a more positive light.⁴⁹

My dissertation interrogates and reconciles the images of the *Sangkum* found in these various works. It tempers the excitement and experimentation found in Cambodian literary and artistic production with the ways the state quelled criticism and with the concerns urban intellectuals had of these changes. While this dissertation supports the idea that this period should be characterized as modern and Cambodian,⁵⁰ it does not agree with LinDa Saphan’s suggestion that modernity during *Sangkum* was a top-down affair. It was not solely Sihanouk, the very rich or the government who articulated modernity. Instead, it was primarily Cambodia’s artists, musicians, writers and journalists who realized modernity as they sought to create a postcolonial Cambodian identity. Through their cultural production, urban intellectuals experienced and created a postcolonial, Cambodian modernity.

The works of these men and women also expressed the ruptures and alienation of modernity. Heder spoke of a deepening socio-political crisis in the late 1960s.⁵¹ Milton Osborne picked up on this as well when he wrote that a “malaise” existed during the *Sangkum*.⁵² Heder believed that this crisis drove the urban and peasant unrest of the period and fed into the communist justification of revolutionary violence. Heder relied on interviews to prove that such a crisis existed. Osborne’s source was his own observation from the time he spent in Cambodia. This dissertation complements their claims of a malaise in during the *Sangkum* period. The crisis, however, was also the result of modernity and the government’s policies to modernize Cambodia.

This dissertation traces the evolution of these new urbanites and new knowledges alongside that of Phnom Penh. By examining the intellectual discourse of its inhabitants and the development of Phnom Penh, this study shows the city was a crucible that generated many identities: the disgruntled government worker, the impoverished construction worker, the cyclo peddler, the liberated modern woman and the social activist intellectual. Urbanites argued amongst themselves, against the state and over the direction of the country. While the state manipulated the image of Phnom Penh into an ideal cosmopolitan city of luxury and modern conveniences, residents challenged this representation by drawing attention to its flaws. Phnom

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Her citations contain no mention of Kiernan, Heder, Chandler or Osborne. She does cite Trude Jacobsen in her article about female singers and gendered modernity in postcolonial Cambodia.

⁴⁹ She acknowledges that “for Cambodians who supported democracy and free speech, the moniker ‘Golden Era’ did not reflect the political reality of the time.” Ibid., 27. The moniker, I suggest, is problematic to more than those Cambodians, who supported democracy and free speech. Others at the time, such Communists, peasants (i.e. those who revolted in the Samlaut Rebellion), the Khmer Sereis, may all question this characterization of the *Sangkum* period.

⁵⁰ In the film, *Don’t think I’ve Forgotten*, Ouk Sam Art, a member of the Drakkar Band, said the “we sang foreign songs, but in a Khmer way. When you listen to it, it’s Khmer. Very Khmer.” In this scene, the film discussed the influence Santana had upon Cambodian music.

⁵¹ “Changes in the national political economy and social structure were taking place; the Sangkum regime was beset by a deepening socio-political crisis that generated a growing opposition...they believed the social justice would result inform he elimination what they saw as feudalism in Cambodian would mean ‘greater rights and freedoms and an end to politics dominated by personal networks of privileged rulers.’ Some were attracted by Marxism, Maoism, the Vietnamese revolution, or even the example of Che Guevara, other were in favour of parliamentary democracy.” Heder, *Cambodian Communism and the Vietnamese Modern*, 101-102.

⁵² Osborne, *Before Kampuchea*, 77.

Penh was a contradictory site of liberation and alienation, of great wealth and beautifully designed buildings alongside intense poverty and economic inequalities. These realities were very much evident in urban writings and novels. These cultural works engendered a modern consciousness within postcolonial Cambodia. While these sensibilities were not cohesive and found their voices in different intellectual and political movements, such as communism, existentialism and republicanism, they nonetheless expressed a changing social order in *Sangkum* Cambodia.

Structure and Sources

Each chapter within this dissertation examines state-enacted policies, the social consequences of these policies and the discursive reaction of novelists, journalists or filmmakers. Through these sources, this dissertation narrates the various interactions Cambodians had with the capital and how these encounters contributed to their understanding of a postcolonial modernity. Chapter 1 examines Cambodia's brief experimentation with parliamentary democracy. The failure of parliamentary democracy during the five years immediately following the Second World War would shape Cambodian politics for the next two decades, the period identified as *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Fear percolated among Cambodians during the First Indochina War, despite it being a mostly Vietnamese-French affair. This insecurity, coupled with democracy's inherent chaos, provided Norodom Sihanouk with the reason he needed to seize power and undermine parliamentary democracy. Sihanouk fashioned the *Sangkum* into a "democracy" and determined the vision of postcolonial Cambodia. This chapter also emphasizes the importance of intellectuals as a social and political force, who formed the base of the Democratic party and clamored for independence.

Chapter 2 turns to cultural history, incorporating folktales, film and literature into its narrative. I trace the changing relationship Cambodians had with knowledge as the modern Khmer intellectual, the *pannavaon*, emerged and as Phnom Penh modernizes under the guidance of Norodom Sihanouk. This chapter describes three parallel narratives: the development of Phnom Penh into the capital of a newly independent country, the rise of the Khmer novel (*broloam lok*), and the emergence of the intellectual. The arc of this cultural history moves from forest to city, sacred to secular, prehistory to history. Together, these three stories illustrate the transition of Cambodian urban attitudes toward the sacred and the secular. This chapter defines the *pannavaon* as a man or woman who received secular and utilized knowledge instrumentally to modernize society.

Chapter 3 focuses on women as artists and intellectuals and their new urban realities as seen through Phnom Penh's bars, rock music, and short skirts. I argue that urban women had a heightened experience of modernity since they underwent the most radical and socially contested changes during this time period. Because female suffrage was a cornerstone of Sihanouk's program to legitimize his "democratic" regime, he rewrote the constitution to give women the right to vote and to stand for elections, as well as enacted educational reforms. As a result, a new type of woman emerged in Khmer society, entering new artistic, political, social, and intellectual spheres, and changing gender relations and social patterns. The lives of women changed, from heightened heterosexual interactions to involvement in politics to new forms of leisure activities. Cambodian thinkers and writers—male and female—applauded or disparaged these changes, either as a sign of continuing progress or as a negative influence from the West.

The last chapter analyzes the writings of one prominent Khmer intellectual, Soth Polin, and his discontent with modernity. Using his characters' alienation as a backdrop, the chapter

traces the decline of Norodom Sihanouk and the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. The fractured masculinities of Soth Polin's protagonists challenged the state's vision of postcolonial Cambodia as an island of peace in turbulent Southeast Asia. Soth Polin's literary works exposed the reality of urban life and, in doing so, showed a disillusioned postcolonial Phnom Penh.

Through these chapters and their focus on Khmer writings from the 1940s and 1970s, my dissertation offers a comprehensive picture of urban life during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* period. It revises previous understandings, misunderstandings, and memories of the period. Instead of a "golden age," the period should be appreciated as a confluence of postcolonial change, identity formation, ruptures and fragmentation, alienation and optimism.

This dissertation relies heavily on Khmer writings produced between the late 1940s and early 1970s. I translated several Khmer passages so that readers may gain some appreciation of the texts from the period. These writings have remained largely unacknowledged and untranslated. In her work anthologizing Cambodian literature, Sharon May has written of the misperception that Cambodia is "just not a very literate culture."⁵³ Ben Kiernan has contributed to this perception when he described the educational advances made during the *Sangkum* as having only yielded "a mass of pseudo-intellectuals." He claimed that "no serious work of history, politics, economics, or literature" appeared in the Khmer language from 1954 to 1970."⁵⁴ This claim is false. It ignores the richness of Cambodian modern literature—how *Sangkum*-era writers experimented with various genres, translated foreign ideas into Khmer and created their own forms.⁵⁵ An examination of the rich variety Khmer writings produced during the *Sangkum* era has enabled this dissertation to capture how Cambodians reacted to their changing environments. It also shows the ways Cambodians navigated and articulated these changes. This history takes seriously the historical value of modern Khmer writings.

⁵³ Sharon May, "In the Shadow of Angkor: A Search for Cambodian Literature," *Manoa*, Volume 16, Number 1, 2004, accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1353/man.2004.0013>, 27.

⁵⁴ Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 1. To be fair, Kiernan is citing another scholar when he wrote these words. He even acknowledged that Cambodians wrote over 200 novels during this time. Yet, for him to include such a characterization intellectual works produced at this time explains why he and perhaps others failed to examine them and to take them seriously as historical sources. This characterization of Khmer writings also supported his depictions of Sihanouk's repressive regime. As he wrote, "from 1955, Sihanouk's regime frequently banned Khmer newspaper, harassed their editors, and suppressed nearly all Khmer-language books exploring history, politics, economics, and even literature. It trained another generation of students in the French medium, still divorced from their country's recent history and much of its vernacular culture." Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, xvii. His characterization of the period ignored how Cambodian novelists and intellectuals were actively and intentionally writing in Khmer. They wanted to demonstrate the value of Khmer literature.

⁵⁵ As examples, see Khun Srun, *The Accused* and "I hate the Word and Letter *Ta*," in Sharon May, *In the Shadow of Angkor*, 55-59 and 90-91, accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/8982>.

Chapter 1

Contesting Democracies, Creating *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*

On March 2, 1955, Sihanouk sent a letter to a Phnom Penh radio station with instructions to open the envelope at noon.¹ Inside the letter was a tape that, when played, announced his abdication. Just two years earlier, Sihanouk negotiated France into granting Cambodia independence. This independence was recognized internationally with the signing of the 1954 Geneva Accords, which ended French colonialism in Southeast Asia and dissolved Indochina. Given his success in achieving liberation, Sihanouk's choice to abdicate appeared radical and ill-advised. In his 1976 autobiography, Sihanouk listed several reasons for his decision, the foremost of which was his frustration with the symbolic nature of his position as king: "The warring political factions within Cambodia wanted to make me a mere figurehead," he explained, "this was the reason for my decision to renounce the symbolic role."² This chapter traces the events that led to Sihanouk's decision and, more importantly, discusses the consequence of his actions for the development of Cambodian democracy. Sihanouk profoundly transformed the evolution of democratic institutions and the establishment of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (The Community the People Favors) marked the failure of constitutional democracy in Cambodia.³ Rather than blame the lack of democratic maturation within the Cambodian population, I argue that a poorly-crafted Constitution, intra-party politics and the instability wrought by the French Indochina War explained why constitutional democracy failed in Cambodia.

Before 1955, Cambodian peasants encountered roving bands of Khmer Issarak and Vietminh soldiers, who clashed with French colonial forces during the First Indochina war (1945-1954). In the capital and major cities, Cambodians encountered another battle: various political parties vied for votes during elections, while Sihanouk, then King of Cambodia, fought with the Democratic Party, who dominated the National Assembly. After his abdication in 1955, however, Sihanouk wrestled power away from the Democratic Party, consolidated control, and firmly established *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* as an original political system. Upon giving up the throne, Sihanouk was able to enter politics as a candidate competing for control of the National Assembly. Once *Sangkum* won the elections, Sihanouk set about changing the nature of Cambodian democracy. Sihanouk manipulated the meaning of democracy, broadened his appeal to the masses, decimated rival political parties by incorporating them into *Sangkum* and changed the Constitution to weaken the National Assembly. By doing so, he ensured that when a clash between the legislative and executive branch occurred, the executive triumphed over the legislative. The decline of the National Assembly as the seat of legislative power, the strengthened position of the Prime Minister, and the disappearance of a multi-party system altered the trajectory of Cambodian democracy. Sihanouk constructed his vision of a modern, independent Cambodia at the expense of a vibrant democratic tradition.

¹ Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 158.

² Ibid., 159.

³ "The Community the People Favors" is not the traditional English translation of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. *Sangkum* is often translated at the Popular Socialist Community, but I argue later in this chapter that "Popular Socialist Community" is a mistranslation of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and fails to capture the populist – not socialist – justification behind Sihanouk's maneuverings.

Post-War Cambodia: A Period of Constitutional Democracy

Cambodia, like the rest of Southeast Asia, experienced tumultuous changes during the Second World War. With the backing of the Japanese, recently appointed King Norodom Sihanouk declared independence. On March 12, 1945, he issued *Kram* 1 NS, which allowed the King to assume the powers of the Résidence Supérieur, and *Kram* 3 NS, which rendered the 1863 treaty between Cambodia and France moot. The 1863 agreement had provided the legal justification for the establishment of a French protectorate over Cambodia.⁴ With the agreement nullified and French colonial administrators imprisoned by Japanese troops, Cambodian nationalists, led by Son Ngoc Thanh, began to create their own government.⁵ For example, *Kram* 88 NS, passed on August 14, 1945, created the position of Prime Minister, who answered to the King and governed the country.⁶ Under this *Kram*, Son Ngoc Thanh became Cambodia's first prime minister. The formal surrender of Japan a day later, however, short-circuited this process and hastened the return of the French. Reeling from the humiliation of its defeat to German and Japanese forces during the war, France sought to restore its former glory and reestablish its empire. While they faced heavy resistance from multiple anticolonial Vietnamese groups, the French received a more amenable response from Cambodian elites, who wanted a compromise. They agreed that the country could join the French-created Associated States of Indochina, as long as Cambodians maintained control over domestic policies and continued the movement towards self-governance.⁷ Khmer elites appeared to cooperate with the French, but they were as preoccupied with independence and self-determination as the Vietnamese. They instead chose a different path, believing violence was not the only means to independence. With this belief in mind, Sihanouk signed a temporary *modus vivendi* with France on January 1946.⁸ So while French and Vietnamese relations gradually deteriorated into an open, armed conflict, Khmer elites and French administrators engaged in a political dance to craft a constitutional democracy in Cambodia.

Cambodian Notions of Democracy

⁴ Claude-Gilles Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge* (Paris : Librairie Dalloz, 1965), 39

⁵ Son Ngoc Thanh was one of the founders of *Nagaravatta*, otherwise known as *Nokor Vat*. It was the first Khmer language newspaper in Cambodia. Many historians, including David Chandler, credit this newspaper as the beginning of Cambodian nationalism. The founders and writers of *Nagaravatta* would later participate in what is now called the Umbrella Revolt. After this revolt, *Nagaravatta* was shut down, its other founder sent to Paulo Condore and Son Ngoc Thanh escaped to Japan. When the Japanese imprisoned the French, Son Ngoc Thanh returned and he, along with King Sihanouk, declared Cambodian independent. For more information, please refer to David Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, (Boulder : Westview Press, 1996), 169-172 and Bunchan Mol, *Political Prison* (គុកនរោត្តម), (Phnom Penh: Building No. 79, Vithei Achar Heim Chiev, 1971).

⁶ Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 41.

⁷ Som Sary, *La grande figure de Norodom Sihanouk telle qu'elle est dépeinte par les documents de valeur historique découverts dans les archives du Palais royal*, (Phnom Penh: Impr. du Palais royal, 1955), 7; Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 147; Pouk Chhay, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge: Essai d'Analyse Sociologique, 1945-1965* (Phnom Penh : Faculté de Droit et des Sciences Economique, 1966), 139.

⁸ Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 42.

Democracy was a powerful concept in Southeast Asia after the Second World War. It enjoyed, as Herbert Feith describes, almost universal favor.⁹ A majority of Indonesian political parties, for instance, “were unreservedly for democracy, but the meanings into which they read this symbol were by no means identical to those attached to constitutional democracy found in the contemporary West.”¹⁰ In Indonesia, according to Feith, “the assumption was general that democracy implied parliament, parties and elections. On the other hand, there was only one specific reference to majority rule and there were none to minority rights, the rights of individuals and institutionalized opposition.”¹¹ Indonesians seemed to have selectively borrowed and incorporated different aspects of democracy. Similar to post-war Indonesian, Cambodians had varied attitudes towards democracy. In his 1957 novel, titled *Rural Teachers*, Im Thok fictionalizes a conversation between Leang, Som and Hom. Through the character Hom, a middle-aged farmer facing possible arrest, the reader is provided a glimpse into the plight of rural peasants under French colonialism. To lessen the burdens on peasants, Hom advocates for a “true” democracy, which would guarantee freedoms and allow for the election of village officials.¹² His understanding of democracy also entailed the formation of farmer collectives to shield against profiteering intermediaries and the expansion of schools to accommodate children, as well as illiterate, old men and women.¹³ “Teachers would be encouraged to create a curriculum in accordance with true democratic principles. Libraries, stocked with books for citizens to borrow, should be created as well.”¹⁴ Democracy for Hom meant elections on the local level, protection from exploitative practices and the right to education for all, combining political freedoms with ideas of social and economic justice. *Rural Teachers* contained no mentions of representatives or national legislative bodies, the hallmarks of democracy in the West.

Slightly different from the vision expressed by the character Hom, the publishing house, Nop Sophan, printed a study manual that promoted another version of democracy. This 1956 anonymous and rather long essay, entitled “On Democracy,” was originally distributed in *Precheachon* [The People], a newspaper known for its support of communism.¹⁵ The goal of the study guide was to correct those individuals who used “democracy” as a propaganda tool to mislead and confuse the public. The manual was intended to help the public understand “the

⁹ Herbert Feith, *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 38-39.

¹¹ Ibid., 39.

¹² ខាងនយោបាយការពារនិងពង្រីកសិទ្ធិសេរីភាព លទ្ធិប្រជាធិបតេយ្យជាក់ស្តែងពីតៗ អោយប្រជាជន អ្នកស្រុក មានអំណាចបោះឆ្នោតជ្រើសរើសរបៀបគ្រប់គ្រងឃុំ ភូមិរបស់ខ្លួន។ Im Thok, *Rural Teachers* (អ្វីៗគ្រប់គ្រងស្រុកស្រែ), (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Youth Education and Sports, 2015), 16. This book was republished multiple times by the government, since it is a part of the curriculum. The foreword written by Im Thok is dated 1953.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ ឧបត្ថម្ភលោកគ្រូបង្រៀនអោយជួយរៀបចំដាក់កម្មវិធីសិក្សា របៀបប្រជាធិបតេយ្យពិតប្រាកដ។ បង្កើតបណ្ណាល័យ ទិញសៀវភៅអោយប្រជាជនខ្ចីបើល។ Ibid., 17

¹⁵ For more information on *Precheachon*, please refer to Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 158.

true direction of democracy.”¹⁶ According to the author, democracy was part of a movement that uplifted the people, enabling them to become fully-liberated individuals freed from oppression and injustice.¹⁷ He suggested that a democracy was a natural outcome of an inevitable struggle between opposing economic forces, the exploiters and the exploited.¹⁸ Most of the essay was devoted to a teleological narrative of democracy, its gradual evolution from slave and feudal societies to its birth in capitalism.¹⁹ According to the author, democracy was a form of government that ensured

the political and social involvement of all, the protection of property, national sovereignty, the rights of individual citizens to hold a position in a public government, individual’s responsibility to obey the law, which is an expression of general will, tolerance for difference of opinions and religions, freedom of expression and right to work, taxes are just and willingly paid.²⁰

The author understood citizens to be the guardians of individual freedoms. “Ultimately, they have the personal responsibility to ardently protect the two freedoms: freedom of religion and the freedom of speech and to publish.”²¹ Another important concept within this author’s notion of democracy was equality. Men must be equal to women, he argued: “if a man has the right to anything, then women have the right to do it as well.”²² It also meant that everyone, from the farmers and workers to ministers and bureaucrats, had an equal stake in the government and thus the same rights.²³ The author’s interpretation of democracy appeared to be routine; it had all the usual markers of Western democracy. It required an active and informed population as well protected the rights of its citizens and treated them equally.

However, communism weighed heavily on the author, which was apparent in his narrative on democracy. Like history, democracy was the result of class struggles, between those who own the means of production and those who labored and produced. More notably, democracy was a government that manipulated and deceived a majority of its citizens. Because democracy owed its birth to capitalism, it must safeguard the profits of the bourgeois.²⁴ He

¹⁶ *On Democracy*, Foreword and 4, Box 215, National Archives of Cambodia (hereafter shorted to NAC), Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ ទើបប្រជាជនត្រូវដកល់ទុកជាករណីយកិច្ចប្រសើរជាងទៅទៀត ត្រូវដកល់ទុកជាកាតព្វកិច្ចផ្ទាល់ខ្លួននៅកិច្ចការពារយ៉ាងម៉ឺងម៉ាត់ នៃសេរីភាពទាំងពីរខាងលើនេះ (សេរីភាពខាងជំនឿនិងសេរីភាពខាងនិយាយស្តីបោះពុម្ពផ្សាយ) *Ibid.*, 33-34.

²² *Ibid.*, 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁴ The word the author uses to describe the bourgeois in Khmer is ធនិក, but this word must be a misspelling. There’s no such word like this. Although he consistently misspelled the word throughout the essay, he must have meant ធនិន, which is the normal word for “bourgeois, wealthy man, merchant, financier.” This word and meaning can be found in Headley’s 1977 and 1997 dictionary, as well as the Buddhist Institute’s 1967 dictionary. See Robert Headley, et.al., *Cambodian-English Dictionary*, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1977); Robert

noted that “the National Assembly and the Royal Council [the Cambodian version of a Senate] cares only for the interest of the bourgeois, who are powerful enough to find ways and send their representatives to control both houses. You can see that the representatives are servants to the merchant class and use every trick to oppress the workers and farmers.”²⁵ So while the author of this study guide understood the basic principles of democracy and its attempt at political equality, he ultimately was critical of its project. For him, democracy was too entangled with a small class of people, namely the bourgeois, and must be overthrown by a coalition of workers and farmers. At the end of the essay, he advised workers and farmers to look after their own interests and join an organization to create a more just society.²⁶

The anonymous writer of this essay and Hom, the character in Im Thok’s novel, encapsulated some of the differing views on democracy. While some believed it to be an instrument of good that would help the people, others were much more ambivalent. The essayist, like other Khmer intellectuals, was suspicious of democracy and considered it to be a tool of the merchant class. Another example, Pouk Chhay, citing French writer and politician Georges Cogniot, argued that the democratic character of a regime could not be judged by the presence of conflicting political parties or the existence of an opposition in parliament. Rather one should ask who controls the means of production, whose interest does the state defend and who does it serve? The answers to these questions, according to Pouk, clearly demonstrated that popular sovereignty did not exist in liberal democratic or parliamentary states.²⁷ While these intellectuals understood the benefits of democracy, they were also cognizant of its many faults. Despite their differences, these two works, along with the political parties examined later in the chapter, show that democracy attracted the attention of Cambodians even as they did not ascribe to a unified understanding of democracy. As Cambodians chose their form of government, the democratic tradition appealed to many members of the community.

Even as they debated the functions and goals of democracy, a more immediate question concerned Cambodians: were they socially and culturally ready for a new political system? Since Cambodia experienced little actual fighting during the Second World War, it came out relatively unscathed. However, the French had long neglected Cambodia in favor of its other Indochinese colonies. Furthermore, during the years of the war, France was preoccupied with its problems on the European continent; the needs of Cambodia paled when faced with a Nazi invasion. In September 1946, Philippe Deviller of *Le Monde* reported that the Cambodian budget “was burdened with considerable reconstruction expenses” needed to restore a state that has been “poorly maintained for the last 5 years.” He noted that “for the future, Cambodia relies heavily on French financial and technical aid.”²⁸ Because of this reliance, France wanted a strong role as Cambodia “consolidates its institutions and fully develops the resources of its economy.”²⁹ Some Cambodians supported this position. An unidentified Cambodian believed that Cambodia could only attain happiness and prosperity through “collaboration with France, a

Headley, Rath Chim, and Ok Soeum, *Modern Cambodian-English Dictionary* (Kensington, Md.: Dunwoody Press, 1997); *Cambodian Dictionary*, (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1967).

²⁵ *On Democracy*, 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁷ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 110.

²⁸ *Le Monde*, 8/9 September 1946, Box 10, Haut-Commissariat du Cambodge Collection (hereafter shortened to HCC), Archives nationales d’outre-mer (hereafter shortened to ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, France.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

country which has given the world, thanks to the [1789] Revolution, the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.”³⁰ He then compared Cambodia to “Poland, a prey caught between the descendants of Gia Long and the sons of Phraya Roeung.”³¹ Only France, he thought, could rescue Cambodia. Prince Sisowath Monireth was another person, who held that Cambodia needed France. He believed that “the people were not ‘politically’ educated and that a sudden passage from a quasi-feudal regime to a democratic one will cause serious instability.” He, like the French, preferred a gradual implementation of democratic practices.³²

Constitutional Commission

After its return and the signing of the temporary Cambodian-French *modus vivendi*, the colonial government created a Franco-Khmer Studies Commission to consider a modern constitution for Cambodia.³³ As expressed by one of its members, Prince Monireth, the Commission believed there was “an absence of political maturity among the majority of the Khmer people.”³⁴ “It was impossible,” the Commission asserted, “to suddenly install democratic institutions in Cambodia.”³⁵ The government it created could only be loosely labeled as a constitutional democracy. It would have a National Assembly, as well as a Council of Ministers and a prime minister, and the king remained as head of the government. However, the National Assembly members would not be elected by direct universal suffrage. Article 51 of the proposed constitution stated that while “waiting for the evolution of the country to permit the election of the National Assembly by universal suffrage, the members are to be elected by provincial advisors, who themselves are chosen by commune advisors, who are then elected by universal suffrage.”³⁶ This article embodied the guiding principle of the Commission: Cambodia needed to gradually implement democratic practices. Cambodians were to practice with voting on the commune level until the colonial government felt they were ready for a true democracy. In addition to not having the ability to directly vote for their Assembly members, Cambodians also would not have a fully-empowered National Assembly. Legislative power remained in the hands of the King, according to Article 17.³⁷ In fact, the only real power the National Assembly had, according to Article 69, was it “could present to the King proposals and counter-proposals in the form of opinions.”³⁸ The National Assembly, as proposed by the Franco-Khmer Commission, could not initiate or modify laws; it had only an advisory role. The government created by the Franco-Khmer Commission’s constitution would have been a constitutional democracy in name only.

The Franco-Khmer Commission’s recommendations would have restored the king and the colonial government to the same positions they held before the Japanese interregnum. The

³⁰ Summary of Political Views on the Situation in Cambodia, Box 10, HCC, ANOM. The Cambodian person in this document was not named. The author, a Sûreté agent, was simply reporting a conversation he had a Cambodian person.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Sisowath Monireth, “Mes Articles,” (Phnom Penh: Imprimerie du Palais Royal, 1950), found in Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 141

³³ Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 44

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 45

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Commission's constitution was not ratified however, because King Sihanouk encountered political pressure against these proposals.³⁹ The recommendations did not sit well with many influential Cambodians, especially a "group of young, French-educated intellectuals, who constituted a dynamic force" in Cambodian society.⁴⁰ Just two month after the French return, the Sûreté heard rumblings of discontent in Phnom Penh. Some Cambodians "regret that Son Ngoc Thanh did not continue to direct the affairs of the country. These same Cambodians criticize the King and Prince Monireth for agreeing too quickly to a treaty with the French."⁴¹ In another instance, a French commander visited the governor of Kandal province and overheard a secretary, Vann Roth, asked his colleagues, "what are these French doing here? They should be kicked and thrown out."⁴² On January 13, 1946 in the streets of Phnom Penh, an incident occurred between soldiers in the Royal Cambodian Army and French Sûreté agents. "Around 6 o'clock in the evening, some 50 Royal Cambodian Army soldiers invaded O'Russey, a neighborhood in Phnom Penh. In groups of 2 and 3, they manned the intersections, making threats against the general Vietnamese living in the quarter and the Sûreté agents in particular. The Vietnamese population fled and barricaded themselves in their homes, only leaving when there were no more incidents. These soldiers retired at around 5 in the morning."⁴³ The chief of the French police blamed this incident of nationalist propaganda that "excited [these soldiers] against our agents, [who they] considered to be instruments of French authority in Cambodia."⁴⁴ Cambodians also "did not favorably receive the departure of Cambodian soldiers to Saigon. They see this as a path towards a return of the old regime and question the existence of a real autonomy" in Cambodia.⁴⁵ As ordered by the temporary Franco-Khmer government, these Cambodian troops were sent to Cochinchina to support the French.⁴⁶ The proposed constitution was further proof that Cambodian self-governance was only a myth. Some of these discontented Cambodians now filled the ranks of the newly created Khmer Issarak, which was an anti-French movement that advocated for complete independence. In February of 1946, the Sûreté reported that Battambang had become a refuge of "Son Ngoc Thanh partisans who fled Cambodia, Cambodians who condemn the [current] politics, and army deserters."⁴⁷ The western provinces of Cambodia, namely Battambang and Siem Reap, were under Thai control in 1946. The Thai government funded and sheltered the Khmer Issarak movement.⁴⁸ All these factors – the public

³⁹ Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 46

⁴⁰ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 141.

⁴¹ Sûreté Fédérale Au Cambodge, Rapport mensuel – Mois de Mars 1946, No.693/PS-C, Box 11, HCC, ANOM.

⁴² Sûreté Fédérale Au Cambodge, Note Quotidienne d'Information du 5 Février 1946, Box 10, HCC, ANOM.

⁴³ Le Chef des Services Français de Police, à Monsieur le Commissaire de la République à Phnom Penh, Incidents Provoqués par des Tirailleurs Cambodgiens contre la Sûreté Française, 14 Janvier 1946, Box 10, HCC, ANOM.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Letter from the Chief of National Police to His Royal Highness the Minister of the Interior, January 18, 1949, Box 10, HCC, ANOM.

⁴⁶ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 151.

⁴⁷ Sûreté Fédérale Au Cambodge, *Rapport mensuel – Mois de Février* 1946, No.446/PS-C, Box 11, HCC, ANOM.

⁴⁸ The Khmer Issarak is a diverse move group of individuals with contrasting and complementary goals. To label them as one unified group is a mistake. One large group within the Khmer Issarak was led by Son Ngoc Minh, who was a member of the Indochinese party and worked with the Viet Minh to fight against the French. However, the Khmer Issarak originally started in along the western border of Cambodian and enjoyed the early support of the Thai government in their struggles against the French. While the Thai government later withdrew their support, a group of Issrak led by Son Ngoc Thanh continued to fight, but refused to collaborate with the Viet Minh. For more

discontent and the growing armed uprising along the borders – caused King Sihanouk to reject ratification of the Franco-Khmer Commission proposals.⁴⁹

Instead of endorsing the proposed constitution, King Sihanouk sought to pacify the discontent and gain approval from the people. On April 13, 1946, he announced the creation of a provisional Constitutional Assembly, whose purpose was to “understand the constitution created by the Franco-Khmer Commission. [The provisional Constitutional Assembly] will, in complete freedom, express its opinions on the diverse aspects of this constitution and present their observations on what must be done.” The King will then “study these opinions and observations to determine the best interest of the Nation, and the definitive text of the Constitution that We will endow to Our people.”⁵⁰ This proclamation was an important point in the development of a constitutional democracy in Cambodia. Bowing to pressure from the intellectual class, Sihanouk allowed a larger body composed of only Cambodians and elected by Cambodians to shape the constitution.⁵¹ This pressure demonstrated a number of Cambodians’ desire for an autonomous government freed from French control. However, despite this apparent step towards self-governance and a constitutional democracy, the King remained the ultimate arbitrator of what type of government Cambodia will have. As the last line noted, the King will “endow” the constitution to his people. The National Assembly was only working within the framework King Sihanouk provided. Even then, the representatives only had an advisory role. This moment marked the beginning of a power struggle between Sihanouk and the National Assembly, especially as the National Assembly began to demand its proper role in a constitutional democracy.

Following this royal proclamation, the King issued a series of *kram* that established the essential rights found in a constitutional democracy. *Kram* 166 NS and *Kram* 167 NS recognized freedom of press and association.⁵² These two declarations were particularly crucial to the upcoming election, which was the first meaningful, nation-wide election to be held in Cambodia. Cambodians needed to have the freedom to create political associations and to campaign without fear of government reprisals. Another important law for the election was *Kram* 185 NS, passed on May 31, 1946, which established direct universal, male suffrage. Any male over 21, who was not a member of the armed forces or a monk, was eligible to vote. He

information please refer to Vandy Koan, *Dreams and Realities*, (Phnom Penh: Mou Seth, 2012), 135 and Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, 174.

⁴⁹ This claim is a significant departure from previous interpretations of these events. If we were to believe Sihanouk and others’ accounts, Sihanouk’s generosity and care of the people caused him to not ratify the Franco-Khmer Commission’s constitution. Please see Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, Sam Sary, *Le grande figure of Norodom Sihanouk*, and Pouk Chhay, *Le pouvoir politique au Cambodge*, David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, for more information. All these accounts locate the origins of Cambodia’s constitutional democracy with Sihanouk and his actions. While he was an important figure, such an overemphasis on his role ignores how bottom-up social forces caused Sihanouk to choose the path he did. The closest we get to a recognition of these bottom-up forces is Claude-Gilles Gour’s *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*. Even then, Gour only states that Sihanouk chose to go to the people because of “political reasons,” never stating exactly what those political reasons were. Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 46.

⁵⁰ Sam Sary, *Le grande figure de Norodom Sihanouk*, 9. The entire text of April 13, 1946 Royal Proclamation is pages 8-11 of Sam Sary’s collection. Excerpt of the Proclamation can also be found in Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 47.

⁵¹ Originally, the provisional Constitutional Assembly members were to be elected by indirect suffrage, but, for fear of corruption and perhaps further protest, the government chose direct suffrage. Ibid., 48.

⁵² Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 142.

must not have committed any of the 32 crimes that caused him to forfeit his right to vote, however.⁵³ The *kram* were issued to prepare for the election, which was set to take place on September 1, 1946. This election determined the composition of the provisional Constitutional Assembly, which would voice opinions on the proposed constitution. Three major political parties quickly formed and vied for votes during the summer of 1946.

Major Political Parties

The first and most organized was the Democratic Party (គណៈបក្សប្រជាធិបតេយ្យ). Led by Prince Yuthevon and Ieu Koeus, the Democrats attracted support from intellectual, young bureaucrats, and teachers. They also gained some followers from middle merchants located in cities and from rural instructors, like monks and *achars* (temple leaders who were once monks).⁵⁴ According to the Sûreté, the nationalists, who long associated with *Nagaravatta* and Son Ngoc Thanh, also supported the Democrats.⁵⁵ The leaders of the Democratic Party were “principally intellectuals, high functionaries [in the colonial government] and businessmen who had pursued their studies abroad” in France or Vietnam.⁵⁶ Prince Yuthevon, for instance, had spent half of his life in France, joined the French Socialist Party, married a Frenchwoman, and received a doctorate in mathematics.⁵⁷ Other members of the Democratic Party’s central committee received degrees from abroad. Chean Vam received his license de philosophie from France, while Ieu Koeus received a degree from the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce at Hanoi. Huy Kanthol graduated from Collège Sisowath in Phnom Penh and traveled to Hanoi to receive his diplôme from l’Ecole Supérieure de Pédagogique in 1931. He later received a scholarship to study in France for five months.⁵⁸ While not all central committee members studied abroad, such as Sim Var and Nou Hach, they were all educated within the Cambodian French system. Almost all attended the Collège, later to become the Lycée, Sisowath.⁵⁹ These men exemplified the group of young, French-educated intellectuals, who challenged the king and the Franco-Khmer Commission. They coalesced around the Democratic Party, whose platform was “to cultivate and instruct its members in democratic ideology, which has been adopted by almost the entire civilized world, holding however to the particularities of our country and its inhabitants.”⁶⁰

⁵³ *Le Monde*, 8/9 September 1946.

⁵⁴ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 144.

⁵⁵ Sûreté Fédérale Au Cambodge, Rapport mensuel – Mois de Mai 1946, No.1141/PS-C, Box 11, HCC, ANOM.

⁵⁶ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 143.

⁵⁷ For more information, please refer to Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, p. 30, Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, p. 57, and Sûreté Fédérale Au Cambodge, Rapport mensuel – Mois de Mai 1946.

⁵⁸ Abdoul-Carime Nasir, who is pursuing his dissertation at Université Denis Diderot - Paris VI and is a member of the Association d’Echange et de Formation pour les Etudes Khmères, compiled and posted information on these important figures in Cambodian politics up until the end of *Sangkum*. His wonderful compilations can be found at <http://aefek.free.fr/pageLibre00010678.html>. It is from this site where I found this information on members of the central committee. Some information can also be found at Pouk Chhay, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 143.

⁵⁹ Sûreté Fédérale Au Cambodge, Rapport mensuel – Mois de June 1946.

⁶⁰ Article 2 of the Party Statutes, elaborated in April 1946, as cited in Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 143.

While not necessarily anti-French, the Democratic Party members were eager to modernize the country and demand independence, liberty, progress and democracy.⁶¹ They favored a democratic system found elsewhere in the world.

The second political party to emerge during the 1946 campaigns was the Liberal Party (គណៈបក្សសេរីភាព). Prince Norodom Norindeth led this party, which was dominated by court

mandarins and functionaries as its base. The goal of the party was for Cambodia, “as part of the French Union and in conversation with France, to follow [a course, where] traditional Royal institutions were adapted to the needs of modern life.”⁶² The party’s platform included programs to expand the Cambodian education system and to improve social conditions. Liberals advocated for the progressive evolution of traditional institutions, but they believed such evolution should be measured. They were thus aligned with the current colonial government, which believed that “reforms should be accomplished in stages and under the guidance of France”⁶³ This party enjoyed the favor of the king.⁶⁴ Other notable supporters were Hell Meas, Kong Maing, Tep Thansay, Sok Tith, Kim Nguon Trach, Tes Phnieth, Van Molyvann, and Vann No. They were “no doubt seduced by [the party’s] attachment to the existing social order and to the moderation of its proposed reforms.”⁶⁵ The Liberal Party appeared to be on the other end of the political spectrum from the Democrats; they preferred to maintain the present course and agreed with the Franco-Khmer commission.

The third party was the Party for Cambodian Progress (គណៈបក្សចម្រើនជាតិខ្មែរ), which sought to strike a balance between the conservative Liberals and the more progressive Democrats. Prince Norodom Montana founded the party, whose members included Chea Chinkok, Au Chheun, Dr. Neal Smuoek, Ponn Vuthan, Mey Nosey, San Thieu, and Ly Kim Knout.⁶⁶ The party promoted protections for the rights of individuals, families and property-holders as well as the freedom to work. It also believed in a right to free expression.⁶⁷ The Cambodian Progress Party attracted middle functionaries and merchants close to Prince Montana. The Sûreté considered the party to be similar to the Democrats, but with a greater belief in gradual reform and “collaboration with the French administration.”⁶⁸ The Cambodian Progress Party truly represented a middle path between the two other parties.

These three parties characterized the range of elite opinions at the time and illustrated the many issues dividing Cambodians. All the parties appeared to support some version of a democracy. They also shared similar educational background: most were educated abroad. For instance, Vann Molyvann of the Liberal Party was educated at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts at Paris. While the various members of the different political parties shared similar socio-economic backgrounds, ideological differences divided them. Key cleavages that separated these parties included the degree of their attachment to the French and the speed at which they thought Cambodia should democratize. Often times, these two issues coalesced. If a

⁶¹ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 144.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 145.

⁶⁴ Sûreté Fédérale Au Cambodge, Rapport mensuel – Mois de Mai 1946.

⁶⁵ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 145.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Sûreté Fédérale Au Cambodge, Rapport mensuel – Mois de Mai 1946.

person had a strong attachment to France, he was less likely to support a rapid transition to democracy. The Democrats, who were educated abroad and enjoyed speaking French, were not automatically against the French, but a majority wanted autonomy and true democracy, which they saw as an essential component of all civilized societies. This desire often put them at odds with the colonial government, the Franco-Khmer Commission, and the Liberal party. When the Democrats won the 1946 elections, they crafted a radically different constitution than the one put forth by the Commission.

1946 Election

In the September 1st election to select members of the provisional Constitutional Assembly, 60% of the eligible electorate voted and Democratic Party gained 74.6% of those votes. The Democrat victory translated into controlling 50 of the 67 seats available in the National Assembly. The Liberals won 20.8% of the votes, which meant they controlled 14 seats, while independents took the remaining 3 seats after winning 4.4% of the votes. The Cambodian Progress Party failed to gain any seats.⁶⁹ With its victory, the Democrats selected Prince Yuthevong to be prime minister, and he, along with his fellow Democrats, began to construct their vision of a Cambodian government, in opposition to the recommendations of the Franco-Khmer Commission. Where the Franco-Khmer Commission wanted an indirect suffrage, the Democrats promoted a universal, male suffrage. Article 18 of their constitution stated that “only Cambodian citizens have the right to elect National Assembly representatives. He (an eligible voter) must be a man over the age of 20 and cannot belong to either the army or the *sangha* since this would violate Buddhist law.”⁷⁰ Another important difference between the two constitutions was the role of the National Assembly. In accordance with their democratic principles, the Democrats believed in a strong legislature. Thus, article 64 announced that “only the National Assembly has the right to craft laws. The National Assembly cannot give this right to anyone.”⁷¹ With this constitution, the National Assembly exercised the true power of a legislative branch. The Democrat’s constitution also gave the National Assembly the power of the purse. According the article 66, the national budget was to be controlled by the National Assembly, as well as any expenditures and revenues. Any contract to borrow money must be agreed upon by the National Assembly.”⁷² The powers the Democrats gave to the National Assembly made the proposed Cambodian government more in line with democracies found the West.

By designing an entirely different government than the one mapped out in the Franco-Khmer Commission constitution, the Democrats overstepped their duties as prescribed in the April 13th Royal Proclamation. King Sihanouk had wanted a provisional National Assembly to offer only opinions and observations on the already proposed constitution. He did not say that the National Assembly could devise a new government. However, the Democrats did not consider the Franco-Khmer Commission to have “sufficient political independence.”⁷³ It was not, they argued, a legitimate representative of Cambodian desires. Party leaders believed that

⁶⁹ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 147 and Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 48.

⁷⁰ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, Box 107, NAC.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Gour, *Cours de Droit Constitutionnel Cambodgien*, Faculté de Droit de Phnom Penh, Licence IV, 1962-1963, 24, in Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 149.

they, the Democrats, were “the true agents of the people, a majority of whom supported them.”⁷⁴ Democrats held that the elections gave them a mandate. This belief empowered the Democrats to ignore the King’s efforts to moderate their democratic fervor.⁷⁵ Gour likens this situation to the moment when the Estates General gathered by order of King Louis XVI in 1789 and the Third Estate declared itself to be the National Assembly.⁷⁶ He suggests that the Democratic Party, similar to the Third Estate, was a revolutionary force in society. “If there was a breakdown in the legal continuity of Cambodian institutions and a sudden transition from an ancient regime to a modern system of government,” he continued, “it was the result of the Assembly’s will to exceed the purely consultative framework of its power.”⁷⁷ The Democrats’ efforts had a strong base of support and King Sihanouk may have feared being seen as too authoritarian. In post-war Cambodia, Sihanouk encountered a political environment hostile to an overly absolutist monarch. A play, which opened on January 20, 1947, captured the hostility Sihanouk faced as the Democrats were writing their constitutional proposals. This new play opened in the Soy San Vong Theater, located on rue Okhna Chun in Phnom Penh. In the play, a son, whose father died as a result of an absolute king, gives a moving monologue, where he critiques the abuse of royal power. At the end of this monologue, according to the Sûreté, “there were two distinct groups among the spectators. One, as shown by their furious applause and other joyous signs, approved of the son’s speech and demanded that it be published in the journals. The other, to the contrary, completely disapproved of the son’s words. Those, unhappy, left the room.”⁷⁸ This play demonstrated the opposition the King encountered in post-war Cambodia. The popular support for the Democrats forced King Sihanouk to ratify their version of the constitution on May 6, 1947.⁷⁹ Thus, the Democrats and their bottom-up supporters were responsible for the 1947 Constitution of Cambodia. In spite of ambivalence from the King and protest from the colonial government, it was the Democrats who made Cambodia a constitutional democracy.

When the Democrats created a constitutional democracy and gave the National Assembly legislative powers, they minimized the role of the king. Traditionally, the Cambodian king retained all three forms of governmental powers: legislative, executive and judicial.⁸⁰ He created the laws, implemented them and determined if they were just. Although cultural and religious norms tempered his royal powers, the Cambodian king was an absolutist monarch and French colonialism reinforced his authority.⁸¹ The king was still a powerful force in post-war Cambodian society. Intentionally or otherwise, when the Democrats gave the National Assembly the sole power to create laws, they removed this ability from the purview of the King. They challenged his traditional position in Cambodian politics, which can be seen as the start of a transformation of the king into a symbolic figurehead. Their actions also revealed a tension

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 48-49.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Sûreté Fédérale au Cambodge, Note, No. 281/PS-C, January 20, 1947, Box 10, HCC, ANOM.

⁷⁹ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947.

⁸⁰ Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 20-26.

⁸¹ As Alain Forest states, “in Cambodia, to the contrary, since the moment when the crown supported the French project, the colonizers magnify [the king’s] traditional function by all means.” Alain Forest, *Le Cambodge et la colonisation française : histoire d’une colonisation sans heurts, 1897-1920*, (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1980), 78 and Claude-Gilles Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 34.

within Cambodian democratization between the forces of modernization and the need to maintain tradition. The Democrats wanted a government with a fully realized National Assembly, but one that continued Cambodian traditions.

Their desire to strike a balance between tradition and progress was apparent in their Constitution. It took away the absolutist powers of the King, but maintained the idea that he was the leader of the country. According to Article 21, “all power emanates from the King.”⁸² However, this “power must be in accordance with the Constitution.”⁸² This article, like other parts of the Constitution, begs the question: who is higher, the King or the Constitution? The quandary reappears in another article. Article 46 states that the King is the signatory on all agreements made with France and with the other members the Associated States [of Indochina]. However, his signature can only come into force upon agreement from the National Assembly.⁸³ This tension between the King and the National Assembly is repeated in Article 36, which mandates that the King declares all laws introduced through the proposed bi-cameral legislature. The King has the opportunity to send to law back to both houses if he does not agree with it.⁸⁴ However, the article does not explain what will happen if both houses continue to pass the same law despite the objections of the King. These gaps within the 1947 Constitution revealed the Democrats’ hesitation to directly undermine the King and to make the constitution the supreme law of the country. The closest they come to this position was in Article 32, which states the King must swear an oath to obey the constitution.⁸⁵ Although certain parts of the 1947 Constitution suggested that while the Democrats would like to limit the powers of the king, which after all is the objective of a constitution, they must have realized they were still working within the framework King Sihanouk created. They needed his approval in order to ratify the constitution. The Franco-Khmer Commission’s constitution was a viable option at this time. King Sihanouk could very well ratify it instead. Cambodia, unlike other countries which overthrew their king and crafted a constitution against him, had a king and a powerful one thanks to French.⁸⁶ The Democrats must negotiate with him. The 1947 Constitution recognized this political reality.

The 1947 Constitution was thus a compromise between the King and Democrats. Cambodia retained its monarchy, as stated in the very first article of the constitution.⁸⁷ On the surface, King Sihanouk had “granted” this constitution to the Cambodian people. This solution, Pouk states, “represented in fact a ‘pact’ between the King and the National Assembly, a ‘pact’ where the Assembly was the ‘dominant party.’”⁸⁸ While the Constitution appeared to be a gift from King Sihanouk, in actuality the Democrats and their young, educated supporters compelled the King to ratify it. This Constitution would not have been as forceful and democratic as it was

⁸² Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 21.

⁸³ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 46.

⁸⁴ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 36.

⁸⁵ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 32.

⁸⁶ The most obvious example of a country creating a constitution against a king is the American Constitution. The conditions in which Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and the other colonialists ratified their Constitution were completely different from Cambodia’s. In both cases, however, the conditions and fears of the creators shaped the nature of the Constitution and the government it created. Another comparable case is during the 1789 French Revolution when the Estates General failed, the King was rejected and the National Assembly was formed. They drafted the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man.

⁸⁷ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 1.

⁸⁸ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 149.

without the determination of the Democrats. They did not believe the French-backed constitution was a legitimate document that expressed the will of the people. They took it upon themselves to craft an entirely new document that embodied their wishes for Cambodia. However, the 1947 Constitution was teeming with contradictions, reflecting the political reality of the time. The King's absolute and symbolic power competed with democratic forces to produce this Constitution. While the National Assembly had the powers normally associated with a democratic, legislative body, the King continued to command a position within the new government. Most importantly, he would call "the National Assembly into session and could dissolve [it] on the recommendation of the prime minister," according to article 37. The article also directed that "a national election must take place within 2 months" after such a suspension.⁸⁹ This power, when exercised by the king, had potent consequences later in Cambodian history. For now, Cambodia had a constitutional democracy and a new election set for December 1947. The Democratic Party had gotten its way.

Fragmentation, Insecurity and a Constitutional Crisis

While the 1947 Constitution established Cambodia's first fully-fledged National Assembly, representative bodies had existed in Cambodia before 1945. The French first introduced to Cambodia the idea of a representative body in 1913. The Royal Ordinance of March 18, 1913 created a Consultative Assembly, which was a gathering of appointed men with little parliamentary authority. Legislative power formally remained in the hands of the Cambodian king, but informally, the *Résidence Supérieur*, as the representative of the colonial government and the president of the king's council, determined the laws.⁹⁰ The king simply declared the laws that the *Résidence Supérieur* had already approved. The symbiotic relationship between the *Résidence Supérieur* and the king was the cornerstone of the colonial legal system with the Consultative Assembly acting as a relatively insignificant advisor. The Assembly underwent reform as a result of a Royal Ordinance of April 10, 1940 and became the Representative Chambers of the People, but the Vichy government later suspended this representative institution in June 1940. Cambodia was also a member of the Indochinese Federation at the Assembly of the Union, which was instituted in 1918.⁹¹ Despite the representative nature of these institutions, they were all quite powerless: their only role was to consult.⁹² They could not change or suggest new laws. When the Democrats crafted the 1947

⁸⁹ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 37.

⁹⁰ The Khmer king's subordinate position to the colonial government originates from the 1884 Conventions between King Norodom and France. For more information on the circumstances that brought about the Conventions, please refer to Milton Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response, 1859-1905*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969) and Gregor Muller, *Colonial Cambodia's 'bad Frenchmen': The Rise of French rule and The Life of Thomas Caraman, 1840-87*, (New York: Routledge, 2006). In regards to the actual legislative abilities of the colonial state, Gour summarizes well the king's position and the role of traditional Cambodian laws when he writes, "In the domestic domain, public laws and the autonomy of the protected country [Cambodia] is in large measure subordinated to a source of superior state law: the regulatory power of the Governor General of Indochina and the head of the French State, the legislative power of the French Parliament." Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 33. French and colonial laws took precedence over traditional Cambodian laws.

⁹¹ Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 37.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 38.

Constitution, Cambodians had every little experience with an actual, empowered National Assembly. The National Assembly, as constructed by the Democrats, was a radically new experiment for Cambodians.

Since they had no real domestic model for the National Assembly and because many were French-educated, the leaders of the Democratic Party looked to France and its parliament as a guide. The Fourth Republic, which governed France at this time, had a strong legislature, a relatively weak executive with the president as a figurehead. Likewise, the Democrats created a strong legislative branch, which was made up of two chambers. The National Assembly was the stronger of the two houses: it initiated laws and controlled the purse. Any male over the age of 25 could stand as a candidate for the National Assembly.⁹³ The second house in the Cambodian legislature was the Royal Council, whose members were not universally elected. Royal Council members must be 40 years old and cannot be representatives in the National Assembly.⁹⁴ Four members were not elected, instead two were appointed by the king. They must be chosen from the royal line, while the majority party in the National Assembly appointed the other two.⁹⁵ Eight other members were to represent the seven regions and the city of Phnom Penh.⁹⁶ The provincial governors and the mayor, along with the *sangkat* leaders, were to select these members.⁹⁷ The remaining Royal Council members represented the major occupational groups in Cambodia. For instance, government workers would elect their representative within the Council.⁹⁸ The main power of this second chamber was to give opinions on the laws passed in the National Assembly. While it could not modify the laws, the Royal Council had the ability to veto bills or ask the National Assembly to modify them. The National Assembly then must bring the Royal Council's recommendations to a vote. If the Royal Council completely vetoed a bill, there was a one month cooling off period. Once one month passed, the National Assembly was allowed to bring up the bill again, openly discuss it and, if a majority of the representatives pass it, the bill would then become law, overriding the Royal Council's objections.⁹⁹ Thus, in the legislative process as conceived in the 1947 Constitution, the National Assembly trumped the Royal Council, although the Council could check the National Assembly. Because the National Assembly was the only universally elected chamber (unlike the Royal Council), the Democrats may have thought that the National Assembly was better equipped to speak on behalf of the public will. It was the more democratic of the two chambers. This relationship between the two chambers demonstrated the dominant position the National Assembly held within the Democrat's vision of democracy.

⁹³ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 29.

⁹⁴ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 70.

⁹⁵ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 71 and. 72.

⁹⁶ The 1947 Constitution uses the word ភូមិភាគ, which mean region or part, when talking about these members. They

divided the country into seven regions: region 1 was the provinces Battambang and Siem Reap; region 2 was the provinces of Pursat and Kompong Chhnang; region 3 was Kompong Thom and Kompong Cham; region 4 was Kratie and Stung Treng; Region 5 was Prey Veng and Svay Reing; Region 6 was Kandal and Kompong Speu, and the last, region 7 was Takeo and Kampot. Constitution of Cambodia, 1947.

⁹⁷ *Sangkat* are the sub districts of Phnom Penh and how the capital is organized. It has become how Cambodians understand the various part/neighborhoods of Phnom Penh.

⁹⁸ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 74.

⁹⁹ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 78.

The National Assembly's dominant role was also apparent in its rapport with the executive branch, which was to be composed of the prime minister and his Council of Ministers. To pick the prime minister, the king must consult with the president of the National Assembly and the president of the Royal Council, as well as the leaders of the various political parties. Once all had agreed upon a person, he would be appointed prime minister and select his ministers, who will lead a particular ministry and be a member in his Council.¹⁰⁰ The Council of Ministers consisted of no more than 12 individuals, including the secretary.¹⁰¹ These ministers must also be approved by the National Assembly.¹⁰² Additionally, the National Assembly had the ability to disband the Council of Ministers and remove the prime minister. The first method of doing this would be through a vote of no confidence. The prime minister can request a vote of confidence from the National Assembly. If a clear majority of National Assembly representatives voted no confidence, then the prime minister must resign and his Council disbanded.¹⁰³ A single representative could also initiate the second method of removing a prime minister. Any representative could introduce a motion to condemn the Prime Minister and/or any minister. The National Assembly must bring this motion to a vote and if a clear majority agreed, then the prime minister or his Council member will be stripped of his position.¹⁰⁴ A single representative has the ability to question a minister or the prime minister. He must answer the representative in a timely manner.¹⁰⁵ As the only elected branch within the government, the National Assembly clearly has more authority than the executive branch. In fact, a single member within the National Assembly had the ability to topple the executive branch. The only power the prime minister had to check the National Assembly was to dissolve it with the help of the king. The overwhelming power of the National Assembly as written in the 1947 Constitution and its relationship with the prime minister had significant consequences when the Democratic Party fragmented. In spite of these potential problems, Democrats envisioned Cambodian democracy as a system with a strong legislative branch. The National Assembly was designed, elected and empowered to express the will of the people. With the possible exception of the king, no other governmental institution could compete with the National Assembly.

Once the Constitution was ratified, the elections were held and the Democrats easily won a majority of the votes. Competing against 5 other parties, they received 72% of the votes.¹⁰⁶ Elections were important to the Democrats' vision of democracy. In addition to being an instrument to gain control of the government, the Democrats saw elections as a manifestation of a growing Cambodian political consciousness. The Democrats were "ambitious, active and resolute in accelerating the political and social awakening of Cambodia."¹⁰⁷ Elections were moments when this political awakening was witnessed and realized. As Pouk Chaay described in his thesis, "the 1947 election campaigns had completely captured people's attention. Hundreds of thousands of men, going from rallies and discussing the party and candidates they

¹⁰⁰ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 80.

¹⁰¹ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 79.

¹⁰² Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 80.

¹⁰³ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 84.

¹⁰⁴ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 85.

¹⁰⁵ Constitution of Cambodia, 1947, art. 83.

¹⁰⁶ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 150-152.

¹⁰⁷ *Le monde*, Box 10, HCC, ANOM.

avored, participated en masse in a ‘public thing,’ something [Cambodians] had never encountered for centuries.”¹⁰⁸

Soun Sorin’s novel, *A New Sun Rises on an Old Land*, also painted a triumphant image of elections.¹⁰⁹ Soun describes the electoral process before the *Sangkum* period and the various actors involved in electing a representative. Som, the protagonist of the novel, slowly climbs his way from being a lowly cyclo driver to leading an influential trade union that advocates on behalf of cyclo drivers in Phnom Penh. One day, two candidates walk into the union’s headquarters and convince Som to mobilize the union members on their behalf. These politicians made financial donations, as well as promises, to the unions. They assure Som that they

truly agree to stand as candidates for the National Assembly. If Som helps me, I hope to become a National Assembly representative. Once I become a member of the National Assembly, Som, you do not have to worry. I am dedicated to helping the workers – I will fight for the government to uplift the status and lessen the living conditions of the workers. For instance, I will ask the owners of the cyclos to lower rental fees or I will fight for the government to subsidize housing for workers, who deserve electricity and running water.¹¹⁰

These promises convinced Som’s fellow union members and, because of the worker’s full-throated support, the candidates won seats in the National Assembly. Although these candidates never came around the union headquarters again once they won, *A New Sun Rises on an Old Land* captured the democratic awakening Cambodia experienced under the Democratic Party. In this novel, trade unions, political parties, potential legislative representatives were social actors who worked to better Cambodia. Som voted for the first time and exercised his political rights as a citizen within a democracy for the first time. At this brief moment, he believed in his power to change society and improve his lot as worker.

Som’s decision to engage in the democratic process mirrored the attitudes of Cambodians during the 1947 election. They voted for those who looked out for their interests or against those who hurt them. While visiting Kilo Ampil, a suburb of Phnom Penh, the Sûreté reported that “some of the poor said they would not vote for Prince Montana [of the Cambodian Progress Party] because when he was the National Economy Minister, he limited the sale of dried and smoked fish to only a select few. Even the small fishermen were forced to sell their fish products to the cooperative.”¹¹¹ Others had yet to make a decision on which political parties they were voting for. They said they would wait for the electoral campaigns. They will then ask “who is responsible for the increases in taxes and why is fabric selling at such an unaffordable price?”¹¹² The inhabitants of Tuk Laak, a village en route to Kompot, also declared that “they will only vote for the party that best cares for the interests of the people.”¹¹³ These accounts confirm that Cambodians took interest in the election and the democratic process. For the

¹⁰⁸ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 152.

¹⁰⁹ Soun Sorin, *A New Sun Rises on an Old Land*, (Phnom Penh: Publishing House Vakriyak, 1961).

¹¹⁰ Soun, *A New Sun Rises on an Old Land*, 166.

¹¹¹ Political Report: The Attitudes of the Population (Km7), Box 10, HCC, ANOM.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Political Report, 7 July 1947, Box 10, HCC, ANOM.

Democrats, the vote was “a means of democratic expression par excellence.”¹¹⁴ It allowed each individual to participate in politics and in the affairs of his country. The vote, according to one Democrat, fulfilled one of the essential goals of Democracy: “the complete blossoming of a human being. All citizens have equal rights.”¹¹⁵ Elections, for the Democrats, were more than simple contest between different political parties: they symbolize Cambodia’s transition from a colonized monarchy to a semi-autonomous constitutional democracy.

While the Democratic Party celebrated Cambodia’s political evolution, they also engaged in a project of political education. Democratic behaviors and norms were not simply given and demanded from the populace, but developed and nurtured over time. The Democrats proudly wrote in their newspaper, *Pracheatiphitey* [Democracy], that “Cambodia, a kingdom of feudal character, became a constitutional monarchy equipped with a Parliament elected via universal suffrage. ‘Voila’ two facts that illustrate the political evolution of a modern Cambodia and, without any doubt, mark progress from the past.”¹¹⁶ As much as they reveled in this new Cambodia, they realized it must be continually supported. One democrat noted that their goal was to “morally, intellectually and materially uplift the people in order to give them the most dignity possible. All the above was our manifesto in June 1946.”¹¹⁷ The Democrat’s project was thus “to educate the masses so that they are able to fulfill the new responsibilities upon which they are incumbent. We must make them know their rights and their duties.”¹¹⁸ The Democrat’s first attempt to educate Cambodians was in the Constitution. At the end of the 1947 Constitution, Ieu Koeus, a writer of the 1947 Constitution, included a glossary of terms he believed needed to be defined and explained in Khmer. Some of the terms were Council of Ministers (គណៈរដ្ឋមន្ត្រី), prime minister (នាយករដ្ឋមន្ត្រី), citizen (ពលរដ្ឋ), rights (សិទ្ធិ), executive power (អំណាចនីតិប្រតិបត្តិ) and legislative power (អំណាចនីតិបញ្ញត្តិ). These words are now considered

commonplace within the Khmer language, which makes Ieu Koeus’ glossary even more noteworthy. He felt the need to explain these terms for a possible reader of the Constitution. This endeavor was not a solo enterprise: Ieu Koeus collaborated with a committee to compile and define these terms. Although no explanation was provided as to why one of the most important leaders of the Democratic Party personally worked on this small political glossary, the fact that it was completed suggests how the Democrats saw their overall project. They were very conscious of the newness of democracy for Cambodians and sought to ease the transition through education and through the practice of democracy. Although the glossary embodied the didactic nature of the Democratic Party’s project, it also demonstrates the alien quality of the 1947 Constitution. In defining these terms, Ieu Koeus often turned to French versions of these words to explain them. This indicates how the Democrats relied on French understandings of democracy as they constructed their own version of Cambodian democracy. Despite the successes that the Democrats achieved in constructing, ratifying and practicing their Constitution, the very newness of their project contributed to its downfall.

The Decline of the Democrats

¹¹⁴ “Dictatorship or Democracy,” *Democracy*, 27 April 1950, Box 48, HCC, ANOM.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ “Editorial,” *Democracy*, 20 April, 1950, Box 48, HCC, ANOM.

¹¹⁷ “Our Ideal Remains Always in Democracy,” *Democracy*, 20 April, 1950, BOX 48, HCC, ANOM.

¹¹⁸ “Editorial,” *Democracy*, 20 April 1950, Box 48, HCC, ANOM.

The Democratic Party enjoyed the support of a certain sector of Cambodian society, namely French-educated intellectuals and mid-level bureaucrats living in the city. However not everyone supported them. Well-to-do Cambodians, especially those associated with the royal courts, supported instead the Liberal Party. Even up to the 1947 election, over a quarter of Cambodians backed the Liberal Party. Furthermore, budgetary problems continued to beleaguer the Democrats' attempt to create a new, democratic Cambodia. The *Modus Vivendi* Cambodia signed in 1946 tied the Cambodian piastre to the French franc. As the franc collapsed while France reconstructed its post-war economy, Democrats raised more and more taxes to meet state demands. Cambodians complained against these taxes and turned away from the Democrats.¹¹⁹ For instance, cyclo drivers protested against the 25 piastre fee they had to pay every time they transported more than two people.¹²⁰ Because of the Democrat's taxes, some Cambodians were unhappy with their government and refused to vote. The political project of the Democrats was beginning to crack, but corruption within the Party was the real catalyst behind its decline. In August 1948, Chean Vam resigned his post as Prime Minister when the National Assembly refused to grant him more powers to better combat Cambodia's financial problems. His resignation reflected the persistence of power inequalities between the executive and legislative branches. Penn Nouth became Prime Minister, but his Council was soon embroiled in a corruption scandal. In particular, Yem Sambaur, a representative in the National Assembly, accused Meach Konn, the Minister of Finance, of selling exclusive fishing rights to his family and unfairly distributing them.¹²¹ Because of this scandal, initiated by a single representative, the entire executive branch was replaced. One minister's corruption did not simply lead to his firing but to the dismissal of the executive branch as a whole. This incident exemplifies the structural weaknesses of the 1947 Constitution. The National Assembly had too much power, which led to a continually, unstable executive. These problems caused the public to feel deceived by the Democrats. The general distrust of the Democratic Party triggered an overall wariness of the democratic project. Democracy so far has only benefited those connected with the Party – not the nation as a whole.

Along with these budget and corruption concerns, the question of Cambodia's relationship with France also troubled the Democrats. As shown earlier, the desire for greater independence fueled the Democrats' triumph over the Franco-Khmer Commission. Sihanouk yielded to the Democrats because of their bottom-up supporters, especially the French-educated intellectuals. As early as September 1946, a French informant spoke of the "revolutionary mentality of Cambodian intellectuals in the Capital." The informant had a conversation with an unknown Cambodian *évolué*, who spoke a vague discontent with the return of the French.¹²² Cambodian intellectuals' discontent against the French proved to be a significant obstacle as the Democrats negotiated the exact nature of current relations between Cambodia and France.

¹¹⁹ For more information about the localities, please refer to the Sûreté reports found in Box 10, HCC, ANOM. To learn about the financial obstacles the Democrats encountered, please refer to Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 154-155.

¹²⁰ Sûreté Fédérale au Cambodge, Note, No. 1756/PS-C, July 8, 1947, Box 10, HCC, ANOM.

¹²¹ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 158.

¹²² Bulletin de Renseignement, September 14, 1946, Box 10, HCC ANOM. Évolué occupied a strange placed within French colonial society. Like other colonized subjects, they were not considered citizens, yet they shared the language and customs of the colonizers. A native could only become a citizen once he became an *évolué*. For more information, see Olufemi Taiwo, "Colonialism and Its Aftermath: The Crisis of Knowledge Production," *Callaloo*, Vol. 16, No. 4, On "Post-Colonial Discourse": A Special Issue (Autumn, 1993), 896, accessed at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2932216>.

Since the 1946 *Modus Vivendi* was a temporary agreement, Cambodia and France needed to sign a permanent agreement to formalize Cambodian return to the French Union. However, how much autonomy should Cambodia have, while still a state within the French Union? King Sihanouk and members of the royal court readily agreed to return to the French Union, but the Democrats were much more hesitant. Indeed, a significant number of their supporters were against such an attempt. In 1948, the National Assembly was supposed to send delegates to negotiate a permanent treaty with France and to represent Cambodia in the Assembly of the French Union. There was a delay in sending these delegates while the National Assembly debated over their exact mission in France and whether to rejoin the union. According to the Sûreté, a majority of the National Assembly questioned the usefulness of such a mission. One deputy argued that sending delegates placed an undue financial burden on an already deficit-ridden national budget. Other deputies feared that such action would embarrass Cambodia and would make it dependent upon France. The Sûreté believe that “the National Assembly undoubtedly opposed Cambodia’s participation in the Assembly of the French Union if His Majesty has not already asked Cambodia to be represented.”¹²³ Since King Sihanouk had agreed to a delegation, the National Assembly settled upon Sim Var, Sok Chhong and Pann Yung to represent Cambodia and to negotiate a permanent treaty.

These three delegates were all members of the Democratic Party and Sim Var was a member of its Central Committee. Even more importantly, Sim Var and Pann Yung participated in Son Ngoc Thanh government, which first declared independence from France in 1945. So the French were rightly skeptical of the Democrats’ desire to remain a French colony, although Sim Var stated at the onset of his mission that he was looking forward to confirming Cambodia’s allegiance to the French Union. He wanted to prove that “contrary to what one can suppose, an individual can be a nationalist and aware of Cambodian interest in the French Union.”¹²⁴ Echoing the sentiment, Pann Yung, the oldest and the leader of the delegation, candidly and unknowingly spoke of his love for France to a Sûreté informant: I “know well [as a result of] my upbringing and French education, the ideal of liberty and generosity of France to feel my duty in clarifying these questions [of Cambodian autonomy within the French Union]...I am neither a pillar of the Issarak nor a collaborator with French colonialists, I am a Cambodian who desires to live in friendship with France.” However, in this same conversation, Pann Yung warned that if France does not give in to Khmer demands for greater autonomy, Cambodians will press for complete independence.¹²⁵ These questions plagued not only France as it decided the fate of its empire, but also the Democratic Party as it mulled over the meaning of independence. Party leaders did not know if they should bow to forces within their own party that desired complete independence or to others who wanted a middle road between complete independence and a return of old colonialism. As Cambodia began to define its own identity in the post-war world, the Democrats confronted the difficulties in delineating its new relationship with France.

In this moment of multiple financial and political crises for the Democrats, Yem Sambaur became Prime Minister. Having made his name as a fighter of corruption, Yem enjoyed the early support of the Liberals, the Democrats and the King. However, he initiated a strong anti-corruption campaign and accused many Democratic members in the National Assembly of

¹²³ Sûreté Fédérale au Cambodge, Note, No. 1654/PS-C, May 11, 1948, Box 54, HCC, ANOM.

¹²⁴ AFP, July 22, 1948, Box 54, HCC, ANOM.

¹²⁵ Note: A Summary of conversations between M. Pann Yung, Cambodian delegate to the French Union and M. Simeon Paul, Box 54, HCC, ANOM.

corruption. While this action endeared Yem to the Liberals and to the King, it provoked wrath from the Democratic Party and calls for his resignation. To counter this call and to strengthen his position as Prime Minister, Yem colluded with King Sihanouk and together they constitutionally dissolved the National Assembly in September 17, 1949.¹²⁶ This date was another crucial moment in the development or, in this case, the dismantling of Cambodian democracy. The National Assembly and the Democratic Party never fully recovered from this dissolution. The Constitution stated that upon the dissolution of the Assembly, its president who was Ieu Koeus must organize and set a date for a new election. On September 28, only eleven-days after the dissolution, Ieu Keous was assassinated at the Democratic Party headquarters. The assassination of Ieu Keous remains unsolved to this day, but his death had a major impact on the Democratic Party, especially during this crucial, historical moment. With its leader gone, the Democratic Party fragmented, as seen in its erasing Yem Sambaur, Ray Lamouth, and others from its party rolls. It failed to launch a strong resistance to King Sihanouk and the Yem Sambaur government. New elections would not be held until November 9, 1951, two-years after the dissolution. The period between the dissolution of the National Assembly in September 1949 and the new elections in November 1951 set a precedent within Cambodia for a government with a strong executive branch and sanctioned Sihanouk's actions. It proved to King Sihanouk the suspension of democracy would incur little resistance.¹²⁷

King Sihanouk, according to Pouk Chhay, agreed to this dissolution because he was tired of the National Assembly dragging its feet in regards to a permanent French-Cambodian treaty. With the National Assembly gone, the King was free to negotiate with France as he wanted.¹²⁸ Only two months after the dissolution, the French Parliament ratified Franco-Cambodian treaty on November 8, 1949, which solidified Cambodia's return to the French Union. In a speech following this ratification, King Sihanouk emphasized how Cambodia has entered into a new stage in its international relationships and promoted Cambodia for membership in the Union. According to him, France formally recognized Cambodia as an independent state within the French Union, which assured Cambodians of benefiting from "the resulting advantages of being a member of a global bloc."¹²⁹ However, a majority of Cambodians did not understand the opportunities and limitations of being an associated state. They simply latched on to the word, independence.

A year before the 1949 Franco-Cambodian treaty was formally ratified, the French Commissaire de la République, along with King Sihanouk, sought to dispel Democrat fears and

¹²⁶ For a more thorough account of Yem Sambaur's rise to power, refer to Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 159-160.

¹²⁷ Sûreté archival material from 1949-1955 is relatively thin. According to what remains, there does not seem to be any armed unrest. After the 1949 treaty between Cambodia and France, David Chandler writes that the French police arrested a dozen members of the Democratic Party on charges of conspiring with the Issarak, but no citation was given. He does not state who were charged exactly. See Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, 176. These arrests do suggest that the Democrats faced political pressure after the dissolution of the National Assembly. Their newspaper, *Pracheatiphitey (Democracy)*, disappeared from the list of Khmer newspapers the Sûreté tracked. It was there in 1949, but disappeared in 1950 and returned in 1951. Please see Box 22, HCC, ANOM. The reason behind this possible disappearance is unclear. They could have run out of funds or the Sihanouk/Yem Sambaur government shut them down. Because of the lack of documents, the Democrats' reaction to the dissolution of the National Assembly in 1949 remains unclear.

¹²⁸ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 160.

¹²⁹ *Journal of Extreme Orient*, Box 58, HCC ANOM.

reaffirm Cambodia's independence within the French Union. Upon hearing this announcement, parades and crowds spontaneously gathered in the streets of Phnom Penh, "singing into the late hours of the night." Some believed that "the French would leave Cambodia by December 1949" and that "the French language would be outlawed in Cambodia." Others questioned "why we still see the French flag if we are independent?"¹³⁰ In Ream, the people believed that "independence" would lead to the end of the Khmer Issarak and Viet Minh resistance.¹³¹ The general population failed to comprehend the exact relationship between Cambodia and France. Some, who had a more nuanced understanding of the Franco-Cambodian treaty, were more skeptical of vague promises of independence. One un-identified Democrat believed that "independence within the heart of the French Union was worthless and offered no advantages" to Cambodia.¹³² The treaty, to the dismay to those in Ream, strengthened the Khmer Issarak's resolve to fight for true independence from the French and further destabilized Cambodia. The American consul general in Saigon, George Abbott, described the Treaty as "none-too-popular."¹³³ King Sihanouk recognized this unpopularity when he encouraged his audience to ignore those who were critical of the government and seek to sabotage the domestic and international achievements of government.

Despite his entreaties, Cambodians turned against the French and began to violently struggle for complete independence. In 1962, in a speech celebrating the ninth anniversary of Cambodian independence, Sihanouk—with hindsight—recognized the consequence this treaty had upon Cambodian security: "According to the November 8, 1949 Treaty, France lawfully recognized the independence of the Kingdom of Cambodia. However, protests increased because this 1949 treaty made Cambodia an associated state within the heart of the French Union."¹³⁴ By signing the 1949 Franco-Khmer Treaty, which formally made Cambodia a part of the French Union, King Sihanouk turned Cambodia into a battleground in the First Indochina War. Since 1945, when the French first returned to Indochina, Cambodian elites, especially the Democrats, navigated a fine line between immediate independence and gradual self-governance. The Democrats, as seen in their careful considerations and long debates in the National Assembly over how to negotiate a permanent treaty with France, were well aware of the demands for independence simmering among segments of the Cambodian populace, especially within the core of their Party. This treaty, which was ratified without the consent of the Democrats, served as a tipping point and may explain why the French police arrested a dozen leaders of the Democratic Party after its ratification in 1949.¹³⁵ Ironically, a treaty that declared Cambodia's autonomy with the French Union lead to an escalation of armed rebellion within Cambodia and an intensification of demands for complete independence. This growing insecurity within Cambodia was another factor in the decline of Cambodian democracy.

The Strengthening of the Khmer Issarak

By itself, the 1949 treaty was not the only factor in the dismantling of Cambodian democracy. Rather the growing insecurity, which was the result of this treaty, made Cambodia's

¹³⁰ Sûreté Fédérale au Cambodge, Note, No. 5350/PS-C, December 23, 1948, Box 58, HCC, ANOM.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Kenton Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia, 1870-1969: From Curiosity to Confrontation*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 23.

¹³⁴ *Le Sangkum*, October 1968.

¹³⁵ Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, 176.

democratization difficult. Democratic Party elites had to focus on pacifying the armed rebels instead of consolidating democratic institutions. More importantly, Sihanouk used this increasing instability to justify his final dissolution of the National Assembly in 1953. Cambodia security problems were directly linked to the Khmer Issarak, Viet Minh, and the First Indochina War. Starting in 1946, France and the Viet Minh were fighting for territorial control of Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina. The Khmer Issarak, with the help of a friendly Thai government, was engaging in its own armed conflict against the French along the western borders of Cambodia. However, because of Cambodian elites' early agreement with France and the political promises of the Democratic Party, the Khmer Issarak had little effect and Cambodia largely escaped the open conflict Vietnam faced since 1946. This situation changed in late 1947 when Phibun Songkram returned to power in Thailand. The new Thai government was anti-communist and no longer supported Khmer Issarak movement along its borders. Along with this change in Thai support was a strategic adjustment on the part of the Viet Minh. In April 1948, the Viet Minh decided to pursue an Indochina-wide strategy, actively involving Cambodia and Laos in its fight against the French. Because of the withdrawal of Thai support, the Khmer Issarak became more amenable to collaborating with the Viet Minh.¹³⁶ In addition to changes within the Thai government, the Viet Minh, and Khmer Issarak, 1948 was also when negotiations towards a permanent treaty between Cambodia and France began. As the Cambodian populace also became more skeptical of the Democrats' ability to maintain independence, the military situation in Cambodia deteriorated.

The 1949 Treaty exacerbated the already tense political conditions found in Cambodia. A letter French security forces intercepted provides some insights into how the 1949 treaty affected Khmer politics and caused some Cambodians to pursue an armed strategy against the French. Although his letter was written in 1952, Poc Kun offers some scathing critiques of Sihanouk's policies towards the French overall. Poc Kun was notable because he commanded armed rebels around the Thai-Khmer borders from 1945-1948 and was the former president of the "Cambodian Committee for National Liberation." He was also brother to Poc Hell, who was a lawyer in Phnom Penh. In addition to being a former president of the Court of Appeals, Poc Hell was an active member of the Democratic Party. The Poc brothers demonstrate the goals shared between the Democratic Party and Khmer Issarak, although one was more gradualist than the other. In the letter the French Sûreté intercepted, Poc Kun justified the actions of the Khmer Issarak to his brother. He wrote:

you have repeated to me that the Khmer people suffer from the harshness of the rebels, caused by theft, the assassinations, etc...this is true, no one denies it... Cambodian troubles are caused by a unanimous desire of a people to have real and total independence for the country. If the people suffer from the consequences caused by the struggle for the ideal, the fault does not belong to those who fight or who is forced to snatch independence.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ For more information, please refer to: Motoo Furuta, "The Indochina Communist Party's Division into Three Parties: Vietnamese Communist Policy Toward Cambodia and Laos, 1948-1951," *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s*, edited by Takashi Shirashi and Motoo Furuta, (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asian Program, 1992), 143-164, accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/59369/>.

¹³⁷ Unfavorable Critiques of Royal Politics according to a Cambodian émigré in Thailand, July 24, 1952, Box 55, HCC, ANOM.

Instead, Poc Kun placed the blame on Sihanouk, who he considered to be indecisive, cowardly, and egotistical. Because Sihanouk is a slave to his crown, he will not “negotiate for immediate, total independence in order to satisfy the will of the people and to stop the misery or discord of war.”¹³⁸ In another letter, dated April 10, 1952, Poc Kun mocks his brother, who was elected to the Royal Council, presumably during the 1951 elections: “you believe that with a Democratic government, independence will be obtained, if yes, one waits for [independence] to be declared.”¹³⁹ The exchange between the Poc brothers illustrates the decisions Cambodians encountered as they decide upon their individual, political choices. With the ratification of the 1949 treaty, the possible paths for Cambodians to choose become more limited, causing some Cambodians, such as Poc Kun, to advocate for armed struggle.

To persuade other Cambodians who faced the same political dilemmas as the Poc brothers, the Khmer Issarak and Viet Minh leaflets blanketed Cambodia. In a period of one month, from February to March 1950, the French gathered about 1,500 leaflets in the Phnom Penh area alone.¹⁴⁰ In Kampot and Takeo province, over 7,000 leaflets were gathered by the French during February 1950.¹⁴¹ Cambodians encountered thousands of Viet Minh and Khmer Issarak propaganda materials.¹⁴² Most of the materials encouraged Cambodians to take up arms against the French. The below image is a leaflet gathered at the village of Lovea on March 1, 1950.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Letter, April 10, 1952, Box 55, HCC, ANOM.

¹⁴⁰ C.C.F.A.E.O Service Moral-Information, Annexe: II, March 13, 1950, Box 23, HCC, ANOM.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² For a listing of all the various leaflets, please refer to Box 23, HCC, ANOM.

¹⁴³ C.C.F.A.E.O Service Moral-Information, Annexe: I, Box 23, HCC, ANOM.



Figure 1: "Tract en cambodgien invitent les populations à combattre les Français" from Archives nationales d'outre-mer

In this tract, there are two drawings. The top drawing is of a French soldier chasing after a crying Cambodian peasant, while the bottom shows three peasants, representing Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, attacking the French soldier. On top of the drawings is the following message: "Alone is not enough power to fight the French. IF CAMBODIANS, VIETNAMESE AND LAOTIANS UNITED TO FIGHT THEM, the French would be forced out of all three countries, creating true independence." The French also engaged in their own propaganda

campaigns. They distributed over 10,000 tracts all over Cambodia. Below is an example of their leaflets.¹⁴⁴

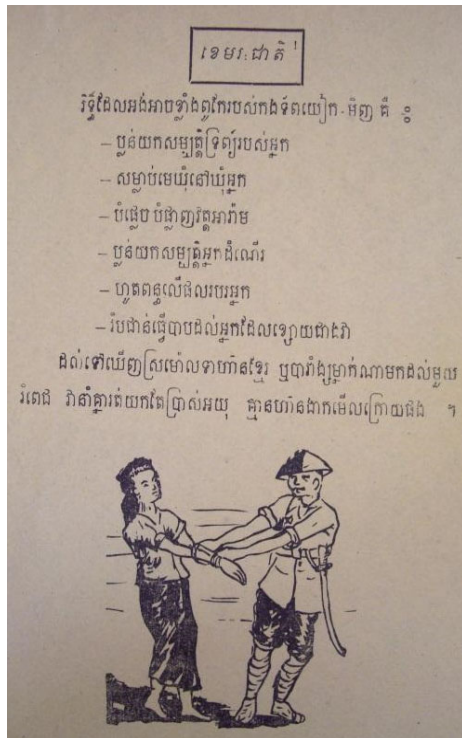


Figure 2: “Cambodians!” from Archives nationales d’outre-mer

This French leaflet sought to exploit the ethnic tensions between Cambodians and Vietnamese. It features an image of a Viet Minh soldier dragging or kidnapping a Cambodian woman. The message says, “the wonderful and courageous actions of Viet Minh troops are: stealing your possessions, murdering your village leaders, destroying pagodas, stealing the possessions of travelers, taxing your harvest, and torturing the weak. If they catch a glimpse of a Khmer or French soldier, they will flee for their lives without looking back.” The French did not want Cambodians to cooperate with the Viet Minh and through their propaganda tried to stop this collaboration. The increased propaganda campaigns reflect the worsening situation in Cambodia and the growing insecurity Cambodians faced after 1949.¹⁴⁵

As the conflict between Khmer Issarak soldiers, Viet Minh supporters, and the French army engulfed Cambodia, these groups preyed upon Cambodian peasants, who often encountered heavy taxation, kidnappings and death. As implied in the French leaflet, Viet Minh and Khmer Issarak troops terrorized villagers, stealing their possessions, taxing their harvest, and murdering them if taxes went unpaid. The Viet Minh and Khmer Issarak relied on these taxes to support themselves as they fought the French.¹⁴⁶ Between March and April of 1951, Puth

¹⁴⁴ C.C.F.A.E.O Service Moral-Information, Annexe: II, March 13, 1950, Box 23, HCC, ANOM.

¹⁴⁵ “Press Conference of the Commissariat of the Republic,” *Democracy*, 27 April 1950, Box 48, HCC, ANOM.

¹⁴⁶ For more information about the importance of these taxes to the Khmer Issarak, please refer C.C.F.A.E.O Service Moral-Information, Annexe: I, Box 23, HCC, ANOM. In it, you will find a tract from the Popular Committee of Khmer Issarak, explaining why villagers should pay taxes. It helped the independence movement in their eyes.

Chhay, a leader of the most violent Khmer Issarak group, was responsible for the deaths of over 20 villagers.¹⁴⁷ On June 20, 1952, Ouk Sam Oeun, who was a member of Puth Chhay's band, attacked and pillaged a Malay village in Chroui Meatrei (25 km from Phnom Penh, Khum Prek Dambaung, Srok Moik Kompul, Kandal) because the inhabitants refused to give them money. 18 inhabitants (16 men, 1 woman, and a child) were killed and 13 were injured. They also carried off about 5,000 piastres worth of stolen cash and jewelry.¹⁴⁸ In August 1952, Puth Chhay's group sacked a catholic, Vietnamese village close to Phnom Penh and killed a handful of villagers, while kidnapping others. Two days later, the village was plastered with tracts demanding 10,000 piastres in ransom and threatening further attacks.

The violence was not limited to the countryside. The French intercepted a letter from Yip Ngoun, the Minister of National Defense, to Chap Soum in Kompot. In this letter, Yip explained his fear of traveling to Kampot. On February 20, 1951, Puth Chhay attacked a civilian jeep and killed 7 people. Yip writes that "life is no longer interesting here because, as in Kampot, one cannot travel far from the city."¹⁴⁹ These examples demonstrate the effects the First Indochina War had upon Cambodia. Despite the fact that scholars often depict the French-Indochina War as mainly a French and Vietnamese affair, these French security documents record the deaths and atrocities Cambodians witnessed during the early years of the 1950s. The records also illustrate the failure of Cambodians to avoid the violence of decolonization. Despite the hopes of Cambodian elites in agreeing to French terms in 1945, Cambodians experienced the terror and uncertainty associated with war. This insecurity contributed to the final disassembling of democracy in Cambodia.

As it became clear that Cambodia was becoming more and more unstable, Sihanouk faced pressure to organize new elections, which were set for November 1951.¹⁵⁰ The Democratic Party again won those elections with 69% of the votes. Coming into the National Assembly, the Democrats had to deal with the growing conflict. They decided to give amnesty to Khmer Issarak soldiers in an attempt to incorporate them back into the government. This measure was a failure, as seen in the telegrammed reply from Savonnang, a Khmer Issarak leader. He states that the Khmer Issarak "Central Committee pursued a revolution for a long time [because they were] simply fulfilling our duties to our fatherland without any thoughts of treason. The Central Committee would be so happy if the Royal Government declared that Cambodia has recovered its complete independence!" Since the Khmer Issaraks were unwilling to give up their armed struggle without complete Cambodian independence, the Democrats changed strategy. Even before the 1949 Franco-Khmer treaty, some within the Democratic Party's base desired complete independence from France. So as much as the Democrats condemned the violence of the Khmer Issarak, they also denounced the tactics France used against these rebels.¹⁵¹ France unlawfully detained anyone they suspected of being a Khmer Issarak or Viet Minh. In January 20, 1952, the newspaper reported that the French army had

¹⁴⁷ Sûreté Fédérale au Cambodge, Annexe à la Note, PS-C du 29 Mai 1951, Box 54, HCC, ANOM.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Summary, 21 February 1951, Box 54, HCC, ANOM.

¹⁵⁰ Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, 178. Again, because the archival documents are so thin for these years, it is hard to say who exactly pressured Sihanouk into calling new elections. According to secondary sources and to historical events, Sihanouk did call for elections, which were held in 1951.

¹⁵¹ Services de sécurité du Haute Commissariat au Cambodge, Note, 754 PS-C, January 26, 1952, Box 47, HCC, ANOM.

forcibly relocated the inhabitants, including the old and the very young, of Kok and Svai Cheeath villages. The villagers, who were critical of the French Army, were now corralled at Phnom Thipedei.¹⁵² These reports further stoked the anti-French sentiments within the Democratic Party. The Democrats came out against what they called arbitrary detentions. They argued that France should respect the Cambodian government and at least inform them before they detain any Cambodian citizen. Huy Kanthoul issued a memo to the Cambodian National Police not to detain any person without cause and forbid the torture of any prisoners.¹⁵³ The Democrats decided they would no longer collaborate with the French in the repression of rebels. Along with this change, the Democrats as seen through their official newspaper began to call for complete independence. In May 1952, an article argued that a possible solution to the insecurity was not “war or governmental reforms,” but total independence.¹⁵⁴ Because the Democrats refused to suppress calls for total independence, the French accused them of collaborating with the Khmer Issarak. This belief led the French to support King Sihanouk, when he dismissed the Huy Kanthoul government and disbanded the National Assembly in June 1952.¹⁵⁵ When the National Assembly reconvened in January 1953, King Sihanouk came before it and asked for extraordinary powers, citing the on-going insecurity Cambodians faced. The Democrats refused, holding on to their belief in the electoral process. Sihanouk then surrounded the National Assembly with troops and dissolved it for a second time. He issued emergency decrees, suspended political rights and imprisoned 17 Democrats.¹⁵⁶ With Sihanouk’s actions and with the war continuing, the Cambodian experiment with constitutional democracy ended silently without much opposition from the general public, in stark contrast to the animated spectacles of the 1946 and 1947 elections.

Scholars and informed observers have offered various interpretations as to why the Cambodian experiment with constitutional democracy failed in 1953. An editorial, published soon after Sihanouk’s 1953 coup, implies that Cambodians were simply more accustomed to an authoritarian government.¹⁵⁷ This argument is very similar to the one promoted by the Franco-Khmer Commission in 1946, justifying why Cambodians were not ready for democracy. Following this same notion, Sihanouk argued in 1976 that he did “not think it necessary for Cambodia to ape Western-style democracy with its multi-party, ‘loyal opposition’, and so on. The results, even in the West where the system has been operating for centuries, were not positive enough for it to be introduced into Cambodia, where there were no traditions to support it. Our brief experiment with multi-party ‘democracy’ had proved disappointing to say the least.”¹⁵⁸ Sihanouk’s argument that the lack of democratic traditions – not his own actions – caused the end of Cambodian democracy appears self-serving. However, this line of thinking continues into present-day scholarship on Cambodia. In his thesis on Sihanouk, Abdoul-Carime Nasir writes that “this parliamentary political system is alien to the rural mentality (for nine-tenths of the population) which remains attached to the hierarchy of the monks, of the notables

¹⁵² *Democracy*, January 20, 1952, Box 48, HCC, ANOM.

¹⁵³ Memo, December 28, 1951, Box 47, HCC, ANOM.

¹⁵⁴ *Democracy*, May 26, 1952, Box 54, HCC, ANOM.

¹⁵⁵ Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 166.

¹⁵⁶ Chandler, *Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 65.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁵⁸ Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 46.

and a vertical relationship of clientelism vis-à-vis the powerful.”¹⁵⁹ Likewise, Sao Leang argues that Cambodian leaders “lacked the education and experience necessary to create a type of politics that is accountable before millions of people, especially during a difficult time.”¹⁶⁰ These scholars blame the lack of democratic maturation within the Cambodian population for why constitutional democracy failed in Cambodia.

However, as shown in the above narrative, a poorly-crafted Constitution, intra-party politics and the insecurity wrought by the French Indochina War contributed to the dismantling of Cambodia’s constitutional democracy. Perhaps if the Democrats had constructed a government with more checks and balances, it could have withstood the financial, political and security problems Cambodia encountered. In any case, the Democratic Party reflected the goals and aspirations of some segments of Cambodian society. Despite its supposed failure, these social actors, namely those French-educated intellectuals, who fueled the creation of a Cambodian constitutional democracy, remained an active social force. When Sihanouk created a new government, he needed to take into account the democratic desires of these social actors. Sihanouk manipulated the meaning of democracy in order to consolidate political power. Upon abdicating his crown in 1955, Sihanouk claimed to be saving democracy and reforming the problems that inundated the Democrats. Thus, in some ways, the Democratic Party’s project was a success. Cambodia in 1955 was not the same as Cambodia in 1946. Those few years of democratic experimentation expanded the horizons of Cambodian political culture. For Sihanouk to survive in this new political climate, he appealed to the people and became “democratic.”

Sangkum Reastr Niyum: A Betrayal and Continuation of Cambodian Democracy

In his 1976 memoir, Sihanouk describes the transformation of Cambodian politics in the post-war world. “In the space of 8 years,” he writes, “Cambodia had moved forward from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and on to an original form of guided democracy via the National Congress of Sangkum.”¹⁶¹ Two things stand out in his description of Cambodia’s evolution. One, Cambodia moved forward: it evolved and changed. It did not stay still or remain the same. Second, Sihanouk labeled *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* as “an original form of guided democracy.” English-language scholars normally translate *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* as the People’s Socialist Community.¹⁶² Most likely, these scholars translated this phrase from the French-language version found in the *Statuts du Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, which was signed by Sihanouk.¹⁶³ In its statutes, *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* is translated into French as the *Communauté Socialiste Populaire*, which literally translates from French as the Popular Socialist Community. Both translated versions of *Sangkum*, the English-language

¹⁵⁹ Aboul-Carime Nasir, *La personnification du pouvoir sous le régime de Norodom Sihanouk*, Mémoire de DEA, Université Denis Diderot - Paris VII, 1994, 22.

¹⁶⁰ Sao Leang, *Destin ou manque de réalisme politique*, (Paris : CCV, 2000), 59.

¹⁶¹ Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 164.

¹⁶² See Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, 88 and Milton Osborne, *Power and Politics in Cambodia: The Sihanouk Years*, (Victoria, Australia: Longman, 1973), 55.

¹⁶³ The statutes can be found in Annexe III of Claude-Gilles Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 417-424. It seems that the statutes are only available in French. At least in my search of the archives, I have not come across the Khmer version of the statutes.

People's Socialist Community and the French-language Popular Socialist Community, suggest a heavily socialist element to Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*.

This representation of *Sangkum*, based on its translation into foreign languages, is misleading. Rather than associate it with any socialist program, *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* should be understood as populist or popular. It should be translated as the Society that Favors the People or the Society that the People Favors. Either way, the emphasis is placed on the people or in Khmer, on the *Reastr Niyum*, which is populism. This characterization of *Sangkum* is evident in article 4 of the Statue, which provides a practical definition of *Sangkum*. It states that "our Community promotes a regime that the *Reastr Niyum* which gives to the true people – to the great mass of common Khmer People – sovereignty."¹⁶⁴ To Sihanouk, this populist element of *Sangkum* makes it democratic. The underlying foundation of *Sangkum* ideology, similar to any democratic principle, is popular sovereignty. As Sihanouk writes, *Sangkum* placed the "power of decision-making...in the hands of the Prime Minister and his cabinet, reinforced by direct participation of the people."¹⁶⁵ He additionally expanded suffrage to include women and allowed for elections at the provincial level. The supposedly unfiltered participation of the people in their government, as well as the expansion of political rights to women, made *Sangkum* more democratic than the previous parliamentary regime of the Democrats.¹⁶⁶ Sihanouk did not believe he was destroying Cambodian democracy. Rather, he was reforming it and making it more democratic. In 1954, he promised new elections will be held and a National Assembly will be re-established once the insecurity passed.¹⁶⁷

To better understand Sihanouk's *Sangkum*, it is helpful to examine a document Sihanouk published a couple months before he established *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* in April 1955.¹⁶⁸ In this essay, Sihanouk states that he received letters from peasants all over Cambodia. These letters, according to him, "exposed the faults that emerged within democracy as practiced today. They have asked the King to take control and construct a new government so that the people will not encounter problems with democracy again."¹⁶⁹ Sihanouk identifies several problems with the previous form of democracy practiced in Cambodia. First, too many political parties confused and divided the people.¹⁷⁰ Second, expensive campaigns led to corruption because the parties spent too much money to gain votes.¹⁷¹ Third, representatives, who won, later forgot the promises they made when campaigning or they lost touch with their constituents.¹⁷²

In this essay, Sihanouk proposed a series of reforms. He claimed that these reforms would make the government more democratic and the parliamentary representatives would be

¹⁶⁴ In the *Statutes*, which is in French, found in the Annex of Gour's text, *Reastr Niyum* is capitalized and transliterated into French. This suggests that *Reastr Niyum* is important to the definition of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. The emphasis should be placed on the *Reastr Niyum*. Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 418.

¹⁶⁵ Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 164-165.

¹⁶⁶ For an example of the praise Sihanouk received from the international community for how "democratic" *Sangkum* was, please see: *Echos du Phnom Penh*, July 14, 1960.

¹⁶⁷ *Phnom Penh*, September 2, 1954.

¹⁶⁸ Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 162.

¹⁶⁹ Norodom Sihanouk, *Mémoire sur la constitution 1947*, 1955, Box 347, NAC.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

more accountable to the people. The first reform was to get rid of electoral districts and make communes the basis of representation. He also mandated that any candidate must live in that district for at least 3 years before they can run. The goal was that by living in the commune the candidate would develop closer ties to the community and thus better represent its interests. This reform was also done to stop representatives from leaving their commune and remaining in the city. Sihanouk declared that the residency requirement will make for better representatives. With this goal in mind, he hoped to pass other reforms, such as requiring representatives to open their paychecks from the commune (thereby ensuring they will return at least once a month). Another important check Sihanouk sought implement was that the people's right to recall their representatives at any time.¹⁷³ He also believed the candidates should be chosen without displaying their party affiliation.¹⁷⁴ Lastly, he proposed the creation of provincial assemblies to give citizens greater control over the government.¹⁷⁵ At the end of the essay, he asserts that he has carefully crafted a "broadly-defined populist government on par with other populist regimes found in the Western world as known today." So he asks, do Cambodians "want a government that allows the citizen to directly use their power or a regime that gives power to politicians, who utilizes it on the people's behalf?"¹⁷⁶ Because there were many problems with the democracy as practiced earlier, Sihanouk's stated goal was to make the Cambodian government more democratic and to correct the chaos of the Democratic period.

In this essay, Sihanouk was working out his vision for a new form of government. A month later, Sihanouk abdicated his throne and a month after his abdication, he established *Sangkum*. While not everything he mentioned in his essay made it into the actual statutes or the new 1956 Constitution, Sihanouk kept his promise to give direct power to the people. Article 51 of the new Constitution gave people the ability to recall their representative. If 50% plus 1 asked the king to revoke their representative, the king must call for new elections within that district. This representative must go before his constituents and explain his actions if he wanted to be re-elected.¹⁷⁷ In addition to exercising greater control over their representative, villagers also felt more invested in the new government. Sihanouk's actions made villagers believe that their voices were finally being heard, something all democracies aspire to accomplish. He also extended suffrage to women, which made Cambodia more democratic. Article 49 and Article 50 of the 1956 Constitution gave women the right to vote and stand as candidates for the first time in Cambodian history.¹⁷⁸ In the name of reforming Cambodia's democracy, Sihanouk eliminated political parties. The Statutes did not allow for a member of *Sangkum* to be a part of political parties, a key regulation that allowed Sihanouk to weaken potential opposition and transform Cambodian democracy.¹⁷⁹ The members of the Liberal Party quickly dissolved their party and joined *Sangkum*. Other individuals quickly followed suit, including Lon Nol of the National Renovation Party and Son Sann of the Democratic Party. After Sihanouk achieved independence in 1953, he was also able to rally some members of the Khmer Issarak to *Sangkum*. All of these

¹⁷³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷⁷ Constitution of Cambodia, 1956, art. 51.

¹⁷⁸ Constitution of Cambodia, 1956, art. 49 and 50.

¹⁷⁹ Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 418

factors allowed Sihanouk to successfully consolidate his role as a leader and the guarantor of Cambodian democracy.

Although Sihanouk appeared to have reformed the Cambodian political system in order to make it more democratic, he in fact strengthened royal and executive power vis-a-vis the legislative branch. The 1956 Constitution continued to state that legislative power remained in the National Assembly.¹⁸⁰ He, however, removed other powers the legislative branch enjoyed during the Democratic period. For instance, the king can unilaterally appoint a prime minister without consulting the leaders of either legislative chamber. Likewise, he can appoint any minister without having to consult the National Assembly.¹⁸¹ The legislative branch had lost the power of congressional oversight. Article 68 and 69 of the new Constitution changed the ability of the National Assembly to challenge executive action.¹⁸² Now, the National Assembly needed to have at least half of all representatives agree before calling “an eminent person” to clarify questions of national importance. Using the excuse to make Cambodia more democratic, Sihanouk formally rewrote the Constitution to consolidate his control as Prime Minister. The National Assembly no longer had the right to question the executive branch. The eclipsing of multiple political parties in Cambodia meant that to be a representative in the Assembly, one had to be a member of *Sangkum*. Sihanouk admitted that *Sangkum* leadership or in other words, he selected the candidates competing in these elections. Having representatives beholden to *Sangkum* was a quick and easy method for Sihanouk to entrench his regime. As he justified it later: “in order to ensure a fair representation of left, right and center tendencies in the National Assembly, candidates for election were pre-selected by the *Sangkum* leadership. This method provided a measure of balance and stability, something very rare in Southeast Asia, and did much to preserve national unity.”¹⁸³ In doing this, Sihanouk rendered elections meaningless and weakened potential competitors. Claude-Gilles Gour, who was a professor at the Faculté de Droit at Phnom Penh during the 1960s, notes that the “popular vote no longer signified a choice between persons or ideologies.” Under Sihanouk, the vote became a “renewal of support for the ideals of *Sangkum*.”¹⁸⁴ In “reforming” it, Sihanouk stripped Cambodian democracy of its significance. The vote and the National Assembly no longer had the consequence it enjoyed under the Democrats.

In addition to curtailing the National Assembly’s constitutional responsibilities, Sihanouk further minimized its legislative abilities. When he established *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, Sihanouk created the National Congress. The *Statues of Sangkum* has little to say about the National Congress, writing only that delegates to the National Congress are from the *khums* (communes), *srok*, and cities or provincial capitals.¹⁸⁵ Generally, the National Congress is a meeting of all *Sangkum* members. Since it was not mentioned in the 1956 Constitution, the National Congress was not a government institution. This situation changed, however, when the National Assembly challenged Sihanouk’s rule and the representatives competed for

¹⁸⁰ Constitution of Cambodia, 1956, art. 65.

¹⁸¹ Constitution of Cambodia, 1956, art. 65.

¹⁸² Constitution of Cambodia, 1955, art. 68 and 69.

¹⁸³ Norodom Sihanouk, *War with CIA*, 46.

¹⁸⁴ Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 223-224.

¹⁸⁵ *Khum* and *Srok* are how Cambodians divides a province. *Khums*, normally translated as communes, can be made up of many villages, then *Khums* are grouped together to form *srok*. Provinces are made up of many *srok*. Gour, *Institution Constitutionnelles et Politiques du Cambodge*, 23.

governmental control. In June 1956, Sihanouk refused to join the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Cambodia's relationship with the United States worsened.¹⁸⁶ By April, Sihanouk raised the possibility of accepting Chinese and Soviet aid.¹⁸⁷ This thought did not sit well with some National Assembly deputies, who enjoyed American aid. These tensions coalesced in December 1956, when the National Assembly voted to dismiss the prime minister and his Council, despite the objections of Sihanouk. At this moment, Sihanouk believed that the "US Embassy and the wealthier of the compradors had bought up enough deputies in the National Assembly to override my recommendations."¹⁸⁸ Regardless of the veracity of this claim, the situation captures the on-going conflict between Sihanouk and the National Assembly. Segments of the Cambodian population seemed to have held onto the belief in a strong legislative branch, resisting *Sangkum* reordering. Sihanouk saw this challenge and decided to take away the National Assembly's defining power. In 1957, he proposed that the National Congress "become the nation's supreme policy-making body. Its decisions would be binding on the National Assembly....The role of the National Assembly would be to discuss, ratify and implement the decisions of the Congress."¹⁸⁹ With this measure, Sihanouk ensured that the executive would overcome the legislative, as he writes: "this would block any possibility of a majority of Assembly delegates being brought up to block or reverse fundamental national policies."¹⁹⁰ Despite what was written in the 1956 Constitution, the National Assembly no longer had legislative power. It had to listen to the National Congress, which the people did not formally elect. With this measure and for the time being, Sihanouk succeeded in silencing the National Assembly.

Sihanouk, via his *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, overturned piece by piece the constitutional democracy the Democrats created in 1946. The vote was rendered essentially meaningless and the National Assembly, which was the powerful core of the Democratic Party's democracy, was, by 1956, a shadow of itself. Despite his destruction of constitutional democracy, Sihanouk presented himself as a savior and patron of Cambodian democracy. This image was first seen in his 1955 essay, justifying the need for democratic reform. Som Sary reinforced Sihanouk's democratic image, when he published "Le grande figure de Norodom Sihanouk" in 1955 with support of the Royal Palace. The overall intent of Som Sary's collection of documents and letters was to showcase the role Sihanouk had in ratifying the 1946 Constitution, completely erasing the Democratic Party's role in the Constitution's creation. Other scholars and international observers also contributed to Sihanouk's democratic image. Writing in 1954, the newspaper, *Phnom Penh*, believes that Sihanouk gave democracy to the people because he was happy "to give rights and freedoms to his people so that they can help lead Cambodia and guide the country towards independence."¹⁹¹ Pouk Chhay, writing in his 1966 thesis on *Sangkum* political institutions, states that "under the influence of a group of elites and the

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 76-79.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 87.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ ទ្រង់សព្វព្រះរាជហឫទ័យឱ្យប្រជារាស្ត្រស្រីរបស់ព្រះអង្គមានសិទ្ធិ និងសេរីភាព ជួយត្រួតត្រាប្រទេស កម្ពុជានឹងជួយដឹកនាំនគរ

ទៅរកគោលឯករាជ្យ *Phnom Penh*, September 2, 1954.

‘democratization’ movement developing in Asia,” Sihanouk chose to the “ ‘liberal way,’ bypassing the idea of a purely and simply ‘given’ Constitution to a Constitution ratified by the people...In his intention to ‘give Cambodians policies as democratic as possible,’ of endowing Cambodia with a Constitution, the King is going to adopt a ‘middle path,’ a solution of compromise.”¹⁹² These accounts represented Sihanouk as the creator of democracy. They removed the Democratic Party’s role in Cambodian history: they were the true impetus behind the 1946 Constitution – not Sihanouk. The erasure of the Democrats from *Sangkum* history allowed Sihanouk to present himself as democratic even as he dismantled democratic institutions. Sihanouk consolidated his power and modernized Cambodia at the expense of the Democrats, their supporters and a vibrant democratic tradition.

Conclusion

In preparation for the upcoming 1955 election, which was mandated by the Geneva Accords, the newspaper *Phnom Penh* published an editorial on the current state of Cambodian politics. The unknown author compares Cambodia’s experience with constitutional democracy with that of England. The author wonders why “one hardly ever hears of the parliament dissolving or the collapse of a cabinet” in England.¹⁹³ In the same nine-year period, 1945 to 1954, Cambodians have seen the departure of many prime ministers and the National Assembly dissolved twice. In contrast, England experienced only two prime ministers, Winston Churchill of the Conservative Party and Clement Atlee from the Labor Party. The author marvels at the stability of England and disparages the disunity of Cambodians. The author’s solutions to Cambodian political problems are unknown because the editorial continued to the next issue, which was not saved in the archives. The solution most likely would have been connected to King Sihanouk, since in the same issue, another article, entitled “Democracy,” ended with praise of the monarchy. The comparison with England fits into Sihanouk’s description of a chaotic democracy as practiced under the Democrats. Constitutional democracy has only led to pandemonium and instability. Cambodians, unlike English citizens, were not ready for democracy. Sihanouk had succeeded in presenting Cambodia as a country incompatible with the constitutional democracy as practiced by the Democratic Party. Rather than nurturing democratic practices as the Democrats hope to do, Sihanouk created a unique political system called *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*.

By 1960, Sihanouk appeared have accomplished a reorganization of Cambodian politics. Gone were the meaningful, chaotic, and confusing elections in which multiple political parties competed for votes and made unfulfilled promises. The National Assembly ruled by Democrats, who arrogantly believed in their transformational role in Cambodian history, had also disappeared. Replacing the death and atrocities committed during the French Indochina War was a supposed oasis of peace. Cambodia developed into a modern country without the problems plaguing its neighbors. Or this image at least was the myth the Sihanouk government told. This new Cambodia had come at a price. Even as he manipulated and co-opted the values of the Democratic Party, Sihanouk disenfranchised important segments of the population. These social actors, especially the intellectuals, continued to haunt Sihanouk and would lead to his downfall in 1970.

¹⁹² Pouk, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge*, 141-142.

¹⁹³ *Phnom Penh*, September 2, 1954.

Chapter 2

Losing the Sacred: Modern Khmer Intellectuals in Phnom Penh

A 2013 Radio Free Asia broadcast asked its audience: what obligations do intellectuals (*pannavoan*) have in resolving politics?¹ The speakers believed that intellectuals have a duty to intervene and help the nation, since they have the most informed understanding of the world. The speakers' optimistic perspective on intellectuals is expected given the historical role intellectuals played in promoting Cambodian democracy, as seen in the previous chapter. A few months after the broadcast, a blog posted a poem that contested this very view.² The student, named Tararith, berated those so-called patriotic, enlightened intellectuals. Rather than celebrate their commitment to their countrymen, Tararith exposed them as hypocrites, willing to prostitute themselves and their country for power. The lack of reverence in Tararith's tone spoke to the new position Khmer intellectuals found themselves in since the 1960s.

A product of a secular education, modern Khmer intellectuals made their first appearance during the 1940s when they protested French colonialism. They were ardent followers of the Democratic Party and instigators of constitutional democracy. While some later joined *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, intellectuals were known to antagonize Sihanouk. Historians often point to the intellectual class as the culprits behind the downfall of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and the establishment of the Khmer Republic in 1970. A few years later, the intelligentsia, along with their fellow urbanites, became victims of Pol Pot's communist regime. The Khmer Rouge considered them to be too western and sought to eradicate them. This 35-year history illustrates the tempestuous and fluid position intellectuals held within Cambodian society. This chapter traces the evolution of the modern intellectual, from early conceptions found in folktales and religious scriptures to his position in *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. By locating him within the capital and by tracing his evolution alongside Phnom Penh's development, I show the effects Sihanouk's modernizing policies had upon the city, the novel, and the intellectual. The birth of the modern Khmer intellectual, the *pannavoan*, cannot be separated from Phnom Penh and from

¹ វណ្ណ វិចារ, “តួនាទីបញ្ញវន្តក្នុងដំណោះស្រាយនយោបាយ?”, *Radio Free Asia, Khmer Edition*, November 13, 2013, accessed at <http://www.rfa.org/khmer/callshow/The-role-of-intellectual-in-settling-political-deadlock-11032013075359.html>.

² បញ្ញវន្តស្វែងបុណ្យមន្ត្រី រកបានស្រីថ្មីចោលប្រពន្ធ
ព្រមធ្វើកញ្ឆាវស្រូវរិះគន់ ជាជនលោកលន់ហួសប្រមាណ។
ពីមុនស្អប់ណាស់ជនក្បត់ជាតិ លះបង់សាច់ញាតិមិននឹកស្មាន
ធ្វើនយោបាយរកក្រុមក្បួន ជួយខ្មែរសុខសាន្តសង្គ្រោះជាតិ។
មិនយូរប៉ុន្មានបានលុយកាក់ កងប្រាក់បុណ្យសក្តិទៀត
បែរក្បាលប្រហារខ្មែរគ្រប់ស្មៀត ដែលសូម្បីជាតិក៏ហ៊ានលក់។

Tararith Kho, *Pannavoan*, Khmer Literature, Blog, January 2, 2014, accessed at <https://khmerliterary.blogspot.com/2014/01/blog-post.html#links>. Tararith Kho is a Khmer poet, who was Scholars at Risk Fellow at Harvard University and International Writing Project fellow at Brown University. For more information, see Geoffrey Cain, “Interview with Cambodian writer Tararith Kho,” *New Mandala*, March 12, 2012, accessed at <https://www.newmandala.org/interview-with-cambodian-writer-tararith-kho/>.

modernity. He³ is at once a product, an agent and a mirror of Cambodian modernity. The overall goal of this chapter is to describe modern Khmer intellectuals and their urban context.

Early Learned Men

Early Khmer conceptions of learned men drew upon different traditions, most of which were borrowed from India. To overemphasize Indian influence is a mistake. As Penny Edwards wrote, Cambodian cosmology is founded on a Buddhism “overlaid on centuries of ongoing animist practice, Brahminic beliefs, and worship of Hindu deities.” This syncretic Buddhism “became integrated into the worldviews and daily lives of Cambodian farmers.”⁴ The combination of animist, Hindu and Buddhist philosophies informs Cambodian understandings of an intellectual. Cambodian learned men, like the type of Buddhism practiced in Theravada Southeast Asia, is an interweaving of different strands of thoughts and practices. This pulling together of many beliefs is most readily apparent in two popular understandings of learned men: the *pandit* and the *lok ta essey*.

Zhou Dagaun, the Chinese official who visited Angkor during its final years, noticed the men “who dress like other people, except they hang a white thread around their neck. This was all that distinguishes them as learned men.” These men, according to Zhou, were called *banjie* and some of them were “men of great status.”⁵ Zhou puzzled over their doctrine and where they studied because Angkor apparently did not have an academy or a place of education. He later mentioned that “when young boys go to school, they are all trained by Buddhist monks.” While prejudiced by his Confucian ideas of proper schooling, Zhou’s accounts attest to the existence of learned men within Khmer society as far back as Angkor. The men Zhou labelled *banjie* were most likely *pandit* in Khmer.⁶

Pandit has its roots in Sanskrit and in India, where the word refers to “scholars who annotated and embroidered the sacred texts which guided man’s action toward the highest state of being.”⁷ *Pandit*’s original usage in Khmer indicates a man who was a former monk. The Venerable Choun Nath defines *pandit*, who is commonly called *a-tith*, as a man respected by the people for his knowledge and virtuous character, which they believe were direct results of his

³ I intentionally use gendered pronouns (he, him, his) here. *Pannavoan* (ប្រាណវោន) in Khmer refers to a male. While present day usage of the word has become more gender neutral, the presumption is male. In the 1960s, a feminine version of the word existed. It rarely heard or used present day. The 1967 edition of *Khmer Dictionary* (វចនានុក្រមខ្មែរ or *Dictionnaire Cambodgien*) lists the word *pannavakthei* or *pannavoannei* to identify a female

intellectual. “ស្រីជាបញ្ជីតី ឬ បញ្ជីតី” See *Cambodian Dictionary*, (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1967), 632.

Choun Nath is usually credited with the compilation of the dictionary. His name is listed at the bottom of the foreword. The inclusion and recognition of women as an intellectual is a departure from earlier and continuing representations of learned men in Khmer folklore. Since *pandit* were former monks, women were inherently excluded from being a *pandit*. Current usage allows for a woman to be a *pandit* since the term now also signifies a person with a doctoral degree.

⁴ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*, (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 2007), 98.

⁵ Zhou Dagaun, *A Record of Cambodia: the land and its people*, translated by Peter Harris, (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2007), 52.

⁶ See Harris’ explanation in his endnote. *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷ Edward Shils, *The Intellectual between Tradition and Modernity: The Indian Situation*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1961), 20.

time spent as a monk. *Pandits* were also known as *neak klea vey* or *neak prach*. These words signify learned or wise men within Cambodian society, although *pandit* are explicitly linked to the monkhood or *sangha*.⁸ The training as a monk, Cambodians believed, imbued these men with wisdom and integrity. In his 1967 poem defending the *sangha*, Phal Teth wrote that being a monk acquired many merits and unknown number of virtues. The monkhood takes the rich and poor alike to study in-depth moral laws. Farmers, if they joined, learned to at least write and produce literature.⁹ These skills, along with their accumulated merit, remained even after they depart monkhood. These sought-after skills also made these former monks eligible bachelors.¹⁰ Along with their increased social status, *pandits* are known for their words and writing. In his attempt to collect and identify famous Khmer writers, Ly Team Teng listed the majority of respected, Angkorien writers as *pandits*, who shaped high literary culture up until the start of French rule.¹¹ The title, *pandit*, exercised and demanded social and political capital within pre-colonial Cambodia.

However, *pandit* is not the oldest example of a learned man within Cambodian culture. The *lok ta essey*, often represented as an old hermit who lives in isolated forest, is commonly found in popular Khmer tales and religious texts.¹² He is not associated with Buddhism *per se*, but rather originates in the Hindu classic, the *Ramayana* or in Khmer, the *Reamker*. When a pregnant Sita was banished to the forest, Indra in the form of a buffalo led her to the dwelling of Vajjaprit, who was described as “a most august sage of great learning.”¹³ With his learning,

⁸ គេក៏ហៅអ្នកនោះថា បណ្ឌិត ដែរ, ហៅក្លាយមកថា បន្តិត, ហៅក្លាយឃ្លាតមកថា អន្តិត ព្រោះគេយល់ថា អ្នកនោះបានបួស

មានការចេះដឹង មានចរិយាមារយាទត្រឹមត្រូវ *Cambodian Dictionary*, (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1967),

⁹ ទំសៀមនេះឯងគេតែងក្រត ដើម្បីទាញចិត្តមនុស្សឱ្យស

មួយគឺឱ្យមនុស្សទាំងមានក្រ ទៅរៀនច្បាប់ល្អឱ្យស្គាល់ច្បាស់

-ពីរក៏ឱ្យខ្មែរស្រែចំណាក ចេះសរសេរអក្សរសាស្ត្រ

បើទុកជាជ្រុំមិនជាន់ច្បាស់ អន់ណាស់អានបានសរសេរបាន។

ការបួសកើតបុណ្យមានគុណខ្ពស់ រៀបរាប់មិនង់សំហួសប្រមាណ

Kumbuja Suriya no. 4, 1967

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ly Team Teng, *Famous Cambodian Authors* (អ្នកនិមន្តខ្មែរដែលមានឈ្មោះល្បី), (Phnom Penh: Sohokor Yeoung

Publishing House, 1972). According to the back of the cover page, this book ran 5000 copies. Santhor Mok, the author of the first version of *Tum Teav*, was an example of the *pandit*'s imprint upon Khmer culture. *Tum Teav* is a Khmer literary classic, often taught in schools and brought to life in films. Its author was raised and educated in a pagoda near Oudong. After Mok disrobed, making him a *pandit*, “the abbot presented him to King Norodom, who recognized his extraordinary intelligence and made him royal secretary.” His connection to a pagoda in Oudong, which was the early 19th century royal capital of Cambodia, as well as his intelligence, enabled Santhor Mok to become a court official. George Chigas, trans., *Tum Teav: A Translation and Analysis of a Cambodian Literary Classic*, (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2005), 17-18.

¹² I want to thank Lok Kru Frank Smith helping me work out the ideas about the Lok Ta Essey and, most importantly, for pointing me in the direction of these Khmer texts, especially the *Reamker*.

¹³ Vajjaprit demonstrated his great learning when he rescued Sita and, with his knowledge of the Vedas (the holy book of Hinduism), conjured “a hut for the queen to make her home in, there beneath the trees. It was decoratively

Vajjaprit saved Sita from possible death in the forest and demonstrated the power the bearers of knowledge carried. Those with learning can save and enrich a life. Vajjaprit was not a unique figure in Khmer literature, rather he and his fellow *lok ta essey* frequently surfaced in folktales. Judith Jacobs, in her essay on “The short stories of Cambodian popular tradition,” writes that a “young man may aspire to train in the art of magic and seek a teacher in the forest, as princes do. An ascetic may help an abandoned heroine.”¹⁴ The ascetic rescuing an abandoned heroine is readily apparent in Vajjaprit’s relationship with Sita.

A young man seeking a teaching in the forest is found in other stories, such as *Neang Romsay Sok* and *Preah Chan Kaorup*. *Neang Romsay Sok* is a tale that explains the origins of a mountain range found in Battambang province. According to August Pavie’s version of this tale, his parents “took their son [Reachkol] to a celebrated hermit.” They hoped the *Lok Ta Essey* will educate Reachkol “the ways of wisdom and sciences and make him into a man capable of walking a good path in life.”¹⁵ In his 1921 collection of Khmer folktales, Pavie included Cambodian drawings of important scenes, which provide insights as to how a Khmer artist imagined characters in these tales. Below (Figure 1) was a drawing of when Reachkol and his parents first encountered the *Lok Ta Essey*.



Figure 3: Reachkol and Parents Meeting Lok Tak Essey and Neang Rumsay Sok from August Pavie’s *Contes du Cambodge*

created by skilled craftsmen, with fine cushions and pillows, mattresses and pretty foreign coverlets.” Vajjaprit’s great knowledge and magic reappeared when he created a companion for Sita’s son. He drew a picture of the infant and placed it in the fire. The drawing “burned up, glowing readily. By divine power of the learned magic spell, he caused a miracle to take place.” Judith Jacob, *Reamker (Rāmākerti) the Cambodian version of the Rāmāyaṇa*, (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1986), 210-214.

¹⁴ Jacob, Judith, “The Short Stories of Cambodian Popular Tradition,” in *Cambodian Linguistics, Literature and History*, ed. by David A. Smyth, (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1993), 252, accessed at <http://sealang.net/sala/soas93/htm/JACOBJudithM.htm>.

¹⁵ Auguste Pavie, *Contes du Cambodge*, (Paris : Leroux, 1921), 69.

Although Reachkol and his parents are of royal blood, they bow before the hermit, which indicates the higher position of the hermit. His renowned knowledge of magic and science gives him a greater status than even royalty.

This image of the *Lok Ta Essey* is repeated in another Khmer legend, *Preah Chan Kaorup*, a prince who believed he must first study magical skills in order to be a praiseworthy king. So he “left the city and went to study with a hermit [*Lok Ta Moni Essey*] who lived on a big mountain covered with forests.”¹⁶ In 2010, Reyum is the latest publisher to produce an account of this tale and included illustrations of the *Lok Ta Essey*.

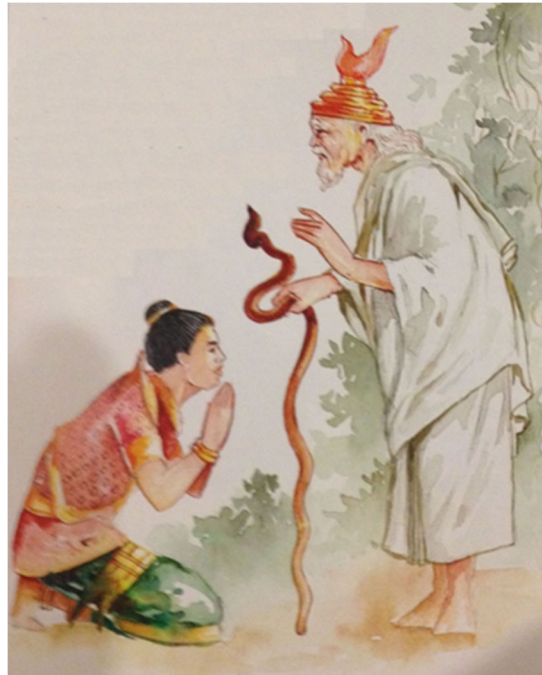


Figure 4: Preah Chan Kaorup and Lok Ta Moni Essey from *Preah Chan Kaorup*,

The *Lok Ta Essey* in Reyum’s version shares many of the same characteristics of the hermit in Pavie’s 1921 *Neang Romsay Sok*. The hermit, like his 1921 predecessor, lives in secluded forest, away from the city. Reyum’s illustrator, Khun Sovanrith, shows Preah Chan Kaorup, sitting in a cave and reading a palm-leaf manuscript. The student and teacher are not in a room at the center of a palace or at a university located in a busy metropolis. Instead, they are alone in a forest, which suggests the forest is a special site of learning within early Khmer imaginations. David Chandler and several other scholars of Cambodia have noted the special place the forest has within the Cambodian imagination. While they argue that the forest is a site of disorder, a challenge to Buddhist cosmology, these images demonstrate that the forest is also a place of learning and enlightenment. Buddha was in the forest, meditating under a Bodhi tree when he

¹⁶ August Pavie’s collection of Khmer folktale was in French. The *lok ta essay* is translated into French as *ermite*. A person unfamiliar with Khmer images would not know that the *ermite* is the *lok ta* in Khmer. *Preah Chan Kaorup* is a work produced by a Cambodian publishing house. It includes both Khmer and English text. Reading the text side by side, we learn that the hermit is the *lok ta essey*. While these two concepts do not neatly translate the other, they indicate that *lok ta essey* has been consistently translated as hermit. *Preah Chan Kaorup*, (Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing, 2010), 2.

reached enlightenment.¹⁷ These two illustrations portray the typical image of the *Lok Ta Essey* found within Cambodian literature, performances, and cinema.¹⁸ He is an old man, often partially dressed, eschews the luxuries of civilized life, and uses his skills to save lives. His distance from worldly delights allows him to gather absolute knowledge of man and of the world. His actions are not rooted in the desire for political power or control over other men, but in Good. He is incorruptible and pure. For these reasons, *Lok Ta Essey* occupies a respected position within Khmer thought.

The above tales and popular representations of the *Lok Ta Essey* also speak to the supernatural origins of knowledge within early Khmer imaginations. Knowledge, magic and religion are intimately linked, which is seen in the cinematic version of *Neang Romsay Sok*.¹⁹ In addition to being supernatural gifts from spirits and gods, knowledge is also the culmination of merits gathered over many lives. This connection between merit and knowledge appears in the life of the Buddha.²⁰ Buddha reaches Enlightenment because he is “omniscient...he was full of all wisdom, as he went about for the sake of wisdom and knowledge.”²¹ Khmer Buddhist scholars believed that Buddha, in his last incarnation as Siddhartha Guatama, “found the path free from suffering because his knowledge (*pracha ngen*) was flawless and transparent, as if a light shining through the darkness, which we identify as Enlightenment.”²² The knowledge,

¹⁷ See Anne Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood, eds, *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*, (Ithaca, NY: SEAP program, May, 2008).

¹⁸ In tale of Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso, which is also a popular story regularly performed by Khmer classical dancers, Lok Ta Moni Essey practices such formidable magic that the gods and goddesses feared him. He is “sought across the land for his powerful magic and knowledge,” which was passed on to his students, Moni Mekhala, Ream Eyso, and Vorachun. His skills allow Lok Ta to create a powerful axe and capture lighting in a crystal ball. Moni Mekhala is not the only tale to speak of the powerful Lok Ta Essey. In Preah Chan Kaorup, he foresaw the dangers that Preah Chan encounters. Lok Ta Essey cautions him to avoid women during his journey, which but Preah Chan ignores and almost dies as a result. In contrast, the hermit in the story of Ruthisen is more successful in saving the hero. He gives Ruthisen a magic branch that parted the earth and created an ocean, allowing Ruthisen to escape his pursuers. Prum Sodun Ok, editor, *Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 4-5; Pavie, *Contes du Cambodge*, 55.

¹⁹ In the 1993 movie, Lok Ta Essey’s knowledge is the result of an agreement he made with a cave spirit (a neak ta). He promises to protect the cave from intruders and receives knowledge in return. *Neang Rom Say Sok*, directed by Kong Bonchoun, (Phnom Penh: Angkor Wat Cinema, 1993), accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrZ3_J3oUSo.

²⁰ It also appears in the past lives of the Buddha as as Mohosadha Pandit. When Mohosadha comes into the world, his birth is witnessed by Sakka, the ruler of the heavens, who places in Mohosadha’s hand a medicinal herb. Since Mohosadha Pandit left his mother’s womb with such a plant and was able to speak right away, his father, a merchant named Sirivaddhaka, believes his son to be “a being of such surpassing merit.” The herb that was in Mohosanda’s hand cures his father, whose seven-year long headache “passed away at once like a water from a lotus leaf.” The remainder of the Jataka tale on Mohosadha Pandit reinforces this cyclical connection between merit and knowledge. Mohosanda Pandit’s knowledge of plants, architecture, and Solomon-like rulings between arguing neighbors demonstrate his merit, yet his merit allows him to develop such knowledge in the first place. E.B. Cowell, editor, *Jātaka; or, Stories of the Buddha’s former births*, (Cambridge, University Press, 1895), 156.

²¹ Ibid.

²² លុះព្រះបរមពោធិសត្វលះរាជសម្បត្តិ ហើយចេញទ្រង់ព្រះផ្នួសស្វែងរកមោក្ខធម៌ មិនយូរប៉ុន្មានក៏បានឃើញជាក់ច្បាស់នូវមោក្ខធម៌គឺ សព្វញ្ញតញ្ញាណ ដែលមានខ្លឹមសារដោយប្រាជ្ញវិញ្ញាណរបស់ព្រះអង្គឥតមានទើសទាក់ ឬកំបាំងនឹងអ្វីឡើយ ហាក់ដូចជាគឺទ្រាលពន្លឺភ្លើងទៅ ក្នុងទីងងឹត ដែលយើងហៅថាព្រះអង្គត្រស់ដឹង *Kambuja Suriya*, no. 3, 1958, 201. In these Khmer Buddhist works,

which Buddha amassed over his many incarnations and in his last life as Siddharta, allows him to finally discern the Three Truths (Change, Suffering, and Death) and find the Middle Path towards Nirvana. Thus, in early Khmer thought, intelligence and knowledge are not inherent human faculties given to all by nature or mental capacities that are nurtured and fostered over a single lifetime. Rather, they are products of merit accumulated over many lives and the lessons learned over numerous lifetimes. Because of its connection to Siddharta's Enlightenment, knowledge is sacrosanct, which explains the reverence early Khmers had towards the *pandit* and the *Lok Ta Essey*.

Knowledge as an abstract body of concepts was not alone in its connection to the sacred. Knowledge as a tangible collection of texts was explicitly linked as well. During the pre-colonial period, according to Penny Edwards, *chbap* [didactic moral poems] “functioned as the principal ‘textbooks’ for Cambodia.”²³ David Chandler, as well as Saveros Pou, believes the *chbap* in particular reflect Cambodian concerns since “the genre itself does not appear to be borrowed from somewhere else.”²⁴ He suggests that the *chbap* “present a continuous and popular attitude toward education which blended the past, the *kru* [teacher], his audience and ideas about dharma.”²⁵ While they are poems, *chbaps* are collections of knowledge pre-colonial Cambodians passed to one another and to the next generation.

In particular, the *Chbap Srey* (*Women's Law*) has captured the attention of scholars for its pronouncements on the proper role of women in Khmer society. Less examined, however, is the actual narrator of the *chbap*, who is a mother living in the realms of the water serpents (*a neak*).²⁶ The *chbap* is essentially knowledge that a mother hopes to transfer to her daughter, who is about to leave the realm to follow her human husband. The knowledge instilled in this *chbap* originated in the serpent world, if the audience was to believe the narrator. *Chbap Bros* (*Men's Law*), in contrast, were not the words of serpents, but instead from a time long ago.²⁷ The *chbap's* origins are mythical. To start the poem in such a manner, locating it outside of time, makes the knowledge found within timeless. This idea of a timeless knowledge is often found within early *chbaps*.

scholars switched between two words, *panna* (បញ្ញា) and *pracha* (ប្រាជ្ញា), for knowledge. *Panna* is rooted in Pali, while *pracha* originates in Sanskrit. Otherwise the words have the same significance and meaning in Khmer: both in lay terms indicates knowledge. According to Theravada doctrine, one important division of the 8-folds path, which is path towards Awakened Status or Enlightenment, is *panna*, along with behaviors (សីល) and contemplation (សមាធិ).

The importance of knowledge is also found in Mahayana Buddhism, which believes that a Buddha must encompass the characteristics of Avalokitesvara or Lokeshvara (the Lord of All Things), Compassion and *Pracha*. I want to thank Sophearith Siyonn and Vireak Kong for their emails and for clarifying these Buddhist principles. Without them, the articles I encountered would not have made as much sense.

²³ They were written “to be read aloud and memorized” so that their “moral message and social instruction” was transmitted to all social classes, despite being accessible to only the monks and those related to them. Edwards, *Cambodge*, 172.

²⁴ David Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian past: Selected Essays, 1971-1994*, (Chiang Mai : Silkworm Books, 1996), 47.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 55.

²⁶ *Chbap Srey-Bros: Taken from the Palm Leaves* (ច្បាប់ស្រី-ប្រុស ដកស្រង់ពីសាស្ត្រាស្លឹករឹក), (Unknown: Choun Nath Association, 1974), 1. I bought this book at a bookstore in Phnom Penh.

²⁷ The phrase used, ពីព្រេងព្រឹទ្ធិ, is very similar to the English phrase, “Once upon a time.” *Chbap Srey-Bros*, 12

As David Chandler suggests, these poems were very much aligned with Theravada Buddhist ideals. They reveal that “dharma, therefore, has nothing to do with politics, manipulations, or money. The virtues of the poems were those that accrue to educated men who are trained to step away from the turmoil of competition.”²⁸ While the *chbap*’s values echoed those of the *lok ta essey* in his forest, it did not reflect the actual role some educated men enjoyed within traditional society.²⁹ Some *pandits* did not step away from political power. In fact, the king actively recruited learned men to be members of his court.³⁰ The monarch collects around himself knowledge, which he used to magnify his own power. This political reality often conflicted with the idealized tradition of pure knowledge removing itself from the world and from competition. This tension between knowledge in the use of power versus knowledge freed from power shapes later Khmer attitudes towards the modern intellectual.

Writing in 1958, Ray Buc continued to believe in the original value of the *pandit*.³¹ The *neak prach* also retains its meaning as someone who can lead others onto the right path.³² These articles, however, present a deceptive image of a static Cambodia. While the traditional meaning of *pandit* remains in the Khmer language and continues to refer to men who have disrobed from the monkhood, it received an additional layer of meaning. As the Venerable Choun Nath writes in 1967, *pandit*, “if used in the current period, refers to those with the highest level of knowledge

²⁸ Chandler, *Facing Cambodian Past*, 54.

²⁹ Based on the scribe Nong’s royal chronicles, Edwards described “key holders of prestige and power in the kingdom as royalty, religious leaders, including the chief monk (sanghareach), Brahmins, literati, ‘sages, scholars, poets, and ‘high-ranking mandarins, ministers...and functionary and servants in their service.” Edwards, *Cambodge*, 70.

³⁰ We can see this in two tales, Mohosadha Pandit and *Tunchey*. Mosanda Pandit, because of his wisdom, eventually relocated to the palace and became an advisor to the king. *Tunchey* is a Khmer tale about a very clever male servant, who terrorized his master to such a degree, the master decided to gift him to the king. The king accepted *Tunchey* as a member of his court because he appreciated *Tunchey*’s cleverness. In addition to folktales, the real-life biography of Santhor Mok mentioned earlier also demonstrates the king’s need to collect knowledge around himself.

³¹ Ray Buc who was president of the Friends of Buddhist High School Association believes that a person knows the right path by associating “with an pandit, who has the knowledge (vichea) to show right from wrong, good from bad and who follows the religious discipline of Buddhism. Only [through such an association] will the person know the correct path, the good path.” មនុស្សភាគច្រើនមិនដឹង ផ្លូវខុសផ្លូវត្រូវ, ផ្លូវល្អ, ផ្លូវអាក្រក់មនុស្សទាំងឡាយមិនដឹងផ្លូវខុសព្រោះខ្លួន

សេពគប់នឹងមនុស្សពាល, ទុច្ចរិត,នឹងមិត្តអាក្រក់ ដែលទូន្មានទៅខានអបាយមុខ, ឱ្យប្រព្រឹត្តបាបអកុសលគ្រប់យ៉ាង, ដល់ប្រព្រឹត្ត បាបទុច្ចរិតយូរៗទៅ...ក៏រចនាខ្លួនឱ្យបានទៅកាន់ផ្លូវត្រូវ ផ្លូវល្អវិញ។ ការដែលទៅកាន់ផ្លូវត្រូវ ផ្លូវល្អបាន ដោយសារកាចូល ទៅសមាគម គប់នឹងបណ្ឌិត ដែលមានវិជ្ជាអាចបង្ហាញផ្លូវខុស, ផ្លូវត្រូវ, ផ្លូវល្អ, ផ្លូវអាក្រក់, ធ្វើតាមពុទ្ធារាជគីសាននា ទើបបុគ្គលនោះ ទៅកាន់ផ្លូវត្រូវ ផ្លូវល្អបាន។ *Kambuja Suriya*, no. 3, 1958, 279, Ray Buc, “The Opinions of a Buddhist,” *Kambuja Suriya*, no 1, 1958,

20. The idea of the *pandit* as a person who leads others onto the right path is found in another article by the Venerable Ho Say, *Kambuja Suriya*, no. 2, 1958, 108.

³² បុគ្គលដែលបានធ្វើសេចក្តីសិទ្ធិស្នាល ដោយការពេញចិត្តជ្រះថ្លាចំពោះធម៌ ចំពោះបុគ្គលដូចជ្រៀបរាប់មកនេះ ឈ្មោះថាជាឧត្តមបុរសក្នុង លោក។ បុគ្គលជាអ្នកប្រាជ្ញ ដែលត្រូវអ្នកដទៃតម្កល់ទៅសេពគប់ តែងតែព្រមានដាស់តឿនចង្អុលប្រាប់ប្រយោជន៍ ក្នុងផ្លូវនាំឱ្យបានជួប ប្រទះនូវសុភមង្គលដល់អ្នកដទៃតាមរយៈ មិនដែលបង្ហាញផ្លូវដើម្បីឱ្យវិនាសបាត់ប្រយោជន៍ឡើយ *Ibid.*, 107.

(*vichea*), with a doctorate. They are called *pandit docteur* in accordance to their discipline: medical doctors (*vichakpandit*), lawyers (*pandit kang chbap*), scientists (*pandit kang vicheastr*), and doctors of literature (*pandit kang asarsastr*).³³ This change in the meaning of the *pandit* was the result of Sihanouk's larger project to modernize Cambodia throughout the 1950s and 1960s. This modernization project concentrated its efforts in Phnom Penh, which became the site and home of the modern Khmer intellectual.

Images of Early Phnom Penh

Except for a brief interlude during the 15th century under the reign of King Ponhea Yat, Phnom Penh was not the historical capital of the Khmer empire. Rather the political center of the empire was the Tonle Sap (the Great Lake) basin, where Khmer kings built the great cities of Angkor. Each successive king attempted to create his own idealized metropolis, forming the 400 km² complex known today as the Angkor Archeological Park. Khmer cities were to mirror, “in reduced form, the cosmology of the Brahmanic universe as a series of concentric mountains and oceans.”³⁴ The layout of these cities was yet another indication of supernatural hold over early Cambodian everyday life: Brahmanism influenced Khmer conceptions of space, as well as Khmer knowledge. When Buddhism replaced Brahmanism as the dominant religion of post-Angkor Cambodia, cities were no longer concentrated symbols of Mount Meru.³⁵ Instead, Cambodians oriented their cities around temples or *vat*, a shift very much reflected in the layout of Phnom Penh.

The birth of Phnom Penh was recorded in the royal chronicle by Okhna Cakrei Pon. His undated account, which George Coedès translated into French in 1913, provides what little information we have on precolonial Phnom Penh.³⁶ From Okhna Chakrei Pon and George

³³ ពាក្យសន្មតប្រើតាមសម័យនិយម, ហៅអ្នកមានវិជ្ជាថ្នាក់ខ្ពស់ដែលមានសញ្ញាបត្រ ដុកតូរ៉ាត (Doctorat) ថា បណ្ឌិត ដុកទ័រ (Docteur)

តាមឈ្មោះនៃវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រនោះៗ ដូចជា វេជ្ជបណ្ឌិត, បណ្ឌិតខាងច្បាប់, បណ្ឌិតខាងវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រ... , បណ្ឌិតខាងអក្សរសាស្ត្រ ជាដើម។

Cambodian Dictionary, 568. Also see R. Kovith, *Dictionary of New Words*, (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Reasmey Publishing House, 1967), 127.

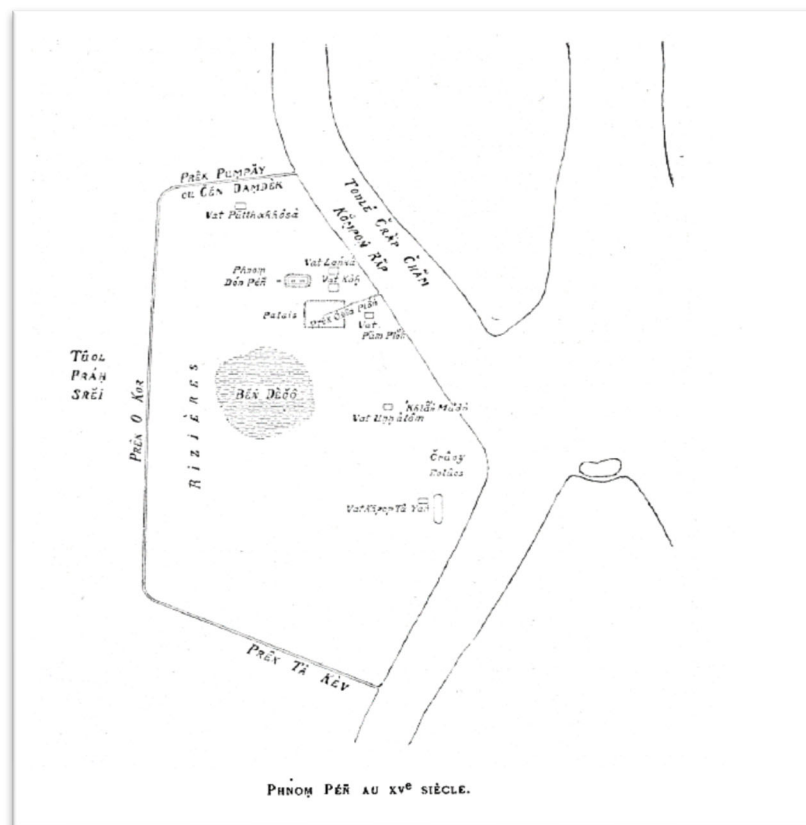
³⁴ Vann Molyvann, *Modern Khmer Cities*, (Phnom Penh : Reyum Publishing, 2003), 13.

³⁵ On the importance of Mt. Meru within Buddhist cosmology and Southeast Asian political conceptions, see I.W. Mabbett, “The Symbolism of Mount Meru,” *History of Religions*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Aug., 1983), 64- 83 and Robert Heine-Geldern, “Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Nov., 1942), 15-30.

³⁶ Okhna Chakrei Pon's account of early Phnom Penh is found in the Royal Chronicle P63. Georges Coedès translated portions of this text in his “La Fondation de Phnom-Penh au XVe siècle,” B.E.F.E.O. See Georges Coedès, “Etudes cambodgiennes,” in *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, Tome 13, 1913, 6-11, accessed at <https://doi.org/10.3406/befeo.1913.2786>. Pich Sol also relied on Okhna Chakei Pon's account in her article, “The Birth of Phnom Penh in 15th Century” (ដើមកំណើតទីក្រុងភ្នំពេញក្នុងសតវត្សទី១៥), published in *Kambuja Suriya* in 1957.

The coincidence between Georges Coedes and Pich Sol's titles cannot be denied. It is very possible Pich Sol read Georges Coedès's article in her research. However, in her account, she cited only Okhna Chakrei Pon. See Pich Sol, “The Birth of Phnom Penh in the 15th Century,” *Kambuja Suriya*, 1957. These two accounts of early Phnom Penh are very much the same, which indicates they followed Okhna Charek Pon and the royal chronicles. His account, along with Coedès, then filtered into other works on Phnom Penh. See Christian Goulin, *Phnom-Penh: étude de géographie urbaine*, (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: La Faculté Royale Des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 1966), 53-55; Sotheavy Lim, *Phnom Penh: Approche de la Capital du Cambodge jusqu'a 1979*, (Paris, 1993), 49-53; Vann Molyvann, *Modern Khmer Cities*, 150-151; and Edwards, *Cambodge*, 42.

Coedès, we learned the origins of a temple around which the city grew. An old lady, named Daun Penh, found four statues of the Buddha, hidden within a tree, floating down the Mekong River. She, along with her neighbors, constructed an artificial hill in 1372 and a pagoda to consecrate the statues.³⁷ This *vat* became the revered focal point of Phnom Penh. From the moment of its consecration, the statues were rumored to “emit such a powerful and sacred aura that all prayers were answered.”³⁸ This aura attracted people to Phnom Penh for the next 60 years. Phnom Duan Penh and its powerful relics also drew King Ponhea Yat, who moved his capital to Phnom Penh in 1431.



³⁷ Pich Sol, "The Birth of Phnom Penh in the 15th Century," *Kambuja Suriya*, 1957.

³⁹ Ibid, 232.

As seen in the drawing, the most visible landmarks were the canals, a lake, the palace and a series of pagodas scattered throughout the city. Missing from Okhna Pon's descriptions are markets, schools or houses. The material conditions of ordinary people were mentioned only once within the royal chronicle: "within the dikes that formed the city boundaries, court officials and the inhabitants freely built their houses and to the west of the city were rice fields."⁴⁰ Otherwise, Okhna Pon dedicated his account of Phnom Penh to its religious and political character. In Phnom Penh, only the king and sacred relics appeared to matter.

The French colonial government restored this sacred image of Phnom Penh when they reestablished it as the capital of Cambodia in 1866. Acting like King Ponhea Yat, the French located the Residence home opposite of Vat Phnom, so they too took advantage of its spiritual power. As Penny Edwards stated, "the protectorate did not so much as displace religious power as fuse it with new layers of secular authority."⁴¹ Although religious symbolism of Phnom Penh remained, the French slowly changed the very nature of how Cambodians understood Phnom Penh as they presented a different view of Phnom Penh in their travelogues, photographs, and officials accounts. Henri Muhot, who traveled to Cambodia between 1859 and 1860, described the town as

‘the great bazaar of Cambodia’...Mouhot found Phnom Penh ‘long and dirty.’
The phnom and its pagoda he dismissed as ‘possessing neither beauty nor
interest.’ At the southern end of Phnom Penh he found a collection of upwards of
five hundred boats forming a ‘floating town’⁴²

Another French traveler, Father Testion, thought the French-designed royal palace worthy of the king, but considered other parts of the city to be less attractive. The houses he saw were “elevated on poles above the ground, constructed of either wood or bamboo.”⁴³ The homes he found were probably very similar to those depicted in the below French postcard, which showed Phnom Penh as a “village at high water.”

⁴⁰ Ibid, 234.

⁴¹ Edwards, *Cambodge*, 42.

⁴² Milton Osborne, *Phnom Penh: A Cultural and Literary History*, (Oxford: Signal Books, 2007), 47.

⁴³ Édouard Testoin, *Le Cambodge, passé, présent, avenir*, (Tours: Imprimerie Ernest Mazereau, 1886.), 126.



Figure 6: Phnom Penh (Undated) from National Archives of Cambodia

Through French endeavors, Phnom Penh changed from a sleepy, marshy village surrounding a sacred hill to an urban, colonial outpost with a planned layout of 6 distinct *quartiers*.⁴⁴

The neighborhoods of Phnom Penh were now partitioned into blocks delineated by streets named after previous *residence supérieurs* and French explorers, like Paul Bert, Francis Garnier and Doudart de Lagrée. Henri Mouhot also was honored with a street, as well as Bishop Miche, whose appeal triggered French intervention into Cambodia.⁴⁵ The 1928 map of Phnom Penh illustrates a radically different Phnom Penh than the one present in Okhna Chakrei Pon's account.

⁴⁴ Michel Igout, *Phnom Penh : Then and Now*, (Bangkok : White Lotus Press, 1993), 84.

⁴⁵ Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, 53.

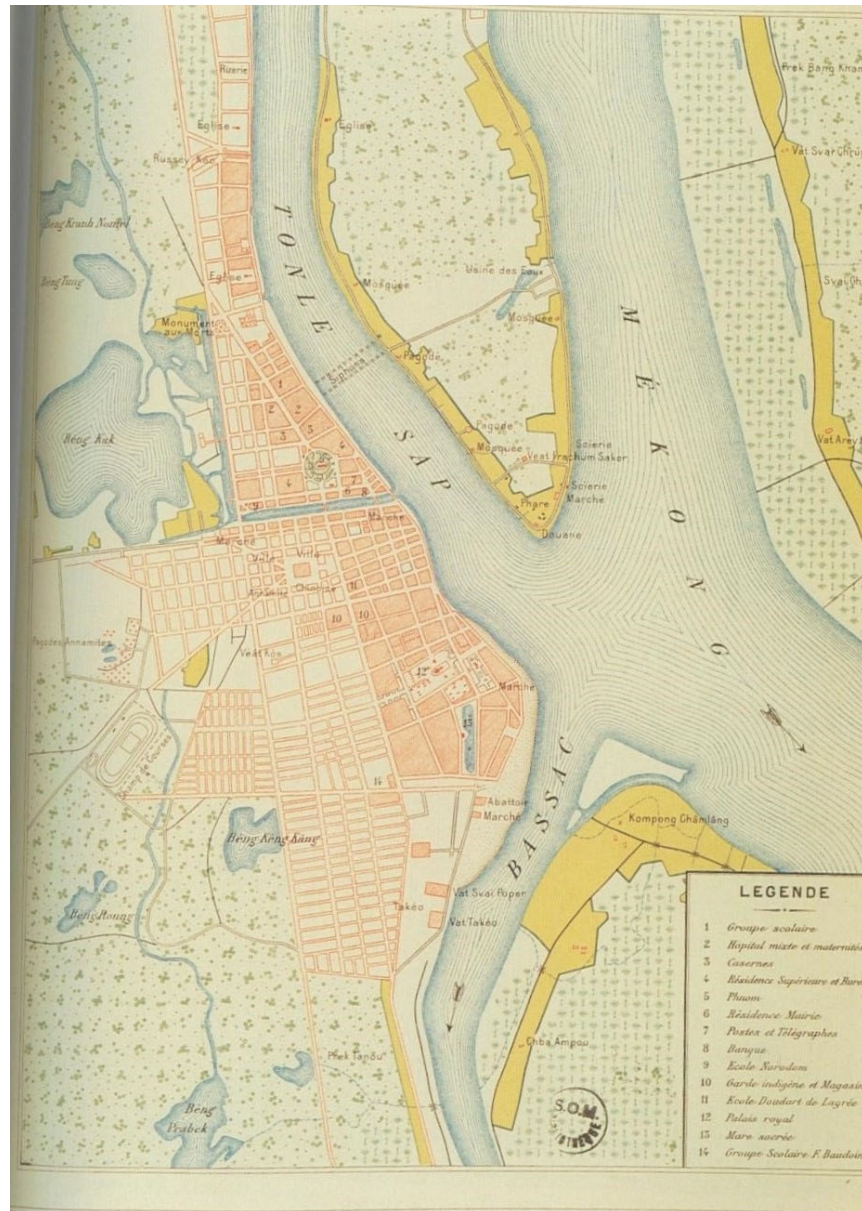


Figure 7: 1928 Phnom Penh from Michel Igout

On the map, a majority of Phnom Penh was no longer blank and void. Rather, these spaces were now made of blocks and lines that filled with houses and streets where *cyclos* carried their passengers. The French took photographs of these streets, their concrete homes, administrative buildings, and other architectural achievements. They captured images of everyday life in Phnom Penh, such as a post office counter, a day at the marketplace, or views from the streets.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Igout, *Phnom Penh*, 60 and 122-130.



Figure 8: A Street in the Cambodian Quarter in 1903



Figure 8: A Street in the Chinese Quarter in 1910



Figure 10: 1928 Cyclos and Pedestrians on Ohier Street in 1940

With these images, Phnom Penh's streets and the common person who used them began to appear within history

While the French used the photographs of the streets to legitimize and promote their colonial regime,⁴⁷ the roads, as Penny Edwards notes, "became symbols of colonial exploitations." These roads were built with *corvée* labor, men who worked baked under the tropical sun, as seen in the below drawing.

⁴⁷ See Gwendolyn Wright, "Tradition in the Service of Modernity: Architecture and Urbanism in French Colonial Policy, 1900-1930," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Jun., 1987), 291-316.

Phnom Penh transformed into a city for the everyday person, who used its streets to walk, to sell goods, or to stare at passersby. Phnom Penh may have always been this way, but it now was fully represented as such within government documents. The city did not lose its religious significance, but its meaning encompassed more than the sacred. It became the space for new identities. Under Sihanouk, despite his protestations of creating a Cambodia freed from France, Phnom Penh continued to act as a crucible that generated new subjects. The city housed many of the modern identities, such as the urban worker, the government bureaucrat and the secular intellectual. Sihanouk, in particular, used the city to construct a postcolonial identity for the young nation-state. So, while Wat Duan Penh remained as prominent landmark in *Sangkum* Phnom Penh, it is no longer the only one. Competing for attention were major markets, the government buildings, the universities and the Olympic Stadium. Along with these recent additions and institutions emerged brand-new subjectivities. The underpaid construction worker, the bored bourgeois who wandered the streets and the activist intellectual found a home in Phnom Penh.

From the Streets of *Sangkum* Phnom Penh...

Phnom Penh, the capital city of an independent Cambodia was a source of national pride for Cambodians during the period of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. After independence in 1954, Sihanouk's government focused on turning Phnom Penh into a modern city equal to other big cities. In 1958, Sihanouk created a committee, whose main goal was to "elevate the standing of the city of Phnom Penh."⁵² Vann Molyvann, who later became one of Phnom Penh's main urban planners, said "ambitious public works projects were undertaken in the capital and throughout the Kingdom. The necessity of rapidly designing and constructing buildings to house the institution of the newly independent State led to major public works projects."⁵³ Because of the government's concentrated efforts, Phnom Penh began to rapidly expand, quadrupling demographically and tripling geographically over the next fifteen years.⁵⁴ The urban population growth is seen in the following chart:

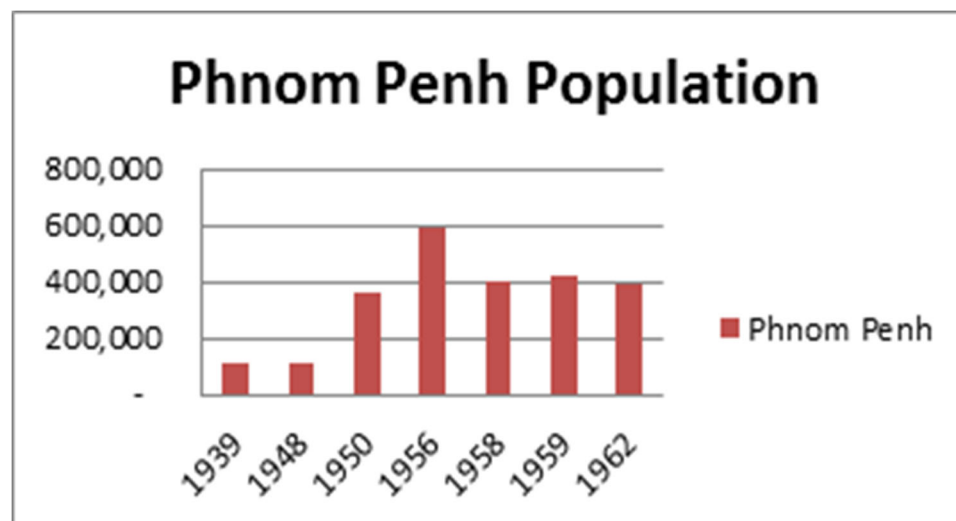


Table 1 : General Population of Phnom Penh from Annuaire Statistique Rétrospectif du Cambodge, Ministre du Plan and Recensement Général de la Population 1962, Ministre du Plan

⁵² "Pour L'Embellissement De Phnom-Penh," *Les Cahiers du Sangkum*, August-September 1958.

⁵³ Vann, *Modern Khmer Cities*, 157.

⁵⁴ Goulin, *Phnom-Penh*, 3; for maps refer to Vann, *Modern Khmer Cities*, 155-159.

During the late colonial period, from 1930s to 1940s, the population of Phnom Penh lingered at 100,000. Once Cambodians began to govern themselves when a Franco-Cambodian treaty was signed in 1949, the urban population increased, shooting up dramatically in 1956 after the Geneva Accords were signed in 1954. Once Cambodia achieved official independence, Phnom Penh stabilized at around 400,000 throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In little over a decade, the population of Phnom Penh quadrupled.

Christian Goulin in his 1969 study of Phnom Penh argued that the population increase of Phnom Penh was largely due to an internal migration from the countryside to the capital city.⁵⁵ Because of independence, Phnom Penh was no longer a regional capital of the larger *Indochine française*. Cambodia had transformed into a sovereign nation-state. With this new status, Cambodia required a more advanced bureaucratic apparatus, economy and infrastructure. People were needed to manage and work in these new institutions and industries. Phnom Penh became the political, administrative, financial and cultural heart of this new Cambodia. New ministries – Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, and the Ministry of National Education – needed to govern a country were all located in Phnom Penh.⁵⁶ Many of the banks (The Chartered Bank of India, Australia, and China, the Bank of Phnom Penh, The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation) and new factories were also found in Phnom Penh.⁵⁷ Most importantly, Phnom Penh was home for many of the new universities and technical schools: *l'École Nationale des Travaux Public, du Bâtiment, et des Mines* (1962), *l'École Nationale des Arts et Métiers* (1956), *l'École Technique Supérieure* (1963), and *l'Université Royal du Cambodge* (1960).⁵⁸ The new universities, as well as the burgeoning bureaucracy and financial system, lured many Cambodians living in the countryside with the promise of a better education and job opportunities.⁵⁹ Once they arrived to the capital, Cambodians were transformed alongside the city. The state placed an “emphasis...on developing a new national identity and affirming Cambodia’s role on the international stage.” The city was to reflect what the government wanted Cambodia to become; it was to embody the ideals of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. As the Phnom Penh developed, it became the centerpiece in the state’s attempt to build a new identity for Cambodia, one that was modern and grounded in the past.

The use of a city to foster a new national identity was a common project among post-colonial countries. As Brenda Yeoh stated, “given the colonial context from which many of these cities emerged just a few decades ago, the post-colonial enterprise of cultivating national identity and promoting national pride remains highly salient.”⁶⁰ The city, in her estimation, is the “key-node” around which the post-colonial state produces a nation and constructs a dialogue with the past.⁶¹ Likewise, Sanjay Srivastava asserted that “the analytical importance of the post-colonial metropolis lies in its role as complementary trope to the 'modern' nation-building

⁵⁵ Goulin, *Phnom-Penh*, 148.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 169.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 190-191.

⁵⁹ A deeper discussion of why Cambodians from the countryside migrated to the city during the *Sangkum* period, refer to Goulin, *Phnom-Penh*, 144-161.

⁶⁰ Yeoh, Brenda S.A., “The Global Cultural City? Spatial Imagineering and Politics in the (Multi)Cultural Marketplaces of South-east Asia, *Urban Studies*, Vol 42, Nos.5/6, May 2005, 945.

⁶¹ Ibid.

project.”⁶² The metropolis was constantly produced and reproduced within the discourse of the post-colonial nation-state, which causes the city to be “‘overwhelmed’ with the onslaught of representational spaces. These representational spaces constitute the murals of the nation-state...”⁶³ These two scholars both spoke of the importance of the city as not only a site for constructing a cohesive national identity but also as a stage upon which the national narrative is enacted. The city, its urban landscape, the architectural design of its buildings, the ways in which these constructions were reproduced in the media were all a “part of the state’s attempt to secure political legitimacy, build ideological consensus, and forge a sense of national identity.”⁶⁴ *Sangkum* used the design and the buildings of Phnom Penh to articulate and reinforce its ideology and nation-building project.

Sihanouk’s *Sangkum* had great successes in modernizing Phnom Penh. Buildings were constructed, roads were paved, and lights were installed. All these public works caused a visiting tourist to mention how on the streets of Phnom Penh, “there is much construction of apartment houses, factories and school buildings of reinforced concrete.”⁶⁵ Sihanouk boasted of the fact that “there are construction projects happening all over the place.”⁶⁶ Phnom Penh expanded south along the Bassac River and to the west. The area created to the South was a new district called Chamkar Mon. This new district housed the new buildings for various ministries, such as the Ministry of the Interior, and the State Palace, which was now Sihanouk’s home since he abdicated the crown. When Phnom Penh expanded towards the west, it focused on two areas: the route to Pochentong and the area around Olympic Stadium. Pochentong was the new international airport built by *Sangkum*. To connect the city proper to the airport, *Sangkum* created a new, paved road, named the Avenue of the USSR. Along this road was the new Technical Institute, a new university and the new Ministry of Finance. Another area of growth was around the “Olympic Stadium.” In order to construct each of these buildings, water had to be pumped out and land had to be raised. The university, for example, was built “on a plot of inundated land”; ditches and canals were dug “to gather the rain water and, at the peak of the rainy season to pump this over the nearby dike.”⁶⁷ The new district, buildings, and roads changed the landscape of Phnom Penh and Cambodians noticed it. In a speech given before the National Assembly in 1961, Sihanouk acknowledged the growing sentiment around this new Phnom Penh, which both awed and amazed everyday Cambodians: “Our youth from the countryside are amazed by the electrical lights and atmosphere found in our capital, Phnom Penh.”⁶⁸ The physical and symbolic transformation of Cambodia’s capital city became one of *Sangkum*’s prized achievements.

⁶² Srivastava, Sanjay, “Modernity and Postcoloniality: The Metropolis as Metaphor,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 31, No. 7, (Feb. 17, 1996), 406.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Construction of “Nation,”* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 15.

⁶⁵ *Le Sangkum*, March 1969.

⁶⁶ Sao Leang, *Destin ou manque de réalisme politique*, (Paris : CCV, 2000), 6.

⁶⁷ *Kambuja*, 15 April 1966.

⁶⁸ “បីព្រហ្មតុនៃស្ថិតានេះគឺការដែលយុវជនយើងច្រើនរូបយល់ខុសថាកសិកម្ម ជាវិស័យ ទាបថាកម្មនិសមនឹងមានរបស់បិត្តល ដែល

ធ្លាប់បានរៀនសូត្រក្នុងសាលានិងការ ដែលយុវអ្នកស្រែយើងសប្បាយត្រេកត្រអាលនឹងពន្លឺសក្តិសនី និងការកសាងនៅ រាជធានីភ្នំពេញ
Sao, *Destin ou manque de réalisme politique*, 13.

As it changed the physical appearance of the city, *Sangkum* imprinted its ideology onto the city. The facade of a building, the interior décor of a room, or the shape of a roof were examples of how old concepts and modern ideas coexisted. This supposed blending of old with new could be seen in the decoration of the State Palace. Sihanouk was personally responsible for the décor, which was said “to be worthy of modern Cambodia.” On one wall was the copy of the “Churning of the Sea Of Milk,” which is the famous relief found in Angkor. On the opposite wall was a painting by a modern Khmer artist, Nhek Dim. “A ‘modern painting’ by a contemporary Cambodian ‘artist,’” as Ingrid Muan argued in her dissertation, *Citing Angkor*, “was thus put on equal level to the monumental past.”⁶⁹

The city planners and architects also combined the old with the new. In designing the buildings of Phnom Penh, they reinterpreted classical Khmer architecture and made them modern.⁷⁰ The Olympic Stadium, which was built in 1964 when Cambodia hosted the GANEFO games, was a “the pride of the nation”⁷¹ because it could house 50,000 in its bleacher, another 8,000 in the covered seating areas, and 2 Olympic-sized swimming pools.⁷² The Indian Embassy even asked for its blueprints because they found the stadium to be “a fine example of modern Khmer architecture which provides all the up-to-date facilities for international athletic and track-events, including indoor and out-door games.”⁷³ This modern construction “derived its rigorous composition from Angkorian temple ensembles.”⁷⁴ The moats, which encircled the stadium, were copied from the surrounding moats of Angkor. The attempt to make the stadium like Angkor was so effective that when Jacqueline Kennedy visited Cambodia, she said “it’s your Angkor Wat in modern dress.”⁷⁵

The Olympic Stadium was not the only example of how an Angkorien architectural detail was incorporated into a *Sangkum*-era building. The Independence Monument also integrated the ancient temples into its design. The architect of the Independence Monument, Vann Molyvann, and his collaborators went to *Bantey Srei* for inspiration and used its various *kbach*⁷⁶ to decorate the façade of the Independence Monument.⁷⁷ With their small details, the Olympic Stadium and the Independence Monument displayed the legacies of the past, but their sleek lines firmly established them as products of the twentieth century. These buildings demonstrated the link between the past and the present: how a glorious past, when used correctly, can provide the foundation for a modern present and an even better future.⁷⁸ With careful planning by the

⁶⁹ For more information about the décor of the State Palace, refer to Ingrid Muan, *Citing Angkor: The “Cambodian Arts” in the Age of Restoration, 1918-2000*, (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2001), 253.

⁷⁰ “The vocabulary adopted by city planners and architects for the new buildings of the independent capital was that the modern movement adapted to the Khmer context.” Vann, *Modern Khmer Cities*, 157-160.

⁷¹ *Kambuja*, 15 April 1966.

⁷² *Kambuja*, 15 April 1966.

⁷³ “L’urbanisme khmer vient de gagner ses titre de noblesse d’une manière écalant : la République indienne sollicite les plans et modèles du Complexe sportif national, de la Cité sportive et des terrains de sports de Phnom Penh pour l’aménagement de quatre métropoles indienne, New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta et Madras.” “Phnom-Penh : ville-modèle,” *Le Sangkum*, November 1968.

⁷⁴ Vann, *Modern Khmer Cities*, 157.

⁷⁵ *Kambuja*, 15 December 1967.

⁷⁶ The simplest word English word to capture the meaning of this Khmer word is ornament.

⁷⁷ “Interview with Vann Molyvann,” Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, editors, *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2001), 22.

⁷⁸ Sihanouk’s response to a question in an interview best captured this sentiment. In response to the question: “The unique ability possessed by the Khmers, and to which no other Asian people can pretend, of laying out immense

government, the buildings of Phnom Penh were therefore the concrete representation of *Sangkum*'s ideology, used to embody its legitimacy and its nationalist narrative.

The state did not rely on buildings alone to reinforce its legitimacy and nationalist narrative, but employed a range of mediums to showcase Phnom Penh and to remind the readers of its significance. Sihanouk produced various media, glossy magazines, newspapers, films, and a permanent exhibition, to showcase the achievement of the *Sangkum* and to express its ideology.⁷⁹ In one such newspaper, Sihanouk wrote that the newspaper "definitively represented the opinions of a majority of Cambodians, who loved and were loyal to the ideals of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and the politics of neutrality."⁸⁰ Although most of the newspapers and magazines Sihanouk published catered to a foreign audience and were written in a foreign language, they regularly contained interviews of him and governmental reports or articles written by other Khmers about *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. In addition to articles on the government, the magazines published the letters from foreigners or Khmers living abroad, and political cartoons. Through the pages of these magazines, the government expressed and disseminated its ideology to a domestic and international audience.

These periodical and films collaborated to propagate a cohesive message on *Sangkum*. Whenever Sihanouk produced a film or engaged in a new project, the newspapers and magazines had articles, which served the dual function of highlighting *Sangkum* and reminding the readers of its achievements. The government's coordinated effort to shape public opinion was best exemplified in how the media treated Sihanouk's film, *Apsara*. The 1965 movie starring Sihanouk's daughter, Norodom Bopha Devi, and Samdech Nhek Tioulong, was a love story between a young traditional ballet dancer and dashing pilot in the Khmer Air Force. In producing this film, Sihanouk had one goal, which was "to publicize traditional and modern Cambodia to foreigners."⁸¹ He juxtaposed the beautiful countryside and the grace of traditional Khmer dance with supersonic fighter jets and the elegant buildings found in Chamkar Mon. The audience was also treated to the tour of the new Phnom Penh, first seeing the sights along the avenue of USSR. Then they saw Vat Phnom and the Independence Monument, and lastly the modern apartment complexes newly built by *Sangkum*. As the movie showed these Phnom Penh streets, the city transformed into a beautiful, modern space filled with selfless individuals like General Rithy, who gave up his beautiful wife so she may find happiness elsewhere. *Apsara*

cities with mile-long vistas, is it not being displayed today in those growing towns of modern Cambodia is engaged in laying out at the present time?, Sihanouk answered: "I agree with you that this is so. The fashion in which Khmer towns – and particularly Phnom Penh – have been extended during recent years furnishes conclusive proof that the Khmer are still a people with an inform love of building. This tends to develop into frenzy whenever economic conditions enable them to indulge this propensity, while it may be said without exaggeration that all my fellow-countrymen possess an innate capacity for laying out, an adorning towns with an eye to fine vistas, gardens and the ornamental effect of water." "The Strength of Our Nationalism: Interview Granted by Samdech Head of State to Mr. Cluade Clert, Director of 'Caravelle' Films," *Kambuja*, 15 February 1969.

⁷⁹Ingrid Muan wrote of how Sihanouk "published glossy magazines filled with stories and photographs of himself and his work for the Sangkum. He made films of his Cambodia, showing them first to diplomats later to general audiences. And he memorialized the 'achievements of the Sangkum' in a permanent exhibition which opened on November 23, 1961. Displays in the hall emphasized advances in 'industrialization, transportation, communications, production and social progress, as well as progress in the arts. Other government sponsored exhibitions of the Sangkum, both at home and abroad, presented images of life in Cambodia to national and international audiences." Muan, "Citing Angkor," 247.

⁸⁰ *Neak Cheat Niyum*, 12 Aug 1959.

⁸¹ This is from the official site of Norodom Sihanouk. Accessed at: <http://www.norodomsihanouk.info/cinematographie/1965-69/apsara.htm>.

succeeded in producing a particular image of Phnom Penh: it honored traditions but was still modern. More importantly, it was a happy, carefree place, where two lovers found one another. The opening of this movie was heavily publicized in various state-run newspapers, such as *Phseng Phseng*, *Neak Cheat Niyum*, *Le Sangkum*, and *Kambuja*.⁸² In *Kambuja*, an editorial spoke of how *Apsara* beautifully displayed “modern Cambodia and a Capital intent on becoming a great world Metropolis.”⁸³ By combining these mediums – films, magazines, and buildings – Sihanouk manipulated the public image of Phnom Penh to remind the audience of the legitimacy of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and its place in Khmer history.

However, Sihanouk’s manipulation of the image of Phnom Penh required careful editing and a reliance on an uncritical audience, one like Sophat, the central character in Rim Kin’s 1942 novel. In this story, Sophat is a young man who travels from the countryside to the capital city in search of his father and of education. From his very first step out of the car and onto the streets of Phnom Penh, “Sopha is not fearful or shocked by the big, stone homes, the people walking all over, or the many types of wagons crisscrossing the wide boulevards. [Rather] Sopha opens his eyes wide, observes everything, and experiences a soul-deep happiness.”⁸⁴ Unfortunately for Sihanouk, not all Cambodians experienced Sophat’s awe-struck joy of Phnom Penh. Indeed, there were those who considered the city to be loud, filled with vain individuals who wished only to be noticed.⁸⁵ A popular Sangkum-era film, *Chet Mdai*, depicted a scene where an old man drove an oxcart away from the hustle and bustle of Phnom Penh. As he drove, the old man compared and contrasted life in Phnom Penh with that of the countryside:

the lifestyle in the countryside is completely antithetical to the lifestyle found in Phnom Penh...the vast spaces of the countryside are covered with green plants, which are gently swayed by the breeze. The ties of friendship between each individual here [the countryside] remain forever strong. In Phnom Penh, people may occupy the same space, but they erect walls to section themselves off from one another, like villages that are separated by hundreds of miles...no matter how ignorant the people are [in the countryside], they work side by side without discriminating based on status. They know how to care about one another. They know how to relieve each other’s problems.⁸⁶

The Phnom Penh in this film was not the same Phnom Penh showcased in *Apsara*; this Phnom Penh was not filled with kind generous people, like *Apsara*’s General Rithy. Instead, the capital corrupted naïve innocents from the countryside.

In addition to not being kind, the city was not as clean as the images Sihanouk circulated. Journalists begged the government to clean the city. A writer for *Le Contre-Gouvernement du Sangkum Reastr Niyum* reported that the area along the Université de Commerce has become

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ *Kambuja*, 15 April 1967.

⁸⁴ Rim Kin, *Sopha*, (Phnom Penh: Seng Noun Hout Bookstore, 1965), 13. I bought this publication of *Sopha* at a bookstore in Phnom Penh. This version has an introduction by Ly Team Teng, who notes the historical importance of this novel. Sopha is considered to be the first Cambodian novel. It was originally published in 1942 in Saigon. The first edition ran 2,000 copies, according to Ly.

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⁸⁶ *Chet Mdai*, directed by Yvon Hem, featuring op Nem, Keo Montha, Saom V. Sodany, (Phnom Penh, 1963). For a list of pre-1975 Khmer films, go to: <https://cambodianostalgia.wixsite.com/khmermediaarchive/pre-1975-films>.

overridden with grass, which has caused “citizens, who lack consideration for others and uncleanliness.”⁸⁷ The space behind the Lycée Descartes suffered the same problem: “the cyclo drivers often like to rest there because of the shade of the *kaki* trees, but they do not simply rest. They do other things as well as a result of their natural needs.”⁸⁸ These journalistic concerns demonstrated that Phnom Penh was not the idyllic city Sihanouk portrayed. It experienced its fair share of typical urban problems.

One of the biggest urban concerns was traffic. Cars and buses had become a feature of life in Phnom Penh. The government doubled the number of roads, which allowed for greater travel within the country and generated a need for cars. Cambodians witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of automobiles in the country, as seen in the table below.⁸⁹

Year	Tourist Cars	Buses	Trucks	Motorcycles	Tuk-Tuks	Mopeds	Total
1921	235	100	10	-	-	-	345
1928	1,505	702	217	-	-	-	2,420
1940	2,740	407	690	-	-	-	3,837
1951	3,097	987	2,874	-	-	-	6,958
1968	23,096	9,367	1,345	15,196	2,117	98,416	151,505

Table 2 : Motor Vehicles in Phnom Penh from *Annuaire Statistique Rétrospectif du Cambodge*, Ministère du Plan and Christian Goulin

If these numbers are indications, Cambodians were more mobile than they were during the colonial period. A comic joked that riders should be ready to pay more in order to return to the capital.⁹⁰ On their weekends off from work, the middle-class inhabitants of Phnom Penh enjoyed a trip to the beaches Kep or Sihanoukville, while students and manual laborers returned visited their family in the countryside during the holidays. A comic strip mocked the increased price of bus tickets during the New Year. A husband, a wife, and a child would normally travel to the provinces for 40 riels, but during the holidays it increased to 50 riels. As Cambodians began to travel more, Phnom Penh grumbled over the growing traffic problems. An article in *Neak Cheat Niyum* wrote that “on the morning of January 23, 1963, *Trasok Peam* (Sweet Melon) Street, which is to the west of *Psar Tmey* (Central Market) and close to the police headquarters, was chaotic with big and small automobiles crowding one another. The cars came to a standstill, taking 2 hours to get out.”⁹¹ Another newspaper believed the traffic on Norodom Boulevard became “more and more anarchic” because traffic laws were seldom obeyed. The journalist criticized that “not only are the ‘stop’ signal placed at the intersections...rarely respected by the drivers of most vehicles, but also a number of automobilists did not respect the Law.”⁹² These complaints offered a different glimpse of life in Phnom Penh streets.

While Sihanouk used images of Phnom Penh boulevards to promote his vision of a modern Cambodia, these journalistic vignettes showed that the streets were not orderly or clean. Rather, they were chaotic spaces where cyclo-drivers lounged and cars jostled. Phnom Penh had

⁸⁷ *Le Contre-Gouvernement du Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, no. 275, 12 September 1967.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Goulin, *Phnom-Penh*, 91 and Ministère du Plan, *Annuaire Statistique du Cambodge*, 1968, Box 679, NAC.

⁹⁰ *Neak Cheat Niyum*, 28 April 1963.

⁹¹ Chau Seng, “Important Events in the Country,” *Neak Cheat Niyum*, 27 January 1963.

⁹² *Réalités Cambodgienne*, 8 April 1961.

become more than a sacred space for kings and temples, but its meaning and place within modern Khmers' imagination were up in the air. Sihanouk used the city to craft a postcolonial identity for Cambodia. Following suit, Cambodian intellectuals imprinted Phnom Penh into the literary imagination and in the pages of their novels. By doing so, they offer alternative identities for the nation and whittled a new social role for themselves.

In the Pages of a Cambodian *Broloam Lok*...

As Phnom Penh turned into a capital city to represent a newly sovereign country, Modern Khmer literature saw an increased growth in its consumption and production. Cambodians created new words to capture the changing times. A new dictionary was compiled in order to keep track of these words. In the foreword the dictionary, the author wrote that “the country has made progress in the international theater and literature has developed as well. It is for these reasons that new words, which belong to the nation, grew like mushrooms.”⁹³ All of these changes caused Khmer literary scholars, Jacques Nepote and Khing Hoc Dy, to describe the *Sangkum* period as a renaissance in Cambodian literature.⁹⁴ Sharon May wrote that “as the country was gaining its independence from France, education and publishing were expanding and classical works were being reproduced in books, filmstrips, radio broadcasts, and movies. A lively, sophisticated community of writers and intellectuals began to develop in Phnom Penh.”⁹⁵ During the *Sangkum* period, the publishing sector rapidly grew as more newspapers were circulated and more novels, which Cambodians called *broloam lok*, were being published than ever before. An estimated 1000 novels were published between 1955 and 1970.⁹⁶ This number is a dramatic increase from the 1940s when an average of 2 novels were published per year. In 1957, 1966 and 1971, 60, 100 and 70 novels, respectively, were produced.⁹⁷ A single year of literary production during the independence period eclipsed the total number of *broloam lok* published in the 1940s. The substantial growth in the production of the *broloam lok* during the

⁹³ R. Kovith, “Foreword,” *Dictionary of New Words*, ៣.

⁹⁴ Nepote and Khing were not the only scholars to describe the *Sangkum* period as a renaissance. Klairung Amaratisha also consider the period after independence to be one of “tremendous growth” in literary production. Klairung Amratisha, “Women, Sexuality And Politics In Modern Cambodian Literature: The Case Of Soth Polin's Short Story,” *Manusya*, Special Issue, November 14, 2007, accessed at http://www.manusya.journals.chula.ac.th/files/essay/Klairung_76-91.pdf

⁹⁵ Sharon May, ed., *In the Shadow of Angkor: Contemporary Writings from Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 31.

⁹⁶ Jacques Nepote and Khing Hoc Dy, “Literature and Society in Modern Cambodia,” *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia : Political and Sociological Perspectives*, edited by Tham Seong Cheep, (Singapore : Singapore University Press, 1981), 64. For a more detailed listing, refer to Khing Hoc Dy, *Ecrivains et expressions littéraires du Cambodge au XXème siècle*, (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1993). Nepote and Khing probably got this number from Khing's *Ecrivains*, but its listing is not exhaustive. In my research, I have found works that were published between 1955-1970 but were not included in Khing's *Ecrivains*. Khing created his list from the books he escaped with, documents from the Association of Khmer Writers, and from memory. It is unlikely we can ever know the true number of works published during this 15 year period since a number of books have been lost as a result of time and of the Khmer Rouge. For the impact of the Khmer Rouge on the Cambodian Archives, please refer David Chandler, *Voices from S-21 : Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) and Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable : Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

⁹⁷ Nepote and Khing, “Literature and Society in Modern Cambodia,” 65.

Sangkum period was due in part to the centrality of the novel in the creation of a postcolonial identity.

The *broloam lok*'s acceptance and popularity during the postcolonial period masked Cambodians' initial opposition to the printed word. The French began printing Khmer script soon after they conquered Saigon and Cambodia in the late 19th century. By 1877, printed Khmer works made its way to Saigon, Paris, Hong Kong, Hanoi and Singapore.⁹⁸ However, this printed script was limited to Westerners, used only among the colonial administration, scientific institutions, and Catholics missionaries. Cambodians did not accept the printing of Khmer script until decades later, despite the available technology. Jacques Nepote and Khing Hoc Dy offer multiples reasons behind Cambodian resistance to the printed word, the most important of which was "the magico-religious obstacle." Cambodians considered writing to have "a symbolic value...that was incompatible with the idea of wide, indiscriminate dissemination."⁹⁹ Cambodians sensed early the argument Walter Benjamin later made in "The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction." Khmer classical literature, as discussed earlier in the chapter, was located in ahistorical, mythical time and its teachings had a weighty permanence. As Nepote and Khing write, classical Khmer literature was "almost motionless and unaffected by time, and motivated by a desire for justice with magico-religious sanctions...Social equilibrium is restored by the death of a protagonist or by the intervention of some ideal figure – the perfectly just king, the wholly compassionate monk, etc."¹⁰⁰ This literature was closely associated with the royal palace and the Buddhist monasteries. Monks and members of the court often authored these literary works and they were its collectors, teachers, reproducers, and reciters. Since traditional Khmer elites knitted their identity to this classical literature and its hand-scribed reproduction on palm leaves, Cambodian society ignored the printing press, at least during the early decades of French colonialism.

This situation gradually changed as the French implemented a Western-style education, which needed textbooks to be printed in Khmer. The end of the First World War marked the period when Cambodians began to accept the printed script. In 1918, Oknha Keth and the Venerable Choun Nath produced religious works in printed Khmer, despite objections from traditionalist Cambodians. The 1920s witnessed the appearance of periodicals that incorporated the printed Khmer script or were completely printed in Khmer: *Bulletin élémentaire Franco-Khmer* (1925), *Kambuja Suriya* (1926), and *Sruk Khmer* (1927). By 1936, *Reatrei Tngai Saur* and *Nokor Vat* joined the other periodicals devoted to Khmer print. These last two newspapers were particularly important to the development of modern Cambodian literature since they ran serialized versions of the *broloam lok*. The works of Rim Kin, a founder of modern Cambodian literature, were serialized in *Reatrei Tngai Saur*.¹⁰¹ The interwar period saw a noticeable increase in Cambodian acceptance of the printed word and the birth of the modern novel in 1939.¹⁰² The acceptance of the printed word was another indication of the secularization Cambodians encountered throughout the early 20th century, alongside the desacralization of knowledge and of space.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰² Amratisha Klairung, *The Cambodian Novel: A Study of Its Emergence and Development*, (Ph.D. Diss., University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1998), 83.

In spite of the changes of the interwar period, the end of the Second World War and the destabilization of French Indochina proved to be the true turning point in modern Cambodian literature. Nepote and Khing argued the post-colonial period triggered a “national identity crisis” among young Khmer intellectuals, who previously engaged in only “a literary game.” This game during the postcolonial period, however, “became the stake of a whole country which, within an unstable Indochina, was henceforth trying to recreate the collective cultural image of its equilibrium. Though created by a small milieu, modern literature [like the city] became for the whole population the means of creating its future image.”¹⁰³ Cambodia had spent almost a century under French governance and as a member territory of Indochina. With the dissolution of Indochina, Cambodia now had to find its identity separated from France and Indochina. Similar to the city, the *broloam lok* became the screen upon which a new nation projected itself.

Benedict Anderson noted the important function the novel in fashioning of an identity: “we see the ‘national imagination’ at work in the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside.”¹⁰⁴ For this reason, the novels published during the *Sangkum* period often revealed “the diversity and aspirations of modern Cambodia.”¹⁰⁵ Kim Saet dealt with prostitution in his work, *Ladies of the Night (Neary Reatry)*, while Im Thok depicted the plight of urban workers in *Sim the Chauffeur (Sim Neak Bor Lan)*. Dik Keam showed the middle class in his novel, *Where did my salary go? (Prak Kae Tau Na)* and Kong Bon Choeun spoke of social inequality in *Mother, O Mother, I Don’t Want to Farm, I want to be a Lady (Mae Oey Mae, Min Jong Tvea Srai, Jong Tvea Lok Srey)*. The titles of these novels alone indicated the need of these writers to describe and process their contemporary times. This absorption of everyday life, as well as the casual acceptance of the printed word, became the defining characteristics of modern Cambodian literature and explained *broloam lok*’s popularity among Cambodians.

Cambodians noted this advancement in literary consumption and production. Ly Team Teng noted in 1970 that

immediately after independence, the literary drive has quickly picked up speed. It follows the laws of literature and has high convictions as its foundation. This shows that Khmer authors at this time have maintained virtuous principles, waiting only for their freedom to demonstrate these core beliefs. For this reason, I judge the literature produced during these contemporary times as valuable in every way, worthy of being named Independence Literature or national literature.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 2006), 30.

¹⁰⁵ Nepote and Khing, “Literature and Society in Modern Cambodia,” 64.

¹⁰⁶ ពីពេលឯករាជ្យភាព សន្ទុះអក្សរសាស្ត្របានប្រកបដោយល្បឿនឆាប់រហ័ស មានលក្ខណៈត្រឹមត្រូវ តាមច្បាប់អក្សរសាស្ត្រ និងមានគោលគំនិតស្របទៅតាមឧត្តមគតិជាតិជាមូលដ្ឋាន បញ្ជាក់ឱ្យឃើញថា អ្នកនិពន្ធខ្មែរនៅគ្រានេះ ពិតជាខំចិញ្ចឹមរក្សាទុកគោលគំនិតប្រសើរៗ យូរឆ្នាំហើយ រង់ចាំឱ្យបានដល់គ្រាមានសេរីភាព ក៏ផ្ទុះពុះពារឧត្តមគតិនោះឡើង ។ ហេតុនេះ បើវិនិច្ឆ័យលើស្នាដៃអក្សរសាស្ត្រទាំងប៉ុន្មានដែលបានចេញផ្សាយក្នុងគ្រានេះ ឃើញថាមានតម្លៃពេញលក្ខណៈ ល្មមជាអក្សរសាស្ត្រសម័យឯករាជ្យ ឬអក្សរសាស្ត្រអារ្យប្រទេស មួយ

Because Cambodian literature was moving in such a furious rate, the Association of the Former Student and Friends of Lycee Sisowath started to publish a recommended reading list at the end of its magazine to help its readers to choose the right book.¹⁰⁷ Cambodian started to pick up on various literary changes, trends and epochs. They realized Khmer literature was not static and several Khmer intellectuals turn a historical gaze upon current and past literature.¹⁰⁸ Their attempts to better understand and represent Khmer literature yielded the clearest distinction between traditional and modern.

A notable critic of Khmer literature was Kim Saet, who was born in Cochinchina in the 1930s. For most of his adult life, he lived in Phnom Penh and produced over 20 novels before his death in 1975. To further support himself, he wrote several scholarly texts, including *An Explanation of Literature* (1960) and *An Explanation and Critique of Literature* (undated). These works were meant to be study manuals for students, for whom Khmer Literature was a required subject in Sangkum-era schools. On the back of *An Explanation and Critique of Literature* is slogan that reads: “Easy to read, Easy to understand, Easy to memorize. You will never forget!”¹⁰⁹

An Explanation and Critique of Literature offered a broad historical and critical overview of Khmer literature from Pre-Angkor to the present day. Kim divided Khmer literature into five periods: Pre-Angkorien (*samey mun Angkor*); Angkorien (*samey Angkor*, 804-1433); the Lost Period (*samey Lovek*, 1434-1862); the Colonial (*samey ananikum barang*, 1863-1953); and the Modern (*samey eakarech*, 1954-present).¹¹⁰ He also identified four “movements” or trends within Khmer literature: Brahminist, Buddhist, “Khmerist” (*khemerakniyum*) and Foreign.¹¹¹ Kim considered the works that relied on God or karma to fall within the Brahminist and Buddhist traditions, while the literature that “do not depend on the powers of Brahma or Buddha and depict the real conditions of Khmer life” to be works in the Khmerist movement. The last movement Kim describes in a rather censorious tone contains novels that illustrate “norms and customs against Khmer traditions...such as *rom-dan-cing* [dancing in a bar or club].”¹¹² In his periodization of Khmer literature, Kim suggests that individual autonomy from the gods and realistic depiction of Cambodian life delineate modern novels from traditional works. Modern

ពាន ១ Ly Team Teng, “Literature in the Period of a New Cambodia (អក្សរសាស្ត្រក្នុងសម័យកម្ពុជាថ្មី),” *Kambuja Suriya*, no. 4, 1970.

¹⁰⁷ See *Magazine for Former Students and Friends of Lycee Sisowath*, 1956, no. 1, 47-49 and *Magazine for Former Students and Friends of Lycee Sisowath*, 1956, no. 2, 33-35.

¹⁰⁸ Hen Kim Siv, *The Basis for Understanding Literature*, (Phnom Penh: Bookstore Phnom Penh, 1963), found at the National Library of Cambodia.

¹⁰⁹ Kim Saet, *An Explanation and Critique of Literature*, (Phnom Penh: Bookstore Vong Raksmei, Undated), back page, found at the National Library of Cambodia.

¹¹⁰ Kim, *An Explanation and Critique of Literature*, 30. Kim Saet was an intellectual comfortable in Khmer and in French. So his work, while mostly in Khmer, interjects or position French phrases next to Khmer. This seem to be an attempt to further clarify the Khmer. I have chosen the French phrases to be translated into English and transliterated the Khmer. There is tension in doing this. For instance, the last period, which I translated as Modern, is derived from his French (*periode moderne*). However, the Khmer phrase he used is better translated as Independent period. So there is a collapsing of the Modern with Independence, which I think captures how Kim Saet, and Ly Team Teng in his earlier quote, understood the modern. For Cambodians at this time, to be modern meant they were free from the French. They now decided for themselves their values, principles and literature.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

Khmer literature no longer focuses on the lives of gods or Buddha's many reincarnations instead everyday Cambodians are the new protagonists.

Because of this new literary spotlight on the lives of the everyday person, Khmer scholars became conscious of the social role novels and literature played. Hon Kim Siv, a high school teacher, believed literature was "intimately linked with human society, an offshoot of politics, economy, social work and religion...in short, literature is the fruits of human society."¹¹³ He further argued that the characters in the *broloam lok* were "often symbols of the conditions, times and periods in which the author is preoccupied."¹¹⁴ Hon, more so than Kim Set, credited the Khmer novel with tremendous social powers, but he failed to make the same observation that Nepote and Khing made later. The *broloam lok* were not simple reflections of their times. Rather the novel encompassed the author's visions, dreams and critiques for a post-colonial Cambodia. The novel, as well as the city, was instrumental in offering a new identity for a new Cambodia.

One novel that many critics mentioned was Im Thok's *Sim the Chauffeur*. For instance, the Association of Former Students and Friends of Lycee Sisowath recommended this novel to "those who wished to learn more about the living conditions of workers and government officials."¹¹⁵ Im Thok's novels are starkly realistic, often focusing on the lives of the lower classes. The previous chapter briefly discussed one of his novels, *Rural Teachers*. In it, we gained a glimpse into Im's politics. He believed in democracy, but his own version: a community of equals with access to education and a direct voice in politics. Although Im's biography is largely unknown, he was a journalist and the director of the newspaper, *Vat Phnom*. *Sim the Chauffeur* was first published in 1956. His next novel, the *Levied Coolie*, followed soon afterward and his last work, *Rurals Teachers*, was published in 1957. Although his novels appeared to be critically acclaimed, the actual sale numbers for his novels are unknown. His works were later resuscitated during the 1980s. The communist People's Republic of Kampuchea made Im Thok's three novels a mandatory part of high school curriculum. To label Im Thok a communist and his works Socialist Realist may have merit, but is misleading as well. Im Thok's connections with the Khmer Rouge are unknown. A reading his novels yields only Im's political vision for a democratic, post-colonial Cambodia. *Sim the Chauffeur* is arguably his most celebrated work. In it, he describes the difficulties of the working poor in Phnom Penh. He shows a new consciousness is forming as the city takes shapes. Im Thok opens *Sim the Chauffeur* with the following passage:

"At nine o'clock in the morning, on the National Highway No.1 in front of *Trey* Market in Phnom Penh, small and big cars weave in and out, competing with cyclos, horse-drawn wagons, and wagon led by water buffalos. Close to the street, to the north-east of the market, is a field measured at about 70 meters by 30 meters across. In this field, groups of male and female workers are busy cutting, chopping, carrying, and lifting. Some are digging canals, other are breaking up concrete and asphalt. Even more are carrying water from the Tonle Sap to mix

¹¹³ Hen, *The Basis for Understanding Literature*, 12.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 30.

¹¹⁵ *Magazine for Former Students and Friends of Lycee Sisowath*, 1956, no. 1, 48-49.

concrete. If we observe for a while, we would notice that these laborers all have different responsibilities and work in groups under 4 supervisors.”¹¹⁶

Im Thok follows this paragraph with three more, depicting the duties of each group. The paragraphs are replication of the other, but the first is focused on the labor involved in mixing concrete for the foundation, the second is on workers building the walls and crafting the windows, while the last describes those workers cleaning up debris. Im has turned this urban construction site into a mini-factory with a clear division of labor.

These workers repeat the same task over and over. In his descriptions of the construction worker, Im effectuates Karl Marx: these coolies are factory workers, “organized like soldiers. As privates of an industrial army they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants.”¹¹⁷ Im’s workers like Marx’s proletariat also develops a sense of solidarity:

This group of coolies are very familial. They do not discriminate against a person’s race. They speak honestly to one another, often teasing and joking. The youth call their elders “uncle,” “aunt,” or “grandma” and “grandfather,” while the elders say “nephew” and “grandson” to the youth. The coolies think alike. A similar lifestyle leads to similar thoughts. Their jobs are alike and they think alike.¹¹⁸

Im Thok wrote the above following his description of the worker’s job site. Their experience in this construction site/factory tied the workers together and formed a new class.

However, it also makes them very conscious of class differences. As the workers rest, they talk. A majority of dialogue within the novel occurs when the work ends. In these moments, Im makes clear a new identity is forged among these urban laborers. One worker,

¹¹⁶ ព្រឹកម៉ោង៩ នៅលើផ្លូវជាតិលេខ១ ចំពីមុខផ្សារត្រីក្រុងភ្នំពេញ រទេះឡានតូច-ធំបើកចុះឡើង ប្រជ្រៀតនឹងស្ម័គ្រ រទេះកង់ រទេះសេះ និងរទេះគោ។នៅក្បែរផ្ទះខាងកើតឆៀងខាងជើងផ្សារ មានទីលានមួយមានបណ្តាប្រហែល៧០ម ទទឹង៣០ម។ក្នុងទីវាលនោះអ្នកធ្វើការ ប្រុសស្រី បានប្រញាយកាប់គាស់ដកសែង ញាប់ដៃញាប់ជើង។ខ្លះដឹកចង្កូរ ខ្លះបំបែកដុំឥដ្ឋ ដុំបេតុង ខ្លះដងទឹកពីទន្លេសាបយកមកលាង ក្រូសអាចម៍ផ្កាយលាយបាយអ។ល។ ហើយបើយើងសង្កេតមើលយូរបន្តិច យើងមុខជានឹងឃើញអ្នកធ្វើការទាំងនោះ មានមុខការខុសគ្នា ធ្វើដោយក្រុមនៅក្រោមមេតប្រុងប្រយ័ត្ន។ The excerpt is taken from an online site that has posted the entire novel in

Khmer. I have verified that the passage I cited matches the novel I have in my possession. Because of the novel importance, Jacques Dolias and Khing Hoc Dy republished the work and translated it into French. This is the version I have. I translated from the Khmer portion – not the French. Im Thok, *Sim the Chauffeur*, translated by Jacques Dolias and Khing Hoc Dy, (Unknown: Angkor Bookstore, 2007), 69.

¹¹⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel, “Communist Manifesto,” in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Jodi Dean, *The Communist Manifesto*, (Pluto Press, 2017), 60, accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1k85dmc>.

¹¹⁸ ក្រុមគ្នាលីនោះរាប់អានគ្នាណាស់។គេមិនប្រកាន់ថា អ្នកនេះជាតិនេះ អ្នកនោះជាតិនោះឡើយ។គេនិយាយរកគ្នាដោយស្មោះស្ម័គ្រ គេចម្លែងចម្លាំងគ្នាលេង។ក្មេងៗហៅចាស់ៗ ពូមីង យាយតា។ងចាស់ៗវិញ ហៅក្មេងៗ ក្មួយឬចៅ ឬអាមីងទៅតាមការរាប់អានរបស់គេ។ក្រុមគ្នាលីមានចិត្តស្រដៀងគ្នា គំនិតដូចគ្នា ជីវភាពដូចគ្នា ការងារដូចគ្នា ចិត្តដូចគ្នា។ Im, *Sim the Chauffeur*, 70.

Bachelor Mao, speaks of how the company is responsible for most of the construction occurring in Phnom Penh. The company “has seen tremendous profits these past few years. Before, it had only one car, now it has 7. The owner used to ride around in a cylco and now he has a lot of cars, while coolies like me continue to lack money.”¹¹⁹ Another worker, Aunt Prem, argues that since “our country has received independence and peace, we should live easily, eat well, and life should be better.”¹²⁰ Their words are given weight and their bond strengthens because Im juxtaposes their labor to construct contemporary Phnom Penh with the harsh realities of their lives. As Phnom Penh the capital city came into existence, the identity of the urban worker was created as well. In *Sim the Chauffeur*, Phnom Penh was the crucial agent in forming this new proletarian identity.

Sim the Chauffeur is one example how the city and the novel become tools for Cambodians to foster a new identity and to exercise their anxieties toward the changes happening around them. Another novelist and fellow journalist who did the same is Soth Polin, whose politically potent body of work will be explored in-depth in the last chapter. Unlike Im Thok, who focuses on the urban workers, Soth captures the mundane existence of the disaffected middle-class in Phnom Penh. A typical Soth Polin’s protagonist is Peng, whose story is recorded in *The Bored Man* (1968). As Peng’s family business flourished, they moved from their wooden shack on the on-skirts of Phnom Penh to a concrete villa in the city center. As they enjoyed the quintessential conveniences of urban life – a stone house, fast cars, and modern appliances – Peng become further disillusioned. He was no longer the hard-working youth trying to get by, but a bored man who roamed the city’s lonely streets. Soth Polin’s novels chronicle the transformation of the city and of the middle-class. Through their representation of the city, Im and Soth used the novel to critique decadence found in *Sangkum* society.

While Soth Polin and Im Thok portray different aspects of the city and its inhabitants, both used the novel and the city as instruments for their contrasting visions of postcolonial Cambodia. Their works showed how the city and the novel gave voice the new identities found in the capital city. Soth Polin and Im Thok, however, were perhaps unaware of the new social role they created for themselves in this postcolonial urban environment. Like the characters in their novels, they were also something new that Cambodians had not yet experienced. Soth Polin and Im Thok exemplified the new type of intellectual Cambodians encountered as they transitioned away from colonialism. These intellectuals were educated within a secular school system, assumed an active social role, and believed that knowledge could be traced, measured, and studied.

Pannavaon: The Modern Cambodian Intellectual

Unlike the learned men mentioned early in this chapter who were often revered, the *pannavaon* inhabited a much more ambivalent space in post-colonial Khmer imagination. While intellectuals continued to be respected and occupied the highest ranks of the *Sangkum* government, they were also heavily criticized and viewed with suspicion. The word *pannavaon*

¹¹⁹ ហាងបានចំណេញច្រើនណាស់ក្នុងប៉ុន្មានឆ្នាំនេះ ពីដើមមានទូរស័ព្ទតែមួយទេ ឥឡូវមានប្រាំបី។ ថៅកែពីដើមជិះតែស៊ីក្លូ ឥឡូវមានទូរស័ព្ទតូច ល្អណាស់ ឯចំណែកគ្រួសារវិញ ដូចខ្ញុំជាដើម នៅតែខ្វះច្រករាល់ពេល។ Im, *Sim the Chauffeur*, 71.

¹²⁰ ស្រុកយើងឯករាជ្យ សន្តិភាពហើយ គួរតែយើងបានរស់ស្រួល គួរតែយើងស៊ីផ្អែត គួរតែយើងបានធូរ។ Im, *Sim the Chauffeur*, 73.

first appeared in Khmer print in February 1962, in a Kamubja Suriya article on how intellectuals and nonintellectual are mispronouncing the national language.¹²¹ It also in a review of a 1962 film, *The Raft of Life* (*Kbon Chivit*).¹²² The villain of the film was labeled a *pannavoan* because he received a post-secondary education and held a government job. However, in pursuit of power, he betrayed his siblings and allowed his mother to die. The film's portrayal of this *pannavoan* as a misguided individual was radically different from the enlightened, benevolent *lok ta essey* and *pandit*. This shift in attitudes towards learned men is part of the overall secularization Cambodians experienced throughout the 20th century. Like the city and the novel, the Khmer intellectual underwent a process of secularization. The modern intellectual, unlike his predecessors, is not a product of religious schooling. Rather he was a product of a secular school system first supported by the French and then by Sihanouk government. Knowledge was also emptied of its sacred meaning. Its origins are no longer mythical, but rather accredited to other men. This democratization of knowledge and of education has caused the Khmer intellectual to lose his sacred aura and made him vulnerable to criticism like those found in *The Raft of Life*. For these reasons, the *pannavoan* was new agent in Khmer society, similar to the urban worker and the disaffected middle-class.

In its present-day usage, *pannavoan* directly translates into English as intellectual and into French as *intellectuel*.¹²³ However this word did not appear in Khmer dictionaries until the 1960s, which suggests *pannavoan* is a recently invented word meant to capture an emerging social class. The 1902 *Dictionnaire Cambodgien-Français* by J.B. Bernard listed only *neak prach* as “savant, lettré, docteur, intelligent.”¹²⁴ Admittedly, it was not the most comprehensive listing of Khmer words and perhaps did capture every Khmer word. For instance, it did not contain *pandit*, even though Zhou Dagaun used it in his 15th century account of the Khmer empire. The 1933 *Vocabulaire Khmer*, which was compiled by E. Menetrier, was more comprehensive since it contained *pandit*, which he translated as “sage, savant, le maître, le philosophe, le savant.”¹²⁵ It also contained *neak prach*, which was referred to “le sage” or “le savant.”¹²⁶ Neither of these two early French-Khmer dictionaries contained the word *pannavoan*. This trend continued even when the first Khmer-Khmer dictionary was published in 1938, which was compiled the Venerable Choun Nath with support from the Buddhist Institute. A review of later dictionaries published in the 1950s also revealed the same: none contained the

¹²¹ Kouch Ky Leng,, “Reading Cultural Words, “ *Kambuja Suriya*, no. 2, February 1962.

¹²² This is an undated, unknown article I received from Hayden Brooks. I thank him for sharing it with me. I use it because of its description of the *pannavoan*.

¹²³ Kim Sos, Lim Hak Kheang, Madeline E. Efram, *Cambodian-English Dictionary*, (New York : Hippocrene Books, 1990), 262 and Michel Rethy Antelme and Helene Suppya Bur-Nut, *Dictionnaire Française-Khmer*, (Paris: L’Asiathèque, 2001), 456.

¹²⁴ J.Benard, *Dictionnaire Cambodgien-Français*, (Hong Kong : Imprimerie de la Société des Missions Etrangères, 1902), 245.

¹²⁵ E. Menetrier, *Vocabulaire Cambodgien dans ses rapports avec le Sanscrit et le Pali*, (Phnom Penh: Imprimerie du Protectorat, 1933), 85.

¹²⁶ Menetrier, *Vocabulaire Cambodgien*, 99.

word, *pannavoan*.¹²⁷ *Pannavoan* also appeared in dictionaries in 1962.¹²⁸ In these dictionaries, *pannavoan* was directly tied to the French *intellectuel* – not to *le sage*, *le savant* or *le philosophe*.¹²⁹ The appearance of *pannavoan* in these 1967 dictionaries suggests he was a new Cambodian identity and is different from the earlier *pandit* and *neak prach*. Like the intellectual who is not the same as the savant or the philosophe in French, the *pannavoan* is not the same as the *pandit* and the *neak prach*. He was much more contested social figure who transformed post-war Cambodian society.

Chay Yi Heng provided one of the clearest definitions of *pannavoan* in a short 1999 essay entitled “The Duty of a Cambodian *Pannavoan*.” While a *pannavoan* may be determined by Bachelors, Masters, or doctoral degree attached to his name, Chay believed a better definition of *pannavoan* was “a person whose livelihood was largely dependent on knowledge (*panna*) such as an author or a university professor.”¹³⁰ He also differentiated a *pannavoan* from a manual laborer and a merchant because a *pannavoan* relied on intellectual activity and was in the pursuit of Truth, while the others depended on their bodies, manufactured goods, and pursued money.¹³¹ Another Khmer scholar, Vandy Koan, believes the *pannavoan* belonged in the “modern world [with] those who obeyed rational laws and honored a new order that guaranteed

¹²⁷ See *Cambodian Dictionary*, 2nd edition, (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1954); *Cambodian Dictionary*, 3rd edition, (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1958); Noun But, *Cambodian Dictionary*, (Phnom Penh: Bookstore Bot Neng, 1954); Bikkhu Preap Sok, *Dictionary English-Cambodian*, (Lancaster, PA: Nha-Sach Xuan-Thu, 1957). None of these dictionaries contains the word *pannavoan*. The *Cambodian Dictionary* compiled by Noun But, uses the word បញ្ញា as state of being that come from learning, reading, etc. He also associated បញ្ញាវប្បធម៌ with “culture

intellectuelle.” Clearly, at the time he published his dictionary, បញ្ញា intelligence, but he does not list the word

បញ្ញវន្ត. Noun But, *Cambodian Dictionary*, 425.

¹²⁸ Kim Yok and Teav Kon, *French-Khmer Dictionary*, (Phnom Penh: Librairie Bout Neang, 1962), 1198. In this dictionary the word *pannavoan* appeared, but it was listed as an adjective. For it to become a noun, the compilers listed បញ្ញវន្តជន. It becomes a noun in 1967 with the publication of *The Dictionary of New Khmer Words*. These

changes in the actual word demonstrate the fluidity of the concept *pannavoan* before it settled into its final form.

¹²⁹ The 1967 version of the Choun Nath dictionary has the *intellectuel* in parenthesis when Choun Nath attempted to define this word. Headley’s 1977 Khmer-English Dictionary translates *pannavoan* as “intellectual member of the intelligentsia.” Robert Headley, et.al., *Cambodian-English Dictionary*, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1977), 482.

¹³⁰ បញ្ញវន្ត គឺជាអ្នកប្រកបមុខរបរដោយផ្អែកលើនិម្មិតបញ្ញាជាធំ ដូចជាអ្នកនិពន្ធ សាស្ត្រាចារ្យជាដើម គឺយើងអាចយល់ថាអ្វីទៅដែល

ហៅថា បញ្ញវន្តកម្ពុជា។ Chay Yi Heng, *Duty of a Cambodian Intellectual*, (Unknown: Unknown, 1999), 7. The author

notes in the preface that this was paper presented at the Second Annual on Socio-Cultural Research, held February 5, 1999. Unfortunately, he does not provide details. He mentions the importance of intellectuals therefore he published his paper.

¹³¹ គួរកត់សំគាល់ថាបញ្ញវន្តផ្ទុយពីហត្ថករ ព្រោះបញ្ញវន្តផ្អែកលើបញ្ញាពលកម្មជាធំ ឯហត្ថករ ផ្អែកលើកាយមលកម្មជាធំ។ បញ្ញវន្ត

ខុសពីពាណិជ្ជករ ព្រោះបញ្ញាពលកម្មរបស់បញ្ញវន្ត គឺដើម្បីស្វែងរកសច្ចភាព ឯបញ្ញាពលកម្មរបស់ពាណិជ្ជករ

គឺដើម្បីស្វែងរកប្រាក់ចំណេញ។ Ibid.

progress.”¹³² They were the children, according to Vandy, of “those with means [who] sent their kids to French schools... [and] farming families, who wanted their children to a comfortable future, sacrificed and sold land to send their children to French schools.”¹³³ Experience in a secular French education appears to be a defining characteristic of the *pannavoan*.

A *pannavoan* was a man or a woman who experienced some secular education, either in the country or abroad. These experiences politicized these men and women, instilling a desire to modernize Khmer society. The activist political dimension of a *pannavoan* was as important as his or her level of secular education. Knowledge was not meant for one’s personal enlightenment. Rather, it was to be used instrumentally for the betterment of society. The *pannavoan*’s relationship with knowledge distinguished him or her from earlier Khmer understanding of learned men. The last distinctive characteristic of *pannavoan* as a social class was the incorporation of women. Previously, *pandit* was a title reserved for men, but once it came to signify those with doctorates, the term became gender-neutral. In Khmer, *pannavoan* has masculine and feminine versions. As a social group, it includes men and women. This incorporation of both sexes, along with secular education, political activism and a new belief in the instrumental power of knowledge, defined this new intellectual class.

Besides creating a secular school system, the colonial government even sent a small number of Khmer youth to study abroad in Vietnam and in France. *Kram* No. 1-PR, declared on September 1947, determined the characteristics of who received these scholarships. A committee decided who qualified for the scholarship and how much to give. This decision relied upon on the opinions of the Chief of the First Office of the Résidence Supérieure. If they were in good standing with the colonial government, then they were given funds and allowed to study abroad. The experience these young men and women had abroad transformed them. According to Vandy Koan, the men and women, “who studied in France and absorbed democratic ideas, felt a striking contradiction, a profound imbalance. Eagerly wanting to renovate their country, they were helpless in the colonial milieu; completely cut off from the peasantry and the proletariat, they did not share in traditional beliefs.”¹³⁴ The Colonial government also picked up “revolutionary mentality of Cambodian intellectuals in the Capital.” The colonial government did not label these individuals as *pannavoan*, rather they were called “*évolué*” or “intellectual.”¹³⁵ These accounts show that modern Khmer intellectual had a different mentality and outlook than their more traditional counterparts. Because of their experience, Cambodian intellectuals supported the Democratic party and formed the core behind the movement for independence. Although the Democratic Party failed because of Sihanouk’s political maneuverings, the social and intellectual force behind it remained within postcolonial Cambodia.

¹³² Vandy Koan, *Dreams and Realities*, (Phnom Penh: Mou Seth, 2012), 132.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Le reste des jeunes, la minorité d'ailleurs, qui étaient allés étudier en France, s'imprégnant des idées démocratiques, ressentaient à leur retour une contradiction frappante, un déséquilibre profond. Ardemment désireux de rénover leurs pays, ils se trouvaient impuissants dans le milieu colonial, complètement coupés de la paysannerie et du prolétariat, dont ils ne partageaient plus la vie et les croyances traditionnelles. Pouk Chhay, *Le Pouvoir Politique au Cambodge: Essai d'Analyse Sociologique, 1945-1965* (Phnom Penh : Faculté de Droit et des Sciences Economique, 1966), 58.

¹³⁵ *Bulletin de Renseignement*, September 14, 1946, AOM, HCC, Box 10. This source was first mentioned in chapter 1. In the source, the connection between an *évolué* and anti-colonial sentiments. As mentioned previously, a native who was labelled as *évolué* occupied a strange placed within French colonial society. Like before, see Olufemi Taiwo, “Colonialism and Its Aftermath: The Crisis of Knowledge Production,” *Callaloo* , Vol. 16, No. 4, On “Post-Colonial Discourse”: A Special Issue (Autumn, 1993), 896, accessed at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2932216>.

In fact, Sihanouk's policies only served to expand the intellectual class, which is why in *Sangkum*, the *pannavoan* made his complete emergence. As he did with Phnom Penh, Sihanouk engaged in a project to transform the Khmer education system by building more schools and universities. To get a sense of this transformation, in 1955, Cambodia had 2,731 primary schools, 12 high schools, zero universities and about 317,000 students. By 1968, Sihanouk increased the number of elementary schools to 5,857 and the number of high schools to 180. He also created 9 new universities and 99 technical schools. The student population rose to nearly a million and a half.¹³⁶ In particular, this new education system had a tremendous effect on women, which will be discussed in the next chapter. For now, this expansion in education increased the number to those considered *pannavoan*.

The state also increased the number of fellowships granted to young men and women to study abroad. In a letter to a student studying in Washington, Sihanouk wrote that "I always strive to alleviate social problems and create a thriving society in our country, as well as have Cambodian youth attain a deep knowledge of the sciences."¹³⁷ True to his statements, Sihanouk helped to fund the education of many Khmer students to other countries.¹³⁸ Although the process by which these students were chosen remains unclear. By 1954, the documents do not say anything of a committee, as had existed during French rule; rather they are simply letters from Sihanouk telling the Minister of Education to support this person or that person. These letters suggest that Sihanouk received personal requests for aid, such as a letter from Tea Kim Lean, who was a student at the School of Dental Surgery and Stomatology at Paris. The personal nature of these letters indicates that the students who received these funds had connections to palace in some way. While not all the names were familiar, one family name that did show up several times on these documents was Thioun. This name is most likely connected with Thiounn Sambath (the variation in the spelling is probably a product of how various people transliterates Khmer differently and in Khmer tradition, last names come first). Thiounn Sambath, as Penny Edwards showed in her work, was "Cambodge's most powerful civil servant, palace minister, a post he retained until 1941."¹³⁹ However, the personal manner by which these fellowships were given out did not lessen potential social impact the recipients had upon their return to Cambodia.

¹³⁶ "Statistiques essentielles sur notre édification nationale en treize années d'administration du sangkum reastr niyum", *Le Sangkum*, October 1968.

¹³⁷ ខ្ញុំរមែងប្រឹងប្រែងជាងរាបរៀងមក ដើម្បីបណ្តុះបណ្តាលព្រឹកនូវបញ្ញាសង្គមឱ្យបានចម្រើនលូតលាស់ឡើងនៅក្នុងប្រទេសយើង

ព្រមទាំងឧបត្ថម្ភដល់យុវជនខ្មែរឱ្យបានប្រកបវិជ្ជារូបវិទ្យា។ A Letter to Noul Pim, Student at Georgetown University from His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, 11 August 1954, found in Sam Sary, *La Grande Figure De Norodom Sihanouk*, (Phnom Penh: Imprimerie Du Palais Royal, 1955), 265.

¹³⁸ For a partial list of the students who received funding from the state, refer to: Sam Sary, *La Grande Figure*, 232-277. This is not a complete list of names, rather this work contain letters from Sihanouk to various government officials, such as the Minister of Education and Fine Arts (and vice versa), telling to give a scholarship to such and such student.

¹³⁹ For more info on the Thiounn family, please refer to Penny Edwards, *Cambodge*. In one of the memos, M. Thioun Thoeun, who was a scholarship recipient, was identified as the grandson of His Excellency Thioun. "Annotation of His Majesty," Cabinet of the King, No. 144, dated 28 September 1942, found in Sam Sary, *La Grande Figure*, 231. Other scholarships recipients had the last name Sisowath, which means they were of the royal line of King Sisowath. All of this implies the scholarship were mostly given to individuals with ties to the palace; at the very least they were not given to individuals from poor families, who would not have a way to personally contact Sihanouk – let alone have the courage to write him.

Two of the scholarship recipients, Thou Kabo and Kong May who received 28,000 francs a month to study at *l'École Nationale d'Organisation Économique et Sociale à Paris*, wrote a letter to thank Sihanouk for his generosity, comparing it to “a spacious boat that has helped animals such as them and all Khmer youth to cross [the river]. Additionally, [Sihanouk’s] command has reminded all students to study and gain knowledge so that [they can be] of use to the country.”¹⁴⁰ Men were not the only ones to benefit from this program, women did as well. The strides Sihanouk made in education were essential to the development of the *pannavoan* in Cambodian society. The State’s own policies and justification in sending these youths abroad inclined them to have a different attitude towards knowledge and politics.

The time spent abroad, especially in France, further politicized these young men and women. These youth formed associations and engaged in political activism. Already among the first generation of scholarship recipients, factions appeared. Sam Sary, along with Douc Rasy, Mau Say and Prom Thos formed the Friends of Cambodians in France. This group opposed the left-leaning Association of Khmer Students. This association was composed of Keng Vannsak, Thoiun Mourn, Rath Samoeurn, Saloth Sar and Ieng Sary.¹⁴¹ Later when Sihanouk dissolved the legislature in 1952, the Association issued a pamphlet condemning his political maneuver as undemocratic.¹⁴² Because of strong political stances, the Cambodian community in France was “split into ‘right,’ left’ and ‘moderate’ factions.”¹⁴³ These political divisions plagued the Cambodian students living in the *Maison*. In 1973, as a civil war broke out in Cambodia, violence and confrontations also flared up among the *Maison* residents. As a result, the *Maison du Cambodge* closed its doors. Politics became embedded in these student’s lives as they worked towards a degree. Knowledge, for them, could not be divorced from politics.

Historians have already noted the importance of France in the rise of Cambodian communism. Ieng Sary and Saloth Sar became staunch supporters of Marxist-Leninism when they were students in Paris. While this fact cannot be denied, I suggest that Cambodian communist intellectuals were parts of a larger secularization process. The students who studied in France, whether they were right- or left-leaning, were politicized. For them, knowledge did not remain in the realm of the sacred. Ly Team Teng noted the healthy skepticism current students had toward any systems of thought: “Before they whole-heartedly believe in a system, they first reflect on the causes so that they are reasonable. If the belief is reasonable and true, they would execute the theories according to the beliefs. If the opposite is true and they found the beliefs to be without reason or apparent, they as a group will slowly stop believing until they

¹⁴⁰ ព្រះករុណាទីកុណាប្រាសាទប្រណីក្រានេះ បីដូចជាសំពៅធំទូលាយចំឡង់សត្វគឺទូលព្រះបង្គំទាំងពីររូបព្រមទាំងខេមរ បុត្រទូទៅ។ មិនត្រឹមតែប៉ុណ្ណោះទេ ល្អងធ្វើស្តេចទ្រង់ព្រះមេត្តាប្រាសមានព្រះរាជឱង្ការរំលឹកដាស់តឿននិស្សិត ទាំងឡាយ ឥឡូវខិតខំតែរៀនចំណេះវិជ្ជាដើម្បីប្រយោជន៍ប្រទេសជាតិនោះ។ A Letter to His Majesty from Tou Kabo and Kong May, 13 February 1954, found in Sam Sary, *La Grande Figure*, 276.

¹⁴¹ Emmarane Sam, *Cambodge: histoire d'une vengeance royale, 1958-1965*, (Paris: Thélès, 2009), 100.

¹⁴² Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 121.

¹⁴³ Penny Edwards, “A Taste of France,” (unpublished), 5. I want to thank Penny for sharing her unpublished work.

no longer believe.”¹⁴⁴ Knowledge was to be learned and used in order to fashion a better Cambodia. They put into practice what Sihanouk envisioned when the scholarship program began. However, as attitudes towards knowledge changed in Cambodia, the status of those “gatherers of knowledge” transformed as well. Intellectuals, who used knowledge instrumentally, no longer occupied the revered positions of previous learned men. They were now vulnerable to criticisms and condemnations.

No one illustrates the vulnerabilities of a *pannavoan* more than Sam Sary. Born into a family of Chinese descent on March 6, 1917, Sam Sary was the son of *chauvaisrok*.¹⁴⁵ By his sister’s account, he was proud, serious and studious. His studies took Sam to Phnom Penh, where he enrolled in the Lycée Sisowath and obtained his baccalaureate in Philosophy. From 1945-1946, he worked for the Protectorate in various administrative positions. In 1946, he was one of the first students to receive a scholarship to study in France. From 1949 to 1950, he earned a variety of certificates and degrees: a diplôme from l’Institut Sciences Politiques de Paris, a brevet from the Centre des Hautes Etudes Administrative de Paris, and a licence en Droit from the Faculté de Droit de l’Indochine. Upon his return to Cambodia, Sam Sary first rallied around the Democratic Party. However, once it began to decline in 1952, Sam turned to Sihanouk and became a close confidant.¹⁴⁶ He helped established *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and published several works in support of Sihanouk. *La Grande Figure De Norodom Sihanouk*, which Sam compiled in 1955, was an example of his intellectual endeavors to support Sihanouk. His shining moment occurred during the Geneva Accords in 1954.

Sam Sary was member of the Cambodian delegation. During a tense moment early in the negotiation, the Khmer delegates faced pressure from North Vietnamese, Chinese and Russians representatives to include members of the Khmer Issarak and Cambodians supporters of the Viet Minh. The French, English and American representatives were against such an inclusion. It appeared the negotiations were about to break down. By Sam’s accounts, at this moment, the Cambodian delegations, namely Sam, launch into a speech that demonstrated their masterful and cogent oratory skills. Before these various superpowers, Sam argued that the Khmer Issrak and Vietminh supporters could not be included as Cambodian representatives because 1) they did not have clearly demarcated territory within Cambodia, 2) they failed to have a regular government that exercised sovereign rights in Cambodia, and 3) they lacked an organized and disciplined army to fight for their government.¹⁴⁷ The Khmer Issarak was a loose coalition of various factions and leaders. Because of his argument, according to Sam, the Cambodian delegations were able to convince the Russian, Chinese, and Vietnamese representatives and prevented the Khmer Issarak from participating in the Geneva Accords.

¹⁴⁴ បើមុននឹងប្រកាន់ចិត្តទៅក្នុងជំនឿអ្វីមួយ ៗ វាតែងពិចារណាក្រហមផល ឱ្យឃើញភាពសមរម្យសក្តិសិទ្ធិជា មុន

និងជំនឿគន្លឹមមានហេតុ Ly Team Teng, *Kambuja Suriya*, 1962, 43-44.

¹⁴⁵ The chief of a district

¹⁴⁶ Sam, *Cambodge: histoire d'une vengeance royale*, 92-102.

¹⁴⁷ Sam Sary, *Sur les accords de Geneve et les elections generals au cambodge*, public conference, 22 August 1955, 72-73

This instance was when Sam Sary was at his most impressive. His speech garnered praised from the American, French and English parties.¹⁴⁸ Based on his knowledge of international law, which he may have gained while a student at the Faculte de droit de l'Indochine,¹⁴⁹ Sam Sary gained respect from the superpowers and, most importantly, ousted potential political rivals. He affirmed Cambodian sovereignty and independence in a high-stakes international setting like Geneva. In this moment, Sam Sary demonstrated why Cambodia needed individuals skilled in specialized fields like engineering, law or agricultural. As a newly sovereign country, Cambodia valued those men and women who had studied abroad and gained such knowledge.

However, Sam Sary's storied career came crashing down when he was the ambassador to England. He was accused of beating his mistress and was recalled to Cambodia. Soon after, Sam Sary resigned from *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and created his own political party. The government accused him of treason and he left Cambodia to avoid arrest. In the aftermath of his exile, government painted Sam Sary as man who betrayed his country to foreigners in order to increase his personal wealth.¹⁵⁰ In a speech at the *Maison du Cambodge* before 400 Cambodian students from France, England and Belgium, Sihanouk faulted Sam for loving "hard cash" more than his motherland. Sihanouk had made Sam Sary into the prototypical *pannavoan* who valued money over tradition and country. He, despite his previous academic advocacy for *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, transformed into a traitor.

The story of Sam Sary demonstrated the fungible status *pannavoan* had in *Sangkum* society. One minute they were applauded and honored for their intellectual contributions. The next, they were suspect and vulnerable to foreign influences. Soon after the Sam Sary incident, an editorial appeared in *Meatophum*, warning "our brothers and sisters living far from the mother country" to be "careful and steady themselves against the additional propaganda and lies from the enemy."¹⁵¹ This treatment of intellectuals was also repeated in the stories of Hu Nim, Hou Youn, and Khieu Samphan. They too were educated and high ranking officials within the *Sangkum* government. Soon after they were exiled, accused of working with the "enemy," and believed to be dead. The modern intellectual in postcolonial Cambodia did not share the security and reverence the *pandit* and *lok ta essey* enjoyed in precolonial Cambodia.

A Changing Cambodia

The *pannavoan* was one of the many identities that emerged during the postcolonial period. As the city developed, more people migrated to share in its wealth. They transformed

¹⁴⁸ សេចក្តីផ្តើមនៃគណៈប្រតិភូខ្មែរនេះនាំ...មានសេចក្តីសរសើរ នឹងសេចក្តីរាប់អានជាច្រើនដល់ខ្មែរ ហើយនាំឱ្យបំបាត់ជីវិត នៃពួកខ្មែរតស៊ូ រហូតតាមផ្លូវការ។ Sam, *Sur les accords de Geneve*, 38.

¹⁴⁹ Sam, *Cambodge: histoire d'une vengeance royale*, 102.

¹⁵⁰ This memory of Sam Sary was being created even as the scandal unfolded. See *Affaire Sam Sary à Londres*, (Phnom Penh: The Royal Palace, 1958). With this book, the palace sought to convince the public of Sam Sary's arrogance. Newspapers reinforced this image in reports of the events following the scandal. See *Meatophum* 7 Feb 1959; *Meatophum* 19 Feb 1959; *Meatophum* 28 Feb 1959; *Somleng Sophea Procheareas* 19 Feb 1959; *Somleng Sophea Procheareas* 5 Feb 1959.

¹⁵¹ យើងត្រូវប្រុងប្រៀបសួរគឺឱ្យបាននឹងនួនជានិច្ច ដើម្បីទប់ទល់នឹងឧបាយគលនៃបញ្ហាមិត្ត ពិសេសគឺបងប្អូនរួមលោហិតដែលនៅឆ្ងាយ ពីមាតុប្រទេសវិញតែត្រូវ *Meatophum*, 3 February 1959.

into the urban poor and into the middle class. These personal, individual transformations mirrored the larger changes Cambodia faced as it became a sovereign nation-state. The city and the novel became instruments state and intellectuals used to frame and stabilize these unstable times. The city, its layout, and building were to embody the government vision for this young nation-state, while the novel gave shape to these new urban subjectivities. Literature focused on more than the gods and the capital was no longer the sole purview of kings and temples. Space, literature and knowledge gained a secular layer, shedding its sacred aura.

Chapter 3

The *Neary Samey Thmey* in 1960s Cambodia

The previous chapter discussed the emergence of a new intellectual force in Khmer society, the *pannavoan*. The emergence of the *pannavoan* marked a moment when women too became intellectuals. The female intellectual, such Madame Pung Peng Cheng and Madame Diep Dinar, contributed to the increased visibility of Khmer women experienced during the 1960s. These women gave speeches, attended conferences and contributed to public policy. Cambodians labeled these new women the *Neary Samey thmey* (the Modern Woman). As with the *pannavoan*, the city shaped the identity of the *neary samey thmey*. Night clubs, government offices, even car interiors were arenas opened to women during the *Sangkum* period. As modern women traveled into these spaces, they moved from the home into the public, going from traditional gendered realms to leisure sites that encouraged greater heterosexual interactions. The new relations between the two sexes engendered anxiety toward the new woman and her place in postcolonial Cambodia.

With the inclusion of the *Neary Samey thmey* into this narrative on *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, this chapter challenges the male-dominated view of Cambodian modernity.¹ Feminist scholars have criticized the long-held association between males and modernity. Describing Marshall Berman's seminal work on modern life, Rita Felski writes that "from a reading of Berman's book, it would be tempting to conclude that the gender of modernity is indeed male. All the exemplary heroes of his text -Faust, Marx, Baudelaire- are of course symbols not just of modernity, but also of masculinity." Berman, she concludes, assumed "the modern individual... to be an autonomous male free of familial and communal ties."² In her own work, Felski demonstrates "that the struggles for women's emancipation are complexly interwoven with the processes of modernization."³ While the modern woman has varied interactions with modernity, she nevertheless dynamically contributes to its processes and experiences its effects. Women, as Felski would say, do not exist outside of history. This chapter illustrates how *Sangkum's* modernizing policies transformed Khmer women's social and economic positions and created a new identity, the *Neary Samey Thmey*. During *Sangkum*, women left the home and markets and entered schools and offices. Like her male counterparts, she traveled abroad, drove cars, and danced in clubs. Films, newspapers, and novels disseminated images of this educated and

¹ Males also figured dominantly in scholarship on Cambodian modernity. Anne Hansen showed in her work, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia*, that the origins of Cambodian modernity was located in Theravada Buddhism, making Cambodian modernity different from western understanding of modernity. By locating modernity within the all-male *sangha*, Hansen unintentionally suggests that men were the only ones "imagining and expressing modernity in Cambodia" during the colonial period. However, Penny Edwards' article, *Restyling Cambodia*, illustrates the effects French colonialism had upon Khmer women's behaviors. Her article, along with other works discussed in this chapter, show that colonial modernity influenced and changed Khmer women as well as men, creating a growing class of secular intellectuals. These individuals, who grew up during the dying days of French colonialism, would articulate a vision of their postcolonial world, where men and women had an equal role in fashioning modernity. Refer to Anne Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia*, (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 3 and Penny Edwards, "Restyling Cambodia (1865-1954): French Dressing, and Indigenous Costume," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, Volume 5, Number 4, November 2001, 389-416.

² Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

fashionably-dressed woman. This image determined the standard to which Khmer women aspired. It also illuminated the positive, yet angst-ridden relationship between the *neary samey thmey* and modern life in postcolonial Cambodia. Undeniably, Cambodian experiences during the 1960s shows that modernity was just as much feminine as it was masculine. The *neary samey thmey* and her increased heterosexual interactions factored significantly into how urban Cambodians perceived modern life.

The Neary Samey Thmey's Predecessors

The relatively powerful positions enjoyed by women distinguished early Southeast Asian societies from other world regions. Describing Southeast Asia before Indianization, Georges Coedès remarked on “the importance of the role conferred on women and of relationships in the maternal line.”⁴ Khmer women continued to be seen as important economic players well into the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* period. May Ebihara, who was doing ethnographic work in Cambodia at the time, did not think Cambodian wives were “submissive and docile” to their husbands. Instead, a Cambodian wife was a “coworker in the fields; she oversees and keeps the family budget; she shrewdly handles many financial transactions and often undertakes her own commercial ventures to earn money; she owns and can dispose of property in her own right.”⁵ Cambodian women therefore possessed more rights and greater freedoms than her counterparts in other Asians societies at the time.

Later scholars, however, have questioned the supposed equality between the sexes in Cambodia. Some have argued that while Khmer women played a vibrant role in the economy throughout Cambodian history, they have lacked political power and were not valued as highly as men. Sokhieng Au in her chapter on “Prostitutes and Mothers” noticed a small difference in the rewards given to mothers who had a baby boy versus those who had a girl as part of colonial natalist program. Au interpreted this monetary difference as an example of how “the much-vaunted equality between the sexes in pre-colonial Southeast Asia had its limits.”⁶ In a similar vein, Annuska Derks has argued that the idea of pre-colonial gender equality belied the complex realities of gender relations in Cambodia. She advocated for a move “away from a fixed view on the status of men and women, gender and sexuality, because they are symbolic constructs assigned various meanings in different contexts.”⁷ The status of Southeast Asian men and women, in other words, changed according to the time and place. Judy Ledgerwood has rejected the supremacy of Southeast Asian women as a myth propagated by early foreign visitors to Southeast Asia. Once visitors saw light-skinned, sexually-free Khmer women “engaging in commerce, acting as court astrologers, participating in palace rituals,” they concluded that

⁴ Georges Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), 9. For other works on women and Southeast Asia, please refer to: Barbara Andaya, *Other Past: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000) and O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in the Southeast Asian Perspective* (Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).

⁵ May Ebihara, *Svay, A Khmer Village in Cambodia*, (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 1968), 114.

⁶ The French government offered the same reward regardless of the baby's sex because the colonial state was interested in increasing the overall birthrate. The Khmer advertisement for the same program, said that the mother of a boy will be given 5 riels (about 1 piastre), while a woman who gave birth to a girl would be given 2 to 2.5 riels. Sokhieng Au, *Mixed Medicines*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 30.

⁷ Annuska Derks, *Khmer Women on the Move*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 37.

women must play “a preponderant role in the organization of the court itself.”⁸ In contrast to these three scholars (Au, Derks, and Ledgerwood) who claim that pre-colonial women were not as powerful as previously understood, other researchers have argued that Cambodian women actually held a lot of power, but that this power diminished as a result of foreign influence. For example, Trudy Jacobsen has argued that “Cambodian women have always been powerful, although not necessarily in ways that dovetail with Western constructs of power.” After colonization, women were “relegated...to inferior and dependent positions” as a result of “imported ideologies [and] misogynist perspectives foisted upon Cambodian culture for over a millennium.”⁹ Specifically, she blames King Ang Doung and the French colonial government for lowering women’s status. Ang Doung, who reigned from 1848 to 1859 after spending years in the Thai court as a ward, passed a series of decrees to limit royal titles and inheritance accorded to the queen or princesses. His literary works, such as *Neang Kaki* and *Chbap Srei* (Women’s Codes), were known for their strict prescriptions of proper female behavior and for denigrating “loose” women.¹⁰ Jacobsen suggested that after Ang Doung’s reign, the position of women diminished. Despite their disagreements, most historians agree that Cambodian women played a crucial role in the pre-colonial economy and in the structure of family life. While their powers were curtailed and intricately tied to the status of their male relatives, Khmer women were active in court, in the markets, and in the home.

During the colonial period, women’s roles gradually shifted and came into conflict with French policies. Trudy Jacobsen held the French colonial government responsible for lessening female power in Cambodia. The French forced women to use their husband’s last names and decreed that only males could succeed to the throne.¹¹ Although Jacobsen is correct to point out that French policies attempted to alter gender norms, the impact of French efforts remains open to debate. An example of such ambivalence may be seen in the realm of female education. In 1924, the French opened the first school for midwives (the *École Pratique des Sage-Femmes*) in Cambodia.¹² The success of the school was limited. It was not able to recruit a high number of eligible candidates due to an overly-bureaucratic application process, and of those who were admitted, very few students completed the program. Another obstacle the school encountered was hesitant parents who were unwilling to let their daughters leave home.¹³ As Au aptly demonstrated in her work on medical practices in colonial Cambodia, the students and graduates of the *École Pratique* faced the difficult choice between having a career and having a family.¹⁴ These conflicts of expectations explain why professional careers, such as midwives and nurses,

⁸ Judy L. Ledgerwood, “Khmer Kinship: The Matriliny/Matriarchy Myth,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 51, no. 3 (1995), 255, accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3630360>.

⁹ Trudy Jacobsen, *Lost Goddess*, (Copenhagen S., Denmark: NIAS Press, 2008), 14 and 289.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 118-123.

¹¹ Jacobsen, *Lost Goddess*, 148.

¹² Au, *Mixed Medicines*, 141.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁴ For example, in 1930, Neang Saroun, who was a graduate of the program, requested unpaid leave from her position at the Assistance Médicale (AM). She explained her situation, saying “I find myself in a situation that does not permit me to reconcile my job as a midwife with my duties as a mother, and strongly desiring to breastfeed my newborn myself and care for my other small child, I very respectfully request one year of leave.” The government denied her request and she died two years later. Saroun’s story demonstrated the pressures these women encountered as they began to enter professional careers. Letter to the RSC from Neang Saroun in Siem Reap, May 20, 1930, NAC RSC 7187, found in Au, *Mixed Medicines*, 147.

were considered unattractive.¹⁵ Because of these obstacles, the French policy to turn Khmer women into professionals was unsuccessful.

The problems the French faced with midwives and the *École Pratique* reflected the shortcomings of their endeavors in the field of women's education overall. Before colonialism, Khmer youth had three options: "to attend classes at the village pagoda and possibly join the *sangha*; to become apprentice of a *krou* (master-teacher); or to enter into the service of a mandarin."¹⁶ These three educational paths were limited to boys. Girls were expected to stay home and learn what they could from "community life, parental guidance, cultural events and religious rituals offered in teachings, for example when attending a public theater performance or making offerings at the village pagoda."¹⁷ Girls also "learned to sew and embroider, and to listen to didactic verse and poetry including hundreds of stanzas of the centuries-old *Chbap Srei*," which governed the conduct of Cambodian women.¹⁸ So, women, unlike men, almost never received a formal education from an outside institution.

During the early 1900s, the French government attempted to change this situation by opening the first school dedicated to the education of young girls, the *École des Filles*, in Phnom Penh on 1 October 1911. As with the *École Pratique*, the French failed to enroll a high number of Khmer girls in their schools. The French continually encountered resistance from parents, who feared that "girls who went to French-run schools ran the risk of staining their purity through alleged or real sexual encounters, and thereby bringing public scorn and disgrace to families."¹⁹ Although parental concerns inhibited these schools' achievements, French schools offered an important space for women to move beyond the family, the market, and the temple. Freison described the schools as "public spaces where girls and women could meet free of the watchful gaze of the meddling mothers, protective brothers, Buddhist monks, and male lay priests."²⁰ While the schools did not meet the colonial administration's goals, they did create the conditions for a change to occur later.

The beginning of this change can be observed on the pages of *Kampuchea*, one of the main Khmer newspapers of the 1940s. Usually described as conservative and pro-French,²¹ the editors of *Kampuchea* were remarkably progressive in regards to female education.²² They published many articles about how women could contribute to the development of the nation, going as far as establishing "a group of women writers tasked with providing moral instruction to

¹⁵ As Au pointed out, "the social expectation to have children and the need to care for infants at a time and place with no child-care facilities conflicted with Saroun's duties to the AM." Au, *Mixed Medicines*, 147.

¹⁶ Eric Muller, *Vision of Grandeur, Tales of Failures: The Establishment of the French Colonial Rule in Cambodia and the Life Story of Thomas Caraman, 1840-1887*, (Ph.D. Diss, University of Zurich, 2002), 116.

¹⁷ Muller, *Visions of Grandeurs*, 116-117.

¹⁸ Kate Frieson, "Sentimental Education: Les Sages Femmes and Colonial Cambodia," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 1, no. 1, (2000) accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ John Tully, *France on Mekong: A History of the Protectorate, 1863-1953*, (Landham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002), 366; Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation 1860-1945*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 212.

²² The editors' support of female education may not be surprising given their support of French policies. As mentioned in the previous p, the colonial government introduced secular schools for girls in 1911 because they wanted to educate native children. Since female education was one of the colonial government's objectives and since the editors supported the government, possibly a by-product of the French system themselves, it made sense for them to be promoters of female education.

[the] newspaper's readers."²³ *Kampuchea* promoted the secular education of Khmer youth, including women.²⁴ Believing women to be crucial to the development of a strong Cambodian nation, the editors pioneered the idea of female education among the Khmer population. They told their readers to send their daughters to school so that they could better fulfill their duties to the family and support the nation.²⁵

Kampuchea was one of the first Khmer voices to advocate for women's access to modern education by trying to alter the conservative sentiments of their parents. Furthermore, the newspaper influenced the position of women simply by gathering a group of women writers and displaying their opinions to the public. By becoming educated and literate, these women were able "to negotiate their claims to the public domain of power, a privilege that had been up to then exclusively male (apart from a select group of palace women)." These women essayists derided "customs that prohibited secular and religious schooling for girls. They argued...for women to become emancipated from the rigid gender codes that confined women to the shadows of public life."²⁶ One writer blamed men for the conditions of women and encouraged women to stop being housewives.²⁷ This sentiment triggered a strong reaction from men, who argued that a woman's place was in the kitchen and with her family. Other women writers expressed a similar view, saying Khmer women should find contentment in housework.²⁸ For such a debate to take place on the public pages of a newspaper was unprecedented. It demonstrated that the position of women was changing. In this same period,²⁹ the first woman was appointed Minister of

²³ Frieson, "Sentimental Education," accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

²⁴ "Knowledge Comes from Learning" (ចេះមកពីរៀន), *Kampuchea* (កម្ពុជា), 28 January 1943; in another editorial, the newspaper acknowledged that "We, Khmers, have held to on to the wrong beliefs for the last hundred years because we have barred young girls from learning for fear of violating customs. Thus, we have stash young girls at home, keeping them ignorant of literature. Because the number of the people who hold these beliefs has decreased the last 10 years, there are now women in the cities and provinces, who go to school. Women, who finished their studies, have become school teachers and clerks in various ministries." "However," the editors argued, "these accomplishments are not enough because Cambodian women must also participate in sports and other activities, like the women in well-developed countries. When all the women have participated in sports, Cambodia will be equal with the neighboring countries. Because women as mothers are the spine of the family, once she is able to know something very well, she will be able to transfer knowledge to her daughters, who will be able to learn the sciences at a much faster pace. As an old proverb says, if learned from the mother, it will be transferred to the children. Buddha also said something every similar to this proverb: Mothers are the first teachers of little boys and little girls." *Kampuchea*, 3 June 1943. For another article that advocated for increased freedoms for women, refer to *Kampuchea*, 10 July 1943.

²⁵ "The wife holds the wealth of the family and she should have good conduct, work industriously, keep the house clean and neat, and think only of her family's well-being. *Khmer daughters should be civilized, especially in connection with education and development. A woman is not considered civilized if she does not follow customs, and does not contribute to the development of the motherland. Khmer daughters – your nation is waiting for you to apply your collective strengths!* [Emphasis added]." *Kampuchea*, No. 190, 10th lunar month, mid-August-mid September, 1945, p. 2, in Frieson, "Sentimental Education," accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

²⁶ Frieson, "Sentimental Education," accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

²⁷ *Kampuchea*, 20 January 1946, Frieson, "Sentimental Education," accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

²⁸ Frieson, "Sentimental Education," accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

²⁹ *Kampuchea* came into existence during the early 1940s, but continued throughout the decade, which suggest there could have been several incarnations of the newspaper, each with a different editorial board. These articles were published during the late 1940s, which was roughly the Democratic period in Cambodian history. In 1945, Cambodians declared a brief independence from France. Although a few months later Cambodia agreed to join the French-controlled Associate States of Indochina, it was able to elect its own officials, which marked the rise of the Democratic Party, led by Prince Yukanthor and Ieu Keuoss. The Democratic Party would continue to dominate

National Education, Sports, and Youth. Princess Ping Peang Yunkanthor held this position from 1952 to 1953.³⁰ In her capacity as the Minister of Education, she represented Cambodia in international conferences.³¹ The women writers of *Kampuchea*, along with Princess Ping Peang Yunkanthor, showed that Khmer women by the early 1950s were beginning to enter the public spheres in ways they never had before. The presence of these women generated public discourse on gender norms and relations. This discussion would continue into the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* period.

Although the debates over their proper roles surfaced during the late colonial period, women remained by and large within the home or in the rice fields. French attempts to educate Khmer women were a disappointment. In 1945, which marked the beginning of the end of French rule in Cambodia, 96% of Khmer women were illiterate, suggesting that parents continued to refuse to send their daughters to schools.³² Sokhieng Au described the colonial period as a time when “the social role of Khmer women was largely confined to the domestic sphere.”³³ Preexisting norms of proper behavior limited colonial women’s desire to move beyond their duties to the families. During the *Sangkum* period, this situation changed: women entered the job market, gained an education, and increased their public visibility. Like the *pannavoan*, the modern Khmer women emerged during *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*.

The Arrival of an Urban Woman Living in *Sangkum*

In February 1966, *Kambuja*, a government periodical, published an article to entice its readers into visiting Takhmau, the capital of Kandal Province located 6 kilometers from Phnom Penh. In addition to providing beautiful pictures of the provincial capital, the article unintentionally offered insight into the life of a modern Khmer woman. Ary, the writer of the article, had just returned from abroad and was amazed at how Cambodia has transformed. To see this new Cambodia, she jumped on her bike. She resolutely turned her back “on the Capital leaving it further behind with each turn of the pedal” so that she could observe these changes first-hand. As she traveled on the “road which winds it ways between new buildings, charming little flowered house and factories,” she noticed that “fruit and flower gardens now replace the wooden houses on either side of the roads” and that a new “metal bridge stretches across the river.” The bridge doubled “the old one and was made necessary by the increase in road traffic that came with the development of the province.” Once she reached Takhmau, she left her bike with a “cycle-watcher” and strolled through the city. First, she went to the garden built by Governor Tep Senty and then through another garden in front of the Psychiatric Hospital, headed

Khmer politics until the establishment of Sihanouk’s *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. They remained a challenge to Sihanouk’s power even after the creation of *Sangkum*. Only after 1958-1959 was the Democratic Party’s power truly eclipsed. These articles were being published during this period of Democratic Party’s dominance, roughly from 1945 to 1955, which also coincided with the dusk of French colonialism in Cambodia. Sihanouk declared Cambodia’s complete independence from the French in 1953 and the Geneva Accord, which marked the dissolution of Indochina, was signed in 1954.

³⁰ Puy Kea, *The Governments of Cambodia from 1945 to 2010* (រដ្ឋាភិបាលកម្ពុជាពីឆ្នាំ១៩៤៥ដល់ឆ្នាំ២០១០), (Phnom Penh:

Reas Publishing Service, 2010), 22-25.

³¹ Sideth S. Dy, “Strategies and Policies for Basic Education in Cambodia, Historical Perspectives,” *International Education Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2004, 93.

³² UNESCO, “Cambodia,” *International Yearbook of Education*, Vol. 21, 1959, 117.

³³ Au, *Mixed Medicines*, 133.

by Dr. Son Mam. Finally she joined her friends and together “picnicked on the edge of the water. On [their] menu was a delicious melon, as sweet and juicy as could be desired.” Together, they “wandered through the paths of Nagas and then went down to the floating houses,” picking lotuses. As a souvenir of her adventures in Takhmau, Ary carried back an “enormous armful of lotuses” to fill her house.³⁴

Although Ary may not have realized it, the day she chronicled in the article reflected many ways that the position of women had changed in Cambodia. Ary had traveled abroad; she ventured out of her house alone with her own means of transportation and spent a leisurely day with friends. She spoke to hundreds of readers and published her adventures in the magazine, *Kambuja*. Through the article, Ary showed her intelligence and education: she was able to read and write, unlike a majority of earlier generations of Cambodian women. Ary was merely one of many women who inhabited Phnom Penh and her day characterized a day in their lives as well. In short, she was one of the *neary samey thmey* (the Modern Woman) who lived in 1960s Phnom Penh.

As a part of its modernization project, the *Sangkum* government encouraged the advancement of women. Sihanouk promoted women’s rights to justify his control of Cambodia. Women’s equality was a key to Sihanouk’s ability to fashion Sangkum into a “democracy.” As discussed in Chapter 1, Sihanouk made himself more “democratic” to discredit the Democratic Party and consolidate his own power. He accomplished this political maneuvering when *Sangkum* gave women suffrage. Based on his policies toward women, he often promoted *Sangkum* as a democracy. As he stated in a speech, “our state is one of the more democratic and our people are composed of only free men. In many domains, such as the emancipation of women for example, we are even more advanced than a good number of Western countries.”³⁵ Sihanouk proposed in 1955 for women to have the right to vote and to stand as candidates. In January of the following year, the National Assembly passed a law (*Kram* no. 65-NS) and modified the constitution to give suffrage to Cambodian women.³⁶ Article 49 of the Constitution was altered to allow “all Cambodian citizens of either sex of at least 20 years of age” to vote and Article 50 sanctioned “all candidates of either sex of at least 25 years of age” to run for office.”³⁷ May 21, 1958 marked the first election in which women voted.³⁸ These new opportunities and rights enabled the first woman, Madame Pung Peng Cheng, to be elected to the National Assembly. In 1962 she was re-elected and joined by a second female representative, Madame Diep Dinar.³⁹ Another woman was elected to the legislature in 1965, bringing the total number of female deputies in the Assembly to three.⁴⁰ While this number was small, especially considering that women accounted for half of the electorate, it nevertheless represented an important shift in the presence of women in the public sphere. Madame Pung Peng Cheng, Madame Diep Dinar, as well as other women, represented Cambodia at international

³⁴ *Kambuja*, February 1966.

³⁵ *Cambodge*, 27 January 1968.

³⁶ *La femme cambodgienne à l'ère du Sangkum*, (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Information, 1965), 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Jacobsen, *Lost Goddess*, 185.

conferences, attended National Assembly meetings, and spoke at *Sangkum* open-air meetings at Veal Men.⁴¹

In addition to taking on new roles in the new government, women also entered into new economic fields. Whereas women often participated in the agricultural economy of the village, they were not as engaged economically in urban areas. Roughly 40% of women in rural areas were considered actively involved in the local economy in contrast to only 16% of women in the city.⁴² This situation during the 1960s slowly changed as factories were established, creating a demand for female labor. According to the 1962 census, 27,000 women held jobs directly linked to manufacturing and craft industries.⁴³ Women also joined the burgeoning government apparatus, where women occupied 100% of the positions available at the Ministry of Public Health.⁴⁴ Thus, during the *Sangkum* period, Cambodians witnessed the growing presence of women within most economic sectors. Sihanouk also passed laws mandating that women receive eight weeks off after childbirth and a one hour break in the workday when they were nursing.⁴⁵ The government, unlike the colonial state, sought to ensure that women were comfortable as they entered these new fields. Women were no longer seen only in the rice fields, the market or the home, but were now writing and filling prescriptions, teaching in front of classrooms, or typing away in an office.

More important than the entry of women into new economic sectors was the strides women gained in education. As mentioned earlier, the French tried to implement a modern education system in Cambodia, but its impact was negligible. By the end of French colonialism, Cambodia only had one major high school (the Lycée Sisowath) and no universities. The colonial state created the *Ecole des filles* to provide primary school instruction to women, but offered no secondary education. The lone high school in Cambodia, Lycée Sisowath, accepted only male students. To attain secondary instruction, Khmer women traveled to either Hanoi or, more often, Saigon. The lack of schools caused women to attain a lower level of education when compared to men. At the end of French rule, of 86,000 Khmer children who received a primary school education, roughly 6% were girls. 360 students received a secondary level education, but only 80 were women.⁴⁶ But female education changed drastically once Cambodia gained its independence. In 1957 alone, 124,000 women had completed primary education and 2,450 had finished secondary school. By 1964, over 200,000 women had finished elementary school and

⁴¹ *La femme cambodgienne à l'ère du Sangkum*, 6-7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 28. This number is suspect. This magazine, published by the government, listed the number of workers at the Ministry of Public Health as 1,281. It then provided a breakdown of the various positions at the Ministry of Public Health, ranging from 3 doctors to 22 lab assistants, on page 28. The brief description said all these workers were women, even titling the section "Participation in Social Activities: the Women in Public Health." What is even more notable is that when listing the number of girls enrolled in the Royal School for the training of rural midwives, the nurses assistants, and the state midwives, 100% of the student population was female. *La femme cambodgienne à l'ère du Sangkum*, p. 12. Apparently, only women enrolled in these programs, making the 100% female labor force at the Ministry of Public Health more credible and suggest that women during *Sangkum* were channeled into public health profession. This channeling is probably a legacy of the colonial government's *École Pratique des Sage-Femmes*, but the 100% labor force is still quite unbelievable.

⁴⁵ *Documents sur le IVe Congrès National de 12 janvier 1957*, Box. 687, National Archives of Cambodia (hereafter shorted to NAC), Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

⁴⁶ *La femme cambodgienne à l'ère du Sangkum*, 8.

14,000 had attained a secondary level education.⁴⁷ As it did with men, the state granted fellowships to women to study abroad. This expansion in education produced female doctors, school teachers and administrators.

In addition to unlocking new career paths for women, the state allowed women and men to attend the same schools. Although a few women were able to go to pagoda schools, colonial schooling was a *de facto* male privilege. As mentioned earlier, colonial women remained in the domestic sphere. The few women who received some education attended the *Ecole des filles*, a school devoted only to women. Thus, in the colonial period, schools reinforced the spatial separation between men and women. This situation, however, changed during *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Girls and boys, men and women, now attended the same primary and secondary schools. These schools provided men and women a new place to develop friendships. Darina Siv, who entered first grade in 1962, remembered having a number of friends: “Mony was a smart rabbit-girl who had stolen a wise man’s brain; Sivan, with her sharp, pointed nose and skin [and] Meng, a boy with skin so dark it looked like it had been burned in a fire.”⁴⁸ She also “knew students, both male and female, from seventh and twelfth grade. I asked the older students for help with my math, physics, and chemistry and they agreed without hesitation. I was attracted to the older male students, who were quiet and talked less.”⁴⁹ Under *Sangkum*, schools became places where men and women mixed and interacted socially. Darina, unlike her mother, did not hide from the public gaze.⁵⁰ In fact, Darina actively pursued public attention. As her knowledge expanded, she discovered a love for literature and began to write short stories. She sent these stories to a Phnom Penh radio station and they were broadcast.⁵¹ Darina’s biography illustrated the differences between colonial and postcolonial women. The improvements *Sangkum* instituted within the education system enabled women to experience new interactions. They were no longer sequestered from men and they freely sought the public spotlight.

The story of the Douk Phana provides another example of one possible path for a modern woman to follow. In 1942, Douk Phana, who excelled in natural science, was awarded a scholarship to study pharmacy in Hanoi. Because she wanted to spend her first year of study in Phnom Penh, the state awarded her a small monthly scholarship of 15 to 18 piastres and 145 piastres to cover her fees. Although how much she received to support her studies later in Hanoi is unknown, others students received a monthly stipend of 45 piastres and 375 piastres to prepare for their departure.⁵² She most likely received the same amount. After studying in Hanoi, Douk Phana returned to Cambodia and helped establish the Faculty of Pharmacology in Phnom Penh. She then studied in France and received her doctorate after writing a thesis that catalogued the various medicinal herbs available in Cambodia. Afterwards, she returned to Cambodia in 1966 and was made president of the National Committee for Scientific Research.⁵³ Douk Phana was

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Darina Siv, *Never Come Back: A Cambodian Women’s Journey*, (St. Paul, Minn: Writer Press, 2000), 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

⁵⁰ In her memoir, Darina spoke of the first meeting between her parents. Her mother immediately left the room, after depositing hot soup on the straw mat. “Tradition held that a young woman could not be in the room with guest unless it was necessary,” Darina wrote. In contrast to her mother, Darina did not hide away from guest. Her parent encouraged her schooling, freeing her from some household chores. Ibid., 5 and 20.

⁵¹ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵² “Annotation of His Majesty,” Cabinet of the King, No. 144, dated 28 September 1942, in Sam Sary, *La Grande Figure De Norodom Sihanouk*, (Phnom Penh: Imprimerie Du Palais Royal, 1955), 229-230.

⁵³ “The Cambodian Woman of the Sangkum era: Doctor Douk Phana,” *Kambuja*, no. 56, November 1969.

not unique; Tip Mam, who at various points led the Ministry of Planning and the Ministry of Public Health and Social Affairs, had a similar story. She too went abroad and received her medical degree from France. Upon her return, she climbed the ranks of the Cambodian government, first as a professor, then as a Secretary of State for a ministry and finally a ministry head.⁵⁴ Plek Phiun was another woman who traveled up the ranks of the government. Starting out as a librarian in the 1940s, she was the Director of the Department of Work and Social Action during *Sangkum*.⁵⁵ During the 1940s, the newspaper, *Kampuchea*, singled her out, noting that: “The country greatly appreciates having such an intelligent, knowledgeable, well-educated and serious woman librarian who tries her best for the salvation of Cambodia.”⁵⁶ The stories of Douk Phana, Tip Mam, Plek Phirun showed that women during *Sangkum* were able to reach the top echelons of the government.

Eager to show the progress that women achieved, the state publicized the achievements of Douk, Tip and Plek. They represented the heightened visibility achieved by Cambodian women because of the state’s modernization policies. Their images were featured in government pamphlets and government-sponsored newspapers. Interestingly, the state included photographs of these women in their official capacities. They were pictured working in the lab, holding a degree, or attending a meeting surrounded by men, as seen below.



Figure 12: Tip Mam from *Kambuja*



Figure 13: Douk Phana from *Kambuja*

The government did not emphasize their roles as wives, mothers, or daughters; the readers were told nothing about their personal lives. It was as if that part of them did not exist. The state’s representation of these women changed how women were perceived. Before women were defined by their domestic roles, now in *Sangkum*, through the government’s own propaganda machinery no less, these women’s identity was portrayed independently of their domestic roles. At least in the cases like those Tip Mam and Douk Phana, women were now defined by their achievements.

⁵⁴ “The Cambodian Woman of the Sangkum era: Professor Soarin Tip Mam,” *Kambuja*, no. 57, December 1969.

⁵⁵ *La femme cambodgienne à l’ère du Sangkum*, 7.

⁵⁶ *Kampuchea*, No. 190, 10th lunar month, mid-August-mid September, 1945, p. 2, found in Frieson, “*Sentimental Education*,” accessed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

Heterosexual Contacts and Spaces of Leisure

In addition to increasing political and economic visibility, modern Khmer women experienced greater visual prominence within the general public. They were found at the movie theater, bicycling about city, or dancing the night away. As Cambodia modernized, work patterns changed and a new conception of time emerged. Cambodians now embraced the idea of leisure. These leisure activities were not simply times to relax from work. They were opportunities for women to interact with men in new ways. More importantly, leisure demarcated these women as modern and different from previous generations.⁵⁷ An examination of their leisure habits reveals the distinguishing characteristics of the modern Khmer women. The ways they behaved in public, their new interactions with males and their fashionable appearance underlined their identity as modern women. Their experiences were different from those of women living before French rule.

In precolonial Cambodia, women, especially unmarried women, remained within the domestic realm as it was believed that tragedy would befall those who violated this norm. The classic Khmer tale, *Tum Teav*, provided an example to any women who moved into the public. Teav initiated the events that lead to her death when “glancing around fitfully, she poked her head into the guest room, mouth agape.”⁵⁸ Rather than shun male attention, Teav had searched out Tum. Tum violated social norms as well, when he refused to turn away from Teav. Because of their defiance, Teav and Tum triggered their tragic fate. A proper woman should not behave as Teav did. Instead of following the prescriptions found in *Tum Teav*, the *neary samey thmey* choose instead to be a contemporary Teav. However, she did not anxiously slip her head into a guest room. Rather, she boldly walked out of the house and danced in bars. The modern Khmer women embraced her leisure time in public and in the company of men.

The Cambodian political, economic, and educational systems developed rapidly during *Sangkum*. These developments generated more professional and administrative jobs held by an increasingly educated population. Because of these changes, a new class of men and women surfaced. These men and women had disposal income, spare time to travel around the country and enjoy new leisure activities. This new group worked, but they also went to bars, dance-halls, and movies. Nuth Bopinnara defended her desire to dance when she wrote to the editors of *La Dépêche du Cambodge*: “The night, as we already know, is for rest. If we were to stay up past 2 or 3 in the morning, it would sap our strength and weaken our heads and provoke overwork (*ars longa vitas brevis*). But one can also benefit from enjoying the bar or the cabaret once a week, only on Saturday night and one will have Sunday to rest.”⁵⁹ Bopinnara believed that, despite possible dangers, one night out per week was positive for a working woman such as herself.

⁵⁷ As Kathy Peis wrote, leisure activities “offer an arena for the articulation of different values and behaviors.” Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 4.

⁵⁸ George Chigas, trans., *Tum Teav: A Translation and Analysis of a Cambodian Literary Classic*, (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2005), 42.

⁵⁹ La nuit, comme nous savons déjà, c’est pour le repos. Si nous prolongeons la durée inutile jusqu’à 2 ou 3 heures du matin, cela nous gêne notre force et notre boîte crânienne et provoquera le surmenage (*ars longa vitas brevis*). Mais on peut aussi profiter pour en jouir une fois par semaine dans le bar ou cabaret seulement le soir du samedi et on aura le dimanche se reposer. “Letter to editors from Nuth Bopinnara,” *La Dépêche du Cambodge*, June 13, 1962, found in Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, editors, *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s*, (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2001), 215.

The desire to go out with friends and relax after a hard day at work was only one aspect of this new activity. For such an activity to take place, this new class of people needed places to go. Fortunately, Phnom Penh boasted a growing entertainment industry. Writing in 1969, an Englishman recalled the entertainment offered in Phnom Penh “varied, with good cinemas, several nightclubs and two floating dance halls.”⁶⁰ Luckily, for Bopinnara who enjoyed these nightclubs, Phnom Penh appeared to have several. One floating bar-restaurant, the Lotus d’Or, which was located behind the old dancing-bar Claire de Lune, advertised its “Tahitian Night.” The advertisement, which was in the newspaper *Cambodge*, said that the bar will be open from 7:30pm to dawn and the songs will be performed by talented artists and “your favorite female singers.”⁶¹ These “dancing-bars” were controversial, known for violence and their “demoiselles aux fleurs d’ors.”⁶² To “safeguard the health of our families, spouses, and children,” the government closed many of these dancing-bars, especially in Sihanoukville. The government instituted programs to regulate the profession, requiring women to undertake periodic visits to the doctor. Sihanouk even declared that if these “taxi-girls” accepted a life in the countryside, the state would be willing to give them land, animals and materials to build a house. Perhaps recognizing the social function of these bars, the government also decided to open state-sponsored dancing-bars. One was the “Bar Restaurant Night-Club at Pochentong,” which *Kambuja* compared to “what one might find on the Champ-Elysees, in Piccadilly or on the banks of the Tiber.”⁶³

Hotels openly publicized the fact they had “a large reception hall with lounge, a bar, a restaurant, and two rapid elevators.”⁶⁴ Some government officials, like Ok Youen and Ouch Ek, supported opening these dancing-bars even with taxi-girls. They realized that the dancing-bars were popular with tourists, who were attracted to the “charms” of these girls.⁶⁵ They may have also recognized that the dancing-bars were fashionable among Cambodians who wanted to relax and have a good time, which can be seen in the below drawing of a hotel taken from an 1965 women’s manual.

⁶⁰ *Kambuja*, January 1969.

⁶¹ *Cambodge*, 4 November 1963.

⁶² In Khmer, a name for prostitutes is រៀង្សី, which is the literal translation of this French phrase: Golden

Flowered Girls. The other nickname for prostitutes at the time was taxi-girls.

⁶³ *Kambuja*, July 1966.

⁶⁴ *Kambuja*, May 1966.

⁶⁵ *Cambodge*, 4 November 1963.



Figure 14: Drawing of a Hotel Scene from Women Manual, *Polite Behavior for Men and Women*

Cambodge au jour d'hui observed that “Western dances, such as of the frenetic be-bop, the mambo, and others, have made great inroads and, have first been accepted by the upper classes, have now been adapted by all social classes. The most important fact is perhaps the favorable reception of these western dances by Khmer women and girls, who only years earlier, considered them immoral.”⁶⁶ The acceptance of bars and dancing clubs among youths, the image of the taxi-girls was tied to these clubs and shaped the club’s reputation as a place of vice within the larger public.

The dances performed in these bars were another source of controversy. The Twist, which had grown into a dance craze during *Sangkum*, drew particular attention. Chum Kem, who later became a singer at the “Bar Dancing Kbal Thnal,” studied ceramics in Italy. When he returned, he introduced the Twist to Cambodia. Chum Kem was a part of a larger movement in Khmer music, what Ingrid Maun and Ly Daravuth called Modern Khmer Music. As they wrote,

As Rock and Roll and groups such as the Beatles became wildly popular in the West, their music quickly came to Cambodia and spread throughout the countryside via the radio. Some popular movements in the West became curiously transplanted phenomena in 1960s Cambodia...The interest in such forms of popular music and dance led to the development of a local music industry. Songwriting and singing became a full-time profession and several record production companies were established.⁶⁷

The new music industry and these dancing-bars went hand-in-hand. The popular singers recorded their albums and sang their songs at these clubs, which generated greater interest in their albums. The Twist triggered a debate, when *La Dépêche du Cambodge* asked its readers what they thought of the new dance. Readers sent a torrent of letters, which *La Dépêche*

⁶⁶ *Cambodge au jour d'hui*, December 1958

⁶⁷ Daravuth and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 200.

published. Most of the surviving letters disapproved of the new dance. Kim Sillion wrote, “It is ridiculous that, at the moment when humanity is searching to walk forward with its head held high, some creators of an art seeks above all to imitate gestures and movements of beasts. What is the Twist but the walk of a goose? A day will come without any doubt when men will walk like a monkey or run like a kangaroo, howl like a wolf or bark like a dog?”⁶⁸ However, the Twist did have a few supporters. Most notable was Mme. Ek Simone, a high school teacher from Kompong Cham. She reminded the readers that the children today “only speak of the atom, interplanetary voyages and reactors. In the contemporary period, children no longer play with hoops as we did in our time. Young girls no longer wear their hair in the style of a “Sak Spei Khdob” and the old no longer go to market at night carrying a torch to illuminate their way... The jazz and the Rock are to their times what the ‘chamrieng chapei’ or ‘chamrieng sadiév’ were to your parents.”⁶⁹ Madame Ek’s letter best encapsulated the larger issues tangled in this minor debate over the Twist. The Twist, along with these dancing-bars, was perceived to be a source of degeneracy and vice. As the letter writer above noted, it caused men to behave or simply move like beasts. Yet, supporters also understood it to be a sign of the times. The Twist was the dance this new generation now practiced and the bars were the spaces where they interacted.

In these dancing-bars, men and women ate, danced, and drank. In his movie, *Joie de Vivre*, which has been described as “a campy satire of the lifestyle of the rich, famous, and hedonistic in Cambodia’s swinging sixties,”⁷⁰ Sihanouk included a scene at a state-sponsored restaurant-dance-hall, where men and women got together, danced, and engaged in nefarious affairs. The movie moved to a shot of Pan Ron, a famous female singer who was second in fame only to Ros Sereysothea. In the scene, she started to shake her hips as she sang *Rom A-go A-go* (Dance A-go A-go), which motivated the crowd to “dance while you’re still young. Dance to the Go-Go beat.” Upon hearing her song, men and women, who were sitting down or sharing a kiss, got up and danced. Their bodies shuddered and wiggled as their arms, legs, and head moved up and down.⁷¹ If Kim Sillion had observed them, he would have surely called it the movements of monkeys. Ironically, Pan Ron’s other famous song was *Sva Rom Monk-kiss* (A monkey dances monkey), which describes a man dancing like a monkey. Pan Ron sang “I saw a Monkey dance like a monkey; nothing compares to the Monkey dancing...the Monkey laughs, Haha Monkey, Hehe Monkey, Go ahead and dance, Monkey!” This infectious song may have been a playful jab at those who would agree with Kim Sillion and considered these moves bestial. Nothing, however, deterred these modern Khmer singers from encouraging their audience to dance. Whether it was Pan Ron’s *Rom Jongvak Twiss* (Dance the Twist) and *Rom, Rom, Rom* (Dance,

⁶⁸ ...il est très ridicule que, au moment où l’humanité cherche à marcher toujours la tête bien haute, certains inventeurs de l’art cherchent surtout à imiter les gestes et les mouvements des bêtes. Le twist n’est il pas la marche de l’oie ? Un jour viendra, sans nul doute où les hommes marcheraient comme un singe ou couraient comme un kangourou tout en hurlant comme un loup ou en aboyant comme un chien ? “Letter to editors from M. Kim Sillion,” *La Dépêche du Cambodge*, June 21, 1962, in Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 221.

⁶⁹ ...autour d’eux on ne parle qu’à tome, voyages interplanétaires et réacteur. A l’époque actuelle les petits enfants ne jouent plus au cerceau comme de notre temps. Les jeunes filles ne portent plus les cheveux dits ‘Sak Spei Khdob’ et les vieux pour aller au marché pendant la nuit n’éclairent plus leur chemin avec des torches...le jazz et le Rock sont à leur temps ce que le ‘chamrieng chapei’ ou ‘chamrieng sadiév’ étaient à vos parent. “Letter to editors from Mme. Ek Simone,” *La Dépêche du Cambodge*, June 15, 1962, in Daravuth and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 217.

⁷⁰ Til Baumgartel, “Cambodian Cinema,” *Phnom Penh Post* 7 Days, Feb 25-March 3, 2011.

⁷¹ Norodom Sihanouk, *Joie De Vivre*, directed by Norodom Sihanouk, (Khemara Pictures, 1969).

Dance, Dance) or Ros Sereysothea's *Rom Jongvak* (The Woolly Woolly) or *Rom Tov Mit* (Go Dance, Friend), these songs celebrated the idea of men and women happily dancing through the night.⁷² As they relaxed in clubs, the dancers would hear Ros Sereysothea sing:

I sing a happy song
All my handsome boys and girls
They dance to forget the sadness from their spirits, darling
Go and dance to this new beat, friend
Dance to this modern song that everyone likes
Dance and have fun

Men and women crowded bars where these songs were played. These bars allowed the music industry to flourish and proved to be sites of relaxation for these men and women. There, these young men and women escaped their lives trapped at a desk or answering to a superior. The symbiotic relationship between new industries of leisure and an emerging class provided the setting of the *neary samey thmey*.

Besides crowding the dancing-bars, men and women also visited tourist destinations around the country. Ary visited Takhmau because she had read a *Kambuja* article praising the beauty of the city. As a part of its efforts to promote Cambodia as a tourist destination, the government advertised the charms of various Cambodian destinations. Since these advertisements were published mostly in foreign-language magazines, the goal was to attract foreign visitors to Cambodia, but they also sparked domestic interest. The circulation of people was nothing new in Cambodia. As Penny Edwards has demonstrated, Cambodian society was highly mobile. At times Cambodians traveled for economic reasons to fulfill "seasonal obligations such as cutting firewood, fishing in certain swamps, driving heard to pastures and so forth." Other journeys were the results of political upheavals: "the capture, displacement and resettlement of populations; the raising of armies; the flight from invading troops; and the abandoning of cities and villages."⁷³ Musicians, such as Krom Ngoy, also traveled from one village to the next, playing their instruments and telling tales.⁷⁴ As a part of a Theravada Southeast Asian network, monks frequently traveled to Sri Lanka and Thailand in search of Buddhist teachings and manuscripts. These travels increased during the colonial period, as the government devoted significant resources to building roads. These travels increased during the *Sangkum* period, when the government doubled the number of roads and added a port in Sihanoukville as well as many airports. Cambodians also witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of automobiles in the country, as shown in the previous chapter. Cars and buses became a feature of life in Phnom Penh.

As automobiles became more available, more and more urban Cambodians took trips to other parts of the country. The newspaper, *Réalités Cambodgienne*, had a column, asking its

⁷² For example, the chorus to Ros Sereysothea's *Rom Jonvak* (*The Woolly Woolly*) is:

We dance to beat the music
We dance with boys and girls
We dance through the night
We dance to our heart's content.

⁷³ Penny Edwards, "The Tyranny of Proximity: Power and Mobility in Colonial Cambodia, 1863-1954," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 37, no 3, October 2003, 426.

⁷⁴ Refer to *The Sayings of Krom Ngoy* (ប្រាសាទក្រុងក្រវាញ), (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1972).

readers “Where will you go Sunday?” Unlike articles advertising tourist destinations to attract foreigners, this column appeared to be geared towards French-speaking Cambodians. The newspaper encouraged a growing number of Cambodians to spend their weekends outside of Phnom Penh. It marketed Kirirom, Sihanoukville, Kep, Kompong Chnang, and Takeo as places to visit and relax. Another newspaper, *Cambodge aujourd’hui*, also proclaimed that “the Cambodian tourist has come to be.” It noted:

a new phenomenon of some importance among the urban population: a visit to the countryside during the holidays. One knows the importance of ‘le week-end’ for Parisians and Londoners, the joys of swimming in the sea or even a simple riverside picnic. In Cambodia, Kep has long been a beach frequented by Westerners...only recently, we see every Saturday entire families of Cambodian rolling to the beach to taste for 24 hours the salted sea’s delights.⁷⁵

The weekend as a time for leisure and escape from the capital city was the result of economic development and the emergence of a middle-class who had a different conception of time and financial wherewithal to enjoy these activities.

Companies urged their workers to engage in these activities. Shell Company of Cambodia brought more than 450 employees and their families to Kep, a beach in southern Cambodia. The company organized an annual outing to tourist sites around the country, and in 1966, Shell decided upon Kep. So, a caravan of “seven buses and many tourist cars” descended upon its shores, where the employees “invaded the beaches, zoo, and market.” They listened to music and played ping-pong.⁷⁶ Although 80% of the clientele in Sihanoukville were foreign tourists, a number of Khmer families also loved to picnic on the surrounding hills.⁷⁷ In fact, the editors of the *Réalités Cambodgienne* and their staff picnicked at Bokor, the former French mountain resort near Kep and Sihanoukville. Upon their return, they collided with a young calf, who had wandered onto the national road. As a result, editors took to the pages of the newspaper to protect the lives of those who traveled the road and encourage the government to penalize the owners of these animals.⁷⁸ The road between Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville seemed to be particularly dangerous. F. Dô had also gotten in an accident upon his return from Sihanoukville. He escaped serious injuries and praised the medical care he received at Sihanoukville.⁷⁹ Uch Ven, who was reporter for *La Dépêche*, and his family were not so fortunate. After an accident, Ven’s Jeep caught on fire and he was gravely injured, along with his wife and kids. His mother-in-law was killed.⁸⁰ Urbanites were not the only ones to get into accidents. Motorists from Kampot or Sihanoukville, who were not accustomed to the driving habits of the capital, were often confused and missed signs that indicated a street was reserved for cyclos and bicycles. They continued onto the street and ran into cyclists.⁸¹ Despite these journalistic accounts of traffic and accidents, the middle-class continued to journey to and out of the capital city for

⁷⁵ *Cambodge au jour d’hui*, December 1958.

⁷⁶ *Réalités Cambodgienne*, 28 January 1966.

⁷⁷ *Réalités Cambodgienne*, 22 January 1966.

⁷⁸ *Réalités Cambodgienne*, 17 March 1961.

⁷⁹ *Réalités Cambodgienne*, 22 February 1962.

⁸⁰ *Réalités Cambodgienne*, 16 December 1960.

⁸¹ *Réalités Cambodgienne*, 31 December 1960.

leisure. These trips and the automobile provide spaces for men and women to interact as they never have before.

This novel interaction between men and women is apparent in Soth Polin's short story, *Communication*. Most of the story occurred in a car. In the story, Sarey invites the protagonist, Vanna, on a trip to Kep with her and four co-workers: Sothy, Sophan, Bopha, and Lina. Sarey wanted Vanna to learn the value of communication because he was too shy and never expressed himself, keeping his thoughts locked inside. The trip, Sarey hoped, would change this habit. The six of them jumped into Sothy's car, a Peugeot he borrowed from his father, and left Phnom Penh. As the car traveled along the national route to Kep, the 3 men and 3 women gossiped, debated, and joked. Vanna, in an attempt to learn how to communicate, realized that "they talked about various subjects, like sports cars, smoking [cigarettes], movie stars who know how to daringly fight, money, and fashion."⁸² Sothy, for instance, really liked Charles Bronson, while Sarey disparaged the overly sexy female stars. Sophan changed the conversation to talk about his trip from Siem Reap, where the car broke down and they watched a hilarious ah-yi (អាឺយ៉ី)

show, making fun of the Vietnamese.⁸³ The conversation then moved to cars, with Vanna liking the Peugeot and Lina thinking a Mercedes was better. Someone, then, interjected that the quality of the roads mattered more than the car. The consensus was that the roads improved all-around in Cambodia, although "it was boring to wait at the ferry crossings." The ferry crossings are not as terrible as when cars have to slow down "to avoid bikes, mopeds, and tuk-tuks or dogs and pigs that were crossing the street."⁸⁴ The story of Vanna and Sarey provides a glimpse of what could take place when Khmer women and men were crammed together in a car as they traveled to escape their working lives in Phnom Penh. As a result of their administrative jobs in Phnom Penh companies, these single men and women had the money, time, and a car to make a 2-hour trip to Kep. The trip was a space where men and women interacted with one another without the watchful gaze of a parent.

The automobile, however, was not only an arena for interaction between men and women; it was also a symbol that empowered women. Ary had been able to leave Phnom Penh on her own because she had a bike. The bike allowed Ary to move about Phnom Penh, freely. Other women experienced this new-found independence as well. Although the number of women who owned bikes, mopeds, motorcycles, and cars is unknown, pictures of women driving cars or riding bicycles abound. In a brochure about the women of *Sangkum*, the government

⁸² ឆ្មុយទៅវិញគេប្តូរវាចាអំពីរឿងផ្សេងៗ ដូចជារឿង រថយន្តស្ព័រ (voitures sports) រឿងជក់បារី រឿងតួឯកកុនកូរហោយដែល ចេះដាល់តប់យ៉ាងស្បើង រឿងលុយកាក់ រឿងម៉ូដខោអាវ ។ល។ និង ។ល។ Soth Polin, "Communications (កាទាក់ទងគ្នា)", in

Tell Me What To Do...I Will Do It (ឱប្រុងធ្វើអី...បងធ្វើដែរ), (Phnom Penh : Nokor Thom, 1969) p. 14 *Tell Me*

What To Do...I Will Do It. This a collection of short stories by Soth Polin.

⁸³ This is a type of comedy show, where actors sang and made jokes. These shows are still popular, but not necessarily on making fun the Vietnamese. This was Soth Polin's special touch.

⁸⁴ ការចាំឆ្លងសាឡាងអផ្សុក មិនដល់ការត្រួបត្រួយល្បឿនគ្រប់ពេលវេលាដោយត្រូវជឿសកង់ ឬ ម៉ូតូ រ៉ឺម៉ក ឬ ដោយមានផ្តែ ឬ ជ្រូកគោឆ្លងកាត់តួលេខ Ibid., 22.

boasted of how women could drive their own cars.⁸⁵ It also pictured female students leaving school on bicycles and female agents from the Ministry of Public Health riding bikes to visit patients.⁸⁶ Films also frequently showed women driving and going out.⁸⁷ In scenes from *Joie de Vivre*, such as the one pictured below, the femme-fatale character played by the great Saksi Sbhong drove to a club where she danced and scheduled a rendezvous with her lover.



Figure 15: Saksi Sbhong in the film *Apsara*

Sihanouk was fond of depicting female drivers, as he did in his other film, *Apsara*. Again, Saksi Sbhong drove around Penh Penh, until she arrived at her lover's villa for a date.⁸⁸ In another film, *Thavary Meas Bong* (Thavary My Darling), Thavary, played by Vichara Dany, drove to bring food to her sick father and was stopped by a suitor, who cunningly asked for her number.

⁸⁵ *La femme cambodgienne à l'ère du Sangkum*, 38.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 10 and 28.

⁸⁷ The film industry also developed quickly during the *Sangkum* period. During this time, roughly 350 films were shown in Cambodia. Phnom Penh had approximately 30 movie theaters and 23 production companies. Films were a popular pastime for most people during this period, causing some to label *Sangkum* “The Golden Age of Khmer Cinema.” Most of the films were produced and watched in Phnom Penh, since it was most metropolitan area in Cambodia. However, films slowly made its way to the countryside. Sihanouk, especially, made a point to show his films, such as *Joie De Vivre*, to all Cambodian. Milton Osborne believed that the effect may not have been as Sihanouk wanted. Rather than uniting the country, country folks watched bewilderedly as the city life flashed before their eyes. As he says, “In the countryside, where the prince had commanded that the films be screened for the benefit of his ‘children’, peasant farmers and their families watched with amazement the scenes of high living depicted in them.” These films may have made them more aware of the differences between city and rural life, as well as engender a desire for that high, urban living. Although available sources can neither confirm nor deny these conjectures, they do show that these films influenced the ways people perceived Cambodia and the world around them. For more information about films, please refer to: Department of Media and Communication, *Kon: The Cinema of Cambodia*, (Phnom Penh: VS Vann Sophea Printing House, 2010) and the documentary, *Golden Slumbers*, or *Le sommeil d'or* (original title), directed by Davy Chou, featuring Yvon Hem, Dy Saveth, Liv Sreng (Vycky Films, Bophana Production, Araucania Films, 2011); for an account of Sihanouk's films, please refer to Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).

⁸⁸ *Apsara*, directed by Norodom Sihanouk, featuring Prince Sisowath Chivanmonriak, Bopha Devi, Norodom Narindrapong, (Khmerak Pictures, 1966).

Thavary's sister, Sony, drove to the markets or to the theater.⁸⁹ In these visual representations, women moved about freely in the city. She drove to bring food to the needy, to go shopping or to visit friends.

The new normal, as depicted in films and novels, for modern women was to have a job outside the home, to go out to bars, to visit beach resorts, and to drive a car. These activities could be found in the lives of real women. Dy Saveth, who is known as the Marilyn Monroe of Cambodia, became a movie star at 16, after she won the Miss Cambodia title in 1959. She starred in another movie, *Kbon Chivit* (Life Raft) that was directed by Ung Kanthok, who was also the director of *Thavary Meas Bong*. The movie sold out at every showing for over a month. She went on to star in several other films, including some directed by Sihanouk, and cemented her place as Cambodia's leading lady. At 20, she married Houy Keng, and together they opened a production company. To save money, she worked as the company's "scriptwriter, director, costume designer and make-up artist, while her husband served as a cinematographer." She eventually directed one of the company's films. When she was not working, Dy Saveth recalled, she "and other showbiz people went to dance at the Delta Bar near Pochentong airport. As my house had a big yard, I used to have parties there, and invited my colleagues and friends. And I often went to shop with them or to sing karaoke."⁹⁰ Dy Saveth's life during *Sangkum* echoed Sony's description of her life in the film, *Thavary*. These urban women did not simply stay home, care for kids, work in rice fields or sell produce in the markets. They worked as secretaries, directors, teachers, and heads of ministries. They went to the movies, they traveled abroad and within the country, and they transported themselves from place to place. They were well-educated, well-traveled and played a heightened social role. The *neary samey thmey* were a source of pride for the *Sangkum* government and indicated how modern and progressive Cambodia had become. The government boasted that the "young Khmer woman of today is at the side of her husband during receptions, is informed in all aspects of national life and international affairs, and expresses her own opinions. She is often interested in literature and music, frequents the movies, knows western dance and follows fashion."⁹¹ This new women were different from older Khmer women, who "remained attached to a tradition that gives them supreme reign over domestic life and advises them to stay away for their husband's political and

⁸⁹ When asked if she was free, Sony replied "I'm never free. After school, I go out, watch a movie, go to a friend's house, or go look at the new fashions." សម្រាប់ខ្ញុំមិនចេះទំនេរទេ បើសល់ពីពេលវេលា ខ្ញុំទៅដើរលេង ទៅមើលកុន ទៅលេងផ្ទះម

មិត្តភក្តិ ឬទៅមើលម៉ូដអាវុឌី ១១ *Thavary My Darling* (ថាវីមេសបង), directed by Ung Kanthok, (Phnom Penh, 1969).

Sony, in this film, was depicted as the young, immature woman, who followed the fashions. She wore the short shorts, drove cars, and even attempted to smoke to imitate the French movie stars she saw in the theaters. Her immaturity led her to break up her proper sister's marriage, but nevertheless her character embodied a certain sensibility of the times. Girls watching her on the screen may have well wanted to be as fashionable and independent as she was.

⁹⁰ Hong Chanpheaktra, Vorn Mara, Tet Chann, "'I am the luckiest person' From Movie Star to Waitress and Back Again: The Roller Coaster life of Dy Saveth," Kon, (Phnom Penh: VS Vann Sophea Printing House, 2010), 13.

⁹¹ La jeune femme khmère d'aujourd'hui est aux côtés de son mari dans les réceptions s'informe de tous les aspects de la vie nationale et des événements internationaux puis exprime son point de vue, s'intéresse souvent à la littérature et à la musique, fréquente assidûment les cinémas, apprend les danses occidentales, et suit la mode. *La femme cambodgienne à l'ère du Sangkum*, 37.

social activates.”⁹² Unlike older women, the modern Khmer woman was educated, opinionated, well-traveled, and fashionable. She had moved beyond the domestic sphere. She was the product of socio-economic changes Cambodia experienced under Sihanouk’s leadership. The growth in education, the improvements made to the Constitution, and restructuring of the economy, along with the creation of new industries of leisure, redefined the position of women in Khmer society and altered the interaction between men and women. This larger societal transformation established the condition from which the modern Khmer women emerged.

Although *Sangkum* created the conditions for women’s entry into the new economic and educational fields and enhanced their visibility in the public arena, women were still limited to a small handful of jobs deemed socially acceptable. In the government bureaucracy, women were more prevalent in the Ministries of Education, of Public Health and Social Affairs, Planning and the National Bank. In these ministries, women occupied roughly 20% to 100% of the government employees. In contrast, in the Royal Cabinet, the Ministries of Industries, Justice, Interior, Public Works and National Security, women accounted for less than 2% of the available positions.⁹³ Women were more common in the ministries whose jobs required an attention to detail and the skills of a caretaker. These characteristics were aligned with traditional female virtues. When Tip Mam visited a bombed village in 1969, a newspaper celebrated her work in offering relief to the victims. The article described Tim Mam as “a frail woman with reassuring gestures and a comforting voice.” Her “feminine presence provides a considerable moral prop for the inhabitants” as the war rages around them.⁹⁴ The newspaper’s representation of Tip Mam demonstrated how the traditional perceptions of women as caretakers could help women fulfill their responsibilities at work or get a job with a particular ministry. However, women were restricted to these positions. A woman was proposed for the position of Vice-President of the National Assembly. A group of male deputies organized against her candidacy, arguing that politics was not a place for feelings. They implied that women were too emotional and irrational and hence unable to carry-out the duties of such an office.⁹⁵ This event highlighted the difficulties and double standards women encountered as they tried to make sense of their new social position. In the previous case, a woman’s perceived ability to feel and empathize was seen as an asset, while in the second case it detracted from her capacity to serve as Vice-President. The second story also showed that men at the time did not believe women were capable of handling leadership roles. In fact, women in government offices often worked as typists and secretaries – not as the person in charge. A government pamphlet acknowledged that the government reserved subaltern positions in the office (dictation-taker, typists, and secretaries) for women. It stated that women during the *Sangkum* period “were taking the administrative positions that had been vacated by the Vietnamese as a result of decolonization.”⁹⁶ So even as Cambodia developed and was in need of skilled workers,⁹⁷ women were channeled into specific types of jobs, rarely could they be found in positions of high-rank and “non-feminine” jobs. A

⁹² Certes l’évolution est moins sensible chez les plus de quarante ans qui demeurent attachées à la tradition qui leur confère la direction souveraine de la vie domestique et leur conseille de se tenir à l’écart des activités politiques et sociales du mari. Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 5.

⁹⁴ *Kambuja*, December 1969

⁹⁵ Norodom Sihanouk, *Editorial in Somleng Neary*, undated.

⁹⁶ *La femme cambodgienne à l’ère du Sangkum*, 23.

⁹⁷ *Situation du programme de développement communautaire au Cambodge*, Box 691, NAC.

gendered division of labor was not unique to Cambodia, but it demonstrated that the position of women in *Sangkum* was not as advanced as the government depicted.

While men and women did not enjoy equal responsibilities during the *Sangkum* period, the social and economic position of women nevertheless changed. Like men, women had become better educated, enjoyed opportunities to travel abroad, and joined the growing government. Escaping from the confines of the home, the rice-field and the market, she was now in an office or at a conference. Her leisure habits had transformed as well. During the 1960s, it was normal for women to travel to resort towns or to go dancing with male friends. These social and economic changes allowed for women to become more visible, as evident in the films, magazines, and in bars. These public manifestations of the *neary samey thmey* transformed her into a symbol of the modernization Cambodians experienced during *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Women experienced greater freedoms: they were no longer limited to the home and domestic actives. The modern Khmer women drove to work, danced with males in clubs, and traveled throughout the country.

Modernity and Cambodian Gender Relations

Khmer intellectuals had a variety of reactions to the new social position of Khmer women. Some advocated and celebrated the emancipation of women even as they warned of the dangers in changing gender norms. Others saw these new gender relations as a mark of the growth of negative Western influences and further social disintegration. Regardless of the opinions expressed in these various writings, they confirmed that the position of Khmer women in society and gender relations had transformed.

Writings that guided the *neary samey thmey* were women manuals published during the *Sangkum* period. While the actual number of female manuals written during Sangkum is unknown, at least seven manuals related to Cambodian women have survived to this day.⁹⁸ For

⁹⁸ Given Cambodian history, a lot of literary works from the *Sangkum* period did not survive. This does not mean that the amount that did survive is anything to scoff at. A fair number of literary works remains for current scholars to examine and analyze. If anything, this dissertation should show that Cambodians did write and they wrote a lot. However, it may not be a representative sample of the literary production that took place during Sangkum.

Throughout the course of my research, I have encountered advertisements for books on the back of other books, only to go to the bookstore to find the work no longer exists. The owner of the bookstore or stall would say that the book was most likely destroyed during the Khmer Rouge. The same is true for texts that were mentioned in passing by other works. So there could have been more than seven manuals published during the *Sangkum* period, but I do not know. There is no such thing as a list of all the published manuals during Sangkum. In my quest to gather and read the various works of *Sangkum* era intellectuals, I have found these seven manuals. At the very least, I can say six manuals were published during the *Sangkum* period, with another one published during the Republican period. See San Neang, *Polite Behavior for Men and Women* (សុខដ៏រុងរឿងសម្រាប់បុរសនិងស្ត្រី), (Phnom Penh: Bookstore Pich Nil,

1967); Sakun Samoun, *Manual To Educate Women's Behavior* (ក្បួនអប់រំចរចរាស្ត្រី), (Phnom Penh: unknown, 1957);

Sakun Samoun, *Home Sciences: On the Ways to Educate a Women* (វិជ្ជាមេផ្ទះ ចែងអំពីការអប់រំស្ត្រី), (Phnom Penh:

unknown, 1964), accessed at <http://www.elibraryofcambodia.org/kbourn-orprom-chakriya-srey-ebook/>; Sambath Rattana, *Manual to Educate the Family* (ក្បួនអប់រំគ្រួសារ), (Phnom Penh: Lok Srey Bun Dong, 2000); Sar Chakriya,

Virtues of Ladies (សម្បត្តិនារី), (Phnom Penh: Bookstore Banteay Srei, 1998); Sun Siv, *Polite Behavior within the*

the most part, these manuals were written by women for women. The writers were aware that the circumstances of women during the *Sangkum* period differed from the previous generation of women. One wrote that

Girls today have the same rights and freedoms as boys if the young girls attain a high level of education that they are able to compete for job, stand as political candidates. People can elect them as representatives or members of any level of the government as long as they have enough knowledge and the needed characteristics. This situation is the complete opposite of previous periods when then mothers were unwilling to let their daughters attend schools for fear that learning to write would make it easy to communicate with men.⁹⁹

The women's awareness of their changing social position motivated them to write these manuals. They were meant to be a guide for the *neary samey tmey*.

The manuals were filled with advice on how to throw a great dinner party and differences between dressing for a cocktail party versus going to a bar.¹⁰⁰ Another manual advised women on the proper way to handle a bike or a motorcycle. "If the light is yellow, one should slow down," the author wrote.¹⁰¹ An alternative manual encouraged women who were finished with the daily chores to read a book or newspaper in order to escape boredom.¹⁰² On the cover of yet another manual was a woman reading a book with the globe in the background.¹⁰³ This book-cover captured the worldly nature of the new Khmer woman: she goes out, she reads, she dresses fashionably and appropriately, she can handle herself in almost all situations. None of these writers believed their readers should be hidden away from the world in their homes. The writers wanted women to embrace new technologies, different modes of dress and entertaining. The

Family (សុដ៏វិធីប្រចាំសង្គមក្រសារ), (Phnom Penh: unknown, 1965); Hak Chay Hok, Manual to Educate the Youth:

Female Sciences and Male Principles (កូនទូន្មានយុវជន វិជ្ជាស្ត្រទីស្តីបិរស), (Phnom Penh: Bookstore Pich Nil, 1972).

Although some of the publication dates are after the Sangkum period, such as the 1990s and 2000s, these books were originally published during the 1950s or 1960s. I know this because the books normally had a foreword written by the author with the date she was writing. I also could tell why the description of what was fashionable. Other times the books indicate that this was a republishing of an older book.

⁹⁹ កូនស្រីសព្វថ្ងៃ មានសិទ្ធិសេរីភាពពេញលេញបរិបូណ៌ស្មើនឹងបុរសបើយុវនារីណាបានសិក្សារៀនសូត្រមានចំណេះវិជ្ជាខ្ពង់ខ្ពស់ អាចចូលប្រឡងប្រជែងធ្វើការងារ ឬឈរជាបេក្ខជន ឱ្យប្រជាពលរដ្ឋបោះឆ្នោត ជ្រើសរើសធ្វើតំណាងរាស្ត្រសមាជិករដ្ឋាភិបាល ឬបុគ្គលិករដ្ឋាក្នុងតំណែងណាមួយបានទាំងអស់ ឱ្យតែមានចំណេះវិជ្ជាគុណសម្បត្តិសមត្ថភាពគ្រប់គ្រាន់។ វាជួយស្រឡះពីនារីសម័យដើម ដែលមាតានៃបុត្រីមិនឱ្យចូលសាលារៀន ព្រោះយល់ថា បើនារីណាចេះអក្សរនាំឱ្យងាយទាក់ទងសេចក្តីស្នេហារវាងបុរស។ Sar, *Virtues of Ladies*,

52.

¹⁰⁰ San, *Polite Behavior for Men and Women*, 31-40 and 58-63.

¹⁰¹ ឃើញភ្លើងលឿងត្រូវបង្អង់ Sar, *Virtues of Ladies*, 87.

¹⁰² បើយើងបំពេញការងារប្រចាំថ្ងៃរួចរាល់អស់ហើយ យើងត្រូវប្រឹងរៀនសូត្រ ដោយអានសៀវភៅ ទស្សនាវដ្តី Sambath, *Manual to Educate the Family*, 92.

¹⁰³ Sakun, *Ways to Educate Women's Behavior*, cover.

writers of these manuals, thus, advocated for their audience to be a new type of women to match their changing conditions.

However, as much as these writers embraced modern norms and aesthetics, a strong conservative impulse existed within some of these manuals. For instance, Sakun Samoun continued to believe a woman's main obligation was to be a wife and mother. She claimed that any woman who did not want a child was unnatural: "Nature has given women the greatest privilege to forget about herself and to make a sacrifice. Women who care only about their own desire are those who do not want a child."¹⁰⁴ Another author, Sambath Rattana, advised the modern woman should leave her job especially if it interferes with her husband's schedule:

After we have gotten married, we should consider if the jobs we have had since the very beginning interferes with our husband's work? If we can see that it does, we should leave that job and concentrate on helping our husband so he can quickly earn results. Based on my observations, when a husband works at one place and the wife works at another, the marriage is not a prosperous one. There are only arguments.¹⁰⁵

Sambath was fully aware that of the dilemmas that working women in *Sangkum* Cambodia may face. She believed the woman's role as a supportive wife to be more important than any possible fulfillment a job can offer. The author added an additional point to support her argument: the negative impact it has upon the development of a child. According to her, "day in and day out, the children are not fully looked after. They are left with the servants. Given this situation, how can a family be happy?" For the well-being of her family, especially her husband and child, the woman should give up her job.

The writings of Sakun Samoun and Sambath Rattana were contradictory in their opinions towards the modern woman. They encouraged her to be worldly, yet undermined her career goals to those of her husband. Samoun and Rathana's inconsistent views on the proper feminine behavior illustrate the difficulties urban women experienced in the shifting social climate of 1960s Phnom Penh. Before *Sangkum*, a majority of women remained in the home as less possible paths were open to them. Because of political and economic developments, women were no longer tied to the home. Works such as Sakun Samoun's were needed to help women navigate these transitional times.

¹⁰⁴ ធម្មជាតិលោកបានក្រងទុកឱ្យស្ត្រីគ្រប់រូបនឹងគុណធម៌ដ៏ខ្ពស់ពីរ យ៉ាងគឺភ្នំច្បងនិង ធ្វើពលិកម្ម។ មានតែស្ត្រីដែលនិយមការត្រួតក្រណាតតាមចំណង់ទេ ទើបមិនចង់ឱ្យមានកូន។ Sakun, *Home Sciences*, 76.

¹⁰⁵ ក្រោយដែលយើងបានរៀបអាពាហ៍ពិពាហ៍រួចហើយយើងគួរពិចារណាមើល តើមុខរបរដែលយើង ប្រកបតាំងពីដើមមកនោះ វាជំទាស់ នឹងការងាររបស់ស្វាមីយើងដែរឬទេ? ប្រសិនបើឃើញថាជំទាស់គ្នា យើងត្រូវតែបោះបង់ការងាររបស់យើងចោលទៅ ហើយខំមកជួយជ្រាប ជ្រួតស្វាមី ឱ្យឆាប់បានសំរេចលទ្ធផលជាក់ជ័យវិញ។ តាមការសំគាល់ឃើញរបស់ខ្ញុំ ស្វាមីទៅធ្វើការផ្សេង ភរិយាទៅធ្វើការផ្សេង មិនសូវ ឃើញមានការចំរើនលូតលាស់ទេ ឃើញតែការសណ្តោះប្រកែកគ្នាជាញឹកញាប់ Sambath, *Manual to Educate the Family*, 102-103.

Sakun Samoun and her fellow manual writers were not the only ones to react to the new gender relationships. Peng Creo was another such author. As government policies changed the position Cambodian women held in society, women were finally allowed to vote and hold office jobs. They left the home and gender relations changed. Peng Creo recognized this fact in another one of his articles, entitled “Cultural Changes in Choosing a Partner.”¹⁰⁶ Peng described the invention of a new practice whereby women and their families “bought” educated men with good prospects.¹⁰⁷ According to Peng, these women and their families were defying Cambodian traditions, which required men to ask women for marriage and to prove their worthiness by working as a servant in her household for at least a year. In contrast to this custom, middlemen now went from house to house, advertising the fine attributes of a certain young gentleman. Men with a good education, who held a respectable position in the government bureaucracy, fetched the highest price. If the woman and her family were interested, they gave money, as well as other gifts and a picture of the woman, to the middlemen, who turned it over to the bachelor. The men then evaluated the various attributes of the woman and decided if they would like to marry her. This practice, according to Peng, inverted old customs and dehumanized all parties involved: women valued themselves less as they had to buy men, while the men were likened to watermelons and pigs, commodities to be sold. He did not support the new ways in which men and women interacted. Unlike the female authors of these manuals, Peng did not see these new relations as something that can be navigated around. Peng believed the new relations were systemic and resulted from increased Western influence. The new gender relations, he suggested, were the outcome of extreme Western consumerism.¹⁰⁸

In January 1963, Peng published an article on the emergence of a societal crisis, which was featured in *Kambuja Suriya*.¹⁰⁹ In this article, he observed that monks were defying

¹⁰⁶ Peng Creo, “An Opinion: Cultural Changes in Choosing a Partner (វិចារណកថា ការផ្លាស់ប្តូរប្រពៃណី ក្នុងរឿងរក គូស្រករ),” *Kambuja Suriya*, October 1969.

¹⁰⁷ It is unclear how new or old this practice really was or if it really occurred as Peng described it. Although rumors exist that in the province of Takeo women would give gifts, such a scooter and money, to eligible bachelors with a high education and a good government job, there are written records of this actually occurring beside this article by Peng Creo. However, the truthfulness of this practice is not relevant to my argument. What is important, however, is that Peng was clearly scandalized for this practice. He saw it as an example of how gender relations were changing.

¹⁰⁸ “What is the cause? The answer is nothing but an extreme consumerism. As we have already seen, this world from the 19th century to the late 20th century, the power of Asians has weakened, while the western continents are ones who promote consumerism.” (តើមានអ្វីជាមូលហេតុ? ឆ្លើយថាមូលហេតុនោះ គ្មានអ្វីក្រៅពីការប្រកាន់សម្ភារនិយម

ហួសប្រមាណពេកតែប៉ុណ្ណោះឯង ។ ដូចយើងឃើញស្រាប់ ក្នុងពិភពលោកតាំងពីសតវត្សទី ១៩ រហូតមកដល់សតវត្សទី ២០ នេះ

ខាងក្រោយគឺពិភពលោកស៊ីវិលបានចុះអន់ថយមក ទ្វីបខាងបស្ចឹមទិស ជាអ្នកប្រកាន់សម្ភារនិយម ។) Peng Creo, “An Opinion:

Cultural Changes in Choosing a Partner,” *Kambuja Suriya*, October 1969.

¹⁰⁹ កម្ពុជសុរិយា or *Kambuja Suriya* was the earliest magazine in Cambodia. The Buddhist Institute, which was

created by the French, began publishing this magazine in the 1920s. Often considered as the guardian of Cambodian culture, the magazine focused on Buddhism and literature, which composed its two main sections. Starting around

Buddhist scriptures, officials were disobeying commands, and the general populace was ignoring laws.¹¹⁰ These actions, Peng argued, were the products of increasing Western influence and consumerism. He observed that “currently, there is a state of tremendous change. This change is the result of what? The answer lies in the fact that Western customs have expanded their reach into Asia, especially Southeast Asia. Thus, those individuals who are capable, those with means, follow Western norms, disregarding their own customs and claiming other traditions as their own.”¹¹¹ Cambodians now preferred a stone house over those made of wood and ate while seated around a table rather than on a mat. More importantly, Peng Creo noted that “those with means” flaunted their recently purchased objects in the face of those who were incapable of purchasing such things, generating a need for money and a desire for these objects, which he called consumerism.¹¹² For Peng, consumerism was the true cause of the aforementioned crisis:

In the contemporary period, the scales are heavily tilted towards consumerism. This imbalance causes a move towards calamity, which in turn weakens ethical behavior. The lack of ethics explains the emergence of a crisis, a crisis of consciousness. As the crisis expands, it will lead to anarchy.¹¹³

1959, an essay, called វិចារណកថា or Opinion, appeared intermittently in the *Kambuja Suriya* literature section.

These essays did not have anything focus on literature per se, but were commentaries on the current state of cultural affairs.

¹¹⁰ “ត្រង់ចំណុចនេះហើយដែលបណ្តាលឱ្យមានវិបត្តិសតិសម្បជញ្ញៈ គឺព្រះសង្ឃឈប់គិតដល់វិន័យ នាម៉ឺនឈប់គិតដល់បទបញ្ញា ប្រជាពលរដ្ឋសាមញ្ញឈប់គិតដល់ច្បាប់ទូទៅ,” Peng Creo, *Crisis of Consciousness: An Opinion* (វិបត្តិសតិសម្បជញ្ញៈ វិចារណកថា), *Kambuja Suriya*, January 1963.

¹¹¹ “ឥឡូវតាមការសង្កេត ឃើញមានការប្រែប្រួលខ្លាំង ។ ការប្រែប្រួលនេះបណ្តាលមកពីអ្វី? ឆ្លើយថាបណ្តាលមកពីមានទំនៀមទម្លាប់ខាងបស្ចិមទិសចូលរុករានទន្ទ្រានយ៉ាងពេញទំហឹងក្នុងទ្វីបអាស៊ី ពិសេសគឺអាស៊ីទ្វីបភាគអាគ្នេយ៍ ម៉្លោះហើយអ្នកមានសមត្ថភាព អ្នកមានមធ្យោបាយដែលអាចនិយមតាមទំនៀមទម្លាប់នេះបាន ក៏ទៅជាផ្លាស់ទំនៀមទម្លាប់ខ្លួនចោល ហើយប្រកាន់យករបស់គេទុកជារបស់ខ្លួន,” Ibid.

¹¹² I chose to translate សម្ភារៈនិយម as consumerism. Another meaning for it is materialism, which is what the literal translation of it is: សម្ភារ means materials, while និយម is the Khmer version of the suffix “ism.” សម្ភារៈនិយម is most often found in Marxist treatises, which suggests the word emerges from that school of thought. In conjunction with another word, *vichjarakvichea* (វិចារវិទ្យា), it is used to translate the Marxist concept of dialectical materialism. I chose to translate សម្ភារៈនិយម as consumerism because it is the best word to fit the context in which he was using it.

¹¹³ “សម័យបច្ចុប្បន្ន ក្នុងសាកលលោកឃើញថា ថាសជញ្ជឹងខាងសម្ភារៈនិយមមានកម្លាំងក្រៃពេក គឺទម្ងន់មិនស្មើគ្នានេះហើយដែលបណ្តាលឱ្យមានចលនាជាអកុសលច្រើនអនេក ចលនានេះនាំឱ្យសីលធម៌មានកម្លាំងខ្សោយ បើសីលធម៌ថយកម្លាំងហើយ គុណវិបត្តិត្រូវ

This essay is not the only instance of when Peng Creo decries the disturbing effects of a consumerist ethos in a modern capitalist society. In a September 1964 article called the “Disease of the Microphone and the Radio,”¹¹⁴ he describes how the use of microphones during festivals and weddings created tension between neighbors. Since the microphones were so loud, neighbors could overhear voices from the event, including simple requests for forks and spoons; the sound kept them up throughout the night. Peng believed that microphones and radios fed people’s desire to be heard and recognized: “This disease spreads because people like to be praised, although they are not deserving of it. They like to be fashionable and for others to know that they have done this or that. They do not carefully consider the reasons behind their actions.”¹¹⁵ While he acknowledged the benefits of the microphone and the radio, Peng saw this technology as an engine fueling the cravings of an egotistical modern subject. Peng argued that modernity with its attendant consumerism and technological advances were responsible for these social ills.

Peng Creo also expressed his anxiety towards modern urban life through a series of essays on a variety of subjects, from how to speak properly to children’s obedience to their parents.¹¹⁶ The essays revealed the author’s unease towards a changing environment. As

មានកម្លាំង គឺវិបត្តិសតិសម្បជញ្ញៈនេះឯង បើវិបត្តិនេះកើតច្រើនហើយ នាំឱ្យមានអាសាធិបតយ្យ.” The actual word Peng Creo used

was សតិសម្បជញ្ញៈ (*satisampanjannak*) which I translated this concept as “consciousness.” But more accurately, it should be defined as “an awakened consciousness,” a being that is capable of reason and interacting morally with the surrounding world. Its meaning is rooted in Buddhist thought. Peng Creo, “Crisis of Consciousness: An Opinion.”

¹¹⁴ Peng Creo, Disease of the Microphone and Radio: An Opinion (ជម្ងឺមីគ្រូ-និងជម្ងឺវិទ្យុ វិចារណកថា), *Kambuja Suriya*, September 1964.

¹¹⁵ “វាគ្មានហេតុដ៏ចាំបាច់អ្វីទាំងអស់ទេ នេះគឺជាជម្ងឺឆ្លងទេតើ ព្រោះមនុស្សភាគច្រើន ពេញចិត្តនឹងការកោតសរសើរ ទោះបីខ្លួនមិនគួរដល់ការសរសើរ ក៏ដោយ និយមការហ៊ីហាហ៊ីកហ៊ីក ចង់ឱ្យគេឯងដឹងឮ ថាខ្លួនធ្វើនេះឬធ្វើនោះ ហើយមិនបានពិចារណាឱ្យយល់ច្បាស់ ថាការប្រព្រឹត្តរបស់ខ្លួនសមហេតុផលឬទេ?” Ibid. Although this statement the article was asked in the form of the question, it

was clearly a rhetorical question because in the next lines he confirms of the truthfulness this question. I change it into a declarative statement to capture to essence of what Peng was conveying. Also note that he used the word ហ៊ីហាហ៊ីកហ៊ីក (*heuha heakhak*) to describe the diseased people. *Heuha* means fashionable, in the eye-catching,

glitzy sense of the word, but when Peng added *heakhak* which means hurried, scurry, flighty or rushing about, he added a negative connotation to the word. The words together form alliteration and calls to the reader’s mind:

ហិនហោច (*henhouc*), which is ruin or devastation. So the three concepts together: ហ៊ីហាហ៊ីកហ៊ីកហិនហោច (*heuha heakhak henhouc*) captures the idea that wanting to be fashionable and always rushing about will lead to ruin.

While Peng does not explicitly state this, he conveyed it when he put *heuha henhek* together. Cambodians enjoy a good play on words, which Peng provided in his article and used to express his distaste towards the fashionable.

¹¹⁶ A partial list of his essays are: “The Act of Speaking (ការនិយាយស្តី),” *Kambuja Suriya*, January 1963; “Reputation and Happiness (កិត្តិយសនិងសុភមង្គល),” *Kambuja Suriya*, May 1963; “A Nationalist (អ្នកជាតិនិយម),” *Kambuja Suriya*,

Sihanouk's economic policies developed Cambodia and as Vann Molyvann-designed buildings mushroomed across the cityscape of Phnom Penh, Peng noticed a change in the ways Khmers related to one another. He wrote to critique how these changes had undermined familial and social relationships. In a three-part essay on children-parent relationships, for example, he advised his readers to ignore intellectuals, scientists, and teachers who say that children no longer owe a debt to their parents.¹¹⁷ A sense of urgency permeated the essay, as Peng observed the undeniable fact that old social relations were disintegrating. New ideas, new modes of dress, and new ways of being had penetrated Cambodian society during the postcolonial period. Cambodians were now free of French colonialism and were sending young people to study in France, United States, and other Asian countries. These youths returned and occupied positions in the government, hoping to build a bright future for the country.

In focusing on a critique of modern behavior, Peng neglected the reasons why Cambodians felt a need to advertise in public and through new technologies important life events, such as weddings and funerals. But some hints as to the actual reasons behind this desire may be found in Peng's own article. In it, he discussed individuals who were not invited to their neighbor's wedding as well as the propensity to be unmoved by the death of a common person.¹¹⁸ Underlying his critique was Peng's acceptance of the anonymous mass of isolated beings as the new normal. Unlike those in the countryside, neighbors in the cities had no ties with one another.¹¹⁹ In Peng's view, a person's sleep was more valuable than a stranger's marriage or funeral. He did not appreciate the reasons why modern subjects made a spectacle of themselves. He failed to realize, however, that the purpose of the spectacle was to combat the increasing isolation urbanites felt. Their egotistical behavior was a reaction to the crowded conditions of urban life, just as his article was a reaction to their activities. All these reactions –

September 1963; "Crime (អំពើហិង្សា)," *Kambuja Suriya*, October 1963; "Can a Crooked Tail Become Straight?

(កន្ទុយខ្លីនឹងអាចរលាត្រង់វិញបានទេ?)," *Kambuja Suriya*, November 1963; "The Manner of Speech (របៀបនិយាយ),"

Kambuja Suriya, November 1969; "Should Stop These Habits (គួរតែប្រឡេះភារៈខ្លះចោល)," *Kambuja Suriya*,

November 1969; "Power – Money – Women (អំណាច — ប្រាក់ — ស្រី)," *Kambuja Suriya*, February 1971.

¹¹⁷ ឥឡូវស្រាប់តែបានឮថា អ្នកបញ្ជាវត្តនឹងអ្នកវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រសម័យខ្លះ មានជាអាទិ៍ គឺសាស្ត្រាចារ្យខ្លះប្រៀនប្រដៅសិស្ស បានពន្យល់សិស្សថា ឪពុកម្តាយមិនមានគុណលើកូនទេ កូនស្តាប់ឪពុកម្តាយក៏បាន មិនស្តាប់ក៏បាន គោរពក៏បាន មិនគោរពក៏បាន ហើយមិច្ចាធិបតេស្តសងគុណចំពោះឪពុកម្តាយទេ (June 1963)

¹¹⁸ Peng Creo, "Disease of the Microphone and Radio: An Opinion."

¹¹⁹ This situation was a common critique of life in Phnom Penh. In a popular Sangkum-era movie, *Jet M'day* (A Mother's Feelings), a character spoke of how "in Phnom Penh, people may occupy the same space, but they erect walls to section themselves off from one another, like villages that are separated by hundreds of miles...no matter how ignorant the people are [in the countryside], they work side by side without discriminating based on status. They know how to care about one another. They know how to relieve each other's problems." Another Cambodian noted that "city people only stick their heads out of the door, watching the chaos and never lifting a hand to help. Even if someone died or collapsed, these people care only for themselves. Neighbors, who have lived next to each other for years, do not know each other." Thran Vun Yong, *Who am I?*, (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Personal Publication, 1971), 24-25.

Peng's and the individuals' mentioned in his articles – reflected the breakdown of old social ties. The social glue that forced a person to suffer through a prolonged ceremony appeared to have weakened in Phnom Penh. In response, Cambodians manufactured new identities and new ways to interact. Reactions, like Peng's essays, sought to understand and control these new relations.

Peng Creo and the authors of the manuals were among the many Khmer intellectuals, who reacted to the new social relations between men and women. Their works redefined and contested the meaning of tradition. Despite the diversity of their opinions, the written works by Khmer men and women demonstrated a realization that gender relations had changed. These authors attempted to understand this new society, express their social views, and exert control over these changes. The multiplicity and contradictions of their opinions adds to the cacophony of voices that epitomized *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* Cambodia; any attempt to incorporate this period into a single, linear project, a single metanarrative, does an injustice to the wide range of experiences Cambodians had with modern life. As Marshall Berman wrote, modern life is “maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.”¹²⁰ Some Khmer thinkers fought against the shifting sands of postcolonial social relations, while others pushed it along. Together and through their writings, they struggled to make sense of their modern maelstrom.

Conclusion

In her work on Cambodian women, Trudy Jacobsen acknowledges that during *Sangkum* “women were entitled to the same civil and legal status as men. Policies for increased literacy and education were implemented.” Yet, she argues that “women were impeded from exercising greater social and political power due to deeply ingrained male attitude and ‘traditional’ social constructs that maintained the idea that men were superior to women.” Khmer women, she believes, “had to remain as ‘traditional’ as possible so that Cambodian culture was not lost in the face of rapid modernization.”¹²¹ In spite of the social and economic changes women experienced during this period, Jacobsen insisted on the constant oppression of Khmer women. This position depicts Khmer women as figures outside of history. In contrast, this chapter emphasizes the effects *Sangkum* modernizing policies had upon Cambodian society and Khmer women. *Sangkum* altered gender roles and normalized the new behaviors of the *neary samey thmey*. While not everyone, as seen in the essays of Peng Creo, approved of her conduct, the *neary samey thmey* was a historical phenomenon in *Sangkum* society and urban intellectuals of the time reacted to her existence. If anything, their essays and novels confirmed how much gender norms have altered in 1950s and 1960s Cambodia.

¹²⁰ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: An Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 15.

¹²¹ Jacobsen, *Lost Goddesses*, 209.

Chapter 4

Alienated Masculinities: Soth Polin and Urban Life

Throughout the *Sangkum* period, Phnom Penh held different meanings for various social groups. For women, it provided sites for amusement and avenues for increased visibility. To intellectuals, the city sheltered their universities and offered an audience for their endeavors. The capital was also the *Sangkum* government's special project. It was central to the state's image of Cambodia as a culturally harmonious oasis of peace within a chaotic Southeast Asia. However, this image unraveled even as it was being promoted. *Sangkum*'s modernization policies caused social tensions to emerge and gaps widened between Cambodia's rich and poor, between the cities and the countryside.¹ Literary works of the time, especially those of Soth Polin, expressed these social tensions.

During the 1960s, Soth Polin managed two newspapers, owned a publishing house, and authored several novels. These various undertakings made Soth Polin a well-known figure within the intelligentsia. He lived and worked in Phnom Penh, which served as the primary setting for most of his novels. The Phnom Penh Soth Polin described in his novels differed radically from the one that littered the pages of government newspapers. Rather than seeing Phnom Penh as a celebration of modern life and the embodiment of Cambodia's progress, Soth Polin depicted it as a site of anomie, a place from which to escape. For him, man transformed into a machine in Phnom Penh. Hence, by contradicting the state's image of Phnom Penh and by revealing the alienating consequences of urban life, Soth Polin's works challenged *Sangkum*'s representation of Phnom Penh and questioned the advancements made by Cambodian modernity.

An Unraveling *Sangkum*

In 1968, Bill Brannigan from the American organization, ABC News, reported from Phnom Penh: "just 100 miles from Saigon, you'd never know that much of Southeast Asia is today in turmoil. Cambodia's capital city and much of the countryside reflect peace, limited but growing prosperity, and an easygoing charm radically different from the tense weariness found in neighboring South-Vietnam." Brannigan then described some of the internal problems Cambodia faced: the Khmer Rouge, which he described as a local version of the Viet Cong, its Chinese and Vietnamese minorities, and its overall geopolitical position caught in-between an American-embracing Bangkok/Saigon and increasingly powerful Hanoi/Peking supposed alliance. Despite these apparent problems, Brannigan believed that Sihanouk's neutrality policy was paying off, as he wrote, "Prince Sihanouk may very well guide his nation safely through the current storm, without the loss of independence, neutrality or peace."² *Le Sangkum*, the state-run magazine that published this English-language excerpt, used the American reporter's words to justify Sihanouk's overall politics, claiming that Sihanouk was not an opportunist and cared more about reciprocity.

What Bill Brannigan failed to fully appreciate and *Le Sangkum* tried to cover-up was the level of social discontent that existed in Cambodia, especially among urban intellectuals. In 1968, when Brannigan wrote his article, Sihanouk had succeeded in modernizing Cambodia. He improved the government's healthcare services by constructing 43 hospitals since the mid-1950s, bringing the total to 59 in the country and tripling the number of available beds. In

¹ David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution Since 1945*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 181.

² *Le Sangkum*, December 1968.

agriculture, with the help of new technologies such as better irrigation systems and tractors, the production of rice and other agricultural products tripled from 1955 to 1968. Additionally, Sihanouk encouraged the development of other economic sectors, such as manufacturing. In this period, Khmers witnessed the creation of soap, paper, textiles, and car factories, multiplying the number of Cambodian factories from 628 to 3,728. Cambodia doubled the kilometers of paved roads and railroads it had. Cambodia's infrastructure developed further when the government built a deep-water port in Sihanoukville and multiple airports. The state renovated the old electricity plant and water treatment facility. *Sangkum* also engaged in a Khmerization program, which encouraged Khmer students to hold literacy classes in rural areas. By 1968, the illiteracy rate was 1.14% of the total population, which is a dramatic decrease from 20% illiteracy rate in 1964. These social indicators provided partial, but conclusive evidence of how much Cambodia developed during the years of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. These achievements impressed reporters like Brannigan and other international observers, perhaps causing them to overlook the social tension that emerged from these successes.³

As Phnom Penh developed and *Sangkum*'s accomplishments grew, social tensions manifested. The same Khmerization programs that lowered national illiteracy rates also contributed to revolt by the Khmer Loeu, a minority group in Cambodia.⁴ Instead of blaming his enacted policies, Sihanouk pointed to outside influences as the cause of the revolt. This particular revolt, Sihanouk wrote, "...has sprung up in the least warlike ethnic group of all, and consequently the most prone to external influences. For this revolt has effectively been organized and directed from abroad..."⁵ The *Samlaut* Rebellion, which took place in western Cambodia, was treated in the same manner. Rather than acknowledge the grievances peasants had in regards to his policies, Sihanouk took a dismissive point of view. "*Samlaut*, as everyone knows," claimed Sihanouk, "was a quasi-official Vietminh fief."⁶ Sihanouk failed to appreciate the genuine disagreement indigenous populations felt toward his policies. He, instead, chose to connect these rebellions to foreign support. This inability to accept criticism, linked in large part to his conviction that he alone was capable of stabilizing Cambodia, led Sihanouk to ignore the discontent that percolated both in and outside the capital city.

Cambodia's position next to South Vietnam also compounded an already tense domestic condition. After gaining independence in 1953, Cambodia tried to escape the bi-polar politics that began as the Cold War enveloped Southeast Asia. In 1956, Sihanouk refused to join SEATO, despite strong enticements from the United States, Thailand and the Philippines.⁷ He

³ Jacques Baruch is a French scholar, whose 1967 essay, *La Democratie au Cambodge*, repeated many images found in Bill Bannigan's report. Baruch wrote "In the middle of chaos that reigns today in Southeast Asia, an island remains that knows equilibrium, peace, and an almost prosperous state, Cambodia." William Shawcross repeated similar things about Phnom Penh: "Cambodia has held a special appeal for foreigners. Many of the journalists, tourists, and diplomats who visited it in the 1950s and 1960s wrote of an idyllic, antique land unsullied by the brutalities of the modern world. Phnom Penh was, it is true, an exquisite riverine city, and its fine white and yellow-ocher buildings, charming squares and cafes lent it a French provincial charm that gave it considerable edge in over its tawdry neighbors Bangkok and Saigon." See Jacques Baruch, *La Democratie au Cambodge*, (Bruxelles: Éditions Thanh-Long, 1967), 2 and William Shawcross, *Sideshow : Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*, (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1979), 36.

⁴ Milton Osborne, *Politics and power in Cambodia: the Sihanouk years*, (Sydney: Longman, 1973), 8.

⁵ *Kambuja*, 15 September 1967.

⁶ *Kambuja*, 15 August 1968.

⁷ Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 170.

also travelled to Indonesia to participate in the 1955 Bandung Conference and declared Cambodia to be a neutral country, aligned with neither the United States nor the Soviet Union.⁸ However, Cambodia's neutral stance became untenable when the United States passed the Tonkin Resolution in August 1964. As American troops hit the ground in South Vietnam and an American blockade forced North Vietnam to find new supply routes, China asked Sihanouk to run supplies through Sihanoukville, Cambodia's only port. Under pressure, Sihanouk secretly agreed in 1966 to transport supplies via Cambodia into South Vietnam.⁹

This agreement violated the official neutrality policy Sihanouk implemented 10 years earlier and allowed for Viet Cong sanctuaries to flourish along the Cambodian-South Vietnam border. Although he later stated Chinese pressure overcame his initial reluctance to the agreement, Sihanouk's ultimate decision to secretly ally Cambodia with China and North Vietnam was apparent as early as 1963 when he broke off economic and military relations with the United States. He also blamed the United States for the 1964 bombing of Chantrea, a village on the Cambodian side of the South Vietnam-Cambodian border.¹⁰ Sihanouk believed the United States silently supported the Khmer Serei and Dap Choun's attempts to assemble troops, thereby violating Cambodian sovereignty and acting as an imperialist aggressor.¹¹ All these reasons explained why Sihanouk chose to ally Cambodia with the communist bloc, who he felt was more supportive of his regime. This choice, however, had important consequences later in 1970 as the Republicans used Sihanouk's weak stance against North Vietnam and Communism as a reason for their revolt against *Sangkum*.¹² In 1968, therefore, Cambodia was not the island of peace that international journalists and scholars suggested.

⁸ Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983), 189. In later speeches, Sihanouk reaffirmed his dedication to neutrality. In a 1961 speech before the National Assembly, Sihanouk credits his policy of neutrality with maintaining domestic tranquility: យើងអាចបញ្ជាក់ទៀតបានដែរ ថាសង្គមជាតិកម្ពុជាសង់នូវសន្តិភាព

ក្នុងប្រទេស។ ការសាងសង់នេះយើងបានសម្រេចទៅកើតដោយសារតែនយោបាយសហភាពជាតិនិងអព្យាក្រឹតភាពរបស់យើង។

[emphasis original] *Message de Samdech Preah Upayuvareach Chef de l'Etat a l'occasion de l'ouverture des travaux de l'Assemblée Nationale et du Conseil du Royaume*, (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Information, 10 April 1961). Also see *Cambodge aujourd'hui*, May 1959.

⁹ William Shawcross, *Sideshow*, 64.

¹⁰ This bombing took place before the Tonkin Resolution and when the United States Congress had not yet officially allowed the president to intervene in North and South Vietnam. The bombing was memorialized in a film and novel. Siv Heng, *Chantrea Khmer Land* (ច្បន្ទា ដីខ្មែរ), (Phnom Penh: Bun Chun, 2003). According to the forward,

this novel was originally published in 1964. In the same forward, the author speaks of turning the novel into a film and the novel also contain photographic inserts from the film. Both pieces blamed on the US although there is no firm evidence that the US was involved. In fact, Shawcross' *Sideshow* suggests that the US began to bomb Cambodia in 1969, otherwise other bombings were carried out by the South Vietnam government. The film and book suggest that Cambodians held the US accountable and this sentiment perhaps explained why Sihanouk was anti-American.

¹¹ In 1965 interview with the Far Eastern Economic Review, Sihanouk explained his feelings towards the United States: "I see no signs of improvement in our relations with the USA. Quite the contrary. [sic] Our villages along the border continue to be bombed and attacked. The 'Khmer Sereis' based in Thailand and South Vietnam, paid equipped and trained by the Americans step up their incursions and murders in our territory. Our border on the West is being persistently threatened by the Thais. Lastly, the Anglo American press continues as always to adopt a hostile and contemptuous attitude towards Cambodia." *Le Sangkum*, December 1965.

¹² *Khmer Republic*, September 1971.

The sense of besiegement Sihanouk and the Sangkum government felt in the late 1960s was well represented in political cartoons and other propaganda from the period. The following cartoon from *Le Sangkum* in 1966 is one such example:



Figure 16: Political Cartoon from *Le Sangkum* (October 1966)

This 1966 cartoon illustrated the pressures that Sihanouk faced. It contained Lyndon B. Johnson and Thanom Kittikachorn, the leader of Thailand from 1963 to 1973, as well as Son Ngoc Thanh, the leader of Khmer Serei. The cartoonist portrayed Johnson wearing a backpack filled with money and directing Thanom to use Thanh as bat to knock down the “Sangkum” wall. However, the wall stood strong. This comic accomplished several things: 1) it showed Thailand and the Khmer Serei to be puppets of the American government; 2) it demonstrated that *Sangkum* could withstand pressure from its neighbors and the United States; and 3) it claimed that enemies, namely the United States, conspired to tear *Sangkum* down. To counteract this sentiment of being under attack, the government maintained a propaganda campaign to project an image of harmony, stability and continuity from the past to the present.

As it had done since 1955, the *Sangkum* government used the capital to depict this stability and harmony. In its propaganda material, the capital turned into a place, where “a group of monks in their saffron robes, silently thread their way towards a nearby monastery [and where] majestic elephants suddenly appear in a maelstrom of cars and cyclists.” In Phnom Penh, “a Cambodian woman in a sarong passes a Vietnamese [woman] in her long transparent tunic...and a peasant, in traditional costume, and the city-dweller, in the latest Paris fashion, bow and doff their hats in respect, as they pass in front of a stupa.” The government presented Phnom Penh as a multicultural haven, and, more importantly, a microcosm of the country as a whole. If “Cambodians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indians, Europeans, Burmese, Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics, Protestants, Moslems, Caodaist, Taoists, Animists...all these meet and intermingle in that cosmopolitan melting-pot which [was] Phnom Penh,” then they did the same in

Cambodia.¹³ This cosmopolitan melting pot countered the underlying sense of anxiety and maintained the myth of Phnom Penh as an oasis of peace in chaotic Southeast Asia.

To reinforce the myth of a stable Cambodia, the government also sought to create a continuous link between the past and present. Chapter Two of this dissertation described how the new buildings of Phnom Penh, such as the Independence Monument and the Olympic Stadium, reproduced Angkorian ornaments and motifs. The façade of these urban landmarks was one means for the government to link itself to Angkor. In her scholarship, Penny Edwards noted that Sihanouk often compared “his Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime with the Angkorean Era and liken[ed] himself to Jayavarman, who had regained national independence.”¹⁴ Sihanouk went beyond rhetoric and actually “style[d] himself [as] the Great Buddhist king,”¹⁵ who was “the mediator between social disorder and order.”¹⁶ Sihanouk revived an old ritual, where Khmer kings would plow the earth in order to bring about a healthy harvest. Except now, it was Sihanouk – not a king – who plowed the earth.¹⁷ Traditionally, Khmer kings were also seen as the venue of last resort for the oppressed and the poor. This perception of Khmer kings was evident in the 1916 Affair, where over 40,000 peasants walked to Phnom Penh to petition King Sisowath to alleviate their tax burdens.¹⁸ Modeling himself after these past kings, Sihanouk made himself available to the Cambodian people during the late 1950s and 1960s. They came before him, spoke their troubles, and in resolving them, Sihanouk acted like an ideal Cambodian king. One state newspaper publicized that at nine o’clock, Sihanouk invited Cambodians “to lay their grievances before him. A fisherman (he has traveled to the Capital – a distance of 150 kilometers accompanied by a party of his fellow-citizens) had a complaint to lodge against the mayor...After listening to the plaintiffs, Sihanouk decided then and there, and without much more ado, on the appropriate action. He directed new elections to be held in the fishing-

¹³ *Kambuja*, 15 October 1965. This image of the capital is repeated in another article that appears in *Le Sangkum*. This article described Phnom Penh as follows: “Buddhist monks or priest (bonzes), in their saffron-coloured robes, carrying satchels and umbrellas of the same colour, stroll in groups or pairs. Many of them are young men and boys, who temporarily join the monastic order to develop inner spiritual strength and poise. In the busy shopping centres, on the pavement before the open-fronted shops, Khmers, turbaned and bearded Indians, Vietnamese and Malaysians go their ways. Chinese, who own many shops, sell their rainbow-coloured silks, linens and jewelry; some do a flourishing business as practicing dentists and supply gold crowns for healthy teeth, a fashionable trait in the Orient. Cyclos, a three wheeled vehicle with operator, is a characteristic feature in Phnom Penh where taxis are at a premium and there are no traffic problems. The many-covered markets in Phnom Penh are clean and orderly and supply the capital with vegetables, exotic fruits, flowers, cereals, commercial products for home use, meat, basketry and multi-coloured straw sleeping mats and carpets.” A English-speaking tourist, named P. Rodzinako, wrote this article. He clearly offered a different image of Phnom Penh than what I presented in my dissertation so far. For instance, he said Phnom Penh had no traffic problems, while in chapter 2 and 3, I showed the journalists felt that urban traffic was getting out of control. While what he wrote is what he saw Phnom Penh, what I’m more interested in is the fact *Le Sangkum*, which is a state-run magazine, featured the article. It is another attempt by the state to foster an image of Phnom Penh as orderly, harmonious and progressive. Another tourist, Rene de Berval recalled Phnom Penh as “la plus belle ville, la plus propre et la mieux équilibrée de tout l’Extrême Orient.” See Rene de Berval, “Le Cambodge, un style Independent,” *Le Sangkum*, June 1967. P. Rodzinako, “The Land of the Khmers,” *Le Sangkum*, March 1969.

¹⁴ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*, (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 2007), 249.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁷ *Kambuja*, 15 January 1968.

¹⁸ David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 154.

village.”¹⁹ Despite giving up his throne, Sihanouk continued to act and behave in the manner of traditional Cambodian kings. Sihanouk used these traditional, monarchic perceptions to bolster his legitimacy as the modern leader of a new Cambodia.

In addition to modeling his public persona after the kings of Angkor, Sihanouk also associated his *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* to Angkor itself. He stated in a 1969 interview, “modern Cambodia is as much a projection of the Khmer Empire as the Vth French Republic is a projection in time of the Carpetian Kingdom, the People’s Republic of China of the Han Empire.”²⁰ In that same interview, Sihanouk explained that

Our nation flag is emblazoned with the towers of Angkor Wat. This serves not only as a reminder of Cambodia’s past, but is at the same time a symbol of Cambodia today. The Khmers have retained their pride in the civilization evolved at Angkor, and this gave them the staying power to endure for many centuries ordeals, the like of which few peoples would have been able to survive. This heritage from the Angkorean past is still today the driving force which infuses vitality into our conception of what constitutes a nation, and inspire our people with the will to move with the times.²¹

Sihanouk connected his regime to Angkor again in another interview when he claimed “we are one of the oldest States in the world and from our own history, our own past as builders, we have the experience and strength which enables us to ensure our survival and to build our future.”²² In each of these interviews, Sihanouk deliberately linked present Cambodia with an ancient empire, but he went beyond simply creating a linkage between the two. He spoke of how current Cambodians drew upon the “experiences and strength” of past Cambodians in order to build a future. In connecting the past with the present and the future, Sihanouk created a narrative where *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* organically inserted itself into Cambodian history and tradition. *Sangkum* was now the rightful and legitimate heir to Angkor. This link to Angkor provided Sihanouk and *Sangkum* with a stability during time when Cambodia faced increasing domestic and international pressures from the North and South Vietnam conflict.

However, despite the official attempts to create this myth of stability and continuity, Cambodians, and urban intellectuals, felt an unrelenting sense of social discontent. Milton Osborne, an Australian graduate student studying in Cambodia during the 1960s, collected his memories of *Sangkum* and published them in a book, entitled *Before Kampuchea*. Although he admitted difficulties in trying to explain the causes behind the Sihanouk’s downfall, Osborne recalled being “struck by the changed atmosphere in the country. There is a discontent, and there is a surprising amount of open speculation about the possibilities of change in the direction of the country...The irony of the situation is that the factors most likely to bring change result from the implementation of policies that are essentially Sihanouk’s own...” He remembered speaking to a cyclo driver, who was smart, educated and spoke French very well. This cyclo driver clearly had benefited from the improvements *Sangkum* had made in education, but here he was driving a

¹⁹ *Kambuja*, 15 January 1966.

²⁰ “The Strength of Our Nationalism: Interview Granted by Samdech Head of State to Mr. Cluade Clert, Director of ‘Caravelle’ Films,” *Kambuja*, February 1969.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Kambuja*, 15 January 1968.

cyclo. Osborne read him as an example of yet “another discontented youth of some education adrift in the capital.” Based on these recollections, Osborne believed “Phnom Penh was a city gripped by malaise.”²³ This disgust with the government caused educated men like Poc Deuskumar and Khieu Samphan to revolt against Sihanouk. In his memoir, Khieu Samphan supported Osborne’s observations. He said: “there were many Cambodians who were dissatisfied with their living conditions, and who felt frustrated, suffocated and sometimes, even humiliated by their leaders.”²⁴ An urban malaise and discontent toward Sihanouk may have accounted for why “a group of youth, especially students, and a majority of intellectuals in Phnom Penh celebrated the downfall of Sihanouk” in 1970.²⁵ In the late 1960s, this discontent found its clearest expression in the novels of Soth Polin.

Soth Polin’s Anti-Sihanouk Project

Soth Polin currently works as a taxi driver in Long Beach, California.²⁶ His unassuming demeanor conceals a man, whom some have called “the most celebrated, living Khmer writer.”²⁷ His work, however, are not without controversy. Some lay Cambodians and scholars labelled his novels pornographic and misogynistic for its treatment of women.²⁸ In reality, Soth Polin used his female characters’ convictions and wisdom to sharply contrast the inadequate, doubt-ridden nature of his male protagonists. While his more recent works contribute to the understanding of Pol Pot or describe the lives of Cambodian immigrants as they confront their traumatic experiences during the Khmer Rouge,²⁹ this chapter focuses on the novels published during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* period. This 15-year period was Soth Polin’s most prolific and politically active years. Soth Polin published his first novel during the *Sangkum* period, in 1965. Over the next 5 years, until 1970 when Sihanouk was overthrown, Soth completed five more novels and a collection of short stories. He opened a publishing house and was the managing editor of two important newspapers. He wrote editorials in opposition to *Sangkum*, invoking strong governmental oversight of his work. In 1970, he became a vocal supporter of

²³ Milton Osborne, *Before Kampuchea: Preludes to Tragedy*, (Boston : G. Allen & Unwin, 1979), 77.

²⁴ Khieu Samphan, *Cambodia’s Recent History and the Reasons Behind the Decisions I Made*, (Cambodia: Ponleu Khmer Printing and Publishing House, 2004), 5.

²⁵ ទោះជាយ៉ាងណាក៏ដោយ នៅភ្នំពេញ ពួកយុវជន ជាពិសេសពួកនិស្សិត និង បញ្ញវន្ត មួយភាគធំ អបអរនឹងការ ទម្លាក់សម្តេច

សីហនុ។ Sao Leang, *Destin ou manque de realisme politique*, (Paris: CCV, 2000), 118.

²⁶ He is always in his cab, since “writing doesn’t bring food to the table.” Thomas Beller, “The debris of the visible,” *The Cambodia Daily*, August 26, 2006. Despite his financial needs, Soth does find the time to write. Since arriving on American shores, he has published two Khmer-language novels, *The Widow from LA* (1996) and *Lost Teeth* (undated).

²⁷ Christophe Macquet, “Introduction to Communiquer,dissent-ils...”, *Europe*, May 2003. Somewhat contradicting Macquet, many Cambodians have call Soth Polin’s work អាសង្កាស, which means obscene, illicit or pornographic.

²⁸ Amratisha Klairung, “Women, Sexuality And Politics In Modern Cambodian Literature: The Case Of Soth Polin’s Short Story,” *Manusya*, Special Issue, November 14, 2007, accessed at http://www.manusya.journals.chula.ac.th/files/essay/Klairung_76-91.pdf.

²⁹ In his study of Pol Pot, David Chandler has reference Soth Polin’s essay, “The Diabolical Sweetness of Pol Pot.” Soth Polin in an interview has mentioned other scholars who referenced this work. Please see Soth Polin, “The Diabolical Sweetness of Pol Pot,” found in Sharon May, ed., *In the Shadow of Angkor: Contemporary Writings from Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004).

Lon Nol's Khmer Republic and agreed with the removal of Sihanouk. Soth Polin's anti-Sihanouk political project subtly influenced his novels, which was most apparent in his depiction of urban life. The Phnom Penh found in Soth Polin's novels deliberately contradicts the Phnom Penh that Sihanouk promoted.

As much as his works offer a critique of *Sangkum* society, the novels Soth produced throughout the 1960s are products of his particular time and place. An important intellectual movement was Khmerization (ខេមរនីយកម្ម), which materialized in 1967 as a reaction to the continuing influence the French language exercised within the education system and the bureaucracy.³⁰ While this movement marginalized non-Khmer speaking minority groups, as discussed above, its main goal was to achieve cultural independence from France.³¹ On July 5, 1967, representatives from ten associations (the Association of Khmer Professors, the Association of Khmer Educators, the Association of Friends and Former Students of the College and Lycée Sisowath, the Association of Khmer Performers and Artists, the Association to Rescue Social Welfare Employees, the Railroad Association, the Association of Khmer Sons, the Association for the Improvement of Knowledge, the Association for Social Welfare, and the General Association for Khmer Students in Cambodia) organized a conference to discuss a shared concern over the social role of the Khmer language.³² After much discussion, they issued a statement, entitled the *Collective Declaration of All Ten Associations*, in which they affirm their belief that “the Khmer language has the definite ability to be used in an official capacity.” For this reason, they “will implement this idea on their own, in each of their individual organizations, and criticize friends who like to use foreign languages or like to combine Khmer with other languages [to officially use only Khmer].”³³ They also promised to disseminate this declaration within their organization and wholeheartedly support any ministry that believed in their solutions.

To implement their declaration, the collective created tangible goals. The first was to create Khmer language books for the various academic disciplines, such as Chemistry, Physics,

³⁰ In their declaration, the supporters of the movement mentioned the weakness of the Khmer language on the national stage, which allowed “foreigners to consider the national language of Cambodians to be French. [Khmerization] is needed so that there can no longer be any mistakes like the one committed by that Australian living in our country who said French is the language of the Khmer nation.” ហើយបង្ហាញឱ្យយើងឃើញថា យល់ច្បាស់

ថាភាសាជាតិរបស់ខ្មែរមិនមែនជាភាសាបារាំងទេ កុំឱ្យមានការភាន់ច្រឡំដូចជនជាតិ អូស្ត្រាលីខ្លះដែលបាន ពោលថា

នៅក្នុងប្រទេសយើង ភាសាបារាំងជាភាសារបស់ជាតិខ្មែរ (!) [Original emphasis] The Permanent Committee of Mixed

Associations, *Long Live the Khmer Language!*(ជយោភាសាខ្មែរ), (Phnom Penh, 1967), p. 12

³¹ Speaking of the decision during the National Congress to implement Khmerization, the declaration states that “our people has taken an important step forward, which is the path towards cultural independence.”

តាមព្រះបញ្ជាដ៏រឹងមាំនៃសម្តេចសហជីវកម្ម សមាជិកជាតិក៏បានអនុម័តសេចក្តីស្នើដ៏ត្រឹមត្រូវរបស់មហាជនគ្រប់ មជ្ឈដ្ឋានខាងលើ។

ប្រជាជាតិយើងក៏បានបោះជំហានទៅមុខ មួយជំហានទៀតយ៉ាងសំខាន់ ពោលគឺបានចូលទៅ ក្នុងផ្លូវឯករាជ្យវប្បធម៌។ Ibid., 6-7.

³² Ibid., 9-10.

³³ យើងខ្ញុំជឿជាក់ថា ភាសាខ្មែរមានសមត្ថភាពនឹងយកមកប្រើជាផ្លូវការបានជាប្រាកដ យើងខ្ញុំនឹងអនុវត្ត ការនេះខ្លួនឯង

ក្នុងផ្នែកសមាគមយើងរៀងៗ ខ្លួន ហើយទីតៀកមិត្តភក្តិដែលនិយមភាសាបរទេស ឬនិយមតាម ភាសាខ្មែរនឹងបរទេសចំរុះគ្នា Ibid., 14.

Philosophy, History and Geography.³⁴ However, they could not wait for the books to be translated and believed that teaching in Khmer should commence immediately. To facilitate this process, they proposed a creation of a technical committee to create new words so that French ones could be abandoned. For instance, for French words such as *le centre de gravité* and *la condensation*, they proposed *ti projum tomngun* (ទំប្រជុំទំអង់) and *bondtom chumhai* (បណ្តុំទំហាយ).

The collective also sent representatives to take part in the 23rd National Congress of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* to present their stance and solutions.³⁵ The congress adapted their ideas, which started Khmerization as a government campaign. This government project began first as an intellectual and social movement. While not universally approved and at times contentiously debated among intellectuals,³⁶ Khmerization was a prevailing movement during the *Sangkum* period.

Although not officially a part of the movement, Soth Polin must be read within this context. Khmerization, first and foremost, is a postcolonial movement: it reacted against the effects French colonialism had upon the development of the Khmer language and rejected the role French continued to play within the education system, in spite of Cambodia having gained independence 14 years previously in 1953. Yet, the movement remained within a French worldview; the words these intellectuals translated were French ones. This contradictory relationship with French is also apparent within Soth Polin's body of work. For instance, some of the chapters in *A Meaningless Life* begin with an excerpt taken from French authors. French phrases also appear in footnotes or in the text to explain a new Khmer word Soth used.³⁷ Soth's

³⁴ Ibid., 21.

³⁵ Ibid. For a different version of the events, please read Khin Sok, "La khmérisation de l'enseignement et l'indépendance culturelle au Cambodge," *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. 86, no. 1, 1999, accessed at http://www.persee.fr/doc/befeo_0336-1519_1999_num_86_1_3414. Khin Sok believes Khmerization was the brainchild of three individuals: Hang Thun Hak, Kong Orn and Loch Phlèng. As teachers and government inspectors, Kong Orn and Loch Phlèng toured the country and were shocked at the low level of knowledge among the students. They felt French instruction, which was still prevalent at the time, was at fault. They, together with Hang Thun Hak, contacted various influential intellectuals and religious figures, one of whom was Hell Sumpha, the president of the Association of Khmer Writers, and Chhouk Meng Mao, the president of the Friendship of Khmer Teachers as well as the President of the Association of Khmer Professors, to push for Khmerization. Khin Sok's emphasis on the role of these three individuals is the major difference between his account and my document. My document is made up of three documents published as a collection in 1967. It was published by organization that calls itself The Permanent Committee of Mixed Associations. It was written by representatives of the 10 associations I already listed and claimed to be the product of the July 5 1967 Conference between the associations. They felt that their movement for Khmerization was successful and important enough that they wanted to document their collective work. So all ten associations appeared to have donated funds to have to document published. These documents emphasize the collective nature of their work. They do not mention a single person, but argue that they represent the will of the Khmer people. The document offers a different interpretation than Khin Sok in his informative essay. I do not believe one is more correct than the other, but can be read as supportive of one another. They mention the same organizations as the major forces behind Khmerization. No matter what, both works illustrate the importance of Khmerization as movement during the *Sangkum* period.

³⁶ For more info please read Khin Sok, "La khmérisation de l'enseignement et l'indépendance culturelle au Cambodge," *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. 86, no. 1, 1999, accessed at http://www.persee.fr/doc/befeo_0336-1519_1999_num_86_1_3414; Phal Sok, "A Note on New Word Formation in Modern Khmer," *Siksacakr*, no. 7, 2005, accessed at <http://khmerstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/siksacakr-7-page-53-to-611.pdf?lbisphpreq=1>.

³⁷ For an example, please see the beginning of chapter three of *A Meaningless Life*, where Soth Polin footnotes an

publishing house, Nokor Thom, supported a Khmer-language biography of Albert Camus, as well as a translation of *The Stranger*.³⁸ His newspaper serialized translations of Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Wall*. Although his publishing house translated more than French-language literature,³⁹ these works indicate Soth's role in translating French ideas into Khmer. Putting Khmerization into practice, Soth strengthened Khmer as a language through his various publications.

Despite the obvious influence of French literature, Soth Polin did not write in French during the Sangkum period, although he could have. In fact, after he immigrated to France in 1973, Soth published two French-language works, a novel and a historical account of Cambodia up until the Khmer Rouge. He also wrote French-language editorials. During the *Sangkum* period, Soth could have written in French as well. Instead, he wrote in Khmer and this choice, when read against the context of Khmerization, was a significant one.⁴⁰ While his body of work at the time borrowed thoughts from outside of Cambodia, Soth Polin attempted to interpret these ideas into a Cambodian context. He believed these ideas help explain or capture some aspect of his contemporary society. Soth Polin did not simply translate foreign philosophy; he rendered them meaningful for the context in which he was writing. He sought to improve Cambodian

explanation for the chapter title using French (*un sale intellectuel*). Soth Polin, *A Meaningless Life* (ជីវិតគត់ន័យ), (Phnom Penh: Nokor Thom, 1965), 47. For instance of in-text slippage from Khmer to French to Khmer, see Soth Polin, *Disorganized Adventurer* (អ្នកផ្សេងៗក្នុងអារាមភ័យ), (Phnom Penh: Personal Publication, 1969) and Soth Polin, *To Provoke Without Pity* (ចំពិត ឥត អាស្រូវ), (Phnom Penh: unknown, 2005). The version I have in possession was republished in 2005. This novel has been republished in Phnom Penh without Soth Polin's permission. During fieldwork, I found a copy at a Phnom Penh bookstore, but the novel has a recent photoshopped cover and does not list the publishing house. It was published in 1965.

³⁸ See Vandy Koan, *Albert Camus: Philosopher of the Absurd* (អាល់ប៊ែរ កាមុស ទស្សនវិទូនៃការគត់ន័យ), (Phnom Penh: Nokor Thom, 1973) and Albert Camus, *L'étranger* មិនចុះសម្រុងនឹងជីវិត, translated by Yee Chieng Ang, (Phnom Penh: Nokor Thom, 1973).

³⁹ *Nokor Thom* (នគរធំ) also serialized a translation of Henry Miller's *Sexus*. It was translated by S.L Heng (ស.ល. ហេង)

See *Nokor Thom*, 29 August 1972; *Nokor Thom*, 31 August 1972; *Nokor Thom*, 9 September 1972; *Nokor Thom*, 12 September 12, 1972; *Nokor Thom*, 16 September 1972; 22 *Nokor Thom*, September 972; *Nokor Thom*, 27 September 1972; *Nokor Thom*, 28 September 1972; *Nokor Thom*, 29 September 1972; *Nokor Thom*, 13 October 1972. In these same publications were serialized translations of Jean Paul Sartre's *The Wall*, which was translated by Sakona. Other issues of *Nokor Thom* could have contained translations of other French works. These issues of *Nokor Thom* were all that remained in the National Archives of Cambodia.

⁴⁰ A possible comparison would be to Leopold Senghor's decision to write in French. For Senghor, French had become his native language. See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising The Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (Harare, Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1987), 19 and endnote 17. Ngugi cites an interview where Senghor explains why he chose to write in French. French to Senghor was not a "foreign vehicle," but a natural expression of his thoughts. French never became Soth Polin's natural tongue and Khmerization was not Soth Polin's political project at the time. Reading Soth Polin's work, you are struck by his mastery of Khmer and the ease in which he translated complicated, philosophical positions. The French phrases seem act more as recognition on his part that these ideas are complex and that the reader is better served by seeing the original. He shows that he is, in fact, translating these ideas into Khmer. He seems to believe that these translations are valuable in understanding the minds of his character and their experiences as they travel through *Sangkum* society.

society and challenge Sihanouk's vision.

Soth Polin was born into a scholarly family in Kompong Cham. His maternal great-grandfather was Nou Kan, who gained prestige for his poem, *Teav Ek*. Nou Kan later became a court mandarin and gained the title *Oknha Vibol Reach Sena* (Servant of the King).⁴¹ As the family's patriarch, Nou Kan was an intimidating figure in Soth Polin's life. Soth remembered in a 2003 interview: "I wrote to imitate someone like my great-grandfather. I saw him as a very big – a giant – so I feared him. When it was time to write by myself, I was scared I would not be able to reach him."⁴² Despite Nou Kan's larger than life figure or perhaps because of it, Soth Polin credited his great-grandfather for instilling a love for reading and writing:

His books were the first ones I read. I was a shy boy. So I had his books as my world – like a spot in a garden, an Eden. When I read, nothing outside could affect me. Reading was my fortress, something that protected me, a fortress of the mind. I discovered everything in his books – not the real world, but the imaginary world.⁴³

Nou Kan was Soth Polin's first major literary influence. Evidenced of this lasting influence, poetry often appeared in Soth's novels.⁴⁴ These poetic inserts in Soth Polin's novels can be seen as homages to his great-grandfather.

Two other men were important to Soth Polin's development. The first was his father, Soth Somate, and the second was his maternal uncle, Sim Var. Both men were politically active: Soth Somate was a member of the Democratic Party, while Sim Var was a founder of the party. As mentioned in the first chapter, Sim Var was part of the delegation the Democratic Party sent to France to negotiate for greater Cambodian autonomy in 1948. Because of these two men, Democratic Party politics figured largely in Soth Polin's childhood. In 1996, Soth Polin mentioned his earliest memories from age 6 to 10 were of Son Ngoc Thanh, Prince Yutevong and Ieu Keous, whose photographs hung on the walls of his childhood home. In the same essay, he fondly recalled the motto of the Democratic Party: Discipline, Honor and Bravery. He shared his memories of the funeral procession banner that followed Ieu Koeus' body, which stated "*Eternels regrets*." Soth remembered being in awe as his father engaged in political discussions with friends.⁴⁵ These stories spoke to a lingering sense of regret within Soth Polin for the

⁴¹ Sharon May, "Beyond Words: Soth Polin," found in Sharon May, ed., *In the Shadow of Angkor: Contemporary Writings from Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 10.

⁴² Ibid., 11.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See Soth Polin, *Disorganized Adventurer*, 117-121.

⁴⁵ កាលនៅក្មេង, ពីអាយុ៦ឆ្នាំទៅអាយុ១០ឆ្នាំ (១៩៤៩-១៩៥៣) ខ្ញុំតែងតែឃើញមានព្យួរនៅជញ្ជាំងផ្ទះ របស់ខ្ញុំជានិច្ច ជាកាល

នូវរូបរបស់រដ្ឋបុរសបីរូប ៖ សឹង ង៉ុកថាន់, ស៊ីសុវត្ថិ យិត្តិវង្ស និង អៀវ កើស។ ខ្ញុំធ្លាប់ឈរស្តាប់ឪពុកខ្ញុំដោយ

ភ្លឹកភ្លាំងនិងដោយស្ទើរចសរសើរ ពេលណាគាត់ជជែកពិភាក្សាគ្នាអំពី នយោបាយជាមួយមិត្តភក្តិរបស់គាត់។ ដោយ ហេតុ

តែបានឃើញច្រើនដងពេកទៅ ខ្ញុំចាំរហូតដល់ពាក្យពេច ន័បាវចនានៃគណបក្ស «ប្រជាធិបតេយ្យ»សម័យ នោះគឺ «វិន័យ ថ្លៃថ្នូរ

ក្តាហាន»។ ខ្ញុំចាំរហូតដល់ពាក្យបារាំងសរសេរនៅលើបង្អួចឱកាសហែរសពលោកអៀវ កើស...«Eternels regrets»

collapse of the Democratic Party and its values, even though he was only a child when the party was its apex. The Democratic Party had a powerful influence upon Soth Polin's formative years. As Soth Polin wrote, "political desires are passed from father to son."⁴⁶ The political principles of the Democratic Party, which had been co-opted and manipulated by Sihanouk when he established *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, survived and shaped the politics of Soth Polin.

When his family later moved to Phnom Penh, Soth Polin attended the *Lycée Descartes* to finish his high school education. At the *lycée*, he encountered the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus. Soth found these existentialist works difficult at first. He said, "At the beginning, I didn't understand the reading fully, so to be successful, I tried to learn it by heart. I was reading Sartre, Nietzsche, Camus. I read certain books so many times that I memorized them. And when I wrote, their ideas came to me as if they were my own."⁴⁷ His high school exposure to French Existentialism continued to influence Soth's literary production throughout the *Sangkum* and well into the Republican period (1970-1975). He admitted that his first novel, *A Meaningless Life* "was influenced by Nietzsche, Sartre, and Buddha."⁴⁸ Soth started this novel when he was 19, but published it in 1965. It was a popular, but tragic love story between Rattana and Sarak. The first edition had over fifteen hundred copies and sold out. It was republished several times.⁴⁹ In addition to French Existentialism, Communist principles were also apparent in *A Meaningless Life*. Rattana and Sarak's relationship failed because of their class differences. Rattana was wealthy whereas Sarak was poor. As Soth wrote on the first page, "*A Meaningless Life* will expose you to the conflict between classes."⁵⁰ In his first novel, Soth was preoccupied with issues of social inequality and was more interested in Communist values.

Soth Polin's interest in class tension, however, faded in his second novel, *An Unhappy Love*, also published in 1965. In this novel, Soth seemed to have discovered his main literary project, which was to lay bare the truth of human existence and of *Sangkum* society. The protagonists in his later novels no longer belonged to the lower class as found in *A Meaningless Life*, they originated instead within the affluent middle class of Phnom Penh. The imagery within Soth's novels also became more graphic as he sought to revolutionize Cambodian literature. He stated in the foreword of *An Unhappy Love*, "the truth does not cause man to sink further into disaster, but rather it will rehabilitate, reform, and enlighten him."⁵¹ Soth's concerns

(សេចក្តីសោកស្តាយដែលគ្មានទីចប់) ។ Soth Polin, "Sihanouk and the Khmer Serei" (ស្តេចសីហនុហើយនិងពួកខ្មែរសេរី),

Angkor Borei, 31 September 1996, accessed at <http://devaraja.free.fr/1sothpolin/1execution-of-khserey.pdf>.

⁴⁶ គឺបានសេចក្តីថា តណ្ហានយោបាយច្រើនតែចម្លងពីឪពុកមនកូន។ Ibid.

⁴⁷ I have the 5th edition which was published in 1973 by Soth Polin's publishing house, Nokor Thom. On the title page, it says the first edition was published in 1965. The same title page states the 5th edition had 3,500 copies. All of this supports Soth Polin's claim that *A Meaningless Life* was a popular book. May, "Beyond Words: Soth Polin," 12.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ ជីវិតតតន័យនឹងលាតត្រដាងជូនមិត្តនូវទំនាស់រវាងវណ្ណៈនិងវណ្ណៈ។ Soth Polin, *A Meaningless Life*, 1.

⁵¹ ការពិត មិនមែនជម្រុញមនុស្ស ឱ្យធ្លាក់លិចលង់ទៅក្នុងអបាយមុខនោះទេ ប៉ុន្តែជួយកែ ជួយតម្រង់ ជួយបំភ្លឺផ្លូវទៅវិញទេតើ។ Soth Polin, "Foreword," *An Unhappy Love* (ស្នេហាអវេទនា), (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Unknown, 2004), ក. This novel

about depicting the truth of human existence were most apparent in his politically controversial novel, *To Provoke without Pity* (1967). The *Sangkum* government banned this book because it indirectly criticized Sihanouk and contained gratuitous sexual depictions.⁵² This work caused Soth Polin to flee to Paris in 1968 to study for a *Maîtrise* in Social Science at the Sorbonne. *An Unhappy Love* and *To Provoke without Pity* were departures from his first novel. Through these later novels, Soth Polin began to elaborate upon an openly anti-Sihanouk project.

To Provoke without Pity was the story of Kem, a middle-class dilettante wandering about Phnom Penh. The last dramatic scene in the story revealed the same strong French Existentialist influence that characterized Soth Polin's novels since his first one. Having heard of his uncle's death in a car accident, Kem stood naked, bent over, in front of a mirror. As he stared at his reflected butt from in between his thighs, the death of his uncle forced Kem to confront the possibility of his own death. At this moment of confrontation and self-awareness, Kem realized that "no one can rescue me. Not even darling Sinuon. Even the angels in Indra's heaven cannot save me. I am filled with poison and no medicine can cure it."⁵³ Although he prays to Buddha for "the Wise Teacher to guide my mind and to give me strength to accept the truth so that I will not go mad...don't let my knowledge lead me to commit suicide," Kem laughs at the end.⁵⁴ He knows the futility of his request as he asks himself: "how can I change when everywhere I see is the truth? When a person sees the truth, he cannot easily live."⁵⁵ Although Soth Polin did not explicitly state it, Kem's situation was an existentialist one. In the above dialogue, Kem appears to echo Sartre, who writes: "God no longer exists [and] with his disappearance goes the possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There could no longer be any *a priori*

has been republished in Phnom Penh without Soth Polin's permission. During fieldwork, I found a copy at a Phnom Penh bookstore, but novel has a recent photoshopped cover and does not list the publishing house.

⁵² Although I have translated *chomtut ot asor* (ចំពិតតែអស់ស្មារ) as *To Provoke without Pity*, a more literal translation would be *To Show your Buttocks without Pity*, which is close to what Amratisha Klairung translated in her article on Soth Polin. As she says, *chomtut* (ចំពិត) could mean to make love or to provoke; therefore the book was like

offering his backside to the king who had put to death many intellectuals. The word *chomtut* also suggests absolute indifference to the Government. Readers thought the title referred to making love but the authorities knew that he was provoking them. In this, Klairung is paraphrasing Soth Polin in his interview with Sharon May. Please see Sharon May, "Beyond Words: Soth Polin," 14 and Klairung, "Women, Sexuality And Politics In Modern Cambodian Literature," 77 and footnote 5.

⁵³ ហ្ន៎! អញអើយ គ្មាននរណានឹងអាចមកជួយសង្គ្រោះអញបានទេ។ កុំថាឡើយត្រឹមតែអូនស៊ីនួន សូម្បីតែទេព

អប្បបរមាកញ្ញាចុះពីឋានព្រះឥន្ទ្រ ក៏មិនអាចមកស្រោចស្រង់រូបអញបានដែរ ចិត្តអញពោរពេញដោយពិសពុល

អកុសលទៅហើយនឹងរកឱសថអ្វីមកកែច្នៃឲ្យលឿង។ Soth, *Provoke without Pity*, 82.

⁵⁴ ឱ! ព្រះពុទ្ធ ព្រះបរមគ្រូខ្ញុំអើយ សូមព្យាបាលអង្គមេត្តាជួយដឹកនាំសតិធម៌របស់ខ្ញុំផង ឲ្យខ្ញុំមានកម្លាំងទទួលការពិត កុំឲ្យឆ្គួត!!

កុំឲ្យប្រាថ្នារបស់ខ្ញុំសម្លាប់ខ្លួនខ្ញុំ! ហា! ហា! ហា! Ibid.

⁵⁵ ធ្វើម្តេចនឹងកែកើតបើអញមើលទៅចេះតែឃើញ ការមពិតអញ្ចឹង! មនុស្សយើងតែឃើញការពិតកាលណាហើយ

ច្បាស់ជាវាស់នៅពុំសូវស្រណុកទេ។ Ibid.

good...we must be honest or must not lie, since we are on a plane shared only by men.”⁵⁶ With man being the sole determiner of his existence, Kem condemns the mirror as an object of scientific rationalism.⁵⁷ As Kem continues to stare from in between his legs, he says,

This mirror is extremely valuable, but...I unhesitantly scoff [*chomtut ot sranoh*] at this mirror, at all science, at all human civilization. I want to vomit! I am disgusted! I am ashamed...Descartes once said that science will allow humans to master and possess the earth...but I don't see humans as conquerors of the world, but rather as losers. The truth is this: the truth is the truth and can never be escaped.⁵⁸

Kem's last scene embodied Soth's literary project, which was deeply informed by French Existentialist thought. Soth hoped “to paint and decorate the Khmer novel with a set of ideals, ‘Realism,’ to demonstrate psychological problems of humankind.” He believed that “realism is valuable, a radiant jewel for Khmer literature.”⁵⁹ The truth, for Soth, was liberating. Ironically,

⁵⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 27-28

⁵⁷ Kem reveals his feelings towards the mirror in a two paragraph long internal dialogue, where he sees the mirror as an object for rich Cambodians and a symbol of European science: តើកញ្ចក់នេះជាអ្វី? ឆ្លើយថា៖ គឺជានិមិត្តរូបនៃ

អារ្យធម៌របស់មនុស្សទាំងមូល។ តើមនុស្សលោកយើងខំស្រាវជ្រាវប៉ុន្មានឆ្នាំ ខំចំណាយកម្លាំងប្រាថ្នាប៉ុន្មាន កប៉ាល់ ប៉ុន្មានឃ្លាំង

ទ្រទ្រង់តែឆ្លើយត្រឡប់យ៉ាងល្អវិចិត្រដូច្នេះបាន។ ហា!ហា! កញ្ចក់នេះ មិនមែនជាកញ្ចក់ធម្មតាទេ! គឺជាកញ្ចក់ដែលគេសាងមកពីអ៊ីប៊ុប។

ទាល់តែអ្នកមានសមត្ថភាពស្តាប់សូរណ៍ ដូចជាអូនស៊ីន្ទនជាដើម ទើបហ៊ាន ប្រើប្រាស់កញ្ចក់ដ៏មានតម្លៃដូច្នេះបាន។

គេធ្វើឡើងតាមស្បង់ តាមរូបសាស្ត្រអុបទិច (Optique) គឺថាឆ្លុះទៅ រូបយើងយ៉ាងម៉េច ឃើញត្រឡប់មកវិញអញ្ចឹងគ្មានរៀប

ឬស្របត្រង់ណា...គឺអត់ចេះករ...ឆ្លុះមកនូវការពិត។ Soth, *To Provoke without Pity*, 83-84.

⁵⁸ ឃើញថាកញ្ចក់នេះ មានតម្លៃ (sic) អស្ចារ្យក្រឡាលុយតែម្តង។ ប៉ុន្តែខ្ញុំសូមចំពិតដោយឥតស្រណោះ ជូនកញ្ចក់ នេះ

ជូនវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រទាំងឡាយ ជូនអារ្យធម៌នៃមនុស្សជាតិទូទៅ។ ខ្ញុំចង់កូត! ខ្ញុំខ្ពើម! ខ្ញុំសូមខ្មាស! ហា!ហា!

មានលោកទស្សនវិទូម្នាក់ឈ្មោះដេស័ការគឺបានថ្លែងយោបល់ថា វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រនឹងអាចជួយយិតយោងមនុស្សឲ្យបង្រាប់ ជំនះធម្មជាតិបាន។

La science nous aide à nous rendre maître et possesseurs de la nature. លោកមានបំណង ចង់និយាយថា

វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រនឹងអាចនាំមនុស្សលោកទៅដល់សុភមង្គលបាន។ ប៉ុន្តែខ្ញុំ ៗ គ្មានឃើញមនុស្សឈ្នះ ធម្មជាតិសោះ ឃើញវឹតតែចាញ់ទៅ។

ការពិតអញ្ចឹង៖ ការពិតគឺការពិតឥតនាំទៅណាឡើយទេ។ ibId., 84-85.

⁵⁹ When Soth Polin speaks of realism, I don't believe he is speaking of it in the same lines of French Realism in the tradition of Hugo, Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola. While I believe Soth has read the novels of these French literary giants, he does not admit to having been influenced by them as he does with Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. For Soth Polin, I believe his realism is simply the depiction of true social conditions. No matter how improper, grotesques or absurd, he believes Khmer literature should embrace and depict it. More importantly, he feels the truth or realistic depictions of socials conditions reveal something about human condition. This depiction of the truth aligns with French Existentialist thought. ខ្ញុំចង់លាបពណ៌លំអ ចង់តាក់តែងប្រលោមលោកសម័យខ្មែរយើង

Kem, who is unable to deny the truth of his existence, escapes into madness at the end of *To Provoke without Pity*.

Soth's desire to depict the truth in his literary works tied into his political, anti-Sihanouk project. As a child on the sidelines as the Democratic Party experimented with constitutional democracy, Soth Polin absorbed many of their political values. As seen in his work, he cared for social and economic equality. Yet, in spite of his fond memories of the Democratic Party, Soth Polin initially supported Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. He honestly considered Sihanouk as the Father of Cambodian Independence. However, in 1965, according to Soth Polin, he at the age of 22, turned away from *Sangkum*. While 1965 was the important year in the escalation of American involvement in Southeast Asia, this event was tangential to Soth Polin's political development. Crucial to Soth's politics, instead, was the public executions of Khmer Serei *pannavoan*.⁶⁰ Khmer Serei was an organization led by Son Ngoc Thanh, who refused to join *Sangkum*. It was believed at the time be supported by the South Vietnamese Government, who did not like Sihanouk's neutral stance and pro-communist sympathies.⁶¹ The *pannavoan* killed were Preap In and Sauv Ngoy. The Sihanouk regime broadcasted the public executions of opposing intellectuals by publicizing the following images.

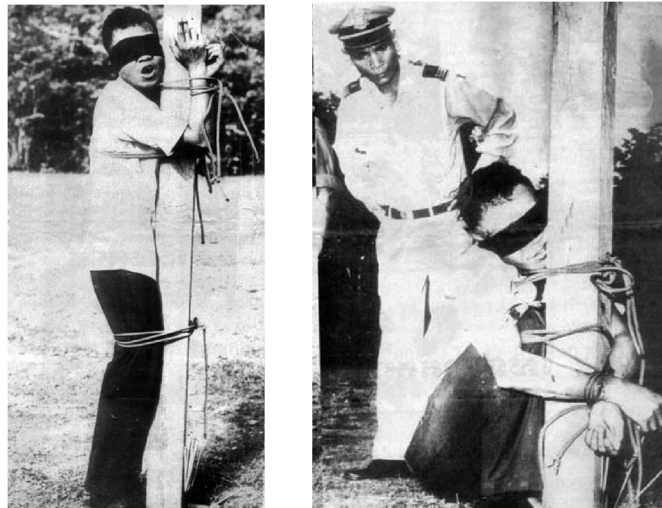


Figure 17: Images from *Angkor Borei*

Soth Polin stated that he was unable to ignore these inhumane images because “Sihanouk ordered it be plastered on every white screen in every movie theater, from ones in the city to

នូវឧត្តមគតិមួយគឺ “ភាពពិតប្រាកដនិយម” ដើម្បីឱ្យស្របទៅតាមបញ្ជាចិត្តសាស្ត្រនៃមនុស្សជាតិ។ ខ្ញុំយល់ថា ភាពពិតប្រាកដនិយមនេះ ជាតម្លៃមួយធំអស្ចារ្យ ជាគ្រឿងអលង្ការ ដ៏ភ័យចំពោះសម្រាប់អក្សរសាស្ត្រយើង។ Soth, Foreword, *Unhappy Love*, ក-ខ.

⁶⁰ *Pannavoan* was Soth Polin's term to refer to intellectuals. Soth Polin, “Sihanouk and the Khmer Serei,” *Angkor Borei*, 31 September 1996. Also refer to Chapter 2, where I explored the origins and meaning of *pannavoan* within the Cambodian context.

⁶¹ The United States officially denied any connection with the Khmer Serei, but, as William Shawcross showed, the US used the Khmer Serei as recruiters in its war efforts. Shawcross, *Sideshow*, 64-65

those in the countryside, from 1965 to 1967.”⁶² Soth Polin marked this moment as when he became disillusioned with *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and with Sihanouk. According to him, “Sihanouk had become a cruel king with a damaged mind who no longer knew the difference between right and wrong, and who was now treating his own people as enemies.”⁶³ The public execution of these *pannavoan* in 1965 explained the difference between *A Meaningless Life* and the remainder of Soth Polin’s novels. Since Soth started writing *A Meaningless Life* before 1965, it was less influenced by this new direction in his politics. Soth’s new political stance against Sihanouk explained why his later works challenged political and aesthetic constraints.

Upon his return from France, Soth Polin worked at his uncle’s newspaper, *Khmer Ekkereach*. He again displeased Sihanouk and the newspaper was forced to close. During this free time, he published *The Disorganized Adventurer* and *Tell me what to Do...I will do it* in 1969. A few months later, he opened his own newspaper, *Nokor Thom*. *Nokor Thom* “was known in Khmer intellectual circles” as being “avant-garde and anti-Sihanouk.”⁶⁴ *Nokor Thom* also served as his publishing house. Through his newspaper and novels, Soth Polin expressed his political views against Sihanouk and supported the Khmer Republic. On the eve of the last *Sangkum* National Congress, he published a short story in *Nokor Thom* on the *mouton de Panurge*, sheeps that blindly follow one another off a cliff. He hoped “to send a secret message to my readers that the true crazy person is Sihanouk, who we should no longer blindly follow. I tried to explain that Cambodians should not swallow ‘the poison grasses’ like a sheep under Sihanouk’s guidance.”⁶⁵ This anti-Sihanouk sentiment shaped Soth Polin’s novels, especially his depictions of urban life.

A literary and political project guided Soth Polin as he wrote his novels, short stories and editorials. His literary desire to depict the truth was why his novels were so graphic and his characters were weak, insecure and in eternal crisis. His wish for realism in Khmer literature compelled him to represent Phnom Penh and its flaws. Similar to how he bared the fragility of

⁶² ចំណែកខ្លួនខ្ញុំវិញ បើទោះជាចង់ឃើញ ឬក៏មិនចង់ឃើញ ក៏ខ្ញុំចៀសមិនរួច ពីទិដ្ឋភាពសមនុស្សធម៌និយាតកម្ម កណ្តាលថ្ងៃត្រង់ទៅលើរូបពួកខ្មែរសេរីដែរ...ដោយសមេចសីហនុព្រះប្រមុខរដ្ឋ ទ្រង់បានព្រះរាជបញ្ជា ឱ្យយកទៅចាត់ បញ្ជាំងផ្សាយនៅក្របខ្លាំងសមពត៌ស គ្រប់រោងកុង...តាំងពីទីក្រុងរហូតដល់ស្រុកស្រែចំការ...តាំងពីឆ្នាំ១៩៦៥ដល់ ១៩៦៧។ Soth, “Sihanouk and the Khmer Serei.”

⁶³ នេះជាសក្ខីភាពមួយបង្ហាញថា ស្តេចសីហនុមានសេចក្តីកំណាចឃោរឃៅ រហូតដល់មានការឆ្លុតលីលានៅក្នុង សតិអាម្ពណ៍លែងដឹងខុសត្រូវ ខ្លួនឯងយកប្រជាពលរដ្ឋខ្មែរធ្វើជាខ្លាំងសសត្រូវ Ibid.

⁶⁴ “Le « Nokor Thom » connu dans les milieux intellectuels khmer comme un journal de l’avant-garde anti-sihanoukiste avant même les fameux événements du 18 mars, et fidèle à sa ligne de conduite, a écrit le 1er avril dans son éditorial intitulé « Sihanouk est en train d’apprendre à jouer un nouveau rôle ».” *Cambodge Nouveau*, May 1970.

⁶⁵ ដោយមានឫកពារអាកប្បកិរិយាដូចមនុស្សឆ្លុត ខ្ញុំបានសាកល្បងបញ្ជូនសារសម្ងាត់មួយទៅមិត្តអ្នកអាន ថាមនុស្សឆ្លុតពិតប្រាកដនោះ

គឺសម្តេចព្រះប្រមុខរដ្ឋ ដែលគេមិនត្រូវដើរតាមទាំងខ្វាក់ដឹងតែងល់នោះទេ។ ខ្ញុំបានសាកល្បងពន្លាស់ដល់ជនជាតិខ្មែរ គុំឱ្យហូប

«ស្មៅពិល» ដូចហ្វូងចៀម តាមការណែនាំរបស់ប្រមុខរដ្ឋ Soth Polin, “The Last National Congress of Sangkum Reastr

Niyum: an extract from *Cambodge- le Chemin de L’Apocalypse*,” *Ankgor Borei*, undated, accessed at <http://devaraja.free.fr/1sothpolin/1c-last-congress1.pdf>.

men's psyche, Soth Polin exposed the flawed, alienating underbelly of *Sangkum* Phnom Penh. These literary objectives supported his political goals to challenge Sihanouk. Through his realistic depictions of urban life, Soth Polin challenged the state's myth of the capital city.

Soth Polin and Urban Discontent

Soth Polin was not the first Khmer writer to depict urban life. In fact, since the publication of the first Khmer novel, *Sophat*, in 1939, modern Cambodian literature has often contained scenes of the capital city. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Phnom Penh depicted in *Sophat* was a strange, yet exciting place of opportunity for the titled hero. Upon entering the city, Sophat experiences wide-eyed joy and wonder at the chaos and luxury of urban life. In the capital, he finds his true love as well as his long-lost father. Sophat seems to realize his identity, becoming the man he was meant to be: the refined and educated son of a high-ranking official. In its first novelistic depiction, Phnom Penh was site of promise and of becoming.

Im Thok, another author discussed in Chapter 2, repeated the theme of Phnom Penh as a crucible that produced new selves. In *Sim the Chauffeur*, he showed how the construction sites found throughout Phnom Penh were factories that produced a proletarian identity. However, Phnom Penh's shiny luster faded in his 1956 novel: the capital was no longer filled with wondrous opportunity. Instead of prospects, Im Thok revealed to readers the inequalities and oppression found within the city. Soun Sorin's 1961 novel, *A New Sun Rises on an Old Land*, likewise painted the capital as a place where the rich harass and trap the poor in a cycle of poverty. Som, the main character, switches jobs and identities as the novel progresses. He is first a farmer in search of opportunities, a lowly cyclo driver, then a union organizer, a prisoner, and lastly, an altruistic politician from the countryside. *A New Sun Rises on an Old Land* contained same themes of the earlier novels. Phnom Penh remained a motley pot of constantly constructing selves. But, as with Im Thok, Soun Sarin showed the city to lack prospects. Som leaves the city to find affluence in the countryside. Phnom Penh in these later literatures was not a space for growth and progress, even as it continued to transform. Rim Kin's opportunity-filled Phnom Penh was only a momentary flash in Cambodian literary history.

The negative image of Phnom Penh remained well after the *Sangkum* period. Thran Yun Yong's 1971 philosophical essay, *Who am I?*, listed the differences between Phnom Penh and the countryside. In contrast to the farms, where fresh air was abundant, the city meant inhaling exhaust from cars and motorcycles.⁶⁶ Phnom Penh, in Thran's eyes, was an uncaring, isolating place. If he encountered a problem or a worry in the city, he would fend for himself because "city people only stick their heads out of the door, watching the chaos and never lifting a hand to help. Even if someone died or collapsed, these people care only for themselves. Neighbors, who have lived next to each other for years, do not know each other."⁶⁷ Phnom

⁶⁶ ផ្ទុយទៅវិញនៅទីក្រុងឯណោះ ខ្ញុំដកដង្ហើមស្រមយកចំហាយប្រេងសាំងឡានសាំងម៉ូតូ គ្មានខ្យល់សបរិសុទ្ធទេ។ ខ្ញុំរស់នៅដោយ ចង្អៀតចង្អល់ណាស់។ Thran Yun Yong, *Who am I?*, (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Personal Publication, 1971), 23.

⁶⁷ ពេលមានរវល់ឬមានទុក្ខវេទនាផ្សេងៗ អ្នកនៅទីក្រុងបានតែនាំគ្នាអើតតាមមាត់ទ្វារបញ្ឈររង់ចាំស្ទឹង មើលផ្អើលទឹកផ្អើលដី គ្មានចេះមក ជួយគ្នាទេ។ ចង់នរណាស្តាប់ក៏ដោយ នរណាឈឺប្រកាច់ប្រកិនយ៉ាងណាក៏ដោយ គេសុំតែមួយរស់។ សូម្បីអ្នកជិតខាងខ្លួនជិតបង្កើយ គេមិនទាំងស្គាល់គ្នាផងទោះបីរស់នៅជិតគ្នាជិតជួរណាស់ហើយ ក៏ដោយ។ Ibid., p. 24-25

Penh choked Thran:

If I wanted to go out, I would have to dress appropriately so others do not frown. I cannot wear a sarong or a *krama* to go to the market, as I would have if I lived in the countryside. Even if I had no money in my pockets, I still have to dress handsomely in order to avoid embarrassment. If I walk around, shabbily dressed, I walk awkwardly and cannot smile fully. Moreover, traffic formed a chaotic pattern; even at the stop light, it was difficult to make one's way.⁶⁸

These few lines readily illustrated Thran's unhappiness with urban life. Phnom Penh, for him, was anything but harmonious and well-balanced.

The writings of Im Thok, Soun Sarin and Thran Vun Yong departed from Rim Kin's earlier positive representation of Phnom Penh. Each, however, seemed to use the capital for their own purposes and preoccupations. Concerned about the working poor and capitalist exploitation, Im Thok's city was a factory that oppressed even as it solidified class identity. Soun Sarin shared Im's worries over social equality, but, unlike Im who believed capitalism infected urban and rural people alike, the countryside for Soun offered a haven from urban exploitation. This rural and urban split was also apparent in Thran's essay. Thran and Soun appeared to separate urban from rural, making them two realms within Cambodia. Unlike these three authors, who saw the city in some relationship with the countryside, Soth Polin focused on only on urban life, its transformation and eventual alienation. His fascination with the city can be seen on the below covers of his two books.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ បើចង់ដើរលេងត្រូវតែរត់មកស្លៀកពាក់តាក់តែងកាយឱ្យសមរម្យ ទើបមហាជនមិនពេបប្រាយ។ ខ្ញុំមិនអាច ស្លៀកសារុង បង់ក្រមាដើរកាត់ផ្សារដូចកាលខ្ញុំនៅស្រុកស្រែទេ។ ទោះបីអត់អ្វីទទួលទាន គ្មានលុយក្នុងហោប៉ៅ ក៏ដោយ ត្រូវតែហុំហាសិន ទើបមិនខ្មាសគេ។ បើអ្នកមិនអរ ខោមិនខោខ្ញុំហាក់ដូចជាដើរលេង ដូចជារៀនដើរពុំ សួរសម ញញឹមពុំសួរស្រសើ។ មកនេះ ចរាចរខ្វែងក្រឡា ទៅនោះភ្លើងស្កុប ដូចជាពិបាកធ្វើដំណើរចុះឡើងណាស់ Ibid, 23-24.

⁶⁹ These covers appear to be the original covers to the book. The title page indicates the original publication date and states that Soth Polin personally published these works. As the publisher, he must have chosen these cover designs.



Figure 18: Covers of Soth Polin's novels, *Disorganized Adventurer* (1969) and *Tell Me What to Do...I Will Do It*, 1969

As the men and women in various states of dress foregrounds multileveled buildings, the covers evoke the various relations the protagonist have with others and with the city as he travels through urban spaces. Through the lens of these bourgeois heroes, or rather anti-heroes, Soth Polin offered a different glimpse of Phnom Penh than found in Soun, Im and Thran. Soth wanted to depict the real underbelly of the capital and to show his readers the true conditions of urban life.

The characters in Soth Polin's novels were "middle class people living an urban life in Phnom Penh."⁷⁰ Although Sarak in *A Meaningless Life* was a student and Peng from *Bored Man* was a dilettante, the others were mid-level paper-pushers in the government, a private company, or a teaching facility. All were living and working in Phnom Penh. From the very beginning, the readers learn something wrong with these men. All of them felt disconnected from those around them. Sarin in *The Disorganized Adventurer* spoke of how "in Phnom Penh, which is the city of my birth, there are plenty of strange objects. The strangest items are my parents, my siblings and my friends."⁷¹ He could not understand why these individuals kept trying to talk to him: "I was very confused as to why my relatives kept closing and opening their mouths in my direction. I was very frustrated because I knew that no matter how hard I tried to speak to them, it will be useless." Sarin felt that there was no such thing as communication. He came into this world alone and lived among his family as "an individual lived among

⁷⁰ Tomoko Okada, *Modern Short Stories – people's experience and memories recorded by novelists*, (Tokyo, Japan: Cambodian Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2002), accessed at: <http://www.tufs.ac.jp/common/fs/ase/cam/res/lit/ot06.html>.

⁷¹ នៅតែទីក្រុងភ្នំពេញ ដែលជាទីក្រុងកំណើតខ្ញុំហ្នឹង គឺរាប់មិនអស់។ របស់ប្លែកៗ មុនដំបងបង្អស់ គឺ ឪពុកម្តាយខ្ញុំ បងប្អូនខ្ញុំ

មិត្តភក្តិខ្ញុំ។ Soth Polin, *Disorganized Adventurer*, 1.

foreigners.”⁷²

Likewise, in the *Bored Man*, Peng experienced similar feelings towards his wife, Pachany. As they lay in bed together, he could not communicate with her. As he said, “I cannot find anything to discuss with her. I do not know what is her purpose on this bed. What is Pachany anyways? What meaning does she have? What is that thing rolling around on the bed? And what am I?”⁷³ Another character, who had problems communicating, was Vanna in “Communicate, they say.” Vanna was “unhappy, rudderless, alone, much too alone and alienated from others.” When he told this to Sary, a girl he liked, she told him, “You’re suffering because you do not communicate!” After he followed her advice and tried to communicate, he found communication to be “an incessant babble, a long verbal diarrhea, interspersed with jokes, laughs, and mild teasing...in short, they talked about everything, and their phrases, so peremptory, contained nothing new: no new ideas, no original thought, just familiar territory that they had trampled many times before. After a while there was such clamor that no one listened to anyone else.”⁷⁴ There was no point in communication. No one understood the other and everyone spoke past one another.

In addition to being alone, the characters in Soth Polin’s novels likened themselves to machines. Som Un, the protagonist in “Command Me, Darling!,” spoke of how his “machine self suddenly found movement” when he heard orders from his wife, Mily. It was as though the blood vessels from his head to his feet slowly pumped blood again.⁷⁵ He repeated this analogy

⁷² ជួនកាល ខ្ញុំមានសេចក្តីងឿងឆ្ងល់ នឹងបងប្អូនឯទៀតៗ ដែលខំបើកមាត់ម្តងៗ និយាយមករកខ្ញុំ។ ខ្ញុំចម្លែង ចិត្តឥតឧបមា

ព្រោះខ្ញុំហាក់ដូចជាដឹងថា បើទោះជាខ្ញុំប្រឹងនិយាយតបតទៅអ្នកទាំងនោះវិញ យ៉ាងណា ក៏គ្មាន ការទាក់ទងនឹងគ្នា។

ខ្ញុំកើតមកពីខុយត្តម្នាក់ឯង រស់នៅក្នុងគ្រួសារឯង គឺដូចជាបុគ្គល ម្នាក់ រស់ក្នុងចំណោម ពួកបរទេស។ Ibid, 2.

⁷³ ខ្ញុំដូចជាការអ្វីទាក់ទងជាមួយនាងមិនកើតតែម្តង។ រូបនាងមិនដឹងជាមកដៃកម្រិតខ្លាំងបានការអី តើរូបបុណ្យនេះជាអ្វីទៅ?

មានន័យថាម៉េច ស្តីគេហ្នឹងរតេយ្យតាមនៅលើគ្រែ ហើយតើរូបខ្ញុំផ្ទាល់ហ្នឹងជាអ្វីដែរ Soth Polin, *Bored Man*, (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Unknown, 2004), 12. This work has been republished by an unknown publisher. The original was published by the author in 1968.

⁷⁴ I have two different versions of this story. I have the original, which was published by the author in 1969 and written in Khmer. I also have an English-translated version. When I thought the translation captured the original, I decided to use the translation. However, where I thought the translation did not capture the original text, I chose to translate it myself based on the original copy. The difference between these two versions will be noted in the footnote. If I am translating from the original, the title will be “Communications,” which I feel is more appropriate translation of Soth Polin’s original title: ការទាក់ទងគ្នា. When using the translation, I will use the title of the translation

copy. Soth Polin, “Communicate, They Say!,” found in Sharon May, ed., *In the Shadow of Angkor: Contemporary Writings from Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), p. 3

⁷⁵ នេះបានចំណាត់ការបញ្ជាមែន ៗ យ៉ាងមុត យ៉ាងស្អាត ដូចការបញ្ជាដែលខ្ញុំធ្លាប់បានទទួលកាលខ្ញុំធ្វើការ នៅសាលាឯកជនដូច្នោះ។

រំពេចភ្លាមនោះ ម៉ាស៊ីននៃខ្លួនខ្ញុំទាំងមូលស្រាប់តែកម្រើកឡើងយ៉ាងរំពើក ដោយសារតែឥទ្ធិពលនៃការបញ្ជានេះ។ ខ្ញុំហាក់ដូចជាដឹងថា សរសៃសរសួងរបស់ខ្ញុំញាក់ស្រឹកៗតាំងពី ខួរក្បាលរហូតដល់ចុងជើង។ Soth Polin, “Command Me, Darling!

(បង្គាប់មកបងចុះអុន!)”, *Tell Me What to Do...I Will Do It* (ឲ្យបងធ្វើអី...បងធ្វើវិញ), (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Personal

when he defended his wife's treatment of him. "I was always happy because she gave me a reason to live. She causes the gears inside of me to spin. In the mornings before she goes to work, she gives me her commands. I make a record of it in my head. Then, that very afternoon, I would use my time to follow her orders one by one, as neatly as possible. I behave like a machine that has been wounded up already."⁷⁶ One day, this situation changed because Mily stopped giving him instructions. On that day, he "became stuck and still, like a rock, without any worth whatsoever. My arms laid flat, my legs folded upon one another, my eyes were empty pools. I am a machine left unwound, a machine whose key has been lost."⁷⁷ Som Un existed in this manner from the very beginning of "Command Me, Darling!".

His wife's orders only served to inject some movement into him. With or without them, he remained alienated from his surroundings, forever a tin man in need of commands in order to have meaning to his life. Another one of Soth Polin's characters, who saw himself as a contraption, was Peng. Peng considered the act of making love "an ordinary exercise, which the hands and legs are lifted, thrusting up and down on top of nothing. This is to say, a form of work without doing any work, an expression of movement on top of nothing (like a mechanical fan which turns and touches nothing), a kind of communication in which no communication is achieved."⁷⁸

Even in one of the most intimate acts, Peng could not connect with his wife. He felt no emotions towards her. He was a fan, which turned and touched nothing. Through these characters, Soth Polin showed that urban life was not blissful. Most of his characters, all of whom lived in the city, went through the motions of life without actually living. Peng in *The Bored Man* captured Soth Polin's negative attitude toward urban life best. In his misery, Peng often remembered his hard adolescence in an old, unstable hut near Lake *Sralang*. Although his family was very poor, Peng felt that life in those days "went along happily." He did not experience the boredom that he felt now; instead it was a "normal boredom, like the kind of

Publication, 1969), p. 39

⁷⁶ ខ្ញុំតែងតែអរព្រឹត្យ ជានិច្ច ព្រោះអីនាងធ្វើឱ្យខ្ញុំរស់ នាងធ្វើឱ្យម៉ាស៊ីនខ្ញុំដើរឬរិល។ ខ្ញុំតែងតែកត់ត្រា ក្នុងខួរ ក្បាល តែម្តងនូវកិច្ចបញ្ជាទាំងប៉ុន្មាន ដែលនាងធ្វើឡើងនៅពេលព្រឹក មុនចាកចេញទៅធ្វើការ។ ហើយនៅ ថ្ងៃនោះឯង ខ្ញុំប្រើពេលរបស់ខ្ញុំក្នុងការគោរពបញ្ជាទាំងនោះមួយម្តងៗ យ៉ាងស្អាត។ ខ្លួនខ្ញុំមានលំនាំដូច ជាម៉ាស៊ីន ដែលគេម្ជួល គន្លឹសហើយជាស្រេចដូច្នោះ។ Ibid., 47.

⁷⁷ នាងលែងកុមារម្យង់ដែរ លែងបង្កប់ លែងបញ្ជាអីៗទាំងអស់មកលើអំបែងក្បាលខ្ញុំ។ ម្ល៉ោះហើយខ្ញុំនៅស្លឹកនឹង ផ្តល់ ប្រៀបបាននឹងដុំថ្ម ចោលម្សៀតពេកកន្លង។ ខ្ញុំខិតខំប្រុងប្រយ័ត្ន ដើរខ្ញុំបត់អង្កាញចូលគ្នា ភ្នែកខ្ញុំលង់ស្តីទៅ ក្នុងភាពស្ងប់ស្ងាមស្ងាម។ ខ្ញុំគឺជាម៉ាស៊ីនមួយដែលគេភ្ជួរម្ជួលឡាន ឬដែលគេធ្វើឱ្យបាត់កូនសោរដូច្នោះ។ Ibid., 49.

⁷⁸ ការប្រព្រឹត្តិស្នេហារបស់ខ្ញុំទៅលើភតិយាខ្ញុំ គឺជាកីឡាហាត់ប្រាណដ៏សាមញ្ញមួយ ដែលគេលើកជើងលើកដៃ ផ្អឹបចុះ ផ្អើរឡើងជាមួយទទេ ពោលគឺការធ្វើការទទេ ការបញ្ចេញសកម្មភាពលំទទេ (របៀបជាកងម៉ាស៊ីនដែលរិលគ្មានប៉ះ អ្វី) ការទាក់ទងដែលកាន់ការទាក់ទង។ Soth Polin, *Bored Man*, p. 5.

being too lazy to study or not wanting to do house chores.”⁷⁹ He remembered one episode the most. Whenever it rained, the house flooded and the pots of water would be covered. Peng rowed his boat to the middle of town to get potable water. The water never tasted so sweet to him than it did at that moment. For Peng, this difficult period had the most significance: “At that time, my life was really sad, but it was filled with such meaning. My life seemed to have an incomparable value...something that should be lived.”⁸⁰ Now, like Lake *Sralang* which urban development erased, Peng’s former life with its invaluable meaning disappeared.⁸¹

His father’s business flourished and his family moved into a villa in the center of the city. The house was filled with all types of modern appliances, such as televisions and air conditioners. New cars with plush leather seats and cool circulating air replaced the row boat. Peng’s family no longer had a worry in the world. As his material surroundings improved, Peng became more and more bored. He was aware of the causes behind his condition: “Unfortunately, I should be happy, but it was not like that. From that day on, I slowly but surely became bored or unsatisfied. It is great. I am a person who is not happy in comfortable settings, but one who is satisfied in a place filled with hardships.”⁸² The new world Peng inhabited alienated him. All the quintessential conveniences of city life – a stone house, fast cars, and modern appliances – only bored him. Peng’s slow transformation from happiness to boredom demonstrated the flaws of life in Phnom Penh. With this story, Soth Polin intentionally sought to highlight the limitations of urban life. He showed that life in Phnom Penh was not happy, directly contradicting the images of Phnom Penh found in the state newspaper and magazines.

In most of his novels and short stories, Soth Polin depicted unhappy men who lived the nice, middle-class existence in Phnom Penh. At one time in each of their stories, these men were educated, had a relatively well-paying job, a beautiful wife and home. On the surface, they lived the ideal urban life the magazines and newspapers showcased. Then, one day, they lost a loved one, a job, or merely had a thought, their life changed and what once seemed so perfect no

⁷⁹ កាលខ្ញុំនៅក្មេងតាំងពីជំនាន់ខ្ញុំរៀននៅសាលាបឋមភូមិចៅពញាហុករហូតមកដល់ក្នុងវិទ្យាល័យស៊ីសុវត្ថិ ជីវិតខ្ញុំ ដូចជាមានដំណើរប្រព្រឹត្តទៅសប្បាយណាស់។ ខ្ញុំដូចមិនសូវដែលកើតធាតុអផ្សុកដល់ម្តងណាឡើយ ឬពុំដូច្នោះទេ ខ្ញុំគ្រាន់តែអផ្សុកធម្មតា ដោយខ្លួនឯងរៀនសូត្រ ដោយធុញទ្រាន់នឹងឆ្លើយការក្នុងថ្នាក់ ដោយម្តាយខ្ញុំប្រើកាំរ៉េទៅលេច ទៅកើត ។ល។ និង ។ល។ កាលពីខ្ញុំនៅវ័យកុមារ គ្រួសាររបស់ខ្ញុំរស់នៅរបៀបខ្សោយ ដុនដាបជាទីបំផុត ប៉ុន្តែខ្ញុំហ៊ានបញ្ជាក់ថា ក្នុងមួយជីវិតខ្ញុំ ពុំដែលបានសប្បាយ បានជួបប្រទះសិរីភាពនៅពេលដែលគ្រួសារខ្ញុំនៅ ក្រឡាត់រោមរហាមនោះទេ។ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁰ កាលនោះជីវិតខ្ញុំកំសត់ណាស់ ប៉ុន្តែជីវិតខ្ញុំមានរសជាតិអីម៉្លេះទេ! ជីវិតខ្ញុំហាក់ដូចជាមានតម្លៃកម្ចីប្រៀបពុំ បានតែប៉ង...គួរឱ្យចង់ រសើ។ Ibid., 35.

⁸¹ Soth Polin wanted to emphasize this point because he footnoted how Lake Sralang is gone: សព្វថ្ងៃនេះបឹងគេលុបបាត់ទៅហើយ Ibid., 32.

⁸² អនិច្ចាធីយ ខ្ញុំគួរតែសប្បាយ។ ប៉ុន្តែមិនដូច្នោះតាំងពីថ្ងៃឯមក ខ្ញុំក្លាយបន្តិចម្តងៗ ទៅជាបុរសអផ្សុក ឬ បុរសមិនស្រណុក។ ល្អមើលដែរ ខ្ញុំជាមនុស្ស ដែលរស់មិនស្រណុកក្នុងកន្លែងស្រណុក ប៉ុន្តែរស់ស្រណុកក្នុងកន្លែង ឥតស្រណុក។ (original emphasis) Ibid., 39.

longer was. At this point was where Soth Polin began his stories. He showed these men going through the convulsions of confronting the realities of their existence, the fragility that the encounter exposed within them, and ultimately, the lack of resolution brought about by their newfound knowledge. None of these men had a happy ending. One ended up in an insane asylum; another received treatment and went back to living the lie. One died and most simply continued their alienating existence.

For Soth Polin, the cause of their alienation was the current conditions of *Sangkum* Phnom Penh. His stories were critiques against the *Sangkum* society and an expression of his discontent with Sihanouk. In them, Soth Polin used the symbols touted by *Sangkum* and perverted them, all to show the “real” *Sangkum* Phnom Penh. For example, in “Command Me, Darling!,” Soth Polin showed how the school, which Sihanouk saw as an instrument of progress and enlightenment, can take away one man’s agency. Som Un could no longer think for himself and needed commands to carry out the most basic action because of his job as a “nonessential staffer at a private high school in the capital.” At this job, he received all types of orders: “greet guests, provide information to anyone who ask, answer the telephone, take the money from the students, make out receipts, go check up on the students who have yet to pay, maintain financial records, go left, go right, etc.”⁸³ The constant orders from his boss slowly took away Som Un’s ability to think for himself, until one day he found himself relying upon them to live and feel. The school, as depicted in Soth Polin’s short story, turned Som Un into a machine in need of commands, therefore challenging the ideals promoted by *Sangkum*. Through his works, Soth Polin countered the idea that *Sangkum* created a better Phnom Penh. He, instead, portrayed Phnom Penh as a city where its citizens were machines and isolated from one another.

Soth Polin’s works challenged another principle ideological foundation of *Sangkum*: the relation between modern Cambodians and the celebrated glory of the Angkor period. The main character in the short story “Communicate, They Say!,” Vanna, was a socially awkward, young man who believed that communication was often reduced to nothing more than incessant babble. The source of Vanna’s alienation was the divide between his outer identity, which was viewable to the world around him and his personal, internal identity. The imagery and feelings that Vanna conveyed through his narration reflected the ideals that *Sangkum* attempted to impress on its citizens, particularly the burgeoning young, educated population:

“I saw...I saw mountains, many mountains, then like a jewel case, a dense forest, a long necklace of intense green...I saw water stream out of the summits only to plummet in a radiance of light...I saw thousands of spray of foam shimmer in the sun: I saw white, pure white, gleaming. I saw blues, reds, and then yellow...Finally – and this was the most penetrating image – I saw in the distance, along the gorges that cut the flank of the mountains...the Khmer

⁸³ ជាយូរឆ្នាំណាស់មកហើយ ខ្ញុំធ្លាប់ធ្វើការជាបុគ្គលិករាយរងម្នាក់ក្នុងដីឡាលែងឯកជនមួយ ក្នុងព្រះរាជធានី...ខ្ញុំធ្លាប់តែធ្វើការរៀងរាល់ថ្ងៃ ទេតែថ្ងៃអាទិត្យ ខ្ញុំធ្លាប់តែទទួលការបញ្ជាសព្វមុខ សព្វយ៉ាងអំពីនាយចៅហ្វាយផ្ទាល់របស់ ខ្ញុំ៖ ឲ្យទទួលភ្ញៀវ ឲ្យផ្តល់ព័ត៌មានទៅអ្នកដែលមកសួរ ឲ្យឆ្លើយទូរស័ព្ទ ឲ្យទទួលលុយកាក់ក្រោយប្រគល់បង្គាន់ដៃ ដល់សិស្ស ឲ្យដើរឆែកឆេរមើលសិស្សណាដែលមិនបានបង់ប្រាក់សាលា ឲ្យកិតបញ្ជី ឲ្យរត់ការឆ្លងស្តាំ។ល។...និង។ល។

Soth, “Command Me, Darling!,” 35-36.

empire...at the apex of its glory and power...I saw the temple at Angkor dominating in all its splendor the city of Siem Reap, the royal capital where almost two million souls were living...I saw the intrepid Khmer army come out of the temple walls to fight the enemy...I saw warriors so numerous that they covered the earth and masked the spread of the sky.”⁸⁴

Imagery and descriptions like this created a constant state of neurotic comparison and pressure within Vanna. The romantic glorification of the ancient Khmer empire tortured and divided him because they had no reflection in his daily reality. Vanna was an “insignificant secretary, lost in a miniscule business, which was itself lost among hundreds of others” in the royal capital of Phnom Penh.⁸⁵ Vanna was an inconsequential being in the urban spaces of Phnom Penh and, more importantly, he knew it. His external being did not mirror his internal ideal. This division cleaved a clear distinction between the two sides of him. He lacked ownership over what was inside: “the part that people could not see, which the strong part inside of me also, did not really belong to me at all. Truthfully, I was only a guard for the great treasure inside of me and I did not have any right to use this part at all.”⁸⁶ This split, or existential crisis, guided Vanna in his daily interactions with coworkers and friends. As he separated from his internal self, Vanna detached from his surroundings.

Vanna was symbolic of the Cambodian society overall. Soth Polin used the very normalness of this “insignificant secretary in the royal capital” to suggest the existential crisis was not a singular event, but a part of a deeper societal crisis. *Sangkum* promoted Phnom Penh as a natural inheritor of the majesty of Angkor. However, despite Sihanouk’s attempts to link Phnom Penh with Angkor, Soth Polin showed that within the mind of at least one Cambodian – albeit a fictional one – those two realities failed to align. The insignificant nature of Vanna’s urban actuality simply could not compare to the glory of the past. The realization of this fact leads to Vanna’s alienation and, as Soth Polin implied, a general crisis.

In a different work, Soth Polin assaulted the very image that the state had painted about Phnom Penh. As shown earlier, *Sangkum* represented Phnom Penh as an “island of untroubled gaiety,” where the various ethnic groups coexist harmoniously.⁸⁷ A scene in *To Provoke without Pity* undermined this very image of Phnom Penh. The protagonist, Kem, parties with friends, driving along the road, and spots an old Vietnamese lady. Upon seeing her, he slows down to strip and expose her. Although his friend tries to stop him, he chases her down and kicks her. As she falls, she yells in her broken Khmer, “What did I do to you, mister? Why did you kick

⁸⁴ Soth, “Communicate, They Say!,” 1.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ រវាងភាគខ្លួនខ្ញុំទាំងពីរនេះ វាមានការដាច់គ្នា។ កម្លាំងផ្ទៃផ្ទៃរបស់ខ្ញុំ ពុំបានទៅជួយស្នូលភាពអន់ឡាយរបស់ ខ្ញុំទាល់តែសោះ។ រហូតដល់យូរទៅខ្ញុំមកនឹកថា ភាគដែលគេមើលមិនឃើញ ហើយដែលជាភាគខ្លាំងនៅក្នុងខ្លួន ខ្ញុំនោះ គឺមិនមែនជាកម្មសិទ្ធិពិតប្រាកដតបស់ខ្ញុំឡើយ។ មែនទែនទៅ ឃ្លាំងមហាសម្បត្តិនៃដែនដីបិតរបស់ខ្ញុំ គឺខ្ញុំគ្រាន់តែជាអ្នកយាមប៉ុណ្ណោះ ហើយខ្ញុំគ្មានសិទ្ធិអំណាចអ្វីយកមកប្រើប្រាស់បានឡើយ រហូតទល់ថ្ងៃខ្ញុំស្លាប់។

Soth, “Communications,” 8.

⁸⁷ *Kambuja*, 15 October 1965.

my butt for fun? Everyone, come and consider this. Our country is independent.”⁸⁸ In response, Kem’s friend laughs because the phrase “our country is independent” in her Vietnamese accent turns it into “our country has diarrhea.”⁸⁹ Afterwards the two men return to their bike and drive home. This turn of phrase by Soth Polin captured his distaste for *Sangkum*. Soth Polin emphasized the ethnicity of the Vietnamese lady when he deliberately misspelled Khmer words to reflect a Vietnamese accent. He, however, wanted to make sure the readers knew that the lady referred to Cambodia’s independent state because he footnoted it and spelled it correctly in Khmer. Due to his political leanings, Soth Polin had to be aware of Sihanouk’s depiction of Phnom Penh as a place of inter-ethnic harmony and chose to deliberately rebut this ideal. With this scene in his most politically controversial novel, Soth Polin challenged *Sangkum*’s imagery; for him, Phnom Penh was not where Vietnamese, Chinese, and Cambodians lived together peacefully. Instead, Soth Polin showed that Phnom Penh was a place where a disgruntled Khmer man could kick a Vietnamese lady for no other reason than because he wanted to.

Phnom Penh was a crucial site on which *Sangkum* imprinted and enacted its ideology. To create a cohesive national identity and to build support, the state created a particular image of the capital and ignored problems that appeared as result of its policies. Oppositional voices found an outlet in the literary works of the time. Through these works, they were able to express their discontent with the government and illustrate their views of Phnom Penh. One of these voices was Soth Polin. He depicted another Phnom Penh in his works. For him, Phnom Penh was not a modern cosmopolitan city with a rich tradition, but a place in which men felt insignificant and isolated. The factories and schools, which made *Sangkum* so proud, did nothing to improve men’s conditions. They only generated alienation. Likewise, the rich Angkorian history that *Sangkum* promoted caused men to fall into existential crisis. The oasis of peace also proved to be a myth in Soth Polin’s works. In short, the Phnom Penh in Soth Polin’s works diverged from the Phnom Penh the government propagated in their newspapers. These differences were the means through which Soth Polin voiced his discontent against the government.

Conclusion

Cities are more than concrete buildings, paved stones, and bright lights. They are “cultural entities...places where people meet, talk, share ideas and desires, and where identities and lifestyles are formed.”⁹⁰ On the buildings and spaces of Phnom Penh the government enacted its ideas and desires for post-colonial Cambodia. It created a narrative to unify Cambodians and to justify its rule. In this narrative, the current regime was the inheritors of Angkor and the bringers of a brighter tomorrow. It employed architects and urban planners to ensure its vision could be seen on the bricks and molding of government buildings, sports arenas, and public monuments. The very layout of the capital city was intentionally made to embody the nationalist narrative and government’s hopes for the future of Cambodia. The state

⁸⁸ ព្រំមានថីសាអីឡូកងង មិតទាត់សាដិតព្រំឡេនទទេរ បងអូងអីយជួយអាចារណាមី ស្រុកយើងអាជរក។ Soth, *To Provoke*

Without Pity, 28. This speech is in is Vietnamese accent. The មិត should have ឺ but because Microsoft word

Khmer font will not allow this, since there’s really no proper Khmer spelling has that combination of vowels. Al

⁸⁹ I would like to thank Trent Walker for pointing out this hilarious play on words to me.

⁹⁰ Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore*, Syracuse, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 28.

thus created a new Phnom Penh, one that it promoted as a peaceful island that was modern and traditional. Through its promotions on the pages of newspapers and in the built environment of Phnom Penh, the state reminded the public of its narrative, thereby unifying the nation and legitimizing itself.

However, in solidifying Phnom Penh's image as an "oasis of peace", the government also ignored many of the social problems found in urban life. The discontent with the city found its voice in other works than those published by the government. One body of work in particular painted a different image of the city and of urban life. Soth Polin used Phnom Penh to voice his critique of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. In his works, Soth Polin deliberately perverted Phnom Penh, the highly touted symbol of *Sangkum*. The city, which filled the leaders and urban planners with pride, was portrayed in his works as site of alienation and as a place where men turned into machines. The polite, modern inhabitants of the capital transformed into young men who kicked old ladies and who were bored with life. Similar to how the government employed Phnom Penh to embody its ideal, Soth Polin used Phnom Penh to express his political discontent against the Sihanouk government. More importantly, in showing another side of Phnom Penh, he provided some insights as why urban students and intellectuals became so disillusioned with society and chose to overthrow Sihanouk in 1970. At the very least, his novels offered an explanation as to why Soth Polin turned against *Sangkum* and supported the creation of the Khmer Republic.

Conclusion: “The Golden Era”

On Saturday, July 20, 2019 at the Meta House in Phnom Penh, the Neak Ta Project advertised a silent auction to support its aims to collect and archive lived histories of Cambodian genocide survivors. The email added that “DJ Sao Sopheak will throw in the best tracks from Cambodia's Golden Age.”¹ The casually mentioned “Golden Age” refers to Cambodia during the 1950s and 1960s, also known as the *Sangkum* period. This advertisement is not the first or only time “Golden Age” signified the era. Holly Robinson of the South China Morning Post cites the term as she mourns the demolition of the White Building, one of the Vann Molyvann’s architectural achievements during *Sangkum*. She accurately observed “the White Building was constructed at the peak of modern Cambodia’s “golden age”, an era of prosperity that came on the heels of independence from France, in 1953. Many look back on the period – which was marked by artistic and cultural accomplishments centered on Phnom Penh – with nostalgia.”² The wistfulness invoked in these depictions contrasts with the sentiments expressed by Vandy Koan in the 1970s, when *Sangkum* came to an end.

In March 1970, the National Assembly voted out Norodom Sihanouk as head of state. David Chandler labelled this event as the “Coup of 1970,” although the Assembly had the right to do per the Constitution.³ Soon after, the Assembly abolished the monarchy and declared Cambodia a republic. Sometime during these events, Vandy Koan published a radical, psychoanalytical reinterpretation of a classical Khmer poem, *Neang Kaki*.⁴ The poem, composed by King Ang Doung in 1813, was based on an older *Jataka* tale. It told the story of a beautiful queen who took many lovers. This poem served as a cautionary tale against female lust and Neang Kaki became an epithet within Khmer society to identify disloyal women who dishonored their husbands.⁵ In his essay, Vandy rescued Neang Kaki’s reputation. Rather than blaming her for what he considered to be natural urges within the human psyche,⁶ he likened Neang Kaki to Madame Bovary. Both women, in his mind, were casualties of a society that favored weak, incompetent men.⁷ Neang Kaki was correct to pursue her own happiness, as should every individual. So rather than condemn her actions, Vandy argued Cambodians should applaud her revolutionary acts.

The description of Neang Kaki as a revolutionary tipped the readers to the political nature of this literary essay. Vandy, first and foremost, sought to reposition women within Khmer society. He believed that “woman were humans too. As humans, they have desires for all kinds

¹ Nicolaus Mesterharm, email message to author, July 19, 2019

² Holly Robertson, “A last look at icon of Cambodia’s ‘Golden Age’ before it is bulldozed to make way for condo tower,” *South China Morning Post*, accessed on July 25, 2019, at: <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/2106117/last-look-icon-cambodias-golden-age-it-bulldozed>

³ David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 204.

⁴ Vandy Koan, *Contributions in the Study of Khmer Literature*, (unknown: unknown, undated). I picked up this collection in a Cambodian supermarket in Long Beach, Ca. When I conducted field work in Phnom Penh, it was freely available in local bookstores and the stalls of Orussey market. Unfortunately, this collection does not have a title page like I have found in other Khmer books. I believe this book was published after Sihanouk was deposed in March 1970 because on page 75, Vandy Koan writes: “we are in the midst of a regime change, from a monarchical regime to a republican one.” Since the Khmer Republic was established soon after Sihanouk’s removal, it is likely the book was published during this time.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 85 and 89.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

of freedoms, especially the freedom to fulfill bodily urges.”⁸ According to Vandy, humans are innate sexual beings. In fact, lust was a defining human characteristic.⁹ As such, sexual desires were natural and must be fulfilled. Vandy considered any limits on this freedom toward sexual fulfillment to be an injustice, a violation of natural rights. This point led to the essay’s second political conclusion. Continuing censure of Neang Kaki’s actions was “a denunciation of current attempts to bring about equality, in particular equality between the sexes.”¹⁰ Vandy tied the condemnation of Neang Kaki to the poem’s author, King Ang Duang. The fictional king’s attempt to control his queen was a microcosm of a tiered power system where husbands mastered their wives, fathers dominated the family and kings ruled their subjects.¹¹ To completely free women, Vandy believed that Cambodians must abolish the old system. The Khmer Republic must fashion itself after the 1789 French Revolution, a comparison that appeared many times throughout the essay.¹² Just as the French Revolution guillotined Louis the XVI and tried to erase all traces of the *ancien régime*, Cambodia, in addition to deposing its king, must also change its traditions and remove any monarchical legacies. The monarchy, Vandy believed, was a source of social inequalities: the favoring of men’s desires over those of women.

This essay of Vandy Koan represents the changes Cambodians experienced since independence in 1954. His open call for a revolution, an overturning of a political system that traced itself back to the god-kings of Angkor, signaled a crucial difference between the Khmer Republic and *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, or even the earlier period of the Democratic Party. Vandy, who at most was thirty at the time of his essay’s publication, no longer feared royal power. He did not mask his critiques of Sihanouk or of the monarchy behind representations of the city as Soth Polin did. Vandy openly wrote of his mistrust of kings. He, unlike the 1946 Democrats, was not concerned about a king who could veto laws or end governments. Main supporters of the Republic, who were the intellectuals centered in Phnom Penh, now had an opportunity to create a society freed from not only French colonialism, but also from what they called feudalism. They could, as Vandy advocated in his essay, fashion a country where men and women’s desires were equally valued.

While his views on women made his essay fascinating, Vandy Koan was no more special than other intellectuals discussed in this dissertation. Born in 1942, Vandy was a native of Phnom Penh, where he completed his primary and secondary schooling. He, along with other city dwellers, witnessed the social and physical transformation of Phnom Penh into a capital city. His pronouncements on women, most sweeping in its advocacy of sexual liberation, extended a discourse that began when women gained voting rights and the ability to stand for elections in

⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁹ For this argument, Vandy relied on the philosophies of Spinoza and Buddha. He stated that lust set humans apart from God, who is being without any lust or desire. Since a human being is not God, he cannot be a being without lust. So to be human means to lust or to want.

¹⁰ Ibid., 95 and 98.

¹¹ គំនិតរបស់បុរសខ្មែរទាំងអស់ គ្រាន់តែជាស្រមោលនៃគំនិតស្តេចតែប៉ុណ្ណោះ ពោលគឺបែបដឹកនាំគ្រប់យ៉ាងដូចម្តេចលក្ខណៈរបស់ក្រុងសាវ័ក

ដូច្នេះដែរ។ បើស្តេចជាម្ចាស់របស់នគរទាំងមូល ឪពុកក៏ជាម្ចាស់ របស់ក្រុងសាវ័កដែរ។ Trudi Jacobsen elaborated upon Vandy’s argument, although there was no citation of Vandy’s essay. Please see Trudi Jacobson, *Lost Goddess*. Vandy’s argument, at first glance, seems to be very similar to Marx’s thought. However, Vandy based his argument on psychoanalysis and humanist philosophy. He connected the king’s need to control Neang Kaki to a deep-seated insecurity and narcissism. So the emphasis was not on the control of labor or the means of production for the benefit of a particular class, but rather Vandy was concerned about psychological inner workings of the mind.

¹² Ibid., 95.

1955. Despite the changes, his references to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and to the French Revolution demonstrated the persistent hold French thinkers and symbols exercised in postcolonial Cambodian thought. At the same time, his work shared a preoccupation with Khmerization: Vandy attempted to translate Freudian ideas into Khmer. This essay, similar his other works, were beautifully prosed in Khmer, but contained French words in parenthesis in order to clarify his thoughts. Like what Soth Polin did with Sartre and Camus, Vandy used psychoanalysis to critique and challenge Cambodian cultural values and political structures. Via his writings, Vandy Koan, similar to the other Khmer men and women examined in this dissertation, assumed the task of conceiving, defining, and building a postcolonial Cambodian modernity.

For this reason, I studied the experiences and cultural products of urban intellectuals like Vandy Koan in order to excavate what independence and modernity meant to them. This dissertation closely analyzed their novels, essays, manuals, editorials and films to unpack some of the complex emotions Cambodians felt as Phnom Penh developed. I have described the various reactions Cambodian intellectuals had to the four interlinked state “projects” that characterized modernity: democratization, secularization of knowledge, gender equality, and urban development. It was the intellectual class who promoted and campaigned for Cambodia to become a constitutional democracy. They were the first ones to put it into practice. Sihanouk, later, co-opted their political project to institute his government, *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, but their work during this brief period of democratic experimentation established their role as the vanguard in Cambodian politics and culture.

Their ranks expanded beyond its old confines during the *Sangkum* period as a result of Sihanouk's efforts to improve Cambodian education. To develop into a sovereign nation-state, the young country needed men and women trained in specialized fields such as law, architecture, or sciences. Independence provided an opportunity for Cambodians to develop a secular school system to fit their needs. An alumnus of the Lycée Sisowath explained the importance of this historical juncture in the expansion of a secular education:

Since our country has achieved Independence, we need builders (*neak kor sang*). We must create more schools so that every Cambodian can relish in knowledge. We must modify the curriculum. We must teach in Khmer. How we teach must change as well. In short, we must undertake all necessary curricular and pedagogical adjustments to optimize the benefits for our nation in accordance to its status.¹³

This desire to transform Cambodia into a country befitting of its independence fueled a rapid growth in the number of Cambodian schools and students, eclipsing many times over what the French colonial administration attempted to do in the Protectorate.

¹³ ឥឡូវនេះប្រទេសយើងបានឯករាជ្យហើយ ។ ត្រូវការអ្នកកសាងណាស់ដូច្នេះយើងត្រូវបង្កើតសាលាឱ្យរឹតតែបានច្រើនទៅទៀត ដើម្បីនឹងឱ្យពលរដ្ឋខ្មែរគ្រប់រូបបានក្រេបជញ្ជក់យកដំរិះវាជួរ។ កម្មវិធីទៀតក៏ត្រូវកែប្រែ ត្រូវតែបង្រៀនជាសាខាខ្មែរ របៀបបង្រៀនវិញក៏ដូច្នេះដែរ បានសេចក្តីថាយើងធ្វើយ៉ាងដូចម្តេចឱ្យកម្មវិធី ឱ្យរបៀបបង្រៀនស្របទៅតាមប្រយោជន៍ជាតិយើងស្របទៅតាមឋានៈនៃប្រទេសយើង។ “The Path of Education,” *Magazine for the Former Students of Lycee Sisowath*, 1956, 5-6.

When the government overhauled education, they also gave rise to a secular, instrumentalist view of knowledge. Knowledge became identified with mass-produced textbooks and men, whereas before it was a gift from supernatural beings. The hollowing out of the sacred changed how Cambodians perceived intellectuals. As knowledge became more material, “the gatherers of knowledge” also became mundane and vulnerable to attacks. Cambodians viewed these intellectuals as distinct from earlier types of learned men who were revered of their distance from earthly delights. The commonness of Cambodia’s new intellectuals was reflected in their modern works and in their contemporary representation of the city. New subject matters preoccupied these new men and women. This turn in subject matter differentiated modern literature from traditional writings. Modern literature focused on the realities of Cambodian conditions and depicted the lives of ordinary men. It was neither adapted nor inspired by religious texts. Instead, its themes centered on man and his struggles, sorrows, jealousies, and deception. This change in perspective was visible in Vandy’s understanding of Neang Kaki. Nowhere in his essay did Vandy refer to Neang Kaki as the wife of a bodhisattva. Rather Vandy described Neang Kaki as a gentle woman who wanted the most out of life but caught in the system that failed to acknowledge her wants. The king, who was celebrated as one of Buddha’s past lives, was re-interpreted as a flawed man. Vandy borrowed Buddhist philosophy to support his argument, but he used Buddha in the same manner as he used Spinoza and Freud: as a source of knowledge rather than as the Truth. The words of Buddha was not an absolute truth to Vandy, but was one of many possible thoughts, used in the service of his argument. The methodological and theoretical shifts in how intellectuals represented their subject matter echoed the overall secularization that they personally experienced during the *Sangkum* period. Both, they and their area of study, became ordinary. Independence and the changes made to the school system produced a flattening of knowledge and identities.

The changes made to the education system also allowed women to join the ranks of intellectuals. Sihanouk felt that advances made in women’s rights was the one area in which Cambodia was superior to the West. Because the government reformed the Constitution and passed favorable labor laws, *Sangkum* outperformed its colonial predecessor. The French were unable Khmer women to enroll in school. In contrast, the *Sangkum* period marked a time when women in large numbers attained formal education. Once a domain reserved for men, Cambodian schools became a space of heterosexual interaction. Likewise, the National Assembly and the office saw female senators and secretaries. New forms of leisure also gave urban women greater visibility. During *Sangkum*, women could be found dancing in nightclubs, driving cars, visiting tourist destinations with friends, or participating in international conferences. These women, like their male counterparts, experienced tremendous personal change. How they dressed, spoke and interacted with men all become subject of much discourse. Their experiences and the reaction to their new ways defined modernity in Cambodia. They were symbols of how far Cambodia has developed as well as embodiments of the disrupting forces found in modern life.

As much as the top-down projects by the state transformed Cambodian society and brought about new social groups, they did not defined how Cambodians experienced modernity. It was Cambodian intellectuals who rendered modernity meaningful through the conversations and debates they had in reaction to these state-led projects. From these conversations, three themes emerged to denote Cambodian modernity: an uneasy relationship between the old and the new, the building of Independence and the centrality of Phnom Penh. These three associations together gave Cambodian modernity its unique character.

The Old and the New

New social relations between men and women emerged as the result of government reforms, expansion in education and the development of different leisure activities. New attitudes towards knowledge and space also flowered during the *Sangkum* period. At the same time, this period saw a return of old rituals, such as audiences with the king and the Plowing of the Earth ceremony. Cambodian architects incorporated traditional ornaments to the design of their new buildings. The relationship between the old and the new proved to be contentious. For the government and some Cambodians, there were no problems. The old and new can be harmoniously combined, as manifested on the façade of Phnom Penh buildings. An architect of some of these buildings, Vann Molyvann, felt that the grandeur of Angkor inspired him as he faced the task of constructing an independent Cambodia. Others described a rupture between the old and the new. New literature, for instance, was different from older literature. Cambodian women no longer behaved like they once did, a fact some writers delighted in while others were dismayed. For even more Cambodians, the grandeur of the past instilled an insecurity, an awareness that the present failed to measure up to the past.

These discussions revealed that Cambodians were as preoccupied with the old as they were with the new. Rather than seeing modernity as only the creation of an ever-evolving new, their debates suggested that these intellectuals considered modernity to be a dialectical struggle between the old and the new. Their works showed an attempt to relate their new times in some way to past norms and thinkers, to find some constancy in a changing world. Cambodia, to them, was never a blank slate.

Postcolonialism in Cambodia

Independence was another important topic in their conversations. They believed French colonialism deliberately retarded the development of Cambodia, instead of developing as it pledged. Independence from France meant, to these intellectuals, the chance to modernize and to become everything *mission civilisatrice* promised, but without French presence. Vann Molyvann described *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* as “the building of independent Cambodia: in other words, building immediately what the country needed most. This led to the overall development of communication infrastructure throughout Cambodia’s territory—roads, bridges, railways—to link all parts of the country.”¹⁴ Independence drove the government and people to change their country. In addition to changing the built environment, some of the literatures showed that independence had altered expectations. Aunt Prem in Im Thok’s *Sim the Chaffeur* spoke of how people should live better and eat well because the country had gained independence. The nameless Vietnamese lady in Soth Polin’s *To Provoke without Pity* raised independence as a point when she publicly scolded Kem. Independence apparently meant a life freed of random violence, an idea Kem and his friend openly mocked. During this period, Independence along with a hope for an increased standard of living and a desire for a peaceful existence blurred together to color Cambodian conceptions of modernity. Independence provided the moment when Cambodians proclaimed themselves, their literature, music and buildings as modern. As Cambodian intellectuals intertwined modernity with ideas of independence, some used these twin concepts to challenge Sihanouk’s government. Soth Polin’s Vietnamese lady became a trope to poke fun at the image of Phnom Penh as an oasis of peace. Aunt Prem’s words of an independent Cambodia proved to be fantasy as she dealt with the harsh realities of being

¹⁴ *Cambodia Daily*, 31 October 2007

construction worker in Phnom Penh. To inhabitants of Phnom Penh, the end of colonialism brought about new dreams and shattering disillusionment.

Phnom Penh and Modernity

For these intellectuals, Phnom Penh was the epicenter of Cambodian modernity. The government turned it into a showcase for all its achievements and a vehicle to connect to the past. It was the center of the state's bureaucracy and transportation networks. It housed the major banks and universities. Newspapers and publishing based their operations in Phnom Penh. The capital city was the cultural, economic and political heart of postcolonial Cambodia. Given its centrality, Phnom Penh was a powerful symbol of the changes Cambodians experienced during this time. It was not a static symbol, but one that shifted according to the hopes and apprehensions Cambodian intellectuals had toward modern life. Their representations showed how Phnom Penh transformed its inhabitants. People from the countryside came to the city in search of jobs and education. In the process of walking, working and writing about the city, these men and women turned into construction workers, bureaucrats, secretaries and teachers. The city was the site that generated new identities.

Memory of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*

Any history of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* must face the popular memory that this period invoked among journalist, scholars and Cambodians. Peter Olszewski of the *Phnom Penh Post* wrote that Vann Molyvann engineered “an enlightened national social development policy that was planned for the Kingdom during the 1955-1970 *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* or ‘Golden Age’ regime under guidance of Norodom Sihanouk.”¹⁵ Similarly, Adeena Mey reported in the Italian art magazine, *Nero*, that “for many people in Cambodia, the 1960s and the *Sangkum* period represent the country's golden age.”¹⁶ Another journalist and producer, Robert Turnbull, described the *Sangkum* period as a “yardstick by which most aspects of contemporary culture can be judged today.”¹⁷ He expanded on his understanding of *Sangkum* in a recent Indiegogo campaign to raise funds for a Cambodian production of Mozart's Magic Flute:

In the 1960s Phnom Penh was known [sic] as the Pearl of Southeast Asia, and Cambodia was seen as a rising power on par with Vietnam and Thailand. Cambodia had a flourishing artistic community complete with rock musicians, a prolific cinema scene, coexisting with traditional disciplines such as Apsara dancers and shadow puppetry. That was all but silenced by decades of conflict, which began with the Khmer Rouge genocide in which most of the country's artistic and intellectual community were murdered, followed by internal conflicts that continued into the 1990s.

¹⁵ Peter Olszewski, “Building on the Shoulders of Giants,” *Phnom Penh Post*, 16 July 2009

¹⁶ Adeena Mey, “A New Reportage,” *Nero*, issue 32, Spring-Summer 2013, accessed at <http://www.neromagazine.it/magazine/index.php?c=articolo&idart=1087&idnum=42&num=32&pics=0>.

¹⁷ Robert Turnbull, “A Burnt-out Theatre,” *Expressions of Cambodia: The Politics of Tradition, Identity and Change*, edited by Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier and Tim Winter, (New York : Routledge, 2006), 144.

This narrative juxtaposed a flourishing *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* with that of the murderous genocidal Khmer Rouge.¹⁸ *Sangkum* in this narrative becomes a golden age in Cambodian history that came to a tragic end because of Khmer Republic, the American war with Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge. It seems that any understanding of *Sangkum* is forever tied to what came later.

Milton Osborne, who began his study of Cambodian history in the 1960s, notes how later events have casted *Sangkum* in a positive light: *Sangkum*'s "contrast with what came afterward make the years before Sihanouk was overthrown a period to be treasured."¹⁹ Despite Osborne's awareness that the period contains "as much dross as precious metal," he maintains that it "was a time, indeed the time, when for a period Cambodia's present and its future prospect seemed bright under a charismatic ruler."²⁰ Scholars and journalists appear to agree that *Sangkum* was indeed a golden age in Cambodian history.

Their understanding is not without merit. It is, in fact, based on how many Cambodians remember this period. For Sihanouk's 85th birthday, the *Cambodia Daily* ran a special, celebratory issue. In an article entitled "Memories of Independence," the newspaper listed Cambodians' impressions of *Sangkum*. Chea Vannath remembered it as a time when "there were very few street children, very few beggars." Meng Muy Chang spoke of how "we didn't have to lock the door at night. We could just sleep with it open." Chea Vannath added that "We were very proud to get independence in a non-violent way. It's different from Vietnam." The only time a person's memories ran counter to the overall image of *Sangkum* as a time of peace and order was when Sieng Sen, who was born in 1943, mentioned how he and his family "were always hiding in the forest, always on the run" during the First Indochina War. Sieng's memory was the only indication of how *Sangkum* was not as peaceful after all. Sieng and the article later papered over this slippage by saying that with Independence all his family troubles disappeared.²¹

Since they lived through these historical events, their memories cannot be discounted. However, these accounts contain ellipsis and erasures. For example, Nou Mem, who was interviewed as a part of *Living Memory of the Khmer* project, spoke of how he "was happy during the King's regime [*Sangkum Reastr Niyum*], there was no problem. I did not know any party, I only cheered for the King! Cheered for the King! The King led us to a happy regime." He then mentioned that he joined the Khmer Serei, an organization created to oppose to Sihanouk. Nou continued his interview without any awareness of this contradiction. If there were no problems during the *Sangkum* period, then why did he join the Khmer Serei? Similarly, if the *Sangkum* period was the "golden age" as popular memory paints, why was there support for its removal? These memories, when compared to Vandy Koan's essay from the Republican period, indicate that the past was more complex than these popular narratives tell.

¹⁸ This narrative is repeated in two recent documentaries on Cambodia. The first is *Golden Slumbers*, which documents the prolific cinema scene Robert Turnbull mentioned. The second is *Cambodia's Lost Era of Rock and Roll*. As the name suggests, the film depicted the Cambodian music scene during the 1950s and 1960s. It did not end there. Both films follow the same narrative: first is the flourishing of *Sangkum*, then came the chaos caused by the Lon Nol and Cambodia's entry in the Vietnam War, then there was the genocide and extended civil war. Now there is recovery and rebuilding.

¹⁹ Milton Osborne, *Phnom Penh: A Cultural and Literary History*, (Oxford: Signal Books, 2007), 123.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Memories of Independence," *Cambodia Daily*, November 7, 2007, accessed at <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/memories%E2%80%88of%E2%80%88independence-91256/>.

This dissertation revises the popular image of *Sangkum* as portrayed by these memories with that found in archival documents, novels, and essays from the period. It restores to *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* the full range of people's emotions and thoughts, along with all its complexities and contradictions. It attempts to reconstruct, as faithfully as possible, the preoccupations and concerns that worried Cambodian urbanites throughout the 1950s and 1960s. While present concerns influence constructions of the past, I held to the idea of the past as a special domain with its own dynamics and fixations. This dissertation stresses the aspirations and anxieties of Phnom Penh intellectuals as their postcolonial country modernized and *Sangkum* came to be.

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