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Nation, Modernisation and Civilisation: Development and the Emergence of a Transformed Cambodian State

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Development has emphasised and naturalised the reorganisation of individuals' social lives around economic subjectivity in order to become 'empowered'. However, for Cambodians, development as a project that reorganises society also represents another period of social upheaval and change, which also seeks to dismantle social relationships that have become relied upon as strategies of survival in recent decades. More so, development as currently implemented by international actors is a continuation of projects that have sought to 'modernise' Cambodian people, from the colonial period as a French protectorate, to the genocidal policies of Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge. In development processes, there is a need to critically examine structural and historically embedded power relations as well as the multiple and complex meanings of being 'modern'. The socially and politically mediated categories created by differing understandings of being 'modern' pose a significant crisis for understandings of Cambodian identity. Development, as a modernising project, creates categories and then attempts to insert individuals into those categories (according to being poor, impoverished, vulnerable, victims, etc.). What becomes apparent is that people challenge, resist and defy those categories by drawing upon local meanings of status, prestige and power which are context specific. This article situates the current trajectory of development as an extension of Western, modernisation processes and argues that the overall 'fit' between current development paradigms and Cambodian people is an uncomfortable one. There is a discordant relationship between local and external perceptions of development and this clash creates a discursive field in which there is a questioning of both local as well as Western constructs of development. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Cambodia in 2009 with high-ranking officials of the Cambodian government (who I have anonymised here), I will illustrate how current approaches to development do not necessarily translate to locally desired forms of development, which are largely coloured by national, cultural and individual aspirations for distinction and recognition. I will then draw on aspects of post-development approaches as a 'Marxism', and in particular, its location of development within Western progress narratives, its emphasis on alterity and the significance of local, context-specific relations. I will then critically discuss the implicit aims of development to 'modernise', where development, as an extension of modernisation and colonialism, becomes an explicitly political project, rather than a humanitarian one. Development largely seeks social transformation along a certain dimension, which is largely based in Western and Eurocentric understandings, where the desire to 'modernise' and 'civilise' the 'backward' is inherent. In addition, factors such as religion are central to the understanding of Khmer identity and social organisation and I present the example of 'corruption' to illustrate the clash between categories of development and local

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concepts. I conclude that development as an objectifying process is also compelling the resurgence of the understanding of Khmer nationhood with its wider historical significance as a civilisation. The engagement with development not only compels a sense of nationalism, but also reinforces Cambodia's particular experience of modernity.

This particular experience of modernity and its confrontation with current approaches to development becomes visible in interactions with government officials. Officials hold a dual role in the development context in Cambodia; they are beneficiaries in the sense that international bodies seek partnership with the Cambodian government in order to achieve the goals of development in the country, yet they are also amongst the 'agents' of development in the local context. In our discussions, the responses that emerged were also specific to our relationship: researcher to informants, representative of international actors to local actors in development. Our interactions were characterised by our formal positionalities within and on behalf of organisations and we were also speaking from the sense of structured embeddedness from which development is expressed and communicated. Most informants for example, in meeting with myself and other Cambodian counterparts, were coming to the table as representatives, categories of office and not as individuals and individual personalities. This revealed that development is further reinforced as being implemented from the outside, as the very relationships established are conducted through contractual, categorical interactions between 'outsiders' and 'insiders', with outsiders remaining on the outside and insiders remaining on the inside. Given the nature of my interactions with officials who have been involved with development organisations and projects, the data that emerged revealed an ongoing separation between those who 'implement' development and those who 'receive' it. By exploring the nature of interactions in this way, it was also revealed that the culture, identity and position of individuals is largely linked to a wider understanding of the nuances of Cambodian society that is often overlooked by development initiatives.

These impressions illustrate the way that the articulation of a developed, modern Cambodia carries distinctive ideas, images and symbols from Khmer historicities. Discussions within Development Studies have been conceptualised within various Marxist-based approaches including dependency theory, post-colonialism and feminism (WID, WAD, GAD and DAWN)². This discussion draws upon aspects of post-development as an approach, and in particular, the need for development to be context-driven. What is revealed is that the articulation of a developed, modern Cambodia carries distinctive ideas, images and symbols from Khmer historicities that are not necessarily akin to the ideals of development as framed by Western discourses. Instead, development in Cambodia is desired in a more culturally autonomous form, and what has resulted is a stalemate of sorts, where development in both terms has few options to proceed in partnership, as Western discourses of development are implicitly resisted and local articulations of development are stifled.

Perspectives of Cambodian Government Officials

² Gender-based approaches to development: WID: Women in Development, WAD: Women and Development, GAD: Gender and Development and DAWN: Development Alternatives with Women for a new Era

Nhean, Sovann and Jovina were students in an ‘Issues in Development’ discussion group I was running within a major government institution in Phnom Penh. The government ministry they worked within was keen to facilitate dialogues between officials and representatives of international institutions. As a doctoral student of the University of Melbourne, I was invited to run the session for two hours a week for ten weeks. I was told this would ‘facilitate knowledge transfer, help to establish good relations between the Cambodian government and foreign institutions and would help to build local capacities.’ The weekly discussions were semi-structured, revolving around a theme and broad questions. Some topics incited more lively discussion than others, the most popular topics being culture and development, gender, and globalisation.

Nhean was in his mid-40s, he had been working in his department for over ten years, in the same department where his mother had worked as an administrative assistant. She had originally found the job for him by asking her employer, a family friend to interview him. In addition to working the usual 42 hours a week, Nhean was also taking private Japanese and English classes. He was hoping to change careers into foreign relations, but while his children were in school, the time he could commit seemed unlikely. Nhean was exceptionally attuned to the current state of economics and politics in Cambodia and he kept up to date with world news. He could speak extensively about the Global Financial Crisis and how it had affected Cambodia. Like many of my students, Nhean was eager to see Cambodia develop and become a modern city, however, he was also concerned about how Cambodian culture would be affected by increasing participation in the world economy. He explains,

Everyone has a spirit and a physical body and the body needs material things to grow, but the spirit also needs to grow. Changing culture also affects identity. While accepting the good things from outside, we also need to develop our own. We know the ideas of development come from outside, that’s good, we accept it, we know how technology can improve society but development is not always good for culture, there is also a bad side to things which come. It also influences upon our culture and we need to distinguish what is good and what is bad, if it is good, if it is for advancement we should accept it. But when we accept what we think is good, how can we see the bad impacts on culture? We also need to educate people to understand and value our culture. We have had a glorious culture in the past. So both the physical and spiritual advancement should go hand in hand, otherwise it will be lopsided; there will be an imbalance. If the development of the physical side is too fast, it will come to a halt, it won’t be everlasting and won’t benefit the generations to come.

Nhean’s view reiterates many others I encountered, which suggests the desire to ‘preserve’ culture and traditions as they have proven to uphold regional strength and power in the past. When speaking about culture, many officials referred to ‘Khmer’ culture as well, rather than ‘Cambodian’ culture, suggesting a differing category of understanding history, Khmer denoting pre-Cambodia as a modern state. Similarly, there was a sense that reaching a modern, developed Cambodia also restored a certain sense of grandeur that the Khmer empire had held historically. The height of the Angkorian civilisation was built upon the values and culture of the Khmer people and in particular the strength of the Khmers as predominantly agricultural people who

worked together within their family and community. Within this social structure, reciprocity became integral to defining Khmer culture. Nhean further describes:

Khmer culture is about sharing. Even now, my neighbours, everybody knows each other, who you are and where you're from. Every time, when some of us have food, we still share. We've kept this culture. People now are changed. They start to not believe in each other and they don't rely on each other. But when you grow up and live in one area for a long time, they know us clearly, they know you and they know your family and your work. They know your mind. Now for city people, they don't believe in each other. They just live, you have your way and I have my way. It's like this in Phnom Penh. But for the countryside, it's different. If you live in one village, you know the people in the next ten villages.

Nhean's comment suggests that the social relations of village life, which he describes as central to understandings of Khmer culture has been disrupted by increasing urban living. Further responses also suggested a sense of rural and community nostalgia and that becoming 'modern' also implied a loss of cultural authenticity associated with Khmer village life. The importance of family structure and the relations of community are resonant in several studies of South East Asia (Hansen 2004, 2007, Swearer 2010, Nissen 2008). In the case of Cambodia, the association of family with community as a central characteristic of Khmer culture is strongly linked to notions of tradition. Local articulations of development in Cambodia still emphasise the importance of relationships between people, family and collective interests. In contrast, Western models of development largely emphasise individuality and the relationship between people and things that influence perceptions of status, prestige and power. The clash within the layers of discourses in development in Cambodia reveals how people seek to meet basic needs, mediate their material wants and navigate individual aspirations, while still subscribing to particular shared notions of cultural identity.

Jovina, a middle aged woman who held a high position in the Ministry of Women's Affairs felt very strongly about the impact of increasing economic demands on women alongside the expectation to retain their role as caretaker of the family. Jovina herself had experienced this burden; she starts her day at 4am, cooks the day's meals for her family and does her house chores before getting ready to go to her office for 8am. She shares a similar view to other women holding higher positions of power; there is an anxiety about what is expected of them on behalf of development and what is expected of them culturally and concern for how they will fulfil both roles as economic providers and caretakers.

Even though both sexes are supposed to be treated equally by the law, even now, women are not treated equally by society. For example, from the community level to the provincial and the national level, where women are so committed to their jobs, at the same time, while women have their official duties, they have another role in the family, that is to look after the children and also to take care of their husband. They have to prepare food and take care of the household. This is very important to Cambodian society.

The awareness of current social change and its implications for women are particularly sharp. There were several expressions of how women were concerned

about mediating these roles. Furthermore, women are intrinsically linked to culture as the embodiment or carriers of tradition and values (Derks 2008, Turshen 2001). Jovina suggests that this has become more prominent in the commodification of culture through tourism.

Now, with globalisation, the changing role of women is more important to all aspects and sectors of society. For example, with tourism. Many women work around the Angkor temples, they sell souvenirs and some are tour guides. The women who are very skilful with traditional dances and songs are very important now to serve in the tourist industry, they show tradition. The women model the culture itself. Culture is invested mostly with women. When we talk about culture, women play the most important role because they bring local culture to the international stage, in performance, concerts, dance and music. Women know what culture is all about.

Jovina's view also reflects Cohen and Kennedy's assertion that in many cases, tourism, as an aspect of Appadurai's 'ethnoscapes' of globalisation, can assist in strengthening cultural identity and reinvigorating the visibility of local cultures (Cohen and Kennedy, 2000). However, her perspective also suggests the burden women bear for embodying, retaining and displaying tradition and implicitly suggests the social stigmatisation that can be placed on women if they cannot uphold cultural norms and values (Clark 2003, Derks 2008).

Sovann was one of my youngest students and also one of the most educated. He was in his early 20s, he had finished his Bachelor of Public Administration at the Panasastra University in Phnom, he was fluent in English and at the time, he was applying for scholarships to further his study abroad. Like many of his generation, he was brought up with the hard luck stories of his relatives after the conflict, and was the product of their recovery to give him and his sisters more opportunities. Sovann was also part of a generation who voiced change for their future. At his university, he was competitive for grades but he also saw how grades could be bought. Now in his current job at the Ministry of Interior, once again he is seeing how an education, while it is an asset, can only get him so far when networks seem to advance the individual further. In our discussion of corruption in formal definitions and the ambiguity generated by notions of reciprocity, gift-giving and culture, Sovann took the opportunity to criticise his peers. However, he also suggested that culture wasn't entirely to blame:

In Khmer culture, giving money to people for your own favour is similar to giving money to the gods or to deities as an offering for good fortune. Globalisation is changing how these practices are seen. The meaning changes from one country to another, the meaning that was part of tradition. When there's a change of practice and what new things mean, it changes the meaning of the practice even though it is based in tradition.

Throughout these discussions, Sovann always sat with his colleagues from the ministry he worked in. All were young Cambodian men who held similar status in education as he did, they had all attended university and they could speak at least two languages (in addition to Khmer and English, some spoke Japanese, French or Russian). This group largely represented a new generation of officials who were

ostensibly caught between ‘new’ ways and ‘old’ ways of negotiating political power in Cambodia. Although our discussions were highly mediated by my respective role as teacher and representative of expatriates in Cambodia and that of my students as government officials, there was still large scope for their responses to reveal several recurring themes and concerns.

In these brief illustrations, the concerns for the multiple expectations of Cambodians that need to be negotiated in the relationship with development processes become visible. The valorisation of rural life and its importance to culture and tradition in contrast to urban life, the multiple burdens on women to be producers as well as reproducers and the transforming implications of reciprocity and obligation suggest just some of the expectations that need to be navigated. In the case of Cambodia, when we locate approaches to development within Western narratives of progress, it becomes clear that ‘progress’ speaks to a largely different teleology in Khmer terms; progress as associated with particular understandings of Cambodian history and of the Khmer civilisation in particular.

The study of government officials does not reveal the government as a homogenous group of development agents in Cambodia. As a young, single male, Sovann’s concerns are very different to that of Jovina’s. Similarly, Jovina’s struggles are different to that of Nhean’s. Post-development as a school of thought rejects the tendency development has in practice to ‘pathologise’ problems, or to create categories of development problems to be solved. In this way, this discussion reflects Escobar’s deconstruction of the perspective of the need for development on behalf of the ‘West’ – as well as his view of the need to examine the subjectivity of development agents and practitioners as they operate in developing contexts (Escobar, 1995).

Post-development as a ‘Marxism’ and the issue of alterity

A central concern of post-development, alongside other critiques of Western modernity and narratives of technoscientific progress including critical theory and post-structuralism is with development as a discourse, how development knowledge and perceptions are constructed, whom they serve and whom they include and exclude in development processes (Escobar 1995, Pieterse 2010, Bawtree and Rahnema 1997). Furthermore, post-development explores the counternarratives of development: how development is professionalised and institutionalised by development agents such as policy makers, development practitioners and NGOs, researchers and academics, as well as the explicit and implicit forms of resistance they encounter in local contexts (Escobar 1995, Bull and Bøås 2010). In this way, post-development represents a neo-Marxist reading of development for the purpose of modernisation as a reflection of narratives of modernity, as it focuses on the inherent unequal power relations between development agents and beneficiaries, as an extension of developed/ underdeveloped, urban/rural, core/periphery dichotomies (Saunders 2002). As a sub-discipline, the main position of post-development is largely Marxist; development processes are inseparable from conflict, and development itself is a form of conflict. Development as a form of conflict is revealed by closer examination of the contextual relationships between local and international actors. In development as implemented by international actors, issues of access, inclusion and exclusion (to resources and socio-economic opportunities) are left largely invisible in their relation to wider, structural inequalities based on age, gender and ethnicity. Instead, the focus is on creating

individual economic empowerment, which has been continually reflected in recent approaches and initiatives such as microfinance.

The strongest critiques of development argue that current approaches still largely reflect the modernisation approach with its inherent power structures that produce inequalities. Modernisation approaches seek to increase GDP and facilitate the growth of a country's economy by increased industrialisation and labour (Bebbington and Kothari 2006, Mosse and Lewis 2005, Kothari 1997, 2002, Abrahamsen 2004). Development as a political project predominantly has its roots in 18th century modernisation and colonisation, where expanding the economy and facilitating economic progress through extended empires was viewed as paramount to furthering the notion of 'civilisation'. However, development as a political and intellectual project with its current intents and purposes came out of the post-world war period of the 1940s and 1950s. The processes of decolonisation and the rise of the soviet bloc that followed, generated a global climate where those who had economic power also had power over the world economy (Veltmeyer and Petras 2000, p. 21). Modes of thinking about development at this time 'emphasised the obstacles to and the dynamic forces of economic growth' in order for countries to become more competitive and for this, neoliberal policies were viewed as engine to increase economic growth as well as achieving development (ibid, 21). Seen in this light, development is an overtly Western-led project, which reflects distinctly Western understandings of modernity that come into question in post-development theory.

Although post-development as a critique provides much-needed insight into the nature of development processes, one of the key weaknesses of the approach is that post-development does not pose alternative pathways to suggest how development can be 'done' differently. Post-development approaches critique the existence of development and highlights its pitfalls as a form of neo-colonialism, however, it falls short of providing a way out of the quagmire (Schubert, 2011, personal communication). In pursuing a context-driven mode of analysis, I propose to provide a way out of the post-development discourse and into a new direction, by illustrating what this new direction would entail for Cambodia as a case study. This approach to development in Cambodia will show where the existing categories to development fall short. Most importantly, as I will illustrate, this different direction has to be informed by local contexts, which is where limitations of current theory and approaches lie. With my discussion of the case of Cambodia, I am exploring emerging themes in a particular way to link the larger social context to individual experiences, in order to suggest that although development largely treats individuals as independent from social and structural contexts, these contexts are always pervasive in the individual's experience of development, as the individual's experience of development is located in the individual's existing world-view. The path that development is unfolding in Cambodia is within a particular context which needs to be taken into account when implemented, as the implications of the change that development poses run deep to how Cambodian society is understood. By approaching development in Cambodia in this way, I aim to challenge the existing categories that development has so far perpetuated.

As a theoretical model, the approach to this discussion heavily draws upon post-development theorists who respond to modernisation theory and the assumptions of development economists who predominantly view development as a process of economic relations without critically examining power relations (Escobar, 1995, Ferguson, 1990, Gupta, 1980, Wainwright 2008). This approach brings to the

foreground the conditions of poverty and inequality that were created by structural and historical processes and have been rearticulated as a problem of a lack of progress (Escobar, 1995, Ferguson, 1990, Luke, 1990, Wainwright, 2008). Although the approaches I employ are not new or novel, the innovation may be concluded as an observation of concrete phenomena of development as experienced in real contexts—with the construction of relationships between local and international actors as political phenomena in the foreground.

In this discussion, the multiple expectations and understandings of development according to ‘Western’ discourses in contrast to ‘local’ articulations are analysed by examining the systems of relations between institutions, socio-economic processes and forms of knowledge that inform these positions. Nhean’s concerns with culture and globalisation, Jovina’s further preoccupation with how women will adequately navigate culture and development and Sovann’s questioning of the changing nature of cultural practices in increasingly globalised contexts speak to anxieties of the contingency of emerging Cambodian identities and the changing place of culture, tradition and values in a rapidly-modernising country. I argue that there is much more at stake for Cambodians than building modern, institutional functions of the state. There are strong suggestions of the desire to build a nation that echoes the significance of Cambodia to the region. The distinctiveness of Cambodian identity and of Cambodia, historically, is inextricable from the emerging nation and is compelled by development. These themes have been consistent in Cambodia’s history, and in particular, in Cambodia’s recent history, where multiple projects have sought to transform Cambodian society within a short space of time, according to particular cultural ideals. The next section will provide the recent context from which the current state of development has emerged.

The background to the current development context: the civil war, UNTAC and the state of NGOs in Cambodia

The revolution in Cambodia under Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea regime was swift, relentless and accomplished in three and a half short years to transform Cambodia’s society by ‘eradicating over 2000 years of Cambodian history (Chandler, 1993, p. 209). The civil war was the culmination of the encroaching conflict between the US and Vietnam and the deepening of communist ideologies with Cambodia’s further co-operation with China, and the overthrowing of the king Sihanouk’s parliament by Lon Nol (the then prime-minister) and his supporters in 1973³. The country was plunged into further chaos as the US bombed heavily into the country, destroying major infrastructure (Winter, 2007, p. 3). The Khmer Rouge, which combined orthodox Marxism with Leninism and the Maoist communist ideology gained wide support in the rural areas, where the population was largely in support of the monarchy. The Khmer Rouge then attempted to transform Cambodian society by destroying the existing social, political, economic and cultural infrastructure and in its

³ I have given a very brief summary of the period of decolonisation to the civil war, highlighting the construction of Khmer ideology in relation to constructing a national and ethnic identity that has influenced the development context today, only. Extensive historical analyses have been given explaining how the Khmer Rouge came to power in relation to the decline of the kingdom and the Vietnam War, which was fought with Cambodia as a proxy-war and the atrocities committed under the regime. The most notable of which are *Cambodia 1975-1982* by Michael Vickery (1984), *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution Since 1945* by David Chandler (1991) and *How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975* by Ben Kiernan (1985).

place, constructing a radically different, new society (Quinn, quoted by Clayton, 1998, p. 3). Part of the propaganda in building the new society was based on a nationalist ideology which emphasised the past glory of the Khmer empire, historically, and the need to purge foreign powers and influence, which were viewed as contaminating (Edwards, 2007, p. 9, Winter, 2003). What resulted was what is now recognised as one of the most shocking and violent projects or social engineering in the late twentieth century (Chandler 1993, p. 209).

Under the Khmer Rouge's rule (1975-1979), it is estimated that one million Cambodians died from starvation, disease, torture or execution (Chandler, 1993, Broinowski and Wilkinson, 2005, Kiernan, 1996). Within days of capturing Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge emptied the capital of its inhabitants, swiftly executing those who were perceived to be enemies of regime; intellectuals, educators and bureaucrats, and mobilising the remaining population to be put to work on collective farms. Collective farming was a key strategic plan to the revolution, the export of jute, rubber, coconuts, sugar, kapok and rice was perceived to increase income for light industry, and eventually, heavy industry would follow (Chandler, 1993, p. 215). At the time, Pol Pot reportedly described the revolution of Democratic Kampuchea as "a new experience, and an important one for the whole world, because we don't perform like others. We leap directly to a socialist revolution, and swiftly build socialism. We don't need a long period of time for transformation" (Chandler, Kiernan and Buoa, 1988, p. 36). Private property was abolished in favour of the collectivisation of all Cambodian property, rice yields were expected to be tripled by extensive irrigation, double and triple cropping and exhaustive working hours (Chandler, 1996, p. 214). The deaths that resulted were from mass famine, overwork and exhaustion, neglect, mistreating and the execution of the sick (as hospitals and Western medicine had been abolished) and systematic starvation until the Vietnamese army captured Phnom Penh in 1979. French socialist and Indochina expert Lacouture described life for Cambodians under the regime as "auto genocide", where "we are seeing the suicide of a people in the name of revolution- worse, in the name of socialism" (quoted by Shawcross, 2002, p. 40).

Against this recent history of conflict, the dominating central theme that has remained as Ayres describes, is the idea of timelessness (2003, p. 2). Traditions of power, leadership and hierarchy have endured in Cambodia, permeating economic, political and cultural life. Recently however, the pursuit for development has come up against time-honoured traditions and cultural underpinnings of the state (Ayres, 2003, p. 3). Yet, it was mobilising the notion of tradition that also compelled the Khmer Rouge regime to savagely transform the country in the drive to form a purer Khmer state. Through a revolutionist ideology, the Khmer Rouge set to purge the country of post-independence modernisation programs, which they viewed as corrupt, elitist and urban-centric, and replaced them with a solely agrarian based economy (Winter, 2003, p. 4). While 90% of schools were abolished, new schools were established to serve the aims of the revolution (Clayton, 1998, p. 9). The radical ideology of social change were embedded in programs such as education as part of the modernist, development projects embarked upon by the Khmer Rouge to transform the society. Central to the transformation was issue of race and striving to achieve Khmer cultural purity by the expulsion of foreign influences (Winter, 2003, p. 4).

However, despite an agrarian-based economy initially forming the basis of the new society, the aims of the Khmer Rouge were, in practice, to modernise the country according to their own agenda and views of what a transformed Cambodia would

entail. Agriculture supported developing industries including pharmaceuticals for export, irrigation canals, dams and reservoirs. Thus, for the Khmer Rouge, previous models that extended Western vestiges of modernisation were erased, to be replaced their own, with disastrous results. For Cambodians today, projects including development that attempt to transform the society are met with scepticism, as I shall explain using the implementation of UNTAC as an example.

In addition to removing the country of foreign influences, the Khmer Rouge also sought to eliminate organised religion that regulated social and economic life for the new order to be established. Between 1970 and 1973, the Khmer Rouge systematically eliminated Buddhism from Cambodian society by destroying one-third of the country's monasteries and closing the remaining monasteries (Edwards, 2007, p. 125). The destruction of Khmer social and cultural institutions would have severe consequences for rebuilding the state later on, where restoring their importance to daily life also became part of emerging nationalist ideologies.

The endurance of tradition and hierarchy that defined Cambodia well into the 20th century, with a royal family at the top, a small-class of bureaucrat-aristocracy in the middle (who often had strong ties to the royal family, which maintained their wealth and power) and 90% of the population who were engaged in agriculture or service occupation, was replaced by the Khmer Rouge with a political ideology that stressed new values and codes of conduct to re-build the Khmer state (Ebihara et al. 1994, p. 12, Vickery, 1996, p. 52). The most dramatic change for the existing social structure from this period was the mass separation of families and communities. Prior to Democratic Kampuchea, village life was a fraught and volatile existence, where people were largely dependent one another against variable weather, little support from the state and poor roads and communication infrastructure (Ayres, 2003, p. 10.) Ayres suggests these factors resulted in the system of hierarchy and alliances that have remained for generations (ibid). However, the Khmer Rouge destroyed this system of relations and people were no longer bounded by senses of trust and obligation that had secured their survival and had little incentive to help one another (Ebihara et al. 1994, p. 2). Throughout my fieldwork, there was a constant reiteration of the reluctance to help people they don't know, as suggested by Nhean. Similarly, for people who retained long term ties, there remains the obligation to share resources, information and opportunities, particularly around employment.

Fractured social relations and the brutal attempts to erase much of Cambodia's past by the Khmer Rouge have created a lasting crisis of identity today. Winter suggests that recent decades have left a deep-seated anxiety over what actually constitutes Cambodian, or Khmer, culture, identity and history, and more recently, the socio-cultural markers defining 'Khmer' have become politically charged with associations between ethnicity, conflict and aggressive nationalism (2007, p. 7). Ongoing to this theme has been the configuration of Khmer identity in relation to foreigners or outsiders as 'others'. Ayres suggests that under the protectorate, the French enacted a moral obligation to improve the social, cultural and material status of the 'natives' (2003, p. 21). Similarly, following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991, which effectively sought to encourage the intervening Vietnamese forces to withdraw, encourage the Khmer Rouge to disarm and neutralise the political conflict, the implementation of the United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993, would bring an unprecedented amount of external actors into Phnom Penh and further contribute to the crisis of cultural identity and cultural autonomy in the country.

One of the main criticisms of how UNTAC was managed and implemented was that the project emphasised conducting ‘free and fair’ elections, prioritising the hasty transition to democracy over a process of reconciliation (Findley 1995, Kamm, 1998). Within a few short months, 6,000 civilians and 16,000 UN soldiers arrived in Cambodia to deploy the largest peacekeeping mission to date (Kamm, 1998, p. 212). The primary goal was to oversee and implement the first free and fair election in Cambodia within a politically neutral environment. Despite aggressive attacks from the Khmer Rouge and alleged intimidation by the major political parties (including the Cambodian People’s Party, CPP, the head of which is the current prime Minister, Hun Sen) on civilians, UNTAC forces were strictly instructed not to intervene (Kamm, 1998, p. 216). Kamm observes that to become involved with local skirmishes and to die for Cambodia was not an acceptable proposition for a foreign soldier or their government, and he then asks, ‘what was the purpose of sending 16,000 men who had chosen a military career to a distant country to implement a national agreement’ (1998, p. 214). On the one hand, UNTAC forces seemed disorganised and uncommitted to genuinely protecting civilians and on the other, they also refused to engage with locals beyond a superficial level (Kamm, 1998, p. 212). Instead, UNTAC employees tended to treat locals with an amused and condescending indulgence and preferred the company among other foreigners (Kamm, 1998, p. 212). Furthermore, there was an idealised self-image among UNTAC personnel based on the sense that they were the only ones helping ‘the Cambodians’ (Heder and Ledgerwood, 1996, p. 30). In addition, on top of their salaries, staff were given \$130 USD daily allowance (Kamm, 1998, p. 212). The economic boom that resulted in Phnom Penh from the sudden influx of foreigners with high disposable income also saw the increase in prostitution, the rapid spread of HIV, an influx in Thai investment and the conspicuous consumption of Cambodia’s urban nouveaux riches (Findley, 1995, p. 150). The economic impact of UNTAC gave credibility to Khmer Rouge propaganda of the corruption Vietnamese implemented State of Cambodia government, and the exploitative and decadent intentions of the UN (ibid). Findley also notes that the unintended and negative economic and social consequences of UNTAC’s presence could have been avoided if the UN had been more mindful of allocating payment after the deployment or into foreign accounts rather than in a negligible and locally inappropriate amount in Phnom Penh (ibid). Despite these factors, UNTAC is largely viewed as a successful project where the first democratic mechanism was introduced, and voting occurred smoothly. In May 1993, the election results saw the FUNCINPEC (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia) party in power, led by the exiled king Sihanouk’s son, Ranariddh as prime-minister. However, the 1997 coup saw the CPP stage an armed overthrowing of FUNCINPEC in the name of ‘preventing anarchy,’ ending with the CPP’s leader Hun Sen as prime-minister. Hun Sen has remained prime-minister to this day and since, the Cambodian government and NGOs have had a largely hostile relationship.

Today, there are approximately 2000 NGOs operating in Cambodia, from large INGOS Oxfam, the Red Cross and World Vision, to numerous small, locally run NGOs. There are heavy criticisms and accusations between NGOs and the Cambodian government, especially in regards to the allocation of funds. NGOs are critical of Hun Sen’s government, accusing it of extortion, bribe taking and other forms of corruption, and the largest criticism of NGOs is that foreign consultants make thousands of dollars per month, tax free, draining aid budget. Cambodia is still

predominantly dependent on foreign aid and NGOs to provide services and delivery in microfinance, education, public health and agri-business initiatives, and the largest contribution, demining. Analysts and expatriates agree that NGOs and their workers suffer from an image crisis among the Cambodian population for their visible comparatively high salaries and lifestyle, which stands in stark comparison to the 35% of the local population who live on less than \$0.50 a day (Ear, 2006). NGOs have also been synonymous with businesses that do not pay taxes. UN departments and programs have been in operation in Cambodia since 1992 and critics and Cambodians have accused successive UN missions of being poorly organised and deployed time and time again. This brief background has set the scene for how development in Cambodia is understood today.

As development initiatives are largely based on a benefactor-recipient relationship, those who hold power within Cambodia, including government officials, are also conflicted over how to manage unfolding development processes. Because of their role in state-building, the contestation of their power within Cambodian society by the perceived encroachment of development has steered them to reinforce a sense of cultural identity as form of resistance. By nature, development and development actors set up recipients as mirror counterparts or 'those who they are not' and position them as 'needing' development, where the implications of being 'backward', 'not modern' and 'uncivilised' is inherent. However, Cambodian history also has a salient theme of Khmer culture as needing to remain pure and untainted by 'otherness' or foreigners. The paradox that emerges is that local and international actors view one another as 'other' mirror counterparts, where the outcome of the relationship is development processes travelling along in parallel, but not in partnership. Development as currently implemented then, from this perspective, can only succeed so far.

The issue of Cambodia's nationhood is highly bound with cultural, political and social organisation that has largely remained unchanged since the height of the Khmer empire. Religion has also remained central to economic, social and political life and has held a prominent role in what constitutes Khmer identity. (I shall explore the significance of religion to these spheres shortly.) More recently, religion in Cambodia has continually been used in solidifying the legitimacy of the state. This suggests another layer of complexity to how Cambodia's history and identity is understood today, confronted with development. It is to the discrepancies development holds of modernising the state alongside the emergence of Cambodia as a modern nation that I shall now turn.

Nation, modernisation and civilisation

Cambodia is in a unique position in relation to development. Like many other developing countries (India and China for example), Cambodia has a long history, not as a world-power in modern, nation-state terms, but as an empire and civilisation. This is important to consider when we are speaking about the relevance of culture and autonomy to development, especially as development represents an extension of Western modernising processes. The emergence of a modern Cambodia is very much constructed by active selection and emphasis on particular notions of 'Khmerness'. In Nhean's description, he emphasises that Khmer culture is about sharing, in Jovina's; Khmer women uphold their role predominantly through their relationship to the household. These understandings have several implications for the transition for Cambodians to becoming individual economic actors, as emphasised by approaches to

development as modernisation. In several discussions, there were also pointed definitions given of what it means to be Khmer, including the use of Khmer proverbs in everyday speech, the centrality of the temple to daily life and most obviously, the on-going relationship to rural life. In interactions with over a hundred Cambodians across my time in Phnom Penh, every individual had at least two immediate members of their family living in provinces outside of Phnom Penh, whom they would visit regularly. As mentioned, the emphasis on what constitutes Khmer identity has been an on-going theme in Cambodia's history. More recently, contestations over what constitutes 'true' or authentic Khmer identity has been the source of several periods of upheaval, and I would argue, development poses yet another period of destabilisation to the country, at least in terms of contesting the understandings of Khmer identity the implications of being 'modern' is interpreted within a 'traditional' subjectivity'.

In successive nationalist regimes, the arguments for social reform have heavily drawn on notions of Cambodia's decline from a glorious past, and Edwards suggests that these notions of decay fuels an ongoing theme in Cambodian nationalism of the fear that Cambodia could disappear (2007, p. 7) More specifically, these nationalist discourses implicitly emphasise the fear that Cambodia and Cambodian culture could become swallowed up by variants of what constitutes the outside. Since decolonisation, successive regimes have emphasised the role of religion in state affairs and (or the detriment of religion to the state), while seeking legitimacy in the revived imagery of Angkor Wat and the former Khmer empire. To date, these regimes are:

Sihanouk's royalist Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1955- 1970),
Lon Nol's Khmer Republic (1970- 1975),
Saloth Sar's (Pol Pot) communist Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1978),
Heng Samrin's socialist People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979-1989),
Hun Sen's State of Cambodia (1989- 1993), and
The Kingdom of Cambodia (1993-). (Edwards, 2007, p. 5)

Since decolonisation, Cambodian nationalism has been littered with multiple images and meanings that rejuvenate the imagination of empire and civilisation that preceded colonialism. Edwards also suggests that the backward looking Angkor-centric nationalism with the glorification of monarchical, political and religious institutions also feeds French colonial propaganda which portrayed Cambodians as changeless and suspended in political time and space (2007, p. 9).

According to Smith, the notions of 'nation' and 'national identity' operate on several levels, they are abstract, conceptual categories based on the reproduction and reinterpretation of symbols, values, memories, myths and traditions that compose the sense of having a distinctive heritage, which individuals identify themselves as sharing (2007, p. 19). Yet, nation and national identity are also inter-subjective realities, the identification is constituted within people's minds although they are also justified and legitimised by functioning institutions of the state, or a sense of 'primordialism', where belonging to a category is viewed as fixed and natural, such as belonging to a family, which reinforces the power of the social bond (Smith, 2007, p. 19). However, symbols, values and any definitive marker of cultural meaning is variable and malleable to collective or individual interests. Shifting cultural symbolisms have given rise to national phenomena outside of the West, in the old

societies but new states in Africa and Asia where nationalism can erupt into violent conflicts (Smith, 2007, p. 22).

Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge is an example of such a conflict. Nationalist sentiments in decolonised, transitional, modernising or post-conflict states can also be fuelled or challenged by the process of modernisation itself, where they are positioned against Western modernity as being backward and uncivilised and therefore need to be modernised (Taylor, 1998, p. 206). Part of the modernising project is the challenge of building a particular kind of state and the functional institutions of the state while simultaneously flattening or diluting local, cultural and national aspirations for distinctiveness, and indeed, sentiments of superiority that mirrors that of Western modernity.

Bhabba suggests that the nation is essentially a political construct, 'a system of cultural signification' whose 'national traditions' stem from a complex intersection of 'acts of affiliation, establishment, displacement, exclusion and cultural contestation' (Bhabba, quoted by Edwards, 2007, p. 6). However, as Edwards observes, despite these linkages, most attention on nationalism continues to suggest that culture and politics are mutually exclusive spheres of activity (2007, p. 6). Modern conflicts based on nationalist movements, often draw strong distinctions based on difference of ethnicity, race and religion, in favour of a united 'national' ideal. In this way, nations are essentially what Benedict Anderson has infamously termed an 'imagined community' where shared terrain is based on unified ideals of a political community (1991). In Cambodia, there have been numerous political projects that have drawn upon, manipulated and reinforced selections of aspects of culture. Most obviously, the use of culture to facilitate the political transformation of Cambodia was under Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea regime, where superstition, tradition, religion and the linguistic and aesthetic expression of ethnic difference was criminalised (Edwards, 2007, p. 1). Furthermore, Pol Pot equated the assimilation of Cambodia's various tribal and ethnic groups with their modernisation (ibid). Culture in this way was used to define the 'Original Khmer' to be mimicked in order to reflect what it is and means to be truly Cambodian. More than just being born onto the land, one had to speak, act, dress and perform according to the ideal that was shaped from a rejection of modernity, seeking to return to a pre-feudal past and at the same time embarking on taking Cambodia into a progressive future (Edwards, 2007, p. 1). Importantly, this idea of the relationship between the 'Original Khmer' and mimicry was also bound with anxieties of nation, tradition and authentication. 'Original Khmerness' also become an ideology, which served to vilify 'other' ethnic groups and reinforce the regime's sameness with the Original Khmer of Angkor (Edwards, 2007, p. 12). While government officials didn't explicitly speak about the nation, as I have illustrated, there were clear understandings of what it means to be Khmer and how the world is viewed through Khmer culture. Furthermore, the way they spoke about Khmer culture in relation to development resonated of concerns for building the Cambodian nation.

However, explanations of nationalism and the nation by themselves are not sufficient enough frameworks with which to analyse the Cambodian context. Nation in Cambodia is also linked to the wider-encompassing notion of civilisation, which as an experience of modernity, and precedes modern categorisations of the state. The interpretative framework of civilisation suggests the salience of an internal logic, which itself is an expression of a unique experience of modernity that differs from that of the West. In contrast to experiences of Western modernity, which stressed the idea differentiating social functions and into specialised spheres, Cambodia has had a

history of centralised economic, political and social life that endured well into the 20th century (Delahunty, 1999, p. 24). The Cambodian experience of modernity did not see the pursuit of autonomy for the individual political subject, culture or social domains as in the West, and therefore has its own, historically distinctive logic and experience of social reality. These factors have different implications for Cambodia as a nation, as they permeate the point of identification and are inextricably linked to existing class and political loyalties.

In the case of Cambodia, seen through the lens of critiques of processes of modernity; civilisation, rather than nationalism becomes more relevant, as analyses of nationalism tend to overlook the inherent cosmopolitan nature within countries. The nation is essentially a political construct, 'a system of cultural signification' whose 'national traditions' stem from a complex intersection of 'acts of affiliation, establishment, displacement, exclusion and cultural contestation' (Bhabba, quoted by Edwards 2007, p. 6). Although development is largely framed as an economic project for the purpose of modernising, it is also a political and cultural project that inevitably seeks the total political and cultural transformation of states. Development discourses as a perpetuation of universal understandings of humanity speak to concepts of modernity and by extension, modernisation, where in this tradition, the individual is conceived as an autonomous, rational actor. Therefore, in the application of development, the implicit aim is to build autonomous, rational actors, acculturated to participate in the globalised, Westernised international political economy. While the means to achieving these aims are implemented in depoliticised, neutral terms, the aim of development itself is inherently political and inseparable from its cultural embeddedness as a Western project.

Modernisation compresses technological, economic and political measures into a single indicator (progress), without raising the complexities of race, region, religion or culture (Luke 1990, p. 220). According to Luke's explanation of 'modernity' as understood in Western terms, which collapses all identities that precede the state (of race, religion etc.), 'modernity' as understood in Khmer terms becomes an extremely culturally specific experience. If 'modern' is a type of identity that connotes cultural advancement and achievement, then 'modern' has already been achieved in Cambodia in particularly Khmer terms: an Angkorian empire, ruled by a god-king, and built on an agrarian peasantry, which at its height extended over the majority of South East Asia. The allusions to the former Khmer empire does not mean there is a desire to replicate the nation of the past, but perhaps suggests a desire to recapture the significance of the nation as in the past, as the empire was a result of a culturally autonomous mode of society-building. Like Nhean, other officials spoke of this glorious culture at the past, and how it was disrupted by colonisation and globalisation. Furthermore, Jovina also suggests that interventions from the outside have had a severe impact on the social position of women:

In Buddhism, women also have very high religious status compared to other religions like Islam which gives little rights to women. Originally in Cambodia women had very high authority before the colonisers from India came.

Although this is also too brief a reading of Khmer notions of 'modern' and 'modernity', the main point is that while Western models of development as implemented in Cambodia are conceived without contextualisation in Khmer historicities, they are largely being 'received' in locally articulated forms and

contextualised within a history of disruptions caused 'by the outside'. The further problematic factor of the implementation of Western modernisation in Cambodia is that Cambodia's modern history has also suffered a series of upheavals linked to particularly anti-modern conflicts, as previously mentioned. While Cambodia's relationship to modernisation, development, globalisation and Westernisation is ambivalent and complex, Cambodia's relationship to its own understanding of modernity and modernisation as conceived in Khmer terms is also ambivalent, complex and arguably feared. While countries 'brought' into globalising processes struggle to assert distinctive and autonomous cultural identities, Cambodia has an added layer of ambivalence towards the memory and reconstruction of tradition, culture and identity, given its recent history of civil conflict. The Khmer Rouge regime was also based on nationalist movements, which drew strong distinctions based on difference of ethnicity, race and religion, in favour of a united 'national' ideal.

The present stage in the modernisation of Cambodia is emerging as a competition between local and international actors for the imaginings of development. Nanda Shrestha describes this transitional stage as 'becoming a development category', which is an expression of an existential crisis where the imagination and aspiration of being modern (but not being there yet) is itself a descriptive category of a total experience of modernity (2002). Shrestha draws upon his own experience in Nepal, and he has since conducted extensive fieldwork with insights largely akin to critiques of post-development. Imagining the state of development gives means for instilling the functional institutions that facilitate development, and in this way, symbols, images and significations also constitute the means through which to exercise power as development knowledge. However, the patterns of meaning that constitute world views in which tradition, value and culture is part of, is practiced and reinforced in day to day interactions between particular social groups. It is in the engagement with development that the incongruence, or clash between contrasting world views of development 'benefactors' and 'recipients' is exposed. In theories of post-development there are proposals of alternative development movements; however, they are more concerned with the implementation or construction of a particular type of development than with examining particular experiences of development (Pieterse, 1998).

The interconnection with power allows us to contextualise cultural factors within historical processes. The saliency of Cambodian culture and its embodied rationality and the subsequent desire to retain that cultural authenticity is part of the stalemate between formal discourses of development and local appropriations of development. For, if images come from culture and traditions, and the appropriate or functional use of images and symbols as communicated come from culture and tradition then meaning and rationality itself is constituted within cultural traditions, or what Arnason describes as an 'internal logic' that is culturally and historically specific to a civilisation. Cambodia's recent history has seen the emergence of successive movements which have drawn on interpreting culture and tradition in order to legitimise power and its attempts to transform society. Considering how Cambodia's historicities are understood within modern subjectivities is critical in examining Cambodia's engagement with development and development processes.

In everyday interactions, there are different levels of how the past is understood in the present. There is a strong emphasis on cultural traditions, however, to draw upon Arnason again, the specificities of what is featured in cultural traditions

are less important than the patterns and levels of rationalities embodied in them (Arnason 1997, p. 55). That is, development as a project that reflects Western narratives of progress emphasises a particular trajectory of rationality. Within development discourses, the building of autonomous, economically empowered individuals also brings a certain rationality which is re-formed within the rationalities of Cambodian culture and tradition.

The following example of the entanglement of ‘corruption’ in Cambodia will explain how the Cambodian ‘rationality’ clashes with the concepts and categories of development. Rationality as embedded in this distinct cultural context places a high emphasis on the importance of cosmology and karma within understandings of Theravada Buddhism. It is widely known in common and scholarly literature on Cambodia that Buddhism strongly defines the self and community in relation to what it means to be Khmer (Hansen 2004, p. 40, Swearer, 2010). The transformations in Buddhist understandings from the history of the Angkorian empire, to colonial times to contemporary Cambodia represented strong themes of continuity and change to understandings of Khmer identity, state and nation. Understandings of Buddhism have been repeatedly drawn upon and moulded to suit changing agendas of the Khmer state and influence notions of exchange and reciprocity within Khmer cosmology. Development as a project then also has far reaching implications for Khmer identity and culture, as well as religious and belief systems. The conditions, values and understandings of Khmer experiences of modernity are strongly linked to Buddhism and the use of the religion to shape social values of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour according to the agendas of different powerful bodies. This context has strong implications for perceived ‘problems’ of development that are persistent in Cambodia and in other developing countries, such as corruption.

Sovann’s example of the changing meaning of ‘corruption’ in relation to gift-giving and transactional practices, suggests the contractions between the rationality of development as modernisation, where corruption is illegal, unfavourable and detrimental to the state and the embeddedness of corruption within cultural understandings. More generally, practices of exchange are often located in the understanding of relationships, and failure to comply with these social obligations are also seen as a failure to act out one’s responsibility (Sindzingre 2004, p. 40). In these contexts, corruption itself can become a social norm, among other strategies of accessing resources and opportunities (Mishra 2006, p. 350). Notions of wealth, rank and status are highly intertwined with the understanding of karmic (or *kammic*) inheritance in Theravada Buddhism (Hansen 2004, 2007, Swearer, 2010, Nissen, 2008). Central to this idea are the concepts of the metaphysics of action (*karma*, or *kamma*), rebirth (*samsara*) and merit (*punna*) (Swearer, 2010, p. 37). These metaphysics are navigated through practices of exchange and reciprocity and are one of the core functional ways within Buddhist practices to gain access to power. Reciprocal exchange emerges from donor- recipient relationships in the form of giving material gifts for the benefit of the monastic order, either through giving to the temple directly, or through giving in merit making rituals (Swearer, 2010, p. 19). By giving offerings, the virtuous power held by the sangha (collective gathering of bodies with access to spiritual beings) can present a spiritual reward of merit (Swearer, 2010, p. 19). This merit can enhance the donor’s balance of karma, which then in turn affects the status of the person in the next life, according to merit accruing acts on the cosmic scale. Related to the concepts of balance and harmony described above, the

goal in one's life is to accrue merit which will then be transposed to the individual (and family) in the next life.

These concepts are circular and carry inferences of inter-generational debt, where finitude and to an extent, linearity is not understood as attributed to one person across their lifetime. Hansen explains that the sum of one's moral virtue and religious practice is not only the determinant of the realm of one's rebirth, but also one's social standing, circumstances and fortunes in that life (Hansen, 2004, p. 45). Social rank is not only related to one's immediate lifetime, but also to countless lifetimes in which one is reincarnated into within the cosmic order. In this way, since the cosmologically-determined existing social order was dependent on the smooth flow of the reciprocal benefits between patrons and clients, recipients and donors, it became disrupted when either or both sides were unable to fulfil their obligations (Hansen 2007, p. 54). This juxtaposition becomes critical when understanding differing implications of debt, repayment and indebtedness, which are resonant with themes in development such as microfinance and corruption.

Development initiatives largely conceive of people as autonomous individual actors and in doing so decontextualise them from their larger social embeddedness. Relationships that are mediated by debt, obligation and reciprocity are largely considered on one-to-one terms, where an individual is treated as a sole unit. However, as Nhean emphasised, sharing is integral to Cambodian culture, where one person is rarely providing for themselves, but is also fulfilling larger family or community obligations, leveraging available resources to access further resources or opportunities. Yet, these understandings are not static. While aspects of religion and culture may remain central to the overall understanding of identity, they are continually contested and shaped to gain power and determine who is able to access power and who cannot. As previously mentioned, religion in Cambodia has also continually been used in solidifying the legitimacy of the state. The current government has embarked on a large scale project to restore the visibility of Buddhism across the country, where thousands of temples are currently under construction. As the temple is central to Khmer experiences of modernity and occupies a central place in the cultural psyche of Cambodia, the incorporated values and practices of exchange pose a contradiction to development as modernisation and its underlying assumptions of the value of individual economic empowerment.

Development and a 'modern' Cambodia

Development presents a different path for Cambodia, as it aims to integrate the country into the globalised market and international political economy. Some of the implied questions that development poses for Cambodians are: "What does it mean to be 'developed'?" "What does it mean to be modern?" and most importantly, "What does it mean to be a modern, 'developed' Cambodian?" These questions operate at all levels of society, for individuals and for local political actors, even if they are not directly involved in development initiatives.

For Cambodians, development as implementing and attempting to replace a particular working internal logic based within culture is problematic and a cause of anxiety and ambivalence as rationality becomes the site of contestation of power through knowledge. In terms of Cambodia's recent history of transformations, I would argue that the two most significant cultural projects have been the attempted building of Democratic Kampuchea by the Khmer Rouge, and the attempted building of the modern Cambodian state through development, largely led by international actors.

The themes of the emergence and decline of a civilisation are resonant in both instances. The Khmer Rouge attempted to build Democratic Kampuchea through the deliberate reconstruction of aspects of historicities of Angkor and radicalising certain Marxist principles, to emphasise a ‘closure’ of Khmer culture. Development as modernisation, based on building a functional, technocratic society able to participate competitively in the global market economy emphasises ‘openness’ to adopting progress from the West. Both pose an anxiety of the meaning of Khmer culture and subsequently, the implications for Khmer identity.

As a ‘Marxism’, post-development approaches and emphasis on constructions of ‘otherness’ and context-specific relations contribute to creating a more nuanced understanding of development as implemented in local contexts. However, I have developed this dimension further to suggest what this direction would entail for Cambodia. The multiple layers of complexities, structural inequalities and power relationships that beneficiaries navigate in everyday interactions have continually been overlooked by development initiatives. This discussion has focussed mainly upon the experiences of Cambodian government official who represent one distinct and diverse group within the development context in Cambodia. From the responses that emerged, far reaching understandings of religion, exchange and historicities particular to Khmer notions of rationality have been revealed that are seldom considered by mainstream approaches to development in practice.

The discussions I have presented here, of the implications of culture and power, religion and corruption suggest that Cambodian government officials are not ignorant of the accusations of corruption or of being incompetent in managing in the eyes of development discourses or the ‘Western’ world. The implicit accusations brought by engagement with development instead instils a sense of embarrassment as well as pride that comes where they feel they must defend Cambodian nationhood and civilisation in the face of such accusations.

Under the current trajectory of development, there is little room to incorporate local identities, relations of power, social organisation and forms of knowledge into the development process. Given the trajectory of development as it currently stands, re-articulated within Khmer experiences of modernity as a civilisation, development represents a deeply, condescending and objectifying project. Engagement with development agents represents a continual process of objectification and differentiation, but also contains an implicit contest of superiority, where development aims to civilise, and where Cambodia has already had its own experience of civilisation. The modern Cambodian state is being created out of socially mediated meanings of Khmer historicities and of imaginings of modernisation. However, development as a recent project seeks to modernise ‘states’ but does not necessarily consider that there is a distinction between ‘state’ and ‘nation’. Even where it seeks to democratise or make states more efficient and accountable, rarely is it able to penetrate depths of sentiments of people in which the ‘nation’ is a lived and ongoing vehicle through which aspirations and self-identification occur. The development project is far more than an endeavour to economically empower people; it represents an ongoing project of personal and social reorganisation- which Cambodians significantly challenge, if not resist.

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