

Manipulations of Cambodian Nationalism: From French Colonial Rule to Current Polity

Hilary Grant, Memorial University

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the sources of and problems arising from Cambodian nationalism. It considers four different political regimes: French colonial rule, the reign of Prince Sihanouk, the Khmer Rouge regime and the UNTAC period. Each of these periods demonstrated that nationalist sentiments can easily be transformed and influenced by political players. The paper also points to the role nationalism plays in internal and external conflicts. In analysing these periods it establishes the pillars of Cambodian nationalism as the burden felt by the modern Khmer to live up to the glories of the ancient Angkorian empire and the concept of the morally superior ethnic Khmer. It concludes that Cambodian nationalism has been vertically imposed on the general population by powerful elites to negative ends.

i) Introduction

The founding of the Angkorian Empire is credited to Jayavarman II, who also built the Bayon. Suryavarman II, responsible for building Angkor Wat, provided Cambodia with its greatest national symbol (Hinton 2006: 445). The Angkorian period is marked by engineering and artistic achievements - such as road systems, hydraulic systems and the Angkorian Temple Complex - capable of rivalling the wonders of ancient Greece. The empire was vast, containing Vietnam and Thailand and stretching from the Mekong Delta to include Malaysia and Burma. The fall of the Khmer empire is generally pinned to 1431, when an army from a polity of Ayudhya - associated with the modern day Thailand - attacked Angkor. An internal breakdown ensued as rivals for the kingship used land to buy military support from neighbouring empires. This caused the empire to diminish to approximately one third of its original size. In 1749, Thailand annexed what Cambodians refer to as lower Cambodia or Siem Reap and Battambang provinces which include the Angkor Temple Complex. Kiernan quotes Charles Meyer in explaining that the Cambodians are “burden[ed] [by] the past” (Kiernan 2001: 191). Modern Cambodian’s compare their level of development and dominance to that of the ancient Angkorian Empire. They feel “burdened” to return to the magnificence that that era represents. They view themselves as a nation at risk of disappearing, perched dangerously between the Thai ‘tiger’ and Vietnamese ‘crocodile’, and the fear of being annexed by either of these countries is strong. History is then reinvented or reinterpreted to manipulate these national sentiments, often represented through the creation of an ‘other’ or non-Khmer, as a means of gaining and maintaining political power.

Nationalism in Cambodia centers around two recurring themes, the grandeur of Cambodia’s past and the moral superiority of the ethnic Khmer, both of which originated from the colonising French. These views have been manipulated by different political players throughout history, creating a situation where nationalism is imposed vertically from the powerful elites to the general Khmer population. Considering the French colonial government, the royalist government of King Sihanouk, the communist government of Pol Pot and the parties composing the Democratic government of the UNTAC period, we can see that the political arena

has been dominated by players who manipulate conceptions of nationalism to gain power and justify discrimination.

ii) French Colonialism

The vision of a lost, golden era has not always permeated the Khmer population. Many of these historical influences, along with the belief in a superior ethnic Khmer, were introduced to Cambodia through French colonial rule. Dommen dates the formation of the Protectorate of Cambodia to August 11, 1863. The French are credited for having rediscovered Angkor Wat in the 1850s (Dommen 2001: 7). Previous to this rediscovery the Cambodians thought of Angkor Wat as a place of pilgrimage rather than a vessel of history (Hinton 2006: 456). The French wished to define their new colony and its people, giving it a national identity, and so implemented a form of stage theory in which the state of Cambodia they witnessed was compared to the wonders of the past. This led the French to view Cambodia as a fallen nation that could be projected to the outside world as needing to be civilised.

This ideology was then extended to the formation of ethnic types. The French claimed that the Khmer had 'Aryan' blood that made them morally superior to the 'yellow' Chinese and Vietnamese. This French interpretation of the Khmer as "the descendants of a magnificent civilisation" (Edwards 1996: 59) was in stark contrast to earlier Vietnamese colonizers' interpretation of the Khmer as "savages whose nature is evil and vicious" (Edwards 1996: 59). Hence, the French propagated a view that the weakened yet superior Khmer needed French protection while the French needed Cambodia for the cultural riches of Angkor. Therefore, both pillars of Cambodian nationalism were built by the French and not by the Cambodians themselves. This means that when subsequent governments make reference to national identity they are in fact using the images constructed by the colonial French. For example, Edwards points out that in trying to prove that the Khmer essence is one of gentility and patience in the face of Vietnamese assault in the 1971 book *The Westward March and Indochina in the Year 2000*, Nuon Khoeun references French authors including Aymonier, Panntier and Testoin (Edwards 1996: 53-56 and 59).

The return of lower Cambodia and the Angkor Temple Complex to Cambodia during colonial rule in 1907 bolstered a sense of territorial entitlement amongst the Cambodian elite based on the territorial supremacy of the ancient Angkorians (Dommen 2001: 51 and Kiernan 2001: 190-191). The French stimulated the historic conflict between Cambodia and Thailand in an unintended way through the promotion of Thai immigration to Cambodia. The new colonial system required a host of bureaucrats but deemed Cambodians under-educated to fill these positions and subsequently turned to the more educated Thai population (Dommen 2001: 51 and Kiernan 2001: 199). Cambodians who were educated could not work outside Cambodia (Kiernan 2001: 199). This led to a view of Cambodia as under threat from the Vietnamese and the Thais. Hence, as early as French colonial rule we can see the beginnings of the formation of an 'other' within Cambodian borders.

iii) Reign of King Sihanouk

Ironically, the nationalism that the French created to help them stabilize and define their colony would turn against them and result in a new political system. At the conclusion of the Franco-Siamese conflict, on January 15, 1941, Thailand led a successful campaign against Cambodia and reclaimed Battambang and Siem Reap provinces. The French signed the Tokyo Convention on May 9, 1941, giving Thailand control of the two provinces, and anti-French nationalist sentiments began at the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942 (Dommen 2001: 51 and 162). Though both provinces were returned with the signing of the Franco-Siamese Agreement in 1946 (Dommen 2001: 162) I believe that these nationalist sentiments were caused by France's abandonment of Khmer entitlement to their ancestral territory and were then the starting point for King Sihanouk's gaining of power. The French chose to keep the monarchy in place because they felt the king was the embodiment of the nationalism that they hoped would stabilize their colony (Dommen 2001: 23).

Sihanouk quickly adopted these anti-French sentiments and used them as a way of garnering public support. In 1953 he succeeded and Cambodia became a - still colonial - monarchy. He then defined himself as a nationalist in the 1950s by changing citizenship laws so citizenship was limited to people who could speak Khmer and identified with Khmer customs (Kiernan 2001: 198-201). P. Edwards provides more examples of his solidification of Khmer identity, such as closing both the Vietnamese and Chinese presses in 1967. This solidified the conception of the ethnic 'other' that was formed by the French. However, Sihanouk strictly controlled any form of nationalism that was not aligned with his own proving that his nationalism was vertically imposed. Starting in 1955, Sihanouk banned and harassed newspapers and banned a number of Khmer books (Edwards 1996: 55).

iv) The Khmer Rouge Regime

In 1970 Sihanouk was overthrown by Lon Nol, the right-wing former prime minister and lieutenant general, forcing Sihanouk into hiding (Edwards 2004: 56-57). The change of administration allowed for a brief outpouring of Khmer-language literature - including the memoirs of dissidents - which Sihanouk had banned, opening the door for the violent civil war that ensued (Kiernan 2001: 201). M. Edwards describes the two groups struggling for power: the government forces of Lon Nol's renamed Khmer Republic and the Royal Government of National Union Kampuchea consisting of Sihanouk's supporters and the infamous Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) led by Saloth Sar, better known by his alias Pol Pot.

The nationalism that many Cambodians saw as being embodied in Sihanouk played no small part in the rise of the CPK to power. Sihanouk is actually the originator of the better known name for the party, giving it the French nickname *le Khmer Rouge*. (Edwards 2004: 56-57 and 66). The loyalty felt by the people towards Sihanouk was due to the symbolic nationalism the French embodied in him. This respect and obedience that the Cambodians held for Sihanouk did not transfer onto Lon Nol. Hence, when Sihanouk allied himself with the CPK it gained them thousands of supporters. This was particularly true in rural areas, where royalist support was strongest (Edwards 2004: 56-57 and 60-62). 85% of the population lived in rural areas before

the US bombing campaigns, making it an important demographic. Pol Pot knew that it was important to align himself with what was conceived as traditional values stemming from the glorious past. In 1952, Pol Pot began calling himself the “Original Khmer” (Kiernan 2001: 194). M. Edwards and Kiernan both expand on Pol Pot’s ability to manipulate the rural population. Industrial development had caused some tension between rural and urban populations over the rate and type of progress that should take place. (Edwards 2004: 58-60 and Kiernan 2001: 196). However Pol Pot was treading a thin line in trying to portray himself as supporting nationalist ideals since Sihanouk had denounced communism as anti-nationalist throughout the 1950s and 1960s. To accommodate this Pol Pot established an organisation, Angka, specifically designed to mask Communist aspects of the ideology to woo peasants. He was tenaciously anti-Vietnamese to limit the chance of anyone drawing connections between his ideology and Vietnamese communism in addition to his portrayal of the Vietnamese as an enemy to play on the conception of the ‘other’.

The manipulation of royalist nationalism was limited, however, in comparison to Pol Pot’s reinvention of the recurring Khmer fear of extinction. The Vietnam War provided Pol Pot with a host of material to work with. Cambodia’s involvement began when Vietnamese forces unlawfully began using the Ho Chi Minh trail through the country to move supplies. This escalated into North Vietnamese forces using Cambodia as a base for guerrilla attacks on the South Vietnamese and American forces. March, 1969 began the first of 3500 American bombing attacks on Cambodia (Edwards 2004: 56-57 and Ledgerwood 1998: 96). While many raids were targeted at specific Viet Cong forces many were arbitrary, resulting in the destruction of uninvolved rural towns and villages (Edwards 2004: 57). In 1972, 53 300 tons of ordnance were dropped on Cambodia and in 1973 this increased to 257 500 tons, with 3600 tons a day dropped at the height of this strategy. American forces also briefly invaded Eastern Cambodia, only to drive the Viet Cong forces further west. In August, 1973, the bombing was halted due to pressure from the American Congress. This conflict’s repercussions were two-fold: firstly, it allowed the CPK to reinvent the historic conflict with Vietnam in a very current way and secondly, the involvement of the US created a new enemy presence for the CPK to interpret and present however they wanted. The Americans were supportive of the Lon Nol regime so the CPK easily used their military blunders as a recruiting tool for the Khmer Rouge army. Despite initially superior numbers and equipment, due to Lon Nol’s poor military leadership and the traditionally trained military’s inexperience in guerrilla warfare, Phnom Penh was captured by CPK forces April 17, 1975 (Edwards 2004: 56-60 and 63-65).

Not only did Pol Pot use French colonial nationalism, he was heavily influenced personally by foreign ideology, in particular, those of China and Vietnam. Pol Pot was not a part of the rural population he so admired but was a part of the educated elite. He studied in Paris where he was introduced to European Marxism and Stalinist communism and travelled to China during the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Other high ranking officials - such as Nuon Chea, Pol Pot’s deputy, who was educated almost exclusively in Bangkok - were heavily influenced by the ideologies of other countries (Edwards 2004: 61 and Kiernan 2001: 192, 196 and 201). In my mind this again points to the vertical imposition of nationalism which during the Khmer Rouge regime was taken to extreme limits.

Pol Pot's use of nationalism continued through his four year reign, with dire consequences. Kiernan gives the example of the adoption of the name Democratic Kampuchea as a combination of his two influences: international communism and French nationalism - the word democratic often being used in the names of communist countries and Kampuchea being the French name for Cambodia. Kiernan also explains that the influence of other communist regimes is evident in the organization of his government. Though the CPK was quite large, it was controlled by a clique of 6 members known as the 'Center' which was headed by 'Brother Number One' Pol Pot. Rolling purges were common to ensure the ideological purity of the party. Leninist terms such as 'full rights' and 'candidate' party members were extended to the entire population which was divided into 'full rights', 'candidates' and 'deportees' (Kiernan 2001: 195, 201 and 205).

The lasting effect of French colonialism greatly affected the CPK's policies. One of the features of Angkor commonly glorified by the French was a complex hydraulics system that the French believed yielded multiple rice harvests for the ancient Khmer's. Pol Pot attempted to revive this agricultural efficiency but failed miserably (Kiernan 2001: 189-190). Pol Pot was quoted by Kiernan as saying, "with water we can have rice, with rice we can have everything". In this quote Pol Pot is expressing the belief that by recapturing Cambodia's lost productivity Cambodia could be economically independent, freeing itself from its enemies (Kiernan 2001: 195). Pol Pot tied the pride instilled by the French in the Angkorean past with the threat of Khmer annihilation and early disagreements with Vietnam concerning the "grandeur of Angkor Wat" (Kiernan 2001: 194). Pol Pot's regime was infamous for engaging in military conflicts against each of Cambodia's neighbouring countries: Laos, Vietnam and Thailand.

Pol Pot manipulated the fear of Cambodia's disappearance to justify extreme actions, using French colonial myth in propaganda as a main vehicle for solidifying a view of Cambodia under threat. An important source is the regime's *Black Paper*. In the September issue of 1978, Khmers are treated to a myth - supposedly from Cambodian chronicles - that indicates that the Vietnamese were given what would become Saigon in 1623 when a Cambodian king married a Vietnamese princess. This was presented as an example of how the immoral Vietnamese use their women, linking it to the French conception of the morally superior Khmer (Kiernan 2001: 188). Another *Black Paper* article tells the myth that in 1813 a group of Vietnamese buried captured Khmers up to their necks and used their heads to balance a wood stove. When the stove was lit to prepare tea for their leader, and the Khmer were in pain, the Vietnamese said, "[b]e careful not to spill the master's tea" (Kiernan 2001: 188). We are also treated to a lesson on the origin of the word *Yvon* as "...the name given by Kampuchea's people to the Vietnamese since the epoch of Angkor and it means savage". Kiernan, in contrast, believes the name originated from the Vietnamese's name for themselves, *Yueh* (Kiernan 2001: 188-189). To monopolize the information Cambodians had access to, Pol Pot dismantled all pre-existing social institutions such as schools, religious networks and unsupervised leisure time (Kiernan 2001: 192).

French colonial nationalist belief in the threat of extinction and international communist belief in ideological purity at all costs found a tragic expression in the ethnic cleansing that took place under the Khmer Rouge regime. Reports of the numbers of victims vary from 1.5 million to 1.7 million – 21% of the population (Kiernan 2001: 192 and Edwards 2004: 59) Minorities were

expelled, exterminated or assimilated; the Vietnamese population was eliminated, half of the Chinese population was eliminated - approximately 200 000 people - and one third of the Muslim Cham population was eliminated. The working class was destroyed, with 2 million people being evacuated to the countryside in 1975, one third of the urban population dying from starvation, overwork and political murder and 15% of the rural population being killed in purges. There was also violent repression of political opponents such as Buddhist monks and educated and skilled workers (Kiernan 2001: 194-195). However, the most horrific of all these actions has to be the extermination of those who were classified as 'Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds'. The Pol Pot regime was so occupied with ideological purity and the threat posed by neighbouring Vietnam that any citizen found as having any non-Khmer traits or leanings would be classified as having a Vietnamese mind. These people were viewed as enemies within the country hiding in Khmer bodies and needing to be exterminated. It is generally accepted that more than 100 000 people were killed under this pretext in the second half of 1978. These actions were justified using the French's conception of the morally superior Khmer. Ledgerwood quotes Pol Pot from an October 1997 interview when he was asked if he felt any remorse for the inhumane happenings under the Khmer Rouge regime. He said that his "conscious [was] clear" because Cambodia would have been annexed by Vietnam if it were not for his leadership (Ledgerwood 1998: 100).

v) The UNTAC Period

Following the downfall of Pol Pot in 1979, we see a transition to democracy under the United Nations Peacekeeping known as the UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) period. This led to the 1993 elections. Four political parties participated: (i) The State of Cambodia (SOC) and its ruling party the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) which held power during the election and was supported by the US, (ii) the Party of Democratic Kampuchea (PDK) containing the remnants of the Khmer Rouge (whose participation took the form of boycotting the elections), (iii) the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) and its electoral offshoot the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP), and (iv) the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) run by Norodom Ranariddha, the son of ex-and future king Norodom Sihanouk, the party's founder (Edwards 1996: 57).

All of these parties preyed on the same fear of extinction prominent in Pol Pot's campaign. The emphasis in campaigning was suring up their own, and undermining other parties', nationalist credentials to such a degree that policy differences were lost (Edwards 1996: 57 and Ledgerwood 1998: 101). Each asserted that they represented the true Cambodian ideology. P. Edwards claims that SOC presented a horrific vision of what Pol Pot had done while representing that the FUNCINPEC, BLDP and PDK formed "a genocidal clique" intent on the final and total destruction of Cambodia. SOC warned the Cambodians that any change in their current political system would result in their annihilation. The FUNCINPEC, BLDP and DPK counter-attacked, claiming that the SOC were little more than "Vietnamese puppets" (Edwards 1996: 57-59). Vietnam had liberated the Cambodians from the Khmer Rouge regime but then stayed 10 years as an occupying army. SOC were installed by the Vietnamese and proceeded to

change the flag, the national anthem and to reinstate Buddhism as the national religion (Ledgerwood 1998: 97).

The strategy of the FUNCINPEC, BLDP and DPK held little weight, however, after the SOC planned and executed an exodus of up to 30 000 Vietnamese in March 1993 (Edwards 1996: 63). The PDK, BLDP, and FUNCINPEC all tried to escape blame for the genocide of the Khmer Rouge regime in order to lessen the nationalist credentials of the other parties and exonerate the ruling elite. The PDK accused Vietnam and the UN of genocide. The BLDP also accused Vietnam but accused the PDK of continuing to plot genocide against the Khmer. The FUNCINPEC also accused Vietnam and the PDK of genocide but less forcefully (Edwards 1996: 57).

The fear of extinction was not only imposed onto the recent genocide but continued to the painting of external enemies. P. Edwards insists that the PDK and BLDP were the greatest adherents to this method. Both blamed Vietnam for the failure of social, economic and national developments in Cambodia, such as the Khmer Rouge regime, and the UNTAC for lesser afflictions such as crime and inflation. The PDK propaganda is fairly consistent with that of the Khmer Rouge regime except it envisioned a new circle of western powers, Cambodian traitors and UN bureaucrats intent on crushing Cambodia. They used “Youn-Tac” instead of UNTAC to connect UNTAC to the ethnic Youn Vietnamese and asserted that Cambodians “have no other choice but to unite, rise up and attack to completely smash” the Vietnamese (Edwards 1996: 64-66). The still active Khmer Rouge radio claimed that the country, despite being filled with UN soldiers at the time of broadcast, was filled with millions of Vietnamese settlers and soldiers (Legerwood 1998: 101). P. Edwards explains that the BLDP conceived of three imaginary threats: the military strength of the Vietnamese government, the puppets of the Vietnamese such as SOC and foreign investors who controlled part of the Cambodian economy. The BLDP propaganda sent such messages as, “Thailand has come to fight in Cambodia using dollars and baht.” Despite the horrors inflicted on them by one of their own, the belief in the morally superior Khmer was still present (Edwards 1996: 67). The PDK, BLDP and FUNCINPEC, not currently in power, all tried to capitalise on marketing themselves as a vehicle of return to the glories of the past. Interestingly, FUNCINPEC was the only party to market it with any success because it had been founded by Sihanouk, and so it won the election (Edwards 1996: 58-59).

vi) Conclusion

These now traditional forms of nationalism have been carried into modern time. Many Cambodians feel threatened by forces of globalization, such as the power held by foreign investors and their economic reliance on tourism. Modern events such as the Anti-Thai riots in January 2003 and the conflicts surrounding the Preah Vihear temple as recently as October 2008, prove that negative consequences of negative nationalism – defining yourself in terms of an ‘other’ - are all too real for the modern Khmer. The vague nature of the modern-day Kingdom of Cambodia’s constitution also contributes to this problem, since read literally, it denies basic human rights to anyone labelled as non-Khmer (Edwards 1996: 69). The formation of the ‘other’ was at its most severe during the purges and genocide of the Khmer Rouge regime. During the CPK’s rise to power Pol Pot hid his international influences and allied himself with King Sihanouk in order to project an image of an ideal nationalist. A violent civil war was

fought in order for him to gain leadership and was again concerned with the painting of an 'other'. King Sihanouk himself used nationalism associated with his kingship to gain power while his nationalist power was instilled in him by the same French colonizers he was competing against. All of these manipulated images and ideas stem from the two pillars of Cambodian nationalism - the lost glory of the Angkorian Empire and the moral superiority of the ethnic Khmer – which were introduced to the Cambodians through French colonisation. Cambodian nationalism has been historically imposed vertically and the political arena has been dominated by players who manipulate conceptions of nationalism to gain power and justify discrimination.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dommen, Arthur J. The Indochinese experience of the French and the Americans: nationalism and communism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Edwards, Matthew. "The rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia: internal or external origins?" Asian Affairs 35.1 (2004): 56-67.
- Edwards, Penney. "Imagining the Other in Cambodian Nationalist Discourse Before and During the UNTAC Period." Propaganda, politics, and violence in Cambodia: democratic transition under United Nations peace-keeping. Ed. Heder, Stephen R. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. 50-72.
- Hinton, Alexander. "Khmerness and the Thai "Other": Violence, Discourse and Symbolism in the 2003 Anti-Thai Riots in Cambodia." Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 37.3 (2006): 445-468.
- Kiernan, Ben. "Myth, nationalism and genocide." Journal of Genocide Research 90.2 (2001): 187-206.
- Ledgerwood, Judy L. "Does Cambodia Exist? Nationalism and Diasporic Construction of a Homeland." Diasporic Identity. Ed. Carol A. Mortland. Arlington, VA: American Anthropological Association, 1998. 92-112.