



**Cambodia's Modern Patronage System:
A Brief Reflection on Historical
Foundations, Contemporary
Articulations, and Future Policy
Formations**

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Contents

Executive Summary

Part 1. The Foundations of Contemporary Politics: Transformed Patronage and the Rise of the Ruling Regime.....	1
<i>1.1 Patron-Client Protection and the Historical Underpinnings of State-Society Relations.....</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>1.2 Post-DK State-building and the Emergence of the Modern Patronage System.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>1.3 Manipulating Modern Patronage: The Rise of the Ruling Regime.....</i>	<i>3</i>
Part 2. Cambodia’s Political Theatre: Cultural Manipulations and the Art of Constructing Legitimacy.....	4
<i>2.1 Historical Roots: Angkorean Symbolism and Buddhist Morality.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>2.2 Colonial Encounters.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>2.3 Modern Re-Articulations: Constructing Cambodia’s Political Theatre.....</i>	<i>7</i>
Part 3. Working within Cambodia’s Modern Patronage System: Potentials, Pitfalls and Policy Recommendations.....	10
References.....	14

Executive Summary¹

A wave of dramatic infringements on public space and institutions is sweeping through Cambodia. Critical voices are facing severe punishment and attempts to challenge or reform the established order are met with rejection and swift retribution. Working within this reality can be a precarious undertaking, but for those stakeholders trying to navigate the murky water of Cambodia's current political landscape, a better understanding of the surrounding circumstances can become a vital tool.

This paper tries to add to our knowledge of contemporary event by highlighting how historical legacies have evolved into the modern setting. More specifically, it traces the formation and underpinnings of two defining aspects of the current political landscape – the modern patronage system and the political theatre constructed to provide a veil of legitimacy for its dynamics – arguing that a better understanding of these aspects can help us to construct tools that are better adapted to work within Cambodian realities.²

By tracing the formation and transformation of Cambodia's patronage system, and the political theatre that support it, I, throughout this paper, argue that the evolution of contemporary politics does not represent a continuation of ancient governance or a simple transfer of traditional values into a modern bureaucracy. Instead, a historical perspective on current setting illustrates how there has been a genuine transformation; a fundamental change in how societal relations operate. While an existing foundation of patron-client relations, and a trust for the protection this provided, were important organisational principles in pre-Democratic Kampuchea, the emergence of the current regime, and their manipulation of the country's economic transformation, reconfigured the logics of patronage. In this process, old patron-client structures were transformed into a mass-patronage system where the political elite survives by protecting each other, not the people. As the democratic transformation (during the 1990s) introduced an electoral basis of power, the logics of modern patronage were adapted to continue its existence within the new system. New institutions gave the political elite an opportunity to expand their influence and – by placing friends, family and loyal followers in crucial positions within the institutional structure – consolidate power over the state and its adjacent institutions. Under these circumstances, an elaborate network of mutually beneficial relations was allowed to prosper and embed itself throughout Cambodia's societal structure. Today, Cambodia's elite continues their rule through a modern patronage system that has been adapted to use a combination of violence, intimidation, and material inducements to gain enough votes to secure electoral victories.

The ability to justify these methods by reference to tradition and religion has become an important aspect of Cambodia's contemporary political landscape. By utilising a number of different tropes and rhetoric tactics, here referred to as "Cambodia's political theatre", traditional values and religious beliefs have been manipulated and re-articulated in a deliberate attempt to construct a legitimising narrative for the contemporary elite. Building on

¹ References for statements made in this section are available in the main text.

² The findings presented in the paper are derived from the Master Thesis: *"Modern Patronage and Development in Cambodia: Historical Foundations, Modern Re-Articulations and the Contemporary Quest for Political Legitimacy"*. For information regarding theory and methodology please consult this publication. Available at: <http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/8910871>

a combination of Buddhist notions and Angkorean symbolism, the ruling regime has constructed a veil of legitimacy built around projection of menace, protection and moral authority.

The modern patronage system, and the political theatre that supports it, has now become an institutionalised feature of contemporary Cambodia, and work within the constraints set by this political reality require an approach that correspond to local specificities. Based on the findings presented throughout this paper, I argue that one such approach can be found within the domain of local authorities. While Cambodia's local authorities are still fraught with problems and inherent weaknesses, initiatives that work through this path has the potential to both correspond to Cambodia's political reality and, in a longer perspective, engender attitudes and expectations that can become catalysts for long-term transformative change.

Turning potential into substantial progress, however, will depend on a delicate negotiation between contending interests, and the ability to slowly, and over time, introduce mechanisms that can protect and nurture local expressions and influence. Utilising this space require tools that adapted to work within the lower levels of Cambodia's modern patronage system and, based on this, I recommend:

- *The International Development Community*: Try to move beyond an agenda that focuses to narrowly on measurable organisational changes within the national governance sector, and divert more attention towards efforts aimed to promote long-term change within the lower levels of Cambodia's modern patronage system.
- *National and Local Government Officials Interested in Improving the Conditions for their Country and Community*: Utilise local knowledge and strengthen the potential capabilities of your local authorities. Improve funding, and strive to construct organisational capabilities and accountability mechanisms that assure that the loyalty of local leaders remain with the local community.
- *National and International Scholars*: Delve deeper into the dynamics of local governance. The bonds between the local and national level need to be more accurately mapped, the local impact of the political theatre needs to be further understood, and the everyday work of local authorities needs to be further explored.

Cambodia's Modern Patronage System: A Brief Reflection on Historical Foundations, Contemporary Articulations, and Future Policy Formations

A wave of dramatic infringements on public space and institutions is sweeping through Cambodia. Critical voices are facing severe punishment and attempts to challenge or reform the established order are met with rejection and swift retribution (Chheng 2017; Baliga 2017; Dara & Baliga 2017a; Dara & Baliga 2017b; Kijewski & Chheng 2017; Sokhean 2017a; Sokhean 2017b; Sokhean et al 2017). Working within this reality can be a precarious undertaking, but for those stakeholders trying to navigate the murky water of Cambodia's current political landscape, a better understanding of the surrounding circumstances can become a vital tool.

In what follows, this paper will briefly outline some of the historical foundations and modern re-interpretations that have conflated to engender Cambodia's contemporary political articulations. By doing so, it tries to add to our knowledge of contemporary event by highlighting how historical legacies have evolved into the modern setting. More specifically, it traces the formation and underpinnings of two defining aspects of the current political landscape – the modern patronage system and the political theatre constructed to provide a veil of legitimacy for its dynamics – arguing that a better understanding of these aspects can help us to construct tools that are better adapted to work within Cambodian realities. In the concluding sections, the implications of these articulations are discussed, focusing mainly on how they affect the ability to implement reform and development efforts, and a few policy recommendations are made – both for future research endeavours, the international community, and for those actors pulling the strings within the domestic societal domain.

Part 1. The Foundations of Contemporary Cambodian Politics: Transformed Patronage and the Rise of the Ruling Regime

To capture the essence of Cambodia's political landscape, it is important to begin with the basic structures that determine the current distribution of power and resources – the modern patronage system.

1.1 Patron-Client Protection and the Historical Underpinnings of State-Society Relations

Traditional patronage, and the patron-client relationship – the original foundation of Cambodia's modern patronage system – has been an important organisational feature throughout Khmer history. Mirroring codes of conduct and organisational patterns persisting since pre-Angkorean times (Kimchoeun et al 2009: 49), these informal relations were hierarchal in nature, and based on a reciprocal arrangement where people with limited means sought protection from those occupying the higher positions within the societal strata. In return for protection, people at the lower end of the hierarchy offered homage and loyalty to their benefactors. These patron-client relationships were influential aspects of the traditional Khmer village life and royal culture and, while it has not always been the case in practice, it is

believed that a majority of the population once perceived them as “natural” and generally mutually beneficial (Chandler 2008: 126-130).

During the French protectorate (1863-1953), however, French forces tried to implement a number of organisational reforms aimed at transforming Cambodia’s traditional power-basis into a rationalised bureaucratic governance structure. But despite the influx of values from the French metropolis, the trust for the patron-client system remained intact, and while the French will to rationalise this ancient system was strong, they never succeeded in their attempts to remove its influence from the societal sphere (Chandler 2008:174-178).

Subsequently, the logics of patron-client protection remained an important influence during both the country’s independence process and its aftermath. For a new emerging political force – King Sihanouk, ordained under French tutelage in 1941 – Cambodia’s patron-client foundations became an important power-consolidating tool (Chandler 2008: 201-234). By conveying an image of himself as the benevolent father and patron of, what he called, his family (i.e. the Cambodian population), whilst backing up this image by the coercive power of the state, Sihanouk tried to appeal to the public trust for the patron-client dynamics, and his success illustrated how appeals to the logics of the traditional patron-client relationship could be utilised as a political tool in, at least, a semi-modern context (Kent & Chandler 2008: 6).

The years that followed Sihanouk’s demise are a well-documented part of Cambodian history. The communist regime, known as Democratic Kampuchea (DK), or the Khmer Rouge, implemented an unprecedented revolutionary reform program that intended to erase 2000 years of history and take the country back to, what they referred to as, year zero. The DK regime only lasted for 3 years, eight months, and twenty days, but when the dust of the revolution settled, an estimated 2 million people had perished and almost all of the pre-existing social institutions had been destroyed (Ear 2007: 73; Chandler 2008: 251-258). While the atrocities of DK regime had a profound impact on all societal domains, the patron-client structure would, however, quickly reappear as an organisations principle.

1.2 Post-DK State-building and the Emergence of the Modern Patronage System

In the wake of the ousted DK regime, an organisational vacuum had been created, and a new regime could begin its journey towards the upper echelons of power. Originally given mandate to rule by the Vietnamese, this new regime – then known as Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party, but today operating under the much more familiar name, Cambodia’s Peoples Party (CPP) – began to transform Cambodia’s political landscape.

In the early stages of their rule, state cohesion was low and the central authorities struggled to gain administrative control over local authorities (Hughes 2003: 23, 30). However, the new regime’s ability to create a cohesive state apparatus changed dramatically during Cambodia’s burgeoning economic transformation. The liberalisation of the economy was originally initiated in 1989 by the Cambodian government, and subsequently used as a tool to strengthen the cohesion of the state and limit the scope for oppositional forces (Hughes 2003: 19-20). By liberalising the economy, the people at the top of the political hierarchy gave themselves the opportunity to guide and control the privatisation of land and state owned enterprises. In this process, access to land and resources became dependent on power (including political, economic, and military power), and those controlling the state and its institutions were provided with a new set of tools that could be used to strengthen the attachment of individuals in control of local authorities (Hughes 2003: 38-39).

Once again, the patron-client logic reappeared as an organisational framework for Cambodia's political relations, and the central government was transformed into a protective umbrella used to secure alliances with important stakeholders by providing them with opportunities and support in their endeavours to capitalise on the privatisation process (Hughes 2003: 40). For members of the ruling regime, these changes allowed them to build on an existing foundation of patron-client relations and, supported by the benefits granted to them by their high positions within the state, expand their personal networks and recruit the loyalty of important new allies (Hughes 2003: 40-44).

The relationships created in the midst of Cambodia's economic transformation were, however, far from traditional. They were engendered within a modern context that differs significantly from the one that characterised the existence in pre-modern Cambodia. The early 1990s was dominated by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), and their quest to transform the country into a liberal democracy. This had a number of impacts on Cambodia's societal context. Most importantly, it deepened the economic liberalisation, created new institutions for controlling the state, and implemented a system where political power became dependent on electoral success (Hughes 2003: 59-60). Faced with these structural opportunities and constraints, the ruling regime fundamentally transformed the dynamics of Cambodian patronage. Instead of being localised protective expressions building on personal contact and reciprocal respect, patron-client logics were now intertwined with the capacities and modern bureaucracy of the new state. In this process, reciprocity between two parts was transformed into a one-way exploitation of a third part. Patrons, within the transformed relationship, now had the ability to reward the loyalty and support of their followers by offering them societal positions and protection that facilitated for rent-seeking and self-enrichment (Hughes 2003: 59-63; Kent 2007: 335-336). Since this self-enrichment came at the expense of a third party (mostly the less fortunate segments of the population), this transformation resulted in a purely extractive *modern* patronage system (Hughes 2003: 62; Springer 2008: 144).

1.3 Manipulating Modern Patronage: The Rise of the Ruling Regime

Cambodia's modern patronage system has many skilful navigators, but the most successful of them all is, arguably, the person that today occupy the apex of the societal pyramid – Prime Minister, Hun Sen – and his personal power-consolidating process provides important insights into the defining characteristics of Cambodia's contemporary political landscape.

Hun Sen was born in 1952 and, as such, his formative years were influenced by the tumultuous circumstances that defined the late 1960s and early 1970s (i.e. Sihanouk's fading power, Lon Nol's *coup d'état*, and the growing Communist influence). After having witnessed the devastation caused by the American bombing campaigns and Lon Nol's crusade against the communists, the 18 years old Hun Sen decided to join the armed insurgency against the regime. While he claimed to be unaware of it at the time, this insurgency was led by Pol Pot (the subsequent leader of the DK regime). Due to Hun Sen's relatively high educational status (most soldiers were not even able to read), he soon advanced through the Khmer Rouge hierarchy. During his years in the Khmer Rouge, Hun Sen was involved in a number of military campaigns, and while he denies any involvement in some of the more atrocious episodes of the murderous regime, he remained a cadre until he defected to Vietnam in 1977. Whilst in exile, Hun Sen gained the trust of the Vietnamese and was given control of an exile force that eventually participated in the invasion that led to the ousting of the Khmer

Rouge (Human Rights Watch 2015: 6-22; Morgenbesser 2017: 5). After Khmer Rouge had been ousted, Hun Sen was appointed foreign minister of the newly established regime (Morgenbesser 2017: 5). Due to his political prowess, Hun Sen quickly advanced through the hierarchy of the party, and when the current leader passed away (in 1985), he was appointed Prime Minister (Morgenbesser 2017: 5).

From his place at the apex of the political hierarchy, Hun Sen was in the best possible position to control and manipulate the modern patronage system that emerged during Cambodia's economic transformation. His political privileges gave him the ability to amass personal wealth for himself and his family by appropriating the country's natural resources (Global Witness 2007, 2009, 2016); secure lucrative stakes for himself and his followers in the most profitable business sectors (Un & So 2009: 127; Verver & Dahles 2015: 60-63, 65); act as a gatekeeper for high office and appoint loyal followers to strategic positions within the state and its institutions (Morgenbesser 2017:6-7); and, manipulate and control the societal institutions meant to hold leaders accountable (Un 2006: 231-233; Morgenbesser 2017:6-7). Building on such abilities, Hun Sen secured the loyalty of a number of key individuals – creating the group today loosely defined as a “ruling elite” (see for example Cock 2010a: 528-529) – and constructed a vast network of personal patronage connections that stretches throughout Cambodia's entire societal foundation (Morgenbesser 2017: 11-12; Un 2006: 228-229).

In recent times, the overarching control of the ruling regime has been manifested in a number of manners and circumstances. The most significant is, of course, the dissolution of the main oppositional party – Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) – and the arrest and persecution of some of its leading figures (Chheng 2017b; Kijewski & Chheng 2017; Sokhean et al 2017). However, the country has also witnessed violent physical attacks on critical voices (Handley & Ananth 2017), and a wave of legal attacks on critical media outlets (Baliga 2017; Dara & Baliga 2017b), human rights workers and NGOs (Sokhen 2017a), political analysts (Sokha & Kijewski 2017), and even members of the monastic community (Koemsoeun & Nachemson 2017).

The capability to continuously conduct such elaborate attacks with impunity is engendered by the modern patronage system that has been skilfully constructed by Cambodia's ruling regime. The persistence and influence of this regime cannot, however, only be attributed to such structures. The dialectical pressure emanating from the coercions and inducements inherent in Cambodia's modern patronage system is an important aspect of the political landscape, but the stability of the system cannot be sustained with a sense of public consent. To understand the nature of Cambodia's modern patronage system, we, therefore, have to explore the manipulated cultural imagery used to construct a veil of consent-enhancing political legitimacy.

Part 2. Cambodia's Political Theatre: Cultural Manipulations and the Art of Constructing Legitimacy

Culture, religion, and traditional practices are an important aspect of everyday life in Cambodia (Kimchoeun et al 2007), and the historical underpinnings of these notions are therefore a relevant focal point. The term political theatre is, as I define it here, an umbrella term for the cultural and traditional rhetoric and behaviour that is used to construct a legitimising narrative for the current political establishment. In Cambodia, a central collection

of notion in this narrative is constituted by the traits and values ascribed to the image of “Khmerness” (i.e. characteristics and behaviour that are perceived to be important features of a true Khmer identity), and the ability to correspond to this imagery can be considered an important legitimising principle for a righteous Khmer political leader (see for example Edwards 2007: 10-12). The pillars of Khmerness are not, however, static formations that, once formed, remain fixed and unchanged throughout eternity. As can be said about most forms of social expressions, cultural phenomenon, at least the way it is conceptualised here, are dynamic formations malleable to surrounding circumstances. To understand the political theatre that today is used to construct a sense of legitimacy for the ruling regime, it is, therefore, paramount to explore both its historical roots and modern re-articulations.

2.1 Historical Roots: Angkorean Symbolism and Buddhist Morality

The historical roots of the notions that today underpin perceptions of Khmerness and righteous leadership could be traced back as far as the pre-Angkorean process sometimes referred to as “Indianization”. During this cultural revolution, Hindu beliefs, values, behaviour, and perspectives on Kingship and politics, were embedded within both the higher and lower levels of Cambodia’s societal strata. At this point in history, Buddhist ideas coexisted with its Hindu counterparts (Harris 2005: 24-25), but within the small city states scattered around present-day Cambodia, kings used Siva and other Hindu notions to legitimise the reigning social order and their right to rule (Chandler 2008: 22-23).

As King Jayavarman II consolidated control over the northern areas of the country and laid the first foundations of the Angkorean empire (around the 9th century), Hindu notions continued to serve as the guiding principles, and this logic was subsequently adopted by a number of Angkorean kings. For large parts of the Angkorean era, kings were perceived to be patrons whose connection to the spiritual domain ensured enough rain for successful harvests; god-like entities that represented an ideal version of virtuosity and power; and, a central administrative figure in the reciprocal relationships that underpinned society (Chandler 2008: 39-54). Adhering to these perceptions provided most of the Angkorean kings with a protective legitimacy, and it was not until the 12th and 13th century that Buddhism began to establish itself in the consciousness of the upper echelons of society (Edwards 2007: 97).

The exact process that cemented the Buddhist influence is not known, but after having gained a more prominent role after 950 CE (Harris 2005: 4, 15), the religion began to prosper under the tutelage of King Jayavarman VII (r. 1181-1220) (Chandler 2008: 66). Under his rule, new legitimising principles, based on Buddhist notions, were introduced to the Khmer public and a new form of kingship emerged. Instead of claiming a special connection to Hindu deities, Jayavarman VII proposed that his right to rule was attributed to his extraordinary devotion to the Buddhist precepts and the meritorious behaviour he displayed (Chandler 2008: 66-73). After Jayavarman VII and the demise of Angkor, Buddhism remained an influential force in royal circles, and its popularity continued to grow. In time, Theravada Buddhism (the strand practiced in Cambodia today) overtook the earlier preferred Mahayana Buddhism, and the foundational principles of the Buddhist cosmology established itself within courts and villages (Harris 2005: 30-48).

The Buddhist cosmology that took root in 15th century Cambodia – and, as far as it is possible to discern from the scarce available evidence, remained relatively unchanged until the 19th century – was, however, shaped by the country’s religious history. Within 19th century Buddhism, new and old notions had been intertwined to form a number of syncretic

articulations (Edwards 2007: 97; Forest 2008: 16, 19-22). Perhaps building on the foundations laid by Jayavarman VII (see for example Chandler 2008: 66-73), Hindu notions of a divine monarchy with spiritual connections were intertwined with a karmic perspective that emphasised the societal force of *bon* (merit) (Harris 2005: 79-80). Merit, according to karmic theory, is a force – collected by benevolent and righteous acts during the continual process of birth and rebirth that define human existence – that determines roles within the social hierarchy (Hansen 2007: 20). Power, within this moral order, is connected to those with an abundance of merit, and since merit is accumulated through morally commendable acts, those with power are entitled to the societal position they occupy (Jacobsen & Stuart-Fox 2013: 10,11,14). As a result, kings were perceived as sacred individuals that gained strength from their superior merit (Harris 2005: 79-80), and the force of merit acted as an important organisational principle throughout the societal structure.

According to 19th century Buddhism, the history of the world was characterised by a process of decline and regeneration where its destruction and rebirth were connected to merit. Merit was thus a force that connected the interests of the upper and lower levels of society by constructing a moral order where righteous behaviour became connected to societal prosperity (Hansen 2007: 20-23). The king had a central role in this order, and was perceived as the protector of the realm and the guardian of morality. The righteous leader, underpinned by his superior merit, was meant to guide the population and lead society towards prosperity and moral development (Hansen 2007: 20-22, 33, 42).

At the end of the 19th century, however, a new cultural force was introduced to the Cambodian public, and it was within the confines of this encounter that the foundations for the modern perception of Khmerness began to emerge (Edwards 2007: 7-8).

2.2 Colonial Encounters

During the French protectorate, the Khmer social elite was suddenly faced with an occidental perspective of their own history and culture. The French brought their own perspectives and interpretations, and when these imageries were projected to the Khmer, a new space for cultural transformation opened up (Edwards 2007: 8-12). Two particular articulations engendered in the encounter between French cultural imaginings and Cambodia's pre-existing traditional foundations seem to have had a lasting impact on perceived Khmerness – the reinvention of Angkor and the modernisation of Buddhism.

As the French revelled in their self-proclaimed discovery of the Angkor Vat temple complex, they proudly presented it as a symbol of national pride and heritage. While historical records suggest that this interpretation was a bit misinformed, and that Angkor was an important, and not forgotten, spiritual centre (Edwards 2007: 19-26, 125-129), this depiction did not match the narrative promoted by the French. According to them, Angkor Vat was the pinnacle of a lost civilisation that, under their tutelage, could be reinstated to its former glory (Edwards 2007: 2). The Khmer, within the French narrative, were distant descendants of a once grand civilisation that, through centuries of decline, now were in desperate need of protection (Chandler 1997: 35, 37-39). Based on these premises, an imagery portraying the bravery and glory of the lost ancient Khmer civilisation was disbursed throughout the architectural and cultural landscape. Over time, the spiritual roots of Angkor began to fade, and the temples were reinvented as a national symbol, and the greatness, skill, and bravery of those who built it were portrayed as the epitome of the proud Khmer population (Edwards 2007: 10-12, 51-53, 61-63, 150, 164-165).

The modernisation of Buddhism was not guided by the same direct colonial influence – religious influences from Siam and a growing internal will to adapt Buddhism to a modern context were more important factors (Harris 2005: 130; Edwards 2007: 95-96; Hansen 2007: 77) – but since it became intertwined with the emerging nationalist movement and the quest for independence (Edwards 2007: 220), it had an important impact on perceived Khmerness. The Buddhist modernisation movement wanted a more “rational” religion. Instead of “old superstitions”, proponents of modernisation wanted a religion that followed the “true” words of the Buddha. In their eyes, the traditional manuscript culture that formed the basis of 19th century Buddhism – where merit was gained by reciting old scriptures (without understanding its content) – needed to be replaced by an order that placed a greater emphasis on individual acts and behaviour, and where everybody should be able to understand and live according to the true words of the Buddha (Edwards 2007: 104-106; Hansen 2007: 101, 178-181). Within this order, merit remained a vital organisational principle, and individual morality and meritorious acts were seen as the true path towards a prosperous society. Such meritorious acts could, for example, include feeding monks, donating to the *Sangha* (the monastic community), building schools, participating in religious ceremonies, and providing for the poor (Jacobseb & Stuart-Fox 2013: 11). In the 1930s, modernist Buddhism became the dominating perspective (Hansen 2007: 178-181), and within the emerging nationalist movement, a new generation of intellectuals saw its fundamental principles as an important part of the Khmer identity (Edwards 2007: 95-97).

Within the nationalist movement, Khmer Buddhist modernist principles were intertwined with the reinvented myths and traditions that defined the ancestral brilliance of the Angkorean civilisation, and promoted as the fundamental traits of the Khmer identity. Through a variety of disbursement methods, including the newly established newspaper media, this imagery was eventually spread beyond elite circles and incorporated into the consciousness of the wider population (Edwards 2007: 7-8, 10-12, 210- 213, 218-221).

2.3 Modern Re-Articulations: Constructing Cambodia’s Political Theatre

The perception of Khmerness would, however, not only serve as a unifying tool in the colonial independence movement, and its legacy has remained an important feature of the societal landscape. Within Cambodia’s contemporary political theatre, Angkorean symbolism and Buddhist cosmological foundations have been manipulated, re-invented, and transformed into a legitimising narrative that portrays the elite as capable protectors, guardians of morality, and righteous leaders that will guide the nation towards prosperity.

An important dimension of this imagery is constituted by the projection of protection and menace. In a similar manner as Sihanouk once proclaimed to be the father of the nation, the contemporary elite is using a rhetoric that highlights the beneficial features of the traditional patron-client relationship and portrays themselves as the country’s protectors (Hughes 2006: 469-471, 479). To elicit a sense of protection, backed up by menace, the elite, and Hun Sen in particular, has used an imagery connected to the perception of the traditional leader of the *Khsae*, the *Bong Thom* (big brother). The *Bong Thom* is the fair, but ruthless, leader that offers protection and benefits to his loyal followers, but ensures that any acts of disloyalty or resistance will be met with harsh punishments (Hughes 2006: 470-471). Such ideas of morally condoned violence is a recurring theme in traditional Khmer tales, and the notion of justifiable violence still appears to be somewhat accepted by contemporary Cambodians

(Edwards 2008: 216-218). Due to his personal influence over the military and police, Hun Sen certainly got the institutional means to back up the menace-related aspect of his image, and the consistent stream of public violence and intimidations that have been connected to his rule could have helped to cement this image in the public consciousness. Hun Sen himself promotes this menacing/protective perception, and has suggested that a victory for the political opposition could result in a new civil war (Sokchea & Dara 2017).

Violence and fear thus, in quite a contradictory manner, seem to have become an aspect of legitimacy. By evoking the imagery connected to the *Bong Thom* – an imagery reminiscent of the leadership that is believed to have underpinned the greatness of ancient kings and the prosperous Angkorean civilisation – the elite is constructing a narrative that portrays them as the only leaders capable of retaining stability and order (Hughes 2006: 471, 479).

To evoke notions of protection, however, the elite also has to show that they are capable of providing the population with material security and societal improvements (Edwards 2008: 221- 225). Studies of leadership and voting preferences have implied that the Khmer public is relatively uninterested in the ideological foundations of a political party (Hughes 2006: 479). Instead, the preferred leaders are those supported by the traditional perceptions of “righteous leadership” and those who can prove that they are capable of delivering local improvements and material benefits (Vimalea et al 2009: 87-89; Baaz & Lilja 2014: 16).

Hun Sen seems to be well aware of such perceptions and, through what can be considered an elaborate self-promotion attempt (Hughes 2006: 472; Edwards 2008: 224), he has orchestrated a number of “personal” development initiatives. These initiatives range from small-scale ceremonial handouts of money and supplies to large-scale infrastructural projects that, among other things, have covered the geographical landscape with buildings bearing his personal monogram. Through closely directed ceremonies broadcasted to the public by the elite-controlled media apparatus, Hun Sen and other members of the political elite, are shown interacting with a grateful public overwhelmed by the personal generosity they display (Hughes 2006: 472-478; Edwards 2008: 220-221). In a style reminiscent of both Jayavarman VII’s and Sihanouk’s early use of the patron-client system, Hun Sen’s “personal” projects (often founded by foreign donors or wealthy allies) have been used to portray him as the benevolent benefactor that works tirelessly to protect his loyal followers (Hughes 2006: 472-478).

The imagery of the benevolent benefactor has traditional roots, and the meritorious acts that the elite displays are meant to invoke a sense of righteous leadership promoted by the merit-based Buddhist cosmology (Jacobsen & Stuart-Fox 2013: 18). The “gifts” bestowed upon the public gain a certain amount of moral authority from Cambodia’s cultural legacy – a legacy that emphasises the role of merit and the socially binding force of reciprocal gift-giving (Nissen 2005: 50-55; 2008: 275-276) – but under the tutelage of the current political regime, this tradition has been reinvented and turned into a large-scale secular operation meant to project a sense of merit-based legitimacy (Hughes 2006 472-478; Edwards 2008: 220-225). By continuously projecting expressions of their personal generosity and selfless commitment to the public, the elite is promoting a narrative that portrays them as the personal patrons of Cambodia’s development, and illustrates how they, through the superior merit they possess, have the capacity to guide the country towards prosperity (Heder 2012: 104; Jacobsen & Stuart-Fox 2013: 18-20).

Such appeals to the traditional perception of “righteous leadership” are recurring themes in Cambodia’s political theatre. In addition to the reinvented gift-giving tradition, Hun Sen has, for example, tried to enhance his personal “moral legitimacy” by inventing a narrative that connects him to the revered 16th century King, Sdech Kan (Heder 2012: 104; Norén-Nilsson 2013: 4). Sdech Kan, the quintessential *neak mean bon* (man of merit), was a king that rose from humble beginnings and, through his personal prowess, earned his place at the throne by overthrowing a cruel and unjust ruler. Guided by his fairness and superior merit, he quickly gained the trust and admiration of the population and helped to usher in a sustained period of national prosperity (Norén-Nilsson 2013: 6-8, 11-12). In a presumed attempt to benefit from the perception and collective memory of Sdech Kan’s righteous leadership, Hun Sen has repeatedly emphasised the similarities with his own life story and rise to power. Building on, and in some cases inventing, such similarities, Hun Sen has tried to portray himself as the modern *neak mean bon* and the righteous leader of contemporary Cambodia (Norén-Nilsson 2013: 4-8, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20-21).

On a somewhat larger scale, the righteous leadership of the ruling regime has been promoted by incorporating the *Sangha* (the monastic community) into the political theatre. The Buddhist community has, historically, been a force capable of placing some restraints on the political elite’s use of power (Kent 2003: 3). However, even though the Buddhist discourse can still be used to challenge the current social order (Marston 2009: 247-248), within the modern political context, the social role of Buddhism has increasingly been subverted to the interests of the political elite. Instead of aligning elite behaviour to the Buddhist precepts (as has been the traditional role of the *Sangha*), representatives of the Buddhist community are now used to construct a religious legitimacy for the modern behaviour that underpins the elite’s power position (Kent 2003: 2-3; 2006: 354-355; O’Lemmon 2014: 38). In this process, prominent monastic figures have been co-opted into the overarching patronage networks of the elite and, through a combination of intimidation and inducements, convinced to convene the elite’s political messages (Kent 2006: 354-355; Marston 2009: 246).

To further emphasise moral authority, the elite has also co-opted the religious space of the pagoda. In recent years, the elite presence within the pagoda sphere has increased, and by becoming major sponsors and leading figures in merit-making activities, many pagodas have been transformed from spaces of religious devotion to spaces of political manifestation and spiritual propaganda (Kent 2003: 18-21; 2007: 342-352; O’Lemmon 2014: 38-40).

When these tactics are put together, it illustrates the kind of moral legitimacy that the elite is trying to evoke through their political theatre. To construct their invented morally legitimising narrative, people and spaces imbued with moral superiority have increasingly been co-opted, and the authority of these institutions has been used to portray the elite as patrons of religion and guardians of the morality that upholds the Buddhist cosmology.

Cambodia’s political theatre, then, can be conceived as an elaborate attempt to construct a legitimising narrative for the dynamics that define the modern patronage system. By using reinvented traditional beliefs and religious values, the ruling regime is constructing a veil of legitimacy that portrays the modern patronage system as a mutually reciprocal protective relationship; elevates themselves to a position of national patrons; and co-opts features of the Buddhist belief system in an attempt to be defined as righteous power holders. To what extent this political theatre is believed by the Khmer public is, of course, questionable (Hughes 2006: 482; Kent 2006: 350-351; O’Lemmon 2014: 40-49; Norén-Nilsson 2016: 795, 814). Khmer people are not impressionable spectators easily fooled by the loud and bright

distractions showed towards them by the elite and their political theatre. However, while people are becoming more aware of the political underpinnings of the elite's culturally manipulated tropes and tactics (Norén-Nilsson 2016: 795, 814), this heightened awareness might not become the transformative catalyst that is hoped for. As could be said about so many social phenomena, the strength of its impact does not emanate from a singular force; it is engendered through the combined effects of many different forces acting in conjunction with each other. For Cambodia, the culturally manipulated political theatre gains its strength from its entanglement with the very real forces that constitute the modern patronage system. Such a context, even if its premises are not internalised and completely accepted by everybody, provides the population with very few available means of rejection and spaces of contestation (Hughes 2006: 488-489).

Part 3. Working within Cambodia's Modern Patronage System: Potentials, Pitfalls and Policy Recommendations

Modern patronage, and the political theatre that supports it, are today entrenched features of the Cambodian landscape, and this has, or at least should have, important implications for the kind of reform and development efforts pursued in the country.

If the specificity of Cambodia's political landscape is taken into account, it is, for example, not surprising that externally promoted strategies that emphasise the virtues of "good governance" have produced such meagre results (see for example Ear 2007: 68; 2009: 151-153; Un & Hughes 2011: 208; Hughes 2013: 144-146). Successful implementation of these policies relies on a fundamental change in Cambodia's modern patronage system. However, since the protection and maintenance of the modern patronage dynamics is an integral part of the ruling regimes political existence, any overarching attempts at reforming the foundations of this system will most likely be met with severe resistance.

Previous experiences support this inference. Attempted reforms within areas that affect the foundations of Cambodia's modern patronage system have had very limited impacts, and, in some cases, regression has been a more prominent result than improvement (Ear 2009: 173-175). After almost two decades of internationally sponsored good governance reforms, Sophal Ear (2007, 2009), for example, has concluded that, despite having spent billions of dollars, these strategies have failed to make a significant contribution to both Cambodia's governance situation (with the exception of political stability) and the state of poverty within the country (2007: 68, 76-78; 2009: 157-159). He even suggests that the continued flow of international aid, even with the accompanying requirements of good governance, has made a more significant contribution towards preserving the current order than it has done to change the exploitative structures that underpin it (Ear 2009: 159-165). Others have drawn similar conclusions (Cock 2010b), and years of attempted institutional reforms within the upper levels of the Cambodian state apparatus have produced few encouraging tendencies (Un & Hughes 2011: 200-201). Within such domains, powerful political actors have the capability to circumvent and counteract changes and reform efforts that undermine their influence. New institutions and regulatory framework are, for example, regularly created in accordance to demands from international reformers. The people placed in charge of these mechanisms are, however, directly connected to, and controlled through, the patronage connections of the ruling regime. In the end, such superficial changes allow the regime to project a sense of compliance and progress, whilst still remaining firmly in control (Un & So 2009: 128-129; Un & Hughes 2011: 206-208, 218; Un & So 2011: 289, 306-308).

Cambodia's political landscape does not, however, necessarily only engender developmental obstacles. Turning its limitations into possibilities, though, require strategies that are adapted to work within, not only against, the modern patronage system. Such strategies are of course difficult to envision, especially from an outside perspective, but some initial insights can be gained by looking at areas where important progress has actually been achieved.

The reform of Phnom Penh's water management system provides one such potential example. The leader of this particular project, Ek Sonn Chann, was a high ranking member of the CPP, and through his involvement in, and knowledge of, the logics of the political system, the dynamics of modern patronage could be turned into an organisational advantage. By rearticulating donor rhetoric and aligning it with a more familiar local imagery, at the same time as he used his personal connections to isolate the project from further political interference, Ek was able to frame the project in a manner that both complied with donor requirements and that was perceived to be unthreatening to other members of the indigenous elite. Ek's reforms also happened to correspond to the elite's legitimacy building strategy. At that time, CPP were in the midst of orchestrating an extensive "beautification" of Phnom Penh – meant to invoke a sense of emerging prosperity and progress – and an improved water supply fitted neatly into the imagery they tried to project. Combined, an intricate knowledge of the political system, an ability to avoid undermining the influence of other elite actors, and the alignment with the pursuit of political legitimacy, allowed Ek to establish a functioning organisation and improve water access throughout the capital (Hughes 2013: 146-148).

Other influential development schemes have followed a similar pattern (Un & Hughes 2011: 208, 215-218), and while it is not possible to reproduce the exact conditions that made these reforms successful, they provide some important insights into the kind of strategies needed to work in Cambodia's political reality. Within this reality, reform and development efforts that adapt to work within the modern patronage system, avoid obvious attempts at undermining established patterns of influence and power, and are framed in ways that, at least perceptually, contribute toward the legitimacy of the elite, are more conducive and able to make a substantial impact. This is perhaps not the most compelling alternative – especially due to the exploitation and atrocities attributed to the ruling regime – but, based on the dynamics of the current political context, it might be the most pragmatic.

While it will be difficult to design efforts that correspond to these criteria, the dynamics of the political landscape provide some potential openings. Since political survival appears to be built on notions of fear, protection, and moral authority, the elite continuously needs to convince the public that they have the capability to preserve stability and moral order, and guide the country towards increased material prosperity. At the very top of the social hierarchy, such notions are reinforced through ceremonies, rituals and rhetoric that promote their inherent Khmerness, but this theatre cannot be sustained without tangible improvements at the local/village level. In short, the elite's legitimacy is, despite the exploitative dynamic of their rule, intrinsically intertwined with the ability to project a sense of material improvement at the local level. Thus, to evoke notions of stability, protection and progress, the elite needs to produce, or at least evoke a perception of, improved local conditions. Since this change usually falls outside of their own personal domain, this pressure is diverted to lower level public servants. These local authorities are the ones that manage a majority of the contact with the population (Craig & Kimchoeun 2011: 224-226), and to retain and strengthen the legitimacy of their superiors (and by extension their own positions), local officials are

pressured to deliver more effective local governance and material improvements (Sedara & Öjendal 2009: 114; Un & Hughes 2011: 199-200).

Within Cambodia's modern patronage system, local representatives are thus given an important development mandate (Hughes et al 2011: 248), and their proximity to the villagers, their local knowledge, and their personal connection to the spatial domain, are all factors that could contribute to the hypothetical developmental potential of these agents. Unfortunately, reality does not always corresponds to hypothetical ideals, and local authorities have, for a number of reasons – including political interference, chronic underfunding, corruption, and unsatisfactory organisation capabilities (Hasselskog 2009: 194-200; Sedara & Öjendal 2009: 118-119) – not yet been able to live up to their potential. However, past efforts to work through these channels have also engendered some promising tendencies, and the now discontinued Seila programme is a good example of this duality.

The Seila programme, introduced in 1996, was an internationally sponsored decentralisation effort. The programme wanted to improve the relationship between the local government and the population, and believed that by strengthening the capability of local authorities, these units could be transformed into accountable development agents. Working on these premises, Seila introduced a number of mechanisms designed to encourage a more participatory development model and make rural villagers an integral part of the planning process (Hasselskog 2009: 192-193; Sedara & Öjendal 2009: 108). Unfortunately, politically vested interests complicated the implementation process and – mirroring the pattern prevalent in national-level governance reforms – many of the efforts were co-opted and manipulated by influential local actors (Hasselskog 2009: 206; Hughes 2013: 153), and the resulting improvements were used to support the elite's personal interests (Hughes 2013: 149-151).

In contrast to reforms of national level governance, however, the political co-optation of local reforms has evoked a more tangible sense of dissatisfaction within villages. When local leaders abuse their power, the local community has both better reasons to react – because it affects their immediate existence and livelihood – and better means to protest (Hasselskog 2009: 207, 210-211; Sedara & Öjendal 2009: 117). Increased scope for dissatisfaction and the relative proximity of local leaders open up a possible zone of contestation (Hasselskog 2009: 210-213), and it is here that potential possibilities begin to emerge. While the Seila program had some problems – the aforementioned vested interest combined with organisational difficulties and trust deficiency being the most prevalent issues – it illustrates how local authorities have, at least, potential to become development agents that, in contrast to national leaders, could be held accountable for their actions (Hasselskog 2009: 194-206, 210-213). The programme also showed that some factions of the local government embraced their new developmental role. While this faction did not represent a majority, such attitudes could, in the long run, have an important impact on the expectations and demands the public places upon their local authorities. If one local authority is able to provide services and improvements for their community, other communities might start to think that theirs should be able to do the same (Hasselskog 2009: 215). Such perceptions are indeed becoming more prevalent and studies have suggested that local villagers now, for example, see the commune election as an important tool that can be used to remove unpopular leaders and, in the end, increase their influence over how local resources are spent (Sedara & Öjendal 2009: 109, 117).

Changing local expectations and attitudes, increased ability to question local leaders, and a greater influence over how resources are spent are all promising tendencies. As Seila

illustrated, through decentralisation and more development oriented local authorities, it is possible to create a new space for local contestation and resistance, and within this space, ideas and attitudes that challenge inequalities and injustices can be allowed to prosper and, eventually, spread throughout the collective consciousness of the village (Hasselskog 2009: 214). So, while efforts that aim to strengthen and utilise the potential of local authorities will, in some ways, sever the interests of the elite, they also have the potential to engender attitudes and expectations that can become catalysts for long-term transformative change (Hasselskog 2009: 217; Sedara & Öjendal 2009: 122-129). This potential is important. In a country where public space for contestation and resistance are increasingly limited (Hughes 2006: 488), a better ability to challenge local inequalities and injustices is a promising tendency.

Turning this promising tendency into substantial progress, however, will depend on a delicate negotiation between contending interests, and the ability to slowly, and over time, introduce mechanisms that can protect and nurture local expressions and influence. Stronger and more development oriented local authorities represent a promising avenue of influence for those working to make a difference within the constraints of Cambodia's modern patronage system. To be able to utilise the space this opens up, however, require tools that adapted to work within the lower levels of the system. Based on the findings presented here, the construction of such tools would be a path worth pursuing further, and I recommend that:

- *The International Development Community*: Try to move beyond an agenda that focuses to narrowly on measurable organisational changes within the national governance sector, and divert more attention towards efforts aimed to promote long-term change within the lower levels of Cambodia's modern patronage system.
- *State and Local Government Officials Interested in Improving the Conditions for their Country and Community*: Utilise local knowledge and strengthen the potential capabilities of your local authorities. Improve funding, and strive to construct organisational capabilities and accountability mechanisms that assures that the loyalty of local leaders remain with the local community.
- *National and International Scholars*: Delve deeper into the dynamics of local governance. The bonds between the local and national level need to be more accurately mapped, the local impact of the political theatre needs to be further understood, and the everyday work of local authorities needs to be further explored.

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