At the heart of precolonial Cambodia, and at the heart of the country’s modern conscience, are the awe-inspiring towers of Angkor Wat. Built in the twelfth century by the Khmer king, Suryavarman II (r. 1113–1150), the temple embodies the two underlying tenets of Cambodian traditionalism. First, it represents a palpable testament to the glorious pages of Cambodia’s past, when the Khmer kingdom was among the most powerful in Southeast Asia. Second, the cosmology associated with Angkor Wat highlights the essential themes of traditional Cambodian conceptions of power: absolutism and the primacy of hierarchy. The story of Angkor Wat’s penetration of Cambodia’s modern conscience is the story of the enmeshment of Cambodian traditionalism within Cambodian modernity.

The temple, like others constructed in the region during what is now referred to as the Angkorean period, is an architectural representation of unity between kingship and cosmology. In its ideal form, the perception of unity provided a framework establishing that the political order was a “microcosm of the cosmic order.” Providing legitimacy to absolutist rule and a rigid political hierarchy, the traditional system, which had declined in stature after the fall of Angkor, was bolstered by the French, whose scholarship and restoration of Angkorean history brought its long since forgotten grandeur back to life. The French endeavors to conserve Cambodian kingship, designed to secure the legitimacy of their colonial project, accorded judiciously with the indirect
rule implied by Cambodia’s status as a protectorate. By according renewed prominence to kingship, and therefore reinforcing the associated notions of absolutism and hierarchy, the French effectively fused those “modern” institutions they had implanted in defining a geographical space called Cambodge with those that had sustained the precolonial Khmer polity. While the traditional political culture owed its renewal to the demands of the modernity underpinning the colonial enterprise, modernity in turn owed its limited successes to the legitimacy afforded by Cambodian veneration of tradition.

Pol Pot, the figure most synonymous with what is now generally regarded as the tragedy of modern Cambodia, declared in 1977: “If we can build Angkor, we can build anything.” His assertion amplifies the extent to which the perception of the eminence of Cambodia’s past has permeated its present. Once a source of pilgrimage for those Cambodian peasants fortunate enough to move beyond their local world, Angkor Wat, depicted on each of the country’s national flags since independence, now stands alone as the paramount symbol of Cambodian nationalism. Embodied the hierarchy and absolutism of the traditional world associated with the precolonial Khmer polity, it has provided a reference point for modern political practice. It is within this setting, where the tension between modernity and tradition is played out, that this book considers questions of education, development, and the state.

The book is about Cambodia’s education system, its relationship to change and development, the relationship between education and development, and the state. It unravels the “crisis” that has characterized education in Cambodia since the country was reluctantly granted independence by the French in 1953. In so doing, it not only illuminates our understanding of Cambodia’s firmly entrenched and pervasive educational problems but also contributes to a greater understanding of Cambodia’s tragic modern history and, importantly, a greater understanding of the inextricable link between that tragic history and the conditions of the present.

Alongside “tragedy,” the idea of timelessness is one of the dominant themes of Cambodia’s history. In one respect, the book amplifies this theme, demonstrating how time-honored notions of power, hierarchy, and leadership—the roots of tradition in Cambodia—have continued to enjoy prominence in the country’s economic, political, and cultural life. In another respect, the oversimplification associated with the idea of an unchanging society is highlighted. With the political extremities that have characterized Cambodia since independence as a backdrop,
the book examines the social institution most readily associated with change and dynamism in a country that continues to genuflect before the weight of tradition and the part-myth, part-reality perception of a glorious past. The focus on education informs both the broader theme of tragedy and the dichotomy between change and changelessness yet also communicates its own complex story.

The notion of a crisis in education first emerged in the 1960s, when educational planners, politicians, social scientists, and economists throughout the world realized that the great optimism associated with the perceived potential of education to bring about desirable social change had not been realized. Put simply, the crisis was, and continues to be, a product of the disparity between the education system and the economic, political, and cultural environments that it has been intended to serve.\footnote{In order to examine the Cambodian crisis, as it has been manifested, addressed, changed, and often ignored since independence, education is set within its historical and cultural context. In this respect, the book is concerned with addressing the role of education in constructing, and paradoxically being constructed by, Cambodia’s past. It focuses on a tension that Cambodia—along with many of its counterparts in the developing world—has played out time and time again: pursuing development (and one of its symptoms, modernity) in a manner at odds with tradition and the cultural underpinnings of the state.}

Education has been central to the tension between modernity and tradition and between development and state-making. On one hand, Cambodia’s leaders, with the notable exception of the notorious Pol Pot, have considered the education system an essential institution through which to create good citizens and realize their perspective on Cambodia’s future. In other words, embracing the same attitude as the leaders of developing countries across the globe, they have seen education as the key to modernization. On the other hand, these leaders, including Pol Pot, have embraced education in order to promote and ensure their personal power and legitimacy and that of the regimes over which they have presided. Formal education, therefore, has served a dual role: making Cambodia look modern and at the same time sustaining the key tenets of the traditional polity, where leadership is associated with power and where the nature of the state is perceived to be a function of that power.

The crisis in Cambodian education—its disparity with the economic, political, and cultural environments—is easy to identify. Its symptoms
were evident only a few years after independence. The quality of educational instruction was rapidly degenerating, infrastructure was being constructed at a rate that was impossible to sustain, while unemployed graduates and disgruntled intellectuals not only began to agitate for reform and change but became increasingly drawn to the promises of equality whispered by those radicals who had rejected the status quo and fled to the countryside to prepare for a revolution. The horrors of the 1970s, when a crippling civil war was followed by the Khmer Rouge reign of terror, only served to exacerbate the problems for those entrusted with reconstructing Cambodia during the 1980s. The political and continued military unrest that accompanied this period not only undermined development but reinforced the educational disaster. The continuity of the crisis is such that, in the 1990s, education in Cambodia is in an arguably more parlous state than it was in the 1960s: teachers are poorly trained, learning aids and teaching facilities are practically nonexistent, unacceptable numbers of students continue to repeat grades and many others drop out before they have completed primary school, and the budget for educational development provides little optimism about the prospects for future improvements.

In the spirit of setting education within its historical and cultural context, and therefore taking account of the manner in which the tension between tradition and modernity has become manifest over time, the book embodies several aims. The first is to examine the effects on education of the regimes that have ruled Cambodia since 1953. When Prince Norodom Sihanouk assumed almost absolute power following the country’s 1955 elections, he set in place a state ideology called Buddhist socialism. This ramshackle ideology was later replaced by the equally decrepit neo-Khmerism of Lon Nol and then by Pol Pot’s commitment to self-reliance and self-mastery. In 1979, as Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge carried their utopian ideals to their jungle hideaway, their replacements not only sought to rehabilitate Cambodia but also Cambodian socialism. When Eastern European Communism began its dramatic collapse in the 1980s, so too did these half-hearted attempts at socialist rehabilitation. Communism was eventually replaced by an unbridled official commitment to capitalism, to the free-market, and to the ideals of the so-called New World Order. In and of themselves, the effects on education of each of these ideological shifts are worthy of detailed study. In effect, however, the ideologies are nothing more than a small part of a bigger picture. How did the regimes promoting them assume state power? How did their behavior accord with these ideological
convictions? In what ways did they change? What forces led to their eventual demise? Each of these phenomena needs to be explored and related to the nature, structure, and form of education since independence.

The second aim of this book is to investigate the extent to which the paradigms that have informed our ideas about development have influenced state ideals, and in turn education, in Cambodia. How were Sihanouk’s Buddhist socialism and Lon Nol’s neo-Khmerism influenced by the modernization and human capital theories that dominated development agendas throughout the world from the 1950s through the 1970s? Although he would certainly have denied any such link, how was Pol Pot’s commitment to development based on self-reliance influenced by the ideas of exploitation, domination, and dependency that were at the core of the underdevelopment theories that emerged in opposition to the Westernized modernization and human capital models? How does the commitment to development based on free-market principles of the regime that has emerged in Cambodia since the United Nations sponsored elections of 1993 reflect the key tenets of the New World Order? While we can acknowledge that the development aspirations of Cambodia’s various post-independence regimes have not emerged in total isolation, we also need to question the degree to which these global development paradigms have been tempered and subverted by conditions tied firmly to the society and culture of Cambodia. In essence, how has the weight of the past, embodied by tradition, impacted on aspirations for the future?

The book’s third aim, informing the educational analysis, is to provide a balanced account of the contributions separate regimes have made to Cambodia’s political development. Unlike its more populous neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam, research and publications about Cambodia’s recent past are decidedly thin. Apart from the information explosion generated by the Khmer Rouge holocaust (1975–1979), few scholars have attempted to account for developments in Cambodia since independence. Even fewer, if any, have concerned themselves with questions of social policy. In a review essay, Serge Thion wrote, “explaining Cambodia is typically a foreigner’s business.” It is also, perhaps unfortunately, a business often colored by the embroilment of those foreigners in the politics of the Cold War. By weaving my narrative around the key issue of for what end Cambodia has used its education system, I have attempted to avoid political partisanship in the raging academic debates that often characterize Cambodian scholarship. Instead, by presenting what is essentially a chronicle of the continued
development and educational failures of every one of Cambodia’s post-independence ruling regimes, I have highlighted not the differences between them that their sides in the Cold War may have required, but the striking similarities.

In focusing on these similarities, the book works toward its final aim: pointing to the relationship between past practices and the problems of the present. Through focusing on the relationship between tradition and modernity, I have attempted to tie questions of history and politics to those of culture. Within this framework, the book links the crisis in contemporary Cambodian education, as with those of the past, to the roots of Cambodian culture—traditional notions of power, hierarchy, and leadership. In doing so, it debunks the idea that the Khmer Rouge was some extreme historical anomaly whose legacy is the major impediment to development in contemporary Cambodia. It also, therefore, debunks the popular myth, manifested in the desire by many Cambodians to realize their nostalgia for the past, that the Sihanouk era of the 1950s and 1960s was some kind of golden era for Cambodia and Cambodian development. In reality, while acknowledging the horrors and debilitating effects of the Khmer Rouge period, it is evident that Cambodia’s prerevolutionary past is no more a golden era than is its present; both are characterized by political repression, state-sanctioned violence, factionalism, corruption, and absolute contempt by those with power for those over whom that power is exercised. It is the echoes of the voices of the past in the circumstances of the present that resonate through the chapters that follow.

The foundations of tradition and modernity are established in chapter 1, which overviews Cambodia’s traditional sociocultural setting before exploring its initial interaction with a European vision of modernity. The nature of traditional Khmer society, including its education system, and the first inklings of modernity advanced under the patronage of the French are the two embracing themes of the chapter. Critical of French inertia in regard to the development of Cambodia, the chapter disentangles, through its examination of colonial educational development, a fundamental contradiction in the application of the mission civilisatrice that underpinned the colonial enterprise. On the one hand, it demonstrates the relative vigor with which the mission civilisatrice was applied to the Cambodian elite, whose assimilation into the so-called modern world represented a concerted French priority. On the other, however, the chapter establishes that the local world of the Cambodian peasant was left largely unvarnished by the brushstrokes of the colonial
period, with the country’s traditional patterns of hierarchy and absolutist rule reinforced by the colonial administration. Finally, the chapter reveals how it was the economic, political, and cultural changes ushered in by this contradictory agenda that served to influence the framework for the nation-state, and the state-sponsored education system, that emerged in Cambodia following independence.

The remaining chapters accord with the neatly arranged periodization of Cambodia’s modern history produced by the changes in the country’s ruling regimes. Consideration is therefore given, within separate chapters, to the Sihanouk regime (1953–1970), the Lon Nol regime (1970–1975), the Pol Pot regime (1975–1979), the Heng Samrin/Hun Sen regime (1979–1993), and the Hun Sen/Norodom Ranariddh regime (1993–1997), whose tumultuous end was realized in a coup d’état in July 1997. The chapters deliver analysis at several levels, with change and changelessness, and the enmeshment of tradition and modernity, emerging as central themes at each level. At one level, the chapters trace the development of educational policy in Cambodia, illustrating its relationship with the past, and the involvement of both international (global) and indigenous (local/national) forces in shaping its orientation. At another level, related to the first, the chapters examine the articulation of educational policies in practice, taking account of the range of factors—local, national, regional, and global—that have affected the implementation of educational policies in Cambodia since independence. A third level of analysis broadens the field of exploration, relating educational policy and practice to the construction of the nation-state, taking account of the contradictions between the traditional ideals underlying the construction project and the state of modernity it has generally embraced. The final level of analysis, enveloping the first three, relates educational policy and practice, and the construction of the nation-state, to the crisis in Cambodian education. It is at this level that we are able to account for not only the failure of an education system to fulfill the expectations of national leaders, educational policy makers, and citizens but also the failure of a political culture to deal with change and to deal with the aspirations of those affected by that change.

A Note on Sources

The Cambodian revolution of 1975 has been described as a prairie fire. For the researcher of Cambodia, the effects of that fire were to have a considerable and enduring impact. Given that the premise of historical
research is to “interpret past events by the traces they have left.” It would seem that to interpret Cambodia is to comb the ashes of the fire for the traces not destroyed. It is a task that almost inevitably leads to a methodological hotchpotch, characterized by the problems generated by war, wanton destruction, genocide, and the geographical dispersion of a people affected by each of these. In constructing my narrative, I have attempted to accommodate these problems by drawing on a wide range of sources: print media, the transcripts of speeches, government reports, publications, legislation and decrees, and the reports of international and nongovernment organizations. Certain historical periods, through no other reason but necessity, are dominated by a reliance on certain groups of sources, while other periods are characterized by a similar reliance on different sources. At almost every juncture of the narrative, documentary and transactional records have been corroborated with data gleaned from personal interviews and discussions and with the substantial contribution to our understanding of Cambodia made by leading scholars.

Keeping in mind the obvious constraints associated with reconstructing the past, and the more unique constraints presented by Cambodia’s tumultuous modern history, the book provides for many Cambodian voices to be heard. It is not intended to be a comprehensive history of Cambodian education, development, or the state, and it is therefore acknowledged, and regretted, that many stories remain untold. What has been undertaken is an attempt to peel away the many layers of Cambodia’s past, the ideologies of successive and radically different yet remarkably similar Cambodian regimes, to present a story about education. Like any other story, certain characters emerge, and twists and turns in the plot are taken, while others are not paid the attention they arguably deserve. While many other stories remain to be told, and a cacophony of voices remain to be heard, it is as a beginning and not an end that this study contributes a small drop in the shallow pond that is our understanding of modern Cambodia.