Introduction

Like many people, the main images I had of Cambodia before I first arrived in the country in 1995 were those of Angkor Wat and the Killing Fields. Not surprisingly, like most of the literature, news reports and films tend to focus on the splendor of Angkor, which symbolizes the glory of the country’s past, and on the horrors of the Killing Fields, which evoke more generally the tragedy of Cambodia’s modern history. History, it seems, is a central theme in the way the country is portrayed. This attention focused on Cambodia’s past is also manifest in the labels of tradition, conservatism, timelessness and changelessness that are often employed in describing Cambodian society (Martin 1994; Ledgerwood et al. 1994; Chandler 1996a; Curtis 1998; Ayres 2000).

It does not, however, take long to find out that Cambodia is not as static or backward-looking as such labels or the dominant focus on the past may suggest; not only because of the centuries of history in which the country has continuously been (re)created and transformed, but also because of the variety of influences and processes that have affected the country in more recent times. The transition from a closed socialist system to an open-market system and toward peace and reconstruction has contributed to a new framework for the country’s future, and to new opportunities, expectations and needs for its inhabitants.

Hence, on a closer look we find a country full of contradictions in which past and present constantly interact. While the majority of the population are subsistence farmers, growing rice and using technology similar to those depicted on the Angkorian bas-reliefs, the ancient temple itself has become a site of (post)modern achievement due to its function as a major tourist attraction as well as a backdrop for Hollywood productions. Contradictions can also be found in the lives of Cambodians themselves, which are, for the majority, dominated by poverty and
the rhythms of rural life, while a small, mostly urban, elite enjoys the “benefits of democratic happiness-cum-consumerism” (Thion 1993). And while many Cambodians aspire to take part in an officially proclaimed “new era” of prosperity and development, dominant discourses still revolve around the timeless concern about the perceived loss of Khmer tradition, land and national identity.

In such a context there are ample challenges for an anthropological study of what Fischer (1999) has called “emergent forms of life.” By exploring such forms, this book aims to give a dynamic picture of Cambodia and the way Cambodians deal with new aspirations, opportunities and constraints. It analyzes the interrelations of individual experiences, symbolic constructions and structural inequalities that shape the country as it adapts to the global pressures of the twenty-first century. The focus is on young Cambodian migrant women, who are directly involved in, affected by and also shape current processes of change as they leave their villages to work in the city.

**SOPHEA’S STORY**

“I think that I have two hands and two legs so I can earn money to support myself without having to steal from others. My siblings know about my character and remain silent. They know that I will not become a prostitute like other women. I told my siblings that they need not worry about me, that I know how to take care of myself and that I am well aware of the good and bad roads to follow.”

Through her remarks, the young woman whom I call Sophea points out how her move to the city was guided by the need for cash income, moral dilemmas and, above all, self-determination. It is the last for which I remember her most fondly. I met Sophea for the first time in a restaurant where she was working as a beer promotion girl. In her charming and open way, she told me that her brand of beer was still unknown among most customers, and that she therefore had a hard time selling it. Her arguments convinced me and my companions to support her by ordering her brand of beer. As we continued to talk about her work and life in Phnom Penh, it turned out that we were living very close to each other, and we arranged to meet again later that week.

On several occasions afterwards I learned about Sophea’s story. Her parents died during the Pol Pot era while she was still very young. The eldest of her seven siblings took care of her. When she was about sixteen years old, she ran away from home because she no longer wanted to
live in the household of her oldest brother, who blamed her for being lazy and denied her a much-wanted bicycle and wristwatch like those a neighbor possessed. She decided to try her luck somewhere else and left for Phnom Penh with three friends from her village. Two of these friends have since returned to marry and live in the village, but Sophea has stayed in Phnom Penh. She found work first as a domestic servant, later as a market trader, as a factory worker in several factories and, finally, as a beer promotion girl.

When she came to Phnom Penh, she stayed with the family she worked for, then moved to live with the family of her cousin, who helped her settle as a market trader. When she started working in the ironing section of a factory, she rented a room with a friend from her village who worked in the same factory. Sophea later found a job in another factory, where she could work with a sewing machine. In this factory she befriended Sophoarn, a young woman from her work unit, who joined them in living in a small, wooden room located on a compound close to where I lived. Of the three women, only Sophoarn continued to work in a factory. Sophea and her other friend quit after they got fed up with night shifts, forced overtime and arrogant behavior of the Chinese supervisors. Sophea tried to find another factory job, but was unsuccessful and remained without work for a few months. She was in urgent need of money: “I spent the money that I’d earned before [. . .] and didn’t want to go back to my native village. I didn’t know what to do, so I decided to sell beer.”

When I met Sophea, she had been working as a beer promotion girl for two months. She worked on the basis of commission and had difficulties earning enough to cover her living expenses. Sophea is well aware that her job, often seen as an indirect form of sex work, is not good for her reputation as a woman. At work she has to wear a short, tight blue dress, which she tries to cover with a long black skirt when she takes a motodup (motorbike-taxi) to go to work. Her work also requires an adaptation in behavior and speech. She has had to learn how to soothe unknown men, sit, talk and drink with them in a familiar, intimate way. Further, Sophoarn, her friend and roommate, criticizes her for incorrect behavior outside work, for going out with men, wearing too tight tops and skirts with a long split. Sophoarn and others consider such style and behavior as “too modern” and not proper for Khmer women.

Sophea knows that urban types of work, styles and behavior set her apart from other women in her village: “When I compare myself
now with women of my age in my native village who have one or two children, I am very different: I have my own money to buy rice.” She attaches high value to the autonomy she has in the city, which is possible through the money she earns herself. Sophea likes to buy new clothes, go out for fun (dae leeng), and sing karaoke—activities she could not indulge in or afford back in her home village. No wonder that Sophea vehemently refuses her siblings’ repeated calls to come back to her village and get married. For Sophea, twenty-four years old when I befriended her, it is clear: she wants to stay in Phnom Penh a bit longer and “have some more fun.” She finds life in the village too boring (opsuk) and, as she admits, she always longs to go back to Phnom Penh after a short visit with her family. As a result her siblings joke that Phnom Penh is her native village: “They love me very much, but I am obstinate and I want to outdo them, even if it is only a little.”

Sophea is one of tens of thousands of young women who have left their villages to find work in Phnom Penh. Her story is one of many, neither exemplary nor unique in its facets of mobility and determination. Her career so far illustrates part of the spectrum of jobs available to young women without much education. At the same time it shows a young woman’s mobility, switching between jobs, places and styles. Sophea is accommodating her work, housing, friends and behavior to the possibilities and constraints that make up the lives of young Cambodian women like her. Her behavior does not fulfill the conceptions of traditional proper behavior for women, as shown in the reactions of her family and roommate. Though such notions are both assumed and referred to as a given, they are, like Khmer tradition in general, constantly being created (Ledgerwood 1996a: 412).

Women like Sophea who make their way from the village to the city to find work, and with it an income to support themselves as well as their village-based families, are very much part of a process in which meanings of “proper” female behavior, tradition and being Khmer are renegotiated. This renegotiation takes place in the face of the social upheaval and destruction associated with Cambodia’s recent past, and also in the face of its present road toward reconstruction and the related concerns with development, globalization and modernization (see also Edwards and Roces 2000). It is within this context that this study will explore, in detail, stories of young rural women’s work and life in Phnom Penh, the teeming capital of Cambodia.
MY STORY

Before I started this study I had worked for three years for a local research organization in Cambodia. During this time I worked on research projects focusing on such topics as ethnic minorities, conflict resolution and democratization. I was frequently assigned to work with female Cambodian researchers on gender issues. A great deal of my work involved research on the trafficking of women and children, an issue that drew increasing attention from local and international organizations, policymakers and the media. It was, and is, commonly associated with young women and girls who are brutally forced, kidnapped, or deceived into a globalized sex industry. What I discovered in my research, however, was a much more differentiated and complex picture. Not only were the target groups, the recruitment practices and the services or activities in which “trafficked” persons ended up much more varied than the general picture of young women forced into “sexual slavery,” but also those women who ended up in the sex industry did not necessarily see themselves as victims of organized “global sex traffic” (Derks 1997, 1998a, 2004; see also Law 2000: 11). I encountered young women in search of a better life for their family and themselves, wanting some adventure and using some of the opportunities open to them, leading them into diverse new, positive and negative, experiences.

This discovery inspired me to focus on different forms of female mobility. Instead of looking at the forced forms of it, and instead of focusing on sex work, I wanted to take a broader look at the migration and opportunities available to young women coming from the countryside to Phnom Penh. These young, often poorly educated, women are most likely to end up working in the sales, service and industrial sectors, performing jobs that contrast sharply to those performed in their home villages. I decided for comparative reasons that it would be interesting to focus on specific categories of unskilled or low-skilled, low-paid employment within these three sectors.

Within the sales sector, I look particularly at female migrants working as street traders. Trading is an activity in which women traditionally prevail and contribute cash to the household economy. There is a large variety in trades and traders, but young, rural women—who are the focus of my research—dominate in small-scale street trading that often involves food items.

Work in the industrial sector, contrary to trading, is a relatively new economic activity for women. It is related to Cambodia’s integration
into the global capitalist economy. This concerns in particular the garment industry, which has been pinpointed as one of the main catalysts to development. I therefore focus on migrant women working in this particular industry.

Within the service sector I concentrate on those “service providers” that I was already familiar with, namely sex workers. Prostitution, as such, is not a new phenomenon in Cambodia, although the scale upon which it has been practiced within the past decade is unprecedented. Sex work takes place in nightclubs, brothels, and parks, as well as more indirectly by some women working in the entertainment or service sector, such as beer promotion work in restaurants. I will examine these different forms, but I focus mainly on brothel-based sex workers. Since sex work most strongly defies cultural notions of proper behavior and sexuality of women, it is an interesting case for comparison with small-scale trading activities and factory labor.

By studying three different categories of work, the question I seek to answer is how to understand the differences and similarities in rural-urban migration and urban employment of young Cambodian women. I will do so by exploring the interrelationships among structural conditions, social and cultural constructions, and individual experiences. I concentrate on the processes and practices of migration and employment with an initial set of research questions. What are the individual and familial motivations for migration and urban employment, and how do these relate to structural conditions? How are migration and urban employment related to contacts with family and village of origin? What are the conditions of women’s work and life in the city? And how do these motivations, contacts and conditions differ between women in factory work, sex work and street trade?

Although the three categories of work have specific entry routines, working, earning, and related living conditions, as well as specific interventions and regulations, Sophea’s story shows that the borders between these categories of work are porous and easily crossed. Soon after starting my fieldwork I realized that mobility is not only related to geographic movement of women from the countryside to the city, but also relates to women’s ever-changing work and living situations, and to the flexible patterns of behavior these young rural women display as they try to make sense of ambiguities and contradictions in their pursuit of fulfilling personal desires, family obligations, or cultural ideals.

This finding motivated me to look in detail at women’s experi-
ences and the ways in which women view themselves in the city and in relation to their rural background. With a second set of research questions I focus on these urban experiences and their consequences. What does urban work and life mean to young rural women? To what extent do they aspire to and achieve participation in urban life? How do women perceive their rural backgrounds in relation to their desired “modern” urban experiences? How are contradictory moralities and ideals regarding financial obligations, responsibilities, female behavior and individual desires reworked through social relationships, networks and employment in the city? And do these urban experiences influence decision-making processes that affect their own lives as well as those of their families?

Over the past two decades many studies have analyzed the migration and employment of women in Southeast Asia (e.g., Enloe 1983; Ong 1987; Murray 1991; Wolf 1992; Chant and McIlwaine 1995; Mills 1999; Law 2000; Elmhirst 2002). In this sense, the focus of this study is not unique, and neither, at first glance, are the experiences of Cambodian migrant women, which parallel those of other women in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. Yet, by paying attention to local conditions, meanings and consequences, and by taking a comparative look at migrant women in different categories of work—which also required high mobility and flexibility for myself as a researcher—I hope to provide insight into the ways that young Cambodian women with similar rural, economically poor, rice-farming and poorly educated backgrounds involve themselves in urban employment and thereby contribute to a multiplicity and dynamism in social practices and the production of cultural meanings. In Cambodia, which has recently opened up to the global economy, the ideas of social reconstruction and the ways in which people handle new possibilities, changes and insecurities have so far hardly been analyzed. Women definitely play an important role in these processes, not simply, as we shall see, as pawns in the country’s pursuit of national development or as simple cultural images of “tradition” and “modernity,” but also as agents in their own right.

**SUBJECTS AND SYMBOLS**

Studies focusing on women in developing countries tend to highlight how they are used to symbolize the state of “tradition” in their societies or how women are subjected to structures of dominance. The former perspective points to women as the symbolic bearers of culture, honor,
or national identity, and as such carrying the “burden of representation” (Yuval-Davis 1997: 45–46). The last perspective relates more specifically to female migrants and laborers, who are often portrayed as exploited subjects, forced to leave their village and work under unequal, capitalist conditions and patriarchal control systems in order to provide their families with much-needed cash earnings (e.g., Enloe 1983; Heyzer 1988; Sassen 1998). While such portrayals of women as symbols of tradition or subjects of capitalism can be criticized for suggesting passivity and homogeneity among women who differ in class, ethnicity, and age as well as in the ways they respond to and act upon changing opportunities and constraints, they continue to appear quite regularly in analyses of female labor migration.

Approaches to female labor migration variously emphasize the role of economic rationality, structural conditions, household strategies and agency. An approach that focuses on economic rationality explains population movements merely as a function of individual decisions based on “pull” factors, such as employment opportunities, better wages, working conditions and other advantages in usually urban industrialized areas, and on “push” factors that are related to the deteriorating conditions in the usually rural areas of origin, such as declining productivity, increased landlessness, or demographic growth. This approach has been rightly criticized for failing to take into account the structural determinants, or the underlying inequalities, that are fundamental to understanding processes of migration. To consider migration, Fernández-Kelly argues, “as the result of aggregate individual decisions does not adequately explain why migration begins, increases, and diminishes at certain historical stages nor does it account for the direction of migratory flows” (1983: 206).

An approach that focuses on structural conditions and links labor migration and participation to specific economic, political and ideological conditions, can therefore be seen as an important corrective to the more functionalist individual, rational actor approach to labor migration (Fernández-Kelly 1983: 221). Feminist authors have in this way examined the gender-linked characteristics of migration. Sassen (1998) analyzes the systematic relationships between globalization and the feminization of waged labor. She argues that the fundamental processes leading to an increase in migratory movements of so-called Third World women, within their country as well as abroad, are related to economic restructuring at the global level. These include, most obviously, the shift
of factories and offices to developing countries that promotes a demand for cheap female labor. The connection between female migration, labor participation and unequal developments within the world market, resulting in an international division of labor, is also explored by other authors. Mies (1986), for example, argues that women in developing countries form a cheap, easily controllable, flexible workforce, serving international male-dominated capital by producing commodities for the world market, and by fulfilling subsistence and reproductive services in the informal sector or the sex business.

In an effort to link this overly deterministic focus of the structural approach to the individualistic focus of the rational actor approach, some researchers have resorted to a household strategies approach (cf. Wolf 1992: 13). Female labor migration has, in their view, to be considered above all as part of a household survival strategy, because women who migrate are doing so in order to earn an income that can contribute to the household economy. The diverse tasks associated with household maintenance are, as Chant and Radcliffe (1992: 22) argue, as important as labor opportunities in explaining female labor migration. Gendered divisions of productive and reproductive tasks, and decision-making structures within the household are, according to these authors, crucial in analyzing who moves, whether other household members move with them, and who stays behind. Such divisions should therefore be considered in combination with the structural elements that lead to a gender-segregated labor market (Chant 1992; Chant and Radcliffe 1992).

Although the household strategy approach attempts to mediate between macro-structural and micro-individual levels of analysis, it fails to take, as Wolf (1992: 17) argues, sufficiently into account that household reproduction cannot be considered as a given, and that households are in fact sites of conflict, loci of contestation and negotiation between contradictory positions and expectations among household members of different genders and ages. These contestations and negotiations are partly related to women’s own aspirations regarding consumption, beauty, fashion and commodified leisure. State-based pursuits of development, as well as the capitalist images spread by television and other media, play an important role in young women’s material aspirations. These pursuits and images also influence the employment strategies of young migrant women, such as those described by Murray (1991), who abandoned informal economic activities such as street trading and adopted a more profitable economic activity, namely prostitution.
This all points toward a complex interplay among the different levels—individual, household, state, and global—in processes of female labor migration. On the one hand, we can, like Mills (2003: 42), speak of a “profoundly gendered global economy.” Gender inequalities serve to define women around the globe as supplementary or devalued workers in the new sites of industrialization, the informal sector, and domestic service as well as the sex industry. On the other hand, there is “considerable diversity in discursive forms and material practices that gender hierarchies take within the global labor force” (Mills 2003: 43). This diversity relates, besides ethnicity, class, or age, to women’s diverse positions as unmarried daughters as against wives or mothers, and to the dynamics and experiences of women in migration and labor participation. Women’s experiences are differently affected by employment-related disciplinary strategies (and resistance to these), by the ways in which women are positioned as consumers rather than producers, as well as by the multiple gender roles and meanings. This complexity results, as Ong has written, in a “gap between our analytical constructs and workers’ actual experiences” (1991: 279).

Increasingly, studies therefore try to come to terms with the complex dualism between the unequal structures of power and wealth within the global economy, and the daily lives and views of young women in the global labor force. The concept of female agency, the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001: 112), plays an important role here. Law, for example, speaks in her study about sex work in Southeast Asia of a “negotiated tension” (2000: 121) between free will and the constraints that make certain kinds of employment, such as in the sex industry, an opportunity for women. She adds that sex workers themselves, contrary to the views of many observers, do not view their position and encounters with men in strictly oppressive terms, and points therefore to the possibilities for resistance—albeit in a complex, unanticipated, or culturally relevant way.

Contestation and struggle have become critical themes in studies of women’s experiences of migration and employment. Women may be confronted with diverse forms of exploitation or domination within the family, at work or in society, and yet by “manipulating, contesting and rejecting these claims, working women reassess and remake their identities and communities in ways important for social life” (Ong 1991: 296). This is clearly visible in courtship and marriage practices, in which young working women increasingly gain autonomy, as well as
in their engagement in “new patterns of consumption linked to desired and often globally oriented standards of ‘modernity’” (Mills 2003: 49). These are, however, at the same time the arenas of life that most interfere with ideas about women’s symbolic role in national development and modernization, as well as in embodying the maintenance or loss of traditional values. It is in this context that portrayals of female migrants as capitalist subjects contrast most strongly with portrayals of women as symbols of tradition.

Young women working away from the direct control of their parents in the sex industry, factory labor, or trading are easily depicted as “loose women” who are behaving in improper, immoral, or nontraditional ways. Such concerns affect not only women and their parents but also society at large. While women’s lives are affected by external forces such as the global economy, changes in their behavior may be interpreted as a threat to “tradition” and “national identity.” It is for this reason that Ong and Peletz (1995: 2) suggest placing gender both in relation to specific historical and political economic forces and in the framework of symbolic meaning.

The argument that gender and sexuality are in fact symbolic constructs with various meanings in different social and cultural contexts—and thus not natural categories—has long been discussed among feminist anthropologists. Studies about gender in Southeast Asia tend to emphasize these symbolic meanings of gender. Local constructions of gender relationships, Atkinson and Errington (1990: viii) argue, demand understanding in their own terms. As a result, gender should be viewed as a cultural system of meaning that pertains to the differences and similarities between women and men as they are lived and interpreted in particular contexts (ibid.: 8). Whereas attention for the impact of exogenous factors on these gender meanings is, in early works, minimal, they become central in later works on gender in Southeast Asia (Steedly 1999: 438). Ong and Peletz (1995: 2) argue that “indigenous notions bearing on masculinity and femininity, on gender equality and complementarity, and on various criteria of prestige and stigma are being reworked in the dynamic postcolonial contexts of peasant outmigration, nation building, cultural nationalism, and international business.” Gender should therefore be considered as fluid and contingent, characterized by contestation, ambivalence and change.

Few studies and analyses focus on the complex interplay between symbolic meanings of gender, and the processes and developments that
have shaped post-conflict Cambodia.³ Contestation, ambiguity and change are especially relevant themes in relation to years of warfare, the Khmer Rouge terror regime, and isolation under the guidance of their “traditional enemies,” the Vietnamese. This heritage has led to the pervasive idea of the destruction or even loss of Khmer culture, and “[i]n the face of a threatened loss of their culture, Khmer emphasize certain cultural symbols as the embodiment of ‘Khmerness’” (Ledgerwood et al. 1994: 9). The cultural symbol of the Khmer woman has thus taken on a special meaning. Ledgerwood writes: “They—the Khmer—are focusing on women. The sense of their importance goes beyond the fact that more women than men survived the horrors of their recent history, or the fact that women are somehow “culture bearers” par excellence. There is something of central importance to this focus that is linked to the proper behavior of women” (1990: 2).

Ledgerwood goes on to explain that to be Khmer means to live in accordance with a certain hierarchical order of society, one that places a strong emphasis on gender roles. “To move outside these roles is to enter the realm of chaos where, having lost what it is to be female in Khmer terms, one loses also what it is to be Khmer” (ibid.: 3). Symbolic images of the woman, and of proper female behavior, thus not only function to preserve culture but the Khmer social order and people in general. This does not, however, mean that these images are fixed or internally coherent. Gender relationships—in Cambodia, Southeast Asia, or indeed anywhere—cannot be considered as fixed systems, if only because they are typically comprised of contradictory ideologies that are constantly undergoing change (Ong and Peletz 1995: 4).

Such ambiguous gender imagery is especially important in times of rapid social change, as it can be used to put forward new issues and categories that become restated as “tradition” (Ledgerwood 1996a: 412). Studies on Khmer gender typically refer to the Chbap Srey, or “Code of Women’s Behavior” that advises women how to behave properly and is often referred to as a kind of blueprint for the traditional, submissive position of women in Cambodia. Yet, a detailed reading of such and other texts shows that the “proper,” or virtuous, woman in the Khmer context is a multivalent symbol, through which she is simultaneously many different and contradictory things and can thus be made to fit new situations (Ledgerwood 1990: 317). A proper woman must be “soft and sweet” as well as a “hard-headed businesswoman,” and while daughters are supposed to be protected, they are also expected to go
to the city in order to earn money to help support the family (Ledgerwood 1994: 123; 1992: 5). Such multiple ambiguous notions of female-ness allow ideals to be discussed as being retained, even though the action has significantly changed (Ledgerwood 1996a: 139–140). In this sense, the contradictory and changing meanings of ideals with regard to women are of major importance to our understandings of young women who temporarily leave their families and villages in search of work in the city.

CAMBODIA AND THE EXPERIENCE OF MODERNITY

Whereas Ledgerwood focuses in her work mostly on how the changing symbolic meanings of “proper” Khmer women are restated as tradition, at the same time, especially in the media and advertisements, women are portrayed as symbols of progress and modernity. These images of modernity certainly exert appeal as they reach villages through occasional TV sets and the stories of those who have experienced a stay in Phnom Penh. They contribute to the perceived attractions of city life and jobs, particularly for young people, and are important for generating a flow of migrants to the city. Working and living in Phnom Penh gives these young people the opportunity to become, if only temporarily and to a limited extent, part of a “modern” urban world. This “modern” experience plays an important role in young rural women’s perceptions of their work, life, and position in the city. Yet, in their desire to be modern women (*srey samay*), they struggle to find a proper balance between what they consider to be “old” or “traditional” in village life and what they see as “too modern” in the city. This struggle occurs between parents and daughters, managers and workers, men and women, or among women themselves, and interrelates with the constraints and opportunities that are set within the specific Cambodian context.

In the 1950s and 1960s, journalists, tourists and diplomats who visited Cambodia described it as “an idyllic, antique land unsullied by the brutalities of the modern world” (Shawcross 1986: 36). Such descriptions referred to Phnom Penh, a quiet riverside city with a provincial charm and, unlike cities such as Bangkok and Saigon, seemingly untouched by the pressures of trade and war. They referred even more so to the countryside, where the majority of the “friendly,” “smiling” population lived in villages built around Buddhist temples and surrounded by green rice fields. Although this idyll was already by then an illusion, it was brutally destroyed by the years of war, terror and
geopolitical forces that dominated the country’s history from the late 1960s up to the 1990s.

This violent past is now thought to be a result of a confrontation between the traditional and the modern. Only during the French protectorate (1863–1953) did Cambodia become part of a modernist, colonialist project while, as Ayres (2000: 2) states, continuing to uphold its system rooted in “time-honored notions of power, hierarchy and leadership.” He speaks of a “Cambodian veneration of tradition” that made modernity only a limited success (ibid.). Hence the Pol Pot regime is often seen as synonymous with what is regarded as the “tragedy of modern Cambodia.” While similarly focusing on this interplay between the traditional and the modern in Cambodian political history, Marston (2002) argues that Cambodia never met the criteria for modernity as defined within the modernization theory relating to industrial development, mass media, liberal democracy and social diversification. Yet, modernity also refers to individual identity in relation to the modern world, a modern world that is increasingly complex, globalized, ideologically diversified and self-reflexive (Marston 2002: 39–40). Seen from this perspective, modernity has touched Cambodia to the extent that global processes created its recent past, not only the Pol Pot regime, but also the economic, political and social developments that have influenced Cambodia up to the present day. Even more important for Marston is the conception of modernity—that is, the configuration of what, in different ways and in different places and times, is conceived of as modern—and how this is played out in what is conceived of as “traditional,” leading every society to spin its “modernities” out of the fleece of the “traditional” (2002: 59).

How, then, do past and present developments shape the “face” or “character” of modernity in present-day Cambodia? As we have seen, Cambodia’s recent past, marked by war and destruction, is crucial to understanding the present meanings of modernity, which constitute, above all, a break with this past and the onset of better times. Developments in Cambodia since the early 1990s have brought hopes of what Prime Minister Hun Sen has called a “new era of growth and prosperity” (Ministry of Commerce 2000). This new era involves a necessary “process of modernization and national economic development” and integration into a capitalist global economy (Minister of Commerce Cham Prasidh, in Ministry of Commerce 2000). Such ideas and hopes
of prosperity, development and modernity, proclaimed at the highest political levels, have reached people at all strata of Cambodian society.

Young women and their mobility play a decisive role in this pursuit for prosperity, development and modernity. First, their labor contributes significantly to national economic development, especially in the factories that produce for a global market. Second, their earnings contribute to fulfilling, if only to a limited extent, the needs and aspirations of their rural families who, through new commodities, agricultural inputs, as well as the education of younger siblings, hope to enhance their own position and comfort. Third, women are pursuing their own aspirations regarding modern consumption and display as these are promoted in images of modernity in advertising and the mass media as well as in stories of peers who live and work in the city. These three roles are not easy to reconcile, especially when taking into account the symbolic and limited positions of women in a rapidly changing society like Cambodia according to which women are simultaneously symbols of tradition and yet subject to, and thus constrained by, structures of dominance. Edwards and Roces (2000: 10–11) speak therefore, more generally, of a “modern” Asian woman who “exudes contradiction and ambivalence as she straddles between tradition and modernity, victimization and agency, between being a subject and an object.”

Are these oppositions reflected in lived experiences? This central question runs throughout this study. By paying attention to Khmer women’s own stories, as well as to their responses, actions, consumptions and creativity, I hope to gain insights into their subjective experiences and the ways in which these are based on practices that can be considered neither wholly acts of free will nor completely socially determined products.

**PLAYING GAMES**

Studying Khmer women who move to the city to work involves reaching an understanding of the conditions that contribute to the demand for female labor, the constraints and opportunities that are set in a Cambodian historical context, and the ways in which these relate to cultural and social constructions of gender that are characterized by contestation, ambivalence and change. Furthermore, a study of Khmer women on the move will need to explore the role of the experience of modernity, existing at large but variously practiced and conceived (Ber-
man 1988; Appadurai 1996). And maybe most important, this study calls for an understanding of the ways in which women themselves are agents in these processes. How can one understand the links between subjective experiences and actions, constructions of gender and the broader historical context, and structures in which these are situated?

Probably the most influential framework in which such questions are dealt with is so-called practice theory, as it tries to overcome dualistic conceptualizations such as those of structure/individual and objective/subjective. Within the practice framework, the emphasis is on the idea that human action is constrained by the given social and cultural order—usually condensed to the term “structure”—but also on the idea that human action creates structure—that is, it reproduces or transforms it, or both (Ortner 1996: 2). The actions, or practices, of individual actors are produced by what Bourdieu (1977: 72) calls the habitus, the “strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations.” Bourdieu pays significant attention to the reproductive tendencies and unintentionality of practices. Ortner (1996), however, insists that it is important to pay due attention to agency as both a product and a producer of society and history.

As noted earlier, agency refers to a capacity to act within specific contexts. These capacities are neither passive reactions to sociocultural prerequisites nor simply acts of free will or resistance (Rapport and Overing 2000; Ahearn 2001). Instead, agency concerns the mediation “between conscious intention and embodied habituses, between conscious motives and unexpected outcomes, between historically marked individuals and events on the one hand, and the cumulative reproductions and transformations that are the result of every day practices on the other” (Ortner 2001: 77). In an effort to develop a model of practice embodying agency, Ortner refers to an image of what she calls “serious games.” The idea of the “game” is to capture simultaneously the actors, rules and goals that make up social life, the different webs of relationships and interactions between “multiple, shiftingly, interrelated subject positions” as well as agency, because the actors “play with skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence” (Ortner 1996: 12). Through the adjective “serious,” Ortner means to bring in “the idea that power and inequality pervade the games in multiple ways, and that while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process, the stakes of these games are often very high” (ibid.).

As far as the migration of young rural women to Phnom Penh is
concerned, it may be useful to keep in mind the dimensions involved in what Ortner called “serious games.” Doing so allows us to go beyond ideas of economic rationality, determining structures, and household strategies, and emphasizes the embeddedness of women’s practices and the complex ways in which they go about life in a particular time and place. The seriousness of the games refers to the global economic, but also to the national and regional historical context that influences the constraints and possibilities these women face in their lives. The actors, rules and goals that are culturally organized and constructed contribute to specific understandings and meanings of practices and experiences related to employment, duties and desires, and arrangements for the future. Through the webs of social relationships and interactions, these understandings, practices and experiences are sustained, contested and changed. This is possible due to the agency of these women, which suggests that they are knowledgeable about, and skilled in, using the rules and goals of the game and also aware of the intentions of the different subject positions that make up their lives as they move to the city.

**RESEARCH AND RESONANCE**

Doing research in a city involves a different setting from the village in which anthropologists tend to conduct field research. In cities, places and people are more diverse, scattered and unknown. Since the focus of my research was on young rural women working in different sectors, I had to find a way to gain access to these diverse, scattered and mostly unknown women. Although the help of Cambodian friends and former contacts with organizations facilitated access to places and people, I still had to create my own network of women working in the sex industry, factories and street trading. I decided to find a place to live in the northern part of Phnom Penh, Tuol Sangkeo, located close to a market and situated within easy reach of one of the most famous brothel streets in Phnom Penh and close to a conglomeration of garment factories. Among my neighbors living in small rooms in the same compound were factory workers, families from the countryside, as well as the landlady and her family, who possessed a TV set in front of which we all assembled several times a week to watch and comment on popular Thai soap operas.

My living situation allowed me to talk to my neighbors on a daily basis, so I could cross-check information and the meanings of concepts during our evening talks, and provided at the same time enough privacy
to receive people, most notably sex workers, who are not necessarily welcome in all houses. This relative independence to maintain relationships with different kinds of people in my own house would have been almost impossible if I had lived with a family. I also bought a small, secondhand motorbike—the kind mostly used by students—in order to be able to move around independently and visit places not considered proper for young women.

On many occasions Lim Sidedine accompanied me and assisted me with the Khmer language when needed. I had worked with Lim Sidedine for several years, especially in research projects on trafficking of women and children. She proved to be an open-minded person with very good interview skills. We have worked well together for many years and became close friends, discussing not only the situations and stories of the women we met, but also our own stories and insecurities. The fact that she is a university teacher in her forties did not hinder her communication with younger women. On the contrary, it made it easier for her to communicate about all kinds of subjects, including sexuality, and to enter sex establishments without feelings of shame and fear, something that would have been more difficult for younger research assistants.

My fieldwork took place from September 2000 through May 2001, and was followed up in 2002 and 2003. During these times I tried to address the context within which the daily life of the women I wanted to study is set. Through life histories, interviews and focus-group discussions I gained insights into the ways these women present themselves, and how they see their urban experiences and their individual accommodations to different situations, sometimes contradictory expectations, and sociocultural imperatives. Several in-depth interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated. More often, however, we took notes during or after interviews, discussions and informal talks, so that women would feel more at ease in telling us personal stories.

However, as Wikan states, anthropologists cannot only rely on people’s own narratives. A “person must also respond to events, create and consume resources, and influence the events and course of social interaction” (Wikan 1995: 265). Thus, besides women’s own presentations, their actions are important for understanding their positions and the way they deal with the constraints and possibilities in their positions. In this sense, participant observation can give important clues with regard to, for example, how sex workers interact with their brothel managers, their clients, or among themselves; the consumption practices of factory
workers in their free time; or the ways in which street traders create and use urban spaces for themselves. I visited brothels at different times of the day, spent time with factory workers on Sunday afternoons (I also visited some factories, but gaining access to them was difficult), and spent time with street traders as they prepared curry or sold pickled mango, noodles, or fruitshakes on Phnom Penh’s streets.

It was not always easy to move among the women working in different occupations and living in different parts of the city. Initially, I focused on factory workers and sex workers, presuming that it would be easy to get in contact with street traders, easily visible and accessible as they are, later on. This was not as simple as I had thought, because of the high mobility of street traders during work time, and also because of their frequent visits to their home villages. As a result, I spent more time with sex workers and factory workers than with street traders. Since my field research took place in the city, I know the rural perspective only from hearsay through my informants. I did, however, accompany a few women when they visited their families and home villages. In this way I saw how these women interacted with their families and other villagers, showing off their acquired urban styles and experiences.

In order to gain insight into the cultural and symbolic constructions of gender, I explored diverse Khmer texts, such as the chbap (didactic codes), folktales, religious stories and popular songs that describe, advise and indicate the importance attached to proper behavior for Khmer in general, and for Khmer women in particular. These sources do not give us a blueprint of how “it should be” or “used to be,” but are helpful in understanding how gender ideals, concepts and patterns are part of the everyday discourse and how they relate to the lives and views of young rural women in Phnom Penh today. Views from religious specialists, family members, neighbors, village chiefs and other authorities in state institutions or civil organizations extended such understandings, and the different perspectives of these people proved helpful in shaping the contexts and positions in which women find themselves (see also Barth 1994; 2002).

These contexts and positions are framed by material and structural constraints, such as those reflected in statistics on female labor, education, marital conditions, migration on a national level, and by historical conditions. To document these, I relied on records and documents from government departments, international and national organizations involved in the collection of economic and social data, on archival
sources, and on the valuable insights and accounts in anthropological and historical literature on Cambodia.

The difficulty and the beauty of ethnographic research is that it is never finished and always in motion. During my stay in Cambodia, I saw how the upgrading of a brothel street changed the image it had had when I arrived. The brothels located in a squatter area that I used to visit regularly had disappeared when I returned a year later. People moved on, so I occasionally got new neighbors, noticed that a sex worker had changed brothels, found that an ambulant street trader had turned to selling alternative products at a local market, or lost contact with a factory worker who had gone back to her village. Thus the lives of these women—like my own—carry on, and my presence may have been after all nothing more than a pleasurable, enriching, temporary experience.

For many young rural women seeking to become part of modern urban life, I was a symbol of the “modern woman.” While I wanted to learn about their life and work, these young women showed a fascination with my world. When visiting me, some of them were more interested in the photos and magazines that friends or family had sent me than in answering my questions about their own life and work in Phnom Penh. Furthermore, by borrowing my trinkets to show off in the factory, framing the pictures I gave them, bringing me along to go dae leeng, or to the village, I guess that our willingness to engage in each other’s worlds not only brought me, but also these young rural women, new kinds of cherished experiences. It is such resonance that Wikan (1992) describes as evoking sameness, but without denying difference.

There are, indeed, obvious differences, which are difficult to bridge and which made me uneasy about my position as, depending on the person concerned, older sister (bong srey), younger sister (p’oun srey), friend, neighbor, or foreign student. I encountered women in extremely difficult positions, from fractured families, working hard to make ends meet, or living with AIDS, without—except for some small contributions—being able to help. I do hope that this book will give these women a voice, and that, by exploring the forces that shape their position, it will be helpful to all who seek a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between individual experiences and structures of inequity.