Introduction

Originations

In 1952, two years before Cambodia gained independence from French rule, a letter comparing democracy and diamonds appeared in the Khmer-language press, under the nom de plume “The Original Khmer” (Kmae daem). The writer would assume other names, but his self-identification as a Kmae daem was not so easily shrugged off. At the height of his political career, from 1975 to 1977, he practiced John Doe politics, ruling under the mantle of anonymity, in the shadows of the invisible but brutally omnipresent Angkaa (the “organization”). This bizarre preemption of Maurice Blanchot’s description of the holocaust as the “unknown name, alien to naming” ensured that no names or faces could be put to his regime, making it harder to translate the terror into political opposition. In a famous public speech delivered in late September 1977, he unmasked Angkaa as the Cambodian Communist Party and identified himself as Pol Pot, another pseudonym. The man behind this masquerade was born as Saloth Sar.

In its attempt to transform Cambodia’s culturally diverse terrain into an ethnically homogeneous, revolutionary utopia, Saloth Sar’s murderous regime of Democratic Kampuchea (DK, 1975–1978) criminalized superstition, tradition, religion, and the linguistic, sartorial, and culinary expressions of ethnic difference. As he indicated with pride in a 1978 interview, Saloth Sar equated the assimilation of Cambodia’s upland tribal groups with their modernization, declaring that while these “national minorities” were very miserable before, “now one cannot distinguish them from the other people. They wear the same dress and live like every one.” In many respects, the DK regime was one where the right to life was determined by one’s powers of mimicry. It was not enough to be a Cambodian, born on the land: one had to speak, act, dress, and perform according to an ideal—that of the Original Khmer.

The curious ideological mix of the DK combined the rejection of modernity with the quest for a return to a prefeudal past and the simultaneous search for a progressive future. In internal policy documents and public pronouncements, boasts that the DK could outleap Mao Zedong’s Great Leap Forward sat alongside explicit appeals to the “masses” to prove their mettle as worthy descendants of the builders of the twelfth-century temple complex of Angkor Vat, and implicit exhortations to return modern Cambodia to its past glory. Whereas Marx had set out to turn all peasants into citizens, Saloth Sar was determined to turn all citizens into peasants, view-
ing their potential to build anew as an atavistic trait exemplified in the prototypes for his earlier masquerade as the Original Khmer: the builders of Angkor.

Like many others in his cohort, Saloth Sar was pale in complexion. His parents were well-to-do farmers in the province of Kompong Thom, but he had spent his formative years in the elite enclaves of Phnom Penh and Paris, moving between the Palace, cafés, and colonial schools. The farther he travelled from the site and status of his birth, the more seductively the role of “the Original Khmer” must have beckoned, offering fixity in a time of political and personal transition, and enabling Saloth Sar and his coterie to stamp Cambodia’s budding communist movement as “national.” It was precisely his departure from his rural origins and his coaching in foreign institutions that inspired him first to hanker after this *dramatis persona* and then, after decades in the Cambodian wilderness (*priy*), to emerge with his hands dirtied, and bloodied, and closer in image to this fictive persona.³

The Kmae Daem has dark skin, a pure soul. He is a son of the soil, but the blood of Angkor’s builders courses through his veins. An apparition that vanishes on attempt to translate it into the flesh and blood of the everyday, “the Original Khmer” is the conjunction of two notions—Khmerness and a state of origin, or before-ness. This book is an attempt to map the fractured genealogy of this split personality—the modern Kmae daem—and to detail how this figure of fiction emerged in the twilight of colonialism, and whence it drew its authority.

**MAKING HISTORY**

Saloth Sar was apparently untroubled by the contradictions inherent in his blend of Angkorean antiquity and revolutionary modernity, or by its intellectual genealogy, which sat oddly alongside the DK’s robust anticolonial vitriol. As would have been well known to Saloth Sar and such members of his inner circle as Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Thirith, the French Protectorate (1863–1954) had used the trope of fallen race and the lodestone of Angkor to indicate what heights the Khmers could achieve with the correct (French) tuition. Saloth Sar used the same tropes, but “independence mastery” was his motto. This skewed translation of colonial historiography was conducted with a peculiar eye to posterity.

In DK, the past was banned in many ways. Nostalgia was renamed memory sickness (*cheu satearum*), a counterrevolutionary condition treatable by execution, as if history had become literally embodied in particular people, whose annihilation could eradicate the country’s polluted past.⁴ Pre-DK songs were forbidden, as was money.⁵ But when questioned about such moves, Saloth Sar furnished historical examples, aligning his regime with the precolonial era, when barter and work in kind were still common. “At certain times in Cambodian history,” he responded in a 1978 interview, “we have not needed money.” The “we” placed him on a continuum with his ancestors and bracketed him with the mythical persona onto which he projected his political desires: the Original Khmer.
We see a glimpse of Pol Pot’s yearning for a place for himself and his regime in \textit{la longue durée} at his coming-out speech in 1977, in which he celebrated the “powerful historical tide” of world revolution and urged the people of Kampuchea to take their place in this forward push of history. Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld has argued that, when history becomes the discourse of any totalizing regime, it acquires “precisely that capacity for suppressing time that Lévi-Strauss identified as the specific property of myth,” encouraging a “creative rethinking of pasts mythologized in very different fashions by previous sources of authority.”

DK historiography shared with that of other postcolonial regimes a common capacity for suppressing what Herzfeld calls time’s specificity, most notably through the erasure of the colonial encounter from the idea of Cambodian history. Paradoxically, this negation of time in itself reveals the enduring hegemony and mythic hold of the rethinking of time that occurred among Cambodians in the French Protectorate.

The DK leadership’s notions of history survived the regime’s collapse. In late 1978, tank columns accompanied by a Vietnamese-backed Cambodian resistance group rolled across the eastern border, pushing the DK leaders and captive populations west into Thailand, where they set up camp on the Thai–Cambodian border. In 1988, a document emerged from one such DK camp, allegedly written by the DK leadership to provide ideological guidance to cadre. The style of Khmer language used suggested it had been written first in French, which in itself is unsurprising, given that the inner circle of the DK leadership were mostly educated in Paris and in the colonial school system in the French Protectorate. The document rationalizes attacks on the DK as a case of historical envy, asserting that enemies desired to “crush” them “because they do not want us to let the world know our history,” and aim to deny us (the DK) “our place in history” and to “crush us until we, our name, our forces, and this history no longer exist.” It contextualizes the DK’s successes in light of historic heroes. First on the list is Napoleon, closely followed by three famous monks and the Cambodian prince Sivutha, who led uprisings against the French in the late nineteenth century. But the DK dismisses these examples as unimportant. Napoleon made mistakes. The Khmer resistance leaders were not communists. “The History” also repeatedly emphasizes that the DK failings were a matter of \textit{time}. The DK only had three and a half years before it fell, yet it was being compared with regimes and dynasties hundreds of years old. In truth, therefore, the “DK is far better than all of those historical heroes” and its “virtue, quality, true character and value” are the best in Cambodian and world history—a world history shrunk to the span of the French history that would have been taught in those schools and \textit{lycées} where the DK leaders gained their education.

Another, macabre collection of DK historiography dates from the regime itself, in the files of its notorious secret prison at Tuol Sleng/S-21, which sent some sixteen thousand Cambodians to their deaths after excruciating torture and the extraction of so-called confessions. Writing on modernity, Dipesh Chakrabarty has illuminated the nexus between violence and idealism underpinning the process by which the narratives of citizenship and modernity come to find a natural home in “history.”
the colonial prisons noted by Chakrabarty, S-21 also functioned in part as a laboratory of knowledge whose deeply disturbing archive, analyzed in depth elsewhere by David Chandler, Judy Ledgerwood, and Stephen Heder, raises troubling questions about the role of texts in constructing modern regime narratives of “truth” and national identity.

Extracted under hideous torture, the confessions were transcribed by a clerk and subsequently scrutinized by the prison head, Khang Khek Ieu, who added his own marginalia to many of the thousands of pages so generated. In this bizarre chain of audiences, the role of the victim’s interrogator is complicated by the quest to salvage memories in a regime that has banned nostalgia and who is framing his questions in the knowledge they will be subsequently examined by his superiors, and ultimately by the all-seeing and all-knowing Angkaa. Once the required knowledge is extracted, the prisoner is executed, the report filed. The files accumulate and become an extensive archive whose meticulous documentation is all the more extraordinary in a regime that placed a virtual ban on reading.

Why was this archive built? Why were the confessions sought? Stephen Heder has offered the most persuasive explanation, arguing that it was compiled “to provide the Party Centre with raw material for a massive, unwritten history of the Party. . . . because everyone held at S21 was eventually ‘smashed’ their confessions would testify not only to their crimes but also to the Party’s power and omniscience.” David Chandler has called these confessions “induced historical texts,” which provided the party’s leaders with intriguingly dark areas that threw “the triumphal history of the party into sharp relief.” The confessions were testaments to the omniscience of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), designed to demonstrate its leaders’ “consummate ability to grasp the wheel of history and thereby create and control the Party’s triumphant narrative.”

Literary critic Homi Bhaba has noted a similar demand for narrative in colonial regimes, where much of the drive for collecting indigenous versions of the “truth” was driven by the search for validation and the need to hear, from the colonized, why “we,” the colonials, are “here.” Although it seems a far cry from the brutality of DK to colonial Cambodia, in some respects the clerks in Tuol Sleng bore more relation to colonial bureaucrats than to traditional scribes. In precolonial Cambodia, writing was invested with sacred meaning, and transcription was a deeply spiritual transaction. Manuscripts were created to be read aloud, and the act of listening to a monk’s recitation of scriptures was a means of gaining merit. The scribes of Tuol Sleng worked to a reverse formula. The subject was made to speak so that her or his loudness could be made silent, absorbed on paper, sandwiched between cardboard, stacked on a shelf. The subsequent execution of the subject of the history thus produced gave the institution—Tuol Sleng—and by extension DK, the nation-state on whose territory and in whose conceptual framework that institution resided—an immortality.

Drawing on the work of Holocaust scholars Erving Goffman and Irving Horowitz, Chandler likens the DK regime itself to a total institution, which became a “sealed environment” cut off from the outside world. This insulation of DK has
gained a curious immortality of its own, in part through museology. In 1979, one of the first priorities of the newly installed regime of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea was to turn Tuol Sleng into a museum of genocide, so localizing the DK experience, excising it from the present and consigning it to a place marked “past.” In the same curatorial spirit, a number of commentators have emphasized DK’s isolation from our world, denying Saloth Sar the glory of posterity by relegating him and his regime to a place outside of history: it is comforting to consider the DK as an anomalous and totally alien elsewhere. But, as others have noted, several key nationalist notions that drove Saloth Sar’s murderous revolution have found a place in the ideological armature of all Cambodia’s postcolonial regimes. Sihanouk’s royalist Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1955–1970), Lon Nol’s Khmer Republic (1970–1975), Saloth Sar’s communist Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1978), Heng Samrin’s socialist People’s Republic of Kampuchea (1979–1989), Hun Sen’s State of Cambodia (1989–1993), and the Kingdom of Cambodia (1993–) have all sought legitimacy in imagery of Angkor Vat. Idealized in national anthems, flags, and ceremony, this emblem of antiquity has come to signify Cambodian sovereignty. Today, its tricorn towers stand as political shorthand for two enduring nationalist tropes, symbolizing faith in Cambodia’s past glory and fears of that country’s future disappearance.

These abstractions share a common point of origin. Forged in the French Protectorate, they have spilled across that false and seductively simple line staving off colonial from postcolonial time, carried in images and intellects, embodied in a panoply of forms, from the “national-style” architecture that survived the iconoclasm of the DK to the logoization of Angkor as national monument. Some, notably the notion of Buddhism as the Khmer national religion, were not admitted into Saloth Sar’s vision of the Original Khmer. However, the fact that they survived the destructive policies of the DK and remain central constructs of Khmer nationhood today attests to their longevity. This book is a history of these ideas, and of the individuals and historical circumstances that brought them into being.

**COLONIALISM, NATIONALISM, AND SYMBOLISM**

The hypnotic appeal of Angkor Vat as a sacred symbol uniting Khmers in time and space has seduced some observers of modern Cambodian history into accepting nationalist myth as historical fact. Until recently, Cambodian nationalism was commonly conceived of as a primordial web of memory linking “pre- and postcolonial Cambodia” via an unbroken chain of pride in the golden age of Angkor.¹³ Implying that this atavistic pride had simmered beyond the reach of history for centuries, several scholars have pinpointed its sudden mutation into modern nationalism to the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁴ Such analyses are anchored in two specific developments. First is the launch, in 1936, of the Khmer-language newspaper *Nagaravatta* (Angkor Vat). Often wrongly described as the first Khmer newspaper, *Nagaravatta* is now widely regarded as the birth certificate of modern Cambodian nationalism. Second is the
“Umbrella War” of 1942, an anti-French demonstration by several thousand monks and laypeople in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh.\textsuperscript{15}

This preoccupation with the political manifestations of nationalism as opposed to cultural content has fostered a popular view of Cambodian nationalism as a creature of discontent—a knee-jerk reaction to the political repression, economic injustice, and educational denial commonly equated with the French Protectorate (1863–1954). Such analyses hinge on a common interpretation of “nation” as an essentially political construct. However the nation is very much “a system of cultural signification” whose “national traditions,” as Bhabha has argued, stem from a complex nexus of “acts of affiliation . . . establishment . . . disavowal, displacement, exclusion and cultural contestation.”\textsuperscript{16} Despite such linkages, much current scholarship on nationalism continues to depict culture and politics as mutually exclusive spheres of activity.

One of the first champions of two distinct brands of cultural and political nationalism was the French intellectual Antonin Artaud. In 1936, when a small group of Cambodian civil servants were furtively penning articles for \textit{Nagaravatta} on issues ranging from Khmer national culture to the economic virtues of Chinese immigrants, Artaud contrasted “cultural nationalism,” which asserts the unique features of a nation, with a rival brand of “civic nationalism” characterized by customs restrictions, economic conflict, and military engagement.\textsuperscript{17} The following decade, as the Governor General of Indochina recruited politically dependable cultural experts to concoct Vichy propaganda, the European historian Hans Kohn conflated these conceptual boundaries with geographic borders, arguing that only “outside the western world” was nationalism first expressed “in the cultural field,” originating as “a venture in education and propaganda” orchestrated by scholars and poets. Western nationalism, by contrast, was a political construct, concerned with “policy-shaping and government.”\textsuperscript{18} In the 1980s, when fighting Cambodian factions staked out their claims with different flags, each bearing the image of Angkor, Kohn’s bipolar view resonated in the work of John Hutchinson, who argued for two “quite different types of nationalism—cultural and political.” Hutchinson defines cultural nationalism as the brainchild of historical scholars and artists who form cultural and academic societies, and argues that it is concerned exclusively with the articulation of a nation’s unique civilization, history, culture, and geography. Political nationalism, in contrast, is the creature of legislators and politicians, who aspire to uproot the status quo and to realize a civic polity.\textsuperscript{19} This compartmentalization of culture and politics has also featured in recent scholarship on national identity formation in colonial states. In his pathbreaking study of nationalism in British India, for example, Partha Chatterjee posits an inviolable “spiritual” space enshrining language, religion, and family life, which Indian nationalists sought to insulate from European influence and to preserve as a sovereign domain of cultural difference. This he contrasts with the outer “material” domain of law, administration, economics, and statecraft, in which nationalists sought to erase substantive difference. Indian nationalism, asserts Chatterjee, allowed “no encroachment by the colonizer” on the “inner core of the national
In Cambodge, such notions become unstuck: the very notion of a national culture, let alone its inner core, were products of the colonial encounter. In the protectorate, precisely those domains marked as separate by Chatterjee in India became entangled, both in mutually constitutive processes (there could be no “public,” itself a product of modernity, without a clear demarcation of what was “private” and “native”) and through the personal journeys of key interlocutors and vectors of cultural transition that crisscrossed these spiritual and material, colonial and colonized, public and private realms. Despite, or because of, such efforts to categorize and compartmentalize, these spheres became intertwined in inseparable ways as nationalism developed. The dynamic intersection of European and indigenous worldviews fostered a self-conscious demarcation of a national religion, a national space, a national past, and a national culture. The last, open to manipulation and veneration, became not so much an inner core as an outer shell.

In the protectorate, the multistranded construction of a national, geocultural body of Cambodge would gradually and imperceptibly extend the rural majority’s boundary markers beyond the local landmarks of temple, forest, and folklore and expand the horizons of individual belonging from a local to a national community, bounded by the monumental regalia of Angkor Wat, framed in a national space defined by modern mapping, and unified by a “national” heritage, history, religion, and literature. Cultural parameters became contiguous with territorial borders, binding socially and regionally disparate groups into an “imagined community,” in Benedict Anderson’s famous phrase. While Anderson defines a nation as an “imagined political community,” the anthropologist Bruce Kapferer has highlighted its cultural dimensions, arguing that Sri Lanka’s nationalists made a “fetish of culture.”

In Cambodge, nationalists did not produce a national culture. Rather, the elaboration of a national culture by French and Cambodian literati eventually produced nationalists. As the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov has argued, the development of a national cultural consciousness is a critical prelude to the evolution of the idea of political autonomy. In Cambodge, as in the Europe studied by Miroslav Hroch and Eric Hobsbawm, the initial developmental phase of nationalism in the nineteenth century was “purely cultural, literary and folkloric,” with “no particular political . . . implications”; as in Europe, the elaboration of this self-conscious cultural identity subsequently became politicized and promoted by “militant pioneers” of the “national idea.” Elaborated, contested, and revised by indigenous intellectuals, this early colonial synthesis of cultural and social practice, ancient monuments, and present customs into a narrative of Khmer national history provided the blueprint upon which future nationalists would build. Like their counterparts in the India studied by Marinalini Sinha and Chatterjee, Cambodge’s budding nationalists structured their arguments for social reform around notions of Cambodia’s decline from a glorious past. These notions of decay would fuel an enduring theme in modern Cambodian nationalism: the fear that Cambodia could disappear.

As the notion of “Cambodge” took root, the theater of “the Protectorate” became dislodged from a specifically Southeast Asian location to a broader arena of
trends and ideas reaching back and forth into the Métropole, or Paris. Recent scholar-
ship by Edward Said, Antoinette Burton, and Ann Stoler, has highlighted the elas-
ticity of the notion of national cultural consciousness by stimulating recognition of
the interdependency of “Imperial and national identities” and exploring the connec-
tivity between Metropolitan and colonial ideologies and anxieties.27 The emergence
of Cambodian nationalism was fraught with just such a traffic in ideas and images,
and this study is framed with as much attention to the “cultural topography” of colo-
ries and the “imaginary scaffoldings” of empire explored by literary critic Panivong
Norindr as to the charting of a linear chronology.28 In broadening our understanding
of the workings of colonialism, this focus on the croscurrents between Europe and
Cambodge simultaneously threatens to discount or elide the influence and rich ex-
change of ideas between China, Siam, Japan, and other countries, colonies, and indi-
viduals in the region. Regrettably, the scope of this project has not allowed for more
than passing reference to such exchanges, which merit far more extensive scholarly
attention.29

The dominant paradigm of Khmer national sentiment as a primordial contin-
uum linking pre- and postcolonial Cambodia is a shibboleth. Cambodian culture
was, and remains, a dynamic field of change that evolved in the colonial era via a pro-
cess of “creative adaptation,” to use John Smail’s diagnosis of parallel developments
in the Dutch East Indies.30 Chandler has long hinted at the crucial place of colonial
culture in forging modern Cambodian nationalism, arguing that the contradictions
between French conceptions of past glory and present decay led to a crisis of iden-
tity among educated Khmers in the 1930s and 1940s and so catalyzed Cambodian
nationalism.31 Locating the origins of Chandler’s crisis of identity in the late nine-
teenth and early twentieth century, when the clinical gaze of colonial rule and the
telescopic eye of Western historiography forced indigenous literati to reassess their
culture and history, this book shows how Cambodian nationalism was shaped, not
in the pages of Nararatavatta, but in colonial offices, schoolrooms, research institutes,
and museums. In stark contrast to the “cultural asphyxia” that French rule inflicted
upon Algeria, the protectorate of Cambodge saw a redefinition of Khmer culture and
its emergence into the public sphere of the modern nation.32 This controversial claim
flies in the face of much existing scholarship and most nationalist historiography. A
case in point is the assertion by former minister of cults and religion Bunchan Mul
that Khmer “literature and culture ran and hid in the pagoda” during colonial rule,
and that Khmer monks alone “preserved, supported, and kept it intact.”33

In fact, European scholarship and colonial cultural institutions in France and
Cambodge opened up new space for the reform of Buddhism, while sponsoring new
forms for its conservation in palm-leaf manuscript or printed book. For the most
part, these activities and the conversations they generated with indigenous monks
bore the heavy imprint of individual initiatives. Despite such dialogues, the colonial
period was long treated by Khmer scholars and politicians as nonhistory, an act of ex-
ilé earlier seen in DK historiography. Chandler has noted how the Cambodian Palace
Chronicles of 1927–1949 did not consider the colonial era “as a phase of Cambodian
history worth examining by itself.” The first entry to break this trend, made in July 1945, a month before the fall of Vichy Indochina when Cambodge was under temporary Japanese military control, implicitly disowned the period as an era of Cambodian history, alleging that Cambodians had been rendered “unconscious” under colonial rule by policies privileging French values, culture, and language. A later entry from the same year reinserted Cambodians into the period, mapping a time line of heroes from the antimonarchic revolts of 1860 and 1866, the anti-French revolt of 1884–1885, the demonstrations of 1916, the assassination of Résident Bardez in 1925, and the demonstration of 1942. But these Cambodians were still on the margins of history, looking in at institutions of monarchical or colonial power from the invisible and otherwise undocumented realm of non-kings and non-Résidents. This version of the past, set aside once the French returned to Cambodia in 1945, still did not resolve the questions raised by Chandler: what were Cambodian values, and what was Cambodian history? Postcolonial Khmer historiography has commonly depicted Cambodian history as a thread running from Funan to Angkor to the reign of Ang Duong, suddenly ruptured by the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1863 and mysteriously mended and tied to a new, true chapter of Cambodian history upon independence in 1954. Although variations on this theme have emerged, most notably in DK historiography, which blanketed two thousand years of history prior to the revolution as a period of feudal rule, all regimes have promoted the view of the colonial era as a chapter outside the passage of Cambodian time.

Riding on the wings of postcolonial guilt, this version of history gained a mysterious credibility among Western audiences. Until recently, most scholars cold-shouldered the period, as if Cambodia’s entanglement with Europeans from 1863 to 1954 rendered it somehow impure. Brief flirtations with the period en route from or to other eras yielded superficial conclusions, many of which have gained common currency, notably the portrayal of Cambodge as a “backwater” of French Indochina. The colonial impact is generally described in negative terms, such as a “severe decline in traditional intellectual institutions” or a “barren legacy” in education, depicting Cambodge as culturally and socially stagnant when contrasted with the supposedly born-again Cambodia that emerged after 1954. This academic neglect and the resultant knowledge deficit allowed even the most learned scholars of Cambodian society and culture to pole-vault this near-century of events and ideas with such sweeping statements as “[Khmer] girls did not go to school” before Independence. Such leapfrogging of the colonial era fostered the perception of postcolonial currents of thought, and most notably Sihanouk’s backward-looking, Angkor-centric nationalism, as a continuation of traditional monarchical political and religious institutions bridging pre- and post-colonial Cambodia. The theme of continuity is privileged, suggesting that the colonial era is some inauthentic abyss, an aberration for which the French can be blamed but that is not to be claimed as an integral or “authentic” passage in Cambodian history. Ironically, this interpretation buys into French colonial propaganda, which held that Cambodians were changeless, suspended in cultural time and political space.
This academic lacuna finds its antithesis in popular culture. Since the early 1990s, bookshops and cinemas in France and Indochina have yielded increasing shelf space and screen time to the literature and cinema of colonial nostalgia. A boom in re-releases of such exotica as Pierre Loti’s *Un pèlerin d’Angkor* (1911) and Roland Meyer’s *Saramani: Danseuse cambodgienne* (1919), exhibitions of colonial photographs, and such films as *Indochine* and *L’amant* all demonstrate a belated backwash of the dissolution of empire. This literary and cinematic afterglow has submerged a period of oppressive rule in an overpowering “aura of nostalgia.”40 This new wave of colonial chic—or *Indochic*, to quote Norindr—calls for a reevocation of the context that produced such images. Glamorized and excised from their historical context, such memorabilia foster the view of colonial society as a romantic interlude, an exotic escape from the frenetic pace of life in the West, where races and cultures coalesced in a generally free and happy fashion. Such quaint imagery not only diverts attention from the less picturesque agendas of colonial rule; it also projects the deluded notion that Europeans were the exclusive architects of cultural life in the colonies. The net effect of these competing views of colonial history is to deny Cambodians agency in a highly significant era of social, cultural, and political change, which saw the crystallization of the very notion of the Cambodian nation and the self-conscious articulation of a national culture.41

In the past decade, new scholarship on the colonial period has brought this long-neglected era into new focus. An outstanding doctoral dissertation by the late art historian Ingrid Muan has put colonial arts education and its legacies of Angkorean reproduction in a fresh and critical perspective. In his forthcoming biography of a small-time entrepreneur whose late-nineteenth-century antics reveal a robust energy, obstinacy, and commercial savvy, alternating with bouts of delusion, historian Greg Müller has lent rare life and complexity to the colonial period. Scholar of religion Anne Hansen has also shed important light on shifts in the conceptual, intellectual, and literary register of a leading Khmer poet, Suttantaprija In. This small but growing body of nuanced scholarship is changing perceptions of the protectorate as either monolithic or culturally static.

As Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh have argued, colonialism generated a heightened self-consciousness among colonized intellectuals, forcing them to confront questions about their history, society, and themselves. Cultural practices that had long been “lived” and thus taken for granted were now refracted through the lens of Orientalist preoccupations with authenticity and reframed in European paradigms of race and nation.42 This new scrutiny resulted in the identification of a panoply of cultural forms and practices, from ritual objects to court dance, as signifiers of national belonging. Indigenous intellectuals in Cambodge, like their counterparts in British India, played a vital role in structuring and shaping this cultural production through a complex web of exchange best described by Aijaz Ahmad as a “wilderness of mirrors.”43

In Cambodge, the mirror becomes a particularly compelling metaphor. Khmers in the French Protectorate, repeatedly told they were a vanished race, were tasked not
with imitating European colonialists, in the spirit of Lord Macaulay’s “class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste . . . and in intellect,” Rudyard Kipling’s “Hurree Babu,” or V. S. Naipaul’s “mimic men,” but with mimicking their ancestors. Before Khmers could perform this task to the satisfaction of their colonial tutors, the latter had to ascertain the ethnocultural dimensions of the “authentic” Khmer, whom both painstaking scholarship and amateur antiquarianism located in the temples of Angkor, after an initial misdiagnosis that the Khmers had vanished, and that the Cambodians who now walked the land were some distant and degenerate offshoots. Bas-reliefs, sculptures, inscriptions, and decorations were the materials from which the French would mold the template of the Original Khmer and chart the specific coordinates of the Khmer race, temperament, and nationality. In this hall of ancestral mirrors, mimicry became inextricably tied up with questions of nation, authentication, and anticipation.

Had Khmerness been identified as something inhering in the contemporary, this dilemma might never have emerged. But most early European visitors were, quite naturally, drawn to Cambodge’s ancient temples and monuments, and subscribed to the view that “the Khmers” had vanished, and that Cambodia’s current inhabitants were the detritus of Angkor’s builders. From 1860 to the 1910s, at precisely the time when preoccupations with France’s falling birthrate dogged politicians and technocrats in the Métropole, this trope of the vanishing Khmer dominated colonial discourse. As if to compensate for this presumed absence, a model of what was authentically Khmer began to be sculpted onto the colonial aesthetic. Stamps, banknotes, exhibition and museum displays, art, photography, poetry and literature, architecture and urban sculpture, provided multiple arenas for the projection and expression of imaginings about Cambodge. The more “scientific” material and “documentary” evidence those working for and with the protectorate dredged up from the past, the more entrenched and irreversible the notion of the Khmer became. By the 1900s, these notions had become, quite literally, set in stone, informing monuments to Khmerness that still exist, at the time of writing, in Phnom Penh and Marseille. This colonial aesthetic enjoyed currency largely among Metropolitan museum goers and exhibition visitors, subscribers to such journals as the Parisian daily L’Illustration, and tourists or civil servants in Cambodge. It was also woven into the lives of elite Cambodians.

French scholar-officials and native literati did not simply dislocate such elements as dress, coiffure, architecture, and art from the social, historical, and cultural network in which they were embedded. Some labored to produce icons of Khmerness, which simultaneously hailed back to the imagery of, or assumptions about, Angkor and also catered to the expectations and tastes of contemporary Europeans. In colonial exhibitions, court dance was truncated into manageable performances. In the new art school, decorative emblems from Angkor were conflated with ritual objects. In the capital’s new “national” monument, a spiritually imbued toponym and Buddhist pagoda were teamed with Angkorean motifs and a statue of King Sisowath flanked by a bas-relief of a Cambodian militiaman sporting a beret. Clothes
for women were translated into a so-called national costume in part modelled on the European skirt, while monks who wore robes of European cloth were reprimanded as “un-Cambodian.” Like the stereotypes enumerated by Nicholas Thomas in his study of colonial culture in the South Pacific, such cultural constructions performed a legislative function “by privileging certain identities and stigmatizing others as inauthentic.”

The notion of authenticity had a particular currency by the 1910s to 1930s. As James Clifford writes, what “matters politically is who deploys nationality or transnationality, authenticity or hybridity, against whom, with what relative power and ability to sustain a hegemony.” Under the French Protectorate, a narrative of authenticity emerged as a hegemonic discourse. This was not simply a word-based narrative, in Bhaba’s earlier sense. It was created through a traffic in ideas, images, and artifacts. This rich visual, material, and textual discourse, generated by both colonizers and colonized, gained a momentum of its own, securing converts among those Cambodians and Europeans who felt dislocated by the social upheavals of colonialism and the global turmoil wrought by industrialism, modernity, and the devastation of the First and Second World Wars. Many Cambodians, both in the civil administration and in the sangha (monkhood), enthusiastically participated in the identification and delineation of an authentic Khmerness and transcribed this notion into diverse spheres of activity and contesting schools of nationalism. After Independence, this authenticity discourse was deployed by successive regimes, which asserted their claims to political legitimacy and national moral authority by deploying the notion of their “Original Khmerness” both to vilify “other” ethnic groups, countries, or ideologies and to assert their regime’s “sameness” with the tropes of Angkor and the Original Khmer.

The authentication of a particular body of culture as “the Khmer nation” represented a radical deviation from previous notions of identity within the territory now under the Tricolour. The cultural foundations of this modern construct were by no means new; much of the literature, art, sculpture, language, and religious scriptures mobilized to form the modern nation predated the colonial encounter by hundreds, and in some cases over a thousand, years. What was new were the terms of reference framing these linguistic, religious, and artistic expressions. Like Malays under colonial rule, Cambodians played a pivotal role in the articulation of concepts of a national community that would last well after the withdrawal of the French administration, including concepts of nationalism, of a territorially defined nation-state, and of Khmerness itself. Central to this process was a changing vocabulary of “nation.”

NATION AND TRANSLATION

The concept of nation was pushed to the forefront of intellectual inquiry in France in the early 1880s, with the appearance of Ernest Renan’s essay Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? (What is a nation?). Renan, whose emphasis on the monumental manifesta-
tions of a national essence were partly shaped by a tour of the Pyramids in colonized Egypt, defined the nation as “a soul, a spiritual principle,” whose two essential constituents were “a rich legacy of remembrances” and “the will to continue to value [a common] heritage.” Although not published until 1882, Renan’s exegesis gave verbal form to a concept of cultural nationhood that had been brewing in France as elsewhere in western Europe for the best part of a century. In two earlier publications, Renan had identified temples and traditions as vital constituents of each nation’s “great soul” and invoked the “ancestors” and a “common past” as a thread linking “plebeians” and “patricians” into a national culture. While Renan focused on a nation’s cultural complexion, his influential contemporary Jules Michelet emphasized its geographic dimension, cultivating a new awareness of landscape and place as repositories of a nation’s essence and its past.

In reporting signs of “national” identity in late-nineteenth-century Cambodge, French explorers and observers were unwittingly transporting this vocabulary to a country where patterns of identification were still governed by a very different cosmology. A prime example of this tendency to box indigenous thought worlds into European frames of reference is the observation by the scholar-official Étienne Aymonier, published in 1896, that “The nation has long been accustomed to the idea of not separating its own existence to that of the royal house. The monarch is the living incarnation, the august and supreme personification of nationality.” Reading such colonial commentaries as testimony to the existence of a “national religion” and “nationalist pride” in nineteenth-century Cambodia risks obscuring indigenous patterns of identification. Khmer sources indicate that concepts of “nation” and “nationality” as understood by Aymonier and his contemporaries did not percolate down into Cambodian consciousness until the first decades of this century, and then only into elite circles. Although the current Khmer term for nation, jiet, was used during the nineteenth century, its meaning differed markedly from contemporary usage. Jiet (Pali: jati, root meaning “birth”) was a moral and cosmological term that literally had to do with one’s birth, and whose late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century usage encompassed a multiplicity of concepts, including ethnic identity and social status. In nineteenth-century France, “birth” was one of the many meanings of the term race, which was used in multiple contexts to denote social and professional groups, sex, nation, and ethnicity. In the first decades of the twentieth century, secular literati and the sangha in Cambodge increasingly used jiet to signify both race and nation, echoing the interchangeability of nation and race in contemporary French discourse and paralleling the development and deployment of similarly fluid formulations for race/nation elsewhere in Asia.

Colonial education was one means of inculcating such notions. Schooled in Phnom Penh and Hanoi in the 1910s, the teenage Prince Areno Iukanthor defined the term ma pauvre Race as mon peuple (my people) and their héritage (heritage). The establishment of the first Khmer-language newspapers and journals in the 1920s would provide new forums for the translation and formulation of such ideas, while the continued role of monks as interpreters of this Khmer media to their rural con-
stituencies, ensured the percolation of such concepts beyond the small nucleus of the educated elite.

But the shifting meaning of *jet* cannot entirely be ascribed to pedagogy or print media. Native participation in the adaptation and elaboration of colonial forms of knowledge engineered new ways of relating to both space and time. Of key significance here was the introduction of European notions of history as a sliding scale of time, which encouraged the elite to relate to the past as both a separate realm and a national, rather than purely dynastic, terrain. Prior to the eighteenth century, Western chronicles of history, like their counterparts in the preindustrial societies of nineteenth-century Southeast Asia, depicted the past with an “immediacy and intimacy” that reflected its presumed likeness to the present. In Cambodge, as in Malaya, India, and countless other territories under European rule, history writing evolved from the “flat canvas” of traditional texts, which had plotted important incidents around particular reigns, to a linear narrative of nation that fused concepts of country, people, sovereignty, and statehood. The resultant shift in literary focus from the “history of kings” to the “history of this country” was coupled with a distinction between the “legends and fabulous tales” of indigenous sources and the new, “true historical account” reflecting the criteria of Western scholarship.

Late-nineteenth-century European preoccupations with themes of decadence and decline exaggerated this process, leading colonial and metropolitan scholars, administrators and writers to extol the antique civilizations of colonized countries, juxtaposing past golden eras with present degeneracy, as in Renan’s earlier mentioned reflections on Egypt. In Cambodge, the ancient temples of Angkor were seized upon as the apotheosis of past glory and presented as the pinnacle of national endeavor in scholarly works, official pronouncements, visual arts, and plastic representations that collectively plotted monuments and moments in Cambodian history as part of “a national (in the sense of a nation-state) continuity” and cast “the Khmer as a people sliding down a millennial incline.”

These preoccupations with vanishing and decline stemmed in part from a growing tendency on the part of Europeans, bound up with the rise of national heritage movements in nineteenth-century France, England, and elsewhere, to equate the existence of the Cambodian nation with the maintenance of its “traditional” culture, a mentality seen in scholar-official Roland Meyer’s novel *Saramani: Une dansine cambodgienne* (1919). When Meyer began his novel in 1910, the Khmer population of Cambodge had nearly tripled since the establishment of the French Protectorate. Yet *Saramani* portrays the Khmers as a people on the brink of extinction, destined to die out under the barrage of European, Chinese, and Annamite influence—despite the fact that these non-Khmer groups then formed a mere fraction of the population. Meyer’s concern was not that actual persons would die or disappear, but that their customs and culture might vanish. Similar preoccupations dictated a policy of cultural containment in education, religion, publications, the pictorial, plastic, and performing arts, museology, and archaeology. In these areas, French conceptions of Cambodge gained tangible form and were made accessible to Cambodge’s slowly expanding, educated urban elite.
Nagaravatta, whose title reflected both the validation of the temples of Angkor as an emblem of that “newly imagined collectivity”—the nation—and the identification of the newspaper’s founders as the rightful heirs and guardians of that nation, provided a forum for the coinage and circulation of a new, nationalist vocabulary. By the time of Nagaravatta’s establishment in the 1930s, jiet had become the principal term for race/nation in the rhetoric of both secular intelligentsia and reformist sangha. The popularity of such pen names as Kmae botra (Son of the Khmers) and Kmae daem (Original Khmer) reflected the new primacy of ethnicity as a locus of identity. As defined by one self-styled “Son of the Khmers,” jiet denoted race (la race). However, it also signified nation, as in such compounds as sasana-jiet (national-religion) and jun-jiet (nationality). Editorials regularly urged readers to sralan jiet (love the race-nation). Coverage of such abstract notions as race and nation vastly eclipsed the attention given to the monarchy in Nagaravatta and its predecessors. The linkage of the term bangsaa (race/family/lineage) to such terms as yeung (our) and kmae (Khmer) reflected a shift in focus from royal ancestry to national genealogy, indicating that in Cambodge, as in Malaya and other colonial dominions, race and nation were competing with and in some cases superseding royalty as a primary object of loyalty. As we shall see, these developments were tied up with the shifting meaning of the Khmer term sasana. Used to denote religion at the turn of the century, sasana had broadened by the late 1930s to encompass notions of race and ethnicity, reflecting the elevation of nation to a quasi-religious site. By 1937, sasana-kee (lit.: the religion of others) was used to mean other races, and sasana-kmae (Khmer religion) to denote both Buddhism and the Khmer race.

From the earliest Khmer newspapers to the 1952 essay on democracy and diamonds by the “Original Khmer” Saloth Sar, pseudonyms emerged as a popular strategy among Cambodian intellectuals, allowing these graduates of colonial modernity simultaneously to shield their identity from the scrutiny of the Surêté, and to bask in the fantasy of antiquity through such alter egos as Son of the Khmers and the Original Khmer. These names not only concealed their author’s identity and revealed their aspirations, they also reflected back at the protectorate its description of Khmers as talented copyists.

From the 1930s to mid-1940s, these abstract notions of Cambodge and attempts to personify Angkorean glory through such individual and national acts of naming, were circulated through a growing number of school clubs, newspaper groups, and literary associations. Barely visible in these early nationalist organizations were the future foreign minister of Democratic Kampuchea Ieng Sary, a young Saloth Sar, and his future wife and mentor, Khieu Ponnary. These and other secular intellectuals would carry the conceptual legacy of Cambodge into the postcolonial era.

CHAPTER AND VERSE

As a history of ideas, this book is organized with more attention to the circulation and translation of abstractions than to the strict sequence of events. Three
chapters focus on interventions at Angkor and three on the monkhood, while three deal with more urbane themes. But rather than group these chapters into a thematic triptych, I have interleaved them to create a sense of the interconnectedness of these spheres of activity, and to emphasize the plurality of actors and ideas engaged in the “cultivation of a nation” in Cambodge.

Following on from this introduction, Chapter 1 explores Angkor as a site for the generation of European imaginings about Cambodge, from the arrival of the explorer Henri Mouhot in 1860 to the construction of an Angkor pavilion at Marseille in 1906. Interleaving Cambodge and the Métropole, museums and monuments, exhibitions and excavations, it explores the influence of European heritage movements and historicist paradigms in shaping Angkor Vat’s transition from a primarily sacred site to an emblem of the modern nation-state. Moving to the colonial capital of Phnom Penh, Chapter 2 explores the translation of these visions into the built environment, the authentication of a Khmer “national style,” and the cult of “verisimilitude” that saw the integration of Angkorean symbols into the new Cambodian capital as well as Paris. Turning from European designs to Cambodian interlocutors, the third chapter of this book explores the emergence of two key transitional figures who marked the emergence of an indigenous secular literati, and who participated in the initial scripting of a Khmer nation for European and Cambodian audiences. Turning to the domain of religious practice and Buddhist texts, Chapter 4 explores the impact of colonial intervention on the Cambodian sangha, or monkhood, and charts the cultivation of Buddhism as a national religion by French scholars and reformist sangha from the establishment of the protectorate to the 1920s. Chapter 5 examines the “Hinduization” and desecralization of Angkor in situ and the reverberations between metropolitan and indigenous fund-raising schemes to conserve the temples, following the establishment of a formal conservation program in 1907. Examining the impact of colonial excavations of Angkor on indigenous belief systems through the work of a noted Khmer poet, the chapter also explores the involvement of Cambodian donors, committee members, and laborers, in the temple complex’s rehabilitation. Focusing on the School of Fine Arts established by the protectorate, Chapter 6 examines colonial prescriptions both for visions of Khmerness and for the field of Khmer vision, and explores the emergence of particular artistic products as embodiments of the Khmer “national style.”

Chapter 7 moves to the secularisation of the sangha, and explores how administrative suspicions of the sangha fostered strategies to tax, school, and card that mirrored metropolitan concerns to segregate church and state, and also cohered with the visions of Cambodian reformist monks, to create an ethnolinguistic Khmer nation. Chapter 8 examines the role of other key cultural and educational institutes established by the protectorate, notably the Royal Library and the Buddhist Institute, which were established with the dual aims of insulating the Cambodian sangha from Siamese influence and articulating and conserving a specifically Khmer branch of Buddhism. Chapter 9 explores the convergence of these trends and arenas in a vital, dynamic decade, when the sangha, secular intellectuals, print media, and club-
Originations: 17

house became conjoined in the translation of the conceptual rubric of Cambodge into a modern nationalist movement, from 1935 to 1945. Chapter 10 briefy reflects upon the ramifications of colonialism’s “temple complex” for postcolonial politics and sketches the longevity of “Cambodge,” and its attendant fantasies, in regime discourses after Independence.

SOURCES AND TERMINOLOGY

In attempting to recreate a feel for the social, cultural, and intellectual climate in Cambodge, this book draws on a range of French and Khmer literary, archival, and news materials, as well as illustrations and photographs. Rather than looking in at the period from the “master narrative of nationalism,” I have tried to shed light on the mindsets of French and Cambodian actors by peering out from their piecemeal trail of articles, literature, memoirs, and letters, and mapping the outbound trajectory of their notions through their translation into colonial policy, intellectual practice, and nationalist politics. This approach has its obvious shortcomings. Like the letters exchanged by an estranged couple in Siri Hustvedt’s recent novel, all texts are “skewed by invisible perforations, the small holes of the unwritten but not the unthought.” My main Khmer sources are journals, newspapers, and administrative reports, which passed the scrutiny of the Sûreté but were still perforated by the individual acts of self-censorship common to all authoritarian states. My main research sites—national and colonial archives—are no less flawed. This is not only because their contents are imprinted with the ideologies of their writers and the imprint of their supposed spectator, nor is it purely because they have been scrutinized, culled, and ordered in a particular way. The holdings of colonial and national archives, long held in awe as bastions of historical evidence, are complicated by their simultaneous function as “the outcome of historical process and the very conditions for the production of historical knowledge.” Moreover, as Stoler convincingly demonstrates, many of the documents stored in these monumental spaces are not records of past events but plans and prescriptions expressing often unrealized colonial desires. These “colonial utopias” and “historical negatives,” Stoler argues, are not so much paradigms of conquest as distress signals, pointing to “the disjuncture between what was possible to think and impossible to implement.” Despite these restrictions, however, in between Stoler’s “blueprints of distress” and Hustvedt’s “perforations” the marvellous vagaries of human error and individual eccentricities have infused my own experience of archival and library research in Paris, Marseille, London, Rangoon, Canberra, and Phnom Penh with a taste of the subversive potential of archived materials to transcend and elude the categories under which they are filed. Random photos, misplaced letters, eclectic collections of news cuttings, scrawled notes on visiting cards, personal dedications in the flyleafs of crumbling books, are just some of the sources undermining the presumed rigor and monumentality of the archive. The rigorous scrutiny of the Sûreté, particularly in the late 1930s and during the Vichy regime, acted as
a lens on both the paranoid machinations of the regime and the everyday, ensuring the obsessive conservation of many personal letters of both Europeans and Cambodians. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French and Khmer media produced in Indochina, Paris, and Marseille, as well as colonial novels, travelogues, poetry, and photographs, also figure throughout this book.

However, like many other works on colonized domains, this book remains captive to the conundrum of its reliance on the very European colonial sources whose fundamental assumptions it sets out to question. Since I am writing about exchanges in ideas and images between Cambodians and Europeans, such materials are essential to my project. Too easily lumped together as a hegemonic and homogeneous narrative, works by Europeans were themselves caught up in a complex circuit of knowledge production, involving indigenous actors, the transmission of new modalities and technologies of knowledge and print production, and a multiplicity of sponsors, audiences, and motivations for publication. To emphasize colonialism’s often fractured chorus of voices and to alert readers as to their origin, I have tried, as far as possible without disrupting narrative flow, to signal the authorship and genre of documents cited in the main body of the text.

I use the term “Cambodge” throughout the book, as in its title, to denote the political life span and geographic domain of the protectorate, and the conceptual rubric of nation structured within this temporal and territorial frame. Like the Indochina described by Norindr, I see Cambodge as a product of the “identification,” “conflation, and confusion” of French imaginings with the political and geographic structure of the protectorate. I use the term “colonial” broadly to describe the regime, policy, personnel, and European residents of the Protectorate of Cambodge. I do so, not to denote “the colonial” as a monolithic category, but in an adjectival sense, to connect such figures in time and place with the colonial enterprise. When writing about Cambodge, the majority of French administrators and scholars used the term le Cambodgien to refer, not to an inhabitant of Cambodge, but to the majority Khmer ethnic group as distinct from le Chinois or l’Annamite. To avoid confusion with the current English usage of “Cambodian,” which denotes a resident of Cambodia regardless of ethnicity, I have rendered the French term Cambodgien as “Khmer” where context so requires. I have kept Annamite as used in the French period—the preferred blanket term referring to those people later identified as “Vietnamese” living in Cochinchina, Tonkin, and Annam. When discussing relations and correspondence between administrations and individuals on the mainland and the Protectorate of Cambodge, I often use the term “Métropole” to refer to France. I use the term savant interchangeably with the nearest English equivalent, scholar, to describe those colonial personalities of various professional backgrounds who held a lasting scholarly and cultural interest in Cambodge. A full glossary of French and Khmer terms appears at the back of this book. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Khmer and French sources are my own.