

2009

Looking Beyond "The Shadow of Genocide": Agency and Identity in Post-Conflict Cambodia, the Significance of Silk

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Recommended Citation

Chugh, Ayesha, "Looking Beyond "The Shadow of Genocide": Agency and Identity in Post-Conflict Cambodia, the Significance of Silk" (2009). *Scripps Senior Theses*. Paper 15.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/15

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**LOOKING BEYOND “THE SHADOW OF GENOCIDE”:
AGENCY AND IDENTITY IN POST-CONFLICT CAMBODIA,
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SILK**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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April 24, 2009

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Acknowledgements

Constructing this analysis would have been impossible without the support and assistance of several people whom I must acknowledge. I would like to express my immense gratitude to Professor Zayn Kassam for her time, moral support, and creative feedback. Your academic insights have been crucial to the creative and intellectual processes behind this work, and I attribute a lot of my courage and curiosity in the subject matter of this thesis to you. I am also indebted to Professor Donald Crone for his tremendous help throughout the year, from thesis seminar to the thesis deadline. Our office-hour sessions, although the last one entailed a discussion on the inner and outer martial arts (ba gua vs. karate), your counsel assuaged my copious anxieties and feelings of hesitation, instilling in me the momentum to push forward. My confidence in being officially finished with this thesis can be partially traced back to a humorous exchange one afternoon, involving a phrase I swore I would quote you on one day (hint, you advising me how to officially commemorate being done). For the sake of propriety, that day is not today. Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for engaging in tedious conversations on the subject of my thesis, and Prince Pheanuroth Sisowath and Marie-Claude Frauenrath for initially corresponding with me on the subject of this analysis, and for sending me their silk-sector strategy. My interest in this thesis was sustained by your enthusiasm, enabling me to transform into a viable academic project.

Introduction

Post-Conflict Re-emergence and Identity

Women of the Silk by Gail Tsukiyama is a poignant piece of fiction, depicting the lives of women working in Yung Kee 'silk village' in 20th century pre-revolutionary China. In particular, it follows the coming of age story of 13-year-old Pei and her adaptation to the ways of the 'silk sisterhood,' a group of women who use their collective agency to engage in a political strike. A closer look at the novel suggests an insightful commentary on subversive agency exercised by female silk workers within the patriarchal framework of an industrializing China. Though circumstances were diverse, early 20th century Chinese women are portrayed in their forced or self-imposed exile, as participants in a version of history counter to the structurally dominant forces of modernization and war.

Women using their agency to challenge identities imposed by powerful structures such as the state can be seen as self-empowering. The existence of such a space amidst dominant patriarchal structures suggests histories of opportunity and dissent rather than voiceless passivity. Though the history and culture of China is unique and conclusions made from it will never perfectly fit in other contexts, what Tsukiyama writes about can be viewed as a powerful analogy of the struggle over identity occurring in periods of societal transformation. Cambodia's revolutionary past is not so distant. In light of significant economic and political reforms in the post-revolutionary period, it is an increasingly relevant case study. Scholarly research up until now has failed to engender a

critical analysis of Cambodia's post-conflict development period, from a standpoint of deconstructing primarily the role of cultural production and identity construction as functions of elite power. Such an approach, within relatively recent strands of academic literature on Cambodia's reconstruction is rare. *Yet it is necessary, as Cambodia's national reconciliation and emerging role as textile exporter is contingent upon these processes of redefinition and contestation.*

From “ The Shadow of Genocide” To Where?

The Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia left a void in the spaces of Cambodian culture and tradition. In a bizarre Marxist project to return to the ‘Year Zero’, the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea obliterated spaces of social and cultural identity; one of the goals of the Khmer Rouge was to reach a society that was racially and ideologically “pure” (Ponchaud 1977, 26). The implications of what Cambodian historian James Tyner (2008) deems as the “un-making of space” on the rehabilitation and recovery of Cambodia today are vast. Cambodia's reconstruction period began from the UNTAC mandate and the Paris Agreements in 1991, and after a demonstration of ‘free and fair elections’ in 1993, it implemented a constitution that established it as a multiparty coalition-based political system. Since 1993, the Cambodian government has experienced the difficulties associated with consolidating a fractious bunch of ideologically divergent parties under the umbrella of a plural democratic system. Yet these developments relative to the Khmer Rouge period, where social spaces were erased suggests that Cambodian identity is also subject to change, and is being re-made, or

redefined in the emergence of a new post-revolutionary phase of democratization, export-led growth, and the emergence of a nascent civil society (Hughes, 2002).

The use of NGOs and civil society groups to achieve political ends is also a phenomenon in certain contexts emerging from intense political conflict and civil strife. Often in Southeast Asia, civil society¹ is reduced to a framework of token NGOs, monitored closely by the government in spite of their ‘non-governmental’ status. It is thus easy to write off Cambodian civil society as a formation heavily controlled by the government. This common perception needs to be challenged. The emergence of civil society marks a new phase of Cambodian identity; this variable presents a challenge to the state’s consolidation of power and identity construction. The emergence of many NGOs needs to be acknowledged as a step worthy of further exploration and critical analysis.

New Avenues for Research

A case that has been neglected by scholars is the discourse surrounding export-led development and industrialization, and in particular, the revitalization of *tradition* to fuel *modernization*. The Cambodian silk industry embodies such a paradox, as it re-emerged after the war and has been re-contextualized in a modernist paradigm of state led industrialization. Fostering a silk economy to re-orient Cambodia’s economic growth and modernization through exports is also considered a viable strategy to alleviate rural poverty by empowering the ‘poorest of the poor’. A variety of private and government-

¹ Gordon White (1994) defines civil society as “an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values. (White 1994, 379)”

sponsored NGOs have arisen to revive the Khmer tradition of sericulture and weaving in an attempt to introduce a sustainable means to support rural livelihoods. Interestingly enough, sericulture initiatives are predominantly aimed at women. Academic and policy based rationales for this revival emphasize demographic changes that the Khmer Rouge prompted, in leaving more women than men in rural areas widowed; yet in this context, very few examine the link between the rise of female headed households, an increase in the number of women in the labor force, and the discursive practices surrounding policies that target them.

Policy-makers often conflate the rise of female-headed households with the rise of rural poverty. This is a problematic assumption that can result in development agency led programs that specifically target women without assessing their relations with men in their communities, in a narrow aim to empower them simply by increasing their incomes. This strategy fails to approach poverty through an entitlement approach that views poverty beyond income levels, acknowledging other dimensions such as intra-household poverty. While acknowledging the problems associated with poverty alleviation programs, the question still exists whether certain programs in specific contexts actually leave room to empower women. The silk economy, and its civil society involvement suggest the possibility of new avenues of empowerment. In spite of similar analyses in other contexts, very few function to critically assess possibilities of rural development initiatives such as sericulture to actually ‘empower’ women, within the context and limitations of Cambodia’s recent past. This requires perhaps a re-evaluation of notions of ‘empowerment’ in relation to the Cambodian context, along with acknowledging the

politicized nature of attempts to promote the role of women in economic development initiatives.

Thus the textile industry is a pertinent example of rural development that is worth examining, because of its discursive construction. *In Cambodia, few have examined the relationship between structural approaches to economic development— and more discursive aspects of identity formation.* How does the revival of the silk economy affect identity formation in post-revolutionary Cambodia? It is vital to reiterate that academic approaches to this question are limited by how recent events occurred, thus it is even more important to provide a more comprehensive approach to identity formation in post-conflict Cambodia. In order to establish the lens from which to understand identity formation and power, theories on identity formation will need to first be examined. In the next section, theories on identity and the variables that impact identity in Cambodia will be assessed.

Literature Review

Variables

In this literature review, several variables will be examined. They can be ordered in two categories; these are structural and discursive variables. Given that structural and discursive forces shape identity construction in general, it is logical to group the variables impacting identity in post-revolutionary Cambodia in this manner. Within these two categories, there exist several sub-variables that require attention. Political and economic developments after the Khmer Rouge period fall under the structural category, whereas the revoking of cultural narratives of tradition falls under the discursive category. Though

it can be argued that all of the sub-variables can fall under both categories, these distinctions will be maintained for the sake of clarity of analysis. It also must be made clear that gender, a constructed category, will not be approached as a variable impacting identity, because gender itself is an identity which is shaped by discursive variables such as cultural narratives and structural variables such as civil society and the feminization of labor in Cambodia.

Identity Formation

The ability to frame a situation, a history, or a group of people creates a prevalent power dynamic. The portrayer subjugates the depicted. In Cambodia, representations of society prior to, under, and after colonialism and the civil war are all different. Many have in the past and in the present continue to emphasize the *external* forces that shape Cambodian identity. Since the mid-19th century, Cambodians have been subjected to years of imperialism under the French, the Vietnamese, and the Americans. The common prognosis within dominant academic literature is the portrayal of Cambodian identities as reactive formations contingent upon external power agendas. In representations of Cambodia after the civil war, numerous prescriptions for Cambodians to finally achieve retribution and experience ‘true’ democracy suggest a pathologization of Cambodian identity, or a pessimistic gaze.

The terrain is difficult to maneuver when discussing post-conflict Cambodia. The context of genocide and civil war makes it easy for some to fall into the predictable pattern of alluding to the country’s historical victimization by neighbors and world powers. While being sensitive to the absolute desecration of humanity that occurred

during the Khmer Rouge period, it is also vital to acknowledge more covert methods of subverting systems of domination. While recognizing the existence of hegemonic narratives that work to silence dissent, very rarely in the context of post-conflict Cambodia is attention paid to alternative representations emerging from new spaces created by socio-historical and contemporary forces shaping identity. These forms of definition counter more common narratives of identity prevalent in academia and in the international community, but are not simply reactionary to them. Thus discursively at least, post-conflict Cambodia is a problematic arena of contestation; forces that construct identities are in a constant struggle with each other, yet alternative identities emerge from the spaces of opportunity they create. A legitimate question that arises is the impact of these forces of social definition (variables shaping identity) on the formation of identity in present-day Cambodia.

The Problematization of Identity Construction in Theory

First, it is vital to emphasize that academic approaches to identity formation suggest that identities are definable. The problem arises in who does the defining. It is too simplistic to assume that identities are pre-determined categories. How does one distinguish between the forms of identification and what differentiates them? In contexts like Cambodia, the cultural is severely politicized, and the political cannot be separated from the cultural; identity politics as a hegemonic discourse rests on the assumption that identities can fall in distinct categories, yet when contextually mapped they are often difficult to distinguish. Thus maintaining a sense of reflexivity while attempting to

recognize the roles and production of identity in the sensitive historical context of Cambodia is difficult but necessary.

Establishing The National Identity Discourse

In order to successfully problematize identity construction and its links with hegemony, national identity needs to first be examined and then deconstructed. National identity theorists such as Benedict Anderson (1983), stress that national identity is a modular concept. Ernest Gellner asserts that it is an enlightenment construct that is “rooted in modernity” and contingent upon circumstances (Gellner 1997). Accordingly, nationalism can be perceived as a framework that is easily transferable to other contexts; thus, traditional Western frameworks of nationalism are often imposed through what are titled as official nationalisms (Chatterjee 1986) in order to mobilize support of a particular regime in power. Chatterjee (1986) and Gayatri Spivak (1999) view nationalism as inherently fused with the colonial question. Assertions of national identity were constructed upon a struggle against colonialism; this works against Anderson and Gellner’s approaches that are linked to conceptions of pre-existing national communities and nationalisms before the inception of the nation state, as national identity is perceived as a European export that was narrowly constructed as a reaction to the colonial state.

Post-colonial critics such as Spivak (1999) also suggest that liberal rationalist approaches to identity formation tend to essentialize groups in automatically assuming the existence of common characteristics that unite them in their ‘culture’, without questioning them as constructions. Thus this reinforces the notion that identities are constructed often strategically within hegemonic discourses to further political interests.

Cambodian nationalism involved both the use of the “official nationalisms” that Smith, Anderson, and Gellner espouse, but also cannot be viewed separately from the stages of French and Vietnamese intervention.

First, traditional views on identity formation in the context of national identity seem to be becoming less relevant to current post-conflict analyses of Cambodia. The links between national identity discourse and alternative identities needs to be made. Alternative assertions of identity can be perceived to contradict mainstream or more dominant narratives that may seem to be solely linked to the traditional politics of national identity. Today, identities in Cambodia are being shaped by a multitude of other variables, such as the revival of industry and its social implications, and the emergence of a nascent civil society. Thus, second, many fail to recognize alternative strategies arising from the agency of those who are being framed by standard narrative approaches to identity. Such passivity is an assumption that goes in tandem with the homogeneity that Spivak suggests is implicated in identity politics. Yet even theorists such as Spivak are criticized for undermining the agency exerted within hegemonic frameworks of strategic interest.

Economics and Identities

The case of Cambodia demonstrates the emergence of new spaces of identity formation after the Khmer Rouge genocide. It is impossible to contextualize identity without delving into interlocking structural systems in place, such as the political economy of systems that shape identities linked to class, ethnicity, and gender. During and after the Khmer Rouge period, one major source of identity formation stemmed from

strategic government aims at facilitating Cambodia's economic development and growth. This approach to economic development adhered to a traditional modernist paradigm, associated with export-led growth and industrial development to build up Cambodia's infrastructure, but it also involved socialist elements such as autarky and economic nationalism.

Marx and Engel's theories of economic determinism suggest that the base from which social structures such as ideology stem are the various modes of production, and the relations associated with them. Marx's history is extremely teleological, and centered on the historical stages of production in societies. The theory has been criticized for being overtly reductionist in its approach, as it assumes uniform contexts, devoid of any social factors that influence the identities that develop. For the purposes of my thesis, I will suggest a modified version of this framework taking into account historical, social, and cultural influences that also shape identity development, yet also acknowledging the crucial role systems of production also play. Examining Cambodia's shift to export oriented textile production and the impact(s) upon identity will illustrate this.

The Cambodian Silk Economy (and Identity)

The Cambodian silk economy is a comprehensive example of identities that are either being manufactured via external processes of framing, or are emerging in the creation of alternative discourses that are underemphasized in academic literature on Cambodia.

Historians such as Gottesman and Martin exemplify a strand in literature on post-revolutionary Cambodia that fails to locate alternate forms of agency in identity creation, and primarily focus on factors of economic and political transition. The silk economy is

being re-defined by grassroots initiatives such as textile NGOs, working to improve living standards in rural areas by providing training in silkworm cultivation and weaving as a livelihood strategy (Dahles and Horst, 2006). Given the recent nature of the textile economy's establishment in post-civil war Cambodia, very little scholarly research has been conducted examining the link between the export of silk and identity formation. What makes this particularly relevant is a variable that emerges within international and domestic policy discourses that is directly implicated in Cambodia's resurgence in export led growth. It is also implicated in prospects for women in Cambodia's development. The feminization of Cambodia's textile economy directly implicates gender as an increasingly dominant identity in post-Khmer Rouge period discourses.

Gender and Identity

There is very little critical discourse on the subject of what variables shape gendered identity in post-civil war Cambodia. Besides the importance of gender as a category of critical assessment, in Cambodia gender is also important in the context of its emergence in discourses linked to a highly politicized form of identity stemming from a nascent civil society. Thus gender is impacted by structural and discursive variables presented in this literature review. It will not be asserted that gender is itself a variable shaping identity in post-conflict Cambodia, because gender has always shaped identities and roles in patriarchal systems, and can be seen more as a constant construct. What is crucial to note is that structural developments in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge period, like the emerging female dynamic in the silk industry, are impacting gendered identities.

Gender, Culture and Silk in Cambodia

The emergence of a female dominated silk industry has implications for Cambodian identity, especially because of the linkage of the silk economy's revival to narratives of national redefinition and cultural 'revival' promulgated by dominant forces in society such as the government. Dahles and Horst (2006) suggest the cultural significance of the silk revival in Cambodia and its impact as a national and ethnic identity marker. Dahles and Horst also assert that the significance of the silk economy on national and ethnic identity is understated. All highlight the inventions of tradition and the social construction of the Khmer ethnic identity. In dating back the process of weaving to the golden age of being Khmer, the Angkor period, its resurgence marks the same notions of a cultural revival that Smith alongside other indigenous thinkers such as Senghor, Césaire, and Tagore tend to view as 'blessings'. Even Chatterjee asserts that nationalism can lead to social change, and exert a humanizing influence (Chatterjee 1986). In this vein, the question that arises is what impact the feminization of the silk economy has on identities such as national identity.

Yuval-Davis (1997) argues, "gendered bodies and sexuality play pivotal roles as territories, markers, and reproducers of the narratives of nations and other collectivities" (Yuval-Davis 1997, 39). Gender relations exist at the very base of constructions of social identity. Smith (1986) argues that cultural myths and symbols are reproduced from generation to generation in spite of historical change (Smith, cited in Yuval-Davis 1997). Yet Yuval-Davis asserts that there is no proof of what did *not* survive historical change, and that cultural elements that did survive historical change may change in their *meaning*, relative to context. These still become symbolic markers of identity. Thus it can be

asserted that the perception on behalf of academics, of national and cultural identity markers being empty constructions of state interests to maintain hegemony—may not entirely be the case in the context of Cambodian silk economy. However, scholars like Pearson and Elson (1981) assert that the instrumental use of women in the development process needs to be problematized and investigated.

Conclusions/Additions

In an exploration of Cambodian identity and its contestation, this thesis investigates new definitions of agency and identity stemming from spaces created by economic and political developments in Cambodia's phase of export-oriented industrialization. Again, as Chandra Mohanty (1995) points out, it is important to analyze and theorize identity by emphasizing difference based on contexts of cross-cultural feminist work. It is important to locate and historicize struggle and agency within the context of Cambodia. Cross-cultural linkages can be recognized, but not to the point of decontextualizing struggle and agency in the assumption that these are universally shared by women. Looking at informal networks of agency being formed between women abroad as political refugees and women working and living in Cambodia suggests one such example.

Research Methodologies

In order to show that the re-assertion of cultural tradition in the context of gender and Cambodia's economic development needs to be problematized, the case of the silk economy and its re-emergence will be examined. It is necessary to examine both the structural and discursive variables linked to identity formation to substantiate the claim that the re-assertion of cultural traditions, while operating within the framework of identity formation, can be both empowering and disenfranchising for Cambodian women.

Given that it has been asserted that structural sources of identity formation are linked to political and economic systems, examples of both will have to be assessed in their impacts on identity. In terms of political identity, theorists such as Caroline Hughes (2002) assert that political life is shaping identity in Cambodia; moreover, new developments in political life create room for identities that contest the established conflict over ideology to procure democratic goods. Thus the connection between the growth of civil society in Cambodia and the plural forms of identity that facilitate the emergence of a wide variety of interest groups and NGOs will be explored through a critical examination of scholarly writings that have already made this link. This will allow for the application of theories and case studies on the possibilities of this connection to the case of political identity in Cambodia.

The second structural connection that needs to be made is the impact of economic systems on identity formation. Using the modified Marxist paradigm of both economic systems and social and cultural factors impacting identities, primary and secondary sources are analyzed to exemplify the impact that various rural development policies

have on the status of gender, and the identities of the women they target. Though these policies also very much affect men, the breadth of this analysis will acknowledge that a gender sensitive approach involves including women and men, but maintain that rural development schemes in post-conflict Cambodia produce a gender dynamic that involves the feminization of labor. Thus, for the sake of concision and clarity this analysis limits itself to examining the identities that emerge involving Cambodian women. The official documents of development agencies and NGOs involved in sericulture and silk weaving constitute the primary sources drawn upon for such analysis.

Discursive sources of identity formation that have been examined connect discourses of development, gender, and culture to the construction of identity in post-conflict Cambodia. The emerging feminization of the silk economy can be viewed as historically connected to narratives of an essentialist female identity that is simply being repackaged in modern Cambodia. On the other hand, the discourse of the cultural practice of silk weaving and its revival suggests its potential to offer new spaces of identity and opportunity for women. In order to assess these two strands of thought against each other, historical secondary sources and theories of identity construction and gender are examined.

The puzzle that arises from opposing the discursive and the structural forces of identity construction suggests that there exists a constant tension, where identities are in continuous contestation with each other, opposed to a simplistic binary. The sites at which such opposition occurs are also part of the question. Rather than attempting to provide an easy solution, this analysis will attempt to intentionally maintain this puzzle, in challenging assumptions of linear and monolithic identities. It will do this by

examining the gendered nature of the textile economy (its feminization), and hopefully suggest that identities emerging in Cambodia's post-conflict period are a combination of discursive and structural forces, where discursive sources of identity compete with new identities that stem from Cambodia's structural redefinition after the Khmer Rouge.

Due to the theoretical approach of this analysis, it has to be emphasized that there is no real method to quantify a subject such as identity, and how it is constructed—that is precisely how discursive forces operate to create and perpetuate categories within hegemonic frameworks. Therefore, the analysis is limited to qualitative and conceptual frameworks of assessing identity and the politics associated with it.

Chapter Outline

The following chapters of this analysis will be organized around attempting to demonstrate the impacts of research variables on identity formation. All chapters attempt overall to reinforce the claim that identities forming in post-revolutionary Cambodia are a contestation between competing narratives. The silk economy is particularly demonstrative of the tensions between competing discourses of development and the identities that emerge from the spaces they create.

Chapter 2 examines the broader historical context of post-conflict identity formation in Cambodia. It attempts qualitatively to understand conceptions of identity in Cambodia prior to the Khmer Rouge period. In particular, it is important to examine national identity as a relevant construct when looking at post-conflict identity formation in Cambodia, especially since the Khmer Rouge came to power partially through the use of official nationalism. What were the conceptions of national identity prior to the Khmer

Rouge, if any existed, and how is national identity construed today? Given that Cambodia is redefining itself as a sovereign nation-state, it can be asserted that women are behind its emergence as an international exporter of textiles and garments. What are the implications of the feminization of its export-oriented labor force on national identity? More importantly, this phenomenon is examined against the discourse of identity construction for hegemony, highlighting the implications of the state's involvement in attempting to 'empower' women.

Chapter 3 examines the emergence of civil society in Cambodia. Such an examination is vital for understanding the significance of this development in Cambodia's political history. The implications of the emergence of civil society on identities such as political identity and gender-based identity raise important questions. How has this emerging plural identity contributed to or hindered the emergence of civil society? Examining the role of civil society in Cambodia is necessary in order to assess its impact on gendered identity formation. Since the silk economy is very much based on the cooperation of NGOs with the state, its role in gendering identities is significant.

Chapter 4 aims finally to establish the connection between the silk economy and the emerging gender identity associated with its feminization, in transitioning Cambodia to a post-war economy. It assesses the impact of the silk industry on identity formation, by emphasizing the discursive and the structural processes involved. This chapter works towards understanding the feminization of the textile industry and its implications on identity construction. Besides the NGO-led silk industry highlighting the discursive practices of identity construction, it also raises the question of emerging spaces of agency. Chapter 4 will explore silk sector initiatives that exist as sites of opportunity for

contesting and negotiating several forms of identity, challenging common assumptions behind identities such as traditional/modern, rural/urban, Khmer, and woman.

Thus examining the impact of a nascent industry such as the silk economy also has practical implications, as a conceptual understanding of all the processes involved should contribute to understanding discursive and structural practices in other development contexts that affect women's statuses and identities. Chapter 5, as a concluding chapter, will close this analysis by examining the implications of what is drawn from looking at the silk economy and prospects of agency in Cambodia. It assesses the conclusions drawn from the earlier chapters against the broader question of Cambodia's rehabilitation and its future development trajectory. From a policymaking perspective, in order to be able more fully to understand obstacles existing in the path of societal retribution in post-conflict Cambodia, a more holistic approach needs to be taken. This may involve a reassessment of certain policies involved with human development such as those that specifically target women without approaching gender relations from the base or at the family level. Questions will then be drawn from this thesis that suggest possibilities for further scholarly exploration.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the necessary problematization of the role of women in undergirding crucial aspects of Cambodia's economic re-emergence. An investigation of the silk economy will demonstrate the impact of variables—such as economic and political structural forces and more discursive forces such as narratives of culture and tradition—upon identity formation. The thought that gender barriers are being

“dissolved” in order to build Cambodian society with full force is pervasive throughout Cambodia’s economic and political re-emergence. The rest of this analysis therefore critically approaches the role of rural Cambodian women as markers of Cambodia’s new post-revolutionary identity. This question has been subject to limited scholarly debate; therefore establishing a discourse on it is crucial.

Chapter 2

Cambodian Nationalism(s) and Identity

Introduction

In order to understand post-conflict identity formation in Cambodia, it is necessary to establish the historical context of the conflict. Identities are salient and are discursively constructed; as Spivak and Chatterjee assert, they are manufactured within hegemonic frameworks. People internalize and assume such identities, and hence, *identities are a function of power*. It is necessary first to establish the discourses on ‘identity politics’ in terms of it being seen as a movement. In the case of Cambodia, identity and its associated politics need to be understood within the context of a transition from a particular framework of social organization, to another kind.

Clarifying the Meaning of Identity Politics

It is often argued that the identity politics movement in the United States was constructed purely as a backlash to the perceived ‘threats’ of social justice movements such as the civil rights movement. As a discourse popularized in the 1960s–1980s, ‘identity politics’ has been very much predicated upon claims for *recognition*. Ibrahim Kaya (2007) successfully problematizes the assumption that groups struggle for recognition solely on the basis of identification. Rather, he contends “new social movements based on cultural identities are far from representing the demands of groups for recognition ... These movements aim at establishing hegemony by controlling the intellectual life of society by cultural means” (Kaya 2007, 705). Jean Cohen theorized that New Social Movements are especially important recognition-based social movements, stemming from the 1960s onward (Cohen, 1985). Such movements were

often believed to spring up in opposition to labor and socialist movements. Kaya asserts that it is precisely this shift—from issues of *interest*, to a focus on issues of *identity*—that needs to be explored in the Cambodian context. Thus a good question would be whether in Cambodia’s ‘democratic transition’, a similar identity politics discourse arises with a similar function—that is, culturally to assign identities that work in the interests of power. *In post-conflict Cambodia’s rise of democratic pluralism, does a similar politics of recognition exist, and has it worked to assign a new set of identities operating within their own hegemonic frameworks?* This question can only be answered by further probing into the functions of identity in Cambodia from a historical perspective. In doing so, this analysis will also assert that the feminization of the Cambodian silk industry and the rise of silk NGOs suggests that new identities emerge that are not necessarily confined within existing power structures.

National Identity As a Function of Power

When examining how groups come to power, and the role that sense of identity plays, the question of national identity inevitably arises. In other contexts, a sense of collective identity has been vital towards achieving the goals of industrialization and political consolidation. Yu-han Chu and Jih-wen Lin (2001) investigating the case of Taiwan after its experience of Japanese colonialism demonstrate how a sense of national community was fostered by the authoritarian Kuo Min Tang (KMT). “Re-imagining” a new Taiwanese identity was crucial in enabling the KMT to consolidate its power (Chu and Lin, 2001). Here, this analysis asserts that Cambodian identities are also being re-imagined or re-made. Thus the rest of this chapter focuses on examining the historical

background of national identity and its construction in Cambodia. In using the term ‘construction’, this analysis rests on the assumption that identities are not inherent, but are strategic constructions to serve the interests of those in power. Official nationalisms and the identification they promoted with the Cambodian state is a prime example of a previous *regime* of identity construction that has worked to ossify hegemony. Fostering perceptions of an existing national identity was also a function of the state’s larger agenda to institutionalize agendas of power.

Cambodian Nationalisms/Official Nationalisms

Nationalism in the context of Cambodia is a salient issue given its entrenchment in a recent civil war from 1975-1991. From a theoretical perspective, academic sources perceive nationalism during the revolutionary period as a historical co-optation of identities. When considering Cambodia, identity theorists emphasize the instrumentality of asserting nationalism, especially as a reaction to a constructed threat, or colonialism. In the words of Partha Chatterjee, “national identity is fused with the colonial question” (Chatterjee 1986, 7). Academic sources primarily concentrate on the modular character of nationalisms asserted during the Khmer Rouge period and the civil war from 1975-1991. National identity in the civil war period was intrinsically connected to political agendas.

When attempting to understand the power of nationalism in the Cambodian context, the question arises whether a new national identity emerges from Cambodia’s post-revolutionary period. If national identity was predicated upon official or elite nationalisms during the civil war period, what is the character of national identity in the post-civil war period, and to what extent is it connected to ‘official nationalisms’? In

post-civil war Cambodia, a new form of political identity emerges that is separate from, and no longer as dependent upon the use of official nationalisms. Instead, a civil society is arising from within a framework of nascent pluralism. The implications of this new form of political identification and engagement on the future of Cambodia subversively counter academic threads of Cambodian pessimism. This analysis will first establish and define the character of nationalisms during and after the Cambodian civil war period. In theoretically assessing the nature of nationalisms in Cambodian history, it will next delineate the overall transformation of Cambodian political identity and suggest its implications.

National Identity and Official Nationalism

National identity in Cambodia can only be understood after it is first assessed from the standpoints of popular identity theorists. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* defines the nation as “an imagined political community” (Anderson 1983, 6). Ernest Gellner places greater emphasis on the “fabrications” associated with the nation, hinting at the falsity of the very premises of the nation’s assertions such as a common threat and a shared past. To him, “nationalism is not the awakening of the nation to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist. (Gellner 1997, 169)” Therefore Gellner acknowledges the power involved in being able to define and construct the nation. Yet Anderson too acknowledges this power, with an entire chapter on what Seton-Watson deems as “official nationalisms” (Setton-Watson 1977, 148). The concept of nationalism is defined by its construction during the Enlightenment period,

and Spivak, Gellner, and Anderson also reach a consensus on nationalism when viewing it as a modular, Western export (Anderson 1983). Gabriel Almond in 1960 stated,

The political scientist who wishes to study political modernization in the non-Western areas will have to master the model of the modern, which in turn can only be derived from the most careful empirical and formal analysis of the functions of the modern Western polities. (Almond cited by Crawford, 7)

Political theorist Crawford Young asserts that this 'polity' was very much the nation state. In establishing it as an enlightenment discourse, nationalism as a model for consolidating hierarchical rule was exported via colonialism to the rest of the world. Therefore in post-colonial contexts, modular nationalisms are often propagated by elites to come to power by mobilizing their constituents in their ideological cause. Again, Anderson's definition of *imagined community* and Gellner's 'fabrications' are relevant, as groups mobilized by nationalism perceive themselves as part of a collective culture that is often imagined or sometimes for political purposes is fabricated. The question that arises from theoretical approaches to nationalism and 'official nationalism' is how these models translated into the various historical contexts to which they have been applied. Cambodia is a good case study that highlights exactly how nationalisms have been used to gain collective support. It also demonstrates the emergence of a new context in Cambodia where the use for such nationalisms can diminish.

The Colonial State and Nationalism

Therefore it can be asserted that nationalism was constructed through colonial rule. National identity did not exist until the nation was administratively established via the workings of the French. Perhaps Anderson's broader definition of the nation, the *imagined community*, did indeed exist prior to colonial rule. In the Great Angkor Period,

for instance there is speculation that there was a feeling of unity under the great empire. Yet this analysis will contend that nationalism in Cambodia reached its apotheosis through modular or 'official' uses which stemmed from colonialism. Penny Edwards (2007) asserts that the French protectorate's 'cultural policy' was to shape a Cambodian national consciousness. "Cambodian nationalism was shaped... in colonial offices, schoolrooms, research institutes, and museums" (Edwards 2007, 8). This sense of consciousness was shaped by intellectual and material interventions on the part of French and Cambodian elites. Representations of Khmer culture and the knowledge circulated in colonial *métropoles* formed a web that became entrenched in French and to an extent in Cambodian minds. The familiar narrative of a glorious and grand past still existed among more 'contemporary' Cambodians, but this was intrinsically connected to the promise colonial rule seemed to offer to revive it. Among the Cambodian elite, it was precisely this sentiment of a greater Khmer cultural past that was encouraged by the French, which led to nationalist sentiments. Examples that Edwards cites of this form of nationalism during the French rule extend from the transformation of Angkor Wat as a prime religious monument to a symbol of national memory. The goal of promoting this sentiment fell specifically into the modular nationalisms that Gellner, Seton-Watson, Spivak, and Anderson agree characterized colonial frameworks of domination; they strove to specifically provide Cambodians with a cultural narrative that portrayed France's protectorate as mild, paternalistic, and promising. Cambodians could revel in the imaginings of their own cultural history and traditions, provided these took place under the 'benevolent' supervision of the French. Such supervision was defined by the French

pursuits of architectural and cultural revival (after all the French claimed that they ‘discovered’ Angkor Wat!).

It is noteworthy that in the same nationalistic vein the French also facilitated the rise of a national ‘Khmer’ Buddhism. This was an orientalist, rational, demythologized, and nationalist form of “original” Buddhism that according to Anne Ruth Hansen (2007) was promoted by the French to discipline Cambodian conceptions of the righteous rule of kings. The French then fostered hierarchical concepts of morality in a way that legitimized their presence. Discursively, this was exemplified by the French’s privileging of the Pali scripture as the dominant Khmer practice, that was modernist in its favoring of text and print media (Hansen 2007). Anderson’s idea of the nation being constructed partially through the establishment of print media is seen here, as through emphasizing the textualization of this Buddhist sect, the self-perceptions of the community were concretized and visualized. Such construction also perpetuated the recurring narrative of the French saving the protectorate from foreign encroachment from the Thais and the Vietnamese. Finally, such moves again demonstrate that the goals of inciting Khmer Buddhist nationalism were primarily to consolidate control; the Khmer Mahanikay sect staved off the subversive influences of the Thai and Vietnamese Buddhist sects, such as the Siam-based Dhammayut sect.

The French, therefore, introduced “official nationalisms” to Cambodia. This legacy, as a western export, was passed on to the mindsets of the national elite that replaced the colonial administration. The nationalisms that arose from this period can be described as reactionary to colonial rule, in that rising movements such as the Khmer Rouge used the French as another name on the checklist of foreign influences that invade

Cambodia's history and identity. The Khmer Rouge essentially strove to erase these aspects of Cambodian identity through their 'Year Zero' project. But before the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975, what nationalisms existed? Elite or 'official' nationalisms for the most part also characterized the post-colonial period.

Post-Colonial Nationalism

The rise of Communism in Cambodia officially occurred in 1951, once the local Communist parties of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia differentiated and the First Congress of Khmer Communists took place in 1960 (Martine, 45). Before that, there were calls for Cambodian independence from the French protectorate such as issued by the Khmer *issarak* movement in the 1940s. Again, these were reactionary movements to colonialism. Marie-Alexandrine Martin (1994) asserts that this movement however could not be considered to be a movement for national liberation. She acknowledges that some of their leaders such as Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey and Son Ngoc Thanh were "responsible for awakening Khmer nationalist sentiment" (Martin 1994, 47) but contends a more significant surge of rebellions in the 1930s–1940s involving students, civilians and the clergy such as the *révolte des ombrelles*, along with the formation of the first Khmer political party (the Democratic party), signified a new national awakening. One of the main goals of this new party was to press for dialogue with Paris on independence (Martin 1994).

After a *modus vivendi* agreement in 1946 that granted Cambodia domestic independence with the French still handling foreign affairs, Sihanouk in 1949 signed a treaty with France that granted Cambodia partial independence. From 1953 onwards,

Sihanouk's politics became increasingly anti-colonial and more left-leaning; after his abdication in 1955 he gradually turned his back against the democratic system by dissolving most political parties in favor of supporting his creation, the Sangkum Reastr Niymum (popular socialist community) (Martin 1994). The Sangkum party for the next 15 years dominated political life, as Sihanouk came to rely on the rural peasantry and youth for support as many of them still considered him their 'divine king'. The 15-year Sihanouk period was characterized by mass corruption in the military and civil service, and by political repression. Thus modular or elite nationalisms transcended the colonial period and were used by elite-backed forces pushing for liberation from the French. Sihanouk also used modular nationalism in his official project of the *Khmerization* of education, and to consolidate the Sangkum . However, the use of official nationalisms really reached its epitome under the Khmer Rouge.

The Khmer Rouge: A Case of Official Nationalism

The Khmer Rouge demonstrates the character of official nationalism at its paramount; the elites that brought the Khmer Rouge to power had previously flourished at their *lycées* in Paris and Phnom Penh. Saloth Sar (later known as 'Pol Pot') and Ieng Sary, who later formed the Khmer Rouge, had created a Marxist cell at their university. Peasants had been too enamored with their God King to express much political dissent, and it was in the minds of elites where nationalist thoughts formed that would shape the next 25 years. The Khmer Rouge came to power in the context of a society that had suffered previously from the Vietnam War and the American invasion, and from the violence associated with Lon Nol's coup deposing of Sihanouk. Thus, the nationalisms

that existed during the Khmer Rouge period came into existence on the premises of a war-weary, starving peasantry that had become disillusioned with the former Republic.

The Democratic Republic of Kampuchea (DRK) officially assumed power in Cambodia in 1975. Though the Khmer Rouge came to power using certain nationalist strategies such as instilling fear of the Vietnamese, they really consolidated their power by simply being victors in the war. The question of national identity or nationalism under the regime was non-existent; the Khmer Rouge attempted to erase the very social fabric of Cambodia in an attempt to create an ethnically and socio-economically homogenous or 'pure' agrarian society. Centers of knowledge production that had previously been one of the main engines of facilitating a sense of national identity were erased. The ideologies they professed to embody were Marxist, but in actuality were a bastardization of principles stressing the necessity of starting a new society. Cities had been too influenced by a modernist imperial past and were hence tainted; people were forced to evacuate towns and migrate to the countryside *en masse*. Cambodian intellectuals were shot or forced into prisons such as Tuol Sleng where they eventually were killed; some elites were given the opportunity to join the *Angkar* ('organization'), while everyone else was forced into agrarian collectives. The implications of this period and the ensuing civil war up until the early 1990s on national identity are vast; a civil political life and prospects of moving towards the system of plural democracy envisioned earlier by the Democratic Party now seemed to belong to a distant past. What is apparent in this instance of mass genocide, the nationalism involved during its early years depended upon the construction of an external threat, or in this case, fear of an ethnic Other—the Vietnamese. Another important element is the extent to which the Khmer Rouge's agendas of power embraced

the idea of epistemological hegemony, where monopolizing common modes knowledge production (through attempting to erase pre-existing forms) was *as* important to political and ideological domination as the physically forced economic production; this suggests the importance of both the roles of the discursive and economic practices in consolidating control.

Post-Conflict Cambodia and Plural Spaces

The period from 1991–1993 marks the UNTAC period, where a UN peacekeeping mission intervened in an attempt to help Cambodia rebuild its social and political institutions. This can be perceived as a new phase of identity building in Cambodia that is separate from the previous periods of nationalisms.

Political theorist Atul Kohli (1997) in what he refers to as ‘follower democracies’ asserts that certain cultural conditions favor clientalism in political relationships as opposed to models that favor a Western rationalist approach. Thus if plural democratic frameworks are imposed on these contexts, a crisis over ‘fundamentals,’ or ideological foundations occurs; political parties mobilize along the lines of a highly politicized identity that characterizes more of an intra-elite struggle, and this hinders pluralist prospects of consensus and cooperation. If applied to Cambodia, Kohli’s model suggests that the democratic system UNTAC worked to establish with the holding of free and fair elections in 1993 failed to move parties beyond fundamentals. However, this approach is inaccurate in the context of Cambodian post-conflict political identity. A new political identity is emerging that is moving away from a conflict over fundamentals, towards a

more pluralist framework. This emerging form of national identity no longer seems to be contingent on elite nationalisms of the past.

The 1991 Paris Agreements marked the beginning of Cambodia's political transformation; ideological factions who had earlier been at war with each other were transformed into political parties that had to contest each other within an electoral system guaranteed by the new Constitution. In 1993, the Khmer Rouge reneged from the Paris Agreements in an attempt to disrupt elections through violence. In 1997, the Communist People's Party (CPP) ousted the other main party in the coalition, the royalist FUNCINPEC in a military battle allegedly in defense of the constitution. These incidents demonstrate that there has been a resort to force around contending interpretations of the new constitutional framework established after the revolution. This can be understood as evidence of parties within the new plural framework not being able to move beyond Kohli's 'fundamentals,' and there is even criticism that UNTAC failed completely to restore 'democracy'; yet in Cambodia what contests this view is the recent phenomenon of a convergence in party ideologies. If ideologies are indeed converging, then a conflict of fundamentals would gradually diminish. Yet the conflict over fundamentals is shifting towards petty contestations over electoral and constitutional frameworks, which may not necessarily be better. For example in 1998, Cambodia held its second post-war election. Kohli asserts that the politics of electioneering were reduced to contesting superficial electoral regulations versus actual policies, as policy-platforms were almost identical. Such platforms included clauses on the protection of territorial integrity, respect for democratic principles, and support for the constitutional monarchy (Kohli 1997). Hughes

(2002) points out that there was fundamentally very little difference between the policies of parties aligned with the former Khmer Rouge, and those aligned with the CPP.

Though it can be viewed as simply a repackaging of ‘fundamentals’, ideological convergence still suggests an opening of opportunity and spaces for identities that in the past never existed. Since ideological lines are blurring, parties are now resorting to other means to garner support; ideological co-optation no longer seems to be much of an option. Today it can be asserted that political parties in Cambodia in their competition for support offer viable opportunities for civilians to influence political agendas and procure goods from elites. This is a unique phase in Cambodian history precisely because earlier on factors existed that mired prospects of plural democracy. These factors included imperial subjugation by neighbors and other powers, and the resultant ideologies that characterized the lengthy civil war period. The agency exerted by interest groups and civil society is undermined in most literature on Cambodia’s new plural system, as it suggests that even the movements that arise for ‘democracy’ and accountability on behalf of political parties are in essence still linked to party incentives. For instance, Blunt and Turner when talking about state involvement, suggest “nearly all of these entities have tentacles that reach down to the level of the commune” (Blunt and Turner 2005, 79). Yet, this should not undermine the emergence of protest movements that have taken advantage of this new relationship between parties, the state, and civilians.

New Pluralism: Civil Society and the State

Hughes (2003) suggests that though politics may appear to be still a conflict over ideology, in the xenophobic rhetoric parties use to frame their concerns over policy issues they also allow demonstrators to affect party agendas. In the 1990s, a series of movements emerged that imply that Cambodian citizens were discovering new avenues of expression and political participation. The human rights movement, Democracy Square, and the *Dhammayietra* peace march are three examples that can demonstrate the existence of collective action during the 1990s. The 1998 Democracy Square movement is interesting because a series of interviews confirmed that civilians were voicing a variety of genuine concerns such as land rights, corruption and rent-seeking, discrimination and intimidation, and other factors affecting their rights and freedoms (Hughes 2003; Curtis 1998). Most of the people interviewed agreed that ensuring their participation in the new regime was more important than which party won an election. Though violence did ensue as police broke up the demonstrations 3 weeks later, the Democracy Square Movement set the precedent for a new era in Cambodian politics where voices other than the parties were heard, suggesting a new trend in Cambodian democracy.

The Sam Rainsy Party's alleged involvement with the movement did lead to a lot of speculation over motives. Yet, relative to parties such as Hun Sen's FUCINPC, Sam Rainsy's party is well known for an ideological commitment to strengthening civil society at the grassroots. For instance, in September 2007, the Sam Rainsy Party attempted to decentralize power by extending the realm of decision making into civil society. It worked to push a reform initiative that worked to help facilitate a democratic

election that would choose national party leaders. Also, the involvement of the party attempting to insert its motives into the demonstration still created a new political space for opposition. Sit-ins have become the characteristic form of protest in Cambodia, and Democracy Square set this precedent. Though they have ended in violence, the very act of occupying a space (even if it is for a small amount of time) with an agenda in mind is a fundamental form of civic action, and demonstrates a form of public agency that previously ceased to exist.

Another example of citizens using the new spaces between party contestations of power is the relationship between the Sam Rainsy Party and the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC). In this instance in 1996, workers protests stemmed from the factories and were later ‘adopted’ by SRP, as opposed to initially stemming from the party. Successful campaigns gained concessions such as wage increases and rules regulating overtime hours. Although it is argued that a trade union must achieve independence from the state to be considered legitimate, Hughes notes that in 1996 workers did not even know what a trade union was. It can thus be argued that in helping FTUWKC form, the Sam Rainsy Party helped workers realize a political space that were previously *unaware* of. Thus party involvement with the emerging civil society in Cambodia has to be acknowledged as a means for individuals to realize political spaces they have been oblivious to, and a means to distract parties from concerns over ‘fundamentals’ and towards more policy-based issues. Perhaps it is unrealistic to attempt to measure Cambodia’s success in facilitating democracy; Grant Curtis (1998) asserts that a more historically appropriate method would be to understand the progress made towards re-establishing Cambodian civil society. Civil society is

emerging, and the UNTAC era along with donor funding created a variety of groups that included political parties, non-governmental organizations, interest groups, community groups, and credit societies (Curtis 1998). The range of these organizations is impressive and can be perceived as evidence of a civil society emerging. The extent of their impact has been debated, but the human rights umbrella in relation to the international donor community made some considerable achievements. Although it can be argued that these groups coming to existence were contingent upon external agencies and donor efforts, Curtis argues that some community development organizations made progress towards approaches to civil society that were more “Cambodian” in their approach, establishing themselves at the village level and working from within a framework of village traditions and livelihoods.

This chapter attempted to define the character of various nationalisms in Cambodia’s history; elite nationalisms have characterized nationalism in the context of Cambodia mainly due to colonialism and the resultant elite bureaucracy. As indicated by the anti-Thai protests in 2003, parties still can be argued to operate through the propagation of xenophobic wartime identities.² Yet it cannot be refuted that the relationship between parties and civilians, and the contested avenues of dissent and participation, are all markers of a new politicized identity in Cambodia. It should also be reiterated that this is a plural identity that is moving away from an ideological issue base to more of a policy-based framework.

² Alexander Hinton (2006) contends that notions of Khmerness are connected to a discourse surrounding the construction of the Other. For his case, Hinton cites the riots in 2003 that protested alleged comments made by Thai actress ‘Morning Star’, demanding that Angkor Wat be returned to Thailand, and that “she would rather be a dog than be a Khmer national” (Hinton 2006, 446). These comments sparked widespread resentment amongst Cambodians, inciting national outrage, including a statement made by Prime Minister Hun Sen, attacking Morning Star’s remarks via denouncing Thailand’s historical presence in Cambodia. Hinton links this case to the more general trend of Cambodian nationalist discourse that relies on Orientalist imagery to reaffirm notions of a Khmer national and ethnic identity.

What are the implications of this new plural identity on Cambodia's pursuit of further pluralism and democracy? Robert Putnam (1993) argues that it is impossible to establish "civic virtue" or in the case of Cambodia, civil society, where it does not exist (Putnam, cited by Leman 2008). Therefore importing Western liberal democratic ideals and institutions into Cambodia may not be the most sustainable approach to facilitating a bottom-up form of civil society. But then again, definitions are not absolute and vary depending on the context. In Cambodia, it can be argued that village-level institutions were once the norm, until the country was invaded and colonized— thus it is not fair to assume that civil society *never* existed and is therefore impossible. In fact, though many have been weakened over the past 25 years, some of these cultural aspects of Cambodian society still survived, and should be considered as viable approaches to development. Thus a re-evaluation of approaches towards the facilitation of 'democracy and development' is necessary.

Conclusion

This chapter attempted to establish a historical context in relation to identity formation in Cambodia. In exploring state nationalisms, it demonstrates the impact of external agendas on shaping notions of national identity—and how these are intrinsically linked to agendas of power. National identity has played a significant role in Cambodia's colonial, pre-revolutionary, and revolutionary periods. Yet the function of official nationalisms in Cambodia's post-revolutionary period is arguably less relevant in the face of an emerging pluralist framework. However, the deployment of official nationalisms should not suggest that identities are simply external constructions of the state or groups

in power; identity as a discourse is linked to power—identities are not static and are constantly negotiated from *within* hegemonic spaces and discourses. New identities emerge through this constant process of negotiation.

Gordon White's (1994) definition of civil society is useful to reiterate, and it can be viewed as “an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values” (White 1994, 379). NGOs play a vital role as organs of civil society. The next chapters specifically examine NGO involvement in the re-emerging silk economy, and therefore it analyzes civil society's role in identity construction, and poses the question of whether spaces of agency are being created that involve assertions of identity separate from dominant frameworks. Cambodia's silk industry is being increasingly filled with female workers; the rest of this analysis will therefore attempt to frame the discourse of the Cambodian silk industry in a manner that successfully problematizes the question of whether in the process of Cambodia's rehabilitation and to an extent, redefinition, identities are again simply being manufactured by external agendas— or if in fact, they are being contested and reworked.

Chapter 3

Discourses of Identity in Post-Conflict Cambodia

Introduction: Economies and Identities—Is the National Economy Replacing the Imagined Community?

The previous chapter asserted that civil society is emerging in Cambodia; and placed its development in the context of an emerging plural identity. In suggesting another space for a nascent set of interests external to the party-state, Chapter 2 also laid the foundations for examining post-conflict identity formation. Scholars question the existence and function of civil society in post-war Cambodia only to the extent of primarily concluding 1) that a civil society is emerging that is suggestive of a new phase of Cambodian identity construction, and 2) that weak civil society can function to reinforce elite power. Yet what avoids scrutiny is how processes of identity construction and agendas of development frame and reinforce each other. Since official nationalisms belonged to the pre-war and civil war periods, after the Khmer Rouge period, it can be asserted that the space of Cambodian national identity has been filled by the development agenda and its discourse. What roles do the state, the international donor community and civil society play in shaping identities in post-conflict Cambodia? Since the concept of national identity is discursively manufactured, the development agenda replaces this function of power.

In other global contexts, some scholars like Suzanne Bergeron (2004) have argued that economic development involves the political consolidation of national identity. *The national economy has come to replace the imagined community*. For example, Bergeron (2004) asserts that in contexts of decolonization and postcolonial liberation movements,

“national identity was a central theme in discussions of self-determination and sovereignty. Mid-century development thought was characterized by a ‘search for national development’...” (Bergeron 2004, 24). This ideal of national self-determination was very much located within economic frameworks and state agendas. Dependency theorists like Raoul Prebisch, who advocated protectionist approaches to national development helped shape the conception of the national economy existing as an imagined community, a collective whole, or *an identity*, that the state controlled “for the good of the nation and the people” (Bergeron 2004, 26). Policies of economic nationalism like Prebisch’s need to be understood from the context of national identity (Bergeron, 2006). Both Bergeron (2006) and Helleiner (2002) assert that policies of economic nationalism need to be understood from the context of national identity; because of its divergence from economic liberalism, economic nationalism is often used in a manner that is almost derogatory. A shift needs to be made in contemporary academia that moves away from the simplistic approach to economic nationalism as a state-centric approach, placing it in the context of a set of policies that stem from a shared national imagination or identity. Here, representations of the nation need to be taken into account, along with their compatibility with post-war economic nationalism. This is particularly salient in the case of Cambodia’s post-war reconciliation narrative (s) of identity.

With regard to Cambodia’s economic ‘re-emergence’, the approach outlined above is rarely taken. Here, constructions of a dominant national economic identity reinforce larger interests. The role of civil society in relation to state agendas needs to first be understood critically in light of this assertion. In order to fully understand the role

of civil society in Cambodia's post-war development context, this chapter will first attempt to establish the discourse surrounding economic development in Cambodia. Exploring the function of development in relation to post-war political and economic identities will lead to the more context-specific approach embodied in Chapter 4, examining the role of development programs in rural Cambodia such as silk NGOs and their impacts on identity. Here the role of the silk sector must be problematized when assessing the impact of development and identity construction. The silk economy and its role in the construction of gender identities is scrutinized towards understanding the discursive/ symbolic function aiding the industry's emergence. Such an understanding is also key towards grasping the possibilities of identity *contestation* and *redefinition* within dominant state frameworks of politics and development.

Making the Connection: Post-Conflict Reconstruction and National Identity

Ryerson Christie (2004) in a conference paper at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association asserts that NGOs affect notions of identity, in shaping traditional perceptions of peoples' relationships and expectations with the state. "Peace-building requires a struggle over identity. (Christie 2004, 1)" To build on Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities, *how do communal imaginings function in post-conflict situations?* Cambodia presents an opportunity to explore precisely this question, and in this context the role of the discourse of development is important to acknowledge. As Partha Chatterjee (1986) and Suzanne Bergeron (2004) emphasize, identities are often contested within national narratives of development. Noting the difference in time period between both of their research, it only suggests that the

traditional nationalisms of earlier periods are being reproduced. Yet such constructions are not linear, and neither are they uncontested. The state's vision of policies may also conflict with alternative approaches that emerge. Identities, therefore, are not passively constructed, and are continually being *constructed, redefined, repackaged, and contested*—the question of power lies in how such associations become dominant and reified. In Cambodia, an emerging civil society further complicates post-war identities, bringing into question the extent to which they function to further entrench and reproduce cultural constructs within narratives of state policy frameworks, institutions, and agendas of control—or rather, the extent to which spaces are being made, where civil society may provide opportunity for groups to exert their agency.

Civil Society: Autonomy and Agency

Nicholas Platt (2000), an American diplomat and former president of the Asia Society in New York, introduced a speech titled 'Cambodian Civil Society: Challenges and Prospects.' He asserted that in the decade after the first UN established post-Communist election, Cambodia returned to its authoritarian power structure. But, in spite of this 'failure', a "new era is taking root in this war-torn nation, a nascent civil society and a culture of human rights is becoming institutionalized" (Sirivudh, Platt, and Hourn 2000). Kheang Un (2006) cites Gordon White (1994) to assert that civil society can serve as an impetus for democratic consolidation, as it forces accountability amongst state officials. Diamond defines civil society as:

An intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values. (White, cited by Un 2006)

Going by this definition, does the fact that the autonomy of civil society in Cambodia is often challenged suggest that what is emerging in post-war Cambodia is not worthy of being classified as civil society? This is debatable. Yet, since definitions change depending on context, *autonomy* is hardly what needs to be assessed when looking at Cambodia as much as *relative autonomy*; also, the significance of NGOs as exhibiting an oppositional space is undermined. Un asserts that in Cambodia after 1993, a force challenging elite networks is indeed civil society, which consists of a web of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Cambodian non-governmental organizations (CNGOs) have been entrenched at the core of contesting issues of human rights. Yet, Un only mentions the extent to which CNGOs cater to the ‘demand side’ of democracy, informing citizens of their rights and of government accountability. Indeed, their watchdog presence has been of tremendous assistance in identifying human rights violations such as human trafficking.

CNGOs, Democracy, and the Judiciary

In spite of this, it must be acknowledged that the judiciary branch still manages to curtail the functioning of many CNGOs. The judiciary’s lack of independence from the state is very much connected with Cambodia’s history of authoritarian rule, genocide, and civil war. According to Julio A. Jeldres (1996), the Cambodian judiciary is very much controlled by the CPP along “Stalinist lines—A structure that it has used to its advantage” (Jeldres 1996, 149). Thus the judiciary’s legislation regarding Cambodian civil society is very much governed by a top-down system of control. Jeldres asserts that for Cambodia to be considered a ‘true’ democracy based on liberal democratic values it

needs an independent judicial branch. A CPP member heads the Ministry of Justice, and this branch of government still is in charge of legislation, and all judges and prosecutors are appointed by it. The Human Rights Action Committee has been particularly active in attempting to lobby the judicial system for structural change; yet, according to Un's experience interviewing an NGO director, CNGOs only have the National Assembly to provide access to forums of legislation, which is considered to be merely a "rubber stamp" and not a guarantee of legal reform.

Jeldres's insights are important, but he suggests a trend in academia that still stifles prospects to delve more structurally and discursively into democratization. The mere notion of Cambodia ever really becoming a 'true democracy' is problematic, and it is important to establish that democracy is a Western liberal ideal that even Western industrialized countries such as the G5 still fail to uphold in a variety of contexts and situations. In Cambodia, prospects for democracy need to be assessed from a lens that is context-specific, and not based on a standard imposed externally. Democracy must be viewed from within the perspective of 20 years of civil war, and be measured again as relative as opposed to an absolute and universal value. This is not an apology for an abysmal human rights record or the degree of authoritarianism still exhibited by the Cambodian state— but rather it should be viewed as an attempt to break away from the dominant paradigm (a paradigmatic shift away from) of definitions of democracy and development that end up being used to justify the intervention of international regimes of control.

Foreign Donors, Aid, and Civil Society

Thus, in spite of the political confinement CNGOs face in Cambodia, after 1992, a relatively autonomous plural identity emerges. Yet, assuming that it is remotely quantifiable, civil society's level of autonomy in Cambodia is very much due to an international presence. Since access to the government is limited or in some cases blocked, civil society's emergence has primarily been a function of the international donor community. Foreign donors on the grounds of their assistance attach conditionalities that are linked to domestic policies in the spheres of human rights and social justice. Primarily, the international donor community has funded CNGOs since their creation in 1992. This to an extent has given CNGOs independence from state agendas, but it also highlights the concern that interests of donors influence development agendas and policies.³ Un (2006) asserts that the Cambodian government uses the relationships CNGOs have with foreign donors as a reason to impose limitations on them. This occurs more often in rural than in urban areas, because rural constituencies are considered to be more susceptible to an array of ideological factions that contest the dominant framework of the CPP (Un 2006). *Thus the spaces that rural CNGOs in particular provide become even more politicized— in that they serve as arenas of contestation between external and state development goals.* This suggests that the relationship between the development agendas of the state and those of the donor community, and the role of NGOs as spaces for the formation of civil society is an important consideration when attempting to understand contestations of identity and agency within dominant frameworks of the state.

³ Thun Saray, an important human rights activist and director of ADHOC, in 1996 raised this important point; today in 2009, it is still extremely relevant. Un suggests that people he interviewed who were affiliated with CNGOs all worked within the limitations of donor-established policies.

Civil Society and Rural Development

In spite of the academic focus on the ‘demand side’ of Cambodian democracy and the NGOs affiliated with it, less critical insight exists on NGOs that work on the ‘supply side’, working with groups and individuals to ensure access to resources and capital. It has been argued by several scholars that that the Cambodian government’s top priority, before a cultivation of a democratic culture, has been that of economic growth. The Cambodia Development Resource Institute and the Asian Development Bank’s views on the importance of economic development as an impetus for Cambodia’s recovery suggest that perhaps a tangible arena for the state and civil society to agree on policy frameworks does exist, but more so in the context of economic growth and development. The Cambodian government openly acknowledges the role that NGOs play in facilitating Cambodia’s re-emergence. Although quite a bit of scholarly research (Hughes 2002; Un 2006; Jeldres 1996.) points to the lack of resources and agency of NGOs involved in issues of social justice, there is a lack of critical insight on the relationship between the state and NGOs involved in processes of economic development. Within academic and political discourses, a suggested binary exists between NGOs that pursue social outcomes and those that focus on economic goals. This notion has to be problematized, as economic development and issues of equity and social justice are intrinsically connected. *Discursively, ‘development’ also involves more than just economic growth, as it transcends merely GDP and income—it is linked with cultural production, it has an impact on notions of collective and individual identities—and thus is linked to agendas of power.* Though studies have been conducted to understand the efforts of rural

development NGOs and agencies, in Cambodia few analyses exist that frame rural and economic development in the context of identity formation.

“The Development of Cambodia Depends on the Development of the Countryside”

In February 1995, the newly established Royal Government of Cambodia, with some assistance of the UNDP, developed the *National Programme to Rehabilitate and Develop Cambodia*. It stated:

The overriding objective of the Royal Government is to achieve a fair, just and peaceful society and, through accelerating the rate of economic growth, to raise the living standards of all Cambodians. In short, the Government is striving to achieve sustainable growth with equity and social justice. (Curtis 1998, 60)

Primary features of the clause were to establish a ‘fully fledged’ market economy, and this transition was initially based on the rehabilitation of the rural sector. A central clause to the program was to prioritize rural development (Curtis 1998). “The overview also grounded Cambodia’s rehabilitation and development on a necessary foundation of rural development” (Curtis 1995, 62). This document was followed up again in 1995 by a follow-up document titled *Implementing the National Programme to Rehabilitate and Develop Cambodia*, which committed to ‘sustainable development’ with the establishment of various sectoral policies. Curtis (1995) makes the connection between the clause that emphasizes the “closer integration of the Cambodian economy into regional and world economies... and rural development (provisions for food, water, de-mining, credit, shelter, access to markets)...” (65). Since 85 percent of the population of Cambodia at the time lived in rural areas, again it reiterated the importance of focusing on the rural sector, claiming, “ the development of Cambodia depends on the development of the countryside” (65).

Thus rural development was a priority for the Cambodian state, the international donor community, and civil society NGOs.⁴ In the 1994–5 *Development Cooperation Report*, summary tables indicate that U.S. 178.1 million (12.96 percent of all external assistance) was directed to rural development. In May 1996, a Ministry of Rural Development position paper highlighted the role of rural development as a “vision for the 21st century”. The paper asserted that ‘Returning to the Village’ was a requisite for Rural Development, where the local at a grassroots level had to be empowered in order for Cambodia to achieve self-sufficiency in a sustainable manner. Curtis suggests that the RGC used “developmentally correct jargon” in order to please the donor community, and very few “real development choices” were made by the Royal Government— or let alone Cambodians. Yet regardless of *who* initially steered the reconstruction process, post-UNTAC Cambodia “was demonstrably on a path toward some form of development— even if the path or its ultimate destination was not necessarily the choice of the Cambodians themselves” (69). Therefore, the attention of the donor community, Cambodian and international NGOs, and the state initially converged on agendas of rural development; thus the link between rural development, national reconciliation, and identity is significant and needs to be questioned further. *Why has rural development been discursively connected with notions of national reconciliation and reconstruction?* Further examination of this function in the Cambodian context suggests that the answer is very much linked to the function of development and national identity

⁴ The donor community’s involvement had been primarily human rights based, especially in camps along the Thai border, but in the 1980s an interest in ‘development’ activities in the rural sectors emerged. This period witnessed the construction of an aid market in Cambodia, where donor interests competed in the context of a variety of development experiments, projects, and programs. The donor community on the insistence of the RGC, again, targeted rural development, where many ‘interventions’ occurred in the countryside.

The Act of Othering and the National Self

The answer to the question above is linked to the function of how national identity in the past has been constructed through the creation of the ‘Other’ to unify, reify, and affirm the identity of the ‘Self’. In the context of Cambodia, this logic can be further utilized to explain the function of the rural or ‘traditional’ sector, its construction, and its fetishization in order to consolidate the national economy and construct the identity of a Khmer national Self. Kevin McIntyre (1996) asserts that under the Khmer Rouge, the ‘orientalism’ of the agrarian or rural sector justified its assault and intervention by Polpot’s regime.⁵ In post-conflict Cambodia it can be argued that the act of othering still functions, except now it works to consolidate the ‘traditional sector’ into a larger national statistic of gross national product or GNP (Bergeron 2006).⁶ This income statistic functions to consolidate a diverse range of formal and informal economic activities into one national statistic that justifies economic progress being approached in a manner that is central, top down, and technocratic.

“To argue that someone or something needs to be integrated into the national economy does, of course, suggest that it is not currently part of that object” (Bergeron 2005, 57). The ability of the state, the international donor community, and to an extent

⁵ McIntyre in *Khmer Rouge Orientalism* (1996) examines Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan’s doctoral thesis to assert the ideological paradox of orientalism exhibited in Khmer Rouge policies. Polpot in the Communist Party of Kampuchea acknowledged the party as an offshoot of Maoism. The Khmer Rouge ideology can thus be associated with Maoism, in its mix of nationalist and Marxist beliefs. McIntyre emphasizes that Marxism, Maoism, and Khmer Rouge ideology insisted on an ongoing tension between the town and the ‘countryside’. This binary is evident in the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Weber’s work on the rational city and the traditional countryside helped cement the binary between the Occidental and Oriental cities.

⁶ Bergeron (2006) refers to the Harrod-Domar model as an economic growth theory that explains economic growth through a combination of capital infusion and savings. Ideologically this theory worked to explain economic growth through investing in capital and labor, thereby justifying the need for foreign direct investment in less-developed countries (LDCs). Such an approach conflates growth with development, and is embodied by technical programs implemented by development agencies and donor governments such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

civil society to stress the importance of the rural sector and its inhabitants in being incorporated into the market based economy also functions to frame them, know them, map them, and represent them as “legible subjects”. As Bergeron states, “Economic growth was envisioned as taking place in the bounded economic space of the nation and thus was imagined as being subject to national plans” (Bergeron 2004, 44). Michael Foucault’s metaphor of the Panopticon resonates here as an example of the spatial disciplining that functions to exert power over and knowledge about its mapped subjects.⁷

Gunnar Myrdal, in *Asian Drama*, which covers different aspects of the economic development of Southeast Asian countries, states that modernization and national consolidation go hand in hand. Modernization and economic growth were contingent upon inciting a sense of national identity, or an “integrated national community” where “caste, color, religion, ethnic origin, culture, language and provincial loyalties would be broken down,” leading to the creation of the “new man” (Myrdal 1968, 60-65). In Cambodia, economic development is contingent upon the fostering of a monolithic national economic culture, which in turn justifies a fetish for development initiatives in the rural or ‘traditional’ sector to incorporate it into a larger national framework. This kind of discursive mapping occurred in the developed or Western world’s obsession with development in the global south or third world. Bergeron asserts, “in the narratives of national development planning we find a particular method of ordering thought that enframes the national economy” (Bergeron 2004, 49). This ordering also enframes

⁷ To reinforce this notion, Bergeron (2004) also asserts, “the nation is portrayed as something that can be understood as if we are looking down at it from above; as something that can be grasped by the knowing mind of the development expert, now armed with more sophisticated tools; and as an economic space that can be successfully predicted and engineered through development planning”(52). Similarly, Chatterjee (1993a) emphasizes “the state as a planning authority can promote the universal goal of development by harnessing within a single, interconnected whole the discrete subjects of power in society. It does this by turning those subjects of power into the objects of a single body of knowledge (Chatterjee, cited by Bergeron 2004, 53)”

‘traditional’ economies within the space of the larger Cambodian market economy. However, this is entirely dependent upon the prior construction of and enforcement of notions of the ‘traditional’ to reinforce the identity of the ‘modern’ nation. Interests linked to power arise here in the homogenization of the multiple sectors of an economy under one system of logic; how the economy is constructed materially and discursively is intrinsically linked to how the nation is understood and manipulated (Chenery 1979; Ruccio 1991).⁸

Tradition in Discourse: Identity and Development

In the past, the construction of the ‘traditional’ also had a more direct function in relation to nationalism. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) and a variety of post-colonial theorists such as Spivak (1999) and Chatterjee (1986) assert that the construction of the identity of the ‘traditional’ functioned to consolidate national support through the idea that a ‘traditional’ and glorious past needed to somehow be excavated or unearthed. Modernization was pursued while on the other hand a national identity was constructed, based on the search for a traditional past. Leakthina C.P. Ollier and Tim Winter (2006) stress the importance of cultural production in relation to power, viewing “tradition, identity, and change as processes that are, implicitly or explicitly, bound up in social networks of power, political cultures, and an array of institutional relations” (Ollier and Winter 2006, 11). Thus, scholars from a variety of disciplines agree that the construction of tradition functions to enhance power. To what extent does this transform onto national economic agendas?

⁸ We should view the national economy as a site that is conflictual, as opposed to a homogenous national entity comprised of neatly defined economic sectors.

Myrdal (1968) stresses the importance of cultural and social factors involved in economic development, and the importance of replacing the traditional with the modern. Although nation-as-community narratives have been problematized, development economists are still caught in the vortex of cohesively representing development and its goals. Gross national product is still very much viewed as the indicator of progress in developed Western countries and in developing countries like Cambodia. Therefore the traditional/ modern dichotomy in development discourse and policy is rarely a subject of scrutiny (Mehmet and Escobar, cited by Bergeron 1994). This leads to a vital question—how do these identities function to stabilize and reify the quest for modernity and growth?

The modern/traditional dichotomy can be compared to the public/private spheres in terms of their function in national economies (Bergeron, 1994). The national economy fits into the modernizing public and sphere, while agriculture and less formally acknowledged means of production are labeled the ‘traditional’ or private sector. This sector is often portrayed as “the object” or the national economy’s Other. Binaries are constructed to reinforce hierarchal relations of power between those who benefit from binary construction and those who are subjugated and silenced. Demonstrated by its continual emphasis in development rhetoric, the traditional ‘subsistence sector’ has been portrayed in a manner that suggests it requires incorporation and transformation (Lewis 1954).⁹ In development contexts such as Taiwan, China, and South Korea the seemingly ‘unproductive’ and ‘lazy’ subsistence sector has been whipped into shape to extract a surplus of capital that further fuelled industrialization. In Cambodia this bias was evident

⁹ In a telling metaphor, Lewis refers to the traditional sector as the “economic darkness” that surrounds the developed capitalist centers of the underdeveloped nations. (Lewis 1954, 409).

in prominent Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan's doctoral thesis, and is evident through the emphasis in rural development initiatives on part of the RGC and the donor community. The predominantly rural-based textile industry is a prominent example of this. However, what also makes it significant is that it also depicts the tension between initiatives that are informed by donor or state agendas—yet may also exist as oppositional spaces for identities to be contested and reworked.

Tradition in Practice: Silk, “An Ancient Art as A Modern Model”

Cambodian economic policies that exemplify the construction of a traditional identity are linked to the development of the industrial export sector, and the reconstitution of traditional activities within a larger modernizing market-based framework. Such construction involves a combination of reinstating the value of Cambodian traditions, and incorporating them into the larger discourse and practices of export-led growth. The Cambodian garment industry is one such example that shows the impact of cultural construction in reinscribing value to the traditional craft of silk weaving. Dahles and Horst's (2008) study of the silk economy in Cambodia is an insightful approach towards understanding the role of cultural production, identity, and economics. Policy oriented publications and academic research (e.g. Zwart 2003; Morimoto, 1995) both assert the cultural significance of the tradition of Khmer silk weaving. “Khmer silk weaving seems to be an expression of the national identity of the kingdom of Cambodia and its subjects” (Dahles and Horst 2008,121). Yet the extent of fabrication is demonstrated by the fact that trade reports from 1450–1680 demonstrate that the Khmer people did not produce raw silk or export silk (Ishii, cited by Miwa 2005).

Economically, sector-wide silk projects have been established that demonstrate the importance given to revitalizing the long lost tradition of weaving. The International Trade Centre (ITC) founded by UNCTAD and the WTO in its Sectoral Silk Strategy for 2006 under a section titled ‘The Existing Situation’ states the following:

The Cambodian hand-woven silk industry is characterized by a strong skills base and a traditional heritage. In order to become competitive on an international level, however, improvements must be made in productivity, quality and design techniques and the supporting institutional structures. (ITC 2006, 5)

The report asserts that sericulture in Cambodia has officially “been revived” by the financial and technical assistance of the Agence Française du Développement (AFD). The traditional sector bias is evident in the report’s insistence on the possibilities of silk weaving’s incorporation into the national export-based economy, and the narrative of a lost art and livelihood strategy justifies its foreign funded and technical recovery. According to Bob Guthrie (2004) from the Rolex Institute, Kikuo Morimoto (a 2004 Rolex Award laureate) in the 1990s moved to Cambodia with aims of “resurrecting silk production as a model to help revitalize rural Cambodia” (Guthrie, 2004). Although in Cambodia traditional sericulture practices involved cultivating silkworms to produce ‘golden’ thread which would then be woven, Dahles and Horst (2008) point out that the tradition of weaving relied on cross border exchanges that suggested the Khmer tradition to have been dependent upon processes of local and international exchanges. The role of Vietnamese and Chinese Cambodians are significant to this process. Dahles and Horst argue that although the roots of the silk weaving industry in Cambodia can be dated back to the Great Angkor period, the origin of the tradition needs to be viewed in the context of Southeast Asian trade routes and France’s colonial policies. For instance, with the 1869 opening of the Suez Canal L’Agence Economique de L’Indochine became

interested in the prospects for silk cultivation in Cambodia. In 1926, French agronomists found that most of the Khmer population did not possess “the skills” to make silk yarn. Here the importing of mulberry planters from the Kwantung region in southern China and the Red River Delta in North Vietnam. The ethnic implications here are also vast. The silk industry’s revival has been predicated upon recovering a lost Khmer craft, and yet the productive roles of other ethnic groups are downplayed. Therefore the silk industry has become a marker for Khmer national, economic, cultural, and ethnic identity; in every way it functions to perpetuate a new and surprisingly monolithic Cambodia, from notions of the economy to notions of a Khmer identity.

Academic studies such as Dahles and Horst’s (2008) stress the cultural dimension inherent in development initiatives such as those of the nascent silk sector. Yet they only briefly mention gender as an identity also constructed in relation to Cambodia’s economic re-emergence. John ter Horst (2008) mentions that Zwart (2000) in her study of women traders in Phnom Penh markets visits this topic, yet still very few studies have been conducted that place the demographic change and the rise of female headed households after the Khmer Rouge in the larger context of the silk economy’s feminization. The feminization of this industry has not been problematized in relation to the larger market based strategies of national reconstruction and reconciliation. Exploring this aspect is crucial critically understanding the phenomenon of Cambodia’s ‘re-emergence’. Chapter 4 explores this dynamic and attempts to locate it within the larger discourse of identity formation in post-conflict Cambodia. It will again emphasize the power of cultural construction in relation to economic production, through the reassertion of traditional gender identities in the context of the liberalizing Cambodian nation. This is

intrinsically connected to the role women often play in periods of economic transition, with the use of female labor often constructing the productive foundations of the ‘new’ nation.

Conclusion

The silk industry demonstrates an aspect of development that involves the cultural production, and in specific, the creation of a traditional other that needs to be recovered, revitalized, and incorporated into the larger Self. Discursive manufacturing of identities function to further entrench power. Yet, as demonstrated in the case of Cambodia, the question of *who* exactly performs the constructing becomes confusing; attempting to examine this would be futile, as the Cambodian state, the international donor community, and civil society can be seen as operating within a dominant historically constructed paradigm, and neither can operate externally. To suggest that one group exerts more leverage over the other in constructing development agendas would deny the agency of the other. Yet, in spite of this, it is useful to emphasize the dual nature of civil society and NGOs; in spite of it functioning to reproduce larger cultural markers of Khmer identity, the NGO sector in Cambodia can potentially provide spaces for alternative identities to emerge, from within and external to mainstream constructions. In the silk industry, the Khmer Silk Villages is one such example, along with Kikuo Morimoto’s Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles. This unexplored side to development’s ‘dual-edged sword’ will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Locating Agency in the Development Discourse: Women and Spaces of Dissent in the Silk Sector

Introduction

Although tradition is a category imposed on an Other, opportunities involved in the act of reclaiming a tradition, whether ‘real’ or constructed, remain somewhat unexplored. The traditional Other as a category in Chapter 3 was demonstrated as a function of the larger Cambodian national economy. But it is vital not to underestimate the power of categories such as the ‘traditional’, and the possibilities for identity that it in fact may offer. The previous chapter established the basis for which to problematize development initiatives and their function within larger structures of cultural production and power. Although the traditional/modern binary and its functions can be applied to agendas of power, there are other aspects that still need to be explored. Although the NGO-led development sector often contributes to the larger processes of framing their targeted subjects, there are other spaces of agency that exist between the binaries of tradition and modernity. While these are not apparent in everyday literature on Cambodia and agency, they can nonetheless be brought into view by redefining approaches to agency. The possibility for realization of such spaces of agency become more concrete when looking at specific initiatives and how they function within the confines of the development discourses of the state and the donor community such as silk NGOs. By honing in to focus on a specific NGO-led initiative and its impacts on identity

formation, this chapter will explore an interesting aspect of the nascent silk economy, enabling broader conclusions to be reached on the nature of identity formation.

The Silk Sector and Women

The Cambodian silk economy is a vital case to explore that demonstrates the dual-edged sword of development, modernity, gender, and national identity. The significance of this form of rural-based production is that although it functions as another metaphor in the lexicon of modernization myths, it also demonstrates possibilities for agency. This is specific to the silk sector because it exists in the nexus where the realms of national production and NGO-led development initiatives intersect. An exploration of the national garment industry alone would not analyze post-conflict reconstruction in Cambodia in a manner that assesses the function of various NGOs within civil society—and neither would it fully question the reputation of widely acclaimed development initiatives as being empowering for Khmer women.

Cambodian Women's Agency in Academic Literature

Within Cambodia's post-conflict period, few scholars have explored this niche in economic and political development. Mona Lilja (2008) explores the agency exercised by Khmer women in Cambodia's post-reconstruction period; by focusing on Cambodia's female politicians, she explores women's agency as a function of political participation. Although Lilja (2008) deploys various approaches to empowerment and agency, exploring theoretical terrains of subversive forms of agency, to some her main focus on participation within the public spheres confines her analysis to the notion that political

acts are defined through public involvement and negotiating various identities within the public sphere, such as in villages and governments. This approach needs to be reworked in a manner that recognizes elements critical towards understanding agency. First, what constitutes public and private spheres is constructed to the extent of its definition being negotiable; thus, second, any theory that builds its assumptions on binaries such as the public/private dichotomy is flawed when applied to contexts such as Cambodia, in it being limited by an ‘objective’ universally accepted standard. This framework ignores how such categories intersect to create sites of negotiated agency. It is *here* where the silk economy –and paradoxical identities of development— meet, where the personal becomes political, and where identities reproduce themselves in a manner that is indicative of both agency and the constraints of power. The ‘NGO-ization’ of the silk economy, its relationship to national agendas, and its function in identity construction in post-conflict Cambodia needs to be critically evaluated by approaching the question of agency.

The Tourist Economy as a site of Agency

The silk sector suggests opportunities for agency that may not necessarily appear in academic literature that attempts to assess the nature of post-conflict Cambodia’s democratic re-emergence. This occurs because gender, which is a fundamental question in relation to agency, is a variable that is downplayed in most economic and political analyses. Another area that needs to be mentioned in relation to post-conflict emergence and agency is Cambodia’s tourist industry. Tim Winter (2007) emphasizes that “little attention has been given to either motivations and values of tourists from Asia, or the

broader, social, cultural, and political implications arising from this fast growing industry. (Winter 2007, 27)” Saskia Sassen (1991) and Zukin (1991) assert that there needs to be a better understanding of processes of how capital becomes embedded in cultural landscapes (Sassen 1991; Zukin, cited by Winter 2007). For instance, Zukin (1991) demonstrated how cultural value becomes an exchange commodity that becomes abstracted into market culture. Winter locates this narrative of the pre-eminence of Angkor civilization in the larger industry of Cambodia’s tourist economy.

In the mid 1990s, The International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of Angkor (ICC) developed a two-pronged approach to Cambodia’s economic recovery that linked both interests of cultural conservation and socioeconomic development (Winter 2007). The site where both these agendas converged was international tourism. The silk economy, like the promotion of temples such as Angkor Wat can be viewed from a similar perspective— symbolically it functions as a nexus for cultural conservation and socioeconomic development, and materially, silk tradition and its feminine counterparts become valued commodities. With the case of silk, the gendered nature of tourism production becomes apparent.

Sarah Kindon (2001) suggests that women are often the “producers” of tourism in Southeast Asia. As an important source of foreign exchange revenues, tourism often caters to government elites in their obsessions with modernization and economic growth. Yet Kindon more importantly contends,

There is no comprehensive view of the social, economic, cultural, environmental, and political issues, processes, and problems associated with tourism’s development in Southeast Asia, and when trying to systematically investigating women’s experiences, the picture is even more partial. (Kindon 2001, 74)

Thus the role women play in producing valuable commodities such as hospitality, handicrafts, sex, and silk for tourist economies is significant. The link with tourism and the production of national gender imageries is also important, as symbolism and imagery that cater to binaries that reinforce development agendas (Sen and Stevents, cited by Kindon 2001). Here binaries such as tradition/modernity and masculine/feminine enframe its subjects and control them. But even Kindon contends that with the development of tourist economies, women face ambiguous messages that are often contradictory, as they seek employment in the new spaces tourism creates. Such spaces allow for new meanings to be created around binaries of masculinity/femininity and modernity/tradition, where cultural meanings are reworked locally (Kindon 2001).

This reworking suggests a destabilizing of aspects of national tourist narratives. The informal sector is one space where national development agendas still do not fully manage to map the informal sector's subjects onto the narratives of national modernist development. Kindon (2001) provides examples in other locations in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia and the Philippines where the concentration of women's activities in informal sectors allows for a relative lack of integration into the larger national economy. This can be perceived as "marginalization" by some, but others contend that these "peripheral" or "threshold" subjectivities allows for the (re) negotiation of women's identities and activities (Ong and Peletz 1995; McIlwaine, cited by Kindon 2001). Certain activities that are classified as informal can allow for female tourism producers to "slip through" hegemonic classificatory systems that favor the Modern, Urban Self, and

attempt to incorporate the Traditional, Rural, Other.¹⁰ The Silk sector embodies this space in it arguably being a part of the national whole, the export economy.

Gender: Representations and Implications

Dahles and Horst's work on ethnic identity and the silk economy established a unique precedent towards approaching identity narratives and their negotiation in the context of women in rural Cambodia. Yet, although the majority of their research was based on women weavers and traders engaging in processes of sericulture, the question of gender was only visited briefly in the acknowledgement that the majority of weavers were the heads of their households (Dahles and Horst 2006, 120). The neglect of gender, like ethnicity, as an identity open to negotiation highlights the ambiguity of sub-narratives of national development in Cambodia.¹¹ The ability to negotiate gender identity, for women and men is very much determined by their individual patriarchal and cultural contexts. Within the context of Cambodia this needs to be taken into account especially when looking at the ways in which women negotiate agency. Women's ability to negotiate agency is as contingent on specific circumstances within their everyday existences as it is on the larger prevailing socio-historical culture. Lilja (2008) in her work on Cambodian woman politicians delves into this by asserting that women politicians are constantly engaging in processes of negotiation with their gender identities, such as strategically de-feminizing themselves and ascribing to the Cambodian

¹⁰ Kindon (2001) uses the term 'liminality' to describe the subjectivities of women in informal tourist production. She suggests that this position is central to the functioning of larger "mature" national development discourses and the tourist industry. In her work on female tourist producers she argues for the inclusion of this concept into academic approaches towards tourism and development in Southeast Asia.

¹¹ Sub-narrative as a term may suggest an implied inferiority, but in this case it is worth mentioning that this context, the term suggests identity aspects that are often strategically manipulated, and as narratives that de-center and subvert meta-narratives.

cultural ‘virtuous woman’ image when necessary. The relationship between these identities, the silk economy, and rural agency will be explored in greater depth towards the end of this chapter.

Silk: Alternative Epistemologies and Approaches

In Cambodia’s post-UNTAC period, NGOs established by the international donor community played a significant role in establishing the foundations of a pluralist state. As established in Chapter 2, the actual power of NGOs and other private civil society enterprises is contested. Besides a lack of resources and capital, according to Carolyn Hughes (2003) the relationship between international donors and their Cambodian extensions is frequently problematized. For instance, Cambodian human rights NGOs are known to feel the need to ‘compromise’ expectations of both donor governments and state interests; due to the lack of autonomy with funding, NGOs are in a constant state of supplication (Hughes 2003). Thus often the goals of foreign civil society are the establishment of Western, or European norms such as the human rights standards mentioned in the Universal Declaration. The impact of this approach encourages disciplinary, top-down, and technocratic methods of cultivating democratic values. This often results in a gap between the NGO movement and their rural ‘beneficiaries’ (Hughes 2003). What obviously lacks is a willingness to operate from within or *negotiate* with Cambodian cultural norms. This is evident in the assumption that Khmer culture is not inherently democratic (or that more ‘indigenous’ Khmer democratic values and human rights standards were completely ‘erased’ by the Khmer Rouge), and that democracy needs to be fostered through promoting a set of imported values and norms, such as

accountability, good governance, and transparency. However, the NGO initiatives linked to silk are more indicative of what Hughes terms as “alternative approaches” to NGO work (Hughes 2003, 168).¹² Silk NGOs can be perceived as alternative approaches to rural development—in their abilities to operate strategically from within frameworks of Khmer culture.

William Collins (1998), in his analysis of the power of spiritual and moral epistemologies asserts that village temple committees play a role counter to the influence of the secular state and its officials. *Wat* committees represent a form of civil society that in Cambodia corresponds to the village’s local political economies (Collins, cited by Jacobsen 2008). Committees would frame their actions through Khmer morals and Buddhist values. Taking a similar approach, alternative civil society approaches by NGOs are rare, but can potentially work within a community’s local epistemologies. The silk economy is one such example—in reaffirming the necessity for a revival of craft of silk weaving through sericulture, it operates from within Khmer cultural paradigms associated with Khmer values. Yet on the level of identity construction, it also functions as a space for alternative assertions of identity that negotiate and recombine both the traditional and modern, the public and the private, and expectations of appropriate femininity.

¹² For instance, Hughes cites the *Dhammayietra* peace march as an alternative approach towards community development. As a march that demanded an end to ongoing the civil war at the time, it framed its demands using Buddhist values of peace and reconciliation. The Cambodia Centre for Peace and Development is another example that Hughes cites, as a method of framing Cambodian issues within a Buddhist-inspired moral sphere. Both these initiatives are indicative of approaches to community development that seek to work from within Cambodian cultural frameworks.

Sericulture

As an agricultural process, sericulture has lately been proposed by a variety of development agencies, donor governments, and local governments as an activity that can alleviate poverty.¹³ It has conventionally functioned as a small-scale enterprise or cottage industry that allows people to work from within their communities or homes, to produce for national export-markets. In order to understand the implications of this process in Cambodia, the practice needs to first be understood technically as a form of rural-based cultivation— and then historically—to relate the process to more theoretical issues surrounding its historical ‘revival’.

According to the ITC silk sector strategy published in 2006, locally based or ‘indigenous’ processes of sericulture today in Cambodia involve the production of Khmer golden thread. Yet currently Cambodia is reliant upon imports of thread mostly from Thailand and Vietnam. The publication asserts, “Khmer golden silk is in demand for high value, niche products, and so there is the potential to significantly increase sericulture production” (ITC 2004, 11). The shortage of Khmer yarn thus offers an opportunity for independent weavers’ associations to produce quality standard yarn. The processes of silk manufacture involve a division of labor that incorporates a variety of ‘middlemen’ (and women, as we shall see) in the production chain of thread producers, weavers, and buyers. NGOs are responsible for the production and manufacturing of silk handicrafts, thus the process of sericulture is intrinsically connected to the process of Khmer textile

¹³ International organizations like the FAO and the UNDP have worked to assist over 20 countries with training programs for the development of sericulture. The Royal Government of Cambodia has also acknowledged the viability of sericulture as a means to alleviate poverty. ECOSORN (Economic Social Relaunch of Northwest Provinces, part of the RGC’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries) in a 2007 publication asserted that sericulture offers opportunities for young “vulnerable” women to become economically self-sufficient.

weaving and manufacturing. Both the revival of sericulture and Khmer traditional textiles are connected by the work of civil society and NGOs.

Until 1930, many farmers in the provinces of Takeo, Kampot, and Kompong Speu based their livelihoods partially or entirely on the cultivation of mulberry trees, producing silk yarn for personal consumption and to sell in local markets. After the Khmer Rouge regime only 15 hectares of mulberry trees were left as a result of compulsory agricultural policies (ITC 2004). Knowledge of this justifies conclusions that the Khmer Rouge ‘erased’ the skill of sericulture and all knowledge forms associated with it. This historical assumption allows for narratives of its restoration to be constructed that are connected to agendas of integrating economic activities of rural ‘peripheries’ into national export production. In 2002, the Agence Française du Développement (AFD) and its operative agency *Projet d’Appui au Secteur de la Soie (PASS)* became involved in providing technical and financial assistance to re-introduce the activity of sericulture in the villages of *Beantey Meanchey* and *Oddar Meanchey* (ITC 2004). Technical assistance comprised of training to farmers in planting, arboriculture, irrigation, rearing silk worms, cocoon processing, and spinning. PASS later went on to help establish the local association, *Khmer Silk Villages*, which included 800 weavers in an effort to market golden yarn produced in village provinces (ITC 2004).

Thus the ITC silk sector strategy demonstrates the agency-led focus of civil society and NGOs to engage in an effort that unites both producers and weavers of Khmer Golden Silk to contribute to the revival of a ‘lost’ tradition—yet it also demonstrates another side to development initiatives, which is the potential to develop Cambodia’s exports in a manner that is both “bottom-up” and self-sustaining. The

implications of this process are both discursive and practical. Here traditions are co-opted for purposes of modernity; while bearing in mind that the extent of their construction as Khmer traditions is questionable—what becomes relevant, however, is the negotiability of this recovery narrative, and the flexibility that notions of Khmer tradition can have.

Christine Su (2005) asserts in her study of Khmer identity, “ a thoughtful interpretation of Cambodian identity sees it as a site of constant contention and creation...” (Su 2005, 292). Thus although narratives of (re) constructing tradition are prevalent in maintaining power, such conventions are binding only to an extent. Very much also depends on how they are interpreted and reconstituted. This position of subjectivity is where the potential exists for the selective maneuvering of multiple identities. This idea will be approached by looking at the silk sector’s NGO-led developmental bodies such as the IKTT, their ideologies, and their praxis within a restoration narrative of a misplaced Khmer cultural identity.

Case: Morimoto’s IKTT

In December 2003 at the town of Siem Reap, Cambodia, the Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles (IKTT) and the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS) gathered for their first public Exhibition and Seminar project to introduce Cambodians and foreign visitors to the processes of weaving and dyeing in textile production—and its significance as a marker of Khmer culture. Speakers such as Kikuo Morimoto from IKTT and Philippe Peycam from CKS opened the workshop, and it entailed a diverse body of lectures, such as those from two students attending bachelors programs at Cambodia’s official arts conservatory the Royal University of Fine arts (RUFA). The two-day educational seminar

also included an exhibition of 200 samples of old Cambodian textiles that had been collected for preservation and reproduction. The exposition functioned to inform the general Cambodian public of the historical importance of textile traditions, allowing for “an opportunity for Cambodian and international scholars to reflect on the importance and value of the textile tradition in Cambodia” (Morimoto *et al.* 2003). Taking a closer look, however, entails understanding the ideological undercurrents in this meeting. The importance of knowledge and its dissemination is extremely apparent. In this case, the fact that the Cambodian public had to be informed of prior existing forms of cultural and artistic knowledge is indicative of a larger function of reviving traditions.

Acknowledging the nationalist habit of constructing traditions to unify people, there exist less explored implications of a Khmer cultural identity that supposedly needs to first be recovered and then disseminated back to people who have historically identified with it. The IKTT and CKS workshop is indicative of a kind of knowledge production that even NGOs must engage with in order to operate. This ability to assume an authority over recovering knowledge also suggests the agency that NGOs possess in being able to maneuver around accepted larger narratives of modernity, cultural tradition, and development. In being able to function as “epistemic communities” (Haas and Adler 1992, 27), silk sector NGOs such as IKTT are able to exert an influence over the interests of the state that in the case of Cambodia is ignored by academic accounts such as those of David P. Chandler (1998), and Caroline Hughes (2003). These communities are knowledge-based experts that automatically possess the authority over certain policy-specific forms of information. Haas and Adler (1992) assert that these communities are

research intensive and are able to shape the perceptions of both governments and the principles of community members.

Although it is frequently argued that NGOs in Cambodia are often suppressed by the state in exerting their agency, the question of silk perhaps suggests that such pathologization of NGOs in Cambodia needs to be examined more closely and reworked. The extent to which direct government policy is affected by the silk NGOs calls for a comprehensive study, as it difficult to quantify given the fluidity of state-civil society-donor relationships. In the realm of cultural production, however, NGOs as epistemic communities clearly operate as authorities; although government involvement in the NGO sector exists, Cambodian silk NGOs have reached a consensus on the value of textile traditions and their revitalization through a variety of individuals and groups with research authority specific enough to distance themselves from state policy and research. This distance may seem intangible, yet it is not irrelevant; its significance is further demonstrated by the space that this relative autonomy provides to the assertions of identity formations that subvert more mainstream constructions.

Local Epistemologies and Agency

Black Feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) suggests the power of alternative epistemologies, in being able to subvert a dominant discourse and its knowledge claims. “An alternative epistemology challenges all certified knowledge and opens up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth” (Collins 1990, 216). The ability to operate within frameworks of tradition is exceptionally important when considering the epistemic

importance of the power to disseminate information, and also the importance cultural frameworks provide for spaces for agency. This is important to recognize because prominent identity theorists suggest that traditions are often invented for the function of consolidating a national identity (Chatterjee 1986). However, when examining agency in rural Cambodia, the potential for alternative or local epistemologies to provide spaces for agency is often overlooked. Joakim Öjendal and Kim Sedara (2006) depart from pessimistic approaches to agency in rural Cambodia in suggesting the growth of agency in rural areas comes about as a result of the last decade's political changes.¹⁴ They argue that there are several themes that recur in scholarly approaches to post-conflict development and identity formation in Cambodia: “exercise of power, social hierarchies, relational rigidity, patriarchal dominance, peasant docility, distance between the state and the people, a lack of general trust and social fragmentation” (Öjendal and Sedara 2006, 3). Within academia, these are essentialist attributes accorded to Cambodia today, stemming from a monolithic perspective of a culturally defined history. This is connected to a narration of Cambodian history shaped in part by the devastation that occurred during the Khmer Rouge and the civil war periods. Öjendal and Sedara define this essentialist understanding of culture, politics, and agency as a “recently invented category of ‘post-conflict’ countries” (Öjendal and Sedara 2006, 3). Yet again, they assert that frameworks for locally defined epistemologies of politics and agency are definitely emerging, but are still perceived as peripheral. Their approach to agency is defined by the ability of actors within a dominant institutional and cultural framework to “act against their culture,” contesting notions that culture is fixed, and cannot change. Culture is

¹⁴ Öjendal and Sedara (2006) argue that agency has been neglected in most studies of rural change in Cambodia.

embedded and reproduced from within institutional frameworks. In the Cambodian case, the ability to assert values stemming from Buddhist and Khmer traditions—in the face of a modernizing and increasingly ‘rationalized’ Khmer culture—demonstrates an unrecognized form of local agency. The silk NGOs are also a good example of this. They are distinct from other CNGOs in their abilities to work from within the frameworks of Khmer cultural identities. Sericulture is vital example of this strategic agency, in that the process itself is linked to a narrative of Khmer tradition associated with a cultural history that dates back to the Angkor era. Regardless of whether this belief is ‘real’ or mythical, today there is proof of it functioning as an initiative dependent upon local epistemologies, or frameworks of knowledge: those of Khmer people, especially women.

Cambodia’s Silk Grandmothers

The PBS frontline series documentary ‘Cambodia: The Silk Grandmothers’ (2007) by Emily Taguchi works to demonstrate the contemporary significance of the process of restoring traditional art forms, sericulture and weaving. Examining the implications of the film help reach conclusions on the cultural and practical function that silk initiatives possess. Kikuo Morimoto, who currently heads the Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles, in 1980 worked at the refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border, and worked at the weaving school there. Morimoto ended up in Cambodia in 1994, with UNESCO (the United Nation’s cultural arm) on a mission to *recover the lost* weavers of Cambodia. This process involved surveying villages extensively to find out whether and where the craft still existed. On finding several villages where weaving was a dominant activity, Morimoto’s task involved commissioning weavers to recreate and

restore traditional Khmer patterns based on fabric swatches he had collected. What is important to note here is that Morimoto asserts that neither Cambodian NGOs nor the government were aware of whether the craft still existed; the only people able to recreate the ancient swatches happened to be older women whom Morimoto today refers to as “silk grandmothers” (Taguchi 2007).

Six women from this (apparently nameless) village 50 kilometers from Cambodia’s capital, Phnom Penh, possessed the knowledge of silkworm cultivation and spinning. Predominantly labeled as a tradition, silk cultivation and weaving has now become a commodity; what may have been valued in Cambodian societies in the past is now instilled with a more commonly recognized form of value: monetary value. As a commodity with public value, it is a vital link within the production chain of Cambodia’s textile and tourist economies. This source of knowledge survived the Khmer Rouge period and is now being reproduced and transferred intragenerationally with the work of Morimoto, the silk grandmothers, young female weavers, and the IKTT. Although some may describe this as an act of appropriation, simply labeling it such does not do justice to aspects that are less acknowledged, but as important towards an understanding of identities and agency.

The Others Negotiated: Gender and Tradition

Lilja (2008) asserts that in Cambodia the likelihood of redefining notions of femininity is higher than when attempting to redefine masculinities. This can be linked to the increasing need for women to fill voids in the labor force and other institutional

structures, given the male to female ratio in Cambodia after the war.¹⁵ A redefinition of femininity, and hence a change in status, can stem from “endowing new, interesting and important domains (power bases) for femininity and associating them with the female gender” (Lilja 2008, 172). This is important to consider when examining the agency potential of alternative initiatives such as the revival of sericulture and silk weaving; obtaining access to technologies and skills in the face of a modernizing economy is a vital tactic towards negotiating power relations, however what can be more valuable in certain contexts is when certain ‘new’ knowledge appears and is reified under what is considered to be a ‘female’ monopoly (Lilja, 2008). A central tenet of IKTT’s philosophy involves ensuring the intra-generational transmission of the skills of sericulture and silk weaving, with young women learning from the silk grandmothers (Taguchi, 2007). Not only do the silk grandmothers mentor the generations below them at the 400 people collective, they are also actively involved with every step of production. Thus a new knowledge emerging that is increasingly being recognized by the Cambodian state, but such skills that are increasingly becoming a vital source of textile and tourist industry revenues can be seen as becoming monopolized by women. This suggests that there exist untapped opportunities for women to re-construct notions of femininity in a manner that gains leverage from conventionally underappreciated, but increasingly relevant epistemologies.

A connection that has not been made in this specific context is the agency involved in being able to reconcile the pressures of a modernizing nation with local

¹⁵ Women head twenty percent of Cambodian rural households (Ledgerwood, 2006). For every 88 men, there are 100 women, and this gender ratio is more skewed in rural areas compared to urban areas.

practices and values.¹⁶ The IKTT's initiative involving the participation of the silk grandmothers and young women aspiring to learn the craft is indicative of this. First, can this form of gender-related agency be defined? Being able to articulate it would make it seem more concrete. Judith Butler (1999) using the term "performativity," emphasizes that gender, as an identity *is a series of acts*. In suggesting that gender is an act as opposed to a mere construct, she suggests that definitions of gender roles can be contested through behaviors and actions that aren't typically constitutive of it. It is at this site where physical actions defy conventions, where contesting them can "shake the cultural order" (Lilja, 2008). Lilja applies this concept to her study of Cambodian women politicians, and suggests that "changing the content of the identity position without crossing the borders of what women can do, and making legitimate and intelligible the new performance of the female identity within the discourses and logic of the expected femininity" (Lilja 2008, 118). Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity is also very important to acknowledge as a framework from which to approach the silk economy and its feminization.

To be Khmer

Lilja (2008) suggests that the concept of hybridity is based on the idea of Fairclough (1992), that discourses construct the way we make sense of the world around us, but they also manifest in ways that can be creative. The transformative potential of discourses is very important to acknowledge here, as a variety of discourses intersect to

¹⁶ The suggestion that in many industrializing post-war societies women become the bearers of tradition is underestimated, and needs to be connected to the notion of women also being dominant among those mobilized for causes of export-production and global capitalism. Thankfully, certain scholarly accounts such as that of Cynthia Enloe do make this connection.

manufacture perceived ‘truths’. In the case of Cambodia and the silk economy, for instance, notions of what constitutes modernity, tradition, or femininity to Cambodians is a product of a variety of intersecting discourses. The way Cambodian women act in relation to their families and the state is also constitutive of intersecting discourses of the state and traditions on ‘Khmer-ness’. Such intersectionality lends Khmer identity an aspect of flexibility that remains unnoticed; Su (2005) suggests that “to be Cambodian is to be in process: changeable and changing, flexible, and transgressive, while not altogether indistinguishable nor indefinite” (Su 2005, 292). This notion is further enhanced by the identity implications of being a Cambodian or Khmer woman.

To Be a Khmer Woman: Hybridity and Silk

The power of discourse lies in its ability to create new truths, or “hybrid” truths, that can often function as forms of resistance (Lilja 2008, 125). Within postcolonial theory, this concept transcends onto the “subaltern” being able to negotiate spaces of agency through hybridizing different discourses to create truths that are more empowering to them in the context of their everyday realities. These woven discourses become new forms of reasoning and performance that oppose conventional discourses. To apply this to the case of the Silk Grandmothers, the concepts of performativity and hybridity can be applied to Ledgerwood’s (1992) analysis of the status of women in rural Cambodia. Here her notion of what constitutes the “good Khmer woman” is particularly insightful, as it can be applied to the case of the re-emerging rural silk sector, in that it is reconciled with the practices of export production. Ledgerwood (1996) asserts that there exists a contradiction between the expectations for Khmer women on one hand to be

strong matriarchs, and on the other hand to be ‘virtuous women’. Both of these ideals are considered to be ‘traditional’ expectations of Khmer women. These expectations were exacerbated and intensified in aftermath of the civil war (Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002). Hybridity occurs when Khmer gender ideals are used in a variety of situations to justify new patterns of behavior (Ledgerwood 1996).

Su (2005) asserts “Khmer women are described as exemplars of beauty, strength, and virtue, as reflected in the graceful Apsara figures sculpted both tangibly in the glorious Angkor monuments and symbolically in the minds of Khmer through folktales and legends” (Su 2005, 281). Cambodian culture has extensively embedded its moral value systems in the acts of Khmer women. Khmer cultural beliefs about women can be rooted in the *Cchab Srey*, a text informing Cambodians on the codes of ‘proper’ behavior for women. The text describes the *srey krup leak* or the unmarried-young-woman as vulnerable, shy, ignorant, and industrious; she is devoted to her parents, and stays at home with the family. She is soft-spoken, silent, devoted, and brings honor to her family (Ledgerwood 1990). Annuska Derks (2005) for her PhD dissertation interviewed several young Cambodian women from different villages who work in the factories of Phnom Penh, demonstrating the contemporary significance of the *Cchab Srey*. Pressures of modernity further intensify these expectations as women increasingly leave their homes to work at factories in cities (Derks 2005).

Most western donors and normative development agencies stress the importance of empowering women.¹⁷ Yet they are often quick to assume that this process involves the active participation of women in the public sphere, or recognized forms of political

¹⁷ Women in Development and Gender and Development frameworks embody western development agency approaches to “third world women”.

activity that demonstrate an active sense of agency. This approach characterizes liberal Western feminist philosophies of emancipation, which are rooted in the participation of *individuals* in the *public sphere*. More covert forms of agency, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty's approach, suggests that messianic approaches towards integrating women into male-dominated public spheres undermines assertions of agency that exist more subversively. Of course, this assertion is not for the sake of discouraging women's active participation in public life, but rather it contests approaches that negate this possibility. The approaches of silk NGOs that function like the IKTT suggests that there exist several spaces of agency in rural Cambodia that go unrecognized, which are linked to the "performance of tradition" that silk weaving provides (Dahles and Horst 2006).

Performing Tradition: 'Women's Work' and Agency

First, by being able to perform an activity that is considered to be a Khmer art dating back to the 7th century of Angkor, women at silk villages are able to perform several identities, negotiating them when convenient, thereby engaging in the process of hybridity. In Cambodia, weaving has traditionally been considered to be "women's work" passed down from one generation of women to the next, as indicated by Morimoto in his interviews with Emily Taguchi on PBS. The association of silk weaving and cultivation with 'women's work' can be connected to the Chinese influence on the art. In particular it dates back to the origins of sericulture in China in 2500 BC, when Empress Si-Ling-Chi reared silkworms to produce silk fibers. This 'secret' had been kept from the rest of the world for 4,000 years in order for China to maintain its monopoly over the silk industry (Sonthisombat and Speakman 2004). From this period onwards, technologies

were exported to other parts of the world. The mythical significance of the craft being ‘discovered’ by a woman, combined with activities of sericulture and weaving being performed in the ‘private’ sphere or home has contributed to the association of weaving and sericulture as female-oriented tasks. This association was further strengthened by China during its revolution nationalizing its silk industries and encouraging more female participation in silk factories to increase national economic production. Elson and Pearson (1981) assert that a major reason why women make up the bulk of factory workers in developing countries is due essentialist notions of women possessing more “nimble” fingers than men, thus possessing the skills to perform detail-oriented tasks.

Elson and Pearson also suggest that associations of women training their daughters and other female kin to perform socially conditioned “women’s roles” also condition this perception. They give examples of sewing, which is performed in the household, conditioning young girls with dexterity at an early age (Pearson and Elson 1981). These “traditional skills” find their modern equivalent in export production initiatives. These “knowledge-intensive processes” establish a technological base for export-industries in developing countries, such as electronics manufacturing. Yet, in spite of them being knowledge intensive, they “call for very little modern knowledge, and are highly labor intensive. (Elson and Pearson 1981, 88)” The Cambodian garment industry is increasingly becoming feminized. Many of the women workers are migrants from rural villages, unmarried, who violate traditional Khmer codes of honor and conduct for women, and as a result face stigmatization. The bright lights of the city do not always provide emancipation for women from rural villages, as many women face exploitation and violence in cities as low-paid migrant workers. Also, because as migrants they return

home periodically, they can be chastised as village communities become suspicious of their activities in the city. Although they are a part of the larger export- based silk economy, silk sector initiatives function as spaces for which women do not necessarily have to face rigid binaries of being urban vs. rural or proper vs. improper. They are able to negotiate these boundaries and, in doing so, exert their agency.

In engaging in sericulture as a viable livelihood strategy, women do not necessarily have to leave their homes in a manner that blatantly violates Khmer cultural codes. But to an extent, they can also function outside traditionally prescribed women's roles by leaving the private sphere of their homes to work and earn an income for themselves and their families. At silk villages they can exert more control over the spending of their incomes, as opposed to staying at home and working (cite). As they break these various images of 'virtue,' it can be argued that they are simultaneously legitimized by engaging in a 'female' and 'traditional' activity that does not necessarily have to defy village expectations. In communities that are predominantly rural based, it is considered more acceptable for young women to remain in their villages than leaving to work in the factories of Phnom Penh. For instance, Derks (2005) asserts that migrant women from rural villages who work in Phnom Penh are often stigmatized for embracing the 'modern' identities associated with living in a city. These have traditionally been associated with the wanton values living in a city is presumed to breed, such as engaging in sexual activity and frivolous spending.¹⁸

Women at silk villages such as the IKTT evade the stigmas of working in Phnom Penh, while still being able to earn an income. This demonstrates the ability of women

¹⁸ Derks (2005) notes that in December 2000, Prime Minister Hun Sen 'warned' of the erosion of Khmer cultural values and identity, attributing it partially to women wearing tight and short skirts on television and in public, and demanding a "return to modesty".

silk workers to negotiate identities of modernity and tradition, through predominantly operating from within dominant frameworks. Trudy Jacobsen (2008) asserts, “it is here that we should look for the empowerment of women in Cambodia, in a culturally context-specific locale rather than a hybrid of interpretation of misogynist perspectives foisted upon Cambodian culture by foreigners for over a millennium” (Jacobsen 2008, 289). Although she asserts that a Cambodian culture based on past glories of the Angkor period and its ‘tradition’ was a colonial construction, and that today it is perpetuated for the institutionalization of a regime that exerts control over the rights and interests of women, tradition cannot be discarded entirely as it, too, is a vehicle for which multiple interpretations can exist, thereby providing spaces for negotiating identities.

Conclusion

Ledgerwood (1990) in her research investigated the importance of the female gender identity and its impacts on Khmer identity. Though her work focused on Khmer diasporic women, she asserts that a fundamental tenet prevailed even among Khmer women abroad: the role of the ‘virtuous woman’ (Ledgerwood 1990). With the opening up of markets and liberalization in the post-war period, any threats to patriarchal beliefs deeply rooted in village kinship structures is often perceived by communities as a threat to Khmer identity. But as demonstrated by the case of silk, there are spaces where identities are negotiated. The NGO-led silk sector, and its ability to work within Khmer cultural frameworks is thus a vital part of the growth of the larger textile economy, contributing to Cambodia’s export led economic re-emergence. How can this be connected to the larger political economy of feminized production, and how can

understanding agency enhance prospects for future academic analysis? Chapter 5 will conclude by drawing parallels with similar contexts in which women have been the markers of national identity, and strategic bearers of tradition.

Conclusion

Problematizing Post-Conflict Approaches to Identity in Cambodia

Problematizing Approaches to ‘Re-Emergence’

This analysis attempted to situate Cambodia’s post-conflict development agendas within the larger political economy of cultural production and gender roles. By examining various motivations for cultural production in a post-conflict society such as Cambodia, it promulgates a variety of implications on the field of post-conflict and political studies. Most importantly, it suggests that the very notion of Cambodia’s ‘re-emergence’ after the Khmer Rouge genocide and the civil war need to be problematized, in how it is discursively constructed, and how it politically functions in regard to questions of identity. Identities are often impacted by, or deployed in agendas of economic growth and modernization. Academic approaches to Cambodia’s post-conflict identity focus on pathological assertions of Cambodia’s inability to democratize. Few studies locate pockets of agency within hegemonic state and international structures.

Agency Negated and Negotiated

Locating agency is vital to assess comprehensively Cambodian identities and the ways in which they manifest historically and locally. This is also important because it offers alternative insights that counter standard-narrative approaches towards assessing post-conflict prospects and trajectories, in a manner that does not directly cater to the strategic agendas of development planners, their institutions, and the governments that fund them. Academics and policymakers make this mistake by too often falling into

comfortable patterns of concluding that Cambodian political life on the ground is factious and marginalized; Cambodian politics in both the cities and countryside fail to move beyond conflicts over “fundamentals”, political life is predominantly confined to analyses of political participation in public spheres, and agency is measured through what is assumed to be concrete and visible. In contrast, this analysis attempted to demonstrate that recently spheres have emerged within dominant approaches and narratives of development. These spaces, and their abilities to offer possibilities for identities to be contested and re-worked are often negated in political analyses of post-conflict Cambodia. Kheang Un’s (2006) analysis of Cambodia’s prospects for democratic consolidation serves as a prime example of such negation, through a pathological approach to democracy in Cambodia, biased against less acknowledged forms of agency and participation.

The sober reality perhaps is that civil society cannot really contribute substantially to democratic consolidation until Cambodia has a larger urban, educated population, a larger middle class, and more experience with the idea of non-political “secondary associations” to build up “social trust” and to generate “norms of reciprocity” that deviate from standard patronage networks. (Un 2006, 245)

What is important to gauge from this is that Un believes that a larger urban middle class that is ‘educated’ is necessary to challenge clientalistic and patrimonial elite networks of political power. Such an approach suggests that substantial economic reform needs to be made, that will somehow transform 80 percent of Cambodia’s rural population into urban, formally educated individuals. The role of people at the grassroots is undermined in this assumption. This approach to development is also inherent in the World Bank’s ‘good governance’ strategies and policy papers such as ‘Good Governance from the Ground Up’, which specifies the role of women in promoting institutional transparency

and accountability in the government and in civil society. The need for transparency and accountability asserts a political identity that undermines the relationships existing that negotiate meanings of democracy within local frameworks.

Locating Agency

The existence of sites of agency is demonstrated by examining the NGO-led silk sector. Yet even the silk sector, as a site for identity-contestation needs to be placed into the larger context of traditions being constructed or invented for national goals. And the connection between the silk sector and a “national” identity needs to be questioned to successfully conclude this analysis. It must be mentioned, however, asserting that women have agency does not attempt to excuse oppressive institutional and patriarchal structures currently in place in Cambodian society. Patriarchal structures based on kinship exist at a village level that restrict women’s movement; in cities women face discrimination in exploitative informal work arrangements, and formally women’s participation in activities such as party-based politics and government is limited to women having to increasingly assert their positions in male dominated spaces.

Lilja (2008) manages to address this issue constructively by acknowledging it and then moving towards analyses of power. This only suggests that future academic and policy-based analyses of women in post-conflict development contexts need to incorporate similar dimensions that are culturally relevant, in a way that acknowledges the complexity of issues on discursive and practical levels, and that capital intensive technical fixes may not be effective solutions. Academic approaches to Cambodian history such as that of David P. Chandler acknowledge the various layers that make up

the fabric of contemporary Cambodian politics. Yet a gender dimension in these accounts is still lacking. A gender sensitive lens is also vital towards understanding the complexities of post-conflict development and modernization; as the case of Cambodia demonstrates along with numerous other examples, women are increasingly the force behind economic growth, though their labor and their roles in discursively constructing imaginings of the nation and its value systems.

Although the discursive framing evident in Cambodia's economic re-emergence is very much indicative of Hobbes' idea of inventing tradition, and Benedict Anderson's idea of the cultural realm reinforcing communal imaginings, there are counter approaches which may be as relevant to the Cambodian case. Andreas Huyssen (2003) asserts that during times of national crises, a return towards "a culture of memory" occurs (35). He defines this as the practice of resorting to concepts and ideas of the past and its traditions. Although it is evident that there is a retreat into the past glories of Angkor, the narrative that has recently become more dominant is that of the Khmer Rouge genocide. "Thanatourism" (Seaton, cited by Winter 2006) or "grief-tourism" is a new upcoming phenomenon, and according to Winter (2006) it is increasingly a subject of scholarly attention. The Tuol Sleng Museum (S-21) and the Killing Fields are destinations that any respectable tourist would not fail to miss. Partly, the appeal of genocide-tourism comes from the thrill of imminent danger that is widely publicized (e.g. 'Danger: Landmines!' t-shirts sold at a local market in Phnom Penh).

Winter (2006) declares that although such tourism is a vital source of Cambodian revenue, assertions like the one that claims the Khmer Rouge erased Cambodia's very social fabric construct a very monolithic representation of Cambodian identity in

suggesting that between Angkor and the genocide (rhetorically, the ‘peak’ and ‘end’ of Cambodian civilization) the culture and histories between those periods was inconsequential. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) assert that the phenomenon of consuming tradition exemplifies tradition being (re) invented for the sake of modern nationalist agendas. Heritage crafts or “folk-crafts” are reinvented to reinforce the identity of more “modern” means of production, indicative of the need for the construction of tradition to relationally reaffirm a modernizing Cambodian identity. Yet the historical function of silk, relative to other “folk-crafts” is much more complex as it has historically functioned as a local means of subsistence. The monolithic approach to culture can be connected to a one-dimensional approach to political analysis mentioned earlier. Both the ideological and cultural realms are intrinsically connected to and reinforce each other; in this instance, a liberal ideological approach to political analysis is reinforced by the discursive constructions of the cultural realm.

Cultural Memory

Thus, the NGO-led silk sector cannot be written off as solely functioning as a (re)invention of tradition for a nationalist agenda, as it must be understood also as a site for identities being contested. Yet, Huyssen (2003) asserts that cultural memory can serve often to counter state-sanctioned narratives of history. Hesford and Diedrich (2008) assert that cultural memory can also serve to strengthen spheres within emerging civil society, for ,“as ‘unofficial history’ cultural memory can “operate as an effective counter narrative to state sanctioned narratives and retreat into an ‘ideology of tradition’” (7). Thus a return to the past may not simply suggest the co-optation of tradition, but in light

of an increasingly monolithically represented Cambodia, it can also imply a disruption of increasingly rationalized social and political life (Hesford and Diedrich 2008). Although the uses of tradition such as Khmer silk weaving can even in this context be perceived as another process of framing and constructing identities for larger economic processes, their assertion is especially insightful as it lends it a unique perspective. In light of this assertion, Chandra Mohanty's term "feminist temporalities of struggle" suggests that in specific contexts, women's struggles can also be viewed in relation to an evocation of cultural memory, as "one of the ways to counter this delimitation of space in the present ... is to deploy cultural memories as (temporal) disruptions of the present" (Hesford and Diedrich 2008, 8). The inter-generational transmission of alternative epistemologies involved in performing the craft of sericulture and weaving can be seen as reinforcing Mohanty's point.

The Recent Khmer Rouge Trials and The Implications of Othering

With the Khmer Rouge trials finally being kicked into session this year with the trial of prison warden Comrade Duch (originally named Kaing Guek Eave), it warrants some constructive criticism.¹⁹ It is important to understand the implications of a historical pattern evident in Cambodia, self-exoticism, or Othering (Hinton 2005). This concept is especially significant as it continues to be reproduced even in 'modern' notions of what it means to be Cambodian. The notion of retribution is often central to the pursuit of justice in post-war situations, such as trying perpetrators of war crimes. Yet putting perpetrators of genocide to justice through a lengthy trial is really as effective as working to

¹⁹ This year in Phnom Penh, the long awaited UN-backed trial was finally opened on Feb 17th 2009 since the establishment of the tribunal in 2007. According to the BBC, five main leaders are due in court for trial, however proceedings for four of them are not set to begin until 2010.

“dismantle the master’s house,” using the “master’s tools” (Lorde, 1984). Incarcerating war criminals may allow victims a piece of justice, but does nothing to confront the discursive notions that allow holocausts to occur and be reified. Such ontological constructs are based on the binaries examined in Ch 3, which during the Khmer Rouge period were used to consolidate a basis for support through relationally defining the Other, which was anyone who did not fit Pol Pot’s vision of the ‘pure’ Khmer. Such orientalism defined the Khmer Self as being distinct from the evil Other (who were mainly Thais, Vietnamese, Cham, and Chinese people).

Although this risks over-simplification, these notions comprise the basis for which acts of mass genocide to some are made to seem necessary, rational, and even appealing (Hinton 2005). This analysis demonstrated that this pervasive tendency is even reincarnated in contemporary politics and development initiatives, such as rural development programs. Therefore, a successful tribunal that would truly bring justice to Cambodians, or rather, *active* justice (versus justice as a *passive* entity accorded to deserving parties) would have to include possibilities for dialog that locates the very discursive, intangible, un-named processes that lead to such acts being reified in the first place. This would allow for Cambodians, and non-Cambodians, to move beyond the seemingly static “Shadow of Genocide”—and into a future of critical and active engagement, negotiation, and participation.

Conclusion

This analysis therefore suggests that the silk economy, an integral aspect to the discourse of re-emergence, fits the dual-edged sword that development initiatives tend to embody; it problematizes a static construction of Cambodian post-conflict identity in suggesting its power to influence nationalist agendas of identity construction, while also providing a site for narratives that counter or subvert other dominant constructions. The discourse of recovery is vital both to problematize yet also to incorporate into avenues of further post-conflict, multidimensional scholarship on Cambodia.

The identity theorists mentioned in Chapter 1 gave a framework for the ways in which identity is approached in the academy. Chapter 2 suggested the link between various nationalisms, how they have been incorporated into reinforcing hegemonic relations of the state and society. Chapter 3 demonstrated that economic nationalism in Cambodia involves the specific processes of constructing a disciplinary framework that maps out its objects and its subjects. The processes of consolidating a monolithic Khmer identity are historically rooted, stemming from periods of “official nationalisms” and carrying over onto the rise of the development agenda. Thus nationalism and economic development are both connected by similar processes that function to maintain existing relationships of power. Yet as demonstrated by Chapter 4, the analysis aimed to push this connection further by also examining sites of contestation within meta-narratives of the national-Self and the constructed Other, where agency related discourses remain underemphasized. Thus further reflexive-analyses of economic narratives in post-conflict

contexts would need comprehensively to take into account questions of power, spatial discipline, and agency.

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