

CHAPTER THREE

FORMATION AND FRAGMENTATION OF KHMER CULTURE

3.0 Introduction

As the previous chapter argued, development agencies failed to factor in the Cambodian culture as their basis for development projects and recognise the importance of the traditional community support system provided by the *wat*. One of the difficulties, as noted by the Undersecretary of State for Cults and Religions, H.E. Mr. Dok Narin (1997 interview), was partly due to the eradication of Buddhism under Pol Pot and the subsequent Vietnamese occupation. As a result, the knowledge level of Cambodian monks was virtually non-existent, making it a case of “the blind leading the blind”. In this case, according to Dok Narin, the *sangha* was in desperate need of support and instruction to enable the monks to resume their traditional place in the community and help develop Cambodia in a culturally sustainable way. However, as the following historical review suggests, this was a complex challenge: while the vast majority of Cambodians claimed to be Theravada Buddhist, many other influences from the past were to be identified. As a result, finding culturally compatible models for use in the planning of policies for poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment in sustainable community development would be highly problematic. As David Chandler has observed, (conversation, 1998), “Cambodian culture is more deeply rooted in its history than any other country I know”. So to understand the ways Cambodian women position themselves through choice from available historical models, it is necessary to consider the range of influences that gave rise to ‘Cambodian culture’ in the 1990s.

Current social frameworks in Cambodia reflect Khmer responses to a wide range of historical experiences including earlier models of wealth and power followed by periods of extreme hardship, wars, civil unrest, occupations and extreme communism. These experiences interpreted in stories, poems, songs and Buddhist laws, arguably resulted in a gradual weakening of women’s status. Historical occurrences recorded by travellers, politicians and historians have also contributed to Khmer understandings of themselves, particularly in the period of French occupation. Current social understandings are seen in the hierarchical power structures, gender understandings and religious beliefs that direct people’s everyday lives. In researching the origins of contemporary Khmer society,

historical documentation is patchy, with very few records referring to women, particularly rural women. Nevertheless, the available texts have been reviewed to find evidence for influences contributing to the formation of Cambodian culture as seen in the 1990s. This analysis reveals some of the historical role models given to both rural and urban women through literature studies and oral teachings at home, school, village *wats* and weddings. A chart showing the historical position of Cambodian women from the Funanese of the first century to the year 2,000 has also been compiled (see Appendix 2).

In making sense of historical records that appear at times conflicting, I have drawn liberally from the interpretative framework of David Chandler's *A History of Cambodia*. Key contributors for later periods have included Penny Edwards on the ways French imposed their cultural expectations on Khmer women, and Milton Osborne and David Steinberg for the Sihanouk period. Mayko Ebihara has provided insights into the lives of rural Khmer in the 1970s, and French academic Jacques Népote provides understandings of the basic structure of Khmer society. To complete my analysis of the 1980s, I have also drawn from French writer Mary Martin along with Seanglim Bit, Michael Vickery and others.

3.1 Khmer Cultural Heritage

Although the exact origins of the Khmer remain unclear, people who made clay pots using the same methods and patterns used today lived in north-western Cambodia over 6000 years ago. Chandler (1993:9) points out that recent findings suggest Southeast Asia was a comparatively sophisticated culture in the prehistoric era, with the first cultivation of rice and first bronze casting in the region. He believes it is likely that by the beginning of the first century, Cambodians were using languages similar to modern day Khmer, and that the lives of the rural majority have remained largely unchanged since that time.

I have found that many Cambodians adhere to the belief of matriarchal beginnings to their society, and although current Western academic opinion debates this¹, research

¹ Anthropologist and Khmer women's specialist Judy Ledgerwood (Northern Illinois University USA, communication 1999) claims that educated Khmer women argue Cambodia was originally a matriarchal

into family and language patterns certainly reveal evidence of a matrilineal basis within the society. The following story depicts the Khmer culture as originating with a strong, matriarchal queen. This version was widely used for instruction in final year high school in the 1990s. Translated from Keo Men's (1997) *Khmer History*, the story reinforces the way Cambodians perceive their beginnings, and was widely adopted as a role model by educated Cambodians and NGOs to encourage women in leadership in the 1990s.

In primitive society, Khmer people lived under the rule of a queen. One of the names given to her is Liv Yi. At that time the country was called Nokor Phnom. Kang Thai, the Chinese Ambassador who arrived in Nokor Phnom in 3 A.D., called this country Funon.

Under Princess Liv Yi's rule, people lived peacefully. The governing style was called a matriarchy in which a mother or woman is the leader. Later, people from India arrived in Nokor Phnom and defeated princess Liv Yi. One of them married Liv Yi and one of the names given to this man is Kaudin.

Although Kaudin came to live with Liv Yi, starting the first Khmer dynasty since the first century, he agreed to adapt himself to the customs of the landowner. This means that Kaudin totally accepted the matriarchy of Liv Yi. A Cham inscription in Mei Seun (658 A.D.) also confirms this. Matriarchy at that time was very strong.

This matriarchy existed from the grass roots level to the top level in the family and the society. In regards to positions in society, women played as important roles as men did. The wife of king Kaudin Jayavarman, kol Praphea Votey, wrote an inscription in the Southern part of Takeo. This inscription describes the building of a Vishnu-styled hermitage. This evidence shows that women in the Nokor Phnom period played an important part in the family as well as the society. This supremacy of women existed until later eras. (Translated from Keo Men, 1997)

In agreement with this story, important clues to the existence of a more elevated position of females in earlier times are to be seen in contemporary Khmer language usage. For example, the prefix *me* meaning 'mother', is used before words meaning

society because French orientalist constructed Cambodian history and systematically fed it to them in schools. Ledgerwood believes French researchers mirrored their own evolutionary models prevalent at the time they first worked in Cambodia and the matrilineal system used in determining lineage in ancient Cambodia should not be confused with matriarchy. Adhir Chakravati (1982:64) outlines the nature of matrilineal succession in *Royal Succession in Funan and Anchor*.

'leader', 'greatness', 'wealth', 'army', 'house', 'cook', and numerous other words (see Appendix 3). The term used for 'cousin' is *bong p'oun chidounmuey*, meaning 'of one grandmother'. However, Ledgerwood (1995) proposes that the prefix *me*, used to connote leadership, is related to the nurturing aspect of Khmer patron/client relationships rather than to women. However, this does not accord with my findings that Cambodians themselves believe the term refers to 'mother', even though women have been severely devalued through the long periods of war and difficulties. My informants pointed out that in some cases Cambodian women of today maintain formidable levels of power within the private sphere of their homes, particularly in wealthier families where women manage all the finances. They believed this aspect of the language is directly related to an earlier matrilineal culture and more elevated position of women.²

Apart from language use clearly relating to earlier times, ancient forms of animism were still widely practised. Chandler (1993:11) records a few of the more ancient elements apparent in contemporary Khmer life including ancestor spirits, stones, the calendar and the soil. Chandler does not elaborate on the animistic beliefs and practices of sorcery that are still widely practised as an adjunct to Buddhism throughout Cambodian villages, especially within ethnic minority groups. Nor does he discuss the traditional practices of midwives who are responsible for village birthing and childrearing throughout the countryside. But we know from the studies of Eisenbruch (1992) on the beliefs and practices of present-day *kruu* (traditional healers) who claim to pre-date Hinduisation in Cambodia, that animist beliefs continue to inform contemporary Khmer life.

Further evidence of the continuity of ancient customs relating to animism can be found in Cambodian wedding ceremonies, in which traditional, symbolic enactments take

² The durability of Khmer culture is clear in observing the small country of Meghalaya, an ancient colony in Northeast India. These people migrated from the region that is now Cambodia to trade and settled prior to the Indianisation of the Khmer. Their language and culture are visibly related to the Khmer in dress, habits, language and culture. Female Meghalayan journalist, Nēichu Angami (interview, 2003) revealed that her culture was matriarchal prior to Indian control. Currently, although male leaders have been installed by the Indian government her society remains strongly matrilineal. Women hold positions of power equal to men. Similar to traditional Cambodian practice, all properties are inherited by the youngest daughters, males come to live with their wife's family after marriage, and women control the family purse. However, unlike present day Cambodians, they have not adopted Hindu or Buddhist beliefs and are matriarchal. Their rulers practise animistic beliefs that appear to be the same as those still practised throughout Cambodia.

place. These rites reaffirm ancient myths of the founding of Cambodia, and indicate Khmer perceptions of complementary gender roles. One marriage rite that is usually played out by the bride and groom represents an ancient myth portraying the bride as a young wife and daughter who has been born of the land (represented as a snake) and the groom as a foreign prince born of the sky (represented as a bird). In this enactment, the bird prince is marooned in Cambodia and marries the snake girl. The bride's father symbolically gives his daughter the use of the land as her marriage dowry. Népote (1992:169) informs us that enactments of the original *nagi* (snake) who is the holder of the Khmer earth are acted out again and again throughout Cambodian history.

Besides these ancient practices related to animism in Khmer society, Hindu influences dating from Indianisation of the ninth to the fourteenth centuries are also evident in contemporary Cambodia. These include hierarchical beliefs and behaviours, local health and agricultural practices, and the enduring *Sanskrit* writing system. Chandler (1993:21-25) points out that Hindu additions to the Khmer language are related to Hindu religious practices and village customs, blended with beliefs in local spirits, the most enduring being that of the lingam (stone phallus) as the patron of local communities. This cult links ancestor spirits with the fertility of nearby soil for agricultural use.

Other aspects of Cambodian society can also be seen to draw from ancient, hierarchical understandings. In Anchorean times, Chinese Diplomat, Chu Ta-Kuan (translation, 1993) described a ruling class and non-mercantile middle class who owned large contingencies of various kinds of slaves who made up the majority of the population. Despite the French having banned slavery in the colonial era, an acceptance of master-slave behaviour remained in the culture. This was evident in the harsh slavery of the Khmer Rouge era and again in the open-market culture of the 1990s when the division between the rich ruling class and the rural poor widened. At this time practices related to slavery re-emerged in the form of widespread trafficking of people and exploitation of the poor. Links to post-Angkorean practices where rulers of the multitude of principalities saw themselves as rivals, each having absolute power over their particular realm, have also been hinted at in contemporary Cambodian political life.

Attitudes to women have been contradictory and ambiguous in the different stages of Cambodian history. This uncertainty was reflected in the understandings of Khmer university students I met in the 1990s who considered the Angkorean period as their main reason for national pride and potential to greatness. However, few were aware of the earlier strength of women. Although most were aware of Queen Indira Devi (consort of King Jayavarman VII, 1181-1219) as a teacher, none was aware that she was not only a great scholar and teacher in her own right, but hailed as the most ardent patron of art forms at the time the Khmer empire was at its zenith of power. Murray (1996) points out that inscriptions record Queen Indira Devi as the 'chief teacher of the king'. He also points out that women of her time held political posts, including serving as judges. Added to this, translations of Chou Ta Kuan's recordings of life in Anchorean times (1993:18) reveal Khmer women as physically very strong and with enormous personal freedom. When a girl was born, it was customary for her parents to express "may the future bring thee a hundred, a thousand husbands!"³ As occurred in other kingdoms of Southeast Asia (Ramusack, 1999), Chou Ta Kuan records (p.72) that the personal bodyguards chosen by the king were strong women armed with shields and lances, as women were assumed to be less likely to betray the king. Also recorded at this time was inheritance by women, particularly by sisters of the deceased, and although in a much diluted form, vestiges of this custom continued into the modern era. The great Anchorean empire peaked in the twelfth century under King Jayavarman VII. But due to continuing conflict with the Thai and exhaustion of the great irrigation systems, it eventually fell, and the Khmer shifted their centre to the present-day site of Phnom Penh to pursue maritime trading through the Mekong Delta. In cultural terms there was a corresponding shift from Hinduism to Buddhism and, influenced by prolonged warring and conflict, a hardening of attitudes towards women.

The fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, during which many of the present-day attitudes restricting the behaviour of Cambodian women originated, are the least documented in Cambodian history. Chandler (1993:77) points out that during this period the entire population shifted from beliefs in Vishnuism to Theravada Buddhism, though the latter was greatly influenced by ancient animistic and Hindu practices and beliefs.

³ Discussing this historical aspect of the culture with several educated Khmer men in the 1990s revealed their beliefs that harsh controls on women's behaviour later introduced under King Duang were an entirely justifiable reaction to this earlier freedom.

This form of Theravada Buddhism has remained the foundation of Khmer cultural identity to the present time, despite periods of denial under communism.⁴ The post-Anchorean period was extremely unsettled due to revolutions and constant warring between competing royals and officials, and between neighbours (Keo Men, 1997:16). This period saw a strengthening of Khmer fear and distrust of their neighbours, due to periods of annexation by both Thai and Vietnamese. These had resulted in such chaos, killing and severe shortages of men that the society neared extinction. Internally there were also religious conflicts between the Vishnuists and Buddhists, and famine and disease were prevalent. The large numbers of men occupying bonzhood (Buddhist monkhood), combined with loss of men through conflict, resulted in periods where there were drastic shortages of male labour. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that in this time of cruelty and disaster - which many Cambodians believe was worse than that suffered under Pol Pot - the great majority of anonymous rice-farmers holding the country together were women, as occurred following the KR in the late 1970s.

Due to the decrease in male population and the influence of their hegemonic neighbours, this period saw increasingly patriarchal attitudes and restrictive codes for women's behaviour in Cambodia, not dissimilar to those seen in the 1990s. Ebihara (1984:294) tells us that in this time Cambodian people at all levels of society were increasingly using the patron-client system, attaching themselves to the more powerful to gain access to resources beyond their control. Woodside (1984:319) explains that these patron-client relationships preserved hierarchical positions (both hereditary and non-hereditary) through adherence to the Cambodian Buddhist moral and legal 'laws' called the *chbab* that were introduced during this period. Behaviours related to the orally-transmitted *chbab* have broadly remained in practice throughout Cambodia. They were still taught in homes, schools and monasteries throughout the country in the 1990s, enjoining clients to be obedient, and teaching them the ethics of obedience to masters outside the family. Chandler (1993:90) reveals that the *chbab* described knowledge as static, with teachers and parents 'bestowing', 'transmitting' and 'commanding', while

⁴ Cambodian kings continued to have Hindu priests privately conduct rituals prior to the official Buddhist ceremonies into the 1990s (Népote, 1992).

wives, students and children ‘received’, ‘accepted’ and ‘obeyed’. As evidenced by the ideals of good behaviour I observed in the 1990s, Cambodians believed that proper hierarchical relationships and a shared Buddhist ideology were necessary for the cohesion of society. To maintain this cohesion, appropriate respectful behaviour, and proper language including the use of pronouns, nouns and verbs emphasising the status of the speaker in relationship to the person addressed, were adhered to. However, although these behaviours and associated language remained the ideal, I heard many older people complain that terms of respect and good behaviour of children had been severely undermined by the Khmer Rouge.

In contrast, sixteenth century Cambodia was ‘profoundly Buddhist’. With the shift to Theravada Buddhism, the king (who was still seen as a Hindu god), the nobles, and the *sangha* dominated society. Chandler (1993:87) cites a Portuguese trader of this time who expressed admiration for Cambodian solidarity and obedience to the king. Da Cruz claimed that the *sangha* contained about 100,000 monks who were worshipped as gods. He estimated that these men comprised about one third of the able-bodied male population, describing them as exceedingly proud and vain. All possessions, ranks, lands and positions in society were held only at the king's pleasure. All properties were returned to the king when the owner of a house died, causing widows and their children hiding what they could to establish a new life. Da Cruz described Cambodian women in this era as mere concubines and subservient supporters, marking a shift from the more liberal view of women as recorded in Anchorean times to mere ‘supporters of men’ as described by Hun Sen in the 1990s.

Much of Cambodia’s contemporary literary traditions also date to this era. Ayres (2000:14-17) describes the ways in which these traditions (including the *chbab* poems, *Reamker*, and tales of *Gatiloke*) contributed to the creation of a plethora of didactic Khmer proverbs that people were still using to direct their lives in the 1990s. He maintains that the central themes of these proverbs are totally compatible with the country’s hierarchical system and a pragmatic acceptance of the necessity for strict social regulation. Reflecting the “immense and admirable heroism and struggle” of women facing severe restriction in contemporary Cambodia, Mav Tannavy (1998:19) believes that models prescribing women’s behaviour have always been available in literature, in

either part of a story or the whole story (as in *Reamker, Yum Teav and Mea Yoeng*). In the teaching of literature and morals at all levels of Cambodian education in the 1990s, traditional understandings of correct gendered behaviour were reinforced through the oral teaching of Khmer Buddhist laws through poems dating from this period. These include the *chbab srei* (women's laws) and the *chbab pros* (men's laws). Ayres (2000:14) points out that these poems legitimise traditional relationships and dependencies through prescriptions for harmony, balance, regularity and conformity. The *chbab rajaneti* does not question social inequalities, but counsels participants in the ways that harmony can be maintained. The *chbab kram* emphasises that people need others to guide them, and that correct social relationship between the student and teacher is a means of maintaining civilised behaviour in society. Goonatilake (1996:17) explains that despite contemporary socio-economic changes through which the vast majority of women have become income earners, with substantial numbers constituting heads of households, the sixteenth century poems, the *chbab srei*, have remained the governing code of behaviour for women. Below are extracts from a typical version of the *chbab srei* which have been translated from the rendition of Madame Saverous Pou (1988)⁵:

“Always speak sweetly and accomplish your tasks with dexterity, weave and work with the iron and needle and finish each task forthwith ... you must grow old without a moment of distraction ... never turn your back to your husband when he sleeps and never touch his head without first bowing in his honour ... you must take care of your parents and never contradict them ... never tattle to your parents anything negative about your husband or this will cause the village to erupt ... never go strolling to visit others ... respect and fear the wishes of your husband and take his advice to heart ... if your husband gives an order, don't hesitate a moment in responding ... avoid posing yourself as an equal to your husband – and never above he who is your master; if he insults you, go to your room and reflect, never insult or talk back to him ... have patience, prove your patience, never responding to his excessive anger ... but using gentle language in response.” (Saverous Pou, cited in Zimmerman, 1994:24)

The following version of *Mea Yoeng* (Our Uncle), a folk tale from this era about “a woman with holes in her basket”, reinforces Buddhist ideals of the perfectly virtuous woman. This story continues to be used to direct young women in the kinds of strong behaviour expected of Khmer women:

⁵ As these codes of behaviour are orally transmitted, this French publication is unique. I found it to be rare, and only available in private collections.

In the time of a compassionate and illustrious king, there lived in great misery a poor fisherman and his wife. The woman carried fish her husband caught in a basket, but the basket was full of holes and many of the fish escaped. The woman was lazy and careless, and did not bother to repair the basket. One day a merchant vessel was passing along the river, and the wife of the chief of this vessel spied the fisherman's wife and called out to her, "Hey! Why don't you stop up the holes in your basket?"

The merchant was angry at his wife and also saw the remarkable beauty of the woman with holes in her basket. He demanded that the fisherman exchange wives with him. His wife, being a *srei kruap leakkh*, a perfectly virtuous woman, willingly followed her husband's orders; the woman with the holes in her basket was overjoyed at the prospect of being the rich man's wife and the poor fisherman was afraid to object, so the switch occurred.

The virtuous woman patched the basket and the catch increased significantly, so much so that she even suggested that he share some with their neighbours, who promptly decided that the fisherman had a fine new wife.

The fisherman came home from chopping wood one day. And his wife recognised one particular type of precious wood. She had him find more, which she marketed, and they became wealthy. Then she suggested that her husband take up running, and when he became accomplished, she arranged to have him introduced to the king. When the king's horse ran at full gallop on an outing in the woods, only Mea Yoeng kept up with him. Alone in the forest, the king ate a wonderful meal prepared by Mea Yoeng's virtuous wife. Then on three different occasions, Mea Yoeng saved the life of the king and became his most valued servant.

As for the new wife of the merchant, with her laziness and careless ways, she squandered away the wealth of the merchant. She had a baby by the chief of this boat. After the baby relieved himself, the unvirtuous woman wiped him with silk clothes, which she then threw away in the river. In time, all their wealth and the boat were lost, and they were reduced to begging from house to house. One day, they came to the home of their former spouses. The virtuous woman recognised them and pointed out that for their greed they now had nothing, while she who was tossed away had transformed a miserable person into a rich man. The couple were greatly ashamed, and left the mansion. (Translation cited in Ledgerwood, 1994)

Orally transmitted stories such as this re-enforce the qualities of the ideal Cambodian woman, and the ways in which she should behave. Women I spoke with agreed that in order to find a husband and maintain a marriage they not only needed to

honour their parents and be quiet and gentle, but also should be intelligent, advising and assisting their husband in his endeavours, as well as generous and obedient. They also needed to know how to cook delicious food, wash clothes and take care of babies. Most importantly, as this story shows, Cambodian women have a role as keepers of the family wealth. Fisher-Nguyen (1994:100) has pointed to this element in many orally transmitted Khmer proverbs dating from this period, including: “ If you do not listen to the advice of a woman, you’ll not have any rice seed next year”; “Wealth is there because the woman knows how to save and be frugal”; and “The rice seed draws the earth to it in clumps; the woman supports the man”. These proverbs further praise the qualities of the virtuous women. However, they also show the enormous burden of responsibility placed on a woman for the success of her family, often despite the behaviour of her husband. If her husband fails her, society dictates that she must shoulder the blame. Given the abiding influence of proverbs and literature noted by Thion (1983:11) in the 1980s, stressing the helplessness of the individual, the centrality of the king and the acceptance of prevailing power relationships, it is possible to discern more ancient cultural models in the social and political behaviours of the 1990s. (See Appendix 4 for other widely used proverbs related to women in the 1990s.)

Although much of contemporary oral ‘literature’ dates from these times, little was recorded of Cambodian life in the sixteenth century because of limited contact with outside traders. However, a return to being a maritime kingdom in the seventeenth century gave rise to prosperity and the emergence of numerous historical records. Chandler (1993:94) has summarised Cambodia at this time as “a variegated, conservative and hierarchically organised society, consisting of a few thousand privileged men and women, propped up by an almost invisible wall of rice farmers, in which great emphasis was placed on rank and privilege, and on behaviour thought to be appropriate to one's status”. Harsh times had led to the disappearance of the ‘non-mercantile middle class’ of the Anchorean period. Describing the social structure of this time, a Spanish missionary recorded only two classes, rich nobles and poor commoners (Chandler, p.87). All nobles had several wives, the number depending on their level of wealth. High-ranking women were white and beautiful, wearing silks and fine gauze, and traveling in groups carried on the shoulders of others. He described common people traveling by cart and buffalo as ‘brown’ and explained that the women worked the soil while their husbands made war. In

a striking parallel, following fifteen years under communist rule, the 1990s saw the return of a widened gap between rich and poor. While the elite did not openly have several wives, they were frequently promiscuous and beautiful women were expected to be white. Several women explained to me that Cambodians hated their natural brown skins, preferring to marry Chinese in order to be more 'white'. It is possible that this kind of preference helped give rise to the supportive role rich Chinese merchants offered the Cambodian elite in the 1990s.⁶

By the end of this period, the seventeenth century saw the region's trading centre shifting to Saigon, resulting in Phnom Penh becoming a backwater. Saveros Pou (cited in Chandler, 1993:250, ref.18) has traced a slow degradation of the gentler, traditional Khmer values from the seventeenth century onwards, partly caused by a strong Thai influence. According to Lim (1993), this was because Khmer kings were being educated in the extremely patriarchal Thai courts. This altered the collective acceptance of traditional Cambodian values. Buddhist notions of social order became enshrined in local stories and versions of the classics focussing on the restriction of female freedom and legitimising barbaric violence against women seen to be unfaithful in love. Such stories have continued to be popular to the present time. Added to this, as in contemporary Cambodia, men continued to obtain merit through becoming monks and shunning worldly activities such as trading, while women were encouraged to handle the family purse and run small businesses to supplement the family income.

The 'laws' articulated in these stories became severely restrictive, with women required to purify their minds and be perfectly virtuous. Women were confined to running the house and family budget while caring for the children. In the 1990s, they were again being memorised by all Cambodian children, and belief in their 'rightness' remained strong. The seventeenth century also saw the introduction of the tradition *chol mlop*, where girls reaching the age of puberty were condemned to stay at home to take care of their body and receive advice from their parents until marriage. Keo Men (1997:18) states that this custom prevented women from going to school and acquiring

⁶ I witnessed several cases of a prejudice against 'brown skinned' women. One of these was a prostitute who claimed that her price had to be much lower than her fairer-skinned Vietnamese (Chinese looking)

comprehensive knowledge of academic secular affairs and *dharma* (the Buddhist way to live). It also prevented them from contributing to social activities. Although the practice itself no longer existed in the 1990s, the associated restrictive attitudes towards the behaviour of young women remained. These attitudes are apparent in examples translated by Keo Men of insulting sayings originating from the seventeenth century and common throughout the 1990s. These include, "women cannot [do not have the ability to] go away from the kitchen" and "women urinate no further than their heels". Lyrics from a song of this period, when women vastly outnumbered men, include the words "a virgin costs 20 cents and ten skinny widows cost one seed of areca".⁷ A saying referring to the low value of women and still popular in contemporary times is, "what is scarce costs more and what is abundant costs less". Furthermore, in the harsh period of the Vietnamese protectorate and Thai invasions of the early nineteenth century, women were prevented from becoming literate or learning simple mathematics, reasoning that if they did, they may become clever enough to write love letters to boys. In this period even King Duang was quoted as saying "women are not important and only exist to serve men's sexual desire". Keo uses these examples to explain the devaluation of women and unacceptably high levels of family violence in the 1990s, stressing that traditions dating from this period have continued to strongly influence the thinking and behaviour of Cambodians.

By the nineteenth century, Cambodia had become so weakened after being repeatedly invaded and occupied by both Vietnam and Thailand, that the south-east had irreversibly fallen under the control of the culturally incompatible and much-dreaded Vietnamese. They attempted to colonise the Cambodians through controlling the adult male population (Chandler, 1993:117-127). They treated Cambodians with disdain, seeing them as a lazy, barbaric race badly in need of cultural and agricultural reform at every level. For Cambodians, this period encompassed the darkest part of the dark ages of Cambodian history, comparable with life under the horrific 1970s Khmer Rouge regime.

friend. Another case was of a wealthy young man who was in love with a beautiful, educated girl, but he said his parents would never accept the colour of her skin.

⁷ This is particularly insulting since the areca flower represents an ancient tradition symbolising a pure and virtuous woman in Cambodian marriage, pre-dating and including Buddhist marriage ceremonies. The flower represents the appreciation of the groom to those who have helped him find a pure woman. (Moeun Nhean, 2001:12-14).

An extract from an unpublished poem, written in 1856 and housed in Wat Srolauv, north-central Cambodia, describes the life of an elite Cambodian and his family in flight from the Vietnamese several years earlier. "Their misery was so great. There was no food at all, no fish, no rice ... to stave off their hunger; instead, they dug for lizards (together) ... without being guilty about it ... They hunted for roots ... it was hard to swallow the food; they sat silently beside the road, intensely poor, and miserable." (cited in Chandler, 1982:65)

Eventually, due to the strength of the Thai and the strong cultural and religious entanglement of the Thai and Cambodian courts, the Vietnamese withdrew. Chandler (1993:133) states that in 1841 the Thai released the impounded Khmer Prince Duang to be installed as the legitimate king of Cambodia. The Theravada Buddhism that had been destroyed by the Vietnamese was now restored. King Duang, however, was in control of an utterly weakened country, remaining subservient to the Thai to keep clear of the Vietnamese. Under his patriarchal rule, *chbab* teachings portraying women as the moral guardians of society became even more restrictive at all levels of society. In a story written by King Duang himself, he describes a certain Queen Kakei who was married to a king with hundreds of concubines. When the king found that his queen had a lover of her own, he was afraid people would laugh at him so he ordered his men to put her on a raft and abandon her to the sea. In discussing this story separately with two educated Cambodian men (interview, 1996), they recognised King Duang as an excellent king who was just and right to treat his queen in such a way, as they believed that women needed to be kept under control. However, Keo Men (1997:10) believed that this and other more extreme stories from this period that were still popular in the 1990s provided negative models and served to legitimise jealousy, vengeance and domestic violence against women as the social norm.

3.2 French Influence

Looking at early French records of Cambodia, we can see that the Khmer population is not unaccustomed to suffering, oppression, exploitation and human trafficking. In an official French expedition to explore the Mekong River as a trade route in 1866-68, Louise de Carné (1995:10,11) described Cambodia as a 'dismembered kingdom', victim to the greed and cunning of both Siam and Hué alike. He recorded that

the population of Cambodia was “hardly a million souls, including in this number forty thousand slaves, and twenty thousand (more or less independent) savages inhabiting the mountains”.⁸ He claims that the suppression by the Annamites (Vietnamese) was so great that Cambodian dislike towards them turned into ‘inextinguishable hatred’. The Annamites regarded the Cambodians with ‘profound contempt’, their emperor boasting that under his rule, “those barbarous manners which showed themselves in their cutting of hair, in wearing clothes not slit at the side, in covering their body round with a langouti, in eating with their fingers, and sitting squat on their heels”, were disappearing day by day. The Cochin-Chinese law went so far as to “punish with strangling any Annamite who married a Cambodian woman”. De Carné states that “the Annamite emperor’s clear intention was to conquer the whole kingdom”. Burchett (1981:49) reveals that a French bureaucrat of this time described Cambodian peasantry as suffering miserably. “The blows of fate catch him disarmed; sickness, death and calamities make him prey to the Chinese usurers. From then he struggles hard, working more and more land in the vain hope of wiping out a debt that usury is ceaselessly swelling. His harvests are automatically confiscated, his family goes into slavery, beginning with the youngest and the females, and the day comes when despite all his sacrifices, he is brutally dispossessed of his property by his creditors. There is nothing left for him to do but to go and live off a relative whom luck has made better off, or enter religious life.”

Turning to the culturally more compatible Thai court for protection against the cruel Vietnamese, King Duang enjoyed a period of peace and near normality through subservience. Realising the weakness inherent in such dependence, and facing imminent annexation by both countries, in 1853 he called on the French to declare a protectorate over Cambodia. As Osborne (1992) points out, while the French initially eliminated the threat of annexation by the feared and hated Vietnamese, they immediately began to

⁸ Louis de Carné (1995:82,83) recorded several classes of slavery including slaves for debt, slaves of the king, and slaves of the pagoda. Slaves for debt were held as debt interest only, providing the labour of those taken in war or those reduced to slavery by legal sentence. Slaves of the pagoda were held for crimes in the pagoda or were taking refuge from pursuit for delinquency. They became “a slave, or rather bonze, for life”. Other slaves could be purchased in Phnom Penh, Laos and Siam. Those most prized were taken from the forests where they had been trapped by ‘manhunters’. Price was determined by the degree of confidence a master could put in the slave’s ‘uprightness’. Consequently, Annamite slaves were the cheapest. Young, good-looking virgin girls were bought as mistresses by rich men for the same price as ‘pleasure elephants’.

encourage Vietnamese immigration into Cambodian areas, and systematically stripped the king of his traditional power. This fear of the Vietnamese helped fuel the Maoist Khmer Rouge and still persists in contemporary Cambodia.

As under the French, working as an official in the Cambodian government in the 1990s provided a network of status relationships giving access to power and money (Chandler, 1993:142-158). Peasants paid in rice, forest products and labour to support the bureaucrats, while they in turn paid the king. Their system was based on the support of entourages, the exploitation of labour, and the taxation of harvests (rather than land), for the benefit of the elite. Tully (2002:64) records that at the end of the 19th century the king was still seen as a god with around 500 wives and up to 100 children. He abducted beautiful young women from the countryside to add to his harem which absorbed the greatest part of the country's revenue. He points out that French bureaucrats interested in the development of Cambodia actually believed that their reforms (intended for the betterment of the majority) would be well received by the poor and exploited. Their 'orientalist, rationalist'⁹ view of life meant that the French – like the Western aid providers of the 1990s - were totally baffled by the different perceptions held by the Khmer, who believed their own, traditional ways were better.

Cambodians had not foreseen the cost of the French protection they had requested, including the changes that the French would seek to impose on their culture. Though neither masters nor slaves wanted it, the French abolished slavery. They effectively cut the king from his entourage, and the entourage from its followers (though servitude for debts remained widespread). In this way, the god-king was effectively reduced to mere puppet of the French. The elite could only gain poorly paid jobs in the public service, thus weakening the traditional social structure. The peasants were forced to pay taxes at the highest rates in Indochina. Added to this, the highly paid French officials enforced the hitherto unknown practice of 'land ownership' for tax exploitation, and bought up large amounts of property. France had clearly been guilty of exerting their paternal colonial superiority over a country they largely considered as a 'far away backwater' of scant

⁹ In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1979) described the ways in which western concepts falsely rationalised and oversimplified Asian cultures. Consequently they perceived 'the other' as childlike, savage and sensual.

importance within their huge empire (Tully, 2002:121). Although their archaeologists awakened Cambodian awareness of the greatness of Khmer history, the French shamelessly spent almost nothing on education or health improvements. Khmer Prince Yukanthor attempted to publicise the French injustice to Cambodia in France, proclaiming, “you have created poverty, and thus you have created the poor”, before fleeing in fear of reprisal to self-exile in Siam.

Although they have been criticised for making Cambodians disproportionately aware of their ‘glorious Anchorean past’, one of the enduring legacies of the French occupation was the restoration of Anchor Wat as the Khmer national icon. In the 1990s, apart from occupying central place on the national flag, this magnificent monument could be seen in paintings on the wall of every government ministry and home, and filling every art shop. However, as I discovered in discussions with Cambodian post-graduate students, the reality that Anchor Wat belonged to a long lost period of cultural renaissance and did not represent modern cultural realities eluded them. Edwards (1999:1), in her paper ‘Propagating Patriarchy: Marianne and Joan of Arc in French Propaganda and Colonial Nationalism’, has pointed out that France strongly embossed its paternalistic image onto colonised Cambodia through attempting to restore its Anchorean heritage as a parallel to the French Napoleonic era. She said they did this through “militarisation and maternity ward, costume and custom, exhibition and education”. Edwards maintains that under the French, Cambodian women were commonly idealised as symbols of their glorious ‘lost past’, which eluded present reality. Seeing Cambodian women as ‘dressed like men’, they attempted to impose their own Western ideals of femininity. For example, a visiting Englishman, Casey (1929, Chapter 6), saw Cambodian women’s faces as ‘hard and masculine’ attributing this to the “legendary days when the females of Cambodia turned the tide of battle against the Thais and gained the right to ape the dress and appearance of warriors”. He noted that Cambodian women were ‘strange’ with their with betel-stained teeth¹⁰ and close-cropped hair, and

¹⁰ Chewing betel is an excellent way to prevent tooth-decay.

distinguished only from men by their ‘superior grace of carriage’. Like the men, women wore the *sompot* in a diaper-like fashion between the legs and knotted at the belt.¹¹

Determined to ‘civilize’ the Khmer, the French imposed their conception of race, civilisation and tradition through the press and secular French schools, presenting a rupture with the abiding traditional Khmer society, particularly in urban areas. Without being invited into Cambodian homes (not a Cambodian custom), the French arrogantly judged Khmer women as not only dressing in an unfeminine way, but as being inferior wives and mothers. At the same time, they encouraged women to become better wives and mothers, through propagation of the popular French ‘cult of Joan of Arc’.¹² They recast Cambodian heroines, and strongly endorsed the *chbab srey* rules to encourage the feminisation of women. At the same time the French reinvented the exterior Cambodian male and female images through enforcing more covered and clearly gender-divided Western dress codes. Because women at that time could not be seen in public unless they were wearing acceptable clothing, many had to borrow clothes to venture outside their house and beautiful girls made themselves as ugly as possible so that French men would not trouble them (interview with elderly informants, 1997).

In order to endorse their idea of ‘civilised behaviour’, Edwards (1999:15) explained that the French introduced ‘secular girls’ schools’ in urban areas. Here Cambodian girls were provided with four years of schooling, including domestic work, dressmaking, maternal care, basic maths, Khmer and French. They were trained to become wives of civil servants and praised for their modernised dress styles, high heels and bobbed haircuts,¹³ while the boys were educated for the civil service. In 1918 almost 10,000 girls were being educated in these schools. This increased to 20,000 in 1927. At the same time,

¹¹ Casey (1929), also described his strong sense of unchanging ancient Khmer ancestry in the farmers who wore ‘negligible scraps of clothing’ as they transplanted rice shoots by hand, laboriously ploughing the fields with wooden ploughs and sieving rice in wicker baskets. He noted hundreds of priests journeying in bands, “trailing their yellow robes through the shaded streets”.

¹² Ironically, although the French tried to impose their colonial ideas of women as wives and mothers in Cambodia, it was the Cambodian women educated in the French ‘privileged’ schools for the elite (including the wife of ‘Pol Pot’) who participated in the nationalist overturning of colonial imagery.

¹³ My translator was French-educated. She was extremely outspoken, with a highly developed level of French etiquette and housekeeping methodology.

however, some were arguing for a modern, ungendered education system. According to Chandler (1993:160), the only contribution the French made to the wider Cambodian state education system was to sponsor the 5,000 existing *wat* schools (at very little cost), only introducing the first state secondary school in Phnom Penh as late as 1936. Traditional primary education in the *wat* schools (primarily for boys) remained under the control of the *sangha*. In agreement with Edwards (1999), Ayres (2000) argues that the ‘education crisis’ of the 1990s was a direct result of French policies and neglect of education for the agrarian majority. This in turn resulted in the contemporary, persisting ideal of boys being educated for an overloaded bureaucracy and girls being educated to fulfil domestic roles as wives for bureaucrats.

Onset of the Second World War and subsequent Japanese occupation provided impetus for the birth of Khmer nationalistic thinking and a strong will to be free of the repression of colonialism. This strengthened the Cambodian resolve to cling to their culture - though by this time ‘Khmer culture’ had incorporated a strong French overlay in urban areas, exacerbated by self-serving land ownership rights introduced under the French - encouraging huge increases in illegal land seizures and landlordism, exploitation, and Chinese usury. Consequently, as seen in the 1990s when much land was illegally confiscated by the powerful, by 1950 only 44 percent of the cultivated land was owned by peasantry who survived on less than two hectares of land per family. Over 50 percent of the land was owned by the wealthiest 20 percent of farmers and 20 percent of the rural workforce was classified as landless. They were living on rented land, share-cropping or working as hired labourers, and surviving however they could (Ebihara, 1971:51).

By 1949 Cambodia had proclaimed independence from France, although France maintained economic and military control until 1954. According to Ayres (2000:18), the cultural legacy of the French colonial period was permanent disruption with the harmony of the Khmer Buddhist social system. He points out that this period created an “irreconcilable fusion of conflicting cultural and political ideals”, spawning the emergence of two ideologically opposed political cultures that have remained until the

present time – one was the traditionally harmonious Buddhism meaningfully connecting all levels of society; while the other had notions of modernity that largely ignored the peasantry, encouraging them to be loyal and acquiescent to the elite. Finally, in 1953 Cambodia gained independence under the previously French-installed puppet leader King Sihanouk, who, in the words of Osborne (1992:137), pursued a policy of neutrality for fifteen years of peace under ‘Buddhist Socialism’.

3.3 Independence: 1953-74

Cambodia under King Sihanouk was internationally viewed as ‘the jewel of Asia’, and this period of independence is still seen by many Cambodians as ‘idyllic’. The population of that time was estimated to be fewer than 5,000,000.¹⁴ Osborne (1992) recorded that, in line with his ancestors, Sihanouk saw both people and country as his personal possession, and the people widely supported him as their god king, believing him to be endowed with supernatural powers. As a ruler, he was energetic, eccentric, egotistic, shrewd and contradictory, achieving widespread changes for his country. These included the establishment of public health and education, and the creation of universities. He was also responsible for the creation of hydraulic works and tourism, and the beginnings of industrialisation. Sihanouk was famous for producing numerous romanticised movies promoting his culture, his country, and himself as its only suitable ruler. These movies served to perpetuate the prevailing stereotypes of women. Steinberg (1959) described Sihanouk's Cambodia as containing three main occupational segments: government bureaucracy, clergy and peasantry.

In his attempt to soften the extreme gaps between the urban and rural population and in line with his socialist policies, in 1965 Sihanouk gave women the right to vote. He also promoted a policy of education for both genders, although as Osborne (1992:269) has pointed out, the teachers were unskilled and provided deplorably low teaching levels. Unfortunately, Sihanouk did not foresee that students reaching tertiary levels would prefer the liberal arts and humanities in the hope of gaining employment in the

¹⁴ This of course, did not include the large number of Khmer living in the Mekong Delta area (known as Kampuchea Krom), annexed to Vietnam under the French.

bureaucracy, and reject the technical subjects that were more suited to their agrarian society (Ayres, 2000:53). As a result, the number of high school and university graduates in liberal arts and humanities far exceeded possibilities for employment in the civil service, and few were trained as technicians. Many of these unemployed disillusioned males and females were to drift into the communist movement that formed the basis of the destructive Khmer Rouge regime. This imbalance in education persisted into the 1990s because the highly conservative officials from MOEYS were predictably strongly supportive of the preferred ideals introduced under the French. Education suiting the predominantly agrarian society was yet to be formulated even though the agricultural sector of Cambodia remained dominant, with commercial aspects being handled primarily by the Chinese.

In economic terms, many of the conditions occurring under Sihanouk's independence returned to become the norm in the 1990s. Ebihara (1971) recorded that under Sihanouk, although 80 percent of all cultivated land was occupied by rice growing, the majority of rice farmers were only able to use their crops for family consumption due to the small size of their holdings. She maintains that those living beside the Tonle Sap Lake and along rivers or coastline were mostly professional Vietnamese fishermen. Fishing as a larger, organised activity was mainly controlled by the Chinese who leased fishing grounds in both the Tonle Sap and the sea. The large amounts of fish caught were sold fresh or dried. They were also made into fish-paste or oil, with up to one third being exported. In addition to this, large-scale producers from plantations of pepper and rubber were owned and operated by either the French or Chinese who utilised Vietnamese contract labour. Less significantly, timber and other forest products were exported. Hu Nim (1965) provided a detailed breakdown of the enormous exploitation of the poor peasants by rich peasants and landlords at that time.

The peasants are not only victims of natural calamities resulting from serious climatic defects and of the agrarian system inherited from the colonial era, but also of exploitation by landlords, usurers, merchants and comprador businessmen. Commercial capital, usury and land rent comprise an outdated system exploiting the masses of the peasantry. (Hu Nim, 1965 doctoral thesis cited in Kiernan and Boua, 1982:77-85)

In 1959-60, anthropologist Mayko Ebihara (1971) undertook a detailed study of a segment of Khmer peasant culture. Her study is significant because it provides the first

understanding of village life in a section of the hitherto largely invisible and unchanging agrarian population.¹⁵ Although it is now recognised that there is great variation in villages throughout Cambodia, in the absence of any other studies of the rural population prior to the 1990s, Ebihara's account has remained an important source of information on the agrarian sector. Ebihara (1971:63-65) revealed that the majority of rice farmers in her village produced barely enough for survival, so every Cambodian family fished in their paddy field or nearby waterholes and streams. Families along river-banks were able to grow vegetables, fruit and fibre crops. These included maize, beans, peanuts, sugar cane, soy-beans, bananas, coconuts, cotton, tobacco, ramie and kapok to sell in the markets. As occurred in the 1990s, Ebihara noted that in some instances entire villages devoted themselves to handicrafts such as weaving, basketry and mat making, pottery, metal work and woodwork. These were sold in both local and regional markets. Every agricultural community had a few individuals who were able to practise some craft or skill on a part time basis. Cattle breeding occurred in a few provinces, and individual Khmer families sometimes raised a few chickens or pigs to sell. Unfortunately, much of this skills base was lost in the Khmer Rouge era. Returning to her chosen village in 1989, Ebihara (1990a) found that although its size had diminished and the people had suffered deeply, many, although poorer, had returned to conduct their lives in much the same way as before.

In the village culture, although women and men worked equally in the fields, men held all formal positions of power within the community. Ebihara (1990a:21) noted that Buddhist temples served as the moral, social and educational centres in villages, and monks were accorded the highest respect. She observed that Theravada Buddhism was combined with folk beliefs and practices that revolved around a variety of animistic spirits. In her focus village, she found that no females over 18 were literate, but 75 percent of males were, due to boys having access to a traditional temple school where they served as monks for various periods of time (p.530). However, although under Sihanouk girls living in rural areas were given the opportunity to go to school for the first time in history, and even though villagers saw the advantages of both girls and boys receiving education, because females were responsible for governing the household,

¹⁵ Ebihara's fieldwork constituted the only anthropological studies on Khmer women until the 1990 study undertaken by Brigitte Sonnois (Redd Barna, Phnom Penh). Ebihara's work was widely used as a reference for WID planning in the 1990s.

raising the children and managing household finances, only one third of the enrolments were female. Although the government school system had superseded the temple in delivering education in the 1990s, much of the culture described by Ebihara re-emerged in the 1990s.

In relation to the importance of women's role in the family, Népote (1992) maintained that their social position was directed through an older brother. In keeping with tradition, women kept their maiden name after marriage. Népote pointed out that if a Khmer man wanted to assert his authority he had no choice but to assume the leadership of a family 'clan' in which no one dared act independently, or deprive the family of an opportunity to enrich itself or exert its power. In a French symposium on Khmer history, Thion (1993:16), in agreement with Népote, indicated that two abiding backbones of Khmer society have been kingship and kinship, of which no complete analysis has been undertaken. Both French academics maintained that although kingship is patrilineal, society at large inherits a degree of matrilineal orthodoxy; with the traditional model of 1960s Cambodian society being made up of two symmetrical halves divided into large matrilineal clans. These occupied territorial units known as *phum* or *srok*, constantly struggling against each other, and elements of these traditions have continued to strongly influence the society.

To ensure the continuing health and sustainability of the clans, suitability to marriage and choice of a suitable partner have always been central issues in the Khmer society. Under Sihanouk, traditional stories, proverbs and *chbab* rules to prepare girls for womanhood were strongly enforced in homes and schools throughout the kingdom. Girls were still 'put into the shade' (*chol mlop*) for up to six months at the onset of puberty, depending on the economic level of the family. They were given special foods to eat, taught household skills, and protected from all kinds of desire. Following this isolation at home, girls then underwent a ceremony and were eligible for marriage. Although *chol mlop* ceased under the Khmer Rouge, in the 1990s girls still remained closely chaperoned until marriage. As commonly seen in the 1990s, arranged introductions were organised in consultation with the parents, and when there was an agreement between all parties, an engagement ceremony was arranged. Steinberg (1959:84) points out that under Sihanouk young men took a vow of servitude to their future in-laws and embarked on a courtship

designed to test their qualities as a husband. This was done through labouring for them in agricultural and household tasks for up to two years. However, courtship has been less demanding in contemporary times. Poor behaviour, disrespect, complaints or infidelity could result in dismissal and an end to the engagement. However, as in the 1990s, if an engagement was dissolved, the girl's reputation was in greater tatters than the boy's. Martin (1994:25) points out that when a young man married, he moved to live with his wife's parents, who generally had a lineage superior to his own. Steinberg tells us that although these traditions were persistent and unchanging in the countryside, they were greatly modified in the cities due to Chinese, Vietnamese and European influences. Unattached men and women were severely disapproved of, so women were expected to marry, whereas men could choose between marriage and monkhood.

Ebihara (1971:113) found that although Buddhist doctrine assigned superiority to males, and the legal code provided a man with almost absolute power over his wife, in everyday village life, the relative positions of male and female were equal. She observed little division of labour and behaviour patterns between women and men under Sihanouk (p.190-96). Although certain activities such as women caring for the household and men ploughing the field were gendered, many activities were shared, and gendered activities could be reversed without fear of embarrassment. Ebihara noted that men were responsible for providing food, shelter and 'moral aid' to their wives, and had to obtain their consent before entering the monastery or taking a concubine. Women were responsible for caring for the children, overseeing and keeping the family budget, and respecting and obeying their husbands. Although these behaviours were seriously eroded under the intervening communist regimes, they have remained the ideal in the 1990s. As in contemporary Cambodia, women frequently undertook commercial ventures to earn money, and could own and dispose of property in their own right (p.355). Even though women enjoyed a considerable degree of voice and independence in village life, as well as great authority within the family, men enjoyed superior social status and more mobility and freedom of action. Wealth alone was not the basis for prestige under Sihanouk, although in the current market-based society this ideal has been seriously eroded.

In urban Phnom Penh in the Sihanouk period, according to Martin (1994:25), Cambodian women enjoyed both social and political importance even though formal political power belonged to men. The husband trusted his wife to care for the wealth of their family, and the wife exerted great influence over her husband, pleasing and charming him until she bent his will to her wishes. Thus, the Khmer husband was rarely in a position of strength in his home, while the wife had the potential to utilise her husband's societal position to build herself a 'clientele'. At the same time, as seen again in the 1990s, extreme male sexual promiscuity was considered as the norm (Vickery, 1984:176). When a woman's husband had a position of power, his wife's power could become enormous, with subordinate's wives and friends turning to her for favours that had to be paid for in one way or another. Hence the frequently quoted Khmer proverb: "If the husband is a colonel, his wife will be a general." This distribution of power was again clearly evident among the elite in the 1990s.

Although Sihanouk helped to restore traditional Khmer values and a sense of national pride, Chandler (1993:200-205) records that his popularity began to fade. Apart from a seeming unwillingness to deal with corruption in his government, Sihanouk closed private banks and nationalised the import-export sector to cripple the monopoly of Chinese business in Phnom Penh. However, most importantly, in late 1963 Sihanouk cut off the U.S. military aid program in order to stay out of the Vietnam War. This effectively lowered the national budget by 15 percent and lowered the morale of the armed forces, making Sihanouk more vulnerable to pressures from the left. Finally, during his absence from the country, an army coup overthrew Sihanouk and installed his pro-U.S. Prime Minister Lon Nol as leader of the country.

Although Lon Nol's coup was popular among the educated in Phnom Penh and in the army, rural Cambodians (traditionally loyal to the king) were unprepared for a republican leader. City people were complaining that traditional morality and family structure were being increasingly undermined because of the financial independence of women educated under Sihanouk, with, according to Vickery (1984:176-77), women increasingly demanding social and even sexual equality. In the eyes of the old traditionalists, the saying "too much education can turn women into whores" was being

vindicated.¹⁶ The Lon Nol Regime's overwhelming corruption and attempts to brutally crush all opposition, combined with the legitimisation of relentless U.S. carpet-bombing of large areas of Cambodian countryside, exhausted the agrarian population in the East, and hardened the will of the surviving Communist forces (Chandler, 1993:200).

Finally, in early 1975, communist 'Democratic Kampuchea' (DK) forces mined the approaches to Phnom Penh and prevented shipments of rice and ammunition from reaching the capital. The city swelled with up to two million refugees. After three months of virtual siege, Lon Nol fled the country, and Communists troops dressed in khaki uniforms and peasant clothes filed silently in to take control of Phnom Penh. These soldiers were mainly heavily armed child recruits under fifteen years of age. They believed that they could help return Prince Sihanouk to power and end civil war. Initially welcomed, they emptied the city to usher in a shocking new phase that Ben Kiernan has described as "the most totalitarian system in recorded history" (Monash-Asia Institute lecture, September, 1999).

3.4 Maoist Influence

The revolutionary regime, the Khmer Rouge (KR), believed that Cambodia's poor rural community, exploited and enslaved throughout history, could now rid their country of all Western influences, control their own lives and collectively become masters of their own destiny. In this way they could recapture the genius of the legendary Anchoorean society. In fact, they introduced 'a system of absolute slavery' dominated by a totally despotic regime (interview, Khmer lecturer, 1998). Ayres (2000:103) points out that the aims of the regime were to rid Cambodia of everything Western. Agriculture, particularly rice production, was to become the basis of economic reconstruction and development. The Cambodian Genocide Program (Yale University) estimates that out of

¹⁶ A well-known example of this change was the beautiful and talented leading dancer of the royal ballet. French educated daughter of Sihanouk, Princess Bopha Devi (currently Minister of Culture and Fine Arts) openly emulated the behaviour of her male counterparts by choosing numerous handsome men of her own choice to liaise with, shocking the community and causing her father to call her a 'whore'.

a population of around eight million, close to 1.7 million Cambodians died due to murder, starvation or torture, in one of the worst human tragedies of the modern era. Educated people who had not fled the country were systematically killed. The people of this small country were left with their lives, families, knowledge, religious system, health, values, infrastructure, cities and countryside totally shattered. Children brought up in this society, the young adults of the 1990s, like their surviving parents remained traumatised. Although all historical periods have added to the current Khmer cultural heritage, it would be a grave error to underestimate the profound affect this social experiment dedicated to breaking down all aspects of the 'old' culture has had on contemporary Cambodian society.

Following their fateful entry into Phnom Penh on April 17th, 1975, the KR, predominantly manned by rifle-toting Maoist-trained teenagers from the countryside, mercilessly emptied the cities. They swept throughout the countryside bent on destroying family life, individualism, and all existing institutions. Their intent was to remove all impediments to their ideas of national autonomy and social justice. Personal accounts of the emptying of Phnom Penh revealed heart-rending callousness as the whole city, including hospitals, was simultaneously forcibly evacuated. "Children screamed, adults cried, the elderly followed miserably, and women gave birth on the sidewalks ... people were forced to abandon their possessions ... cadavers abounded ... there was an epidemic of cholera" (Martin 1994:170). Witnesses gave me accounts of wealthy people driving their Mercedes cars into the river, drowning their whole families rather than face what was to come (field notes, 1996). Although brutality is not new to Cambodia, my informants were convinced that the widespread normalisation of brutal acts in contemporary Cambodia originated from this time.

People were sent in all directions, and as a result, many families were irreparably divided and dislocated, the results of which remain to the present. Those who survived privation and execution were forced to resettle as 'new people' in assigned villages, working manually under harsh conditions, with very little food. The country was turned upside down, the rich killed and the educated demoted or killed, while the uneducated

were elevated to positions for which they were inexperienced and unqualified. There are differing accounts as to the severity of life in all regions, but in effect all were slaves who owed their allegiance to *Angkar*, under cruel conditions with appallingly little to eat. Recalling stories from literature and folk history originating in the dark ages of the eighteenth century, starvation and disease were the norm. Those who dared complain or were caught stealing food were killed. Women informants told me that all adult females ceased to menstruate, and sick people who were sent to primitive makeshift hospitals staffed by the newly appointed uneducated and inexperienced usually died. They said they only knew the name *Angkar* (the organisation), and did not hear the name of its leader, Pol Pot, until they came to Australia.

Chandler (1993:209) has detailed how under the KR, money, markets, formal education, Buddhism, books, private property, diverse clothing, styles, and freedom of movement were abolished. All personal property was confiscated, and 'collective marriages' of groups involving hundreds of mostly unwilling couples from different social and regional backgrounds were enforced (Martin 1994:172). I have known three such educated women who were subjected to these forced marriages to previously unknown 'brown-skinned' men. One bore two children and left her husband as soon as she could. The second also bore two children, but stayed with her husband because he was a 'good man', even though she did not love him. Both of these women were the family breadwinners. The last woman said she would have preferred to die than marry an unknown man, and ran away to avoid the KR punishment of death for refusing. Few such marriages have survived and many children of these unions are among the confused young adults of today. Cultural dislocation was exacerbated by the communalisation of all lands, tools and livestock and the enforcement of communal eating in order to control food distribution (Vickery, 1984:174). All organisations (cooperative, factory, mobile team) including agricultural, industrial, fishing and transport, were headed by a president and two vice presidents. Members were divided into military units (team, group, section, company, battalion, regiment and brigade). Female cadres and administrators were often only teenagers and could be just as tough as the males.¹⁷ As this kind of behaviour for

¹⁷ A Vietnamese refugee who was previously a soldier in the Vietnamese Liberation Army described the horror he felt on witnessing "the most beautiful girl I have ever seen" (a Khmer Rouge cadre) being tried and stoned to death for her particularly vicious killings of a large number of fellow villagers.

women was seen as 'un-Khmer', after liberation a return to more traditional behaviour was embraced.

The KR argued that education in the old regime was useless and failed to serve the needs of the people. Every man, woman and child was forced to take part in protracted 're-education sessions'. Here, already exhausted after a long day of hard labour, people had to silently and mindlessly endure meetings in which illiterate cadres recited propaganda and performed bizarre Maoist dances while shouting KR slogans. Everyone had to make endless 'confessions' about their anti-socialist behaviour and their previously self-centred lives. Ayres (2000:113-114) records that at this time the new mindless revolutionary songs replaced the traditional *chbab*. He points out that with no texts, inadequate writing materials and school infrastructure, unqualified and often illiterate teachers, and overworked and malnourished students, random attempts to provide education in basic literacy tended only to lead to negative developments in the children. Martin (1994:178) lamented the results of children's education under the Khmer Rouge, as "in terms of political education, there were no more familial values, critical thinking, or initiative. Too arrogant, for the children are aware of the future role that they will have in the country's reconstruction, intolerant of everything that represents weakness, pretentious, like their masters, the children are hungry for power". It is important to remember that children brought up in areas controlled by the KR until they surrendered in 1997 had known no other way of life. Conversely, many of those previously living under KR control lament that the corruption, crime and sexual promiscuity forbidden under the KR is rife in present day Cambodia.

Due to their wish to increase the revolutionary population, the KR did not want to destroy the nuclear family and forbade sexual relations outside marriage. Ebihara (1990b:30-34) points out that the communist family ideal did not include traditional extended families and parental authority, particularly over young adults, as this authority belonged to the state. Differences in status no longer existed, the concept of self was replaced with group identity by omitting *khnom* (I), and replacing it with *yeung* (we). Relations between husband and wife and parents and children were to be marked only by cordiality. A huge and enduring disruption of traditional society occurred due to the customary relationships between old and young being reversed, with children being

regarded as infants of *Angkar* (the organisation) youth regarded as respected bearers of the new revolutionary structure, and adults seen as survivors of the old, despised regime. Kinship terms of respect were altered, with, for example, all adults addressed as 'mum' or 'dad' and age peers addressed as *mit* (comrade). 'Senior comrade', 'junior comrade' and 'comrade child' were also used. According to many older people today, the behaviour of children brought up in this era retain many of these characteristics, showing no respect for their elders. At the same time, a new type of social unit was introduced, the association. These included associations for men, women, school children and young people. Of special significance was the Youth League which was used to indoctrinate and organise the young.

Kiernan and Boua (1982) found that although women worked in separate groups to men, all had to labour equally for *Angkar*. They were conscripted to long hours of digging and building canals, dams and reservoirs that were ill-planned and unsound. The 'new' people worked as rice farmers with the 'old', who were mostly already poor rice farmers. The latter experienced the least disruption of their lives. Some women were expected to spin, sew or cook for the communal kitchens. For example, my 'older sister' (*bong srei*), widowed in 1975 and mother to eleven children, was one of the 'older people' (deemed not an enemy) of Kompong Cham. All except for her youngest child were taken away, so she constantly battled with thoughts of suicide. On one occasion she was assigned to sewing the usual black clothes for a group of KR soldiers, and had to keep on working silently as they discussed the forty people they had brutally killed the night before. Everyone worked for *Angkar*. "Everybody in the village worked as hard as the next person ... However, the peasants definitely got more attention and food than the city people" (Kiernan & Boua, 1982:340). Women had to bob their hair and dress severely, being strictly segregated in work teams, associations and dining halls. Discipline was imposed on all levels of behaviour including correct modes of drinking, sleeping, walking and talking. Crimes punishable by death included laziness, resistance (even verbal) to policy or instructions, and boasting or pretension.

Vickery (1984:105,115,178) reported that married women and old people were often put to care for very small children whose mothers worked in the village. Unmarried women could be sent to work in the distant fields. Young children old enough to work

were only absent during the day and put to tasks including collecting natural fertiliser and planting and picking fruit, although others report harsher tasks being given to children. In 1977, all children over the age of eight years were separated from their parents and sent away to work. Some reported that in 1978 small children were separated from their parents and put into centres. Male and female unmarried youth were segregated into various mobile work teams and sent away to perform such tasks as clearing land and constructing buildings for *Angkar*. Buddhist pagodas were destroyed and monks were sent to labour in the fields. Although the disruption of traditional society seemed complete, in the 1990s people longed to rediscover the now glorified lost past of the 1970s.¹⁸ However, much irreparable damage has been done through the destruction of the educated class, of education, law and traditional family values, especially among the young.

Not only were the Khmer victims of the KR, but they were suffering ongoing illegal carpet bombing from the Americans backing South Vietnam. My Cambodian foster son told me that much of his childhood in Suong (near the Vietnam border) was spent running from bombs and yellow rain as the Americans illegally carpet bombed the area. From 1977-78, fighting along the border with the much feared and hated Vietnamese increased. Hanoi was now setting into place its plan to invade and 'liberate' its weakened and devastated neighbour under the excuse of constantly being attacked by them. Martin (1994:215) reminds us that conditions continued to deteriorate and, in a paranoia of eliminating 'enemies' of *Angkar*, more and more people including KR cadres themselves were being killed under an escalating program of torture and execution. Finally, on the 25th December 1978, the militarily superior Vietnamese launched a decisive assault and imposed a military occupation, causing thousands of refugees to flee across the borders into the jungles, hoping to reach Thailand.¹⁹ Many of these were to be accepted as

¹⁸ Post-graduate students in my 1997 AusAID class believed there were two great periods in Khmer history, the Anchorean and Sihanouk. They had not given any consideration to the vast differences in achievements and length of time in each period.

¹⁹ Commenting on this issue, Vickery (1984:279-81) made unfortunate comparisons with Yugoslavia (an ally of Cambodia), which shared similar structural backgrounds prior to communism. He clearly misunderstood the genuine, deep threat of unresolved historical conflicts and bitter memories of the earlier Vietnamese incursion. Mary Martin (1994), first published in French in 1989, showed a greater understanding and sensitivity towards the Khmer psyche and their deep fears, valid or misguided, of their consuming neighbours.

refugees in third countries, to find new models of living and the chance to gain education, before returning to their country as ‘foreigners’ in the 1990s.

3.5 Marxist-Vietnamese Influence

In 1979 during the months following the Vietnamese invasion and capture of Phnom Penh, almost everyone began moving. Exhausted and malnourished evacuees and refugees were criss-crossing their devastated country, either returning to their native villages in search of their families or hurriedly fleeing the country in fear of the newly installed regime. Chandler (1993:229-230) described rural society as a shambles. Villages had been abandoned or torn down; tools, seed and fertiliser were nonexistent, hundreds of thousands had emigrated or been killed, and in most areas survivors were suffering from malaria, shock and malnutrition. So many men had died or disappeared that over 60 percent of families were headed by widows.²⁰ The imbalance of the population was extreme. Although this period under the pro-Russian Vietnamese allowed relief from the genocidal Maoist regime and a chance to begin rebuilding the society, its influence has continued to dominate the socio-political and judicial life of the country in the 1990s.

My interviews with a range of Cambodians revealed widely differing views on the behaviour of the Vietnamese. Some gave accounts of rapes and killings of innocent Cambodians regardless of their political sensibilities, while others said that the behaviour of the Vietnamese was impeccable. Pilger (1986: 376-427) and Vickery (1984:219-30) preferred to praise the generous contributions made by Vietnam at a time of its own great need, to help offset the horrific conditions they found and to “protect themselves from the constant border attacks of the Khmer Rouge”. They disagreed with writers such as Shawcross, Heder and Ponchaud who tended to demonise the Vietnamese. Vickery maintains that, although the Vietnamese systematically pillaged the cities, there was no evidence to support any systematic mistreatment of the Khmers, who had initially welcomed them as liberators. However, I found that those living in areas of KR

²⁰ Shawcross (1984:37) recorded that his driver told him greetings had changed with each regime. Under Sihanouk, people would greet each other after a time of absence saying “How many children have you?”;

resistance profoundly disagree with Vickery's defence of the behaviour of the Vietnamese. They believe that he ignored their stories, as it was more politically expedient to be pro-government, and as a consequence, even in the 1990s, many were refusing to tell their stories to Westerners whom they felt would not find them credible.

Due to the chaos caused by the mass movement of people, rice crops were left untended and any stored grain consumed. Resulting food shortages were then worsened by a drought in which hundreds of thousands of Khmer had nothing to eat. According to Ea (1990:8-9), the 1979-80 drought was the most catastrophic in Cambodian history, causing a further 500,000 people to lose their lives. However, Vickery (1984:219) has claimed that in response to calls for aid from the west, large contributions of rice, foodstuffs, medicines and other necessities arriving from ICRC and UNICEF helped offset the threatened disaster of widespread drought.²¹ In 1980 I met several refugees who had fled the drought and been accepted as refugees to Australia. They had lost many family members and were still suffering from the oedema caused by starvation. This was not the only problem as fighting between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese in areas along the Thai border was causing more refugees to flee for their lives. Shawcross (1984:90) reported the famous incident where approximately 45,000 of these refugees were heartlessly robbed at the Thai border and many pushed down the cliffs of Preah Vihar by the Thai military. Without food or water they then faced a three-day trek through a large, heavily mined field. At the same time, the Thai allowed the Khmer Rouge to remain in well-hidden enclaves along their southern border. In a 1987 visit to the Khao I Dang refugee camp in Thailand (a non-KR camp), I witnessed the aggressive, suspicious and exploitive approach of Thai officials at all levels. Refugees related horrific descriptions of persistent military involvement in terrorising, raping, robbing and abusing them, and even desecrating their dead. Actions such as these resulted in

under Lon Nol, "Are you in good health?"; under the Khmer Rouge "How much food do you get in your cooperative"; and under Heng Samrin, "How many of your family are still alive?"

²¹ Other international organisations involved in Kampuchean Humanitarian Assistance Programs were: FAO, ICM, UNBRO, UNDP, UNHCR, WFP and WHO (UN, 1986). Although resources were extremely limited in Cambodia, Mysliwiec (1988:66) informs us there were 27 NGOs from Australia, Europe and USA with about 40 staff in Phnom Penh. Their projects included nutrition centres, hospital equipment, health education, artificial limbs, water supply, irrigation, rice research and veterinary assistance.

widespread resentment and mistrust among many Cambodians towards their more culturally compatible Thai neighbours.

In 1980, according to Vickery (1984:237), the population of Phnom Penh had grown to approximately 200,000, including 50,000 state employees, growing to over 600,000 in 1982. Martin (1986:217) reminds us that in Phnom Penh every member of the new People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government was assigned a Vietnamese 'adviser', and every document written by a Khmer official had to be undersigned by the Vietnamese authority assigned to their department. Also, the Vietnamese government had installed 180,000 soldiers throughout the country, which they maintained throughout most of their ten-year occupation. Martin observed that with Cambodians still reeling from the horrors of the KR, it was less than a year before it became apparent that the Vietnamese 'liberation' was in fact another 'occupation'. Cambodians not only had to endure a new form of communism, but the domination of their traditionally feared and hated Vietnamese neighbours. Many believed they were attempting to de-Khmerise the population. The situation caused a continuing exodus of the few surviving Khmer professionals including administrators, physicians, teachers and technicians, further depleting the country's scant resources.

By 1982, according to Boua (1983:61), industries in the city were being rehabilitated and smuggling across the borders was thriving. However, massive health care problems revealed by an FAO survey in 1983 described the health system as 'disastrous' and nearing deep crisis, with no Khmer doctors in any of the seven provinces visited (Shawcross, 1984:399-400). There was a lot of wastage of materials and equipment due to a lack of understanding of their use. Shawcross also noted increasing deterioration of the roads, severe lack of water, and threats of further food shortages, despite the inflow of aid. He found that Cambodians were resentful of the Vietnamese, complaining that hundreds of thousands of them were moving into their country and being granted civil rights superior to theirs. Added to this, large quantities of Cambodian fish were being exported to Vietnam, resulting in more resentment (p.417). Vickery (1984:240) noted that communication and travel outside Phnom Penh were extremely difficult, and the roads were in such an appalling state that transport of food and commodities was severely curtailed. Added to this, KR soldiers, officially recognised as

the legal rulers of the country by the UN, were busily laying mines on connecting roads each night. These had to be cleared the following morning, necessitating constant patrolling by Vietnamese troops. To encourage the people to produce enough food for themselves, and not be dependent on charity or loans from abroad, the new regime reorganised food production by setting up provincial and district administration centres. However, at the same time Vietnam was systematically moving their border eastward at several kilometres a year, and numerous reports revealed that 'yellow rain' was intermittently falling, particularly in KR-controlled areas. The Vietnamese were also using mycotoxins to poison the vegetables, particularly along the Thai border (Martin, 1986).

Marie Martin (1986:234-35) has argued that under the PRK, Vietnamisation was enforced at all levels. This included government-controlled entertainment, music, theatre, the arts, songs and choirs, cinema, television, books, clothing and museums. There was also free settlement of Vietnamese in all parts of Cambodia. They established a National Day of Hatred, and killing and torture places of the Khmer Rouge were turned into museums to remind people of the horrors of their previous regime. Television and movie houses showed news and political films, and the only books permitted were those dealing favourably with Stalinist communism and Vietnam. There was also strong encouragement of mixed marriages between Vietnamese and Khmer. Although Kiernan (Kiernan & Boua, 1982:368) claimed there was religious freedom in Phnom Penh in the 1980s, Martin (1994:237-39) pointed out that religion was in fact discouraged by the Vietnamese, revealing their official communist position as "religion is a poison, like opium; it is better to give money to help the soldiers fight". Pagodas were limited to one for each commune, with only one or two elderly men permitted to serve as monks. These monks were supervised and half the pagoda offerings were sent to support the local revolutionary committee. Cadres were taught that "religion and communism do not mix", so kept any beliefs they had towards spirits or occult powers to themselves.

Martin (1994:238) notes that shortened traditional weddings were now permitted, but permission had to be gained to allow dancing, resulting in the loss of their religious and socio-economic significance. In 1987, I found that a five o'clock curfew was being imposed in Phnom Penh. I witnessed a wedding at that time, where no-one was smiling.

Throughout the country clothing was standardised for government workers. Men were required to wear plain and sober attire, and women to wear black, brown or navy skirts with modest, loosely fitting blouses. No brightly coloured prints or western pants were permitted. People needed authorisation requiring several signatures to visit their relatives. “Daily life in its entirety as well as cultural practices were challenged ... Cambodians no longer lead a normal family life - fathers in the army, sons engaged in clearing operations, daughters in the militia, and mothers in the village production team ... travel was regulated (restricting friendships, family and business) ... marriages, formerly the occasion of get-togethers, were celebrated hastily. Traditional village life, with the pagoda as its religious, social, and economic axis, no longer existed.” (Martin, 1994:39)

As Chandler (1993:230) has pointed out, under the PRK lands and the means of agricultural production were state property, but the much-hated collectives and communes of the KR period were not reintroduced. Instead, a new system was introduced in which land tenure was allocated to administrative units, family lots and *krom sammaki* (solidarity groups). The *krom sammaki* were usually composed of ten to fifteen families using separate or communal paddy land averaging two hectares per family (Mysliwiec, 1988:28-29). Families pooled their labour, farm tools and animals. The system included all types of productive activities such as fishing and craft work. Returned people were allowed to occupy their former holdings within size constraints, and local officials helped resolve conflict and encourage fair distribution. In 1983, taxes or 'patriotic contributions' of about ten percent of the rice yield were introduced. Mysliwiec maintains that without these groups, up to one third of rural families would not have survived, due to lack of tools, draught animals and male workers. In agreement, Boua (1983:261) recorded a large number of peasant women claiming that, apart from providing a measure of protection from KR robbers, the *krom sammaki* offered security to vulnerable women and children. They also offered security to non-farming workers such as teachers and nurses, as well as to the handicapped, through shared labour and production.²² But according to Frings (1994:50), because the people had no guarantee of ownership, they hesitated to clear new land. This had a negative effect on the distribution of the labour force, and was not

²² Frings (1994) argued that in hindsight, the main aim of enforced collectivisation was not to boost agricultural production, but to rally popular support to compensate for unpopular measures such as the enforced conscription of young men.

economically productive. After suffering under both the KR and PRK, many people had developed hatred for organised communal farming, and in early 1989, after four years as prime minister, Hun Sen announced that solidarity groups were to “completely disappear in the near future”.

Although schools and education were being reintroduced in the late 1970s under the Heng Samrin PRK, with most of the teachers having been killed under the KR, teachers were poorly educated and often illiterate. Vickery (1984:230) points out that primary school books introduced in this era were similar to those used under Sihanouk, and *chbab* laws were gradually added to the school curriculum. However, two unpopular new subjects, Vietnamese language and politics (Viet-Lao-Khmer friendship) were also introduced.²³ Although Mysliwiec (1988:41) records that by 1986 there was virtually 100 percent enrolment in grades one to eight, Martin (1994:232) writes that children accessing eighth grade and above were almost exclusively the sons of officials. Further to this, she claims that children from eighth grade not attending school were given one of two choices, the army or clearing operations. I heard many stories of army recruitment drives where male students were forcibly taken from high school or off the street with no warning, to serve in the army. My driver in Phnom Penh was one of these conscripts, together with seven of his classmates. He was trained as a tank driver. His mother was financially ruined when she sacrificed everything she owned, trying unsuccessfully to buy him back from corrupt army officials. After five years, although he survived, all his friends had died, and he felt that his life had been ruined.

An ADB mission in 1992 (cited in Duggan, 1994b:26) found that under the Vietnamese about 6,500 teachers had been trained in short pre-service programs. Even so, by 1989 only 25 percent of primary teachers and 40 percent of secondary teachers had received any kind of formal training at all. Many had simply been ‘picked off the street and put into classrooms (Duggan, interview 1996). Duggan and Daroesman (1998:43)

²³ In 1992, Sylvia Reese (education adviser in charge of the upgrading of primary school teachers) assured me that the official education policy under the Vietnamese had consisted of only three parts. These included: firstly, communism; secondly, science which was Marxism and Leninism; and thirdly, the consolidation of both. She also explained that until 1989 the teaching of English and French was prohibited in Cambodia, while languages of the Soviet Bloc were encouraged.

revealed that in this period the Vietnamese introduced fourteen Technical, Vocational and Educational Training (TVET) colleges and units to train government staff in all ministries. Martin (1994:234) told of Vietnamese orphans being sent in truckloads of orphans to study in Hanoi while others were sent to learn skills under the tutelage of Vietnamese government departments. She claims that the most gifted children were sent to study in Vietnam and the others to Eastern Europe. In Hanoi, some were trained especially to take over leadership positions in the PRK. High schools and university subjects were reintroduced as teachers became available. However, the collapse of bilateral assistance from the Soviet Union and Vietnam in 1986 saw the trainers from these countries return home, and their units fall into disuse. People trained in this regime were to become the main source of government employees in the 1990s.

As many of the women active in politics and NGOs in the 1990s received their first experience in the Revolutionary Women's Association of Cambodia (RWAC), it is of interest to this thesis to outline their function in the 1980s. RWAC was the only women's organisation in the country, which according to Sonnois (1990:43) was created at the time of the Vietnamese liberation for the political purpose of explaining government policies to women to obtain their support and participation in implementation. All women above eighteen were supposed to be members, and theoretically numbers totalled around 1,800,000. Originally called RWAK, its name was changed to WAC in 1989 when the constitution was revised. RWAK was committed to promoting women's equal rights; to encouraging women to participate in all aspects of political, economic, social and cultural life; to increasing the educational level of women; and to improving the welfare of women and children.

Sonnois (1990:43) notes that RWAC was well structured at all levels, employing 100 cadres at central level, 10-15 at provincial, 5-8 at district, 3-4 at sub-district, two at village, and one at 'solidarity group' level, in both the countryside and towns. The four departments maintained at the central and provincial levels were Administration, Organisation, Propaganda and Education, and Protection of the Interests of Mothers and Children. RWAC also played an important role in promoting and mobilising the government-led literacy campaign from 1979-88. The salaries of all cadres down to sub-district levels were paid at the same low rates as all civil servants, while others were

volunteers. Many women were widows from the Pol Pot period or single women, and even though general training sessions were provided for cadres, there was a severe shortage of qualified or experienced personnel. Many of these women were unable to devote much time to their positions in RWAK, due to their need to undertake supplementary economic activities to provide for their children. Added to this, Ashton (1990) found that the differing levels of depression and trauma facing the leaders of women's groups impacted on regional variations to the success of their organisations. After 1985, due to the enormous needs of its members, there was a push from the women to shift from a policy of mobilisation to one of women's projects and welfare. This opened up the support of international aid agencies to implement development projects to benefit women. Ashton points out that RWAC was meant to provide input about women's needs into government policies; however, as occurred in the 1990s, there was little evidence of impact because of lack of support from government ministries due to negative perceptions of the status of women and the status of the organisation itself.

Despite lack of support for women by government ministries, Ebihara (1990b:38-39) notes a major development under the PRK in terms of the reuniting of families and networks to care for those in need. However, there were many instances of divorce rather than reunion, especially among those who had been forcibly married under the KR regime. Added to this, widespread premarital and extramarital activities were seen as departures from traditional culture, particularly in the city. This was a result of the decreased male population, combined with huge economic and psychological problems following the severity of the KR regime. Vickery (1984:240) estimates that 65 percent of the population were women in the early 1980s. Some interviewees assured me that in certain villages, particularly in the north-west region, there were no male survivors at all. Vickery saw many men with several wives as everyone was bravely trying to rebuild the country. Consequently, in this society where children are traditionally desired and treasured, there was a baby boom. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 1995:7-8) reported government estimates of the population reaching eight million in the 1980's period. Two thirds of these (89% agrarian) were concentrated in the central plain, south of the Tonle Sap Lake. With nearly half of the population under sixteen (one third of these being under three years old), the economically active population was only around three million, placing a huge burden on

the women. The return of border camp refugees, the majority of whom were widows and children, added to the landless poor and further diminished the status of women in the 1990s. At the same time, as David Chandler pointed out (Monash University Series lecture, March 1999), refugees educated and experienced in assisting Western NGOs in border camps, were to form the basis of the much-derided NGOs of the 1990s.

Clearly, this period was subject to particularly conflicting reports. They varied according to the biases of those interviewed, and the interviewers themselves. For example, Rowley (1995:195), in his review of *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, criticised Martin for failing to recognise the reports of Vickery and others who acknowledged the extent of rebuilding rather than destruction under the Vietnamese ‘protectorate’. In explanation, Hunt (1997:9) sensibly argued that differing accounts of this period written by Cambodian ‘experts’ such as Vickery, Boua and Martin were not wrong, but portrayed different parts of the truth. In my interviews with Cambodian women I was struck by their differing opinions. Some were desperate for ‘freedom’, while others were grateful to the Vietnamese, saying, “at least we have enough to eat now”. However, by the time the Vietnamese withdrew in 1989 and the international community was beginning to focus on the situation facing the Cambodian population, a more coherent picture began to emerge, mainly in ‘safe’ areas not occupied by the KR. The Cambodian National Assembly attempted to re-establish an acceptable Khmer identity, remodelling the constitution and announcing a series of reforms making Buddhism the state religion. This allowed farmers to pass land titles on to their children, and householders to buy and sell land. The death penalty was abolished. Free markets and black markets began to flourish, and collectivism was dead. After fifteen years of personal, social and cultural decimation, the people were longing to return to freedom and to rebuild their lives.

In reconstituting their post-KR identity, Cambodians demonstrated a wide range of ‘positionalities’ within Khmer Buddhism that revealed enduring connections with their past history. The majority of women living in the hierarchical and often-corrupt male-dominated society of the 1990s cared and provided for their families in a dangerous environment. They followed their customs and beliefs, and accepted and endured all that came their way. As this chapter has signalled, women at all levels of society continued to be guided by handed-down stories, proverbs and rules describing the ‘ideal woman’.

Women were conditioned to believe that they were the cause of failure when things didn't work out within their family. Although even the rich and more educated women had little power outside their home, some were able to achieve a level of autonomy. A few managed to achieve considerable levels of status and power, choosing to follow the more ancient Khmer models. But before dealing with how Cambodian women accessed the range of historically available cultural models to make meaning of their lives during the 1990s democratisation and WID/GAD development processes, I will provide an overview of the mix of methodologies I have employed to give voice to these women.