International Journal of Asian Studies (2024), 1–18
doi:10.1017/S1479591424000184

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Embodied national history: leaders, regime change, and regional historiographical trends of independent Cambodia

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(Received 1 August 2023; revised 15 April 2024; accepted 23 April 2024)

Abstract

Post-independence national historical writings have often been seen as a product of nationalist advocacy and modern nation-state formation. Moving beyond this perspective, this article considers how political leaders took a direct role in promoting different kinds and forms of collective historical thoughts to strengthen their leadership. Specifically, the article explores an active engagement of independent Cambodia's leaders such as Prince Sihanouk, Lon Nol, and Pol Pot, who independently saw national historical understanding as one's own monopolized source of power. It also discusses how different historical accounts in the country were shaped by, and kept up with, other important factors such as Cold War confrontations and regional and global historiographical trends, including "Modernist" and "Marxist" approaches. Discussing these factors helps us understand more critically national historical accounts, which were closely intertwined with specific socioreligious and political circumstances such as political rule and legitimacy, widespread public anxieties, and geopolitical tensions. It also sheds light on the substantial impact of state-imposed historical interpretations on society. As informed by the Cambodian case, this impact can be seen in the implementation of state projects stirred by certain kinds of historical understanding which consequently transformed the living conditions of thousands of people.

Keywords: colonial historiography; independent Cambodia; Marxist historiography; Modernist historical approaches; nationalist historical writings; Sihanouk; Lon Nol; Pol Pot

Introduction

Post-independence national historiography can theoretically be understood through what Duara (1995) describes as repressive, exclusionary, and incomplete accounts because it closely followed the colonial linear-mode framework that heavily imposed the notion of modern nation-state upon historical understanding. He (1995, p. 5) notes in his discussion of early-twentieth-century China that the colonial model of history allowed "the nation-state to see itself as a unique form of community which finds its place in the oppositions between tradition and modernity, hierarchy and equality, empire and nation." What Duara argues is largely applicable to the contexts of Southeast Asian countries, including independent Cambodia, where national historiography emphasized long progressive historical development. Many historical accounts produced during those years are full of historical inaccuracies mainly because they impose a strong sense of presentism and nationalistic views on the understanding of past events.

Nevertheless, post-independence historical accounts in Southeast Asia, and perhaps elsewhere, are not a matter solely of their inaccurate historical representation and an intimate relationship with

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nation-state formation or nationalism. Instead, it had much more to do with multiple changing factors at the national, regional, and international levels which directly shaped the production and circulation of certain kinds and forms of domestic historical understanding. In Cambodia, for example, all major local historical scholarships were produced to respond to specific sociocultural and political circumstances such as national and international Cold War contestations, public anxieties, or regime change. Moreover, its production, apart from fostering nationalist sentiment and patriotism, was primarily aimed to construct the particular identity of a leader, an institution, a political movement, and even an ethnic group. Exploring these intentions allows us to move closer to the relative circumstances, within which these historical accounts were produced, circulated, and receipted by the larger public. It also allows us to think more broadly about post-independence national historiography which is not always concerned with the abstract sense of modern nation-state and nationalism.

This article demonstrates that the production of independent Cambodia's historical works was directly shaped by, and kept up with, the emergence of the predominant role of individual leaders such as Prince Sihanouk, Lon Nol, and Pol Pot, who independently re-formulated collective understanding to conform with their own political motivations. The contents of national historical narrative were also influenced by other driving forces such as colonial-era historical frameworks, popular religious beliefs, Cold War contestations, as well as regional and global historiographical trends such as "Modernist" (notions of nationality and mass cultural elements) and "Marxist" historical approaches. Discussing these multiple factors is crucial for uncovering the central role and motivations of individual leaders in manipulating collective historical understanding among the larger public. It also sheds light on the employment of certain forms and themes of historical views to justify and tackle social issues, public angsts, state policies, and political control. Here, we begin the article with how powerful rulers such as Prince Sihanouk, who successfully declared Cambodia's independence from French colonial rule (1863–1953) in 1953, came up with their own version of historical trajectory which consequently transformed the format and contents of collective understanding after they seized power.

National history and Sihanouk's uncontested rule

Sihanouk's rule between 1955 and 1970 marked the most important moment when colonial-era historical scholarship was widely used for strengthening the power of Cambodian leaders. Since the emergence of the French model of historical writings in Cambodia during the 1900s, no Khmer rulers were interested in turning the colonial scholarship into their own monopolized source of political power. Local rulers such as King Sisowath (r. 1904–1927) and King Monivong (r. 1927–1941) largely ignored what the French wrote about Cambodia's long historical development while the two royal courts continued to revise and reproduce their chronicle history-making to advocate them among the Cambodian public (Thun 2024, pp. 52–62). Despite this, French colonial-era historiography had a profound impact on Cambodia's nationalist thought and movements since the 1920s. Key aspects of Cambodia's historical knowledge such as those related to the founding of the Khmer Kingdom and the Angkor civilization were adopted by local nationalists, particularly those affiliated with the Buddhist Institute and the *Nagara Vatta* newspaper, and turned them into an important source of patriotism and national pride (Edwards 2007; Thun 2024, pp. 63–109; Thun and Keo 2024).

As far as King Sihanouk (r. 1941–1955) was concerned, since the early years of his reign, the Cambodian palace gave up the practice of composing chronicle manuscripts following the history-making tradition of his royal predecessors. Following Sihanouk's abdication of the throne and his political takeover in the mid-1950s, the Prince became the first Cambodian ruler who directly engaged with French scholarship by incorporating it into his own historical discussions and skillfully utilizing it for the promotion of his leadership. It is surely significant that unlike his predecessors, Sihanouk had been educated in colonial schools and thus more directly influenced by such scholarship.

The ideas that Sihanouk promoted during those years were intended to cultivate a form of collective understanding that positioned himself, rather than the nation, as a living-divine leader. He did so

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through a series of historical manipulations that aim to resemble his leadership with that of ancient Khmer kings, especially those belonged to the Angkor period between the ninth and thirteenth centuries (Barnett 1990; Osborne 1966). Historical knowledge related to ancient Khmer civilization, especially the Angkor Empire and its powerful rulers such as King Jayavarman II (r. 802–835), King Suryavarman II (r. 1113–1150), and King Jayavarman VII (r. 1181–1210s), was largely produced in French via colonial-era scholarship since the 1900s.[1] The colonial scholarship depicted them through the historical understanding of their successes in wars, territorial expansion, statecraft, temple construction, and public infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, and water reservoirs. Angkor kings such as Jayavarman II were characterized by French colonial scholars, especially George Cœdès, as having a political attempt to promote themselves as the "Devarāja" or "God-King" to overcome chaotic situations as well as disseminate their supreme rule among other divided rulers (Cœdès 1944, p. 124).[2] Having learned about Angkor rulers and the Angkor civilization from the French, Sihanouk and those who supported his leadership aspired to associate socio-economic and religious components of modern-day Cambodia with historical events that occurred in Cambodia's long-distant past.

Embodied the imaginary Dhammik king

Sihanouk's direct engagement with national history can be furthermore understood through the promotion of his religious virtue to tackle public angst regarding a widespread rumor of an impending social disorder and warfare that arose during Cambodia's celebration of the 2,500th Anniversary of Buddhism in May 1957. This seven-day event marked the most important moment of Buddhism in the kingdom, along with many Buddhist countries around the world, as it brought together people from all walks of life, including the King and the Queen, Prince Sihanouk, the heads of the sangha, as well as foreign ambassadors, to commemorate what was called a "National Celebration of the 2500th Anniversary of Buddhism."[3] The rumor was associated with the midpoint of the prophesied 5,000-year life span of the teachings of the Buddha, and it was widely discussed among secular and religious circles at that time. Its core story line goes:

> Upon the year 2500 of the Buddhist era, a destructive war in our world will break out. People will kill one another, causing the flood of blood to rise up the level of an elephant's belly. Encountering such chaotic situations, a meritorious man known as the Dhammik king will arise to overcome all the turmoil and to drive society and Buddhism toward prosperity.[4]

Symbolizing the largest and most powerful animal known to most Cambodians, the elephant's presence suggests a Buddhist characteristic for the rumor because the animal symbolizes loyalty, wisdom, patience, and strength in Buddhism. As Hansen (2018) points out, this rumor involved ongoing prophetic anxieties in Theravada Buddhist countries about the impending decline of the Dhamma in relation to key geopolitical contestations associated with the early Cold War era. Its larger implication concerned with a collective effort by Buddhist intellectuals who intended to foster Buddha's teachings and promote Buddhism as a world religion which was able to illuminate the world and foster world peace. The Dhammik king depicted in the rumor was not an actual person, and ideas formulated about this imaginary figure were associated with a "millenarian thinking" that took shape in

[1]For a more detailed discussion, see Cœdès (1944); Leclère (1914); and Aymonier (1904).

[2]For a good counter argument about "devarāja" as opposed to that of Cœdès and other French scholars, see Kulke (1978).

[3]For a more thorough discussion of the 2500th Anniversary of Buddhism, see Marston (2016).

[4]This is based on a letter written by a pseudonymous person who called himself Bu Srae on May 9, 1957. The letter, which appears in the form of a true confession, was published and distributed along with Bu Srae's other letters by Wat Ounalom in Phnom Penh during the 2500th Anniversary of Buddhism. The letters are kept at the National Archives in Phnom Penh, Box no. 511. I am grateful to Anne Hansen for bringing these letters to my attention. See also Buddhist Institute (1957, p. v).

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Cambodia at least since the mid-nineteenth century. Emerging as a belief of Buddha's prophecies (*buddh daṃnāy*), nineteenth-century Khmer notion of millenarian thinking portrayed the Dhammik king as the one who emerged in the midst of social turmoil causing calamitous death and social destruction. He, then, embodied in or reincarnated as a particular Buddhist leader whose destiny was to overcome all societal upheaval, as well as to bring peace and prosperity to the land (see Hansen 2007, p. 56; Harris 2005, p. 169, for more). Similar phenomena occurred in other Buddhist societies such as Burma, where the belief of an imaginary righteous ruler or a millenarian leader was widespread throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Foxeus 2023; Gravers 2012; Hansen 2014, pp. 231–32).

In Cambodia, both the celebration and the amplification of the impending social turmoil and destruction were directed at turning Sihanouk into a modern millenarian Buddhist ruler. There was an explicit assertion by a group of leading scholars and Buddhist monks affiliated with the Buddhist Institute[5] who claimed that Prince Sihanouk was the embodiment of the Dhammik king. In their edited volume produced to commemorate the 2,500th Anniversary of Buddhism, they stated that Samdech Preah Upayuvarāj, referring to Sihanouk's royal title after his abdication which means "lord young prince who has been king," was a meritorious man (*anak mān puṇy*) who provided all kinds of support for Buddhism. He himself was a Buddhist monk once, and his traits perfectly matched the description of Dhammik king. "The Prince embodies the Preah Pād Dhammik, who we have heard repeatedly about in the Buddhist prophecy. He is the father of our national independence, and the one who liberates us from all kinds of sorrow and brings peace and prosperity to our country" (Buddhist Institute 1957, p. v).

Sihanouk's embodiment of the Dhammik king was also highlighted in another Khmer text distributed during the 2,500th Anniversary celebration.[6] A drawing of Sihanouk's portrait appears in the middle of Cambodia's map on its cover (Figures 1 and 2), the text title reads: *Preah Petā Ekarāj Jāti*, which means "the royal father of national independence." Its sub-title on the second page reads: *Neḥ Preah Pād Dhammik*, which means "this is the Dhammik king." Although the text defines the term "dhammik" by associating it with anyone who is truly faithful to the teachings of the Buddha, the way it was construed shows a clear intention to depict Sihanouk as the Dhammik king (OCCAB 1957, pp. 1–4).

Religious, historical, and sociopolitical connotations

Connecting one's body into meanings at varying scales, embodiment can largely be understood as the strengthening of social and cultural relations through and by the body. Apart from representing an individual figure, the embodied body is being made up by external forces (Cresswell 1999, p. 179). Sihanouk's embodiment of the Dhammik king indicated the effort to integrate his public persona with a well-known imaginary character whose image carried significant religious, historical, and sociopolitical connotations. In doing so, the Prince could intelligibly merge his leadership with important elements such as Buddhism, popular beliefs, and collective historical understanding. His action, in fact, intersected with three overlapping circumstances when the Prince was holding uncontested power in determining Cambodia's domestic politics and foreign policy.

First and foremost, it had to do with the construction of Sihanouk's Buddhist kingship, which was directly aimed at fostering his popularity among Cambodian Buddhists who accounted for over 90% of the total population. This construction was carried out by placing his moral political power on the 5,000-year timespan of the Buddhist temporal understanding. In doing so, it allowed these writers to present the leadership of the prince to the Cambodian public as being predestined for saving

[5]The Buddhist Institute was the most important state-sponsored scholarly institution on the studies of history, culture, and religions. Founded since 1930, it ran a popular scholarly magazine called *Kampuchèa Sauriya* (Cambodia Sun). See Thun (2020).

[6]The text was authored by the Organizing Committee of the Celebration of the 2500th Anniversary of Buddhism (hereafter OCCAB) and published in 1957.

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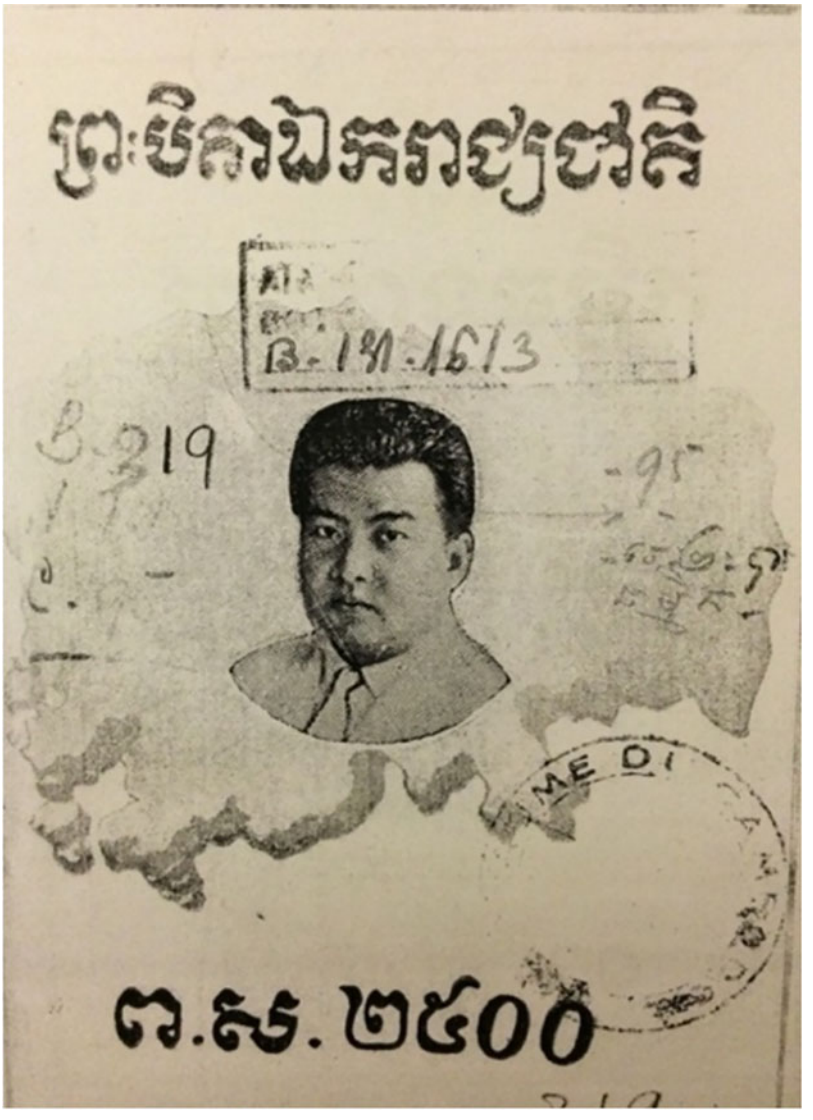

Figure 1. Drawing of Sihanouk's portrait appearing in the middle of the Cambodian map on its cover, the text's title reading: Preah Pitā Ekarāj Jāti [the royal father of national independence]. Photo courtesy: National Archives of Cambodia.

Buddhism and the kingdom from any potential catastrophes. Through his embodiment of the Dhammik king, Sihanouk was predestined to overcome any impending wars and destructions, such as the cataclysm circulated in the rumor that potentially ruined the kingdom and disrupted the 5,000-year timespan of the Buddhist teachings. Furthermore, the embodiment helped to place the Prince at the center of national prosperity because it equipped him with a supreme sacred duty as a Buddhist leader capable of ensuring the continuation and flourishing of Buddhism, which was accepted as the state religion. This practice essentially transformed him into an inseparable component of the Cambodian nation, which was in turn embodied by Sihanouk himself. The construction of Sihanouk's public image during those years was largely comparable to that of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946–2016) of Thailand, who was regarded by many as a semi-divine Buddhist ruler and the embodiment of the Thai nation. As shown by his significant role in navigating Thai political

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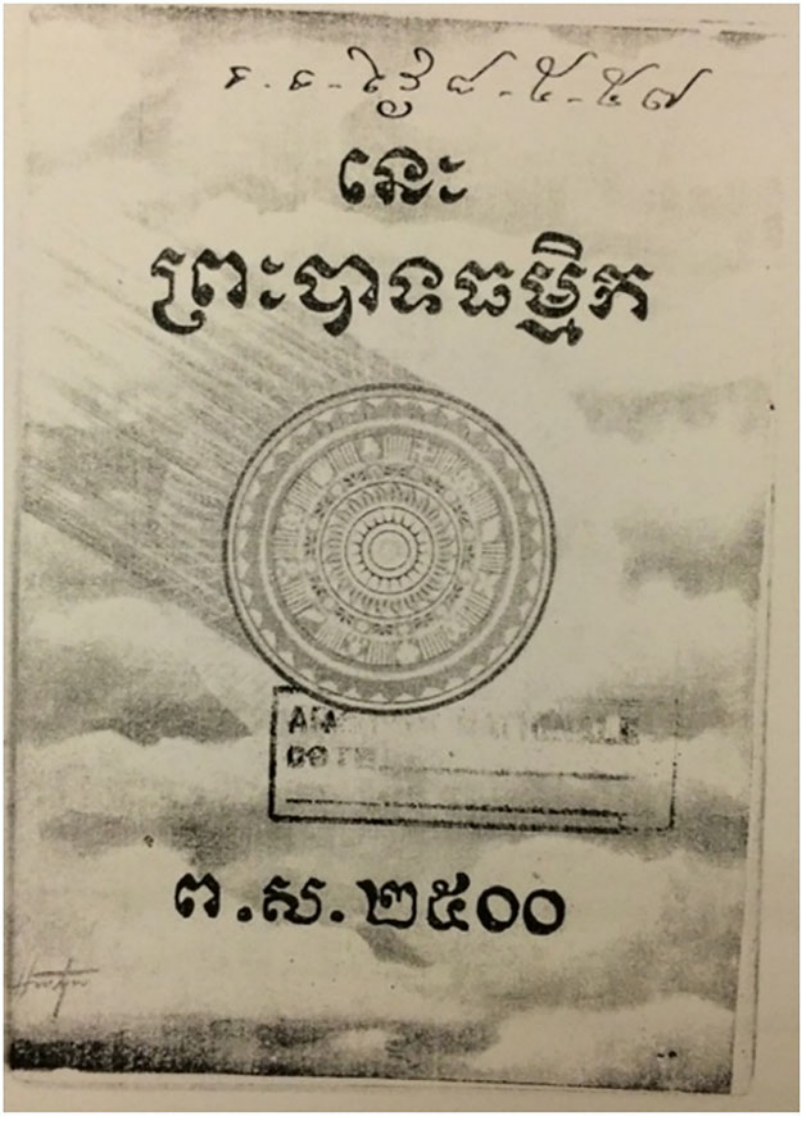

Figure 2. The text's subtitle on the second page reading: Neḥ Preah Pād Dhammik [this is the Dhammik king]. Photo courtesy: National Archives of Cambodia.

crises during his 70-year reign, the King was frequently bestowed with considerable power to address national crises (Gravers 2012, p. 340).

Second, Sihanouk's embodiment was a justification for an "ideal king" or "righteous ruler" of post-independence Cambodia which he and his supporters, including the sangha community, tried to construct. Largely in line with the notion of "ideal ruler" which Heng (1994, 2008) discusses in his writings on good governance in the Buddhist teachings, this embodiment aimed to characterize Sihanouk as the "ideal ruler" who promoted ideas of the "Sangkum Reastr Niyum Preah Buddhsāsnā" or "people's Buddhist socialist community," widely referred to as Buddhist socialism.[7] A similar attempt was carried

[7]According to Chandler (1991, p. 87), as far as Sihanouk was concerned, this socialism was a matter of keeping things as they were, expanding educational facilities, and hoping for the best.

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out by post-independence Southeast Asian leaders such as U Nu of Burma, who also promoted ideas of Buddhist socialism as his domestic and foreign state policies. U Nu himself was being depicted by his supporters as the ideal Buddhist ruler who would become a Buddha in a future life (Sarkisyanz 1965, pp. 209–10). For Sihanouk, the embodiment existed as a core of his self-defined Buddhist leadership style, which was proclaimed as a combined doctrine of Buddhism and traditional Khmer kingship inspired by Angkor rulers such as Jayavarman VII (Osborne 1966, p. 11). This justification characterizes the way in which the Sihanouk regime re-defined modern Khmer kingship by utilizing the existing historical understanding of Angkor kingship and the ongoing popular beliefs and anxieties of the 1950s. What he did was not merely about using these historical consciousness and beliefs to justify his rule and policies, but it also involved an effort to bring these understanding and beliefs to life through his own cult of personality.

Sihanouk's embodiment of the Dhammik king was deliberately aligned with the existing historical understanding of Angkor ruler Jayavarman II, who was depicted by Cœdès (1944, p. 124) in 1944 as having embodied the god Vishnu in order to turn himself into the "Devarāja" or "God-King" to disseminate his rule among other divided rulers during the 900s. Similar to Jayavarman II, Sihanouk re-introduced ideas of embodiment or reincarnation to post-independence Cambodia by associating himself with a popular mythical Buddhist figure who was believed to be capable of bringing lawful order and prosperity to the kingdom. Sihanouk's embodiment was not only to revise and reintroduce the Hindu kingship of "God-King" by inserting Buddhist elements into it to be congruent with the popular beliefs or faiths of contemporary Cambodia, but it also was centered around an effort to turn himself into modern Cambodia's "God-King," who was described by the OCCAB (1957, pp. 1–4) as being capable of overcoming any living and spiritual being in any realms across the Buddhist cosmology. Sihanouk (1963, p. 3) himself said that the Cambodian people venerated him with the respect of a "god" and held him as a "sacred character." While this assertion was largely true, particularly among the vast majority of rural peasants, Sihanouk's statement showed the existence of a belief in the "God-King," inspired by French colonial-era scholarship, which he himself claimed to embody through the imaginary Dhammik king.

Third, to some lesser extent, Sihanouk's embodiment intersected with the promotion of his neutral foreign policy which was enacted as the law in 1957. This policy was launched after the Geneva Conference in 1954, and it was essentially influenced by Sihanouk's concern to save Cambodia from war and foreign occupations (Martin 1994, p. 87). While keeping the country from becoming either a capitalist or a socialist state through the so-called "Non-Aligned Movement," the policy, in turn, gave the Prince considerable freedom to maneuver Cambodia's foreign relations (Mabbett and Chandler 1995, p. 241). The association of Sihanouk's public image with the Dhammik king was a convenient justification for his policy which was depicted as a key principle of Buddha's teachings of "upekkhā" (middle-ness or being non-biased). Through Sihanouk's Buddhist kingship of the Dhammik king, Prince's political stance was comprehensible because it naturally demonstrated the Buddhist perception of being neutral within the larger international community, which was divided between the Free World and the Communist Bloc.[8]

Other Sihanouk's historical depictions

Besides the Dhammik king, Sihanouk went to great lengths to mirror his own leadership to that of Cambodian rulers of the past, particularly those of the Angkor era between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. He often projected himself as the reincarnation of Angkor ruler Jayavarman VII and had his profile photographically compared to that of the great Angkor emperor (Barnett 1990, pp. 122–23). Similarly, Sihanouk's reference to the Angkor era frequently occurred during his speeches at the inauguration of public infrastructure projects such as railways, schools, irrigation systems, and hospitals.

[8]Sihanouk's policy was publicly endorsed by top leaders of the sangha including Huot Tat, who praised the Prince's leadership and neutral foreign policy in his publication. See Huot (1961, pp. 6–7).

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Simultaneously, the Prince contrasted the grandeur and power in Angkor times with the decline that occurred from the fifteenth century, in which both Thailand and Vietnam were blamed for causing such an enduring decline from the fourteenth century onwards (Osborne 1966, pp. 4–8; 1994, p. 13). Despite a series of defeats, retreats, and interferences imposed by the Siamese and Vietnamese courts on the Khmer court between the fourteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, Sihanouk (1958, p. 6) praised the Khmer monarchs during this historical period as the ones who had "dignifiedly fulfilled their duties as Kings and defenders of the nation." He (1958, p. 12) staunchly endorsed post-Angkor Khmer rulers like King Jay Jestha II (r. 1610s–1620s), who faced accusations by modern Cambodian nationalists of ceding the territory of Prey Nokor (also known as Cochinchina and Kampuchea Krom/Khmer Krom, situated on the Mekong Delta) to Vietnam as a politically necessary and unavoidable action.

Contradicting Sihanouk's portrayal of Jay Jestha II, a new study (Thun and Keo 2024) reveals that the historical understanding of King Jay Jestha II's cede of the territory of Kampuchea Krom or the Mekong Delta to Vietnam was "fabricated" by writers of the 1904 Khmer palace chronicle. In fact, Vietnam of the Nguyen court's territorial expansion over the Mekong Delta began in the late seventeenth century (not Jay Jestha II's reign in the early seventeenth century).

Sihanouk's historical depiction effectively helped him to draw a rallying point for unity behind his domestic and foreign policies, as well as the Khmer palace institution. The projection of his administration's achievements appareled with those of the Angkor era aimed to portray the Prince as one of the great Khmer rulers capable of bridging modern-day Cambodia with its glorious past. Moreover, his argument for Cambodia's decline during the post-Angkor era encompassed some historical accuracy, but the employment of his postcolonial nation-centric view upon those precolonial interstate contestations is historically inaccurate. While showing little concern with this precolonial historical understanding *per se*, Sihanouk's reference to this episode of the past was in fact politically motivated by Cambodia's ongoing territorial and diplomatic conflicts with the Sarit Thanarat government of Thailand[9] and the Ngo Dinh Diem administration of South Vietnam during the late 1950s and 1960s. Through a historical projection, he could intelligently associate the current disputes with those precolonial interstate contestations. Thus, it allowed him to turn the disputes into historical warfare with the two historical enemies which Sihanouk (1965, pp. 14–17) himself characterized in 1965 as the "Eaters" of Cambodian territory. It also offered the Prince a "historic duty" to lead the country to confront with the leaders of Thailand and Vietnam to ensure Cambodia's survival and prosperity.

Furthermore, Sihanouk's depiction of the Angkor and post-Angkor periods was intended to promote the monarchy as a unifying force for the Cambodian political community, of which the Prince held a dual role as a representative of the Palace Institution (even when he was no longer King) and Chief of State (Osborne 1966, pp. 9–10). In fact, regardless of any episodes of national history, his trajectory to the collective past was central to his intention to establish the monarchy as the essence of national life in building, protecting, and struggling for Cambodia's survival and prosperity.

As far as Sihanouk remained in charge, the understanding of Cambodia's collective past had to be carried out through his political views, state propaganda, palace institution, and, most importantly, the Prince himself as the uncontested political and spiritual figurehead. Apart from these, his regime embraced Khmer ethnicity[10] as the core of Cambodia's citizenship, nationality, and patriotism. Starting from the 1960s, there was a noticeable surge of local scholars' endeavor to advance the Khmer language and the study of Mon–Khmer ethnic groups and cultures (more on this below). The label "Mon–Khmer" had been applied earlier by European scholars to a group of languages and peoples (including the Khmer) since the early twentieth century (for more, see Sidwell 2009). It was now enthusiastically adopted by a group of Cambodian scholars, resulting in the launching of the Khmerization program in 1967[11] and the establishment of the Mon–Khmer Institute in

[9]For more about Sihanouk's disputes with the Sarit Thanarat government, see Ngon (2018).

[10]Both "ethnicity" and "race" are translated as *janjāti* in the Khmer language.

[11]The program was established by the Sihanouk government to promote the teaching of Khmer language in public schools and modify the Khmer modern vocabulary. For a more detailed discussion, see Hideo (2015, pp. 62–65).

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February 1970. Both initiatives were aimed at promoting the usage of Khmer language in public education and deepening the understanding of Mons, Khmers, and other regional ethnic groups – some of which, notably the Mon, did not actually live in Cambodia.[12] The removal of Sihanouk from power in March 1970 reshaped the focus of these scholarly institutions. The Mon–Khmer Institute was renamed the Khmer–Mon Institute in March 1971 and became a key propaganda machine for the new government under General Lon Nol. Coping with its limited military capability and political legitimacy, the Lon Nol administration (1970–1975) saw an ethnically essentialist perspective as the replacement of the long-held collective historical understanding based on royal figures like Sihanouk and his predecessors.

Ethnically essentialist historiography and regional significance

The overthrow of Sihanouk in March 1970 and the establishment of the Khmer Republic by Lon Nol in October 1970 marked several key changes in the collective historical understanding. For the first time in national historiography, anti-monarchy and anti-French revolts of the precolonial and colonial years were given much attention while leaders of these revolts were now historically depicted as national heroes. The ashes of anti-French Buddhist monk activist Hem Chieu (1898–1943), who was jailed and passed away on the colonial prison island of Poulo Condore (Koh Tralach) following his arrest in July 1942, were returned to Phnom Penh in an enormous ceremony and he was promoted by the government as a national hero in July 1972 (see Khong 1972, pp. 33–37, for more). Intellectuals associated with the Lon Nol administration also promoted ideas of regaining the lost territory of Kampuchea/Khmer Krom (Lower Khmer) from South Vietnam through their efforts to claim ethnic Khmers of the Mekong Delta as "Cambodians."[13] This happened largely because both Lon Nol and many intellectuals associated with his administration were descendants of these Khmer Krom communities. What is worth considering in detail is the regime's effort to promote ethnic essentialism through the notion of Khmer–Mon racial superiority as opposed to other regional groups, especially the Thai and the Vietnamese.

Being preoccupied with severe internal conflicts, poor leadership, and the civil war which resulted in its collapse in April 1975,[14] I would argue, the decision made by the Khmer Republic to adopt the notion of Khmer–Mon racial supremacy and turn it into the regime's core political ideology was aimed to cope with its own immediate key challenges. One of them involved the Lon Nol government's effort to re-produce a national historical and cultural identity which was no longer linked to royal lineage and court culture. The new regime's abolishment of the monarchy and proclamation of Sihanouk as an enemy of the state gave them no choice but to search for an alternative source of moral power and legitimacy, with a strong historical component. The political ideology based on Khmer racial supremacy emerged to be an ideal option given the fact that issues of ethnic conflicts and antagonism, especially those between Khmers and Vietnamese, had always been very appealing and sensitive in the collective historical understanding since the precolonial years (for more, see Thun and Keo 2024).

The Khmer Republic also faced a challenge in its limited military capability to effectively establish territorial control over Cambodia. It happened so because in its early days of power the entire Cambodia's north-eastern provinces had fell under the military control of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK)[15] and Viet Cong troops linked to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV or

[12]During the initiative behind the formation of the Mon-Khmer Institute in 1969, Dik (1969), a key intellectual of the Buddhist Institute, published an article on Mon-Khmer cultures by comparing key similarities of religious practices and scripts of the ethnic groups.

[13]These efforts can be seen in Khmer texts published during the Khmer Republic years, including Sanng (1971) and Kem (1973). For a good discussion of Khmer communities in the Mekong Delta, see Taylor (2014).

[14]For a good discussion of the Khmer Republic's rise to power and its collapse, see Corfield (1994).

[15]In May 1970, the CPK formed the Royal Government of the National Union of Kampuchea (well known as GRUNK) led by Sihanouk based in Beijing. This political alliance allowed the CPK to rapidly expand its forces due to Sihanouk's popularity among peasants across Cambodia's countryside.

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North Vietnam) and National Liberation Front (NLF). The promotion of Khmer ethnic supremacy allowed the Lon Nol administration to call on support from various communities, including the Cham Muslims, who had been branded by the Sihanouk administration as "Khmer Islam," and Khmer populations in the Mekong Delta and northeast Thailand. Another major challenge came from its ongoing military confrontation with the CPK, which was ideologically and militarily supported by Vietnamese troops allied to the DRV until late 1972. Since August 1970, the government began launching many military campaigns, including the Chenla I and II operations, with little success against the CPK and Vietnamese troops. By fostering the notion of Khmer racial purity and supremacy via the faith in Buddhism, the regime was able to transform the civil war into an ethnical and religious conflict between the Khmer and those labeled as "non-Khmers" or "*dmil* (non-believers)," which referred to Vietnamese troops and CPK supporters.

Undermined by these challenges, Lon Nol and intellectuals associated with his government invested great efforts to impose a belief about Khmer racial greatness both in historical and cultural terms. Lon Nol (1972, p. 3) himself, in his widely circulated bilingual text titled "Néo-Khmérisme" or "neo-Khmerism" of 1972, asserted the Khmer people's glorious past by exaggerating Cambodia's role prior to the thirteenth century in spreading Buddhism to China and Southeast Asia, including Laos. Such a claim is not supported by available historical evidence.[16] Well-known for being a highly superstitious person, he saw himself as a predestined Buddhist chief of state (Chandler 1991, p. 198) who was leading a holy war to save national Buddhism from being forced to vanish prior to the 5,000-year timespan set out in the prophecy (Khmer Republic 1974, p. iii). He also promoted ideas regarding Khmer–Mon racial virtues by overstressing their skills in employing magical power in healing and combat (see Khmer Republic 1974, pp. 4–6). Lon Nol was also known for seeking military advice from a Buddhist monk named Man Prum Mani, who claimed to be a reincarnation of Angkor King Jayavarman VII. Based on Chandler's (1991, p. 205) discussions, many Cambodians were actually convinced by these exhortations. As far as Lon Nol was concerned, key political ideas that he adopted regarding Buddhist virtue with respect to leadership, the Angkor glory, embodiment or reincarnation,[17] and securing Buddhism from extinction were in fact ideas cultivated under the Sihanouk's rule. What he did was to turn them into a new form of collective understanding which filtered out any elements related to the modern Khmer monarchy, especially those of Prince Sihanouk. At the same time, he imposed his own view of Khmer racial superiority which often led to ethnic violence[18] and disastrous social and political consequences.

Intellectuals who supported Lon Nol's rule also advocated ideas of the supremacy of the Khmer race. Apart from the Khmer–Mon Institute, which regularly published short articles on Mon and Khmer cultures and propaganda messages of the government, key local public intellectuals such as Keb Vanndy, Chhatra Prémredy, and Tren Ngia tried to reshape the collective understanding by revealing the linguistic and cultural practices of the two ethnic groups. Tren (1976), who was the Director of the Khmer–Mon Institute and one of the most influential public intellectuals of the Lon Nol era, discussed Mon and Khmer linguistic connections by claiming that those who spoke these and related languages were especially different from the languages of the Thai, the Burmese, and the Vietnamese. This is true for the first two, but the latter has long been recognized as a Mon–Khmer language.

In their works on Khmer–Mon cultures, both Keb (1971) and Chhatra (1974) used linguistic linkages to emphasize the Khmer civilization as the greatest and oldest in mainland Southeast Asia which survived and developed until the modern times while the Mon civilization ceased. Moreover, Tren (1973, p. 16) stated that the decision to rename the Khmer–Mon Institute was due to the fact that, compared to Mons and the rest of other regional ethnic groups, "Khmers are the most important

[16]For a good discussion of Cambodia's Buddhism during the pre-Angkor and Angkor periods, see Harris (2005).

[17]For good discussions of how reincarnation, embodiment, and imaginary politics have continued to be highly relevant to contemporary Southeast Asian societies, see Norén-Nilsson (2013) and Gravers (2012).

[18]For more about violence against ethnic Vietnamese under the Khmer Republic and the Khmer Rouge, see Thun and Keo (2021).

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[among these ethnic groups] having the largest population and living in an independent, sovereign, and highly civilized country." In his book published in 1974, Tren (1974, pp. 176–80) highlights the loss of Cambodia's territory to the neighbors under different Khmer kings during the post-Angkor period between the fifteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. This depiction was mainly aimed to foster hostile views toward the former Khmer monarchy institution, as generations of Cambodian rulers bore a considerable share of the blame allying themselves with one or the other powerful neighbors, thus facilitating foreign intervention.

The historical and cultural trajectories that these scholars formulated were closely associated with a broader political motivation of the Khmer Republic. When their nationalistic and political preferences were able to be self-evident, their intellectual traits in exploring linguistic and cultural aspects of the collective past are deemed to be worth discussing further. For the first time in Cambodia's intellectual history, there was an intention made by local scholars to move beyond the lineage of the royal family in understanding collective history and culture. For the entire colonial and post-independence periods of the 1950s, either via the chronicle history-making tradition or the colonial-model historical stream, the royal lineage and kings had remained the core of the collective imagination. In this sense, asides from the political factors, the shift to explore ethnic and linguistic themes marked a significant turning point in the intellectual evolution of post-independence Cambodian and the wider regional intelligentsia.

This new approach was in fact parallel to Southeast Asian historiography in general after the periods of decolonization and nation-building. Starting from the mid-1950s, regional national historiography inspired by "Modernist" and "Marxist-oriented" historical approaches emerged in the public sphere. Nationalist scholars across the region and beyond became aware of more diverse themes and approaches in the reconstruction of their collective past, which encompassed the notions of nationality, the good citizens, as well as broader social, cultural, and economic perspectives. In independent Laos, for instance, nationalist historian Sila Viravong (1964, p. 9) published an influential history book, *Phongsāvadān Laos* (History of Laos), originally published in 1957, which incorporated a strong sense of Lao national identity by comparing the Lao race with that of the Chinese. He emphasized that the Lao were "one of the most ancient races of the world which had known a wide range of splendor and progress no less than any other races of the same era." Sila Viravong's writings, according to Vatthana's discussion (2004, p. 238), have significantly shaped a perennialist vision of the Lao nation by strongly relating Lao national identity to a myth of ethnic descent.

Similarly, in countries like the Philippines, the emergence of new historiographical trends promoted by a nationalist historian Teodoro Agoncillo is another good example. Following the publication of his major work on *The Revolt of the Masses* in 1956 (see Ileto 2002, for more), Agoncillo (Agoncillo and Alfonso 1960) co-authored an influential textbook on *A Short History of the Filipino People*, first released in 1960, which aimed at exploring the history of the "Filipino people," rather than the history of Spain and the Catholic Church.[19] In Thailand, the Marxist intellectuals Jit Phumisak and Chatthip Natsupha emerged to be the leading Thai scholars between the late 1950s and 1970s whose scholarship offered new perspectives of the collective past outside the established royal-nationalistic historical trajectory. While Jit's (1987) work, especially his *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today*, concentrated on the notion of class exploitation in the feudal (*śakdina*) society of the Thai past, Chatthip's scholarship concentrated on themes such as economic classes, tax-farmers, the bourgeoisie, and land tenure systems, as opposed to the royal-nationalistic history that emphasized the reigns of various kings (Thongchai 2008).

In Cambodia, political suppression and censorship imposed by the Sihanouk government since 1955 prevented diverse perspectives of the collective past, especially Marxist-oriented historical thought, from entering the public debate.[20] But regional modernist approaches parallel to those in

[19]For a good discussion of the book, see Totanes (2010).

[20]This suppression and censorship also included the government's precautionary measures toward Chinese and Vietnamese newspapers and books, which were legally placed under the surveillance of an appointed inspection committee after January 1956. See Rājkicc (Royal Decree) 1956.

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the Philippines did take shape in the kingdom from the early 1960s, in which several Cambodian scholars began to incorporate the historical development of mass cultures such as languages, religions, ethnicities, and cultural practices in their historical discussions.[21]

The founding of the Khmer Republic and the emergence of political instabilities in 1970, to a certain degree, loosened the restrictions on the freedom of expression and publication. As Kiernan (2001, p. 201) has mentioned, the post-Sihanouk era allowed for a brief outpouring of Khmer-language political and historical publications, including the memoirs of dissidents. But this did not mean the new Republic regime allowed Marxist-oriented historical thoughts, like those circulated in Thailand[22] and elsewhere, to be circulated within its controlled territory. As long as the regime's military and ideological conflicts with the CPK and Vietnamese communist troops were concerned, new national historical themes and approaches parallel to broader regional historiographical trends remained restricted within and influenced by the political motivations of the Republican government. In this sense, apart from allowing a more pluralistic understanding of the collective past, the majority of new publications of the Republican era, with various forms whether it is historical, racial, cultural, and linguistic, or even literary approaches, shared a common ground in promoting and strengthening the Lon Nol administration.

Pol Pot's Marxist historiography

The CPK's rule under Pol Pot (1925–1998), also known as the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime, between April 1975 and January 1979 did not allow any intellectual debates to take place. Moreover, unlike the Lon Nol regime, the CPK had abandoned the promotion of Khmer identity and national historical thought based on an essentialist ethnic and Buddhist lens since its first year of power (Thun and Keo 2021, p. 327). While it persecuted Buddhist and secular scholars, namely Huot Tat, Khieu Jum, Dik Kheam, and Tren Ngia, among hundreds of others, shortly after taking power, the administration presented a completely different timeframe for the collective past. This new historical formulation was initially published as several short articles in the CPK's official publication *Dañ'paṭivatt* (*Revolutionary Flag*) since 1974, and Pol Pot himself appeared to be the author of these Khmer texts. At the 17th Anniversary of the Party in September 1977, in which the CPK leadership was publicly announced, Pol Pot (1977a) combined all these texts and incorporated them into his five-hour speech for the special occasion. Besides broadcasting on radio, the entire speech was published as a special issue in the *Revolutionary Flag* in the same year.[23] In fact, the speech was the most important and widely circulated source of the CPK's historical imagination prior to the outbreak of DK's warfare with Vietnam in 1977. In September 1978, the regime published another important text titled the *Black Book* (*Livre noir*), which was politically designed to condemn Vietnam for what the CPK called "the acts of aggression and annexation of Vietnam against Kampuchea" (DK 1978). The content of Pol Pot's historic speech and the *Black Book* has fairly been discussed in earlier scholarship (Chandler 1983, pp. 34–56; Kiernan 2001, pp. 188–90; Thion 1980). But what is worth considering further here is a reflection of how Pol Pot, compared to Sihanouk and Lon Nol, reframed national historical understanding to serve his leadership.

Unlike the two earlier leaders who defined the national past in relation to "Angkor," Pol Pot viewed Cambodia's long historical development based on his ruling party. This depiction is largely similar to that of the Pathet Lao historiography and subsequently the early historiography of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR), which placed the Lao People's Revolutionary Party at the center of national historical imagination, especially during its 30-year struggle for power between 1945 and 1975 (Stuart-Fox 2006).[24] In the Cambodian case, Pol Pot (1977a, p. 10) divided the collective past

[21]These scholars included Dik (1969); Ly (1965 [1969]); Chhea *et al.* (1970); and Tauch (1974).

[22]For more on Marxist historical thoughts in Thailand, see Reynolds and Lysa (1983).

[23]Pol Pot's speech was unofficially translated into English by the Group of Kampuchean Residents in America (G. K. Ran) in New York, see Pol Pot (1977b).

[24]Almost no studies of precolonial Lao history were published until the 1990s.

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into three main historical periods: the pre-CPK years (prior to 1960), the CPK-led revolutionary period between 1960 and 1975, and the period after the CPK's seizure of power in April 1975. In each period, Pol Pot (1977a, p. 7) emphasized the collective efforts of the masses and then the CPK in what he called "a long struggle to completely liberate Cambodia to become a 100% independent country." Different from earlier historical understanding, there were no individual protagonists or national heroes in this depiction.

Pol Pot's formulation of the pre-CPK years is largely in line with Marxist historiography, which portrays the past as a series of struggles between the working class–peasant class and the established feudal, exploitative, and capitalist classes. Pol Pot (1977a, pp. 12–13) stated over and over again that, for more than 2,000 years of history, Cambodian society had gone through the periods of slavery (*ḍāsbhāb*), feudalism (*saktibhūmi*), capitalism (*nāydun*), and socialism (*saṅgam niyam*). Class conflicts between the exploiting class and the exploited ones occurred throughout these periods. His depiction of the period from 1960 onwards was central to his argument of the CPK's establishment on September 30, 1960 – instead of 1951 (the latter date marking the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party by the Vietnamese), key social and military circumstances that led to the seizure of power in 1975, and the post-liberation period which elaborated the CPK's efforts to defend and build a socialist Cambodia.

Although Pol Pot was the first reigning leader who applied Marxist concepts to an understanding of Cambodia's long historical development, his overall view of the past reflected several interesting characteristics, some of which are similar to those of Sihanouk and Lon Nol. First, as Chandler (1983, p. 44) mentions, Pot Pol's formulation of the past was based on a point of view, rather than historical material. His narrative heavily employed a Marxist-oriented approach with very little consideration over actual historical evidence or fragmented events. The way in which he treated the past was to emphasize the significant role of the CPK in history, which was imposed as the only platform for a historical understanding of Cambodia. Through this approach, it is not surprising that he disregarded the prominent roles of North Vietnam and Prince Sihanouk in supporting the CPK during the 1960s and early 1970s from his historical depiction.

Second, reading Pol Pot's historical writing, the intention to distinguish his leadership from previous Cambodian leaders is clear throughout the narrative. However, it does not necessarily suggest that he attempted to completely break off from the 2,000-year temporality of national history by imposing the so-called "Year Zero" from the very day the CPK took power on April 17, 1975, as falsely described by some observers.[25] Pol Pot and other senior CPK leaders such as Nuon Chea and Ieng Sary did see April 17 as the most important moment of Cambodian history as reflected in the DK national anthem:

> … For the victorious 17 April!
> That wonderful victory has greater significance
> Than that of the Angkor era!
> We unite
> To build Cambodia to become a prosperous society…[26]

But they neither used the term "year zero" or "*chnaṃ sūny*" to describe their regime, nor enforced it as the beginning of the year, in a similar fashion carried out as "Year One" for the French Revolution on September 21, 1792. In the 1977 historical depiction, apart from asserting April 17 as the most meaningful moment in Cambodia's 2,000-year history, Pol Pot (1977a, pp. 98–99) emphasized a need to continue and strengthen the CPK's "cooperative" policy which was put into practice in the CPK-liberated zones since 1973. The annual celebration of the Party's founding anniversary of September 30, 1960 and Pol Pot's narrative trajectory of portraying the CPK as the core of national

[25]These observers include Ers (2011); O's Kane (1993); and Ponchaud (1977).

[26]For the Khmer and English versions of the song, see Locard (2004, p. 42). The English translation of the anthem quoted here is mine.

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history offers no indication that his administration attempted to erase and replace Cambodia's entire temporal timespan with "Year Zero" starting from April 17, 1975. The term "Year Zero" has also been used by earlier researchers to describe the CPK's policy of completely destroying existing social and cultural practices and replacing them with a new revolutionary culture.[27] But this usage has less to do with the CPK's notion of time than it reflects the social and cultural destruction that the regime had employed on society.

Third, although Pol Pot repeatedly proclaimed that his DK administration was much more successful than any other era in history, the temples of Angkor, especially Angkor Wat, were still his regime's focal point of success. In a way similar to that of the Sihanouk and the Lon Nol regimes, the Angkor temples were adopted on DK's national flag and featured in the national anthem and currency. While discarding the rest of Cambodian history, Angkor was too big, too well-known, and too Cambodian to be discarded by DK (Chandler 1983, p. 62). Pol Pot (1977a, pp. 90–91) said in his speech that "People all knew Angkor. Angkor was built during the era of slavery. We, the slaves, built Angkor under the exploiting class of that era for the happiness of their kings. If our people were capable of building Angkor, we can do anything." While incorporating a class-based perspective to explain this aspect of the past, the speech suggested Pol Pot's aspirations for the Angkor infrastructures which remained a symbol of accomplishment and national pride. As argued by Locard (2015) and Barnett (1990, p. 102), these aspirations were key factors, among others, that led to DK massacre and brutality because the administration carried out projects of building massive waterworks such as irrigation canals and ponds across Cambodia's countryside inspired by those of the Angkor's hydraulic system.

Fourth and finally, while Pol Pot's 1977 narrative trajectory does not touch on the history of Cambodia's relations with neighboring Thailand and Vietnam, this popular theme was the subject of DK's (1978) *Black Book*, which was produced mainly for an international audience. The book's publication in 1978 does not necessarily suggest any significant changes in CPK historiography because its content was in fact discussed internally among CPK cadres much earlier than this release date. Based on a CPK internal document (DK 1977), dated June 15, 1977, both Thailand and Vietnam were portrayed as aggressors who always attempted to annex Cambodian territory since the seventeenth century. It (DK 1977, p. 1) depicted King Jay Jestha II as a national traitor based on the belief that this king ceded the territory of Kampuchea Krom from Cambodia to Vietnam after marrying a Vietnamese princess. The document (DK 1977, p. 1) also highlights key events concerning the loss of Cambodian territory to neighboring countries until 1939, for which the CPK blamed the French who gave many Cambodian islands to Cochinchina (South Vietnam). When fighting with Vietnam escalated in 1978, DK (1978, p. 1) published the *Black Book* by incorporating this 1977 document into its broader argument which was politically framed to criticize Vietnam for what it called "the ambition to annex and swallow Kampuchea." Reading the *Black Book* and the 1977 document offers a clear understanding of the way in which the CPK viewed itself in relation to Cambodia's neighbors, especially Vietnam, throughout history. But an important takeaway from the two texts is found in the CPK's historical thoughts in portraying Cambodia as the "victim" of its neighbors. While this portrayal is in line with those of the Sihanouk and the Lon Nol administrations, DK shared the perspective with the Khmer Republic in blaming post-Angkor rulers for Cambodia's enduring decline and losses of its territory to Thailand and Vietnam.

Concluding remarks

This article has discussed significant changes in Cambodia's historical landscape between the 1950s and 1970s. These changes are profoundly influenced by the rise to power of leaders such as Prince Sihanouk, Lon Nol, and Pol Pot, who directly engaged in the production and dissemination of national historical knowledge among their domestic audience. Regarding it as their monopolized source of

[27]They include Ponchaud (1977), whose book recounts the early years of DK in power.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591424000184 Published online by Cambridge University Press

power, these leaders turned national history into an account that placed themselves and their political institutions at the center of collective understanding. Moreover, besides utilizing it as a core of their ideology and propaganda, these rulers often transformed their respective historical accounts into policy implementation that directly impacted hundreds of thousands of people's lives. In this sense, national historiography should not simply be understood as an effort to superficially construct past events that conform with contemporaneous sociopolitical conditions of a society. As informed by the case of post-independence Cambodia, national historical accounts should be characterized as a significant state project of specific leaders who actively used them for both domestic and foreign policy purposes.

Apart from political leaders, changes in geopolitics and regional and global historiographical trends also exited as the factors that stimulated historical discourses at the national level. As informed by the discussions of historical thought under Prince Sihanouk, some themes of historical debates, such as the depiction of Sihanouk's central role in overcoming chaotic situations and promoting peace, were largely motivated by the global Cold War contestations and Cambodia's conflicts with neighboring Thailand and South Vietnam. Likewise, the promotion of ethnically essentialist history under Lon Nol was partly stirred by the emergence of regional historiographical trends like the Modernist approach which emphasizes mass cultural elements such as languages, religions, and ethnicities in collective historical understanding. This development becomes much clearer when considering Pol Pot's national historical trajectory inspired by the Marxist historiographical model which had spread all over the Southeast Asian region between the 1950s and 1970s.

Another important consideration is that post-independence national historiography, one way or another, drew heavily on the colonial scholarship in their reproduction of collective past. Historical accounts of the Sihanouk regime were produced by adopting French colonial historiography because all those Angkor rulers, including King Jayavarman II and King Jayavarman VII, were only made known when the French studied them. Lon Nol's promotion of "Khmer–Mon" ethnic essentialism, besides embracing the colonial historical framework, was derived from the scholarship on Mon–Khmer cultural and linguistic features produced since the early decades of the twentieth century. Even Pol Pot's Marxist model of historical interpretation also depended heavily on French colonial historical thought, especially on the Angkor civilization, in his depiction of Cambodia's long historical development. These epistemological traits suggest that, while sharing parallels in terms of themes and approaches to global and regional historiographical trends, the colonial-era historical frameworks had remained one of the most important sources of former colonized societies' historical reformulation.

Taken together, the formulations of the collective culture carried out by the three Cambodia's political regimes do not merely reflect a pattern seen in many other former colonized societies, where the collective culture was profoundly influenced by the political ideology of their respective leaders. They also characterize the way in which national historiography in these societies had been fused with various forms of political manipulations, resulting in the creation of national historical imagination embedded with various forms of propaganda rather than a channel for deep and nuanced understanding of collective past events. For the Cambodian case, this phenomenon has extended far beyond the three administrations discussed in this paper as we have seen many post-Khmer Rouge (1979–present) leaders to have actively continued manipulating different aspects of past events to promote their leadership and political institutions.[28] This practice has effectively turned the landscape of collective culture and identity into a kind of knowledge that primarily reflects the predominant role of one particular contemporaneous leader, rather than that of the nation itself.

Acknowledgments. This paper was drafted during my fellowship at Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) in 2021, and I am grateful to the support of CSEAS colleagues, especially Satoru Kobayashi. I also thank Bruce Lockhart, Martin Rathie, and Father Will Conquer for their generous feedback on earlier drafts. I acknowledge Hong

[28]For more discussions of national historiography of post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia, see Thun (2021a); Thun (2021b); and Norén-Nilsson (2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591424000184 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kong's University Grants Committee for the Postdoctoral Fellowship Scheme (PDFS) at the University of Hong Kong. Finally, I extend my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers and the editorial team of *IJAS* for their valuable comments.

Competing interests. None.

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Cite this article: Thun T (2024). Embodied national history: leaders, regime change, and regional historiographical trends of independent Cambodia. *International Journal of Asian Studies* 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591424000184