

In the Hands of the Khmer Mother:
Gender and Decolonization in Cambodia, 1900 – 1970

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation uses a gender analysis to investigate how concerns of the domestic, from homes and domesticity to familial lines and politics, shaped decolonization and state-building in Cambodia. It argues that late colonial urban women's concerns about modern Khmer domesticity shaped discourses on citizenry along with postcolonial state programs around education, Buddhist socialism, and "community development." By tracing the educational records and writings of urban women and by conducting oral histories with elderly Cambodian women, this dissertation also brings forward the contributions of female leaders who have often been left to the margins of histories on the modern Cambodian state.

In 1911, the French colonial administration opened a school for Cambodian girls. In response, Norodom princesses established their own schools for girls. These schools, and later print media, became the sites for constructing French colonial and Khmer gender ideologies. By the 1940s, urban women organized the first association and Khmer language women's magazine, which focused around Khmer and Euro-American approaches to domesticity. At the time, male politicians were contesting an appropriate form of governance and path to independence. Through writing and organizing, the female visionaries established that fashion, cooking, good manners, and child-rearing were critical to building a modern nation and further emphasized that the home was a refuge from the violence of national politics. These imaginings for the home shaped a state-building approach that blended local Buddhist ideologies and monarchical leadership with imported socialist and democratic frameworks. In 1955, Prince Sihanouk established the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, a political party and state system intended to modernize institutions while quelling the violence of representational politics. Women received voting and representational rights and were expected to embrace their duties as mothers caring for the country's citizens, whether in the

context of their home or through humanitarian work and governmental leadership. Meanwhile, the state developed education programs for children and adults, constructed model villages and new schools, and founded a youth movement. This undertaking transformed the country but not always in ways envisioned by the government and by the late 1960s gender, class, and generational differences began to fray the country's social fabric.

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INTRODUCTION

This history begins with the memoir of a retired civil servant, the oral history of an urban novelist, and a 1958 article on the “Khmer mother,” three testaments to the interlocking histories and modes of telling for understanding the history of gender and decolonization in Cambodia. In 2005, Phlek Phirun deposited a copy—possibly the only existing copy—of her memoir at the National Archives of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. Phlek was born in Phnom Penh in 1921 to parents who enjoyed close ties to the royal palace—her father worked for Prince Sitavong and her mother was the niece of a concubine of King Norodom. As a child, Phlek attended école Sutharot, a “princess school,” along with école Norodom and lycee Sisowath—the most prestigious schools in Cambodia. After receiving her secondary school diploma in the early 1940s, she worked for a French controlled Ministry of Propaganda. During World War II, she served as a Khmer language radio host in Saigon, participated in girl scouts, and attended a short course for girls in Dalat, Vietnam. In the 1950s and 1960s, she traveled to international conferences on behalf of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Cambodian Red Cross. In those spaces, she represented Cambodia and spoke to leaders about women’s issues along with humanitarian and social concerns.¹ She remained a recognizable leader of the Cambodian Red Cross for the remainder of the twentieth century.

In March 2018, I interviewed award-winning novelist and Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) witness, Oum Sophany.² Oum Sophany was born in 1946. Around

¹ Phlek Phirun, *Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmâk .l. Bân Dhvoe 'vī Khlah?* Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.

² The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) is a Cambodian court intended for prosecuting leaders of the Khmer Rouge. The ECCC has received legal and financial assistance from the international community, especially the United Nations.

the age of 10, she enrolled in the princess school école Malika where she received an education from the Yukanthor princesses. Sophany was not royalty but her aunt was a concubine and her grandfather was an assistant for Prince Yukanthor. Besides studying, Sophany played volleyball and participated in school dance performances for charity. According to Sophany, “my parents were city people, we all received an education.” Her sisters entered careers in education, finance, nursing, and journalism. Sophany studied Archeology at the Royal School of Fine Arts. Growing up, Sophany helped her mother and sisters with “cleaning and decorating the house.” She enjoyed writing poems and songs for her mother, whom she pitied because “she had to take care of the whole family and to feed and educate the children at home as well as do her housework.” While Sophany witnessed the pain of her mother’s marriage to her father—a chronic philanderer—she married a man she met while attending university. During the Khmer Rouge period, she became a mother, an experience she documented in a secret diary.³

The same year that Sophany entered école Malika, *Sruk Srae* (Countryside) published an article that posited “the good fortune of Cambodia is in the hands of the Khmer mother.” The writer argued that Khmer mothers, as the doctors, educators, and protectors of life, were the key to Cambodia’s prosperity and sovereignty.⁴ In the 1940s and 1950s, urban Cambodian women and men suggested that Cambodia would prosper only if Cambodian mothers gained the necessary

Cambodians were invited to testify and serve as witnesses during the trial of high profile individuals. The court held trials from 2009 until 2017. While many of my interlocutors are referred to by pseudonyms, Oum Sophany requested I use her real name, arguing that otherwise no one would know about her family’s important connections and history. Oum was a public figure in the literary world of Cambodia and has written and spoken about her family in other spaces. Sadly, she passed away only two months after our interview.

³ March 30, 2018 interview.

⁴ “Grū Kamnoet ĩ grū toem,” *Sruk Srae*, December 1955.

skills in literacy and domesticity in order to support their husbands and raise healthy, educated, and civic-minded children. Households were imagined as important autonomous units supporting the national causes. Over time, those mothers included not only housewives but also female leaders who took on work in ministries and humanitarian organizations that reflected their “motherly” roles in education, health, and well-being of individuals. Women were central to decolonization and state-building efforts in mid-twentieth century Cambodia. Moreover, the history of gender in Cambodia is the history of politics and the state in Cambodia.

Theoretical approaches to gender and sexual difference in Southeast Asia provide avenues for considering the relationship between gender and decolonization in Cambodia. The politics of promoting areas studies enlivened the argument that women in Southeast Asia historically occupied a relatively “high” status in Southeast Asia.⁵ The veracity of these gender depictions have been called into question by scholars. Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz have argued that, “an understanding of the working and reworking of gender at particular historical junctures and domains of social life will yield new insights on the nature of cultural reproduction and contestations in centers and peripheries alike.”⁶ While Ong and Peletz are concerned with the relationship between gender and ongoing negotiations among hegemonic and non-hegemonic communities, their call to examine the reworking of gender at particular historical junctures

⁵Barbara Andaya addresses this issue in: Barbara Watson Andaya, “Studying Women and Gender in Southeast Asia,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 2007): 113–36.

⁶ Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz, *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (University of California Press, 1995): 15. Their approach to gender builds on historian Joan Scott’s argument that gender constitutes historical relationships of power Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053–75.

provides the opportunity to turn to decolonization as an access point into understanding how gender was shaped by and shaped the efforts to end colonial rule and build a sovereign state.

Similarly, Ashley Thompson considers the contradiction between claims about women holding a high status in Southeast Asia and the reality that there are few female protagonists in historical narratives about the region. In her response to the dominant narratives of Cambodian history, she examines several different cases studies of gender and sexual difference in Angkor and Middle Angkor art and in French anthropological studies. In her examination of the phenomenon of spirit possession in shamanistic rituals she suggests that possession shaped historical trends in Southeast Asia and that studying possession “gives voice to characters or ‘subject positions’ that are silenced in traditional histories, be they ancient/indigenous or modern/international.”⁷ While Thompson focuses her attention around Angkor and early twentieth century anthropological studies, her approaches for generating new historical perspectives can be utilized for widening the scope of historical analysis for twentieth century Cambodia.

Challenging dominant narratives of history requires new frameworks of analysis, and in this dissertation, I use decolonization as a tool of analysis to bring forth new voices and characters that become lost in state-focused examinations of historical periods. In the historical scholarship, “decolonization” often refers to the mid-twentieth century period when colonized people struggled to gain political and economic independence from European colonial powers. The Southeast Asian scholarship on decolonization has brought forth new understandings about the ethnic, religious, and regional tensions of decolonization along with competing visions about the appropriate

⁷ Ashley Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016): 119.

economic and political system for a country.⁸ However, these works do not necessarily question male-dominated state structures or provide considerations for how a gender analysis may shed light on alternative histories. Alternatively, gender histories have sometimes reinforced dominant state narratives by casting women through state periodizations.⁹ In this dissertation, I ground my gender analysis around the political transformations that took place as Cambodians sought independence and then constructed a postcolonial independent nation-state. By doing so, I demonstrate that women were historical actors in these decolonizing efforts. Moreover, I bring to the forefront new connections between the colonial and postcolonial periods that would otherwise be lost in histories that either analyze a single state period or which examine general themes in successive states.

Decolonization as a period allows for new investigations into how political transitions shaped gender constructions and gendered political subjects; at the same time, theorists, transnational feminist scholars, and activists have expanded the periodization definition of

⁸ Some works that take this approach are: Clive J. Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism* (I.B.Tauris, 1998). Christopher E Goscha and Christian F Ostermann (eds), *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Marc Frey, Ronald W. Pruessen, and Tai Yong Tan (eds), *The Transformation of Southeast Asia* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2003); Dane Keith Kennedy, *Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹ Cynthia Enloe provides some considerations for the problems with state-focused theories or studies in: Cynthia H. Enloe, *The Morning after: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). As Enloe writes, “State-focused theory, like capitalism theory, generally takes the masculinization of public life for granted. The masculine character of the state elite (even when the nominal ruler might be a woman) is seen as unproblematic.” (46) In her analysis of politics at the end of the Cold War Enloe argues that “democratization and demilitarization have commonly been presumed to serve women's interests.” At the same time, she argues, that while democratization may create the space for more voices and may also for new policy agendas but “such changes will take place only if the two processes are not designed in such a way as to privilege masculinity.” (23)

decolonization by arguing that the practice of decolonizing is an ongoing struggle to gain economic and political independence from imperial powers and to undo the forms of knowledge and political ideology imposed by Euro-American hegemony.¹⁰ Walter Mignolo, in particular, argues that “decolonizing” and “decolonial thinking” is an effort to find “other economic, political, social, subjective modalities” that challenge colonial forms of power.¹¹ In this dissertation, I approach politics as both the formal institutions governing the country as well as the people outside formal institutions engaging in political work by supporting, contesting, or questioning systems of power through attention to matters that affect their communities.¹² In mid-twentieth century Cambodia, men and women were determining how to create a state and society that reflected local ideals and priorities.

Transnational feminists, who have called for “decolonizing feminism,” also help to provide a framework for examining how mid-twentieth century Cambodians conceived of gender and class in the context of an independent nation-state. The work of transnational feminists calls into question homogenizing “Third World women” or, in this case, “Cambodian women,” as well as

¹⁰ Works that call into question parameters of temporality and Global North understandings of colonialism, postcolonialism, and decolonization are: Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (Columbia University Press, 2010). Mignolo, Walter. “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, culture, and society*: 26, 2010: 159 – 181. Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Walter Mignolo, 2010.

¹² My definition of politics is informed by Tyrell Haberkorn, *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law, and Violence in Northern Thailand* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz, *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (University of California Press, 1995); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

privileging liberal Western discourses and priorities.¹³ In this dissertation, I will examine how urban Cambodians conceived of government and state by blending local and colonial/Euro-American forms of knowledge and power. As Freya Schiwy has argued, “Asking how the modern/colonial constructs of gender are perpetuated and contested also helps to better understand the ways decolonization pushes against the building blocks of coloniality and where, at times inadvertently, decolonization recreates these.”¹⁴ To that end, this work will consider how urbanites adapted and blended colonial/modern and local/traditional ideas in negotiations of domesticity, domestic politics, and the domestic landscape.

Using this approach to decolonization helps us to move away from the tendency to look at Cambodian history backwards from 1975, when the residents of Phnom Penh were forced to evacuate the city to their home provinces in the countryside. Orienting Cambodian history towards understanding Democratic Kampuchea has tended to marginalize and shadow historical actors considered unimportant to determining how and why the country fell to the genocidal Khmer Rouge.¹⁵ By thinking about decolonization in terms of a process of seeking alternative

¹³ Margaret A. McLaren (ed), *Decolonizing Feminism: Transnational Feminism and Globalization* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Chandra Talpade Mohanty Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse*. Lan P. Duong, *Treacherous Subjects : Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Freya Schiwy, “Decolonization and the Question of Subjectivity,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (March 1, 2007): 273.

¹⁵ Works that focus on the “path to the Khmer Rouge” include: David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). While focused on nationalism and the colonial period, Penny Edwards also emphasizes that she is trying to answer questions about Khmer Rouge fixations with Angkor and Khmerness. Edwards, Penny. *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007.

modalities—as opposed to a transition from colonial violence to various forms of state-sanctioned violence—we can examine history from the shoulders of the men and women who imagined building a society that assessed the current political workings and recovered from the vestiges of colonial rule to build a society in the imaginary of the indigenous actors and political leaders. In this process, different groups put forth their own vision for the country. In the historiography of twentieth century Cambodia, Sihanouk remains a dominant actor because of his position as a King turned Head of State and due to his own efforts to remain involved in every aspect of state-building. While it can be difficult to de-center him from the history, a decolonization approach helps to bring to the forefront the myriad of groups that envisioned different political modes for governing the country, including various political factions, such as the conservatives, leftist communists, and *Sangkum* adherents. The historical actors extend beyond just recognized political groups. In five chapters, I show that urban women in the schools and civil society organizations had their own visions for how to create a postcolonial society. Their visions and approaches to the domestic were critical to building a postcolonial state that incorporated ideals of modern domesticity.

My definition of the domestic involves two parts. First, I define the domestic as activities, concerns, and relationships that broadly include familial relationships as well as the tasks and activities that allow a household to function, including caring for the family members or residents who reside within the home and attending to the household structure. A family's domestic concerns involve the work and activities that help sustain the economic and social vitality of the family members, which could include harvesting rice, trading goods, or going to work in an office each day. Historians have traced how the onset of modernity produced discourses that emphasized how activities surrounding the home—also referred to as domesticity—concerned housewives while

activities outside the home concerned men. In early women's history scholarship on Europe and America, these separate spaces often described as the private and public spheres. Alternatively, scholar of China Elizabeth LaCouture has pointed out that in China the household was never considered separate from the state.¹⁶ Similarly, I also use the domestic to describe genealogies and family lines. Family lines and marital relations can be particularly informative for understanding how family histories shaped the intellectual and political work of various individuals. In early twentieth century Cambodia, families oftentimes maintained or gained a high social status through marital, sexual, and working or trade connections to the monarchy and the royal palace, the most important family and domestic domain.¹⁷ At the same time, families also began to gain new forms of status through their work for the colonial administration. These relationships in Phnom Penh fomented the intellectual ideologies of mid-twentieth century Cambodia.

The domestic as home and family intersects with the domestic as nation-state. The domestic in the nation-state occurs through two modes. One the one hand, nationalists imagine the

¹⁶ The 2019 American Historical Association roundtable on domesticity Antoinette Burton argued that we should “unsettle” histories of domesticity in order to consider how the domestic is central to history. The roundtable papers can be found in: *American Historical Review* 124, no. 4 (October 2019): 1332–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhz643>. Works that discuss the home and domesticity in Asia include: Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011); Ji-Eun Lee, *Women Pre-Scripted : Forging Modern Roles through Korean Print* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015); Barbara Hamill Sato, *The New Japanese Woman : Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan*, Asia-Pacific (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Theodore Jun Yoo, *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910-1945*, Asia Pacific Modern ; 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Part of this definition and observation is born out of my analysis of interviews with women from urban families. Many of my well-connected interviewees described aunts working as concubines, parents and grandparents trading or working with the palace, as well as family members in the colonial administration. Moreover, my most important actors were closely connected to the political workings of the country.

nation through what Mrililini Sinha calls the “domestic genealogies,” wherein “the nation is built on an unbroken continuum.”¹⁸ As demonstrated by historians Penny Edwards and Ashley Thompson, French colonists became obsessed with finding the connections between present-day Cambodia and the Angkor empire.¹⁹ As he built his nation-state, Sihanouk often emphasized how the postcolonial state reinstated the continuum of Buddhist monarchs ruling over a unified country of men and women. To that end, when Cambodians controlled the narrative, they placed importance on the genealogical history of the monarchy along with the connections to Angkor.²⁰ Meanwhile, Sihanouk and the political elite domesticated the state by investing in domestic issues like the education, cleanliness, appearance, and health of citizens.²¹ In the 1940s, men and women became “equal” citizens at the same time that they began to take on new gendered citizenship and leadership roles that continued domestic responsibilities from the home to the national space.²²

¹⁸ Mrinalini Sinha, “Nations in an Imperial Crucible,” in *Gender and Empire* edited by Phillipa Levine, (Oxford, GBR: Oxford University Press, UK, 2007): 187 – 188.

¹⁹ For more, see: Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Ashley Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor*, Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).

²⁰ The “genealogical continuum” is particularly important for understanding the basis of Khmer Rouge ideologies that emphasized rebuking all forms of “modernity” and returning to Cambodia’s Angkorian era economy and technology. In Theravada Buddhist Cambodia, this narrative of a genealogical continuum can also intersect with understandings of reincarnation. Contemporary Prime Minister Hun Sen has recently suggested that he is the reincarnation of a 16th century outsider king. Julia Wallace, “A Long-Dead Cambodian King Is Back — and He Looks Familiar,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2017.

²¹ For more on the domestication of politics see; Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920,” *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 620–47.

²² “Gendering” of the state in the mid-twentieth century has also been examined by: Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood : Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser’s*

Building on these threads of the domestic, from household and home to domesticity and domestic politics, this dissertation argues that: 1) During the colonial period and years of negotiating independence from France, urban Cambodian women—especially women within the intellectual and political enclaves of Phnom Penh—developed a local interpretation of domesticity that blended Khmer and Euro-American ideals of morality, childcare, and housekeeping. Their visions of domesticity made women into political subjects and shaped the formation of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* citizenry discourses along with state programs. 2) In particular, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* emphasized equal rights and duties of citizens along with women’s domestic duties to the nation. The gendered domestic roles outlined by urban women transformed into national positions that reflected maternal responsibilities. 3) Moreover, by focusing on education, humanitarianism, and “community development” programs, the state took on domestic responsibilities, which extended to overseeing the development of the young citizens of the country. 4) Through this process, new forms of gendered, class, and generational differences arose, which would ultimately contribute to a fraying social fabric in the years prior to a coup d’etat and civil war.

In five narrative chapters, I analyze the confluence of decolonization, state-building, and gender in Cambodia through the lens of the domestic, from domestic spaces and domesticity to familial lines and domestic politics. During the late French colonial period (1910 – 1952), urban Cambodian women proposed that all women should gain literacy in reading and domesticity in order to foster educated and healthy households. When politicians attempted to create a multi-party democratic system under the absolute monarchy in the 1940s and early 1950s, women’s

Egypt (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011); Gail Hershatter, *Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, US: University of California Press, 2007);

discourses on domesticity centered around blending and balancing traditional/Khmer and modern/French ideals around domestic matters like child-rearing, cooking and sewing, and manners. The labors of housewives complemented and contributed the public work performed by men in politics. Meanwhile, domestic spaces offered protection from the corruption and immorality of politics and state-building.

By the mid-1950s, King Sihanouk extinguished the multi-party system with the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (People's Socialist Community or Popular Socialist Community), a political party and state system that was supposed to rise above the fractured political system in order to develop a state that benefitted the people. The *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* emphasized a state of citizens working together under common causes of sovereignty and unity. The concerns of domesticity became more prominent on the national stage as urban figures began to take on new leadership roles and the state began to produce discourses directed towards the rural populace. While Sihanouk became the paternal King turned Head of State, royal women acted as the humanitarians and the protectors of culture for all Cambodians. Meanwhile, women also fell into gendered roles, both as political figures in socially-oriented ministries or as rural women expected to gain literacy and domesticity skills that they could apply to their roles overseeing the households. In this process of state-building, urban political leaders became concerned with transforming the tableau of rural villages and homes into a domestic landscape comprised of citizens and communities contributing to the nation. To achieve this goal, the state assumed the duties of the mothers and fathers by inserting state schools into each village and by developing a plethora of development programs.

When I write about the narrative of how urban women's concerns about domesticity transformed into national plans for state-building, oftentimes I am speaking about women from a small community of families and households involved in Cambodian politics. The story begins

and ends with the Norodom family, a line of the Cambodian monarchy that was in power until King Norodom's death in 1904 and again when King Norodom Sihanouk was crowned in 1941. Sihanouk stepped down from the throne in 1955 in favor of becoming Prime Minister and then, in 1960, Head of State. Due to his omnipresence after his crowning and especially after 1955, Sihanouk has played a central role in both scholarly histories and the historical memory of the mid-twentieth century. This dissertation demonstrates that even though many projects and plans bore his signature and photograph, it is possible to trace the inspirations for his ideas along with the people who supported and guided him along the way.

While it is impossible to write a history on mid-twentieth century Cambodia without discussing Sihanouk, historians have often neglected to discuss the important roles of the family members around him. His aunts, princesses Norodom Sutharot and Malika as well as Malika's daughters Yukanthor Ping Peang and Ping Pah, held influential roles in girls' education. Princess Rasmi Sobhana along with Sihanouk's mother Kossamak, wife Monique, and daughter Bopha Devi became important in the arts and charitable spaces beginning in the 1940s. Besides the royal family, a few key families appear throughout the chapters, especially the Sons (Nematoulla Macchwa and husband Son Sann), Sams (In Em and husband Sam Sary), and Pungs (Siv Eng Tong and husband Pung Peng Cheng). Khieu Ponnary, the wife of Saloth Sar (alias Pol Pot), is an important actor in the early chapters (before she joined her husband in the upland marquis in the early 1960s). All four women were educated during the colonial period and continued on to leadership positions in civil society and politics. Their husbands also became politicians and leaders of the state. Moreover, the families continued as leaders of post-conflict Cambodia. The Sons operated Khmer Rouge resistance campaigns in the 1980s and continued to remain involved in contemporary civil society organizations. The Sams' son Sam Rainsy co-founded the

Cambodian National Rescue Party 2012. The party was dissolved by the Supreme Court of Cambodia in 2017. The Pungs' daughter Dr. Pung Chhiv Kek established prominent human rights NGO LICADHO in 1992. These families, as well as the families of women I interviewed, oftentimes enjoyed the favors and relations to the royal palace. The close-knit network of urbanites continued and, in some cases continue, to hold influence in politics and civil society. Moreover, these families were influential in creating a culture and state informed by their close connections to the royal palace and colonial systems of power.

To make my arguments, I have used multi-archival and oral historical methods. Due to the degradation of Cambodia's archives, scholars of Cambodia have relied upon colonial documents, official government publications, memoirs, and interviews with high profile individuals to understand the country's tumultuous twentieth century history. Recently, historians of gender and youth in Southeast Asia have incorporated oral histories to supplement their historical narratives.²³ In Cambodian studies, historians often have accessed materials in Cambodia, France, and the United States. I collected materials at the National Archives of Cambodia, National Library of Cambodia, Bophana Audiovisual Center, and Center for Khmer Studies Library and additional materials from Swarthmore College Peace Collection along with the libraries at the University of Wisconsin and Cornell University. This dissertation does not include documents from the colonial

²³ For works that used combined archival and oral history methods, see: David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Milton E Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), Christina Elizabeth Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016); Karen M. Teoh, *Schooling Diaspora: Women, Education, and the Overseas Chinese in British Malaya and Singapore, 1850s-1960s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

archives in France. My project builds on the methodological practices of historians studying Cambodia by incorporating materials that have been understudied and overlooked in the scholarship. Like Chandler, I have examined memoirs to understand how personal stories fit into larger narratives. As opposed to using the memoirs of male politicians, I have prioritized women's memoirs in order to reorient the history around the experiences and memories of women. Further, I have used colonial Resident Superior documents, *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* reports, photographic and visual media, and Sihanouk's own descriptions of his plans for the independent state—materials commonly used in histories of pre-1970 Cambodia.

At the National Archives of Cambodia and the National Library of Cambodia, I have mined the archival keepings of French-language and Khmer-language newspapers and magazines to uncover the intellectual contributions of Cambodian women from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. The single most important publication in my trove of archival materials is the first Khmer-language woman's magazine, *Dassanāvattī Nārī* (Woman's Magazine) (1949 – 1952), which has been given almost no attention in the scholarship thus far. The monthly publication includes hundreds of articles on fashion, recipes, good manners, child care, and hygiene, as well as opinion pieces on women, society, and politics. It also serves as a repository of information on the activities of women with close ties to the late 1940s and early 1950s political groups. Significant post-independence sources include *Dassanāvattī Nai Yuvān/ Bulletin de Jeunesse* (Youth Magazine), *Revue de l'Instituteur Khmer* (Journal of Khmer School Teachers), and *Dassanāvattī Bhūm Yoeng* (Our Village Magazine) along with an information book and 24-minute film on women in *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* Cambodia. These publications were produced by the Ministries of Information, Education, and Planning during a time when government restricted independent publishing. The articles and themes help to elucidate the

capital's visions for the country's young people and rural populations. In addition, the propaganda magazines *Kambuja*, *Realities Cambodgiennes*, and *Le Sangkum* provide information on *Sangkum* events, projects, and declared achievements. Contemporary streets, markets, and homes also hold stories of the past that have informed my arguments. The Ouressey market book sellers; Angkor Thom, ABC, and Peace bookstores; along with École française d'Extrême-Orient and the Buddhist Institute hold original and reprinted books from pre-1975.

In addition to conducting archival research, I worked with my research assistant Nhip Socheat to collect around thirty original oral histories from elderly women. I found my interlocutors through five main sources. First, I connected with women in the Khmer Writers' Association. Conveniently, the association maintains a member list that includes the sex, birthdate, and phone numbers of all members. The women in that group were oftentimes highly educated—they had gone to the best schools and had attended university. Second, I interviewed several former teachers who I met through a grassroots politician. In this second group, most of the women were either widowed or never married (presumably because they reached marriageable age in the 1970s). In those two networks, the women were often grew up in middle class or upper class families. Finally, I interviewed nuns at a wat near Phnom Penh, elderly flower sellers along the riverside in Phnom Penh, and grandmothers at a village in Battambang. Those women were often from rural families and varying socio-economic positions. Interviewed in homes, at coffee shops, and in workplaces of the interviewees, the oral histories usually lasted between one and two hours. In one instance, I conducted a group interview with nuns living at a wat near Phnom Penh. The oral histories help to shed light on the lived experiences of women during the mid-twentieth century and provide insights into how and why women became more active in education, politics, charity, and national affairs. Interviews with former scouting and military volunteers, retired

provincial teachers, and daughters of women who worked in the Cambodian government provided particular insight into the experiences of being a woman during periods of state-building.

There is no official transcription system for Khmer script. This dissertation uses the Library of Congress transcription system, which can be best described as a more detailed version of the Frank Huffman system. Nevertheless, there are some difficulties with using transcription when Khmer letters and words have been transcribed in a variety of formats in the twentieth century. In some cases, I transcribe words that have often been presented in an alternative format. Most notably, a word for woman, *nārī*, is written as *neary* in French sources and scholarly work. Names prove to more difficult. I have elected to maintain the recognized Romanization of famous Cambodian figures as well as the Romanized spellings of Cambodian names in my periods of study. This practice follows historical and contemporary standards of Cambodians Romanizing their names without diacritics.

The names of married women add another difficulty. Despite the fact that Cambodian women oftentimes do not change their name at marriage and that Cambodian family names do not follow strict family name rules, twentieth century Khmer language and French language print culture followed the Euro-American practice of referring to a married woman as Mrs., Madame, or Lok Srī followed by her husband's full name. Through interviews and memoirs, I was able to find out the names of some public female figures. In those cases, I sometimes found their records in the colonial school archives. I debated about which names to use, especially because I was not sure about the preferences of the historical actors. Ultimately, the story of Lok Srī Lay Hunky (Trung Ngea) changed my mind. In 2017 – 2018 I was trying to find her because she is the author of a scholarly book on Khmer culture. At one point I was told that I was wrong, the author was not a woman. Eventually, a friend also interested in female authors confirmed that I was correct.

Graciously, he helped connect me with her. When we met, she told me that she published the book right before Cambodia fell to Democratic Kampuchea. At that time, the copies included her name. Her well-known husband died under the Khmer Rouge and when country began to reprint books in the 1980s, the book sellers elected to use her husband's name because they thought his fame would help sell copies.²⁴ Ultimately, for the women whose names I know, I decided to use the names they would have been known by followed in parentheses by the name they were referred to in the text. In this way, I hope to bring out the women from behind their husbands and prevent further erasures.

Spanning from 1900 until 1970, this 5-chapter dissertation sweeps over several political regimes, monarchies, and state systems, which I will describe as I outline the chapters. The narrative is bookmarked by the 1904 death of King Norodom, a monarch who resisted French colonial reforms and whose death ushered in the more compliant monarch King Sisowath, and the 1970 coup d'état of Norodom Sihanouk, the king turned Head of State who enacted significant reforms to create an independent and neutral nation-state but whose plans were met with significant resistance by the various disgruntled left and right wing factions of government. Between 1904 and 1940, the French colonial government enacted a series of reforms and projects that created a stronger colonial presence in politics and the state. I pay particular attention education and schools, humanitarianism and charities, scouting organizations, as well as the arts and dance troupes to consider how the actors negotiated local and colonial gender ideologies.²⁵

²⁴ June 16, 2018 interview. Her son maintains an up-to-date Facebook page on Lok Srī Lay Hunky (Trung Ngea)'s activities and work. The page uses her late husband's name (Khmer spelling) but mostly features her work.

²⁵ For in-depth studies of colonial policies, reforms, and institutions in the Protectorat of Cambodia see especially: Sokhieng Au, *Mixed Medicines: Health and Culture in French Colonial Cambodia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Penny Edwards, *Cambodge:*

Chapter 1: From the Stove to the School examines early primary and secondary schooling for girls along with the French and Khmer gender ideologies from the colonial period. In this chapter, I argue that princesses established their own schools in response to colonial interests in creating schools for indigenous girls. I illustrate that these schools provided the basis for understandings about a “proper” girls education and consider the contending royal and colonial approaches to girls’ schooling. I demonstrate how Khmer and French gender ideologies interacted on the colonial landscape, especially in the last decade of colonial rule. This chapter also introduces actors who will be important in later chapters.

While urban nationalists began to organize and speak out against the French colonial government in the 1930s and rural communities had resisted French rule through rebellions, World War II catalyzed the movement for independence. The French Protectorate was occupied by Japan for most of the war; in 1945 Japan encouraged Cambodia to declare independence from France. Independence was short-lived after Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers. Nevertheless, the post-World War II international landscape was not favorable to colonialism and France needed to reorient its relationship to Cambodia. The French Empire became the French Union, a system states composed of former colonies. In 1946, Cambodian political leaders wrote a constitution that created a National Assembly elected by a universal male electorate and under the power of the King. Between 1946 and independence in 1953, political parties vied for control of the National Assembly. Ultimately, the coordinated Democratic Party, which promoted a quick and peaceful path to independence, maintained majority rule in that arena.

The Cultivation of a Nation (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Christina Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016); Gregor Muller, *Colonial Cambodia’s “Bad Frenchmen”: The Rise of French Rule and the Life of Thomas Caraman, 1840-87* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Chapter 2: Writing and Organizing focuses on the post-World War II period of contested national politics, a moment when urban Cambodian women attempted to respond to the divisiveness with their own ideals of compromise and unity. By tracing the work of the *Samāgam Khmaer Sahajivinī*, I argue that women responded to the violent political domain by constructing the domestic space as one that supported national politics and acted as a morally sound domain detached from the corruption of political life. In this process, the urban intellectuals asserted that women were fundamental to the Cambodian nation-state. This chapter ends with the beginning of 1953, when Sihanouk dissolved the National Assembly and declared the Royal Crusade for Independence. Cambodia gained independence in November 1953.²⁶

In 1955, Prince Sihanouk effectively muted his political opponents in the Democratic Party by stepping down as king so that he could establish his political party and platform the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. The *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* is most often translated as the People’s Socialist Community or the Popular Socialist Community.²⁷ *Sangkum* translates as “community” or “society.” Notably, the word for “reastr” evokes a royalist connotation, which emphasizes that the community is under the King. Moreover, “nyum” often meaning “ism” can mean “favors or likes.” The statutes of the organization describe it as, “a community of citizens... composed of comrades

²⁶ For a closer examination of this history see: David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Kenton Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia, 1870 - 1969: From Curiosity to Confrontation* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); Justin Corfield, *Khmers Stand Up!: A History of the Cambodian Government, 1970 - 1975* (Victoria, Australia: Monash University, 1994); Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

²⁷ In her 2019 dissertation, Siti Kalang Keo argues that a better translation is “The Community the People Favor.” Using this translation, Keo argues that Sihanouk’s vision of democracy was not based on representation but rather on a form of populism that signified rightful leadership.

who have freely responded to the appeal addressed to them...Our community is not a political party. [It is] a symbol of the aspirations of the common people who are the real people of Cambodia..."²⁸ This understanding of community connects to Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia understandings of *sāmaggī*, the Pali word for unity. Simon Creak has found that by the 1960s Laotians used *sāmaggī* "to [describe] a united approach in national affairs."²⁹ While Sihanouk maintained significant control over political policies and leadership, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* can also be interpreted as a unified approach to modernizing the polity that suffered under colonial rule for ninety years.

When Sihanouk renounced the throne and established the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, he held a referendum to be elected Prime Minister, a position he held until 1960 when his father died and he became Head of State in order to mitigate any threats to the throne or his position of power. Sihanouk imagined his kingship as a modern version of the ancient monarchies of Asoka and Jayavarman VII. He believed that, "the ancient monarchy, steeped in traditional ways of thought, cannot stand still in a rigid and fossilized form of society."³⁰ The king was supposed to symbolize a social order within society but he was not necessarily supposed to work directly with the people.³¹ Sihanouk, while maintaining a social order with the king in the highest position, created deeper

²⁸ Quote from: Martin, Marie Alexandrine. *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1994: 64.

²⁹ Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015): 127.

³⁰ "The Threefold Basis of Cambodian Freedom: Monarch Socialism Neutrality (2)," *Cambodian Today*, January 1960.

³¹ Peter Gyallay-Pap, "Restructuring the Cambodian Polity: Buddhism, Kingship, and the Quest for Legitimacy," in Ian Harris (ed.), *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, (London: Routledge, 2007).

connections with his people.³² He attributes his sympathy with his people to his travels throughout the country during his early days on the throne. During these journeys, he “learned about the inequities of colonialism” and “acquired a taste for conversing with the peasants and tribespeople.”³³ For Sihanouk, a significant component of modernizing the monarchy included making the crown and royal family more visible and more integrated into Cambodian life.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, “Buddhist socialism” became one of the most important political stances of the *Sangkum*. Sihanouk argued that the crusade for independence created an “awakening” in the people that returned the country “to the source of Buddhism and the traditions established by our Great Kings, several centuries before.”³⁴ This return to Buddhism and previous monarchs had implications for domestic and international politics. Buddhist socialism was an economic approach to solving issues of socio-economic activity where “the big people gave to the little people.” The impact of this ideology on the relationships between wealthy and poor Cambodia will be given further and deeper consideration in Chapter 3. Part of this Buddhist socialist approach included “encourage[ing] enthusiasm among our people for manual labor” because “the health and prosperity of the nation are to be achieved by sheer hard work.”³⁵ The Buddhist socialist approach reinforced both the importance of social stratification and the emphasis on unity for achieving national goals.

³² Gyallyap-Pap, 87 – 88.

³³ Prince Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA: Cambodia's Fight for Survival*, Pelican Originals (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973): 146.

³⁴ Sihanouk Norodom, “Notre Socialisme Buddhique” (Kambuja, November 15, 1965), Box 511, National Archives of Cambodia.

³⁵ “The Threefold Basis of Cambodian Freedom: Monarchy - Socialism - Neutrality,” *Cambodia Commentary*, January 1960.

Chapter 3: The Generosity of the Monarchy examines the intersections of domesticity, monarchy, and Buddhism during the colonial and *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* periods. During the French Protectorate, the monarchy had served as an important symbol of Cambodian culture. Royal women continued to serve an important proponents of Khmer culture throughout the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* by blending colonial institutions with Khmer Buddhist ideologies to produce discourses and activities of generosity that displayed the monarchy's care for the Cambodian people. When Sihanouk's father died, his mother Kossamak remained in the royal palace to symbolize the monarchy. Meanwhile, royal women published works on Khmer culture and oversaw the continuation of royal performances and ceremonies. Through ceremonial forms of giving and attention to culture, the royal family signified that they would protect Khmer culture. Furthermore, royal women contributed to the construction of a stratified community of men and women helping each other by acting as leaders in humanitarian organizations.

Decolonization and the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* created new forms of political participation. While the democratic system put in place after World War II reflected Western liberal ideologies, Sihanouk argued that creating a one-party democratic system was based on Khmer monarchical traditions. He explained that, "the king is elected by the people through its representatives. In the earliest times of our history it was a woman who was elected Queen by her tribe of Khmers and this custom prevailed to this day thus explaining the origin of elective type of the Khmer monarchy." For Sihanouk, the multi-party system is not more democratic or free because "political parties could be bought by imperialists and neo-colonialists whose aim is to create division among our people, and eventually crush down our independence, neutrality, and

national regime.”³⁶ Citizens elected *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* representatives to the National Assembly and citizens gather twice a year to voice their concerns in the National Congress. Marie Martin has argued that the National Congress was supposed to help engender a “democratic veneer” because “in theory each person could present personal or village claims, criticize delegates, or have unworthy officials removed.”³⁷ The National Congress manifested Sihanouk’s belief in a democratic system that emphasized the direct input of the Cambodian community. To that end, *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* was Sihanouk’s vision of a political system that blended local and global political ideologies. This system also reshaped gender and urban/rural relations.

Chapter 4: Rights and Duties contributes to the history of *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* state-building by examining the gendering of political and the state activities beginning in the early 1950s. While female intellectuals debated whether women should become voting citizens, women around Cambodia became subjects of the state by joining the voluntary *Nārī Klahan* paramilitary forces during the Royal Crusade for Independence. The paradox of these experiences and opinions came to the forefront in 1955. In response to complaints from his political rivals, Sihanouk amended the 1955 constitution to give women the right to vote and run for political office and adopted new language around gender equality. While he emphasized that all men and women should contribute equally to the state, women began to take on new gendered roles. Women became leaders in the ministries of education, social affairs, health, and tourism. Meanwhile, female leaders in civil society and politics as well as the state emphasized that women—specifically rural women—should embrace their important roles as mothers in order to support the

³⁶ “Main Points of the Answers Made by the Head of State to Questions Posed by Miss Suvarna H. Bhatt on 28th January 1969,” *Kambuja*, March 1969.

³⁷ Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 65.

state. I show that translating domesticity into the national political sphere helped to elevate urban women who took on new gendered leadership roles and “othered” rural women who became the recipients of discourses about their need to become engaged citizens of the state.

With royal and urban men and women stationed in humanitarian, state, and political leadership positions supporting the political visions for the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, the urban leadership began to transform the country’s towns and villages through education, community development, and school programs. This process involved local leadership as well as international “experts” interested in helping to “develop” Cambodia. Ultimately, proponents of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* envisioned transforming the former French colony into a modern Cambodian society with a well-educated populace living in villages and cities that contributed to the national goals of maintaining a monarchical Buddhist country that was neutral in the face of bifurcating Cold War politics. According to Sihanouk, “Cambodia did not want to be part of SEATO and did not want to choose between the free world and the communist camp because neither system worked for the monarchical, neutral country.”³⁸ Sihanouk argued that in 1956 – 1957 period the National Assembly had determined that “Cambodia would remain neutral unless attacked.”³⁹ For Sihanouk, neutrality meant that Cambodia would remain committed to nationalist ideals grounded in monarchy and Buddhism while also adopting new approaches to “development” in order to build

³⁸ Prince Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA: Cambodia’s Fight for Survival*, Pelican Originals (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973): 76.

³⁹ Prince Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA: Cambodia’s Fight for Survival*, Pelican Originals (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973): 89 Margaret Slocomb has interpreted the policy of neutrality as not just an approach to foreign affairs but also to an economic system that balanced both “public action and private action.” She quotes an official communiqué from 1961 that explains, “Neutrality in the political domain consists of staying outside blocs, between capitalism and communism. On the economic plane, it suggests a balanced adaptation of the two systems for the organization of the country. Margaret Slocomb, *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010): 78.

the vitality of the country. I see these state plans as part of the broader intellectual thought about blending local and global approaches to solving social and political problems.

Chapter 5: In the Hands of the State? examines how the state's preoccupation with creating a modern national landscape intersected with anxieties about education and national loyalty. In particular, I examine how the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, with help from international experts, assumed the responsibilities of households in order to educate adults and children in matters from reading and writing to hygiene, health, and cooking. By assuming the task of educating the populace, the domestic narrative shifted from the importance of mothers overseeing the education and well-being of their children to the necessity of the state becoming more involved in domestic matters of the largely rural populace. While some of the state's programs to become more present in the villages began to wane in the mid-1960s, the country always prioritized the school system and the education of children. Schools began to represent the state in villages throughout the country and school children began to gain the state's perspectives on the importance of health, hygiene, and literacy. Meanwhile, Sihanouk founded the youth organization, *Jeunesse Socialiste Royaliste Khmer* (JSRK) where the youth—both boys and girls—learned about civic duties and trained for military operations. In these spaces, the *Sangkum* leadership both emphasized that all citizens—both men and women—should engage in state affairs. Through the schools and the JSRK, the *Sangkum* propelled the vision for a modern and strong Cambodia while also instigating changes unforeseen by the state leadership.

In the efforts to create a political system that forged a new path forward, the proponents of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* faced political opponents—some of whom had initially supported Sihanouk or who had tried to work with the system but became disenchanted with the country's economic and foreign policy issues. Sihanouk was unable to hold off political opponents forever.

By the late 1960s, Cambodians in various sectors became frustrated with his policies. In 1966, the conservative faction of government took over Sihanouk's duties. That government launched the 1970 coup d'état that created the Khmer Republic under General Lon Nol, which sparked an agrarian civil war fueled by American capital and military expertise. Hidden in the northwestern provinces since the 1960s, the Khmer Rouge slowly gained control of territory throughout the 1970s before seizing the capital in 1975. While this dissertation follows the imaginations and processes of decolonization until the coup d'état that led to a civil war, I do not try to argue that the experimentations with different domestic politics and state systems caused the civil war and eventual Khmer Rouge regime. Rather, this dissertation will demonstrate how a gendered analysis of decolonization can provide new insights into why imagining and experimenting with social and political formations created immense transformations in the lives of young and old men and women, the constructions of households and villages, and the structure of the independent nation-state. By following these ideas, plans, and projects, it is possible to trace the gendered and class relationships that changed from 1900 until 1970.

CHAPTER 1:
FROM THE STOVE TO THE SCHOOL

Three years prior to independence from the French Union, a contributor to *Kambujā* newspaper wrote that Khmer mothers were concerned that their daughters “did not know how to beautify themselves. They only know ‘how to move around the stove [and therefore possessed no worldly knowledge].’ While the practice of just “going around the stove” previously was acceptable in Khmer society, today’s women who only know how to cook rice and to take care of their husbands are not highly regarded. Today, men want a wife who can cook, take care of a house, teach the children after school.”¹ The writer implied that when a girl receives an education she gains a social standing that sets her above her uneducated peers from families that did not see the value in education. While the writer in *Kambujā* asserted a societal-level shift in ideas about womanhood and education, only several hundred girls had received an education by the end of the colonial period. Perhaps because girls’ schools were not widespread in the Protectorate, few historians have critically investigated the founding of girls’ schools and their impact on changing gender ideologies.² Meanwhile, a later *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* narrative asserts that women

¹ Guṇadhamr Rabás Strī Khmaer Pān Camroen r̄ te? *Kāmbuja*, March 21, 1950.

² For works that deal with wat schools and boys education see: David M. Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis: Education, Development, and the State in Cambodia, 1953-1998* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000); Clayton, Thomas, “Restriction or Resistance? French Colonial Educational Development in Cambodia,” *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, no. 19 (December 1, 1995); Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); I Hansen, Ann Ruth, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007). Kate Friseon has written an article about girls’

remained inside the house until Sihanouk created new opportunities for women. What caused this shift in expectation for future wives? Why did people in the urban milieu decide that wives could no longer just “go around the stove” and instead needed to study reading, housework, cooking, and beauty practices?

This chapter contributes to scholarship on gender, colonial power, and education in Southeast Asia. Ann Stoler has argued that “imperial authority and racial distinctions were fundamentally structured in gendered terms.” Her theoretical work demonstrates we cannot study colonial hierarchies without taking into account the relationships of power along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. In particular, she has guided researches into studies of the intimate by arguing that colonists fixated on “regulating the sexual, conjugal, and domestic life of both European colonials and subjects.”³ While Stoler’s theories create a framework for analyzing colonial systems, we cannot understand girls schooling simply as a colonial pursuit. As demonstrated in histories of early twentieth century urban schools in Southeast Asia, local, diasporic, and colonial actors mediated and negotiated the ideologies and identities forged in classrooms.⁴ By tracing the history of girls’ schooling from the first institutions in Phnom Penh

education: Kate Frieson, “Sentimental Education: Les Sages Femmes and Colonial Cambodia..” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 1, no. 1 (2000).

³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010): 42. See also: Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: A Colonial Reading of Foucault’s History of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather : Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁴ Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Karen M. Teoh, *Schooling Diaspora: Women, Education, and the Overseas Chinese in British Malaya and Singapore, 1850s-1960s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

and following how the schools changed over several decades, this chapter instead shows how urban Khmer women played a significant role in shaping the educational landscape for younger generations of women. In particular, the Norodom princesses acted in their own political interests and the interests of other elite families when they responded to the colonial administration's interest in girls' education by opening their own princess schools in 1911. The princess schools became highly esteemed institutions that attracted elite families; over time, families also chose to send their daughters to secondary schools in Phnom Penh and Vietnam. In turn, many graduates became recognizable leaders in postcolonial Cambodia.

This chapter makes two arguments. First, the advent of girls' schooling in Cambodia initiated colonial and local negotiations over how women would engage with new forms of education and the state bureaucracy. At the turn of the twentieth century, the colonial administration and Norodom princesses engaged in a contest over shared power on the changing colonial landscape by opening colonial and private girls' schools, or princess schools. Clearly, the royal founders of private girls' schools accepted the arrival of formal schooling for girls and determined that they could assert their own authority in that space with their own schools. Meanwhile, the colonial administration attempted to expand girls' education by opening new girls' schools in the provinces and by training new teachers. While the female teachers and students oftentimes struggled against colonial regulations and expectations, the women ultimately made decisions about their own position within the changing educational landscape that would shape how future generations of Khmer women gained an education or interacted with the state. Second, colonial and royal educators blended Khmer Buddhist understandings of order and gendered codes of conduct with colonial gender ideologies around motherhood and national duties. The French

and Khmer gender ideologies intermingled to produce new ideas about modern Khmer domesticity while strengthening social hierarchies and gendered and class-based categories of difference. While leaders only modestly expanded girls' schools during the colonial era, the Cambodians in the urban milieu began to uphold the vision of an educated housewife literate in reading, cooking, beauty, and child-rearing and cognizant of her duties to the nation.

To make these arguments, I examine the colonial documentation on girls' schools and teachers to understand the politics behind establishing girls' schools along with the efforts, or lack thereof, to expand girls' schools to the provinces. Alongside these official reports, I have traced education journals and newspaper editorials to uncover the kinds of curriculum found in the colonial schools as well as the changing attitudes about girls' education. To complement reports and opinion articles on education, I turn to the colonial-era scholarship records and education stories from postcolonial female leaders. In addition, memoirs and oral histories help to contextualize the print sources and colonial documentation. Using these materials, this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section analyzes the politics of opening the princess schools in Phnom Penh. The second section examines the colonial administration's attempt to open schools in the provinces along with their struggles to staff schools with Cambodian teachers. The third and final section illustrates how this schools and late colonial scouting programs shaped mid-twentieth century gender ideologies so that urbanites prioritized young women gaining skills in literacy and domesticity learned from educational institutions in order to prepare for futures as housewives.

Politics at the Door

The colonial administration and royal family opened schools for girls amid a changing colonial order due to the recent death of King Norodom. While the historical scholarship on

colonial education has established that concerns about creating civilizing subjects consumed colonizers, this section elucidates how the political dynamics of 1903 propelled the efforts to fund teachers and classrooms for indigenous, *métis*, and European girls.⁵ Until his death in 1903, King Norodom resisted French attempts to reform Khmer political structures and institutions but his successor King Sisowath complied with the French political projects. The French administration opened a school for the children of the royal palace in 1903 and in 1911 two Norodom princesses—Princess Sutharot and Princess Malika—opened their own schools for girls. The Norodom directors of the private girls' schools lived in a royal palace that had already struggled with colonial encounters for decades. The opening of girls' schools by the princesses is one instance of the royal family responding to the changes and new institutions imposed by the Metropole. Importantly, their decision to open schools for girls catalyzed the use of the education system to spread royal and colonial gender ideologies in the urban enclaves and rural provinces.

The opening of the first girls' schools needs to be examined within the context of the tensions between the French colonial system and the local Buddhist monarchy. When the French arrived in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century, they encountered a political system based on the Buddhist cosmic order. The mandala system, also termed the galactic polity, describes a political system with a capital as the political center and other important hubs circling from that center. In the capital sits the highest ruler with leaders in smaller polities gaining power from their

⁵ Julia Ann Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (University Press of Virginia, 1998); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

relationship to the center.⁶ This political structure represents the Buddhist cosmic order where Mount Meru, the highest point in Nirvana, demarcates the middle of the kingdom.⁷ Historically, the Khmer king sat on a throne in the center of his earthly kingdom connected to outlying communities through an tributary system.⁸ As pointed out by Ashley Thompson, this system differed from the state and territorial configurations in China, India, and the West.⁹ Within the context of Buddhism, the successive king ultimately gain his position due to accrued merit in his previous and current lives. To administer his kingdom, the king appointed officials to conduct administrative duties such as collecting taxes and mobilizing troops. Like the king, officials were expected to be “men of wisdom, generosity, courage, modesty, honesty, and the like.”¹⁰ While French colonists often described indigenous rulers as despotic powers, in reality the kings and officials were expected to exude benevolence emblematic of a rightful ruler. At the same time, since the king enjoyed absolute rule, he could use his power at will.

While the monarch held absolute power, his position always remained precarious. In European monarchies power is passed down through defined inheritance structures but in

⁶ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, “The Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 (December 23, 2013): 503–34; see also: Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

⁷ Peter Gyallay-Pap, “Restructuring the Cambodian Polity: Buddhism, Kingship, and the Quest for Legitimacy,” in Ian Harris, *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2007): 75.

⁸ May Ebihara, “Societal Organization in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Cambodia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (1984).

⁹ Ashley Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor*, Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016): 10.

¹⁰ May Ebihara, “Societal Organization in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Cambodia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (1984): 285.

Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia the successive king was not always clear. Kings fathered many children with several wives and the sons competed to ascend the throne. As the closest individuals to the center of power, the lives and bodies of women in the palace were regulated by laws on sexuality, fidelity, and loyalty.¹¹ Trude Jacobsen writes that the women living the royal palace acted as “living embodiments of political fealty between the king and powerful families in the kingdom and beyond” and “played a vital role in the relationship between the mundane and celestial worlds which would ensure the harmony of both.”¹² Examinations of the palace social world in Siam show that the Siamese believed that a female relative living in the palace was highly advantageous to their own social status.¹³ Writings about the palace in Cambodia reveal similar relationships between the inner confines and outside world. Georges Groslier wrote that select

¹¹ Tamara Loos, “Sex in the Inner City: The Fidelity between Sex and Politics in Siam,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 4 (2005): 881–909; Hong Lysa, “Palace Women at the Margins of Social Change: An Aspect of the Politics of Social History in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (1999): 310–24. Indeed, in Siam, village women were allowed to vote at the turn of the century while high-class women did not gain that same right until later in the century. Katherine Bowie, “Women’s Suffrage in Thailand: A Southeast Asian Historiographical Challenge,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 4 (2010): 708–41; Tamara Loos, “The Politics of Women’s Suffrage in Thailand,” in *Women’s Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Nationalism and Democracy*, ed. Louise P. Edwards and Mina Roces, RoutledgeCurzon Studies in the Modern History of Asia ; 16 (London ; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

¹² Jacobsen, Trude, “Working Paper 133: Divergent Perspectives on the Cambodian ‘Harem’ in the Reigns of Norodom (1863–1904) and Sisowath (1904–1927),” 2010. Other works discuss how kings married foreign women for the purposes of political alliance: May Ebihara, “Societal Organization in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Cambodia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (1984): 280–95. Leslie Ann Woodhouse, “A ‘Foreign’ Princess in the Siamese Court: Princess Dara Rasami, the Politics of Gender and Ethnic Difference in Nineteenth-Century Siam” (Ph.D., United States -- California, University of California, Berkeley, 2009).

¹³ Tamara Loos, “Sex in the Inner City: The Fidelity between Sex and Politics in Siam,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 4 (2005): 892; Hong Lysa, “Palace Women at the Margins of Social Change: An Aspect of the Politics of Social History in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (1999): 310–24.

Cambodian families offered their daughters as minor wives or concubines to gain favor with the royal court. Meanwhile, princesses in Norodom's palace were forbidden from marrying anyone below their rank, meaning that they could only marry their brothers or uncles.¹⁴ Despite little evidence that the female dwellers of the royal palace felt trapped in their positions, the number of women living in the royal palace disturbed the French colonists.¹⁵ When King Sisowath was crowned the King of Cambodia, the French administration regulated the number of women living in his palace and the practice began to wane by 1913. Groslier and Jacobsen have commented that the girls began to go into the royal ballet corps instead. While the ballet became an important avenue for families to maintain connections to the royal palace, likely the opening of colonial and private schools for girls was another way to create political connections with the royal palace. While historians have theorized about women's agency within the confines of Southeast Asian palaces, it is clear that when royal women became educators they asserted and rearranged new forms of power within the context of attempts by the colonial power to "reform" a system that defined social, political, and gender relationships and hierarchies.¹⁶

¹⁴ George Groslier, *Danseuses cambodgiennes, anciennes & modernes*, (Paris: Augustin Challamel, 1913). Jacobsen, Trude, "Working Paper 133: Divergent Perspectives on the Cambodian 'Harem' in the Reigns of Norodom (1863–1904) and Sisowath (1904–1927)," 2010. Cited Corfield 1993: 38.

¹⁵ During the first twenty years of the Protectorate, "bad Frenchmen," as they have been coined by Greg Muller, viewed Phnom Penh as an exotic playground for sexual trysts and commercial adventures. The Resident Superieur of French Indochina eventually installed more respectful colonials committed to fashioning a more civilized colonial space. New laws prohibited Frenchmen from initiating relationships with local women and Frenchwomen settled in Phnom Penh. Gregor Muller, *Colonial Cambodia's "Bad Frenchmen": The Rise of French Rule and the Life of Thomas Caraman, 1840-87* (London: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁶ Susan Kepner's biography of M.L. Boonlua Debhayasuwan, the first Thai woman to earn a university degree, provides an interesting look into similar livelihoods and projects of royal women in early twentieth century Bangkok. Susan Fulop Kepner, *A Civilized Woman: M.L. Boonlua Debhayasuwan and the Thai Twentieth Century* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2013).

The first female graduates of colonial-run schools became central to the changing forms of political power. When the first female students attended schools, they enrolled in either *école Protectorat*, the school for European and metis children, or *école Norodom*, the school for children of the royal palace. In 1903, the colonial administration founded *école Norodom* in honor of the aging king. Run by French teachers, the students who attended those schools learned in French language. At the time of his death in 1904 he conceded to colonial demands for a royal school by dedicating a financial sum for his descendants to attend school.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the successor King Sisowath accepted the colonial efforts educate the royal children. In 1905, twenty-nine princes and twenty-five princesses attended classes at *école Norodom*; Princesses Yukanthor Ping Peang and Ping Pah and their lifelong colleague and friend Keo Khat were noted as the highest achieving female students in the class.¹⁸ Significantly, the Yukanthor sisters began to attend *l'école Norodom* only a few years after their father Prince Arun Yukanthor scandalized the French colonial officials by collaborating with a French journalist to expose the injustices of the Protectorate. He remained exiled in Bangkok until his death in 1934. His daughters and Keo Kath often traveled to the Thai metropolis, perhaps to visit the prince.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the Yukanthor sisters dedicated the rest of their lives to educating the children of Cambodia.²⁰ As French educated princesses from a family that had confronted French control, the Yukanthor sisters were well-positioned to respond to

¹⁷ Milton E Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859-1905)* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1997): 254.

¹⁸ Osborne, *The French Presence*: 256.

¹⁹ David Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009): 180.

²⁰ National Archives of Cambodia, RSC File No. 1209.

French plans to disseminate a French colonial education to the daughters of the royal family and indigenous civil servants.

After several years educating *métis*, European, and palace girls, colonial officials proposed establishing a school for the daughters of indigenous employees. While a few proposals surfaced in the years after opening *école Norodom*, the plans finally materialized in 1911. Resident Outrey announced in a September circular that the administration intended to open a school for girls in *école Norodom* in order to prepare for the school's October 1st opening, he requested the names of all married indigenous employees along with the names and ages of their daughters. After years mulling over opening a new school, the rushed effort to recruit female students within a few weeks did not produce a satisfactory response. The disgruntled chief of service of the cadastre responded that most of his staff was "in the bush" and that the three employees in Phnom Penh preferred not to enroll their daughters. One placed his daughter in a school closer to home, another needed his children to sell goods in the market, and the third thought his seven-year-old was too young. He ends the letter arguing the populace was not amenable to the "eccentric plans."²¹ From 1911 onwards, the colonial officials often sounded perplexed about the needs or wants of Khmer parents, but the plans for student recruitment shows little forethought from the colonial officials about introducing families to the proposals for girls to attend school.

When colonial officials opened a girls' section of *école Norodom*, two daughters of the late King Norodom joined the initiatives to educate young women by opening their own private schools for girls. Two weeks after the French opened the new classroom doors at *école Norodom*, the administration enthusiastically approved Prince Sutharot and his half-sister and wife, Princess

²¹ NAC, RSC File No. 1214.

Norodom Phangangam (commonly referred to as Princess Sutharot) to begin teaching girls at *école Sutharot*.²² Two months later, in December 1911, their half-sister, Princess Norodom Malika, the wife of Prince Yukanthor and mother of Princesses Ping Peang and Ping Pah, established *école de la Princess Malika* in a building behind her house on the grounds of the royal palace.²³ There are no comprehensive statistics on the total number of enrolled students throughout the colonial period but in 1920 a combined seventy girls attended the two schools.²⁴ The French administration never theorized about why the princesses suddenly became interested in opening schools. Yet, it seems likely that the princesses saw an opportunity to gain some control over French plans to influence the elite girls residing in the capital at a moment when the political power of the royal court became more entrenched in colonial reforms and bureaucracy.

The opening of these schools provides new considerations for the power balances between the monarchy and the French. Anne Stoler has argued that the “colonizer/colonized” relationship was part of a “historically shifting pair of social categories” and that largely uneven imperial projects reflected the “unstable relationships between colonizer and colonized.”²⁵ Moreover, Tamara Loos has shown that while Siam was situated in a “liminal space” between sovereignty and colonialism, the Siamese utilized legal jurisdiction to assert a local modernity that gave primacy to the nuclear family and reasserted the power of the king.²⁶ The construction of colonial

²² NAC, RSC File No. 26505.

²³ This school is sometimes also referred to as l'ecole Yukanthor.

²⁴ NAC, RSC File No. 485.

²⁵ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 13.

²⁶ Tamara Lynn Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006). Other sources that deal with Siam's own approach to modernity and European imperialism include: Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of*

modernity in Siam was not just about cultural exchange but also about political power. In this way, the markers of colonial modernity are present in the country that avoided colonialism. Cambodia was a colonized country as opposed to a “liminal space” like Siam. Yet, when the royal women began to educate girls living in the capital, they participated in a similar process of navigating and accessing the colonial and modern approaches to education and living. To that end, they collaborated in the project of cultivating a generation of young women formally instructed in colonial and royal forms of knowledge.

From the outset, Princess Sutharot and Princess Malika differed in their working relationships to the French. Princess Sutharot oftentimes worked closely with the administration. She opened her school in a building belonging to the city of Phnom Penh and she sent requests to the *Resident Supérieur* to improve the building fixtures for the school.²⁷ The Sutharots chose Mademoiselle Marie Cazeau to lead the school as the head instructor. A *métis* woman, Cazeau received her education at *école Norodom* and at a girls’ school in Saigon.²⁸ Likely her identity as a woman with Khmer ancestry and formal French colonial training made Cazeau an ideal candidate for navigating and upholding the colonial education system. In the years following the school’s opening, Princess Sutharot continued to correspond with the administration about problems that she wanted officials to resolve.²⁹ By collaborating in vision and implementation, the two bodies of power reciprocally gained their desired outcomes.

Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image (University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

²⁷ NAC, RSC File No. 26505.

²⁸ NAC, RSC File No. 26505.

²⁹ NAC, RSC File No. 11596.

Princess Malika worked with the colonial officials in a markedly different manner. Since Malika operated the girls' school in her home on the grounds of the royal palace, she neither sought approval for the classroom space nor requested assistance with any construction for the school. Since Malika's daughters had received elementary certificates from *école Norodom*, she could rely on their expertise in the school system. She appointed her daughter Princess Ping Pah as the head instructor.³⁰ The school operated for two months before the first colonial school inspectors surveyed the school grounds and lessons. When Henri Roussy visited the school in early 1912, he reported that Malika was operating a "real" school in her home:

...Yesterday, I went to the Princess Malika school: this is not just a dining hall, it was a real school that I found installed in her home behind the palace, with a classroom where 19 little pupils were doing reading and writing exercises in Cambodian and a workshop of 9 girls were doing Cambodian embroidery...Having noticed that most of the girls were pupils of the Norodom school, I authorized [Ping Pah] to continue to teach them, but I reminded her firmly that the teaching was to be given in the Cambodian language.³¹

As noted by Roussey, Malika had developed a Khmer language and arts and crafts curriculum that supplemented the French language education at *école Norodom*. Since Roussey insisted that Princess PingPah teach students in Khmer language, it is clear that the administration feared the classroom in Malika's home could be seen as an alternative—as a opposed to a supplemental—form of schooling for young girls. From the position of the Yukanthor women, teaching Khmer language and as well as Khmer embroidery likely represented an important counterweight to the French curriculum at *l'école Norodom*.

³⁰ NAC, RSC File No. 26505. In "Royal Family of Cambodia" Justin Corfield suggests that Princess Pingpah received a certificate in Saigon. Likely, this is true since girls traveled to Saigon for secondary school until the mid-1920s. However, I have not yet found a record indicating that she traveled to Saigon. It should also be noted that she started teaching at a young age (17 - 18 years old).

³¹ NAC RSC File No. 11595.

The colonial administration sometimes showed frustrations over the general operations of the private institution. Ping Pah and officials argued over personnel issues around long-time teacher and friend Keo Kath, the woman who attended *l'ecole Norodom* with the Yukanthor sisters. Keo was a close confidant of the Yukanthor sisters. In the late 1920s, Ping Peh described Keo as an “irreplaceable teacher” who is “regrettably not paid the same as a regular cadre.” Officials, on the other hand, wrote that “seventeen years of teaching has changed her character. It seems that after some time, this instructor is less patient with the students.” Furthermore, they argued that they only hired her in 1911 because not even “four Cambodian women could read fluently and speak a little French.” Since *l'ecole Norodom* operated in French language, the administration could only rely on a small pool of teachers. Shortly after this last report, Keo traveled to Bangkok and refused to return to her teaching duties. The reports do not elaborate on her decision to remain in Bangkok and subsequently the Disciplinary Council dismissed her.³² This seemingly mundane dispute over Keo’s value in the classroom provides a glimpse into how the administration attempted to maintain some control over the schools, largely through the control of the princesses. Of course, Keo was not officially dismissed from her teaching duties until she left the country and refused to return, suggesting that the colonial officials complied with Ping Pah’s decision to continue employing Keo. The royal educators and colonial officials may have flexed their power over varying issues but ultimately the two entities needed each other to continue the goal of educating young women.

Elite and ruling families with ties to the royal palace sent their daughters to the princess schools. A 1936 article in *Le Khmer* writes that all the students at *l'ecole des Princesses* were

³² NAC, RSC File No. 7297.

descendants of King Norodom, King Sisowath, and King Monivong.³³ While the article emphasizes that the schools educated elite children, it should be noted that the criteria for attendance was not as strict as the article suggests. Cousins, nieces, relatives of royal consorts as well as daughters of important chiefs or businessmen also attended the schools. Two of my interlocutors whose aunts were concubines of kings and princes attended the princess schools.³⁴ Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who grew up in the Sutharot household, and Khieu Ponnary, the daughter of a local judge in Battambang and future wife of Saloth Sar (alias Pol Pot), also attended *l'ecole Sutharot*. While Khieu was not a princess, her father clearly held a prestigious position within the polity. At her death in 2003, Sihanouk recalled that he and Khieu ““were always in the same class each year.””³⁵ Prince Sihanouk’s attendance at the school also indicates that Norodom educators aimed to ensure that the future leaders of Cambodia would gain the requisite knowledge and influence from the royal women. In his memoirs, Sihanouk describes how his grandmothers and aunts deeply influenced his own understanding of Buddhism and morality. Importantly, the schools taught young people about Khmer language, morality, and arts while also preserving and strengthening elite networks and relationships.

Within this world of girls’ schooling, the French officials expressed little understanding for the social hierarchies within the royal and elite milieu of Cambodian society. In 1937, a colonial officials reported on the challenges for a French teacher at the schools for girls:

³³ Penny Edwards, “Restyling Colonial Cambodia (1860–1954): French Dressing, Indigenous Custom and National Costume,” *Fashion Theory* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2001): 389–416.

³⁴ Interview, March 30, 2018; Interview, May 19, 2018.

³⁵ William Shaw, “King Recalls Ex-Classmate Khieu Ponnary,” *The Cambodia Daily*, August 21, 2003, <https://english.cambodiadaily.com/news/king-recalls-ex-classmate-khieu-ponnary-40143/>.

“The results give the greatest credit to Mlle Vinot. In order to form a just idea of her merits, it is necessary to imagine the difficulties with which she must constantly triumph over. She does not deal with ordinary pupils: spoiled by their parents, convinced that they are superior, willingly scornful for everything that is not part of the Cambodian aristocracy like them...these children are not always easy to handle... if ignored, we risk offending them and their families... Another source of conflict: the inequality between the students, according to the rank of the parents and according to the preferences of the king. The mothers—who, if left to them, would intervene at every moment in the interior life of the school--demand that their daughter not sit next to another judged to be of a lower class.”³⁶

He continues his assessment of the situation by explaining that the French teachers could not comprehend the constantly shifting hierarchies among the girls and their mothers because of France’s egalitarian education system. Of course, his attention to the “preferences of the king,” indicates a disdain for the continued practice of polygamy and perpetuates an orientalist stereotype that the lavishness of the monarchy has corrupted Cambodian women. Moreover, these observations seemed to further justify that the colonial administration needed to insert French women into the schools so that they could mitigate local and monarchical around hierarchy and status.

The complaint from the colonial official provides a rare window into some of the priorities for parents sending their daughters to school. While the administration sometimes claimed that parents did not show particular enthusiasm for the education of their daughters, this correspondence indicates that mothers were very interested in the affairs of the classroom. Social rank was an important concern because the young women needed to survive and find a husband in a society that maintained vestiges of royal patronage within a modernizing state system. By insisting that their daughters sit according to rank in the classroom, the mothers certainly worried about their daughters’ futures. When disputes and concerns around networks and relationships left

³⁶ NAC, RSC File No. 37626.

the bedrooms and living rooms of the royal neighborhood and entered the confines of the classrooms, the mothers signaled that they saw the schools as important spaces to reproduce social hierarchies. While few parents may have envisioned their daughters working after graduating from the primary and secondary schools, the men and women in the elite confines of Phnom Penh began to value a diploma from a good school as a new mark of social status.

Two educated women, Phlek Phirun and Nematoulla Machwa, lived very different lives, but their familial histories and marital paths illustrate how the education system changed gendered accesses to power. Phlek Phirun, a prominent leader in the postcolonial Cambodian Red Cross and in the post-Khmer Rouge reconstruction, received an education at *l'ecole Suthorat*, *l'ecole Norodom*, and *Lycee Sisowath*. According to Phirun's memoir, her family had gained new forms of social status due to their relations to the royal palace. Her grandparents farmed the land but her mother was raised by her aunt, a concubine of King Norodom. Meanwhile, her father worked for Prince Sitavong, Head of the Ministry of the Interior. Over time, her parents gained connections with the wealthy and influential Princess Pindara. After finishing school, she followed her father's footsteps in government work by joining the Ministry of Propaganda. Importantly, Phlek Phirun never married so she did not gain these positions simply because she was married to an important man, as is sometimes cited as the reason women were able to gain prominent positions.³⁷ From connections to the royal family through concubinage to her own leadership in the post-colonial government, it is apparent that education reframed the ways in which families, including women, could gain prominence in Cambodian society.

³⁷ Phlek Phirun, *Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmâk .I. Bān Dhvoe 'vī Khlah?* Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.

Education also created a profound impact on the life of Nematoulla Machwa, daughter of Taybbhay Hiptoola Machwa and future wife of Son Sann. In January 1940, Taybbhay Hiptoola Machwa, the son of an Indian trader and the owner of the prominent import-export shop *Le Petit Paris*, owed the colonial administration 124.03 francs because his daughter left the normal course (a teaching track) of *Lycee Sisowath*. Two years earlier, at the age of 18, she signed a contract agreeing to work for the administration for ten years in exchange for her scholarship.³⁸ Ultimately, Nematoulla left school because Son Sann proposed marriage to her.³⁹ For the two families, the match was ideal. Son Sann was a rising public servant and Nematoulla was the sole heiress to the prosperous family business. Certainly, repayment to the colonial administration was a small price to pay in comparison. Yet, it seems appropriate to consider the extent to which her education was favorable to the eventual marriage proposal. Not only was she from a wealthy family, but her literacy and familiarity with French customs and language likely were important forms of knowledge in the elite circle.

The marriage proposal itself is indicative of how Nematoulla Macchwa and Son Sonn were moving through and bringing together French, Khmer, and cosmopolitan worlds. Son's mother was frustrated that he had not yet chosen a wife. He had received an education in Paris and was busy in his work. She approached Nematoulla's parents and they decided that it would be a good match. To introduce Son to Nematoulla, the parents arranged to all go to the local movie theater at the same time. Nematoulla sat in front with her parents, not realizing what was happening. Son Sann sat behind her and decided that he would accept her as his wife. Nematoulla saw her fiancé for the first time from the secondary floor window of her house when the family arrived with the

³⁸ NAC, RSC File No. 27183.

³⁹ Interview with Sonn Soubert, son of Sonn Sann and Nematoulla Macchwa, October 25, 2017.

bride price gift. Son Soubert says that his mother remained fond of the movie from that day for the rest of her life. At the time of the interview he thought that the film may have been called “Mr. Baby.” It seems likely that the film was the 1938 film *Bringing Up Baby*, starring Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant.

The elite girls’ schools in Phnom Penh served two important purposes. On the one hand, the girls who attended the schools became conversant in French language and culture while learning to read and write in Khmer language. Besides these language and literacy skills, the graduates had gained direct instruction on best practices in domesticity from the princesses and French colonial instructors. In addition to gaining an education, the young women became part of formal institutions that recognized and aimed to strengthen elite hierarchies and family connections. Tracing not just the curriculums and lessons of these schools but also the graduates provides new insights into how the twentieth century Khmer elite class comprised of not just the now well-known male politicians but also the women who attended the schools and forged paths in the spheres of power.

Hiring Teachers and Expanding to the Provinces

For decades, the colonial administration experimented with different ways to expand girls’ schools in the Protectorate. Recruiting and attaining Khmer teachers was one of the highest barriers to establishing girls schools in the provinces. As Penny Edwards notes:

In 1923, Humbert-Hesse, director of primary education in Cambodia, asserted that it would be 'good politics' to expand education for girls in Cambodia. Praising the industry, dexterity and enthusiasm of girls’ students in Phnom Penh, Hesse blamed the slow development of girls’ schools in Cambodia on the lack of qualified women

teachers and noted a parental preference for French teachers [as opposed to Vietnamese teachers].⁴⁰

Humbert-Hesse's notes reflect the general sentiment towards girls' education. While local officials and school directors enthusiastically proposed creating more seats for girls, the Resident Supérieur faced practical problems that prevented opening new classrooms, especially because of the lack of Cambodian and French women available and willing to teach in remote towns. While the numbers of girls attending school in Phnom Penh steadily rose and remained stable during those twenty years, the situation in provincial schools was an entirely different matter—schools opened and closed with no marked “successes.” Moreover, the apparent lack of royal voice or guidance in the matter suggests that the royal teachers so influential in Phnom Penh did not necessarily view rural girls' education as an endeavor worth their time.

While the Norodom women were preoccupied with providing an proper education to girls in the capital, the French embarked on other ambitions to open girls' schools in villages across the Protectorate. Funding girls' schools in provincial areas was part of a wider scheme to reach the general population through education and other social programs.⁴¹ Between 1910 and 1930, colonialists endeavored to create a standardized educational system in the Protectorate. A 1916 decree required that all boys living within two kilometers of a French school must enroll in the

⁴⁰ Penny Edwards, “‘Propagender’: Marianne, Joan of Arc and the Export of French Gender Ideology to Colonial Cambodia (1863- 1954),” in *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France*, ed. Tony Chafer (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002): 22.

⁴¹ Sokhieng Au has shown that the colonial administration used midwifery schools and public health programs for mothers and prostitutes as one way to reach the general population. Like girls schools, These programs were highly uneven and did not actually reach the general population. Au, Sokhieng, *Mixed Medicines: Health and Culture in French Colonial Cambodia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

school.⁴² The decree was largely unsuccessful due to the pre-existing educational infrastructure within the Theravada Buddhist belief system. While living with senior monks, young boys who ordained as monks for a period of time memorized Buddhist texts and learned the basics of reading and writing. Neighboring Thailand had developed a “modernized” wat school system in order to blend the two educational systems. Since Khmer parents preferred to send their sons to the wat schools, the colonial administration adopted a Thai model of modernized wat schools, in which monks would simultaneously instruct the Buddhist tenets and provide a modern secular education. While initially slow to start, the schools enjoyed moderate success throughout the 1930s. In 1931, 3,332 male pupils attended 101 wat schools and by 1939, 38,519 pupils attended 908 wat schools.⁴³ While the wat schools became a popular education option for boys, Buddhist customs prevented girls from learning alongside boys in these monastic spaces. Therefore, if the colonial administration wanted to provide girls with a secular colonial education, they needed to establish a completely new institution overseen by colonial officials and female teachers willing to live in the provinces.

While the royal family helped to establish girls’ schools in the capital and while the Buddhist sangha collaborated with colonial educators to introduce new educational models for male students, provincial colonial officials typically proposed opening new girls’ schools. Between 1911 and 1920, officials established some girls’ schools in provincial outposts but the records about establishing the schools are not held in the National Archives of Cambodia. Beginning in the 1920s, provincial officials began to request funding for girls’ schools. In 1920, the French

⁴² NAC, RSC File No. 26005.

⁴³ Charles Bilodeau, *Compulsory Education in Cambodia, Laos and Viet-Nam* (Paris: UNESCO, 1955): 21.

Director of *l'ecole de Kompong Speu* wrote to Phnom Penh seeking resources for a girls' section due to the local populace's expressed interest in educating their daughters. Both the Director of *l'ecole de Kompong Speu* and Resident of Kompong Speu favorably supported the proposal, but the Resident Superior in Phnom Penh regarded the request as impractical, citing several reasons the Protectorate would not invest in a girls' section in Kompong Speu, including that the school year was close to ending and that the teacher ought to focus her attention on the boys.⁴⁴ This ill-timed and singular inquiry illustrates that expanding girls' education was difficult not only because the administration was inclined to focus its efforts on schools for boys, but also because of differing priorities between the leaders at the center and the peripheries of the country.

Despite denying the request for a Kompong Speu girls schools in 1920, within a few years officials began to more seriously consider building more girls schools. In October 1925, education officials requested female teachers for schools in Pursat, Kompong Speu, Kompong Thom, and Prey Veng.⁴⁵ While his earlier requests about a girls' school in Kompong Speu had been dismissed, the Kompong Speu Resident wrote again to Phnom Penh, explaining that local families wished to send their daughters to school. This time he emphasized that twenty girls already had registered for the school but that because he lacked material and an instructor he could not provide a class for the students. Since he needed teachers for both the boys' and girls' schools, he recommended assigning a married couple to teach in Kompong Speu.⁴⁶ The uptick in interest in provincial girls' schools occurred around the same time that the administration began to train monks for the modernized wat schools. In this simultaneous attention to the wat schools and new efforts to open

⁴⁴ NAC, RSC File No. 31747.

⁴⁵ NAC, RSC File No. 26505.

⁴⁶ NAC, RSC File No. 26505.

girls' schools in the provinces, the administration renewed its efforts to reach rural youth through the school system.

Throughout the process of opening girls' schools in the provinces, the colonial administration closed poorly performing schools while trying to open new schools. In 1927, the Resident Supérieur closed a girls' school in Kandal Province, purportedly because of lackluster instruction. In the final report, the colonial official explained that the principal cause of the school closure was the "evident inadequacy of the instructor," who rarely taught and experienced poor health. The administration had already sought her dismissal the previous year but decided to keep her because they could not find anyone to replace her.⁴⁷ The school's location was in Kien Svay, Kandal province—only 15 kilometers outside of Phnom Penh. Many families likely considered this distance too far and unsafe for their daughters or wives to travel for work. The female instructor would have had to live in an unfamiliar village. To that end, the opening of schools relied on the availability of indigenous personnel and the interest and willingness of Khmer women to move to unfamiliar places. In the early twentieth century, Khmer society largely did not support a kind of system that relied on women moving away from home for work. Therefore, the administration relied on a small pool of women willing or obliged to participate.

During the initial effort to expand girls' education beyond the capital, the administration relied on metis women, a group that experienced significant precariousness within the Protectorate. Since the 1880s, colonists had attempted to end sexual unions between European men and Cambodian women and the children born of these unions were often raised in orphanages or sent to European schools due to concerns that the children would receive bad influence from their

⁴⁷ NAC, RSC File No. 31308.

mothers.⁴⁸ After *école Norodom* opened a girls' section in 1911, at least four métis women joined the teaching cadre as the first female teachers with Cambodian ancestry working in Phnom Penh.⁴⁹ Indigenous personnel files typically include familial information about an employee but the files of the metis teachers do not include this kind of information, suggesting that some or all of the women may have been raised in the *Société de Protection de l'Enfance*, which often prepared girls to become teachers, midwives, and nurses. In 1916, Madame Baudoin, of the *Société de Protection de l'Enfance*, explained that, "... [Charles Gravelle] desires to see [those] female pupils remain in the Colony," with the hope that the "Asian elite, becoming more educated, will seek marriages with these girls, who will be excellent agents of French propaganda."⁵⁰ The first four métis teachers working in Cambodia married Cambodian men, some of whom worked as civil servants or teachers in the French administration. By stationing the married métis women in schools, the administration clearly viewed the women as agents of cultural transmission not only through their marriages but also through their leadership positions in the classrooms in Phnom Penh and the provinces.

Except for Marie Cazeau, who taught at *école Sutharot* until her death in 1917, the three metis teachers hired by the administration worked in provincial schools, often replacing each other

⁴⁸ For more information on metis children in colonial Indochina see: Christina Elizabeth Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

⁴⁹References of other female teachers with metis names (ie a French first name and Khmer or Vietnamese surname) in the administration suggest that there were more than four metis women working as teachers. The women I will discuss here have personnel files in the colonial archives in Phnom Penh.

⁵⁰ NAC, RSC File No. 2452.

during absences and changes of location. Marie de Lopez began her teaching career at *école Norodom* in 1912 before moving to Takeo province in 1915. After a year in Takeo, she requested a transfer to replace the Vietnamese metis teacher, Denise Su, in Kompong Chhnang.⁵¹ Meanwhile, Catherine Tot replaced Lopez's position in Takeo for a short period before going to *école des filles* in Kampot.⁵² Despite these transfers between the provinces, the three metis teachers worked in the schools for several years.⁵³ The teachers oftentimes were placed in postings alongside their husbands, which may have eased their assimilation in the local communities. While it is difficult to know whether the women enjoyed the teaching profession, certainly they benefitted from the salary, particularly if they did not have access to familial support.

While the *métis* teachers may have held long careers as teachers, they certainly experienced a plethora of health, marital, or financial problems that reflected their precarious living situations in the racialized colonial setting. In 1919, Catherine Tot, who had been working in the schools for five years, wrote to the administration asking for a scholarship to attend midwifery school in Hanoi. In order to attend the school, she requested funding for her daughter, voyage, and tuition; in her letter, she requests that the administration consider her "precarious situation."⁵⁴ She does not detail her rationale for switching professions but it seems likely that she was looking for an opportunity to leave her outpost in the small river town of Kampot. Yet, after only few years away

⁵¹ NAC, RSC File No. 10936.

⁵² NAC RSC File No. 13162, RSC File No. 2241.

⁵³ This trend differs from reports of early midwives leaving their posts after a short period of time. Au, Sokhieng, *Mixed Medicines: Health and Culture in French Colonial Cambodia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 146 – 150.

⁵⁴ NAC, RSC File No. 2241.

in Hanoi, Tot returned to her teaching post. Sarah de Coulgeans, who started working for the administration in 1914, divorced her husband, also a teacher, in 1932. After fifteen years of marriage, the couple had no children together and her file is filled with notes about the health issues that plagued her. While she adopted her husband's name, Moeung, during their marriage, she reclaimed de Coulgeans after the divorce. Shortly after, she quit teaching due to her health problems.⁵⁵ Certainly, the teachers gained some form of financial stability that otherwise may have been unobtainable, but their complaints and requests to move indicate the difficult burden of straddling French and Cambodian culture in a colonial space unfavorable to mixed race unions and *métis* children. Having grown up in urban areas, these difficulties were likely further compounded by the isolation of provincial schools.

In the effort to open more girls' schools, the administration also hired Vietnamese women as teachers. Hiring Vietnamese teachers was impractical on an even basic level because most Vietnamese teachers could only communicate with their Khmer students in French. On a deeper level, Khmers were wary of their Vietnamese neighbors because of a more protracted history of invasions from Vietnam. The Vietnamese women who chose assignments in Cambodia encountered an array of adversities in their teaching roles. In their letters of resignation, the teachers mentioned the hardship of separation from family in Saigon or Phnom Penh. In 1926, the administration decommissioned Ngo Phu Nhoun, a Vietnamese woman born in Phnom Penh, due to her refusal to fulfill an assignment in Kompong Thom. She wrote that she could not complete the assignment due to familial and moral isolation, a rationale that the chief of education dismissed as unacceptable.⁵⁶ Over time, officials began to turn away Vietnamese women seeking

⁵⁵ NAC, RSC File No. 10966.

⁵⁶ NAC, RSC File No. 13165.

employment in Cambodia, citing the need to focus their efforts on recruiting Khmer women. The administration's focus on phasing out Vietnamese teachers in order to hire more Khmers teachers was part of a broader trend towards hiring more Cambodians for the positions in the bureaucratic system. The French had relied on Vietnamese civil servants working in the administration since the nineteenth century but officials endeavored to create a more robust Khmer civil service. While the Vietnamese teachers and metis teachers had helped to charter and to sustain the initial forays into girls' schools, these two groups were working for an administration that looked towards a future where they relied upon Khmer employees.

During the 1920s, some educated Khmer women began to apply for teaching positions in the colonial administration so that they could gain a stable income for their families. In 1920, a woman wrote to the Head of Education explaining that she and her sisters lost their mother and dutifully cared for their ailing father, a former royal guard of the king, but that her monthly salary did not sufficiently feed the family. To remedy the situation, she requested a teaching position for her sister Pomme Kim, who had attended *l'Ecole des Jeunes Filles indignes de Saigon* where she obtained her Certificate of Primary Studies. Fortunately for the Pomme sisters, the administration accepted the request and Pomme worked as teaching assistant at *école Sutharot* and *école Norodom* for the next eighteen years.⁵⁷ During that time, one of sisters, Pomme Peang married Jean-François Izzi. They gave birth to a young girl named Monique who would capture the heart of Norodom Sihanouk only a couple of decades later. This educated family with close ties to the royal palace navigated the new colonial systems that allowed them to support their families during times of strained resources. By working in the schools and the administration, the Pomme sisters accessed

⁵⁷ NAC, RSC File No. 5939, RSC File No. 2068, RSC File No. 20109.

new forms of capital that generated income in ways not previously available. Moreover, by working in *école Sutharot* and *école Norodom*, Pomme maintained the close relations to the royal palace established by her father.

In an effort to increase the number of teachers, the administration modified and changed the requirements for indigenous teachers. The education system in colonial Cambodia was based on a French model but the administration made various amendments over the decades in order to comply with local specifications. In the first decade of girls' education, the administration created two elementary school tracks in order to accommodate parents who only wanted their daughters to attend school until the age of fourteen. After completing secondary school, teachers in training were required to study in the *cours-normale* prior to entering the classroom. The need for teachers was so high that acceptance into the course was not dependent on whether students had passed the diploma of Upper Primary-Khmer Studies. They only needed to have completed the fourth year of their studies. At the time, the age limit for entrance into the *cours-normale* in Cambodia was twenty years old, three years older than the age limit for girls in Tonkin. Seemingly in hopes of attracting more teachers, a July 1938 amendment changed the age limit to 24 years old for Cambodians and 22 years for Annamites (Vietnamese) living in Phnom Penh.⁵⁸ Of course, while these changes provided women with more time to complete the qualifications to become a teacher, the administration did not seem to imagine or propose ways to create remote teaching more amenable to the female teachers.

While some women wrote to the administration for a job, the colonial officials were not typically in a position to turn away applicants. In 1939, Tep Vem wrote to the administration

⁵⁸ NAC, RSC File No. 27437.

requesting a seat in the teaching track of the secondary school despite failing her *Diploma D'Etudes Primaires Superieries*, the equivalent of an upper primary school or middle school certificate. The principal of Lycee Sisowath was amenable to her acceptance because of “Cambodia’s need for a teaching staff and the small number of pupils suspected of entering the [teaching course] (a dozen) this year.” Meanwhile, the Local Head of Education opposed making an exemption for her admission.⁵⁹ Likely, his opposition was overruled because she was admitted to repeat her studies. Prior to completing high school, Vem wrote twice more to the Chief of Education twice requesting a teaching position in Phnom Penh—she persevered because she wanted to help alleviate the burden of her brother's education expenses. She writes, "That is why I have just begged you to place me somewhere at your service, again to alleviate, the burden too heavy for my parents." The administration finally determined that she could serve as a temporary instructor while another teacher was on maternity leave.⁶⁰ For women like Vem, the teaching profession became an avenue to supporting their families, especially for those whose families began to realize that education could provide better paying salaries. Meanwhile, the colonial administration, desperate for teachers, felt obligated to hire more teachers even if they were not fully qualified by the colonial standards.

While teaching careers became appealed some educated women, the administrative expectations of teachers and societal expectations for wives created a compounded burden for female teachers. Samian Thiang taught at a school in Kompong Cham for two years while her husband worked for the Indigenous Administration in Phnom Penh. After multiple exchanges requesting her reassignment to Phnom Penh, Samian’s husband finally penned a lengthy letter

⁵⁹ NAC, RSC File No. 27350.

⁶⁰ NAC, RSC File No. 7474.

explaining that the posting was a smear on her character because "the considerable distance between the two spouses caused contempt in all Cambodian circles, brought not against me, but against her." In addition, "Kompong Cham is a completely foreign place—its remoteness causes her many worries." After listing the expenses caused by the separation, he finally begged the administration to consider her position, to imagine the feeling of living alone in an unfamiliar place.⁶¹ Certainly, female teachers confronted significant social pressures in a cultural environment in which women leaving their families for work was unfathomable. In a rare instance, the administration gave in and granted Samian a re-assignment to Phnom Penh, where she continued to work in the schools for at least six more years. In instances like this one, it is apparent that Samian wanted to continue teaching—perhaps her family needed her salary—otherwise she could have quit without requesting a return to Phnom Penh. As this case shows, not just the princesses engaged in compromises with the colonial administration. Regular teachers also negotiated how they would participate in these new state institutions.

From the early *métis* teachers requesting transfers after a few years in different posts to the Khmer teachers writing to the administration pleading for a more compassionate placement, it is clear that the issue was not teaching in a classroom or starting a career but rather the difficulty of placements in remote areas with the lack of a social network. While colonial officials accepted Samian's request for transfer, the administration was also determined to not give into such requests because of the larger plan to distribute teachers evenly throughout Phnom Penh and the provinces. Another women, Pou Chreng, who was working in Phnom Penh while her husband lived and worked in Kompong Cham, struggled with the demands placed upon families who worked in the

⁶¹ NAC, RSC File No. 11786.

civil service. In January 1928, she requested a transfer to Kompong Cham so that she could live with her husband. In her letter, she writes that her husband previously requested a transfer to Phnom Penh but due to the denial, she would like to transfer to Kompong Cham. In response, the Residence Superior argued that due to the shortage of indigenous female teachers, her request could not be fulfilled.⁶² Female teachers oftentimes needed to navigate the difficulties of upholding their employee contracts along with duties of Khmer wives in a state system that was not amenable to the conflicting interests.

Throughout the first twenty years of girls' school, the lack of secondary schools and teacher training programs continued to be an issue for young women, especially provincial girls. Before the 1920s, male graduates of complementary education programs received an in-service training from French educators during the school holidays.⁶³ In 1925 the administration formalized teacher training by opening a four-year teacher training course for men at *College Sisowath*. Two years later, the French created a two-year course to train auxiliary teachers.⁶⁴ During these years young women who wished to continue their schooling after primary school needed to travel to Saigon because Phnom Penh had neither secondary schools or teaching training schools for girls. Meanwhile, *Lycee Sisowath*, the only secondary school in Phnom Penh did not admit women until later in the 1930s. If parents from Phnom Penh or the provinces wanted their daughters to attend secondary school, they needed to send them to Saigon. Some girls residing outside of Phnom Penh lived with relatives in the capital while they attended school.

⁶² NAC, RSC File No. 7284.

⁶³ Jean Delvert, *Le Cambodge* (1re édition. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1983).

⁶⁴ René Morizon, *Indochine française. Monographie du Cambodge ...* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Étrême-Orient, 1931).

On September 1, 1929, officials established a new boarding school for girls and the administration prepared to recruit young Cambodian girls to the school. A note regarding the recruitment explains:

"To remedy the weakness of teaching Cambodian girls and to facilitate the recruitment of indigenous instructors, whose shortage is felt in all the provinces, a boarding school of Cambodian girls will be opened on September 15, 1929 in Phnom Penh...[it] has twenty places."⁶⁵

Once again, officials responded to the lack of girls school in the provinces with various proposals to improve the quality and quantity of female teachers. The archival record lacks further information about the fate or operations of this boarding school. During my research, I met one alumnae of the boarding school, which seems to indicate that it remained in operation through the colonial period. She attended in the 1940s and at the time her parents consulted with several relatives before they decided that she could attend the school.⁶⁶ While the school seemed to remain in operation and likely housed some women who traveled from the provinces, it never manifested into a particularly well-known or large institution.

Due to the lack of schools, the colonial administration's own priorities, and social pressures, girls with aspirations for higher education faced a host of barriers to obtaining their secondary school diplomas. In Em, Khieu Ponnary and Siv Eng Tong, three women who later became prominent political figures, endured their own experiences with these roadblocks. In 1935, In Em became the first Cambodian woman to earn her Elementary Diploma and DEPSFI diploma, a lower secondary school or middle-school degree. Born the daughter of a school teacher in Kandal province, she was twenty-two years old when she earned the degree and her educational successes

⁶⁵ NAC, RSC File No. 33616.

⁶⁶ May 17, 2018 interview.

created headlines in the local newspapers in which onlookers debated about whether Khmers should celebrate such an achievement. Some people viewed her diplomas as unfeminine and a danger to society. On 13 July 1935 Sok Sarou wrote a letter to *L'Aurore* newspaper titled, "On the margins of the scholarly success of Mlle In Em: The Emancipated Woman, would she be a danger to society, to government?"⁶⁷ In the article, he describes himself as a "true feminist" but he bemoans the celebration of her diplomas by pointing out that societies with highly educated women have fallen to communism and other social evils. Notably, he writes that in Vietnam the educated young women have become communist sympathizers. Clearly, Sok is concerned that as more young women receive an education Cambodian society will begin to embrace communism. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the relationships of power that constituted the fabric of Cambodian society rubbed against the new racialized and bureaucratic colonial system. King Sisowath had acquiesced to the Protectorate's efforts to weaken the monarchy and now not only men, but also women, could gain new forms of prominence through alternative routes, like education degrees in French colonial schools.

While the old generations viewed In Em's success with trepidation, supportive peers defended her educational aspirations. In a response letter titled, "Should we educate the girls? A few say, yes!" letter writer Saryeth argues: "In Em pushes her sisters to the limit. Why diminish her good work?...Without In-Em, who despite opposition and mockery, continued her studies in Saigon, Khmer girls would still be in the dark. Already some courageous women are following her. I believe that her sisters will follow the path that she has made..."⁶⁸ By referencing the

⁶⁷ Sok Sarou, "En marge des succès scolaires de Mlle In-Em: La Femme Cambodgienne Emancipée serait-elle un danger pour la société le gouvernement ?" *L'Aurore*, 13 July 1935.

⁶⁸ Saryeth, "Une Lettre: Faut-il enseigner les filles? Quelques cambodgiens disent: oui!" *La Presse Indochinoise*, July 25, 1935.

difficulties endured by In Em in the process of receiving the degree, the writer indicates that In Em had experienced criticism within elite Phnom Penh circles for several years. Yet, Saryeth articulates that more girls wanted to continue their education but only needed a leader who could make the path slightly easier for them.

Saryeth's admiration for In Em's leadership was accompanied by another supporter who both despised Sok Sarou's old-fashioned stance and praised In Em's attention to her own culture.

In a the letter to *l'Aurore*, an *Neang* (Miss) Phong Sonn writes:

Permit me to say that I think that the author of the letter in question, M. Sok Sarou—with all due respect—is envious and old-fashioned. Your correspondent has a sister who would have been blackballed from exams if not for In-Em... Neither having the honor to be a parent or a friend of the happy laureate nor a member of the Feminist club, I will try to defend the cause of Mlle In-Em and the one of feminism... In effect, no one knows that the young Khmer woman has been relegated to the house where she just learns how to weave and pray. Engaging with the old-fashioned and rigid prejudices, Mlle In-Em did not hesitate to wear sampots at the French schools, eager to learn and rise to the occidental. Blithe and proud, she was an example to her sisters on the path of progress and civilized brothers.⁶⁹

In building her case for In Em, Saryeth emphasizes that the young graduate is a leader for Khmer women in the Khmer community and also in the French schools. In her communities, In Em must stand up to people who do not think her degree is worthy of celebration. Moreover, by not simply acquiescing to “occidental” ideals, In Em demonstrated how young Khmer women could navigate colonial schools without abandoning their Khmer identity. In particular, by wearing the *sampot*, In Em demonstrated that Khmer women could make appropriate progress in school without losing an essential component of their ethnic identity.⁷⁰ Finally, both Saryeth and Phong Sinn invoke the

⁶⁹ “La Femme Cambodgienne émancipée serait-elle un danger pour le Gouvernement?: Autour des succès Scolaires de Melle In-Em” *L’Aurore*, July 20, 1935.

⁷⁰ Penny Edwards writes about the importance of the sampot in her article: Penny Edwards, “Restyling Colonial Cambodia (1860–1954): French Dressing, Indigenous Custom and National Costume,” *Fashion Theory* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2001): 389–416.

imagery of women walking down the path of progress, a movement that reconfigures the image of a woman circling around the stove, as cited in the opening of this chapter.

In the decades after receiving her diploma, In Em remained a leader in education and civil society. Based on her son's memoir, it seems as though In Em received her DESPFI diploma in Saigon.⁷¹ That year, she requested a scholarship to attend *Lycee Sisowath* as a day student. Women had never attended *Lycee Sisowath*. The administration approved her scholarship because of her own educational merits and her father's work as a school monitor at a communal school in Kandal province. The French also decided that a scholarship to *Lycee Sisowath* was more practical for the administration because attending *Lycee Sisowath* was significantly less expensive than sending her to Saigon.⁷² The decision to create space for women to attend *Lycee Sisowath* significantly changed the opportunity for women to obtain a higher education in Cambodia. In Em married Sam Sary in 1939 so she probably never finished her studies at *Lycee Sisowath*. As I will show in Chapter 2, however, she became a significant voice for women in the late 1940s as part of her work in women's organizing. Seemingly, her interest in championing causes for women did not end with her diploma.

Other women found hurdles within the colonial bureaucracy and plans for the high school girls. After receiving her Diploma in Upper Primary Franco-Indigenous Studies at *Lycee Sisowath* in 1939, exemplary student Khieu Ponnary wished to leave the normal course, which trained teachers, and continue her studies in the secondary school. Supporting her wishes, Khieu's father agreed to reimburse the administration for her scholarship to the normal course. The response was

⁷¹ Sam Rañsū, *We Didn't Start the Fire: My Struggle for Democracy in Cambodia* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2013): 11.

⁷² NAC, RSC File No. 10079.

harsh. The colonial administration preferred that Khieu continue in the teaching program rather than attend the secondary school. The Director of Bureaus wrote that Khieu was permitted to leave the normal course only if her father reimbursed the administration in one complete installment. In addition, she would *not* be admitted to the secondary school because the course was already full.⁷³ Khieu is often recognized as the first woman to receive a baccalaureate in Cambodia. Yet, these conversations between the Khieu family and the colonial administration indicate that her baccalaureate almost did not occur because of an administration that sought to direct women in the schools into a teaching track that would produce more female teachers for the elementary schools.⁷⁴ In the end, Khieu did become teacher—she was a well-respected teacher at *Lycee Sisowath* until she joined her husband in the marquis in the 1960s.

Meanwhile, Siv Eng Tong, the daughter of widowed school director in Prey Veng, completed her Franco-Indigenous Primary Studies certificate in 1934. Since she wanted to continue her studies, her father wrote to the administration requesting a scholarship for her to enroll in the normal section of *Collège des filles indigènes* in Saigon.⁷⁵ While Siv's father encouraged her to continue her studies in Saigon, her decision was not easily accepted by others. The people

⁷³ NAC, RSC File No. 27178.

⁷⁴ There is some confusion in the scholarship about whether In Em or Khieu Ponnary was the first woman to receive a diploma. Khieu is often cited as the first woman to graduate secondary school while Sam Rainsy points out that his mother was the first woman to receive a diploma. I think this confusion is due to the variety of diplomas at the time, including lower secondary school diplomas, secondary school diplomas, and teaching certificates. Overall, I do not think we can assign one individual to be “the first” because the kinds of diplomas and degrees available to women changed over the course of the early twentieth century. Finally, as I have shown in this chapter, several women, including Khieu Ponnary, In Em, Phlek Phirun, and Siv Eng Tong, earned similar degrees in the late 1930s, evidence that this was the time when Khmer women began to graduate from secondary school, about 25 years after the first school for girls opened.

⁷⁵ NAC RSC File No. 25294.

in their community thought that she should stay at home in order to find a husband instead of going to school in Saigon.⁷⁶ She attended for the school for four years before returning to Phnom Penh with her diploma in teaching. Siv's daughter, the first female Cambodian doctor and later prominent civil rights activist Pung Chhiv Kek, explained that her mother wished to attend medical school but that attending medical school "was out of the question for women at the time". Instead, she became a teacher so that she could train the youth for the future. Despite the neighbors' comments about her marital prospects, Siv returned to Phnom Penh and married Pung Peng Cheng, a fellow teacher who was supportive of Siv's career and success. In the following twenty years, she worked as a school instructor and school inspector and even tutored the children of the royal palace. In 1958, she became the first women elected to the National Assembly.

After the first twenty years of a haphazard effort education for girls in the provincial communities, the French officials began to find some success by 1930. In his monograph of Cambodia, René Morizon writes that the three protectorate schools in Phnom Penh enrolled 290 girls while 10 schools across the provinces enrolled 377 female students.⁷⁷ There is no information about the backgrounds of the girls attending the colonial schools, but outside of Phnom Penh most of the schools were established in the provincial capitals. Most likely, the young students were the daughters in well-connected families who sought to benefit from some of the colonial administration's programs. Perhaps, the father of Siv Eng Tong was aware that families in Phnom Penh sent their daughters to school and decided that his daughter should also participate in the new opportunities. That is to say, the girls who received an education across provincial districts were

⁷⁶ December 16, 2018 interview with Pung Chhiv Kek, or Kek Galabru.

⁷⁷ Morizon, *Indochine française*, 122.

probably from middle-class or local elite families who understood that in the changing social landscape young women could benefit from an education and diploma.

Establishing girls' primary schools in the provinces and creating more secondary school opportunities in Phnom Penh required significant negotiations between the colonial administration, Khmer families, and the female students and teachers. While the French could attempt to spread a French colonial education through schools, they needed to work with the women who staffed the institutions. As demonstrated above, the colonial administration could be unsympathetic to the personal dilemmas of teachers and the educational desires of some young women. At the same time, the administration was often in a difficult position and could not completely dismiss all requests or demands. The young women also wielded some power over the administration. The risks taken by the first female students and teachers paved the way for future generations of young women who sought to fulfill their dreams of education and careers. Moreover, the negotiations around education and teaching certainly shaped the kind of work and projects taken on later by Khmer women who sought to use their experiences to teach and help other women.

Gender Ideologies

The curriculum at the royal and colonial schools for girls blended Khmer and colonial understandings of social order and civilized womanhood to create a powerful class-based gender ideology that raised up urban and royal girls in the colonial capital as the appropriate models for young Khmer women. Indeed, Penny Edwards has argued that despite the small number of women in schools, the girls were “daughters of the colonial encounter” who “came to represent a powerful

force in the nationalist imagination.”⁷⁸ Taking into account the royal culture of the private girls’ schools as well as the French concerns about creating curriculums that aligned with parental preferences, the “nationalist imagination” was steeped in mutually reinforcing colonial and Khmer gender ideologies. Nineteenth and early twentieth Khmer gender ideologies were derived from codes of conduct on proper social behavior along with rites of passage marking when a girl was prepared for marriage. Mid-twentieth century Cambodian commentaries on girls’ education emphasized that a young woman should gain learn about morality, literacy, and housewifery during their studies. The French also prioritized domesticity and literacy skills while also proposing that young girls should learn about patriotic duties to the nation, an ideal that was introduced through scouting programs. As will be shown throughout this dissertation, the changing gender ideologies and expectations for women significantly shaped ideas about gender, domesticity, and citizenship in the postcolonial period.

Prior to the establishment of girls’ schools that taught about the “appropriate” behaviors and attributes of women, Khmer men and women learned about social expectations through normative poems passed down through oral traditions. The polity composed of towns and villages oriented towards the royal palace was governed by understandings of social order, as defined by prescriptive *cpâp* or normative poems. According to David Chandler, central Khmers’ concerns with issues of order and civilization produced discourses about the “order” or *sandap thno’p*, meaning customary, and wildness, or *prei*, the word for forest.⁷⁹ Angkorian era *cpâp* survived into

⁷⁸ Penny Edwards, “‘Propagender’: Marianne, Joan of Arc and the Export of French Gender Ideology to Colonial Cambodia (1863- 1954)”: 127.

⁷⁹ “Songs at the Edge of the Forest” in David Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past : Selected Essays, 1971-1994* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 1996): 77.

the Middle Angkor (1400s – 1863) and the colonial period. Cambodians passed down the *cpâp* through oral tradition and rote memorization. In the early 20th century, a Cambodian Buddhist modernist movement concerned with purification exalted the *cpâp* as important guides for leading a moral life.⁸⁰

Through memorization of the *cpâp*, people learned correct behaviors, especially in regards to relationships of power dependent on gender, age, and social status. Over time, new *cpâp* were composed and in the nineteenth century a literati penned the *cpâp srī* (women’s code) and *cpâp brūs* (men’s code). Trude Jacobsen writes,

“The *chpab srei*, like all *chpab*, provided guidelines for acceptable behavior. In the ‘Minh Mai’ text (the best known of the *Chpab Srei* manuscripts) the narrative takes the form of Queen Vimala instructing her daughter Indrandati in necessary information that will be of use throughout her life before she leaves her parents’ kingdom. The key thrust of the text is that it is the responsibility of wives to ensure the good reputation of the family by maintaining a harmonious image of the home, regardless of what happened behind closed doors.”⁸¹

The *cpâp srī* mostly discusses how a woman should treat her husband and act around her family and acquaintances. In particular, the poem directs women to act deferentially to their husbands and to not spend significant leisure time gossiping with their neighbors. In the context of concerns around order and Buddhist models of hierarchical relationships, the *cpâp srī* guides women so that they can create the kind of order in the house that is expected of wider society.⁸² Of course,

⁸⁰ Hansen, Ann Ruth, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007): 173.

⁸¹ Trudy Jacobsen, *Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2008): 120.

⁸² Besides Trudy Jacobsen, Judy Ledgerwood, Judith Jacob, and Khing Hoc Dy write about the *chpab srei* as a normative poem. Judy Ledgerwood writes that the text was written by an individual named Minh Mai while Khing Hoc Dy attributes the text to King Ang Duong. In her work, Trudy Jacobsen theorizes that the text may be King Ang Duong’s misogynistic response to his niece Ang Mei’s crowning by the Vietnamese in the 1830s. Trudy Jacobsen, *Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2008);

normative poems presented an ideal social relationship which was not necessarily reflective of the lived realities in homes.

Other forms of education for girls also directly correlated with gaining the requisite skills for wives and mothers. Until the twentieth century, young women in wealthy families participated in *cūl mláp*, “entering the shade,” at the time of their first menses in order to prepare for marriage. For three months—about the time a banana tree ripens with fruit—the teenaged women were expected to stay in the home to learn embroidery and to memorize the codes of conduct, including the *cpâp srī* (woman’s code). The young women were not supposed to go outside during the daytime and were forbidden from eating certain foods. After completing *cūl mláp*, ceremonies announced that a girl was ready for marriage. Reading and writing were not desirable, or even requisite, skills for a potential wife. Rather, women were expected to understand their moral obligations as mothers and wives and to accept a marriage proposal agreed upon by both families.

Customs around the *cūl mláp* and particular decisions around girls’ schooling provide insights into how early twentieth century parents determined that their daughters were prepared for marriage. Judy Ledgerwood has suggested that the practice of *cūl mláp* began to die out around

Judith Jacob, *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia: A Preliminary Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Judy Ledgerwood, “Changing Khmer Conceptions of Gender” (Cornell, Cornell University, 1990); Khing Hoc Dy, *Contribution a l’Histoire de La Litterature Khmère*, vol. 1: Litterature de l’Epoque “Classique” (Paris: Editions l’Harmattan, 1990). In contemporary Cambodia, the *cpâp srī* has become a point of contention because it is still taught in the schools. The international development sector has argued that the *cpâp srī* reinforces a patriarchy in Cambodian society. In 2018, my friend Thida told me that she believes this perspective is mostly wrong and that the *cpâp srī* was supposed to be a way for women to gain power in society. This sentiment aligns with Katie Schubert’s arguments about that following the *cpâp srī* is a form of empowerment in Cambodian society, an argument that she made at the Canadian Council on Southeast Asian Studies Annual Conference in 2018.

the 1930s.⁸³ A newspaper article from 1948 also corroborates that the practice became less popular in the early twentieth century. The writer suggests that until twenty years earlier, women still practiced *cūl mláp*. In an article about the girls' schools in Cambodia, it seems as though the writer is suggesting that the practice changed when girls began to attend school.⁸⁴ Whether or not girls participated in the practice of *cūl mláp*, the age of maturity signified that a girl was prepared for marriage. A few years after the girls' schools opened in Phnom Penh, the colonial administration reported that 330 girls attended schools in Phnom Penh but that generally families only supported education for their daughters until the age of thirteen or fourteen.⁸⁵ In this sense, we can think of the schools as new venues for young women to gain the expected knowledge for marriage and that families wanted their daughters to stop attending school in order to prepare for a marriage at home.

The French colonial schools expanded this household education to include an array of subjects, including French and Khmer language, morality, physical education and hygiene, history, geography, and arithmetic. Curriculum books tailored the lessons for elementary or secondary school classes so that the lessons became more difficult as students progressed. For example, in 1930 an elementary school student sitting in morality class might learn about social life and the basic concept of charity. Meanwhile in the secondary school classroom, a student might prepare to compare "European philosophy and Oriental philosophy," or Buddhist compassion and Christian charity.⁸⁶ In addition to these general lessons, girls studied sewing and household

⁸³ Judy L. Ledgerwood, "Changing Khmer Conceptions of Gender: Women, Stories, and the Social Order" (Ph.D., United States -- New York, Cornell University, 1990): 136.

⁸⁴ "Khemara Butri" *Kambujā Waxing Moon* 1945, 163.

⁸⁵ NAC, RSC File No.2259.

⁸⁶ Publication Mensuelle de la Direction de l'Instruction Publique, "Bulletin Général de l'Instruction Publique," *Gouvernement Général de L'Indochine* 9 Année, no. No. 8 (Avril 1930).

education along with drawing.⁸⁷ These household education lessons may include short passages on the household and sewing and more practical applications of the lessons. One such French language passage addressed “To Future Housewives,” details how “a modest mother, applied to all her duties, thrifty, far-sighted, can now lead her children far.” Another passage on sewing tells a little story about a girl learning how to sew from her mother.⁸⁸ Importantly, these lessons were not just teaching young women how to sew or complete other tasks. The articles also suggest the kind of relationships that mothers should create in their homes. In other words, the lessons imparted the French image of a good mother and wife.

While the colonial educators developed lessons to mold “civilized” young men and women, they also fretted about designing a curriculum that would appeal to Khmer parents. From the inception of *l'école Norodom* in 1903 until the end of colonial period, reports emphasized that handicrafts should be a central component to the schools’ curriculums because of the wishes of Khmer parents. In a letter to the Exposition at the Louvre in 1913, the Resident Superior of Cambodia explains the rationale for a particular emphasis on handicrafts:

“However, despite the instinctive opposition against the education of girls, which they have considered for a long time to be a dangerous novelty, our schools have seen the population increase progressively above all when the administration has assured the parents themselves that we have in their interests a girls’ education that is a professional and housekeeping one.”⁸⁹

⁸⁷ “Bulletin Élémentaire Franco-Khmer,” *Protectorat Du Cambodge* 2e Année, no. No. 11 (Septembre 1927).

⁸⁸ Imprimerie Henry, “Bulletin de l’Enseignement Primaire Au Cambodge,” *Publication Mensuelle* Année 1, no. No. 3 (May 1940).

⁸⁹ NAC, RSC File No. 2022.

Indeed, again in 1927, Henri Gourdon, school inspector, suggested that school curriculums focus on domesticity to appease parents.⁹⁰ Commentaries about the parents' predispositions towards domesticity curriculums are recounted through the writings of colonial administrators so we do not know how the administrators came to these conclusions. Clearly, however, the administration tried to develop a curriculum that they believed would attract Khmer families which helps to demonstrate that this colonial curriculum drew inspiration from the local values and expectations.

Princess Malika designed her own curriculum for her school, although reports of the education suggest that she followed a similar framework of teaching about household matters along with language, literature, and the sciences. Materials from the school no longer exist but alumnae of the school were able to describe to me their education with the princesses. When I spoke to alumna Chhanny about her studies at the *école Malika* in the late 1930s and early 1940s, she recalled courses in math, science, discipline, morality, and good manners. Moreover, she said that the school emphasized practical learning. The educators dedicated Thursdays to housekeeping and students learned everything from cooking to washing and ironing clothes. When she described her education at *école Malika*, she used the phrase "girls' education" to encapsulate her understanding of the type of education she received.⁹¹ Similarly, narrator Sophany, explained that she learned proper culture, behaviors, and manners from the Yukanthor sisters.⁹² The components of their schooling, equally emphasizing science and math along with good manners and morality,

⁹⁰ Penny Edwards, "Propagender," 122.

⁹¹ Interview, May 17, 2019. In a 1930, she writes about continuing her nursery class at l'école Princess Malika using the reading and writing booklets printed at the expense of the administration that she had been using for the previous eighteen years. It seems as though these materials are no longer in existence, at least not at the National Archives of Cambodia. National Archives of Cambodia, RSC File No. 1405

⁹² March 30, 2018 interview.

demonstrate that the princesses intended to develop young women according to the expectations of elite families.

Outside the classrooms and circles of female educators, onlookers began to discuss the best kind of education for Cambodian girls. In 1941, a contributor to newspaper *Nagara Vatta* detailed how teachers and students at a school in Kandal province joined together to study the *cpâp srī*. Young women needed to leave home for a few hours each day. According to the article, "...Some women risk leaving their husbands during the day in order to go study the rules...In one town, a girl went to study and her parents thought she was lost before they found her with the teacher and class."⁹³ The author goes on to propose that this instruction in the *cpâp srī* was a model of girls' education. While it seems as though this school was more of a space for women of all ages to come together to memorize the *cpâp srī*, it is apparent that proponents of these social codes viewed the schools as spaces to spread ideas about Khmer culture and norms.

While some contributors to *Nagara Vatta* applauded the focus on morality laws, others believed that girls also needed to learn about being housewives. Beginning in the 1940s, nationalists increasingly viewed housewifery as a refined skillset expected of women. In order to promote these ideas, some individuals close to the bureaucratic workings of the country theorized how domesticity could be further institutionalized in the curriculum:

The meeting discussed teaching girls about the rules of domestic science. The Ministry of Education has not thought a lot about [teaching girls domestic science]. Our women nowadays will not know anything. We have our superior law for women [*cpâp srī*] If our women know the laws of our people, they will have some skills. However, we need to accept the education system for women in this modern time.⁹⁴

⁹³ "Pangrian Dhamr Strī" *Nagara Vatta*, August 13, 1941.

⁹⁴ "Strī Dhvoe Me Phdah" *Nagara Vatta* May 11, 1940.

Unlike the writer who believed teaching the *cpâp srī* was the model of education, this contributor was more concerned with focusing on alternative approaches to women's education. By proposing that girls needed to learn domestic science and household skills in a school, these commentators also gestured towards the notion that mothers and older generations did not teach girls about the correct manners or skills. This concern about the proper way to approach housewifery relates to broader concerns about behavior and comportment within the Buddhist modernist movement in Cambodia.⁹⁵ By imagining that girls could learn about the *cpâp srī* and housewife skills in schools, the onlookers concerned about the educational situation of women in Cambodia began to create a broader conversation about the relationship between education, the home, and the nation.

Meanwhile, the colonial introduction of scouting programs for boys and girls added another layer to the discussions and observations around gender, education, and the nation. The scouting organizations in Cambodia were founded by Prince Monireth in the early 1930s.⁹⁶ The 1930s Cambodian scouts were connected to the French scouts under the M. Lefèvre. Early twentieth century scouts were premised on a vision of internationalism. Started in 1908 by Lord Robert Baden-Powell, the organization “had a group of more than 40 nations that adhered to practicing the law of the scouts” by 1935.⁹⁷ In a speech given by M. Lefèvre in Phnom Penh, he described the “two million young men and one million young women” around the world participating in

⁹⁵ For more information on the modernist movement see: Anne Ruth Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007).

⁹⁶ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007): 223. Anne Raffin, “Youth Mobilization and Ideology,” *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 396.

⁹⁷ “La Conférence sur le Scoutisme,” *La Depeche*, April 10, 1935, Box 1, National Archives of Cambodia.

scholarly work and camping. Furthermore, he said that the world jamboree brought together “forty to fifty thousand scouts.”⁹⁸ While Prince Monireth may have been an enthusiastic supporter of the scouting groups and their ideology, internal revenue issues suggest that the organization was not well supported. In 1937, Prince Suramarith, the President of the Central Committee of the Cambodian Scouting Association, wrote to the Resident Superior explaining that their “situation was very poor” due to minimal member contributions from members. In order for the organization to survive, Suramarith requested 500 piastres from the local budget.⁹⁹

Scouting was supposed to be an opportunity for boys *and* girls to gather around the spirit of gaining useful life skills. When M. Lefèvre visited Phnom Penh in 1935 he suggested that young women begin a scouting organization. According to an article detailing his efforts, he asked two young women about organizing only to receive ambivalent answers about how “it’s too much.” Supposedly, his “long demonstration” about the “pretty role they could fulfill” was unappealing.¹⁰⁰ The article, titled “Scouts or dancing?” inferred that the female students were too caught up in their clothes to make a serious commitment to group intended to develop other kinds of skills.¹⁰¹ The article’s emphasis on how female students preferred to spend their time on clothing or going to dances suggests that young women were too frivolous or preoccupied unprepared to participate in series causes that would benefit the nation. Moreover, it is difficult not to see parallels between the newspapers comments about the frivolity of the young women and the education

⁹⁸ “La Conférence sur le Scoutisme,” *La Depeche*, April 10, 1935, Box 1, National Archives of Cambodia.

⁹⁹ “Subvention prévue au budget local du Cambodge au profit de l’association cambodgienne de scoutisme” (Phnom Penh, 1943), Box 3359, National Archives of Cambodia.

¹⁰⁰ S.C., “Scoutisme ou dancing?,” *LA Presse Indochinoise*, April 8, 1935.

¹⁰¹ S.C., “Scoutisme ou dancing?,” *LA Presse Indochinoise*, April 8, 1935.

administration's emphasis on the difficult nature of Khmer mothers and daughters in the classroom.

During World War II, the scouting groups moved away from the more internationalist organizing structure and focused more on a patriotic agenda. At the time, Vichy ideology sought to “remasculinize the male body, and virilizing elites” and the Vichy regime fostered youth organizations in Indochina as a way to “counteract Thai irredentists, Vietnamese revolutionaries and Japanese occupiers and their claims of ‘Asia for Asians.’”¹⁰² In Cambodia, the youth organizations donned *yuvǎn*, the word for youth in Khmer. Under Vichy Cambodia and the newly crowned King Sihanouk, the scouts were highly popular with upwards of 15,000 youth members.¹⁰³ At this time, the organization became more closely associated with the crown as Sihanouk became the face of the organization. Discussions about the budget and the plans of the scouts in the 1940s show an increase in activity. In 1943, Prince Montana requested \$2000 piastres for the Cambodian Association of Scouts for the purpose of the camps. The next year, another \$2000 piastres were requested for the camps as well as the funds for the scouting magazine “*Servir*.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007): 232. Quotes from vichy et l’eternal feminin (283- 285). Anne Raffin, “Easternization Meets Westernization: Patriotic Youth Organizations in French Indochina during World War II,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 20, no. 2 (July 1, 2002): 121–40.

¹⁰³ “L’Oeuvre du Commissariat Général a l’éducation Physique, aux Sports, et a la Jeunesse en Indochine,” *Indochine Hebdomadaire Illustré*, July 20, 1944, Box 403, National Archives of Cambodia. Anne Raffin, “Easternization Meets Westernization: Patriotic Youth Organizations in French Indochina during World War II,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 20, no. 2 (July 1, 2002): 121–40.

¹⁰⁴ “Subvention prévue au budget local du Cambodge au profit de l’association cambodgienne de scoutisme” Phnom Penh, 1943, NAC.

Vichy desires to create a more robust population of patriotic youth also engendered renewed efforts from the colonial administration and the royal family to encourage more patriotic participation from young women. In J. Desjardin's article about Cambodia and the youth, he dedicates some space describing the budding female leadership. One hundred young women gathered for the occasion of a graduation in which Princess Rasmi Sutharot, "one of the most enlightened spirits of the aristocracy of the kingdom," conferred instructor diplomas to fifteen young women. In order to gain the diplomas they participated in "physical and moral training" and took an oath to "always loyally serve the *yuvān* cause." The presence of Sutharot illustrates the crown's growing stake in promoting royal culture and youth patriotism. For Desjardin the true accomplishment was that "their oath touches the heart of the great duty of which they too have become aware, that of collaborating in the rebirth of the Cambodian homeland."¹⁰⁵ Desjardin warns against the countries that are so caught up in new femininity that they "go as far as violating fashion and censoring the most innocuous traditions," but he does believe in the good that "the woman puts aside her pride to evolve at the same pace as the man, her companion."¹⁰⁶

Desjardin writes that the highest praise should be given to "Mme Sonn Venue Sai, the qualified instructor, and her followers, Mlles Victoire Meas, Vann-Si, Phlech-Phiroun, Pol Thuch"¹⁰⁷ Phlech Phirun's participation is illuminating. In 1943, she was sent to Dalat Vietnam to study at a girls school that "instructed women during short semesters so that girls would work hard

¹⁰⁵ J. Desjardins, "A L'Ombre de la Révolution Maréchalienne: Le Cambodge et sa Jeunesse," *Indochine Hebdomadaire Illustré*, August 17, 1944.

¹⁰⁶ J. Desjardins, "A L'Ombre de la Révolution Maréchalienne: Le Cambodge et sa Jeunesse," *Indochine Hebdomadaire Illustré*, August 17, 1944.

¹⁰⁷ J. Desjardins, "A L'Ombre de la Révolution Maréchalienne: Le Cambodge et sa Jeunesse," *Indochine Hebdomadaire Illustré*, August 17, 1944.

to have appropriate good manners for a future good state.” The education included lessons in housework and physical education. In her autobiography, Phlech described a strict schedule during her time at the school, including cleaning their rooms and “joining the Cravate in their green colors and lining up correctly” on Sundays. They showed “respect to the national flag” and “recited the rules every morning.” Phlek also remembered the ethnic minorities who lived on the mountain. In her memoir she writes, “there were many people and I did not see so much clothing.”¹⁰⁸ These formative experiences certainly helped to develop a female leader who would blend patriotic duty and concern for the poor populace in her state work during the 1950s and 1960s.

It is clear that the bolstering of educational institutions and introductions of the scouts had created changes in the capital, some of which were controversial. Five years prior to independence, a contributor to *Kambujā* wrote a long exposé on the “Transformation of the Khmer Yuvānī” in the decades after the French and royals had introduced education for girls. According to the writer, in a matter of twenty years, young women transformed from “not wearing make-up or permed hair” and “primarily busy in the home” to “attending school with young men” at Sisowath High school and “wearing lipstick, perming their hair, and beautifying themselves in a modern way.” The writer even commented on the scouts. According to this author, “In Battambang in 1937, they initiated a Young Pioneers for Khmer girls. In that time, the leader of the Young Pioneers wore shorts which caused the Khmer women to be very displeased.” Significantly, the writer expressed dismay that the state schools were unconcerned with developing the character of the young Khmer women. In contrast, he wrote, the Malika and Sutharot schools “continue to teach a young girls with a curriculum that follows the true customs” by “following the traditional methods and French

¹⁰⁸ Phlek Phirun, *Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmāk .I. Bān Dhvoe 'vī Khlah?* Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.

principles of education in order to mold the young Khmer women for a new image of a woman who knows how to continue Khmer traditions and while also knowing how to work within the modern world.”¹⁰⁹ When the princesses blended Khmer and French approaches to gendered education to help sustain an appropriate kind of education for the elite girls of Phnom Penh, they initiated an approach to resolving social problems that would endure through postcolonial political and social restructuring.

These changes in urban Phnom Penh also began to create new differences between urban and rural Cambodia. In a 1946 article penned by a poor “Female Farmer,” the letter writer lamented that her parents prohibited their daughters from attending school and that the government had not yet established a school for the girls in her village:

“... my mother and father do not allow their daughters to go to school. Even though the children beg they still do not give permission. They believe that traditional Khmer women do not know how to read and that studying leads to bad behavior... I want to study so badly but I cannot because there is no girl's school in my village ... I believe that if the government made a girl's school in each village certainly all Khmer women would be educated.”¹¹⁰

Likely, a concerned urban woman wrote this letter on behalf of her rural contemporaries without access to schools. The letter was penned around the same time that *Kambujā* employed a staff of female writers. Exasperated by lack of educational opportunities for girls, the writer clearly believes that society, and particularly older generations in rural Cambodia, need to discard misconceptions about the relationship between education and bad behavior. The concerned writer is one of the first women to write about her concerns regarding the lack of educational opportunities for women in Cambodia and especially rural Cambodia. Moreover, her

¹⁰⁹ “Prarivattañ Nai Yuvanārī Khmaer,” *Kambujā* October 25, 1948.

¹¹⁰ “Saṃputr Rapás Strī Khmaer ‘nak Caṃkār Mnâk” *Kambujā* No. 223.

characterization of rural communities as resistant to new ideas around girls' education reflects an urban sentiment that would endure into the postcolonial period.

With decades of royal and colonial schooling along with the changes on the political landscape during World War II, late 1940s commentators began to develop more pointed arguments about the relationship between education, home, and nation. In the *Kambujā* article “Khmer Daughter,” the writer addresses young Khmer women about their duties to the nation: “In progressive countries not only do men work but women also help to improve the nation in every ministry... The most important of every ministry is not outside the home. Women, your ministry that is the most important is in the family.”¹¹¹ Significantly, this article was written at a time when Cambodia was undergoing significant political changes, including World War II Japanese occupation, brief independence from France, and then a realignment of the political system in the following years. Within this changing political system, women were assigned to the home while their husbands were assigned to positions in government. The author continues: “A love of work is the most important quality... *strī me phdah* (housewives) must not be afraid to break free from laziness but they must not be busy with useless work either. They must work cleverly.”¹¹² In this colonial landscape where Cambodians were working through their own relationships to France and French colonial ideologies—and at a moment of heightened political tensions—it is apparent that onlookers also turned their attention to housewives in order to emphasize that women needed to recognize their own duties to the nation. To that end, an education was not just for a husband or the nuclear family but also for the country.

¹¹¹ “*Khemara Butri*” *Kambujā Waxing Moon* 1945, 163.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Conclusion

As the colonial administration created more opportunities for women to attend secondary school, a cohort of young female leaders emerged on the streets of Phnom Penh and in the provincial classrooms. The first leaders comprised of members of the royal family, especially from the Yukanthor family, an interesting development since Prince ArunYukanthor was exiled to Bangkok while his wife and daughters became deeply involved in the educational system of the country. In later years, Ping Peang and Ping Pah will become even more prominent in the national education system. Working alongside these royal women were *métis* and Vietnamese teachers along with a small number of Khmer women. Due to later discussions of the experiences of women like In Em, who faced backlash after she received her DEPSFI certificate, we can surmise that these women faced significant pressures and barriers from different segments of the population. In the following decades, the women who graduated from the secondary schools and worked as teachers oftentimes married politically powerful men or became politicians and high-ranking employees in the state. Therefore, these schools had become important grounds for debating the meaning of an education for girls and for cultivating new ways to create networks of politically powerful elites.

The cultivation of a small and elite group of educated women raises questions about feminist and women's movements, especially since feminist causes around suffrage had become important to other localities around the world. In other early twentieth century Southeast Asian societies, particularly Vietnam and Indonesia, Euro-American inflected feminist or women's movements emerged as more women graduated from colonial schools. Some scholars have

described these movements as “proto-feminist.”¹¹³ While female students at *Lycee Sisowath* may have formed a “feminist club” in the mid-1930s, this club seemingly never turned into a movement or even a significant space like other organizations and clubs in Phnom Penh. It seems likely that women like In Em, Khieu Ponnary, and Siv Eng Tong, who would take on women’s causes later, developed a particular understanding about the difficulties faced by women in society. Meanwhile, the scouts had gained some traction in the 1940s but this organization focused more on national duties that could be taken on by men and women. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, a contingent of politically conscious women came together in the late 1940s to form the first women’s association with a strong organizational foundation and magazine that last for four years. Fluent in the royal Khmer and colonial gender ideologies from their schooling, the women in these political and organizing circles further developed their understandings of domesticity, modernity, and the relationships between women and the state.

¹¹³ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

CHAPTER 2:
ORGANIZING AND WRITING

In the last years of French colonial rule in Cambodia, two women contributing to the first Khmer women's magazine engaged in a debate centered around the question, "What should women know how to do?" *Nāng Kaev Dov* listed twenty-five behaviors, skills, and characteristics expected of *nārī* (women), including cooking, sewing, listening to her husband, maintaining a well-run household, and reading novels.¹ Perturbed by the extensive list, *'nāk Srī S'īphán* responded that no woman could master all twenty-five skills and suggested that instead women should strive to achieve eight attributes, including acting faithful, appeasing, and pleasant to their husbands, cooking and keeping a house, exuding politeness and gentleness, and avoiding idleness at neighbors' homes. Further, she argued that if women could follow eight requirements, men should follow five, including monogamy, honesty, and openness with their wives, and avoiding fighting and cursing. She expected everyone to abstain from cards, alcohol, marijuana, and opium.² While *'nāk Srī S'īphán* may have proposed reducing the numbers of specific skills and attributes, both women envisioned good women as attentive wives who managed a well-kept and moral household. For *'nāk Srī S'īphán* a household was composed of husband who worked in a career outside of the home, a wife who cared for the house, and children who attended school. Together, the members of this household contributed to the future of the state.

¹ *Nāng Kaev Dov*, "Nārī Trūv Ceh 'vī Khlah," *Nārī*, December 1949 (218 – 219). Parts of this chapter appear in a forthcoming article in *Gender and History*.

² *'nāk Srī S'īphán*, "Poe Strī Kân Vinăy 25 Prakār Khñum Sūm 'o Purah Kân 5 Prakār Te," *Nārī* February 1951 (69 – 70).

When *Nāng Kaev Dov* and *'nāk Srī S'īphán* presented their visions for the ideal woman, as mother and wife, they were engaged a trend of women's publishing spaces weaving ideological narratives about domesticity. The historiography on discourses of modern domesticity can be traced to the 1970s when historians began to pay attention to the histories of women in Europe and America. Since then, historians have examined histories of domesticity outside of the Euro-American context and have further tied domestic concerns to colonial modernity, cosmopolitanism, and consumerism. At a 2019 AHA roundtable on domesticity, Antoinette Barton suggested “unsettling histories of domesticity” and emphasized that “the materialities of the house and home are with the political structures and amenable to geopolitical agendas within and across empires.” Historian of China Elizabeth LaCouture suggested domesticity as method and emphasized that in early twentieth century China, the household, connected to the state, was “a space where new, old, foreign, and local things circulated.”³ Certainly, the early twentieth century concerns about new/old and foreign/local have occupied the attention of historians, particularly those focused on discourses about modern girls, housewives, and professional women in colonial and urban twentieth century Asia. In localities from China and Japan to Burma, public thinkers developed their understandings of modern women, which often related to her representation as a fashionista, a dutiful housewife, or a groundbreaking professional.⁴

³ Antoinette Burton, “Toward Unsettling Histories of Domesticity,” *American Historical Review* 124, no. 4 (October 2019): 1332–36. Elizabeth LaCouture, “Translating Domesticity in Chinese History and Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 124, no. 4 (October 2019): 1278–89.

⁴ Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*, Asian Voices (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011); Ji-Eun Lee, *Women Pre-Scripted: Forging Modern Roles through Korean Print* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, 2015); Barbara Hamill Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Theodore Jun Yoo, *The*

Using domesticity as a category of analysis to examine the conversations about modern women allows me to speak across historical periods and places even when the process looked much different in Cambodia. While colonial Korea and Burma along with imperial Japan experienced publishing booms in the 1920s and 1930s and Thailand and Vietnam each saw a few women's magazines during those periods, the first Khmer language magazine for women did not appear on the shelves until 1949. *Dassanāvatti Nārī* was published by *Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvini*, an association deeply dedicated to nationalist causes and questions about the home in the decolonizing state. While “modern girls” were associated with consumption and individualism in other countries only decades before, the SKS rejected domesticity and modernity as an opportunity for liberal individualism. Instead, SKS focused on how Khmer women could use domestic skills in cooking, sewing, and child-rearing along with knowledge of morals and good manners in order to help achieve national goals of creating a modern and prosperous state. The SKS imagined moral homes as emblematic of an idealized state where good leadership and morality were important components of governance. Amid the violence of trying to obtain independence and carve out a modern Khmer political system, the SKS presented an alternative approach to organizing and governing society.

When seventy women gathered to found the *Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvini* (Association of Female Comrades/Companions), they determined to use their organizing power to substantiate the duties of Khmer women as mothers, wives, and daughters in both their nuclear and national families. The SKS conducted this work through four committees dedicated to interests in fashion, food, good manners, and publishing and they disseminated their ideas to urban women through

Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea : Education, Labor, and Health, 1910-1945, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

their most significant project, *Dassanāvatti Nārī* (Woman Magazine). Officially, the SKS was a non-political association that sought to unify women above the violent political landscape of decolonization in order to become educated and educate others on issues concerning women. Much of their work and imaginings revolved around the labors and presentations of the domestic space. Moreover, the association oftentimes used *me phdah* (housewife or leader of the house) interchangeably with *nārī* or *strī*. At a moment when the politically-minded Cambodians of the urban milieu were occupied with the paths to independence and the approaches to postcolonial state-building, the SKS sketched out the domestic space overseen by modern housewives as a domicile of morality and good behavior.

This chapter argues that the SKS's visions of domesticity responded to the politics of decolonization while also creating the path towards a postcolonial state structure, namely the political party and state *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, which was supposed to support democratic governance without allowing the country to succumb to the corruption of party politics. Prior to this state system, the SKS emphasized that women and their homes were not supposed to be “political.” Instead, the domestic space provided a template for the morally sound state that protected the people. In this way, professions about women staying out of political work engendered a politics of supporting respected leaders and of recognizing the positionality of the royal family. Finally, while the SKS remained focused on shaping homes, their dreams expanded to include positions as national leaders—an effort which culminated in early contacts with international organizations and nascent connections to rural women who did not have access to their urban-based publication. Finally, this work aligned with the decolonizing efforts of politically-minded urbanites to assume responsibility for the direction of the country, an effort that

involved collaborating to imagine and experiment with new possibilities for the state, which included considering varying governing structures, social services, and economic systems.

This chapter uses the SKS's most significant project *Dassanāvatti Nārī*, which ran from 1949 until 1952, as the source basis. Ranging from 25 to 50 pages of text and accompanying drawings and published each month for members and subscribers, the magazine includes the association's intellectual work along with occasional announcements, meetings, and business matters. I also utilize *Kambujā* newspaper to gain information about the association during the organizing phases prior to publication of *Nārī*. The chapter is divided into three sections and an epilogue. The first section details the magazine's organizing in the context of the 1940s politics and longer histories of women's organizing in Europe, the United States, and Asia—movements and groups that the SKS positioned themselves within and against. Nematoulla Macchwa and Princess Ping Peang from Chapter 1 appear in this section. The next section examines the SKS's three committees on good manners, food, and fashion, together establishing the association's idealized vision of the domestic space in the context of decolonizing politics and the royal Buddhist past and present. The third section examines significant changes to the association in 1951, including new leadership under In Em, the first student to receive her DEPSFI and Khieu Ponnary, the first woman to receive her baccalaureate and one of the most infamous female intellectuals of twentieth century Cambodia. During this period, the association began to connect with international organizations, focus more on scientific approaches to housewifery, and reach out to rural women. Finally, the epilogue gives a preview to how the SKS, which likely disbanded around 1953, shaped postcolonial domestic politics and politics of domesticity.

Politics and Organizing

When urban women founded the *Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvini*, they carved their niche within the political scene of Phnom Penh and in relation to the organizing efforts of women abroad. In the early twentieth century, urban Khmers organized into associations, political parties, and journalistic outlets that reflected shared interests. While some women were connected to these intellectual and political circles as wives, writers, and students, the organizations were dominated by men. Urban women did not contest their exclusion from political organizing but instead founded the *Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvini* to negotiate how women fit into nationalist goals to “progress the country forward.” As the first association for Khmer women, the SKS founding sparked questions from members and onlookers about the SKS in the context of feminist movements and women’s organizations in Europe and Asia, as well as the association’s position vis-à-vis Khmer politics. Through these negotiations, the organizers grounded their work in defining women within the context of domesticity which in turn constructed the home in the context of modern state.

When the SKS began to organize in the late 1940s, male nationalists interested in independence had already been campaigning for reforms to governance since the 1930s. The most well-known mouth organ for political thought was Son Ngoc Thanh’s newspaper *Nagara Vatta*, which Michael Vickery explains “advocated very moderate reforms: more Cambodian participation in commerce, greater educational opportunities, and equal treatment for Cambodians and French, all of which probably worried the traditional Cambodian elite more than the French, since their realization would have undermined the old oligarchy.”⁵ Similarly, Penny Edwards has

⁵ “Looking Back at Cambodia,” *Westerly*, 4, December 1976, pp. 14 – 28 at p. 15 in Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

argued that *Nagara Vatta* writers represented the urbanites who wanted more emphasis on “formal educational qualifications established by colonial schools,” as opposed to the paths to power through personal connections.⁶ The fairly radical proposals to embrace liberal reforms divided the Cambodian elites who formed into political parties representing different political interests.

World War II generated new momentum for independence from France. When Japan occupied French Indochina during World War II, *Nagara Vatta* organizer Son Ngoc Thanh organized political rallies to demonstrate Cambodians’ desire to end the Protectorate status under France. Encouraged by the occupying Japanese forces, the recently crowned King Sihanouk declared independence from France in 1945. Unfortunately, sovereignty was short-lived. When Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers only a few months later, France resolved to regain power over Cambodia—an aim supported by the imperialistic United States. The European colonial system that had reshaped the world was dying but colonial powers found new ways to maintain control over their overseas resources and territories. France resumed control by establishing a state within the French Union, a state superstructure composed of former colonies. Although France asserted its power by maintaining control of the military and economy, the metropole agreed to a series of compromises that transferred some power to local politicians. In particular, Cambodian leaders penned a constitution that formed a National Assembly elected by a male electorate and that recognized the authoritarian rule of the King.⁷

Three main political parties emerged in the 1940s representing different forms of nationalism and approaches to governance and independence. The Khmer Issarak, a communist

⁶ Edwards, Penny. *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press): 220 – 221.

⁷ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 29.

insurrectionist group based in the countryside, built solidarities with Thai and Vietnamese communists and the calls for using force to gain independence.⁸ Unlike the political parties in Phnom Penh, the more radical Khmer Issaraks recruited some women to their ranks.⁹ Meanwhile, politically active men established two political parties in Phnom Penh, the Liberal Party and the Democratic Party. Considered the more conservative party, the Liberal Party desired to maintain relations with France and relied on ‘patron-client’ system to gain supporters. Importantly, the Liberal Party represented the interests of the old vanguard of Cambodian elites as well as the French Union. The Democratic Party, the other urban-based party was composed of men educated in the French schools. The Democrats championed a fast and non-violent route to independence and gained support by working within networks of pre-established leaders across the country.¹⁰ While women may have attended gatherings of these political parties, they did not hold any official roles in the urban-based political parties. For the educated and elite urbanites, politics was the work of men.

When politicians and the monarchy ventured into new forms of governance, they confronted the dichotomies of monarchical rule and liberal governing by the people, issues that would continue to shape Cambodian politics into the postcolonial period. Initially, the constitution writers formed a French-style National Assembly elected by elite men and recognized absolute power of the King. In response to limited suffrage, Sihanouk proposed that the National Assembly should be elected through universal male suffrage.¹¹ When men cast ballots in 1946, they voted

⁸ Kiernan, *Pol Pot*, 41 – 60.

⁹ *Kambujā* newspaper occasionally mentioned the women in the Khmer Issaraks.

¹⁰ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 29 – 30; Kiernan, *Pol Pot*, 57.

¹¹ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 29.

overwhelmingly for Democratic Party candidates. The populace may have favored the Democratic Party and respected the King, but the two political forces often opposed each other and sometimes violence erupted. In 1950, Ieu Koeus, former President of the Democratic Party, was killed by a hand grenade in the political party office. Although the case was never solved, speculators have suspected that Sihanouk and his allies planned the assassination. Perhaps to the delight of their political opponents, the Democratic Party suffered turmoil and division after the death of their leader.

Amid those violent struggles for power and the ongoing questions about Cambodia's colonial status, female urbanites determined that Khmer women needed their own organizing space. Like their male counterparts experimenting with political models, the founders grappled to define their purpose and goals. At first, the organizing women founded the Women's Association of the French Union under President Princess Ping Peang Yukanthor, her sister Princess Ping Pah, and sixty other women.¹² Reflecting Princess Ping Peang's decades-long work alongside French teachers in the school, the organizers outlined their mission to include charitable services for women and children. Undoubtedly, many or all the women sitting in that room had attended classes with the princesses at *école Malika* and *école Norodom*. Within six months, the organizers dropped "French Union" and instead organized under *Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvini* (Association of Khmer Women Comrades/Companions). They replaced charitable aims with goals to organize women for around more nationalist-minded purposes. Recognizing that "all Cambodians are participating in politics in order to raise the standard of living in Cambodia so that we become a large and magnificent state", the founders decided that they would focus their attention on unifying women

¹² "Samāgam Strī Sahabhāp Bāraṃg," *Kambujā* May 5, 1948.

to “help push our country's ship quickly to rise.”¹³ In particular, they decided to organize urban educated women around their four committees, fashion, cooking, good manners, and publishing, to fulfill these goals.

The title *Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī* (Association of Female Comrades/Companions) reflected the organizational goals, including ‘to establish among all members an intimate friendship similar to the relationship of those who come from the same womb’ as well as educating all women and girls in the realm of female duties, science, social assistance, and the arts.¹⁴ While ‘*samāgam*’ is translated as ‘association,’ ‘*sahajīvina*,’ or the feminine ‘*sahajīvinī*,’ can take on many meanings in English, including companion, associate, colleague, comrade, fellow member, party member, a person of the same age, or contemporary. Indeed, the organization promised “to collect all Khmer women to love and have a high esteem for each other through unity.”¹⁵ At the same time, it seems likely that the SKS’s use of ‘*sahajīvinī*’ was intended to spark a sense of unity while also invoking politicized motives. With political parties forming along lines of shared ideologies, the founders may have utilized *sahajīvinī* to suggest something akin to a political party for women, a decision which would align with their observation that Cambodians had become enthusiastic for political work. By envisioning horizontal relationships among members, the SKS promoted an organizing space for urban female leaders to join together to educate all Khmer women.

¹³ “Samāgam Saṃrāp Kemara Nārī,” *Kāmbujā* August 24, 1948.

¹⁴ Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī Koet Loeng Hoey’, *Kāmbujā*, 21 September 1948. ‘Vatthu Paṃṅang Nai Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī’, *Kāmbujā*, 30 September 1948.

¹⁵ “Samāgam Saṃrāp Kemara Nārī,” *Kāmbujā* August 24, 1948.

These ideals of unity among members still conformed to hierarchical structures that reflected the contemporary understandings of leadership and power. In the first few months of organizing, emerging leaders of the SKS included royal women and the wives of Democratic Party political leaders. While Princess Ping Peang seemingly left the organization or became less involved after the initial meeting, King Sihanouk's mother Kossamak oversaw meetings about the organization's bylaws and structure while one of his aunts was designated as the president of the association. Other royal women were named secretaries of the good manners and food committees, two designations which may reflect the urban organizers' high regard for the royal family as the model of behavior and gender customs.¹⁶ While Kossamak's son King Sihanouk may have been battling the Democratic Party, the Queen and women from across the political spectrum worked together until at least early 1951. While democratic and liberal, or rightist and leftist, political lines may have defined the work of some politicians, certainly many Cambodians did not define themselves solely within these categories.

SKS leaders came from both old and new political families, including several women who had attended colonial schools and then married men with political aspirations. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Nema Toulla Macchwa came from an ancestral line of Indian merchants, Khmer gem dealers, and royal dancers. In the late 1930s, she married Son Sann, a Democratic Party leader who eventually opened the first bank of Cambodia.¹⁷ Nema Toulla was prominent in her own right as

¹⁶ 'Vatthu Pamṅang Nai Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī', *Kāmbujā* 30 September 1948. Articles do not necessarily include the names of the royal members but rather use designations such as "the king's mother" and "the king's young aunt."

¹⁷ Nema Toulla was the daughter of Taybbhay Hiptoola Machwa, the son of an Indian trader and the owner of Le Petit Paris, a prominent import/export company in Phnom Penh. Taybbhay's father was part of the Mascati company from Mumbai and his mother was a gem dealer who had gained favor with King Monivong. Taybbhay married royal dancer grew up in the royal palace and the pair had one daughter, Nema Toulla.

the sole heir to the import-export business and shop *Le Petit Paris*. Her son told me that friends joked she had enough money for seven lives. Besides close ties to the royal palace, businessmen, and political leaders of Phnom Penh, the Sons also enjoyed a close relationship to French families in the city. According to Son Soubert, his mother cared for Evelyn Maspérs Porée and Guy Porée when they were confined by the Japanese during World War II. Son further mentioned that because Nema Toulla took meals to her French friends, the French were easier on Son, whom they did not like because he was an intellectual, when they regained control of the country.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the wife of Chhean Vem, a former Prime Minister of Cambodia, spearheaded the clothing committee during the first year of organizing. By collaborating within a hierarchical structure that recognized the prominence of royal and non-royal families, the founding members demonstrated that the SKS recognized royal women as the rightful leaders and educators of young women and, on the other hand, respected the emergence of new political leaders. Together, these female leaders imagined themselves as working above the bifurcated politics of the capital.

The organizational hierarchies in the SKS reflect the ongoing appraisal for incorporating Buddhist monarchical traditions within democratic structures. Historically, kings in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia relied on the support of elites in order to successfully ascend to the throne after a previous king died. No laws dictated a particular successor due to birth order. At the same time, Buddhists believed that the eventual successor gained his legitimate claim to the throne from merit-making and accrued karma.¹⁹ The Buddhist understanding of monarchical leadership was

¹⁸ October 25, 2017 interview. The Porées were anthropologists and writers living in Phnom Penh. Nema Toulla named her oldest Evelyn.

¹⁹ Peter Gyallay-Pap, “Restructuring the Cambodian Polity: Buddhism, Kingship, and the quest for legitimacy,” in Ian Harris (ed), *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 77. David Joel Steinberg, *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987), 217.

not necessarily compatible with a liberal democratic government built around the idea of earning a position in government because of political election. Part of the political contestations of the 1940s and 1950s included changing beliefs about the meaning of good governance. When the founders of the SKS proposed unity as an overarching goal, they telegraphed that while men may argue over political differences women would find commonalities in order to ensure the country continued moving forward toward shared goals of progress and prosperity. As the leading intellectuals on concerns about domesticity, their ideals as a non-political organization also shaped their visions of the home as a non-political space.

Besides moving in Cambodia's political circles, the SKS women had access to the flows of information in and out of Phnom Penh that helped to shape their ideas about the meaning of womanhood within local and global contexts. French teachers staffed the secondary schools attended by Khmer girls and Cambodian women travelled to Europe and neighboring Asian countries for school, leisure, and cultural exchange opportunities, such as royal dance excursions to France and trips to Bangkok. Likely, these international exchanges and relationships facilitated the influx of information about Euro-American feminism as well as women's movements more generally. At the end of World War II, *Kāmbujā* hired a staff of female writers and the women contemplated the position of women within Khmer society and the world, especially in terms of questions about "tradition" and "modernity" along with the kind of organizing and political work going on abroad.

One of the most regular female contributors to *Kāmbujā*, *nāng* Sophy processed her own understandings about being a modern woman by discussing her observations about Cambodian and European societies. Her articles included a history of lipstick as a response to concerns about new consumer products as well a more pointed critique of lacking educational opportunities for

girls in villages.²⁰ Sophy certainly promoted the idea of “civilizing” Cambodia. In her article “Is it civilization?” she questioned why Khmer women had not become more civilized in the eighty years since France colonized Cambodia and argued that women would rather follow the old customs than embrace “civilization.” She argued that the inability of European civilization to penetrate Cambodia equated to light not entering an abyss or a deep forest. Most interestingly, she pointed out that Cambodian women were absent from a women’s meeting in Paris and did not study abroad, which she claimed as evidence that Cambodians stubbornly clung to old customs.²¹ The French-controlled Ministry of Propaganda published *Kāmbujā* so perhaps she was appealing to her French superiors who wanted to promote France’s continued role in Cambodia. Yet, discussing international relations certainly appealed to a nationalist urgency for Cambodia’s higher presence on the international stage. If we read Sophy’s article as emblematic of conversations in her intellectual circles, urbanites were processing gendered meanings of “traditional,” “modern,” and “civilized” in terms of Cambodia’s changing position with the international community.

While writers like Sophy provided a critical female voice in print media, the male-dominated press was not necessarily a welcoming place for urban women to engage in intellectual exchange about their changing landscape. As demonstrated in Chapter 1 when In Em graduated with her DEPSCPI, men quickly dismissed her accomplishments and questioned the necessity of praising women’s scholarly achievements. Fifteen years later, men continued to use the

²⁰ “Strī ceḥ proe kraem bī tryṃ ṇā māḥ? *Kāmbujā*, 1946.

²¹ Nāng Supī “Secaktī Sī’vilāy main ṛ de?” *Kāmbujā*, 358 edition. Box 34. National Archives of Cambodia. In Kate Frieson’s article, “Sentimental Education” she quotes the article saying “At the Indochina Women’s Meeting in Paris, Khmer women were absent. Some men tried all means to obstruct the positive progress of women.” This translation is slightly incorrect. The article states that there was a women’s meeting then continues about education abroad before beginning a new paragraph about men in politics obstructing the progress of women.

newspapers as places to question how women should act or organize. In a *La Liberte* article, a woman summarized the crude remarks of a male letter writer inferring that modern women disrespected their families with sexual indiscretions. She responded with, “let me congratulate you for following the evolution of Khmer women so closely. I’m just wondering why could have made you publish these indiscretions in a newspaper instead of having them placed in a woman’s journal.”²² Likely, Sarikakev was referring to *Nārī* —in fact, her name is similar to a female contributor in *Nārī* so she may have written for multiple journalistic outlets. More importantly, however, her remarks illustrate how newspapers remained spaces for intellectual exchange among men, thus requiring new places for women to discuss issues among themselves.

While some public commentators may have expressed a desire for Khmer women to become “modern” or “civilized,” urbanites felt particularly uneasy that educated women may become politically active. In an April 1948 *Kāmbujā* article about modern Thai women, the writer depicted fashion forward women working as doctors and businesswomen and establishing social and educational organizations. While praising these enterprising women, the contributor assured readers that the modern Thai women “did not want to grab the royal government from the men... Siamese women follow their traditions intensely.” As evidence that Siamese women did not care for politics, the writer relayed the story of a woman who wrote a letter to a newspaper complaining that the press only speaks about politics which “[women] do not like because politics only causes anger. Women are the weaker sex. For this reason, we cannot support arguments in this age of voting or arguments about political parties.”²³ While joining the medical and business fields and participating in modern consumption and charitable work was welcomed as evidence of progress

²² Sarikakev, “Lettre ouverte à M. le Vieux Khmer,” *La Liberte*, December 9, 1950.

²³ “Strī Siam kân rapiap damnoeb tae gorab prabaiñī,” *Kāmbujā*, April 21, 1948.

for women, men and women across Thailand and Cambodia identified political work as inherently corrupt and violent work that was not appropriate for women. Seemingly, society could remain cohesive and moral if women avoided politics. Again, this sense of unity above division was reflected in SKS's goals.

As the SKS watched local politics and gathered information about women's organizing abroad, founders established their institutional laws and goals, including surprising membership decisions that excluded anyone who may have compromised the overarching SKS resolve to prioritize the concerns of Khmer women. In a September 1948 meeting with 200 attendees, the leadership read out loud the 39 points of legislation that would serve as the rules of the association and presented two important points to be discussed: 1) Should men be allowed as members of the association? 2) Should French women be allowed to join the association? The attendees settled upon two separate decisions. Khmer men were permitted to join as paying members of the association, but they could attend meetings only as silent participants. French women could join as advisors if invited by the SKS but they would be required to speak Khmer and could not expect translation services since Khmer was the official language of the association.²⁴ These decisions prevented any outside interference and allowed the association to work with Khmer men and French women on their own terms. Later, the SKS coordinated with the government to create a women's radio program and began to meet with humanitarian and organizing women from international organizations. To that end, the association secured its leadership role in the capital in a capacity considered "non-political" despite supporting state initiatives.

Perhaps due to their membership rules, the SKS encountered whispers about the true intentions of their organization. In the opening issue of *Nārī*, the organizers confronted rumors that

²⁴ 'Pracāṃ Mahāsannibāt Nai Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī', *Kāmbujā*, 13 October 1948.

women formed the SKS to boast their achievements to men, to intervene in parents' matchmaking decisions, and to just enjoy each other's company.²⁵ The association firmly denounced these speculations and admonished the rumor-mill for the suggesting that Khmer women misunderstood their societal duties and the norms of female behaviors. While the association affirmed their adherence to customs, onlookers—and particularly male onlookers—still considered this kind of organizing to be transgressive and possibly detrimental to Cambodian society. While not directly speaking to the SKS, a writer to *Kambujā* described 2000 Thai women gathering to debate marriages. Supposedly, the Thai women's association determined that “the majority that must arrange marriages by couples who love each other” and supported the end of polygyny. In contrast previous writers praising Siamese women for upholding traditions, this one wrote “in Siam, ancient traditions are being abandoned as well” and suggested the arrival of changing gender relations in Cambodia and Siam.²⁶ While urban commentators celebrated modern women, the prospect of organizing women—who could call for social changes or become interested in politics—remained a contentious issue that Cambodians would continue to negotiate into the postcolonial period.

While Cambodians had assigned political work to men, no one was quite sure how women should fit into the political schema. The association did not promote women fighting for electoral voting rights but they determined that womanly work was linked to nation-state building:

If men have stepped quickly forward...Why haven't women stepped forward as well? Cambodia is like an oxcart with a pair of cows. But one cow cannot walk without the other cow. Will that cart quickly move ahead or not?...*The men's position is to work in politics but what is the women's position? While certainly wanting a county with contributing men and women, our Khmer women are inexperienced in this matter, never having had worked in politics before.* This is the reason that we must follow the hierarchies and must know the duties of women completely...In the previous era, the custom is supreme but in this era...Contrary to those ancient traditions, modern ways that are entering the country...This is why

²⁵ 'Vatthu Pamṅang Nai Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī', *Nārī*, February 1949, pp. 23 – 26.

²⁶ “ṭamnyng bī brades siam,” *Kambujā* August 23, 1948.

our organization wishes that all women have high ideals placed on them all of the time in order to have equality on the road of living of each life...”²⁷

By arguing that women needed to “know the duties of women completely” in light of the modern ways entering the country, the association telegraphed that “modern ways” needed to be appropriately integrated into the customs. At the same time, the insistence that these customs needed to be studied and understood fully illustrates a modern understanding of womanhood and domesticity that required diligent perfecting.

Believing that women needed to delve into their womanly duties to the nation, the SKS developed seven overarching goals that would be achieved through the work of four committees. The goals included establishing intimate friendship among all members; educating women; cultivating of an understanding about the responsibilities and duties of unmarried women, wives, mothers, and citizens, including their most important role as the mother; loving science; understanding how to make sacrifices in order to help others; and appreciating the arts.²⁸ Although declaring a goal to establish close bonds among the members of the association, the founders certainly set out to disseminate new forms of knowledge to Khmer women, as opposed to coming together to learn from each other. In order to achieve their goals, the founders divided into four committees representing their interests in fashion, food, good manners, and publishing. By organizing around topics related to domesticity, the SKS determined that women’s duty to the nation required an attention to the home. In this case, the home was not separate from national interests but rather contributed the right kind of behavior and work for a modern Khmer state.

²⁷ ‘Vatthu Pamṅang Nai Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī’, *Kāmbujā* 30 September 1948.

²⁸ ‘Vatthu Pamṅang Nai Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī’, *Kāmbujā* 30 September 1948.

In order to discuss matters of domesticity, the SKS forayed into the world of publishing. In February 1949, the publishing committee began to distribute *Dussanavatti Nārī*, a monthly magazine that focused on women's issues. The magazine balanced columns prepared by the clothing, food, and good manners committees along with material submitted by readers. Importantly, the magazine may have printed discussions about clothing or household concerns but this magazine was not a fashion or gossip magazine. The work taken on by the SKS was much more in line with intellectual concerns about nationalism and womanhood. In the first year of publication, the fashion and food committees' articles were featured regularly and prominently, reflecting the association's concerns about relaying domesticity tips easily applied by readers. The good manners committee also submitted content during the first year of publication but the lack of bylines makes it difficult to assess which articles were prepared by that committee. Alternatively, by 1951 articles about manners were specifically attributed to the good manners committee. Meanwhile, the editors encouraged readers to send letters, opinion, pieces, or stories for publishing. In order to ease the concerns of novice writers, the editors explained, "send it to us and don't worry if it is not the interest of all members of the association or all readers." By balancing their own material and the work sent by readers, the magazine blended their objectives to educate and to unify Khmer women in a single space.²⁹

As an emerging women's association with radical membership decisions and a new intellectual magazine aimed to sort out the position of women in modern Cambodia, the SKS needed to address their relationship to wider feminist and women's movements. From the outset,

²⁹ My analysis of *Dussanavatti Nārī* follows some of the methodologies of Joan Judge writing about the periodical press in Republican China, specifically in terms of conducting a deep analysis of one journal. Joan Judge, *Republican Lens: Gender, Visuality, and Experience in the Early Chinese Periodical Press*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

the SKS discussed the political rights and organizational efforts of women in other countries, which included an article on the long history of the French feminist movement along with suffrage histories in the Soviet Union, the United States, and Australia. Although *Nārī* provided an overview of feminism, the writer assured readers that the SKS “did not have the desire to wash away the traditions of our nation’ and only aimed ‘to help Khmer women take a step forward on the road of progress in the contemporary state of affairs.”³⁰ By discussing feminism and the suffrage movement, the SKS situated their own priorities within the histories of intellectual and organising women without claiming suffrage as a goal. Moreover, at this moment of heightened domestic concerns, discussing feminist movements within national settings helped the SKS to emphasize focusing on issues for Khmer women.

Discussing women in their national contexts helped the SKS to discuss how national “traditions,” state formations, and organizing shaped the opportunities and work of women within and outside the home. In a long exposé about Swedish women, a contributor suggested a correlation between political rights and a higher standard of living in the home. Moreover, the writer also relays how public organizing and training also improve women’s domestic work: “most Swedish women add their names to the forums of various trainings. In the meetings girls listen attentively to explanations about the science of disease prevention, domestic science, literacy, and the arts.” Despite recognizing that Swedish women had enjoyed electoral rights for twenty years the writer further points out that at these meetings, “they do not discuss politics at all.” Once again, domestic work is considered above and separated from politics but not separate from national

³⁰ ‘Laddhi Nārī Niyam’ *Nārī*, March 1949, pp. 41 – 42.

interests. in this case, the state facilitated Swedish women “carrying out the functions of girls in modern times” without facing significant backlash or roadblocks.³¹

Concerns about women in modern times overlapped with the understandings about what it means to be a good woman. In an article about women around the world, the writer discusses historical and contemporary renderings of womanhood, including artistic depictions of women as beautiful and “ancient traditions” of women “embodying the attributes of a perfect wife.” The writer then pivots to contemporary times to discuss the opportunities and limitations for women in different nation-states. Here, the writer explains that French women “must know about housework but also seek out knowledge...sometimes they replace men in work” while in America “matters of the household are not so important like in [Cambodia]. Women have an education, some women have replaced men in important work spaces. Together they play sports in order to get stronger and forget all the terribleness and suffering.” Meanwhile, in Japan women must “serve, respect, and cater to their husbands” and in China, “those who have girls are considered unlucky people.” The SKS’s constructions of women in different localities conformed to orientalist stereotypes of East Asia and even provincialized Europe.

At the same time, the SKS developed their own theory about what defined “women” across different times and space. In particular, this article as well as their volumes of work posited that despite different localities placing “varied value” on women, all “women are mothers, women are wives, women are the heads of households, and together all women have the same types of tasks.”³² According to the SKS, the shared experience of living and working as mothers, wives, and heads of households demarcated women from their male counterparts and linked women across national

³¹ “Nārī S’u’ait,” *Nārī*, February 1951, pp. 47 – 52.

³² Nāng Pau Sāvaras, “Strī Knung Lok,” *Nārī* January 1951, pp.7 – 12.

boundaries. The construction of women as mothers and wives and men as citizens was not novel—this understanding of family and domesticity is traced to eighteenth century Europe and United States. Yet, in Cambodia, the home was not considered a sphere separate from the public one. Women did not participate in politics, defined by the ballot box and National Assembly, but their work in the home substantiated the goals of the nation.

In this moment of decolonization when Cambodians were demonstrating their right to independence, the SKS outlined the history of model womanhood and domesticity in Cambodia. The writer explained that Khmer women have advantages because they have “more customs than other older countries that are inscribed with laws” and “excellent guidance that placed on daughters and granddaughters” and “hearts that aim to model the dharma tremendously.” While the writer acknowledged that Cambodia had adopted new practices like men wearing European pants and studying French and English along with Khmer, she also proposed that expertise in customs elucidated how Khmer culture fit into the modern period. Furthermore, the writer emphasized that a knowledge of womanly duties assured that Cambodia would move forward appropriately.³³ Deepening the study of customs in order to “move forward” was part of mid-twentieth century decolonizing response to the histories of colonial suppression of local political, social, and religious formations. By comparing European and local ideas, intellectuals demonstrated that the local approach could be not just better for the people in that locality but also a model for the rest of the world. When he founded the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* in 1955, King Sihanouk would continue this work to develop a modern state rooted in local values.

While the SKS believed that domesticity was an antidote to the polarizing political landscape, contributors to *Nārī* also suggested that women were particularly dangerous to politics.

³³ Nāng Pau Sāvaras, “Strī Knung Lok,” *Nārī* January 1951, pp. 7 – 12.

In one heated exchange of letters, women responded to ongoing Thai debates that centered around amending the laws so that women could run for political office. At the time, some Thais argued that women already corrupted the political system by pressuring men to take bribes; therefore, women should not be allowed to become politicians. The debate prompted questions about whether Khmer women contribute to corruption in Khmer politics. One contributor claimed to have never witnessed corruption and believed that Cambodia was morally superior to Thailand. She also questioned whether Khmer women received blame for corrupt behaviors. Another writer responded by arguing that “women are placed lower than men certainly but men relinquish in power to women.” Two respondents disagreed that Cambodia was somehow different from other countries and one argued that women were empowered to “lead husbands towards good deeds and practices if husbands are losing their way towards the road of evil.”³⁴ By observing points of contention in other countries, the SKS responded to issues closer to home. Importantly, in the 1940s and 1950s politicians faced accusations of corrupt behaviors and politicians were sometimes victims of physical violence. Sihanouk later insisted that electoral political had seeded corruption and division. While political leaders launched accusations of corruption and engaged in violence, the SKS championed the domestic space as the origins of moral society and women as the guiding force of good in the country.

With a desire to rise above corrupt politics, the SKS also recognized that politics did not remain in National Assembly halls and political party offices. *Lok Srī* Ieu Koeus, widowed after

³⁴ “Siam Thà ‘nak Nayopāy Sī’ Samṇūk Broah Tae Srī,” *Nārī* May 1949, pp. 98 – 99; Nāng Māssaem Pū’līng Māranī, “Nau Brates ṇāk’ toy Mān Sī’ Samṇūk Mak Tae Bī Strī Dāng ‘ás,” *Nārī*, September 1949, Sārikā Kaivvang, “Dos Sī’ Samṇūk Dhlāk Loe Strī Maen!” *Nārī*, October 1949.

the assassination of her husband, likely understood this reality more than anyone else. Moreover, the SKS did not just accept the political contestations of the capital. Through their magazine, the SKS envisioned how the domestic space fit into politics and state organization by writing lengthy columns every month about how women should dress, cook, behave, raise children, and arrange home. The SKS argued for women to support the men's political work in public offices. In this process, the SKS constructed an elite and modern understanding of gender as defined by women in a home connected to the nation-state through the labors of housewives and political husbands. While the association spoke about women in general terms, their suggestions and imaginations of a modern Khmer home certainly conformed to urban spaces.

Committees of Good Manners, Fashion, and Food

During the first few years of meetings, organizers from dichotomous political families collaborated to create an organization prefaced on unity and shared interests. Their efforts to rise above the politics of the country helped to support the notion that political differences harmed state-building, an argument that would be later used by Sihanouk when he established the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. With a strong desire to rise above the bifurcated politics of building a country and a cautious enthusiasm for the organizing work of women in other countries, the SKS initially focused on publishing about issues of fashion, cuisine, and good manners. Through their attention to these issues, the SKS built the idealized modern Khmer home and, by extension, nation. By organizing members into committees on fashion, cuisine, and good manners, the association used domesticity as a medium to relay their concerns about modern governance, Khmer ethnicity and culture, and Euro-American approaches to modernity. While the anxiety around new forms of governance likely elicited a stronger debate among members, other concerns, like celebrating royal

culture and asserting the primacy of Khmer ethnicity in Cambodia, demonstrated that organizers held many shared values. Moreover, adept in French colonial and royal culture, SKS members envisioned homes adopting appropriate Euro-American fashions to align with older elite customs. In this way, the SKS not only engaged with tradition and modern ideologies, but actively sought a path to reconcile the differences in order to develop a new nation-state.

From cover to cover, *Nārī* presented an idealized vision of carefully balanced foreign and local modes of domesticity. The bright covers intended to attract young women to the magazine illustrate a desire to produce balance in the home in the face of imbalances due to political unrest. During the first year of publication, the covers evoked a humble simplicity. The figure of a woman stands tall and elegant and flowers cascade out of a basket she holds over her head while the petals float to the ground. For the first twelve issues, the covers only change in color.³⁵ In later years, drawings of women and their children reflect the advice columns found inside the magazine. In one issue, a mother stands with her daughters in the family home. Perfectly poised with a small watch clasped to her wrist, she sits at a desk while reading the newspaper to her two young children. Despite these small gestures towards modernity, the home appears to be a wooden house with a backdrop of palm trees stretching over the fields.³⁶ In other issues, a mother figure walks with her children along a river and sits at her balcony while embroidering. In depictions of domestic labors, the woman puts away books in a home library, sweeps the floor, and cooks at a western-style oven.³⁷ Noticeably, the covers never include a father figure—this domestic world centers the maternal figure who evokes expertise in her care for children and home.

³⁵ *Nārī*, February – December 1949.

³⁶ *Nārī*, September 1951.

³⁷ *Nārī*, February 1952, March 1952, June 1952, November – December 1952.

Through the magazine covers, the SKS imagined a future reality achieved by reshaping the home to embrace local and colonial ideals. When the SKS began to produce their magazine, only several hundred girls had ever attended elementary school.³⁸ Few women, if any, would have used a western-style oven. Yet, depictions of a satisfying and calming home life reflect a phrase found on the covers of earlier issues: ‘happiness in the family, purity in the mind.’³⁹ This focus on purity of the mind and home related to ongoing anxieties about modernity. In the first half of the twentieth century, a Buddhist modernist movement sought to ‘purify’ Khmer teachings of Buddhism and twentieth-century proliferation of printing presses rendered the movement possible.⁴⁰ In a similar fashion, the SKS used their access to a printer in order to contribute their own ideas for modernizing and purifying the domestic space. By maintaining certain vestiges of the Cambodian past and incorporating adaptations, such as mothers reading to their children, the SKS suggested ways to create a better Cambodia.

While the SKS certainly embraced new approaches to motherhood and housekeeping, *Nārī* also served as an alternative publication to the other forms of foreign media circulating in Phnom Penh. The SKS fretted that “girls like to read American and French magazines as well as arousing and inappropriate romance novels.”⁴¹ When “inappropriate” magazines began to circulate in

³⁸ *La Femme Cambodgienne à l'ère Du Sangkum* (Phnom Penh: Ministère de l'information, 1965).

³⁹ *Nārī*, February – December 1949.

⁴⁰ Ann Ruth Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007): 3.

⁴¹ ‘Secktī Thlaeng aṃbī Jivabhāb Nai Strī Khmaer Knung Samāy toem rabasá Nāng Kaññā Sim Vannasee Nau Krung Grýstajhar’, *Nārī*, February 1952, pp. 49 – 58.

Phnom Penh, the governor banned the sale of the magazines to youth. The SKS was not satisfied with the ban, however. In an article about bad influences entering the country, one writer lamented that no laws prevented young people from buying the magazines in the provinces—an observation that indicates the SKS’s view that the provinces were particularly susceptible to unscrupulous behavior.⁴² As mothers becoming motherly figures of the nation-state, the SKS leaders not only worried about their own children but the general populace of Cambodia.

The SKS also pondered the potential pitfalls of the country’s evolving access to foreign films. The Indochina government annually approved the showing of thousands of films from different parts of the globe. In 1951, an Office of Film was established in Phnom Penh.⁴³ That same year, writer K.T. (likely Ponnary’s sister Khieu Thirith) explained her concerns that foreign ‘film-makers create marvellous stories that encapsulate the audience and produce high revenue for the production company...As a result, these film-makers are unconcerned with communicating a moral story.’⁴⁴ She further implored women to protect themselves and their children from the immoral movies. The SKS viewed women’s attention to creating a moral home environment as critical for the country’s progress and implied that inattentive mothers could jeopardize the progress if they did not moderate their family’s consumption of immoral films. Despite the reality of competing media, the SKS did not compromise on this stance.

Creating a moral and modern domestic space was tied to evaluating, modernizing, and reaffirming social relationships in Cambodian society, issues that were taken up by the good

⁴² ‘Mtec k^o hām tae knung Bhnām Peñ n̄oah?’, *Nārī*, February 1952, pp. 58 – 59.

⁴³ Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950’s and 1960’s* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2001): 143 – 144.

⁴⁴ K.T., ‘ ‘am Pañhā Kun nau sruk young’, *Nārī*, October 1951, pp. 370 – 374.

manners committee. The committee aimed to educate the populace about the expectations in the “monarchical country with codes of conduct, particularly between important individuals and the populace, as well as children and adults’ as well as within non-Khmer, or western, settings. Using the word for code, *cpāp*, to communicate a plan to educate young women about forms of conduct, the leadership asserted that ‘students study French language and science more than the codes of conduct.’⁴⁵ The readership would have understood that the magazine was referring to the *cpāp srī* (women’s code of conduct) and other *cpāp* to dictate appropriate forms of behavior. At the same time, using the word *sujīvadhamra*, or good manners, to name their committee indicates a pivot towards a more modern way of framing these ideas. Chuon Nath’s 1966 Khmer dictionary defines *sujīvadhamra* as ‘politeness and courtesy in matters associated with strangers’ as well as generally manners and conduct. While the codes of conduct mostly discussed social relationships within Khmer society, using *sujīvadhamra* illustrates their intention to act as an authority on ways to interact with both Khmers and *pārāṃng*, the word for French that is also interchangeably with Euro-Americans or white people.

By aspiring to incorporate new social practices into Khmer codes of conduct, the SKS demonstrated critical reasons for incorporating *thmae* (new) and *damnoep* (modern) ideals into the home. An *educated* woman, the committee argued, understood that the family’s future depended on the work of the housewife. Educated housewives were distinguishable from “women who are uneducated and ignorant and follow advice of various beliefs that do not have reason (prejudices and superstitions [original article includes the French words])”.⁴⁶ The article further enunciated

⁴⁵‘Vatthu Pamṅang Nai Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī’, *Nārī*, February 1949, pp. 23 – 26.

⁴⁶ “Mukh Ngar Nai Sri Knung Kruasar,” *Dassanāvatti Nārī* March – April 195, pp. 104 – 105.

their ideas under the section, “Knowing the Value of Women’s Work in the Home.” According to the good manners committee, the success of the home and family required that “women have intelligence, know the customs, know about political affairs and have perseverance.” They argued that “the brilliance of the housewife who has good manners can engender bliss...can ease burdens from husbands and moreover, can ensure the daughter makes progress [in finding a husband].”⁴⁷ Creating a mannerly home shaped the present and future happiness of the family, defined by preparing children for their own families. By extension, the success of the state relied upon each housewife ensuring her household engendered happiness.

Armed with knowledge about French and Khmer approaches to social interactions, the good manners committee published guidelines for navigating this new terrain. In the article, “Inviting and Entertaining Guests for an Evening,” the committee addressed the concerns that “invit[ing] someone who has a higher status than us, [which] may endure significant worry” especially in the case of returning an invitation to those wealthy individuals “accustomed to eating expensive foods and being served in a luxurious manner.”⁴⁸ The writer detailed the methods of returning an invitation and preparing for the evening. This discussion about the anxiety of returning invitations to higher status individuals brings to the forefront how the SKS, while calling for national unity elsewhere, still held high regard for localized understandings of hierarchical relationships. By contemplating these situations in the light of new multi-party political system, the organization worked through the ways that society should not change.

Besides providing housewives with the necessary knowledge for navigating class hierarchies, the committee outlined how women should interact with men in order to prevent

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ ‘ñjoeñ Bhñiav liang bel lngāc’, *Nārī*, January 1951, pp. 25 – 30.

disparaging their reputations. Two articles about French greetings, one on late afternoon visits and one on writing letters, included the appropriate ways to engage in these activities with men outside of their families. In regards to colleagues visiting each other, the good manners committee encouraged co-workers to visit each other but suggested that “wives should visit the wives, and the husbands visit the husbands.” The committee also warned that “a single women should be wary of making a bad name for herself” by visiting a man alone.⁴⁹ The warnings extended to include advice on how women should greet men in letters. According to the committee, French good manners stipulated that women should not send letters to men unless the male recipient is elderly, a member of a religious order, or a boss in a government job. Like the warnings about visits, the guidelines suggest that women needed to protect themselves against signalling loose morals. By relaying the French approach to relationships between men and women, the SKS also indicated that they supported adopting French practices and creating additional rules and guidelines for living. Becoming modern did not mean just dressing in vogue or consuming new forms of entertainment but also learning how to interact in different settings.

In one issue, *Nārī* also included an article on the proper way to decorate a *hunṭhān* (salon), the room for receiving guests. In a discussion about decorating the salon, the writer explains that houses are decorated in different manners “according to one’s own preferences.” Since the burden of decorating fell on the housewife, *Nārī* “collected and prepared five types of salons that are the current preferences in different countries.” While historians have linked domesticity to consumption in different settings, the SKS was not particularly worried about purchasing goods for the home. This article is more of an outlier among stronger discourses in the magazine. Yet, by

⁴⁹Gaṇākammakār Sujīvadhamr “Kār Dau Leng Nýng Knā,” *Nārī* February 1951 pp. 56 – 62.

including an article on decorating a home in vogue with new styles, the SKS experimented with different ways to create a modern and welcoming domestic space. Along providing readers with an overview of different materials for chairs and seating along with a warning to not neglect a good color scheme, the article included drawings and short descriptions of furniture arrangements from America, Spain, Italy, England, Cuba, and France.⁵⁰ With a focus on the styles elsewhere, the association delivered foreign ideas to their readers. In this sense, the goal included spreading information about cosmopolitan ideas in order to create an informed readership.

The SKS's fashion commentaries provide another window into how the association sought avenues for women to support national goals. Beginning in the 1940s, male political leaders began to implement government that reflected Khmer understandings of monarchical leadership as well as structures of democracy.⁵¹ Through discussions about fashion, the SKS negotiated incorporating new ideas on citizenry into old ways of governance. Cambodian observers who wrote about the changes taking place in government and society often used the descriptor *pārāṃng* (French) when discussing French, or more generally Euro-American, approaches as well as *damnoep* (modern), *thmae* (new) and *purāṇ* (ancient or traditional) to show the binaries between local and cosmopolitan ideologies. For women, governance often concerned managing the home and the female body, which oftentimes translated into discussions about making clothing and presenting oneself in an appropriate way. The SKS's clothing committee also commented directly on different kinds of dress and more subtly discussed modeling a good government through attention to civic

⁵⁰ “Paip Rajanā Huntṭhān” *Nārī*, May 1951, pp. 143 – 145.

⁵¹ For more information on understandings of democracy see: Siti Galang Keo, “Writing the Postcolonial City: Phnom Penh and Modernity during Sangkum Reastr Niyum, 1955–1970” (Ph.D., California, University of California, Berkeley, 2019), especially Chapter 1: Contesting Democracies, Creating *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*.

responsibilities. By encouraging women to show their allegiances to the political leadership through acceptances of the inherent changes to Cambodia's governing system, the SKS connected the presentation of women to the larger political projects of the country.

The SKS walked a fine line between embracing *thmae* as a guiding principle for bettering society and responding to the negative connotations associated with modern women. The SKS, for their part, wanted to reclaim the meaning of "modern women" from men who promoted the image of modern women who "wear shirts with an open back and open shoulders and closely embrace dancing to swing music' and 'smoke and debate together in a café courtyard." The SKS argued that women who unabashedly embraced foreign fashions and behaviors acted irresponsibly. Furthermore, the writers warned that because of these women "the Khmer race [could] be destroyed and lose all grandeur." In response to the image of modern women wearing revealing clothing and enjoying frivolous, possibly even scandalous, activities, the association constructed a modern woman who studied hard and earned a salary in order to afford enough food and practical clothing for herself and her family. Above all, these modern women "worked for the country."⁵² By recasting the modern woman as an industrious individual, family member, and national contributor, the association connected female dress and labor to a national cause of growing the economy and political institutions.

In order to provide the model of a well-dressed modern woman, the SKS designed appropriate styles for their readers, sometimes imagined as professional women who worked for their families. The models almost always were depicted in new hairstyles and contemporary shirt designs along with the traditional *sambát*, a straight skirt that wraps around the waist. From fashionable buttons, lace, and stitching to form fitting or slouched waist shirts, these designs

⁵² 'Ya''g Mtec tael Hau Tha Nārī Daṃnoep', *Nārī*, March 1949, pp. 48 – 49.

demonstrated options for pairing with Khmer pieces of clothing.⁵³ One magazine issue even included the design pattern for a trench coat paired with a *sambát*.⁵⁴ The fashionable styles always covered the back, chest, and shoulders. Moreover, recommendations about frugality and practicality accompanied these patterns. In one article, the writers present a shirt pattern cut in six different styles and explain, “we have designed shirt patterns for wearing to work... a necessity of all women in the royal government. The patterns are easy to cut too, don’t waste your salary hiring [a tailor].”⁵⁵ By speaking in economic terms and by focusing on the importance of appropriate dress for government jobs, the SKS promoted a form of governance that relied upon hard-work and merit. Moreover, congratulating women who placed their family before their own proclivities only enhanced the connection between domesticity and the state.

Importantly, the association emphasized bringing together women with adversarial ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ points of view. In a statement about establishing the clothing committee, the SKS explained that ‘nowadays, urban women find themselves dividing along lines determined by fashion. Some women wear traditional clothing, some wear contemporary clothing, and yet others wear a mixture of the two.’⁵⁶ These groups of women clashed over a variety of differences. According to the SKS, traditionalists responded to the new styles by protesting “Kill me! I cannot believe these fashions are taking hold in Cambodia!” While some “traditional” women shunned

⁵³ This construction of Khmer fashion could be compared to the history of the áo dài, the “traditional costume” of Vietnam: Martina Thuchni Nguyen, “Wearing Modernity: Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường, Fashion, and the ‘Origins’ of the Vietnamese National Costume,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 1 (2016): 76–128.

⁵⁴ *Nārī*, February 1949, p. 31.

⁵⁵ ‘Təmṛū Tae Muay Kā’t ‘āy Pān 6’, *Nārī* February 1949, p. 30.

⁵⁶ ‘Vatthu Paṃṅang Nai Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī’, *Nārī*, February 1949, pp. 23 – 26.

the new fashions, the association argued that contemporary clothing would continue to gain popularity in the country and that women, especially those who wavered between traditional and contemporary styles, needed to learn about contemporary patterns. The SKS presented itself as a neutral educational space that welcomed different opinions and certainly attempted to remain true to this ideal of intellectual exchange, at least initially.

With education and unity as guiding principles, the SKS also turned their attention to the difficulties faced by women left impoverished by colonialism. Since female contributors to *Kambujā* had drawn attention to the lack of education options for girls in rural areas, urban women intermittently spoke out on behalf of their less fortunate sisters. Oftentimes conversations about inequalities focused on educational disparities between urban and rural Cambodia but in one instance, a writer contended the unfairness of creating fashion expectations for rural women. When a writer in *Kambujā* told Cambodian women to ‘throw away all black clothes!’ (which she described as the color of misery), *ñak Srī* (Married Woman) Siphon of SKS responded with her surprise at this recommendation.⁵⁷ After asking ‘patriotic women’ to send opinions about the *Kambujā* call to rid the country of black clothing, Siphon countered that since Cambodia was a poor and small country, the modern fashionistas from wealthy families could not expect all women to give up their old clothes for new fashions.⁵⁸ As a supportive arm of the politicians working to create a unified and independent country, the SKS demonstrated a serious concern about the current state of impoverished homes in Phnom Penh and provincial villages. In the 1950s and

⁵⁷ ‘Baṅr Khmaer Jā ‘abamanggal ṭail Taṅniam Tamláp Bān Rā’parang’ *Kāmbujā*, 6-7 July 1951.

⁵⁸ Sī’phán, ‘Tap Nýng Kāsaet Kāmbujā tael Cen Thā “Baṅr Khmaer Jā ‘abamanggal ṭail Taṅniam Tamláp Bān Rā’parang’, *Nārī*, September 1951, pp. 332 – 332.

1960s, urbanites focusing more diligently on teaching about domesticity in the rural villages. However, concerted efforts to transform the rural areas did not begin until the late 1950s.

For the SKS, fashion and clothing were not necessarily a celebration of a woman's body or her ability to choose beautiful fabrics displaying her femininity but rather a way to support building an independent country. While their conversations about fashion focused more specifically on the kinds of dress worn by women, it is apparent that the association saw itself as a mediator of new styles and ideas in order to prevent the complete disregard for modesty of Khmer dress. At the same time, discussions around clothing designs and appearances became a mechanism to implore readers to display their support for a blended system of governance through a clothing regime that mixed different styles and relied upon different forms of attire depending on the context. The SKS supported a system of governance introduced from France so long as it remained grounded in Khmer customs, particularly in regards to Buddhist monarchy, which was held in high regard not just for their power to rule but also their embodiment of Khmer customs.

While discussions about fashion reveal the association's concerns about governance, the inclusion of recipes bring forward anxieties about Khmer ethnicity. Decolonization in the mid-twentieth century brought to the foreground anxieties about ethnic differences in an emerging nation-state with a long history of imperial exploitation and tense regional relationships. Cooking became a mechanism to comment on the need for more Khmer presence in urban food enclaves in order to compete with the ubiquity of Chinese cuisine. In 1949, the SKS explained that the founders were incentivized to create a food committee because of an observation that the Chinese access to recipes helped to cultivate a stronger food culture.⁵⁹ Importantly, in the process of promoting a Khmer food culture, the SKS elevated the dishes from the royal family, thereby suggesting that

⁵⁹ 'Vatthu Pamṅang Nai Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī', *Nārī*, February 1949, pp. 23 – 26.

Khmer culture derived its ‘traditions and customs’ from the royal palace. Moreover, issues included drawings to show how to present the completed dish, which established that cooking should include attention to presentation. In a 1951 issue, the ‘Modern Meat Salad’ was accompanied by a drawing of the salad in a bowl adorned with a few flowers and a leaf. The process of elevating Khmerness above other ethnicities was also a process of creating a standard Khmer culture while marginalizing class and regional differences. By positing that preparing and presenting food required the attention of Khmer women with the right training and education, the SKS actively asserted its authority in national conversations about constructing a Khmer identity.

When the SKS recognized the lack of standardized Khmer dishes and protocols for creating Khmer food, they revealed their own anxieties about Chinese business ownership in Phnom Penh and urban areas. In French colonial Cambodia, over 90% of the population identified as Khmer. At the same time, the country included ethnically Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cham Muslim populations, as well as upland ethnic minorities. Khmers may have held judicial and administrative power, but they did not wield this same sort of power in economic spaces and they were certainly not the majority ethnicity in the multi-ethnic capital of Phnom Penh.⁶⁰ Beginning in the 1930s, nationalist-minded Khmers pointed to restaurants as evidence of ethnic and economic imbalances in Phnom Penh. These consternations appeared in *Nārī*, too. An author under the by-line, ‘A Friend in the Countryside’ expressed dismay when she travelled to Phnom Penh, where she found no Khmer restaurants and realized that most events were catered by Chinese vendors. Tying food to womanly work *and* nation-building, she exclaimed “women do not understand the art of building

⁶⁰ W. E. Willmott, *The Chinese in Cambodia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1967): 64.

the country.” However, she hoped ‘all women would observe this problem and help to solve it.’⁶¹ As a solution, she proposed the SKS begin to organize women to cater weddings in order to help establish stronger Khmer presence in the capital. Implicitly, she argued that Khmers should find a way to compete with the Chinese business owners. By taking on these roles, Khmer women could help to promote the unity of Khmers and, in the process, construct a country that prioritized Khmers above other ethnic groups.

Standardizing Khmer recipes also promoted the royal court as emblematic of Khmer culture. The recipes printed in *Nārī* likely originated as some of the favorite dishes found in the palace. In one of the first issues of the magazine, the committee published a recipe for ‘birds in a nest,’ or eggs set in a bed of thinly sliced potatoes.⁶² This same recipe is found in a cookbook published by Princess Rasmi Sobhana in the 1950s.⁶³ In fact, the SKS includes Sobhana’s name with a sweet bread recipe in the tenth issue of the magazine.⁶⁴ Two years later Princess Norodom Sutharot also submitted a fruit bread recipe.⁶⁵ Since these were the only names associated with particular recipes, the SKS clearly placed particular emphasis on recognizing their royal sponsors and contributors. As these politicized women celebrated Khmer culture, they equated the royal family with the Cambodian nation, an amalgamation that began under French colonialism.

⁶¹ Suthi Nādevī “Mati Srī Sruk Srai Mnák,” *Nārī*, August 1951, pp. 293 – 296.

⁶² ‘Su’t Knung Saṃbuk’, *Nārī*, March 1949, p. 53.

⁶³ Rasmi Sobhana, *The Cambodian Cookbook, Le guide Culinaire Cambodgien*. (Cambodia: United States Information Service, 195-).

⁶⁴ ‘Naṃbaeng Saṃlī’, *Nārī*, October 1949, p. 183.

⁶⁵ ‘Numphlae Phambu’, *Nārī*, February 1951, p. 79 – 80.

Furthermore, including these recipes suggested that women outside of the elite circles of Phnom Penh needed to gain knowledge about their culture in order to develop modern Khmer homes.

Besides designating of the royal family as leaders in Khmer culture, the negotiation of ethnic difference facilitated forms of class distinction that emphasized women gaining new forms of knowledge for their motherly duties. Ironically, in order for women to learn Khmer recipes that would give them the ability to act as nation-builders, they needed to leave the kitchen. As described in Chapter 1, the idiom “women only know how to go around the stove” described women with no applicable knowledge about affairs outside of the kitchen.⁶⁶ This description of uneducated women instilled a new emphasis on providing women with an education in order to find a good husband. Young wives were expected to enter married life with a plethora of skills, including cooking. These changing marital expectations signalled that nationalists believed the prosperity of Cambodia relied upon developing well-rounded women. When the SKS published recipes in *Nārī*, they helped to refigure cooking as not just a familial duty but also a purposefully nationalist effort of an educated housewife.

This royalist and classist construction of women as the guardians of Khmer culture became conflated with very distinct expectations that the royal family and—to a certain extent—urban women would provide maternal care for the country. The SKS helped to construct the connections of wealth, power, and giving in the context of modern associational life and building an independent nation-state. Charitable events and announcements about giving fostered the image of the royal family as the historic and contemporary leaders of Buddhist forms of giving, defined by the wealthy providing assistance to the poor. With the attention to the housewife as a leader of

⁶⁶ ‘Gundhmr Rabasa Sdri Khmer Ban Camroen R De?’, *Kāmbujā* 21 March 1950; ‘Vatthu Pamṅang Nai Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī’, *Kāmbujā*, 30 September 1948.

morality and culture in the home, the SKS also envisioned urban educated women as the mothers of all Cambodian citizens, and especially poor children.

The association first fused the promotion of Khmer culture and displays of charity with a special evening gala for the 1949 water festival, an annual event with boat racing and floats. Held at the royal palace, the gala included a *lakhaon* (theater) performance and opening dance from the royal ballet troupe. According to the reporter, the room was decorated “with flawless décor and with Angkorian era art!” While intended to raise funds for the association, the event was also designed to display Khmer art for Cambodians who “had not previously seen the *lakhaon* or had only seen the plays in the modern or Chinese tradition.” While *Nārī* did not elaborate on the Chinese traditional plays, the concern about separating Khmer culture from “Chinese tradition” further illustrated how celebrating food, crafts, and the arts meant to distinguish Khmer culture from other ethnicities in Cambodia. At the same time, these discussions about Khmer culture are not just about women acting as representations. The SKS labored to give attendees the gift of seeing a traditional Khmer art form.⁶⁷ In this way, Khmer women did not just represent Khmer culture but also assumed responsibility for planning and executing the events.

Further emblematic of the relationship between charity, Khmer culture, and female leadership, the association organized a dessert fundraiser at Wat Phnom in 1950. After the last issue of 1949, the SKS stopped publishing *Nārī* for one year because of publishing debts. With profits from the dessert drive, the association repaid publishing debts and donated 25,000 riels to the *Samāgam Kumār Sanggroah* (Save the Children Association), an organization founded under Princess Sisowath Issara aimed to educate and to discipline children outside of school and to

⁶⁷ “Rātrī Samosar Nau Thngai Dī 4 Vicchikā 1949” *Nārī* December 1949, 217 – 218.

provide provisions for needy children.⁶⁸ The charity adopted ceremonious forms of giving by organizing special days for distributing clothes and assistance to children in Phnom Penh and the provinces.⁶⁹ When *Samāgam Kumār Sanggroaḥ* held “Children’s Day” again in 1952, the SKS organized another snack sale that garnered 25000 riels in donations. On the day of the event, 2000 children between the ages of 5 and 10 received second hand clothing and a meal, played games, and took a bath.⁷⁰ The act of giving symbolized maternal leadership. Importantly, the association chose to prepare desserts, evidence of the women’s cooking skills and role in displaying Khmer foodstuffs. By feeding, clothing, and bathing the poor children, the urban women also compassionately cared for the poor children of the country, thus demonstrating that they cared about the physical needs of all children. From desserts to baths, the SKS signified that female leaders should assume charitable duties as part of their public engagement.

While the SKS provided charity to children, the organization also received charitable assistance from the royal family. Despite organizing the Wat Phnom fundraiser to repay the printer, the SKS faced surmountable financial issues that required further funding. In 1949, readers grumbled about the price of the magazine, which prompted the SKS to find ways to create a cheaper magazine and hold the fundraiser.⁷¹ The association still required financial assistance, which they received from Princess Kossamak and the royal government.⁷² The SKS welcomed

⁶⁸ “Kicc *Samāgam Knung Rayà Chnaṃ* 1950,” *Nārī*, January 1951.

⁶⁹ “*Samāgam Kumār Sanggroaḥ*” *Kāmbujā*, April 23, 1951.

⁷⁰ “*Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvinī*’ Bān Jua’ Dhvoe Bidhī Divāsamor Saṃrāp Kumār Knung Chnāṃ 1952” *Nārī* April 1952.

⁷¹ *Nārī* December 1949.

⁷² ‘amṇoy Ya’g Prasoer Bī Rājarāṭṭhābhibāl’, *Nārī*, June 1951, p. 182. *Nārī* January 1951.

these monetary subsidiaries as an indication of their work on behalf of all women. Importantly, the queen's fiscal sponsorship of the association provides us insight into the kind of causes important for the royal women, whose own visions are oftentimes sidelined in historical scholarship on plans for developing an independent nation-state. Besides contributing to *Nārī*, Kossamak dedicated her time and money to several charitable organizations and the royal dance troupe. Her connection to the SKS shows that she believed in the cause of teaching women about their responsibilities as Khmer mothers as well as the efforts to bring together women from various backgrounds.

The conversations around good manners, fashion, and cuisine provide new insights into how the SKS began to construct a form of domesticity that shaped the modern Khmer home and transformed domestic duties into national roles. Domesticity helped to affirm and to connect to the work of the state during the uncertainty of decolonization. The domestic space was not necessarily a place of consumerism and individualism but rather an important component of the larger project to create a discernably modern and Khmer country. At the same time, discussions about domesticity allowed the SKS to configure their own positionality within the state. The emphasis on royal culture and educated women helping to cultivate proper Khmer ways of living and interacting illustrates a class issue that rubbed against the evocations of sisterhood and empathy found elsewhere in the magazine. In this way, the association's negotiations around class and ethnic differences also helped to elevate educated Khmers located in the royal capital and created the narrative on the need to "educate" Khmer women on the way they should dress, cook, and behave. Through these negotiations, the SKS began to assert an urban and royal construction of gender ideals and presentations as the guiding post for all Cambodian women.

Mothers of the Nation

The fashion, food, and good manners committees formed the basis of SKS work but organization priorities began to shift in 1942 to include more attention to their duties as the leaders of Khmer women, especially Khmer mothers. The association's shift in priorities can be attributed to leadership changes within the organization along with new developments in Cambodia's status as a state of the French Union. In 1949, Cambodia became "independent within the French Union," which allowed the Cambodian state to create new diplomatic relationships abroad. Meanwhile, the SKS elected new leaders, including Sisowath alumna Khieu Ponnary, who was particularly interested in childrearing. At this time, the SKS became more interested in scientific and hygienic approaches to caring for the bodies and minds of women and children. As leaders with international connections and holders of knowledge about the best practices of care, the SKS further deepened their practice as motherly leaders of the nation and moved the association beyond the confines of their magazine and urban readership to more outreach initiatives. Through this work, the SKS helped to establish the leadership expectations of urban women that would continue after independence.

While *Nārī* paused publication for 1950, the SKS reorganized their associational hierarchies—new names included leaders in education as well as several wives of prominent politicians. One day, thirty members gathered under the nominal head of Princess Kossomak to hold a vote for new committee leaders. With a few exceptions, the new leaders included mostly women from the high-ranking families of the more independence-minded Democratic Party. Members voted for In Em (Sam Sary) as President, Nema Toulla Machhwa (Son Sann) as Vice President, Madame Chean Vem as the General Treasurer, Teacher Khieu Ponnary as the

Treasurer, and Miss Sim Vannasee as the secretary.⁷³ Committee leaders included In Em (Sam Sary), Nema Toulla Machhwa, and *Lok Srīs* Eau Kaeas, Chean Vem, and Huy Kanthoul.⁷⁴ When *Nārī* printed the new associational leaders and committees, the members are introduced as *Lok Srīs*, an honorific that separates them from the *'nak srī*, married women who are not considered prominent individuals, as well as the *'nak grū*, female teachers, and *nāng*. Married to anti-parliamentarian politician and close confidant of Sihanouk, SKS President In Em (Sam Sary) was an outlier in the leadership ranks. Sam Sary was closely aligned with Sihanouk and against the Democratic Party. His nationalist work was more aligned with conservative approaches to change and independence. Yet, we do not know In Em's political affiliations or values. However, she probably enjoyed close relationships to her fellow members through her studies in Phnom Penh. As a member of the intellectual elite in Phnom Penh, she may have developed political opinions that differed from her husband.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, by the end of the year, she no longer served as the president of SKS.

While the SKS recognized the wives of important politicians with leadership positions, the politically active Khieu Ponnary began to assume new responsibilities as the SKS treasurer. Likely,

⁷³ *Nārī*, January 1951.

⁷⁴ While I know the names of some women due to interviews, memoirs, and other sources, I do not know the names of all the members. As described in the introduction, the SKS addressed women by their husbands' full name. I have elected to solve this discrepancy by using the women's names and including their husband's name in parentheses when possible.

⁷⁵ As mentioned in Chapter 1, In Em is the mother of Sam Rainsy, most famous as the President of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) (2012 – 2017). In his memoir, he mentions that his mother and father had a modern marriage because they met and chose to marry each other. He also insinuates that his parents did not have a good marriage and that his mother oftentimes burdened many responsibilities, including financial responsibilities, while her husband was studying in France for five years after World War II. Since In Em continued her teaching career and associational life while her husband studied abroad and worked in Phnom Penh, it is possible she developed independent political ideas.

she played a significant—but unofficial—role determining the magazine content. Khieu’s communist sympathies and later marriage to Saloth Sar (alias Pol Pot) have sometimes elicited questions about her biographical background. In the 1950s, Khieu’s form of nationalist support shifted in the 1950s from supporting the more moderate Democratic Party to joining the radical Khmer Communist Party. Philip Short has written that, “...Keng Vannsak remembered her as one of a group of Democratic Party women who always sat in the front row at rallies. [Unknown to Keng Vannsak] she was also the main point of contact between Phnom Penh and the Viet Minh prior to the Geneva Accords [1954].” Khieu became acquainted with the Khmer communists and met Saloth Sar while she studied in Paris in the early 1950s. While Khieu is remembered for her radical political leanings, she was also well known for her “traditional” behavior. A former student explained that, “...her way of behaving, her way of approaching people, was very authentic, reflecting Khmer culture and custom... The way she dressed wasn’t excessively prudish; it was traditional, that’s all.”⁷⁶ Certainly going to school in Paris shaped Khieu’s communist political leanings but her work as part of the SKS also represented important intellectual development, which remains in the last archival holdings of *Nārī*. In 1951 and 1952, several articles are written under K.P., which I believe can be attributed to Khieu Ponnary. The content of the articles—on childrearing and fostering a moral home—is congruent with Ponnary’s own values and expertise as a teacher and UNESCO representative. Through Khieu’s intellectual and nationalist trajectory, we can see how different political ideologies and nationalist identities did not always conform to binary categories.

⁷⁶ Philip Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004): 68, 83, 117 – 119.

Khieu placed particular emphasis on the housewife as an integral leader in the home, an argument likely energized by the structuring of ministries to oversee day to day affairs of the state. In an article about approaches to good work, Khieu argues that persons, such as those who work in the ministries, should work with dignity and integrity in order to help the country. Importantly, to achieve progress, these men needed to protect against greed, laziness, or nepotistic tendencies. Moreover, they were the ‘moral leaders of the family’ who returned home each day, from the office, factory or field and ‘enlightened their wives and the children about the importance of moral work in their future employment in government ministries.’⁷⁷ Writers sometimes envisioned the family as an extension of the various government ministries. Enfolding the family into the state structure helped to create a state built the compliance and enthusiasm of men, women, and children and reinforced the idea that women, particularly housewives, needed to place effort into structuring a smoothly run, modern, and Khmer home. An ordered home meant a well-run state.

Visions about a smoothly running home manifested in lists of tasks for housewives and suggestions for how to achieve those tasks. K.P. continued her discussion about the importance of the home to national progress by explaining the duties of the wife:

It is the domain of the wife to create a daily schedule that ensures she takes care of the house, makes enough the food for the children and husband. It is her duty to take care of the children and teach them to have the good manners, respect for the goals of the nation, and the struggles of the motherland.⁷⁸

When K.P. emphasized women should improve their approaches to housework, she suggested that most women were not realizing their full potential as housewives. This struggle to teach women about the importance of approaching housewifery in the same way as a civil servant may approach

⁷⁷ K. P. ‘Karanīy Kicc nai mātā Pitā Camboah Putr’, *Dassanāvatti Nārī*, August 1952, pp. 40 – 44.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

his job in a government ministry is further depicted in a time chart intended for women to plan their daily household activities for the week.⁷⁹ Each day's schedule included times for cooking and cleaning, as well as hours for reading to the children and helping them with their housework. The SKS worked hard to provide corrections to the activities and behaviors of women; in this sense, their efforts to create a place for themselves as authorities on national matters required proving their worth to women, as well.

In line with the association's desire to mediate foreign ideas, Khieu proposed how mothers could incorporate new educational methods into childrearing. She suggested that parents use fun, child-appropriate stories to teach children about appropriate behaviors, such as the story of the Three Little Pigs (which she describes as a Walt Disney story).⁸⁰ Through her explanation the story, she conveyed that parents can discipline children to behave appropriately but that for best results parents should create a fun and happy learning process for children. In particular, she argues that, "progressive countries use age-appropriate methods to teach their children."⁸¹ Once again, "progress" and "progressing" was an important concern for members of the SKS who wanted to use new approaches to domesticity and child-rearing. By finding ways for women to appropriate new educational methods models, Khieu provided a way for women to enhance the "traditional" work of mothers.

Besides teaching readers about the education methods in "progressive countries," *Nārī* also began to promote utilizing scientific approaches to improve childcare and bodily care. Articles on

⁷⁹ *Nārī*, June 1951, p. 187.

⁸⁰ While Walt Disney did not write the story, Disney produced the 1933 animated film, "The Three Little Pigs."

⁸¹ K.P. "Rapiap Praṭau Kmeng Tūc" *Nārī*, August 1952.

“exercises from head to feet” displayed young women performing exercises with accompanying descriptions about the proper way to perform the workout.⁸² These depictions of exercise also extended to children. The last issue of 1951 included exercises for babies between seven and twelve months old.⁸³ Besides exercise suggestions, the magazine advised readers on good nutrition for children, especially related to breastfeeding. One article described the vitamins and minerals in human milk, fresh cow milk, and canned cow milk with a clean chart that clearly showed the benefits of fresh milk and the lack of nutrients in canned milk.⁸⁴ Other articles emphasized the importance of breastfeeding and outlined how to fix to breastfeeding ailments and problems.⁸⁵ The scientific research provided ways for mothers to perfect their duties of raising healthy citizens. By disseminating the advice, the SKS further developed the theories that domestic work, like political institutions, needed to blend local and global knowledges in order to create a domestic environment that would help Cambodia shed its position as an impoverished colony.

As the content in *Nārī* changed, the SKS also began to take on new roles as representatives of Khmer women. In 1949, Cambodia negotiated for independence within the French Union, which Sihanouk described as “50 percent independence.” Although France still held power over the economy and military, Cambodia gained new opportunities for diplomatic relations, which began to shape the SKS’s own work.⁸⁶ In the early 1950s, Khieu Ponnary and Princess Ping Peang

⁸² *Nārī* 1951, pp. 5, 6, 9.

⁸³ , “Hât Prāṅ ‘o Kūn ‘ān ‘āy Bī 7 Dau 12 Khae” *Nārī* December 1951, p. 440.

⁸⁴ "Kār Paṅpau Dār Rak” *Nārī* 1952, pp. 255 – 257 (cannot determine exact date because covered by sticker)

⁸⁵ *Nārī*, 1952, pp. 23 – 24.

⁸⁶ For additional information on Cambodia’s independence within the French Union see: Chandler, *Tragedy*, 43 – 44.

became the Cambodian representatives of UNESCO.⁸⁷ In January 1952 In Em (Sam Sary) and SKS secretary Sim Vannasee attended the 1952 6th Annual Conference of the Pan-Pacific Women's Association (PPWA) in Christchurch, New Zealand on behalf of the Cambodian government.⁸⁸ When they attended the conference, In Em was no longer the president of the SKS. Nevertheless, the conference certainly shaped the work of the SKS during their final year of organizing and publishing. Most importantly, the PPWA conference seemingly provided the SKS with new ideas for creating closer connections to women beyond their urban circles so that they could continue to disseminate strategies for engendering modern domestic spaces in a unified country.

When In Em and Sim Vanassee attended the PPWA conference, they were joining an organization that was going through its own changes. Since 1924, the Pan-Pacific Women's Association endeavored to organize women from cities and countries around the Pacific Rim. The founders organized the association in response to the lack of women's organizing spaces for women living outside of the Atlantic region.⁸⁹ The association leadership was comprised of white women from North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Although the white leaders maintained control over the priorities of the association, the post-World War II conference organizers became

⁸⁷ Samājiga Pī Nāk Nai Samāgam Jen Dau Pant Vijjā Nau Prades Pārāṅg' *Nārī*, September 1952, pp. 12.

⁸⁸ 'Sannisid Loek tī 6 Vong Strī 'ntarajāti Nau Pāsīhvik', *Nārī*, December 1951, pp. 421 – 423. In his memoir, Sam Rainsy mentions that he traveled with his mother to New Zealand to attend the conference. At the time, he was around 2 years old.

⁸⁹ PPWA Sixth Annual Conference Proceedings, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

interested in creating more genuine forms of “cultural exchange.”⁹⁰ When Sim and Sam attended the 1952 conference, members discussed the biggest social problems for women in countries in the Americas, Australia, and Asia, especially regarding educational disparities. In the post-conference proceedings the PPWA leadership summarized their gravest concerns as “the apathy and complacency among women in western countries,” which prevented achieving the goal to combat “illiteracy among the women in non-western countries.”⁹¹ These concerns aligned with the SKS’s own worries about educating Khmer women.

For two weeks, attendees participated lectures and workshops where they identified the issues in their home countries and theorized ways to solve the problems. In particular, PPWA argued that when women became literate, they would gain a better understanding of their surroundings, including societal “evils” like “purdah, polygamy, concubinage, low standards of living, lack of amenities outside the cities, multiplicity of dialects, and a way of life which confined women to their homes.”⁹² Sim Vannasee and In Em (Sam Sary) agreed with the link between illiteracy and low standards of living for poor women and explained that in Cambodia the “deserted mistress or concubine” often was left impoverished without a future. Sim and Sam thought educational reform in Cambodia would help these girls who were “left without protection of any kind and little opportunity to re-establish a life.”⁹³ In order to “reach” uneducated women, the

⁹⁰ For a history of the PPWA see: Fiona Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women’s Pan-Pacific*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009).

⁹¹ PPWA Sixth Annual Conference Proceedings, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁹² PPWA Sixth Annual Conference Proceedings, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁹³ PPWA Sixth Annual Conference Proceedings, Swarthmore College Peace Collection; “Sec Ktī Thlaeng ‘ambī Jivaphāp Nai Strī Khmaer Knung Samāy ʔoem Rabās Nāng Kañña Sim Vaṅṅas’ī Nau Krung Grystajhar,” *Nārī*, February 1952.

PPWA recommended broadcasting women's radio programs and establishing women's organizations at the local levels throughout the countries.

These suggestions helped the SKS begin to conceive of their own responsibility to the women beyond the confines of Phnom Penh. Later in 1952, the association began to host a "The Voice of Khmer Women" radio program every Thursday and Saturday. During the first radio program Madame Huy Kanthol, the wife of the Prime Minister, spoke about "the goals of the association for all young girls in Cambodia."⁹⁴ The SKS also continued collaborate with international women on child and women's matters, which included meetings with Madame Danvoye, an expert in childhood illness, Miss Helen Reimer, chief in childhood education, and Miss Wilhelmina Visscher, an educator. *Nārī* reported that, "the three women in the world organization, health division, were sent to work in Cambodia in order to organize a hospital and education for children."⁹⁵ Through meetings and new programs, the SKS began to establish

⁹⁴ "Samḥeng Nārī Khmaer," *Nārī*, March 1952.

⁹⁵ "Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvini Pān Dhvoe Paṭasaṅṅār Dhal Samājikā Nai 'nggakār Sukabhāp Sākallok," *Nārī* May 1952. Unfortunately the copy only includes this information because the following pages are missing. The three women, Helen Reimer, Wilhelmina Visscher, and Alice Talbot, were WHO nurses in stationed in Cambodia to establish a nursing school and maternity ward. In her book charting the shape of global nursing, Armstrong-Reid focuses on how this mission, and similar ones, attempted to create a cross-cultural nursing program to serve the needs of the local population. The work, which uses the *Canadian Nurse* newspaper and personnel correspondence between WHO nurses, does not mention the meeting with the SKS. However, Armstrong-Reid points out that the nurses were frustrated "in dealing with government officials and other WHO representatives who wanted health-care showpieces as soon as possible" while the nurses wanted to focus their attention on training local nurses. With pages missing from *Nārī*, and no mention of the meeting elsewhere, it is unclear the exact contents of the meeting but it seems like this was very much supposed to be a way for the nurses to meet de facto female leaders in Cambodia, even if they had little experience in healthcare. Susan Armstrong-Reid *Lyle Creelman: The Frontiers of Global Nursing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

working relationships with international organizations while also providing urban-based aid to rural Cambodians, methods that would continue to appear through the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*.

The association embraced the PPWA suggestion to support women's associations in rural areas by working with women in Kompong Cham to create a local branch of the SKS. In May 1952, *Lok Srī* Sokum Kuy, wife of provincial chief of Kompong Cham, invited "all young women in the province, including the wives of big and small officials, teachers, and the wives of bosses and businessmen" along with three representatives from the SKS in Phnom Penh. In total, sixty women gathered in a provincial guesthouse to learn about women's organizing, enjoy food, drink and desert, and to watch a film for entertainment. According to the SKS's report, the women had never enjoyed a moment to gather together in this fashion (unlike their husbands). In order to convince the attendees about the importance of women organizing themselves, the visiting Phnom Penh women explained that "today all countries in the world are gathered under one organization called the United Nations in order to find a solution for peace and to prevent future wars." Furthermore, they explained how the UN sponsored a "women of the world" branch and that in New Zealand "Women of the Pacific" endeavored to raise up women. In Cambodia, "The SKS is the first association for Khmer Women in Cambodia."

The speakers emphasized that the SKS wanted to "educate all Khmer women to know their own duties completely in order to help men serve the motherland" and to "take the first step forward, without the desire to brag, to lead in the education of Khmer women" because of the great need for countries to "follow civilization" and to avoid "walking slowly to the front." In this way, the association's goals had not altered significantly in the years of organizing. At the same time, the visiting members explained their desire to debate viewpoints and opinions but did not discuss earlier goals of gathering women from traditional and modern viewpoints. After more than two

years of publishing material for Khmer women, the organizers seemed most keen on curating content that they deemed most appropriate for educating their readers. Interestingly, the speakers also explained that all members received a copy of their magazine in order to learn about “hygiene, food, and clothing.”⁹⁶ Notably, the speakers did not mention good manners and instead emphasized hygiene, an indication that the association’s content priorities had shifted. Indeed, this worry about the hygiene of homes, schools, and villages would only intensify after 1955.

If the SKS believed women needed to “serve the motherland” alongside men then they would need to unite *all* Khmer women. In particular, the SKS became increasingly interested in teaching rural women about their organizing efforts and addressing domestic issues outside of the city. After the Kompong Cham meeting, the SKS members traveled to a nearby village to see the houses, farms local businesses, and schools. While they reported happy and healthy villagers, the members also determined that the local chief had worked hard to encourage his residents to grow and prosper. In particular, he had requested that wealthy landowners fund new schools—in later years, these would be the spaces where teachers trained in Phnom Penh would teach young children to read, write, count, and wash their hands. By focusing on the labors and visions of the village chief, the SKS implied that rural Cambodians would only become healthy and happy due to the work of leaders.

As the SKS attempted to “reach” rural women, one provincial reader responded with her own opinions about the efforts to enfold rural women into the SKS. From Takeo, the reader probed about the organization’s goal “to educate Khmer women to march towards ways of living similar to civilized countries in the world.” The letter writer found problems with the association’s aims

⁹⁶ “Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvini Pān Paek Maek Muay Nau Khaetr Kaṃbāng Cām,” *Nārī* April 1952

and pointed out that rural girls did not “even know the name of this association.” After arguing that the organization could not possibly understand the situation for women in poor villages, she further enunciated that Khmer women are often under the jurisdiction of parents and husbands, which further prohibited rural women from seeking out an association like SKS. She ended her letter with a series of questions about the association’s rules regarding age, cost, ranking of the members, along with the practical concerns about joining the association from afar.⁹⁷ By printing the letter, the association clearly began to confront their lack of outreach to the provincial areas and to consider how address this issue. Yet, as an urban-based and elitist organization, the association never fully resolved their limited outreach.

By transitioning to more attention on conducting outreach in rural areas, the SKS signaled their leading role in creating national momentum to create “progress” and “move forward.” While nationalists often discussed the importance of all Cambodians working together, the urban-based conversations did not include many critical considerations about bridging socio-economic and geographic divisions. The SKS’s budding plan to collaborate with rural women was short lived. The SKS stopped publishing *Nārī* in 1952—likely, the association ended other organizing work as well. Yet, their initial efforts helped to set the stage for more intensive postcolonial state efforts to transform the domestic landscape with literacy and hygiene programs along with associations, schools, and charitable works. With SKS women as members of the political elite envisioning and implementing these plans, it is reasonable to imagine that the female organizers presented their own ideas and plans to their husbands and social circles. Most importantly, as the only group attuned to women’s concerns and domestic issues, the SKS established that dreams for progress

⁹⁷ “Samputr tael Yoeng Pān Dadual,” *Nārī*, September 1952.

and unity needed to include housewives who worked to transform homes into modern Khmer domestic spaces supporting the state.

Conclusion

An incomplete copy of the December 1952 issue of *Nārī* lays on the shelves of the National Library of Cambodia. The table of contents indicate that the editors included an article on a big upcoming 1953 association meeting but the pages that provide the meeting details are gone. The seeming end of *Nārī* and the SKS sparks questions about the editors' difficulties in publishing along with the association's precarious position vis-à-vis national politics. On a practical level, the association always faced financial issues due to subscribers not paying dues. Moreover, Sim Vannasee explained to the PPWA that young women were more interested in foreign magazines, which suggests that the SKS did not always attract an enthusiastic readership. While the SKS struggled to attract readers, it also seems likely that Khieu's departure to Paris in 1952 caused a dearth in dedicated editors and writers. The experiment in women's publishing had engendered important intellectual contributions to visions for a modern Cambodia but the realities of producing a monthly magazine for the small—albeit growing—group of literate women certainly presented continuous and tiresome hurdles.

The politics of the early 1950s were also exhausting, especially for those who were frustrated with Sihanouk's power plays. The SKS seemed to merge closer to the Democratic Party in 1951 and 1952. With Madame Huy Kanthoul as the association president and Khieu Ponnary as an integral leader of the magazine, the leadership certainly represented women with close ties and allegiances to the Democratic Party. Despite their electoral wins, the Democratic Party was

often vulnerable to attacks by Sihanouk and his allies, including Sam Sary. Where did the SKS and the wives of these politicians stand in these political struggles? As I have argued in this chapter, the SKS posited that women should support the political efforts of the country by endeavoring to create modern Khmer domiciles and families that supported the political aims of the country. These homes supported understandings of good governance and morality as defined by the country's leaders.

At the same time, the SKS should not be seen as only a supportive arm of the government. Their intellectual and organizing work illustrates that the women acted as leaders with their own ideas about how to run a family, home, and country and did not always fit within the political and nationalist categories that are presented in state histories. Likely, their work shaped politics in ways that remain in the shadows of official historiographies. David Chandler has an anecdotal story about the events leading to King Sihanouk dissolving the National Assembly one last time before launching his Royal Crusade for Independence in 1953. According to Chandler, Prince Monireth writes in his memoirs that "several Democrats, enraged at Sihanouk's conduct in 1952, had planned to declare Cambodia a republic when the assembly reconvened. News of the plot reached Sihanouk's mother, Monireth asserts, via one of the deputies' disgruntled wives. Infuriated, Princess Kossamak ordered the royal printer to prepare a decree for Sihanouk's signature dissolving the assembly and, when it was ready, thrust it at her son to sign."⁹⁸ If this story is true, the elite women of the capital continued to seek peace and cohesion above the bifurcations and political infighting. At the same time, by early 1953 Sihanouk had taken over the country and launched his plan to gain independence, which he accomplished by November. These

⁹⁸ David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 66.

tense months, when Cambodians joined volunteer militias, were not conducive to organizing and writing about topics that may have been antithetical to the king's visions.

While the SKS did not continue their work after independence in 1953, their intellectual musings on domesticity and the role of women in a modern state certainly shaped how gender and class determined the expected duties of citizens in the postcolonial state. In 1955, the constitution was amended to give women the right to vote and run for political office. In the following years, women oversaw ministries that reflected a woman's expertise in domestic matters like education, health, social issues, and tourism. While the SKS had not promoted women becoming involved in politics, these positions that reflected maternal ideals certainly aligned with the SKS's vision for how women could help to progress the country. Meanwhile, royal women became more deeply involved in charitable work emblematic of Buddhist generosity. In these positions, urban and elite women took their duties in homes to the postcolonial domestic landscape. To that end, the SKS promoted a vision for women in the state that continued into the decades of post-independence.

CHAPTER 3:
ROYAL GENEROSITIES

The 24-minute 1966 film *La Femme Khmère à l'heure du Sangkum Reastr Niyum* features contemporary Khmer women involved in “traditional” and “contemporary” activities in *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* Cambodia. The first part of the film focuses on how Khmer women embody the ceremonies and cultural art forms that have been handed down from the Angkorian period. In one scene, royal attendants carry Sihanouk’s mother Kossamak in a procession to the royal palace while the narrator explains that she is “conservation of Buddhism.”¹ Next, Kossamak blesses a wedding and appears at the Royal Ploughing Ceremony, the mark of the beginning of harvest season. With performances featuring royal women and dancers, the film proposes an intertwined relationship of Khmer Buddhism, generosity, and the monarchy. By blessing ceremonies and appearing at important festivals, Kossamak symbolizes the ideals of Buddhist generosity, a key component of the Buddhist socialism plan promoted by King Sihanouk beginning in the early 1960s. When connected to the “ancient” traditions of the Angkor Empire, the royal figure and the ceremonies she presides over create a strong narrative about the royal family’s duties to continue upholding Khmer customs as Cambodia engaged with global ideals on the world stage.

This chapter brings together literature on Buddhist economies of merit in Southeast Asia with historiographies on domesticity to propose that ideals of modern motherhood blended with Theravada Buddhist values to emphasize humanitarian giving based on ideals of royal maternal care. Buddhist ethics emphasize the importance of earning merit by participating in acts of giving

¹ *La Femme Khmère à l'heure du Sangkum Reastr Niyum* directed by Norodom Sihanouk (Phnom Penh: Khemera Pictures, 1965). Bophana Audiovisual Center.

and nineteenth and twentieth century Cambodian Buddhists believed that high social status could be earned from merit accrued in previous lives. Thus, a King was the rightful leader because of his previous merit. Mid-twentieth century political and religious thinkers began to consider how these ethics could be incorporated into modern political and economic systems. Several thinkers, including Prince Sihanouk, described this ideology as Buddhist socialism. Paul Cohen has described Buddhist socialism as a “modern interpretation of Buddhist social ethics” that is a “moral and political response to the inequities and tensions created by European imperialism and capitalism.”² This modern form of ethics asserts that issues of politics and economics are entwined with the superior importance of religion, morality, and, in the case of Cambodia, royal leadership. Similar to how urban women promoted the home as a barrier to the evils of the outside world, mid-twentieth century Buddhist thinkers argued that local religious values offered a moral response to unchecked power and greed. These ideas were congruent with Sihanouk’s own promotion of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* as a political system that prevented the corruption of party politics and his own position as King turned Head of State as evidence of rightful royal leadership. By tracing Khmer women’s work in various forms of giving—from preserving culture and arts to organizing charity events—this chapter shows how intellectual strains around morality, giving, and motherhood intersected in colonial and postcolonial charities and humanitarian projects to create a form of maternal royal leadership that protected and the nation and people.³

² Paul Cohen, “The Sovereignty of Dhamma and Economic Development: Buddhist Social Ethics in Rural Thailand,” *Siam Society* 72, no. 1 (1984): 20.

³ Thank you to the Fall 2020 Buddhist socialism reading group for the insightful ideas and theories about the emergence of Buddhist socialism across South and Southeast Asia during the mid-twentieth century. Particular thanks to John Marston for giving me feedback on this chapter.

The monarchy derived its position as the rightful leadership from Buddhist understandings of social status and merit, but the institution underwent significant transformations to its image during the early twentieth century. In order to create a more visually impressive monarchy, the French colonial administration and kings renovated the royal palace, revitalized seasonal festivals and holidays, and invested in the performing arts, especially the female-led royal ballet. The efforts to adapt the royal institution to a modern state continued when Sihanouk acted as King, Prime Minister, and Head of State. Although Sihanouk is the most prominent figure in conversations about *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* monarchy, his closest female relatives carried out much of the work to preserve and perform the “traditions” of the past. Their domestic—and international—performances helped to strengthen the narrative that Cambodia derived its power from maintaining true to its historical and cultural identity. When royal women participated in these performances, they affirmed that women helped to negotiate traditions and modernity in the home and on the national landscape.

While these “traditions” established the Khmer identity in response to colonialism and internationalism, ceremonies and performances also played an important role in establishing a generous and giving monarchy who cared for the royal state’s citizens, many of whom were poor farmers. In addition to fulfilling their royal duties to perform special ceremonies, the royal family—and particularly royal women—took on new forms of giving through charitable institutions introduced by French colonial women.⁴ Their leadership helping children, the infirm, and the poor reflected the kind of matronly roles expected of mothers in the home. Moreover, the charities carried out the Buddhist socialist approach to solving the country’s socio-economic

⁴Frederick P. Munson, *Area Handbook for Cambodia*, (Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968): 103 – 104.

problems through the generosity of the wealthy giving to the poor. By emphasizing that this system was created by and for Cambodians, Sihanouk was also able to strengthen his discourses of neutrality in the face of Cold War pressures. The Cambodian Red Cross became the most important symbol of the relationship between the state, charity, and neutrality. While the Cambodian Red Cross provided relief to Cambodian victims of natural and manmade disasters, the organization worked within the framework of international humanitarianism by donating monetary and material funds to other nations in need.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how we can conceive of the ways that Buddhist ideals of giving and modern notions of domesticity took a hybrid form in the Southeast Asian polity. When Sihanouk established the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* he created a modern nation-state that prioritized solving domestic issues with Buddhist ethics. Significantly, the one-party *Sangkum* was supposed to be above the corrupt electoral political scene of the 1940s and early 1950s and to remain neutral in the face of imperial pressures. This rhetoric echoes the SKS's beliefs that housewives should guide their children and husbands to be above the corruption and immorality of politics and the modern world. Certainly, these ideologies about domestic spaces, both home and nation, informed each other so that male and female leaders were supposed to model the roles of parents in homes. With discussions of unity, Sihanouk emphasized the cohesiveness of the nation under his paternal leadership. This chapter argues that in this process royal women became the maternal leaders who provided moral guidance and material needs to the nation of peasants and farmers. With this strong correlation between the ideal home and nation-state, it becomes apparent that domesticity was not confined to the walls of the house but rather a guiding force for the country.

To make these arguments, this chapter is divided into three sections based on archival materials from the colonial and *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* periods, including government

correspondence, memoirs, speeches, and print media. The first section explores how the French colonial power and Prince Sihanouk ceremonies, festivals, and royal performances like the royal dance to both display the grandeur of the royal family and emphasize the rightful leadership of the monarchy. Through festivals and performances, the monarchy developed a relationship of familiarity with the people while also becoming more connected to the international community. Finally, these performances helped to signify the importance of the Cambodian state drawing from “traditions” to solve social issues. The second section examines historical understandings of Buddhist economies of merit and maps the individual and associational forms of giving and charity in the colonial and postcolonial state. I focus on how royal women leading charitable associations framed generosity in the context of domestic politics and modern womanhood. The final section examines the Cambodian Red Cross, which I argue became the most prominent postcolonial charity carrying out missions of the state, especially as Cambodia became more encumbered by Cold War politics and the growing threat of border skirmishes from the war in Vietnam.

The Palace and Royal Ceremonies

In the early twentieth century, the monarchy needed to reestablish itself in response to the expectations of modern statehood and incoming ideas about liberal democracy. Following a similar path as other nation-state and kingdoms, French colonial administration and royal family of the French Protectorate bolstered the visibility and accessibility of the royal family in order to along with the pomp and circumstance of the royal palace. These transformations helped to construct the monarchy as a family with a long history of prominence. While the monarchy certainly became more visible as national leaders, the power of the throne was threatened by new approaches of governing through liberal democracy. King Sihanouk, who became Prime Minister in 1955 and

Head of State in 1960, drew inspiration from Buddhist kings of the past to establish a state that relied upon local and colonial forms of governance. The royal family used annual ceremonies, dance performances, and art forms to promote the importance of the Khmer monarchy to a modern state. While Sihanouk acted as the paternal figure of the country, the women around him carried important roles preserving and disseminating art forms that continually renewed the relationship between the monarchy and the people.⁵ Over time these performances helped to affirm the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*'s explicit integration of the monarchy into the state framework.

Between 1863 and 1953, the French administration and monarchy endeavored to enhance the prestige of the royal palace. In Buddhist thought, the royal palace at the center of the Khmer kingdom was symbolizing Mount Meru at the center of the Buddhist cosmos. While the royal palace served as important symbol of power, Phnom Penh was not a particularly grand city in the mid-nineteenth century. Pictures of 1850s Phnom Penh show wooden houses along muddy embankments of the Mekong river. The French were dismayed that the country did not evoke an image of pomp and circumstance.⁶ Throughout the late nineteenth century, the French colonists and King Norodom updated and expanded the palace, including adding a “*salle de fetes*” specifically for special events.⁷ Popular festivals were celebrated near the vicinity of the royal grounds, including the Royal Ploughing ceremony performed on land south of the palace walls

⁵ In *Lost Goddesses*, Trude Jacobsen argues that women were expected to remain traditional “so that Cambodian culture as not lost in the face of rapid modernization.” This is part of her longer argument that women have lost their power over time. While I agree that some women were expected to perform “traditional” behavior at different times, I think that “tradition” was deployed in specific political contexts. Trudy Jacobsen, *Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008): 209.

⁶ Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994): 17.

⁷ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge*: 44 – 45.

and Water Festival races on the river in front of the palace. In the early twentieth century, the palace also began to collect luxury goods like carriages, motor cars, and a boat for jaunts on the Mekong River.⁸ Beyond the walls of the palace, Phnom Penh was divided into racialized quarters with sections for the French, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Khmer communities. The Khmer section of Phnom Penh surrounded the royal palace and families in that area oftentimes enjoyed close connections to the monarchy.⁹

Festivals became an important way to engender a national spirit that revolved around Phnom Penh. Alain Forest has argued that prior to the twentieth century, festivals were largely local and village affairs.¹⁰ French colonists and the royal family created increasingly lavish events for coronations, funerals, weddings, and Buddhist holidays.¹¹ Meanwhile, villagers traveled on the new road infrastructure to see big displays in Phnom Penh.¹² Making the Mekong River's directional change, the water festival was particularly popular.¹³ The several day event included

⁸ Osborne, *Sihanouk*: 17. Edwards, Osborne, and others demonstrate the influence of the French administration on the refashioning of the royal palace in Cambodia. Maurizio Peleggi's *Lord of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2002) provides another consideration for the regional context of the new imagery of aristocratic class in Bangkok.

⁹ Several of my interviewees who described their families as well connected to the royal palace lived within the vicinity and could walk to the schools in the area. Gregory Muller also provides fascinating descriptions of the life and drama of the neighborhoods surrounding the royal palace in his book, *Cambodia's "Bad Frenchmen": The Rise of French Rule and the Life of Thomas Caraman, 1840 – 1887*.

¹⁰ Alain Forest, *Histoire Religieuse Du Cambodge: Un Royaume d'enchantement* (Paris: Indes savantes, 2012) : 205.

¹¹ Edwards, *Cambodge*: 53 -54.

¹² Forest, *Histoire Religieuse*, 205.

¹³ During most holidays urbanites travel to the provinces to visit their families, the water festival continues to be a popular time for Cambodians from the provinces to visit Phnom Penh.

boat races, a ceremony of the boats, and the “*fete des feux flottants*,” or the “celebration of the floating fires,” which entailed fireworks and large lighted floats traveling up and down the river.¹⁴ One traveler who attended the festival in 1937 explained that, “Cambodians come from far and near, from every province, to take part in or to witness the celebrations. Fireworks and street processions of amusing clever paper figures, with lantern processions at night, make the town gay.”¹⁵ The ceremonies created new visibility for the crown and strengthened the relationship between monarchy and lay community.

Sihanouk built on the early twentieth century endeavors to create a more visible royal crown by creating connections between his own reign and the reigns of great ancient monarchs. Stories about Buddhist kings Asoka and Jayavarman VII influenced Sihanouk’s visions for a modern Buddhist polity. A great ruler who conquered lands across the Indian subcontinent, King Asoka (268 - 233 BCE) was considered the model of Buddhist kingship. In an editorial titled “Our Buddhist Socialism,” Sihanouk references Asoka’s quote, “I consider the well-being of beings as a goal for which I must fight” as a guiding principle for Buddhist kings.¹⁶ He also mentions how Asoka said, “‘Do not decry the other sects, do not disparage them, but on the contrary, honor what is in them’ as further evidence that a Buddhist king should strive for peace within the kingdom.”¹⁷ Besides acting as a benevolent ruler to his people, Asoka built monuments and stupas in honor of his Buddhist faith. Here, it is apparent that a good Buddhist king is supposed to care for the corporeal and spiritual well-being of his people. Sihanouk grew up learning the stories of King

¹⁴ Adhémard *Cambodge: Fêtes Civiles et Religieuses* 1916 : 257.

¹⁵ Xenia Zarina, *Classic Dances of the Orient* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1967): 68.

¹⁶ Sihanouk Norodom, “Notre Socialisme Buddhique,” *Kambuja*, November 15, 1965, NAC.

¹⁷ Sihanouk Norodom, “Notre Socialisme Buddhique,” *Kambuja*, November 15, 1965, NAC.

Asoka. In his 1981 memoir, he writes, “My great-grandmother, a pious Buddhist, undertook to make the “lion cub” Sihanouk a future Asoka (Indian emperor who was a protector of Buddhism in these States). From the age of 5 years, the child that I was observed the five principles of Buddhism.”¹⁸ Critically, Sihanouk insinuates that he was destined to be King—certainly an understanding of this path to kingship that differs from histories of the French colonial administration choosing Sihanouk because they considered him to be an easily pliable ruler.

Sihanouk also drew connections between his own rule and the monarchs of the Angkor empire. The second Buddhist king of Angkor, King Jayavarman VII (1181 to 1218) honored Buddhism and the well-being of his people.¹⁹ Jayavarman followed in Asoka’s footsteps by building temples and monuments dedicated to Buddhism. He “did not disdain meditation or religious retreats,” therefore demonstrating his dedication to religious practices and built “thousands of kilometers of roads and canals, and hundreds of hospitals.”²⁰ Sihanouk envisioned the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* as a renaissance of Angkor under Jayavarman VII. According to Sihanouk, they could achieve this renaissance because “Our Sangkum, in ‘awakening’ our people and by hiring an intense and continual crusade of national edification, has only returned to the source of Buddhism and the traditions established by our Great Kings, several centuries before.”²¹

¹⁸ Prince Norodom Sihanouk, *Souvenirs Doux et Amers* (Paris: Hachette, 1981): 27.

¹⁹ Jayavarman VII was a Mahayana Buddhist but Sihanouk does not necessarily make these distinctions in his writings. For more information on the changes, see the work Alain Forest.

²⁰ Sihanouk Norodom, “Notre Socialisme Buddhique,” *Kambuja*, November 15, 1965, NAC.

²¹ Sihanouk Norodom, “Notre Socialisme Buddhique,” *Kambuja*, November 15, 1965, NAC. Robert Garry, “La Renaissance du Cambodge de Jayavarman VII, Roi d’Angkor a Norodom Sihanouk Varman,” (*Cambodge*: Department of Information, 1964). NAC.

When Sihanouk argued that restoring Khmer Buddhist constructions of power would bring back the grandeur of the Angkorian Kingdom, he was engaging in similar imaginations of the urban women who had constructed the modern Khmer home as central to a moral and prosperous Cambodia. To make their arguments, the female intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century had focused on their immediate surroundings, namely the homes where they raised children alongside their husbands. For those women, the workings—specifically the successes—of the domestic space would ensure Cambodia would continue “on the path of progress,” a common metaphor used by the writers. The writers argued that homes were formed from the structures of tradition along with the trimmings of modern domesticity. Sihanouk also took in his domestic surroundings, albeit he focused on the domestic as nation instead of the domestic as home. In this rendition of drawing from the domestic for the country’s “renaissance,” Sihanouk embraced incorporating Buddhist leadership of prior centuries into contemporary state affairs. In both these intellectual arguments, local histories and customs served as important foundations to build a modern Khmer nation-state that was neither immoral or nor subsumed by incoming ideologies.

In charge of a modern state but drawing from the grandeur of the past, Sihanouk used ceremonies to affirm that Buddhist practices could help resolve social issues in the country. When Sihanouk’s father died in 1960, Sihanouk elected to keep the throne empty and instead take on a new position as Head of State. Yet, he continued to engage in royal ceremonies. Milton Osborne has written that the Royal Ploughing Ceremony, or “The Ploughing of the Sacred Furrow,” helped to exemplify the “traditional conception of kingship” with Sihanouk’s new role as Head of State. In other words, he could demonstrate that he acted as a monarchical figure even if he continued assuming the non-royal role as Head of State. In 1963, Sihanouk moved the ceremony to the provincial city of Battambang to demonstrate his concern for the western rice-growing region.

Osborne argues that Sihanouk acted as the ploughman despite the fact that in more recent years that position had been occupied by court official reiterated the power of cosmological approaches to resolving very worldly issues.²² Sihanouk was not the only performer in these ceremonies. Royal women also held an important role in the Royal Ploughing Ceremony. In *La Femme Khmère à l'heure du Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, the film narrator explains that, “Women are representatives of spreading the seeds during the ploughing ceremony that we do every year.” Queen Kossamak is featured participating in the ceremony. Her presence along with the narration about women spreading the seeds further affirmed the importance of relying on local approaches to engendering prosperity for the country.

Kossamak also participated in consecrations of marriages, which were well-documented in the state press. *Kambuja* magazine included a “calendar” section in each issue and described the various happenings of Sihanouk and other prominent members of the royal family. Regularly, the magazine included pictures of Queen Kossamak blessing a newlywed couple and described components of the blessing, including the offering to the queen and the showering of the couple with flower petals. In 1967, the daughter of Pung Peng Cheng and Siv Eng Tong, Pung Chhiv Kek wed Gerard Pilorge. The ceremony was conducted “according to a millenary tradition,” bringing “ritual offerings” for the Queen. In return the Queen gave “an old and venerable tradition that means blessing for the couple.”²³ These ceremonies demonstrated that the Queen continued to provide generous deeds steeped in royal traditions while her son Sihanouk acted in more official governing capacities.

²² Milton E. Osborne, “History and Kingship in Contemporary Cambodia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 7, no. 1 (March 1966): 11 – 12.

²³ “Introducing Two Newly Weds to her Majesty the Queen,” *Kambuja*, March 1967.

While seasonal and ongoing ceremonies connected the royal family with the populace, the royal ballet also signified the royal family's important position as the producers and preservers of Khmer culture. The French were involved in this process during the early twentieth century. Just as they had conducted research Angkor Wat and participated in renovating the royal palace, French colonists became interested in assessing and "reviving" the royal dance. French scholars interested in the dance became consumed with determining the connections between the contemporary and Angkorian dances. During the reigns of King Ang Duong and King Norodom, the Khmer royal dance included Siamese dancers and Thai choreographies, which indicated that the Khmer troupe probably gained Siamese knowledge, training, and dancers for at least a century.²⁴ Concerned that the Cambodian dance was declining due to Siamese influence, French ethnographer Georges Groslier influenced French policies to "save" the dance.²⁵ Along with others, Groslier proposed that the dance in the early twentieth century was connected to the dances of the Angkorian period, an assertion that fit well into colonial efforts to rectify the lost traditions of Angkor.²⁶ In addition to studying the dance, the French also sent troupes to perform in Paris.²⁷ While the French scholars

²⁴ Hideo Sasagawa has made the argument that contemporary (1980s to 2005) scholars have not paid close enough attention to the Siamese influences on the Khmer dance. Hideo Sasagawa, "Post/Colonial Discourses on the Cambodian Court Dance," *東南アジア研究* 42, no. 4 (2005): 418–41.

²⁵ Hideo Sasagawa, "Post/Colonial Discourses on the Cambodian Court Dance," *東南アジア研究* 42, no. 4 (2005): 423 – 427.

²⁶ For more, see Penny Edwards discussion of Angkor in *Cambodge*. Paul Cravath has also conducted research into how the dance became politicized under the reigns of King Sisowath and King Sisowath Monivong. His argument can be found in Chapter 4: Khmer Dance; 1431 – 1981 in *Earth of Flower: The Divine Mystery of the Cambodian Dance Drama*.

²⁷ The Resident Superior first sent the troupe to Paris to perform at the Colonial Exposition in Marseille in 1906. RSC File No. 1211. Son Soubert also recalled that his grandmother, Nema Toulla's mother, was a ballerina who lived in the royal palace where she practiced dance and went to school. She traveled to France in 1929 as part of the Universal Exhibition. During the

may have deigned themselves experts on the Khmer dance, they needed to work with a monarchy that did not always approve of particular French visions for the dance. In particular, King Sisowath disagreed with French desires to make the dance a more public spectacle. As a result, multiple capital dance troupes formed in during the early twentieth century. King Sisowath maintained his own dance troupes in the royal palace. Meanwhile, the French oversaw a private dance troupe directed by an ousted princess while Princess Kossamak headed her own troupe. These triangulated dance troupes served the purposes of their benefactors but beginning in the 1940s Princess Kossamak's troupe became of high significance for politics and culture.

While concerned about the components of the dance structure and performance, Kossamak recognized that the royal ballet could not be confined to the inner sanctum of the royal palace if the monarchy wanted to maintain relevant in culture and international affairs. The royal dance signifies a relationship between the corporeal and celestial worlds with performers telling stories through their subtle and slow movements. Some of the dances are intended as blessings for the Kingdom. While the dance continued to symbolize connections between the corporeal and celestial worlds, Princess Kossamak revised the performances to create a dance more amenable to modern audiences and true to the sanctity of the dance. Significantly, she created a dance that spoke to both local and foreign audiences. Kossamak was a visionary but likely she was perceived as a threat to French control over narratives about Khmer culture. When Sihanouk was crowned in 1941, the French declared an end to funding for the dance. However, Kossamak and Sihanouk worked together to create a performance for Vietnamese dignitaries. The performance signified

trip, the dancers decided to venture out on their own but not knowing how public transportation worked, they got lost on the streets of Paris.

the continued importance of the dance and cemented Kossamak as the premier choreographer and organizer.²⁸ She remained in this leadership position throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the dance conformed to the goals of Sihanouk and the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, especially with regards to the country's new forms of disseminating Khmer culture to local and international audiences. In the 1962 Kossamak choreographed the Apsara Dance, which was supposed to be a modern adaptation of an Angkorian Dance. Importantly, the Apsara featured Buppha Devi, Sihanouk's daughter who became the most recognizable and praised figure of the dance. At the age of 15, Buppha Devi became the premier dancer for the royal ballet and at the age of 18 she was granted the title *prima ballerina*.²⁹ Devi first performed the Apsara in France in 1964.³⁰ When Charles de Gualle visited Cambodia in 1966, she performed at the Chatamouk theater, designed by Vann Molyvann and constructed in 1961. While students and other dancers performed folk dances, her performance certainly took center stage.³¹ During the 1960s, the growing film industry also became a venue to feature Khmer performing arts. Sihanouk himself was a filmmaker and Buppha Devi's work is immortalized in his 1966 film, *Apsara*. For close to 20 minutes, the film follows the close movements of Buppha Devi.³² As a symbol of royal

²⁸ Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower: The Divine Mystery of the Cambodian Dance Drama* (First edition. Holmes Beach, FL: DatAsia, 2007): 153 – 154.

²⁹ Milton E Osborne, *Sihanouk*: 34.

³⁰ Suppya Helene Nut, "The Legend of Apsara Mera: Princess Norodom Buppha Devi's Choreography for the Royal Ballet of Cambodia," *Asian Theatre Journal* 31, no. 1 (2014): 280 – 281.

³¹ "Bopha Devi Dances for the General," *Kambuja*, September 1966.

³² *Apsara*. Directed by Norodom Sihanouk (Cambodia: La Société Nationale de Cinématographie, 1966).

Angkorian culture, Princess Buppha Devi displayed one of the most beautiful and enchanting components of Cambodia's past and present. Moreover, in this role, she fulfilled expectation that royal women performed "traditional" culture for the benefit of audiences near and far, in the present and in the future.³³

In the 1960s, the state press also emphasized that royal women comported the royal dance to the goals of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. In 1966, the dancers traveled to Rangoon where "Burmese audiences rate among the best qualified to appreciate Khmer choreography." After a dance performance, Burmese and Khmer dancers and enthusiasts engaged in a two-hour discussion about the dance's Angkorian origins and the contemporary "ballet within the framework of the vigorous progress encouraged by the *Sangkum*." Queen Kossamak is described as "renovating the Royal Ballet Troupe and giving it her protection."³⁴ The emphasis on Kossamak protecting the troupe helps to further instill the monarchy's role to oversee the well-being of the people. By updating the dance to bolster Cambodia's presence on the world stage, Kossamak gave more of her time, energy, and expertise to the needs of the fledging nation-state.

Finally, the royal family sponsored the efforts to use dance as a medium to discuss the similarities between Khmer and European performing arts. In 1966, Sihanouk invited Soviet dance advisors to teach students the classical European ballet. Kossamak "kindly offered 15,000 riels towards the purchase of costumes for the ballerinas and for the décor." Over time, the students also learned the polka. The students performed the dances alongside the royal ballet and other

³³ Simon Creak has found that in newly independent Laos "the female body represented the preserver of customs and culture" that could be labeled "national tradition" in Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem, *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010). He expands on this argument in *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos*.

³⁴ "The Royal Ballet's Splendid Success in Rangoon," *Kambuja*, 1966.

traditional art forms at state dinners and theater performances.³⁵ In an article on the exchange, *Kambuja* magazine assured readers that these ballet performances only supplemented the royal ballet which signified “the image of [a person’s] ideal, his projection into the splendor of a glorious past, *of the permanence of Cambodia’s faithfulness to itself*” [emphasis mine] which stood against “several invasions, several foreign presences and especially the upheaval brought about by Cambodia’s participation in modern progress and technical development.”³⁶ By experimenting with foreign dances while continuing to center the Khmer dance, Kossamak and the dancers demonstrated that the influx of foreign ideas or practices would not compromise Khmer culture or traditions. If we take this idea further, the dance symbolized that Cambodia would not sacrifice morality, monarchy, or religiosity in the face of modernity.

While Kossamak was well-known for reviving and sustaining the royal dance, her attention to the arts intersected with her position as the symbol of the royal palace in the absence of her son. Sihanouk dethroned in 1955 to run for Prime Minister. Sihanouk’s father Suramarit became king, but when he died in 1960 the monarchy fell into disarray. Prince Sihanouk refused to name a new king in case of threat to his authority as Prime Minister. One influential royal, Prince Monireth, favored placing Sihanouk’s mother Kossamak on the throne. Sihanouk also rejected that idea.³⁷ Lamenting the missed opportunity in his memoirs, Monireth explained that Kossamak was “a painful brake” on Sihanouk.³⁸ Sihanouk may have been wary of his mother occupying a position

³⁵ “Classical Ballet,” *Kambuja*, October 1967. “A Future Star,” *Kambuja*, March 1967.

³⁶ “The Cambodian Classical Dance,” *Kambuja*, June 1969.

³⁷ The 1947 constitution stipulated that the throne could not be occupied by a woman.

³⁸ David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 1991): 115.

of authority because she disapproved of his ongoing affair with Monique Izzi.³⁹ Sihanouk resolved the problem with a two-pronged scheme. First, he devised a new position, Head of State, and held a referendum for Cambodians to vote for Sihanouk or his enemy, Son Ngoc Thanh. When voters went to the polls, they were required to throw away the picture of the candidate they did not favor. At the time, throwing away the picture of Sihanouk was considered an act deserving of imprisonment. He became Head of State. Importantly, his mother Kossamak remained in the royal palace along with “the court regalia, the Brahmins, the astrologers, and the corps de ballet.”⁴⁰ From 1960 forward Sihanouk occupied the highest political position in the country while his mother oversaw the most sacred seat of the kingdom. In effect, Sihanouk had found a way to secure power for the monarchy through a “democratic” system of voting. At the same time, by placing his mother in the royal palace, he ensured that the state would remain a royal kingdom. Significantly, as a woman, his mother was considered a safe and appropriate individual to uphold the royal tradition.

While princesses participated in royal dances along with blessing ceremonies and festivals grounded the modern state in the royal Buddhist culture, other royal women demonstrated their knowledge of other art forms like textile work and cooking. Princess Rasmi Sobhana, an educator in the princess schools, forged her own path in preserving and disseminating Khmer culture. Her first book, *Motifs Decoratifs Khmers a l’Usage de la Broderie* showcased Khmer embroidery styles for cross-stich and saṃbát.⁴¹ In the introduction, writer S.K. explains that, “In recent years, magnificent publications about the Angkor sculptures have revealed to the wider public the

³⁹ David Chandler, 116, opinion cited.

⁴⁰ Chandler, 117.

⁴¹ S. A. R. la Rasmi Sobhana Norodem Sutharot, *Motifs décoratifs Khmers à l’usage de la Broderie* (Hanoï: Institut bouddhique, 195-).

treasures of Khmer classical art. Meanwhile, royal dancers continue to express and keep alive the tradition of choreographed art in Cambodia...” While embroidery was not as prominent as sculpture or dance, the School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh had set out to “revive all of the minor art forms in the kingdom.” S.K mentions that “these motifs were raised from the sculptures of the monuments at Angkor or on the *sambát* woven by Cambodians. Under the waves of European modernization...these treasures...risked getting lost.”⁴² Once again, the modern threatened Cambodia’s traditions and a royal woman labored to save the arts and crafts. As “the dignified daughter of a Great King [granddaughter of Norodom], under whose leadership Cambodia began to evolve,” Sobhana possessed the knowledge to connect reader and student to an ancient past.⁴³

Besides publishing a book on Khmer embroidery, Rasmi Sobhana also developed the first cookbook of Khmer cuisine. The cookbook illustrates the gendered connections between crown, giving, and culture. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the princesses taught young women about cooking in the princess schools in *Nārī* but the cookbook brought Cambodian cuisine to an international audience. In the introduction, wife to American Ambassador William C. Trimble explains that Princess Rasmi Sobhana “has spent much of her life learning and practicing the art of cooking...These dishes she has taught to young girls of her school, the Ecole Sutharot...”⁴⁴ The Khmer food culture that was promoted by the Princess in this cookbook reflected the kind of cuisine that could be found in the royal palace.⁴⁵ Dishes included birds nest

⁴² Sutharot, *Motifs*.

⁴³ *Ibid*.

⁴⁴ *The Cambodian Cookbook of HRH Princess Rasmi Sobhana*, 195-. Chapter 1 describes Ecole Sutharot, the school for princesses.

⁴⁵ *The Cambodian Cookbook*, 1950: 43, 36.

and recipes from neighboring countries, such as Siamese Curry, Boiled Chicken Laotian style, Indian Chicken, and Himalayan Chicken. Perhaps the Laotian style boiled chicken was introduced to the royal palace through Sihanouk's Laotian wife or Lao women who had lived in the palace in previous decades. Maybe the royal family members who journeyed to Bangkok for holidays enjoyed the Siamese curries not found in Cambodia. Meanwhile, French interpretations of different components of a meal likely influenced the section on "canapes."⁴⁶ Like her cousins involved in the dance, Sobhana found ways to incorporate foreign dishes without losing the primacy of Khmer cooking.

In addition to publishing the cookbook with the American Ambassador's wife, Princess Rasmi Sobhana enjoyed an ongoing relationship with the International Women's Club in Phnom Penh where she embarked on outreach programs around cultural exchange. In the early 1960s, Mrs. Trimble and Mrs. Murray, the wife of the British Ambassador to Cambodia, served as leaders of the club.⁴⁷ Sobhana participated in different cultural events organized by the women, including an at home demonstration of cooking a Cambodian dish and dessert followed by a snack.⁴⁸ These types of events helped to facilitate the display of Khmer culture important in international spaces after 1953. Sobhana's work in the early years of the *Sangkum* helped to confirm that the royal women were necessary contributors to the national agenda of reviving and preserving traditions connected to a royal heritage. As will be shown below, this cultural exchange also connected to her charitable work in various associations.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Reunion du Club International des Femmes," *Agence du Khmer Presse*, December 19, 1961.

⁴⁸ "Reunion Du Club International Des Femmes," *Agence Du Khmer Presse*, May 16, 1962.

From conducting ceremonies and dancing to publishing on embroidery and food, royal women promoted tradition as a central component to the modern state. As he was losing favorability with the urban populace and his government, Prince Sihanouk invited President Josep Tito of Yugoslavia to Cambodia to participate in the inauguration of the new state store, “*Preah Kossamak*” or Queen Kossamak. A *Realites Cambodgennes* review of the store exclaimed, “We visited it recently. It’s the height of good taste and elegance--and intelligence in design and execution. ...State socialism, when conceived in this way, can only have friends...we can enhance the prestige of Phnom Penh with our visitors.”⁴⁹ The event, while not one of the most significant diplomatic moments that occurred during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, certainly encapsulates the notion that the monarchy actively found ways to use Khmer culture for the diplomatic and material benefits of the country. The emphasis on a state store to display handicrafts to visitors that bore the Queen’s name neatly displayed how the monarchy could help to realize the efforts to use Khmer arts and culture to emulate a state that reflected local values. Finally, the store signified how the monarchy had adapted and changed over the twentieth century, from a relatively closed inner court to an institution that aligned with the goals and strategies of the modern nation-state, especially around the 1960s emphasis on Buddhist socialism.

Generosity and Charities

While royal women displayed Khmer culture through contemporary performances and crafts, the royal and urban leadership also translated the Buddhist culture of giving into a modern model of charity work and monetary contributions. In Khmer Buddhism, people gain social status

⁴⁹ “Magétat ‘Preah Kossamak’: le comble du bon gout,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, January 13, 1968.

due to their accrued merit from performing acts of generosity, such as donating funds to a temple. Meanwhile, the colonial administration introduced charities for assisting needy sectors of the population, particularly women and children. The local and colonial forms of giving blended together and changed as Cambodia established its place as an independent nation-state. Postcolonial welfare organizations built upon colonial associations while also becoming more synchronous with the modern Buddhist state that was generous to the citizens. Moreover, charities presided over by royal women helped to bolster the monarchy as the rightful leaders governing the country.

Buddhist economies of merit described the importance of *dāna*, or generosity, and the relationship between the king, sangha (order of monks), and the lay community. Historically, lay people directed their generousities towards the *wat* (temple), the religious and community center of a village.⁵⁰ In return for providing food, resources, and money to the *wat*, lay members gained merit for the immediate future and in future lives. Individuals could also act generously towards other lay individuals, a form of charity promoted by Sihanouk during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. As king in the Theravadan Buddhist kingdom, Sihanouk ensured the continual adherence to the moral order.⁵¹ As a political figure who acted as Prime Minister and Head of State after he stepped

⁵⁰ Jordan Baskerville and Anne Ruth Hansen, “Poverty and the Poor in the Buddhist Tradition,” in editors William H. Brackney and Rupen Das, *Poverty and the Poor in the World’s Religious Traditions : Religious Responses to the Problem of Poverty* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2019), 115. Charles S Prebish, *Buddhism: An Online Introduction* (Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books, 2004): 340. Judy Ledgerwood “Buddhist Practice in Rural Kandal Province” in edited by Alexandra Kent and David Chandler, *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008): 147 – 168.

⁵¹ Heng Monychenda, “In Search of the Dhammika Ruler,” in *People of Virtue*: 310. For more information on the introduction of Theravadan Buddhism to Cambodia see: Alain Forest, “Buddhism and Reform: Imposed Reforms and popular aspirations. Some historical notes to aid reflection,” in *People of Virtue*: 16 – 34.

down from the throne in 1955, Sihanouk also needed to consider the position of Cambodia in an imperialistic, capitalist, and secular world. The religious practices of generosity provided the basis for dismantling inequitable colonial institutions and moderating the influence of other hegemonic socio-economic systems, like capitalism and Marxist socialism, in which religion was differentiated from politics.

Merit building is closely related to understandings of rightful power wherein “one’s public acts of merit attest to one’s economic means, social standing and prestige. Hence, merit begets social power and status which, in turn, beget more merit.”⁵² Within this philosophy, the monarch gains high social status and leadership over religious and lay communities because significant merit accrued in previous lives. David Chandler, May Ebihara, and Penny Edwards have traced the relationship between merit and power in nineteenth century Cambodian politics. As shown by Edwards, Khmer terminology for leaders often included *bon* for “good” and wealthy, and therefore meritorious, individuals who should assume official posts.⁵³ At the same time, in descriptions of social relationships, *chbap* poems positioned powerful people as people of merit. As noted by Chandler, Ebihara, and Edwards, a powerful individual was expected to rule paternalistically as opposed to despotically—often a French colonial characterization of Khmer kingship.⁵⁴ In this way, the norms on power and merit-making ensured that leaders used their power justly.

⁵² Juliane Shober, “Religious Merit and Social Status among Burmese Lay Associations,” edited by Cornelia Ann Kammerer and Nicola Tannenbaum, *Merit and Blessing in Mainland Southeast Asia in Comparative Perspective*, (New Haven: Yale University, 1996): 198.

⁵³ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge*: 69.

⁵⁴ Edwards, *Cambodge*: 70; May Ebihara, “Societal Organization in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Cambodia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (1984): 280–95; David P. Chandler, “Normative Poems (Chbap) and Pre-Colonial Cambodian Society,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (September 1984): 271–79.

While her name rarely appears in 1950s and 1960s media, Princess Pindara Sodareth personified the economies of merit ethos. In his histories of the royal family, Justin Corfield lists Princess Pindara as a well-known benefactor of Buddhist temples. However, her influence ran much deeper. During an interview, Chea Vannath explained that Pindara was “richer than the queen and King in Cambodia” and that “she was widowed but she was the richest in Cambodia.” Chea’s grandmother worked for Pindara while her son, Chea’s father, was a monk at Wat Ounalom and a student at the Royal School of Fine Arts. After her grandmother retired, she occasionally returned to the princess’s home. Chea remembered accompanying her grandmother and receiving a “really nice material that she made into a blouse. It was really nice material because no one would give the princess bad material.” Later, Princess Pindara visited their home to visit her ill grandmother, an unexpected visit that Chea described as “a great honor” and “a memory that cannot be forgotten.” Chea attributed their special bond to her grandmother’s devotion to the princess even after retiring.⁵⁵ I came across similar characterizations of Pindara in other interviews and memoirs. In his memoir, former Prime Minister Son Sann described how Princess Pindara visited Kampuchea Krom (in Vietnam) in the 1920s. She was “so warmly received by the Cambodians” that she arranged for his father and cousin to study in Phnom Penh.⁵⁶ In her memoir, Phlek Phirun also mentioned the strong relationship between her parents and Pindara. While Princess Pindara may not be recognized as a significant political figure with influence over the

⁵⁵ Interview with Chea Vannath, February 27, 2018. Chea explained that Princess Pindara’s house was the “yellow house” across the School of Fine Arts. The house was “No Problem” restaurant during the UNTAC era. In 2017, developers started renovations to build a Hyatt Regency on the premises. Pindara’s house will remain intact with the hotel built around it.

⁵⁶ Son Sann, *The Memoirs of Son Sann* (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Daily Press, 2011): 6.

country, she clearly helped to strengthen bonds between the royal family and lay community and to also create new paths to upward social status for ordinary Khmers.

In nineteenth and twentieth century Cambodia, the exemplar of giving was Prince Vessantara in the *Jātaka* stories. In the story, Prince Vessantara is exiled after he gave away a magical rainmaking elephant to a neighboring kingdom. While he is exiled, a Brahmin demands that Vessantara give his children as alms—evidence of the ultimate sacrifice of giving. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Khmer royal palace venerated Vessantara by reciting the story at each new year.⁵⁷ In his now iconic description of the recitations, Adhémard Leclère writes that the audience was so enraptured that, “the silence is profound and nothing can distract the attention of the listeners.”⁵⁸ The audience wept as the monk described the prince giving away his children as alms. The powerful story demonstrated that generous sacrifices impacted not just an individual’s own life but the lives of others around them. Within a modern Buddhist state, the story provided a model of the most ideal Buddhist leader.

⁵⁷ Forest, *Histoire Religieuse*: 203. Forest also theorizes how King Ang Duang’s establishment of a Protectorat, thereby giving away his kingdom to the French, may have been interpreted as a similar story to the one of Vessantara.

⁵⁸ For a more in-depth description of the Jataka story and the different interpretations, see: Ann Ruth Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007): 28 – 32. For the importance of Vessantara across mainland Southeast Asia see: Katherine Bowie, “The Historical Vicissitudes of the Vessantara Jataka in Mainland Southeast Asia.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2018, 49 (1): 34–62; Steven Collins ed., *Readings of the Vessantara Jātaka* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) For more on Vessantara in Thailand see: Katherine Ann Bowie *Of Beggars and Buddhas: The Politics of Humor in the Vessantara Jataka in Thailand*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2017); Patrick Jory, *Thailand’s Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jātaka and the Idea of the Perfect Man*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016.

When Sihanouk promoted the efficacies of Buddhist socialism in the early 1960s he interpreted Vessantara as a “sort of Buddhist Karl Marx.”⁵⁹ At the same time, Sihanouk maintained that “our socialism is national in character and cannot accept Mr. Stalin or Mr. Ho Chi Minh as its “fathers”...for all Khmers...are to be loyal to the king.”⁶⁰ For Sihanouk, Prince Vessantara represented a socio-economic system rooted in the wealthy giving to the poor. Because of his status as a royal and wealthy man, Prince Vessantara could renounce his possessions and family members. When Sihanouk used the story of Prince Vessantara to describe Buddhist socialism, he reaffirmed the importance of social hierarchies and rejected the Marxist efforts to eradicate class distinctions. Sihanouk argued that the Marxist efforts for “the weak to destroy the strong and in turn exercise a so-called ‘proletarian’ dictatorship” refuted Buddhist tenets of “love, veracity, purity, nobility of feelings, and kindness” and generated a “new race of strong directing the weak.”⁶¹ Of course, the new “race of strong” had not earned their status due to merit from previous lives. Critically, he argued that “Buddhism teaches leaders to respect the followers.” According to Sihanouk, upending the social order meant marginalizing the rightful leaders who understood compassion. Using “Buddhist socialism” to describe his approach to solving social and economic problems helped to create legible language across national borders but the system very much reflected a Buddhist understanding of giving.

The emphasis on powerful people helping the poor is apparent in the numerous newspaper announcements on donations to charitable causes. Newspapers always announced when Prince

⁵⁹ Ian Charles Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism History and Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005): 148.

⁶⁰ “The Threefold Basis of Cambodian Freedom: Monarchy - Socialism - Neutrality,” *Cambodia Commentary*, January 1960.

⁶¹ Sihanouk Norodom, “Notre Socialisme Buddhique” *Kambuja*, November 15, 1965.

Sihanouk or the royal family donated to a charity or association. The press also announced other female and male donators to causes, especially in education. In 1953, Madame Ly Lien, described as a trader in Battambang, donated 3000 piastres to the Association for the Development of Education “to repair the costs of classrooms...victims of the storm.”⁶² A decade later, Madame Tan-Si-Ei gave 10,000 riels to the Association of the Development of Primary Education for the Preah Ang Chan school. In the description of her donation, the writer explains that Tan-Si-Ei and her family had previously offered two stores worth 300,000 riels in 1960.⁶³ Wealthy donators also supported individuals. Mother-in-law of Sihanouk, Madame Pomme Peang, donated 4,800 riels “for an annual scholarship for the best and most needy Cambodian student.”⁶⁴ These donations demonstrate how acts of giving to the sangha and temple in previous decades were now translated into acts of giving within the state.⁶⁵ When state press acknowledged the donations, they further attested to how traditional forms of monetary giving could be redirected to help the institutions that served as the pillars of the nation.

Interestingly, performances of giving also meant that wealthy donators helped to fund the still-running princess schools, which indicates that giving was also a way to show allegiance to crown and state. In 1962, Sonsasd Kitchpanitch and Seng Thay, proprietors of Green Spot and

⁶² “Un Geste Genereux a Souligner,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, March 21, 1953.

⁶³ “Don en Faveur de l'Enseignement,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, March 17, 1962.

⁶⁴ “Don a un Eleve Necessiteux,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, May 1960.

⁶⁵ When Katherine Bowie interviewed 90 household heads in 1978-79 about merit making, she found that, “14 percent (13 individuals out of 90) responded that giving to the temple was more meritorious; 46 percent responded that giving to a school or hospital made more merit and the other 40 percent replied that all were equally meritorious.” Katherine A. Bowie, “The Alchemy of Charity: Of Class and Buddhism in Northern Thailand,” *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 2 (1998): 469–81.

Pepsi, donated 500 bottles and 10 cases of the drinks to *l'école Sutharot* to commemorate the opening of classes. *Agence du Khmer Presse* reported that Rasmi Sobhana received the donations.⁶⁶ The gifts to a school, rather than to the crown itself, created ties between the royal family and local elites without neglecting the importance of giving as a foundational economic component of Buddhist socialism. Around the same time, a raffle was organized in Kampot to benefit the princess school.⁶⁷ A year later, Princess Rasmi Sobhana, as well as other notable personalities in provincial politics, presided over a theater performance in Takeo put on by student actors of the National School of Theater to raise money for the school.⁶⁸ Provincial fundraising events for an elitist school certainly helped to create stronger relationship between the royal family and Cambodian citizens outside of the urban milieu; moreover, these events created opportunities for provincial businessmen and politicians to demonstrate their own dedication to the crown, which merged with the state when Sihanouk devised the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*.

Charitable associations introduced by the colonists created new avenues for organizing forms of giving. Beginning in the early twentieth century, societies created programs to bolster the health and education of the population. In 1906, colonial wives founded the Society for the Protection of Indigenous Births with King Sisowath as the honorary president.⁶⁹ As described by Sokhieng Au, the society encouraged “pregnant women and newborns with physical care, to

⁶⁶ “Dons a l’Ecole Sutharot,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, April 1962.

⁶⁷ “Organisation de Tombola au Profit du Developpement de l’Ecole Sutharot a Phnom-Penh,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, April 28, 1962.

⁶⁸ “Soiree de Represetation Theatre a Takeo au Profit du Developpement de l’Ecole Suthearot (Phnom - Penh),” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, Deember 18, 1961.

⁶⁹ “Société de Protection de la Natalité Indigène au Cambodge,” 1916 1906, B. 235, National Archives of Cambodia. The association was later changed to the Society for Maternal and Infant Protection in Cambodia.

provide mothers and their children with material aid and clothing on departure from the maternity, and to train indigenous midwives to give care according to the prescriptions of French medicine.”⁷⁰ Despite various initiatives for bringing mothers and their children into the care of the societies, Khmer women showed little interest in changing their birthing practices. Nevertheless, Cambodians found utility in the associational model of raising money for specific causes. In 1949, Democrat Party leader Khuon Nay founded the *Société d’assistance Médicale aux Religieux Bouddhique* to raise the funds for a hospital for monks. The successful fundraisers demonstrated how modern approaches to organizing could help to attend to domestic concerns.⁷¹ Similar efforts were taken up by the SKS and the *Samāgam Kumār Sanggroaḥ* (Save the Children), as described in Chapter 2. From the beginning, that association adopted ceremonious forms of giving by organizing ceremonies for distributing clothes and assistance to children in Phnom Penh and the provinces.⁷² In this way, the associations introduced by the colonial state merged with local signifiers of giving and power.

Through charities, urbanites could also realize their goals to help create healthier and more educated rural populations. In the 1930s, the colonial maternity organizations hosted beautiful baby contests to bring more women into the French medical establishment, but the contest was limited to women living in Phnom Penh. As described by Au, one commentator wrote it was the beautiful *urban* baby contest [emphasis mine].⁷³ Like the schools, the associations found that

⁷⁰ Sokhieng Au, *Mixed Medicines: Health and Culture in French Colonial Cambodia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 128.

⁷¹ John Marston, “The Cambodian Hospital for Monks” in Ian Harris, *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁷² “Samāgam Kumār Sanggroaḥ” *Kambuja*, April 23, 1951.

⁷³ Au, *Mixed Medicines*: 137 – 140.

expanding beyond Phnom Penh was difficult. Yet, *Samāgam Kumār Sanggroah* and other mid-twentieth century female-led organizations became more determined to provide charity beyond the capital. In 1952, *Samāgam Kumār Sanggroah* traveled to Prey Veng where organizers presided over the event alongside the local governor and his wife Madame Phat Leng as well as leaders in the police, education, health, and politics, and their wives. The AKP reported that “day’s activities included: the arrival of 200 children, showers and baths given by the wives of civil servants and female teachers, soup prepared and offered by Mme Phat Leng and distributed to infants and their parents; distribution of 230 clothing sets and medical care given by Mr. Tram Kalan, medical doctor.”⁷⁴ These events created urban and rural relationships where urban women traveled to the provinces to distribute goods alongside the local political elite, which reinforced the social order between the wealthy and the poor as well as the center and the periphery.

Shortly after independence, a group of American women and Princess Rasmi Sobhana founded *Association Feminine d’Entr’aide* (AFDEA).⁷⁵ As mentioned above, Rasmi Sobhana had developed close relations with American women over the years. In February 1954, she invited “all the members as well as all the ladies who are interested in social work of this organization to attend a meeting on Thursday February 26, 1954 at sixteen hours at the American Embassy... The

⁷⁴ Au, *Mixed Medicines*, 137 – 140. “Jounee de l’Enfance,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, April 28, 1952.

⁷⁵ In later years, American and Cambodian sources would both claim that the group was started by either the Americans or Cambodians without acknowledging the involvement of the other group. The Area Handbook of Cambodia claims that the group was founded by American women while the *Sangkum Femme Cambodgienne du Sangkum* book claims that Princess Rasmi Sobhana acted as the primary founder. Likely both of these sources are correct. Rasmi Sobhana acted as president of the AFDEA until the 1960s. *La Femme Cambodgienne à l’ere Du Sangkum* (Phnom-Penh: Ministère de l’information, 1965) identifies the AFDEA as one of the most important forms of charity in Cambodia.

Association apologizes at this time for not being able to send personal invitation cards.”⁷⁶ The association aimed “to relieve human pain, especially that of newborns, of young infants, of future mothers, of maladies, with the proceeding: distribution of milk; distribution of medications; attendance to illnesses; preparation of baby clothes.”⁷⁷ Importantly, these activities were considered strictly philanthropic and that “all discussions outside this framework, including political discussions, [were] formally prohibited.”⁷⁸ The concern about prohibiting politics illustrates that within these female-led charities, the volunteers were supposed to work above politics to instead focus on the morally superior goals of helping the people.

In order to accomplish these goals, the leadership planned to gain “subsidies accorded to the public or private collective, gifts, products from lotteries and raffles organized by the association with the authorization of the government, products from dances, conferences, balls, and produces from the sales of artwork.”⁷⁹ Charity balls had become popular among Phnom Penh socialites and the AFDEA inaugural ball was held at the Hotel of Ville. Attendees enjoyed foreign and royal orchestras as well as a raffle.⁸⁰ The AFDEA continued to encourage philanthropic donations by hosting more balls for charity. A December 1958 ball raised 141,582 riels in donations. In addition to these donations, the ball also received cakes, party favors, whiskey,

⁷⁶ “Association d’Entraide Feminine,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, February 21, 1954.

⁷⁷ “Statuts de L’Association d’Entr’Aide Féminine,” 1955, NAC.

⁷⁸ “Statuts de L’Association d’Entr’Aide Féminine,” 1955, NAC.

⁷⁹ “Statuts de L’Association d’Entr’Aide Féminine,” 1955, NAC.

⁸⁰ “*Le Bal de l’Association Feminine d’Entr’aide*,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, January 8, 1954.

cigarettes, flowers, perfume, and assistance from numerous businesses and individuals.⁸¹ The grand events are indicative of two trends. On the one hand, the cosmopolitan milieu could mingle and socialize in the name of a good cause. At the same time, giving money to the AFDEA showed a dedication to helping impoverished mothers and children.

Monetary and material donations became an important way for wealthy individuals to demonstrate their support for social projects created by the state or civil society organizations. According to Sihanouk, the wealthy gave up their money for goodwill of people. To argue for the success of this strategy, Sihanouk claimed that “80% of our schools and infirmaries and a great part of other realizations are only due to generosity---I should say Buddhist charity---of innumerable admirers of the Vessantara.”⁸² The AFDEA used the donations from wealthy individuals to support mothers and children directly and to fund larger institutions. In the first year, the association raised funds for a Children’s Hospital as well as women and children living in poverty. Rasmi Sobhana explained that the hospital’s new beds put financial and material strain on the laundry services and called upon members to provide support for the hospital even if they could not give money. The report is followed by a long list of donators, including AFDEA members along Chief of State of National Defense, the Central Bombay store, and personnel from the Ministry of the Interior.⁸³ *Kāmbujā* also reported on the association’s mission to donate food and clothing to poor children. Whenever the AFDEA announced an event or a fundraiser, they included names of the donors. Donations arrived from Queen Kossamak, Prince Sihanouk, the

⁸¹ “Communiqué de l’Association féminine d’Entraide,” *La Dépêche du Cambodge*, January 13, 1959.

⁸² Sihanouk Norodom, “Notre Socialisme Buddhique,” *Kambuja*, November 15, 1965.

⁸³ “Communique du Ministere de la Sante Publique,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, September 15, 1955.

Association of French Importers in Cambodia, the head of the government, and others.⁸⁴ Examined through the Buddhist ethics of the Prince, charity work supported and further enhanced the social stratification that maintained a monarchy in charge of the affairs of the country.

Urban-centric civil society organizations and political figures participated in various efforts to connect with the provincial men and women. Like *Samāgam Kumār Sanggroaḥ* and the SKS, the AFDEA tried to support local networks of volunteers in provinces. In 1956, the wife of Kompong Speu's governor, along with female teachers in the province showed "their good hearts" by joining the *Association Feminine d'Entr'aide*.⁸⁵ While these reports suggest that urbanites were making a more concerted effort to create bonds between the capital and provincial outreaches, the occasional connections did not seem to engender stronger or lasting joint efforts. Rather, these outreaches were largely ceremonial with little sustained forms of collaboration between the center and periphery. While charities certainly generated some interest among urban women, scaling the work to a national level with recognizable results proved to be difficult.

The ceremonial connections between the capital and the provinces are perhaps most apparent in the countless inaugurations of new schools and other buildings. Photographs and films show Sihanouk inaugurating new schools and medical facilities all over the country.⁸⁶ In one undated film, the Head of the State is joined by American educational specialists and US ambassador William C. Thimbol in a tour of Kom Ro School in AngTasom, Takeo. The tour

⁸⁴ Secaktī thlaeng kārūṅ nai *Samāgam Sanggaha Nārī*” *Kāmbujā*, April 26, 1956.

⁸⁵ “Wife of the Kompong Speu Governneur Ladies and Teacher in This Province Have Become Members of the Female Mutual Aid Society,” *Kāmbujā*, June 14, 1956.

⁸⁶ Pictures of these inaugurations were regularly documented in *Realites Cambodgiennes*, *Kambuja*, and *Le Sangkum*.

revealed a new music room, library, and laboratory. While discussing the school, Sihanouk acknowledges American commitment to help educate Cambodian farmers. The film ends with Sihanouk's signatory farewell of running to a helicopter while young girl scouts and boy scouts follow him. As the helicopter departs rises into the clouds, the crew throws parcels of clothing and other necessities to the crowd of children.⁸⁷ In my interviews, several rural narrators recalled donning a scouting uniform for Sihanouk's arrival and the final goodbye with parcels flying out of the helicopter. Sihanouk's paternal presence at the inauguration tapped into the longer religious tradition of Buddhist kings providing infrastructure and material support for the people. From descent to ascent, Sihanouk performed his tireless work to provide necessities and to create new opportunities never realized under the previous colonial administration.

While Sihanouk traveled to the provinces to inaugurate new schools, urban women mothered the nation's poor children in new structures designed to house, feed, and educate the "weak" people, especially the elderly, infirm, and young. In the early 1960s, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* built the Prince Sihanouk Child Protection Center and the Chamcar Mon Lodging Center in Phnom Penh. Sihanouk, government officials, and the charitable women's organizations joined together to construct and inaugurate the spaces while the Inspectorate of Social Affairs under the Ministry of Public Health and Labor oversaw the operations of these institutions.⁸⁸ However, the AFDEA, *Samāgam Kumār Sanggroah* and the Women's International Club also used the spaces to hold their events for the children receiving their services. Importantly, the institutions connected the prior and ongoing charity work of urban women with the welfare plans of the state. While

⁸⁷ "Newsreels no 70," newsreel (Phnom Penh, n/d), Department of Cinema and Diffusion (DDC), Bophana Audiovisual Center.

⁸⁸ Frederick P Munson, *Area Handbook for Cambodia* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1968): 96.

organizing charity events for mothers and children may have been reminiscent of colonial associations, the events were now held in spaces firmly attached to the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Moreover, since these spaces were built by the state, organizations like the Women's International Club needed to work with and conform to the local expectations for charitable giving.

The annual Children's Day event first started around 1951 became emblematic of good work as envisioned by Prince Sihanouk. The day's events always included a presentation of various items, including scarves, fabrics, soaps, canned milk, biscuits, and clothing. In addition, the female volunteers helped to bathe and give haircuts for the children. While the activities never altered significantly, the location changed so that the events were held at prestigious or newly minted educational spaces worth celebrating. Initially, urban women used *Lycee Sisowath* to take care of the children. In the late 1950s, the location changed to the Kampong Kantout Teacher Training Center, a center newly constructed with funding from the United States. The school represented the country's commitment to building a strong teacher corps. During these years teachers and students raised 50,000 riels for the event.⁸⁹ In later years the venue changed to the children's center at Chamcar Mon. In 1966, the AFDEA and *Samāgam Kumār Sanggroah* jointly hosted the Children's Day at Chamcar Mon, where they were joined by Mrs. Boediarjo, the wife of the ambassador of Indonesia.⁹⁰ These days helped to affirm that urban women led by their royal association presidents supported the mission of the *Sangkum* to show compassion for the people.

⁸⁹ "Journée de l'Enfance au Centre de Préparation Pédagogique de Kompong Kantout," *Agence du Khmer Presse*, April 1960. Lack of archival evidence makes it difficult to know if other events occurred elsewhere. However, no other Children's Day events are reported for 1960 so it seems likely that this was the premier celebration.

⁹⁰ "Journée de l'enfance," *Realites Cambodgiennes*, April 1966, Charles Meyer Collection, NAC.

Set in contrast to the manual labor days for men, the women volunteers fulfilled maternal duties reflective of their own leadership.

Like many *Sangkum* projects, the activities at Chamcar Mon were just as much for international residents as for the recipients of the care. As discussed above, Rasmi Sobhana participated in cultural exchange and charity work with the International Club of Women as part of a wider international collaboration. On June 12th, 1962, Phlek Phirun, Vice-President of the Committee of the City of Children in Chamcar Mon, introduced the International Club of Women to the center and explained, “the purpose of this city is to educate the children who have been abandoned so that they become conscientious and capable citizens who can fulfill their basic needs.”⁹¹ The tour and emphasis on the plans to educate the youngsters was effective. Less than two weeks later, the International Women’s Club joined the AFDEA as well as royal family members, representatives from the Ministry of Work and Social Action, and the Ministries of the Interior, Culture, and Public Health, and the Director of Basic Education, in a show of support for the center. The club donated furniture, wall clocks, sweets, and toiletries and spoke about their sympathy for the orphaned children.⁹² The relationship between the Center and the club continued throughout the 1960s.⁹³ In the early twentieth century French women had tried to recruit Cambodian women for their causes but now Cambodian women leaders approached international groups to propose collaboration in order to realize their own goals. Through these efforts, women prioritized domestic goals and leadership while also helping to form a modern state that

⁹¹ “Visite du Club International des Dames a la Cite de l’Enfance a Chamcar Mon,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, June 12, 1962.

⁹² “Ceremonie de Remise de Meules par les Dames du Club International des Femmes,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, June 22, 1962.

⁹³ “Gazette du Royaume: Reception,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, June 1966.

collaborated on an international level. To that end, the state blended Khmer and colonial forms of charity in order to demonstrate generosity to the needy population and to signify independence to the international participants.

The Cambodian Red Cross and State Giving

The Cambodian Red Cross became the most important association of giving in *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* Cambodia. The Cambodian Red Cross (CRC) represented the tenets of neutrality that defined Cambodia's political stance in response to imperial pressures. Associated with a worldwide network of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies that offered mutual aid and support in times of crises, the CRC executed domestic projects and worked with international partners to alleviate the human suffering of natural and manmade disasters. The local projects within an multinational organization helped to translate the national aims of neutrality and Buddhist generosity to the international discourses of nonpartisan humanitarianism. Besides acting as a space to realize Cambodian ideals of neutrality and generosity, the CRC helped to strengthen state efforts to construct the royal family as leaders who would enact these ideals. As with other welfare associations, royal women close to Sihanouk oversaw the functioning of the organization. As Cambodia was drawn into the Vietnam War and as the domestic political situation deteriorated, the CRC became the most present and active humanitarian organization in the kingdom. More closely aligned with the state than any other women-led association, the CRC manifested the tenets of protection and domestic sovereignty even when it was clear that Cambodia would not be able to stand against fraught politics.

When the state established a Cambodian Red Cross (CRC) in February 1955, the country was nationalizing organizations previously under the auspices of French colonialism. Founded by Henri Dunant after seeing the battle of Solferino in 1859, the International Red Cross Societies care for wounded soldiers. To do this work, the Red Cross developed a network of societies around the world. The earliest Red Cross society in Cambodia, founded by colonial wives, turned its efforts, and money, towards the metropole. The Cambodia Committee of the French Cross, or the French Society for the Relief of Wounded Soldiers, raised monetary funds in the colony to send back to France. Initially founded by young French women, the Croix Rose, or the Pink Cross, “unite[d] under a magnificent movement of charity that has continued to grow with the war.”⁹⁴ The Croix Rose aimed to help with “the resettlement of young girls in their homes after the war” and “to help young girls of the regions still invaded.”⁹⁵ Until 1918, these societies actively organized yearly fundraising days and lotteries in order to support French citizens and soldiers in the war against Germany.

Colonial Cambodia supported France in World War I with infantrymen and donations to the Red Cross. 1,105 Cambodian infantrymen served on the battlefields of France.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, the Red Cross raised money through membership fees and fundraising campaigns in Phnom Penh and the provincial capitals. Membership roles from 1917 – 1918 show hundreds of French and Asian residents paid yearly membership fees.⁹⁷ Moreover, many local Cambodian leaders and

⁹⁴ RSC File No. 35821, NAC.

⁹⁵ RSC File No. 35821, NAC.

⁹⁶ “Fighting for Colonial Masters: Khmers in the First World War,” *Phnom Penh Post*, June 19 1998.

⁹⁷ RSC File No. 14021, NAC.

Chinese businessmen participated in lotteries for charity.⁹⁸ The records do not provide a clear reason for why Asian residents decided to join the Red Cross or participate in the lotteries. As for the hundreds of Red Cross members, likely joining the Red Cross became a way to remain in good favor with the local French officials. Nevertheless, Cambodians supported their colonizers' war with their money boxes.

While I approach these donations with skepticism, the French viewed the joint effort to relieve French soldiers and citizens from the atrocities of war as evidence of Cambodia's commitment to the metropole. Under the impression that the non-French populace cared about the war, the Resident Superior Baudoin, rather blindly proclaimed, "French, Cambodian, Annamite, and Chinese were all keen to participate in this magnificent movement of generosity; which has manifested itself so admirably in France and in the colonies since the war."⁹⁹ Above all, the French colonial Red Cross was premised on extracting funds that displayed allegiance to the colonizing power. While the fundraising activities sharply declined after World War I, the French Red Cross remained in Cambodia until 1956. At that time, the French Red Cross transferred 40,000 riels and supplies to the Cambodian Red Cross.¹⁰⁰ By regaining the funds originally taken from Cambodian money boxes, the Cambodian Red Cross planned to redirect the humanitarian society to assist Cambodian people.

The Cambodian Red Cross combined international discourses of humanitarianism with the needs of a decolonizing nation. After World War I, the Allied Powers formed the League of Red Cross Societies, which expanded the Red Cross Society's goals by assisting victims of natural

⁹⁸ RSC File No. 35821, NAC.

⁹⁹ RSC File No. 35821, NAC.

¹⁰⁰ "From the Red Cross," *Kampuchea Newspaper*, June 2, 1956.

disasters, emergencies, and health issues. The Cambodian Red Cross adhered to the declaration to help victims of war and other disasters. In a 1961 history, the CRC explained that the Service of Military Health initially proposed creating a national society of the Red Cross after independence. A “meeting of a hundred people from all walks of life: soldiers, civilians, civil servants, traders etc” resulted in a provincial leadership committee.¹⁰¹ Despite this initial enthusiasm, the activities of the Red Cross progressed slowly until the organization caught the attention of Princess Rasmi Sobhana who worked alongside “the very devoted assistances of the ladies who participated with Royal Highness in various charities.” Under her royal leadership, the Red Cross started to provide more aid to Cambodian residents. Princess Sobhana oversaw the CRC’s growth from one-hundred interested but unorganized founders to a well-respected organization whose members attended international conferences and worked alongside other national societies. With Rasmi Sobhana at the helm, the CRC fulfilled visions for gendered and royalist care of the population. While Sobhana worked with other elite and international women through the AFDEA, her position in the Red Cross placed her in greater conversation with countries around the world and helped to signify the royal family as representatives of Cambodian humanitarian work.

The construction of the royal family, and especially royal women, as humanitarians, is apparent in the type of work carried out in Cambodia. During the annual fortnight fundraiser, monetary collections were “carried out by Cambodian ladies accredited by a letter bearing the signature of HRH Princess Norodom Rasmi Sobhana, President of the Cambodian Red Cross.” They raised money through badge sales conducted by youth groups, scouts, and school children; collections at public buildings, embassies, banks, places of commerce; and a temporary increase

¹⁰¹ “Programme des soirees de bienfaisance de Croix Rouge Cambodienne,” December 11, 1961, NAC.

in ticket sales at performance halls.¹⁰² The fundraisers certainly generated revenue while clearly marking the event as a royal activity. Meanwhile, reports on Rasmi Sobhana's provincial trips describe her distributing items to families impacted by fires and visiting hospitals with wounded soldiers or citizens impacted by incidents at the border.¹⁰³ Sobhana was invested in helping victims in need. However, the state media's attention to her work also shows a concerted interest in bolstering the position of the monarchy within the modern nation-state. Above all, the CRC helped to imagine new ways for Khmer women to help to create a moral and giving domestic landscape.

Broadly, the women-led CRC followed the general plans of the League of Red Cross Societies while also affirming domestic priorities. Although established in 1955, the CRC was neither recognized by Prince Sihanouk until 1958 nor part of the International Committee of the Red Cross until 1960.¹⁰⁴ During the five years prior to officially joining the international committee, CRC provided the kind of relief work promoted by the ICRC. A 1962 program listed significant accomplishments of the CRC since 1957, including donating 50,000 riels to a Kompong Cham hospital, creating a maternity dispensary, and funding two scholarships for young women to attend the School of Nurses of the French Red Cross. Furthermore, the organization assisted victims of natural disasters and fires in Phnom Penh and the province. The relief was recorded with tallies of donated money, kilograms of rice, dried fish, soap, and mats.¹⁰⁵ Through war victim

¹⁰² "Quinzaine de la Croix Rouge," *Agence du Khmer Presse*, August 7, 1962.

¹⁰³ *Agence du Khmer Presse*, February 20, 1962 ; "Secours de la Croix Rouge," *Realites Cambodgiennes*, February 1967, "Secours de la Croix Rouge," *Realites Cambodgiennes*, March 10, 1967.

¹⁰⁴ "La Croix-Rouge Cambodgienne," *La Croix-Rouge Cambodgienne*, October 1968.

¹⁰⁵ "Programme des soirees de bienfaisance de Croix Rouge Cambodgienne," December 11, 1961.

relief efforts both at home and abroad, the humanitarian organization became a dynamic symbol of duty, generosity, and alliance. Moreover, royal leadership combined with protecting citizens helped to redefine the positions of urban and royal women within and beyond Cambodia's borders. In the context of an encroaching war and political disarray, the domestic ideals of mothers caring for children translated into narratives of well-positioned women supporting state efforts to protect its borders.

The CRC also engaged in reciprocal forms of charity with other Red Cross societies. Mutual forms of aid demonstrated goodwill, and at times, helped to forgive past misdeeds. One of the first countries to send relief to the Cambodian Red Cross, Japanese Red Cross donated medicine to apologize for “the damages incurred by [World War II].” The CRC responded by saying, “Cambodia must remember this good deed...must return the favor again.”¹⁰⁶ Four years later, President Rasmi Sobhana sent 200 riels to assist recent typhoon victims in Japan.¹⁰⁷ Though a “Third World” country, the CRC sent funds to much wealthier nations, including sending 30,000 riels to the French Red Cross for victims of a recent tragedy in Fréjus.¹⁰⁸ Sent only three years after the CRC became independent of the French Red Cross, the generous act revealed possibilities for mutual forms of charity across national borders and divisions. By the 1960s the donations fluctuated with the rhythms of the Cold War. In 1966, the USSR donated materials to the Cambodian Red Cross with “a ceremony for the delivery of medicines from ...the USSR to the

¹⁰⁶ “ ‘ambī ‘amṇoy thnām kaerog tael krum kākapād kraham japu”n pān juan makṭāl bradas Kāmbujā ” *Kāmbujā* December 27, 1955.

¹⁰⁷ “La Croix-Rouge Cambodgienne Compatit au Deuil Cause Par Les Recents Typhons au Japon,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, October 15, 1959.

¹⁰⁸ “Contribution de la Croix Rouge Cambodgienne a L’Oeuvre de Secours des Sinistres de Frejus,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, December 1959.

Cambodian Red Cross...in the presence of Mr. Durand, a member of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Dr. Chhay Hancheng, Secretary of State for Public Health, Mr. Thor Peng Thong and HE Anatoly Ratanov, Ambassador of the USSR.”¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, international bodies helped Cambodia at the Vietnamese border while Cambodia provided assistance to Laos and North Vietnam.¹¹⁰ Although officially a neutral country, Cambodia showed allegiance to its local neighbors attempting to push out the American imperial power.

Cambodia could not escape the war in neighboring North and South Vietnam and as the war flooded into Cambodia, Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies donated materials to help the military and border residents. Beginning in the early 1960s, Khmers residing in South Vietnam, or Kampuchea Krom, began to seek refuge in Cambodia. Rasmi Sobhana sometimes visited the border to show her support and the Phnom Penh-based organization sent money and supplies to affected communities. In 1962, the CRC provided the Governor of Svay Rieng with 13,125 riels to purchase kramas, sarongs, soap, rice, and dried fish.¹¹¹ Donations abroad were directed towards victims in the neighboring countries. In the wake of battles in Vientiane in 1960, the CRC sent to the Laos Ambassador a check for 5,000 riels designated for the Red Cross of Laos. *Realities Cambodgiennes* requested that, “We take the liberty of advising those of our readers who can, even by modest donations, show their solidarity with the suffering people of the capital of the royal

¹⁰⁹ “Gazette du Royaume: Cooperation khmero-sovietique,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, September 23, 1966, “Gazette du Royaume,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, March 11, 1966, Charles Meyer Collection.

¹¹⁰ “Geste de Solidarite Internationale,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, November 22, 1958.

¹¹¹ “Secours de la Croix-Rouge Cambodgienne aux Refugies du Kampuchea Krom et de Thailande,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, July 20, 1962.

country.”¹¹² Meanwhile, other Red Cross societies also contributed to the response efforts, such as China donating 43 cases of medicine, 4,000 raincoats, and 200 blankets for the Khmer Royal Armed Forces stationed at the border.¹¹³ While the International Red Cross Societies were built on the premise of neutrality in the face of war, the donations in and out of Cambodia reveal alliances and sympathies supporting sides of hot wars across the world.

Armored with the language of human rights and relief work, Cambodian leaders of the Red Cross established relationships across the bifurcated Cold War spaces through international meetings and travel. CRC member and civil servant Phlek Phirun traveled extensively on behalf of the CRC, including trips to the Soviet Union. Phlek and her associate, Madame Pheng Santhan, visited Moscow, Leningrad, Tachkent, Samakand, and l’Hermitage, to learn about the progress in development and humanitarian relief. She explained that, “There was participation from 1 million people who paid a contribution because the Red Cross helps people, helps the country.”¹¹⁴ With English speaking Phirun always present, the Cambodian Red Cross likely appeared less royalist outside the borders of Cambodia. Rather, the Cambodian Red Cross represented a recently independent nation attempting to protect its citizens and develop public health infrastructure. Although country tours under the auspices of the Red Cross likely allowed for connections during ideological battles of the Cold War, Phlek’s autobiography rarely discusses politics or ideologies. Just as welfare and humanitarian associations claimed non-political motives, Phlek focuses on

¹¹² “Il Faut Aider Les Sinistres Lao: Un Don de ‘Realites’ à la Croix Rouge Laotienne,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, December 28, 1960.

¹¹³ “Gazette du Royaume: Dons de la Croix Rouge Chinoise,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, April 1966, Charles Meyer Collection.

¹¹⁴ Phlek Phirun, *Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmâk .l. Bān Dhvoe ‘vī Khlah?* Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.

mutual exchange and good will. She focuses more on the cultural exchange and friendships along way—another indication that the associations under the SRN strived to rise above political differences.

While Phlek was a seasoned traveler on behalf of the CRC and Cambodian state, she was also accompanied by President Rasmi Sobhana for more important meetings. In 1963, the CRC participated in the International Red Cross 100th anniversary in Geneva.¹¹⁵ Rasmi Sobhana, Phlek Phirun, and other travelers visited the Greek Red Cross and toured Venice and Milan along the way. In Geneva, the CRC attended the anniversary celebrations. Phlek’s only discussion of Geneva includes a mention that that Princess Sobhana stayed in a separate hotel from the rest of the delegation. It seems likely that the royal president enjoyed nicer accommodations. After Geneva, the CRC flew to the United States for a state tour. Also accompanied by Prince Sihanouk, Rasmi Sobhana, Phlek Phirun, and the other representatives met leaders in government, non-profits, and American Red Cross branches. In New York, the representatives attended a reception with the Rockefeller Foundation and in Washington DC they learned about the blood donation bank.¹¹⁶ Rasmi Sobhana met John F. Kennedy for a short meeting in the oval office—a single picture documents the meeting. Phlek Phirun writes that the delegation also met with Jackie Kennedy.¹¹⁷ The scant information about the trip suggests that the Cambodian delegation met with different

¹¹⁵ “La Croix-Rouge Cambodgienne,” October 1968. National Library of Cambodia. Phlek Phirun, *Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmâk .l. Bān Dhvoe 'vī Khlah?* Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.

¹¹⁶ Phlek Phirun, *Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmâk .l. Bān Dhvoe 'vī Khlah?* Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.

¹¹⁷ Abbie Rowe, Meeting with the Princess of Cambodia, Norodom Rasmi Sobhana, 10:00AM 1963 September 17 <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHP/1963/Month%2009/Day%2017/JFKWHP-1963-09-17-C>

influential groups in order to discuss collaborations and funding. The state visit, one year after a visit to the USSR, illustrates how the organization moved across Cold War divisions depending on the country's own needs.

The global Cold War and regional hot wars influenced the organization's relief work but the CRC also changed over time due to domestic factors. In 1967, President Sobhana resigned as CRC president (and probably as president of the AFDEA, too). Phlek attributes the resignation to the accelerating growth of the CRC and the declining health of Sobhana. When Sobhana retired, Prince Sihanouk's wife, Monique, became her predecessor. Phlek speaks highly of the new leader and explains Monique "was highly involved with many activities in social affairs." Moreover, as president she "helped the organization reach its goals" which resulted in "fast developments and further progression of the organization."¹¹⁸ While Phlek focuses on Monique's qualifications and contributions to the CRC, her appointment also implies some political calculations in light of challenges to Prince Sihanouk and his policies. In 1966, General Lon Nol was elected to Prime Minister and he appointed a right-wing cabinet. Sihanouk responded with his own cabinet and, according to David Chandler, he "appealed to the people over the heads of their elected representatives, informing them that they were neither right nor left but, like him, 'socialists following the Buddha.'"¹¹⁹ Attempting to maintain power while balancing right-wing and communist factionalism, Sihanouk continued asserting that the *Sangkum* was a righteous government for the people. One outcome of this campaign to save the *Sangkum* from dissatisfied

¹¹⁸ Phlek Phirun, *Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmāk .l. Bān Dhvoe 'vī Khlah?* Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.

¹¹⁹ David Chandler, *Tragedy*: 161.

parties seems to be new emphases on how organizations like the CRC supported the Buddhist state.

Under Monique's leadership, the CRC strengthened its messages of generosity through new avenues of outreach. In the newly launched CRC magazine, an historical overview of the organization illustrates how organizers began to envision the CRC as part of Sihanouk's Buddhist socialism plan. While the 1961 benefit program described an organization that upheld the tents of the 1949 Geneva convention and generally discussed good works for the country, the 1968 magazine expanded upon the international commitments to relief work by outlining the organization's relationship to "the Khmer Buddhist tradition to demonstrate without radical or national distinction." Furthermore, the CRC declared that since 1953, Cambodia had joined the international organizations "whose activities served its interests or humanitarian ideals responding to the ideas based on the teaching of Buddha."¹²⁰ The emphasis on the entwined international relief work and the teachings of Buddha confirmed that Cambodia upheld the highest ideals of humanitarianism which included rising above ideological bifurcation.

As the CRC became a larger organization and the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* press produced more and new forms of print media, the royal leaders of the CRC increasingly appeared in the news. The 1961 benefit program for the Red Cross included tallies of the CRC's accomplishments along with pictures Sobhana visiting patients in hospitals and lists of the men and women who visited victims.¹²¹ The statistics of CRC accomplishments, along with photographic evidence of a well-known princess attending to the infirm, constructed royal women as caretakers of the country.

¹²⁰ "La Croix-Rouge Cambodgienne," *La Croix-Rouge Cambodgienne*, October 1968.

¹²¹ "Programme des soirees de bienfaisance de Croix Rouge Cambodgienne," December 11, 1961.

Meanwhile, the new CRC magazine focused almost solely on Sihanouk and his wife. The opening issue of the bilingual Cambodian Red Cross magazine features Queen Kossamak and Prince Sihanouk.¹²² Though many women participated in the CRC, she is in almost every image of meetings and projects, including visiting an orphanage, distributing gifts at hospitals. While the CRC focused on humanitarian relief, the magazine ends with the poems “Angkor” and “La Naissance” published by royal Sisowath Metheavi and her son Sisowath Thomyco respectively. With images and contributions of royal family members, the new magazine advanced the ideal of a royal leadership that cared for the people above politics.

The gendered and royal imagery of the Cambodian Red Cross was found in other media outlets as well. A *Sangkum* version of *Nārī* began publication in the late 1960s. While the earlier *Nārī* published lengthy articles dedicated to topics crucial to women, the late 1960s *Nārī* often featured Prince Sihanouk on the cover and described the successes of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Oftentimes, the magazine included updates about the Cambodian Red Cross, including cover images of the Red Cross and updates on Monique’s work in the organization. The updates are not usually lengthy or overly detailed and typically just describe a recent charitable event, perhaps they only served the purpose of trying to recruit new members. Yet, the CRC updates in a women’s magazine reinforced the sentiment that all female citizens should be interested in this kind of international humanitarian work.¹²³

Besides outreach to the female populace and the ongoing efforts to “royalize” the Red Cross, the organization continued to carry on the same activities conducted under Princess

¹²² According to Phlek Phirun, the CRC’s magazine was published bimonthly. Today, only the first volume remains at the National Library.

¹²³ *Nārī* 1968 – 1969.

Sobhana. In April 1968, Monique visited the Preah Ket Melea hospital to distribute New Years gifts to the needy. During this same time, Madame Ngo Nou and Nhiek Tioulong, wives of politicians, distributed gifts to patients at the monks hospital and the ophthalmological institute.¹²⁴ A *Realities Cambodgiennes* article features pictures of Monique on tour to military and civilian hospitals in Svay Rieng. The article explains that she was accompanied by “ladies of Phnom Penh and Svay Rieng.”¹²⁵ A few months later, in January 1969, she oversaw the proceedings of a graduation ceremony for instructors and Cambodian Red Cross relief workers.¹²⁶ While Monique’s travels across the country have received little attention in studies of Sihanouk’s power during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, certainly his image was further strengthened by his wife’s constant trips to different provinces to provide care for the people under the auspices of an organization that was supposed to protect the people from natural and man-made disasters.

The Cambodian Red Cross’s neutrality became just as important in domestic politics as it had become on the international stage. The organization’s relationship to the government can be difficult to decipher at times. In theory, under the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, all entities, including non-government welfare organizations, received the approval of the government. Moreover, the CRC enjoyed a close relationship to the Prince because of Rasmi Sobhana and Monique. Sihanouk certainly became even more involved in the CRC after Monique became president. At the same time, the CRC was supposed find their ways to fund projects. When Monique became president, she named Phlek Phirun as the vice president. Phlek explained that Monique told her she needed

¹²⁴ “Sollicitude de la Croix Rouge,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, April 1968.

¹²⁵ “Neak Moneang Monique Sihanouk à l’hôpital de Svay Rieng,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, October 12, 1968,

¹²⁶ “Nouveaux instructeurs de la Croix-Rouge,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, January 10, 1969.

to “find ways to fundraise for the organization because the state can only contribute a little bit.” The organization was supposed to “help the state in the area of humanitarianism” and therefore could not “rely entirely on the state budget.”¹²⁷ Of course, the Red Cross always funded its works through fundraisers, a practice which continued under Monique. In 1968 and 1969, she hosted large evening soirees in the state hotel in order to “help the money box of the CRC.”¹²⁸ The fundraisers certainly signified that the CRC helped the state accomplish issues in the area of social affairs. With women at the helm of the organization and Monique and Sihanouk representing the Red Cross in media coverage of the organization, the CRC emulated the tenets of Buddhist socialism that Sihanouk attempted to instill from the highest political office. In particular, the CRC provided generosity to the Cambodian people and exported the visions of Buddhist policies to the international community. At the same time, the CRC’s friendships with countries on both sides of the Cold War illustrates the *Sangkum* attempts to maintain neutrality.

Conclusion

When Sihanouk proposed Buddhist socialism as an approach to combat socio-economic disparities in Cambodia, he emphasized Buddhist and colonialist ideals of the wealthy giving to the poor. With incoming colonial ideas about governing a modern state, the monarchy needed to emphasize its important place as the rightful leader of the country. Performances and ceremonies helped to establish the monarchy’s role in preserving Khmer culture based on a royal Buddhist

¹²⁷ Phlek Phirun, *Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmâk .I. Bān Dhvoe 'vī Khlah?* Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.

¹²⁸ Phlek Phirun, *Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmâk .I. Bān Dhvoe 'vī Khlah?* Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.). “A Big Night for Hte Cambodian Red Cross,” *Kambuja*, May 1969. “A Big Night for the Cambodian Red Cross (Supplement),” *Kambuja*, June 1969.

history with generous monarchs who developed powerful kingdoms. In this new national vision, residing over ceremonies and donating funds to *wats* was not enough to support the modern state. Caring for individuals and communities through state projects and charitable associations helped to signify that Sihanouk had translated the society's core Buddhist values into the arena of modern statecraft. Moreover, by describing his approach as "Buddhist socialism" he translated local ideas of good governance to global political and economic ideologies. As I have shown in this chapter, Sihanouk may be the most prominent royal figure of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* but a closer examination at the individuals closest to him indicates that royal women were very involved in efforts to promote the monarchy and Sihanouk's social programs. While it would be difficult to determine whether the women were responsible for guiding Sihanouk to some of his political ideologies, certainly the royal family members collaborated to create a more modern royal state. Their work supported and embodied the visions constructed in materials about *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*.

When royal women became more visible in the arena of humanitarianism and cultural preservation, they signified that the royal family would maintain control over the work of connecting contemporary Cambodia to the long histories of generous monarchs who provided moral and material needs to the people. Non-royal women who wanted to contribute to the country through leadership positions could enter politics or government jobs. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, a few women became important political figures in the 1950s and 1960s. Meanwhile, the majority of women were encouraged to continue caring for their families and children who would be expected to serve the state one day. To that end, discourses on domesticity along with royal Buddhist ideals helped to carve a space for royal women as leaders of the modern

state while also emphasizing the kind of leadership that would be expected of women in other segments of the population.

CHAPTER 4:
RIGHTS AND DUTIES

In 2018 I interviewed Seng BouAddheka after reading her self-published memoir, *If On This Earth There Are Angels: A Story of Survival and Renewal from the Killing Fields of Cambodia*. Now the owner of a Khmer language school in Phnom Penh, Addheka grew up in a wealthy and politically powerful family. Her father was a businessman while her mother worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Information. As part of her work, Addheka's mother translated and produced state publications, for both the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and Lon Nol governments. Over the years, her mother became close to high-ranking political personalities. In the late 1960s, she was almost arrested because a newspaper published a defamatory article about King Sihanouk. At home, she dealt with the drama of her husband's second and third wives. Although family members suggested she leave her husband and his messy love life, Addheka's mother believed she had a duty to stay with him. While upholding these wifely tenets, she ran a strict household where her daughters were expected to act properly. According to Addheka, "she had a culture. She was in the Ministry of Information [which focused] on the culture of Cambodia. So that is why she was very strict." Like other female leaders in government, Addeka's mother embodied the tenets of womanhood put forth by the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* while also producing the material that defined the culture of Cambodia.¹ By imagining how Cambodian women should act, urban leaders helped create a domestic landscape that reflected the ideals of modern Khmer domesticity.

¹ Seng BouAddheka, *If On This Earth There Are Angels: A Story of Survival and Renewal from the Killing Fields of Cambodia* (Vivid Publishing, 2016). April 12, 2018 Interview.

Women like Addheka's mother forged the path for women to participate in the government workings of the country. Since the beginning of women's history programs in the 1970s, historians have addressed questions about gender and politics, including seminal texts on American history demonstrating how women participated in the revolution and debating the veracity of private and public spheres.² More recent literature on women and the state in colonial and postcolonial polities has illustrated how building sovereign states that reflected local cultural ideologies and modern political ideals like suffrage shaped the way mid-twentieth century societies envisioned women as political subjects. In Nasserist Egypt and Indonesia under Sukarno, especially, the states envisioned everyone participating in state-building.³ Laura Bier describes that in Egypt, “(purportedly) gender-neutral rights women held as citizens coexisted with new, gender-specific responsibilities they were to fulfill within their own individual family and within the reconstructed Nasserist family.”⁴ This chapter will show how similar discourses about gender rights and gender

² Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920,” *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 620–47; Linda K Kerber, *Women of the Republic : Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).

³ Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Louise P. Edwards and Mina Roces, *Women's Suffrage in Asia : Gender, Nationalism and Democracy*, (London ; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements a Biographical Approach* (Baltimore, Md: Project MUSE, 2013); Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz, *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (University of California Press, 1995); Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Duke University Press, 2006); Zheng Wang, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017).

⁴ Laura Bier *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011): 17. Cambodia and Egypt share interesting parallels in both timelines of suffrage and discourses of locally-derived socialism. A

responsibilities enfolded women into *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* Cambodia. I pay close attention to how gendering the state was a part of the decolonizing process of negotiating independence from France and building postcolonial political and state structures. Significantly, I posit that the late colonial organizations and movements for independence helped to shape women as political subjects and leaders in order to further illustrate how imagining a modern Khmer approach to governance included gendering politics and the state.

This chapter examines how urban and rural women became recognized as important subjects of the state. During the era of the SKS, urban women ambivalently discussed women's voting rights while championing the importance of domestic work to national progress. Outside of this small circle debating if women should gain voting rights, ordinary urban and rural women showed their commitment to the nation by volunteering in the *Nārī Klāhān* (Brave Women) militia during Sihanouk's 1953 Royal Crusade for Independence. Women did gain voting rights in 1955, mostly due to protestations from Sihanouk's opponents about the establishment of the *Sangkum*. During the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, two main discourses around women's rights, and duties circulated in the country. On the one hand, Sihanouk would assert that men and women enjoyed equal rights and equal access to participating in democratic processes. At the same time, *Sangkum* media and leaders along some women's activists disseminated information on the special duties of mothers to the nation. Moreover, *Sangkum* government reinforced ideals of womanly work by placing female leaders in social, cultural, educational, and health ministries. Taking into account those two discourses, this chapter makes two arguments. First, the discourses domesticity, motherhood, and equality produced the expectation that women embrace their rights to participate

significant difference between the countries is that Nasser attempted to shed the monarchical past while Cambodia embraced its monarchy.

in politics while also attending to a home increasingly tied to national causes. Second, adopting ideals of domesticity and equal rights for structuring the state elevated educated urban women to positions of power and representation while fortifying notions that rural or “uneducated” women needed to learn about how to be mothers building households.

This chapter draws on *Sangkum* reports, documents, and print media to understand how women became citizens and political subjects. At the same time, I use conference proceedings, articles, and interviews from interlocutors to better understand the lived experiences and personal opinions of female leaders, including how they responded to international debates on women’s rights. This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part examines the path to the constitutional change in 1955 that introduced women’s suffrage. There, I consider the arguments about voting as well as the Royal Crusade for Independence as intertwined and dueling moments on the path to voting and representation rights. The second part considers the discourses around women’s duties as citizens, including those declaring that women and men have equal duties to the nation and others insisting that women have specific motherly duties to the nation. The last part examines individual women who entered government and performed gendered roles in various ministries. I consider how their work helped to create a state that reflected the ideals of domesticity circulating in urban circles.

Becoming Citizens

Between the drafting of the first constitution in 1946 and the introduction of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* in 1955, Cambodians viewed women as important participants towards the country’s development even if they were not citizens with voting and representation rights. When interested parties debated women’s voting rights, they oftentimes invoked concerns about whether women

were prepared to vote or should enter the male-dominated realm of politics. In 1955, women gained the right to vote after a tense political exchange between Sihanouk and disgruntled political families opposing the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. For Sihanouk, who was trying to create a state that banished contentious—and possibly anti-royal—political parties, giving women the right to vote became a way to demonstrate his position as a benevolent leader who cared for his people. While educated urbanites debated voting rights, women across the country had already contributed to the most important milestone in the country's decolonization process, the Royal Crusade for Independence. In 1953, women of all ages and classes joined the paramilitary *Nārī Klāhān* (Brave Women) to help convince France that Cambodians were prepared to fight for their freedom. The juxtaposition of elitist debates about women as capable voters and the popular joining of arms illustrates the disparate viewpoints and experiences of Khmer women during the era when women became full citizens. In the end, this path to women's suffrage defined the post-1955 anxieties about how women—who were mothers and wives—should participate in affairs of the state.

As the world began to shift towards a new order defined by Cold War politics and new forms of imperial rule, societies confronted new concerns about human rights. The 1947 Declaration of Universal Human Rights had declared full participation in democratic systems as a basic human right. This declaration certainly generated new conversations about the rights of men and women in various localities around the world and required countries like Cambodia to respond to questions about women's voting rights.⁵ In 1951, prominent thinkers Sim Vannasee and Princess

⁵ Throughout the twentieth century, Euro-American humanitarians and feminists have focused on human rights as a fundamental component of equality and autonomy. More recently, transnational and decolonizing feminists have called into question the feminist movement's pushing narratives of human rights onto Global South communities who prioritize other matters. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Margaret A. McLaren, *Decolonizing Feminism: Transnational Feminism and Globalization* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International 2017).

Ping Peang penned articles that frame the political situation for women in Cambodia in relation to the rising pressures from Euro-American governments and organizations to ensure universal suffrage in every nation. As discussed in Chapter 2, instead of asserting any strong statements about women entering politics, the SKS had focused most of its attention on how women should take command of their roles as moral guides of domestic spaces. Yet, transnational organizers and activists wanted more concrete responses to their concerns about the legal, political, and social status of women in Asian countries.⁶ When Sam Sary (In Em) and Sim Vannasee attended the PPWA conference in New Zealand, they joined sessions about the “status” of women and conversed with delegates concerned about voting rights. That same year, Princess Ping Peang published a French and English language article, “The Situation de la Femme au Cambodge,” in *France-Asie*. In these spaces of international dialogue, women from elite and educated backgrounds telegraphed the kind of political power held by women in positions of power and voiced their concerns about giving all women the right to vote.

In her work, Princess Ping Peang addressed what she believed to be fallacies about narratives on the “status” of women in Cambodia. Ping Peang was conversant in local and Euro-American socio-political norms and laws. Besides teaching at *Norodom College*, she had served as both Vice President of the Council of the French Union and Cambodian Representative at the Conference of the International Work Bureau in the late 1940s.⁷ In her article, she explains that, “there is a habit to say, in Europe, that the Orientals have no consideration for their women and

⁶ “Traduction: Federation Internationale de Abogadas - Fédération Internationale de femmes juristes,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, October 23, 1955. In this article, Sihanouk responds to a letter from the International Federation of Female Lawyers inquiring about voting rights for women in Cambodia.

⁷ “The Funeral of Her Royal Highness Princess Ping Peang Yukanthor,” *Kambuja*, March 1967.

they treat them as slaves or as dolls in luxury.” In this instance she attacks a trope that lingered on the tongues of Europeans since they first encountered Khmer kings surrounded by wives, concubines, and female members of the palace. As a princess with a career in the colonial schools, Ping Peang would have been intimately aware of the stereotypes and realities of the palace. She opposed these negative depictions of Asian women by writing, “I think, as for me, that this opinion is completely false, at least as far as Cambodian women are concerned. *These, in effect, have all the rights except that of having several husbands...and the one of voting* [emphasis mine].”⁸ For Ping Peang, using voting and marital rights as evidence of women’s relative “status” in society failed to capture the complexities of Cambodia, a country which did not even have an active suffrage movement at the time of her writing. Instead, the international community’s focus on voting and polygyny laws as evidence of well-being only served to place a European agenda onto the bodies of Khmer women.

Moreover, Ping Peang argues that the European community was paying attention to the wrong laws. According to Ping Peang, Cambodian women had already experienced diminished rights due to the interference of foreign powers. In her narration of ancient and contemporary laws, she argues that women had previously enjoyed property rights as well as their own fortune in the event of divorce. Women lost their rights to property and material fortunes since the integration of French colonial law into the local legal system. In particular, she argues, “present-day law is merely an adaptation of French law, and compels the wife to obtain the authorization of her husband in order to dispose of her fortune and all her other possessions.”⁹ In her analysis of the

⁸ Princesse Pingpeang Yukanthor, “Situation de La Femme Au Cambodge / The Woman in Cambodia,” *Civilisations* 1, no. 4 (1951): 11.

⁹Yukanthor, “Situation de La Femme Au Cambodge : 11. This article is written in French with an English translation. While the English translation stays close Ping Peang’s general arguments,

ways French laws harmed the legal rights of women, Ping Peang illustrates that laws around a woman's rights to possession of land—as opposed to voting rights—should be a major concern for the local and international community. In regards to the difficulties faced by minor wives in polygamous marriages, she writes, “in order to reduce these various disadvantages, customary law gives the first ranking wife equal rights with the husband, and she is all-powerful in her own home. The law provides the resource of divorce and remarriage for wives unable to see their affections shared.”¹⁰ In this sense, a first wife is always equal to her husband in the home, which was viewed as the most important space occupied by women. Notably, Ping Peang explains that polygamy is fading away as “educated individuals adopt Western views and ways.” Ping Peang does not seem to view this kind of European influence as problematic. Rather, she is concerned that Cambodians are forced to confront laws that are prioritized by Europeans, who do not seem particularly concerned about property rights.

Similarly to Ping Peang, Sim and Sam addressed these western concerns about the legal and political rights of women by delving into the complex status of women in traditional institutions and the contemporary state.¹¹ During the PPWA conference, delegates from Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, the Philippines, and Indonesia described women's difficulties in households and

some of the English language paragraphs are abbreviated and do not present her complete remarks. I have chosen the French or English version based on how accurately it describes her words in French. The French version of his sentence reads: *Le droit modern n'est qu'une adaptation de la loi francaise et oblige la femme à demander l'autorisation de son mari pour disposer de sa fortune et de tous ses biens.*”

¹⁰ Ibid, 12.

¹¹ It is unclear to me if this speech was delivered by Sam Sary and Sim Vannasee or by only Sim Vannasee. The official PPWA proceedings attribute different sections of the speech to Sim and Sam but the SKS writes that Sim wrote the speech. Since the speech was delivered at the end of the conference, I suspect that the women worked on it together while they were in New Zealand.

interpersonal relationships while also attesting to the “high” status of women prior to European colonialism as well as the participation of women in struggles for independence. Sim argued that as heads of the household women enjoyed the respect of their husbands and children. She also emphasizes that women held power in religious and royal institutions that predated colonialism. In temples, women were charged with preparing food for the monks and, “in the palace, the king is the living leader always receiving wives of high ranking officials in a special place called the ‘hoah preah.’”¹² This explanation helps to elucidate how positions of power may not always be legible to onlookers outside of Cambodia. She further explained that contemporary women participated in social causes by joining the *Samāgam Khmaer Sahajīvini* and *Samāgam Kumār Sanggroah*. Similarly to Ping Peang who focused on the status of first wives and property owners, Sim prepared a speech that focused on women in positions of relative power and strength. While both thinkers persuasively argue that women hold positions of power in important institutions, they also neglect to account for the legions of women who are second wives, widows, or without any access to the country’s governing structures.

While Sim explained how women garnered respect in the home and enjoyed access to power, she also addressed western concerns about legal rights pertaining to the constitution. In particular, she explains that “In the realm of politics, Khmer women do not have any power.” She writes: “As for the constitution that was ratified in 194[7], we see that there is only one provision about women. It is provision 25, which is “women cannot reign in Cambodia. Only a man may be the king.” Meanwhile, other provisions related to voting rights specified that all men were granted the right to vote. While Sim outlined the ways that Khmer women held power in their domestic

¹² PPWA Sixth Annual Conference Proceedings, Swarthmore Peace Collection; “Sec Ktī Thlaeng ‘ambī Jivaphāp Nai Strī Khmaer Knung Samāy ̄oem Rabās Nāng Kañña Sim Vaṅṅas’ī Nau Krung Grystajhar,” *Nārī*, February 1952.

spheres and “traditional” institutions, she still suggests that Khmer women looked forward to gaining voting rights one day. In her speech, she explains that she heard a rumor that women would be granted voting rights in four years which she says, “has led all women to be very happy.”¹³ These comments are somewhat perplexing since there is little evidence elsewhere that Khmer women championed voting rights. Moreover, Sim goes on to explain that she is anxious about women receiving voting rights because “Khmer women do not understand politics at all” and because “Khmer women have a very large task to fulfill.” It seems likely that Sim is referring not to her own circle of friends but rather speaking about the rural women and illiterate women throughout the country. As in other Southeast Asian polities, discussions about female suffrage stirred anxieties about class politics and power so that elite women aligned with their class.¹⁴

Ping Peang also addressed the 1947 constitution and the possibility of voting rights for women. Like Sim’s commentary on the constitution, Ping Peang’s remarks are shrouded in ambiguity. She writes that “for petty and personal reasons, the Constitution of 1947 did not grant women the right to vote.”¹⁵ Since Ping Peang does not elaborate on these petty and personal

¹³ PPWA Sixth Annual Conference Proceedings Swarthmore Peace Collection; “Sec Ktī Thlaeng ‘ambī Jivaphāp Nai Strī Khmaer Knung Samāy toem Rabās Nāng Kañña Sim Vaṅṅasī Nau Krung Grýstajhar,” *Nārī*, February 1952.

¹⁴ For more information on class and gender in Thai suffrage see: Tamara Loos, “The Politics of Women’s Suffrage in Thailand,” in *Women’s Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Nationalism and Democracy*, ed. Louise P. Edwards and Mina Roces, (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004). Another perspective on voting rights in Thailand is written by Katherine Bowie “Women’s Suffrage in Thailand: A Southeast Asian Historiographical Challenge,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 4 (2010): 708–41. Mrinalini Sinha traces ethnic and gender collectives in: Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁵Yukanthor, 11. The French version of this sentence is: “Mais, pour des raisons mesquines et personnelles que ne valent pas la peine d’être exposées ici, la Constitution de 1947 n’a pas accordé au femmes le droit de vote.”

reasons, it is difficult to surmise the disagreement. Yet, she makes clear that women did not gain voting rights because of politicking among political factions as opposed to significant opposition towards women participating in politics. Despite these remarks, Ping Peang shared Sim's unease about granting suffrage rights to women. She ends her article writing:

“Wearing the pants in the household, the Cambodian woman can say that the political law has only a theoretical and entirely relative value, and that the real fundamental work is done elsewhere than in the democratic ballot box.”¹⁶

Ping Peang saw little reason for women to fight for political suffrage and further asserts that the markers to determine forms of oppression or power should not be explained through the lens of voting rights alone. Certainly, her remarks about women as the leaders in the household and the importance of work outside of the voting box connects to arguments in *Nārī* about the significance of the domestic space as a political entity. For Ping Peang, voting was not an important milestone even within the political realm that included the efforts and work of women.

Both articles reveal how decolonization created class anxieties about changing the governing structure towards a system that relied upon a relationship between officials elected through a popular vote but overseen by the King. In a democratic voting system, the social hierarchies based on merit theoretically collapsed into horizontal relations that gave elites and commoners the same voice in governance. Ping Peang was born into a family that derived its power not from universal voting measures but from their royal heritage. It's possible that both Princess Ping Peang and Sim saw increased political enfranchisement as dangerous for the stability of the country in an already tenuous political environment marked by corruption, differing political

¹⁶ Ibid. The English version of this sentence is: “The Cambodian woman, content to be wife and mother, may well find that political rights have no more than a theoretical and altogether relative value.” The sentence combines sentences in the French language version that describe the work of wife and mother to be the most important role for women.

visions, and Sihanouk's propensity to dissolve the National Assembly. While Cambodians endeavored to negotiate markers of power and ways of attaining power, the reality was that Cambodia was still tethered to the French Union so that the country could not take full command of its military or economy. In early 1953, the avenues for women to voice their political and national aspirations shifted greatly. The most prominent voice of Khmer women, the SKS, seems to have dissolved. Meanwhile, Sihanouk called upon all Khmer men and women to join volunteer voices to show their support for independence. While urban women dismissed women's ability to partake in politics, the energy to gain independence completely reframed how women showed support for the country.

The Royal Crusade for Independence marked an important step in Sihanouk's attempt to gain control over the country and declare independence from France. When Cambodia first declared independence in March 1945, people were elated. As David Chandler observes, "Thousands of people, perhaps without knowledge of precisely what to make of them, attended "national" parades, or marched in them. Thousands listened to anti-French, pro-Japanese harangues. Others marched up and down as members of the Japanese-trained militia."¹⁷ When Cambodia gained "50% independence" from the French Union in 1949, men and women celebrated yet again—likely because they believed the country had gained full independence. Of course, the country did not have full independence and remained in turmoil.¹⁸ Sihanouk appealed to France to give him control of the military in Siem Reap, Kompong Thom, and Battambang in order to "solve effectively the problem of insecurity in the kingdom" due to rebellious Issaraks

¹⁷ David P. Chandler, "The Kingdom of Kampuchea, March-October 1945: Japanese-Sponsored Independence in Cambodia in World War II," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 17, no. 1 (1986): 91.

¹⁸ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 43 – 44.

and other Indochinese communist groups in Cambodia, including the Viet Minh.¹⁹ Prior to French colonialism, the relationship between the village and the King was tenuously tied to local leaders whose ranks of power were determined by their proximity to the king, his advisors, and the royal family. These local leaders may have called upon the people within their village to join military excursions, but Cambodia otherwise did not have an army.²⁰ Therefore, a state military under the King marked a new form of political power in the kingdom.

As he was pacifying the countryside and trying to curtail the popularity of the Democratic Party, Sihanouk gained the momentum to conduct his own campaign for independence. After declaring the Royal Crusade for Independence in early 1953, he flew to France to begin negotiating for complete economic and military sovereignty. Meanwhile, he called upon Cambodians to join volunteer militias, called *Jivabal* (local militia) and *Nārī Klāhān* (Brave Women).²¹ Sihanouk's call for national *sāmaggī*, or unity, against the French colonial power was a clear directive that transgressed communal, political, and geographic divisions and the varying forms of gendered stratification within those spaces.²² The call for national unity also cut across the political factions in order to help reestablish the crown as the rightful leader guiding the country towards peace. One woman explained to me, "My sister was a female soldier for independence. They trained normally from 4pm to 6pm in the evening...My sister was the leader of the training. They practiced crawling on the ground, practiced with the wooden guns...My sister joined because Prince Sihanouk made

¹⁹ Prince Norodom Sihanouk, *Souvenirs Doux et Amers* (Paris: Hachette, 1981) : 167 – 168.

²⁰ David Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009): 144.

²¹ Most documents from the period use the transliterations of *Chivapol* and *Neary Klahan*.

²² *Sāmaggī* is often transliterated as *sammaki*.

an announcement about joining. The song *Nokoreach* motivated my sister to volunteer...²³ Reports and memories of the *Nārī Klāhān* reveal a sense of unity for the national cause. For many ordinary women, joining the *Nārī Klāhān* was a defining moment in the process of decolonization that would return power to the Cambodian people.

While the volunteer groups practiced military exercises for several months preceding independence in November 1953, historians have placed little emphasis on the voluntary forces as particularly strong or important in negotiating independence. Justin Corfield has written that 130,000 men and women volunteered to fight for independence. Meanwhile, Roger Smith has argued that the volunteer forces were mostly important because they helped to establish Sihanouk's ability to protect the interests of the Cambodian people and to create a connection between Sihanouk and the rural populace.²⁴ Those analyses do not necessarily capture the fact that Cambodians believed their volunteer work was instrumental to independence. In 2018, I conducted interviews with elderly interlocutors who remembered and participated in the *Nārī Klāhān*. These interviews took place with elderly flower sellers on the riverside in Phnom Penh and at a wat 45 minutes outside of downtown. My discussions with elderly interlocutors have revealed that the surviving generation of volunteers remember all Cambodians participating in the crusade to demonstrate the will of the people to the French. While several flower sellers remembered the tense months leading to independence in November 1953, most were too young to join the volunteer forces. Instead, they recounted stories about their sisters and mothers responding to the national call for support. These interviews, along with remaining archival research, helped to

²³ October 1, 2018 interview.

²⁴ Justin Corfield, *Khmers Stand Up!: A History of the Cambodian Government, 1970 - 1975* (Victoria, Australia: Monash University, 1994): 16. Smith, Roger M. "Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia." *Asian Survey* 7, no. 6 (1967): 355.

contextualize the national momentum of action prior to November 1953. Moreover, their memories challenge the notions that women did not participate in politics or state affairs prior to the 1950s.

Joining other women in their local communities, the *Nārī Klāhān* practiced military exercises with wooden guns. Some former volunteers remember learning how to line up correctly and how to prepare and carry a gun. As explained by one interviewee, the guns were wooden but painted black so that French flying overhead would think the guns were real. Reports about the uniforms varied but generally women remember tan and blue khakis and skirts.²⁵ During a group interview with elderly nuns at a wat near Phnom Penh, the seven participants, ranging in ages from seventy-one to eighty-six, explained that training in Phnom Penh oftentimes took place on school grounds. Reports of a training session at *Lycée Sisowath* also detail the communal gathering around the schools: “Yesterday at 5.30 p.m., the officials who usually train at the *Lycée Sisowath*, the students of the Foyer des Cambodgines Provinces, all in khaki uniforms, the students of the College of Young Girls in white jackets and khaki berets gathered in front of the Palace Royal for the exercise of the parade.”²⁶ This account of the young school women practicing in front of the royal palace is corroborated by pictures of young women in uniforms marching along large boulevards.²⁷

²⁵ October 20, 2018 group interview.

²⁶ “Exercice de Defile avec Musique Execute par les Forces Vives de Phnom-Penh,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, September 1953.

²⁷ Norodom Sihanouk, “La Monarchie Cambodgienne et la Croisade Royale Pour l’Indepence,” *Ministere de l’Education National*, NAC.

Alternatively, in the villages, everyone practiced together at the wat and marched in parades during visits from officials.²⁸ Khim Tit, the royal delegate to Kompong Cham, attended a military parade on September 27th, five-thousand men and six hundred girls from three *khums* (communes) marched in parade. The report detailed: “After the review and the colorful salute during which the six hundred young girls sang the *Nokoreach* (national anthem), [His Excellency] Khim Tit climbed on a platform erected at the center of this gathering and addressed the volunteers, evaluated to be more than 8,000 people including the residents who participated in an improvised display of patriotism.”²⁹ Uniformed and marching to the national anthem with the knowledge that King Sihanouk was on mission to gain independence, participants showed enthusiasm for national unity and independence.

While the Royal Crusade was a unified movement of men and women, it was not the first time rural women joined men to demonstrate against French colonizers. Scattered stories of rebellions and rebukes to French rule suggest that in previous decades women were present in times of crisis. In 1925, villagers assassinated a French tax collector, an incident that is referred to as the Bardez Affair. In the events leading to the assassination, a woman was attempting to free her husband who was being held hostage by the Frenchman.³⁰ In historical memory, the wife—and protesting women—were actors in the rebellion. In later years, women joined the communist Issarak forces eager to cast out the European colonizer. In 1945, three thousand Cambodians identified as Khmer Issaraks with a few hundred women joining the forces at various times. In

²⁸ October 20, 2018 group interview.

²⁹ “Defile des Forces Vives a Kandol-Chrum (Thbaung-Khmum),” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, October 1953.

³⁰ David Chandler, “The Assassination of Resident Bardez (1925): A Premonition of Revolt in Colonial Cambodia,” *Journal of Siam Society*, 70:1.

1946, a woman named Me Muon, along with Dap Chuon, Son Ngoc Minh, and Khmer-Vietnamese forces seized a town in Siem Reap.³¹ At the same time, 102 women were part of a group of defectors in Battambang province in 1947.³² In 1953, *Kāmbujā* newspaper reported that, “male Issaraks and female Issaraks asked to enter the *sala* (general meeting building) of Srok CheeBu” in Svay Rieng Province. The group included twenty Khmer men and seven Khmer women.³³ Unlike the later Royal Crusade, these groups did not designate titles for men and women’s groups based on gender. The Issaraks were a radical force in the arena of ideas for gaining independence.

With sponsorship from King Sihanouk, the Royal Crusade likely became a more amenable way for women to show their desire for independence. 72-year-old Sokagna was around seven years old when her mother joined the *Nārī Klāhān* in Phnom Penh after hearing the royal call to join for national liberation. Sokagna’s mother, a vegetable seller who was breastfeeding a newborn baby at the time, happily volunteered to practice military exercises. Previously, she wanted to join the Khmer Issarak forces alongside her father but he forbid her from participating because she was engaged to her future husband. According to Sokagna, her mother was motivated to join the *Nārī Klāhān* after a breaking point with French neighbors. One day, Sokagna’s siblings were playing at the neighboring Thai family’s home when the French neighbors threw a pear at the head of one of the children. At the time, her mother wanted to relay her anger to the French neighbors but because she did not speak French and they did not speak Khmer she could not voice her complaints. Joining

³¹ Ben Kiernan, “Origins of Khmer Communism,” *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1981: 164.

³² Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004): 56.

³³ “Male and Female Issarak Groups Ask to Enter into Srok Chhay Pou Sala,” *Kampuchea Newspaper*, March 1, 1953, 2248 edition, sec. Information in the Country, Box 37, National Archives of Cambodia.

the *Nārī Klāhān* allowed her to respond to the inequities experienced in the presence of French colonists who felt entitled to do whatever they pleased. According to Sokagna, her mother insisted that she would have joined the movement even if her father divorced her because of it.³⁴

While most women recalled a period of unity, class and gender inequalities shaped the structure of volunteering. 88-year-old Pisey joined the *Nārī Klāhān* for only 1.5 months. Pisey explained to me that she was a soldier for Prince Sihanouk for six months prior to joining the *Nārī Klāhān*. At the time, she received government support. That support ended with the introduction of the volunteer forces. While she remembers rich people giving rice and sausages to the women in training, the government provided no salary or support to the female volunteers. Since she could not receive the same type of support as a soldier, she quit the *Nārī Klāhān*.³⁵ Certainly, this interview was a little bit confusing for me. I have not found other reports of women working as soldiers for the royal government but Pisey confirmed that she was not part of the Khmer Issarak. While the story has some inconsistencies, her memories about the lack of monetary support for women within a state-sponsored program confirms that the plans to include women, peasants, and the working class into state institutions perpetuated existing inequalities or created new ones.³⁶ Anecdotes like these provide small insights into lived experiences that often cannot be gleaned from the historical narrative. Becoming a citizen was not just about joining in a national cause but

³⁴ October 1, 2018 interview.

³⁵ October 15, 2018 interview.

³⁶ Due to these inconsistencies, I debated including this interview. Ultimately, I follow Gail Herschatter's argument that good-enough stories "[do] not provide a complete understanding of the past, but instead surprises and engenders thought..." Gail Herschatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011): 7. Pisey's story informs us about class struggles within the context of national momentum even if she is not able to explain completely her roles as a soldier and in the government.

also about experiencing new forms of inequality. As part of the effort to shed the colonial past, the state attempted to minimize the reality of socioeconomic and gender inequalities by instead focusing on how women had contributed to state-building. In the process, however, new forms of inequality arose.

Later under the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* Sihanouk used stories of the *Nārī Klāhān* and other female fighters of the past to argue that he had helped to restore a tradition of women protecting the country. While literary traditions of neighboring Vietnam recount legends of female fighters, similar legends are not prevalent in Cambodia.³⁷ Chinese official Zhou Dagan's book about Cambodian customs in Angkor during 1296 and 1297 provide the strongest evidence that women participated in military capacities. He describes women acting as royal guards protecting the king.³⁸ This single observation was used by Sihanouk in his speeches to young women, when he stressed that in ancient Cambodia women "helped to motivate and dared to join with men to protect the country against the enemy."³⁹ The 1965 film *Femme Cambodgiene a l'Heure du Sangkum Reastr Niyum* also recreates a scene on the grounds of a temple in which young men and women dance and act out defending their territory against enemies.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the government erected

³⁷For more information on how these stories have shaped Vietnamese feminism see: Lan P. Duong, *Treacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

³⁸ Dagan Zhou *A Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People*, 1297.

³⁹ Brahrājñibandh nai Samtec Braḥ Uapayubarāj ṭael bān cuṃ phsāy knung sārabaṭr mān saṃleng nārī lekh 1 ceñ thngai 16 uasapā 1958.

⁴⁰ Sihanouk Norodom, *Femme du Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, documentary film (Khemera Pictures, 1960).

a monument to the *Nārī Klāhān* at the Old Stadium in Phnom Penh.⁴¹ The volunteer militias helped to affirm Sihanouk's later assertions that *all* Cambodians, including women, must work to protect and uphold independence. The Royal Crusade became the first time that the state under Sihanouk called upon men and women to defend a domestic cause in response to a foreign perpetrator. Certainly, women took on the duties of citizens, even if they did not possess the same rights as men. Indeed, the 1966 Chuon Nath dictionary defines *Nārī Klāhān* as a "regular female citizen who wears a uniform of a soldier in the territory being defended." In mid-twentieth century Cambodia, defending the country was an important component of citizenship. While royal women may have protected the country as benevolent leaders, ordinary women needed to protect the country by joining men in arms.

Ultimately, differing visions of governance combined with the recent Royal Crusade history contributed to the 1955 amendment giving women the right to vote. Scholarly work has acknowledged that the 1955 constitution granted women the right to vote, but little attention has been given to the events that led to constitutional change. Historian of Cambodian politics Justin Corfield has attributed the inclusion of voting rights in the 1955 constitution to Prince Sihanouk along with politicians Sim Var and Sam Sary. On the other hand, historians of Cambodian gender and women history have attributed the new voting rights to the work of both Prince Sihanouk and the National Assembly.⁴² While Prince Sihanouk certainly proposed the constitutional change, my

⁴¹ I was not able to find the statue but several women confirmed that the statue stood in the Old Stadium at one time.

⁴² Justin Corfield, *Khmers Stand Up!: A History of the Cambodian Government, 1970 - 1975* (Victoria, Australia: Monash University, 1994): 17. Trudy Jacobsen, *Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2008): 181- 184. Katie Frieson and UVic Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives, *In the Shadows: Women, Power and Politics in Cambodia* (Victoria, B.C.: Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives, University of Victoria, 2001). 7.

research demonstrates that the right to vote actually resulted from women and political leaders decrying Sihanouk's 1955 attempt to dissolve political parties in order to establish the one-party *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. After independence in 1953, Sihanouk embarked on a series of efforts to consolidate his power and create a political landscape more amenable to his own visions of a good government for the people. In early 1955, he held a referendum that asked the male electorate to vote on whether they approved of their king's decisions.⁴³ In the scramble to thwart Prince Sihanouk's political power mongering, the Democratic Party and leftists attempted to claim that the February referendum was not legitimate because women did not have the right to vote. Moreover, the Democrats vowed to work for women's rights. The sudden interest in women's voting rights from the Democratic Party seems to be more related to the rush to prevent Sihanouk from taking power away from the political parties. Voting rights was a contest over the kind of governance in the newly independent nation-state.

The decry about lacking voting rights generated stark rebuke from Sihanouk who was trying to demonstrate that he was the rightful benevolent leader of the people. He addressed the Democrats' vow by saying, "At the last congress of the Democratic Party on January 30th 1955, it was mentioned that the Party 'would fight' to win for Khmer women the same rights that are possessed by men."⁴⁴ He goes on to explain that the King and the Royal Palace was never opposed to the freedoms or the rights for women. Moreover, he points out that the Democratic Party, twice the majority in Parliament, never attempted to amend the constitution to provide equal rights for women. In a separate letter, he also argues that he would have welcomed women's participation

⁴³ Chandler, *Tragedy*, 79 – 83.

⁴⁴ "Traduction: Littérale du message Royal inséré dans le no-2 du Bulletin Royal - Du Droit Des Femmes," *Agence du Khmer Presse*, February 1955.

in the Referendum but that "...too short a delay, and, by the impossibility of training in time, the electoral list of women, prevented the realization of the Royal desire."⁴⁵ While the Democrats saw electoral rights as a possible tactic to stagnate the Referendum, the last-minute declaration provided an easy way for Prince Sihanouk to demonstrate the inconsistencies in the Democratic Party's platforms.

In his response to this accusation of suppressing women's voting rights, Prince Sihanouk also denigrated Democratic Party wives, who he claims raised the issue about voting rights in order to protest recent arrests of their husbands. In lengthy statements, he writes two separate characterizations of the women:

"I only regret that the Democratic Party thought it necessary to think of our women not because of their merits and abilities, which are real, but because within the party are a handful of women, armed with the desire to avenge. The arrest of their husbands, some of whom were detained by the government for sabotaging the Royal Mission and betraying the government in favor of the enemy, are thus capable of procuring for the Party additional opposition to the King if not to the monarchy."⁴⁶

By suggesting that the wives were more interested in revenge than national unity, Sihanouk implies that the political warring from the early 1950s would continue if the Democratic Party was allowed to maintain majority in the National Assembly. At the same time, his assertion that the Democrats do not think about the merits of the female citizenry further supports his position that electoral politics failed the people and only helped a few political elites. In contrast, he would be a leader that cared for the rights of the people. It is hard to know the exact motivations of the Democratic

⁴⁵ "Traduction: Littérale du message Royal inséré dans le no-2 du Bulletin Royal - Du Droit Des Femmes," *Agence du Khmer Presse*, February 1955.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Party wives but it seems likely that these women were motivated to act because of a concern about the diminishing power of their political circles.

Sihanouk could not decide if the women acted on their own merit or under the influence of their husbands. He issued another statement where he suggested that the women were victims of their husbands and his own personal enemy Son Ngoc Thanh. He argues that they pushed the women to protest the referendum:

“...The King regrets that the Democrats under Son Ngoc Thanh, at the last minute pushed the handful of women to claim the right to vote, and tried to push Khmer women to accuse the Throne of despising them. They did this to compromise the success (that they fear) of the Referendum, and to permit some women to seek revenge for their husbands, for they are the same women who have been sanctioned by the government...”⁴⁷

Of course, by the end of his statement, Sihanouk suggests that the women worked on their own accord and points out that anyone could be charged with disloyalty if they prevented Sihanouk from realizing his political ambitions. Sihanouk’s reaction to this call for voting rights shows that he—along with others—did not know whether to think of women as political agents of their own accord or simply partners of their husbands. The process of granting voting rights to women meant working through new ideas about women as individual political subjects who were not necessarily connected to the politics through home or their husband’s work.

Sihanouk may have spoken negatively about a “handful of wives” but in general he saw Cambodian women as important contributors to the nation. As a benevolent leader, he needed to demonstrate his love for all citizens, regardless of their gender:

“... the Throne wishes to point out to our compatriots, men and women, that not only does it in no way oppose women's access to the same citizenship status as men, but that the Throne is willing to promote this accession, a deserved accession, since

⁴⁷ “Mise au Point du Gouvernement Royal sur un Article Tendancieux paru dans le No-1893 du Journal d’Extreme-Orient du 7 fevrier 1955,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, February 1955.

the King, during the Crusade, was not only served by Chivapols but also by the Neary Khlahan who gained every respect worthy of the Chivapols.”⁴⁸

In this context, women were given the right to vote because they had demonstrated their patriotism towards not just the nation but specifically towards the king. His reference to the *Nārī Klāhān* illustrates how Sihanouk viewed citizens as people who served and worked under the crown for the nation-state. Furthermore, discussing the *Nārī Klāhān*—as opposed to women as mothers and wives—suggests that Sihanouk envisioned women’s citizenry as defined by their public work.

The constitutional change occurred with little fanfare and in later years Sihanouk changed the narrative about the path to suffrage. *La Femme Cambodgienne a l’ere du Sangkum*, published by the Ministry of Information, explains that “the various political parties that flourished in Cambodia after the Second World War never dreamed to make women participants in the political life of the country.” According to this *Sangkum* narrative, under the multi-party system “this inequality was accepted as resulting naturally from the civil incapacity of the married woman and did not provoke any movement of demand of the interested parties.”⁴⁹ This is not the only time Sihanouk insisted that Cambodia’s initial foray into democracy was failed by a system that allowed one party to grow in popularity. In a 1955 *France-Asie* article that referred to the Democratic Party, Sihanouk commented, “In my opinion, the failure of democracy in Cambodia was caused by blunderers to whom the king had confided the writing of our constitution.”⁵⁰ In these framings,

⁴⁸ “Traduction: Littérale du message Royal inséré dans le no-2 du Bulletin Royal - Du Droit Des Femmes,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, Fevrier 1955.

⁴⁹ *La Femme Cambodgienne a l’ere du Sangkum* (Phnom Penh : Ministère de l’information, 1965).

⁵⁰ Norodom Sihanouk, “Etude Corrective de la Constitution Accordee par S. M. le Roi du Cambodge en 1947,” *France-Asie* : 663. Quote originally found in: Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 65.

Sihanouk emphasized that the multi-party system forced him to follow the will of the political elite as opposed to the best options for the people. Moreover, the political parties are cast as unfit to oversee the governance of Cambodia while women are characterized as voiceless wives with no opportunity to participate in politics. In the ongoing work to restructure institution created under French colonialism, narratives shifted and changed in order to affirm the viability of the *Sangkum Reasr Niyum*.

While *Sangkum* framed the multi-party system as oppositional to women's rights, the state cast Sihanouk as a benevolent leader who oversaw the implementation of more humane laws. In the book on women, the Ministry of Information does not mention the referendum that ended the multi-party democracy. Instead, the writers explain, "Prince Norodom Sihanouk expressed his concern 'to make Cambodia a true socialist and egalitarian democracy' (Statues of the Sangkum)" and prompted the National Assembly to determine in September 1955 that women had the right to vote. The 1956 constitution stipulated that men and women over twenty were eligible to vote and men and women over twenty-five were eligible for the electorate.⁵¹ In this narrative, the multi-party system was the historical antagonist to creating a unified and equal country while Sihanouk was the benevolent leader who created a system that brought women out of the shadows and into the political workings of the country. The discourses emphasize that the state under Sihanouk eradicated inequalities and corruption of the multi-party system. In that way, the *Sangkum* state professed to be a domestic space that eradicated politics and instead created a state without barriers, separations, or differences. In the following years, the *Sangkum*, Sihanouk, and female leaders would continue to contend with the meaning of female citizenship in the postcolonial state.

⁵¹ *La Femme Cambodgienne a l'ere du Sangkum* (Phnom Penh : Ministère de l'information, 1965).

Equals and Mothers

After women gained the right to vote in 1955, the urban leaders under the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* began to critically assess how women should contribute to the prosperity of the new nation. Some women, including Siv Eng Tong from Chapter 1 and Plech Phirun from Chapter 3, began to assume new leadership positions in the state and civil society. Those women, along with Sihanouk and *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* ministries, began to construct discourses about the responsibility of women to the state. On the one hand, Sihanouk and other *Sangkum* leaders emphasized that women and men were now equal citizens and should contribute in similar ways to national causes. On the other hand, *Sangkum* literature directed towards women focused on the importance of mothers and wives paying attention to their duties in the home. This emphasis on motherhood was supported by the proliferation of literacy classes where men and women would gain the skills of citizens in an independent country. Women, in particular, were expected to use these skills to raise the future citizens of the country. To that end, the discourses on domesticity became more closely aligned with state-building goals under the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*.

Until the early 1950s, leaders of the SKS, along with the Yukanthor sisters, had acted as the intellectual authorities on matters pertaining to women, society, and education, but those female leaders mostly faded away in the mid-1950s. Having worked in education and appointed positions for over forty years, it seems likely that Princesses Ping Peang and Ping Pah chose to retire from their public posts in the 1950s. Both women passed away in the late 1960s. Meanwhile, Nematoulla Macchwa (Son Sann) became more involved in the Red Cross.⁵² After her early beginnings forging a path for women in education and her time in the SKS and at the PPWA, In

⁵² Interview with Son Soubert, October 25, 2017.

Em (Sam Sary) joined organizing spaces on behalf of women for only few more years. In 1957, she participated in a conference in Bangkok on the subject of Asian women and upon return to Phnom Penh gave a lecture on the “rights, civic duties, and participation of Asian women in public life.”⁵³ In the following years, she had to endure family scandals involving her husband. While the family was living in England, their maid, pregnant with the Sam Sary’s child, went to the police accusing Sam of physical abuse. A few years later, Sam Sary was accused of plotting against Sihanouk. He was likely murdered by *Sangkum* officials while In Em was briefly imprisoned before fleeing the country with her children.⁵⁴ Finally, married to Saloth Sar (alias Pol Pot), Khieu Ponnary became embedded in underground communist organizing. Other women from the SKS do not seem reappear as prominent female leaders.⁵⁵ Instead, new groups of women became active in the wake of a new political order under Sihanouk.

In 1958, women enjoyed the first opportunity to vote in the elections and run for political office. That year, Sihanouk dissolved the National Assembly that had been elected in 1955 and “sort[ed] through the names of more than seven hundred people who had nominated themselves for the assembly. Those selected were unopposed, except in five districts where Pracheachon [the

⁵³“Conference de Madame Sam Sary,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, September 3, 1957.

⁵⁴ In his autobiography, Sam Rainsy claims that his mother is actually the one who physically abused their maid. He also writes that Sihanouk acted enraged when he learned that In Em was imprisoned, likely in order to demonstrate that he would never do anything like that to a woman. Sam Rañsīu, *We Didn’t Start the Fire: My Struggle for Democracy in Cambodia* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2013).

⁵⁵ I make this claim with the caution that some women who were unmarried during their time in the SKS may have reappeared as married women during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. I do not find an evidence that high-ranking leaders of the SKS became high-ranking leaders of the state or other organizations in the 1950s and 1960s (the exception being Khieu Ponnary).

leftist party] proposed to field candidates.”⁵⁶ The first female representative Siv Eng Tong (Pung Peng Cheng) ran and won her National Assembly seat along with the mostly *Sangkum* party nominees. When Siv campaigned for National Assembly in Kandal province she focused on women’s issues, promising equal pay for equal work and two months maternity leave with full salary. Her election is indicative of the forms of urban female power after 1955. In later years, Sihanouk often discussed the importance of female participation in politics and pointed to the “conservative traditions” that prevented young women from becoming more politically active.⁵⁷ Yet, when he possessed significant control over the outcome of the election, Siv Eng Tong was the only woman selected for office. She embodied the state’s effort to bring more women into positions of power while also contending with the meaning of women acting as political representatives of the state. For Siv, joining politics as the first woman in the National Assembly meant dedicating at least part of her public work to women’s issues, both because she was the only female representative and because she cared about the problems affecting women.

While Siv will always be remembered as the first woman to represent Cambodians in the National Assembly, she certainly faced forms of gender discrimination and empowerment not readily apparent in the remaining record. As described in Chapter 1, neighbors had looked down on Siv when she chose to attend school in Saigon. Siv always had high ambitions for women of her time and after finishing school she wanted to become a doctor. Her daughter Kek Galabru explained that that because “becoming a doctor was out of the question” Siv decided to become a

⁵⁶ Chandler, *The Tragedy*, 9.

⁵⁷ “Main Points of the Answers Made by the Head of State to Questions Posed by Miss Suvarna H. Bhatt on 28th January 1969,” *Kambuja*, March 1969.

teacher so that she “could educate the youth for the future.”⁵⁸ She married fellow educator Pung Peng Cheng and directed a primary school.⁵⁹ Kek explained that her father urged her mother run for political office when “many people thought women shouldn’t go into politics.” Perhaps due to the lack of support for women, Siv wanted another woman to run for National Assembly, too. She tried to convince her former student Madame Diep Dinar to also run for political office but Diep refused. As a result, Siv continued down the path on her own to the National Assembly. For the first year, she served as the acting President of the National Assembly because the men could not agree on a more permanent president among the male assembly members. According to Kek, “the men obeyed her.”⁶⁰

Sihanouk, for his part, created a strong rhetoric on Cambodia’s gender equality after the constitutional change in 1955. In 1958, Siv received funding from the Asia Foundation to produce a newspaper for women. Sihanouk addressed the readership by explaining that the newspaper was intended to help achieve the “education and goals of women” since ‘the constitution provides that all women have the same rights and duties resembling those of men.’ Moreover, he remarked on the necessity of having an organization to help women join together in “solidarity and unity” on the road to progress. Invoking solidarity and unity connected deeply to his vision of the *Sangkum* as a royal state with men and women working together to maintain national sovereignty. To achieve that goal, he argued, the country needed “children of both sexes to support the construction of progress, public welfare, and economics, to make a shield, protection of independence,

⁵⁸ Kek Galabru is often recognized as one of the first female doctors in Cambodia(
<https://speaktruthtopower.ch/en/profile/kek-galabru/>).

⁵⁹ As customary at this time, she is referred to by her marital honorific and husband’s name Pung Peng Cheng in publications.

⁶⁰ December 16th interview.

sovereignty, peace, the constitution, and the integrity of our country.”⁶¹ Having been granted equal rights in the constitution, Khmer women were supposed to contribute their time and efforts to the goals of the nation. By focusing on constitutional rights, Sihanouk minimized and silenced the possibilities that Khmer women may have found difficulties participating in the national causes or may have continued to face struggles unaffected by the constitutional amendment.

While Siv Eng Tong certainly demonstrated concern for Khmer women when she founded the *Women's Voice* magazine, she also contributed to the *Sangkum* rhetoric on the importance of women joining men to build the country. When Cambodia hosted the Chinese Women's Delegation in 1958, Siv Eng Tong spoke to the progress of China and Cambodia's relationship to the country. To attest to Cambodia's support for the country, Siv described the “legitimate rights of China and the need for Chinese people in the great debates on which depend the same sort of peace in the world.”⁶² At the same time, she emphasized that China served as an inspiration for Cambodia's own efforts to create gender equality. She recounts a previous state visit when Cambodian delegates observed “the factories...with enchantment but the observers have thought to discover the secret of this success in competition, not only between men but equally between men and women.” By referring to successes of equality, it is clear that the *Sangkum* modeled discourses on nation-building and gender equality from observations of other polities. Siv further described the liberation of formally inferior Chinese women who “now participate completely in the construction of the country. Placed on equal footing with men, these impress the visitors of

⁶¹ Braḥrājñibandh nai Samtec Braḥ Uapayubarāj ṭael bān cuṃ phsāy knung sārabaṭr mān saṃleng nārī lekh 1 ceñ thngai 16 uasapā 1958.

⁶² “Allocution de Madame Pung Peng Cheng, Presidente du Comite de Reception de Madame Chen Yi, et de la Delegation des Femmes de la Republique Populaire de Chine,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, November 24, 1958.

China with their dynamism, their courage, and their will of modernism.”⁶³ This image of Chinese women working alongside men is aligned with Sihanouk’s emphasis that Khmer women have been given the opportunities to now join in national efforts.

Into the 1960s, the state continued to promote the image of women participating in political affairs as voters, representatives, and active participants in the bi-annual National Congress, where ordinary men and women could voice their grievances and ideas. Footage from the 1950s and 1960s captures older women voting at the polls and running for political office. One *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* era photograph shows a young mother at a ballot box casting her vote. She slides her folded piece of paper into the ballot box while she holds her baby. Both mother and baby watch carefully as the ballot is passed through the slot on the top of the box.⁶⁴ *Femme Cambodgienne a l’Ere du Sangkum* provides further evidence of this new form of equality. The film depicts a representative speaking in front of a crowd followed by groups of women handing out campaign material, running a voting booth, and, finally, a woman voting. Her gender is identifiable by the camera’s focus on a diamond ring on her finger.⁶⁵ In addition, pictures of National Congress meetings, when citizens were supposed to gather to relay their feedback to the government, included evidence of women in the audience or a female representative addressing questions of audience members. These snapshots of the democratic process confirmed that Cambodia was a working democracy and that women were encouraged to participate in the processes alongside men.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ National Archives of Cambodia photograph collection.

⁶⁵ *La Femme Cambodgienne a l’ere du Sangkum* (Phnom Penh: Ministère de l’information, 1965).

According to the *Sangkum*, the government created the mechanisms for gender equality even if women did not participate in the political workings of the country. While celebrating the participation of women, the state also explained that, “in Cambodia as in most democratic countries, it must be recognized that women use very little and very timidly the weapons they have been given.” Referring to the biannual National Congresses where citizens could express their problems at communal meetings, “it is still exceptional if they have the audacity to take the floor to expose their own problems and to propose the measures likely to materialize or to perfect equality with men.”⁶⁶ According to the *Sangkum*, women had been given the opportunity to participate in the political workings of the country that would lead to a better and more equal society. Their lack of participation in these spaces was explained as both part of a general issue in governments around the world as well as a specific issue to women who did not take up the opportunities afforded to them.

While the *Sangkum* may have promoted an idealized view of Khmer women participating in the political workings of the country, women certainly continued to face forms of oppression and inequality. After independence, a new women’s association formed, this time with more specific aims to create relationships between educated and uneducated women. Established in the home of Nek Srei Chea Uom, the *Samakam Kalyanmiетtني Nārī Khmaer* (Young Khmer Woman’s Good Friend Association), united fifty-two women under eight goals, the highest ones being to “protect the rights of women in the constitution” and “find a way to implement the full satisfactory rights of women.” Like the leaders of the *Sangkum*, the association believed that due to the 1955 constitutional change that granted women the right to vote, women should turn their attention to

⁶⁶ *La Femme Cambodgienne a l’ere du Sangkum* (Phnom Penh : Ministère de l’information, 1965).

the “difficult suffering of the country and race and people that live in our society.” Armed with equal rights, “women needed to seek out the means to help and solve these problems quickly.”⁶⁷ Besides focusing on educating women about their constitutional rights and duties to the nation, the association also wanted to educate all citizens on their duties to the family and to eliminate illiteracy. Smaller goals included teaching women to sew, to cook, and to have good morals. Finally, the founders hoped “to eliminate prostitution and to create jobs for weak and poor women.”⁶⁸ Organized in Phnom Penh, it seems likely that this organization, like the SKS, was comprised of mostly urban and educated women who envisioned helping their uneducated sisters.

Founding member Chea Uom recognized that many women faced significant forms of inequality despite their new constitutional rights. She described these inequalities as “women’s problems in the family, women’s problems in society, and problems of ignorance.” Beginning with her an assessment of problems in the family, she writes that “women have encountered lots of suffering and misery because the majority of husbands do not have the desire to be considerate and are not conscientious, are not humane, and use their power dictatorially.” Without further elaborating on this issue, she continues to her next point about problems in society. Here, she explains that “even though there are as many women as men who know how to fulfill their duties, Khmer women usually are placed at a lower status than men.” Even more strikingly, she argues, “Khmer women are usually introduced as a weak powerless group without the value to have influence on matters.”⁶⁹ Certainly, these concerns about the lack of actual influence on political

⁶⁷ “Proclamation de l’association des Femmes Cambodgiennes” (Yuvapirnik, 1958), NAC.

⁶⁸ “Statuts de l’Association des Femmes Cambodgiens,” 1958, NAC.

⁶⁹ “Statuts de l’Association des Femmes Cambodgiens,” 1958, NAC.

matters speak to the reality that Cambodia had not suddenly become a country with complete gender equality.

While Chea provided starker view on gender equality, or lack thereof, she suggested interventions not radically different from the state or political leaders. Both Chea and Siv believed that women needed an education to better understand their rights and responsibilities to the nation. As mentioned above, Siv organized *Women's Voice* magazine for Cambodian women. Funding from the Asia Foundation allowed Siv to distribute the magazine for free with donated bicycles.⁷⁰ Certainly, she envisioned reaching women who could not afford the magazine. Meanwhile, Chea argued that the third issue, ignorance, could be leveraged as the solution to problems in the family and society. She emphasized that Khmer women “have not received a sufficient education” which has made them “deaf and blind.” Without any education, women cannot continue to “progress and cultivate their minds.” While the association praised the king for ensuring that “women have equal rights with men,” Chea clearly states that because of a lacking education the majority of women “[do not know] how to advocate for women’s rights.” The association would educate women on their rights and duties. Despite Chea’s strong stance that husbands and society have treated women poorly, she also believed that women must solve these problems on their own and she emphasizes that “if Khmer women do not gather to find the way to solve these three problems, they will not be able to enjoy their rights fully.”⁷¹ By the end of this analysis on the problems facing Khmer women, Chea makes it clear that she hoped educated women in the SKNK would save uneducated

⁷⁰ December 16, 2018 interview.

⁷¹ “Statuts de l’Association des Femmes Cambodgien, 1958, NAC.

women, the victims of a lack of education that prevented them from understanding their value and critical importance to the growing country.

Urban angst about the struggling educational infrastructure certainly became a driving force behind the kind of solutions for helping uplift struggling segments of the population, including women. While Siv Eng Tong and the SKNK clearly wanted to connect with women through education, creating sustainable programs proved to be difficult. *Women's Voice* only lasted a short period and copies of the magazine no longer exist. Similarly, the SKNK never carried out the kind of work proposed in their goals and introduction.⁷² Chea Uom and her fifty-two founding members likely disbanded the association shortly after they declared the imperative task to help poor women without education. While they never succeeded in eradicating illiteracy or spreading information to women on their rights and duties to the nation, these urban women saw themselves as saviors for women who they believed needed to embrace the suggested forms of education. Their viewpoints were shared by other urban leaders as well as the new arrivals from international organizations seeking to “modernize” Cambodia and educate the country. With international organizations like UNESCO and USAID keen on funding “modernization” programs for countries of the “Third World,” Cambodian leaders could tap into funding and expertise provided by wealthier nations. Through these mechanisms, urban female leaders could carry out their plans to spread information on women’s duties to the nation.

While Sihanouk often spoke generally about men and women as citizens of the nation, magazines directed towards the villagers emphasized the important role of women as mothers and

⁷² I have come to this conclusion because I have never seen the association mentioned in any publication or newspaper. Typically, magazines and newspapers announced organization meetings and events or advertised other publications. Since many archival materials have been lost or destroyed, it is always possible that my hypothesis is inaccurate.

guardians of the family. In 1955, educators working with UNESCO began to publish *Dassanāvatti Bhūm Yoeng*, or Our Village magazine. The writers for *Bhūm Yoeng* penned short 1 – 3 page articles, advice columns, and poems in simple Khmer for the rural audience.⁷³ Sometimes hand drawings accompanied the variety of articles that supported the larger aims of hygiene and healthcare, childrearing, farming, and recipes. Articles also taught villagers about social and cultural matters along with traditional poems and *cpâp* (codes of conduct). With funding from UNESCO and support from the Ministry of Education, *Bhūm Yoeng* reached rural communities in ways envisioned by the SKS and SKNK. In their writings about womanhood, it is apparent that these educators and organizers believed that educating women on modern domestic duties was linked to a larger project of creating a modern and independent nation-state.

Among their many topics, *Bhūm Yoeng* outlined the importance of educating girls and women. In one of their publications, a writer describes the plight of uneducated women in the story *Banlak Srabon*, or “Wilted Sprout.” The story is about a “sad and pitiful girl” who was “orphaned and deprived of a childhood, living in the protection of a man who has had a wife for many years already.” The orphan girl spends her days cooking and cleaning and only ever finds free time in the evenings. Her story symbolizes the “women in the village who gather together to study in the hall, regardless of old or young, who want to study, on their own.” According to the writer, the

⁷³ Other magazines included *Sruk Srae*, or Countryside, published by the Ministry of Planning and *Kasaka*, or Farmer Magazine, published by Agricultural Methods. *Sruk Srae* was clearly written for an audience with a higher reading level than the readers of *Bhūm Yoeng* or *Kasaka*. The articles are much longer and detailed the contents include significantly fewer pictures than *Bhūm Yoeng* or *Kasaka*. Today, only a handful of magazines from the first three years of publication remain at the National Library; it is difficult to determine if the magazine was discontinued or if later copies were lost. *Kasaka*, the third rural-facing magazine, was probably the most “low budget.” While the covers of *Bhūm Yoeng* and *Sruk Srae* were colorful and changed occasionally, *Kasaka* was published only in black and white. The table of contents and articles are all written by hand and copied. While some articles pertain to family matters, most of the content was dedicated to farming.

women “request permission to go and study but without fail the older brother [or male] does not approve and reproaches ‘women! do not leave the end of your stove.’” By referencing the woman who remains at the end of her stove—the common idiom to describe how housewives do not have an education—the writer appeals to the readers to have compassion for these poor pitiful women who want to learn but lack the means or familial support.⁷⁴

This story provides an insight into the dichotomous understandings of gender roles in the home and family, as well as the common viewpoints on how to solve the issues of education. As described above, Princess Ping Peang and Sim Vannasee both argued that women enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy in the home and family as determined by Khmer customs and ancient laws. Yet, the Wilted Sprout writer and Chea Uom both suggested other forms of oppression in the home, particularly in regards to how husbands may view the validity of women’s education. Moreover, these public thinkers and writers continued to explain gender issues through the lens of a family or societal issue that could only be mended through the endeavor of men and women to change their own ways of thinking.

While the story of the *Banlak Srabon*, or Wilted Sprout, outlined how women lacked support for educational pursuits, other stories provided models of the educated woman who led her family. In a story about *Nārī Me Pdaḥ Jamṇān*, or Brilliant/Skillful Housewives, a male writer explains that that men and women “have the rights to become educated with morals, intellect, hope, and scientific knowledge.” He further emphasizes that “we can hope that in the future our women will all become brilliant housewives” for the “improvement of family and health going forward.” According to him, the brilliant housewife should “know how to decorate the house so

⁷⁴ “Banlak Srabon,” *Bhūm Yoeng*, 1955.

that it is property beautiful, know how to cook different types of soup, and know how to make clothing.” These skills, of course, are not particularly new or different. The SKS had spent years teaching their readership about managing a home, cooking, and sewing. He went on to list other skills already identified by female intellectuals, such as “knowing a profession like weaving,” “knowing how to receive guests,” and “knowing how to prepare ideas for the family line for themselves and for their husband.”⁷⁵ Since the *Banlak Srabon* was not allowed to go to lessons at night, she could only do housework and cook at her stove. In contrast, the *Nārī Me Pdaḥ Jamṇān* who gained new skills was better positioned to contribute to her household—and the nation—in both in the present and the future.

Through lessons and publications, writers further stressed the significance of an educated mother and wife creating domestic spaces that supported the aims of education and health. In a series of articles about the “*Mātā ī Grū Kamṇoet*” or Mother or Guardian Spirit, the mother is described as the instructor, doctor, and life-giver of the family. As the “Instructor of Family Life,” the smart housewife cooks for her family hygienically because “food is meant for the strength of the human body, strength of the heart, strengthen of the intelligence of the entire family.”⁷⁶ These articles focused more on teaching women about the importance of cleanliness. While all women were supposed to be in charge of food preparation, clearly the educated and urban leaders were concerned about issues of hygiene and cleanliness in the rural areas. Concerns about hygiene extended to general bodily cleanliness. Beyond providing clean and nutritious food, the “mother or guardian spirit” was responsible for “the children who have a habit of putting their unclean

⁷⁵ “Nārī Me Pdaḥ Jamṇān,” *Bhūm Yoeng*, February 1955.

⁷⁶ “Mātā ī Grū Kamṇoet,” *Bhūm Yoeng*, June 1955. *Bhūm Yoeng* also included a series of recipes, typically short and not as complicated as in other publications.

hands in their mouth, coming from unclean feet that walk on the ground” and cause intestinal worms so that children have “deathly skin, bleary-eyed, bloated stomachs.” The writer admonishes the unknowledgeable mother who thinks her child is sick because of a bad spirit and laments that “if we want to increase the Khmer population from 5 million to 20 million in a short amount of time, first of all we must fix our guardian spirit [the mother].”⁷⁷

Cooking Khmer recipes continued to be a source of demonstrating Khmer ethnic identity but certainly food preparation had created new forms of class difference. Besides this series of articles, *Bhūm Yoeng* regularly included recipes for their rural female readership. Unlike the above articles written by men or without bylines indicating the author, the recipes included in *Bhūm Yoeng* usually included a byline attributed to a female teacher, symbolizing that female educators could teach not just children but also their peers. During the *Sangkum* female leaders in government continued to spread information about cooking. In 1959, Madame Srin Saais-Yann, part of the Commission of Practice and Customs of Cambodia, wrote an article on Cambodian cakes, admonishing Cambodian who called the cakes “Siamese” when “they are purely Cambodian.” In this instance, urban and modern women were targeted for bad practices because they learn “to prepare European, Vietnamese, or Chinese cakes” and are “content to buy Chinese cakes in the pastry shops and cafes.” While the cakes were still popular in the countryside, she argues that no one knows how to properly make them. The article continues with a description of making the cakes along with a story about the Buddha and giving life.⁷⁸ By transitioning into an

⁷⁷ “Mātā ṛ Grū Kamṇoet,” *Bhūm Yoeng*, May 1955.

⁷⁸ Srin Saais-Yann, “Gateaux et friandises cambodgiens,” *La Dépêche du Cambodge*, February 1959. In my interview with Bou Addheka, she also described her mother writing an article on how to make Fish Amok because “some people didn’t know how to make amok.”

article about giving life, the Srin further connected the important relationship between culture, forms of giving, and health.

Besides overseeing the child's physical health, the guiding mother was supposed to find ways to assist with her child's education. In an article about teaching children, the writer implored mothers to follow the direction of "European mothers [who] teach children at home outside of the time that they study at school." With examples of European mothers assisting their children's development by providing them with small musical instruments or engine toys, the writer emphasizes that the mother must consider innovative ways to foster a love of learning for the child. Moreover, to accomplish this goal, the mother herself must be educated, as the article ends by summarizing, "If a mother is knowledgeable, a child is knowledgeable."⁷⁹ Therefore, an educated populace depended on the education and enthusiasm of the mother. Of course, this attention to the specific duties of the mother illustrates how discourses about equal duties to the nation were imbued with understandings that women would occupy gendered roles in the home.

To further elaborate the critical importance of mothers, a contributor to *Sruk Srae* (Countryside) penned an article on *Grū Kamṅoet ř grū toem*, Guardian Spirit or Original Teacher, proposing that "the good fortune of Cambodia is in the hands of the Khmer Mother." The contributor's strong rhetoric underlines the anxieties that Cambodia would not prosper without mothers who understood their maternal duties as well as the continued emphasis on motherhood as the highest priority for women. The writer explains, "good fortunes of each country rely on the fistfuls of the mothers because the mother is the guardian spirit of the life of people, is the big doctor, is the teacher of the family, is the teacher of society, or the nation, is the teacher of the

⁷⁹ "Mātā ř Grū Kamṅoet," *Bhūm Yoeng*, July 1955.

world, is the teacher of freedom, is the teacher of peace.” Her role as instructor, doctor, and caretaker must evolve in order to help prepare her family and her home to support then national cause, or as the article plainly states, “education prepares the Khmer mother in order to fulfill the matters of the country.”⁸⁰ Clearly Sihanouk and other urban leaders generating educational materials for the rural populace believed that they needed to teach many Cambodians how to be appropriate and contributing citizens, especially citizen-mothers. Significantly, the overlapping discussions of motherly duties and the national agenda illustrate the close amalgamation between home and nation-state.

Of course, emphasizing mothers as the key to national prosperity was tricky when the state also celebrated women’s new roles in public service, education, and industries. In an article about the “Rights and Duties of Khmer Women,” a writer celebrates that Sihanouk has provided women with the “rights and freedom like men, Cambodian women could work in all the ministries, as teachers, doctors, soldiers, political party secretaries, etc.” By celebrating the opportunities for women, the writer suggests that women can contribute to the state not just as mothers but in many other areas of work. Yet, this writer, like many of his contemporaries, wanted to focus on women as housewives and justified discussing the duties of housewives by arguing that “some women do not receive the kind of education necessary to work with high officials” and therefore most attention should be given to their work in the home. After posing the question “what are some of the responsibilities of a housewife who has become an independent citizen?” the writer dedicates the rest of the article to the list of responsibilities for women, ranging from cooking and cleaning to taking care of the expenses and acting as the family doctor.⁸¹ This tension between women as

⁸⁰ “Grū Kamṅoet ī grū ṭoem,” *Sruk Srae*, December 1955.

⁸¹ “Siddhi nṅng karanīy kicc rapáh strī khmaer,” *Sruk Srae*, September 1958.

public servants and leaders and women as mothers provides a small window into the *Sangkum*'s fraught discourses about the possibilities for life and work during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and the expectations for the majority of men and women to stay in the fields and stay at home.

Clearly, discussions about women as citizens with responsibilities to the nation catalyzed earlier visions of modern domesticity into discourses about modern domestic space as a component of the nation-state. By framing motherhood and domestic work within the context of nation-state building, the *Sangkum* emphasized that mothers were not working in a private arena separate from public institutions. Rather, the state was in the home and the home was in the state. Of course, while emphasizing gendered duties the *Sangkum*, and especially Sihanouk, celebrated the country's gender equality. As will become apparent in the next section, motherly duties and political work were not easily separated within the institutions of the *Sangkum*. Many of the early competing discourses about a woman's responsibilities to the state fomented into gendered forms of representation in elected and career positions.

Representing Women, Representing Cambodia

Since the *Sangkum* supported women entering the government as elected and state officials, more women did join the government as public leaders in the 1950s and 1960s. Meanwhile, Sihanouk and other political onlookers continued to worry about the number of women in government as well as the reasons that women may not run for elected office or participate in democratic workings of the country. While gendered representation in government was certainly a concern, the female representatives and officials who worked in the capital also embodied the construction of the political woman as a maternal figure who cared for family, health, and home.

From 1958 until the coup d'état in 1970, Siv Eng Tong, Diep Dinar, Tip Mam, Chine Renne, and Ung Mung became prominent politicians and served as secretaries of state and ministers in the Social Affairs and Work, Health, Education, Information, and Tourism ministries.⁸² The translation of maternal responsibilities from the home space to postcolonial public institutions illustrates that the idea of creating a nation of equal citizens was also a project of creating urban leaders who rose through the ranks to take on causes that reinforced gender and class differences.

Throughout the 1960s, the *Sangkum* remained attentive to the number of women working in the government. An internal memo about “Femmes Fonctionnaires” lists the number of women working as civil servants in different departments in the government, broken down by ministry and position, from secretaries and teachers to contractual workers and telephone operators. With statistics unaccounted for from the Ministries of Defense, Public Health, Agriculture, and National Defense, the document shows that 2,618 women worked for the royal government while 33,654 men held positions in the ministries.⁸³ Women accounted for approximately 7% of the state workforce. At the same time, they were still largely excluded from high ranking positions. Without other information about the collected data, it is unclear how this information was used by the government. While commentaries about women in Cambodia's government indicate that the state was concerned about the number of women working in public capacities, explanations for these low numbers oftentimes focused on issues deemed outside the control of the state.

⁸² Pung Peng Cheng and Diep Dinar were both reelected after their initial terms. Diep Dinar was deposed from her position and arrested due to a book buying deal in 1966: “Travaux Parlementaires,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, April 1967, Charles Meyer Collection, National Archives of Cambodia.

⁸³ Femmes Fonctionnaires 1964. NAC.

In the mid-1960s, leading leftist intellectual Pouk Chhay published his dissertation about political institutions in Cambodia and provided his own assessment about the number of women in Cambodia's National Assembly. At the time, the National Assembly included three women, Madames Siv Eng Tong (Pung Peng Cheng), Tip Mam, and Diep Dinar. Pouk compares the number of women in government in Cambodia with the number of women in government in socialist and capitalist countries:

In the outside world, only the socialist countries and, in particular the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, have allowed women to play an important role in political life. In the Soviet Union, 20% of the members of the Supreme Soviet are women. In the United States, a mere 2% of the seats in Congress are held by women members; and, although 6% of the seats in the French National Assembly were held by women in 1946, the percentage fell from 2.5% in 1951 to less than 2% in the present assembly... In Cambodia... the number of women deputies in the National Assembly [are] three, or approximately 3.90% of the total number. The part played by women in political life in Cambodia is therefore, greater than the part they play in the United States, or even in France.⁸⁴

By comparing number of seats held by women in the Soviet Union, China, United States, France, and Cambodia, Pouk Chhay helped to support arguments that the *Sangkum* was in the best interest of the female populace. Moreover, as a leftist, Pouk Chhay certainly suggested that Cambodia should follow that path of other socialist countries in order to eradicate inequalities wrought in capitalist colonial systems.

While Pouk Chhay clearly accounted for the low numbers of women in positions of power in France and the United States, he accounted for issues in Cambodia as a general “phenomenon in the ‘Third World’” in which women are subordinated to men. He writes that,

“the reluctance of women to enter politics is a phenomenon that can be found in a great many countries belonging to the ‘Third World.’ It is due to a number of

⁸⁴ Chhay Phouk, “Les Elites Politiques du Cambodge Contemporain (1945 - 1965)” (Phnom Penh, Universite Royale: Faculté de Droit et des Sciences Economiques, 1965), National Library of Cambodia.

factors. Thus, women who have their hands full at home, are not inclined to embark upon a political career, while the economic, and social structure of these independent countries are in many cases, still influenced by the traditional conception of the subordinate role of women: a tradition nurtured during the period of colonialism.”⁸⁵

Pouk does not pause to elaborate on his comments but clearly he believes that any “traditional” ideas about women’s roles and responsibilities was compounded by a colonial system which prevented the educational opportunities of girls and continued an economic system that revolved around familial work. In his analysis of Khmer society, “custom demands that the Cambodian woman should devote herself principally to her family.” He describes these customs as a “national tradition” in which the livelihood and prosperity of the family is given priority over more immediate concerns and “which effectively rules out any possibility of the average Cambodian woman from playing an active part in political life.” In this context, the woman is still working on behalf of her family, the primary social unit. Yet, by describing this focus on the family as “national tradition” in Cambodia, Pouk moves away from descriptions of the “Third World” to instead suggest identities and customs specific to Cambodia. In particular, he suggests a tension between the domestic space as home and the domestic arena as the nation-state.

Sihanouk also described the tension between the home and the national landscape. When asked about the position of women in Cambodia, Sihanouk explained that he “personally [encouraged] our women to share men’s responsibilities in public life” but argued that “they are however most of them, ‘conservative’ and generally prefer to confine themselves to household activities.” His statements are interesting since *Sangkum* material often emphasized the important role of women in the home. For the SRN, the lack of female participation in politics, either in open

⁸⁵ Phouk, “Les Elites Politiques du Cambodge.”

forums or as representatives, was largely due to the supposed shyness of Cambodian women. At the same time, Sihanouk explained that “Cambodian women are growing more and more conscious of their role and actually enjoy a very normal and satisfactory position.”⁸⁶ According to Sihanouk, the *Sangkum* had encouraged women to participate in politics but that “traditions” continued to prevent more confidence in public matters. Of course, as pointed out by Pouk Chhay, Cambodia was no better or worse than most countries around the world so the questioning of Sihanouk by a foreign reporter on the matter must be considered within the context of orientalist assumptions about the country. At the same time, discussing women in the home versus women in public life illustrates how tenets of the *Sangkum* helped to both cast images of Cambodia as one society under Sihanouk while also generating tensions when individuals and families continued to focus on their most immediate social surroundings.

At the same time that Pouk and Sihanouk suggested a tension between domesticity and public life, the *Sangkum* leadership divided into gendered positions that reflected gendered labor in in the home. While Chapter 3 argued that royal women embodied modern royal generosity, non-royal female leaders carried on gendered domestic roles in their public work while also representing Khmer women on the national and international stage, a trend that began as soon as Siv was elected to the National Assembly. One of Siv’s first duties as a member of the National Assembly was to act as the president of the Reception Committee, which meant that she hosted international delegations arriving in Cambodia.⁸⁷ During her time as Minister of Health in the late

⁸⁶ “Main Points of the Answers Made by the Head of State to Qusetions Posed by Miss Suvarna H. Bhatt on 28th January 1969,” *Kambuja*, March 1969.

⁸⁷ “Allocution de Madame Pung Peng Cheng, Presidente du Comite de Reception de Madame Chen Yi, et de la Delegation des Femmes de la Republique Populaire de Chine,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, November 24, 1958. “Mrs. Chen-Yi, Cambodia’s Guest,” *Kambuja*, November 1966.

1960s, she also flew to Moscow with Tep Chieu Kheng to attend the events for International Women's Day.⁸⁸ By employing women to represent Cambodia in feminine roles and spaces, the *Sangkum* established that women possessed specific knowledge useful for engendering a modern and independent state.

In the state archives, it is apparent that the *Sangkum* press codified female leaders as officials conducting gendered work that reflected women's domestic expertise. Into the late 1960s, Madames Tip Mam, Chinne Renne, and Ung Mung were often featured in the various state magazines and newspapers for their work in the Ministries of Health, Information, and Tourism. The Ministries of Social Affairs and Work, Health, and Education largely focused on issues pertinent to women, children, and vulnerable citizens. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Tourism translated Cambodian culture and arts to international visitors and the Ministry of Information produced a high volume of material for domestic and international audiences about the ongoing activities of Sihanouk and the *Sangkum*.⁸⁹

The publications commented on the advantages of having a government with a feminine touch. In the late 1960s, *Realites Cambodgiennes* ran articles praising Secretaries of State Chinne Renne and Ung Mung for their work to promote Cambodian culture and arts, such as they a series of photographs depicting "tourist, agriculture, industrial, artistic, folkloric, and other activities of the kingdom."⁹⁰ The magazine praised Ung Mung for her accomplishments as secretary of state, writing, "it is decidedly a good thing to have confided the Ministry of Tourism to a woman, who

⁸⁸ "Participation cambodgienne à la fete internationale des femmes," *Realites Cambodgiennes*, March 17, 1967.

⁸⁹ A woman was the editor of the French language of *Kambuja* in 1969. At present, I do not have information about previous years. Women had been working in the Ministry of Information since the 1940s when a group of women was hired to write articles for Kampuchea newspaper.

⁹⁰ *Realities Cambodgiennes*, June 1966.

is also a woman of good taste.” According to the article, she oversaw the production of small booklets, “Khmer Proverbs,” and “The Foundation of Phnom Penh According to Chronicle,” printed on “thin leaves of latanier, thus resembling the ancient manuscripts of the Kingdom.” The works are praised as “an original and informative souvenir or gift.”⁹¹ In another instance, a writer for *Kambuja* describes Ung Mung, “pushing back an obstinate lock of hair in a very feminine way,” before answering a question by an audience member at the 1969 National Assembly.⁹² In these praises for Ung Mung, the state emphasized that femininity was a strength of the state. Of course, the emphasis on the feminine nature of the female leaders seems contradictory to derisions of Khmer women who remained committed to their maternal duties in the home. Yet, it is apparent that the state wanted women to maintain their maternal roles in order to contribute to the progress of the country.

In the late 1960s, female leaders became more literal cultural ambassadors when they were appointed to various international friendship associations. By 1966, Cambodia was participating in friendship associations with seventeen countries.⁹³ These associations became venues for building relationships and cross-cultural communication. Each Cambodian friendship association included three members with at least one female member. In 1966, Tip Mam served on the Khmer-Chinese committee while Chine Renne served on the Khmer-Soviet one.⁹⁴ They acted as hosts in Cambodia and traveled abroad on behalf of the association.⁹⁵ In other instances, officials received

⁹¹ “Gazette du Royaume: Initiative originale,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, November 24, 1967.

⁹² “The Twenty-Seventh National Congress of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum,” *Kambuja*, August 1969.

⁹³ *Realites Cambodgiennes*, June 1966.

⁹⁴ *Realites Cambodgiennes*, June 1966.

⁹⁵ “Départ,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, May 1968.

gifts from the association on behalf of the government. In 1966, Madame Diep Dinar received “technical books, collection of minerals, and lots of materials from the labs of Higher Technical Institute of the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Association.⁹⁶ Importantly, the women who served in these capacities held multiple positions within the domestic and international organizations. While the associations may have included at least one women, the number of women who participated in high-level *Sangkum* activities remained low.

At the same time, the international press oftentimes treated female representatives of the state as authorities on women’s issues of Cambodia. Madame Chine Renne, the Secretary of State for Information in the late 1960s, was often the voice of Cambodia on a variety of matters. She received foreign guests and dignitaries, including a delegation from the “Voice of Vietnam,” on matters of the press and news coverage.⁹⁷ In 1969, she represented Cambodia at a meeting for unaligned countries. Reporting from the conference confirms that she “was the only woman among 200 members of the various delegations.” In international spaces, these Khmer women stood out as charting new territory for women. During an interview for Yugoslav and Danish television services, she spoke about “cooperation between the non-aligned countries” and—importantly—“of the social conditions of Cambodian women.”⁹⁸ Even in this moment, serving as a female representative meant speaking on behalf of Cambodian women even in instances when that was not the expressed goal of a meeting or event.

⁹⁶ “Cooperation Khmero-Sovietique,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, December 30, 1966.

⁹⁷ “Audience de Mme Chine Renne,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, December 1968.

⁹⁸ “The Consultative Meeting of Non-Aligned Countries (Belgrade, July 8 - 12),” *Kambuja*, August 1969.

While state materials oftentimes do not provide deeper insight into the political visions of female leaders, interviews and memoirs can help to elucidate how the few women in government worked tirelessly on behalf of fellow Cambodians, especially Cambodian women. In the late 1950s, Plek Phirun became one of the most important women representing Cambodia abroad. She began her career in the public sector when she joined the Ministry of Propaganda in 1945. Although her name rarely appears in the press—especially prior to her work for the Red Cross in the 1960s—Phlek Phirun was a well-respected civil servant who traveled extensively to international conferences. On one of her first trips, she attended a conference in Pakistan on community development. There, she met with a Pakistani delegation to talk about how to improve social conditions in their respective countries. The following year, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* announced community development as the theme of the 5-year plan, a plan which will be given more attention in Chapter 5. While she does not elaborate on the kind of information she relayed between the conference and the Cambodian government, it seems likely that Phlek's travels helped to inform Cambodia's social programs. She also travelled to Japan twice to discuss the issues facing women and children in societies across Asia. Her second time in Japan, she extended her trip in order to learn more about the country's child services and education programs.

Phlek also collaborated with experts and activists of women's issues in Africa and Europe. In 1960, she went to Cairo on a "mission about the problems of women in Africa and Asia." During this trip, she became friendly with the Egyptian Ministry of Social Affairs and extended her trip in order to visit their office. Besides going to Moscow as part of the Red Cross, she attended the World Congress of Women in 1963. The World Congress of Women was organized by the anti-fascist and pro-peace Women's International Democratic Federation. In her reflections on the period, Phlek mostly focuses on her friendships and experiences sightseeing during her travels.

Yet, her references to the conference themes and her occasional work in the countries after the end of the conferences underlines her important work abroad and immense contributions to Cambodia's social programs. With rare insight into the work and accomplishments of women in the *Sangkum*, it is clear that we must remember that these women were oftentimes taking on issues and missions that are not readily apparent in the remaining archival record.⁹⁹

Similarly, during Siv's tenure as the Minister of Health from 1963 until 1966, she addressed the legality of prostitution and polygamy, issues important to many women, especially in higher classes of Cambodian society.¹⁰⁰ Since the days of *Nārī*, women had called for men to not take more than one wife and to not have sexual relations with other women. Kek Galabru, Siv's daughter, explained to me that Siv responded to ending prostitution by questioning "what's the reality?" She did not think that criminalizing prostitution would stop the practice. Instead, she focused her attention on teaching about syphilis and giving sex workers a monthly medical check, free of charge. While many married women did not agree with Siv's policy decisions, Sihanouk supported the proposal. Siv also worked on property inheritance rights and polygamy. In our interview, Kek pointed out that passing polygamy laws was difficult because "Prince Sihanouk had a lot of women." A monogamy law eventually passed after the Lon Nol coup d'état. As one of the few recognizably powerful women in the 1960s, Siv wielded large influence on behalf of women from different socio-political backgrounds and ideologies. At the same time, she clearly felt beholden to solving issues important to the most elite members of society.

⁹⁹ Phlek Phirun, "Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmâk .I. Bân Dhvoe 'vī Khlah?" Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.

¹⁰⁰ December 16, 2018 interview.

Conclusion

As described here and in prior chapters, urban Khmer women cautiously approached the possibilities of women joining formal political institutions as voters and representatives. According to the intellectual women of the SKS, women should dedicate their attention to creating a home that served as a model of morality and that supported the national goals of the male-dominated politics. While royal women undoubtedly held political power because of their close connection to Sihanouk, the most prominent royal women focused their attention on humanitarian causes of the 1950s and 1960s. While the urban women in those circles certainly envisioned women as mothers, wives, and charitable figures, the transition to an independent state and the establishment of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* as the country's form of governance meant that other actors and leaders had different ideas for how women should participate in building the nation-state. The *Sangkum* promoted women as citizens with both equal and specific rights and duties to the nation, which included participating in his Royal Crusade for Independence and becoming skillful housewives. The effort to demonstrate the success and superiority of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* included allowed for new opportunities for women to work in government. At the same time, as shown above, committing to only revealing the *Sangkum's* strengths further obscured forms of oppression and inequalities that may be looming on the margins. With almost no materials on the experiences or positions of rural women it remains difficult to assess their own perspectives on being a woman during such significant state transformations, although oral histories do help to bridge some gaps.

While the visions for appropriate ways for women to be political subjects shifted from the intellectual musings of the SKS to the structures of the *Sangkum* political institutions, the domestic and domesticity remained at the heart of the imaginaries for a modern and sovereign Cambodia.

Part of the process of decolonization included shedding colonial ties that undermined the country's governance and autonomy. In the wake of independence, Sihanouk prioritized creating a nation-state that self-determined how to blend local and foreign political ideals in order to solve socio-political problems. Creating the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*—the Popular Socialist Community—further engendered the sense that Cambodia was a unified nation under the modern monarchy prepared to chart its own path forward and defend itself against imperialist entities. At the same time, the efforts to enfold women into the state illustrate how creating the domestic in turn invoked upholding the ideals of domesticity. While Sihanouk may have called upon men and women to contribute equally to national causes, the country relied upon the discourses of mothers and maternal figures as important figures to the progress and prosperity of the home and nation. To make these discourses a reality, however, the state would uplift some women while providing direction on their duties to other women. This direction—which came in the form of massive education campaigns—will be the subject of the final chapter.

CHAPTER 5:
IN THE HANDS OF THE STATE?

The 1960 novel *Jāti Strī* (A Woman's Life) by 'nak Srī (Ms.) Luk Ratti tells the story of Som Neang, a woman who endures a difficult childhood because she lives with a stepmother and stepsiblings who treat her terribly and forbid her from attending school. One day, she leaves her provincial home for Phnom Penh where she lives with relatives and begins to attend school again. While Somneang gains a second chance at education, her opportunities are cut short because she becomes pregnant with the child of her cousin and lover, Yutan—who is engaged to be married to another woman. She runs away to her maternal grandmother and lives in poverty with her daughter. In a story about love, hardship, and new beginnings, Somneang's life begins to improve when she attends Sihanouk Center of Vocational Training, where she is a good student and a star athlete. Later, she opens a beauty salon, *Somneang Thmī* (Modern SomNeang) and reconnects with her lover Yutun. Written by one of the first female novelists in Cambodia, the romance novel brings to the surface deeper societal anxieties around youth, poverty, urban migration, and the plight of the uneducated, especially uneducated women. Published at a time when the *Sangkum* invested heavily in education and community development, the novel proposes that *Sangkum* institutions would lift men and women out of poverty to gain meaningful work. Besides the education, her shop is key to the story. She became self-sufficient through a steady income but she did not seek a career in the government—a desired career route that had started to create tensions between the

Sangkum government and young people. Instead, using her skills-based education to start a small business led to a happy ending with her lover.¹

While previous chapters have contributed to the wider scholarship on gender, domesticity, and Buddhism across Europe, Asia, and the United States, this chapter responds more directly to the literature on state-building and culture in Southeast Asia during the mid-twentieth century. In particular, I bring together literature on state education, scouting movements, and modern Khmer architecture to demonstrate how domestic visions for a modern and independent Cambodian landscape became entwined with anxieties about education and national loyalty. Scholarship on nationalism, education, and scouting movements in colonial and decolonizing Southeast Asia have illustrated that nationalists and political elites built on colonial and monastic education institutions along with the influx of scouting movements to instill a sense of national loyalty among the youth. These works have oftentimes placed significant weight on colonial influences and Cold War politics.² Meanwhile, scholarship on art in mid-twentieth century Southeast Asia has responded to Cold War frameworks by arguing that local actors presented dynamic visions of modernity within the context of domestic and local culture, as opposed to Cold War ideologies.³ My chapter connects

¹ This novel won the Indradevi writing award from the Khmer Writers' Association in 1962 – 1963. It was turned into a film in 1967.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006); David M. Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis: Education, Development, and the State in Cambodia, 1953-1998* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000). Katherine Ann Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Simon Creak, *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos*, Southeast Asia--Politics, Meaning, Memory (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015); Alicia Marie Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

³ Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem, *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010); Roger Nelson,

to those strands of scholarship by examining plans and reports for the post-1953 school system and scouting movement along literacy programs and community development plans. When examined together, it is apparent that these interconnected projects directed national attention towards the youth, who were the future of families, households, villages, and the nation-state.

Throughout this dissertation, I have examined how urban women constructed a modern and independent Cambodia through an attention to domesticity and motherhood. As demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, discourses around the domestic became embedded in state-building projects aimed to develop a Khmer form of governance and humanitarianism that solved social and political projects. In those chapters, the discourses of motherhood, education, and modern domesticity oftentimes centered around transforming the Khmer home into a place where educated mothers raised dutiful, healthy, and literate citizens. The *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* drew from these visions of the modern Khmer home by creating education, community development, and youth programs aimed to transform the tapestry of rural villages and cities formerly under colonial rule into a unified national community that revolved around the capital and leader, Sihanouk.

The state attempted to enact this transformation through programs to promote education in literacy, health and hygiene, civics, and morality, and vocational skills along with infrastructural

“Locating the Domestic in Vann Molyvann’s National Sports Complex,” *ABE Journal*, no. 11, accessed October 5, 2020. Particular attention should be given to Ingrid Muan, Ly Daravuth, and Reyum Publishing due to their groundbreaking work historicizing Cambodian culture and arts through archival research and oral history interviews. By publishing work in English and Khmer, they have also paved the way for scholars to create more collaborative work on Cambodian history. Much of this work stopped after the unfortunate and premature passing of Ingrid Muan in 2005. Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950’s and 1960’s* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2001). Ingrid Muan, “Haunted Scenes: Painting and History in Phnom Penh,” *Udaya* 6 (2005); Ingrid Muan, “States of Panic: Procedures of the Present in 1950s Cambodia,” *Udaya* 6 (2005); Ingrid Muan, “Citing Angkor: The ‘Cambodian Arts’ in the Age of Restoration, 1918–2000” (Ph.D., United States -- New York, Columbia University, 2001).

projects directed at Phnom Penh and the villages. While organizations like the SKS had envisioned mothers and fathers guiding their families in the work for national causes, the *Sangkum* created models of villages, homes, and citizens as the blueprint of a future country and citizenry. Examined through the ideals of the domestic and in the context of decolonization, this chapter argues that the state built on the urban anxieties of literacy, health, domesticity, and child-rearing to launch massive plans to ensure the protection and sovereignty of the vulnerable country. In this process, the state became more powerful while also creating a generation of young educated people with both loyalty to the nation-state and personal dreams to realize a better life for themselves and their families. Together, these loyalties and dreams would create tensions that could not be resolved by a state that was teetering on civil war.

The three sections of this chapter trace the massive state projects by drawing from *Sangkum* propaganda material, UNESCO reports, journals for school teachers, and interviews. The first section examines the beginning of the education campaigns in the 1950s. I illustrate how the state, with help from international experts, planned to educate young people along with the rural communities. In this section, I show a shift in attitudes towards girls' education. The second section examines more concrete plans for "community development" through "model villages" as well as bigger plans to create schools that acted as representations of the state in each village. Here, I demonstrate how the state attempted to transform the country by acting as a strong presence in each community and by more directly reaching youth through education. I consider the gendered components of these programs, which included female teachers in primary schools and specific dress, hygiene, and health guidelines directed towards female students and mothers. The final section examines the youth movement under Sihanouk. In this section, I argue that Sihanouk wanted to develop young people loyal to him and his visions for the state. While the movement

was supposed to rise above class, gender, and geographic differences, Sihanouk also used the youth to enact his Buddhist socialist approaches to social and political issues. Through these sections, I consider how the state become more entrenched in Cambodian homes, both in ways expected and unexpected by the *Sangkum* leadership.

Literacy Campaigns

In the 1940s and early 1950s, local leaders in Cambodian education began to collaborate with international organization to revitalize the education system so that the youth along with adults could gain skills identified as important for a modern and independent country. In 1946, the Ministry of Education became one of the first ministries transferred from the French to Cambodians.⁴ Unlike the military or economy, releasing control of the school system would have less consequence on the colonial power's control over the country's resources. At the same time, local control over education allowed King Sihanouk and political leaders to instill a sense of urgency to unite under the need for everyone to work together to engender a more literate and educated populace. Students started to attend school in numbers never seen during the colonial period. Meanwhile, adults who had never attended school learned how to read and write. These education campaigns, launched by local leaders collaborating with UNESCO, created the momentum for Cambodians to work together towards a collective goal to develop a modern Khmer country.

In the 1940s, respected educational leaders who had been working within the colonial school system began to take over the administrative duties. Formerly an educator at *l'ecole Malika*,

⁴ Charles Bilodeau, *Compulsory Education in Cambodia, Laos and Viet-Nam* (Paris: UNESCO, 1955): 28.

Princess PingPah served as the Minister of Education in 1952 before political leader Sam Sary was appointed the official Minister of Education in 1953.⁵ Besides working internally to solve their education problems, the Ministry of Education also sought external support for development of the school system. In 1949, Sisowath Monipong, President of the Council of Ministers, wrote to UNESCO that “[Cambodia] is desirous of taking an active part in international educational, scientific, and cultural work...”⁶ Once UNESCO accepted Cambodia as a member country, female leaders in education became important intermediaries between the international body and the local Ministry of Education. After decades of working with French teachers at Norodom College, Princess PingPeang became an important educational leader assigned to working with UNESCO and in the early 1950s, she wrote comprehensive reports on progress in the Cambodian education system.⁷ Khieu Ponnary, already known as an outstanding teacher, also worked with UNESCO and in 1952 Cambodia sent her to France to continue her studies in teaching and school administration.⁸ While women’s organizations like the SKS may not have become powerful entities educating women, certainly the ranks of associational leadership deployed their expertise to state endeavors.

Cambodian officials worked with UNESCO agents on the ground to begin spreading education to the general populace. Shortly after World War II, the international organization

⁵ “In Memory of HRH Princess Peng Pas Yukanthor (29th October),” *Kambuja*, November 1969.

⁶ Applications for membership of UNESCO, Executive Board, January 15, 1951.

⁷ *Annuaire international de l'éducation*, v. 14, 1952 (Paris: UNESCO, 1953) *Annuaire international de l'éducation*, v. 17, 1955 (Paris: UNESCO, 1956).

⁸ Samājiga Pī Nák Nai Samāgam Jen Dau Pant Vijjā Nau Prades Pārāṅg’ *Nārī*, September 1952, p. 12.

developed a special adult education program called “education de base” or “fundamental education” which was supposed to provide rural men and women with the knowledge and tools to improve their villages, cottage industries, and homes. Cambodia began to use the program in 1954. By all accounts, the Cambodian state was enthusiastic about the UNESCO fundamental education program. In the first year of implementation, Cambodia contributed 1.75 million Indochinese piastres to operations. On the ground, UNESCO staff reported that the “administrative and technical services of the various departments have co-operated in carrying out the programme in the villages; this applies particularly to the veterinary service and the rural engineering service.”⁹ The Ministry of Education directed the Fundamental Education Program and Men Chhum served as the National Director.

Cambodians were eager to begin improving institutions that they believed would have a positive influence on the populace that had been under colonial rule for ninety years. In the mid-twentieth century, urbanites were certainly anxious about developing “the character of each person” due to the fact that morality was lost when “Cambodia was in control of a foreign country.” According to one contributor to *Kampuchea*, the people needed to “try hard to wash away the dirt to be completely clean and must try hard to endeavor to follow the practices of an independent country.” These practices included reading books, magazines, and newspapers along with listening to the radio, sources of information that “speak about the character of the citizens in an independent country.”¹⁰ As hinted at by the writer, these skills and behaviors could be obtained through attention to the print and audio media circulated throughout the countryside. Educating men and

⁹ J.J.A. Frans, Chief of Mission, Fundamental Education Project in Cambodia, Jakarta Indonesia.

¹⁰ “Sīladhamr Saṃrâp Pal Raṭdh Nau Brades Aekarājy,” *Kāmbujā*, July 2, 1956.

women part of the overarching goal to engender the “cultural rehabilitation of the nation” which would be achieved primarily through the “total suppression of illiteracy of the masses.”¹¹

While the Ministry of Education carried out the UNESCO education program, the two entities developed different understandings of how education program should be structured and organized. While UNESCO separated education into “in school” education and “out of school” education, Cambodia’s Ministry of Education presented these various educational platforms as interlinked and connected to the state schools. The Ministry of Education wrote that “the school must not just improve the life of the schoolboy but all the people in the community, that is to say, the life of the children, the life of adolescents, and the life of adults in the entire community.”¹² Therefore, children and adults both could learn and grow from increased educational opportunities in the provinces. Nevertheless, UNESCO and the Fundamental Education branch under the Ministry of Education worked together for several years developing workshops, lessons, and publications that could help to eradicate illiteracy and teach villagers new skills. This program was just one component of several efforts to transform the villages into communities that reflected the values and knowledge highly regarded by the urban center and international development organizations.

The proponents of fundamental education aimed to teach literacy skills along with a variety of professional, health, society, and morality topics. In term of professional skills, the programs included agriculture, animal husbandry, and building houses, weaving, arts and crafts along with commercial techniques for economic progress. Courses on society and humanity included topics

¹¹ “Ouverture d’un Cours Pour Adultes dans le Khum de Sambok, Srok et Khet de Kratie,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, Décembre 1959.

¹² *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, September/October 1959.

on economic and social organization, political institutions and lessons on people in other parts of the world as well as the “proper qualities that permit man to live in the modern world,” such as personal judgment, freedom from fear and suspicions, and sympathy for other points of view. Finally, the program aimed to spread information on health and moral development, including practical hygiene lessons and changing traditional forms of conduct for new circumstances.¹³ Reports on the fundamental education programs oftentimes reported the numbers of men and women attending literacy classes, such as “a meeting of 180 villagers, men and women, with the Director of Fundamental Education...in the opening of night classes for illiterate adults.”¹⁴ In one instance, an article specifically focuses on the number of women attending courses, listing groups of fifty and sixty women attending classes, which indicates the particular concern about the rate of illiteracy among rural women.¹⁵

UNESCO needed Khmer teachers for these programs so the organization opened a teacher training center in Tonle Bati, a village fifteen miles from Phnom Penh. The teachers in training were “rural primary teachers...prepared to live and work among the people in the rural areas because they are already accustomed to rural life.” In the morning, the students studied theory and the rest of the day was devoted to applying their new teaching skills to the local communities. In the evening, they conducted “practical work and demonstrations in the villages; and courses for illiterates.”¹⁶ During a 1955 regional conference in Jakarta, the UNESCO staff explained that they

¹³ *Revue de l'Instituteur Khmer*, September/October 1959.

¹⁴ “Activite de l'Education de Base a Takeo,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, August 1959.

¹⁵ “Phnaek Kār Siksā Mansuss Jās,” *Bhūm Yoeng*, March 1958.

¹⁶ Orientation of agency programmes towards community development, 1960-1962, UNESCO.

lacked textbooks, pamphlets, publications, and documentation in simple language for the students and faced issues finding “candidates with sufficient qualifications, or who have had secondary education, and who are prepared to work with the villagers in rural areas.”¹⁷ A later report on the status of education in Cambodia mentioned that in 1955 the program trained twenty-seven teachers, including one woman, in Siemreap, Kompong-Thom, Kandal, and Battambang.¹⁸ These numbers are comparably low comparative to the number of men and women training to work as primary school teachers, suggesting that even in the beginning the nascent program faced problems attempting to send educators to villages around the country. While the “Fundamental Education” program may have lacked the manpower to initiate widespread programs, the focus on eradicating illiteracy remained a priority of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* throughout the 1960s.

During the 1960s, the state remained highly invested in demonstrating that the literacy campaigns successfully eradicated the high rates of illiteracy in the population. In 1967, the Ministry of Education published data on the number of adults attending literacy classes. Broken down by province and gender, the statistical chart shows the number of men and women without literacy skills and the number of people participating in literacy classes. Nationwide statistics suggest that 813,579 women and 348,206 men or around 20.80% of the population was illiterate at the end of 1966. In the previous two years, reportedly over 250,000 men and women attended literacy classes.¹⁹ Likely, Ministry of Education inflated the statistics on the illiteracy rates in order to support Sihanouk’s goals to emphasize the success of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Two years

¹⁷ J.J.A. Frans, Chief of Mission, Fundamental Education Project in Cambodia, Jakarta Indonesia.

¹⁸ International Yearbook of Education, v. 18, Paris: UNESCO, 1956.

¹⁹ *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, May 1967; *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer* March/April 1967.

later, *Kambuja* magazine printed a report from the *Daily Mirror* claiming that Cambodia's illiteracy rate was closer to 65% of the population. Chine Renne, Secretary of State of Information, rebutted this claim writing "[Cambodia] has one of the lowest illiteracy rates in the world at 1.5% due to the illiteracy campaign going on for the last thirteen years."²⁰ When Chine Renne refuted the *Daily Mirror*, she spoke to the strong desire to cultivate an educated populace and to demonstrate to the world that Cambodia, a neutral country that had tenuous ties with the United States and other imperial powers, was achieving progress through their *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* programs.

When I asked my narrators about their mother's educational history, a few women explained that their mothers (and sometimes fathers) learned to read in adult literacy classes taught in the evenings at the local wat or school. Narrator Pisey explained that her parents attended the evening classes because of Prince Sihanouk's encouragement and because of the general push for an educated country:

Yes, the period of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, he had what do you say, reform for education...he said, maybe let people learn, study, read and write... So my father allowed my mother to go to the literacy classes near my house, and from that time, my mother can read and write.²¹

Pisey, as well as several of my narrators, explained that that men and women of all ages became invested in education because of the strong encouragement from Prince Sihanouk. Pisey was my only narrator who described her mother's decision to attend literacy classes as a dependent on her father's approval. Other women simply remember their mothers learning in the schools or from their children. While these programs were not particularly uniform throughout the country, it is

²⁰ "A Letter to the International Press," *Kambuja*, February 1969.

²¹ March 22, 2018 interview.

apparent that the country was energized to provide opportunities for men and women to gain new skills promote by the government. Above all, the stories of literacy classes along with the statistics and program notes demonstrate that Cambodians were excited about gaining the literacy skills to access new information.

While villages, schools, and wats may have offered literacy classes for adults, the Cambodian state placed most of its attention on sweeping reforms to the education system for children. Historically, many boys ordained as monks for short periods during which time they learned basic literacy skills along with the tenets of Buddhism. Meanwhile, all Cambodians would have memorized or learned the oral poems, Buddhist stories, and *cpâps*. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the French had introduced an educational model that prepared students for the government and civil service, but only a small fraction of students attended the colonial schools that led to jobs in the government and civil service. Although the first girls school opened in 1904, only 5,400 girls had ever attended elementary school by 1945. Attendance in secondary schools was even more dire. Only 360 Cambodians had attended secondary school by 1945. Seventy-eight of those students were women.²² To put these numbers in perspective, the SKS had 40 active members in 1951—a significant percentage of the women who had attended secondary school (although we can assume that some of the women in SKS had never attended secondary school and possibly had never attended elementary school). Between World War II and independence in 1953, the school system expanded to accommodate thousands of new students enrolling in the schools. In 1948 – 1949, 40,578 students attended the state school. That number rose to 120,742

²² *La Femme Cambodgienne a l'ere du Sangkum* (Phnom Penh : Ministère de l'information, 1965). According to the statistics, girls comprised 6.3% of elementary school attendees and 21.7% of secondary school attendees.

in 1951 – 1952. The modernized wat schools also increased the number of students from 17,725 students in 1936 to 77,000 students in the early 1950s. These numbers illustrate that as Phnom Penh gained control from France to govern the country more schools were built and more families sent their children to school.

During this period, girls in particular started to attend school in higher numbers. Several of my narrators remember attending school at a time when communities and families were still contending with what it meant to send girls to school. Noich, a narrator born in Svay Rieng province along the Vietnam border, was one of the few girls attending school in the early 1950s. In her class of forty students, only a quarter of the students were girls. She explained that they attended school “because their fathers were officers.” Yet, she remembers community members supportive of the educational aspirations of the school children. Srey Neang, a narrator who was born in Oudong province, sneaked away while her parents napped so that she could attend classes at the local wat. The monk suggested that she purchase a chalkboard so that she could continue her studies at home. Srey Neang’s parents learned she was attending school when she asked for the chalkboard.²³ Her family eventually supported her educational pursuits but not all children were so lucky. Narrator Socheata who grew up in Takeo province only started attending school as a young teenager because her father wanted someone to accompany her brother. While her father supported her education, her mother disapproved of her spending time in school. While these women faced obstacles in their journey to education, all three continued on to successful careers, a goal that was not obtainable for many men and women.

²³ May 10, 2018 interview.

Although I interviewed many women who went to school in the 1950s and 1960s, many of my interviewees described at least one sibling—typically the eldest sister—who never attended school. Those women either surpassed schooling age by the time education opportunities became more widespread or their families decided not to send them to school so that they could take care of the family. As the state built more schools and as parents changed their attitudes on girls' education, children within one family may have had vastly different experiences with the education system and, by extension, the state. It is important to reflect on how the state's campaigns for education—which would also include model villages, new school buildings, and the scouting movements—would also shape the imaginations of youth envisioning a future much different than the one of their present or their family's past.

Model Villages

Along with promoting literacy and basic educational standards, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* leaders, along with outside experts from UNESCO and USAID, embarked on ambitious plans to renovate the cities, villages, and schools so that they reflected the visions of an independent Khmer state with literate, healthy, and happy communities. Building modern theaters, stadiums, health centers, and villages generated the visions of young men and women who could act and dance, jump and run, and govern in these new spaces. Building on the “fundamental education” programs of the 1950s, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* embarked on an ambitious community development program that included developing “model villages” that could be replicated throughout the country. Meanwhile, modern schools built in the villages upheld the promise of shedding a colonial past marked by suffering educational and economic infrastructures in favor of prosperity and new opportunities. Inside the walls of these schools, the male and female teachers modeled the ideal

public servant and taught students an array of subjects necessary for the modern citizen, including reading, math, hygiene, and morality. In this process, the state endeavored to transform homes and villages to become recognizably modern Khmer spaces with young citizens prepared to serve the state.

By the early 1960s, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* was experimenting with a few different approaches to sustaining social and economic change in the villages and cities. In the late 1950s, UNESCO substituted “fundamental education” for “community development” to describe their rural education programs. From the perspective of UNESCO, this change was attributed to a lack of real understanding about the meaning behind “fundamental education” and “adult education.”²⁴ In Cambodia, the *Sangkum* continued using “fundamental education” until at least 1963 but in 1960 Sihanouk declared community development as the agenda for the country’s 5-year plan. The Ministry of Planning hoped that the five-year plan of community development would strengthen the economic and social infrastructure of the country and raise the gross domestic income by 3%.²⁵ During this period, robust architectural projects transformed the horizon of Phnom Penh. The state commissioned famous architect Vann Molyvann to build the Olympic Stadium, housing developments, and the Chatamouk Theater along the riverside. Standing in stark contrast to the colonial buildings, these spaces imagined Khmer ascetics and architecture in a modern physicality

²⁴ For more on UNESCO and “fundamental education” see: Jens Boel “UNESCO’s Fundamental Education Program, 1946–1958: Vision, Actions and Impact,” In: Duedahl P. (eds) *A History of UNESCO*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 153 – 154. Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013): 108 – 113.

²⁵ Margaret Slocomb, *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010): 79. Slocomb quotes Rémy Prud’homme, *L’Économie Du Cambodge ..* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1969).

the served the purpose of Sihanouk's goals of neutrality, development, and economic stability.²⁶ The state experimented with building modern villages that reflected the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* priorities to support the education, health, and economic endeavors of the populace. Gaining expertise from abroad and commissioning local artists to produce a modern Khmer space, the state put forth a stronger vision for the domestic realm.

“Community development” was supposed to be a better and more expansive version of “fundamental education.” In a memo describing the new “community development” plans, the Ministry of Planning described a robust effort where everyone would have a “role to play in this common struggle for progress and well-being.” Minister of Planning Nhiek Tioulong explained that in order to make this progress, the country had adopted the organization methods “known around the world as community development.” Significantly, the proponents of this endeavor were blending global and local approaches to community development in a similar fashion that the SKS contemplated Euro-American and local forms of domesticity. Nhiek Tioulong continued his description of the natural transition to “community development” by arguing that Cambodia’s “fundamental education” program always understood its mission as “broader than just training individuals...and encompassed all activities of social life including education, health, nutrition, home, agriculture, livestock, etc.”²⁷ As described by a contributor to *La Dépêche du Cambodge*, the main differences between the programs was not in objectives but rather to “utilize to the maximum the existing material or human resources. The problem is to better organize.” Under the fundamental education plan, the Ministry of Education “controlled the activities of the

²⁶ Roger Nelson, “Locating the Domestic in Vann Molyvann’s National Sports Complex,” (*ABE Journal*, no. 11: 2017).

²⁷ “De l’Education de Base au Developpement Communautaire,” Ministère du Plan, 1961.

fundamental educators who work in the villages as intermediaries between the Ministry of Education and the provincial directions.”²⁸ Under the new plan, the Ministry of Planning—along with the Ministry of Social Affairs—would oversee the execution of the plans to educate and develop the villages. To that end, the endeavors to educate had expanded from the responsibility of one ministry to the concern of several ministries.

Model villages became perhaps the most emblematic project of the community development program. “Model villages” intended to propel the “modernization of the Khmer peasant” by improving “the conditions of life and of revenues of producers” and to increase “national production and accomplishments of the 5-year plan.” Model villages were brought to Cambodia through the Cold War development programs of the United States. In her work on 1950s Cambodia, Ingrid Muan has written that, “model homes, model villages, model roads, model farmers, and model toilets were all built with US aid money.” She also notes that Sihanouk also “[built] model villages, [installed] model walls, and generally pursues the same projects of infrastructure development and public good which the US had trumpeted as their aid.”²⁹ Significantly, by building model villages and model walls, Sihanouk translated his strategy of appropriating foreign ideas to the local needs of the country—similarly to how he developed a theory of Buddhist socialism and democracy that he argued was appropriate for the Cambodian context.

While Americans and the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* invested in various model village projects, Anlong Romiet Model Village became the most important and publicized project. Anlong

²⁸ Smok Chak, “Le développement communautaire,” *La Dépêche du Cambodge*, January 22, 1959.

²⁹ Ingrid Muan, “States of Panic: Procedures of the Present in 1950s Cambodia,” *Udaya* 6 (2005): 59 – 63.

Romiet, was a “national project in collaboration with international experts of the UN, FAO, International Bureau of Work, the World Health Organization, and the French Mission of Economic and Technical Aid.”³⁰ Model villages like Anlong Romiet were supposed to be “a case study for the government efforts to promote a better life for the rural population.” Moreover, the *Sangkum* leadership hoped that “the creation of community centers and of cooperatives would allow for the peasant to participate more in the nation community.”³¹ To that end, these model villages were supposed illustrate the kind of living envisioned for the population while also connecting the rural communities to Phnom Penh. The designers of the village hoped that eventually the “1177 rural centers scattered all over the country” would incorporate components of the model village.³² Anlong Romiet became particularly popular because the village was conveniently located within a short drive to Phnom Penh. Prince Sihanouk, civil servants, and foreign visitors could easily stop by the village to participate in a day of work or admire the progress.

Sangkum leadership and outside experts praised the achievements of Anlong Romiet. In 1966, Dr. Robert Garry, a professor at the University of Montreal, provided an in depth description of the village. As described by *Realities Cambodgiennes*, “Robert Garry, who first came to Cambodia 35 years ago, was pleasantly surprised by the progress made at Anlong Romiet. ‘I must stress,” he noted in the village's guest book, “the harmony of this development: it modernizes, without sacrificing traditional values and insists on human values: health, education, hygiene,

³⁰ Cahiers du Sangkum, May 1962.

³¹ Cahiers du Sangkum, May 1961.

³² Cahiers du Sangkum, April 1958 – May 1962. “Le Role et l’Action Departement du Travail et de L’Action Sociale,” *Réalités Cambodgiennes*, September 16, 1960.

better being , raising the standard of living.”³³ Garry was particularly impressed that Anlong Romiet reflected the country’s mission to develop a socialist model that did not undermine individual property or material wealth. In other words, he praised Sihanouk for not adopting the kind of socialist plans found elsewhere. When considered through the perspective of Sihanouk, it is clear that Anlong Romiet not only rejected socialist systems that shunned private property but also that the village had become a material form of Buddhist socialism, which relied on the wealthy and powerful helping the less fortunate and which emphasized Cambodia’s long monarchical and agricultural social systems.

With the new structures designed by famous Khmer architect Vann Molyvann, Anlong Romiet included “a public hall, medical consulting room, sanitary building, home for rural midwives, cooperative store, children’s playground, and sports ground.” Besides including new health centers and communal areas for meeting and leisure, “informal lectures and prudent propaganda” encouraged inhabitants “to establish kitchen gardens and fruit orchards, and three nurseries to distribute seedlings to the farmers.”³⁴ Significantly, these plans included spaces for the kind of work described as “motherly” duties to the nation. In particular, the design emphasized health, childbirth and childcare, and nutrition. Meanwhile, the village was supposed to support the eradication of illiteracy. According to Garry, illiteracy rates in Anlong Romiet had decreased from 58% of inhabitants to 8% in only five years. While visitors certainly found Anlong Romiet to be impressive, it seems unlikely that any other village—even the other model villages—received this kind of attention. Anlong Romiet instead offered a material vision of a future Cambodia. Since the

³³ “Gazette du Royaume: Visite à Anlong Romiet,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, July 15 1966.

³⁴ “Gazette du Royaume: Visite à Anlong Romiet,” *Realites Cambodgiennes*, July 15 1966.

state proposed that villagers should shoulder the burden of transforming their villages to look like Anlong Romiet, the project never expanded throughout the country.

What was the impact of these community development programs and model villages? Most propaganda from the era discusses the massive success of the programs, particularly in publications dedicated to the successes of the government. Certainly, the projects resulted in better health programs for citizens. To help working mothers, the state granted women the right to pre- and post-natal leave—a working right that had been promised by Siv Eng Tong during her run for National Assembly.³⁵ As part of the broader community development plan, the state implemented other health centers and hygiene projects that addressed concerns about the population’s health, such as the Kantha Bopha Pediatric Hospital and School Hygiene programs.³⁶ Meanwhile, magazines like *Cahiers du Sangkum* indicate that the state did in fact build many roads, bridges, dams, and other infrastructure projects that would have created a more accessible and livable countryside. At the same time, historian Margaret Slocomb has written about the economic issues of the community development 5-year plan.³⁷ Despite the ambitious goals and small victories within specific programs, “community development” did not transform the country in five years.

³⁵ December 16, 2018 interview.

³⁶ “1958 – 1962 Ruralism and Community Development,” *Cahiers du Sangkum*, May 1962. Kantha Bopha was Prince Sihanouk’s daughter, who died at the age of 5 from leukemia. Her death, and his veneration of her, has been the interest of scholars for some time. In an email exchange with John Marston, he explained to me that: The monk I am interested in returned to Cambodia for the first time when the Sanchi relics toured Cambodia. He seems to have been in Cambodia at the time that Kontha Bopha died and my guess is that this had something to do with the bond between Sihanouk and Dharmawara Mahathera. He came accompanying relics of Buddhist saints and Sihanouk would have an interest in relics over the years. Kontha Bopha's ashes became a sort of relic for him, and he carried portions of them around with him.

³⁷ Margaret Slocomb, *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010).

By the mid-1960s, the state turned its attention towards developing “Khmerization” programs which were supposed to create a stronger national community composed of the different ethnic communities in Cambodia. Khmerization programs included designating ethnic minorities as Khmer-Chinese, Khmer-Cham, and Khmer-Loeu (an ethnic hill tribe), and so on.³⁸ Through the programs, the *Sangkum* leadership introduced agricultural practices and Khmer culture to ethnic hill tribes. Sihanouk even built model villages in Ratanakiri province, the home of several ethnic upland communities.³⁹ The expansion of model villages to Ratanakiri—with no real evidence that the model villages had enacted significant changes in the other provinces of Cambodia—suggests that Sihanouk was attempting to reproduce the villages as experiments in different regions of the country. Furthermore, reproducing these programs beyond the Khmer village communities further illustrates the state’s deepening anxiety about maintaining control over a country that bordered war zones and imperial powers. Certainly, by the late 1960s, Sihanouk was deeply aware about the precariousness of his position of power.

While the community development programs did not produce the promised changes, the school system always remained a high priority for all Cambodians, including *Sangkum* leaders, village residents, and school children. In the wake of independence, the Ministry of Education endeavored to create an education system that served all Cambodians. Minister of Education Sam Sary explained:

“the school is open to everyone. Knowledge cannot be a privilege reserved for the few because of their fortune, appearance, or religion. For the school should be accessible to all,

³⁸ Ann Keo, “To Give Education a National Character,” *Kambuja*, April 1969.

³⁹ “Samdech in Rattanakiri Province: Visit to the Model Village of Ka Tien (22nd April),” *Kambuja*, May 1969.

the state alone can direct it, because only the state can make it free, and even obligatory, and protect it from any particular philosophical or religious influence...”⁴⁰

While school system under the French colonial order trained students to become civil servants, the Ministry of Education in the 1950s and 1960s endeavored to teach all men and women. Sam made these statements only a month after Sihanouk declared official independence from the French Union. The desire for an education system that served all students reflects the excitement to build a country that united the citizens under the goal of progress and sovereignty. The school system became one of the most important vectors to promote the state’s agenda for the country.

When parents began to send their children to school in higher numbers in the 1950s, the young students entered buildings that represented the independent state. Everything from the school grounds to the training of teachers and uniforms of the student populace was carefully considered by the Ministry of Education as an important component to asserting the authority of the state in the daily life of villages.⁴¹ One month after independence from the French Union, Minister of Education Sam Sary explained to teachers that “it is important not to lose sight of the reasons...that the state has intervened in Education and for which it entrusts you with the education of the students.” For Sam, the “school forms citizens” and “the state represents the interests of the national community.” After years of political unrest stemming from frustrated citizens eager for national sovereignty, the ministers guided by Sihanouk envisioned “public order” for the “interest

⁴⁰ *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, December 1953.

⁴¹ David Ayres has argued that “for the first time in Cambodian history, the state assumed a genuine presence in the localized world of the country’s rural villages through the erection of schools and, in turn, the appointment of state representatives: teachers” (41). I largely agree with Ayres although this section fleshes out that authority stance in the village and considers the implications more so than is found in Ayres book. Throughout this chapter, I also try to make sense of the programs that extended beyond the elementary and secondary school classrooms.

of the national community.”⁴² The school was supposed to ensure that the interests of sovereignty, independence, and unity under Sihanouk was represented throughout the country.

In his first months in office, Sam provided his assessment of the school buildings and grounds and recommendations for improvement. He wrote, “I have been deeply struck by the dull and bare appearances of the classrooms and the grounds.” To remedy the underwhelming appearance of the school grounds, Sam proposed a few essential and supplementary renovations to the school. One of his highest priorities included placing a fence with gate inspired by “the traditional *Khlong-Tvear* [arch or gateway]” around the school grounds. The decorative fences replicated the *wat* (temple) structures found in Phnom Penh and the villages. Additional—and highly suggested—arrangements included a football or athletic field near the school, various fruit trees, and a school garden. In regards to the gardens, Sam pointed out that “it is regrettable that previously developed vegetable gardens have not received sufficient maintenance from school managers.” Perhaps most interestingly, Sam emphasized that the primary school inspectors must be committed to “promoting the birth of a family school” in order to replace the “boring schools” of the past.⁴³ When he sketched out his plan for the renovated schools, Sam envisioned building a school in every village that served the entire community.

Building schools became the work of the capital, villages, philanthropists, and ordinary villagers. In order to support massive expansions to the education system, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* dedicated a significant amount of its expenditure to the educational infrastructure. In 1962 and 1963, the Ministry of Education received 14.8% and 20% of the national budget. These numbers remained around the same in the late 1960s with the 21.7% and 22% of the budget

⁴² *Revue de l'Instituteur Khmer*, December 1953.

⁴³ *Revue de l'Instituteur Khmer*, December 1953.

dedicated to education—second only after the National Defense.⁴⁴ The Ministry of Education attempted to create an education system that combined “Khmer tradition with French humanities and American techniques.”⁴⁵ This curriculum was intended to prepare young graduates for an array of job possibilities, from agriculture and vocational trades to teaching, civil servant positions, and advanced degrees. Additional domestic science curriculums aimed at young women also prepared the next generation of Khmer mothers. In school and after school, students learned about civics and participated in the J.S.R.K. programs. To that end, the schools were supposed to create well-rounded citizens who were prepared to use their skills and knowledge to build the country.

Charles Bildeau, a UNESCO representative working in Cambodia in the 1950s, wrote in his reports that villagers oftentimes helped to build new schools and sought out the teachers for their villagers.⁴⁶ His reports are substantiated with news about men and women donating to schools as well as oral histories from women whose parents helped to build the schools. Srey Neang, the narrator whose attended school for several months before informing her parents, remembered her father helping to build the village school only a year or two after she had started attending school. As a local businessman who built funeral urns, he had the capital and skills to help with the project.⁴⁷ Other narrators also remembered their parents contributing to school building projects—usually secondary schools. Moreover, newspapers and magazines oftentimes included notes about wealthy philanthropists who donated funds to build new schools or help repair schools that had

⁴⁴ Ayres, 46; Slocomb, 118.

⁴⁵ Frederick P. Munson, *Area Handbook for Cambodia*, (Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963.)

⁴⁶ Charles Bilodeau, *Compulsory Education in Cambodia, Laos and Viet-Nam* (Paris: UNESCO): 28.

⁴⁷ May 11, 2018 interview.

been damaged. While the Minister of Education may have proposed the look of the schools, the entire country worked together to erect the walls and doors to the classrooms.

By the early 1960s, the regulations for schools became more elaborate. In 1962, the Ministry of Education explained that “all khums and phums are required to establish a school, either at the town center or at the centers of populations far from the town centers”⁴⁸ Specific regulations for schools included classrooms with a minimum height of four meters, from floor to ceiling and a space of 1.25 meters per student. Classes were not to have more than 45 students. The classrooms were supposed to be well lit and ventilated with good aeration. Additional notes described the expectations for inflammable floors and staircases and specific number of toilets and urinals for the boys and girls.⁴⁹ Besides providing infrastructure requirements, the Ministry of Education explained the purpose of the school to nurture “the physical, intellectual, moral, and social development” of the child. An ideal school was supposed to include a drawing room, workshop, and “for the girls, rooms and amenities for household education (in particular sewing, cooking, and ironing).” Furthermore, the schools to “assure in good condition the physical development of children” were supposed to include a “medical cabinet with amenities and necessary materials” along with a playground, physical education room, sinks and showers.⁵⁰ The more elaborate plans for the schools and grounds illustrated how the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* wanted to the schools to become the spaces to mold the youth into productive citizens and to show everyone the characteristics prized by the state. To that end, the state took on many of the “motherly” duties proposed by the SKS and other intellectuals in the 1950s.

⁴⁸ *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, March/April 1962.

⁴⁹ *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, March/April 1964.

⁵⁰ *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, March – April 1965.

The state utilized Phnom Penh-trained teachers to ensure that the schools oversaw the development of the child. The teacher who stood inside the walls of the school each day was supposed to exemplify the ideals of good citizenry promulgated by Phnom Penh. The Cambodian educator was supposed to “personify education, the truth, correction, good education, all in the good citizen of the nation” through their “health, conduct, and their life path.” Even their house was supposed to be “enlightened, proper, orderly, and welcoming” with a garden and fruit trees. Finally, and above all:

“As a leader of the community, the good instructor contributes to improve quality of life of villagers with their knowledge of practical hygiene, in agriculture, and artisan work. He devotes his leisure time to the fight against illiteracy and the education of adults in his village. Finally, he will make his school the cultural center of the village.”⁵¹

While community development programs were not always a strong presence in the villages across the country, the state had endeavored to send teachers to each village. In this way, the schools and teachers also took on many of the goals outlined in fundamental education and community development programs.

While the state held high hopes for the teachers as important representatives of the state, the lack of personnel presented one of the largest hurdles to the education system. During a 1955 meeting with educational associations and leaders, attendees decided that they needed to recruit three hundred new teachers for the provinces. To accomplish this goal, the Ministry of Education opened new 5th and 6th year classes in the *Collège des Jeunes Filles* and enticed new teachers with access to various services, special allowances, accommodation, and service cars.⁵² Sihanouk

⁵¹ *Revue L’Instituteur Khmer*, June 1964.

⁵² “Un Congrès des Membres de l’Association pour l’Extension de l’Enseignement,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, October 25, 1955.

proposed creating an autonomous fund where interested donors could donate funds to achieve these goals. In the spirit of leadership, he donated the first 100,000 riels.⁵³ Within two months, several philanthropists from the provinces donated the funds to assist with the recruitment of 37 new teachers.⁵⁴ Recruiting new teachers with incentives and special accommodations proved to be effective. Many of my narrators who were retired teachers described how they received high salaries and enjoyed the respect of their communities during the 1950s and 1960s. Teaching became a respected career path for young men and women from both urban and rural backgrounds.

All teachers were trained in Phnom Penh at the National Pedagogical Institute and Kompong Kantout Teacher Training College, training centers run by the Ministry of Education and the United States. Kompong Kantout was established in 1957 by the United States Agency of International Development (USAID) to train future teachers in American teaching methods.⁵⁵ Narrator Noich, who had described her experiences as one of the few girls enrolled in school in Svay Rieng, learned about Kompong Kantout when she went to Phnom Penh to sit for the entrance exam for the National Pedagogical Institute. Having heard about the school's good reputation, she decided to apply for the program. She left her village and parents in Svay Rieng to live with her fellow teachers-in-training on the campus just outside of Phnom Penh. Once prospective teachers were accepted into the Kompong Kantout training program, they moved into the dormitories and

⁵³ “Un Congrès des Membres de l’Association pour l’Extension de l’Enseignement,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, October 25, 1955.

⁵⁴ “Communiqué du Comité de l’Association pour le Développement de l’Enseignement Primaire dans la Province de Kampong-Thom,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, December 1955.

⁵⁵ Munson, *Area Handbook for Cambodia*. From its inception in 1957, Kompong Kantout enrolled an even number of men and women to each new cohort. In 1964, 400 men and 403 women attended the program (in contrast to the 460 men and 83 women who attended the National Pedagogical Institute).

attended courses for two years. Two overarching goals structured the program: “to train primary school teachers with a new formula, given the needs and the problems of the nation” and “to endow future educators with a cultural and social formation, with a scientific and practical formation present between those with a narrow correlation and dosed in a carefully calculated proportion.”⁵⁶ As Noich succinctly explained, she studied “housework and good manners, in addition to mathematics, science, pedagogy, dancing, songs, and psychology.”⁵⁷ The teachers learned academic and domestic skills that they would then teach in the urban and provincial schools.

After two years of training at Kompong Kantout, the new teachers were deployed to schools throughout the country. In the early 1960s, the school curriculum was supposed to “make male and female students accomplished, free and conscious citizens, skillful and hardworking laborers.” Moreover, the Ministry of Education wanted students to learn not just through memorization but through the process of analysis and comparison.⁵⁸ Noich and other teachers remained abreast of education developments through the *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, a French and Khmer journal that served as a curriculum and informational guide for teachers in the state schools. The journal is a testament to the imperial and local tensions on the educational landscape. Published in French and Khmer language, the journal included speeches and notes from the Minister of Education along with information on achievements in the enrollment increases along with essays penned by intellectuals about the issues facing Cambodia and summaries from UNESCO meetings and the observations from American education experts. The detailed journal,

⁵⁶ *Revue de L’Instituteur Khmer*, October 1958. May 1, 2018 interview. May 11, 2018 interview.

⁵⁷ May 1, 2018 interview.

⁵⁸ *Revue de L’Instituteur Khmer*, October 1963.

published every month, provided teachers with not just educational tools but also the most up to date information on *Sangkum* goals and programs for the country.

Besides designing the schools and training the teachers, the Ministry of Education also turned its attention to the physical appearance and health of the students. In 1959, the Ministry of Education issued a circular urging School Inspectors to monitor the dress of their students because “the education of a people is judged in the street, at first sight, by the dress and attitudes of its young and old citizens.” The circular attended to girls’ dress in particular by arguing that “schoolgirls must be distinguishable from other girls or married women, by simple and practical clothing (skirt and shirt). Make-up is uncalled for.” The suggestions continued with assertions that, “transparent or semi-transparent fabric, skirts, or sweaters that emphasize the feminine form, are prohibited” and “girls must fix their hair. Curly hair, or too much hair, is not recommended because it requires a lot of care and distracts from studies.” Finally, the circular stated that “girls pronounced taste for jewelry needs to be gradually combated” because wearing jewelry impeded exercise and invited theft. The plans to help teachers implement a dress code for students further reveals that the teachers were not supposed to just teach the standard subjects but also help to implement standard approaches to dress and behavior. At the same time, the Ministry of Education did not want to deter parents from sending their children to school. Pung Peng Cheng, the husband of Siv Eng Tong, advised teachers to use “tact and extreme caution so as not to upset the parents of students who may not understand the above measures imposed on their students.”⁵⁹ To that end, the state needed to ensure that parents were invested in any changes or updates to the educational program.

⁵⁹ *Revue de L’Instituteur Khmer*, October 1959.

When the Minister of Education wrote a letter to teachers at the beginning of the school year in 1962, he happily announced that several schools in Phnom Penh and a few schools in the provinces adopted the uniforms suggested by the Direction of Pedagogical Services. Other schools recommended that students wear clean clothes and presentable hair and others “had gone further” by banning jewelry and formfitting clothes on young girls. To this, the Director exclaimed, “so many happy signs of the evolution of Cambodian society.” While the director observed these changes, he also reported that recent journal articles “protested the uniforms of our young girls.” While the director acknowledged the importance of public opinion regarding the uniforms, he also explained that “the development of Cambodian society must be made in the schools.” In his perspective, the young men and women in secondary schools were careless in their dress, which proved that “everything [the Ministry attempted to do in the primary schools] is destined to be destroyed in the secondary.”⁶⁰ By focusing their attention on the outfit choices of the secondary school girls, the administration signaled that the bodies of women needed to be monitored in order to ensure the continued “evolution” of Khmer society.

Besides dress, administrators also paid attention to the hygiene of schools and children. The Ministry of Education administered the school hygiene programs in order to inspect students for ailments or other medical problems while also teaching children about taking care of their body.⁶¹ Throughout the 1960s, the school hygiene programs were run by women, seemingly deemed to be the best administrators of that kind of program. Ms. Phy Thien Lay, wife of the Undersecretary of Education, directed the program during the early years when the Ministry of

⁶⁰ *Revue de L'Instituteur Khmer*, July 1962.

⁶¹ *Revue de l'Instituteur*, May 1964 ; *Revue de l'Instituteur*, October 1964.

Education held training days on hygiene education at the Institute of National Pedagogy.⁶² During a speech about the program, Ms. Phy Thien Lay urged teachers to recognize their important role in overseeing this matter.⁶³ 1962 – 1963 statistics on the programs suggest that they were fairly successful: thirty schools in Phnom Penh, ninety-one schools in Battambang, one-hundred thirteen schools in Kampot, two-hundred twenty nine schools in Kandal, and two-hundred forty three schools in Kampong Cham, among others, examined student hygiene.⁶⁴ Statistics like these helped to illustrate the efficacy of the programs. Furthermore, it is apparent that hygiene was no longer just the concern of a family or village. Rather it was a national issue.

The school hygiene programs endured through the late 1960s when Director of School Hygiene, Dr. Oung-Sat wrote in-depth reports on hygiene and nutrition concerns. In one instance, *Revue de l'Instituteur* printed her commentary on the hygiene reports conducted by Chau Chung, the head of primary schools in Baray, Kompong Thom. She points out that the school directors need to pay more attention to the courtyards and the classrooms in the schools. For example, she proposes that they plant more trees and flowers in the outside spaces of the school. Further, she found the hygiene amenities in the classrooms to be wholly insufficient. While the school grounds and classrooms did not meet expectations, she determined that the students were sufficiently clean—although she reminded the directors that “they need to keep track to ensure children comb their hair and wear clean clothes.”⁶⁵ Ironically, the schools, supposedly representing the state in

⁶² “Ceremonie d'Ouverture d'un Deuxieme Cours Pratique d'Education Sanitaire,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, August 21 1959.

⁶³ “Ceremonie D'Ouverture des Cours Pratique D'Education Sanitaire,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, August 6 1959.

⁶⁴ *Revue de l'Instituteur Khmer*, September 1963.

⁶⁵ *Revue de l'Instituteur Khmer*, November 1966.

villages scattered across the country, received more critique than the provincial children whose health and cleanliness had caused concern in the capital.

Later, Dr. Uong Sath wrote an essay on food and nutrition of the students. She explained that in the previous year 27,723 students received care from the School Hygiene program because of maladies related to an “unbalanced diet.” She exclaims that “nationally, almost all parents neglect to provide their children with a food ration sufficient in quantity and quality. Are they doing it out of inattention, egoism, or lack of budget?” She goes on to explain that the diet is unbalanced due to lack of protein from plants and animals along with “overloaded carbohydrates mostly from rice consumption.” Further, she argues, “the population is nourished more and more by poorly milled rice.” She solves the problem by proposing that parents follow her prescribed meals and that donors and parent-teacher-student associations build school cafeterias.⁶⁶ Her solution reflects a common refrain in these discussions about social or educational problems. While the urban experts identified the problems and wrote about their concerns, they oftentimes suggested that the villagers needed recognize the problem and work towards the proposed solutions.

The leaders of the hygiene program also encouraged teachers to educate their students on matters of hygiene, health, and other domestic tasks. One writer assured teachers that “you can teach hygiene at any time. For example, the teacher can conduct a cleanliness inspection several times a week.”⁶⁷ Nhek Suong provided tips for the teacher attempting to integrate household education into her classroom. According to her, “household education is not meant to be taught from the teacher’s desk.” She equated “active lessons” as good lessons and lessons outside of the

⁶⁶ *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, December 1966.

⁶⁷ *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, February 1961.

classroom as the best lessons. For example, she suggested teaching sewing under the shade of a tree “so that classmates can talk to each other while they sew.”⁶⁸ She also encouraged teachers take their student “to the community clinic for lessons in hygiene and childcare and [to see] beautiful babies and sick children” and “to go the market for home economics.” To help teachers provide these lessons for their students, *Revue de L’Instituteur Khmer* promised to print articles each month.⁶⁹ These lessons were not just for students—*Revue* contributor Nhek also encouraged the teachers to find ways to invite mothers to the school to participate in the lesson. By proposing that the school was the center of the village and learning and by encouraging teachers to connect with students *and* parents, the Ministry of Education further promoted that the school could help to transform and modernize homes, villages and, therefore, the country.

While community development programs may not have transformed villages across the country, the spread of education certainly began to transform the home. Young men and women who learned lessons in schools returned home to teach lessons to their mothers and sisters who had not attended schools. My narrator Sophany said that her mother remarked that her daughters knew more than she knew because they were well educated; therefore, she did not need to teach them about womanly work.⁷⁰ Another narrator Samedy explained that she and her sisters taught her mother to read so that she could read the newspapers, including *Kampuchea*, *Santapheap*, and *Angkor Thom*. In our conversations, she also mentioned that she taught her mother about the importance of arranging furniture and purchased furniture for their home because “her mother did not know about these things.” Other narrators also described the children of the family teaching

⁶⁸ *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, October 1960.

⁶⁹ *Revue de l’Instituteur Khmer*, October 1960.

⁷⁰ March 30, 2018 interview.

their mother to read. Phina, a narrator from Kandal province, explained: “My mother learned at home. My brother taught my mother. They had classes at the wat so my mother learned at home and my father learned at the wat.”⁷¹ In this way, school children participated in the wide-reaching education efforts by bringing home the knowledge obtained in the schools.

In the provinces, the *Sangkum* had endeavored to impress upon families and students the importance of education. This effort was widely successful and young people in rural communities were inspired to continue their education even though they faced significant barriers. In her 1959 – 1960 ethnographic study in Kandal province, May Ebihara wrote that “several West Svay children now dream of a secondary education and the possibility of becoming teachers or civil servants, though it is uncertain how many of these aspirations will actually be fulfilled unless the government can expand scholarship programs.”⁷² These difficulties were pronounced in stories from my narrators who tried to seek secondary school education outside of their villages. Socheata and Srey Neang, my two interlocutors whose families tepidly allowed their daughters to begin attending elementary school, recalled their difficult paths to receiving the secondary school education necessary for a successful career outside of the village.

After finishing elementary school Srey Neang left her village to continue her studies in Phnom Penh. Her village did not have a secondary school. She recalled the immense difficulties that accompanied her secondary school education. Her host family in Phnom Penh did not feed her during her first few days in their house. A few years later, they accused her of stealing clothes. She worked as a maid for the family while she studied and remembered, “I was very sad, all of my

⁷¹ April 23, 2018 interview.

⁷² May Ebihara, *Svay: A Khmer Village in Cambodia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018): 217. Book adapted from Ebihara’s dissertation.

books were so dusty from the charcoal dust of the kitchen because I had to cook and learn at the same time.”⁷³ She explained that she did not do very well in her secondary school studies because of her living situations. Meanwhile, her brother lived at a wat in Phnom Penh, a common solution for provincial boys who travelled to the city for education. Without this kind of system for women, aspirational female students needed to find family or contacts in Phnom Penh.⁷⁴ Similarly, Socheata traveled to Kandal province from her home in Takeo to attend secondary school at her cousin’s school. In exchange for staying in the home, Socheata cleaned the house for the family. She also recalled the challenge of studying while acting as the family’s maid. On top of that, her mother did not support her pursuit of secondary education. Yet, both women wanted to continue their studies so that they could find careers and lives outside of the village.⁷⁵

Srey Neang eventually continued on to Kampong Kantout, which she attended for only one year before the school was closed because of bombing threats and the civil war. She married a fellow teacher and raised her family. In 1959, nineteen-year-old Socheata traveled to Phnom Penh from her home in Takeo province to join the parachute division of the Cambodian military. She decided to enter the military because her family was poor. She worked in the parachute division of the military for twelve years, first working in a folding division and then as a secretary, a position that required a little French. After the *coup d’etat* in 1969, she worked in the logistics division for Lon Nol. Meanwhile, she helped arrange elections in the 1960s and the 1970s and

⁷³ May 11, 2018 interview.

⁷⁴ The lack of living accommodations continues to be an issue for women in Cambodia. While provincial students have better access to secondary schools now, most students still need to commute to Phnom Penh or other provincial cities for college. Some NGOs have attempted to create dormitories for female students. Students also look for relatives or acquaintances. I have also heard of families renting apartments where several family members will live while their daughters attend university.

⁷⁵ September 1, 2018 interview.

even convinced her husband to run for political office, although “he was unsuccessful because of corruption,” a refrain about politics that did not disappear during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Her decisions about education and work transformed her family’s socio-economic situation and her own life trajectory. While Socheata and Srey Neang’s peers certainly shared these dreams of a city career, many young Cambodians would not find similar experiences.

For students who attended secondary school, finding employment proved to be even more difficult and the *Sangkum* became frustrated with the rising number of young people searching for jobs in the city. As early as 1959, Sihanouk requested that political leaders begin to work with provincial governments to find a way to encourage—or force—the return of “people who have deserted their rice fields.” While the Ministry of Education actively prepared young people with the skills to find new careers, Sihanouk argued that slowing down the rural migration to the city was “of the most serious importance for the economy and the life of the country.”⁷⁶ According to the US State Department, 5,000 applicants were applying for every 40 openings in the administration, police, and army by 1963. Meanwhile, Kampong Kantout was training up to 800 students in 1962 alone—a huge difference from 1955 when the state had hoped to train 300 new teachers total for the schools. While students wanted to find jobs in the state, the state was not able to keep up with the demand and in the latter half of the decade young people milled about in the city hoping to find jobs that would never appear.

From proposing model villages and plans for schools to preparing community lessons helping to teach young women about hygiene and home economics, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* attempted to extend its influence beyond the capital and provincial cities. While community

⁷⁶ *Les Cahiers du Sangkum: Revue Périodique des Realisations du Sangkum*, May to December 1959.

development programs were supposed to transform every village in Cambodia, these efforts largely did not pan out in the way envisioned by Sihanouk and the Ministry of Planning. The model villages did not replicate in every *phum* and *khum* of the country. At the same time, the state always focused more of its attention on the youth, as evidenced by the immense funding towards the Ministry of Education as well as the extensive plans and materials related to educating children in the schools. Through these programs, the state began to replicate domestic ideals on a national level through the school system. This program was successful in that students brought their lessons home and young people of the provinces began to seek new careers and livelihoods. Yet, the state was unable to keep up with the growing numbers of educated men and women. Many young people felt frustrated that they had worked hard without finding the benefits of an urban life or civil servant job. As will become apparent in the next section, national interests, local community concerns, and the balance between unity and Buddhist socialist approaches to social problems became increasingly frayed as Sihanouk attempted to maintain a corps of enthusiastic young people.

Youth Movements under the Sangkum Reastr Niyum

As part of the effort to educate the young people, the *Sangkum* leadership emphasized imparting a civic education that prepared all the young people to protect the nation. While school curriculum included lessons in civics and morality, Sihanouk also founded a youth movement known as the *yuvān* or *yuvānī* or by the French *Jeunesse Socialiste Royale Khmère* (J.S.R.K.). The J.S.R.K. learned about civics through lessons in afterschool programs and a special state-produced magazine for the youth. In these forums, the J.S.R.K. leaders suggested that the youth rise above class, gender, and geographic differences in “service to the country, religion, and king.” While Sihanouk framed the J.S.R.K. as a youth movement that inspired unity and helping each other, the

organization also conducted military training.⁷⁷ Sihanouk envisioned the youth as future leaders who overcame social differences and also endeavored to create a generation that prioritized the royal state. Through this process, the *Sangkum* leadership attempted to further extend the female thinkers' visions of households as the key to the success of the nation by suggesting that the united national community should be a prioritized by the youth. By conducting trainings and creating community service days, the state took on the efforts to raise the youth to be the kind of citizens envisioned by Sihanouk.

In the earliest discussions about the importance of the J.S.R.K., leaders emphasized that the organization would allow young people to break away from the social organization of families to instead prioritize the state. Significantly, the youth was imagined as an identity separate from gender and class. In 1957, leftist Chau Seng wrote about the ability for a youth movement to “detach [young people] from the family to go to [youth communities]” in order to “find this freedom of soul best, this solidarity that they need.” Chau Seng saw youth groups as important for “the realization of an ideal life.”⁷⁸ In order to achieve this goal, the J.S.R.K. was supposed to be a place for young people to learn about civics so that they could develop a nationalistic spirit. In order to achieve the goal of creating the next generation of Khmer leaders, the organization was supposed to ensure that “young people are brought into close contact with the country's leaders and attend lectures on political and civic affairs.”⁷⁹ By emphasizing that the youth should learn from the

⁷⁷ Katherine Ann Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁷⁸ “Utilite Des Mouvements de Jeunesse: Accès Aux Interets Civiques et Politiques,” *Bulletin de La Jeunesse*, July 15, 1957.

⁷⁹ “La J.S.R.K. D’Aujourd’hui (The R.K.S.Y. Today),” Imprimerie du Ministère de l’Information, January 3, 1960.

country's leaders, the male *Sangkum* leaders developed a way to expand upon and nationalize the arguments that mothers and households teaching children about morals and duties to society. As *Sangkum* rhetoric began to emphasize a more specific vision for solving the country's problems through Buddhist socialism, the leaders needed a generation of young people prepared to follow Sihanouk's lead.

In order to develop a corps of citizenry prepared to be national leaders, the J.S.R.K. emphasized civic education as foundational to the organization's goals. The J.S.R.K. was supposed to focus on a "total education of the nation's youth," and, according to Chau Seng, the civic work taken on by the J.S.R.K. was supposed to help solve the issue of "the gap between taught morality and social habits; hence [the] attitude of opposition, of revolt, so frequently asserted."⁸⁰ Together, the schools and the J.S.R.K. were supposed to teach young people that "a good citizen puts all others above himself."⁸¹ Besides creating a civic curriculum for the schools, the government also supported the development of youth magazine *Dassanāvattī Nai Yuvān/ Bulletin de La Jeunesse*, published in Khmer and French, to answer questions from young people about Cambodian politics and society. Beginning in 1957, the magazine was distributed by the Ministry of Information to students into private and public secondary schools.⁸² Questions ranged from "why did Sihanouk create the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and what are some of the interests of the political party?" to "why were many people uneducated at the time of independence?" These leading questions illustrate how the *Sangkum* envisioned using the J.S.R.K. and civics education to direct youth

⁸⁰ "Utilite Des Mouvements de Jeunesse: Accès Aux Interets Civiques et Politiques," *Dassanāvattī Nai Yuvān/ Bulletin de La Jeunesse*, July 1957.

⁸¹ *Revue de l'Instituteur Khmer*, September 1960.

⁸² *Dassanāvattī Nai Yuvān / Bulletin de La Jeunesse*, Juin 1957.

support towards the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Moreover, since the questions were answered by the capital leadership, the *Sangkum* could try to circumvent alternative ideas proposed by teachers and local schools.

Sihanouk saw the youth as especially capable of overcoming the legacies of a colonial past and the realities of social divisions within the population. While the J.S.R.K. was built on the colonial scouting movements, Sihanouk argued that the youth signified building a new, unencumbered, citizenry that joined him on the path forward. Through the J.S.R.K. “Cambodians of both sexes, urbanites, peasants, civil servants, businessmen, workers, farmers, and students above the age of eight” would unite to build the country.⁸³ On two separate occasions he describes how the youth “are uninhibited by memories of the colonial past. They have been born into an age which has seen the achievement of independence.” Emphasizing the youth’s lack of connection to colonialism inferred that the young people were most prepared to develop the country that reflected the goals of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Moreover, Sihanouk seems to suggest that older segments of the population were not well-poised to lead the country because they either supported or were wounded by the French colonial mindset. Without these same influences, Sihanouk envisioned the youth wholeheartedly supporting his *Sangkum* initiatives to create a united national community.

Importantly, *Dassanāvattī Nai Yuvān* helped to establish the ways in which Cambodia’s contemporary youth movement shared differences and similarities with youth groups and paramilitary organizations in the country’s own past and in other national spaces. In one article, the narrator explains that the scouts were introduced to Cambodia in 1934 and that it represents an international movement of foreigners in order “for young men and women to practice charity, solidarity, distinguish bad from good, to know and respect the laws of the country, to conform

⁸³ “Notre Jeunesse (J.S.R.K.),” *Le Sangkum: Revue Politique Illustree*, August 1965.

always to the civic duties and to bring aid and assistance to others in case of accident.” *Yuvān* movements, on the other hand, are supposed to “further develops national sentiment among young people.”⁸⁴ While the youth movement of the 1950s and 1960s was supposed to create stronger nationalist sentiment among the people, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* also insisted that the creation of paramilitary organizations, like the *Jivapol* and the *Nāri Klahan*, was very normal and that “all countries have military and reserved forces.”⁸⁵ These discussions helped to strengthen the relationship between the *yuvān* movement and military organizations while attempting to argue that Cambodia was not particularly or uniquely militaristic when compared to other countries.

Sihanouk also envisioned the youth movement as a way for women to carry out their new duties to the nation. In his article directed towards women in Siv Eng Tong’s *Women’s Voice* magazine, Sihanouk used Israel as an example of a country where “male and female citizens, all old and young, all wealthy and poor, fulfill duties as soldiers and work for the country.” He goes on to explain that Israel was able to turn the desert into a fertile land because of the “strength and the power” of the military.” In his appeal to women he writes, “I believe that our Khmer women have the full capability to help rescue and raise the standard of living of our country.”⁸⁶ While this article does not invoke or mention the J.S.R.K. specifically, it is clear that Sihanouk was thinking through how men and women both should contribute manual labor and military service to the country. Over time, the J.S.R.K. would perform these kinds of tasks and the organization would often comment on the number of women who participated.

⁸⁴ *Dassanāvattī Nai Yuvān / Bulletin de La Jeunesse*, July 15, 1957.

⁸⁵ *Dassanāvattī Nai Yuvān / Bulletin de la Jeunesse*, July 1, 1957.

⁸⁶ *Brahṛājñibandh nai Samtec Braḥ Uapayuvārāj tael bān cuṃ phsāy knung sārabaṭr mān saṃleng nārī lekḥ 1 ceñ thngai 16 uasapā 1958*. NAC.

Like discussions about the number of women who attended the *Nārī Klahan* marches, materials about meetings and pictures of rallies emphasized that young women participated in the J.S.R.K. Sometimes the notes from events at the training camps in Kep province and the Tuol Kork neighborhood of Phnom Penh included the statistics of the number of participants with added specificity about the number of women. In 1968, 910 members participated in the camps, including 210 women.⁸⁷ The statistics never suggest an equal gender balance but rather demonstrate progress from earlier eras when girls did not enjoy a lot of opportunities in education, politics, or communal forums. While fewer *yuvānī* attended the events, the female members of the J.S.R.K. are always in the front of marches and foregrounded in pictures. In these pictures, the uniformed young women march in unison, sometimes holding guns. Young uniformed girls also stand out in crowds gathered to greet international visitors or Sihanouk.⁸⁸ By centering the women in the pictures, the *Sangkum* propaganda emphasized how the state was built on the strength and efforts of men and women—an argument that was not so different from the idea that men and women both contribute to the health and safety of a family.

While not frequently, the *Dassanāvattī Nai Yuvān* also fielded questions about class and gender differences within schools and the youth movement. In terms of gender, topics focused on occupations of women, including prostitution and midwifery, as well as queries into the intellectual and leadership development of young women. In one instance, a young person asks why it was the case that sometimes the girls who sat at the top of the class did not become the class leader and

⁸⁷ “Dossier Sur La Structure Administrative Du Cambodge et Du Mouvement Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1957 - 1968). Règlement, Ordonnances, Notes Sur l’organisation de l’armée, de La Jeunesse Socialiste Royale Khmère (J.S.R.K.), de La Justice et de l’administration,” n.d., National Archives of Cambodia.

⁸⁸ October 20, 2018 interview.

whether women have the capability of being a class leader. In a dogged response, the writer explains that “some school directors choose the smartest student in the class, whether they are a boy or a girl. Some others choose a student based on observations of their character or through a voting system...”⁸⁹ While the original question was trying to understand gendered disparities in the classroom, the magazine certainly was not interested in digging into these deeper issues. Rather the question was deflected to suggest other possibilities. In the same issue, another student asked a question about the significant differences in teacher salary and teacher training in the provinces and Phnom Penh, the respondent explained that there are scholarships to ensure the development of modern students in Phnom Penh and the provinces and that they “should receive the same so that there is not that much difference.”⁹⁰ The answers to the questions about the different treatment of women and rural residents illustrates the ways in which the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* recognized disparities within the educational, and other, institutions but argued that these issues were not due to problems with the *Sangkum* leadership or programming.

When Sihanouk began to promote his vision for Buddhist socialism in the mid-1960s, he also elaborated how the J.S.R.K. would care for the country’s most vulnerable members without erasing class differences. He said that the organization was supposed to “defend the interests of the little people” and have “a better conscience and a greater comprehension of the diverse social backgrounds, in particular the rural milieu.”⁹¹ Interestingly, these comments contradict other

⁸⁹ *Dassanāvattī Nai Yuvān / Bulletin de la Jeunesse*, October 15, 1958.

⁹⁰ *Dassanāvattī Nai Yuvān / Bulletin de la Jeunesse* August 15, 1958.

⁹¹ “Dossier Sur La Structure Administrative Du Cambodge et Du Mouvement Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1957 - 1968). Règlement, Ordonnances, Notes Sur l’organisation de l’armée, de La Jeunesse Socialiste Royale Khmère (J.S.R.K.), de La Justice et de l’administration,” n.d., National Archives of Cambodia.

statements that the J.S.R.K. was supposed to bring together men and women from all socio-economic backgrounds. By imploring that the J.S.R.K. better understand the rural milieu, Sihanouk built upon earlier notions that the urban and educated leaders needed to conduct outreach to the provincial areas. While his statements elude to creating more collaborative relationships between the urban and rural population, arguing that the J.S.R.K. “defend the little people” suggests that Sihanouk was more interested in using the organization to promote the Buddhist socialist approach of the more powerful people providing help and generosity to the “poor” and “weak.”

While cultivating a better understanding of the “little people” and the rural populace, the J.S.R.K. members were expected to gain a “taste of culture in all forms and especially manual labor” and to develop “a civic spirit.”⁹² To a certain extent, Sihanouk was rethinking the relations between elite urbanites and the poor, mostly rural populace by arguing that the urban center could not simply teach or provide material goods to the rural communities but must also learn about the physical labor of building a village and farm. When the state held manual labor days, civil servants and J.S.R.K. members traveled to a village to perform a variety of tasks. Anlong Romiet became a popular destination for these days. On one trip, in September 1961, 500 volunteers, including members of the J.S.R.K., spent the day digging basins and building embankments in the village. A different 1961 report outlines the activities of the youth in Kratie “installing a school yard and volleyball court, planting flowers in the gardens, reconstructing the paths, and attending the soil

⁹² “Dossier Sur La Structure Administrative Du Cambodge et Du Mouvement Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1957 - 1968). Règlement, Ordonnances, Notes Sur l’organisation de l’armée, de La Jeunesse Socialiste Royale Khmère (J.S.R.K.), de La Justice et de l’administration,” n.d., National Archives of Cambodia.

around the school buildings.”⁹³ Through these programs, the J.S.R.K. directed by the leaders in Phnom Penh installed structures and natural materials in the villages. The relationship between the urban and rural areas was mostly based on the understanding that urbanites and youth would provide support and materials for the rural and poor. At the same time, these manual labor days seemed to instill a sense that all citizens—including high level officials or wealthy urbanites—needed to participate in the efforts to care for the domestic landscape that included rural villages.

Sihanouk promoted civil servants and the J.S.R.K. participating in mandated manual labor in the villages as a way to continue developing the country without losing its neutrality, and by extension sovereignty, amid the bifurcating Cold War. In her work on youth groups, Anne Raffin has argued that youth groups helped to sanctify the “ideology of civic agrarianism” and “civil engagement in agricultural projects as well as expeditions to experience the natural world as a site of purification.”⁹⁴ While Sihanouk certainly idealized the agrarian life of the country, aspects of his manual labor days also related deeply to his efforts to assert a modern Khmer approach to governance. In a set of three articles, Sihanouk described the three-fold basis of Cambodian freedom, including monarchy, socialism, and neutrality. In his article on neutrality, Sihanouk about seeking to “encourage enthusiasm among our people for manual labor.” Significantly, he continued by explaining, “the *Sangkum* has realized that the energies of Cambodia’s youth could be squandered in useless activities or even more useless inactivity if there were not some focal

⁹³ “Activities of the J.S.R.K. of Primary Schools of Kratie,” *Agence du Khmer Presse*, September 16, 1961.

⁹⁴ Anne Raffin, “Youth Mobilization and Ideology,” *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 391–418.

point through which they could be directed towards good and constructive ends.”⁹⁵ Importantly, these good and constructive ends included an emphasis on a “discriminating adoption of technical and cultural and scientific achievements” in order to not be “‘assimilated’ by our neighbors...”⁹⁶ To that end, manual labor days and education were not just about building Cambodia but about defense against other countries.

While Sihanouk spoke about using manual labor days to maintain economic independence and national autonomy, the J.S.R.K. also prepared to defend the country against invaders. At the World Forum of Youths in Moscow a year later, a leader explained that the J.S.R.K. was a paramilitary organization that maintained peace and neutrality. The organization explained that, “our young people, boys and girls, prepare and organize themselves to contribute, at the side of our Army, to the defense of the sacred soil of the country.” During military training, the male and female members learned how to march in lines and shoot guns. Footage in the *A Femme Cambodgienne a l’Heure du Sangkum* shows young women conducting military exercises in a forested area while the narrator explains, “Just now this is the character of the fighter. These days girls receive training in the guns and receive promotions.” Furthermore, the Ministry of Information explained, “Trained as guerilla commandos of the JSRK they constitute elite combat units undergoing tough training with endurance tests, judo and close combat, handling of arms, shooting, etc...”⁹⁷ While the *Sangkum* certainly uplifted the young fighters, the leaders explained

⁹⁵ “The Threefold Basis of Cambodian Freedom: Monarchy - Socialism - Neutrality,” *Cambodia Commentary*, January 1960.

⁹⁶ “The Threefold Basis of Cambodian Freedom: Monarchy - Socialism - Neutrality,” *Cambodia Commentary*, January 1960.

⁹⁷ *A Femme Cambodgienne a l’Heure du Sangkum*, Ministry of Information, 1965.

the military as a “peaceful campaign” where they also “build schools, roads, and dams....”⁹⁸ In the militarized version of raising the youth to contribute to the country, the trained young people protected Cambodia from the threat of military incursions as well as the threat of underdevelopment.

While the J.S.R.K may have become an extension of the most fundamental components of child-rearing and domestic autonomy, the military practices prompted outcries from Sihanouk’s detractors. Sihanouk rationalized the military training of J.S.R.K. by explaining that the training was necessary due to “threats from countries and governments practicing militaristic and imperialistic politics.”⁹⁹ Arguing that Cambodia was a peaceful country based in Buddhist ideology, Sihanouk explained that the military exercises prepared the people for attacks from other countries, “Let us be clear about one point; there is not question of militarizing our youth but rather of helping to train our young people so that they may play their fullest part when called upon to do so.”¹⁰⁰ At the camp in Kep, he further explains that the concern is an attack from the nations of the “Free World” and that if necessary, he would call upon the opposing bloc to but that he was not interested in aligning with “communism that pushes with force and insistence.” Finally, he argued, “our nationalists are neither whites, nor blues, nor reds. We are simply Khmers. And for us, only the sort of Kampuchea that interests us.”¹⁰¹ With the heightened alarm about hot wars in

⁹⁸ “Message of the Royal Khmer Socialist to the World Forum of the Youths at Moscow 1961,” Box 332, National Archives of Cambodia.

⁹⁹ “Adaptation Francaise: D’Un Discours en Khmer Prononce par Samdech Preah Upayuvareach au Camp de la J.S.R.K. a Kep,” April 21, 1960.

¹⁰⁰ “The Threefold Basis of Cambodian Freedom: Monarchy - Socialism - Neutrality,” *Cambodia Commentary*, January 1960.

¹⁰¹ “Adaptation Francaise: D’Un Discours en Khmer Prononce par Samdech Preah Upayuvareach au Camp de la J.S.R.K. a Kep,” April 21, 1960, National Archives of Cambodia.

the region, Sihanouk certainly saw the J.S.R.K. as a preventative measure for keeping the country safe and maintaining the youth's loyalty to the domestic political program, as opposed to the global Cold War blocs.

How many students, and especially women, actually participated in J.S.R.K. military trainings and civic education meetings? During a discussion with seven women about their memories of the *Nārī Klahan*, we began to talk about the youth programs of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. All of the attendees confirmed that they never really participated in the J.S.R.K., at least not in the way that earlier generations had trained for the *Nārī Klahan*. Some women remembered participating in the J.S.R.K. only when they donned uniforms to greet Sihanouk when he arrived to the villages via helicopter. Other women said that they had heard about the *yuvānī* but had not participated in the organization.¹⁰² These memories about the J.S.R.K. are consistent with conversations with other interviewees who remembered wearing uniforms to inauguration events presided over by Prince Sihanouk but who did not attend ongoing meetings or trainings. In one instance, a woman who did not attend school was called upon to put on the uniform for an inauguration.¹⁰³ For many of women whom I interviewed, the J.S.R.K. was not a significant component of their lives even if they had attended school and participated in activities outside of the home. Rather, the uniforms symbolized a special event when Sihanouk arrived in their villages and towns. In that way, the J.S.R.K. did fulfill the promised of linking the youth to their paternal Head of State.

Nevertheless, I met a few women active in various forms of the J.S.R.K. and other militias that formed in the late 1960s. One former J.S.R.K. member, Satya, remembered “wearing short

¹⁰² October 20, 2018 interview.

¹⁰³ June 17, 2018 interview.

skirts and shirts and preparing for Samdech Euv [Prince Sihanouk].” She also recalled talking about citizenship in class and in the *yuvānī* programs, which were run by the school director and building manager.¹⁰⁴ For Satya, the *yuvānī* mostly revolved around meeting to discuss the expectations for citizens and to prepare for Sihanouk’s visits. Another former member, Boramy, remembered the training in more detail. In 1967, a teacher selected her to join the *yuvānī* because she looked strong. The organization met the mornings and afternoons and on Saturdays from 7:00am to 10:30am. During their meetings, the *yuvān* and *yuvānī* practiced using wooden guns and “acting like a soldier.” The young women also helped to build walls and a school. During the 1970s, Boramy decided to use the training to volunteer for what she called the “Sihanouk Khmer Rouge” army. In that period, she helped victims of the war and learned about communist ideology. While she certainly volunteered on behalf of the Khmer Rouge, she did not describe herself as a communist commando and recalled several family members imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge. To that end, she was more invested in defending her community and fighting on behalf of Sihanouk than following a particular political ideology.

Their memories confirm that the J.S.R.K. was highly active in some provinces and communities. Interestingly, both these interviewees participated in *yuvānī* activities in Kompong Cham province; I interviewed a woman in neighboring Kratie province who also participated in extensive military training in the 1960s and 1970s. At the time, northeast Cambodia was a hotbed of Khmer Rouge activity and leadership which may explain why narrators from this region remember ongoing military training. Besides both growing up in Kampong Cham, Satya and Boramy were raised by family members who acted as leaders in village and national politics. They were also among the few women I interviewed who were not the first in their family to attend

¹⁰⁴ April 27, 2018 interview.

school. Satya recalled that her mother received some education and Boramy explained that her aunt attended school and then became a teacher. Boramy recalled that, “the village was not supportive. There was lots of bad talk about my aunt receiving an education.”¹⁰⁵ With family members in local leadership positions and elders supportive of girls participating in education and state activities, it seems likely that Boramy and Satya grew up in families more amenable to daughters participating in organizations like the J.S.R.K. and other military groups. Perhaps their families saw the J.S.R.K. as a route to leadership positions within the state.

The J.S.R.K. served several purposes during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. On the one hand, the organization educated young people on their civic and military duties to the nation. The most ardent proponents of the J.S.R.K. envisioned uniting the youth under a national movement based on Sihanouk’s political ideology. In many ways, the movement was supposed to circumvent any influences that did not align with Sihanouk’s plans. While the intellectual women of the SKS had theorized ways for mothers to protect their children from immoral stories, Sihanouk had found a way to launch a movement that continued that work more specifically within the ideology of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Moreover, the J.S.R.K. fulfilled some militaristic goals to prepare for defending the country’s borders from outside powers. As the war in Vietnam began to spill into Cambodia in the mid-1960s, national defense was no longer just a theoretical problem. Meanwhile, internal political strife about how to handle the war, how to save the suffering economy, and how to navigate relationships in the Cold War created problems that superseded Sihanouk’s dreams to use the manpower and intellect of the youth to build the nation.

¹⁰⁵ December 1, 2018 interview.

Conclusion

In this final chapter, I have examined how the deep urban anxieties about creating a unified, educated populace resulted in wide scale programs to develop the rural areas, educate adults and children, and prepare the youth for their future as dutiful citizens under Sihanouk. These plans and programs were supplemented by international organizations and experts providing their own ideas for how to support the hygiene, health, and literacy development of the population. While historians have examined the education system, *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* architecture, and the J.S.R.K. as separate processes providing insight into institutions, art, and nationalism of the period, I have examined these developments as components of a coordinated policy to transform Cambodia into a state under the monarch turned Head of State, Sihanouk. To that end, these efforts nationalized and institutionalized the domestic concerns that originated in the urban enclaves, including the schools, charitable associations, and women's organizations. In doing so, the state eclipsed the household as the primary location to instill values and oversee the development of children. With non-royal women serving in "motherly" roles in the ranks of government and royal women organizing humanitarian organizations, the state was prepared to reorganize the country into a unified *sangkum* (community) that valued the goals of sovereignty, neutrality, and Buddhist socialism.

While teachers and association women wanted to "educate" other women on their duties, roles, and responsibilities to the home and the nation, the *Sangkum* provided "model" villages, "fundamental education," state schools, and the scouting movement. These programs further enunciated the relationship of giving between the urban center—the holder of power and knowledge—and the rural villages—the recipients of aid, education, and programs. To that end, the *Sangkum* used tools of development and state-building to further strengthen the kind of

relationships engrained in the landscape of the country. Changes certainly occurred. Women, in particular, gained new opportunities in careers like teaching. Moreover, the programs emphasized that young people, as the future of the country, would continue the important work of building and protecting a modern nation-state. Yet, these programs oftentimes remained trapped in the refrain that Cambodia was an agricultural polity that needed to develop to remain a robust populace but in a way that would strip the country of an agricultural tradition.

By the end of the 1960s, the cracks in the foundation of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* could no longer be ignored. As more young men and women received an education, they began to find that the government was not prepared to support an influx of educated young people who did not want to return to rice farming. While Sihanouk implored rural graduates to return to their farms, reports from the late 1960s demonstrate that a sizable number of men milled about in the urban areas, especially Phnom Penh, looking for work. To that end, conservative factions of the government remained unimpressed with how Sihanouk handled the economy and foreign relations. He had ended diplomatic relations with the United States in 1965. Meanwhile, the raging war in Vietnam began to spill into Cambodia's borders causing what would be the beginning of a massive refugee flight to Phnom Penh in the early 1970s. The country began to crumble and crash.

CONCLUSION

Historians and cultural enthusiasts alike have spotlighted the vibrating culture that descended on the streets of Phnom Penh during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. Urbanites living in the manicured capital went to work in ministries where they devised policies and plans that would help to boost the country's economic vitality and stance on the world stage. Artists like Vann Molyvann, Bopha Devi, and students at the Royal University of the Fine Arts imagined and created modern Khmer buildings and art forms. In the villages, peasants and farmers tilled their land and sowed their crops while their children put on uniforms and hurried to school, where they were taught by young fresh teachers newly arrived from teacher training institutions. Since Sihanouk's leadership is oftentimes synonymous with the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, it can be easy to associate mid-twentieth century political, social, and cultural projects with the momentum of postcolonial state-building under his political system. Yet, as I have shown, the exciting culture and intellectual thought that came out of the 1950s and 1960s would not have been possible if it was not for the intellectual ideologies and genealogies of Cambodian women in the first half of the twentieth century.

In this dissertation, I have invited readers to turn away from the allure of focusing solely on the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*—or the colonial period for that matter—to instead use decolonization as the temporal framework bounding this study. By using decolonization as a framework of analysis, I have examined gender and women in the context of the dual processes of gaining national independence from France and building a nation-state that reflected the ideologies, values, and imaginations of Cambodians in positions of power. I have shown that gender and the domestic were integral components to sorting through ideals about the modern

Khmer nation-state. As argued throughout this dissertation, Cambodians envisioned mothers, domestic spaces, and the nation as intertwined actors and entities that determined Cambodia's future as a prosperous nation-state.

Was the good fortune of Cambodia in the hands of the Khmer mother? This dissertation has responded to that question through two interwoven approaches: 1) an examination on how the discussions about domestic spaces and domesticity shaped the construction of independent Cambodia during the transition from the French colonial Protectorate to the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and 2) a close attention to the households, families, and individuals who became prominent political actors during the mid-twentieth century. Through this analysis, I have posited that as intellectual, political, and educational leaders, urban women responded to social and political questions ranging from childrearing and cooking to voting rights and educational development. In turn, these conversations helped to build a political and state structure that prioritized uniting citizens around solving domestic problems. According to Sihanouk, these problems could be solved so long as the state did not fall to the corruption and divisiveness of bad politics. In these final remarks, I reflect on the lines of continuity around the topics of domesticity, domestic politics, and households from the beginning of the twentieth century until the late 1960s. Finally, I consider how the vision of Cambodia “in the hands of the Khmer mother” has remained relevant as the country heals and reconciles from the genocidal Khmer Rouge and faces new economic, political, and development challenges in the twenty-first century.

Households

I have grounded this history in the female protagonists who imagined new ways to approach social and political constructions. In the educational institutions of the early twentieth

century, royal women maintained significant control over the education and upbringing of many young women who would go on to become leaders in Cambodian politics and civil society, including Phlek Phirun, In Em, Khieu Ponnary, Nematoulla Macchwa, and likely others whose educational histories are not available to us. Historians of twentieth century Cambodia oftentimes trace the movements, education, and intellectual trajectories of male leaders but rarely consider the intertwined relationships of women who had attended elite schools before marrying men and raising children who would become important in politics. This dissertation has brought these women out of the footnotes and onto the pages of history in order to emphasize that their intellectual, charitable, educational, and political labors shaped the politics and state-building of the mid-twentieth century. While their work may not be as visible as the work of their husbands, this dissertation has shown that they certainly cannot be discounted as invisible or only linked to public facing work through their husbands and families.

Domesticity

Through their connections to schools and women's organizations, urban women living and working in Phnom Penh envisioned creating modern Khmer domestic spaces and also educating mothers and future mothers about their responsibilities in the home. When the French colonial administration wanted to educate princesses and daughters of indigenous civil servants, the Norodom women responded with their own schools that educated young girls in Khmer language, arts, and domesticity and Princess Ping Peang joined the faculty at the secondary school, *école Norodom*. Girls who attended school in the early twentieth century learned about household subjects, which gained the approval of parents, teachers, and the colonial officials. While the urban onlookers began to praise the skillsets of these young women educated in the schools, the women

in these circles began to imagine how they could continue gathering and educating women outside of the classrooms. When the *Samāgam Khmaer Sahajivinī* was established in 1948, the founders established the first gathering space for women to debate and to discuss the intellectual, social, and political priorities of urban women. This association established that creating a modern Khmer household through attention to fashion, cooking, good manners, hygiene, and childrearing was critical to the development of the country. These conversations shaped 1950s and 1960s ideas about how women and domestic issues fit into the workings of the modern nation-state.

According to mid-twentieth century discourses on gender, domesticity, and the nation-state, the hands of the Khmer mother cooked nutritious and culturally specific food, sewed and embroidered practical and modern clothing, arranged furniture in the house, prepared medicine for ill children, and held books that they read to children. In the hands of the Khmer mother, the domestic space was supposed to be a clean, welcoming, and literate environment where young Cambodians would grow into moral, civic, and healthy adults. In the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, the Khmer mother's hands washed, fed, and clothed poor children, handed out rice and supplies to victims of disasters, wrote the alphabet on a classroom chalkboard, and penned plans for the social affairs of the country. Imagined in terms of her domestic duties to the home and the nation-state, the Khmer mother acted as a nurturing figure who oversaw the morality and health of the home and the country. Importantly, these hands did not contribute to corruption or dividing politics. Instead, they worked within the systems determined as ideal by the country's leadership, especially the monarchy.

Discourses on domesticity and domestic spaces shaped the kind of social policies found in the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. In particular, leaders of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* domesticated the nation-state so that concerns of households became priorities on the national agenda. While 1940s

and 1950s thinkers implored women to educate their children, the governing bodies overhauled the educational system so that children around the country could attend school. These schools were imagined as spaces where the whole community could benefit from the availability of teachers, curriculums, and spaces designated for learning. Moreover, the state built new hospitals and health centers and worked with the Red Cross to provide services to wounded, ill, and elderly citizens. Meanwhile, architecture projects and community development programs created a landscape that reflected a local modernity where the “traditions” of agricultural work and life complemented the desires for a literate, healthy, and robust population. Domesticating the state meant attending to the corporeal needs of the people, thinking about the reception of visitors, and worrying about the spiritual, moral, and intellectual development of the young and old. As I demonstrated across five chapters and especially in chapter five, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* attempted to act as the mother and father in order to ensure that this process of state-building followed a path that supported the missions of sovereignty, neutrality, peace, and prosperity.

Domestic Politics

Significantly, the discussions around motherhood and raising children involved an important process of working through local/traditional and Euro-American/modern ideologies. The mid-twentieth century female intellectuals, performing artists, and royal women envisioned building a Khmer society that brought together various approaches to domesticity along with local arts and culture. Published during the years of volatile political infighting, *Nārī* emphasized the importance of understanding and utilizing modern/Euro-American and traditional/Khmer approaches to fashion, cooking, good manners, and child-rearing. For the urban intellectuals, balancing the trends, practices, and knowledges around these tasks would only enhance the duties

and responsibilities of women, and especially mothers. During this same time, Princess Kossamak devised royal dance performances grounded in traditions while also more amenable to modern audiences and twentieth century diplomacy. Other royal and urban women participated in charitable organizations that built upon colonial institutions and that worked bilaterally with rising imperial powers like the United States.

These approaches signified a form of reckoning between political polarities at moments of heightened volatility. Their approaches to domesticity suggested that Khmers could bring together different approaches to governance and ways of living without inducing violence or tearing apart the social fabric of the country. Therefore, the women were not proposing radical measures to end French colonial ties or a complete restructuring of the country. Instead, balanced approaches were supposed to guide the country forward. At the same time, it is important to consider how urban women redirected the attention of political and state leaders. From my findings thus far, the only discussions about voting rights or political parties focused more on how arguments of men had caused problems in the country. By emphasizing the need to focus on educating people, responding to childhood poverty, and promoting Cambodian culture and arts, the female intellectuals demonstrated that the country needed to think about issues beyond popular voting or the way to achieve independence. To that end, we can surmise the urban women spoke on behalf of many people outside of the circle of politically elected men who wanted the country to have independence but also peace and unity. Moreover, by paying attention to the importance of social issues, the women created a foundation for the all-encompassing plans to transform the country after independence.

Drawing parallels between ideals of the domestic space promoted by urban female leaders and Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, this project has posited that intellectual women were

influential in shaping the postcolonial approaches to politics and state-building. After 1953, Sihanouk emphasized building a unified country that brought together different political ideologies to develop a postcolonial state. While the SKS proposed that the domestic space was a location that counteracted the corrupt politics taking place in the capital, Sihanouk emphasized that the one-party *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* was a solution to the multi-party system of the 1940s and early 1950s. Politicians who had been in other political parties needed to either join the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* or leave politics. Sihanouk was a popular leader who gained the support of large sectors of the population, even as he faced backlash from other political leaders. Undoubtedly, Sihanouk's political ideologies are similar to other ideas circulating in South and Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s.¹ Other religious and political leaders suggested an ideology of Buddhist socialism and Sukarno in Indonesia devised "Guided Democracy," which explains a similar process to the one in Cambodia. Yet, the urban women's ideas on mutual understanding among intellectual factions and the compromises of tradition and modernity certainly provided a foundation for trying to bring together the populace with the sense of a shared path forward.

Sihanouk's political plans—and his omnipresence even in this dissertation which tried to off-center him—brings to the foreground questions about his popularity. It is difficult not to write about the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* without writing about Sihanouk. His picture is everywhere, he was everywhere. He adorns the covers of magazines and is featured in interviews. Whenever a foreign journalist depicted him or Cambodia in a negative light, he responded with a letter that he published in *Le Sangkum*. He became his own producer of popular culture by becoming a filmmaker. He constantly traveled by helicopter throughout the country and attended events in

¹ As described in Chapter 3, U Nu in Myanmar discussed Buddhist socialism in the 1950s.

Phnom Penh.² Phlek Phirun recounted a Red Cross event that went until the early hours of morning. As the guests were leaving, Sihanouk went to his office to work.³ At the same time, he was a popular figure among many factions of Cambodian society and his leadership is remembered nostalgically today.⁴

Yet, the support for Sihanouk has never really been considered in gendered terms. What if Sihanouk garnered a strong following not because politicians agreed to join him or because he gained the respect as the monarch but also because he had created a political system that received the approval of urban women interested in a society that was not prone to the violence of politics? Urban female thinkers had promoted creating a moral and good society that drew from modern approaches to living and working. The *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* was supposed to allow the country to improve education and social issues without compromising the country's morality, sovereignty, or historical relationships between the monarchy and people. By not taking sides in the bifurcating Cold War, Cambodia could mold and blend different political ideologies—like democracy and socialism—into forms that fit for the country. Moreover, declaring neutrality implied that Cambodia would not enter into wars that would upend the peace and unity of the country. In this vision, the earlier intellectual conceptions of the domestic space became the template for the governing system of the nation-state. To that end, we can think of these connections not just in terms of influence but also in terms of reciprocal forms of respect and approval.

² These events and travels are often documented in in *Le Sangkum, Kambuja, and Realites Cambodgiennes*.

³ Phlek Phirun, *Muay Rayà Bel Rás Nau Loe Phaenadhī Toemmâk .I. Bān Dhvoe 'vī Khlah?* Phnom Penh: 2005. National Archives of Cambodia.

⁴ The films *Don't Think I've Forgotten* and *Golden Slumbers* help to forge nostalgia for the pre-war period. Arts and historic preservation groups have also tried to save *Sangkum* era buildings from destruction.

Of course, the imaginaries turned into social policy revealed and deepened social divisions within families and the country. How did gender and generational relations change over the course of the 1950s and 1960s? Based on my interviews, I think that we can conclude that some of the young women who grew up in the 1960s began to see the world in a different light than their mothers, father, and some of their peers. As discussed in the introduction, Sophany remembered her mother's pain because she was married to a man who engaged in affairs with women. Sophany revealed that she was thankful her mother allowed her to enter into a love marriage. She believed that her mother—and other people of her parents' generation—changed their minds about arranged marriages because of the influx of stories delivered through radio, films, and television.⁵ Other interviewees discussed meeting their husbands while studying at the university or teaching. Alternatively, another interviewee, Pisey, recalled growing up with strict gender expectations that she found constraining. Her mother wanted her daughters to have an education so they could become proper women but Pisey disagreed with the tenets of the *cpāp srī*. Due to the wishes of her parents, she was not allowed to become a judge and instead become a teacher. Yet, she resisted these proscriptions placed on her. She insinuated that she survived the Khmer Rouge because she was a strong woman who could work in the fields and she told me that she chose to remain unmarried like me [the narrator] because she did not want to follow the expectations placed on wives.⁶

While generational cracks may have appeared in some families, the social fractures between urban and rural Cambodia became deeper and more apparent. While more men and women in cities or large towns could attend school, join the scouts and sporting teams, and enjoy

⁵ March 30, 2018 interview.

⁶ March 22, 2018 interview.

city life with their friends, their peers living in rural villages experienced significantly less access to these new opportunities. While my urban interviewees married in the later twenties after going to school and working, many of my rural interviewees married in their late teens. In these interviews, women reflected on a hard life with constant difficulties. Histories also show the deepening divisions in Cambodia. Men and women may have received a diploma but non-agricultural jobs were not available for them. While urbanites had spoken at length about education, these same visionaries did not necessarily propose education as a route out of farming or low socio-economic status. Sihanouk especially justified the stratified society with his theories on Buddhist socialism and the great empire of previous centuries. Meanwhile, the reality of a raging civil war in neighboring Vietnam certainly shaped how the country began to factionalize into deeper political grooves in the late 1960s.

The political oppositions humming below the surface of seemingly idyllic 1960s *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* burst into a civil war between two radically different political regimes of the 1970s. While conservative members of the government like General Lon Nol wanted to align with the United States, the radical Khmer Rouge imagined a wholly different kind of political system, based on reproducing the agrarian traditions of Angkor and rejecting any form of modern technology. In 1970, General Lon Nol launched a military coup d'état against Prince Sihanouk, which sent him to exile in Beijing. Supported by funding directed by the United States, the Lon Nol government established the Khmer Republic. Meanwhile, the Khmer Rouge grew in strength in the outer provincial areas of the country. While Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge in 1975, many provinces had been under Khmer Rouge control for several years before the establishment of

Democratic Kampuchea.⁷ The civil war was accompanied by the bombs dropped from US airplanes. Cambodians living in the provinces fled to Phnom Penh seeking safety. With plans for building an agriculture country that remained closed to the rest of the world, Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge proved to be the most drastic approach to eradicating the French colonial ties and infrastructure. By 1976, the country was living and working in cooperatives. In the first waves of executions, intellectuals, soldiers, and police officers were targeted by the Khmer Rouge leaders.⁸

Since 1979, Cambodians and Cambodians in diaspora have endeavored to rebuild war torn Cambodia—a project which has taken many different forms. With the help of disaffected members of the Khmer Rouge, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979 and established the People’s Republic of Kampuchea. The Cambodia People’s Party (CPP) became the main political party of the country. In 1984, thirty-three year old Hun Sen was appointed as Prime Minister, a position he continues to hold until this day. During this period, Cambodians living inside and outside of the country either aligned themselves with the PRK or with resistance groups hoping to regain control of the country. In 1981, Norodom Sihanouk founded FUNCINPEC as a resistance party to the People’s Republic of Kampuchea. The party’s acronym stands for the French, *Front uni national pour un Cambodge indépendant, neutre, pacifique et coopératif* or

⁷ Ian Baird speaks about the experiences of the Brao ethnic community in his book: Ian Baird, *Rise of the Brao: Ethnic Minorities in Northeastern Cambodia during Vietnamese Occupation* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

⁸ For works on the 1970s: David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Norodom Sihanouk, Prince. *My War with the CIA: Cambodia’s Fight for Survival*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia. The title certainly evokes connections to the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. The party united political leaders opposed to Vietnamese occupation, including the Son family (Son Sann and Nema Toulla Macchwa) and other Cambodians living in France along with former leaders of Democratic Kampuchea.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia in 1989 and three years later the 1992 United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia prepared the country for elections. Cambodians once again contended with the multiple visions for a post-conflict independent and peaceful country. In 1993, the FUNCINPEC Party won 45.5% of the votes, securing 58 seats on the constitutional assembly and the CPP won 38.2% of the vote, securing 51 seats. The CPP rejected the outcomes of the election. Through a series of negotiations between the top Cambodian political leaders, Sihanouk became Head of State while FUNCINPEC and the CPP presidents Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen served as co-prime ministers who split the duties of the country, a scenario which lasted until Hun Sen ousted Ranariddh in 1997. Today, the CPP remains in power despite attempts by other political parties to gain a majority in the Parliament. In 2017, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, known as the party of Sam Rainsy, son of Sam Sary and In Em, was dissolved after becoming a strong contender for power.

Since 1993, Cambodians have contended with different visions for a peaceful, just, and democratic society. Prominent female activists and intellectuals have proposed their own approaches to rebuilding Cambodia and have brought attention to issues of human rights, corruption, and the lack of a strong civil society. The work of these activists, along with continued symbols of maternity, allow us to consider how idealizations of family and the domestic in a national context remain an important—yet certainly different—component in the politics and civil

society of Cambodia. I will end this dissertation where I started, with three anecdotes and voices that allow us to consider what it means that Cambodia is in the hands of the Khmer mother. First, the Queen Mother Library that opened in September 2020 to preserve the voices of the royal family and victims of the Khmer Rouge helps to frame how the royal family and archives are thinking about women within the context of rebuilding. Next, prominent human rights activist and memoirist, Chea Vannath, provides insights into her own understandings of Khmer politics and rebuilding. Finally, the cries of land rights and garment factory activists elucidate contemporary struggles for and related to households and female labor in a global economy. These three narratives bring forward not only the women who shape the way the Cambodian state responds to inequities but also the changing and new forms of urban and rural, generational, and class divisions and solidarities within the country.

In September 2020, DC-CAM, the archive that holds the Khmer Rouge archival records, announced the formal opening of the Queen Mother Library, which would hold the books and documents on the Royal Family donated by Ambassador Julio A. Jeldres, the official biographer of Norodom Sihanouk. The library also includes materials on the Khmer Rouge and an audio-visual media archive of interviews with Khmer Rouge victims. Queen Monique donated materials from her own personal collection for the purposes of the library. A press release on the library opening proclaims, “The Queen Mother Library is more than simply a space for learning about the history of Cambodia. The DC-Cam is proud to dedicate this library to the legacy of the Queen Mother and all women in Cambodia” who “through their tireless struggle to rebuild, inspire, and recreate the country, through raising families, conceiving and expanding upon economic opportunities, or preserving, protecting, and rekindling their communities, culture and Nation, Cambodian women represent the spirit of Cambodia.” Built in a city that is bursting and entangled

in the throng of development schemes, the library is envisioned as a place of education, peace, and tranquility—not very different from the domestic spaces visualized by the SKS sixty years ago.

The library will be part of the Sleuk Rith Institute, which will honor the victims of the Khmer Rouge. The building is designed to reflect the architectural design of Bantey Srei (the Citadel of Women) in Siem Reap. The institute is being designed by the Zaha Hadid Architectural Firm, known for its “groundbreaking and futuristic architecture.” According to the press release, DC-Cam chose a woman to design the institute because “the innocent victims of war crimes always include significant populations of women and children, the time is long overdue for a woman to lead such a commemorative design effort to acknowledge and illuminate their collective loss.” Through this library and new institute, DC-Cam genders rebuilding and reconciliation in the form of a woman but also in the form of woman’s spaces, both a library of the past and genealogy of the royal family as an institute that celebrates once again the magnificence of another time period. Yet, this time, the building design is not modeled on Angkor Wat, a building that has inspired many male leaders and much blood shed in the past century, but rather an ancient and intricate Hindu temple that sits on the outskirts of the contemporary park complex, approximately 45 minutes away from the main tourist spots.⁹

Chea Vannath is one of those women who helped to rebuild the country. Born in Pursat Province in 1943 and raised in Phnom Penh, Chea Vannath fled to the United States in 1981 only to return to Cambodia a decade later as a UNTAC translator and then human rights activist. Chea was the vice president of Center for Social Development, a “non-governmental organization that promotes and advocates good governance through the institutionalization of democratic values and

⁹The brochure can be found on the DC-Cam website: <http://dccam.org/the-queen-mother-library>.

principles.” In her reflection on the ongoing efforts to create a more democratic society in Cambodia, Vannath turns most of her focus to the mid-twentieth century in order to contextualize the contemporary political developments. She writes, “Throughout the world, democracy is increasingly seen as a prerequisite for a “good society.” She emphasizes that in the 1940s, “democracy was a relatively new phenomenon” which she believed was “too foreign to the people and too complex for them to fully understand, which quickly led to chaos.” Moreover, she explains, “Cambodians from all walks of life, then and now, considered the 1950s and 1960s era as a ‘good society/golden age.’ Cambodia was peaceful and prosperous. Human resources and intellectual development were a source of pride to the nation.” Vannath considers the time to be a form of guided democracy. When she turns to the contemporary period, she explains that the international community’s concerns with “stability” and “democracy” in Cambodia have “masked different national interests.” Pointedly, she remarks that politicians and leaders have neglected human rights and morality in an effort to eliminate poverty in the country. For Vannath, Cambodia should work towards a “good democratic society” that is based on trust, cooperation, and reciprocity. To that end, she continues the intellectual work of creating a unified and national family.

In her discussion of contentious leaders and political moments in Cambodia, Vannath presents criticisms and praises while offering her own analysis of how Cambodia has needed these figures and memories. As part of her activism, Vannath has worked with leaders across the political spectrum—she organized forums with Khmer Rouge intellectuals and members under the banner of national reconciliation and has received the praise of King Norodom Sihanouk and Prime Minister Hun Sen. Vannath points out that “both [Sihanouk and Hun Sen] were the main architects of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement.” With two chapters dedicated to the political figures, she points out that Sihanouk “made unceasing efforts to help the poor and weak...and contributed to

strengthening a development-oriented Buddhism as the basic moral and ethical value system in Cambodia” and says that Hun Sen is “a workaholic and pragmatic leader who never rests on his laurels.” She sees him as someone who has been able to balance power in his own party, in the Southeast Asian region, and in international affairs.

Vannath also uses gendered imagery to discuss Cambodia’s history and rebuilding, especially when she responds to arguments over which day is more important to post-conflict Cambodia—January 7, 1979 or October 3, 1991(the Paris Peace Agreement). During Voice of America appearance, she wrote, “Both days are important to reflect on Cambodia history. Jan. 7 is the father and Oct. 23 is the mother...Children need both a father and mother and they can’t say a father as more favor than a mother, can’t say a mother has more favor than a father.” She certainly argues that Cambodia needs both the royal Buddhist leader and the pragmatic negotiator, the controversial fall to Vietnam and the day of reconciliation. For Vannath, Cambodians must sift through the appropriate kind of government to create a “good democratic society,” which may not look like one envisioned by the international community invested in Cambodia.¹⁰

What about women who are not civil society leaders, politicians, or popular figures? Do they embody the spirit of Cambodia as defined by DC-CAM? In 2017, *Cambodia Spring* debuted in box offices in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Cambodia. The film recounts the story of land rights activists protesting forced evictions in the years prior to the 2013 election that demonstrated heightening popularity for the Cambodia National Rescue Party. The film primarily follows two women Toul Srey Pou and Tep Vanny, along with Venerable Luon Sovath, as they protest their forced eviction from Boeung Kak Lake after the government leased the land and lake to Shukaku

¹⁰ Chea, Vannath. *A Cambodian Survivor’s Odyssey: A Memoir* (Phnom Penh, 2016)

Inc., a development organization that filled in the lake and built a new development over it. Protesting as part of their women's group Boeung Kak 13, Toul Srey Pou and Tep Vanny were arrested and sentenced to two and a half years in prison in 2013. The women are released after an appeal—significantly, their children protested outside of the courthouse with pictures of their mothers printed on their hats. Tep Vanny and Toul Srey Pou eventually stopped working together, with Toul Srey Pou deciding to stop protesting because she says, “Before when I was protesting I could see my family was unhappy. There was no warmth at home and my children's faces were sad. I did not follow my duty as a mother to look after my children.” Tep Vanny continued protesting and remains an important international figure today. However, she is accused of not being a good housewife or mother and even admits that she “has lost her ability to be a good mother and take care of my children.” In this story of capitalist development and the stripping of land from vulnerable populations, women are both the heroes of the people and vulnerable to slander against their duties as wives and mothers.¹¹

While the Boeung Kak 13 was a small group of activists with little political leverage, a new group arrived on the scene in 2014. That year, the Cambodian National Rescue Party was protesting the outcome of an election that gave them significantly more power in the National Assembly but not majority rule. Amid the protests, garment factory workers went on strike to protest an increase in wages. The garment factory workers had, and continue to have, strength in numbers. The strike was met with violent responses by the police but the garment factory workers have seen increase in wages over the years. Now, Hun Sen leverages support of the garment factory workers in his political campaigns. When the workers went on strike in 2014, they were making

¹¹ A film by Chris Kelly, *A Cambodian Spring*. Brooklyn, NY: Torch Films, 2017.

\$80 per month. Ahead of the 2017 election, Hun Sen promised the workers \$153 per month. Of course, in the past year promises of a stable income have been thrown into flux with the COVID-19 pandemic. Factories have shut down but loan collectors continuing demanding repayments for loans and the government has not provided any sort of significant social relief programs. With a lack of support and early indications that the government is prioritizing the top officials for the vaccines, the little social protection for the majority of Cambodians comes into greater focus.¹² Families, communities, neighborhoods, and villages are in the hands of the many Khmer mothers. Those mothers are not the Khmer Mother but rather many mothers occupying different positionalities, ideologies, and viewpoints. While some, like the Queen mother, are recognized for their cultural importance, many others are known for their precarious positions and vulnerability to not just local or national instabilities but global ones as well.

¹² Phorn Bopha, Sokummono Khan, “Families Fear Banks More Than Virus as Loans Loom Over Their Heads,” VOA, April 30 2020; Sovuthy, Khy. “Desperation Mounts as Garment Workers Await Resolution | Camboja News.” July 30, 2020; “Cambodian Bank Demands ‘Action’ Against NGOs Who Say Workers Need Debt Relief.” Radio Free Asia, July 7, 2020; Annie Kelly and Harriet Grant, “Jailed for a Facebook Post: Garment Workers’ Rights at Risk during Covid-19,” The Guardian, June 16, 2020; The Asia Foundation, Centre for Policy Studies, Angkor Research and Consulting, and Future Forum, “Enduring the Pandemic: Rapid Survey on the Impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs in the Tourism Sector and Households in Cambodia,” <https://www.futureforum.asia/publications/>.

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