

# **In the Shadows: Women, Power and Politics in Cambodia**

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## **In the Shadows: Women, Power and Politics in Cambodia**

*Kate Frieson, University of Victoria*

"Behind almost all politicians there are women in the shadows"  
Anonymous writer, *Modern Khmer News*, 1954

Although largely unscribed in historical writings, women have played important roles in the Cambodian body politic as lance-carrying warriors and defenders of the Angkorean kingdom, influential consorts of kings, deviant divas, revolutionary heroines, spiritual protectors of Buddhist temples, and agents of peace. Cambodian women have not only symbolically embodied the nation in images and figures but have been tasked with guarding its racial and territorial frontiers.

This paper examines the notion of gendered politics in Cambodia based on the premise that sexual difference has political significance and is diffused in power relations. Using interview data and archival sources, including newly recovered Khmer-language newspapers, this study provides a micro history of women's political roles from the mid-1940s to the present. Of particular interest is the positioning of women in the nexus of gender, race and nation whereby the Cambodian state has linked Khmer female citizens with the defense of interior racial and cultural boundaries against centuries-old fears of diminishment.

### **Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Politics**

Conventional approaches to the study of politics, power and the state are now generally viewed as incomplete as they do not consider the relevance of sexual roles in the determination of power dimensions.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the proliferation of gender studies in the past two decades, the study of women in Southeast Asian politics has not gained momentum.<sup>2</sup> Theoretical approaches to the subject of women and politics have been concerned with broadening the traditional definitions of the political world that exclude women, breaking down the dichotomy of public-male/ private-female spheres of political, social, and economic roles, and focussing on the gendered dimensions of politics and notions of power.<sup>3</sup>

A problematic issue in relation to these approaches has been the utility of women as a universal analytical category. This is because factors of social class, ethnicity, race, and other status markers on both local and global levels crosscut the woman category.<sup>4</sup> The arguments are persuasive for using gender as an analytic category to replace that of women. Gender approaches view women in the context of larger social structures, for one thing,

making distinctions possible on the basis of social class, race, and other factors. And of theoretical significance, gender analysis views the socialization of men and women, not in isolation from each other, but interacting together, and as a process that by its nature produces tensions and change on many levels. As Françoise Thébaud argues in defense of the gender approach, "to study women in isolation from men, as if in a vacuum, is a theoretical dead-end and a possible source of historical misunderstandings."<sup>5</sup>

In breaking down the universal category of women, there has been a tendency among a school of postmodern feminist theorists to disengage the one problem that still unites women as a class, and that is their subordinate position vis-à-vis men when measured against economic wealth, political power and social representation.<sup>6</sup> The feminist critique of the state focuses on the unequal access to power of women in relation to men and posits theories as to how the gendering of the state and social forces within it produce unequal power relations between men and women.<sup>7</sup> It is this concern raised by Christine Di Stefano who argues that the notion of the decentered self in postmodernism does not help feminist politics because feminism depends upon the social category of "woman"--a concept that postmodernists would "deconstruct".<sup>8</sup>

The theoretical approach of this paper is to view politics in Cambodia as a gendered process which can be understood in part by examining how the domestic duties of women were consciously merged with patriotism in defense of the state.

### **Women and the Politics of Socialization**

Cambodian society conforms to the general pattern of gender relations in Southeast Asia whereby women figure prominently in family matters, inherit wealth and property on equal terms to male heirs, and who are active if not dominant in marketing and economic production.<sup>9</sup> Women are socialized to have a dominant position in the family, reflected by the title of household head (*mé pteah*). This entails taking care of the household finances, making decisions regarding expenditures, investments, and debt loads, and generally looking out for the family's interest. In the classical literature detailing the roles of couples, men are expected to earn the wages to look after the family, while women are expected to run the household, take care of the children and provide a morally correct environment for the family's well-being.<sup>10</sup> Thus abstracted, family gender relations clearly reflect the dichotomy of private and public spheres. But numerous anthropological studies have concluded that women's economic activities as peasants, marketers, petty traders and handicraft producers illustrates their importance outside of the family.<sup>11</sup> This is especially the case today, as women make up 65 per cent of the rural workforce.<sup>12</sup> Judy Ledgerwood's research in the 1980s on Khmer conceptions of gender led her to conclude that the disjuncture between the mythologized female role celebrating temerity and docility on the one hand, and hard-headed business acumen on the other, is a source of social tension and

conflict.<sup>13</sup>

Women's prominence in the economic sphere has no equivalent in politics. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, high profile political roles for women in Cambodia are rare, occurring only when they dovetail with the careers of male spouses or fathers. In the political realm, women are publicly submissive to the male hierarchy rather than active and participatory. But behind the scenes, women are often cast as intruders who interfere in their husbands political affairs for their own interests. In this regard, Marie Martin summarizes a stereotypical view of the politicized *femme fatale*:

Skilful in the art of pleasing and charming, she often gives him no rest until he accedes to her desires. Firm and smiling, she bends his will. If her husband is an influential man, even at a modest level, she builds a clientele for herself. A practice described by a Cambodian proverb, "If you are a colonel, your wife is a general."<sup>14</sup>

In short, women's political roles have been largely confined to the shadows, taking political action as mothers or wives to enhance the status and access to power of the male members of their families. Women have rarely become political leaders in their own right. This pattern can be seen in other Southeast Asian countries, such as Burma and the Philippines, where Aung San Suu Kyi gained political prominence through the legacy of her father Aung San, and where Imelda Marcos shared infamy with President Marcos, who made her governor of Manila.

In the Khmer political realm, a woman's authority is determined by her kin relationships with male power figures.<sup>15</sup> Wives of male leaders are viewed as especially powerful, and they are expected to act in the interests of the family clan. Lon Nol's first wife, for example, had the reputation of exercising considerable influence over her husband's decisions. Worshipped by her husband, and well respected by the Cambodian Republican elite, her death in 1969 became equated with the decline of Lon Nol's political career. According to observers, "It had been predicted to Lon Nol that, as long as his wife lived, everything would go well for him, but afterward it would be different." The prediction bore out as Lon Nol's second wife was unanimously disliked for her political machinations, particularly those which assisted the aspirations of the corrupt and meddlesome brother of Lon Nol. "If his first wife had lived, Lon Nol would probably have acted differently. She would have prevented him from listening to his brother because she had great influence on Lon Nol."<sup>16</sup> The considerable influence wielded by Princess Monique over King Sihanouk is a favourite subject of gossip among urbanites; most of the King's unpopular decisions are attributed to his wife, thus preserving his image at the expense of hers. Pol Pot's first wife Khieu Ponnary is alleged to have been his theoretical mentor, described by Marie Martin as Pol Pot's "gray eminence".<sup>17</sup> But political historians know little about these politically important women who have operated behind the scenes. The reason for this is that serious

political analysis is reserved for mainstage political players.

Through myriad ways, gender socialization has prescribed a limited public role for Khmer women. But their importance in the socialization of the family, and by extension the nation, has been used as a political tool by various regimes since independence. Women not only literally carry the seed of future generations, they are viewed as being responsible for the cultural regeneration of the nation through their role of raising and educating children.<sup>18</sup> When the nation is under threat, the political roles of women are defined through a conflation of domestic and citizenship responsibilities. Protection of the Khmer nation has been a dominating political theme of 20th century Khmer politics, the heartbeat of all nationalist movements. And as Rowbotham has argued, the emancipatory aspects of nationalist movements tend to link women "in a special dynamic in which the main focus [is] on transforming public aspects of the lives of privileged women and creating a new realm of reformed domesticity. But the new woman in the home was to complement rather than challenge the nationalist man in the family."<sup>19</sup>

### **Women and the State: Regeneration and the Reproduction of the Nation**

A defining theme of Khmer politics since the eighteenth century has been the disappearance of the nation through attrition, annexation and cultural absorption by the Thais and Vietnamese.<sup>20</sup> While the French "saved" Cambodia, they also imparted a legacy of cultural inferiority by comparing Angkor's greatness to the decline of the Cambodian state in the 19th century, and its dependence on foreign powers for protection.<sup>21</sup> Since independence, all political regimes have tried to justify their policies on the basis of national salvation based on the knowledge that the Khmer state came perilously close to disappearing altogether in the 19th century.

With the emergence of nationalist consciousness in the 1940s, Cambodian writers began discussing the issue of female patriotism in Khmer-language newspapers. For example, *Kampuchea* newspaper, which began publication in the early 1940s, published dozens of articles on the cultural, social and political roles of Khmer women in relation to the renaissance of the Khmer nation. In 1945, the paper established a special group of women writers for this task, explaining: "Our editors have assigned a group of women to write articles of significance to the country. Therefore, we would like all of you [readers] as thoughtful people, to consider and examine these articles in order to become Khmer people with the best moral conduct."<sup>22</sup> The same editorial proudly noted the significance of its female librarian Phlek Phirun: "The country greatly appreciates having such an intelligent, knowledgeable, well educated and serious woman librarian who tries her best for the salvation of Cambodia."<sup>23</sup>

The early articles featuring women's social roles in nation-building are instructional rather

than analytical, providing advice and opinions about gender roles in accordance with the didactic *chbab*, but with strong nationalist undertones. An article entitled "Khmer Daughters" thus instructed readers:

Countries which are glorious and prosperous are not only composed of men but also of women who help out in all fields. Indeed, the most important field is the home. This is because the most important person in the family is the woman whose aim is to make the family well. So people, don't forget that a country which is comprised of good families will be a prosperous country. So please fulfill your duties as good housewives. Because it is the woman who is head of the household. It is the woman who arranges the affairs of her family; keeps the family members in harmony; it is the wife who works hard to make the family prosper. And if the family does not adopt this model, it will not be effective. The wife holds the wealth of the family and she should have good conduct, work industriously, keep the house clean and neat, and think only of her family's well-being. *Khmer daughters should be civilized, especially in connection with education and development. A woman is not considered civilized if she does not follow customs, and does not contribute to the development of the motherland. Khmer daughters--your nation is waiting for you to apply your collective strengths!*<sup>24</sup>

It is tempting to speculate that the relationship between familyism and nationalism reflected in the above piece may have been inspired by the ideology of Imperial Japan that captured the imagination of other Southeast Asian nationalists, particularly in Burma and Vietnam in the early 1940s. David Chandler has noted Son Ngoc Thanh was swayed by such notions, and his popularity as a nationalist figure no doubt appealed to young newspaper writers at this time.<sup>25</sup>

Another article echoed this theme, but with Confucianist underpinnings, defining the family as the basic social unit paralleling that of the state. "Women are important in all areas of the nation, and we cannot think that various ministries and departments are separate from the family. The family is the most important basis of any department . . . a country which has good families is a country that will surely prosper."<sup>26</sup>

Women's roles in regenerating the nation were also noted, often with proverbs or short verse, advising men and women to carry out their family responsibilities as a duty to the state. "A wed couple of maturity will increase population numbers and eliminate celibacy as well as endeavouring to generate wealth and assets."<sup>27</sup>, "Oh, my dear daughter! To pity your nation, please try to reproduce your family members and don't waste your money by being a prostitute,"<sup>28</sup>, "Prostitutes everywhere dishonour the Khmer race. They should become wives and join their husbands according to nature."<sup>29</sup>

In another issue, the paper carried a poetic criticism of "single women and prostitutes" who were instructed to stop breaking the family circle and destroying the racial lineage of Khmers.<sup>30</sup> It is not surprising that the categories of single woman and prostitute should be so linked, as there has never been a socially acceptable place for women outside of the family roles of daughter, wife or mother.

Not all Khmer women writers accepted such confinement. In a 1946 article which seems radical even by contemporary Cambodian standards, a female writer calling herself "Woman Slave," condemned the customs and traditions which socialized women into roles of housewives, and argued that it was men who imposed these customs on Khmer women. In a defiant tone, she wrote:

I am a woman of the new era and I like to follow European ways . . . . Any country where women have maintained their own customs is not a very developed country . . . all development and civilization requires much attention and people must adapt to new conditions of modernity. Women must have equal rights to men. In the old traditions, women were put in the house and their freedom was less than their husbands in accordance with the *Chhap Srei* instructions. When examining these instructions it is clear that men in the old society wanted this to be so . . . . Today women in our country are seeking rights for themselves and for their families in order to catch up quickly with civilized countries.<sup>31</sup>

Another article, written by a female writer in 1946 complained how her male compatriots were stubbornly diffident to European ideas of "development and freedom" which had "awakened" women in neighbouring countries such as India:

What a pity it is for Khmer women compatriots! Cambodia has had its connection with France for 80 years, but European civilization has not yet influenced the spirit of Khmer women. Parents do not allow their own daughters to leave their side and forbid them from studying . . . . 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 means that they prevented housewives from attaining a high level of education . . . so women cannot develop their potential. If educated women were strongly supported by men, the customs and traditions of housewives would be totally eliminated. This would encourage women to strengthen their studies.<sup>32</sup>

"Khmer women!! If you want your nation to be a prosperous one in the Asian region, be aware that your duties right now should be to develop your education so that it is on par with women in other countries."<sup>33</sup>

Such views were attacked by male writers and readers of the paper. In an article called "Opinion from a Compatriot," the writer spoke of the "sorrow" of officials whose work for

the nation was interrupted by wives "who urged them to do housework such as cooking rice and bathing the children."<sup>34</sup> More explicit is a piece, entitled "Women's Work is in the Kitchen," noting that "earning money is the responsibility of every man and it is every woman's responsibility to manage the house, including the cooking."<sup>35</sup>

During this period when the relationship between the patriotic and domestic roles of women were debated in the nascent Khmer-language media, Cambodia was still a French colony. Thus the urgent tone of many of the pieces beseeching Khmer women to do their bit for the nation should be viewed in the context of a growing anti-French intellectual climate in Phnom Penh. The anti-colonial views could not be explicit in the Khmer-language media but the self-confidence of the writers who saw possibilities for national advancement unseen for centuries implied as much. With the exception of a few lone cries lamenting the burden of traditional gender roles, most of the media implored women to participate in the nation's regeneration by focussing on their domestic duties.

It was not until independence that women's rights extended to political enfranchisement. On 25 September 1955, under the proposition of Prince Sihanouk, the National Congress decided unanimously to allow women to vote. The proposition was voted into law on 6 December 1955. In the 1958 elections, two women were elected to the National Assembly--Pung Peng Cheng and Diep Dinar, representing 2% of the total of 73 elected representatives.

Preliminary research on this period indicates that there were concerted efforts by Phnom Penh elites to establish associations to promote women's educational and political advancement. Here again, the state was directly involved. The first Khmer Women's Association was established in 1948 by members of the royal family, and urban intellectuals such as Khieu Ponnary.<sup>36</sup> The initial announcement of the group's formation ended with the proclamation: "Khmer women!! If you want your nation to be a prosperous one in the Asian region, be aware that your duties right now should be to develop your education so that it is on par with women in other countries."<sup>37</sup>

In the 1950s, women's advancement was attributed to state directives rather than to pressure for change from the grassroots. The Women's Friendship Association, for example, established by Mrs. Chea Um in 1958, applauded women's political advancement, attributing it solely to the efforts of Prince Sihanouk:

Samdech, Father of Independence, did not allow Khmer women to be slaves but to be daughters, wives and reproducers of the nation. The monarchy permitted women to be registered as representatives and to freely vote for their representatives which enabled them to fulfill their duties as women in an independent country.<sup>38</sup>

Although the Women's Friendship Association was independent of the state, and claimed to represent women of all social classes and political affiliations, its loyalties were clearly tied to the royal government and women's duties were viewed in relation to the state's objectives.<sup>39</sup> "Now that we have rights" the Association President argued, "we must fully apply them in a manner that is beneficial to the development of the country and the nation. We women must seek means to bring about positive results. Women in the national society must resolve to find immediate solutions to problems and difficulties found in our country and nation that are compatible with our place in it. We should not go beyond this point (literally not pass beyond the border)."<sup>40</sup> The Association's more radicalized supporters may have been disappointed to read that the Association's program of action consisted of food preparation for foreign dignitaries, designed to "save the national budget."<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum advanced women's educational and professional opportunities. Modernity and patriotism proved a popular combination particularly among urbanites. Women flocked to work in westernized offices as bureaucrats, secretaries and administrators. Rustling silks and long hair were discarded in favour of short coifed hair and European hem lines. Thousands of young women donned police and army uniforms and marched proudly in step with their male counterparts during public ceremonies.

Education expansion yielded better results at the primary levels than high school and college levels due to deeply ingrained beliefs that women's place should remain in the home, making education redundant. "Women don't have to study to a high level because they are busy running around the kitchen." "Girls will only learn to write love letters to boyfriends if they go to school." These proverbial injunctions along with a largely impoverished population prevented all but a very few women from obtaining higher degrees. But numbers of females in primary and secondary schools swelled in the 1960s as parents heeded the advice of their 'Prince Papa' that Cambodia needed a modern educated citizenry for peace and prosperity.<sup>42</sup>

In retrospect, women's participation in modernization was justified on the basis of national development rather than on a desire to fundamentally alter sex roles. Women were requested to help the state achieve its strategic economic objectives, adding scores of educated female professionals to the bureaucracy, government ministries, health and educational areas. Slow but steady advances expanded the social horizons of many, and the political ambitions of a few. Khieu Ponnary was one such woman, the daughter of an elite Phnom Penh family who rejected her bourgeois past when she joined the Cambodian communist movement in the 1950s and soon after married Saloth Sar. Her sister Ieng Thirith married Ieng Sary, and in Nayan Chanda's words, "the two sisters and their husbands emerged as the most powerful couples in Cambodia."<sup>43</sup> Yet little is known about

Khien Ponnary's political career outside the orbit of her marriage to Pol Pot. As a teacher of Khmer literature at the Lycée Sisowath in the 1950s, she earned a reputation for being strict but fair, and stood out for her plain unadorned appearance.<sup>44</sup> Her personal style presented a strong contrast to the *Women's Magazine* she was associated with in the late 1950s, its pages full of the latest European-inspired fashions, and advice on meal preparation, and child care.<sup>45</sup> Was Khieu Ponnary already thinking about how a communist revolution would liberate women from these roles, free them from their slavish devotion to the *chbab srei*, and provide them with a politically potent role in Khmer history? We will likely never know.

### **Women and the Defense of the State during War-Time**

The benign Sangkum period was brutally interrupted in the 1970s when the Cambodian state devolved into war and revolution. Women and men were swept into violent political movements over which they had little understanding and no control. In their war against the Lon Nol regime and American imperialism, the Red Khmers promised to eradicate sources of oppression in Khmer society, including those which kept women homebound. The exigencies of the bloody civil war made this latter mandate strategically important. Young women fought in the trenches, dispatched messages to the frontlines, and portered weapons and supplies to battle destinations. Moreover, young village women were strategically organized as a support system for soldiers on the front lines and the rear areas. A former Red Khmer male combatant explained:

By 1974, in each battlefield (*smare phum*) location in Siem Reap there were cells composed of one male soldier and two female combatants. The role of the women was to provide moral support to the men, encouraging them to keep fighting. The role of the women was strategically important because when the Lon Nol soldiers wounded us, one of the women in the battlefield location would tend to our wounds, and the second woman was needed to take care of food and so forth. If there were only men on the battlefield, they would lose their morale, especially when they saw the wounded and the dead all around them. But with women there to look after them, they continued the struggle.<sup>46</sup>

A former Lon Nol soldier also recalls this policy, remarking that it helped the Red Khmers win many battles. "What I observed from 1973 on was that for every male soldier there was a female soldier. The Red Khmer treated the men and women equally. As for us, we just got weaker and weaker, we had no support."<sup>47</sup> During periods of heavy fighting, young women were positioned behind the front lines and stood in rows 100 metres apart on the rice dikes and roads in order to care for the wounded. Male medics transported the wounded in hammocks to field hospitals, and women accompanied the wounded, fanning them, whispering encouraging words, and keeping them as comfortable as possible. "The

policy at the time was that only single women took these posts because they were young and could keep the soldier's spirits up. There were many love stories as a result. And Angkar Loeu permitted marriages among combatants and gave us unhusked rice, palm sugar, ducks and chickens for the wedding feasts."<sup>48</sup>

In the rear base areas, women were also strategically important in propaganda dissemination for the Red Khmer forces. What follows is the account of a 60 year old village chief from the Kompong Tralach region of Kompong Chhnang:

In 1970, after the coup, 5 Viet Cong (VC) came into the village to tell the villagers about the coup and to say that if they wanted to have the King come back to power, they should go into them. There were about 16 of us who join the maquis with the VC. I stayed in the village and was in charge of asking the women to collect rice, sugar, salt, prahok, unmilled rice to give to the VC. I held a meeting with all the village women and chose my wife to be in charge of the "brave women's group." Women of ages 16 to 40 in the village were in the group, out of 60 families or so. The VC didn't instruct the women in arms at this time, but were asked to look out for enemies to alert their forces.

By 1973, all of the VC had left the area and were replaced by Khmer Rumdos (KR) who came from outside the village. The goal of the KR regarding women was that they should collect provisions for the Khmer Rumdos in the maquis. Some people didn't want to give provisions so they were told that it was necessary in order to fight the Americans who were dropping bombs on the village. Some people fled to the forest, some fled to the city, and some fled to the maquis.

The responsibility of the neary was to propagandize to make the people believe in the party and hate the American imperialists. They used words that were easy to understand (piac s a m r a i ) . I n t h e

middle of 1974 all the villagers were members of the party in the liberated zone. They told the villagers that they would liberate Phnom Penh in 1975.<sup>49</sup>

The regime of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-78), and to a lesser extent, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979-89) marked the unprecedented powers of the state over the individual.

The ideological forces underpinning the DK mixed communism with ethno-nationalism, with tragic results for women and men. After 1975, the social organization of independent family units was obliterated, stripping women of the little autonomy they had in the pre-revolutionary society. Set to work "building and defending the Kampuchea

motherland," women and men were given the same difficult labour duties without regard for physical differences between them. Work tasks varied according to age. Women over 50 years old were instructed to stay in their hamlets to look after infants. Married women over 30 years of age worked alongside men in rice agriculture, digging canals, building dikes, planting and harvesting rice. Young adolescent girls were formed into mobile production teams (*krom chalat*) and sent to work as agricultural labourers. Children were separated from their parents, inducted into *Angkar*, the revolutionary organization, and taught to report on adults who criticized the revolution.

With their lives slavishly harnessed in the service of the state, women were cut loose from traditional family structures against their will. From one day to the next, women were deprived of the duties which gave them value and respect in pre-revolutionary society. They were denied the bonds of family kinship, torn away from their homes, and separated from those they loved. Women's physiological abilities to outlive men had a psychological toll that associated guilt with survival. "We saw that once starvation set in, men died quickly. But as for women, we managed to survive under the same conditions. But after my children and husband died, I had little will to live."<sup>50</sup> Women desperate for food offered themselves to DK cadre or agreed to heed their demands for sex. "There was one elder cadre who asked me to sleep with him. I was hungry but he disgusted me--he was so old. But soon after another woman who was very pretty agreed to sleep with him and she came home with 42 cobs of corn."<sup>51</sup> The same respondent knew of another woman in her work group who became pregnant after having sex with a married DK cadre. Such unions were forbidden by *Angkar* which had strict prohibitions against pre-marital or extra-marital sex. But when her pregnancy became obvious she was asked by the village officials to identify the father. After she complied, she was accused of tarnishing the reputation of *Angkar* and disrespecting revolutionary morality. According to the respondent, this "crime" was punished in the most gruesome and degrading way: "We heard her screams as they repeatedly shoved a stick up her vagina for punishment."<sup>52</sup>

Some couples managed to live together but there was no energy for lovemaking. "We were like friends, not husband and wife," survivors recall. Many women stopped menstruating due to malnutrition and overwork, and few babies were born during DK. Perhaps out of a plan to replenish the ranks of revolutionary cadre, young people were forced to participate in mass marriage ceremonies. These loveless unions were presided over by Khmer communist cadres who instructed solemn partners to "join hands and respect *Angkar*." Women were to bear children for the revolution. The racial purity of the revolution was to be thus guarded, although so much of what Cambodians considered to be Khmer culture was abolished along with Chinese, Vietnamese, Cham and other minority cultural practices.<sup>53</sup> Making a "pure Khmer" revolution, unmindful of previous revolutionary models or influences was one of the hallmarks of the DK regime.

While women were tasked with defending the state's interior racial frontiers, Khmer Rouge soldiers were dispatched to the Vietnamese border in 1977 and ordered to retake territory that had once belonged to the Khmer state. The forays were foolish since Vietnam's army was much larger and better equipped. Moreover, popular support for the revolution had evaporated among ordinary Cambodians during the first year of the regime, nulling domestic support for foreign policies .

By 1978, the country's population was depleted by at least one million due to starvation, disease and political killings. DK leaders vented their madness on "enemies of the revolution" most of whom were innocent civilians whose misery was equated with treason. But foreign "enemies" were also suspected of contaminating the purity of the revolution. Among the far-fetched plots the DK leaders hatched to justify their killings, was one blaming Vietnam for using female sexual sorcery to undermine the revolution and to destroy the Khmer nation. Citing the example of the Khmer King Chey Chetta (1618-1628) who accepted the gift of a Vietnamese wife from the emperor in exchange for trading rights in Prey Nokor (Saigon), a DK publication concluded: "Les Vietnamiens ont souvent eu recours a l'utilisation sordide des jeunes filles pour réaliser leurs ambitions annexionnistes. Aujourd'hui, ils n'hésitent pas a appliquer les memes méthodes répugnantes pour avaler les territoires d'autre pays."<sup>54</sup> There was no other elaboration; the point was supposedly self-evident.

When Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia in late 1978, the population was grateful. Under the tutelage of the Vietnamese, Khmer communists who had split from the DK in 1977, formed a new regime, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The PRK legitimized itself on the basis of "national salvation" and vowed to prevent the "Pol Pot-Ieng Sary genocidal clique" from returning to power. Fears of Vietnamization compelled other Cambodians to flee to the Thai border where Khmer resistance movements formed in coalition with DK remnant forces. From 1979-1991, nationalist movements were embroiled in a civil war over the issue of the survival of the Khmer nation. The PRK argued that the Pol Potists were culpable for genocide while the anti-PRK forces on the Thai border accused the Phnom Penh regime of succumbing to Vietnamization. On either side, women were trapped as captives in political movements. Women in refugee camps were beholden to the political leadership of the resistance movements; women in Cambodia lived under the grip of a communist state. Women's organizations were formed on both sides of the border to carry out political objectives of the warring parties.

### **Women as Defenders of the Nation**

The People's Republic of Kampuchea established in 1979 under the protective wing of Vietnam, encouraged normalization of Khmer social patterns but within the political framework of a communist state. From the party's viewpoint, the institutionalization of

Cambodian society was strategically necessary to galvanize popular support for the war against the anti-Vietnamese resistance movements based on the Thai-Cambodian border during the 1980s. This meant that while individuals could reform themselves into family units, they were nevertheless inducted into various mass organizations directed by the regime's People's Kampuchean Revolutionary Party. In 1979, the National Association of Women for the Salvation of Kampuchea was established with a vast national network of members that extended to the district level. The Association acted as the women's wing of the People's Kampuchean Revolutionary Party, promoting and explaining party policy to its members and galvanizing women's support for the war against the Khmer Rouge and its coalition partners on the Thai border. These objectives required intense propaganda efforts since the population was depleted of male numbers, and women were loathe to send their husbands and sons off to war.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Cambodian men and women were exhausted and emotionally fragile after 1979. As time progressed, they were increasingly reluctant to imbibe the propaganda of a regime that was installed by Vietnam.

To counter these problems, the state Women's Organization published a magazine that went through several incarnations, mirroring the political evolution of the PRK. First published in 1984, *Revolutionary Kampuchean Women* was issued three to eight times per year, with copy runs up to ten thousand. After the Paris Peace Accords of 1991, the magazine's funding was cut drastically and only a few issues of the publication were issued, renamed *Kampuchean Women*. The magazine reportedly dealt with "women's issues" but a reading of several issues reveals how these were conflated with the state's military objectives. The magazine routinely carried morality stories depicting model mothers as those who "with a spirit of pure nationalism" sent their "few remaining sons to serve in the Armed Forces." Model female citizens were featured as those who "worked tirelessly in agricultural work" so that food could be produced for the army. An article covering a workshop convened by the Cambodian Women's Association to evaluate women's work reported that: "in 1990, 1,400,000 hectares of land were cultivated by women throughout the country, which represents 75 per cent of the state quota. Women of Battambang sent 18,500 sacks of rice to the Front; women of Siem Reap sent 140,000 sacks of rice; and 31 women of Banteay Srei district (Siem Reap) transported food to the Front on four occasions." The piece concluded by summarizing a speech by CPP Secretary General Chea Sim, who emphasized the importance of women in the cause of "Defending and Building the Motherland," urging women to "work hard and carry out the work assigned by the higher authorities."<sup>56</sup> Another short piece, titled "Model Sacrifices of Neary Deu Yieng for the cause of the Motherland," reported that the 56 year old woman from Pursat province acted patriotically "out of her belief in the new regime and her hatred for the Pol Pot genocidal clique" by sending "a total of five of her sons and son-in-laws to serve in the armed forces." Moreover, this model woman worked "in the rear base by doing agricultural work and raising

chickens."<sup>57</sup> Another issue featured the following story entitled "Ms. Krak Yein Performs Very Well in the Movement of Defending and Building the Country":

Ms. Krak Yein, 46, is the chief of Information in Boseth district, Kompong Speu. With political training she has received from the state and the Party, she sent three sons to serve in the armed forces. Her daughter is in the village militia. In the rear base she ceaselessly participates in social work and she also raises animals. She always provides moral support to those on the front lines. She is loved by everyone in the base [village].<sup>58</sup>

As the war dragged on, slogans entreating women to "build and defend the motherland" increasingly fell on deaf ears.<sup>59</sup> Further, the Women's Association was severely constrained by its lack of power within the decision-making structures. In short it had no authority to advance women's issues outside of those considered strategically imperative. The Secretariat of State for Women's Affairs acknowledged this weakness in its 1994 report:

The Women's Association of Cambodia, in theory, had the mandate and the authority to promote the advancement of women. Its representatives, however had little success in influencing policies and programmes to enhance women's positions in the workplace. They were not given the practical means ie. training and resources, and did not receive much support from the authorities to fulfill their mandate. There was not much room for maneuvering or lobbying with the structure of a one-party system, whose period in power was characterized by a protracted war.<sup>60</sup>

The outflow of hundreds of thousands of Cambodians to Thai-based refugee camps during the 1980's was partly spurred by anti-war reasons. According to Chhuor Bounnie's research, a major factor in the accounts of young women fleeing Cambodia for Thai refugee camps was "to escape enforced conscription into village militias (svay tran)."<sup>61</sup>

However, women in refugee camps faced similar pressures as those inside the country to support the war efforts of the resistance forces. Since Khmer resistance soldiers were not eligible for UN food rations, women invented ingenious ways of increasing their overall rations so they could be shared with family members in the army, including feminizing young men during UN inspections.<sup>62</sup>

Food security inside Cambodia was also a concern due to a swell in birth rates to between 3 and 5 per cent immediately after 1979 when the country was still facing food shortages.<sup>63</sup> The desire to reproduce was a natural response of survivors, many of whom recount how the children born after 1979 represented the rebirth of the nation, embodying purity untainted by the revolution.<sup>64</sup> The reproduction of the nation was also politically imperative of the state. A pronatalist policy was adopted.

The negative consequences of this policy have been well documented by Ministry of Health officials and NGOs. Infant mortality rates have been among the highest in the world at 900 per 100,000 and are attributed to "rupture of the uterus, abortion, haemorrhaging, eclampsia, poor living conditions, poor hygiene, heavy workload and anaemia."<sup>65</sup>

The burden Khmer women bear repopulating a devastated state with little assistance in areas of health care, family planning, and education can also be viewed in relation to ethno-nationalism and fears of racial contamination. Most Khmer political parties have expressed grave fears that Vietnamese women are contaminating the Khmer soil with their offspring. Khmer Rouge propaganda has been most vocal on this front: "les femmes donneront naissance a des Yuon et les enfants grandiront pour devinir des Yuon."<sup>66</sup> On the occasion of opening the political party office of the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party in Takeo province in 1992, a woman party member warned:

"The misery, pain, political freedoms and tasks--we women are the most serious victims because women are the head of the family, the mother of the Khmer nation, who must confront fulfilling all the everyday wishes and requests of the family members which is the means of life for individuals and the society. We women appeal for real, clear respect of human rights and of the political rights of all political parties, doing away with the secret tricks [reference to the SoC] which threaten the survival of our nation."<sup>67</sup>

And in a more direct reference to the fear of the Khmer nation's diminishment, a KP Bulletin featured the following warning: "Khmer society has become eroded and rotten. Continual unity leads to peace for us Khmer people and being able to defend our Khmer race and territory which today is threatened by the false patriots selling the nation and territorial integrity to the Yuon communists . . . false patriots would be able to turn into a national minority of the Yuon in the next decade."<sup>68</sup> And a further example of the fear of racial contamination: "The Yuon are an infectious invading germ. The infected sore is already expanding in a big way to the west. The Yuon are poisoness to living things, both plant and human. Therefore, all Khmer brothers and sisters who love their national resources, their territory, their culture and their rights and who love social truth, must help in seeking the key to all this and all measures for the preservation and defense of the territory belonging to our race."<sup>69</sup>

While such views may seem extreme, it is not hard to find popular support for them across a wide spectrum of political parties.<sup>70</sup> With women viewed as the main cultural carriers and care providers of children, their duties as mothers are thus fused ideologically to patriotic duties. In defending the nation, however, women's issues of advancement and equality have been largely ignored.

## **Woman in Post-UNTAC Cambodia**

The conclusion of the civil war in the early 1990s and the promotion of a liberal democratic political system overseen by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) have allowed women more independence from the state, although ironically with less formal representation in it.<sup>71</sup> The burgeoning number of Khmer non-governmental organizations (NGOs) addressing gender issues have provided women with unprecedented opportunities to exert pressure on the state. For the first time, conferences, seminars and workshops are being organized to study a wide range of social issues such as trafficking of women and children, domestic violence, prostitution and the spread of HIV, and women's political empowerment.

The role of international NGOs has been crucial in this respect, providing the financial and ideological support for Khmer NGO advocacy groups, and National Assembly Commissions. Policy recommendations are routinely issued, but as yet the governmental apparatus does not have the personnel or financial resources to handle these.

With assistance from international NGOs, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Secretariat of State for Women's Affairs, has drafted gender-sensitive constitutional codes that conform to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.<sup>72</sup> The Secretariat's programs are wholly dependent on NGOs, however, since it receives 0.12 percent of the national budget to cover all of its operating costs.<sup>73</sup>

The Khmer Women's Voice Center, a local NGO established in 1994, is one of the leading advocates of gender equality, challenging women to question socialization patterns that have produced "negative softness, reluctance, complacent attitudes, dependency and lack of self-confidence". Its monthly magazine is the only publication for public consumption that has the editorial objective of "eliminating harmful and incorrect preconceptions about women . . . and disseminating points of view which are good for women".<sup>74</sup> In recent articles it has advocated family planning and birth spacing, taking issue with the argument that Cambodia's small population makes the Khmer nation politically vulnerable:

Frequent births decrease the quantity of food in the family, and make mothers and children weak, and they cannot develop physically and intellectually. While our country is poor due to chronic civil war, frequent births means that babies cannot fully develop, and cannot be educated over the long term. So between having many children who are weak or having less children but who are strong, which is better? A strong country does not only depend on a large population but also on the quality and capacity of the population.<sup>75</sup>

Such views represent a recent trend in Cambodia whereby women are formulating views

that are not consistent with state objectives. How these contending views will play out in the future remains to be seen. Many Khmer and international NGO workers complain of the government's reluctance to take gender issues seriously at a time when Cambodian society is undergoing rapid change, much of it considered negative for women.<sup>76</sup>

If historians were to characterize Khmer historical periods by the importance of the feminine element in Khmer society, as Jean Thierry proposed in 1955, it would seem that the prominent position accorded women in ancient Khmer society has no equivalent in modern Cambodia.<sup>77</sup> Whether or not we agree with Thierry's argument, it should be noted that there is a broad consensus among Khmers of various social classes that the position of women in contemporary Cambodia has suffered setbacks, particularly since the Democratic Kampuchean period.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to show how an analysis of the gendered state and the social forces that reproduce can illuminate the powerful ways in which Khmer women have been engaged, willingly or not, in the politics of nation-state building in Cambodia. Furthermore, I have argued that the political roles of women have been intensified or weakened by various regime types in the post-independence period, but not fundamentally altered. This is because the imprint of Khmer nationalism with racial survival as its *leitmotif*, is embossed on all nationalist movements, in and out of power, and as such, it has placed an onerous burden on women to be the Khmer nation's reproducers, its ideological protectors, and its cultural guardians--sometimes with tragic results.

## Notes

1. See for example Kathleen Jones and Anna Jonasdottir, *The Political Interests of Gender* (London: Sage), 1985; Jill Vickers, "Feminist Approaches to Women in Politics," in Kealey and Sangster, *Beyond the vote: Canadian Women and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 1989; Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland (eds.), *Gender and International Relations* (Buckingham [England]: Open University Press), 1991; Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* (London: Pandora), 1987.
2. An article by Anthony Day is a marvelous attempt to bring women into the picture of Southeast Asian political history. See "Family Ties that (Un)Bind," in *Journal of Asian Studies* September 1996. The pre-colonial period has been barely touched, with the exception of Anthony Reid's contributions. See for example, "Female roles in Pre-colonial Southeast Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 22, No. 3, 1988, pp.

629-645. Penny Edwards has also made an important contribution with her article, "Womanizing Indochine: Fiction, Nation and Cohabitation in Colonial Cambodia," in Julia Clancey-Smith and Frances Gouda (eds.), *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 1998, pp.108-130. In a survey conducted by Susan Blackburn of nine prominent and frequently used books on Southeast Asian politics published primarily in the 1980s, none contained discussion of the political roles of men and women and how gender issues relate to these roles. See her chapter, "How Gender is Neglected in Southeast Asian Politics," in Maila Stevens (ed.), *Why Gender Matters in Southeast Asia* (Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, No. 23), 1991, pp. 25-42. In two of the latest books published on Southeast Asian politics, there were no references to the role of women in formal politics or analyses of where politics occurs outside the formal public sphere where women's activities and roles can be examined. See, Muthiaah Alagappa (ed.) *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1995 and R.H. Taylor (ed.), *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press), 1996.

3. In addition to the references cited above, see also V. Spike Peterson and Ann Sisson Runyan, *Global Gender Issues* (Boulder: Westview Press), 1993, chapter 5.
4. Françoise Thébaud, "Explorations of Gender," in *A History of Women: Toward Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press), 1994, p.4.
5. Ibid.
6. Spike Peterson, "Security and Sovereign States: What Is at Stake in Taking Feminism Seriously?" in Peterson (ed.), *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner), 1992, pp. 31-64.
7. See Peterson, *Gendered States*, and Grant and Newland, (eds.) *Gender and International Relations*, op cit.
8. Christine Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism," *Women and Politics* Vol. 8, No. 3/4, 1988, pp.1-24. See also Nancy Hartstock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" in Linda Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge), 1990.
9. There are exceptions to the pattern of inheritance, particularly in Islamic parts of Southeast Asia but for a discussion of regional gender patterns, see Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia, The Lands Below the Winds*, and Aihwa Ong, *Center and Periphery*.

10. See for example, *Khmer Customs and Traditions* (Phnom Penh), 1962, which provides detailed conduct codes, including what women should and should not wear according to age, social rank and occasion.
11. See Chantou Boua, "Women in Today's Cambodia," *New Left Review* No. 131, 1982, pp. 45-61; May Ebihara, *Svay, A Khmer Village in Cambodia*, Ph.D. thesis (New York: Columbia University), 1960; Judy Ledgerwood, *Analysis of the Situation of Women in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: UNICEF), 1993.
12. Secretariat of State for Women's Affairs, *Women in Development, Cambodia's Country Report* (Phnom Penh), 1994, p. 4.
13. Judy Ledgerwood, *Changing Khmer Conceptions of Gender*, Ph.D. thesis (Ithaca: Cornell University), 1990.
14. Cited in Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Cambodia, A Shattered Society*, Translated by Mark McLeod (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1994, p. 26.
15. Ibid. This opinion was conveyed to me during myriad casual and formal conversations with Khmer political observers in Phnom Penh, April 1997.
16. Cited in Marie Alexandrine Martin, *op. cit* p. 128.
17. Marie Martin, *op. cit* p. 161.
18. Interviews with Professor Keo Narom, University of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh, March 1997.
19. Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action* (New York, London: Routledge), 1992, p. 105.
20. David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview Press), 1982.
21. David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics War, and Revolution since 1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1991; Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power* (London: Verso Press), 1985; Penny Edwards, "Womanizing Indochine."
22. *Kampuchea* No. 169, 11th lunar month, 1945.
23. Ibid
24. *Kampuchea* No. 190. 10th lunar month, mid August-mid September, (month of Pudurubud) 1945, p. 2. Italics added. This and all further newspaper articles were translated by Phay Mondara and the author.

25. David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* p. 20.
26. *Kampuchea* No. 190. 10th lunar month, mid August-mid September, (month of Pudurubud) 1945, p. 2.
27. *Kampuchea* No. 170, October 1945.
28. *Kampuchea* No. 160, July 11, 1945.
29. *Kampuchea* No. 170, October 1945.
30. *Kampuchea* No. 169, 11th lunar month, 1945, p. 1.
31. "Moral Instruction for Housewives in the Ancient Period," *Kampuchea* No. 438, 28 September 1946.
32. "Is it Civilization?" *Kampuchea* No. 358, 20 January 1946.
33. "An Association for Khmer Women," *Kampuchea* No. 973, August 1948.
34. "Opinion from a compatriot," *Kampuchea* No. 363, 26 June 1946.
35. "Women's Work is in the Kitchen," *Kampuchea* No 235, 11 January 1946.
36. "The Establishment of the Khmer Women's Association," *Kampuchea* No. 997, 23 September 1948. Other members were listed as the "Wives of Son Sann and Ieu Koeuss".
37. "An Association for Khmer Women," *Kampuchea* No. 973, August 1948.
38. Chea Um, author of the first *Khmer Women's Friendship Association Newsletter* (Phnom Penh), 1958. The original document rests in the National Library Archives, Phnom Penh.
39. The second issue of the *KWFA Bulletin* featured a letter of support from Prince Sihanouk who personally knew Chea Um and the other women involved in the Association's Executive as they were all wives of government officials.
40. *Khmer Women's Friendship Association Newsletter* Phnom Penh, 1958, p. 4.
41. Ibid. p. 5.
42. From 1957 to 1964 the percentage of registered girls in primary schools grew from 25% to 32% (200,000 female students); and 16% to 2% (13,800 female students)

- for secondary school registrants. By 1964, there were 180 women university students out of 1,660. Statistics from *La Femme Cambodgienne L'ere du Sangkum, Direction des Services de L'information* (Phnom Penh), 1965, p. 8. For analysis of Sihanouk's modernization ideas see also Charles Meyer, *Derriere le Khmre Sourire* (Paris: Plon), 1971.
43. Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy, The War After the War* (New York: MacMillon Publishing), 1986, p. 76.
  44. David Chandler, *Tragedy of Cambodian History* p. 111.
  45. Khieu Ponnary was the financial officer of the magazine "*Neary Khmer*" at least during its first years of publication in the late 1950s.
  46. Interview with 44 year old, M.S., Siem Reap, April 1997.
  47. Interview with 59 year old district chief, Pradak village, Siem Reap, April 1997.
  48. Ibid.
  49. Interview with 60 year old village chief, Kompong Tralach, Kompong Chhnang, February 1997.
  50. Interview with 50 year old Phnom Penh professor, May 1997.
  51. Ibid. Fruit was measured by *thloons* during DK as there were no weights. One thloon normally consists of 50 pieces with the exception of Battambang where its value is 42 pieces.
  52. Ibid.
  53. Although DK announced that the country was 99 percent pure Khmer, there is no conclusive evidence that the regime carried out executions solely on the basis of race. See Serge Thion, "Genocide as a Political Commodity," *Watching Cambodia* (Bangkok: White Lotus), 1993, pp. 170-172. A contrary view is put forth by Ben Kiernan, (title of book?).
  54. See chapter 2, "Les Manoeuvres et les Methodes Utilisees Par les Vietnamiens pour Annexer and Avaller le Territoire Du Kampuchea Dans le Passe," *Livre Noir* Département de la Presse et de l'Information du Ministere des Affaires Etrangeres du Kampuchea Democratique, Septembre 1978, p. 10.
  55. Women accounted for 65 per cent of the adult population after 1979. See *Cambodia's Country Report* op. cit. p. ii.

56. "Workshop to Evaluate Women's Work for 1990," *Neary Kampuchea* No. 1, 1991.
57. Ibid.
58. *Neary Kampuchea* No. 2, 1990.
59. By the late 1980s, the population was war weary, a factor which figured into the regime's decision to find political solutions to end the war.
60. *Cambodia's Country Report op. cit* p. 25.
61. Chhuor Counnie, "La Femme Khmer Dans les Camps de Refugies de Thailande," *ASEMI* Vol. XIII, 1982, p. 213.
62. Interview with Ek Virak, Phnom Penh, April 1997, formerly Director of KPMLF, Banteay Ampil Women's Association.
63. *Cambodia's Country Report* pp. 44-45.
64. Poignant illustrations of this sentiment are well documented in the film, *Samsara*.
65. *Cambodia's Country Report* p. 45.
66. *Kampuchea Dossier* 11, p. 27.
67. *KPMLF Bulletin* 19 December 1992.
68. *KPMLF Bulletin* 24 December 1992.
69. *KPMLF Bulletin* 7 November, 1992.
70. These issues are discussed in detail in Steve Heder, Judy Ledgerwood eds. *Politics Propaganda and Violence in Cambodia During the UNTAC Era* (Boston: M.E. Sharpe), 1996.
71. The percentage of National Assembly members dropped from 25% in the 1980s to roughly 6% of the total in 2000.
72. *Cambodia's Country Report*, 29.
73. Interview with Kim Suor, Director of Women's Research Dept., Secretariat of Women's Affairs, Phnom Penh, April 1997.

74. *Khmer Women's Voice* No. 1. 1997. This contrasts with the overwhelmingly negative representations of women in the Khmer print media according to a recent study. See *Khmer Women and the Media*.
75. *Khmer Women's Voice* No. 1. 1997, p. 27.
76. The growth of the sex industry, the exponential growth of HIV, the feminization of the low wage labour market are frequently referred to as negative results of Cambodia's integration into the global economy.
77. Thierry, op. cit. The author uses data from inscriptions and Chinese and European sources to argue that high ranking women in Angkorean society were accorded significant religious and social and economic positions which stood in stark contrast to the role of women in India and China during the same period.