

# Traditional Power-Relations in Cambodia

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### **How Enduring Were the Traditional Power-Relations in Cambodia Throughout the Khmer Rouge Period of 1975-1991? What is the Importance of These Power-Relations When Studying Violence Within Cambodia?**

#### **1– Introduction**

The vast tragedies that Cambodia has suffered throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including United States bombardment, civil war, genocide, and Vietnamese invasions, easily bewilder many (Solarz, 1990: 102; Ratner, 1993: 1). However, wishing to avoid retelling this galling story, I shall undertake an analytical examination of the role of traditional power-relations in Cambodia throughout the period of 1975-1991. Even though commentators often mention traditional power-relations, they have not been recognised as a nexus around which violence occurred during the Khmer Rouge (Roberts, 2010: 524, 527; Ledgerwood, n.d: 2). My purpose, therefore, is to show that traditional power-relations have proven enduring, and in doing so, demonstrate the analytical importance of traditional power-relations. This essay argues that those wishing to engage with violence in Cambodia ought to study traditional power-relations, as in doing so, will further our understanding of violence. A conclusion, which I shall suggest, has importance for the study of the Cambodian peace process.

The layout of the essay is as follows. Firstly, I shall identify what is meant by “traditional power-relations.” Secondly, I shall examine the fate of these power-relations within “Democratic Kampuchea” (1975-1979) and the subsequent period of 1979-1991, thereby demonstrating their endurance (Hughes, 2009: 28). Thirdly, I shall argue that these traditional power-relations can be seen as a nexus of violence within Cambodia, and subsequently, that efforts to understand traditional power-relations ought to be undertaken when studying violence within Cambodia. Lastly, I shall conclude by suggesting that this research has bearings on assessing the durability of peace in modern Cambodia.

#### **2 – Traditional Power-Relations**

Traditional Cambodian power-relations are based upon the patronage paradigm of power distribution within society[1] (Vickery, 1999: 14; Nepote, 1992—cited by Le Billon, 2000: 790; Hinton, 2005: 107). Such patronage relations can manifest broadly in different forms at either the community or governmental level[2] (Scott, 1972: 98; Chandler, 1979: 414; Ebihara, 1987: 23). At the community level, family and kinship groups have historically operated as centres of power-distribution, suggesting that potential patrons establish themselves as important figures within such communities, enabling themselves to maintain client networks (Ebihara, 1987: 19). At the governmental level, patronage has often flowed from the executive to local administrations in the form of “office-holding” relationships. In such situations, the “office-holding” patron is both client and patron, dependent upon an original governmental patron yet being able to establish a clientele network for oneself (Scott, 1972: 98, 106; Vickery, 1999: 13-14).

The legacy of colonialism, however, creates a methodological problem when researching “traditional” Cambodian power-relations, as French colonial rule may have altered traditional power distributions (Chandler, 1979: 410; Vickery, 1999: 21). Although the essay’s scope does not include this problem in depth, Scott argues that traditional

# Traditional Power-Relations in Cambodia

Written by Philip Brown

Southeast Asian patron-client relations endured and survived colonialism (Scott, 1992: 105); hence, for the purposes of this essay, patronage relations are taken to be traditional. Furthermore, as shall be demonstrated, the embeddedness of patronage power-relations suggests that such power-relations are traditional. This essay shall now explore how such traditional power-relations endured the Khmer Rouge period and why this observation is important.

## 3 – Power-Relations Throughout the Khmer Rouge Period

This section shall argue that in spite of the systematic violence Cambodia suffered throughout the period in question, traditional power-relations in Cambodia have proven to be enduring. This section shall conclude that such endurance suggests an important relationship between power-relations and violence within Cambodia and bearings for the future.

### 3.1 – Traditional Community Power-Relations.

Following victory in 1975, the Organisation[3] instigated the “Super Great Leap Forward,”[4] which led to the death of 30%[5] of the Cambodian population and the destruction of traditional community power-relations (Hughes, 2009: 26; Solarz, 1990: 102). Through this policy, the Khmer Rouge shifted power away from local communities, which were viewed with suspicion, and arrogated power to the “centre” (Chandler, 1991: 237-238; Hinton, 2005: 134, 148-9). In what follows, by focusing on the urban and then the rural population, I shall outline two examples whereby the Khmer Rouge attempted this centralisation of power, and therefore, systematically destroyed traditional community power-relations.

Emerging victorious from the civil war in 1975, the Organisation emptied Cambodian urban centres[6] (Widyono, 2008: 9). The Organisation then rebranded the displaced population as “new people,”[7] forced them into agrarian slavery, or even executed them (Kiernan, 2002: 485; O’Kane, 1993: 735). Subsequent to this exodus, the urban population were violently separated from their established familial and kinship networks (Ebihara, 1987: 23; Hinton, 2005: 134). As a result, these events destroyed social relations, kinship groups, and abolished extant community dynamics of power distribution, making those formerly powerful now powerless (Chan, Chheang, 2008: 4; Hinton, 2005: 134).

Moreover, because the Organisation feared any power external to the party, the Organization acted against rural Cambodian families and effected the basic building block upon which social and power-relations had traditionally been built (Hinton, 2005: 134, 148-9; Ebihara, 1987: 28). To achieve this, the Organisation violently collectivised almost all aspects of family life—from production and consumption to names of affection (Hinton, 2005: 2, 9, 129-130; Ebihara, 1987: 30-31). Such violent collectivisation[8] prevented Cambodians from establishing their traditional kinship networks, and therefore, establishing traditional, community level patronage groups. Through violently removing the family as a socio-cultural unit, the Organisation undermined the fundamental building block of Cambodian society and power-relations—the family—and prevented such power-relations from re-emerging (Hinton, 2005: 2, 9, 130, 132, 137; Ebihara, 1987: 28; Chandler, 1991: 243).

Although the above examples demonstrate that the Khmer Rouge aimed to destroy traditional social power-relations, subsequent to the fears of the community and familial power, I argue that the act by the Khmer Rouge was a narrative, not a primary motive, but still one which violently upended traditional power-relations[9] (Chandler, 1991: 238-239). Furthermore, I would argue that these examples demonstrate the nature of power-relations and violence in Cambodia. More specifically, the external changes to, or within, traditional power-relations in Cambodia were often accompanied by mass violence. Nonetheless, this section concludes that the Khmer Rouge attempted a systematic destruction of traditional community power-relations throughout their premiership. Yet, as shall be demonstrated, these power-relations endured into the subsequent period.

### 3.2 – Governmental Traditional Power-Relations

1975-1979

## Traditional Power-Relations in Cambodia

Written by Philip Brown

From 1975 to 1979, because senior Khmer Rouge cadres governed Cambodia through patronage chains at the regional level, the Khmer Rouge did not reject traditional Cambodian power-relations altogether (Chandler, 1991: 241, 244; Hinton, 2005: 97, 134). These regional leaders often established their own patronage chains, and subsequently, the party centre was suspicious, often starting violent purges<sup>[10]</sup> (Hinton, 2005: 97, 134; O’Kane, 1993: 735). As a result, the Khmer Rouge would often try to outsmart the party centre by promoting other cadres to such governance positions (Thion, 1987: 161). The Khmer Rouge, therefore, utilised traditional governance patronage networks throughout their premiership by appointing or purging local elites. Subsequently, traditional patronage power-relations endured the Khmer Rouge’s reign, and counter-intuitively, prospered. These examples, again, demonstrate a link between violence and external changes to, or within, power-relations within Cambodia, highlighting the importance of engaging with power-relations when studying violence within Cambodia—a point developed below.

### 1979-Onwards

In 1979, when ousting the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese chased them all the way to the Thai border, ushering in the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (Rowley, 2006: 191). In this section, I shall briefly outline the endurance of traditional power-relations throughout this period, demonstrating how the new government and the Khmer Rouge took advantage. In doing so, I shall again demonstrate that mass violence often accompanied dynamic changes to, or within, traditional Cambodian power-relations.

The People’s Republic of Kampuchea, later known as the “State of Cambodia” (Heder, Ledgerwood, 1996: 7; van der Kroef, 1991: 94), heavily depended on Vietnamese aid, and as a result, attempted to exploit resources and establish taxation to supplement this aid (Hughes, 2009: 28). They attempted to do so through patronage chains, which also built infrastructure and defences but also caused losses of life (Hughes, 2009: 28). This example demonstrates the continuity of deploying traditional governmental patronage networks, resulting in large losses of life, than as compared to the Democratic Kampuchea regime (Thion, 1987: 161; Hughes, 2009: 27-28). This example, like those previously mentioned, reaffirms the narrative of violence surrounding external changes to, or within, traditional Cambodian power-relations.

During the period of 1979 to 1991, the Khmer Rouge, while in exile, also utilised traditional power-relations. With the events surrounding the Cold War, the international community, as well as the USA, China, and Thailand, supported the Khmer Rouge via aid and armaments (Hughes, 2009: 27; Solarz, 1990: 11; Brown, 1986: 1; Rowley, 2006: 194; Vickery, 1987: 309). As a result, throughout the 1980s to the 1990s, the Khmer Rouge established autonomous centres of communal and governmental power along certain areas of the Thai border (Rowley, 2006: 193). In addition, through fighting with other political factions and bandits, the Khmer Rouge<sup>[11]</sup> established control over large amounts of aid and munitions (Brown, 1986: 6; Rowley, 2006: 193). Eventually the Khmer Rouge found themselves as patrons in areas previously devastated by the “Super Great Leap Forward,” (Rowley, 2006: 193). The Khmer Rouge, therefore, established a population base and reinforced their beleaguered armies,<sup>[12]</sup> subverting power from the government of Phnom Penh and continuing the civil war by making attacks deep into Cambodia (Rowley, 2006: 192, 194).

Moreover, because logging was a lucrative venture in Cambodia, especially after being outlawed in Thailand, the Khmer Rouge used the illegal logging industry to their advantage by establishing patronage chains to fund their military ventures (Le Billon, 2000: 785, 788). (Le Billon, Springer, 2007: 17; Global Witness, 1995b: 1). For example, by extorting Thai contractors who wanted access to the forests in their territory, the Khmer Rouge grew wealthy throughout the 1990s<sup>[13]</sup> (Global Witness, 1996, 2; Le Billon, 2000: 792; Le Billon, Springer, 2007: 17). As such, these ventures would not only generate clientelism but also revenue for warfare—an acute need (Le Billon, 2000: 789, 802). Hence, through controlling access to international aid and supplementing this with illegal logging, the Khmer Rouge used traditional, patronage power-relations and their correlation to continue their violence.

To be sure, the above examples raise two analytical points. Firstly, while in exile, the Khmer Rouge found it expedient to advance something similar to the community power-relations, which they attempted to destroy, which consequently provided a means to subvert the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, and therefore, used power-

# Traditional Power-Relations in Cambodia

Written by Philip Brown

relations[14]. And secondly, as I have demonstrated throughout, traditional power-relations have often been the nexus around which violence is created or escalated, the importance of which I shall now turn.

## 4 – Why Are Power-Relations Important?

This essay has drawn two narratives: the endurance of traditional power-relations, and why we should consider traditional power-relations to be important when studying violence in Cambodia. Yet, I shall now examine what follows from these narratives.

As has been argued, external changes to, or within, traditional power-relations are often accompanied by mass violence. If one considers the Khmer Rouge's attempts at destroying traditional community power-relations (Kiernan, 2002: 485; O'Kane, 1993: 735; Ebihara, 1987: 23), or the Khmer Rouge's policy to purge local cadres, whom amassed too strong a client network (Hinton, 2005: 138-139, 141), then both actions created mass violence—the former being a change to and the latter a change within traditional power-relations. Again, the People's Republic of Kampuchea and Khmer Rouge's use of patronage chains throughout 1979-1991 also led to mass violence and death (Hughes, 2009: 28). As such, this essay has argued that changes to, or within, traditional power-relations should rightly be recognised as potential causes, signifiers, or enablers of violence, and not just as symptoms. Therefore, alongside other factors such as ideology, economics, or psychology, power-relations should be considered as a key factor when studying violence in Cambodia.

However, such a conclusion has applications beyond just the study of violence. The considerations I have argued for also have ramifications for the study of peace in Cambodia. Throughout this essay, I have argued that patronage networks are embedded within Cambodian social and political life. Unsurprisingly, therefore, traditional patronage networks have affected the peace process (Roberts, 2010: 526; Un, 2006: 225; Chan, Chheang, 2008: 13). Therefore, this highlights a need to engage with the peace-processes' capacity to factor these entrenched norms into account. As such, I argue that the same reasons, for which we ought to study traditional power-relations to better understand violence, are applicable for the study of peace. Those reasons are that mass violence tends to accompany the embeddedness of such relations and the observed trend through the Khmer Rouge period that dynamic shifts in power-relations from outside. Although this essay cannot undertake such an investigation, it aims at convincing the reader that such power-relations are important when investigating the peace, which Cambodia currently enjoys, as well as the violence, which it has previously suffered.

## 5 – Conclusion

The scale of violence, which Cambodia endured through the Khmer Rouge period, in an essay, which focuses upon the impact of traditional power-relations upon violence, rather than the acts of violence itself, might appear trivial. However, this essay has demonstrated that the endurance of traditional power-relations throughout mass violence enables us to better understand such instances of violence. To that end, I have argued for the importance of concentrating upon traditional, power relations when studying violence in Cambodia throughout the Khmer Rouge period for two reasons. One, because patronage networks have not been just traditional, but also enduring and embedded, any study of violence in Cambodia ought to consider the importance of traditional power-relations, as they permeate from the governmental level through to the community level. Two, and the most important, I have identified a narrative within the Khmer Rouge period which suggests that dynamic changes to, or within, traditional power-relations from the outside is often accompanied by mass violence. Subsequently, researchers concerned with Cambodian violence ought to focus upon the role of traditional power-relations in their own right, that is, as signifiers, potential causes, or enablers of violence—not just as symptoms.

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# Traditional Power-Relations in Cambodia

Written by Philip Brown

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# Traditional Power-Relations in Cambodia

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[1] This paradigm holds that power-relations can be formal or informal, are renegotiable and dynamic, and are in accordance with the availability and need for certain resources, or favours (Scott, 1972: 92). Patron-client relationships place the patron at the apex of a pyramid, with his/her clients beneath. The patron holds material or social benefits, which his/her clients depend upon; subsequently, the patron is dependent upon his/her clients for support in their endeavours, and this support is traded for access to material, or social benefits (Scott, 1972: 92; Hinton, 2005: 109). As such, patron-client relationships operate on the basis of trading support for material or social advantages. This is a simplified account of patronage networks. For more details, please consult (Ledgerwood, n. d: 2; Scott, 1972; Chan, Cheang, 2008; Hinton, 2005: 109)

[2] By community I mean the domestic and village level. By governmental level I mean acting as de-facto sources of executive power over a region.

[3] The Khmer Rouge, who courted secrecy from 1975-77, were known as "the Organisation" (O' Kane, 1993: 736).

[4] A vast socio-economic revolution by which 5 tonnes of rice per hectare was demanded, and communities were collectivised (Hughes, 2009: 26).

[5] The death count is held to be somewhere between 1,000,000 – 2,000,000 (Heder, Ledgerwood: 1996, 3; Hughes, 2009: 26).

[6] There were 2,000,000 displaced just from Phnom Penh alone (Kiernan, 2002: 485).

[7] A derogatory term for former urban populations; traditionally, there had been tensions between rural and city people in Cambodia, exacerbated by the latter being considered "class enemies" by Khmer cadres (Vickery, 1999: 1; Ebihara, 1987: 24,3 1; Hinton, 1998: 365-367).

[8] This entailed: no leisure time, no private property, no control over resources, etc. (Hinton, 2005: 129-130).

[9] Chandler engages in an in-depth discussion on Khmer Rouge ideology and motivations, which focuses on class-

## **Traditional Power-Relations in Cambodia**

Written by Philip Brown

based politics (Chandler, 1991: 238-239).

[10] Not just the patrons, but their whole clientele and families (Hinton, 2005: 138-139, 141).

[11] As part of the Royalist group FUNCINPEC and later the CGDK (Roberts, 2006: 193)

[12] 100,000 and 35,000 strong, respectively (Rowley, 2006: 192).

[13] Admittedly after the period in question, but in 1994, the Khmer Rouge generated near \$15,000,000 through logging (Le Billon, 2000: 792).

[14] As shown above, the Khmer Rouge was suspicious of any location of power external to the party (Hinton, 2005: 134,148-9).

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