Defining a Nation:

Language, Literature, and the Articulation of National Imaginaries in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Cambodia

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Abstract

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This thesis considers the roles played by the Khmer language as a medium and idiom through which generations of Cambodian scholars, authors, intellectuals, religious and civil officials, and others, extending from the opening decades of the twentieth century through to the contemporary era, have delineated and contested the contours of national community and identity. Across diverse social, political, and historical landscapes, I argue, language, from its orthographic conventions to its literary traditions, has remained a central site of engagement through which generations of Cambodians have negotiated and mediated experiences of modernity and postcoloniality, and imagined and articulated possible and alternative futures for the Cambodian nation.

This work is not intended to be read as an exhaustive examination of such themes, but rather emphasizes a close reading of an assemblage of individual texts, ranging from linguistic

studies and a well-known dictionary to novels and blog posts, alongside a careful consideration of their historical contexts, for their insights into the varied and dynamic ways in which the Khmer language has been deeply implicated in successive projects of imagining the Cambodian nation, particularly those carried out both by and contra oppressive regimes of power. I draw on the historical and conceptual journeys traced by such works as threads that bind together a broader discussion of the social and political horizons unfolded – and foreclosed – through discursive engagements with language and literature.

I situate this thesis within a genealogy of studies of national imaginaries, particularly as critiqued and theorized by a range of postcolonial scholars. I draw inspiration from several scholars who have expanded our understandings of literature, across diverse national contexts, as a critical discursive space in which debates around national identity, de- and postcoloniality, and modernity have been held. Finally, I position this thesis in conversation with an assemblage of feminist historians and theorists whose works, taken together, encourage a critical inquiry into the logics of inclusion and exclusion that enable the formulation, consolidation, and naturalization of the 'nation.' Placed alongside one another, such diverse and varied discourses allow for a consideration of the ways in which language simultaneously both naturalizes and destabilizes social and political categories and relations, thereby highlighting the ways in which history continues to do work in the present and unfolding the possibility of more liberatory futures, in ways that add depth and nuance to our readings of the works and authors considered in this study.

Ultimately, I conclude that, despite efforts to fix it in time and place, language has instead endured as a destabilizing force, as its fluidity forever unfolds the space in which to reformulate, refashion, and redefine. From the opening of the twentieth century through to the present day, the Khmer language has endured as a critical site of negotiation and mediation, allowing for the continual making and remaking of the Cambodian nation, as successive generations confront the ever-urgent questions of being and belonging in the modern world.

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A Note on Translation and Transliteration

Khmer belongs to the Austroasiatic, or Mon-Khmer, language family, and is spoken by some twenty million people worldwide; a majority of these speakers live in Cambodia, where Khmer is the national language. Along with Vietnamese and Khasi, spoken in the Indian state of Meghalaya, Khmer is one of three Austroasiatic languages with official national language status; more than a hundred others, including several in present-day Cambodia, are spoken across the countries of Southeast Asia and into the Indian subcontinent as 'minority,' 'indigenous,' and 'ethnic' languages.[1] Khmer has been profoundly shaped by centuries of interaction and exchange with a variety of other languages, foremost among which are Sanskrit and Pali, both Indo-Aryan languages from South Asia, and Thai, the most prominent member of the Kra-Dai language family, originating in present-day southern China. Its writing system is classified as an abugida – its basic units consist of consonant characters, each with an 'inherent vowel,' while other vowel qualities are denoted through diacritics or the use of dependent characters affixed to consonant characters – and descends from the Pallava script of southern India, itself a Brahmic script.

In its phonology, morphology, and syntax, Khmer exhibits a number of dramatic differences from English. It is primarily the former of these, phonology, that poses challenges for practices of transliteration, as the English alphabet is poorly suited for representing Khmer's phonetic inventory. Several consonants that comprise distinct phonemes in Khmer exhibit a merely phonetic distinction in English; others present in Khmer are absent from English entirely. Khmer's vowel inventory, meanwhile, is among the richest in the world,[2] a fact that poses problems for the English alphabet's mere five vowel symbols, their notorious phonetic mutability notwithstanding.

[1] Jenny, Weber, and Weymuth 2015, 13.
[2] Nielson Hul 2023, personal correspondence.

It was largely in response to such difficulties that the linguist Saveros Pou developed the system of transliteration that is commonly seen today in scholarly works focused on Khmer. Pou's system is a 'true' transliteration system, in that it provides a one-to-one correspondence between Khmer and transliterated orthography, representing consonant and vowel characters that may be orthographically realized but phonetically null in spoken Khmer.[3] Given the Khmer script's Brahmic ancestry, Pou's transliteration system is particularly adept at rendering transparent the similarities between the Indic-derived portion of the Khmer lexicon and its Sanskrit and Pali roots, an orientation seen as preferable to scholars concerned with linguistic etymologies, Buddhist studies, and so forth.[4] At the same time, the significant phonological developments that have characterized the Khmer language since the initial adaptation of the Pallavic script in the early first millennium have resulted in a wide discrepancy between contemporary phonetic realizations of Khmer words and their orthographic realizations, a discrepancy that is exacerbated by transliteration based on orthography rather than phonology.

Without a doubt, this thesis is heavily concerned with textual practices of the Khmer language. My emphasis, however, is not on tracing and excavating the etymologies of Khmer words themselves – their connections to Pali and Sanskrit, their circulation within and adaptation from a broader Theravadin cosmopolis – but, rather, on examining the linguistic ideologies of the authors and speakers who use such words, and of the ways in which such ideologies both index and influence broader sociopolitical positionalities.

I have thus decided to use throughout this study a system of transliteration that is a slight modification of that developed by the Geography Department of the Ministry of Land Management and Urban Planning of Cambodia.[5] For my purposes here, this system is, in my view, preferable for

[3] Lewitz 1969. (Earlier in her career, Pou frequently published under her married name Saveros Lewitz.)
[4] Pou herself was a scholar of Old and Middle Khmer, publishing prolifically on historical developments of Khmer language, religion, and culture (Heng Piphal 2020).
[5] UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization Systems 2013.

its lack of diacritics and its emphasis on the contemporary phonetic realizations of Khmer words, rather than on Indic-derived orthographies. Perhaps somewhat ironically, many of the authors considered in this study would undoubtedly take issue with the etymological erasures that such a system of transliteration entails – yet I feel that a system such as Pou's, while pathbreaking and invaluable in other scholarly contexts, would only serve to overly complicate my discussion in this particular instance.

Exceptions to my use of the Geography Department's transliteration system are those instances in which an established transliteration is widely accepted, or, in the case of proper names, preferred by the individual in question. I thus follow established precedent in writing *Angkor Wat*, the Venerable *Chuon Nath*, the Cambodian *sangha*, and so forth, despite such transliterations' idiosyncratic departures from their Khmer sources' orthographic and phonetic realizations alike.

Translation, meanwhile, poses more vexing problems, as well as more exciting possibilities. As an analytic language, Khmer, unlike English, does not exhibit inflectional morphology: it does not make use of affixes, ablaut, or other inflectional processes to denote tense, aspect, mood, case, number, and so forth.[6] Rather, relationships between words are conveyed primarily through the use of particles, auxiliary words, and word order – yet the use of such particles and auxiliaries is rarely

[6] Characterizing Khmer's use of derivational morphology, however, is less straightforward: while a significant number of lexical items in modern Khmer were historically formed through processes of derivational morphology, in many cases such processes properly belong to the realm of diachronically-analyzed etymology, rather than synchronically-assessed morphology. Old Khmer (~600-1300 CE), perhaps most famously attested in the inscriptions of the Angkor temple complex, had, as did a number of other languages in the Mon-Khmer family, a relatively robust system of prefixes and infixes that combined to yield a significant number of word-families of related lexemes (Jacob 1993a; Jenner 1969; Jenner and Pou 1982). Modern Khmer has inherited many such lexical items, and while several processes of derivational morphology typical of Old Khmer are still recognized as such today – albeit with limited productivity – most are not. The result is a large number of words in modern Khmer that undoubtedly hint at some sort of derivational relationship to other words, and recurring phonological patterns that suggest some sort of morphological process at play – yet in most cases the semantic relationship between would-be constituents and across would-be word-families is not, after centuries of linguistic development, predictable enough to posit any sort of straightforward morphological rule. Regardless, such robust diachronic morphological relationships pose particular challenges for translations into English, whose etymological networks may not align with those of Khmer; on this point, see Jennifer Croft's discussion of the use of English rhyme to translate the "underground mycelia" of Polish etymologies in Olga Tokarczuk's *Bieguni (Flights)* (Croft and Dralyuk 2022).

obligatory. It is thus possible to have perfectly grammatical sentences in Khmer that would be impossible in English. English, for instance, does not allow the tense, aspect, and mood of a verb to go unmarked: it may be a present indicative, or an imperfect subjunctive, or a future conditional – but it must be *something*. In Khmer, a verb may be any of these forms, or it may be none of them. It may be clearly marked as one form or another, or it may be left open, indeterminate.

On the other hand, there is much that may be included in a standard Khmer construction that has no natural equivalent in English. Khmer has considerable syntactic flexibility, enabling subtle shifts in the focus of sentences and the order in which information is introduced. Khmer is prolific in its use of compounding, much of it alliterative and 'decorative,' and in its use of verbal strings, or clusters, to add layers of semantic specificity.[7] Such features may be approximated in English periphrastically, or through the use of specific lexical items, but lack any structural English equivalent.

To translate from Khmer into English, then – or from English into Khmer – is thus to come up against a problem that is inherent in any act of translation: what José Ortega y Gasset has framed as the problem of *silences*. "Speech," Ortega writes,

> consists above all in silences. […] And each language represents a different equation between manifestations and silences. […] Hence the immense difficulty of translation: translation is a matter of saying in a language precisely what that language tends to pass over in silence.[8]

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[7] On Khmer's extensive use of 'decorative compounds,' see Haiman (2013), Haiman and Noeurng (2002), and Haiman (2011), "Chapter 4: Symmetrical Compounds." On complex verbal strings, see Haiman (2011), "Chapter 8: Complex Verbal Predicates and Verbal Clumps."

[8] Ortega y Gasset, trans. Trask, 1957; quoted in Becker (1995, 6). This is perhaps most readily apparent in translating nouns from one language into another that has no single-lexeme equivalents for such. Take, for instance, the Khmer words ស្រូវ *srov*, អង្ករ *angkar*, and បាយ *bai*: all three might be glossed in English as 'rice' – yet *srov* refers specifically to the rice plant, *angkar* to uncooked rice grains, and *bai* to cooked rice. The difference between these referents is easily discernible to English speakers – no one, Khmer speaker or otherwise, would expect to open a rice cooker to find entire rice stalks, nor to look out over a field of cooked rice – yet it is possible to elide these distinctions in English through the use of a single, unspecified lexeme, *rice*, in a way that is impossible in Khmer. The difference between planted rice, uncooked rice grains, and

No two languages express such silences and manifestations in the same manner; as such, the distinction between what a language says and how it says it is not as straightforward as we often imagine. Indeed, in translating a word or phrase or passage from Khmer into English, we must repeatedly ask ourselves what it is that we are translating: the meaning of the words, or their mood? Their intention, or their effect? Even if such elements were quantifiable or capable of being objectively assessed – and they are not – we would be forced to decide between a number of mutually-exclusive possibilities, as there is no word or phrase in English – or, for that matter, in any language – capable of *wholly and only* functioning as do ostensibly corresponding words and phrases in Khmer: that is, of capturing precisely what is manifested in the Khmer, and no more; of eliding precisely what Khmer passes over in silence, and no less.

It is for this reason that many scholars of translation studies today consider translation as intrinsically comprising an act of rewriting. Traditional and, frequently, vernacular perspectives on translation, predicated on an assumption of what Lawrence Venuti describes as "equivalent effect," have been challenged and problematized by a range of contemporary scholars. "Because," as Venuti writes,

> translating entails shifting between source and receiving contexts, no translation can elicit a response from its reader that is the same as or closely similar to the response elicited from the source-language reader by the source text – even if we set aside the problem that readerships are heterogeneous cultural constituencies, so that

cooked rice is thus manifested in Khmer, while it is passed over in silence in English. (Of course, it *can* be manifested in English, as evidenced by the fact that this footnote is, I hope, intelligible: I may write 'rice plant' and 'uncooked rice grains' and 'cooked rice' and assume that readers will understand what I am referring to. The difference is that English does not *typically* or *obligatorily* manifest this distinction: farmers say they planted a field of rice, not a field of rice plants; I write 'rice' on the grocery list, not 'uncooked rice grains;' restaurant menus list sides of rice, not sides of cooked rice. In Khmer, the absence of such a manifestation – in other words, such a silence – is impossible.)

> describing any response to the source text requires that a segment of source-language readers be specified.[9]

Translation, then, becomes a fundamentally interpretative act, a series of decisions by which a translator cannot but vary "the form, meaning, and effect of the source material according to the conditions – linguistic, cultural, and social – that the translator selects to frame the interpretation."[10] These decisions are fundamentally influenced by dual triads of relationality and positionality: the first, comprising how we relate to the text, how we relate to our imagined audience, and how we intend for the text to relate to our imagined audience; the second, this same set of relations, as we understand them, between the original author, the original text, and their original imagined audience.

We must thus recognize that no rendering of a Khmer text in English will convey precisely what its author conveyed in Khmer, for the simple reason that no English translation of any particular text will encompass precisely the same constellation of relations between author and audience, text and context, as did its Khmer source. If, as Ronit Ricci has suggested, works of literature are fundamentally predicated on the notion of 'prior texts,' which collectively constitute "the broad cultural memories evoked by words and phrases"[11] – if every text is, in some fundamental way, in dialogue with every text that came before it – then there can be no doubt that any given text in Khmer and its English translation will be fundamentally different works.

This may be a paralyzing realization, or it may be a liberating one. For Venuti, it is the latter. "There is really no such place in a translation as 'the place of the other,'" he writes, responding to Abé Mark Nornes,

> which remains unaffected by the translation process. When translated, 'the other,' the source material, the source culture are accessible only in mediated forms, never

[9] Venuti 2019, 138.
[10] Venuti 2019, 136.
[11] Ricci 2011, 246. Ricci adapts this notion from Becker (1995).

> directly but through an interpretive act that derives from and answers to the receiving culture.[12]

We thus recognize that a translation of any particular text cannot – nor need not – do all in English that it does in Khmer; nor, inevitably, does it do all in Khmer that it will in English. The question, rather, becomes one of what we want this work to be for our audience. We may be inspired by what the original author wanted this work to be for their audience; we may be inspired by what this work has been for us. But these are not, and cannot and will not be, equivalent.

Having thus dispelled the myth of objectivity in translation, all that remains is to embrace subjectivity. And subjectivity is inherently difficult to rationalize and explain. Translators inevitably refer to the 'voice' of the authors that they are translating, the 'feel' of the text. Like flavor, perhaps, or scent, 'voice' and 'feel' can be transcendent to experience, but are difficult to define.

All of this, ideally, would come through in an English translation; and yet such a translation would also, ideally, allow for the divergent experiences and sources of these emotions. Herein lies an inherent tension in translation: in order to be legible, a translation must be rendered, at least in part, familiar, intelligible, even relatable; and yet translation deals inherently in that which is foreign, distant, and unfamiliar.

The answer, in the end, and the one that I bring to my own translation practice throughout this thesis, is that there is no answer. No translation will ever be definitive. Instead, the best that we can do is to be honest and transparent, both with ourselves and with our audiences, around the decisions that we have made, and to embrace the undeniable fact that translators, no matter their philosophy of practice, their framing of the tensions between fidelity and interpretation, are, in the final assessment, authors themselves. The etymology of the English term 'translation' is deceptive, for translation is never simply an act of 'carrying over.' It is, inevitably and always, an act of creation.

[12] Venuti 2019, 161.

Introduction

> THE KHMER DICTIONARY HAS BEEN RELEASED!!! The Khmer Dictionary makes important scholarly contributions to the field of Khmer letters, and is greatly needed and long awaited by all. Volume 1 has now been released, with 779 pages, 1,641 headwords, printed on high-quality paper, sold in paperback for 7.00 *riels* and in hardcover for 9.00 *riels* at the Royal Library. Anyone who wishes to cultivate their sophistication in the literary arts ought to kindly hurry over, and you will surely find your desires met! If you delay, however, you may regret it later – for demand is very high….
>
> *Nokor Wat*, 30 July 1938[1]

Tucked away on the third page of the July 30, 1938 edition of Cambodia's weekly *Nokor Wat* newspaper, printed between a news bulletin reporting on the intensifying Battle of Wuhan and an advertisement for USA Lite batteries and flashlights, was a short, unassuming paragraph announcing the publication of the first volume of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, or *The Khmer Dictionary*. The announcement reads like an advertisement: the physical characteristics of the *Vachananukram* – its number of entries, the quality of its paper, its availability in both paperback and hardcover editions – are described for interested readers; the second volume is promised to be forthcoming, and of similar dimensions.[2] In any case, the editors of *Nokor Wat*, whose writers frequently penned columns on recent events of national significance, did not seem to regard the

[1] *នគរវត្ត* 1938, 3. The newspaper's masthead features the alternative transliteration *Nagara vatta*; see "A Note on Translation and Transliteration," above, for a discussion of the transliteration system and translation philosophy employed in this thesis. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

[2] Volume 2 of the first edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer* was published in 1943 (Edwards 2007, 237). As Sasagawa (2015, 47) notes, Volume 1 of the first edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer* was initially published by the Royal Library in 1938; Volume 2 and all subsequent editions were thereafter published by the Buddhist Institute, following the merger of the two institutions in 1943.

Vachananukram's publication, given no more than a few lines of text and relegated to the third of the paper's four pages, as a matter of particular import.

Such a modest debut belies the outsized importance that this dictionary, first published in 1938 by the Royal Library and known to future generations as the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath* – *The Chuon Nath Dictionary*, named for the reformist monk who played a leading role in its inception and development – would ultimately come to serve.[3] The two volumes of the *Vachananukram Khmer* were consolidated into a single volume that underwent multiple printings, with the fifth and most recent edition published in 1967. In the 1970s, a wave of orthographic, lexical, and other linguistic reforms largely sidelined the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath*, as a simplified spelling system was implemented alongside an overhaul of vocabulary seen as arcane and archaic; in the wake of the Khmer Rouge, the People's Republic of Kampuchea retained this simplified standard, and in 1993, following the restoration of the monarchy and the adoption of the contemporary constitution, the ruling Cambodian People's Party did the same.[4] In 2010, however, Prime Minister Hun Sen announced the restoration of the Venerable Chuon Nath's *Vachananukram Khmer* as the government's official orthographic standard – a decision followed by the release in 2016 of app and desktop versions of the *Vachananukram* and by the National Council of Khmer Language's publication of an updated edition of the *Vachananukram Cheat Khmer*, the *Khmer National Dictionary* – the word 'national' in its title a conspicuous addition – in December of 2022.[5]

[3] I use both '*Vachananukram Khmer*' and, to a lesser extent, '*Vachananukram Chuon Nath*' – and, in abbreviated form, '*Vachananukram*' – throughout this thesis, with the moderate distinction that *Vachananukram Khmer* is preferred in discussions of the dictionary in the context of its original publication, while *Vachananukram Chuon Nath* is reserved for discussions of the dictionary after the death of the Venerable Chuon Nath in 1969, and of its integration into broader debates concerning the Khmer national community that extend beyond the discursive domain of the *Vachananukram* itself – that is, debates in which the dictionary's authorship is considered a relevant factor. There is significant overlap in these discussions, and, therefore, correspondingly significant overlap in the use of these terms as outlined here.

[4] Sasagawa Hideo 2015, 62, 65.

[5] កោះសន្តិភាព 2010; Information Technology Center 2016; ភ្នំពេញ ប៉ុស្ត៍ 2022.

Yet beyond the pendulum swing of its official status as the national orthographic standard, the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath* has played a more profound role in Cambodia's postcolonial trajectory, orienting and anchoring debates around not just the Khmer language but also more foundational understandings of Khmer – and Cambodian – identity and nationhood.[6] Early editions of the *Vachananukram Khmer* emerged alongside – and as part of – a nascent nationalist movement through which Khmer scholars, monks, intellectuals, educators, authors, journalists, bureaucrats, and others sought to delineate the conceptual space of Khmer culture, identity, and nationhood. The *Vachananukram Khmer* was the most ambitious of several efforts to give definitive linguistic form to such national imaginings, an effort to which the Venerable Chuon Nath remained devoted in the decades following independence in 1953, even as dissenting voices began to emerge in opposition to the vision of the national community articulated through the pages of the *Vachananukram*. In the contemporary era, the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath* remains a potent cultural reference point, enlisted in ongoing efforts to redraw the conceptual borders of the national community and to remap its future trajectories.

Language as Medium, Language as Idiom: Imagining the Nation

This thesis takes as its point of departure the historical and conceptual journeys traced by the *Vachananukram Khmer*, engaged here as threads that bind together a broader discussion of the

[6] The terms 'Khmer' and 'Cambodia(n)' have significant overlap but are not interchangeable: 'Khmer' refers to an ethnolinguistic construct – the Khmer language, the ethnic Khmer – whereas 'Cambodia' generally refers to the contemporary nation-state known officially as the Kingdom of Cambodia. ('Cambodia' is an Anglicized rendering of the French *Cambodge*, itself an approximation of the Khmer toponym កម្ពុជា *Kampuchea*.) Many of the early writers and nationalists discussed and cited in this thesis exclusively used the term 'Khmer' in their writings, for reasons that are considered throughout the discussions presented in these pages. Many contemporary writers and politicians, meanwhile, maintain a distinction, albeit at times a hazy one, between 'Khmer' and 'Cambodian,' generally preferring the latter term when discussing the nation-state and its citizens and the former when discussing topics related to language and culture. The term used at any given time thus indexes a specific conceptualization of the intersections of language, ethnicity, and nationhood, and I have therefore tried to mirror, throughout my own writing, the term used by the individuals and works under discussion within any given section of this thesis.

social and political horizons unfolded – and foreclosed – through discursive engagements with language and literature. In the pages that follow, I consider the roles played by the Khmer language as a *medium* and an *idiom* through which generations of Cambodian scholars, authors, intellectuals, religious and civil officials, and ordinary individuals, extending from the opening decades of the twentieth century through to the contemporary era, have delineated and contested the contours of national community and identity.

My reading of the history of the Khmer language as a *medium* for social and political imaginings is rooted in more familiar understandings of language as a communicative technology: that is, a medium through which to articulate ideas and arguments. Across diverse social, political, and temporal landscapes, I argue, language, from its orthographic conventions to its literary traditions, has remained a central site of engagement through which generations of Cambodians have negotiated and mediated experiences of modernity and postcoloniality, and imagined and articulated possible and alternative futures for the Cambodian nation.

In arguing for a reading of the Khmer language as a national *idiom*, I borrow from the work of Chie Ikeya, who suggests a reading of the 'modern woman' in late colonial Burma as "the privileged idiom through which intellectuals, writers, journalists, politicians, monks, and students discussed the possibilities and the challenges of the *khit kala* ['modern era'] and the vital importance of *toe tet yay* (progress)."[7] Elsewhere, Merriam-Webster offers several definitions for 'idiom': "an expression […] that is peculiar to itself;" "the language peculiar to a people;" "a style or form of artistic expression that is characteristic of an individual, a period or movement."[8] Throughout this work, I draw on each of these understandings to suggest a reading of discursive engagements with the Khmer language as more than merely *metaphorical* gestures towards social and political pasts, presents, and futures. Rather, I argue that, over the course of generations and

[7] Ikeya 2011, 3.
[8] "Idiom" n.d.

continuing into the present day, the Khmer language has developed into a particular and peculiar *regime of expression* – characteristic of Cambodian social and political discourse and conveying meanings that cannot necessarily be "derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements"[9] – through which to imagine national communities, identities, and futurities.

I present this work as neither comprehensive in its scope nor definitive in its conclusions, but rather opt to take a "prismatic view,"[10] approaching language as but one lens of many – and a fractured and fragmented one at that – through which we might consider the diverse ways in which generations of Cambodians have articulated particular conceptualizations of, and mediated the tensions between, the past and present, the traditional and the modern, the nation and the self. I do not intend this thesis to be read as an exhaustive examination of such themes, but emphasize instead a close reading of an assemblage of individual texts, ranging from the *Vachananukram Khmer* to formal linguistic studies to novels and blog posts, for their insights into the varied and dynamic ways in which the Khmer language has been deeply implicated through successive projects of imagining the Cambodian nation, particularly those carried out contra oppressive regimes of power.

Many of the dominant themes and questions that have recurred throughout such imaginings were initially born of early-twentieth-century efforts to negotiate the terms of the colonial encounter. By 1915, the year in which a comprehensive Khmer-language dictionary was first commissioned by royal decree, Cambodia had been under French control for more than half a century, and a diverse assemblage of Cambodian monks, intellectuals, bureaucrats, and others had begun to engage and reformulate the discursive regimes imposed by the French colonial state in the service of an emergent nationalist movement. By 1938, the year in which Volume 1 of the landmark *Vachananukram Khmer* was at last published, two concepts in particular had been consolidated as

[9] "Idiom" n.d.
[10] Rafael 2022, 3.

the nuclei around which emergent understandings of national community and identity had begun to coalesce.

The first was an interpretation of the Khmer Empire, epitomized by the Angkor temple complex, as the civilizational achievement of a 'people' historically continuous with the contemporary Cambodian population. The historicization and secularization of Angkor – as architectural marvel and as regionally-dominant polity – enshrined both the temples and the empire that produced them as archetypal expressions of 'pure' and 'authentic' Khmer culture, as well as enduring testaments to the longevity of the 'Khmer race.'[11]

Second, in the opening decades of the twentieth century, Cambodian monks, intellectuals, and other religious and secular scholars alike converged on local expressions of Theravada Buddhist discourse and practice as the site through which to engage modes of modernist thought.[12] Theravada Buddhism as a conceptual space, as well as the individuals and institutions engaged in the project of delineating 'Buddhist modernism,' were entangled from an early stage with constructions of 'national culture,' and ultimately came to play formative roles in the emergence and subsequent development of Cambodian nationalism.[13]

In both cases, figures within Cambodia's emergent nationalist movement sought to refashion the racialized tropes and orientalist fantasies circulated by the French colonial regime – of a glorious Angkorian past alongside the threat of the imminent disappearance of the Khmer people; of Theravada Buddhism as not just a religious orientation and spiritual practice but also a cultural

[11] I draw here on Edwards (2007), particularly "Chapter 1: The Temple Complex: Angkor and the Archaeology of Colonial Fantasy, 1860-1906" and "Chapter 2: Urban Legend: Capitalizing on Angkor," as well as Norindr (2006).

[12] By 'secular scholars,' I refer simply to those individuals not formally writing from a position of institutional religious authority, rather than to individuals explicitly advocating for any sort of separation of religious and other social or political institutions and practices. Indeed, very few of the 'secular' scholars considered in this study were fully – or even minimally – disengaged from Cambodian Buddhist thought and tradition; on the contrary, many early nationalists fully embraced Cambodian Buddhist practice as a cornerstone of national identity and community. (Dr. Keng Vannsak, considered in Chapter 4, is a notable exception.)

[13] See the entirety of Hansen (2007), as well as Edwards (2007), "Chapter 4: Colonialism and Its Demerits: Bringing Buddhism to Book, 1863-1922" and "Chapter 7: Secularizing the *Sangha*, 1900-1935."

and, therefore, national tradition – as narratives of cultural strength and legitimacy. Language featured prominently within such efforts, and such nationalist imaginings were in turn deeply implicated in early efforts to delineate the contours of a national language. The Venerable Chuon Nath emerged from within this dynamic discursive milieu, and the conceptualization of the Khmer national community articulated through the pages of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, I argue, reflects his own understandings of the nation's entanglements with religion, history, tradition, and culture.

Beginning in the opening decades of the twentieth century, Nath and his lifelong friend the Venerable Huot Tath established themselves at the forefront of a reformist movement within Cambodia's Mahanikay monastic order. Nath, Tath, and other reformists sought to mediate the tensions between Theravadin thought and practice, on the one hand, and, on the other, global circulations of modernity, in part through a 'purification' of Khmer Buddhist practice, a return to the canonical texts of Theravadin tradition, and the promotion of Khmer translations of and commentaries on such texts, originally composed in Pali.[14] At the same time, Nath's and Tath's deep linguistic training and their long association with the premier colonial institutions of scholarship of their day, many of which exhibited a stubborn fascination with Angkor, further implicated their reformist project with adjacent nationalist efforts to reinscribe Angkor as a site of national significance and to consolidate "vernacular Khmer as a field of national meaning."[15]

The *Vachananukram Khmer* published between 1938 and 1943 thus articulates a conceptualization of the Khmer national community grounded in Theravadin tradition and in Angkorian inheritance. Throughout its pages, Nath establishes orthographic and lexical standards that accentuate the Khmer language's deep etymological intimacies with Pali, the canonical language of Theravada Buddhism. In doing so, Nath's text melded his modernist understandings of

[14] See Hansen (2007); Edwards (2007), "Chapter 8: Holy Trinity: Chuon Nath, Huot Tath, and Suzanne Karpelès;" and Huot Tath (ហួត តាត 1970).

[15] Edwards 2004, 75. For the reinscription in the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries of the Angkorian temples as sites of Theravadin significance, see Thompson (2004).

Theravadin modes of being and belonging in the modern world, indexed through Pali, with emergent conceptualizations of the nation, indexed through the Khmer language. His simultaneous privileging of Angkorian precedent, evinced through the Old Khmer inscriptions of the temples, further anchors his conceptualization of the nation in the civilizational lineage of Angkor, artfully tethered to Pali-inflected Theravadin tradition in the creation of a single linguistic imaginary.[16]

The Venerable Chuon Nath remained engaged with the *Vachananukram* project throughout the remainder of his life, guiding the work through five successive editions, the last of which was published less than two years before his death in 1969 and has subsequently become known as the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath*, or *The Chuon Nath Dictionary*.[17] In the decades following its initial publication, I argue, successive editions of the *Vachananukram* solidified language's role as a site of engagement – as both medium and idiom – through which to take up questions of national community and identity.[18]

The tumultuous years preceding independence in 1953 brought Cambodia's first forays into representational government, as, having secured expanded autonomy from the French in the wake of World War II, local politicians drafted a series of constitutions and coalesced into the country's first formal political parties. Among the most prominent of such figures was Ieu Koeus, a founder and early leader of the progressive and widely popular Democratic Party, and whose political career ended abruptly with his assassination in 1950.

Three years prior to his death, Koeus published *Pheasa Khmer*, or *The Khmer Language*, the first academic study of the Khmer language by a Cambodian scholar.[19] The delineation of the

[16] ពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត្យ 1967; ជួន ណាត 1967.

[17] Sam (1987, 29 n15) states that, while the *Vachananukram Khmer* project originally involved a committee of scholars, "its final revision was completed by Ven. Chuon Nath alone. Because of this dedicated work, the dictionary was known to the Khmers as Dictionary Chuon Nath."

[18] I here extend Sasagawa's (2015) arguments concerning the expression of particular political positionalities through efforts to establish orthographic and lexical conventions.

[19] អៀវ កើស 1947.

conceptual borders of the Khmer national community articulated through the pages of *Pheasa Khmer*, I suggest, departed in subtle yet significant ways from that of the Venerable Chuon Nath's *Vachananukram Khmer*, thereby challenging our understandings of a hegemonic discourse around national identity in the late colonial period and offering insights into the ways in which Koeus and his Democratic Party colleagues configured the nation and anticipated its future as an independent nation-state. Koeus endorses the *Vachananukram Khmer*, published less than a decade prior to his own text, as a national linguistic standard through which to both mediate and index the broader unification of the Cambodian people into a coherent national community, thus writing the *Vachananukram* into the project of nation-building as realized in the sociopolitical domain. Yet where Nath's conceptualization of the national community emphasized its religious and historical foundations, Koeus instead orients his text towards the future, as he envisions a national language capable of meeting the imperatives of modernity, understood as an educated populace unified in – and through – their identification with a single ethnolinguistic national imaginary. Like Nath before him, Koeus employs the discursive technologies of the colonial state – where Nath turned to lexicography, Koeus draws on historical analysis and linguistic inquiry – as he unfolds a discursive space in which to contest the authority of the French and to imagine Cambodia as an independent nation-state.

Following Koeus's assassination in 1950, optimism for a democratic future gradually eroded as King Norodom Sihanouk steadily consolidated his hold on political authority, culminating in his abdication of the throne and the establishment of his *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, or 'Populist Society,' in 1955, the 'nonpolitical' regime that defined the next fifteen years of Cambodian social and political life, particularly in Phnom Penh.[20] Throughout these years, a generation of Khmer poets, novelists, journalists, and others turned again to the discursive technologies of language and literature in

[20] See Chapter 4 for a discussion of my decision to translate *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* as 'Populist Society,' rather than the more common 'People's Socialist Community.'

their efforts to challenge and contest state-mediated conceptualizations of the national community and to remap Cambodia's postcolonial horizons.[21]

Much of the modernist literature that emerged during this period positioned itself against the linguistic hegemony of the Venerable Chuon Nath's *Vachananukram Khmer*, as the Sihanouk regime sought to bolster its political legitimacy through appeals to traditional symbols of social and cultural authenticity and authority – in particular, Theravadin tradition and Angkorian heritage, both of which featured prominently in Nath's conceptualization of the nation. A linguistic reform movement attributed to Keng Vannsak, a French-educated intellectual and former leader of the Democratic Party, challenged what Vannsak understood to be the arcane and archaic orthographic, morphological, and lexical conventions established through the *Vachananukram Khmer*, inaugurating a modernist literary movement that sought to renegotiate the modern nation's relationship to its past and to embrace the imperatives of its engagement with the modern world.[22]

Emerging from the Keng Vannsak tradition were an assemblage of modernist authors whose works may be read not simply as expressions of dissent vis-à-vis the Sihanouk regime, but as more radical attempts to remap Cambodia's postcolonial horizons. Works such as *Chun Choab Chaot*, or *The Accused*, published in 1973 by the poet and essayist Khun Srun, reimagined the postcolonial nation through strategic engagements with broader circulations of global modernity.[23] Much like Vannsak and other authors who came before him, Srun situated his work at the intersection of diverse currents of both local and translocal literary, political, and philosophical discourse, and, in doing so, configured and constructed an imagined literary and historical community in which to position his work and its readerships. Srun's novella, in engaging French existentialist and absurdist

[21] I here engage Keo's (2019) work on literary expressions of "postcolonial Cambodian modernity" during the *Sangkum* era.

[22] I draw here on anthologies and essay collections edited by Khing Hok Dy (ឃីង ហុកឌី 2002; 2006; ថោង ជាន 2006).

[23] ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1973.

writings, articulated a radical vision of postcolonial nationhood as it renegotiated Cambodia's relationship with its former colonizer;[24] at the same time, the work's thoroughly local orientation complicates and subverts dominant understandings of the circulatory networks and imagined audiences of 'world literature.'[25]

In the contemporary era, as the ruling Cambodia People's Party has steadily consolidated its political dominance, the works of Srun, Vannsak, and other modernist authors of the *Sangkum* generation continue to circulate, a testament to the enduring potency of literature and language as sites through which to confront political and social anxieties and to reckon with the disappointment of those possible futures that have failed to materialize. Today, a new generation of Cambodians, ranging from published authors and social activists[26] to individuals who have found new platforms through social media and other digital technologies,[27] expands beyond the works of their predecessors as they, too, seek to engage the transnational circulations of a globalized world while remaining locally rooted, and to radically challenge the political and moral failings of contemporary society by calling forth new ways of being and belonging in the modern world.[28]

Meanwhile, throughout such engagements, the Venerable Chuon Nath's *Vachananukram Khmer*, cast aside during the linguistic reforms of the 1970s, has returned as a potent signifier of the nation; the ruling party's 2010 decision to restore the Chuon Nath standard as the official

[24] I draw on Chen's (2010, 3) definition of decolonization as an "attempt of the previously colonized to reflectively work out a historical relation with the former colonizer, culturally, politically, and economically."

[25] I here engage the work of Cho (2021), who suggests that we understand world literature as relational, rather than hierarchical, and as process rather than product.

[26] In particular, I consider works by So Phina and by Taing Rinith, both of whom work across genres and languages in their efforts to expand the horizons of Khmer-language literature.

[27] I consider in detail the blog post by Teum Boeun (ទឹម បឿន 2008), engaging the work of linguist and historian Ly Sovir (លី សុវីរ 2006), and its ensuing comment thread.

[28] As Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan write, contemporary Cambodians "are today confronted with questions similar to those which the older generation faced: how to build a contemporary Cambodian culture? What foreign elements to use and how to incorporate them? How to reimagine existing local traditions in the modern world? The initiatives of the previous generation provide perhaps the best resources for reconsidering such questions in the contemporary context" (Ly and Muan 2001, viii).

government standard,[29] and subsequent investments in government initiatives to digitize and update the *Vachananukram*,[30] may be read as efforts to bolster the regime's political legitimacy through alignment with a longstanding symbol of Khmer intellectual achievement and cultural authenticity. At the same time, as accelerating globalization has introduced new anxieties concerning the future of the Khmer language,[31] the *Vachananukram* has, much like Angkor itself, been monumentalized as symbol and signifier of cultural longevity and permanence, enlisted to guard against the anxieties of a changing present and deployed in the service of a desired future.

It is in this sense that, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, generations of Cambodian scholars, authors, monks, politicians, bureaucrats, and everyday readers and speakers have turned to language as the "privileged idiom"[32] through which to imagine the nation. Such imaginings encompass projects both liberatory – as in the deployment by the Venerable Chuon Nath and by Ieu Koeus of discursive technologies introduced by the French colonial regime towards sovereign and independent horizons – and oppressive, as in the deputization of the *Vachananukram Khmer* in the *Sangkum* and contemporary eras alike as a hegemonic construction indexical of state-prescribed conceptualizations of national community and identity.

Yet despite concerted efforts to fix it in time and place, I conclude, language has instead endured as a destabilizing force, its fluidity forever unfolding a discursive space in which to renegotiate, reformulate, and redefine. From the opening of the twentieth century through to the present day, the Khmer language has endured as a critical site of negotiation and mediation, allowing for the continual making and remaking of the Cambodian nation, as successive generations confront the ever-urgent questions of being and belonging in the modern world.

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[29] កោះសន្តិភាព 2010.

[30] Information Technology Center 2016; ភ្នំពេញ ប៉ុស្ត៍ 2022.

[31] I here engage Yin's (2020) work on "linguistic anxiety."

[32] Ikeya 2011, 3.

Theoretical Grounding and Principal Sources Consulted

This thesis engages both primary and secondary sources in making its arguments. In considering the origins of nationalist imaginings in Cambodia, born of early-twentieth-century efforts to negotiate the terms of the colonial encounter, I draw heavily on the work of historians Penny Edwards and Anne Hansen;[33] historical context for later eras is largely sourced from David Chandler.[34] Elsewhere, I engage insightful studies by Sasagawa Hideo,[35] Siti Keo,[36] and Cheryl Yin[37] on entanglements between language, literature, and politics in Cambodia, and refer to Khing Hok Dy's valuable studies of twentieth-century Khmer literature.[38] The central arguments of this thesis, meanwhile, are supported through close readings of a range of Khmer-language texts, including the *Vachananukram Khmer*, particularly the introduction by the Venerable Chuon Nath, as well as the memoir of the Venerable Huot Tath, a lifelong friend and accomplice of Nath;[39] the 1947 linguistic study *Pheasa Khmer*, or *The Khmer Language*, by linguist and politician Ieu Koeus;[40] the modernist author Khun Srun's 1973 novella *Chun Choab Chaot*, or *The Accused*;[41] and a range of texts in the

[33] Edwards 2007; 2004; Hansen 2007; 2004.
[34] Chandler 1991; 2008.
[35] Sasagawa 2015.
[36] Keo 2019.
[37] Yin 2020.
[38] ឃីង ហុកឌី (ed.) 2002; ឃីង ហុកឌី 2006.
[39] ពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត្យ 1967; ជួន ណាត 1967; ហួត តាត 1970.
[40] អៀវ កើស 1947.
[41] ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1973.

contemporary era, ranging from conference papers and literary productions to news articles and blog posts.[42]

At the conceptual level, I draw on the work of a wide range of scholars who have considered the ways in which notions of national community and identity are cultivated and contested in a variety of diverse contexts. As a study of national imaginaries, this thesis is firmly situated within a genealogy of such studies that derive inspiration from Benedict Anderson's foundational work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. My own study in many ways seeks to expand upon Anderson's observations concerning the roles of language and 'print capitalism' in creating the conditions necessary for the emergence of national imaginaries, as it considers more fully the *ways* in which, rather than simply the fact that, language has served as the medium through which to envision the sociopolitical contours of such an imaginary within the context of a single national genealogy.[43]

The premises of Anderson's study were subsequently critiqued and expanded in critical ways through the works of such postcolonial scholars as Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, both of whom challenged the notion that anti- and postcolonial nationalisms were ultimately reducible to reproductions of European models. My readings of many of the texts engaged in the pages that follow are informed by Chatterjee's argument that "the most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a *difference* with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern West," as successive generations of Cambodians have taken up the project of "fashion[ing] a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western;" as Chatterjee demonstrates, language was instrumental in such cultural imaginings, and thus "became a zone over which the nation first

[42] A selection of such works includes ប៊ុន សុខុម (1996); សូ ភីណា (ed.) *(*2016); ទឹម ឃឿន (2008); and លី សុវីរៈ (2006).

[43] Anderson 2006. I do not write "within a single nation," for a central conclusion that I propose through this work is that such imaginaries are inherently multiplex.

had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world."[44] My arguments are informed as well by Chakrabarty's critiques of Eurocentric historicism – the "'first in Europe, then elsewhere' structure of global historical time" that confines colonized and formerly colonized peoples to "an imaginary waiting room of history."[45] Many of the authors considered in this study, I hope to demonstrate, critiqued precisely such historicizations, as they grappled with the recognition that "European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping […] to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations."[46]

Conceptually, I draw heavily Thongchai Winichakul's insightful study of the origins of Thai national imaginaries in *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, in which Thongchai explores the ways in which cartography, as both tool and practice, was instrumental in delineating the geographic and conceptual space of the emergent Thai nation. Just as Thongchai argues that "a map anticipated a spatial reality, not vice versa," and was thus "a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent" – so, too, I argue, has language – and lexicography in particular – been employed towards similar ends in Cambodia over the course of the past century.[47] Thongchai furthermore emphasizes the 'negative' aspects of national imaginaries, as "to figure out a sphere of commonness is to identify the difference between that sphere and the one beyond. An imagined identity always implies the absence of such an identity at the point beyond its boundary."[48] Many of the authors considered in the pages that follow engaged in such projects of 'negative identification,'

[44] Chatterjee 1993, 5-7. Emphasis in the original.
[45] Chakrabarty 2009, 7-8.
[46] Chakrabarty 2009, 16.
[47] Thongchai 1994, 130.
[48] Thongchai 1994, 15-6.

articulating their conceptualizations of their own national communities in part through a mediation of national difference and distinction.

I draw further inspiration from several scholars who have expanded our understandings of literature, across diverse national contexts, as a critical discursive space in which debates around national identity, de- and postcoloniality, and modernity have been held. Kim N. B. Ninh's insight that "the differentiation between the public and private that grows out of the experience of democratic political systems may blind us not only to the possibilities of dissent but to its locations within the very structures of […] the state," as well as her broader emphasis on language throughout her study of the politics of culture in revolutionary Vietnam, encourages the readings that I have undertaken here of the political futures unfolded through even those texts that exhibit few overtly political overtones.[49] Hongxuan Lin's exploration of Indonesian Marxists' and Muslims' efforts to "translate the world to Indonesia" in the first half of the twentieth century takes a similar approach towards language and literature, as "it was in print," rather than through other, more traditionally political channels, that progressive activists "were free to imagine the future contours of an Indonesian polity;" across generations, I suggest, Cambodian authors and activists have done the same.[50] Elsewhere, I consider the implications of Heekyoung Cho's framing of "world literature not as literary texts but as entangled literary relations and the processes whereby those relations appear and change," as Cambodian authors have turned to language and literature in order to enact renegotiations of social and political relations, both between and within national communities.[51]

Finally, I position this thesis in conversation with an assemblage of feminist historians and theorists whose works, taken together, encourage a critical inquiry into the logics of inclusion and exclusion that enable the formulation, consolidation, and naturalization of the 'nation.' Kumari Jayawardena's groundbreaking 1986 study *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* elucidates

[49] Ninh 2002, 10.
[50] Lin 2020, 4, 23.
[51] Cho 2021, 581.

the ways in which colonial experiences of modernity, and the nationalist movements that it engendered, were inherently gendered constructions; indeed, as Jayawardena notes, "many of the reformers of the indigenous bourgeoisie were men who saw the social evils of their societies as threats to the stability of bourgeois family life, and who therefore campaigned for reform in order to *strengthen* the basic structures of society rather than to change them;" as such, "'modernity' meant educated women, but educated to uphold the system of the nuclear patriarchal family."[52] Jayawardena further describes the ways in which women were implicated in the idealization of 'traditional' national cultures and of civilizational pasts, enlisted in nationalist movements as "guardians of national culture, indigenous religion and family traditions"[53] – a theme expanded by Geraldine Heng, who notes that, "perhaps because […] the nation is a modern construct whose ideological bases must be continually renewed and secured, an attendant anxiety over modernity, particularly in the sociocultural register, is endemic in Third-World contexts," resulting in a selective

> acceptance of modernity's incursions, […] distinguishing between the technological and economic machinery of modernization (which can continue to be deemed useful, indeed, essential to the nation), and the cultural apparatus of modernization – the alarming detritus of modernity's social effects – which may be guarded against as contaminating, dangerous, and undesirable.[54]

Thus, Heng argues, "women, the feminine, and figures of gender, have traditionally anchored the nationalist imaginary – that undisclosed ideological matrix of nationalist culture;" 'women's issues' have thus frequently been integrated into – or, perhaps, subsumed by – nationalist movements due

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[52] Jayawardena 1986, 9, 16-7.

[53] Jayawardena 1986, 14. See as well Hongxuan Lin's note that "the perpetual tension between fantasy (engendered by colonial education) and reality (engendered by colonial racism) facilitates the gendering of the nationalist project that [Partha] Chatterjee describes. Denied full assimilation, elite men construct a nationalist project in which someone (conveniently, women) needs to nurture and prune a precolonial or anti-colonial national identity to which men can moor themselves, even as they sojourn in the colonial world" (Lin 2020, 127).

[54] Heng 1996, 33. Heng's argument here reflects Chatterjee's (1993, 6) suggestion that "anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society […] by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual."

to such movements' need for "a certain self-representational vocabulary – a definitional apparatus to imagine and describe itself, to constitute itself ideologically, and to win an essential symbolic momentum" – that gendered constructions are uniquely adept at supplying.[55]

Recent scholars have explored the unique realizations of such phenomena in particular national contexts. Chie Ikeya's study of the 'modern woman' – the "woman of the *khit kala*" – in late colonial Burma highlights women's role as "the privileged idiom through which intellectuals, writers, journalists, politicians, monks, and students discussed the possibilities and the challenges of the *khit kala* and the vital importance of *toe tet yay* (progress)."[56] Discourses concerning femininity and modernity were deeply entangled in late colonial Burma, Ikeya demonstrates, and a critical inquiry into the ways in which 'modern women' reformulated ways of being and belonging in the modern world helps to "broaden the understanding of colonialism and modernity in Burma beyond the level of politics and enable a fundamental revision of the reigning nationalist and anticolonial master narratives of political culture and society in colonial Burma."[57] Siti Keo takes up similar themes in her consideration of the *neary samay thmei*, the 'new-age woman,' in postcolonial Cambodia during Prince Norodom Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* regime, nuancing the arguments of previous scholars who suggested that "Khmer women […] 'had to remain as 'traditional' as possible so that Cambodian culture was not lost in the face of rapid modernization;'" Keo critiques such characterizations for their depictions of "Khmer women as figures outside of history," and instead "emphasizes the effects *Sangkum* modernizing policies had upon Cambodian society and Khmer women" – and the ways in which women actively contributed to, mediated, and negotiated the emergence of novel social and political terrains during this period.[58] Finally, Catriona Miller's reading of the *Tussanavattei Neary* (*Women's Magazine*), published by the *Samakum Khmer*

[55] Heng 1996, 31.
[56] Ikeya 2011, 3. As noted above, Ikeya here provides the language for a central trope – that of the "privileged idiom" – engaged throughout this thesis.
[57] Ikeya 2011, 4.
[58] Keo 2019, 115. Keo here quotes Trudy Jacobson.

Sahachiveni, or the Association of Khmer Women Comrades, highlights the ways in which "Khmer women used issues of domesticity as a medium to relay their own political views [and] to assert their own visions for restructuring the social and political order, particularly with respect to resolving competing visions of governance, negotiating ethnic difference and determining appropriate approaches to modernisation."[59]

Each of these works contributes to the framing of my own project, as I attempt to think through the ways in which language contributes to the construction of social and political space, in recognition of the fact that, as Miller frames it, "politics encompasses people outside formal institutions engaging in political work by supporting, contesting, or questioning systems of power through attention to matters that affect their communities."[60] As the authors considered above demonstrate, such an approach allows for a consideration of the ways in which language naturalizes – as well as destabilizes – social and political categories and relations, highlights the ways in which history continues to do work in the present, and unfolds the possibility of more liberatory futures, in ways that add depth and nuance to our readings of the works of multiple authors considered in this study.

In this regard, I turn to the work of Chizuko Ueno, who argues against the naturalization of the categories of 'nation' and 'women' alike. Ueno draws on postcolonial critiques of Anderson and other historians of nationalism in the European tradition as she argues that "a category, by creating an imagined community, in turn becomes something oppressive. […] Oppression inevitably surfaces because each category involves an exclusiveness."[61] Ueno's approach to historical inquiry emphasizes a deprivileging of 'official' documentary sources – an approach enacted by such scholars as Ikeya, Keo, and Miller as they challenge what Ikeya, quoting Barbara Andaya, refers to as

[59] Miller 2022, 2-3.
[60] Miller 2022, 2.
[61] Ueno 2004, 62.

"the 'hegemony of the national epic in Southeast Asian historiography'"[62] – as she poses a series of questions:

> Just what is written history? Who are the authors of written history? […] Whom is official history written for, and who is entitled to write it? […] When official history is regarded as public memory, who is included in this public 'we,' and who is excluded?[63]

Such logics of inclusion and exclusion, Ueno goes on to demonstrate, structure both gendered and national imaginaries, as they construct "essentialist communit[ies]" to which individual identities are reduced; "the intention," Ueno argues instead, "is to relativise these categories."[64] Such a relativization requires a sensitivity to the multiplicity and intersectionality of the social and political constructs around which identities – individual and communal alike – coalesce, each implicated in, yet irreducible to, the others. A critical inquiry into the ways in which such identities and imaginaries are formulated, Ueno argues, leads inevitably to a "denaturalization and de-essentialization of the category of nation-state as well as that of women."[65] Such denaturalization and de-essentialization, I hope to show, were inherent to the projects of linguistic imagining undertaken by the authors considered in this study.

Researcher Positionality

As a study of the entanglements between the Khmer language and broader conceptualizations of national community and identity, this thesis has been shaped in fundamental ways by my own positionality with regards to both the language and the national imaginaries considered in the pages that follow.

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[62] Ikeya 2011, 4.
[63] Ueno 2004, 124.
[64] Ueno 2004, 140.
[65] Ueno 2004, 126, 145-6.

First, as a white American born and raised in the lands known today as the United States, I do not belong to the community, and nor do I lay claim to the identity, whose linguistic contours are considered in this study. My positionality is instead that of an observer of, rather than a participant in, the debates considered throughout this thesis, as the Cambodian national community, for all of my varied and ongoing engagements over the course of the past seven years with those who claim it as their own, is nevertheless not mine to imagine.

At the same time, I make no claims to impartiality or objectivity, but rather recognize that I am always already writing from a particular subject position; while that position is never fully constant, it has nevertheless been consistently characterized throughout the duration of my work on this study by several significant features: my racial and gendered status as white and masculine; my legal status as an American citizen; my linguistic status as a native English speaker and second-language Khmer speaker; my professional status as embedded within an institution of American academia. Each of these features is implicated in the positionality that I bring to this work, opening up the possibility of framing certain questions in certain ways while foreclosing certain others.

Thus, while I hope that others may find some value in these pages, I urge my readers all the same to remain cognizant of the fact that the questions that I have asked and the conclusions that I have drawn are in many ways as reflective of my own interests and perspectives – insights and ignorances alike – as they are of those whose works are considered in these pages.

Organization

I organize this thesis into five chapters, preceded by this introduction and followed by a conclusion; an appendix presents supplementary data.

Chapter 1 provides the historical and conceptual context that gave rise to the *Vachananukram Khmer*, and established many of the enduring themes and tropes that have continued to anchor discussions and debates concerning national community and identity through

to the present day. I draw heavily on the work of Penny Edwards and Anne Hansen, both of whom consider the discursive and ideological engagements of Cambodian scholars, monks, bureaucrats, and other intellectuals with the French colonial regime in the opening decades of the twentieth century.

Chapter 2 considers the production of the *Vachananukram Khmer* itself, analyzing the various historical and ideological convergences that enabled its initial development as well as the conceptual frameworks that structured the form that it ultimately took in its first edition, published in two volumes between 1938 and 1943.

Chapter 3 turns to the linguistic study titled *Pheasa Khmer*, or *The Khmer Language*, published in 1947 by the linguist and politician Ieu Koeus; here, I explore the social and political implications for the Cambodian nation – on the eve of independence – of Koeus's particular understandings of the linguistic and historical contours of both the Khmer language and its community of speakers.

Chapter 4 widens the scope of the discussion to incorporate works of literature, considering the linguistic and literary politics that characterized the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* years, under Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and their unfolding of alternative postcolonial national horizons.

Finally, Chapter 5 brings the discussion into the contemporary era, engaging a wide range of texts – scholarly works, news articles, literary productions, blog posts, and others – in an effort to understand contemporary Cambodians' repeated returns to language as they imagine new ways of being and belonging in the modern world.

Periodization

Given my emphasis on significant figures, events, and publications within the linguistic and literary history of Cambodia, the periodization of the chapters within this thesis differs from other treatments of Cambodian history. Chapter 1 extends roughly from 1900 to 1938, spanning the opening of the twentieth century through to the publication of the first volume of the first edition of

the *Vachananukram Khmer*. Chapter 2, focused on the development of the *Vachananukram* itself, covers the period from the creation of the initial dictionary commission in 1915 to the publication of the full first edition of the *Vachananukram*, completed in 1943 with the publication of its second volume. Chapter 3, the narrowest in both its content and its temporal scope, considers the historical moment in which the linguist and politician Ieu Koeus composed his *Pheasa Khmer*; I situate this discussion between the end of World War II in 1945 and Koeus's assassination in 1950. Chapter 4 picks up the historical narrative left off by Chapter 3, extending from 1950 to the end of the Khmer Republic in 1975, although its primary concern is with Prince Norodom Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* regime (1955-1970) and its immediate aftermath. Finally, I limit my discussion of contemporary literary engagements in Chapter 5 to the period extending from the UNTAC-organized national elections in 1993 through to the present day.

A notable omission, and one that requires explanation, occurs between 1975 and 1993, a period that may be divided into two parts. The first, from April 1975 to January 1979, comprises the three years, eight months, and twenty days of the regime of Democratic Kampuchea, otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge, and has received possibly more scholarly attention than any other in Cambodian history. The Khmer Rouge enforced a number of linguistic reforms, most notorious of which was the proscription of the use of any and all foreign languages; infamously, the ability to speak another language frequently resulted in the speaker's execution.[66] Less draconian, yet nevertheless significant, were the regime's attempts to level the register distinctions through which Khmer speakers are able to index complex relationalities of respect and relative status, primarily through lexical variants; thus, for instance, Khmer's vast array of terms of address were reduced to

[66] Heder 2007, 302.

the singular use of *mitt*, which may be approximately rendered as 'comrade,' while its seventeen words for 'eat' were reduced to simply *hop*, typical of rural vernaculars.[67,68,69]

It is common, yet problematic, to speak of these years as an 'aberration' or a 'rupture': the fabrics of social and political life were indeed torn during this period, but the regime's rise was neither as sudden nor as impulsive as such terms suggest. Rather, as Khatharya Um has argued, the interpretation of the Khmer Rouge years as "historically compartmentalized, an aberration unmoored to the country's historical continuum," ultimately reduces to little more than a tautology of cultural determinism, in which the years of Democratic Kampuchea are dismissed as "an eruption of the irrational, an undisciplined nation running amok."[70] Instead, Um argues, a responsible consideration of the Khmer Rouge and its aftermath demands a full accounting of the ways in which

> it was embedded in the sociohistorical conditions from which the movement emerged that not only informed the desire for totalistic change but also accounted for the trajectories toward radical solutions and the permissibility of unbridled violence. Though it may have been catapulted to power by external forces and drawn inspiration from larger intellectual traditions, the Khmer Rouge regime was shaped by both the movement's own political histories and those of the nation, and by the

[67] For a richer discussion of the linguistic reforms enacted by the Khmer Rouge, see Yin (2021, 12-20).

[68] Today, the term ហូប *hob*, while still common in the countryside, is rarely heard in Phnom Penh. Anecdotally, speakers tell me that this is in part due to its continued perception as the preferred variant of rural, 'uncultured' Cambodians, but is also in part due to its lingering association with the period of Khmer Rouge rule. (Phnom Penh was forcibly emptied by the Khmer Rouge in April of 1975 – indeed, the city's fall is typically cited as the beginning of the regime proper; as such, regardless of the range and diversity of their individual experiences during the years between 1975 and 1979, contemporary residents of Phnom Penh over the age of fifty are linked by their common experience of those years as, at the very least, a period of physical dislocation and upheaval, as everyone living in the city today either moved there or was born after 1979.)

[69] Artist Svay Sareth comments on the ostensible contradictions between, on the one hand, the common history of having survived the Khmer Rouge, shared by most Cambodians over the age of fifty, and, on the other, trenchant inequality within Cambodian society today, indexed through its linguistic registers, in his piece 'Untitled' (2015), in which seventeen identical black rubber sandals – the footwear mandated by the Khmer Rouge regime – hang suspended from a wooden pole (Little 2015).

[70] Um 2015, 2-3.

circumstances under which the Pol Potist faction conspired and battled its way against both foes and allies internally and externally to total power in 1975.[71]

It is thus only after careful consideration, and not without some lingering ambivalence, that I have made the decision to omit these years from the account provided in this thesis. I have done so for two reasons, both of which are inspired by the perspectives and viewpoints expressed by Cambodian commentators themselves. The first is that, in many regards, and their emergence from a complex assemblage of historical convergences notwithstanding, the Khmer Rouge themselves *did* conceptualize their regime as an historical rupture, a perspective that was reflected in the policies that they sought to implement, with genocidal consequences.[72] This observation in no way runs counter to Um's nuanced and insightful consideration of the sociohistorical conditions from which the Khmer Rouge emerged, but rather reflects the unique preoccupations of my project here. The Khmer Rouge executed a staggering proportion of Cambodia's intellectuals, let alone its population as a whole; effectively abolished formal education, including the promotion of literacy; and sought to inaugurate a new era of ethnonationalist glory through an "annihilation of the old order."[73] As such, they had little concern for the nuanced orthographical and lexical debates that had occupied the Venerable Chuon Nath, Keng Vannsak, and other members of the Khmer literary and linguistic communities in prior decades.

Second, my reading of a range of texts produced in the years following the Khmer Rouge uncovers relatively few references to, or contemporaneous expressions of, the linguistic ideologies of Democratic Kampuchea or its affiliated figures; instead, contemporary authors, journalists, politicians, online commentators, and others continue to evoke the same names – the Venerable Chuon Nath, Keng Vannsak, occasionally Ieu Koeus or Soth Polin – as did their predecessors active

[71] Um 2015, 3.
[72] Chandler (2008, 255) notes that Khmer Rouge spokesmen "claimed after the military victory [in April of 1975] that 'over two thousand years of Cambodian history' had ended."
[73] Um 2015, 4; see as well Yin (2021, 52-5) and Chandler (2008, 255-8).

during Lon Nol's Khmer Republic.[74] This fact is in itself significant, in its suggestion of a steadfast refusal, conscious or otherwise, to incorporate the Khmer Rouge period into the broader linguistic-historical imaginary that circulates among readerships today. Yet my concern in this thesis is precisely with such linguistic-historical imaginaries, and less with an accounting of the historical 'facts' from which they are constructed.

The second period noted above, extending from the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 to the 1993 national elections, is similarly largely omitted from contemporary commentary on Cambodia's linguistic and literary history. Anecdotally, contemporary authors and readers suggest that this is largely due to the government's preoccupation with the ongoing civil war and the formidable task of rebuilding the country, both of which were – understandably, most agree – deemed more urgent than the development of linguistic and literary domains.[75] Furthermore, given the Khmer Rouge's targeted persecution of educated Cambodians, the country exhibited a drastic shortage of educators in the years following the regime's collapse; thus, those individuals who might have otherwise dedicated themselves to more literary or philological pursuits were, in many cases, instead called into service as teachers.[76]

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[74] Similarly, in her study of the reemergence of Khmer honorifics in the years following the Khmer Rouge, Yin (2021, 18-9) notes that while she initially intended to focus her research on the language policies of Democratic Kampuchea itself, she soon found that "any changes to Khmer honorific registers today were not a direct result of the Khmer Rouge, but were more likely due to Cambodia's efforts to rebuild in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge."

[75] Scholar Ly Sovir, whose 2006 work *Neak Reapcham Kae Samruel Aksar Khmer Mun Ke* (*The First to Reform the Khmer Script*), does include an account of the orthographic policies debated by government officials during this period; such debates, however, like the remainder of Sovir's own study, were primarily focused on whether to adopt the orthographic principles of the Venerable Chuon Nath or those of Keng Vannsak (លី សុរ៉ីរ៉ 2006, ៨៦-៥៦). Sovir's work is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

[76] Yin (2021, 55-8) considers this period in more detail, noting that "some Cambodians point to this period and the preceding Khmer Rouge regime as the catalyst for why the Khmer language is in disarray. The 'those who know less/nothing' teachers were unqualified, the curriculum in the 1980s was inconsistent, and the various teachers taught spelling and language differently." A discussant in the comments section of a blog post considered in Chapter 5 (ទឹម ប៊ឿន 2008) similarly characterizes the education that he received in the 1980s as deeply deficient.

Taken together, such factors have contributed to both a relative scarcity of texts produced during this period on and about Khmer language and literature, as well as a relative lack of contemporary discourse on the linguistic policies and developments of this period. As such, I focus my own inquiry into contemporary language debates and discourse on the period that began with the establishment in 1993 of the government that continues to operate in the present, as the end of more than two decades of civil war brought hopes for peace and prosperity, with language enlisted once more as the medium and idiom through which to imagine a national future.

Chapter 1:

Imagining Cambodia: The Consolidation of Nascent Cambodian Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century, 1900-1938

> "Religion and language have become the core expressions of cultural tradition, the Other of the colonial modern."
>
> Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method*[77]

The latter half of Cambodia's colonial period was characterized by a vibrant and dynamic exchange of ideas and ideologies, as a diverse assemblage of Cambodian monastic and secular intellectuals, officials, and others began to engage and reformulate the discursive regimes of the French colonial state in an effort to negotiate the terms of the colonial encounter. Early conceptualizations and articulations of the 'Khmer nation' emerged alongside – and out of – the multiplicity of intellectual currents that circulated during this time. This discursive milieu would have a profound and enduring impact on the earliest efforts to consolidate and standardize a national language and orthography, the echoes of which continue to be felt in Cambodia today.

By 1938, the year in which the first volume of the first edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer* was published, two concepts in particular had been consolidated as the nuclei around which emergent understandings of national community and identity had begun to coalesce. Each was, in its own way, a radical departure from precolonial understandings of social and historical space, and each was strategically employed in the cultivation of an emergent nationalist spirit.

The first of these was an understanding of the Khmer Empire, epitomized by Angkor Wat, as the civilizational achievement of a people historically continuous with the contemporary Cambodian population. The historicization and secularization of Angkor – as architectural marvel

[77] Chen 2010, 87.

and as regionally-dominant polity – enshrined both the temples and the empire that produced them as archetypal expressions of 'pure' and 'authentic' Khmer culture, as well as enduring testaments to the longevity and inherent potency of the 'Khmer race.'

Second, in the opening decades of the twentieth century, Cambodian monks, intellectuals, and other religious and secular scholars alike converged on local expressions of Theravada Buddhist discourse and practice as the site through which to engage modes of modernist thought. Theravada Buddhism as a conceptual space, as well as the individuals and institutions engaged in the project of delineating 'Buddhist modernism,' ultimately came to play formative roles in the emergence and subsequent development of Cambodian nationalism.

In both cases, racialized and historicized narratives originally introduced through contact with the French – of a glorious Angkorian past alongside the threat of the imminent disappearance of the Khmer people; of Buddhism as not just a religious worldview and spiritual practice but also a cultural and, therefore, national tradition – were engaged, contested, and reformulated by emergent figures in Cambodia's early nationalist movement in acts of contestation and defiance of the political and intellectual hegemonies of the French colonial regime. Such figures sought to refashion racialized tropes and orientalist fantasies as narratives of cultural strength and legitimacy, with profound implications for the historical, religious, and cultural contours of the national language later articulated in the 1938 *Vachananukram Khmer*, and repeatedly revisited through the discursive engagements of subsequent generations, extending into the present era.

The Historicization and Secularization of Angkor

The earliest human settlements at the site of what became the temple-city of Angkor, of which Angkor Wat is the best-known temple complex, date to the opening centuries of the first millennium CE, though the Angkorian period is typically considered by historians to have begun in 802, the year that later inscriptions give for the 'founding' of Cambodia by King Jayavarman II.

Angkor itself was established as a city during the reign of King Yasovarman in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, and was expanded over the course of successive centuries and kingships; Angkor Wat was begun in the final years of the eleventh century by King Suryavarman II, and completed sometime after his death in 1150. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries brought "southward shifts in Cambodia's geographic and administrative center of gravity," thus diminishing the political relevance of Angkor itself; a particularly consequential Thai invasion in 1431 is typically cited as the end of the Angkorian period, although the site was never fully abandoned.[78]

The temples were initially introduced to French publics through the travels and writings of Henri Mouhot, whose posthumously-published illustrations and journals of his 1860 visit to Angkor were later widely read in France.[79] Following the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1867, the temples quickly came to occupy a place of singular fascination in the French colonial imaginary, as early exoticized and orientalized depictions of the 'lost' city's simultaneous decadence and decay, its one-time grandeur underscored by its present-day disrepair, captivated French reading publics and colonial administrators alike. Over time, this fascination grew into one of the central narratives deployed by the colonial regime in its efforts to consolidate Cambodia and its people as colonial possessions.[80]

In subsequent decades, as French archaeologists excavated, historicized, and, frequently, looted the complex, Angkor – and specifically Angkor Wat – was subjected to the dual processes of secularization and 'logoization' in service of the French colonial government.[81] Prior to the arrival of the French, the temples had long been the site of a potent religious and spiritual authority, accumulated through centuries of engagement by and association with kings, monks, and other divine and mythical figures and in turn harnessed to constitute the political authority of successive

[78] Chandler 2008, 92. For an overview of Angkorian history, see Chandler (2008), particularly "Chapter 3: Kingship and Society at Angkor" and "Chapter 4: Jayavarman VII and the Crisis of the Thirteenth Century."
[79] Edwards 2007, 19-20.
[80] Edwards 2007, 20-2.
[81] On the term 'logoization', see Anderson (1991, 253-4).

kingships.[82] Through state-sponsored archaeological expeditions, French engagement with the site sought to divest the temples of their religious significance, excising and severing them from the spiritual cosmopolis to which they had for centuries belonged and instead transfixing them in European conceptions of linear and progressive historical time.[83] In doing so, the French sought to position themselves as "guardian[s] of generalized, but also local, tradition" that they alone were capable of unearthing, interpreting, and communicating.[84] In authoring the historical narrative of the land that they called *Cambodge*, the French fashioned "a fixed race, culture, language, religion, territory and heritage" over which they claimed full intellectual ownership.[85]

This process of archaeologically-informed historicization quickly became inseparable from the parallel project of cultural aestheticization. Fiction, novels, and other works of popular literature together helped to constitute in the colonial imaginary what Panivong Norindr refers to as "the auratic construction of Angkor Wat" – that is, "phantasmatic Angkor" – onto which deeply romanticized conceptions of 'the Orient' were projected.[86] Angkor became "the site of intense aesthetic re-imagining, and political and economic appropriation,"[87] laying the foundations for its ultimate "reposition[ing] as regalia for a *secular* colonial state."[88]

By the opening decades of the twentieth century, both such projects – the historicization of Angkor-as-monument, and the aestheticization of Angkor-as-symbol – had become foundational elements of the production of coloniality in French-administered Cambodia, curated and "created through a traffic in ideas, images, and artifacts."[89] Through museums, exhibitions, and other public displays of Angkorian artistic and architectural productions, French colonialists enthusiastically

[82] Thompson 2004, 24; Edwards 2007, 24-5.
[83] Edwards 2007, 22-6.
[84] Anderson 1991, 253.
[85] Hinton 2006, 456.
[86] Norindr 2006, 56-9.
[87] Norindr 2006, 54.
[88] Anderson 1991, 253. Emphasis in the original.
[89] Edwards 2007, 12.

sought to incorporate the temples – and, by extension, the civilization that had produced them – into the conceptual space of France's "national heritage," for the construction of a national imaginary in which France played the role of imperial power, "commit[ted] to cultural conservation and national education," required the corresponding presence of colonies in need of French administration.[90] In Phnom Penh, artistic and architectural motifs drawn from Angkor were integrated into colonial renovations of urban planning and royal ceremony, as the French colonial regime projected and prescribed its conceptualizations of "Khmerness" throughout the physical and social space of the colonial capital.[91] Such conceptualizations were rooted in French understandings of Angkorian grandeur, informed by the archaeological excavations financed by the colonial state, that constructed "Khmerness as an impossibly fractured space between past and present."[92]

"These manifestations of colonial imaginings," notes Penny Edwards, "became the cultural coordinates around which Cambodge's educated elite would map their visions of nation."[93] Yet while early architects of indigenous constructions of Khmer nationalism did indeed engage the aesthetic and discursive productions of French coloniality, they also refashioned such productions' underlying logics into narratives of inherent cultural strength: where the French emphasized the historicity of Angkor, Khmer nationalists brought Angkor into the present, construed as a testament to the resilience and longevity of Khmer culture. Such colonial and nationalist discursive engagements converged on a recognition of Angkor as the sublime realization of "Khmerness," the standard against which to measure subsequent cultural achievements and expressions. The 'national culture' thus enshrined in Angkor – its architectural style, the *apsara* and *tevada* of its reliefs, the languages of its inscriptions – became for many colonialists and nationalists alike the archetypes of a 'pure,' 'authentic' realization of Khmer culture and identity.[94]

[90] Edwards 2007, 26-8.
[91] Edwards 2007, 45-50.
[92] Edwards 2007, 62.
[93] Edwards 2007, 60.
[94] Edwards 2007, 97.

Racialization and the Myth of the 'Vanishing Khmer'

Inherent to the colonial project of the nationalization of Angkor was the corresponding historicization and racialization of the civilization that had produced the temples. Eager to legitimate the historicity of their colonial possessions through the projection of racial and ethnic constructions back in time, the French propagated a conceptualization of Cambodian history as a "primordial continuum […] running from Funan to Angkor to the reign of Ang Duong," structured along a logic of racial homogeneity and cultural immutability.[95] At the same time, the French drew a sharp distinction between the former magnificence of the Khmer empire and what they perceived as the current state of degeneration of the Khmer people – an interpretation inspired by the racial absolutism of social Darwinism and reinforced through literary and pseudo-scholarly depictions of the one-time grandeur of Angkor reduced to ruins in the jungle.[96] French novelists, artists, and colonial administrators cast the Khmer people as a fallen race, tracing a trajectory of decline through the centuries, from an ostensible golden era epitomized by Angkor through to the present day.[97]

Indeed, early French administrators originally postulated that Angkor had been constructed by a different people altogether, and that the present-day inhabitants of Cambodia had moved into

[95] Edwards 2007, 8-9.

[96] Indeed, the etymology of the English (and French) term *jungle* itself is instructive. The term is a product of European colonization in South Asia, and derives ultimately from the Sanskrit *jaṇgala*, referring to uncultivated, typically arid land ("Jungle" 2020). European colonizers came to associate the term with the dense, tangled vegetation that often grows at the edges of tropical forests, and then, by extension, with the forests themselves. With this expanded usage came other connotations: of darkness, of shadow, of the 'untamed,' the 'primitive.' The jungle, in the European colonial imaginary, came to represent a sort of primal life force, inhuman and terrifying, that threatened to overwhelm the imposition of 'civilization' upon 'wild' landscapes. Thus are the jungles of Conrad and Kipling: physical jungles, yes, but metaphorical ones as well – the societies and cultures of colonized peoples, threatening at every turn to overrun the 'civilizing mission' of the colonial project. Indeed, as Edwards (2007, 35) notes, Angkor held particular fascination for many French colonialists and pseudo-intellectuals who ascribed to generalized anxieties around social and moral decline and 'degeneration' then in vogue in Europe.

[97] Edwards 2007, 10-1; Hinton 2006, 456.

the region only after it had been abandoned by the Angkorian Khmer.[98] Such myths were soon dispelled, yet narratives of degeneration and decline persisted. The French enlisted this constructed historical trajectory as justification for their presence in Cambodia, as it became the 'moral obligation' of the regime's 'civilizing mission' to preserve not only Angkor itself, an undertaking that the French felt could not be entrusted to the present-day inhabitants of Cambodia, but also those cultural traditions and legacies enshrined therein, through the restoration of which the Khmer might 'reclaim' something of their 'bygone' glory.

Such narratives, predicated on selective interpretations of a centuries-long decline of the Khmer people and of an imminent threat of Khmer cultural and populational disappearance altogether, predominated throughout the French colonial regime's discursive engagements with Cambodian civil servants, scholars, religious officials, and intellectuals, and were furthermore perpetuated through administrative policies, scholarly discourse, and literary and artistic productions.[99]

Yet while the narrative of historical decline and imminent disappearance "would be worked into national imaginings as a keystone of [late colonial and] postcolonial nationalism,"[100] early Cambodian nationalists critically redeployed such anxieties in their efforts to instill in their fellow Cambodians the urgency of uniting around a common national identity, ultimately culminating in widespread mobilization – military, discursive, and religious – against the French colonial regime. Furthermore, such anxieties further bolstered the reverence and import with which Angkor was viewed, as the temples held out the promise of permanence that, in the colonial imaginary, seemed so tenuous and uncertain for the present-day Khmer population: properly preserved and rehabilitated, Angkor – and all that it represented – might serve to anchor Khmer culture, and thus

[98] Edwards 2007, 25. Pérez Pereiro (2012, 66-7) describes a similar myth that, he says, persists in Thailand today, concerning a 'vanished race' – the Khom – that constructed Angkor before being displaced by the Khmer.
[99] Edwards 2007, 20.
[100] Edwards 2007, 20.

the Khmer nation, in space and time. Angkor, then, as site and symbol, became a matter of existential importance.

Cultivation and Curation: A National Religion Takes Form

Together, the racializing and historicizing narratives that enshrined Angkor as the pinnacle of 'Khmerness' and cast the country's present-day population as a degenerate people descended – in lineage and in status – from this former grandeur suggested, for French orientalist scholars and curators, the vital urgency of documenting and preserving Khmer 'culture.' Envisioned as the greatest achievement of the Khmer people, Angkor was monumentalized as the purest and most authentic expression of a 'national culture,' as "old relics were infused with new meaning as icons of communal identity, continuity, and aspiration."[101]

Among such relics were a diverse and dynamic assortment of practices and beliefs that collectively comprised Khmer Theravada Buddhist tradition, a religious assemblage in which French colonialists took an active interest.[102] Through "scriptural reconnaissance missions […] to explore and demarcate" – and thereby produce – the conceptual borders and cultural topographies of their colonial possession, the French exerted considerable resources in their efforts to characterize and catalogue Cambodian Buddhist tradition, as one of the present-day colony's most prominent 'cultural artifacts' linked directly to the age of Angkor.[103]

Yet this process was far from a top-down affair; rather, it emerged as a complex interplay and exchange between French administrators and scholars, on the one hand, and, on the other, Khmer monks, intellectuals, and emergent nationalists, who brought their own convictions to bear

[101] Edwards 2007, 27.
[102] Buddhism's arrival in Southeast Asia predated Angkor, yet it was in the late twelfth century that the religion found full expression in Angkorian kingship, during the reign of King Jayavarman VII. The traditions of Buddhist kingship that Jayavarman VII established had profound implications for the development of Cambodian society and politics for the next eight centuries (Chandler 2008, 68-83).
[103] Edwards 2007, 107.

on collaborative – and, at times, subversive – projects to catalogue, interpret, and ultimately reform the traditions and institutions of Theravada Buddhism as practiced in Cambodia. Crucially, Theravadin thought was enlisted as "cultural medium for response to and critique of the sociopolitics of modern experiences," and "serve[d] as a site for articulating new ways of being," thereby ensuring its integration into emergent understandings of the national community.[104]

Among the most influential figures in this process of exchange were the reformist monks Chuon Nath and Huot Tath and the French scholar, curator, and librarian Suzanne Karpelès. In the 1910s, Nath and Tath developed and promoted a range of reforms from within Cambodia's Mahanikay monastic order, centering on a return to the 'pure' teachings of the Buddha espoused in the *Tripitaka*, the Pali canon, and on active intellectual engagement with the *Vinaya*, the Buddhist precepts.[105] As Penny Edwards notes, Nath and Tath, "in their desire to define the 'new' and fashion the future through a reversion to the purity of the past," thereby shared with orientalist scholars "a quasi-curatorial commitment to revive and enlist the past in the service of the present."[106] This was an intellectual and ideological convergence that Nath and Tath were able to employ to their benefit, as, with notable support from Karpelès, they leveraged the influence and access afforded them by their association with colonial institutions of scholarship to advance their own efforts of reform from within the Mahanikay order. Both monks spent much of 1922 and 1923 at the École Française d'Extrême Orient in Hanoi, where, under the tutelage of the French Indologist Louis Finot, they studied Sanskrit, Old Khmer, and Buddhist history.[107] Upon returning to Phnom Penh, Tath was recommended by Finot for an appointment as an instructor of Sanskrit at the recently established

[104] Hansen 2007, 10, 12. See also Edwards (2007, 95-124), "Chapter 4: Colonialism and Its Demerits: Bringing Buddhism to Book, 1863-1922."
[105] Edwards 2007, 114-6; Hansen 2007, 118-20.
[106] Edwards 2007, 96.
[107] Edwards 2007, 190; ហ្ជត តាត 1970, ๔๗.

École Supérieure de Pali; Nath, who had been appointed professor at the École in 1915, resumed his post, and was named joint director of the school in 1930.[108]

Chuon Nath and Huot Tath were soon joined at the École Supérieure de Pali by Karpelès, who in 1925 furthermore secured the establishment of the Royal Library, of which she was appointed director.[109] As Edwards describes, these events, followed by the establishment of the Buddhist quarterly *Kampuchea Soriya*[110] in 1926 and the founding of the Buddhist Institute in 1930 – both initiatives in which Karpelès, Nath, and Tath played leading roles – would provide

> vital arenas for the formulation and circulation of emerging ideas about Buddhism and nation, allowing Finot, Tath, Karpelès, and Nath to translate their beliefs and ideas about the true and proper shape of Khmer Buddhism into a coherent body of thought and literature that, by the 1930s, had emerged as the authentic, national model of Khmer Buddhism.[111]

Such developments would have profound implications for subsequent conceptualizations of Khmer national community and identity, for it was from within such a discursive milieu that the earliest expressions of Khmer nationalism emerged. Colonial institutions such as the École Supérieure de Pali and the Buddhist Institute propagated and perpetuated the tethering of religious and ethnonationalist discourse, as "Buddhism remained the primary medium for understanding and articulating a new self-consciousness of what it meant to be [both] Khmer and a modern person."[112]

Such institutions similarly provided the intellectual and institutional foundations on which the *Vachananukram Khmer* project ultimately came to rest. For it was with Karpelès' support,

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[108] Edwards 2007, 190; ហ្ជួត តាត 1970, ๘๘; *Biography of Samdech Preah Sanghareach Chuon Nath, the Chief of Mahanikaya Order* 1970, 3-5.
[109] Edwards 2007, 190-1.
[110] Its name, meaning '(The) Cambodian Sun,' is occasionally transliterated *Kambuja Surya*.
[111] Edwards 2007, 188. See also Hansen's (2007, 5) comment that, "beginning in the mid-1930s, the Buddhist Institute became emblematic of and instrumental in the intertwining of modern Buddhist values and national identity in Cambodia, a position it held through the early 1970s."
[112] Hansen 2007, 12.

alongside the legitimacy afforded him by his position at the École Supérieure de Pali, that Chuon Nath was appointed to the commission created in 1926 to resume the development of the *Vachananukram*, stalled for over a decade due to debates around orthography and etymology;[113] furthermore, it was the Buddhist Institute that would ultimately come to be the institutional home for the project. Buddhist texts in translation, scriptural commentaries, and other works published by the Institute would give Buddhism, as practiced in Cambodia, "a linguistic dimension cordoning it off from Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam," thus cementing among a growing readership the notion of the Khmer language as the medium through which to express and articulate a distinctly national Theravadin practice.[114]

At the heart of such developments was Chuon Nath. Born in 1883, Nath came of age alongside the emergence of colonial narratives of Angkorian glory and existential threat; he was ordained as a monk in 1904, just as the French began to take a more institutional interest in Cambodian Buddhism.[115] Yet while Chuon Nath's religious convictions were shaped by each of these influences, he nevertheless reformulated colonial narratives circulated by the French in profound ways: where the French sought to secularize and historicize Angkor, Nath elevated it as a symbol of a Khmer *Buddhist* people; where the French sought to catalogue and preserve Cambodian Buddhism as a cultural artifact, Nath initiated a reform movement that reimagined Theravadin thought and practice, as performed in Cambodia, as vibrant and active sites of engagement through which to mediate encounters with and experiences of colonial modernity and to imagine the Khmer nation.

It was thus through a nuanced choreography of discursive engagement, contestation, and reclamation contra the French colonial regime that Chuon Nath developed those narratives that would ultimately structure his conceptualization of the Khmer nation, narratives centering on Angkorian heritage and Theravadin tradition. Such narratives would play the defining role in

[113] Sasagawa Hideo 2015, 46-7; Harris 2005, 119; Edwards 2007, 192.
[114] Edwards 2007, 95.
[115] *Biography of Samdech Preah Sanghareach Chuon Nath, the Chief of Mahanikaya Order* 1970, 3.

determining the form that the *Vachananukram Khmer* of 1938 ultimately took, and, with it, the earliest articulation of Khmer as a national language.

Chapter 2:

Defining the National Community: The Venerable Chuon Nath, the *Vachananukram Khmer*, and the Articulation of a National Imaginary, 1915-1943

> "I agreed to assist [in developing the fifth edition of the *Vachananukram*], resolving to join the struggle on behalf of the *Vachananukram* once more, despite the fact that I have now grown old at 84 years, and furthermore have my own responsibilities that crowd in around me such that I can scarcely extricate myself; for this *Vachananukram Khmer* is an old fruit of my intellectual labors. It is never far from my mind: whenever I put pen to paper, I can't help but recall those first two volumes of the *Vachananukram Khmer*. It was for these reasons that I could not refuse."
>
> The Venerable Chuon Nath, *Introduction to the 1967 Vachananukram Khmer*[116]

> "[T]o figure out a sphere of commonness is to identify the difference between that sphere and the one beyond. An imagined identity always implies the absence of such an identity at the point beyond its boundary."
>
> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*[117]

On December 4, 1915, King Sisowath issued Royal Decree No. 67, establishing a committee of scholars tasked with researching the Khmer language and producing a definitive Khmer-language dictionary.[118] The project was initiated through the collaborative efforts of several monks and intellectuals affiliated with the recently-established École Supérieure de Pali, who urged the school's French supervisor, George Cœdès, to petition the École française d'Extrême-Orient in Hanoi

[116] ជួន ណាត 1967, ង.
[117] Thongchai Winichakul 1994, 15-6.
[118] ជួន ណាត 1967, ក. Hansen (2007, 140) instead gives June as the month of the committee's formation by royal ordinance.

for administrative support in developing a comprehensive Khmer-language dictionary; in his letter to Hanoi, Cœdès justified the project through appeals to the need to remedy the problems of the "odiously disfigured Khmer language," corrupted by "the orthographic fancies indulged in by the scribes."[119] French administrators were convinced, and work on the dictionary began soon after.

Yet despite the committee's relatively untroubled inception, disagreements among committee members gradually brought progress on the dictionary's development to a halt. By 1920, disputes between two rival factions, broadly characterized as modernists and traditionalists, the latter of whom opposed certain orthographic reforms introduced by the modernists,[120] had reached a "particularly ugly phase;" six years later, in May of 1926, the proofs for the committee's initial dictionary were, "just as they were about to be printed, […] literally and dramatically pulled from the presses."[121]

A second commission was established later that same year, and, unlike its predecessor, counted among its members Chuon Nath and Huot Tath.[122] By 1926, both monks had become leading figures within a monastic reformist movement within Cambodia's Mahanikay order, a movement that would go on to transform Cambodian monastic practice in dramatic ways. Cambodian Buddhist thought and practice had furthermore begun to be increasingly tethered to early demarcations of the Khmer national community, thus embedding both Nath and Tath deep within the heart of the movement to imagine the Khmer nation.

The discursive engagements and exchanges that characterized such intellectual and religious milieux thus profoundly shaped the contours of the national imaginary articulated through the pages of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, beginning with the publication of the first volume of its

[119] Hansen 2007, 139-40.
[120] ជួន ណាត 1967, ក-ឃ; Hansen 2007, 141; Sasagawa 2015, 46; Thong 1985, 110.
[121] Hansen 2007, 140.
[122] Hansen 2007, 141.

first edition in 1938.[123] The Venerable Chuon Nath, later recognized as the dictionary's primary architect, both contributed to and was influenced by this vibrant exchange of ideas and beliefs, and the conceptualization of the Khmer national community constructed through the *Vachananukram Khmer* was grounded in Nath's particular understandings of the entanglements between history, religion, tradition, and culture, cultivated alongside other early architects of the nationalist movement through processes of negotiation and mediation with the intellectual circulations of the French colonial regime.

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which the specific contours of the national language that the *Vachananukram* delineated were imbued with the particularities of Nath's vision for the Khmer nation. I explore Nath's decades-long engagement with projects to resituate and reconceptualize both Theravadin thought and practice and the legacy of Angkor, as well as the language through which to realize such projects, as reformist monks, scholars and intellectuals, civil servants, and others came together to imagine a new national community. The conceptualization of the Khmer nation that Nath articulated through the *Vachananukram Khmer*, I argue, grounded in and authenticated through Theravadin thought and practice and Angkorian heritage, necessitated an emphasis on distinctions from other, potentially rival centers of Theravadin tradition and learning and rival heirs to the legacies of Angkor.

Chuon Nath, Huot Tath, and the Language of Reform

Born in 1883 in Kampong Speu Province, the Venerable Chuon Nath arrived in Phnom Penh at the age of sixteen, entering Wat Ounaloum as a novice monk in 1899 after having completed two years of monastic study in his home province. From an early age, Nath exhibited a strong proclivity

[123] As Sasagawa (2015, 47) notes, Volume 1 of the first edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer* was initially published by the Royal Library in 1938; Volume 2 and all subsequent editions were thereafter published by the Buddhist Institute, following the merger of the two institutions in 1943.

for learning, and for languages in particular: over the course of his life, he developed proficiency in some nine languages, classical and modern alike.[124]

In 1912, Nath, recently elevated to the rank of *Sangkhasattha*, a monastic position associated with learning and scholarship, met the Venerable Huot Tath, himself recently elevated to the comparable rank of *Sangkhavichea*; the two were assigned to the same *kod*, or monastic dwelling, within the grounds of Wat Ounaloum. "Our work together over the course of many years," Tath recalls in his memoir *Kalyanmitt Robah Khnyom*, "allowed us to gradually come to know and understand one another, and served as the basis for our friendship up to the present."[125]

Nath and Tath's deep friendship was indeed legendary, and the two monks quickly became central figures at the forefront of a reformist sect within Cambodia's Mahanikay monastic order, occasionally referred to as the *Mahanikay Thmei*, or New Mahanikay, and centered on Phnom Penh's Wat Ounaloum. Conceptually, the reformist movement is, as Anne Hansen argues,

> best understood in ethical terms as a rationalist shift in Buddhist intellectual sensibilities about temporality and purification [that] prefigured the notion of a *sāsana-jāti* (national religion) [and] articulated values for living that joined […] understandings of what it meant to live in the contemporary world with interpretations of what it meant to be a good Buddhist.[126]

The faction's reforms themselves, meanwhile, centered on a strict interpretation of the *Tripitaka*, the 'Three Baskets' of the Theravada Buddhist canon, and on active intellectual engagement, through sermons, commentary, writings, and so forth, with the *Vinaya*, those precepts of the *Tripitaka* concerned with monastic rules of conduct and doctrinal practice.[127] In their early years,

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[124] ភិន សុបញ្ញវិទ្ធ 2018.

[125] ហួត តាត 1970, ២-៣. The memoir, whose title may be translated as *My Good Friend*, was published in 1970, less than a year following Nath's death on September 25, 1969.

[126] Hansen 2007, 3.

[127] Edwards 2007, 114-6.

Nath and Tath were marginalized within the Cambodian *sangha*, or monastic community, and their reformist teachings and writings suppressed by more conservative Mahanikay monks; over time, however, Nath and Tath's movement ultimately came to define monastic practice within the Mahanikay order.[128]

Central to the reforms that defined the faction led by Nath and Tath was the emphasis placed on the Khmer language as a legitimate linguistic medium through which to engage with Buddhist doctrine and scripture. "Those who adhered rigidly to the old customs," Tath notes in his memoir, "were accustomed to reciting *sutra* in Pali. As soon as they heard others reciting *sutra* in Pali together with translations in the national language, they labeled them as members of the New *Dhamma*."[129] Importantly, such a characterization was one with which Nath took issue, as it was the medium of the *dhamma*, rather than its content, that the faction sought to reform:

> In truth, these terms "Old *Dhamma*" and "New *Dhamma*" should never have been introduced, as the *dhamma* set down by the Lord Buddha are all well mapped through various treatises and doctrines. […] Any path of spiritual practice that departs from such doctrines must be corrected and set straight; wherever such doctrines must be translated into the national language, then so be it – for practitioners ought to know the truth and essence [of the Buddha's teachings], lest

[128] The Venerable Chuon Nath become *Preah Mahasometheathibati*, the highest monastic rank, of the Mahanikay order in 1948; the supreme title of *Samdech* was conferred on him in 1950 by then-King Norodom Sihanouk, followed by the title *Samdech Preah Sangkhareach*, the highest title in the Kingdom of Cambodia, in 1963. Nath remained Supreme Patriarch of the Mahanikay order until his death in 1969, upon which he was succeeded by the Venerable Huot Tath (*Biography of Samdech Preah Sanghareach Chuon Nath, the Chief of Mahanikaya Order* 1970, 6; ឈាត ស្រ៊ាង et al. 2005, 48-9, 61).

[129] ហួត តាត 1970, ១១-២. The term ធម៌ *thoa*, rendered here as a transliteration of the more widely-cited Pali term *dhamma*, refers to the inherent and universal nature of reality, and more broadly to the teachings of the Buddha. The Pali *dhamma* is cognate with the Sanskrit variant *dharma*; Khmer exhibits derivates of both terms.

they err or grow confused in their practice. That is all that our efforts amounted to: there was no inventing of any 'new *dhamma*' whatsoever.[130]

It was thus through Khmer, suggested Nath and Tath – the *pheasa cheat*, or "national language," referenced here by Tath – that monks and laity alike might study, interpret, and discuss Buddhist teachings and precepts.[131] In later years, and in collaboration with Suzanne Karpelès, who served variously as director of the Royal Library, founder and secretary of the Buddhist Institute, and chief publications officer for the École Supérieure de Pali, both monks played leading roles in the translation of the *Tripitaka* into Khmer; citing limited Pali literacy among the Khmer population, Chuon Nath argued that Khmer translations of the Pali canon were necessary for enabling monks and laity alike to engage with the Buddha's instruction.[132]

Language thus served as the medium through which to not simply circulate and disseminate Buddhist texts and teachings, but to enact the more radical project of mediating them for contemporary audiences and temporalities. As Hansen notes, Nath and Tath's acts of translation are better characterized as "imagining" than as "imitation," allowing them to "serve as a site for articulating new ways of being."[133] Language was deeply implicated in the movement's emphases on authenticity and the purification of "expressions of Khmer culture that had become corrupted," as linguistic expression came to be viewed as more broadly indexical of "moral conduct and the Dhamma itself, which had been damaged by a decline in Pali knowledge and texts."[134]

It was thus through linguistic neglect that corruptions and impurities had infiltrated Khmer Buddhist tradition and practice; similarly, it was through linguistic purification that the Khmer Buddhist community would be redeemed. In his memoir, the Venerable Huot Tath tethers Buddhist

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[130] ហួត តាត 1970, ១២.
[131] Edwards 2004, 65-70.
[132] ឈាតស្រ៊ាង et al. 2005, ២៦, 21-6; Edwards 2007, 188.
[133] Hansen 2007, 12.
[134] Hansen 2007, 14-5.

morality directly to the "correctness" of its linguistic expressions, extolling the Venerable Chuon Nath's contributions to the national language in the midst of recounting the most significant elements of Nath's religious legacy:

> Monks and layfolk alike ought to study diligently, so as to familiarize themselves with the teachings of Buddhism, such as *dhamma* and *vinay*, and to familiarize themselves with the ways of the world, such as letters and literature. As for literature, we ought to study in order to develop a thorough understanding of correct and incorrect usages, in our writing and our reading alike […] for when using our own national language, if we read or write a word from our own national vocabulary incorrectly, then we ought to be thoroughly ashamed. Thus, monks and layfolk alike ought to pay great mind to their literary pursuits, on behalf of their own nation. [… The Venerable Chuon Nath,] when he was still alive, cared deeply for literature and letters, and applied himself diligently throughout his life to studying and explaining the words of our nation, such that others might read and write correctly.[135]

For both monks, mere exposure to Pali teachings and texts was inadequate for "correct" Buddhist practice; rather, Nath and Tath emphasized the inner cognitive and spiritual realms of individual practitioners. The very act of translation thus enacted a reformulation of the Mahanikay order's conceptualization of proper Theravadin practice and tradition, elevating monks' and layfolks' *understandings* of the meanings and significance of such ritual practices to a status equal to that of the proper performance of such acts. Crucially, Khmer was the medium through which such reformulations were enacted.

[135] ហួត តាត 1970, ៦៧-៨.

The Birth of the Pheasa Cheat

In its emphases on textual purification and a return to the original teachings of the Buddha, the Mahanikay's reformist sect largely aligned with the traditions propagated by the Thommayuttikanikay order, the second of Cambodia's two official Theravada Buddhist orders. Founded in Thailand in the mid-nineteenth century by King Mongkut, then serving as a monk, the order was established in Cambodia in 1853, and was subsequently officially sanctioned by King Norodom[136] in 1880, elevating it to the same status as the long-established Mahanikay order; from then on, the Thommayuttikanikay served as the favored tradition of Khmer royalty.[137]

Yet its origins in Siam, alongside the continued prominence of Thommayuttikanikay schools and wats in Bangkok as educational destinations and foci of intellectual thought and scholarly production, concerned the French, who habitually sought to curb the influence of the Thai on Cambodia in order to more fully ensconce the latter within the cultural and political sphere of French-ruled Indochina. The French thus played an active role in encouraging elements and institutions within Cambodia that, in providing Cambodia with its own centers of Buddhist scholarship and learning, might obviate the need for Cambodian monks to travel to and study in Thailand, thereby enfeebling a primary channel for the dissemination of religious – and, the French assumed, political – thought and ideas from Thailand. Thus, following the emergence of the Mahanikay reformist faction in the 1910s, the French regime initially provided institutional and other formal support for the faction's growth and spread among the Cambodian *sangha*.[138]

As Penny Edwards notes, the reforms promulgated by Nath and Tath comprised a movement that was not simply founded on "doctrinal opposition," but was in fact a fundamentally

[136] King Norodom reigned from 1860 until 1904, and is not to be confused with his grandson, King Norodom Sihanouk, who reigned between 1941 and 1955 and again between 1993 and 2004 (Chandler 2008, 167-72, 204, 289, 294). (Sihanouk abdicated the throne in 1955 in order to enter the political realm as a private citizen.)
[137] Edwards 2007, 103, 109-10.
[138] Edwards 2007, 110-2; Hansen 2004, 53-4; Hansen 2007, 116, 120.

"ethnolinguistic construction" – for it was precisely in such dimensions, embodied in its vernacular and in its community of adherents, that the Mahanikay's reformist sect differed most dramatically from the Thommayuttikanikay.[139] The reforms introduced by Nath and Tath thus emerged as the site of convergence between, on the one hand, a rationalist approach to engaging modernity by purifying Theravada Buddhism of its 'folk' accretions, an orientation it largely shared with the Thommayuttikanikay; and, on the other, an indigenous religious tradition firmly rooted in the emerging notion of the Khmer nation, reflecting its accordance of doctrinal legitimacy to texts and sermons rendered in the Khmer language as well as its origins in the long-established Cambodian Mahanikay order.

Furthermore, in its turn towards the Khmer language, the reformist faction of the Mahanikay order brought itself into natural alignment with a growing assemblage of secular writers and intellectuals engaged in the cultivation of new platforms for the exchange of discourse and ideas through the medium of written Khmer, a movement that began in earnest in the 1920s. In 1926, Suzanne Karpelès was instrumental in establishing the monthly journal *Kampuchea Soriya*, initially published through the Royal Library and focused on topics relating to Khmer Buddhism, culture, and history; it was soon followed by the more colloquial *Srok Khmer*, featuring Buddhist poetry and literature alongside agricultural advice and local and regional news.[140] Several additional weekly and quarterly publications appeared in the 1930s, the most significant of which was the weekly newspaper *Nokor Wat*,[141] founded by Son Ngoc Thanh and Pach Chhoeun, both

[139] Edwards 2007, 116.
[140] Edwards 2007, 75; 2004, 194-5.
[141] Its name, *នគរវត្ត*, transliterated on the paper's masthead as *Nagara vatta*, roughly translates to 'Temple City,' a reference to Angkor. *Nokor* 'city' is a Khmer loanword from Sanskrit/Pali (cf. the former Khmer name for Ho Chi Minh City [Saigon], *Prei Nokor*), and is the root of the Khmer term *Angkor* (ពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត្យ 1967, ១៥៧៣).

ethnic Khmer from present-day southern Vietnam – then known to the French as Cochinchina, and referred to by many Cambodians, then as today, as *Kampuchea Kraom*, or 'Lower Cambodia.'[142]

Published from 1936 until its shuttering by the French in 1942, *Nokor Wat* promoted overtly nationalist themes throughout its reporting and editorials. Its writers frequently invoked the notions of 'us Khmer' and 'our Khmer nation,' thereby helping to establish a nationalist frame of reference through which both domestic concerns and foreign affairs – its front page weekly featured an 'Announcements from Various Countries' section – were interpreted and understood.

Of central importance to many of the paper's journalists, editors, and readers was the promotion and preservation of Khmer Buddhism – activities in which both Pach Chhoeun and Son Ngoc Thanh were involved beyond the pages of the paper itself. Both men were incorporated into initiatives organized through the Buddhist Institute by Karpelès, an association that further contributed to the entwining of ethnonationalist and religious-reformist sentiment and activity.[143] Indeed, through his appointment at the Buddhist Institute, Son Ngoc Thanh spent time traveling to military barracks across Cambodia, as well as several in Kampuchea Kraom, to provide 'moral instruction' to soldiers; alongside this official assignment, Thanh took advantage of the opportunity to engage in more clandestine political activities, as he worked to develop a network of ardent nationalists committed to Cambodian independence from the French.[144]

The twofold conviction that Theravada Buddhism, as practiced by the Khmer people, was critically, if not singularly, constitutive of Khmer identity, and that the Khmer language was a legitimate medium through which to give full expression to such, thus brought the editors and readerships of *Nokor Wat* and the adherents to the reformist Mahanikay faction into conceptual alignment. Both movements took up the project of delineating the conceptual space of the Khmer nation, and both enlisted religion and language as focal points. Nath and Tath's emphasis on the

[142] Edwards 2007, 207-9.
[143] Hansen 2004, 127.
[144] Edwards 2007, 207.

Khmer language as the medium through which to engage Buddhist thought and practice, through sermons, scriptural translations, and so forth, both encouraged and benefited from the proliferation of print media, secular and religious alike, in Khmer. Together, as Edwards has demonstrated, the two were "critical in consolidating the emergence of vernacular Khmer as a field of national meaning."[145]

Significantly, such national meaning was not defined in geographic or spatial terms, but rather in religious and linguistic ones. Through the pages of *Nokor Wat*, both Son Ngoc Thanh and Pach Chhoeun, members of ethnic Khmer communities located in Kampuchea Kraom, projected a vision of the Khmer nation that transcended the political space of the French colonial regime, and was instead "ethnically homogeneous but territorially elastic," indexed not through geographic locality but through the dual cultural institutions of Khmer Buddhism and the Khmer language.[146] Khmer communities in Kampuchea Kraom were further incorporated into the national imaginary through initiatives organized through the Royal Library, which began in 1928 – notably under the leadership of Suzanne Karpelès – to promote Theravada Buddhism in French Cochinchina through temple schools utilizing Khmer as the medium of instruction; the Library furthermore fostered opportunities for monks from Kampuchea Kraom to study at Wat Ounaloum, the temple of residence of Chuon Nath and Huot Tath and the heart of the reformist movement. Engagement with Kampuchea Kraom through the medium of Theravada Buddhism continued into the following decade with the establishment of the Buddhist Institute, founded in 1930 for the purpose of unifying the schools of Theravada Buddhism variously practiced in Cambodia, Laos, and Kampuchea Kraom – Siam is a notable absence – and to support people of "the land" in practicing their religion, in part through the translation of the *Tripitaka* into Khmer and other efforts to prevent linguistic degradation.[147]

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[145] Edwards 2004, 75.
[146] Edwards 2007, 215.
[147] ឈាត ស្រ៊ាង et al. 2005, ២១-២, 20-6.

During the opening decades of the twentieth century, religion and language were thus enlisted by early Khmer nationalists not simply as "the Other of the colonial modern,"[148] but rather as mediums through which to mediate and negotiate experiences of and encounters with the colonial modern. These decades saw the emergence of a discourse on Khmer nationhood that increasingly bound itself to the institution of Khmer Theravada Buddhism and articulated itself through the medium of the Khmer language. For the movement's leading architects, these two domains were inseparable, and together served as focal points around which the notion of the Khmer nation could coalesce.[149]

By the 1930s, then, the Khmer language had become deeply implicated in the project of imagining the nation, enlisted as a productive medium through which to engage questions of identity and nationhood. At the same time, it nevertheless remained a largely fragmented and ill-defined entity: written Khmer, once the sole purview of monks, scribes, and scholars of the royal court variously dedicated to the preparation of religious manuscripts and of royal chronicles, had by the early decades of the twentieth century increasingly come to be realized in its vernacular forms.[150] It was precisely this divestiture of the spiritual and monarchical significance that it once carried that allowed the Khmer language to take on a new symbolism – that of the Khmer nation. Yet precisely what form this nation would take – its cultural, historical, and linguistic, in addition to its geographical, contours – had yet to be clearly delineated.

[148] Chen 2010, 87. Citing Memmi (1991 [1957]), Chen notes the grounding in both religion and language that undergirded the nativist movement in Tunisia. "Through religion," he writes, "different social classes were unified to 'reinforce their bonds, verify and recreate their unity;'" language, meanwhile, "is unequivocally the foundation of all nativist movements because the integration of nationalist feeling can be achieved only in one's own language."

[149] For a detailed discussion of the emergence of a national discourse equating Khmer identity with Theravada Buddhist identity, see Hansen (2004).

[150] See Appendix 1 for an analysis and discussion of the lack of a uniform orthographic standard exhibited by the articles and editorials of *Nokor Wat*.

Pali and the Authentication of Angkorian Heritage

While Chuon Nath, Huot Tath, and other Mahanikay reformists embraced the Khmer language as a medium of engagement with Buddhist scripture and teaching – sermons delivered in Khmer, the translation of the *Tripitaka*, the publication of commentaries, and so forth – they simultaneously remained committed to the spiritual authority of Pali, the language of the Theravadin canon and of the Buddha himself. Furthermore, their close ideological and institutional association with both French scholars and secular Cambodian intellectuals encouraged Nath and other reformists to conceptualize Angkor as the cultural and civilizational counterpart to local Theravadin tradition and practice. Thus, over time, two of the most potent sites of nationalist meaning – the national religion, realized as Theravadin thought and practice, and the national culture, indexed and embodied through Angkor – were fused into a single conceptual construct, with enduring implications for the inscription of the national language through the pages of the *Vachananukram Khmer*.[151]

A Brief History of Linguistic Interaction and Exchange Between Khmer, Sanskrit, and Pali

As an Austroasiatic, or Mon-Khmer, language, Khmer belongs to a language family that is firmly rooted in Southeast Asia. Along with Vietnamese and Khasi, spoken in the Indian state of Meghalaya, Khmer is one of three Austroasiatic languages with official, state-sanctioned status; more than a hundred others, including several in present-day Cambodia, are spoken across the countries of Southeast Asia and into the Indian subcontinent as 'minority,' 'indigenous,' and 'ethnic' languages.[152]

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[151] This is not to suggest that Angkor had been divested of its spiritual significance prior to the twentieth century; indeed, as Thompson (2004, 24) notes, and as discussed further below, the temples had long been the site of a potent religious and spiritual authority, accumulated through centuries of engagement by and association with kings, monks, and other divine and mythical figures and in turn harnessed to constitute the political authority of successive kingships. Yet the reformulation of Angkor as a site of *national* meaning, wedded to the symbols, rituals, and practices of Theravada Buddhism as a *national* religion, was a unique development within the opening decades of the twentieth century.

[152] Jenny, Weber, and Weymuth 2015, 13.

Yet while its genetic ancestry, so to speak, anchors it firmly in Southeast Asia, Khmer has been profoundly shaped by centuries of interaction and exchange with other languages, together representing multiple other language families. Foremost among these are Sanskrit and Pali, both Indo-Aryan languages from South Asia, and Thai, the most prominent member of the Kra-Dai language family, originating in present-day southern China.

The influence of both Sanskrit and Pali was already apparent by the time of the earliest pre-Angkorian inscriptions, dated to the mid-seventh century CE.[153] Indeed, the writing system of Old Khmer itself descended from the Pallava script, an Indic abugida in the Brahmic lineage, and the majority of the inscriptions found at Angkor – particularly among those dating to the Angkorian period – are in Sanskrit, with a sizable minority written in Old Khmer.[154] As Judith Jacob notes, it was Sanskrit, not Pali, that characterized pre-Angkorian and Angkorian borrowings, as the royal court and other elite groups employed Sanskrit for "all elevated linguistic activities," providing a conduit for "loan words relating to law, religion, and politics, and abstract ideas in general," to be adopted into Khmer and subsequently phonologically naturalized.[155]

Pali, meanwhile, began to grow in prominence with the spread of Buddhism, notably marked by the establishment of the Buddhist kingship by King Jayavarman VII at the end of the twelfth century;[156] beginning in the thirteenth century, much of the Cambodian population began to convert from the Mahayana tradition that typified King Jayavarman VII's court to Theravada Buddhism.[157] Throughout the period of Middle Khmer, extending roughly from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and into the era of the French Protectorate, Pali loanwords proliferated in Khmer, in large part through the vehicle of Buddhist teachings and practice. Pali terminology was frequently employed in early literature, such as in the didactic tales known as the *chbab*, in order to

[153] Haiman 2020, 557.
[154] Sasagawa 2015, 68.
[155] Jacob 1993, 151.
[156] Chandler 2008, 66-8.
[157] Chandler 2008, 80-2.

explicitly index Buddhist morality.[158] From the latter half of the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, Angkor itself was subject to a political-spiritual reappropriation and reimagining of sorts, and came to be reinvested with religious meaning as a site of spiritual significance for Theravada Buddhist monarchs, monks, and other elites; many of the temple's Pali inscriptions date from this period.[159]

Thus, while both Sanskrit and Pali have remarkably long histories of contact with and influence on the Khmer language,[160] and while Sanskrit is, in fact, the primary language of many of the inscriptions of Angkor – particularly among those that date to the reigns of the Angkorian kings themselves – it was Pali that, for Chuon Nath and other members of the dictionary commission, was uniquely positioned, through its multiplex association with Theravadin tradition, to legitimize and authenticate the Khmer language as simultaneously embedded within a Theravadin spiritual cosmopolis and tethered to the civilizational heritage of Angkor, the potent site of convergence across centuries of spiritual, monarchical, and national imaginaries.

The Origins of the Vachananukram Khmer

The ideological convergences between nationalist constructions of Pali and Angkor were further reinforced through the institutional and intellectual landscapes molded by the French colonial regime, out of which the *Vachananukram* project emerged. In 1909, shortly after the return

[158] Jacob 1993, 155.

[159] Thompson 2004, 24-7. Such processes – of religious *re*investment and *re*spiritualization – stand in notable contrast to the efforts by the French to secularize Angkor. Early nationalists, including the Venerable Chuon Nath, drew on each of these influences, casting Angkor as a site of convergence of both religious and secular – Theravada Buddhist and Khmer national – modes of meaning and significance.

[160] Indeed, among contemporary academic and lay publics alike, distinctions between the respective influences of Sanskrit and Pali are frequently conflated and collapsed, with both languages referred to collectively through the phrase *pheasa Balei-Samskreut*, "the Pali-Sanskrit language(s)," as if they comprised a single entity; English-language scholarship, too, frequently pairs the languages, without distinguishing between each's respective linguistic influence. This is likely due in part to the significant lexical and grammatical similarities between Pali and Sanskrit: in some cases, their lexical descendants in Khmer are indistinguishable, and it is thus impossible to determine, from a synchronic perspective, which language originally served as the source for a particular loan; in many other cases, Pali and Sanskrit descendants in Khmer are distinguishable only in their orthographies, and are identical in their phonetic realizations. Such concerns influenced certain lexicographic decisions made by the Venerable Chuon Nath in the compilation of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, and are considered in greater detail below.

by the Thai of the provinces of Battambang, Sisophon, and Siem Reap to the French colonial administration, the French established the École Supérieure de Pali d'Angkor Vatt, conflating Pali-inflected Buddhist tradition with Angkorian heritage as they sought to "plunge the roots of the Cambodian tree in the soil of Angkor."[161] The school's campus at Angkor was short-lived, closing after less than two years of operation – yet, as Anne Hansen notes, the École introduced a number of pedagogical and administrative measures that would have lasting implications. Among these was an ordinance allowing monks leaving the *sangha* to transfer their monastic ranks to commensurate civil service posts, while simultaneously stipulating that the higher monastic ranks be reserved for monks who had completed examinations at the École; the result was a gradual "movement toward knowledge of Pali as a criterion for administrative posts," secular and monastic alike. Furthermore, given that "not all scholarly monks were members of the modernist faction, [but] most modernist monks were scholars," the administrative measures introduced by the École further contributed to the later consolidation of influence wielded by the reformist faction within the Mahanikay order.[162]

The porous borders between Theravadin- and Angkorian-inflected national imaginaries, on the part of French and Cambodian scholars alike, were further attested by the activities and involvements of the second École Supérieure de Pali, reestablished in Phnom Penh in 1914.[163] By provision of the *résident supérieur*, the school was placed under the supervision of George Cœdès, introduced above in his role in urging administrative support for the establishment of the dictionary commission the following year. Between 1900 and 1918, Cœdès was variously involved with the École française d'Extrême-Orient, the scholarly institute established by the French in Hanoi dedicated to the study of regional civilizations, cultures, and histories,[164] and the school where

[161] Hansen 2007, 132. Hansen quotes Paul Luce, the inspector of civil services.
[162] Hansen 2007, 132-3.
[163] Indeed, as Ian Harris (2005, 139-40) notes, "in March 1941, *Nagara Vatta* [*Nokor Wat*] had praised [...] the École Supérieure de Pali as a 'school for the nation,' arguing that without its influence 'Khmer writing and religion would go to rack and ruin and eventually disappear.'" See as well Edwards (2007, 238).
[164] Hansen 2007, 126.

Chuon Nath and Huot Tath studied Sanskrit and Old Khmer from 1922 to 1923;[165] Cœdès subsequently directed the Vajirayana Library in Bangkok from 1918 to 1929, before returning to the École française d'Extrême-Orient as director, a position that he held until 1946.[166] The appointment in 1914 of a Cambodian monk known as Thong as director of the École Supérieure de Pali further speaks to the school's diverse ideological inheritances, as Thong was renowned for his mastery of both Pali and Sanskrit and, while "more established and less controversial than his younger colleagues Chuon Nath and Huot Tath," nevertheless aligned himself with the modernist faction within the Mahanikay.[167] In 1922, the École Supérieure de Pali was placed under the supervision of the École française d'Extrême-Orient, further bringing monastic Pali education in Cambodia into correspondence with broader intellectual currents dedicated to unearthing the historical trajectories of regional civilizations and cultures;[168] two years later, both Nath and Tath, recently returned from their studies in Hanoi, took up faculty positions at the École Supérieure de Pali in Pali and Sanskrit language instruction, respectively.[169]

Indeed, both Cœdès and Thong would play pivotal roles in the formation of the dictionary committee in 1915. As director of the École Supérieure de Pali, Thong joined a coalition of monks and other intellectuals in urging Cœdès to leverage his credentials with the École française d'Extrême-Orient and to request assistance in petitioning the regime for administrative support for work on a definitive dictionary. Both men were subsequently appointed to the commission following its inception in 1915, Cœdès as an "honorary member and advisor," and helped shape the first decade of its activities.[170]

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[165] The Venerable Huot Tath (ហួត តាត 1970, ៣៧-៥១) gives a delightful account of his and Nath's time in Hanoi in his memoir.
[166] Hansen 2007, 126.
[167] Hansen 2007, 134-5.
[168] Hansen 2007, 136.
[169] ហួត តាត 1970, ៤៨-៥១.
[170] Hansen 2007, 139-41.

From the moment of its inception, the dictionary commission exhibited a strong bias towards the Indic-inflected registers of Khmer. Indeed, much of the impetus for the commission's creation had come from monks concerned with scribal errors in texts written not in Khmer, but in Pali. In their efforts to "compile authoritative new editions of [canonical] texts from a multitude of manuscript sources," Thong, Chuon Nath, Huot Tath, and other monks were repeatedly confronted with errors and inconsistencies across sources.[171] The fusion of otherwise distinct projects of scriptural and linguistic purification – of both Khmer and Pali – was not accidental, but rather reflected the convictions and worldviews, as well as the linguistic training, of the members of the commission, many of whom were adherents to the modernist faction within the Mahanikay.[172]

Furthermore, "as Sanskrit and Pali scholars," Hansen notes, "the men on the commission were particularly concerned with purifying the Khmer language in order to show its Sanskrit and Pali roots and to bring it more in line with the Khmer appearing on ancient inscriptions."[173] The conflation of these two projects is noteworthy, for they are not inherently complementary: while the Old Khmer of Angkorian inscriptions does indeed demonstrate significant Sanskritic influence, much of the linguistic influence exerted by Pali came much later. The melding of these two prerogatives is thus demonstrative of a highly creative act of national imagining, fusing the Buddhist nation with the Angkorian one.

The dictionary commission thus exhibited a strong bias towards registers of Khmer that are characterized by their significant Indic influence. Angkorian inscriptions rendered in Old Khmer reflect highly elevated registers reserved for royal and religious contexts – precisely those domains in which Sanskritic influence was most pronounced.[174] Similarly, in their central preoccupation with

[171] Hansen 2007, 139.
[172] Hansen 2007, 140.
[173] Hansen 2007, 140.
[174] Jacob 1993, 151; see as well Chandler (2008, 27-8) for a discussion of the distinct contexts and contents of Sanskrit and Old Khmer inscriptions at Angkor.

the purification of texts and scriptures drawn from the Theravadin canon, the monastic members of the commission were immersed in registers of Khmer that drew heavily on the Pali lexicon.

The privileging of such elevated registers over speech vernaculars accords with what Nordindr has described as the promotion of "high culture over more popular forms of knowledge" in other domains, a phenomenon that was initially exhibited during the consolidation of national identity and that continues to circulate today. Quoting Crochet, Norindr notes that it is *voabbathoa*, 'culture,' rather than *tumneam tumloab*, 'custom,' that is invoked by intellectuals and other religious and civil officials, a term that "refers to a sophisticated body of knowledge and practices, linked to the court, the *sangha* […] or the University, a classical culture that acts as guarantor for the official image of Khmer identity."[175] Indeed, as Norindr points out, the distinct frames of reference in which *voabbathoa* and *tumneam tumloab* are embedded are reflected even in their etymologies: the former derives from the Pali elements *vappa* 'to sow' and *dhamma*, or *dharma*, introduced above as the term broadly encompassing the inherent nature of the universe, as expressed through the teachings of the Buddha;[176] the latter, meanwhile, derives from native Khmer elements, by way of a process of morphological derivation that is uniquely characteristic of the Mon-Khmer languages. We thus see embedded within the 'high' term for 'culture' itself an explicit invocation of Buddhist modes of thought and practice.

As detailed in the opening to this chapter, the first decade of the dictionary commission's work was not untroubled; the committee's meetings were frequently characterized by heated debates, and by 1920, distinct traditionalist and modernist factions had coalesced around the question of how – or whether – to introduce certain orthographic reforms to the Khmer script.[177] Such disagreements culminated in the commission's dissolution in 1926, as the proofs for the

[175] Norindr 2006, 57.

[176] Norindr 2006, 69 n7; ពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត្យ 1967, ១១៦២.

[177] ជួន ណាត 1967, ក-ឃ; Hansen 2007, 140-1.

dictionary developed by the modernists were "literally and dramatically pulled from the presses."[178] A second commission was established later that same year, and in 1938, after more than a decade of effort, the first volume of the dictionary's first edition was published at last.

Yet despite its ultimate failure to produce a dictionary, the initial commission's debates and activities were far from inconsequential. Rather, as Hansen notes, the engagement among a range of monastic and secular scholars in the projects of orthographic and lexicographic reform and production "contributed to the development of an alternative conception of the role of language and writing as part of the newly emerging discourse of cultural identity rather than as a primarily sacred activity,"[179] a conceptual shift that accelerated further throughout the 1920s and 1930s through the burgeoning of a vernacular Khmer print literature.[180] The debates in which members of the dictionary commission engaged, and the publicity that they generated, contributed in significant ways to the solidification of language as a site of national meaning.

Upon the establishment of the second dictionary committee in 1926, Chuon Nath and Huot Tath, employed as professors of Indic languages at the École Supérieure de Pali, were both appointed as committee members; following Thong's death in 1927, the Venerable Chuon Nath assumed the role of the dictionary's primary architect. Nath, deeply embedded within the discursive milieu and heated debates that characterized the commission's first ten years, took up the prerogatives of his predecessors – yet nuanced them in significant ways. The dictionary that finally emerged in 1938, the *Vachananukram Khmer*, thus reflects the hybrid genealogy of its chief author, consolidating its articulation of the Khmer national community around understandings of Theravadin thought and practice and Angkorian inheritance.

[178] Hansen 2007, 141.
[179] Hansen 2007, 141.
[180] Edwards 2007, 13-5.

The Vachananukram Khmer *and the Accentuation of Pali Inheritance*

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, Pali lay at the heart of many of the preoccupations of monks and other intellectuals engaged in the *Vachananukram* project. The Venerable Chuon Nath himself, as an instructor of Pali at the École Supérieure de Pali, engaged with the language on a daily basis; additionally, as one of the leading figures of the reformist faction within the Mahanikay, Nath was engaged from the second decade of the twentieth century onwards with the translation and explication of Pali texts and scriptures.[181] Like other reformist monks, Nath viewed the Pali language as uniquely indexical of the 'pure' and 'authentic' strains of Theravadin thought and practice that the modernist faction sought to recover and refurbish. The *Vachananukram Khmer* proved to be a uniquely salient medium through which to meld such modernist understandings of proper Theravadin tradition, indexed through Pali, with emergent conceptualizations of the nation, indexed through the Khmer language. Pali-inflected etymologies and orthographies thus became a central medium through which to constitute the Khmer nation as a conceptual entity fundamentally grounded in modernist Theravadin modes of being and belonging in the contemporary world.

The physical text of the *Vachananukram Khmer* accomplished this in several ways. The most straightforward was its preservation of Pali etymologies in the orthographic conventions that it established, privileging the orthographic representation of lexical items' Pali roots over their present-day, phonologically naturalized pronunciations. The orthographic standard established through the *Vachananukram Khmer* is thus replete with silent characters, extraneous syllables, and consonants that do not adhere to the normal rules of Khmer pronunciation, but rather must be

[181] ហ្ជួត តាត 1970, ៨-១១, ២៤-៣២. The most ambitious of these projects, a translation of the entirety of the *Tripitaka*'s eighty-four thousand verses into Khmer, was begun with the establishment of a Tripitaka Commission in 1929; the project was finally brought to fruition four decades later, with the publication of the final of the project's one hundred and ten volumes in April of 1969 (Harris 2005, 120; Edwards 2007, 203-5).

recognized by readers as Pali loanwords and pronounced accordingly.[182] Such an approach was not unique to the Venerable Chuon Nath – rather, as noted above, many members of both the original as well as the second dictionary commission were deeply educated in Pali and Sanskrit, and sought to preserve the contemporary Khmer language's linguistic connections to both languages – yet the consolidation and codification of this tendency was nevertheless fully realized through the *Vachananukram* associated with Nath's name.

Furthermore, Pali was actively employed in the creation of new words, many of which were introduced to replace French-sourced loanwords and other non-standard vernacular terms then in colloquial usage. Such processes of neology had begun prior to the publication of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, as both volumes of its first edition feature heavily Pali-inflected coinages – yet, as discussed in further detail in the next chapter, such processes would prove to be instrumental in the work of the Cultural Committee, the body established in 1947 and explicitly tasked with developing new vocabulary items for the Khmer language to replace French loans. Both Chuon Nath and Huot Tath variously chaired and served on the Committee during its first decade – Tath would remain an active member until its dissolution in 1968 – and were instrumental in the Committee's strong preference for coinages employing Pali elements, as well as the wholesale borrowing of Pali lexical items.[183]

Notably, in addition to its heavy emphasis on Pali etymologies, the *Vachananukram Khmer* further sought to preserve orthographic conventions that had long been attested in the written record, extending in several cases back to the era of Angkor. The *Vachananukram Khmer* of the Venerable Chuon Nath thus perpetuated and further codified the conflation among his predecessors of Theravadin and Angkorian traditions, melding them into a single linguistic imaginary that

[182] The word for 'dictionary' itself, *vachananukram*, is one such loan; the 1967 edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer* cites both Sanskrit and Pali origins for this term, and provides a phonetic rendering of its naturalized pronunciation in parentheses (ពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត្យ 1967, ๑๑๕๒).

[183] Sasagawa 2015, 51-9.

anchored the contemporary Khmer language. In his introduction to the fifth edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, published in 1967, Chuon Nath appeals explicitly to the precedent set by Old Khmer inscriptions dating to the Angkorian period in justifying the preservation of irregular or otherwise non-phonetic orthographies of many words. Such words, he notes, "which an examination of [Angkorian] inscriptions will show to have been in use for a very long time, from the age of *Yasodharapura*[184] (*Maha Nokor* [i.e., Angkor]) of our country of Cambodia, must be preserved in their original form, for that which has been in continuous use must not be altered."[185]

Such convictions are more broadly representative of the linguistic ideologies held by the Venerable Chuon Nath, ideologies simultaneously conservative in their privileging of historical precedent and their emphasis on purification, yet innovative in their efforts to enact such purification and restore such historical precedent in the present. As Anne Hansen notes, the orthographic disagreements that derailed the work of the initial dictionary commission in the late 1910s and early 1920s centered, in part, on the reformists' proposed restoration of three diacritical marks, a reform that Georges Coedès described as not so much the introduction of novel orthographic features but rather "a return to an ancient Cambodian tradition abandoned without reason in a recent epoch."[186] In his introduction to the 1967 *Vachananukram Khmer*, the Venerable Chuon Nath notes his "extreme regret" at the commission's rejection of one such proposed diacritic, the *attheachan*, noting that its absence continues to lead to confusion and irregularity within contemporary Khmer texts. "The [contemporary] Commission," Nath notes,

[184] Yasodharapura is the name given in Angkorian times to the city of Angkor, named for King Yasovarman (r. 889 – c. 910) (Chandler 2008, 45). (Its final element, *pura*, is a Sanskrit term for 'city' that is recognizable in many languages across South and Southeast Asia today – see, for instance, the Malay *pura*, the Thai *buri*, and the Khmer ប៊ុរី *borei*; it is furthermore cognate with the Greek *polis* – and, thus, with the latter's English derivates, such as 'polity.')

[185] ជួន ណាត 1967, ខ.

[186] Hansen 2007, 140.

> is hopeful that, sometime in the future, surely all those engaged in the Khmer literary arts will invent some symbol or another to use in the place of the *attheachan*, no matter what form it takes – for there are symbols in the Khmer inscriptions from antiquity that may serve as perfect models, and need only to be modified slightly in order to fit [contemporary] usage.[187]

The *Vachananukram Khmer* thus codified a particular approach to realizing the Khmer language orthographically and lexically, privileging the accentuation of Pali etymologies – both historical and novel – and the preservation of Angkorian precedent. Yet while both such measures served to foreground both the Theravadin essence and the Angkorian heritage of the contemporary Khmer language – and, thus, of the nation to whom it belonged – the intentional deployment of Pali and Old Khmer served another, related function for the Venerable Chuon Nath. By emphasizing both its rich historical intimacies with Pali and its direct descendancy from the language of Angkor, Nath sought to delineate a sharp boundary between the Khmer language and that of its people's would-be rival as both inheritor of the Angkorian civilizational legacy and spiritual epicenter of Southeast Asian Theravadin thought and practice: that is, Siam.

Thailand and the Negative Identity

The histories of contact and exchange between the people known today as the Khmer and the Thai began in earnest during the Angkorian period. At the height of its influence, the kingdom of

[187] ជួន ណាត 1967, ខ-ត. The diacritic that Nath references, the *attheachan* – a word of Pali derivation meaning 'half moon' – is described as a symbol "with a form similar to a slice of coconut, yet flipped upside down," and was intended to be used above single characters that are intended to be read as a complete word. (Because Khmer text does not typically use spaces between words, such single-character lexical items – "orphan words," as Nath terms them – are frequently subject to ambiguous readings, capable of either standing alone or being incorporated into neighboring words, with frequently drastic semantic implications. Nath laments the then-contemporary usage of the non-Khmer dash symbol, '-,' as an improvised diacritic intended to separate such single-character lexical items from neighboring words into which they may be ambiguously incorporated.)

Angkor encompassed much of present-day Thailand – indeed, lands under its direct control as well as those of its tribute kingdoms together extended over much of mainland Southeast Asia.[188]

In the centuries following the reign of Jayavarman VII, however, the influence of Angkor vis-à-vis the Thai – concentrated, beginning in the fourteenth century, in the kingdom of Ayutthaya – began to wane. As David Chandler notes, this was hardly the linear process of 'decline' that characterized the historical narratives produced by the French during the colonial period, yet Angkor undoubtedly began to be increasingly challenged, both militarily and culturally, by Ayutthaya. Thai invasions, notably in 1431, a date often cited as the 'fall' of Angkor, and in 1594, when the post-Angkorian capital city of Longvek was conquered, and continuing throughout the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries, further accelerated the diminishing influence of Khmer kingship, and the ascending dominance of Ayutthaya, throughout the region.[189]

In the colonial period, as emergent conceptualizations of national identity and culture coalesced around the symbol of Angkor, these historical narratives of territorial loss were extended into the cultural domain, as the Thai were accused of appropriating the cultural legacy of Angkor itself – a characterization that continues to surface in the present. As Alberto Pérez Pereiro notes, the political and cultural prominence of Thailand vis-à-vis Cambodia that has characterized the two countries' relationship in the modern era plays into longstanding anxieties held by many Cambodians around disappearance, as the Thai, while ethnically and linguistically distinct from the Khmer, nevertheless trace much of their own cultural ancestry back to the same ultimate source as do the Khmer: the 'golden age' of Indic-inflected civilization of Southeast Asia, embodied in the temples of Angkor and the traditions of Theravada Buddhism.[190]

[188] For a wide-ranging yet thorough history of the Angkorian period, see Chandler (2008, 35-89), "Chapter 3: Kingship and Society at Angkor" and "Chapter 4: Jayavarman VII and the Crisis of the Thirteenth Century."
[189] See Chandler (2008, 91-117), "Chapter 5: Cambodia After Angkor."
[190] Pérez Pereiro 2012, 64-7.

Such wariness towards the Thai took on a nationalist dimension during the opening decades of the twentieth century, and was actively encouraged by the French colonial regime, who, for geopolitical reasons that transcended their interests in Cambodia, were distrustful of and frequently hostile towards the British-aligned Kingdom of Siam.[191] The retrocession by Siam of the northwestern provinces of Battambang, Siem Reap, and Sisophon to Cambodia in 1906, following more than a century of Thai rule, was widely celebrated, and served as the impetus for the establishment of the initial École Supérieure de Pali d'Angkor Vatt, noted above;[192] this history nevertheless solidified many early nationalists' distrust of Siam for its ostensible claims on both Cambodian land and symbols of national culture. Indeed, in the eyes of many early nationalists, in threatening to usurp the Khmer as rightful inheritors of Angkor, the Thai threatened to sever the cultural and civilizational continuity of the Khmer nation with precisely that which had come to be seen as the defining element of Khmer identity, simultaneously anchoring the nation in a glorious past while ensuring its survival into the future.

Many of the historical events and patterns that have been enlisted in the modern era as historical justification for such animosities and anxieties can be traced back to the fourteenth through nineteenth centuries, during which the largely unidirectional flow of power and authority that characterized Angkor's relationship with the predecessors of Siam was inverted. As Thong Thel notes, these centuries were characterized, above all else, by Thai influence: many Cambodian kings in this period derived their authority from the Thai crown, and lands formerly under their control were incorporated into Siam; Buddhist monks traveled to Thailand for education and scholarship, a phenomenon that continued well into the colonial period. Thai influence on the Khmer language

[191] Edwards 2007, 110-7; Hansen 2007, 112-20. See as well Anderson (2006, 124-5).
[192] Hansen 2007, 132; Chandler 2008, 183-5.

during this period, through loanwords, syntax, and literary traditions, was thus significant – albeit not to the extent that Sanskrit and Pali had been in prior centuries.[193]

Beyond simply the historically-motivated general animosity exhibited towards the Thai by many Cambodians that solidified in the colonial era, therefore, the linguistic influence of Thai on Khmer came to be associated specifically with these centuries of Thai dominance in Southeast Asia – a dominance that, by definition, coincided with the 'decline' of the Khmer people from their former Angkorian glory to their subordination to the Thai and Vietnamese, a subordination that was realized politically during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that endured into the colonial era through both the institutions of French rule and the propagation of social Darwinist and other racialized narratives of cultural and ethnic inferiority.[194] Onto Thai loanwords and other overt markers of Thai linguistic influence, then, were indexed metalinguistic animosities and anxieties rooted in historical grievances and perceptions of cultural rivalry.[195]

Situating Cambodia within the Theravadin Landscape of Southeast Asia

For the Venerable Chuon Nath, animosity towards the Thai language, and the corresponding need to delineate the Khmer linguistic space in contradistinction to that of Thai, was given another dimension of urgency through the changing contours of the Theravadin landscape of Southeast Asia. As discussed above, the reformist faction of the Mahanikay order, in advocating for a 'purification' of Buddhist practice and a return to the Pali canon, shared much in its doctrinal orientation with the Thommayuttikanikay order established in Thailand by King Mongkut. In the nineteenth century,

[193] Thong 1985, 103; see also Jacob (1993, 154) and Edwards (2007, 109-11). Thong, writing in 1985, goes so far as to characterize these centuries as Cambodia's "darkest period."

[194] On the political dominance of the Thai and Vietnamese states during the two centuries preceding the establishment of the French Protectorate, see Chandler (2008), particularly "Chapter 7: The Crisis of the Nineteenth Century" (141-65).

[195] Haiman (2020, 564-5) has characterized the status of the Khmer language in Ayutthaya and other proto-Thai polities during these centuries as analogous to that of Greek in the Roman Empire: what was formerly "the *politically* prestigious language, that is, 'the language with an army and a navy' for the first 500 years of contact," came to be "the *culturally* prestigious language" as the political power dynamic was inverted, yet the old locus of culture and learning – symbolically, if not in practice – continued to reside in Angkor. (Emphasis mine.)

Bangkok had emerged as a center for Theravada Buddhist scholarship; as such, throughout the latter half of the nineteenth and into the first decades of the twentieth centuries, Cambodian monks – from both the Mahanikay and the Thommayuttikanikay orders – would often spend several years residing and studying in Buddhist temples in Bangkok and elsewhere in Thailand before returning to Cambodia.[196]

Nath's efforts to distinguish the reformist faction of the Khmer Mahanikay tradition from the Thai Thommayuttikanikay and its Cambodian derivative were thus grounded in the discourse of language, as it was precisely the use of the Khmer language as the medium for the expression of and engagement with Buddhist scripture that most clearly set the reformist Mahanikay faction apart from the Thommayuttikanikay.

Furthermore, because both traditions emphasized the scriptural purity of the Pali canon, Chuon Nath was able to assert the religious superiority of Cambodia's own reformist faction by foregrounding the deep linguistic intimacies that the Khmer language exhibited with Pali. In articulating the Khmer language's deep Pali heritage, Nath sought to locate the reformist Mahanikay faction, authenticated through its dual legacies of the Pali tradition – its return to the Pali canon alongside its contemporary explication in a language deeply implicated in the Pali linguistic tradition – in a position of primacy within the religious landscape of Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism, thus relocating the spiritual epicenter of Theravadin scholarship and practice from Bangkok to Phnom Penh's Wat Ounaloum.

Taken as a whole, then, Chuon Nath's foregrounding of Pali etymologies in the *Vachananukram Khmer* served two closely related functions: on the one hand, the emphasis on Pali helped constitute a legitimizing thread of linguistic continuity that tethered the contemporary Khmer language to, and thus authenticated it through, the potent cultural imaginaries of Angkorian heritage and Theravadin tradition; and, on the other, Pali served as the means of delineating the

[196] Edwards 2007, 109-11.

Khmer linguistic space in such a way as to set it in a position of both contradistinction and primacy to that of Thai, would-be usurper of both the Angkorian and the Theravadin inheritance, in a process of what Thongchai Winichakul terms 'negative identification.'[197] For not only was Pali the canonical language of Theravada Buddhism; it furthermore stood in contrast to the predominantly Sanskrit etymologies of much of the Thai lexicon – a distinction considered in greater detail in the following chapter, in the context of the neology work of the Cultural Committee, extending from the 1940s through the 1960s.[198] Nath, learned in each of these languages – among others – was thus well positioned to articulate, through the pages of the *Vachananukram*, a conceptualization of the Khmer national community grounded in the potent and multivalent indexicality of the Pali linguistic tradition.

The Nation as Defined by the Vachananukram Khmer

What ultimately emerged through the pages of the 1938 *Vachananukram Khmer* was a conceptualization of the Khmer nation in which specific understandings of Khmer history, culture, and tradition were embedded within the orthographic, morphological, and lexical realizations of the written Khmer language. Through each of these linguistic domains, Chuon Nath tethered the central components of his and others' conceptualizations of Khmer nationhood and identity to the physical form of their linguistic expression. The *Vachananukram Khmer* delineated the linguistic contours of the new Khmer nation, thereby constituting a domain onto which were mapped Nath's own convictions concerning the ideal Khmer national community: a community fundamentally rooted in Theravadin tradition, legitimized through the legacy of Angkor, and imagined in contradistinction to the Thai – identities authenticated through the linguistic inheritances of Pali and Old Khmer.

[197] Thongchai Winichakul 1994, 5, 15-6.
[198] Sasagawa 2015, 55-9.

Yet while the *Vachananukram Khmer* of 1938 was, as I have argued here, the first systematic attempt to articulate a conceptualization of the national community through discursive engagements with language, it would not be the last. The Venerable Chuon Nath himself remained engaged with the *Vachananukram* project through five successive editions, culminating in the fifth and final edition published in 1967, two years before his death. In the three decades separating the *Vachananukram*'s first and final editions, Cambodian social and political life would undergo a number of dramatic transformations. Throughout – and continuing into the present era – generations of Cambodians have repeatedly turned to language as the medium and idiom through which to take up questions of independence, postcolonial modernity, and neoliberal globalization, as they imagine and envision new ways of being and belonging in the modern world.

Chapter 3:

One Nation, One Language: Ieu Koeus's *Pheasa Khmer* and the Linguistic Contours of Cambodia's Nationalist Horizons in the Late Colonial Era, 1945-1950

> "I ask that all my fellow compatriots apply themselves vigorously to the task of ordering our language and script, an important component of building the Khmer nation. […] I hope to see our Khmer language progress and advance, in order to be universally employed at this time in which the French, with such noble intentions, have expanded the rights of the Khmer to include the administration of our own kingdom in our own land."
>
> Ieu Koeus, *Pheasa Khmer*[199]

> "One of the ironies of attempting to know any kind of language in depth is that the unity of the language is sundered in the process. One becomes aware of how plural a language invariably is, and how it cannot ever be its own rich self except as a hybrid formation of many 'other' languages."
>
> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*[200]

On the evening of January 14, 1950, Ieu Koeus, then serving as president of the National Assembly, sat inside the Phnom Penh headquarters of the Democratic Party, shortly after closing a meeting of the party's leadership council. The Democrats, widely popular among much of the Cambodian electorate, were eager to maintain their majority in the Assembly in upcoming national elections, following on a particularly tumultuous period during Cambodia's early forays into constitutional democracy. The National Assembly had been dissolved a few months prior, in September of 1949, and Koeus found his efforts to organize new elections – a responsibility that, as

[199] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣២៥-៦.
[200] Chakrabarty 2009, 21.

stipulated by the Constitution, fell to the president of the Assembly – obstructed by the maneuverings of King Norodom Sihanouk and Prime Minister Yaem Sambor; indeed, by some accounts, on the evening of January 14, Koeus sat inside the party's headquarters correcting proofs of a report recommending the reform of Cambodian political parties. While he worked, however, a hand grenade was rolled through the doorway, severely injuring Koeus; he was taken by *cyclo* to the hospital, where he died shortly afterwards of his wounds.[201]

At the time of Koeus's assassination, the Democratic Party was widely popular among a wide swath of the Cambodian electorate, and Koeus's funeral procession drew more than fifty thousand participants,[202] a figure not surpassed until the processions of King Norodom Sihanouk in 2013 and of Kem Ley in 2017.[203] Despite their popularity, however, Koeus's death dealt a devastating blow to the party, which had lost another of its leaders, Prince Sisowath Yuttevong, less than three years prior. The Democrats, greatly diminished, played an increasingly marginal role in Cambodian politics over the course of the next five years, until the consolidation of political authority by Norodom Sihanouk in 1955 brought the effective end of multiparty democracy in mid-twentieth-century Cambodia.[204]

Yet such events of the early 1950s, and those of the decades that followed, emerged out of the early explorations of constitutional democracy that characterized the latter half of the 1940s, years in which the Democratic Party, led for much of its early existence by Ieu Koeus, played a critical role. Koeus's views on such fundamental questions as the conceptual borders of the emergent national community and the proper path towards an independent horizon helped to

[201] Chandler 1991, 44-5, 323 n67; ញាតិមិត្តនៃសពលោក អៀវ កើស 1947, ច-ឆ.
[202] Chandler 1991, 44.
[203] "Sihanouk Funeral Procession Starts With One Million Mourners" 2013; Eckert and Him 2016.
[204] Chandler 1991, 46.

shape the political landscapes of his day, and consequently exerted an enduring impact on Cambodian social and political life for decades to come.

In this chapter, I consider the construction of a nationalist imaginary in Koeus's sole published work, the 1947 linguistic study *Pheasa Khmer* (*The Khmer Language*).[205,206] The conceptualization of the Khmer national community articulated through Koeus's work, I argue, troubles our understandings of a hegemonic discourse around Khmer nationhood in the late colonial era, as *Pheasa Khmer* represented a nuanced yet critical departure from predominant traditions of scholarship of social and political importance then emergent in colonial Cambodia. In particular, I argue for a reading of Koeus's text as an elaboration on, and partial refutation of, the national community envisioned by the Venerable Chuon Nath through his landmark *Vachananukram Khmer*: published less than a decade prior to *Pheasa Khmer*, Nath's *Vachananukram*, as discussed in the previous chapter, had consolidated the Khmer language's role as a site of engagement through which to propose and contest formulations of an emergent national identity. Koeus, as a founder and early leader of the Democratic Party who played a formative role in Cambodian politics in the years preceding independence from the French in 1953, was immersed within a discursive and ideological milieu notably distinct from that of Nath and other contributors to the *Vachananukram*. Koeus's study of the Khmer language, I suggest, offers unique insights into

[205] There is no single, universally-accepted transliteration of Koeus's name, អឿ កើស /ʔiəu kəːh/: older editions of *Pheasa Khmer*, with a bilingual French and Khmer cover and title page, render his name as 'Iêu Kœus,' perhaps giving rise to the form 'Ieu Koeus' and its variants that are commonly used in English-language sources (e.g., Chandler's (2008, 215) spelling of 'Ieu Koeuss'), a precedent to which I defer.

[206] Koeus's given name, កើស /kəːh/, does not follow the standard rules of Khmer orthography, according to which we would instead expect the pronunciation /kaəh/. The irregularity most likely derives from the fact that Koeus, born and raised in Battambang, spoke a dialect of Khmer more heavily influenced by Thai, resulting in occasional phonetic divergence – particularly in the realm of vowel quality – from standard varieties of Khmer spoken elsewhere (Nielson Hul 2022, personal correspondence).

the ways in which he and his contemporaries configured the nation and anticipated its future as an independent and sovereign nation-state, with lasting implications.

Three central themes evident in Koeus's work structure my analysis: first, the importance of a 'unified' and 'disciplined' Khmer language for the coalescence of a coherent Khmer 'nation;' second, references to the Cham, the French, and, in particular, the Thai peoples and languages as the various 'others' against which the Khmer nation is defined; and third, the negotiation of the competing imperatives imposed by modernity on the one hand, and, on the other, the desire to preserve and protect traditions and customs. I consider each in turn, followed by a brief exploration of the implications of Koeus's work and legacy in subsequent years and decades.

Ieu Koeus, the Democratic Party, and the Cambodian Nation on the Eve of Independence

Born in 1905 in Battambang's Sangkae District, Ieu Koeus attended primary school in his home province before continuing his studies first at Phnom Penh's premier Sisowath High School, and then at the French-administrated School of Commerce in Hanoi. After receiving his degree in 1927, Koeus worked as a public works contractor on rubber farms in Memot, an agricultural district 180 kilometers east of Phnom Penh and not far from the border with Vietnam. In 1932 Koeus returned to Battambang, where for the next nine years he held an assortment of government posts related to commerce and finance; in 1941, shortly after the arrival of the Vichy regime in French Indochina,[207] Koeus left his government post, and spent the next four years running a small pharmacy and producing soap.[208]

In 1945, following the end of World War II, Koeus returned to Phnom Penh, where he quickly became a prominent figure within Cambodia's emergent political scene. The final years of

[207] Chandler 2008, 202.
[208] ញាតិមិត្តនៃសពលោក អៀវ កើស 1947, ត-ង.

the French Protectorate marked the first attempts by Cambodian politicians to establish a system of constitutional democracy, and, with it, a partial return to self-rule after nearly a century of colonial administration. Following the defeat of the Japanese in World War II and the return of French political authority to Southeast Asia, Cambodia entered a period of increased political autonomy, characterized by a vibrant, if tumultuous, exchange between an assemblage of nascent political parties, each with its own distinct conceptualization of the appropriate approach to navigating Cambodia's potential – if not yet inevitable – entrance onto the world stage as an independent nation-state.

After a brief tenure as a Vice Minister within the Ministry of the Economy, Ieu Koeus joined Prince Sisowath Yuttevong in 1946 in founding the Democratic Party, in anticipation of national elections scheduled for later that year. As historian Siti Keo describes, the Democrats successfully cast themselves as inheritors of the nationalist mantle from the pre-constitutional period, attracting the support of "intellectuals, young bureaucrats, and teachers," as well as those "long associated with *Nagaravatta [Nokor Wat]* and Son Ngoc Thanh;"[209] members of the Mahanikay monastic order, increasingly under the influence of the reformist faction led by Chuon Nath and Huot Tath, further made up a significant portion of the Democrats' supporters.[210] The Democrats were not overtly hostile towards the French – indeed, as David Chandler notes, Yuttevong had recently "returned from nearly a decade of higher education in France, his wife was French, and he wanted Cambodia to practice the kind of democracy he had admired in France"[211] – yet nevertheless envisioned a future as a modern and independent nation-state, governed according to the principles of constitutional democracy.[212]

[209] Keo 2019, 25.
[210] Chandler 2008, 213; see as well Chandler (1991, 14-45), "Chapter 1: In Search of Independence, 1945-1950."
[211] Chandler 2008, 213.
[212] Keo 2019, 26.

The Democrats performed exceedingly well in the September 1946 elections, winning three quarters of the national vote and 50 of 67 seats in the National Assembly. With Koeus serving as President of the National Assembly and Prince Yuttevong as Prime Minister, the Democrats quickly set about drafting a new, more progressive constitution that afforded greater legislative powers to the Assembly while diminishing the authority of the monarch. Despite the king's misgivings, the party's undeniable popular support encouraged a reluctant Sihanouk to ratify the new constitution in 1947.[213] In follow-up elections held later that year, the Democrats again won nearly three quarters of the national vote.[214]

Despite such early successes, however, the Democrats were ultimately unable to see their vision of Cambodian constitutional democracy through to fruition. In July 1947, Prince Yuttevong was admitted to Calmette Hospital in Phnom Penh, where he quickly succumbed to "complications arising from overwork, a recent attack of malaria, and a chronic tubercular condition."[215] Following Yuttevong's death, Ieu Koeus became the de facto leader of the Democratic Party, presiding over a tumultuous two-year period that culminated in Sihanouk's dissolution of the National Assembly in September 1949. Koeus, as leader of the National Assembly, was tasked with organizing new elections, yet was impeded in such efforts by Sihanouk and Yaem Sambor, then serving as Prime Minister, both of whom likely feared a Democratic Party victory. In late 1949, Koeus traveled briefly to France, accompanying Sihanouk and Sambor on diplomatic business, where he took the opportunity to seek medical treatment for an unspecified illness.[216] Shortly after his return to Cambodia, on the evening of January 14, 1950, Koeus, as described above, was assassinated by hand

[213] Keo 2019, 28-9.
[214] Keo 2019, 32.
[215] Chandler 1991, 36; 2008, 215, 329n. Tully (2002, 421) gives malaria as Yuttevong's cause of death, while noting that he had indeed contracted a nearly fatal case of tuberculosis during his years in France.
[216] ញាតិមិត្តនៃសពលោក អៀវ កើស 1947, ច-ឆ; Chandler 1991, 42-3.

grenade.[217] New elections would not be held until November 1951 – a period that, in Keo's analysis, established what was to be an enduring precedent within Cambodian politics for a strong executive branch whose actions were all but categorically sanctioned by rhetorical appeals to popular sovereignty.[218]

Yet despite its ultimate shortcomings, the Democratic Party was nevertheless instrumental in giving shape to early political formations that served as the conceptual foundations for later political constructions, continuing into the modern era.[219] The years between the end of World War II and full independence in 1953 marked a liminal period during which earlier configurations of national identity and community were consolidated in anticipation of independence from the French, and would prove to be formative years in the political education of King – later Prince – Norodom Sihanouk, whose *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, or 'Populist Society,' would later define Cambodian political and social life for nearly two decades following independence.[220]

Koeus thus played a central role in a critical period of Cambodian history, during which political traditions and institutions that were to structure much of the next two decades of Cambodian public life initially came into being.[221] Yet despite his prominence during this period, Koeus's political ideologies have received relatively little scholarly attention, and his *Pheasa Khmer* has received even less.[222] I thus argue here for a close reading of *Pheasa Khmer*, the sole publication

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[217] ញាតិមិត្តនៃសពលោក អៀវ កើស 1947, ច-ឆ. His killer gave conflicting accounts of his motivations and affiliations; those ultimately responsible for Koeus's death have never been identified (Chandler 1991, 44-5).

[218] Keo 2019, 37.

[219] Keo 2019, 30-2, 34-7. Indeed, as Chandler (1991, 67) notes, components of Sihanouk's own political maneuverings in the years between 1950 and 1955 were borrowed from the Democrats' agenda.

[220] The emergence of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, and the various literary and linguistic engagements that it engendered, are considered in the next chapter.

[221] Beyond his political offices, Koeus was engaged throughout his final years in Phnom Penh with a number of prominent political and social institutions and initiatives: he was a member of the influential Friends and Alumni Association of Preah Sisowath High School, and served on the Cultural Committee, considered in greater detail below, in the inaugural year of its linguistic development activities in 1947, in which capacity he contributed to the development of the Khmer typewriter and Khmer stenography; he furthermore served as an advisor to the Friends of the School of Pali Association (ញាតិមិត្តនៃសពលោក អៀវ កើស 1947, ង-ច).

[222] Koeus's political activities receive the most extensive attention in David Chandler's *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (1991, 30, 38-45, 59, 62); his name appears only once in Chandler's *A History of*

of one of the leading figures of a decisive period of Cambodian political and social history, as a text that both suggests and enacts novel responses to the same questions that confronted the Democratic Party, and Cambodian publics more broadly, in the late 1940s, as Cambodian nationalists began to envision an independent future and to delineate the contours of what would become the postcolonial nation-state. The linguistic ideologies expressed through the pages of *Pheasa Khmer* offer critical insights, I suggest, into Koeus's and others' broader configurations of the conceptual space and aspirational horizons of the Khmer nation on the eve of independence.

One Nation, One Language: Ieu Koeus and the Consolidation of National Community

Pheasa Khmer opens with a brief preface in which Koeus lays out his motivations for compiling the text. From the outset, Koeus is explicit in linking his work with much broader projects in the social and political realms, projects to which a robust and modern language, widely spoken by an educated population, is seen as essential:

> Those who have developed their knowledge through other languages, such as French, will, once they've developed a strong proficiency in Khmer, be able to communicate their learning through Khmer, spreading it to their compatriots in

Cambodia (2008, 215). Keo (2019, 25, 34, 37) similarly describes Koeus's role in the formation and early trajectory of the Democratic Party, although her primary concern is with the years that followed, rather than preceded, independence. Osborne's (1994, 58, 66) mentions of Koeus are brief, and seem to be drawn primarily from Chandler (1991), while Tully's (2002, 442) only reference to Koeus is in the context of his assassination, and he, too, draws heavily on Chandler (1991); Kiernan (2004, 70, 73) mentions Koeus only in passing. Koeus's *Pheasa Khmer*, meanwhile, is mentioned briefly (but does not appear to have been read) by Anderson (2006, 131), who cites its publication in 1947 as evidence of a broader conceptual shift among Cambodians and their neighbors away from the colonial construct of Indochina and towards more national imaginaries. Loughran (2015, 47-8) draws on Anderson in a compelling, if brief, framing of Koeus's work as an effort to "excavate his indigenous language and elevate it, through print, to a language-of-power," troubling the notion that such works may amount to nothing more than derivates of western models. *Pheasa Khmer* is furthermore discussed by Sasagawa (2015, 55, 59-60, 67-8), who provides a brief overview of the work, with an emphasis on Koeus's views concerning linguistic contact between Thai and Khmer; elsewhere, Ly Sovir (លី សុវីរៈ 2006, ២៨-៣១, ៣៩-៨១) provides isolated examples of discrepancies between Koeus's *Pheasa Khmer* and the Venerable Chuon Nath's *Vachananukram Khmer*.

> order to help them access such learning as well. The Khmer populace will thus raise the level of their knowledge to new heights, as in other countries.[223]

Such a project, Koeus continues, has been given new urgency in recent years, as "the French have eased their control and allowed us to manage our own affairs;" furthermore, the monarch has "granted his people a national constitution, as His Majesty the King wants the Khmer people to advance as a nation and to keep up with the times."[224]

Koeus's stated motivations for pursuing a scholarly study of the Khmer language are thus intimately bound to the national horizons of political possibility that had begun to unfold in the mid-1940s: as the French ceded greater autonomy to local Cambodian actors, Koeus and other early politicians began to anticipate a future as an independent nation-state. The configuration and consolidation of the nation as a unified and coherent entity came to be understood as the project from which independence would follow.

Language, for Koeus, was both the medium and the idiom through which national unity could be achieved and indexed. Throughout *Pheasa Khmer*, Koeus thus places a strong emphasis on the importance of a uniform and unified national language, envisioned as foundational to the broader project of nation-building.

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[223] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១-២. Interestingly, Koeus here uses ប្រជានិការ *bracheanikar*, for what I have rendered as 'populace;' Koeus uses this term only sporadically throughout the work, and nor is it included in a brief glossary of terms that comes at the end of the text. The term is not widely used; the Chuon Nath Dictionary lists it only under the headword ប្រជា *brachea*, and defines it as "a group of [a country's] population, a group of people" (ពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត្យ 1947, ៦៨៣-៨). Through និការ *nikar*, the term emphasizes the collectivity of the ប្រជា *brachea*, '[a] people, race.' (It provides an interesting contrast to Koeus's use in the preceding sentence of the term បងប្អូនរួមជាតិ *bang p'on ruem cheat*, which I have glossed as 'compatriots;' a more literal translation might be 'brothers and sisters of the same race, nation.')

[224] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២. As mentioned above, Koeus would go on to serve as one of the primary authors of the Democratic Party's 1947 Constitution that replaced the 1946 Constitution referenced here.

Configuring the Conceptual Space of the Khmer Nation

Following his preface, Koeus opens the introduction to *Pheasa Khmer* with a simple question: "What is it that we call 'the Khmer language?'"[225] The answer, Koeus suggests, is more complex than it may appear: speakers in Siem Reap speak differently from those in Surin, and both are vastly distinct from speakers in Preah Trapeang (present-day Trà Vinh province in Vietnam); inhabitants of Phnom Penh speak differently from their countryfolk in Battambang, Takeo, or Kracheh. Such varieties, Koeus informs his readers, are known as *kream pheasa*, or 'dialects' – classifiable as such because no two such varieties are mutually unintelligible, requiring the intervention of a translator.[226]

Yet this, Koeus suggests, simply gives rise to a new difficulty: which dialect should be considered the 'true' Khmer language? Koeus notes that all dialects are ultimately relative, perceived in relation to other speech varieties with which different speakers are already familiar, and that the designation of any particular dialect as 'standard' is thus a decision as much political as it is linguistic. Koeus cites several historical examples in which the speech varieties typical of particular urban locales – Athens, Rome, Paris, London – came to be recognized as the 'standard' speech of broader regions, yet argues that such logic does not hold for Phnom Penh, as the variety of Khmer spoken in the city exhibits a number of irregularities not shared by other dialects.[227]

Koeus concludes that no single dialect may be designated as the standard, as each regional variety of Khmer exhibits certain peculiarities that render it ineligible. He then returns to the

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[225] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៧.

[226] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៨. Such regional varieties are also known among linguists today as 'regiolects,' which is, incidentally, arguably a more accurate rendering of គ្រាមភាសា *kream pheasa*.

[227] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៩-១២. As a possible explanation, Koeus notes that Phnom Penh has served as Cambodia's capital city for less than eighty years; while he concedes that its variety of Khmer "is undoubtedly more fully 'the Khmer language' than are the dialects of more outlying regions," he is nevertheless unwilling to designate it as the standard. His reservations may derive in part from an innate bias towards his own native Battambang dialect, although he does address explicitly such biases towards one's native dialect as natural among speakers of any language variety, and provides an account of his recognition of his own linguistic relativity while on a visit to Svay Chek, in present-day Banteay Meanchey province.

question posed at the outset, and provides a straightforward answer: "The Khmer language is the language of the Khmer nation as a whole." Just as language varieties differ by region, so, too, do they differ by generation, class, and, indeed, by individual – and the Khmer language is thus "the standard language, for the entirety of the Khmer nation, without any regard whatsoever for the location or rank of the speaker."[228]

Koeus goes on to clarify the phrase "for the Khmer nation," suggesting that it be understood simply as "all such people that live in the Khmer country." An important distinction is drawn here between Khmer and the languages of various other ethnic groups living in the region, such as the Kuy, the Steang, and the Pnong; such languages, Koeus argues, cannot be considered standard languages, for they cannot be used outside of their limited communities of speakers: for the Pnong to communicate with the Steang or the Kuy, they turn to Khmer. China, Koeus explains, has many such languages – Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese – as does France, where Breton, Basque, and Alsatian are spoken by minority groups.[229]

Koeus thus labors to define the conceptual space of 'the Khmer language' as both abstract – untethered to any particular regional or geographic realization – and expansive, capable of incorporating many diverse peoples – and thus resistant to the imposition of arbitrary limitations on its scope or authority. Koeus's explicit inclusion in the opening pages of both the Khmer Surin and the Khmer Kraom, whose descendants today live in present-day Thailand and Vietnam, respectively, is significant: Koeus, writing in 1946, had only just that year witnessed the return of much of northwestern Cambodia, his native Battambang Province included, by the Thai,[230] while the Mekong Delta region, then administered by the French as the colony of Cochinchina, had yet to be definitively incorporated into Vietnam.

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[228] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៣-៨.

[229] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៨-៥.

[230] Chandler 2008, 215.

Koeus's configuration of the Khmer national community thus reflects the porosity and the contradictions of the prevailing political boundaries of his day, as he defines the nation not through the colonial borders drawn by the French, but rather through a more conceptual – and far more politically potent – space: that of "the Khmer country," or *srok Khmer*.[231] In defining the Khmer language through appeals to its community of speakers, Koeus extends a subtle yet forceful argument for an understanding of *srok Khmer* as the spatial realization of a more conceptual ethnolinguistic space – a space to which political boundaries ought to adhere, rather than vice-versa.

Furthermore, Koeus's references to geographically and temporally distant peoples and locales – Athens and Rome, Paris and London; the minority languages of China and France – serve to situate the Khmer language within a more global conceptualization of human civilizational history.[232] Crucially, the equation of the Kuy, Steang, and Pnong languages with China's Hokkien and Teochew and with France's Breton and Basque implicitly positions the Khmer language alongside Chinese and French, both national languages spoken by the people of independent and autonomous nation-states.[233] Koeus thus gestures towards a future in which the Khmer language, already legitimated as a 'standard language' in the linguistic domain, is politically authenticated as such through the realization of its speakers' national autonomy.

The Vachananukram Khmer *and the Consolidation of Linguistic Uniformity*

Standard languages, Koeus states in his introduction, "are not the languages that we speak, but rather those that we write."[234] He displays a sophisticated understanding of the ways in which

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[231] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៨.

[232] This strategic discursive positioning of the Khmer language vis-à-vis a global conceptualization of civilizational history and progress anticipates the similar positioning of Khmer literature within broader, translocal literary networks by the author Khun Srun, considered at length in the next chapter. Indeed, Koeus's study exhibits a number of conceptual similarities to Srun's *Chun Choab Chaot*, as both works may be read as efforts to reformulate and mediate intellectual traditions in circulation elsewhere – linguistic theory in the case of Koeus, literary modernism in the case of Srun – for a local audience.

[233] Notwithstanding, of course, the civil war then raging within China.

[234] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៦.

languages continuously evolve, and of the tendency for written language to be far more conservative than spoken language; nor does he disvalue the contributions of spoken language: "those languages that have ceased to be spoken are known as 'dead languages,'" Koeus writes; "they are constant and never change, because they are not alive."[235] Indeed, he acknowledges, it is through the continual need to accommodate developments within spoken language that its written counterpart develops at all.

Yet Koeus's privileging of the study and analysis of written language over that of spoken language accords with the views of other scholars within Cambodia's late colonial period. As noted in the previous chapter, the Venerable Chuon Nath heavily prioritized the preservation of Sanskrit and Pali etymologies over phonological correspondence to contemporary spoken Khmer in his consolidation of Khmer orthographic standards through the *Vachananukram Khmer*, an example of what Panivong Norindr identifies as the privileging of "high culture over more popular forms of knowledge."[236] Yet while Nath revered the Khmer script's long history for both its Indic intimacies and its Angkorian indexicality, Koeus's arguments in *Pheasa Khmer* are instead oriented not towards the past, but towards the future: written language, he suggests, provides the medium through which to achieve – and the idiom through which to express – national unity.

Thus, despite his various departures from the linguistic ideology of the Venerable Chuon Nath, considered in greater detail below, Ieu Koeus celebrates the recent publication of the *Vachananukram Khmer* – its second of two volumes was published in 1943 – as "a thoroughly rigorous and robust ordering of the Khmer language."[237]

> The *Vachananukram* serves as a law by which we must abide, in line with which we all must write. The task of writing in line with the *Vachananukram* is one that we all

[235] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៦-៧.
[236] Norindr 2006, 57; see Chapter 2.
[237] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៧.

> must pursue with discipline (*discipline*).[238] Discipline in this arena has the utmost importance for the people, for if we continue spelling words according to our own conventions, differing by pagoda and by school as before, then our language will never be regarded as the language of a single people; and our people will likewise never be regarded as a single nation. Thus, I ask of all my compatriots: do your utmost to write words as they are written in the *Vachananukram*, such that they are all written in the same manner[.][239]

Koeus thus situates the *Vachananukram* explicitly within the project of nation-building, understood as the emergence of a *bracheacheat*, a 'nation' in an explicitly sociopolitical sense, from a *cheat*, a more ethnically-defined collectivity – what I have rendered here as 'a people.'[240] Koeus furthermore frames such a project as contingent upon the nation's recognition and acknowledgement as such by a broader community – left unspecified, yet understood as a community of fellow nations. In anticipating the consolidation of the Khmer *cheat* into a Khmer *bracheacheat*, mediated and indexed through the use of a uniform written standard of the Khmer language, Koeus thus implicitly orients his work towards the ultimate realization of Cambodian independence and autonomy, while avoiding an overtly antagonistic stance towards French colonial authority.

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[238] When quoting directly from Koeus's text, I use italicized parentheticals to represent lexical items that Koeus has glossed parenthetically in French. Here, the Khmer term វិន័យ *vinay* has been glossed as the French *discipline*. (Koeus later cites such a usage of *vinay*, a term traditionally reserved for monastic contexts, as an example of the ways in which the semantic fields of existing lexical items may be expanded to accommodate new ideas, such as the 'discipline' that is expected of students and soldiers (អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣៣៨-៩); see below.)

[239] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៨.

[240] See Edwards (2007, 13-5) for a discussion of the semantic evolution of the Khmer term ជាតិ *cheat* in the early twentieth century.

From Phnom Penh to Paris, from Champa to Siam: The Othering of French, Cham, and Thai in the Configuration of Khmer Linguistic Identity

Koeus closes his introduction with a straightforward recommendation. "In France," he writes, "there is a council of literary specialists that meets for the purpose of debating and resolving various issues related to language and literature," while a similar council exists in Thailand. "Such a council could bring enormous benefits to our beloved national land," Koeus continues, "given that we are currently engaged in the project of organizing and aligning our language."[241]

Such appeals to other languages and peoples as points of contrast against which Khmer may be measured – precedents both to emulate and to avoid – recur throughout Koeus's study, as he draws on historical and contemporary examples alike to bolster his arguments concerning the past, present, and future of the Khmer language. Three languages in particular are repeatedly evoked throughout the pages of *Pheasa Khmer*: Cham, French, and Thai. Each, Koeus suggests, may be understood as having charted a particular trajectory across the social and political terrains of human history, by which each arrived at its current position within the broader geopolitical landscape of the modern world. Such languages, in Koeus's study, constitute the 'others' in opposition to which the conceptual space of the Khmer nation and language may be delineated, both historically and aspirationally.

Cham and the Perils of Civilizational Demise

Throughout *Pheasa Khmer*, the Cham are positioned as a salient example of the fate against which Koeus seeks to mobilize his readers as he calls for an orderly and disciplined approach to linguistic development. Koeus integrates the Cham – and, to a lesser extent, the Mon – into a comprehensive narrative of the civilizational history of Southeast Asia, charting their 'fall' from the former glory of the Champa kingdom to their present-day status as a stateless people.

[241] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៩-២០.

Throughout, language is deployed as an indexical signifier of civilizational status and achievement. "The Cham language," Koeus writes in his introduction, "was in ancient times the standard language of the land known as Champa. Champa ceased to exist long ago, and the Cham language became one of many regional [i.e., minority] languages in the country of the Khmer." The defining feature of such languages, Koeus reiterates, is that they cannot be used with other peoples – and Koeus implores his readers to guard the Khmer language against such a fate: "I ask that the entire Khmer race stand strong, and not let such a fate befall our language; it is our collective duty to protect and preserve the *Khemara* language, such that it forever remains the language of our land."[242]

If Cham serves as an example of a language and people falling from former civilizational heights to a tenuous position as a marginalized and stateless population, Mon, Koeus suggests – albeit somewhat inaccurately – demonstrates the potential for a language and a people to disappear entirely. Within the Mon-Khmer language family, Koeus writes, only those two languages themselves – Mon and Khmer – developed writing systems; yet even so, "among these two peoples, only the Khmer nation (*nation*) remains. The Mon race disappeared at the end of the seventeenth century as a result of invasions by the Burmese and the Thai."[243]

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[242] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៥. Koeus's use here of the archaic form ខេមរ *Khemara*, from which the more recent form ខ្មែរ *Khmaer* – that is, *Khmer* – derives, indexes civilizational longevity and authenticity. (The *Vachananukram Khmer* cites *Khemara* as deriving from a Pali construction meaning 'the people with prosperity and happiness' (ពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត្យ 1967, ១០១).)

[243] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៧-៨. In fact the Mon language is spoken today by approximately a million people across southern Myanmar and central Thailand (Jenny 2014, 553). Koeus's omission of Vietnamese from the Mon-Khmer language family is likewise notable, although the inclusion of the Vietic languages in the Austroasiatic family was, in Koeus's day, still a matter of scholarly debate; indeed, as Sidwell (2014, 153) notes, the French sinologist Henri Maspero, whose brother Georges's 1915 *Grammaire de la langue khmère* is referenced occasionally by Koeus (e.g., អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៧១), "treated Vietnamese as a Tai language, asserting that the tonal system must have been so inherited; so profound was Maspero's influence that he was still being cited as authoritative decades later by westerners [...] and until recently still enjoyed significant support by Chinese and other Asian scholars." In my reading, Koeus makes no mention of Vietnamese in *Pheasa Khmer*.

The fate of both such peoples serves to bolster Koeus's later arguments for certain 'corrections,' both orthographic and morphological, to the Khmer language. In deciding whether to preserve longstanding orthographic conventions that exhibit certain etymological 'inaccuracies' or to renovate such prior conventions in order to better reflect words' etymological histories, Koeus suggests that "we must recognize that the Khmer people are currently in an era of nation-building. If we do not build back up our nation in the present, our nation will undoubtedly dissolve, just like the Cham and the Mon nations in this land of *Sovannaphum*."[244]

Throughout such discussions, Koeus enlists language as indexical of civilizational and cultural accomplishment, legitimacy, and vitality. His repeated warnings of the perils of civilizational collapse and populational disappearance, as realized through the historical examples of the Cham and the Mon, appeal to the latent fears of cultural loss and dissolution that characterized broader currents of nationalist discourse in the first half of the twentieth century, as discussed in Chapter 1. The preservation and cultivation of language thus becomes for Koeus a matter of existential importance – not simply for the Khmer language itself, but for the people and the nation to whom it belongs.

French and the Authority of Modernity

Where Cham and Mon are cited as examples of civilizational demise, French, in Koeus's analysis, is repeatedly invoked as the language that bears the authority of modernity.[245] Throughout the text, Koeus turns to the French language as an idiom of modernity, and it is through his strategic mediation and reformulation of both the precedents set and the influence exerted by the French that Koeus unfolds a discursive space in which to imagine an independent and sovereign future for the Khmer national community.

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[244] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣២០-១. Koeus invokes the historical and quasi-mythological name for Southeast Asia, សុវ៌ណ្ណភូមិ *Sovannaphum*, a term of Indic derivation used across many of the region's languages.

[245] See Rafael (2019, 146, 149-50) for discussions of perceptions in the colonial-era Philippines of English as "the language of modernity" and of its role in Thailand in the 1930s as an index of modernization.

Koeus repeatedly emphasizes the connections between the intentional cultivation of the French language and the broader geopolitical ascendancy of the French polity over the course of the preceding centuries. In his discussion of the French committee of literary scholars convened to work through issues related to language and literature, cited above, Koeus emphasizes the council's historicity, as it was "founded at the time of the [French] language's organization and alignment at the beginning of the seventeenth century, now some three hundred years ago." Koeus's recommendation for the founding of a similar council in Cambodia is strengthened through the parallels drawn between seventeenth-century France and present-day Cambodia, "currently engaged in the project of ordering and aligning our own language."[246]

Such appeals to the historic example of the French recur throughout the text. Where the Cham and the Mon serve as examples of peoples that failed in the project of nation-building, the French are invoked as a testament to the importance of such endeavors, as realized through processes of orthographic reform. "The French built their own nation in the sixteenth century," Koeus writes. "They did away with any [linguistic] inaccuracies, and instead opted for correct usages, for usages that would allow their nation to grow and prosper. They did away with orthographic conventions that differed for no good reason from pronunciation."[247] At the same time, while advocating for orthographic reform in some contexts, Koeus endorses the strategic preservation of etymologies in others, again citing the example of the French, as "writing solely according to spoken pronunciations will lead to the loss of the [etymological] roots of words, leading to the confusion of words with one another."[248]

The example of French similarly serves as justification for Koeus's argument that linguistic development be allowed to include the expansion of the semantic fields of particular lexical items to

[246] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៩-២០.

[247] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣២០-១.

[248] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣០៣-៤. Koeus's emphasis on the importance of etymological transparency is considered in further detail below.

accommodate new ideas and concepts. In the context of Khmer, Koeus cites the example of the term *vinay*, invoked in his introduction as the 'discipline' that the Khmer people must exercise in adhering to the orthographic conventions established through the *Vachananukram Khmer*. "*Vinay*, in its prior usages, was used exclusively with the monastic community," Koeus explains, "referring to the rules and codes that novice monks must follow. The French refer to this as *discipline*." In the present era, Koeus continues, students, soldiers, ministers, and so on must all exercise *discipline* – rendered as a phonetic transliteration of the French – in their various duties; *vinay* may thus be expanded to accommodate these additional usages, as in French. The examples of the French *plan* and *vie*, accommodating both material and abstract entities, similarly encourage the expansion of the Khmer *phaen* and *chivet*, respectively.[249]

Yet while in many cases Koeus evokes the French as an historical example to be emulated, he elsewhere exhibits greater ambivalence in his embrace of French precedents and influence. Throughout the text, Koeus gestures towards a particular understanding of the conceptual distance between the Khmer and French languages, perhaps most explicitly through his omission of French from the languages whose influence on Khmer he considers in the section on loanwords.[250] This omission suggests that French, whose interactions with the Khmer language were considerably more recent than were those of Sanskrit, Pali, and Thai, was seen by Koeus as fundamentally incommensurate with Khmer, while the languages' interactions' lack of historicity rendered such linguistic exchanges not yet temporally validated.[251]

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[249] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣៣៨-៨១.

[250] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៣០. "In the following section," he writes, "we will only be considering words drawn from Sanskrit, Pali, and Thai. Words that we have borrowed from other languages are too few in number to warrant discussion here."

[251] Furthermore, to Koeus and many other educated Cambodians of his generation, fluent in both languages, French loanwords then in circulation were likely not seen as Khmer words borrowed from French, per se, but simply French lexical items inserted into Khmer syntactic structures – a perspective further reflected in Koeus's employment of French terms throughout his text, rendered in the French alphabet rather than transliterated into Khmer, to gloss new or other unfamiliar terms in Khmer. (The transliteration of *discipline*, noted above, is one of the few exceptions.)

Such ambivalence, and, at times, hostility, towards French manifests more openly in other locations in the text as well. Koeus opens a section describing his recommended processes for the creation of new words with a brief linguistic history of Khmer, arguing that, "up until the end of the nineteenth century, the Khmer language did not occupy a lower status than that of its neighboring languages in the land of *Sovannaphum*." Yet while the twentieth century brought significant scientific and technical advancements, "all such new knowledge and ideas arrived in our country […] by way of the French language, as the vehicle that delivered them." The use of French has steadily increased in Cambodia, to the extent that government, business, and other affairs are now routinely conducted in French – even among Cambodians. The result, Koeus suggests, is that

> intellectuals no longer concern themselves with the Khmer language, as they did in previous eras. […] In translating from French into Khmer, simple words that are easy to understand are frequently used, so that rural farmers are able to grasp their meanings on their own, without the added trouble of having to study them. The Khmer language has thus practically become a language of farmers.[252]

The fault, Koeus suggests, lies with Cambodian educational policies that have encouraged high levels of learning, conducted via French, among a small minority of the population – a minority in which Koeus himself is, of course, included – while neglecting the vast majority of Khmer speakers. Yet, for Koeus, the contemporary era has unfolded the possibility of a different horizon, enabled by the recent negotiation of increased autonomy from the French. "We ought to take this opportunity to strengthen our nation and catch up to our neighbors," he writes; "within such nation-building, language-building is an integral component." Koeus holds the French language in high regard, and acknowledges its potential for expanding individuals' access to learning and knowledge circulating far beyond Cambodia's borders; if it were practical, Koeus concedes, the establishment of a French-

[252] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣២៧-៣០.

based education system and the exclusive use of French as the language of government and administration – "without taking into consideration our national sentiments (*sentiments*)" – would be ideal. Yet such a project is unrealistic, and the continued intellectual neglect of the bulk of the Cambodian population is untenable: as such, Koeus writes, it is Khmer, not French, that deserves the nation's attention.[253]

Koeus furthermore expresses resentment towards those French who, "whenever we employ Pali and Sanskrit in our [Khmer] speech, […] laugh and chuckle," for "we are not trying to elevate our own language to the status of the classical languages, together with Pali and Sanskrit – just as French itself derived from Latin."[254] For this reason, Koeus continues,

> it is confounding that certain French intellectuals encourage us to write our language according solely to its spoken pronunciation, without any regard whatsoever for etymology or convention; whereas for their part, they go to great lengths to write differently from how they speak, focusing solely on etymology. [The first such proposals were put forward] in 1915; twenty-eight years later, there was another such scheme to write phonetically – yet in this case it was not simply a proposal, but a decree backed by the force of law; it required not simply the use of a phonetic orthography, but the elimination of the Khmer script entirely, replaced by the Latin script. The Latin script cannot be used to reflect [Khmer] etymologies, no matter how one tries. […] It simply leads to confusion.[255]

Koeus refers here to the "so-called romanization crisis of 1943," during which the Vichy regime of French Indochina introduced and briefly enforced the use of a romanized script for the Khmer

[253] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣៣០-៣.

[254] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣០៣-៥.

[255] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣០៥-៦.

language; as David Chandler notes, many Cambodians, "and especially those in the *sangha* [monastic community], saw the reform as an attack on traditional learning."[256]

Koeus's comments here illuminate a broader positionality vis-à-vis the French, one that challenges those assumptions made by the French colonial administration that categorically equate progress and development with the expansion of Western modes of thought and practice. Koeus, arguing on the basis not of sentimental attachment, but rather of logic and rationality, demonstrates the utility and validity of the Khmer script while elucidating the contradictions evident within the position of the French colonial regime.

Taken as a whole, Koeus's repeated engagements with the French language anticipate Kuan-Hsing Chen's formulation of decolonization as "the attempt of the previously colonized to reflectively work out a historical relation with the former colonizer."[257] Koeus expresses ambivalence towards the historical and cultural precedents established by the French, as he both appeals to the examples that the French language constitutes in his attempts to justify his own arguments concerning the preservation and cultivation of the Khmer language while simultaneously rejecting a categorical embrace of French language and culture as examples to be emulated uncritically.

Koeus's text thus enacts a critical mediation of French influence on the emergent Khmer national community, and unfolds a discursive space in which French authority and projections of cultural supremacy may be questioned and contested. In doing so, Koeus evokes, without ever

[256] Chandler 2008, 207-8. Chandler further notes that "the decree abrogating the reform [in 1945, passed by the newly, if briefly, independent Cambodian government] mentioned that for Cambodia to adopt the roman alphabet would mean the society would become 'a society without history, without value, without mores, and without traditions.'" Sam (1987, 41), too, notes the political overtones to the movement that mobilized in opposition to romanization: "in the late 1930s and early 1940s a number of monks secretly worked with some political groups who hoped to restore national independence. Those monks, including Ven. Hem Chiev […], were discontent with French attempts to romanize the Khmer language." Sam's analysis is notable in its suggestion that a cohort of monks was radicalized to the cause of independence by, in part, the French regime's perceived attacks on the Khmer language.

[257] Chen 2010, 3.

naming as such, Cambodia's future as an independent and autonomous nation-state, capable of negotiating and engaging with the French on its own terms.

Thai and the Threat of Cultural Dispossession

As described in Chapter 2, for many Cambodians engaged in the nationalist project in the late colonial era, the Thai, for a host of complex reasons, emerged as the cultural 'other' against which many sought to define the Khmer nation. Through the pages of *Pheasa Khmer*, Koeus, emerging from within this discursive milieu, aligns in places with certain arguments put forward by others before him, while articulating in others a more nuanced reading of the histories of interaction and exchange between the Khmer and the Thai peoples, informed by his understanding of their respective linguistic histories. Koeus draws on such histories to bolster both his arguments for the historical and cultural authenticity of the Khmer language, particularly vis-à-vis Thai, as well as his convictions that the development of the Khmer language takes precedence over unwarranted anxieties concerning lexical proximity to Thai.

"In order to understand clearly the interactions between the Khmer and Thai languages," Koeus writes, "we first ought to briefly turn to consider [these peoples'] histories." Koeus thus begins a detailed account of the history of the Thai people, extending back some seven thousand years to their origins in western Mongolia, north of the Altai Mountains. He traces their subsequent migration southwards through present-day China, inhabited at the time by a host of smaller kingdoms, culminating in their arrival in Southeast Asia beginning in the third century. Throughout, Koeus contends, their impetus for migration was the invasion of their lands by other peoples; indeed, their migration into Southeast Asia concluded with the final expulsion of the Thai peoples from southern China by Kublai Khan in the thirteenth century.[258]

[258] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៥៥-៩.

Koeus suggests that it was for this reason that the Thai peoples, despite being formally subjugated by the Angkorian kings, frequently took an antagonistic stance towards the Khmer, accustomed as they were to continuous warfare and invasion. Such hostilities were, however, of little concern to the Khmer for centuries, Koeus writes, as the Thai numbered too few to mount a legitimate challenge to Khmer authority. It was not until the thirteenth century that the Thai had grown sufficient in strength and numbers to carve Sukhothai off from the Angkorian empire, thus establishing the first independent Thai polity in Southeast Asia.[259]

Koeus here turns to the work of Luang Wichitwathakan, a Thai politician, historian, and author who played a prominent role within Thailand's own nationalist movement in the early twentieth century. Koeus draws heavily on Wichitwathakan's work *Siam and Suvarnabhumi*, emphasizing in particular Wichitwathakan's argument that the Thai

> are thoroughly adept at adapting to their circumstances; no other race anywhere in the world could compare (*faculté d'adaptation*). On pages 82 and 83 he [Wichitwathakan] says the following: "We eat all kinds of food, without fussing over whether it belongs to this race or that. […] Wherever we go, we are able to assimilate ourselves to the locality: […] if we end up in China, then we are Chinese. Whosever lands we end up in, then we instantly accommodate ourselves to those people's customs and traditions…"[260]

Wichitwathakan undoubtedly celebrated such qualities among the Thai – as Thun Theara notes, "in his writings in the late 1920s and early 1930s [Wichitwathakan] glorif[ied] the Thai race at the expense of others, including the Cambodians"[261] – yet Koeus here extends Wichitwathakan's argument to emphasize the civilizational primacy of the Khmer vis-à-vis the Thai. Over the past

[259] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៥៩-៦០.

[260] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៦០-១. Interestingly, Wichitwathakan here anticipates the central argument of James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) by nearly a century.

[261] Thun 2020, 147.

millennium, Koeus contends, as the Thai came into contact with, and were subjugated by, the Khmer, Khmer customs, language, and script alike were adopted by the Thai as their own.[262] Koeus again quotes Wichitwathakan at length, as the latter describes the adoption by the Thai of many distinguishing features of Khmer civilization, with multiple examples drawn from the realm of language.[263] As the Thai were increasingly engaged in military struggles against the Burmese, Wichitwathakan notes, the Khmer empire entered a state of decline; "had the Khmer continued on as a prosperous kingdom," Koeus quotes, "after perhaps two hundred years we [the Thai] would have come into such extensive contact with the Khmer that we undoubtedly would have become fully Khmer."[264]

Such a history thus explains the extensive similarities between the Khmer and the Thai lexicons – yet, crucially for Koeus, the influence is understood to be primarily unidirectional, beginning during the millennium of the direct subjugation of the Thai to the Khmer (300-1300 CE) and extending through to the fall of Longvek to the Thai at the end of the sixteenth century. During this latter three-hundred-year period, Koeus explains, Khmer-language manuscripts, as well as scholars themselves, were brought back to Thailand by soldiers returning from war; such manuscripts were translated into Thai, yet many were lost during the Burmese razing of Ayutthaya in 1767.[265] Indeed, Koeus contends, the Thai epic *Ramakien* originated not through translations of the Sanskrit *Ramayana*, but rather through the Khmer *Reamker*.[266]

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[262] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៦១-២. The Thai "borrowed [the Khmer script] prior to the thirteenth century," Koeus writes, "legs and hair and all" – a reference to the subscript forms (legs) and the undulating horizontal line (hair) exhibited by many consonants, the latter descended from the Sanskrit *shirorekhā*, that are distinguishing features of the Khmer script. (The Thai writing system later did away with subscript forms.)

[263] Koeus takes obvious delight in annotating Wichitwathakan's note that the Thai royal vocabulary is largely drawn from Khmer with the observation that "the Khmer words that the Thai borrowed to use in this elevated register are quite ordinary words in Khmer" (អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៦៣).

[264] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៦៣.

[265] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៦៧.

[266] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៦៧-៩.

Koeus goes on to describe the period following the fall of Longvek, during which the direction of influence was reversed, as Khmer kings studied under the Siamese court and ongoing invasions by Thai armies further contributed to linguistic exchange. Yet Koeus is adamant that, despite such social and political entanglements, the Thai influence on Khmer was nevertheless relatively marginal, and connects erroneous assumptions to the contrary to a systemic devaluation of Khmer civilization:

> Some Khmer are ignorant of how magnificent the Khmer people were in ancient times, and believe that the temples of Angkor were built through divine intervention; some French, at the beginning of this century, thought the Khmer to be a lowly and inferior race[.] Whenever such people come across an unusual Khmer word, they go around saying that it is a borrowing from Thai. In such cases we must be extremely careful, as it is very easy to confuse the truth.[267]

Koeus cites examples of Khmer words falsely classified as Thai borrowings in both the *Vachananukram Khmer* and Georges Maspero's *Grammaire de la langue khmère*, drawing on evidence from Angkorian inscriptions to refute such claims.[268] Furthermore, Koeus notes, a significant proportion of lexical items borrowed into Khmer during the centuries following Longvek were in fact originally Khmer words, and occasionally Sanskrit borrowings, that Thai had itself borrowed centuries prior, and subjected to various phonological changes. Such words, Koeus suggests, ought to be called not loanwords, but *peak sang bamnol*, or 'repaid words' – literally, 'words that repay a debt.'[269]

[267] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៧០-១.
[268] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៧១-៤.
[269] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៧៤-៦.

'Water from a Common Well': Ieu Koeus's Principles of Neology

Such a nuanced understanding of the history of cultural, political, and linguistic contact and exchange between the Thai and Khmer peoples informs Koeus's views concerning the present-day relationship between the two languages. Writing in 1946, Koeus alludes to debates then circulating among many intellectuals in Cambodia concerning the extent to which Khmer neologisms ought to be explicitly differentiated from their Thai counterparts, yet offers a perspective that departs in significant ways from the views put forward by other scholars, and notably championed by the Venerable Chuon Nath.

As discussed in the previous chapter, and as described by Sasagawa Hideo, central to the linguistic ideology of the Venerable Chuon Nath – and later realized through the coinages of the Cultural Committee, the body established in 1945 for the purpose of developing the Khmer lexicon to mitigate its reliance on foreign loanwords – was an emphasis on accentuating the distinction between the contemporary Khmer and Thai languages. In the creation of new words, Nath and other members of the Cultural Committee drew heavily on Pali derivations, in an effort both to reinforce the Khmer language's entanglements with Pali, the canonical language of Theravada Buddhism, as well as to accentuate Khmer's distance from Thai, which generally favored Sanskrit derivations.[270]

While the Cultural Committee did not begin its activities until 1947 – and, indeed, would count Koeus among its members for its first year of activity – such debates were clearly in circulation by the time of Koeus's writing in 1946. In describing his proposed methods for the formation of new lexical items, Koeus encourages the use of Pali- and Sanskrit-derived elements for cases in which existing Khmer words are inadequate, and characterizes these languages as the common 'well' from which many languages in Southeast Asia have drawn. This, Koeus notes, is

[270] Sasagawa 2015, 47-50, 55-9. The activities of the Cultural Committee are considered in greater detail in the following chapter.

similar to the situation in Europe, where many languages draw on Latin for their literary terminology and on Greek for their scientific lexicon. "When water is drawn from a single well," Koeus writes, "the water, too, is the same. It is for this reason that there are many lexical similarities across the European languages."[271]

In the Southeast Asian context, the Thai, Koeus notes, have in many cases already developed their lexicon for the sciences and other fields, drawing, predictably, from the Pali-Sanskrit 'well.' "When we go to draw from the well after the fact," he continues,

> if we are determined to have water that is different [from that of the Thai], we will not have an easy time of it. Our only option is to not use the water from that well, if we want it to be different. […] In short, it will never do to avoid using new words drawn from Pali and Sanskrit that are similar to those already in use by the Thai. In Europe, the English, Germans, Russians, Italians, and so on – whenever they use a word that the French drew from Latin or Greek, or when the French themselves use some such word from another European people – they don't worry that they are debasing or belittling their own race in doing so. What, then, are we so uneasy about?[272]

Such unwarranted anxieties, Koeus continues, have already led to difficulties; a host of examples follow, in which recent Khmer coinages have been rendered awkward and illogical due to the attempted differentiation from lexical items already employed by the Thai.[273] Koeus is careful to clarify that he is not advocating for the categorical adoption of *Thai* scientific and literary terminology; rather, he concludes, what is required is a rational approach, in which a neologism's suitability for the concept at hand is the primary criterion. Terms used by the Thai and by other

[271] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣៨២-៣.

[272] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣៨៣-៤.

[273] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣៨៤-៩.

Indic languages ought to be referenced, Koeus suggests, yet, if such terms are indeed logical and suitable, then the fact of lexical similarity is not grounds for their rejection from inclusion in the Khmer lexicon – as the Indic languages, rather than Thai, are the ultimate source of such terminology.[274]

Koeus thus articulates an approach to coining new words that diverges from that of the Venerable Chuon Nath – the approach that, as Sasagawa describes, would ultimately prevail among the activities of the Cultural Committee. Koeus, like Nath, was fully proficient in Thai, and was thus able to consider in detail the extent to which neologisms aligned with their Thai counterparts; unlike Nath, however, Koeus was unconcerned with the project of establishing Cambodia as the spiritual and scholarly epicenter of a Southeast Asian Theravadin cosmopolis, and consequently did not view the project of accentuating and expanding Khmer's linguistic differentiation from Thai as valuable in its own right. Rather, the horizons of Koeus's national imaginary extended far beyond Cambodia's borders, engaging global circulations of modernity while anticipating the demise of the French colonial regime. Like Nath, Koeus turned to the enduring legacies of Angkor for legitimacy and authenticity – yet in his recurrent emphasis on the project of nation-building, his gaze was fully on the future.

Pali, Sanskrit, and the Imperatives of Modernity

Pali and Sanskrit feature prominently throughout the pages of *Pheasa Khmer*, as both languages exerted significant influence on Khmer over the course of two millennia, albeit through distinct channels and in distinct eras. Like many early nationalists, Koeus appeals to both languages' exchanges with Khmer for the historical longevity and cultural legitimacy that such linguistic entanglements index – yet his primary concern is not with their role in constructing a national

[274] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣៨៩-៥0.

imaginary; rather, Koeus emphasizes the utility of both languages for consolidating a rational and logical Khmer language in the modern era. In orienting his recommendations for the ongoing cultivation and development of the Khmer language towards the formation of an educated and globally-engaged national populace, Koeus places the imperatives of modernity at the center of his linguistic ideology.

In the latter half of the text, Koeus provides a detailed account of the history of both Pali and Sanskrit. Sanskrit, Koeus writes, is the older of the two languages; as it underwent scholarly study and refinement over the course of centuries, it increasingly diverged from spoken language varieties – known as Prakrits – in various localities across the Indian subcontinent. Sanskrit was already considered a classical language by the time of the Buddha, who, Koeus explains, was committed to a religious movement that was accessible to all people, rather than simply the educated elite; as such, the Buddha's own teachings were conducted through the Prakrit of his region. Over time, this language, too, was codified and consolidated, ultimately solidifying into the Pali language studied today.[275]

Yet while Pali is, in Koeus's analysis, the more straightforward of the two languages in terms of its pronunciation and orthography, Sanskrit is the more precise; several of Pali's phonological – and corresponding orthographic – developments eliminated certain features from Sanskrit that had differentiated various lexical items.[276] Koeus furthermore marks a distinction between the histories of Khmer lexical items of Sanskrit and Pali derivation, respectively, and connects such histories to borrowings from Thai: Sanskrit borrowings into Khmer, Koeus notes, arrived both prior to and during the Khmer empire – that is, when Khmer influence on Thai was at its height; Thai thus borrowed a number of lexical items of Sanskrit origin directly from Khmer. Pali, meanwhile, arrived in Southeast Asia much later, alongside Buddhism; by this point, Khmer no longer exerted such

[275] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៣០-២.

[276] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៣៧.

influence on Thai, and the two languages rather each – and individually – borrowed many lexical items directly from Pali.[277]

Elsewhere, Koeus celebrates the extensive Pali and Sanskrit influence on Khmer, citing as an example an examination of Pali and Sanskrit derivations exhibited in the full title of the king – *Preah Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk Varaman Reach Harevongsak Ouphatao Socheat Visothy Pongsak Akkamohaboroh Rotana Nikarodom Thommik Mohareachthireach Boromneath Boromboprit Preah Thauv Krong Kampuchea Thebatey Chea Mchah Chivet Leu Tbong*. Koeus laments the fact that no Pali-Khmer or Sanskrit-Khmer dictionaries are available, and encourages his readers – particularly those proficient in English, French, or Thai, languages for which Pali and Sanskrit dictionaries do exist – to take up the project, "which may benefit not only you yourself, but also our language and our nation."[278]

Koeus thus partially aligns with the linguistic ideology conveyed through the pages of the Venerable Chuon Nath's *Vachananukram Khmer*, in which Nath elevates Pali, and, to a lesser extent, Sanskrit, as languages of historical influence on Khmer that lend legitimacy and authenticity to the contemporary language. Yet where Nath is motivated by religious convictions, eager to accentuate the entanglements between Khmer and Pali, the canonical language of Theravadin tradition and scholarship, Koeus employs quite different rationales for his arguments.

Etymology and Orthography in an Era of Nation-Building

Koeus opens his discussion on orthographic reforms and standardization with several examples of words whose contemporary orthographic realizations differ from those of Angkorian times, with their contemporary spellings "bringing them into line with their pronunciations in the present era." Indeed, Koeus notes, "if we were able to write every word of our language according to

[277] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៦៦.

[278] អៀវ កើស 1947, ២៩៥-៣០២.

its pronunciation, it would be superb, facilitating both writing and remembering spellings."[279] Yet in many cases a strictly phonetic spelling is inappropriate, as convention, *tumloab*, and etymology, *reuh kul* or *niruttisastr*,[280] must also be taken into account. In the latter case, Koeus writes, "if [the Khmer language] is written solely according to spoken pronunciations, then the roots of words will be lost, and words will be confused with one another."[281]

Koeus thus here evinces a conceptualization of the contemporary Khmer language's relationship to both its past and its future, as well as those of other languages, that differs subtly, yet significantly, from that of the Venerable Chuon Nath. Koeus accedes that the preservation of convention is important – self-evidently so, as he does not feel the need to elaborate on the fact – yet he is far more embracing than was Nath of orthographic reforms that, he suggests, will enhance the internal consistency and logic of the Khmer language. In the lengthy discussion that follows, Koeus cites a number of examples of alleged 'inconsistencies' in contemporary Khmer, in which various widely-used spellings, legitimized through the *Vachananukram Khmer*, reflect neither such words' contemporary pronunciations nor their etymological roots – in many cases, resulting from processes of derivational morphology that were typical of Old Khmer but that are no longer productive in modern Khmer[282] – and, "in order for our language to be orderly and methodical," proposes certain revisions to then-accepted orthographies; "just as [the *Vachananukram* and other] scholars have us write *manuss*, *nongkoal*, and *voalli* in order to preserve etymologies, while Khmer

[279] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣០២.

[280] Koeus alternates between the use of the terms ឫសគល់ *reuh kul*, literally 'roots and base,' and និរុត្តិសាស្ត្រ *niruttisastr*, glossed as the French *étymologie*. The former is a compound formed from native Khmer roots; the latter is an Indic derivation.

[281] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣០២-៤.

[282] As discussed further in Chapter 4, the revival of such processes of derivational morphology, viewed as 'authentically Khmer,' were an important component of the linguistic reforms proposed by Keng Vannsak in the 1960s; see Sok (2005, 59); Sasagawa (2015, 63); and Sam (1987, 30-1).

speakers all over pronounce these words as *mnoeh*, *angkoal*, and *voa*, and there are no issues – I am hopeful that no such learned scholars will disagree with my opinions on this point."[283]

Indeed, elsewhere Koeus expresses further discomfort with the notion that convention ought to be honored purely for its own sake. In discussing Khmer lexical items that originally derived by processes of derivational morphology from other terms, yet are orthographically realized in contemporary usage in such a manner as to obscure this original etymological relationship,[284] Koeus is hesitant to privilege even long-established convention over regularity and consistency:

> Should [such words] be written according to convention, with their form left as it is, or is it better to correct them to reflect their etymologies? On this point, I don't dare try to resolve the issue on my own, for [certain] incorrect usages […] have been customary for hundreds of years, dating back to the era in which civilization flowed forth from the land of the Khmer to the distant western horizons – that is, the era in which the Siamese were still borrowing our words.[285]

Koeus goes on to explain how certain words borrowed into Thai were adapted to the Thai phonological system, changes that were reflected in their Thai orthographies; upon being borrowed back into Khmer, it was the Thai pronunciation and orthography, rather than the etymological source, that served as the basis for the Khmer spelling.[286] Conventional orthographic usages, Koeus thus suggests, even when attested for centuries, do not necessarily represent 'authentic' Khmer tradition; in some cases, they are in fact the result of corruptions introduced by linguistic exchange with Thai. As such, convention should not be uncritically accepted as justification for preserving

[283] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣០៧.

[284] The considerable redundancy of the Khmer script – many sounds can be represented with multiple combinations of consonants and vowels – makes this scenario quite common.

[285] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣១៣-៤.

[286] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣១៤-៥.

particular orthographic forms, but rather ought to be accompanied by detailed and historically-informed assessments of individual lexical items' orthographic histories – assessments made possible by the field of modern linguistics. As Koeus writes several pages later, after posing once again the question of whether it is better to honor convention or to 'correct' orthographies that obscure or confuse etymologies,

> We ought to recognize that the Khmer people are currently in an era of nation-building. If we do not build back up our nation in the present, our nation will undoubtedly dissolve, just like the Cham and the Mon nations in this land of *Sovannaphum*. The French built their own nation in the sixteenth century. They did away with any [linguistic] inaccuracies, and instead opted for correct usages, for usages that would allow their nation to grow and prosper. They did away with orthographic conventions that differed for no good reason from pronunciation […] and instead wrote [in a more phonologically consistent fashion].[287]

Koeus continues with a lengthier discussion of the orthographic realization of words of Pali and Sanskrit origin in which the criterion of convention is omitted entirely. "The ideal (*idéal*)" in deciding such orthographies, he writes, "is to write them in such a way as to align with both Khmer phonology as well as [Indic] etymologies." In many cases, such an ideal is unattainable; Koeus thus proposes privileging phonological assimilation over Indic etymology, yet in such a way as to allow Indic etymologies to nevertheless remain apparent. "Thus," Koeus concludes, "whenever we are able to adapt the form of a Pali or Sanskrit word by relying on certain symbols [e.g., diacritics] that do not obstruct the task of researching such a word's origins, then we need not worry about making such corrections to better align with [Khmer] phonology."[288] Koeus goes on to suggest a range of such 'corrections' to the Khmer orthographic realizations of words of Pali and Sanskrit origin,

[287] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣២០-១. Koeus here provides several examples of 'reformed' French spellings.
[288] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣២១-៣.

primarily by the addition or substitution of diacritics and vowel symbols, arguing that such alterations "do not confuse the process of locating such words' origins, because Pali and Sanskrit do not have such diacritics and vowels, and thus none of these words could be mistaken for another."[289]

Such a proposal diverges drastically from that of the Venerable Chuon Nath, who considered phonologically-void orthographic forms reflective of Pali and Sanskrit etymologies worthy of preservation in their own right, for the ways in which they indexed the Khmer language's deep intimacies with Old Khmer and Pali – that is, the archetypal languages of Angkorian grandeur and Theravadin tradition and scholarship, respectively. Koeus, in proposing an overhaul of the orthographies of Khmer's Indic-derived lexicon, exhibits an entirely different orientation, in which the imperatives of engaging the broader world as a modern nation-state take precedence, imperatives that may be negotiated and mediated through the application of the methods of modern linguistic analysis. Such orthographic renovations are justified, Koeus contends, for an excess of Pali and Sanskrit forms that behave in a phonologically irregular manner "serve only to overload the [language] learner's mind with useless information; it would be better to free up that mental space for various other studies."[290]

Koeus fully recognizes that his approach runs counter to the standard already established by the *Vachananukram Khmer* – and thus here qualifies his prior endorsement of the *Vachananukram* as a standard to which the entire nation ought to adhere. His motivation, Koeus writes,

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[289] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣២៤. As noted in the previous chapter, the Venerable Chuon Nath and other members of the initial dictionary commission's reformist faction similarly proposed changes to the use of diacritics – yet, crucially, Nath's recommendations comprised the *re*introduction of diacritics that had formerly been widely used in Old Khmer (Hansen 2007, 140; ជួន ណាត 1967, ខ-គ). Koeus's recommendations here, meanwhile, are far more innovative, and represent a more novel reform rather than a restoration of an historical precedent.

[290] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣២៥.

> is to ask that all fellow compatriots apply themselves vigorously to the task of ordering our language and script, an important component of building the Khmer nation. Monks and scholars, please, do not mistakenly think that I aim to criticize the scholars who have compiled the *Vachananukram Khmer*, to flaunt my knowledge before them, or to challenge such learned scholars. […] The reason for which I have written this book is simply that I hope to see our Khmer language progress and advance, in order to be universally employed at this time in which the French, with such noble intentions, have expanded the rights of the Khmer to include the administration of our own kingdom in our own land.[291]

This is perhaps Koeus's most explicit articulation of his conceptualization of the relationship between the Khmer language and the broader national imaginary, and of both entities' critical entanglements with the social and political realities of Koeus's own historical moment.[292] Koeus is fundamentally concerned with the development of the Khmer nation, and his configuration of and recommendations for reforming the Khmer language are consistently oriented towards this end.[293] Throughout, Koeus must make repeated compromises, as he reckons with the realities of Khmer's long and complex history of interaction and exchange with Sanskrit, Pali, and Thai – languages that exhibit drastically different phonologies and morphologies from Khmer, and that furthermore occupy drastically different places within the national imaginary of Koeus's day. Yet Koeus engages such challenges and contradictions through rational and logical appeals to the necessity of cultivating an educated and competent national populace, capable of confronting the modern world.

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[291] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣២៥-៦.

[292] Indeed, a footnote to the line in the passage above referring to the French capitulation of greater political autonomy to the local Cambodian government asks readers to "please recall that this book was completed in 1946" (អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣២៦).

[293] In his recommendations for the formation of new words, too, Koeus exhibits a bias towards ease of understandability among the masses, as he recommends the use of existing Khmer words before turning to Pali- and Sanskrit-derived constructions (អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣៣៨-៨).

In doing so, Koeus furthermore anticipates a future in which Cambodia engages the broader world as a sovereign and independent nation-state. In his repeated invocation of the current era as one of nation-building for the Khmer people, Koeus positions the Khmer nation within the broader contours of a global historical imaginary, in which oppressed peoples coalesce into a national community that ultimately triumphs in its quest for independence. Towards this end, language, Koeus suggests, serves critically as both medium, in its capacity to educate and inform, and idiom, as linguistic unity and legitimacy index similar values within the national community more broadly.

Echoes of Ieu Koeus in the Post-Independence Era

While the manuscript of *Pheasa Khmer* was completed in 1946, difficulties in securing permissions and identifying a publishing house willing to print the work delayed its publication until October of the following year.[294] In the interim, political developments in Cambodia proceeded rapidly, and by 1947 Koeus was fully immersed within the world of national politics. In 1946, while completing the manuscript of *Pheasa Khmer*, Koeus founded the Democratic Party alongside Prince Sisowath Yuttevong; by 1947, Koeus was serving as the president of the first National Assembly, a position that he held until his death three years later.

Yet while *Pheasa Khmer* remained Koeus's first and only published work, his interest in the intersections of language and politics continued to surface throughout the final years of his life. As a leading member of the Democratic Party, Koeus was one of the primary authors of the Democrats' 1947 Constitution, which expanded the powers of the National Assembly while diminishing those of the monarchy.[295] As Siti Keo notes, the Democrats self-consciously framed their political project as one of national development and the political education of the masses, as "democratic behaviors

[294] អៀវ កើស 1947, 'សេចក្តីជំរាបជាមុន.'
[295] Keo 2019, 28.

and norms were not simply given and demanded from the populace, but [had to be] developed and nurtured over time;" as one Democrat framed the party's objectives, "their goal was to 'morally, intellectually and materially uplift the people in order to give them the most dignity possible.'"[296]

Such a perspective accords strongly with Koeus's views concerning the imperatives imposed by the modern era on the Khmer language and its associated pedagogical potential. Indeed, the 1947 Constitution included a glossary of political terms, developed by Ieu Koeus, that he and other party leaders "believed needed to be defined and explained in Khmer." As Keo notes, the participation of the governing party's leaders in the development of this glossary speaks to the importance with which the Democrats viewed the project of educating the population, as well as their recognition of "the newness of democracy for Cambodians and […] the alien quality of the 1947 Constitution," as Koeus frequently glossed words from the new political lexicon in French – a strategy similarly employed throughout *Pheasa Khmer*.[297]

Koeus developed the glossary in conjunction with the Cultural Committee, headed by the Venerable Chuon Nath, that had begun its word-coining activities that same year; it was the only year in which Koeus was included among the Committee's members.[298] Throughout the pages of *Pheasa Khmer*, Koeus makes occasional reference to certain activities conducted by and decisions made by the Committee, included as footnotes – added prior to publication in 1947, the year of Koeus's involvement with the Committee – to the 1946 text. Koeus's most extensive discursive engagement with the Committee comes in the final pages of the text, as he demonstrates his proposed principles for the formation of new lexical items through a series of examples. Notably, a sharp division emerges in this section between Koeus's proposed coinages – overwhelmingly drawing on his stated preferences for native and existing Khmer lexical and morphological

[296] Keo 2019, 34.
[297] Keo 2019, 34.
[298] Sasagawa 2015, 52.

components – and the coinages ultimately settled on by the Committee, mentioned briefly in footnotes to the text, that prefer the use of Indic elements.[299]

The linguistic ideologies articulated through the pages of *Pheasa Khmer* were thus deeply entangled, both conceptually and in practice, with Koeus's broader political engagements during the formative years of Cambodia's initial forays into constitutional democracy. Both projects were imbued with Koeus's convictions that the Khmer people possessed the necessary cultural authenticity and historical legitimacy to coalesce into a unified and coherent national community – yet that such consolidation would need to be navigated by a smaller cadre of educated scholars and political leaders, capable of providing the masses with the educational resources and frameworks necessary to become the informed and engaged populace on which modern democratic states were understood to be founded. In the linguistic and political domains alike, Koeus viewed the cultivation of such a populace as the overarching priority of the educated elite.

The textual products of Koeus's academic and political projects may furthermore be read against the backdrop of a broader tradition of expressions of political dissent in colonial and postcolonial Cambodia, characterized by the subversive deployment of discursive technologies introduced or otherwise tolerated by regimes of power towards liberatory ends. In the decades prior to Koeus's own engagements, the Venerable Chuon Nath had turned to the project of lexicography, introduced to Cambodia by early French philologists, in an act of strategic subversion of racialized tropes and orientalist fantasies circulated by the French that cast the Cambodian people as culturally inferior and degenerate; through the pages of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, Nath articulated instead a conceptualization of Khmer nationhood and identity that emphasized cultural

[299] អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣៨១, ៣៥៨-៥. A handful of lexical items included in the glossary appended to the 1947 Constitution and cited by Keo (2019, 34) are similarly heavily Indic, although Koeus notably suggests turning to Pali and Sanskrit elements when "pure Khmer" components are inadequate, and cites the example of the French *statuts*, for which he proposes the Pali-derived លក្ខន្តិក *leakhantika* (អៀវ កើស 1947, ៣៣៧). Koeus thus seems to accede that political terminology is particularly well suited to Indic-inflected neologisms.

authenticity, historical longevity, and civilizational accomplishment. Similarly, Koeus's turn to political and academic textual technologies indexical of a globally-conceived modernity – the constitution and the linguistic study, respectively – enabled the assertion of the intellectual development of the Khmer national community while simultaneously offering a critique of the colonial regime's assumptions concerning the supremacy of French modes of social and political thought and practice.[300] In this regard, the forms of both the Democratic Party's 1947 Constitution and Koeus's *Pheasa Khmer* are thus as significant as their contents. Both represent the mediation and reformulation of discursive technologies initially introduced by the French; in taking ownership of such forms of knowledge production and circulation, Koeus and other Cambodian intellectuals unfolded the discursive space in which to imagine a sovereign and independent national future, freed from the yokes of the French colonial regime. The production of linguistic and political texts by Khmer linguists and politicians thus both advanced and anticipated independence from the French, arriving at last in 1953.

Furthermore, Koeus's inscription of his text into the academic field of linguistic study and analysis, as practiced among a global scholarly community, performs what Grant describes as the 'enactment' of a particular form of – in this case – linguistic inquiry, "simultaneously Cambodian and cosmopolitan," as *Pheasa Khmer* demonstrates for its readerships – implicitly understood to be local, given the text's composition in Khmer – "how to situate their work in relation to, and thus participate in, international [linguistic, and, more broadly, scholarly,] discourse;"[301] similar work is performed by the 1947 Constitution in the political domain. Koeus's engagement with French and

[300] Similarly, the strategic enlistment of poetry and literature as mediums through which to contest state-mediated conceptualizations of the postcolonial nation-state during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* era is considered in the next chapter.

[301] Grant 2017, 195-6, 211. Specifically, Grant considers the ways in which the medical journal *Revue Médico-Chirurgicale de l'Hôpital de l'Amitié Khméro-Soviétique*, published by the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital between 1961 and 1971, "enact[ed] a biomedicine that [was] simultaneously Cambodian and cosmopolitan […] through particular discursive techniques, and in entanglement with social relations," through which journal's contributors "demonstrat[ed] for *Revue* authors and readers, Cambodian and Soviet, how to situate their work in relation to, and thus participate in, international medico-scientific discourse."

Thai texts and academic and political traditions, as well as his strategic mediation of French linguistic and political terminology, serve to situate both *Pheasa Khmer* and the 1947 Constitution, texts that employ the Khmer language as both their medium and their idiom of expression, within transnational circulations of linguistic study and scholarship and of political state-making. In doing so, Koeus radically writes the Khmer language – and, with it, its community of speakers – into broader academic and sociopolitical imaginaries.[302]

Yet while independence brought the end of French colonial authority over Cambodian affairs, significant questions remained concerning the newly independent nation-state's place within the modern world; furthermore, the steady consolidation of political authority by King Norodom Sihanouk, culminating in his abdication of the throne and the establishment of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* in 1955, dampened the hopes that many Cambodians had harbored in the initial years of independence for a fair and functioning constitutional democracy. Thus, throughout the years of Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and extending until the fall of the Lon Nol regime to the Khmer Rouge in 1975, a generation of Khmer poets, novelists, journalists, and others turned again to the discursive technologies of language and literature in their efforts to challenge and contest state-mediated conceptualizations of the national community and to remap Cambodia's postcolonial horizons.

[302] See as well Loughran's (2015, 47-8) interpretation of *Pheasa Khmer* as a work that "excavate[s] his [Koeus's] indigenous language and elevate[s] it, through print, to a language-of-power," thereby challenging hegemonic discourses that consign "postcolonial nationalisms […] to what [Partha] Chatterjee has called a 'derivative' status."

Chapter 4:

Mediating Modernity: Keng Vannsak, Khun Srun, and the Renegotiation of Cambodia's Postcolonial Horizons, 1950-1975

> "Those who've only ever encountered characters in novels will soon see me, Chea Aem, a character strolling out into the real world. No doubt they'll begin to understand that all those different novels they've read in the past are not simply fantasies drifting among the clouds, the whims of an author who floats high above the world."
>
> Khun Srun, *Chun Choab Chaot*[303]

> "[L]anguage […] became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world."
>
> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*[304]

When the political tumult that characterized Cambodia's early forays into representational democracy at last subsided, a single political party emerged intact, and would go on to define the next decade and a half of Cambodian political life. Within two years of Cambodia's independence from the French in 1953, Prince Norodom Sihanouk had successfully consolidated political power around his *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, or 'Populist Society,'[305] and would remain in power until being forced from office in 1970.

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[303] ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1973, 97.

[304] Chatterjee 1993, 7.

[305] While commonly translated as the 'People's Socialist Community,' the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* is, as Siti Keo (2019, 17, 46) points out, better understood as a populist, rather than socialist, political construction. The word និយ័ម *niyum*, here functioning as an affix, is commonly used in compounds that might be rendered in English with the suffix '-ism.' The widespread translation of the phrase សង្គមរាស្ត្រនិយ័ម as 'People's Socialist Community' is misleading, as *niyum* is affixed not to សង្គម *sangkum* 'society,' but to រាស្ត្រ *reastr* 'people, population.' (As Heder (2007, 297) notes, *reastr* carries additional connotations of subjugation to royal

Over the course of the intervening years, a cohort of modernist novelists, poets, scholars, journalists, and others turned to literature and language as a medium and idiom through which to express their dissatisfaction with Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and to contest the regime's delineation of the contours of the postcolonial national community. As a wide swath of the Cambodian population – particularly members of the educated and politically-engaged urban classes – grew increasingly disillusioned with Sihanouk's failure to deliver on the promises of constitutional democracy, language and literature emerged once more as sites of critical engagement, through which to remap the country's postcolonial horizons.

The Independent Nation Takes Form

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Cambodian political landscape in the years following the end of World War II and prior to the achievement of independence was initially characterized by a vibrant, if tumultuous, exchange between a multitude of political parties, each with their own distinct conceptualizations of the appropriate approach to navigating Cambodia's entrance onto the world stage as an independent nation-state.

Yet by the opening of the 1950s, the Democratic Party had begun to fracture, a trend begun by the death of Prince Yuttevong in 1947 and subsequently exacerbated by the assassination of Ieu Koeus in January of 1950.[306] The Democrats were stalled in their efforts to enact their policy agenda through the formal mechanisms of the National Assembly, dissolved by Sihanouk in September of 1949, yet nevertheless managed to win fifty-four of seventy-eight seats in the elections held in November of 1951.[307] As in the wake of the 1947 elections, however, the Democrats had little

authority, in the sense of 'subjects.') Thus, it is not *sangkum*, society as a collective entity, that forms the ideological basis for the political movement, but rather *reastr*, the people as a populist mass. I thus suggest 'Populist Society' as a more accurate translation.

[306] Chandler 2008, 215.

[307] Chandler 1991, 56-7.

opportunity to govern, for in June of 1952, King Sihanouk, in collaboration with French authorities, ordered the National Assembly surrounded by French Union troops, and abruptly dismissed the Democratic Party cabinet, led by Huy Kanthoul, installing himself as prime minister in Kanthoul's stead.[308] Less than a year later, in January of 1953, the National Assembly was reconvened; when the Democrat-led assembly refused to grant Sihanouk's requests for special powers, he again surrounded the building with troops – this time from Cambodia's own military forces – and dissolved the body, issuing emergency decrees and imprisoning seventeen Democratic Party politicians without trial for eight months.[309]

Throughout the remainder of 1953, Sihanouk, now effectively unopposed within Cambodia's formal political arena, embarked on an energetic campaign to secure Cambodia's political independence. His efforts, largely conducted overseas, culminated in the French accession of control over the judiciary, foreign affairs, and the armed forces, including the police, by November of 1953.[310] Cambodian independence was formalized at the Geneva Conference in 1954, which stipulated the organization of national elections in 1955. In March of that year, Sihanouk abdicated the throne, ostensibly in an effort to circumvent criticisms that his role in politics ought to be limited to the ceremonial realm.[311] The following month, shortly before departing for the Bandung Conference organized in Indonesia by President Sukarno, Sihanouk established the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, the 'Populist Society' that would define political and social life in Phnom Penh for the next fifteen years.[312]

The establishment of *Sangkum* ultimately marked the end of multiparty democracy in Cambodia. In order to join *Sangkum*, voters and candidates had to renounce their affiliation with all other political parties; the leaders of several smaller political parties announced the dissolution of

[308] Chandler 1991, 63.
[309] Chandler 1991, 65-6; Keo 2019, 44.
[310] Chandler 1991, 67-72; Chandler 2008, 226-8.
[311] Chandler 1991, 78.
[312] Chandler 1991, 79.

their parties and tethered their political fates to *Sangkum*.[313] The months leading up to national elections in September of 1955 were characterized by the violent repression of opposition – primarily Democratic Party – candidates, campaigners, and voters, as, for the first time, "the weight of the state's security apparatus, the royal family, and the media was mobilized in defense of a slate of candidates."[314] In September, three days before the elections were held, Keng Vannsak, a prominent young intellectual and politician recently returned from his studies in France and running as a Democratic Party candidate, was taken into custody in the midst of a rally; he was held in prison for the next two months.[315] *Sangkum* candidates won 83 percent of the vote, and every seat in the National Assembly.[316]

The years between the assassination of Ieu Koeus and the establishment of *Sangkum* in 1955 thus saw the steady consolidation of political power within the hands of Norodom Sihanouk, as the institutions and individuals advocating for parliamentary democracy were steadily weakened and ultimately either incorporated into the *Sangkum* regime or forced into political obscurity. Over the course of these years, Sihanouk's political style matured and crystallized into the form that would define his leadership over the course of the next fifteen years, characterized by a paternalistic attitude towards Cambodian citizens, little tolerance of dissent, and considerably more enthusiasm for the performance of populist-style political theater than for substantive policy agendas.[317] Styling himself as the father of Cambodian independence, Sihanouk interpreted his success in the campaign for autonomy from the French as a broad popular mandate to govern the country as he saw fit.[318]

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[313] Keo 2019, 47; Chandler 1991, 79-80.
[314] Chandler 1991, 82.
[315] Chandler 1991, 83. Vannsak's political and literary activities throughout the *Sangkum* years are considered in greater detail below.
[316] Chandler 1991, 83.
[317] Chandler 1991, 84; Chandler 2008, 231-2.
[318] Chandler 2008, 228.

Sangkum Reastr Niyum *and the Politics of Language*

Yet while the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* was undoubtedly politically dominant in the years between 1955 and 1970, the regime was not without challenges to its authority, many of which were levied from outside the boundaries of formal political contention. Sihanouk, eager to bolster his own claims to legitimacy while undermining those of his rivals, was adept at drawing on potent symbols of nationalist sentiment to authenticate his rule. In doing so, he largely aligned himself with the vision of the Khmer nation espoused through the pages of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, and celebrated the Venerable Chuon Nath as an emblem of the traditional values that *Sangkum* was purported to represent.

The two primary cultural institutions and symbols that emerged as hallmarks of Sihanouk's political aesthetic were Buddhism, enlisted as the moral underpinning of his political philosophy of 'socialist Buddhism,' and the heritage of Angkor, given new life and urgency through a long-running dispute with Thailand over the Preah Vihear temples. In both arenas, the Venerable Chuon Nath, serving as Supreme Patriarch of the Mahanikay order since 1948, occupied a prominent position, and the modes of discourse and engagement that characterized Sihanouk's years in power ultimately contributed to understandings within the national imaginary of Nath's 1967 *Vachananukram Khmer*, as well as broader conceptualizations of the Khmer national community that it came to signify.

As Ian Harris describes, Sihanouk was aware from an early stage of the potency of Cambodian Buddhism as a political force. Upon the Japanese occupation of Cambodia during World War II, Sihanouk had vowed to become a monk if his life were spared; in 1947, he honored his vow, and was ordained in the *sangha* before spending several months at a pagoda in Phnom Penh.[319] This union of the fate of the nation with the fate of Sihanouk himself, filtered through a paternalistic

[319] Harris 2005, 145.

conception of the Cambodian people and through a rhetorical projection of Buddhist acts of merit, presaged his later assertions that Cambodian socialism was grounded not in the doctrines of foreign political theorists but in an indigenous Buddhist morality and a 'national' religious tradition.[320] Such a "modernized and engaged" understanding of Buddhism, Harris contends, brought Sihanouk into natural alignment with the reformist faction of the Mahanikay order; indeed, the Venerable Chuon Nath was, in its early years, a prominent supporter of the *Sangkum*, encouraging members of the *sangha* to join in Sihanouk's public works campaigns.[321]

Sihanouk further aligned with Nath's conceptualization of the national community in his efforts to derive legitimacy and authenticity through the symbolism of Angkor. Sihanouk drew heavily on Angkorian imagery in his attempts to establish the architectural and cultural aesthetic of *Sangkum*, and frequently cast himself as both inheritor of the mantle of Angkorian kingship[322] as well as human embodiment of national culture, an assertion that he bolstered through projects in architecture, film, music, and other domains.[323]

In the geopolitical sphere, such appeals to Angkorian inheritance structured the political rhetoric surrounding the years-long dispute with Thailand over the Preah Vihear temples, located on the Thai-Cambodia border. As Nguon Kimly argues, Sihanouk strategically employed the conflict to reinforce both the cultural and the political legitimacy of his *Sangkum* regime, appealing to nationalist sensibilities through which the Cambodian people might "re-imagine the country's past in ways that linked his *Sangkum* government to the ancient Khmer Empire of Angkor."[324] Notably, the Venerable Chuon Nath appeared as the leader of a delegation of monks at the ceremony held by

[320] Harris 2005, 148.
[321] Harris 2005, 149. In later years, Chuon Nath was more overtly critical of some of Sihanouk's actions and policies, particularly those that ran counter to established Buddhist custom and morality (Harris 2005, 153).
[322] Chandler 1991, 64.
[323] Keo 2019, 66-79. See as well Norindr (2006, 69) for a discussion of the "nationalist readings" possible in Sihanouk's film projects, and Saphan (2013) for an analysis of the political implications of and motivations for Sihanouk's patronization of – and participation in – popular music.
[324] Nguon 2018, 202.

Prince Sihanouk at the Preah Vihear temples in 1963, following the decision of the International Court of Justice awarding the temples to Cambodia, rather than to Thailand; in blending religious and secular iconography – flag-raising alongside Buddhist ritual – the ceremony fused notions of Angkorian tradition and heritage to the modern concept of the nation-state.[325] Such nationalist discourse furthermore centered and solidified depictions of the Thai as the Khmer's cultural and civilizational *other*: in radio programs, theater performances, and other media, Sihanouk-aligned writers and artists depicted the Thai as villainous and wicked, bent on the theft of temples – and the notions of national heritage that accompanied them – that rightfully belonged to the Khmer.[326]

It was in this context that government initiatives concerned with language began to take on more overtly political dimensions, as evidenced by the evolution of the work of the Cultural Committee, the government body formed in 1945 and tasked with developing a new Khmer lexicon to replace loanwords, primarily from French, that predominated in various fields of the sciences and humanities. The Venerable Chuon Nath chaired the Committee between 1947 and 1957, at which point he was succeeded briefly by the Venerable Pang Khat in 1958 and then by the Venerable Huot Tath, who chaired the Committee from 1961 until its dissolution in 1968.[327] Throughout its years of activity, the Cultural Committee demonstrated a marked consolidation of a trend first appearing in more subtle fashion in Nath's initial development of the *Vachananukram*: the incorporation of Pali etymologies in Khmer neologisms, in deliberate contradistinction to the prevalence of Sanskrit etymologies in Thai.

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[325] Nguon 2018, 204-5.

[326] Nguon 2018, 202-3. As noted by Pérez Pereiro (2012) and discussed in Chapter 2 above, such depictions of the Thai as thieves and usurpers of the cultural and civilizational legacy of Angkor were often seen to have historical precedence in the centuries of Thai political dominance in Southeast Asia, stretching from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, within living memory for many Cambodians of the *Sangkum* era was the Thai annexation of the Cambodian provinces of Battambang and much of Siem Reap, along with parts of southern Laos, in 1941, a cession negotiated by the French and to which King Monivong was deeply opposed; the lands were ultimately returned in 1947, but the incident confirmed for many Cambodians the suspicion that the Thai were still to this day determined to steal from the Khmer nation both land and legacy (Chandler 2008, 203-4, 215).

[327] Sasagawa 2015, 52-3. Ieu Koeus, too, served on the Committee in the late 1940s, prior to his assassination in 1950 (see Chapter 3).

In his analysis of wordlists of neologisms published by the Cultural Committee between 1947 and 1968, Sasagawa Hideo notes the increasingly privileged position of Pali-inflected neologisms. Beginning with the adoption of zodiac-derived Khmer names for the months of the Gregorian calendar in the late 1940s, a distinction was drawn – where possible – between the Pali-derived Khmer names and the Sanskrit-derived Thai appellations.[328] This trend accelerated through the 1950s, as the serial wordlists produced by the Cultural Committee and published in the *Kampuchea Soriya* magazine increasingly sought to differentiate Khmer lexical items from their Thai counterparts by employing Pali roots and affixes in the creation of new words.[329]

What began, then, as a forceful yet subtle assertion of linguistic distinction between Khmer and Thai, realized predominantly through the contrast drawn between the two languages' respective Indic etymologies within existing words, was gradually expanded into a more lexically productive project that reinforced the cultural othering of the Thai. The Committee's turn towards orthographies and processes for word formation that not only accentuated, but generated, lexical and orthographic distinctions between Khmer and Thai may be read within the broader context of the cultural and political turn during the Sihanouk years towards imagining the Thai as the cultural antithesis of the Khmer nation, in a process of what Thongchai Winichakul describes as 'negative identification.'[330] While Chuon Nath's direct involvement with the Cultural Committee ended in the late 1950s, his emphasis on Pali etymology as the defining feature that set the Khmer language in contradistinction to Thai continued to be employed by the Committee in their ongoing efforts

[328] Sasagawa 2015, 49-50. Note as well that because Sanskrit and Pali are themselves closely related languages, in many cases a given word will have essentially the same form in both languages – and thus in their Thai and Khmer derivatives, respectively. Even where they differ, words in Pali and Sanskrit often bear a notable resemblance. Furthermore, because Pali- and Sanskrit-derived words are naturalized into the Khmer phonological system, with many of those features that might distinguish Pali and Sanskrit terms from one another collapsed into a single sound or lost altogether in the Khmer phonetic realization, the distinction between a Pali and a Sanskrit etymology is often discernible in a Khmer word solely in its orthography. It was precisely in this domain, of course, that Chuon Nath, in establishing the orthographic standard for the Khmer lexicon, was able to assert the primacy of Khmer's Pali heritage and draw a careful distinction between the Khmer lexicon and its Sanskrit-inflected Thai counterpart.

[329] Sasagawa 2015, 55-9.

[330] Thongchai Winichakul 1994, 5, 15-6.

throughout the 1960s to further refine the *Sangkum*-aligned vision of the Khmer national community, as realized in the linguistic domain.

The final decade of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* furthermore brought the most consolidated incorporation of the Venerable Chuon Nath's linguistic ideologies into the broader political project of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, in part through the cults of personality that both figures engendered. While Nath's support for Sihanouk grew more tempered in later years, he nevertheless took the occasion of the introduction to the fifth and final edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, published in 1967, to celebrate the opportunities for a flourishing and prosperous literary arts enabled by Sihanouk, invoked as the "Crown Prince, Head of State, Father of National Letters."[331] In 1950, Sihanouk had conferred upon Nath the title of *Samdech*; this was followed in 1963 by the Kingdom's utmost monastic designation, *Samdech Preah Sangkhareach*, and in 1967 by an Honorary Doctorate in Literature from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, in recognition of Nath's contributions to Khmer language and literature.[332]

The Venerable Chuon Nath himself, whose stern, frowning visage is ubiquitous in Cambodia today, maintained a highly public persona throughout the *Sangkum* years. Beginning in 1961, Nath participated in a radio program organized by the Khmer Writers' Association, discussing various matters related to Khmer language, literature, and culture; the program was broadcast weekly on Friday nights until September 1969, shortly before Nath's death.[333] Nath made frequent appearances at both religious and secular ceremonies, such as the 1963 ceremony mentioned above, organized by Sihanouk upon the recognition by the International Court of Justice of the Preah Vihear temples as the physical and cultural property of Cambodia. Throughout much of the

[331] ពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត្យ , 1967 ច.

[332] *Biography of Samdech Preah Sanghareach Chuon Nath, the Chief of Mahanikaya Order* 1970, 6, ២៥; ឈាត ស្រ៊ាង et al. 2005, 49.

[333] Thong 1985, 112; Sam 1987, 30. Recordings of the broadcasts are available on YouTube and continue to circulate today.

twentieth century, Nath was by far the most prominent member of the Cambodian *sangha*, both within and beyond the monastic community, publishing a wide range of scriptural translations and commentaries and works on language and grammar from the 1910s until his death in 1969, and furthermore serving as Supreme Patriarch of Cambodia's Mahanikay order for the final two decades of his life.[334]

The Venerable Chuon Nath thus remained the most prominent architect of the Khmer language, and arguably of the national identity that it indexed, for more than half a century, from his instigation of early reforms to the Mahanikay Buddhist order through to the articulation in the fifth and final edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer* of a linguistic ideology infused with Buddhist and Angkorian symbolism – an ideology to which Prince Norodom Sihanouk tethered his own political maneuverings through the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*. By the time of his death in 1969, however, the conceptualization of the Khmer national community envisioned by Nath – and enforced, through various mechanisms and with varying degrees of success, by Sihanouk – had increasingly become a site of contestation, as new voices converged on language in their efforts to remap the contours of Khmer nationhood and identity in the postcolonial era.

Khemaraneyakam *and the Renegotiation of Modernity*

Few figures from the *Sangkum* era better exemplify the deep intimacies between political engagement and literary and linguistic pursuits than Dr. Keng Vannsak, the central architect of the linguistic reform movement that came to be known as *Khemaraneyakam*, often rendered in English as 'Khmerization,' and a figure who, fifteen years after his death in 2008, remains a revered, if polarizing, figure in Cambodia today. Born in 1925, Vannsak initially studied philosophy in Cambodia before going abroad to continue his studies in Europe, where he taught Khmer at the

[334] ហ្ជត តាត 1970, ៥៣-៦, ៦១-៣.

École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes in Paris and at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. After receiving a bachelors in literature, Vannsak returned to Cambodia, teaching at the prestigious Sisowath High School, his alma mater, between 1952 and 1958.[335]

In 1955, Vannsak, then a leading member of the Democratic Party, ran against Sihanouk's *Sangkum* regime in the general elections; in the middle of a political rally held three days before the elections, Vannsak was taken into custody by Sihanouk's police force, and remained in prison for the following two months.[336] Such experiences discouraged Vannsak from further direct involvement in Cambodian politics – and yet a clear understanding of the political potential of language, literature, and pedagogy imbued his subsequent turn to more scholarly pursuits. Vannsak held various posts with the University for Literature and the Humanities, the Pedagogy Institution, and the Phnom Penh Buddhist University until 1968, when he was barred from teaching by the *Sangkum* regime and placed under government supervision at his home, allegedly for "inciting university and other students to engage in oppositional activities to the government."[337]

With the arrival of the Lon Nol regime in 1970, Vannsak was absolved from such accusations, and served a brief tenure as the head of the newly-established Khmer-Mon Institute, tasked, as scholar Khing Hok Dy describes, with "elevating Khmer-Mon culture to new heights, allowing the Khmer people to take pride in being Khmer and to coalesce around their shared cultural legacy, as a weapon with which to oppose Vietnamese communism."[338] Vannsak soon left the Institute to complete his dissertation, titled *Recherche d'un fond culturel Khmer*, at Sorbonne University in 1971, staying on in Paris in various diplomatic capacities through the remainder of the

[335] ឃីង ហុកឌី 2002, 211-2.

[336] Chandler 1991, 83. Hok Dy (ឃីង ហុកឌី 2002, 212) instead gives the dates of Vannsak's imprisonment as September 13 to October 10.

[337] ឃីង ហុកឌី 2002, 212.

[338] ឃីង ហុកឌី 2002, 212. Thong (1985, 113) suggests that the Institute's mission was more explicitly concerned with language, and was established to research "Old and Middle Khmer to bring new insights to further the development of Modern Khmer."

Lon Nol years, and then in exile following the Khmer Rouge's rise to power. He would never again return to Cambodia.

Yet despite his significant periods spent abroad, Vannsak was considered to be at the time, and continues to be recognized as today, one of the most significant figures in Khmer language and literature of the twentieth century. Vannsak was revered by a generation of Cambodian novelists, poets, and other writers, both for his poetic and literary innovations as well as the social and political commentary that pervaded his writings. Writers grown disillusioned with the failure of the Sihanouk regime to deliver on the promises of constitutional democracy coalesced around the traditions of literary modernism and currents of leftist social and political thought that Vannsak helped establish in Cambodia, allowing for the hallmarks of his literary style – a reformed orthographic standard, a return to the derivational morphology of Old Khmer, the use of colloquial and vernacular registers in literary texts – to become deeply indexical of a broader oppositional sociopolitical positioning vis-à-vis the ruling regime.

Providing the theoretical justification for Keng Vannsak's linguistic reforms were his social and political beliefs. As a French-educated intellectual who came of age during the twilight years of the French protectorate in Cambodia, Vannsak exhibited from an early age deeply leftist and anti-monarchical political inclinations. During his initial years in Paris, he led the left-leaning Association of Khmer Students, which counted among its members Saloth Sar – known to future generations as Pol Pot – and Ieng Sary; upon Sihanouk's dissolution of the National Assembly in 1952, the Association published a pamphlet condemning his actions as undemocratic.[339] In his later writings,

[339] Keo 2019, 84; see as well Chandler (1991, 53-5, 64). Despite his early association with Sar and Sary, and the respect with which many of the Khmer Rouge's future leaders viewed him, Vannsak himself was never explicitly affiliated with the Khmer Rouge, and nor did he ever consider himself a communist. His own interpretation of his influence on Saloth Sar was that it took the form not of particular political ideologies, but rather of "an intellectual and political formation, a way of seeing things, of thinking, of predicting" (Crane 2015). Nevertheless, as Chandler (1991, 53) notes, several themes exhibited throughout Vannsak's body of work, such as "the idea that Cambodia could and should be cut off from other cultures," later surfaced in reformulated fashion in the ideologies of Democratic Kampuchea.

Vannsak advocated for an enthusiastic yet selective embrace of modernity, tempered by the preservation and restoration of those aspects of Khmer culture deemed to be 'pure' and 'original,' uncorrupted by foreign influence from not only Cambodia's neighbors in Southeast Asia, but also the Indian subcontinent. As Sasagawa Hideo notes, Vannsak, unlike Chuon Nath, Huot Tath, and the Battambang-born Ieu Koeus, neither read nor spoke Thai, and had not studied Pali or Sanskrit; rather, he had immersed himself in the world of French cultural and political thought.[340] Vannsak was distrustful of Cambodia's more established institutions of political and social authority – namely, the monarchy and the monkhood – and much of his work in the linguistic and literary domains sought to challenge the cultural hegemony that such institutions were understood to exercise.[341]

Such modernist sensibilities are realized across Vannsak's body of work in a variety of ways. As Khing Hok Dy notes, Vannsak's first collection of poetry, *Chet Kramom*, or *A Maiden's Heart*, composed between 1945 and 1950 and published in 1954, was largely traditional in its form, adhering to established poetic conventions in its structure and rhyme scheme, yet departed significantly from prior works in its engagement with social realist themes, centered on the author's own anxieties and the harsh realities of contemporary society.[342] His later collections, notably *Kok Kam Keleh* (*A Prison of Sinful Desire*, published following Vannsak's release from prison in 1955) and *Chamreang Chapei* (*Songs of the Chapei*, published in 1973), engaged contemporary social and political themes to a further degree, and were additionally characterized by Vannsak's use of non-standard orthographies and lexical items, in an effort to give more authentic expression to his ideas.[343] Both works continue to influence Cambodian poets and authors today.

[340] Sasagawa 2015, 60-1.
[341] Sam 1987, 30-1.
[342] ឃីង ហុក ឌី 2002, 213-4.
[343] ឃីង ហុក ឌី 2002, 223.

The linguistic reforms that ultimately came to be associated with the *Khemaraneyakam* movement were thus grounded in Vannsak's own social and political convictions concerning the Khmer national community, convictions that differed in significant ways from those of the Venerable Chuon Nath. Vannsak, much like Ieu Koeus before him, emphasized the importance of a national language that lent itself to the modern imperatives of an educated and literate population; indeed, the 1967 decree establishing Khmer as the sole language of instruction across the country's education system was one of the *Khemaraneyakam* proponents' earliest legislative victories.[344] Yet Vannsak was further motivated by opposition to what he understood to be the political inscriptions of the Chuon Nath standard, tethering the Khmer language to a Buddhist-inflected conception of the Khmer nation.

Given his educational and political background, Keng Vannsak was far less concerned with the Khmer language's distinctions from Thai, a language that he did not speak. To Vannsak, the preoccupation of Chuon Nath and of the Cultural Committee – which he joined briefly in 1961[345] – with Pali etymologies, accentuated through the consolidation of the Chuon Nath orthographic standard and expanded through the formation of new lexical items, rendered Khmer overly arcane and esoteric; similarly, Nath's deep reverence for longstanding orthographic tradition was seen by Vannsak as unnecessarily archaic, and inadequate for confronting the developmental imperatives facing a modern nation-state.[346] Rather, Vannsak sought to bring the Khmer language fully into the modern era through a renovation of the processes of word formation and of orthographic

[344] Sasagawa 2015, 62; Keo 2019, 123-4.
[345] Sasagawa 2015, 53.
[346] ចៅង ផាន 2006, 31-2. Vannsak's former student Thaong Phan recalls Vannsak asking Phan and other grammar students which of Khmer's several so-called 'independent vowels,' represented with special characters, could instead be written with characters from the core inventory of consonants and vowels. Phan suggests that Vannsak's work on developing the Khmer typewriter in 1952 may have initially encouraged his interest in orthographic reform.

conventions, methods that he articulated in his 1964 book *Principe de création des mots nouveaux* and referred to as *Khemaraneyakam*.[347]

Vannsak's linguistic reforms began to be institutionalized and expanded through the work of the educational magazine *Khemarayeanakam*, launched as part of the 1967 bill establishing Khmer as the language of instruction throughout Cambodian public schools.[348] The editors of *Khemarayeanakam* sought to continue the Cultural Committee's work of introducing new lexical items to the Khmer vocabulary, yet differed drastically in their approach. On the whole, *Khemarayeanakam* editors were far more tolerant of both French and Thai loanwords, as the former were closely bound to the conceptions of modernity that the movement's architects were engaged in mediating for their Khmer-language readerships, while othering and accentuating the difference of the latter was a far less urgent project for proponents of the *Khemarayeanakam* reforms, given both their orientation towards a secular discursive milieu centered on Paris, rather than a religious one emanating from Bangkok, as well as their relative lack of proficiency in Thai.[349]

Thus, in forming new words, *Khemarayeanakam* contributors instead prioritized compounds formed from existing Khmer lexical items and, in limited circumstances, those particles deriving from Pali and Sanskrit that had been naturalized into the Khmer language over centuries of use; Pali roots attested only in more esoteric and scholarly registers of Khmer, used heavily by the Cultural Committee in previous years, were dispreferred.[350] The *Khemaraneyakam* movement furthermore sought to revive the processes of derivational affixation that, widely attested across a number of Mon-Khmer languages, had been strongly characteristic of the morphology of Old Khmer in particular, but that were no longer productive processes in the modern Khmer language: thus, in forming abstract nouns, for instance, *Khemarayeanakam* contributors frequently employed the

[347] Sasagawa 2015, 61.
[348] Sasagawa 2015, 62. *Khemarayeanakam*, too, is frequently rendered in English as 'Khmerization.'
[349] See Rafael (2019, 146, 149-50) for discussions of perceptions in the colonial-era Philippines of English as "the language of modernity" and of its role in Thailand in the 1930s as an index of modernization.
[350] Sasagawa 2015, 62-4.

rules of infixation typical of Old Khmer in preference to the prefixation of Pali-derived abstract noun markers.[351]

In the early 1970s, the official *Khemarayeanakam* reforms were expanded to embrace Vannsak's orthographic renovations to the Khmer script. Despite opposition from certain novelists and various others engaged in the literary arts, the revised orthography was adopted in 1972 by the Lon Nol government, and was maintained as the official standard by a series of governments that succeeded the collapse of Democratic Kampuchea in 1979.[352]

Vannsak and other proponents of the *Khemaraneyakam* reforms thus shared with Chuon Nath a belief in the singular capacity of the Khmer language to index much wider conceptualizations of national community and identity. Yet where the Venerable Chuon Nath sought to inflect the Khmer language with robust linkages to Theravadin tradition and practice, Vannsak sought instead to both renovate the Khmer language to accommodate the imperatives of the modern nation-state while simultaneously accentuating those aspects of the language understood to be uniquely and authentically Khmer.

Beyond the official adoption of the *Khemaraneyakam* lexical, morphological, and orthographic reforms, the linguistic philosophies of Keng Vannsak exercised a significant influence over a generation of Cambodian novelists and poets that came of age during the *Sangkum* era. Such authors, including Vannsak himself, turned to language as the medium and idiom through which to contest both the Venerable Chuon Nath's religiously-inflected conceptualization of the Khmer nation as well as the Sihanouk regime's uncritical cultural depictions of Cambodian as a prosperous and democratic postcolonial nation-state.

[351] Sok 2005, 59; Sasagawa 2015, 63; Sam 1987, 30-1.
[352] Sasagawa 2015, 65. Sam (1987, 30-1) notes that the "harsh conflict" engendered by such debates in the late 1960s and early 1970s "was known at the time as the 'literature war.'"

Writing Back: Literature and the Politics of Dissent

Alongside Keng Vannsak's turn to orthographic and lexical reform and the broader *Khemaraneyakam* movement, a cohort of modernist authors came of age during the *Sangkum* years – many of them inspired by Vannsak himself – and converged on literature as the site through which to contest the Sihanouk regime's configurations of the postcolonial national community and to articulate alternative visions of postcolonial nationhood. Throughout the decades following independence, as optimism concerning the promises of constitutional democracy in Cambodia gradually faded, particularly among members of the educated urban middle class, literature, unlike politics, offered a relatively unrestricted domain in which to renegotiate Cambodia's relationship to the modern world and to reimagine and remap its postcolonial horizons.

In her 2019 study, Keo considers at length the diverse ways in which a generation of authors, journalists, filmmakers, artists, politicians, intellectuals, and everyday Cambodians gave voice and expression to their experiences of "postcolonial Cambodian modernity," understood as "the rupture between the new and the old" that characterized social and political life in the *Sangkum* era.[353] The novel, Keo argues, emerged as a central medium through which a generation of authors was able to give voice to their anxieties and disappointments with *Sangkum*-era society and to their aspirations for the future. The 'national literature' that thus emerged during this period was fundamentally engaged in a project of nation-building, as authors articulated their "visions, dreams and critiques for a post-colonial Cambodia," in part by mediating and reformulating the intellectual legacies inherited from the French.[354]

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[353] Keo 2019, 7.

[354] Keo 2019, 77. The decision to engage French literature in particular was far from passive; rather, as Grant (2017, 195) notes in the context of institutional biomedicine practiced in Cambodia during this same period, "choosing a Soviet model over others […] was a choice about Cambodia's postcolonial medical *and* national identity." See as well Brian Bernards's (2015, 11) formulation of postcolonial literature as that which "rethinks 'national liberation' as an unfulfilled promise, reinvigorates national culture by imagining new bonds of strategic antihegemonic alliance (or eliding old ones), and revitalizes the national literature by forging new creative vistas with language, content, and form."

Among the most prominent of this generation of authors was Soth Polin, a prolific writer of both Khmer- and French-language works who continues to write today from his home in Long Beach, California.[355] Keo provides an extensive analysis of the political connotations of Polin's body of work, with a particular emphasis on his depictions of disillusionment and ennui among the educated middle class and the urban elite of *Sangkum*-era Phnom Penh.[356] Polin developed a political consciousness from an early age: his uncle Sim Var, as editor-in-chief of the nationalist newspaper *Nokor Wat* discussed in Chapter 1, had played a prominent role in the early nationalist movement, and had served as Prime Minister from 1956 to 1958 before becoming an outspoken critic of Prince Norodom Sihanouk; in his early adulthood, Polin served as editor of Var's political newspaper, *Khmer Eikareac*.[357] In a critical account of Sihanouk's political legacy published in 1996, Polin recalls a poster hung on the walls of his childhood home depicting the heroes of the early nationalist movement: Son Ngoc Than, Prince Sisowath Yuttevong, and Ieu Koeus. Like many intellectuals of the *Sangkum* generation, Polin was initially supportive of the Sihanouk regime; as Sihanouk's more autocratic inclinations became apparent – particularly following the execution of Preap En, a political rival, in 1965 – he came to take an oppositional stance towards *Sangkum*.[358]

As Keo notes, Polin's literary engagements sought to mediate social and political discourse emanating from France for a Khmer-speaking audience. Keo locates Polin's works, and the wider tradition of literary modernism to which they belonged, within a broader inclination among many intellectuals during this period towards "cultural independence from France" – an inherently contradictory turn, in Keo's view, insofar as such engagements "remained within a French

[355] Despite his contributions to Khmer-language literature, Polin is not without his critics. For a particularly insightful consideration of themes of misogyny and patriarchy that pervade Polin's work, see Amratisha (2007).
[356] Keo 2019, 116-41.
[357] Amratisha 2007, 77.
[358] សុទ្ធ ប៉ូលិន 1996. Polin goes so far as to characterize En's execution as "the first step of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* towards its destruction."

worldview."[359] Even so, Keo describes Polin's efforts to not simply reproduce literary forms developed elsewhere, but rather to translate and interpret French works for contemporary Cambodian readerships, thereby "render[ing] them meaningful for the context in which he was writing."[360]

Such a project was overtly political, insofar as Polin and other authors contested Sihanouk's discursive projections of untroubled Cambodian modernity through *Sangkum*.[361] Yet while Polin and his contemporaries undoubtedly positioned their works in opposition to the Sihanouk regime, the literary modernism that blossomed during this period may also, I argue, be read as a radical attempt to remap Cambodia's postcolonial horizons and to renegotiate Cambodia's relationship to the modern world.

Khun Srun and the Remapping of Cambodia's Postcolonial Horizons

In January 1973, the Cambodian author Khun Srun completed the final pages of *Chun Choab Chaot*, or *The Accused*, a collection of essays alongside a semi-autobiographical account of his monthslong imprisonment in 1971, under the right-wing Lon Nol regime.[362] The essays cover a range of political and social themes, while the narrative section details the imprisonment of Chea Aem, Srun's narrator, and his subsequent struggles to reintegrate into a society that he increasingly recognizes as corrupt and unjust. Aem ultimately decides to leave the city – a fate presaging Srun's own: shortly after the novella's publication, Srun fled Phnom Penh to join the revolutionary forces of

[359] Keo 2019, 123-4.
[360] Keo 2019, 125. For a comparative study of literature's role as a mediator of modernity in a different context, see historian Hongxuan Lin's (2020) extensive consideration of Indonesian politicians' turn to literature in their "project of adapting or translating the world to Indonesia, in ways that would be relevant and beneficial to Indonesia, while retaining a specifically and authentically Indonesian cast" (Lin 2020, 3), in the first half of the twentieth century.
[361] Keo 2019, 130-40.
[362] Thien 2016.

the Khmer Rouge;[363] five years later, in December 1978, he was arrested and promptly executed in one of the regime's final purges.[364] *Chun Choab Chaot* would be his final work.

Yet while it is tempting to read a certain "fatal significance" back into the finality of this work[365] – to be sure, there are indications throughout the text of the decisions that Srun would ultimately make – I argue instead for a reading of *Chun Choab Chaot* as a text that reimagines the postcolonial nation by engaging strategically – through literature as both medium and idiom – with broader circulations of global modernity. Much like Vannsak, Polin, and other authors who came before him, Srun sought to situate his work at the intersection of diverse currents of both local and translocal literary, political, and philosophical discourse, and, in doing so, to configure and construct an imagined literary and historical community, one that transcends national borders, in which he positions his work and its readership. Srun's novella, in engaging French existentialist and absurdist writings, articulates a radical vision of postcolonial nationhood as it renegotiates Cambodia's relationship with its former colonizer;[366] at the same time, the work's thoroughly local orientation complicates and subverts dominant understandings of the circulatory networks and imagined audiences of 'world literature.'[367]

It was within the robust and dynamic discursive milieu discussed above that Khun Srun came of age. By 1973, Srun, only twenty-eight at the time, had established himself as a prominent

[363] Vachon 2016.
[364] Galmard 2015.
[365] I draw here on Boris Dralyuk's comments concerning the tragic fates of many dissident Soviet poets and authors: "There was and remains a degree of nostalgic envy in the West for the fatal significance of Soviet dissident art. But I feel dissident authors themselves would have much preferred to pursue their art without persecution and fear. […] Cults rise up around those who were, like Mandelstam, martyred for their art, but I would much rather have had more Mandelstam poems than the tragic story of his end, which lends, in my view, the wrong kind of significance to his work. I translate Isaac Babel, who was murdered by Stalin's regime, and nothing bothers me more than the sight of his mugshot in articles about his work. I've even seen Mandelstam's mugshot on covers of selections of his poems. Is that how these life-embracing artists, whose work overflows with vitality, would have wanted to be read – as victims?" (Garyan 2011).
[366] I reference Chen's (2010, 3) definition of decolonization as an "attempt of the previously colonized to reflectively work out a historical relation with the former colonizer, culturally, politically, and economically."
[367] Cho 2021. Cho suggests that we understand world literature as relational, rather than hierarchical, and as process rather than product. I return to her work below.

author within the Phnom Penh literary scene, publishing collections of poetry and essays that dealt with various societal and political concerns.[368] *Chun Choab Chaot* positions itself within this broader literary landscape by engaging literary, political, and philosophical currents circulating both locally and globally, and mediating their diffusion into local discursive spaces.

Situating Chun Choab Chaot *within a Genealogy of Phnom Penh Literary Modernism*

Throughout *Chun Choab Chaot*, Srun employs a number of methods to situate his work in conversation with this prior genealogy of politically-engaged Khmer-language novels, poems, and essays. Srun writes in the orthographic standard associated with Keng Vannsak's *Khemaraneyakam* linguistic reforms in the 1960s. Indeed, Srun himself was directly involved with the Khmerization campaign of the early 1970s, joining the movement's mathematics committee in 1970 at the request of the committee's head, Uy Vanthhon; he would contribute to the committee's mathematics textbook published for grades 8 through 3.[369] Srun furthermore held Vannsak himself in high regard; like many of the latter's admirers, Srun referred to his Vannsak as 'the Great Teacher,'[370] and in 1971 wrote a letter to Vannsak praising his "rationalist thinking, deep reflection and analysis, realism and practicality, and Khmerism."[371] Elsewhere, Srun's close friend and classmate Thaong Phan recalls their dreams of someday compiling a Khmer dictionary in the orthographic style of Vannsak, with the understanding that such a project "would be extremely valuable in helping to

[368] Srun's leftist political inclinations led to his imprisonment in 1971 for a period of seven months, the incident on which *Chun Choab Chaot* is based (Thien 2016); the Lon Nol regime, Srun's brother recalls, had labelled him a 'progressive' (Galmard 2015). Following the publication of *Chun Choab Chaot*, Srun was once again briefly detained, after which he fled the city for the eastern provinces, where, for many young and disillusioned Cambodians, the Khmer Rouge offered an alternative to the corruption and mismanagement of the Lon Nol government.

[369] ឃីង ហុកឌី, n.d., 2, 4. In the era prior to the Khmer Rouge, students entered the educational system at grade 12, and completed their secondary school education at grade 1.

[370] ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1970, ៥៨-៥.

[371] ឃីង ហុកឌី, n.d., 7.

strengthen and preserve various other [cultural] institutions [in addition to language], thereby safeguarding the nation for future generations."[372]

Beyond the sociopolitical positionality indexed through his text's orthographies, Srun incorporates more overt discursive engagements with prominent Khmer authors as well. Both Vannsak and the modernist poet Kuy Sarun, a mentor of Srun and himself a student of Vannsak, are discussed in the essays that form the first half of *Chun Choab Chaot*, as is the author Chhuk Meng Mao, whose ideological notion of the *proleung Khmer*, or the 'Khmer spirit,' offered an early counterpoint to the (ostensibly) Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideologies of the Khmer Rouge.[373] In the opening pages of *Chun Choab Chaot*, Srun prints in full a 1972 letter received from Meng Mao in which the latter praises Srun's commitment to the humanist ideals of societal progress and development.[374]

Srun thus situates himself early in the novella as deeply engaged with the indigenous modernist literary tradition embodied by Vannsak, Sarun, Meng Mao, and other humanist and progressivist political and social thinkers, a social and political positionality that is further indexed through Srun's use of vernacular registers and modernist literary devices throughout the narrative section of the work.

And yet Srun's embrace of modernity is neither categorical nor uncritical: rather, Srun seeks a negotiation between newer and older literary forms, thereby suggesting an approach to mediating

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[372] ថោង ជាន 2006, 37.

[373] ឃីង ហុកឌី, n.d., 9. Meng Mao had previously joined the revolution in Cambodia's eastern provinces, before returning to Phnom Penh to chronicle his experiences living among the Khmer Rouge. Ultimately, Meng Mao asserted, the Khmer Rouge were too dependent on imported ideologies, and had grown too distant from their Khmer roots.

[374] "He is particularly sensitive to everything that affects the human condition. The misfortunes of others have never left him indifferent. […] We are forever exchanging our ideas on the future of our society, on the improvements that we might bring about, on our nation and on the world… In all of this, his mind is forever at hand" (ឃុន ស្រ៊ិន 1973, 8-9). The letter is composed in French.

the tension between the modern and the traditional. The opening paragraphs of the novella's narrative section serve as a particularly salient enactment of such mediation:

> Evening, a waxing moon half-full. Through the bars across the window, a sliver of moon shines, brighter than the night before. How I love it, the rising moon, growing a bit larger, a bit brighter, with each passing day. I'm not like those who wait until it's full, only then showing any fondness.
>
> I've been staring up for half an hour now: watching you, moon, I wouldn't know that you'd grown at all. Yet grown you have. It's been a long while since I've missed seeing you. These days, it's best that I gaze until I've got my fill. Oh, moon! – so cool and soothing, together with a gentle breeze; a heavenly tonic to ease my soul, to allow me to forget for a moment my troubles. Oh, moon! – so clear and bright, like petals of gold leaf pasted by some artist to the round dome of the sky. And still you shine, clear and cool, even as we humans filled with greed hurl the vulgar sorrows of our earthly world up at you. You are forever calm, untroubled by every filth and defilement, a steady shade and shelter for us earthly creatures. My only regret is that you are so far away.[375]

The passage's embellished description of the narrative's time and place, with its emphasis on the natural environment and appeals to poetic sentiments and themes, is deeply evocative of older Khmer literary tropes.[376] At the same time, Srun balances such older forms with a more vernacular

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[375] ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1973, 48.

[376] The works of Nou Hach, Rim Kin, and Nhok Thaem, prominent authors of the previous generation and celebrated as Cambodia's earliest novelists, frequently make use of such introductory paragraphs, panning the reader's gaze across the rice fields of the Cambodian countryside or the picturesque houses of a serene village before coming to rest on the subject at hand. A particularly notable example of such styles, Nou Hach's *Mealea Duong Chet*, was in fact published only a year prior to *Chun Choab Chaot* (នូ ហាច 1972). (Notably, such works themselves enacted certain negotiations of their own, innovating on older, more religiously-inflected literary traditions as they engaged and mediated the textual form of the modern prose novel. For an extensive history of the Cambodian novel as a literary form and its connections to older Khmer literary traditions, see Klairung Amratisha (1998).)

lexicon and syntax that signal the author's modernist sensibilities, as does his use of such literary devices as the introspective first-person narrator and the personification and direct address of the moon.

The form and style of *Chun Choab Chaot* thus gesture towards a particular conceptualization of an ideal balance between modernity and tradition. Such themes are further engaged through the work's content, as Srun's narrator, Chea Aem, critiques the abuses and excesses of institutionalized power and authority while maintaining a deep commitment to the traditional values of respect for elders, particularly one's parents, and religious devotion and practice. Srun's abundant references to works of foreign literature and philosophy, as well as literary and historical figures – evoked alongside the teachings of traditional Cambodian Buddhist thought and practice – enact a renegotiation of Cambodia's place in the modern world.

Remapping Cambodia's Postcolonial Horizons

This renegotiation, I suggest, is best conceptualized alongside an understanding of *Chun Choab Chaot*'s many textual and historical references as what Alton Becker refers to as 'prior texts.'[377] Srun's appeals to such texts help to situate the work within broader, transnational circuits of literary, social, and political thought and praxis, and, in doing so, position both the work and its local readership within a broader imagined literary and historical community.

Srun engages extensively with the French writers Victor Hugo, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as the Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, both referencing these authors by name as well as citing ideas and characters from their works.[378] References to other literary and philosophical figures include both Cambodian and foreign figures, ranging from Hugo and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Keng Vannsak and Krom Ngoy; from Descartes to de Beauvoir to the "three

[377] Becker 1995, 15.

[378] Indeed, the narrative section of *Chun Choab Chaot* bears a number of marked similarities to Camus's *The Stranger*; Chea Aem, Srun's narrator, furthermore identifies directly with Camus's Meursault on several occasions (ឃ៊ុន ស្រ៊ិន 1973, 43, 72-3).

great *M*s (Marx, Mao, Marcuse)." Historical references include Napoleon Bonaparte, King Jayavarman VII of Angkor, and several figures from the *Reamker*, the Cambodian epic inspired by the *Ramayana*.[379] Receiving particular attention are historical figures who fell victim to political persecution and unjust imprisonment – particularly those associated with broadly leftist, anticolonial, and antiauthoritarian political stances and movements: Solzhenitsyn, Mahatma Gandhi, Alexander Berkman, the somewhat obscure Henri Charrière. These and other individuals, Aem reflects at one point, "were locked up for tens of years, day and night, and yet they didn't moan; as for me, tomorrow or the next day I'll be out of here – what am I moaning for!"[380]

More broadly, through a range of historical references and allusions, Srun situates the political and historical moment of his own imprisonment under the Lon Nol regime – and, by implication, Cambodian society of the 1970s as a whole – within the contours of a globalized understanding of political history. Srun critiques the indiscriminate use of the charge of 'treason' to neutralize political opposition through appeals to a wide range of historical and literary examples of individuals falsely condemned within their own lifetimes, yet vindicated by future generations: Socrates and Galileo appear alongside Kumbhakarna, the leader of the army of demons from the *Reamker*;[381] further examples from Cambodia's own recent history follow: Achar Sva and Achar Cheav from the colonial period, both associated with uprisings against the French; Ieu Koeus and Prince Sisowath Yuttevong, both Democratic Party politicians who perished – Koeus by assassination, Yuttevong by sudden illness – just prior to independence; an oblique reference to "the

[379] ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1973, 10, 36, 72, 80.

[380] ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1973, 66.

[381] ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1973, 13-4.

dozens of accused individuals [executed] four or five years ago."[382] Elsewhere, Srun cites, in full and in French, three and a half pages from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[383]

Taken together, such references help to write *Chun Choab Chaot* and its Cambodian readership into the conceptual space of an imagined literary and historical community, predicated on familiarity with the 'prior texts' – literary compositions and historical events alike – that these authors and historical figures together constitute. Srun strategically employs literary and historical references and devices to position his novella at the intersection of particular circulations – both local and translocal – of social and political thought. In doing so, Srun subtly yet deftly renegotiates Cambodia's place within the modern world, as he writes Cambodia into broader literary and historical imaginaries and envisions alternative postcolonial futures.

Troubling 'World Literature'

Crucially, Srun's engagements with foreign texts and authors constitute far more than the simple reproduction or transcription into a local context – or even mimicry in the Bhabhian sense[384] – of Western philosophical and literary discourse. Recognizing the ways in which Srun and other modernist authors of the *Sangkum* generation mediated and reformulated translocal literary circulations critically and creatively allows us to trouble dominant assumptions concerning the avenues and audiences of 'world literature.'

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[382] ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1973, 14. Prince Yuttevong died suddenly in 1947, and Koeus was assassinated by hand grenade in 1950 (Chandler 2008, 215; see Chapter 3). Achar Sva, a militant monk who led an uprising against the French between 1864 and 1866, and Achar Cheav, whose arrest by the French in 1942, in violation of the customs of Buddhist monkhood, provoked a demonstration of some several thousand monks in Phnom Penh (Edwards 2007, 237), were both subsequently valorized as national heroes, entering into the realm of folkloric legend. Srun also bemoans the fact that he is unable to know the final thoughts of "those dozens of accused individuals [executed] four or five years ago" – that is, in the final years of the Sihanouk regime; notably, the phrasing used for "accused individuals" – ជនជាប់ចោទ, *chun choab chaot* – is identical to the title of the work (ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1973, 43).

[383] ឃុន ស្រ៊ុន 1973, 21-5.

[384] See Bhabha (1984).

As Heekyoung Cho argues, world literature, rather than comprising "literary works […] embedded in competitive relations among national literatures," may be more productively understood as "a complex mode of […] networks that constantly generates new meanings and implications through […] entangled literary and cultural relations and processes."[385] The works of authors such as Srun, inherently concerned with local social and political realities and oriented towards local readerships, thus articulate a decolonial turn, as they embody a dual rejection of both colonial linguistic hierarchies as well as an assumed orientation towards French readerships.[386] In doing so, they take up the work of "reflectively work[ing] out a historical relation with the former colonizer, culturally, politically, and economically," as Kuan-Hsing Chen frames the project of decolonization.[387]

Furthermore, in recognizing literature as process, one that, in Cho's formulation, "constantly alters its various relations to sociohistorical and cultural factors and values, other types of writing, other media and forms of movement, and other literary networks," and, in doing so, "continuously engender[s] new meanings and understandings of literature and society," we come to recognize literature's role in renegotiating social and political relations, both within and between national communities, and in rewriting postcolonial futures.[388]

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[385] Cho 2021, 568-9. A detailed consideration of the changing epistemological trajectories traced by the term 'world literature' – and its accompanying academic field – is beyond the scope of my project here; see instead the volume in which Cho's article is included, *The Cambridge History of World Literature* (Ganguly 2021).

[386] Cho (2021, 576) notes that, in the context of Korean engagements in the early twentieth century with nineteenth-century Russian social realist literature, authors were "not motivated by a desire to gain international recognition (essentially Paris's approval) through aesthetic innovation[, for] literature had much more important work to do."

[387] Chen 2010, 3.

[388] Cho 2021, 581. Such renegotiations of social and political relations are explored in another context by Grant (2017), who considers the ways in which the medical journal *Revue Médico-Chirurgicale de l'Hôpital de l'Amitié Khméro-Soviétique*, published by the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital between 1961 and 1971, "enact[ed] a biomedicine that [was] simultaneously Cambodian and cosmopolitan […] through particular discursive techniques, and in entanglement with social relations." The journal's contributors thus "demonstrat[ed] for *Revue* authors and readers, Cambodian and Soviet, how to situate their work in relation to, and thus participate in, international medico-scientific discourse" (Grant 2017, 195-6, 211).

Chun Choab Chaot, I argue, articulates, and thereby enacts, a critical mediation of the tensions between local and foreign, traditional and modern, society and self. The text thus performs precisely the decolonial labor for which it calls, as it casts literature as both the medium and the idiom through which to imagine and strive for alternative postcolonial horizons.

Echoes of Sangkum *in the Modern Era*

In October 2017, the inaugural Khmer Literature Festival was held in Siem Reap province, Cambodia, bringing together some five hundred Cambodian authors, artists, publishers, and readers for panels, workshops, and networking sessions in celebration and support of Khmer literature. Two themes structured the 2017 festival: the first, the works of authors and poets from the Cambodian diaspora; the second, an examination of the works of Khun Srun.[389]

This resurgent interest in Srun's body of work is attested in other domains as well, among both domestic and foreign readerships. Srun's works are frequently featured on various Khmer-language Facebook pages, some affiliated with bookstores, dedicated to the celebration of Khmer literature and poetry.[390] Elsewhere, excerpts from Srun's works appear in the 2022 anthology *Out of the Shadows of Angkor: Cambodian Poetry, Prose, and Performance Through the Ages*, as well as its 2004 predecessor;[391] translator and novelist Madeleine Thien has published English-language excerpts in literary journals and other anthologies, working by way of French-language translations published by Christophe Macquet, whose complete French translation of *Chun Choab Chaot* was

[389] Co and Taing 2017.

[390] See, for instance, 'ប្រលោមលោកខ្មែរបុរាណ' (*Bralaomlok Khmer Boran*, 'Traditional Khmer Novels'), https://www.facebook.com/khmernovels; 'អាណាចក្រអ្នកអាន - Empire of Readers,' https://www.facebook.com/empireofreaders/; and 'ភួបកាសែតពន្លឺវិជ្ជា' (*Tob Kasaet Ponleu Vicchea*, 'Light of Knowledge Book Stall'), https://www.facebook.com/PonleurVicheaBookStore.

[391] May et al. 2022; May and Stewart 2004.

published in 2018.[392] Filmmaker Eric Galmard's 2015 documentary *A Tomb for Khun Srun* traces Srun's life through conversations with Khem, his sole surviving child.[393]

Such attention speaks to the continuing relevance of the project to renegotiate Cambodia's future horizons through the medium and idiom of literature. In the decades following independence, Cambodian authors converged on the literary arts as a site of engagement through which to articulate their disillusionment with Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* and subsequently with Lon Nol's Khmer Republic, and to imagine alternative approaches to negotiating modernity. Modernist authors articulated a vision for Cambodia as a postcolonial nation-state engaged in the circulatory currents of global modernity while remaining firmly rooted in the ongoing project of configuring local tradition and identity.

In the contemporary era, avenues for political expression and dissent have once again been curtailed, as the ruling Cambodian People's Party has outlawed opposition parties and suppressed platforms for meaningful civic engagement.[394] Much as the early optimism following Cambodian independence in 1953 gradually gave way to sentiments of discontentment and disillusionment as the regimes of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and then of Lon Nol failed to deliver the postcolonial nation that so many had hoped for, so, too, has the Hun Sen regime steadily eroded the hopes for functioning democracy that followed the Paris Peace Accords in 1991. And just as global artistic, cultural, and social circulations forced many Cambodians to confront the currents of global modernity in the 1960s and 1970s, the accelerating pace of globalization in the contemporary era has similarly brought new urgency to longstanding debates concerning national community and identity.[395]

[392] Thien 2016, 2018; Macquet 2018.
[393] Galmard 2015.
[394] Ben, Mech, and Baliga 2017.
[395] On the 'linguistic anxiety' that such tensions engender, particularly in the face of globalized English hegemony, see Yin (2020).

The literary and visual arts have thus reemerged in the contemporary era as critical sites through which to confront political and social anxieties and to reckon with the disappointment of those possible futures that have failed to materialize. Authors, filmmakers, and others contest state-mediated – and -circumscribed – understandings of national identity and community, converging on the arts to renegotiate Cambodia's relationship to its past and to remap its future horizons. Today, a new generation of Cambodians turns to the works of their predecessors as they, too, seek to engage the transnational circulations of a globalized world while remaining locally rooted, and to radically challenge the political and moral failings of contemporary society by calling forth new ways of being and belonging in the modern world.[396]

[396] As Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan write, contemporary Cambodians "are today confronted with questions similar to those which the older generation faced: how to build a contemporary Cambodian culture? What foreign elements to use and how to incorporate them? How to reimagine existing local traditions in the modern world? The initiatives of the previous generation provide perhaps the best resources for reconsidering such questions in the contemporary context" (Ly and Muan 2001, viii).

Chapter 5:

Being and Belonging in the Modern World: Language and Literature in an Era of English Hegemony, 1993-2023

> "In those years, I was steadfast. From 1985 on, when I served as Prime Minister, I made it clear that, for anyone preparing a letter or submitting a report written in the phonetic style – I would not sign it! I would send it back to be corrected…"
>
> Prime Minister Hun Sen, *remarks on the restoration of the Chuon Nath orthographic standard*[397]

> "I am very proud to have been born Khmer, with our own language with so many unique qualities, with such a long history, with such a coherent identity, and with so much diversity and richness."
>
> CKVIRYA, *"Mr. Ly Sovir Analyzes Khmer Letters" blog post comments section*[398]

On the morning of August 26, 1996, at the opening session of the International Conference on Khmer Studies in Phnom Penh, First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh, son of King Norodom Sihanouk, stood to deliver the conference's opening remarks. The conference, organized by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport; the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP); and Tokyo's Sophia University, convened scholars from a variety of national and academic backgrounds to present papers on a range of topics, with talks and conference materials provided in a mix of Khmer, French, and English.[399] "We are extremely fortunate," Ranariddh told the audience,

[397] កោះសន្តិភាព 2010.

[398] ទឹម ឬឿន 2008.

[399] Center for Khmer Studies Library n.d.

> that our Khmer language and script were not eradicated, as in some neighboring countries that were forced to formally adopt the Roman alphabet. And yet, when it comes to reforming and correcting the language and script, my own impression is that there are two distinct approaches that are not particularly compatible: that of the Venerable Chuon Nath, representing the conservatives, and that of Dr. Keng Vannsak, representing the modernists; this has resulted in the formation of two opposing schools of disciples. Therefore, in order to preserve and enhance the durability of our national unification, in line with the insightful reflections of the King Father, our honorable Father of National Education, I ask that all national intellectuals continue to implement both such methods, just as the Royal Government uses them in its official communications and other documents, without encountering any difficulties. Yet we are hopeful that the modern characteristics will continue to evolve, given that a new modern grammar is already being developed through scholarly study.[400]

The very fact of Prince Ranariddh's presence at the conference speaks to the political potency that the cultural contours of the Khmer nation continued to exercise in the aftermath of the civil war and the United Nations-led effort to support Cambodia's transition to civil government, known as the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia, or UNTAC. Much like his father's own various cultural projects and engagements, Ranariddh's participation in the conference suggests an effort to exert a degree of control over, and derive a degree of legitimacy from, scholarly projections of Khmer culture and nationhood.

It is furthermore noteworthy that language features so prominently in his efforts to do so. In his remarks, Ranariddh exhibits more than a cursory understanding of the two dominant

[400] ឃីង ហុកឌី 2006, 15-6 n8.

perspectives within the past three decades of debate on orthographic and lexical reform – a topic that might otherwise be considered somewhat esoteric knowledge, particularly for a prime minister.

Yet even as he describes the opposing perspectives of the Venerable Chuon Nath and of Keng Vannsak, claiming to take no stance in the debate, Ranariddh nevertheless continues within a long genealogy of social and political discourse in Cambodia in which otherwise tedious orthographic and lexical distinctions are imbued with a far broader significance, tethered to the survival of the nation itself. Like Ieu Koeus before him, Ranariddh invokes the importance of national unity, responding, like Koeus, to the particularities of his own historical moment: in the UNTAC-organized elections of 1993, Prince Ranariddh's FUNCINPEC party had won slightly fewer than half of the seats in the National Assembly; the resulting coalition government that FUNCINPEC formed alongside the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) involved the formation of two prime minister positions, the first held by Ranariddh and the second by Hun Sen. By 1996, fractures within the coalition had widened; in July of the following year, a military offensive by CPP forces brought an end to the coalition government and drove Ranariddh into exile.[401]

It is striking, then, that, three years after the country's first free and fair elections since the establishment of *Sangkum* four decades prior, and less than a year before violent confrontations would once again be deployed for political ends, Ranariddh invokes orthographic debates in his appeals for the preservation of national unity. Unlike Koeus, Ranariddh does not explicitly endorse a particular approach to deciding orthographic and lexical conventions; he does, however, acknowledge the potential for linguistic divisions to index more ominous societal ruptures. Ranariddh's comments are at once hopeful, in their optimism for a future in which such divisions

[401] Chandler 2008, 286-91. Ranariddh returned to the country four months prior to the scheduled 1998 elections, in which opposition parties won sixty percent of the national vote, yet were unwilling to form a governing coalition; as such, FUNCINPEC again joined the CCP in a coalition government.

may finally be set aside, and cautionary, in their recognition of the lingering fractures in Cambodian social and political life.

Ranariddh's remarks make for a fitting opening to a consideration of discourse on and through language and literature in Cambodia's contemporary period, extending from the 1993 elections through to the present day. Like Ranariddh, contemporary authors, journalists, politicians, online commentators, and others exhibit a notable tension between the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity, between the pragmatism of hegemonic unity – whether national or global – and the ideal of democratic plurality. Many of the questions posed by contemporary Cambodians echo those of previous generations, yet manifest in thoroughly novel ways. In the contemporary era, the spread of English hegemony and accelerating globalization have introduced new anxieties into debates concerning the future of the Khmer language, while digital platforms have brought such debates more fully into the public domain, enabling participation by a wider cross-section of the Khmer linguistic community. Today, as an increasingly entrenched political regime seeks once more to mold the nationalist imaginary in its own image, language remains a central site of engagement through which contemporary participants in political, literary, religious, and other domains confront the challenges of their day and articulate their aspirations for the future of the Cambodian nation.

Hean Sokhom and the Anticipation of Twenty-First-Century Modernity

Among the presenters at the 1996 International Conference on Khmer Studies was Dr. Hean Sokhom, a professor of linguistics at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Sokhom had joined the RUPP faculty in 1993, after completing his PhD at the Institute of Linguistics at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow the year before. He would remain at RUPP for the next twenty years, until retiring from teaching in 2018; today, he remains active within Cambodia's academic community, having served on the Council of the Sciences of Phnom Penh's International University

since 2014 and the RUPP Department of Linguistics' own Council of the Sciences since 2015. In 2017, Sokhom became Director of the National Council of Khmer Language (NCKL), housed within the Royal Academy of Cambodia (RAC).[402]

Sokhom's paper for the 1996 conference, written and presented in Khmer but listed in the English program as "Method of formation and improvement of Khmer socio-political terminology," exhibits a linguistic ideology deeply evocative of that of Ieu Koeus, a convergence that I suggest results from the historical similarities between the Cambodia of 1946 and that of 1996.[403] Sokhom, like Koeus before him, writes during a period of rapid social and political change, as heavy-handed interventions by foreign powers – French colonial administration and UNTAC oversight, respectively – have begun to ease, and optimism for Cambodia's political future is high. At the same time, Sokhom's arguments reflect the nuances of his own intellectual concerns, and respond to the unique anxieties of his own historical moment.

Sokhom's paper opens with a definition of the Khmer language that is deeply reminiscent of Koeus, as, like Koeus, Sokhom defines language through appeals to ethnolinguistic constructions, with the Cham and Mon languages and peoples invoked as Khmer's national and linguistic 'others.' "The Khmer language," Sokhom writes,

> is the native language of the Khmer ethnicity, the majority of whom live in the Kingdom of Cambodia. Among the three ethnic groups with the greatest historicity in the region – the Mon, the Cham, and the Khmer – only the Khmer people have preserved their polity into the present day.[404]

Sokhom continues with a brief sketch of the historical contours of Khmer's linguistic development, emphasizing its neglect during the colonial period and subsequent resurgence as the national

[402] "បណ្ឌិត ហ៊ាន សុខុម" 2018.

[403] I am grateful to Andrew and Stephen Hollister for sharing copies of both the conference program and Sokhom's paper with me.

[404] ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 683.

language of the newly-independent nation-state in the 1950s.[405] This historicization provides the framing for the central themes that Sokhom identifies in characterizing the development of Khmer's sociopolitical lexicon: the challenges posed by a lack of uniform usages and principles for coining new lexical items, alongside the importance of such uniformity and rationality for the development of the country's social and political sciences and institutions.[406]

Throughout his paper, Sokhom repeatedly returns to the issue of lexical variation – rendered as a Khmer transliteration of the French *variant*,[407] and evocative of Koeus's own concern for uniformity – resulting from the borrowing of foreign loanwords and the creation of new lexical items in a haphazard fashion as the country rapidly developed during the mid-twentieth century. The *Khemarayeanakam* reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, Sokhom writes, attempted to resolve such issues, and published their own French-Khmer lexicon of technical terminology. Yet this lexicon was ultimately insufficient, Sokhom argues, both for its limited scope and for its reliance on translating foreign words into Khmer; it was not, Sokhom writes, "an explanatory dictionary," composed in a single language for a single linguistic community.[408] Adherents of the *Khemarayeanakam* movement furthermore exhibited considerable variation among their own usages, "as they were not under the

[405] Sokhom is notably considerably more overt than Koeus in acknowledging the intimacies of language with political ideology, writing that sociopolitical terminology in particular is "a class of words that may be buried beneath the ideologies of the governing regime, in both societal and political domains," and suggesting that the political turmoil and instability of the preceding two decades "have led to both the selection of lexical items for usage as well as the ideological heart of such terms undergoing significant upheaval" (ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 683).

[406] ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 683-4.

[407] Sokhom writes this as វ៉ារ៉្យ៉ង់ *varyang*.

[408] ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 684-5.

jurisdiction of a national committee for technical terminology, for there is no such committee in Cambodia."[409]

The issue of irregular usages thus continues in the present day, Sokhom writes, posing challenges for researchers in the social and political sciences. In particular, Sokhom emphasizes the challenges for readability and understandability that irregular and irrational lexical coinages pose, for both academic and lay readers alike – a challenge that, he argues, threatens the development of the country as a whole, as readers' difficulties in comprehending such words impedes their comprehension of the ideas that they represent.[410] Sokhom largely aligns with Koeus in his diagnosis of the causes of such incomprehensible terminology: such terms rely heavily on calque translations of foreign vocabulary using Pali and Sanskrit, rather than Khmer, morphological components, while the relatively limited attention paid to technical terminology by the *Vachananukram Khmer* allows for considerable variation among regions, authors, and translators.[411] Uniform and comprehensible usages is important, Sokhom argues, even within such specialized domains, "for we must remember that sociopolitical terminology is not just for specialists, but also for use in news media for lay audiences and ordinary readers;" indeed, the unprincipled and disorganized creation of new technical vocabularies, he suggests, "leads to the emergence of considerable variation among technical terms, and, ultimately, results in the problem of variation within the national language" more broadly.[412]

At the same time, Sokhom is critical of what he perceives to be the excesses of the *Khemarayeanakam* movement. He concedes that the reformists' resurrection of the processes of

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[409] ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 685. Sokhom, writing in 1996, was himself then involved in plans to establish such a committee, which resulted in the creation of the National Language Institute in 1998; in 2007, the Institute became the National Committee of Khmer Language, before becoming the National Council of Khmer Language in 2011 ("ប្រវត្តិក្រុមប្រឹក្សាជាតិភាសាខ្មែរ" n.d.).

[410] ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 686.

[411] ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 686-7.

[412] ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 689, 692.

derivational morphology that characterized Old Khmer, particularly prefixes and infixes, expands the contemporary language's repertoire of methods for coining new lexical items in meaningful ways,

> allowing for the preservation of systems [i.e., lexical families] of technical terminology and for easy comprehension and understandability. But at the same time, we ought not to innovate on that which is long attested and has been stable within a language, or to avoid Pali and Sanskrit elements that have already been naturalized.[413]

Sokhom thus here evinces an orientation towards the development of a unified standard that will support the broader population to develop the linguistic and technical competencies that are required for Cambodia to progress as a nation-state, a perspective that accords strongly with that of Ieu Koeus, writing half a century prior. While acknowledging the utility of Pali- and Sanskrit-derived coinages in particular contexts, Sokhom, like Koeus before him, advises against an excessive reliance on Indic derivations, arguing that technical terminology ought not to be the exclusive domain of experts, but rather ought to be accessible to the wider population; as such, "any basic elements from Pali and Sanskrit that are already widely used in the creation of new words […] and that have been naturalized into Khmer" may reasonably be employed in the creation of new technical terms, while novel lexical items and morphological elements introduced from Pali and Sanskrit ought to be avoided, with native Khmer roots employed instead.[414]

Ultimately, Sokhom's primary concern, unlike that of Koeus, is not with the consolidation of the nation-state, but rather with its academic and scientific advancement and development. In this regard, we may observe an effort on the part of Sokhom to position his work within a broader, transnational discursive field, in ways that echo Jenna Grant's analysis of the efforts by the authors

[413] ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 694.

[414] ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 695.

of the medical journal *Revue Médico-Chirurgicale de l'Hôpital de l'Amitié Khméro-Soviétique* in the 1960s to "situate their work in relation to, and thus participate in, international medico-scientific discourse."[415] Throughout his text, Sokhom makes use of French glosses, occasionally omitting a Khmer equivalent entirely, for unfamiliar linguistic terminology; in his comparative analyses, meanwhile, Sokhom incorporates examples drawn from both French as well as Russian, reflecting his own doctoral education at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow and the broader geopolitical intimacies between Cambodia and the USSR that had characterized the 1980s.[416,417] Presenting before a multinational and multilingual audience in 1996, midway between the end of the Cold War and the arrival of the twenty-first century, during a period of relative peace and optimism within Cambodia's own domestic political arena, Sokhom argues for the inclusion of Khmer scholarship – focused on the Khmer language and conducted by Cambodian scholars – within the international field of linguistics, as practiced by the global academic community.

Notably, Sokhom's engagements with the *Vachananukram Khmer* are relatively minor: the work is cited primarily in Sokhom's discussion of orthographic variation, an issue that he suggests has yet to be resolved within Khmer linguistics; indeed, the *Vachananukram Khmer* has in fact contributed to orthographic irregularity, he argues, given the contradictions within its own orthographic usages.[418] Such limited engagement belies the increasingly privileged position that the

[415] Grant 2017, 211. See as well the reading in Chapter 4 of the modernist author Khun Srun's 1973 novella *Chun Choab Chaot* (*The Accused*) as a work that similarly attempts to strategically engage and mediate transnational literary networks and modes of social and political thought.

[416] See Chandler (2008, 277-84), who notes that "by 1988 some five thousand Cambodians had undergone technical or academic training abroad, principally in the Soviet Union, Cuba, or Eastern Europe."

[417] It is furthermore noteworthy that while Sokhom, like Koeus, emphasizes the extent of Sanskrit and Pali borrowings into Khmer, he is far less concerned with differentiating Khmer's linguistic history from that of Thai, as the Venerable Chuon Nath and other members of the Cultural Committee sought to do, or with establishing the cultural primacy and authenticity of Khmer vis-à-vis Thai through a nuanced account of the two peoples' histories, as Koeus sought to demonstrate. Rather, Sokhom states simply that Khmer and Thai, while belonging to distinct language families, nevertheless exhibit significant lexical overlap "due to mutual borrowings back and forth, resulting from their intersecting histories and longstanding interactions" (ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 686).

[418] ហ៊ាន សុខុម 1996, 692. The relatively minimal attention that Sokhom pays to orthography may result from the fact that, unlike Ieu Koeus and Keng Vannsak, Sokhom received formal training as a linguist, and the field

Vachananukram Khmer would continue to occupy within linguistic debates circulating within Cambodia's public and academic spheres alike, culminating in its restoration as the official government standard in 2010 and the establishment in 2017 of a committee to produce an updated version of the 1967 *Vachananukram Khmer*, a project that Sokhom himself, as Director of the National Council of Khmer Language, would oversee, and that continues to this day.

Ly Sovir and Discursive Engagements in the Public Domain

Ten years after Hean Sokhom's presentation at the 1996 International Conference on Khmer Studies, scholar Ly Sovir published his 2006 monograph *Neak Reapcham Kae Samruel Aksar Khmer Mun Ke* (*The First to Reform the Khmer Script*), a far more critical account of the lexical, morphological, and orthographic standards established by the *Vachananukram Khmer*.[419] Across some eighty pages, Sovir provides a brief history of the debates concerning language and orthography that occupied government officials in the decades following the collapse of Democratic Kampuchea, and considers the linguistic philosophies of Chuon Nath, Ieu Koeus, and Keng Vannsak, with examples of discrepancies and points of contradiction between their various works and writings. Sovir ultimately presents himself as a rationalist and reformist, extending the linguistic reforms introduced by Keng Vannsak four decades prior to argue for the codification of a highly regular and rule-based orthography and morphology.

Sovir's critiques of Chuon Nath's orthographic standard center on his perceptions of the standard's inconsistencies and internal contradictions, as evaluated against the dual criteria of pre-Indic Old Khmer precedent and logical regularity. Much like Vannsak before him, Sovir is critical of

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of linguistics is classically concerned solely with the natural phenomenon known as human language, while writing, as a technological invention, is typically excluded from linguistic inquiry.

[419] លី សុវីរ 2006. Such positions are further reflected in the orthography employed by Sovir himself throughout his work, as he adheres to a highly uniform orthographic standard that frequently conflicts with that advocated by the Venerable Chuon Nath (see Appendix 1).

what he considers to be the excessive influence of Pali and Sanskrit on the Khmer language, with the orthography and lexicon of pre-Indic Old Khmer cited in support of various arguments for reforms – yet Sovir extends Vannsak's arguments to further extremes, calling for the elimination of two characters entirely – ណ *na* and ឡ *la*, each originally reserved Pali and Sanskrit inscriptions employing the Old Khmer script – for the phonetic inconsistencies that they introduce to an otherwise logical system of mapping phonology to orthography.[420] Sovir critiques Nath's enthusiasm for Pali- and Sanskrit-derived coinages and preservation of Indic phonology within contemporary Khmer orthography, offering a concise assessment of Nath's motivations: "In my view, [the Venerable Chuon Nath] feared that Pali words would be lost."[421]

In contrast to Nath's emphasis on Pali etymologies and preservation of orthographic tradition, Sovir advocates instead for a reformed orthography characterized by the consistent application of rational principles grounded in morphology and phonology, thereby eliminating the many irregularities and inconsistencies exhibited by modern Khmer orthography. In an echo of Ieu Koeus's assertion in 1947 of the relevance and pertinence of linguistic development for a people in the midst of the project of nation-building, as evidenced by the precedent of revolutionary France, Sovir, writing in 2006, offers the example of "developed countries," in which "no progressive doctrines are ever rendered regressive, for [the people of such countries] understand that principled development can only ever lead to growth. Yet if any development lacks such rigor, it must be rejected."[422] Like both Koeus and Sokhom, Sovir is principally concerned with the

[420] លី សុវីរៈ 2006, 7-9.

[421] លី សុវីរៈ 2006, 38.

[422] លី សុវីរៈ 2006, 57.

pragmatic demands placed on the Khmer language by the modern world; sentimental regard for the illogical and archaic traditions of previous generations must be resisted.

Neak Reapcham Kae Samruel is the twenty-fifth published work by Sovir, a prolific author, and continues to circulate today, available in a variety of bookshops and market stalls dealing in more academic and scholarly texts. Yet while its circulation numbers are difficult to assess, Sovir's work was notably at the center of a spirited online discussion in 2008, in which a variety of participants came together to discuss the central themes at the heart of the work.

'Many Unique Qualities': The Construction of a Khmer Imaginary Among the Linguistic Laity

The impetus for the discussion was a brief overview of the work posted to the Wordpress blog *Samrap Khmer*, or 'For Khmer,' run by Teum Boeun. Boeun posted a photo of the text's final page, on which Sovir poses several questions related to the orthographic inconsistencies identified and reforms proposed throughout his work, and asked the blog's readers for their opinions. The discussion that followed, with thirty-seven comments exchanged between ten distinct participants, touched on many of the same themes and questions that have occupied the debates held among previous generations relating to Khmer orthography and linguistic ideology, centered on the tensions between, on the one hand, rational development and reform, and, on the other, the preservation of tradition. Yet the unique composition of the discussion's participants – predominantly non-experts and non-academics, several of whom explicitly noted their limited formal education – provides insights into the ways in which linguistic imaginaries are variously constructed and contested in non-elite spaces, while gesturing more broadly to the Khmer language's continued salience as a site of national imagining.

The discussion initially centers on the variable yet contradictory usages of the two nasal plosives ន *no* and ណ *na*, a topic revisited throughout Sovir's work and the subject of the photo of the final page of Sovir's text included in Boeun's original post. Commenters offer nuanced understandings of not only the workings of Khmer orthography, phonology, and morphology, but

also of the sociopolitical contexts out of which such rules and standards emerge: "Languages always have exceptions," writes KHMERPOEMBOY, "unlike mathematics;" *Ach Phkay* ('Meteorite') similarly critiques the notion that orthographic rules are immutable and absolute: "We should know that the Venerable Chuon Nath's Dictionary that we use daily is a dictionary that was simply decreed to be the standard, in order for there to be uniformity across usages of the Khmer language."[423] Commenter CKVIRYA further develops this theme, writing that "all doctrines are created by people; therefore, if a majority of people designate or understand a certain thing as true, then we ought to adhere to the opinion of the majority. Such doctrines are not natural laws ([such as the fact that] the sun rises in the east and sets in the west) that humans cannot designate as fact, see!"[424] CKVIRYA closes with a pointed question: "I would like to know when these rules of word formation (or rules of Khmer grammar) that Mr. Ly Sovir raises were created, and by whom."

In a follow-up comment, *Ach Phkay* suggests that while rules of grammar may indeed be human inventions, it does not follow that everyone is entitled to the development of their own grammar rules; this, *Ach Phkay* insists, "would lead over time to the dissolution of national literature, and would inevitably give rise to language wars." Echoing Ieu Koeus, *Ach Phkay* argues instead for adherence to the Chuon Nath Dictionary: not for any particular linguistic merit that it holds over other standards, but simply for its potential to consolidate uniform usage.

From there, the discussion turns to the theme of the proper extent to which Pali and Sanskrit etymologies and orthographies ought to be incorporated into contemporary Khmer. The linguistic reforms introduced by Keng Vannsak are frequently cited, with some commenters demonstrating nuanced understandings of the influence of Vannsak's own sociopolitical

[423] ទឹម ឈឿន 2008.

[424] ទឹម ឈឿន 2008. CKVIRYA goes on to critique Sovir's suggestion that the continued popularity of the Chuon Nath standard represents something of a tyranny of the majority, just as Galileo was falsely persecuted by an ignorant population: orthographic standards and "the case of Galileo that Mr. Ly Sovir raises are two utterly distinct situations: one deals with a law of nature, and one with a law of humankind."

motivations and convictions on his linguistic recommendations: SOKKONG, for instance, writes that "Vannsak did not really know the Old Khmer script, or Pali or Sanskrit, or the languages of neighboring peoples, such as Thai and so on. […] Don't place too much faith in his [version of] Khmer, since he appears to have detested Pali." What Vannsak failed to recognize, SOKKONG suggests, is that "Buddhists, poets, authors, and the like are forever drawing on words from other languages." SOKKONG continues:

> Often, we see loans from Pali, from Thai, and so on – and we ought to preserve their spellings according to their own linguistic principles. […] Also, lots of people rely on Old Khmer [in their arguments] – this isn't particularly appropriate, because Old Khmer is similar to Old Thai (look at the palm leaf manuscripts), with many texts written sequentially, without subscript forms in the ancient period. It's very different.[425]

Boeun, the post's original author, agrees with SOKKONG's comments, critiquing Keng Vannsak's hostility towards Pali and ostensible fixation on 'pure' Khmer linguistic traditions as impractical: "If we try to avoid Pali and Sanskrit out of fear, like [Keng Vannsak], then Khmer will undoubtedly simply disappear." For Boeun, the influence of Pali and Sanskrit is not evidence of linguistic impurity or corruption, but rather a defining feature of Khmer itself, inextricable from its present-day identity: "Avoiding [Pali and Sanskrit derivations] is impossible, for our language is now the fusion of these three languages joined together."

Throughout these discussions, the Thai language appears as a point of reference and contrast, particularly in exchanges between SOKKONG and Boeun. "I am always disheartened whenever I see incorrect spellings, most frequently in newspapers, books, and especially in karaoke lyrics," writes SOKKONG; "compared to Thai, there is a huge difference: they are consistent in how

[425] ទឹម ឃឿន 2008.

they read and write." Yet if SOKKONG expresses dismay at the status of Khmer in the present, Boeun suggests that its innate qualities are incommensurable with those of many other languages: "Khmer has very distinct and clear rules for itself; perhaps Thai and Laotian can't be compared." SOKKONG adds that while Thai may be slightly easier to write, for its lack of subscript consonants, it is considerably more difficult to learn, for its excessive and redundant inventory of consonant characters – a characterization with which Boeun agrees: "I don't know any Thai, but from what I've heard from those who do, they say that our Khmer language has many more unique qualities than does Thai, such as two distinct registers, subscript consonants, and the fact that Khmer words can be read and written in several different ways.[426] When I hear this, I feel contentment and affection for Khmer, knowing that it doesn't lack a thing."[427]

Such pride in the Khmer language, and in the national identity that it indexes, is expressed by other commenters as well. Among the most articulate is CKVIRYA, who describes a recent meeting that they attended with representatives from the Ministry of Education, relating the officials' statement that all Ministry-published books will adhere to the principles developed by the National Language Institute within the Royal Academy of Cambodia – "a piece of good news for those who want definitive linguistic uniformity." CKVIRYA continues:

> I myself am hopeful that this dark age of our Khmer language is fading, and that from now on our language will have the opportunity to strengthen its status, in order to be more and more secure for future generations of the Khmer people. I am very proud to have been born Khmer, with our own language with so many unique

[426] It is, of course, precisely these qualities that give rise to the ambiguities and 'inconsistencies' that lie at the heart of the majority of debates concerning Khmer orthography.

[427] ទឹម ឃឿន 2008.

qualities, with such a long history, with such a coherent identity, and with so much diversity and richness.[428]

Taken as a whole, then, this detailed and wide-ranging discussion demonstrates the extent to which the same questions with which the Venerable Chuon Nath, Ieu Koeus, Keng Vannsak, and other intellectuals from previous generations were concerned are similarly taken up in the public domain in the contemporary era. The discussants cited here are non-experts; SOKKONG, for instance – among the most prolific of the discussion's participants – mentions that their formal education extended only through grade 6, in 1986, and that they could scarcely read until they took a renewed interest in literature in the mid-1990s. Yet they and other commenters express remarkably sophisticated and nuanced understandings of not only the historical trajectories of Khmer linguistic evolution and twentieth-century efforts at reform, but also of the ways in which the architects and advocates of each particular orthographic philosophy were immersed within much broader milieus of social and political thought and discourse. Discussants are critical of Keng Vannsak's conceptualization of a 'pure' and uncorrupted Khmer language, yet nuance their endorsements of the Chuon Nath standard, grounding their acceptance of the legitimacy of Sanskrit and particularly Pali influence on Khmer in predominantly historical, rather than religious, terms.

The scope and sophistication of the discussion considered here furthermore challenges the notion that debates around language and orthography are the exclusive domain of educated elites, and that the linguistic imaginaries constructed through such debates are consequently enacted through top-down processes of state-mediated diffusion. Rather, the discussants engaging with Boeun's blog post demonstrate instead the ways in which conceptualizations of national community and identity emerge through the discursive engagements and convergences of a wide range of actors, as non-elites negotiate and nuance the national imaginaries propagated by regimes of power,

[428] ទឹម ឃឿន 2008.

at times rejecting such imaginaries entirely as they opt instead to envision their own. Each of the discussants cited here engages the arguments of Sovir and other institutionally-affiliated scholars, yet critiques and nuances such scholars' conceptualizations of the Khmer language in critical and insightful ways, thereby enacting their own individual mediations of the tensions between modernity and tradition, hegemony and plurality, self and state.[429]

At the time of Boeun's post and the subsequent discussion that it inspired, the orthographic standard devised by Keng Vannsak, first adopted under Lon Nol in 1972, remained the official standard – in statute, if not always in practice. Yet as the discussion above demonstrates, many within the Khmer linguistic community had begun to view the Khmerization reforms critically, and the figure of the Venerable Chuon Nath, esteemed for his deep learning and lifelong commitment to the dual institutions of Khmer language and Khmer Buddhism, had become a salient signifier of a more admirable conceptualization of Khmer identity and community, particularly as realized through language. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the ruling party had taken notice, and sought to consolidate such sentiment around its own vision of the modern Cambodian nation.

The Restoration and Renovation of the Chuon Nath Orthographic Standard

On March 19, 2010, at an assembly held at the National Institute of Education, Prime Minister Hun Sen made the sudden announcement that students' essays, along with newspapers, magazines, web publications, and public signage, would henceforth be expected to follow the

[429] Such a reading aligns with Keo's (2019, 145) analysis of the cultural productions of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* era, as she concludes that, "as much as the top-down projects by the state transformed Cambodian society and brought about new social groups, they did not define how Cambodians experienced modernity. It was Cambodian intellectuals who rendered modernity meaningful through the conversations and debates they had in reaction to these state-led projects." In this analysis, it was not the *Sangkum* regime or other institutionally-aligned elite individuals that *dictated* modernity for the masses; rather, "it was primarily Cambodia's artists, musicians, writers and journalists who *realized* modernity as they sought to create a postcolonial Cambodian identity" (Keo 2019, 14, emphasis added).

standards established in the *Vachananukram Khmer* attributed to the Venerable Chuon Nath. Speaking to an audience of senior officials from the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, convened to review accomplishments from the 2008-2009 academic year and establish targets for the 2009-2010 research and essay competitions, Hun Sen reported that he had instructed the National Committee of Khmer Language – later renamed the National Council of Khmer Language, or NCKL[430] – to standardize its guidelines for spelling, processes of word creation, and the designation of definitions, as, he noted, the Chuon Nath conventions had begun to be favored over the phonetic approach developed by Keng Vannsak. After relating an anecdote in which he claimed that, as Prime Minister in the years following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, he refused to sign any documents prepared according to the phonetic standard, despite its official status at the time,[431] Hun Sen suggested that it was the country's use of multiple different writing standards that held Cambodia back economically:

> This is an area that deserves our continued attention. We must be unified in our usage. There is only a single Khmer language – yet there are multiple different methods of writing. Now, we have what we need to achieve such unity: it is the *Vachananukram Khmer* of the Venerable Supreme Patriarch Chuon Nath.[432]

Hun Sen's penchant for exaggerated rhetoric is well known. Yet the specific contours of the rhetoric employed in his remarks – the one-to-one identification of language and nation, themes of uniformity and standardization bound to those of development and progress, the renewed appeal of the *Vachananukram Khmer* as symbol of national unity – speak to the enduring potency of the Khmer language as a medium and idiom through which to engage a changing world. Indeed, in

[430] ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាជាតិភាសាខ្មែរ n.d.

[431] Compare such claims to Sihanouk's own retrospective remarks, years after the fact, that he "was on the point of abdicating" in 1943, when the French introduced and briefly enforced the use of a romanized script for Khmer (Chandler 2008, 207).

[432] កោះសន្តិភាព 2010.

providing a rationale for the decision to revert to the Chuon Nath orthographic standard, Hun Sen invokes arguments first articulated by Ieu Koeus more than six decades prior, as he urges the Khmer people to follow the orthographic standard set forth in the *Vachananukram Khmer*: for Hun Sen and Ieu Koeus alike, a lack of linguistic unity threatens the broader cohesion and integrity of the Cambodian nation.

Furthermore, the decision to return to the Chuon Nath standard, I suggest, speaks to more latent political sensibilities as well. Much like Prince Norodom Sihanouk during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party, or CPP, makes strong appeals to nationalist sensibilities in legitimizing its political authority; indeed, in 2008, in the lead-up to national elections, the CPP harnessed nationalist sentiment around the Preah Vihear temple's listing as a World Heritage Site and the subsequent flare-up of border tensions with Thailand, in an echo of Sihanouk's own use of the dispute over the temples, and subsequent victory over Thailand granted by international arbiters, for political gain in the *Sangkum* era.[433] While the CPP won decisively in the 2008 elections, the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party, or CNRP, nevertheless grew significantly in popularity over the next five years, and performed surprisingly well in the 2013 elections;[434] subsequent efforts by the CPP to neutralize the opposition party would later culminate in the dissolution of the CNRP by the Cambodian Supreme Court in November 2017, in what was widely condemned as the 'death of democracy' in Cambodia.[435]

In 2010, however, the CPP was uniquely vulnerable, faced with an ascendant opposition party alongside the continued economic fallout from the global financial crisis.[436] In this light, the

[433] Head 2008.
[434] Fuller 2013.
[435] Ben, Mech, and Baliga 2017.
[436] See Nam (2017) for a fascinating consideration of urban speculation and high-rise construction in Phnom Penh as idioms for social and economic imaginaries – "the capitalist dreamworlds [that real estate experts] seek to conjure" – and for "how market ambitions are translated spatially" (Nam 2017, 648, 663). (Nam additionally notes that, "despite a multiyear lull following the global financial crisis, the serial reproduction of visually similar high-rise forms has rapidly resumed since 2011.")

reversion to the Chuon Nath standard may be read not as a simple matter of administrative course, but rather as an explicit invocation on the part of the CPP of one of the central figures of early Cambodian nationalism, in an effort to authenticate and legitimize its political authority through the association with so revered a figure. The Venerable Chuon Nath – long-time Supreme Patriarch of the Mahanikay Order, learned in Pali, Sanskrit and Old Khmer, architect of the celebrated *Vachananukram Khmer* – remains an enduring symbol in which a multitude of potent nationalist values and discourses converge. The restoration of the Chuon Nath standard, then, alongside Hun Sen's rhetoric denouncing the reforms of the *Khemarayeanakam*,[437] may be read as an effort to bolster the regime's political authority and legitimacy, as the CPP casts itself as both inheritor and guarantor of Cambodia's national heritage.

Such efforts have continued into the present day. In 2016, the Royal University of Phnom Penh, in partnership with the Ministry of Economy and Finance, launched desktop and smartphone app versions of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, a digitization of the fifth edition published in 1967.[438] This was followed in March 2017 by the announcement that Prime Minister Hun Sen had signed a decree establishing a National Committee for the Preparation of the Khmer National Dictionary, housed within the NCKL and tasked with updating and modernizing the 1967 *Vachananukram Khmer* through the incorporation and standardization of recent neologisms.[439]

Public discourse, official and nonofficial alike, surrounding the *Vachananukram Cheat Khmer Thmei*, or the *New Khmer National Dictionary*, has repeatedly emphasized the project's

[437] Such rhetoric may be further motivated by the movement's association with Keng Vannsak himself, an anti-institutional political radical educated in France and a proponent of French-inspired modernity. As the CPP has grown increasingly hostile towards the neocolonially-inflected international policy and foreign diplomacy of the US and the EU, it is possible that, by 2010, figures such as Vannsak no longer carried the prestige they once had as intellectual forebears and revered architects of the modern Cambodian nation. (See, for instance, the differing treatments afforded Keng Vannsak and the Venerable Chuon Nath by participants in the comments section of the *Samrap Khmer* blog post, discussed above.)

[438] Information Technology Center 2016.

[439] ស្រី សុភ័ក្ត្រ 2017.

simultaneous importance to the dual priorities of preservation and development.[440] Speaking in 2020, Dr. Hean Sokhom, serving since 2017 as Director of the NCKL and whose presentation at the 1996 International Conference on Khmer Studies was considered above, claimed that some 7,000 words had been added to the Khmer language since the publication of the 1967 *Vachananukram*, which itself contained roughly 18,000 entries. These new additions ranged from everyday words to technical jargon, and their inclusion in the new *Vachananukram*, Sokhom suggested, would bring benefit to a developing society – in part through their contributions to an educated and informed populace, capable of engaging the broader world.[441] The following year, the NCKL released a survey to solicit public input concerning the transliteration of foreign loanwords in an effort to "avoid criticisms that new loanwords are destroying the national language," and additionally sought input from monks and elders knowledgeable in Pali and Sanskrit, so as to "provide deeper linguistic insights."[442]

After more than five years' effort, a pilot edition of the *Vachananukram Cheat Khmer Thmei* was released as a mobile app in the final week of December 2022. In announcing the dictionary's preliminary publication, the NCKL urged the public – "especially lovers of Khmer literature" – to assist the app's developers in identifying and correcting any errors. The Council encouraged input

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[440] Similar rhetoric accompanied reporting and official statements concerning the publication of the first of two volumes of a separate dictionary, the *Vachananukram Pheasa Khmer Bachobann*, the *Contemporary Khmer Language Dictionary*, in 2021. This latter dictionary is a joint initiative of the Royal Academy of Cambodia and the Ministry of Economy and Finance, with the stated aim of "elevating the preservation and development of national literature in the present day" (រឿន ភារុន 2021). In discussing the motivation for the new dictionary, the project's leader, Dr. Prom Mol of the Royal Academy of Cambodia, cited the significant extent of linguistic change that had occurred in the decades since the publication of the fifth edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, particularly in the realm of new words – loanwords and neologisms alike – that have entered the Khmer lexicon (សារព័ត៌មានថ្មីៗ 2021). Dr. Hean Sokhom, heading the NCKL's own efforts to update the *Vachananukram Khmer*, told reporters at the time that he saw no potential for conflict between the two dictionaries, for the *Vachananukram Pheasa Khmer Bachobann* is being developed in accordance with the principles of the Venerable Chuon Nath. The second volume is slated for publication in 2024.

[441] យ៉ី វិច្ឆិកា 2020. Such language of course echoes Sokhom's views expressed through his 1996 paper on sociopolitical terminology, discussed above.

[442] Voun 2021. Elsewhere, the National Language Institute at the Royal Academy of Cambodia recently developed an Old Khmer Dictionary for public use, an effort praised by Proeung Pranit, president of the Khmer Writers Association, for its benefit to "researchers studying the history of our nation" (Voun 2020).

from "language experts from any and all schools of thought, regardless of whether they are inclined towards conservatism or are language experts aligned with modernism: we must strive for uniformity, and it may come from any milieu."[443] Yet for all of its claims of impartiality, the NCKL went on to encourage particular input from experts in Pali and Sanskrit, "for many Khmer words are borrowings from" these languages, thereby reflecting a conceptualization of the Khmer language – and the proper approach to negotiating the conflicting imperatives of preservation and development – far more in line with that of the Venerable Chuon Nath than with the linguistic philosophies of Keng Vannsak and other *Khemaraneyakam* reformists.[444]

Yet the appeal of the Venerable Chuon Nath and his *Vachananukram Khmer* extends beyond the borders of official government initiatives and rhetoric. A central element of the *Vachananukram*'s continued – if anything, growing – relevance in the contemporary era, I suggest, is precisely its age: first published in 1938, and most recently in 1967, the *Vachananukram* indexes longevity and permanence – precisely those aspects of nationhood that may be most productively enlisted to guard against the anxieties engendered by the rapid development and change that has defined the global twenty-first century.

Linguistic Anxiety in the Twenty-First Century

In her discussion of 'linguistic anxiety' among contemporary Cambodians in Phnom Penh, Cheryl Yin observes that widespread anxieties concerning the perceived degradation of the Khmer language might be read as metalinguistic commentaries on "the country's current political, economic, and social conditions."[445] Yin notes that the shifts in official orthographic standards have fostered a sense not of unity, but of chaos and disarray, which some Cambodians suggest is reflective

[443] ភ្នំពេញ ប៉ុស្ដិ៍ 2022.
[444] ភ្នំពេញ ប៉ុស្ដិ៍ 2022.
[445] Yin 2020, 94.

of a general disorder observed elsewhere in Cambodian society. Concerns around the influx of foreign loanwords are widely cited, and contribute to pervasive anxieties concerning the devaluation, degradation, and ultimate disappearance of the Khmer language. As Yin notes, such anxieties are not extended to loanwords from Pali and Sanskrit, as these languages' association with Angkorian history renders them integral to precisely that heritage that many Cambodians seek to preserve. Indeed, Touch Kimsrieng, president of the Khmer Literary and Cultural Association, suggested to Yin that it was many Cambodians' ignorance concerning Pali and Sanskrit etymologies that had contributed to the decline of the Khmer language.[446,447]

Such linguistic anxiety is grounded in the narratives of displacement and disappearance that have recurred throughout Cambodian nationalist discourses, from the pages of *Nokor Wat* to Sihanouk's vilification of the Thai as thieves and usurpers of Cambodian land and legacies. In the present day, the influx of English loanwords and the proliferation of foreign-language instruction in 'international schools' revive latent anxieties concerning the dissolution of the Khmer language. As Yin reminds us, anxieties around language often speak to much deeper societal concerns; and while expressed in the language of dissatisfaction with the present, such anxieties are fundamentally rooted in concern for the future:

> Alongside their complaints, we find a potential future that is much different from today: if only Cambodians learned Pali and Sanskrit etymology, if only Cambodians put more care and effort in studying Khmer instead of foreign languages, if only

[446] Yin 2020, 106.

[447] Nor are such anxieties limited to Cambodians. Jean-Michel Filippi, a French-born linguist who, together with Hiep Chan Vicheth, developed a pronunciation guide for the standard and Phnom Penh dialects of Khmer, played into these same fears in his assessment of widespread internet access and the ubiquity of English loanwords in the colloquial speech of contemporary Cambodians, particularly youth, as an existential threat to the Khmer language. "As middle-class families send their children to English-language classes or even schools, a generation of Cambodians may become adults with limited knowledge of their national language, he said. 'This could become a big problem for Cambodia,' Mr. Filippi added" (Van and Vachon 2016).

> politicians were more educated, then Khmer would not be in decline and Cambodia would be a thriving country.[448]

In this light, the *Vachananukram Khmer* of the Venerable Chuon Nath serves as a symbol onto which to project linguistically-realized assertions of cultural longevity and permanence, legitimacy and authenticity.

This indexical power of the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath* – frequently referred to as such, rather than as simply the *Vachananukram Khmer* – is ubiquitous within the realm of public discourse, as the dictionary is routinely evoked as the definitive authority on questions of orthography and semantics – questions with which broad cross-sections of Cambodian publics and readerships routinely engage. News outlets routinely publish short articles, such as those in the long-running *Punyol Peak Pheasa Khmer* ('Khmer Words Explained') and the *Akharaviruth* ('Orthography') columns published through *Thmey Thmey News*, to educate readerships on correct usages and spellings of Khmer words, with the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath* – often evoked simply by the visage of the Venerable Chuon Nath himself – routinely cited as the definitive authority.[449] In 2016, in an effort to bolster her campaign for the incorporation of commas into Khmer orthography, the human rights lawyer and activist Seng Theary cited the Venerable Chuon Nath's use of commas in his introduction to the 1967 edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer*.[450] Critics of government officials and policies frequently employ the definitions of words cited in the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath* to give rhetorical ballast to their assertions that the government has failed to deliver on its promises.[451] The NCKL itself notes that, between 2000 and 2007, when the Council was still known as the National Language Institute, it held a series of four conferences aimed at resolving issues related to the Khmer language and script; the sessions generated "a continuous stream of

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[448] Yin 2020, 107.

[449] See, for instance, ថ្មីៗ 2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2022a; 2022b; 2023a; 2023b.

[450] Willemyns 2016.

[451] See, for instance, *The Cambodia Daily* (2020) and ឯម មាឃ (2021).

recommendations from participants requesting the use of the Venerable Chuon Nath's *Vachananukram* as the standard for the use of the Khmer language and script."[452]

New National Imaginaries and the Phantasmatic Vachananukram Khmer

Taken together, such discursive engagements with and evocations of the *Vachananukram Khmer* may be read as a sort of monumentalization of the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath* itself. The *Vachananukram* continues to be employed in lexicographic contexts, as the medium through which to clarify and align orthographic and lexical usages – yet it is the *idiom* of the *Vachananukram*, everything that it indexes and represents, that has come to be imbued with meanings and potencies far beyond its immediate contributions to Khmer lexicography.

Indeed, we might thus speak of a process of 'Angkorization' of the *Vachananukram Khmer* of the Venerable Chuon Nath: for much as Angkor was enlisted to guard against the anxieties of a tumultuous present, deployed in the service of a desired future, so, too, has the *Vachananukram* been reappropriated as a symbol of authenticity and purity, indexing historical longevity and future permanence in the face of present uncertainty. The *Vachananukram Chuon Nath*, with its iconic yellow cover, a stylized image of a seated Chuon Nath gazing out from its center, has, like Angkor itself, become "a site of intense aesthetic re-imagining, and political and economic appropriation:"[453] for just as Angkor, as image and as symbol, was fused with the imaginaries of an emergent national consciousness, so, too, has the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath* been rendered a phantasmatic symbol of the Khmer language – and, more broadly, the Khmer linguistic community – itself.

Yet despite concerted efforts on the part of various regimes to appropriate the political potential of such a salient signifier of the nation, the *Vachananukram Khmer* has thus far resisted

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[452] "ប្រវត្តិក្រុមប្រឹក្សាជាតិភាសាខ្មែរ" n.d. The second request noted by the NCKL as frequently received from participants was for the creation of a national language committee.

[453] Norindr 2006, 54. Norindr's discussion of the emphasis placed on 'high culture' in the construction of national imaginaries, at the expense of more colloquial modes of understanding and of knowledge generation, is similarly worth observing in this context; see Chapters 1 and 2.

inscription into hegemonic and top-down constructions of national community and identity, serving instead – like Angkor – as an active and dynamic "site of memory and repository of knowledge," allowing for the proliferation of "animated and divergent interpretations" of the conceptual boundaries of the linguistic community to which the *Vachananukram Khmer* gives form and voice.[454] The various discursive engagements with the *Vachananukram* considered above – from the vibrant discussion that accompanied Teum Boeun's *Samrap Khmer* blog post to the *Thmey Thmey News* articles that seek to educate readerships on proper orthographic and lexical usages to the deployment of the *Vachananukram* as a rhetorical counterweight in the arguments and critiques of social and political activists – speak to the diverse and divergent ways in which a wide range of contemporary Cambodians enlist the *Vachananukram Khmer* in their own efforts to imagine the nation.

The *Vachananukram Khmer* of the Venerable Chuon Nath thus continues to anchor many linguistic and literary debates among contemporary Cambodian authors, readers, publishers, and other publics. Elsewhere, however, as the internet enables the formation of new readerships and publics, a younger generation of Cambodian authors and activists has found new ways to negotiate the tensions of contemporary life through language and literature, looking beyond the yellow cover of the *Vachananukram Khmer* as they seek novel mediums and idioms through which to engage the modern world.

So Phina, Taing Rinith, and Cambodia's Literary Horizons

In October 2017, on the shaded grounds of Siem Reap's iconic Wat Damnak, the inaugural Khmer Literature Festival brought together some five hundred Cambodian authors, artists, publishers, and readers for three days of panels, workshops, performances, book fairs, and

[454] Norindr 2006, 66.

networking sessions in celebration and support of Khmer literature. Two themes structured the 2017 festival: the first, the works of authors and poets from the Cambodian diaspora; the second, an examination of the works of Khun Srun.[455]

The festival was a noted success in its first year, and expanded in subsequent iterations; in 2018, hosted in Battambang, the festival centered the theme of "Past, Present, and Future of Khmer Literature," while its 2019 edition, held at the National Library in Phnom Penh, featured a two-day book fair. The Covid-19 pandemic forced the event's cancelation in 2020, but the Khmer Literature Festival returned in 2021 in an online format, with a theme of "Literature in Translation."[456] In 2022, the festival moved to Pursat province, the birthplace of its founder, So Phina, with a theme centered on the "Living Legacy of Literature."[457]

The themes, events, and aesthetics of the Khmer Literature Festival have thus gestured across five successive iterations towards a creative melding of past and present. The inaugural festival juxtaposed diasporic literary expressions of how life has continued beyond Cambodia's borders in the wake of the Khmer Rouge with Srun's pointed critiques of the society that produced the regime – themes similarly taken up in the 2022 festival, with plans to feature "a presentation on the works of poets dating back to 1975, who were robbed of the opportunity to publish or have their works read back then due to the Khmer Rouge takeover," alongside a concerted orientation towards contemporary publics. "Our vision for Khmer literature," noted Khut Sokhoeun, who in 2022 took over the responsibility of managing the festival from Phina, "is that we want to see it play

[455] Co and Taing 2017; អ៊ីសា រ៉ហានី 2017.

[456] Pann Rethea 2022a.

[457] Pann Rethea 2022b. Notably, while the festival's emphasis was on literary legacies, such legacies are nevertheless extended to include the *Vachananukram Khmer*: Tim Many, a "veteran writer" and organizer of the festival since its inception, noted that the festival additionally aimed to "strengthen, enhance and raise awareness of the value of Khmer literature for the next generation. Younger Cambodians should be more attentive to reading, because reading books helps them gain knowledge and improve their formal Khmer-language writing skills according to the rules of the dictionary of Samdech Sang Chuon Nath, as the younger generation often writes less accurately" (Pann Rethea and Chea Sokny 2022).

a role in contributing to the development of the country – just as much as other sectors do."[458] Similarly, the organizers' decision to hold the inaugural festival at a wat in Siem Reap – a city and province widely recognized as "an assemblage," as one article noted, "of Khmer culture and civilization"[459] – further enacted the festival's efforts to tether Cambodia's literary past to its literary presents and futures. "Khmer literature started within pagodas," Phina noted ahead of the festival, "so we thought having the events inside the pagoda would have a lot of value in terms of linking the history, the origins, of Khmer literature to now."[460]

The Khmer Literature Festival's strategic and creative mediation and negotiation of Cambodia's literary and historical imaginaries is, I argue, indicative of broader efforts among a cohort of progressive and modernist authors, translators, and other figures active within Cambodia's contemporary literary scene – many of whom have directly participated in or helped to organize the festival itself – to envision new horizons for Khmer-language literature. Together, the works of such figures enact a challenge to the hegemony of English, and suggest a path forward for the Khmer language and literary arts.

'Many Stories to Tell': So Phina and the Language of Representation

So Phina's contributions to Cambodia's literary scene extend far beyond her work in founding and organizing the annual Khmer Literature Festival, a role that she held until 2022. As an established author, Phina has published a range of works across a variety of formats that take up contemporary social issues in Cambodia, particularly related to the ways in which gender norms structure much of modern social and public life for Cambodian women, while her publishing house Kampu Mera, founded in 2015, produces some of the most sought-after titles available in Khmer literature today.

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[458] Pann Rethea and Chea Sokny 2022.
[459] *Fresh News* 2017.
[460] Co and Taing 2017. The grounds of Wat Damnak furthermore serve as the home for the Center for Khmer Studies, a research center and educational institution for scholars and students in the social sciences, arts, and humanities.

Phina's literary endeavors are deeply entangled with her broader orientation as a feminist activist and advocate for gender equity. Kampu Mera's first title, a collection of short stories titled *Thleak Knong Anlong Snae*, or *Fallen into the Abyss of Love* – otherwise known in English as *Crush Collections* – was, as Phina has described, published as a response to the different societal expectations imposed on young men and women, respectively, in contemporary Cambodia. "As a feminist and an advocate for gender equality," she writes,

> I felt it was important to address this situation. My friend and I decided to encourage the creation of stories depicting strong young women in professional careers, daring to express themselves and able to move on with life in spite of the disapproval of men. We solicited submissions and put together our first anthology: *Crush Collections: Heartbroken? Not a Problem!*[461]

The following year, Kampu Mera published its second title, *Vitheavy 2016 Nung Roeung Khlei Datei Teat*, or *Vitheavy 2016 and Other Short Stories*, a collection of fifteen short stories that variously address "Cambodia as seen through the gaze of these authors [collected here], on topics such as the city of Phnom Penh, traditions and customs, experiences and feelings of gendered violence against women, traffic, and love within communities of ethnic minorities."[462] The collection's title story, "Vitheavy Chhnam 2016" – "Vitheavy in the Year 2016" – reimagines the heroine of author Nou Hach's *Phka Srapoun*, or *The Wilted Flower*, originally published as a newspaper serial throughout 1947; Hach's Vitheavy, forced against her will to marry the debaucherous son of a well-off local family, slowly wastes away and ultimately dies. In Phina's story, a mother and her daughter discuss Hach's telling, acknowledging the author's intentions to call attention to the burdensome societal

[461] So 2022, 266.
[462] សូ ភីណា 2016a.

expectations imposed on young women in his day while critiquing his portrayal of Vitheavy as hapless victim.[463]

Elsewhere, Phina's literary engagements take up similar themes of representation in the literary arts. Her 2022 historical novel *Bophana: Phka Min Ruh Rouy – Bophana: The Flower That Never Fades* – tells the story of Huot Bophana, a young woman executed in 1977 by the Khmer Rouge. Bophana passed through the regime's infamous Tuol Sleng detention center prior to her execution, and her extensive file included a trove of letters exchanged between her and her husband, Ly Sitha. Her story has previously been featured in director Rithy Panh's 1996 documentary *Bophana, une tragédie cambodgienne*,[464] as well as in American journalist Elizabeth Becker's 1986 *When the War Was Over*[465] and subsequently in her 2010 *Bophana: Love in the Time of the Khmer Rouge*.[466] Bophana has further lent her name to Phnom Penh's Bophana Audiovisual Research Center, established in 2006 by Rithy Panh and Ieu Pannakar, a former senator and director of the Film, Photography, and Broadcasting Department.[467]

Yet as Chhay Visoth, former director of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, notes in his introduction to Phina's work, *Bophana: Phka Min Ruh Rouy* represents the first account of Bophana's life written by "a Khmer author and published in the national language."[468] Phina herself, who assembled the novel after years of extensive archival work at Tuol Sleng and other locations, similarly emphasizes the importance of excavating stories of strength and resilience from the

[463] សូ ភីណា 2016, 96-8. Similar criticisms, it seems, were levied against Hach in his own time: in his introduction to his second novel, *Mealea Duong Chet*, published in 1972, Hach writes that one of his motivations for writing the novel was that "many of my readers, particularly women, accused me of acting cruelly in having Vitheavy, of the novel *Phka Srapoun*, die at such a young age, and through no fault of her own" (នូ ហាច 1972, កថាមុខ).

[464] Panh 1996.

[465] Becker 1986.

[466] Becker 2010; see as well Becker (2005).

[467] មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលបុប្ផាណា n.d. Incidentally, Pannakar was also the son of politician and linguist Ieu Koeus, considered in Chapter 3.

[468] ឆាយ វិសុទ្ធ 2022, ៦.

Khmer Rouge period for a Khmer audience, in the hopes that "Bophana's bravery will live on in the hearts of Cambodians in perpetuity."[469]

While much of her work is oriented towards expanding Khmer readerships, So Phina has additionally played a critical role in bringing contemporary Khmer poetry and fiction to English-speaking audiences. In August of 2021, she guest-edited an issue of the South Korea-based *Chogwa* zine, featuring a poem by contemporary Cambodian poet Chin Meas alongside seventeen English-language translations by other Cambodian poets. In her introduction to the issue, Phina describes her decision to select Meas's poem "*Chhnang*" for its themes of "struggle, class, unequal wealth distribution, greed, need, endless sacrifice," characterizing the work as "a straightforward poem that metaphorically lays out the collective struggle of a nation, which has political value."[470] Phina goes on to describe the poem's use of a traditional three-stanza, seven-syllable structure, and considers throughout the issue the ways in which various translators bring their own interpretations to the work through the creativity and innovation of their translations.

Phina furthermore served as an editor of the 2022 anthology *Out of the Shadows of Angkor: Cambodian Poetry, Prose, and Performance Through the Ages*, contributing a brief essay on contemporary publishing in Cambodia as well as a translation of her short story "*Bangkang Teuk Sap Nung Chhmuoh Plaek Plaek*," rendered in English as "Freshwater Lobster and the Trouble with Names," a piece that explores the ways in which language is implicated in the construction of social and physical worlds.[471] As Phina notes in her editorial essay for the anthology, her work is motivated by the conviction that literature unfolds unique opportunities to engage and critique contemporary society, thereby enabling progress towards more just and equitable social structures

[469] សូ ភីណា 2022, ១២៨.

[470] So 2021.

[471] So 2022a; 2022b. Phina's short story was originally published, in both Khmer and English, in the Asian American Writers' Workshop's online journal *The Margins* (So Phina 2019).

and relations. “Cambodians have many stories to tell that have not emerged,” she writes, “and there is still a long way to go.”[472]

Rinith Taing and the Historical-Literary Imaginary

Such entanglements between social and literary issues are furthermore exemplified through the work of Taing Rinith, a journalist and fellow co-editor of Phina’s on the *Out of the Shadows of Angkor* anthology. Rinith currently works as Deputy Editor at the *Khmer Times*, and has won multiple international journalism awards, including the Ulrich Wickert International Journalism Award for Children’s Rights for his 2019 article “Children of the Night.”[473] Previously, during his work with *The Phnom Penh Post* between 2015 and 2018, Rinith authored articles covering a range of topics and figures in the realm of arts and culture, with multiple pieces notably focusing on the social and political possibilities unfolded through literature and language.

In a 2018 piece focused on a novel system for the transliteration of Khmer into the Latin alphabet, developed by Lay Sovichea, Rinith explores the historical contours of the issue, one that “strikes at the heart of Khmer nationalism and historic fears about foreign influence in the Kingdom.” Rinith notes skepticism from figures such as Seung Phos, “a retired professor of Khmer language and a former monk,” who fears that the new system could encourage further use of the Latin alphabet, “which could lead to loss of our original alphabet, which is our identity.” Such anxieties are countered by Sovichea’s enthusiasm for the potential of the system to enhance, rather than diminish, the relevance of Khmer in the modern world, as Sovichea

> sees his system as a “complement,” not replacement, of the Khmer alphabet, which could only increase the language’s potential to spread. “Khmer Pinyin will be an important force in pushing the development of our language and a great response to

[472] So 2022a, 267.
[473] May et al. 2022, 336; Taing Rinith 2019.

rapid globalisation," Sovichea says. "[…] I just know I have to do it because the country needs it."[474]

Elsewhere, and much like the themes of the Khmer Literature Festivals organized by Phina, Rinith explores the legacies of prior generations of Cambodian authors in the present day. His article on Bunn Chanmol's memoir *Kok Noyobay – The Political Prison* – provides an historical overview of Chanmol's various involvements with Cambodian politics over a span of more than three decades, from his participation in the 1942 protests over the arrest of Hem Cheav[475] that led to his subsequent imprisonment in the French colonial prison on Koh Tralach – known as Côn Sơn in Vietnamese – to his involvement with the Khmer Issarak and then the Democratic Party, culminating in the publication of his memoir in 1972, three years prior to his disappearance upon the Khmer Rouge's rise to power.[476] Another piece tells the story of Tran Sab, an elderly storekeeper whose career as a book-renter is deeply intertwined with the broader social and political forces that have shaped the past half-century of Cambodian history, from the *Sangkum* era through to the present day.[477] Writing for the *Out of the Shadows of Angkor* anthology, Rinith describes his understanding of literature "as embodying the spirit of the nation," providing the impetus for his more recent efforts in translating Khmer-language works into English, thereby "keeping alive my promise to make Cambodian literature and information about Cambodian authors more accessible to the world."[478]

English Hegemony and the Insurgency of Translation

Taken together, the work of Phina, Rinith, and other contemporary Cambodian authors exemplifies an expansion of prior efforts to negotiate and mediate Cambodia's encounters with the

[474] Taing 2018.
[475] See Edwards (2007, 237) and Chandler (2008, 205-6).
[476] Taing 2017c.
[477] Taing 2017a. A later version of this essay subsequently appeared as a portion of Rinith's contribution to the *Out of the Shadows of Angkor* anthology (Taing 2022).
[478] Taing 2022, 252, 254. An excerpt from one such translation, of author Ty Chi Huot's novel *Mek Bat Duong Chan*, or *Sky of the Lost Moon*, is featured in the anthology (Huot and Taing 2022).

broader world. Both authors critique hegemonic conceptualizations of Khmer national identity and community through the themes engaged throughout their literary activities: Phina's emphasis through Kampu Mera Editions on authors and characters who identify as women and members of ethnic minority groups reflects a broader feminist sensibility that challenges, through language, the naturalization and perpetuation of the national community – along with its conceptual authors and architects – as inherently male and ethnically monolithic;[479] Rinith's work, meanwhile, engages the literary legacies of past generations of authors and other cultural figures, thereby contributing to the ongoing reformulation of a national historical imaginary. As Phina writes, "Cambodians have many stories to tell that have not emerged, and there is still a long way to go."[480]

Furthermore, both Phina's and Rinith's emphases on translation is significant: as Vicente Rafael has argued, translation, in its "incapab[ility] of definitively fixing meanings across languages," encourages instead a perpetual process of reinterpretation and rewriting.[481] Where the spread of English hegemony incites anxiety in many contemporary Cambodians, as Cheryl Yin has described, Phina and Rinith turn instead to the possibilities unfolded through what Rafael terms the "insurgency of language," as translation's

> contradictions and contaminations […] hold out hope for democratizing historical imagination. Both […] make room for dissenting voices, counternarratives, and alternative interpretations from unexpected and often repressed sources.[482]

In themselves engaging the transnational circulations of Khmer-language literature, Phina and Rinith do not so much 'take control' of the narratives of such literature as complicate the notion that any narrative, interpretation, or translation is ever complete or definitive. In this sense, translation

[479] Indeed, Phina has stated that she considers it the responsibility of writers to view their readerships as critical and capable of being challenged, and to avoid an overly pedantic orientation in their works, as well as an exclusive orientation towards the perceived 'market' for literary works (So Phina 2022, personal correspondence).
[480] So 2022a, 267.
[481] Rafael 2016, 118.
[482] Rafael 2016, 18.

serves as a means of not only mediating Cambodia's engagements with the broader world – of "translating the world to Cambodia," to adapt Lin's phrase[483] – but also of mediating the broader world's engagements with Cambodia: that is, of translating Cambodia to the world.

It is in this sense that literature becomes, for Rafael, "the most important arena for linguistic insurgency," as literature's perpetual reimagining of social and political worlds unsettles any effort to fix such worlds in time and place.[484] Literary translation – the confluence of these two destabilizing practices – thus embodies "the potential to undo and reconfigure power relations, even momentarily, in the name of a more just and free world."[485] It is precisely such undoing and reconfiguring that Phina and Rinith enact through their own literary work, as they reimagine what it means to be a Cambodian author today, and unfold bold new horizons for Khmer-language literature and literary publics alike.

[483] Lin 2020, 3.
[484] Rafael 2016, 195. As Rafael writes, literature undoes the possibility of having "a single ideology of translation controlling the production of difference, because difference will always proliferate beyond the control of any particular translation ideology, thanks to literature."
[485] Rafael 2016, 198.

Conclusion

"May the heavenly divinities protect our king
And ensure that he flourish, blessed and prosperous:
We take refuge in the shadow of our sovereign,
Descended from the princes who built the stone temples
And ruled the illustrious ancient Khmer land.

Stone temples hidden deep in the forest
Recall the glory of the Magnificent Kingdom:
Like stone, the Khmer nation stands strong and unyielding;
We place our hope in the fate and fortune of *Kampuchea*,
So great a country descended through the ages.

At every temple is heard the sound of the *dhamma*,
Scriptures recited with joy, evoking Buddhist merit:
Let us place our faith in the ways of our ancestors
And surely the divinities shall protect and reward
This Khmer country, the Magnificent Kingdom."

Nokor Reach, Cambodian National Anthem,
composed by the Venerable Chuon Nath[486]

"Dead languages, fully analyzed and codified, are stable and unchanging, because they have no life. Languages that are still spoken are known as living languages. And living languages are forever changing, never still, as, just like plants and animals, they are full of life."

[486] "តើប្រវត្តិបទភ្លេង 'គោរពទង់ជាតិ' នេះមានន័យយ៉ាងណា? ប្រភពមកពីណា? នរណាជាអ្នកនិពន្ធ?" 2018.

Ieu Koeus, *Pheasa Khmer*[487]

In 1938, Prince Norodom Suramrit, a grandson of the late King Norodom and the husband of then-reigning King Monivong's daughter Princess Sisowath Kosamak, collaborated with the palace's music instructor, a Frenchman named Jekyll, to compose the melody for a new national anthem, adapted from a Cambodian folk melody. At the time, Suramrit struggled to find the appropriate words for his composition, and the task ultimately fell to the Venerable Chuon Nath. Three years later, on July 20, 1941, Nath completed a final draft of the anthem's lyrics, titling his composition *Nokor Reach*, or 'The Royal City,' a lofty reference to Angkor.[488]

Today, *Nokor Reach* is rivaled only by the *Vachananukram Khmer* as the Venerable Chuon Nath's most celebrated and enduring textual composition. *Nokor Reach* was adopted as the national anthem in 1942, shortly following the coronation of King Norodom Sihanouk, son of Prince Suramrit; indeed, its fate throughout the remainder of the century ran largely in parallel to that of Sihanouk himself: as Sihanouk was removed from power in 1970, so, too, was *Nokor Reach* soon replaced under the Lon Nol regime; the Khmer Rouge and the subsequent People's Republic of Kampuchea each adopted their own anthems. It was not until the restoration of the monarchy in 1993 that Sihanouk, newly crowned for the second time, insisted that *Nokor Reach*, too, be restored to its prior status as the nation's anthem.[489]

Yet while Sihanouk undoubtedly expressed a particular affinity for the anthem – his father had composed its melody, and, as David Chandler notes, he likely identified personally with the king evoked in the anthem's first stanza[490] – a closer reading of the text of *Nokor Reach* suggests a

[487] អៀវ កើស 1947, ១៦-៧.

[488] "តើប្រវត្តិបទភ្លេង 'គោរពទង់ជាតិ' នេះមានន័យយ៉ាងណា? ប្រភពមកពីណា? នរណាជាអ្នកនិពន្ធ?" 2018; Chandler 2017.

[489] Chandler 2017.

[490] Chandler 2017.

different conceptualization of the Khmer nation, one far less rooted in monarchical authority than Sihanouk may have imagined. Rather, the lyrics of *Nokor Reach* instead evoke an ancient and resilient people, their strength deriving from the achievements of their ancestors and from their devotion to Buddhist practice – that is, precisely those elements that anchored Nath's articulations of the national community through his *Vachananukram Khmer*.

Indeed, the lyrics to *Nokor Reach* were completed in mid-1941 – that is, in the very midst of Nath's work on the first edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, three years following the publication of its first volume and two years prior to the publication of its second. Its composition furthermore followed mere months after the cession in January of 1941 of Battambang and most of Siem Reap, along with parts of Laos, by the French colonial regime to the Thai, as part of a Japanese-negotiated agreement ending the short-lived Franco-Thai war; King Monivong, Suramrit's father-in-law, was so enraged that, following the French cession, he refused to speak French or to meet with French officials for the remaining few months of his life.[491] Significantly, however, the French had managed to retain control of the lands surrounding Angkor – and it is Angkor that is exalted above all else in the Venerable Chuon Nath's *Nokor Reach*.

Together, the three stanzas of *Nokor Reach* conjure a national imaginary in which the past, present, and future are bound together through the threads of Angkorian inheritance and Theravadin devotion, ancestral tradition infused – somewhat creatively – with Buddhist merit. The anthem's tone is one of strength and hope: Angkor has endured through the centuries, and so, to, shall the Khmer nation; Buddhist merit ensures the protection of heavenly deities. *Nokor Reach* celebrates the king as a protector of the people – yet is unambiguous in positioning him as subordinate to the authority of Theravadin tradition and Angkorian ancestry, as it is through his descendancy from the Khmer kings of old, the anthem asserts, that the contemporary monarch

[491] Chandler 2008, 203-4. Monivong died in April of that same year. The provinces were returned to French control in 1946.

derives his legitimacy, and it is ultimately through the protection of deities and divinities, mediated through Buddhist merit and morality, that the king is in turn able to provide for his people.[492]

It was this same conceptualization of the Khmer nation, I have argued in this thesis, that the Venerable Chuon Nath articulated through the *Vachananukram Khmer*. His dictionary, far more than the rote collection and description of tens of thousands of Khmer words, mapped linguistic form onto the conceptual terrain of an emerging national consciousness, enlisting language as the thread through which to bind Angkorian heritage to Theravadin tradition in a single, unified national imaginary.

It was to this vision, at once both radical in its rejection of colonial tropes and orientalist fantasies and conservative in its celebration of long-standing sociopolitical institutions and formations,[493] that subsequent generations of scholars, intellectuals, authors, and others turned in their own efforts to imagine the nation. Much like *Nokor Reach*, the *Vachananukram Khmer* has long been understood as intrinsically political, engaged as a "privileged idiom"[494] through which broader questions of national community and identity have been evoked; consequently, its prestige as hallmark of an officially-sanctioned linguistic standard has waxed and waned with the political orientations of a string of successive regimes. As noted above, the fate of *Nokor Reach* largely parallels that of Sihanouk himself – yet so, too, does that of the *Vachananukram Khmer*: all three emerged during the twilight years of the French colonial regime, reached celebrated heights during the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, were marginalized during Lon Nol's Khmer Republic, and have been

[492] Notably, only the first stanza of the anthem is typically sung at the opening of official events today.
[493] Indeed, as Jayawardena (1986, 9) notes, there was "an in-built conservative bias in many of the [colonial] reform movements," as "many of the reformers among the indigenous bourgeoisie were men who saw the social evils of their societies as threats to the stability of bourgeois family life, and who therefore campaigned for reform in order to *strengthen* the basic structures of society rather than to change them."
[494] I borrow this term from Ikeya (2011, 3).

restored to their former exalted positions – in ceremonial, if not political, authority – in the contemporary era.

The *Vachananukram Khmer* thus remains emblematic of the ways in which the Khmer language has endured as a potent site of nationalist imagining, as, across generations, intellectuals, monks, journalists, novelists, politicians, and scholarly and lay readers alike have converged on the forms and functions of language to articulate particular conceptualizations of national community and identity. Yet while the *Vachananukram Khmer* was among the earliest and most comprehensive efforts to tether linguistic form to such national constructions, I have attempted to demonstrate, it has not gone unchallenged, and subsequent generations have expanded far beyond the domain of lexicography in their efforts to mediate, through language, the tensions engendered by encounters with the broader world. It is in this sense that, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, generations of Cambodians have turned to language as the "privileged idiom" through which to imagine the nation.

These successive attempts to imagine the nation further demonstrate the ways in which liberatory ideals may be coopted by oppressive currents – or, as Chizuko Ueno writes, "the ways in which a category, by creating an imagined community, in turn becomes something oppressive," as "oppression inevitably surfaces because each category involves an exclusiveness."[495] I have argued for a reading of each of the works considered in this study as inherently emancipatory and liberatory in their aims: the *Vachananukram Khmer* project asserted the cultural longevity and authenticity of the 'Khmer nation,' while Ieu Koeus's *Pheasa Khmer* unfolded the space in which to imagine a sovereign and independent future; Keng Vannsak, Khun Srun, and other modernist authors of the 1960s and 1970s challenged the *Sangkum* regime's enactment of postcolonial

[495] Ueno 2004, 62.

nationhood, while contemporary authors mediate the anxieties engendered by globalization and English hegemony.

At the same time, despite their various efforts to write other ways of being and belonging into the national narrative, such works nevertheless bear the potential to write such being and belonging *out* of the national narrative as well, for any logic of inclusion is accompanied by a commensurate logic of exclusion. This is perhaps demonstrated most clearly by the long history of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, emerging out of a discursive milieu that challenged the orientalist fantasies of the French colonial regime and radically insisted on Khmer civilizational legitimacy and cultural authenticity, yet later deputized under Prince Norodom Sihanouk to project a hegemonic, state-mediated construction of national identity and community. In the contemporary era, the *Vachananukram Khmer* has once more been enlisted in the service of state-prescribed national narratives.

Ultimately, the picture that emerges from the preceding pages is not one of constancy, but of change. Despite concerted efforts to fix it in time and place, the Khmer language has, from the opening of the twentieth century through to the present day, instead endured as a destabilizing force, its fluidity forever unfolding a discursive space in which to renegotiate, reformulate, and redefine.[496] An understanding of this power and potential of language, however implicit, was, I have argued, inherent to each of the projects considered in this study, as authors recognized that, when it comes to language, there is always space for further debate; no scholar, dictionary, or regime ever has the final word.

Language has thus served as a national idiom uniquely privileged for its ability to defy efforts to speak or write definitively and conclusively on its form and meaning: such efforts are

[496] See as well Yin (2021, 264-5), who writes that we ought to "bring variation and contestation to the fore in Khmer language studies. Some Khmer speakers believe Khmer language variation is an indication of decline, corruption, or degradation, but I would like to celebrate language variation as evidence of Khmer's vibrancy." Yin's views accord strongly with those of Ieu Koeus, whose quote opens this chapter.

inevitably frustrated by language's insistence on continuously redrawing its own borders, continuously renegotiating the relationships between itself and others and between its own constituent parts. Today, the Khmer language endures as a critical site of negotiation and mediation – not in spite of, but precisely because of, its inherent instability, variability, and mutability. From the opening of the twentieth century through to the present day, the Khmer language has allowed for the continual making and remaking of the Cambodian nation, as generations past, present, and future confront the ever-urgent questions of being and belonging in the modern world.

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Appendix 1:

A Diachronic Inquiry into the Sociolinguistic Implications of Patterned Orthographic Variation in Written Khmer

1. Introduction

This study investigates the sociolinguistic implications of particular orthographic usages in written Khmer from a diachronic perspective. In particular, this study examines possible correlations between the orthographic standards employed by individual authors and their unique sociopolitical positioning within the particular historical moments in which they write.

Background

While the orthography of the Khmer language has undergone numerous stages of development and change over the course of well over a millennium,[1] the language's written form took on newfound political significance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a nascent nationalist movement began to take shape and to mobilize itself against the French colonial regime. As historian Penny Edwards details, the Khmer language emerged as a critical site of social and political engagement during this period, as a diverse assortment of figures, including monks, intellectuals, colonial officials and administrators, and so forth, sought to delineate the borders – geographical as well as ideological and epistemological – of the emergent Cambodian nation.[2]

[1] While Khmer belongs to the Mon-Khmer, or Austroasiatic, language family, its script, along with numerous others across South and Southeast Asia, derives from the Pallava script, brought to Cambodia in the late first millennium BCE and early first millennium CE by traders, monks, and priests from the Indian subcontinent, and is first attested through stone inscriptions dating to the early seventh century CE (Chandler 2008, 27). As such, Khmer demonstrates considerable Indic influence, with a significant proportion of its lexicon of Indic origin – a fact that would play a central role in many of the twentieth-century debates around contemporary Khmer's orthographic and lexical conventions, as we shall see.

[2] For an extensive study of the origins of the Cambodian nationalist movement during the colonial era, see Edwards (2007).

Through this process, the written form of the Khmer language came to be identified increasingly with the Cambodian nation itself, as nationalist authors and writers sought to mobilize their countryfolk around a common national identity – indeed, to identify as fellow 'countryfolk' at all – oriented towards political independence from the French colonial regime.[3] Such developments brought significant attention to the particular form of the Khmer language itself, as, prior to the early twentieth century, no established standard governed the written language across the various localities of its use.[4]

Thus, on December 4, 1915, King Sisowath issued Royal Decree No. 67, establishing a committee for the purpose of preparing a Khmer-language dictionary.[5] Twenty-three years would pass before the project came to fruition, and in those intervening years the project would come to be led by the Venerable Chuon Nath, a prominent monk and religious reformist within Cambodia's Mahanikay Buddhist Order. Chuon Nath's religious background significantly influenced his decisions concerning the orthographic standard of the Khmer language, with particular importance given to the preservation of orthographic features inherited both from Old Khmer and from Pali, the canonical language of Theravada Buddhism.[6]

The first volume of the resulting dictionary was first published in 1938, its second volume following five years later.[7] The Venerable Chuon Nath would continue to devote considerable time and effort to subsequent editions of the *Vachananukram Khmer*, or *The Khmer Dictionary*, with its

[3] Chen (2010, 87), citing Memmi (1991 [1957]), notes that language "is unequivocally the foundation of all nativist movements because the integration of nationalist feeling can be achieved only in one's own language." Indeed, efforts led by the Vichy French in 1942 to romanize the script were firmly opposed by a wide cross-section of Cambodian society, and the effort was soon abandoned (Edwards 2004, 80; Thong 1985, 110; Chandler 2008, 207-8).

[4] The early linguist and politician Ieu Koeus (អៀវ កើស 1947, 18), whose work is considered as part of this study, wrote of the lack of uniformity of Khmer orthography in the early twentieth century, with different authors varying their spellings "according to our own individual preferences, differing by temple and by school."

[5] ពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត្យ 1967, ក; see also Sasagawa (2015, 47).

[6] See Sasagawa (2015). Sanskrit derivations were also preserved, although Pali derivations were preferred when possible.

[7] Edwards 2007, 237.

fifth and final volume published in 1967, two years before his death; honoring this legacy, the dictionary subsequently came to be widely, if unofficially, known as the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath*, or *The Chuon Nath Dictionary*. Yet its vision of the written Khmer language did not go unchallenged: in the 1970s, a wave of orthographic and other linguistic reforms largely sidelined the *Vachananukram Khmer* as a simplified spelling system was implemented alongside an overhaul of vocabulary seen as arcane and archaic.[8] In the wake of the Khmer Rouge, the People's Republic of Kampuchea maintained the simplified standard established during the 1970s; upon the restoration of the monarchy and the adoption of the current constitution in 1993, the ruling Cambodian People's Party did the same. In 2010, however, Prime Minister Hun Sen announced the restoration of the *Vachananukram Khmer* as the orthographic standard[9] – a decision followed by the release in 2016 of an app and desktop version of the *Vachananukram Khmer*[10] and by news of an updated edition of the *Vachananukram Cheat Khmer*, the Khmer National Dictionary, to be published in 2022 by the National Council of Khmer Language.[11]

Within any particular historical moment, then, the orthographic standard employed by a particular author has the potential to index a particular sociopolitical positioning vis-à-vis broader structures of social and political authority. In 1947, less than ten years after the release of the first edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer* and still six years away from independence, the writer Ieu Koeus praised the dictionary's potential for uniting the Cambodian people and allowing them to be recognized as a coherent national entity.[12] During the era of Prince Norodom Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, the 'Populist Society' inaugurated in 1955 and extending until his fall from power in

[8] Sasagawa 2015, 60-5.
[9] កោះសន្តិភាព 2010.
[10] Information Technology Center 2016.
[11] យ៉ី វិច្ឆិកា 2020. The updated *Vachananukram Cheat Khmer* was released in a trial mode in December 2022 (កោះសន្តិភាព 2010; Information Technology Center 2016; ភ្នំពេញ ប៉ុស្ដិ៍ 2022).
[12] អៀវ កើស 1947, 15-8.

1970, intentional divergence from the Chuon Nath standard and an embrace of colloquial and non-traditional literary forms allowed a generation of modernist authors to signal their dissatisfaction with Sihanouk's authoritarian rule and to articulate alternative visions of Cambodia's postcolonial horizons.[13] The adoption of the reformed orthographic standard propagated by one such modernist author, Keng Vannsak, was officially adopted by the right-wing, anti-Sihanouk Lon Nol regime in 1972, and the use of the reformed standard was thus used to convey governmental authority for the next four decades.[14] The return to the Chuon Nath standard in 2010 was explicitly cited by Prime Minister Hun Sen as indexing a broader effort to reinforce national and political unity through unified adherence to a single orthographic standard – one developed by a prominent symbol of indigenous intellectual achievement, deeply implicated within the early nationalist movement and an early champion of a national community predicated on Angkorian heritage and Buddhist tradition and practice.[15]

Research Question and Hypothesis

Situated within this political history of the Khmer orthographic standard, this study seeks to investigate the extent to which the orthographic practice exhibited by six distinct Khmer texts, authored by writers variously positioned within distinct historical moments and vis-à-vis distinct social and political regimes, demonstrate patterned variation within their use of particular orthographic forms as evaluated against a common orthographic standard, albeit one with diachronic variations in its official status.

A null hypothesis holds that no such patterned variation in orthographic usages is observable in the texts considered in this study, and that any observed variation is instead unpatterned, randomly distributed, and thus sociolinguistically insignificant. A positive hypothesis, on the other hand, holds that patterned variation is indeed observable in the specific orthographic

[13] See in particular the works of the authors Khun Srun, Kuy Sarin, and Keng Vannsak.
[14] Sasagawa 2015, 65.
[15] កោះសន្តិភាព 2010.

practices exhibited by the six texts considered in this study, and that, furthermore, such patterned variation may be mapped in meaningful ways onto the sociopolitical positioning of the authors whose works are considered. Such a hypothesis, if confirmed, would suggest that, within written Khmer, orthographic variation is employed by writers as one among a collection of sociolinguistic variables, capable of indexing particular social and political positions and identities.

Below, I first consider the linguistic variables considered in this study. I continue with a discussion of the methodologies employed, followed by a description of the data collection methods. I proceed with an overview of the data analysis procedures employed, before turning to a consideration of the results of said analysis. Finally, I conclude with a discussion and summary of findings, including a discussion of potential future research directions.

2. Linguistic Variables

Given this study's use of written, rather than spoken, data, the variables considered here diverge somewhat from more traditional sociolinguistic studies. In this study, I consider variations in the orthographic realizations – in other words, the spellings – of individual lexical items as they appear within a selection of individual texts. Such variations are divided here into three distinct classes: the use of 'hanging syllable' versus 'separated syllable' forms, the use of 'independent vowels,' and the use of other non-standard spellings.

'Hanging Syllable' and 'Separated Syllable' Forms

Khmer is an analytic language, although it is not typically considered fully isolating; rather, historical processes of derivational morphology, primarily dating to Old Khmer, have resulted in a significant number of polymorphemic words, even if most such processes are no longer productive today.[16]

[16] See Jenner and Pou (1982) for a comprehensive account of Old Khmer derivational morphology. Attempts to revive such derivational processes as productive were a central element of the linguistic reforms undertaken in the 1970s (Sok 2005, 59).

The historical presence of such processes of derivational morphology, canonically involving prefixation and infixation, have resulted in an archetypal 'sesquisyllabic' word structure in modern Khmer, involving an unstressed, and frequently reduced, initial syllable followed by a stressed primary syllable. Consonant clusters routinely appear at the boundary between these two syllables, with nasal plosives frequently preferred in the coda position of the first, unstressed syllable.[17]

When such nasal plosives are labial, Khmer orthography allows for two distinct mechanisms of representing the resulting consonant cluster:

1) The labial nasal plosive may be written as a full consonant, with the following consonant – the onset of the second, stressed syllable – written in subscript form. This is referred to as *pjieng tamruet*, or 'hanging syllable,' notation.[18]
2) The labial nasal plosive may be written using a vowel symbol applied to the initial consonant – the onset of the initial, unstressed syllable – allowing the onset of the second, stressed syllable to be written in full, rather than subscript, form.[19] This is referred to as *pjieng riey*, or 'separated syllable,' notation.

The word for 'hanging' – *tamruet* [tɑmruət] – offers a prime example.[20] The word may be written as តាំ្រួត, with the initial consonant ត [t], with inherent vowel [ɑ], followed by the labial nasal plosive character ម [m], to which the subscript form of the rhotic liquid រ [r] is affixed, orthographically

[17] This results from the prominent role played by nasal plosives as derivational prefixes and infixes in Old Khmer. See Jenner and Pou (1982).
[18] Subscript consonant forms typically appear 'hanging' below the character to which they are applied.
[19] The Khmer script is properly an abugida, with vowel quality represented through the use of 'dependent' characters combined with, or 'applied to,' consonant characters, each of which has an 'inherent vowel' that is phonologically realized when vowel quality is not otherwise explicitly marked. (For historical reasons, syllable nuclei comprising a particular subset of vowel qualities followed by a labial nasal plosive in the coda position may similarly be represented by 'dependent' characters applied to consonant characters.) A subset of vowel sounds following a glottal stop may be represented using a collection of 'independent vowel' characters, discussed in further detail below.
[20] Incidentally, this word derives, through the application of a nominal infix, from the verb ្រួត [truət] 'to hang.'

realized as ្រ. This consonant cluster is modified by the vowel ួ [uə], and the coda of the final syllable is once again represented by ត [t]. Written thus, the word *tamruet* is said to be represented in 'hanging syllable' notation.

Alternatively, we may write *tamruet* in 'separated syllable' notation, តំរួត, in which the initial consonant ត [t] is modified by the 'vowel' ំ [ɑm] to yield the initial syllable in its entirety, តំ [tɑm]. This is then followed by រ [r], modified by the vowel ួ [uə], and then again by the final syllable ត [t], yielding the second, stressed syllable as a distinct orthographic entity, រួត [ruət].

The 'hanging syllable' notational style is indicative of the Chuon Nath standard, whose dictionary employs the character ម [m] with affixed consonantal subscript forms in nearly every possible instance; Chuon Nath himself, in describing this decision, cited his desire to preserve the orthographic continuity of the modern Khmer language with its predecessors from antiquity, as attested through inscriptions at the temple-city of Angkor.[21] The reformed standard of the 1970s, by contrast, overwhelmingly preferred the 'separated syllable' notation, which was seen by its proponents as a more streamlined and rational method for representing discrete syllables.

There is, finally, a small number of cases in which lexical items that involve the use of non-labial nasals in the coda position of an initial syllable (C_1) followed by another consonant in the onset of the second syllable (C_2) may similarly be represented either through the use of a subscript consonant C_2 affixed to a full consonant C_1 (*pjieng tamruet*, or 'hanging syllable,' form) or through the separation of the two syllables, with C_2 written as a full, non-subscript consonant (*pjieng riey*, or

[21] ពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត្យ 1967, ក-ឃ. Notably, not all lexemes involving such consonant clusters may allowably be written using either notation; certain subscript combinations – in particular, the use of the labial nasal plosive with an additional non-labial nasal plosive affixed as a subscript consonant – are disallowed.

'separated syllable,' form). In the present study, such cases are classified similarly to those involving labial nasal plosives as described above.

Independent Vowels

While most Khmer vowels are 'dependent' – the Khmer script is properly an abugida, rather than an alphabet[22] – a set of approximately a dozen so-called 'independent vowels,' or *srak penh tua* ('full-character vowels') in Khmer, are variously used to render particular combinations of syllable-initial glottal stops followed by a vowel. In every case, the syllable in question could equally be written using the character for a glottal stop, អ [ʔ], modified by the relevant vowel character.[23]

While several of the 'independent vowels' are rarely encountered, others appear quite regularly, particularly those that are conventionally used in the spelling of several common lexical items. Among the most prominent of these is the word *aoy* [ʔaoj], which may be written one of three ways: a) with a glottal stop អ [ʔ] to which the vowel ◌ៅ [ao] is affixed, followed by the glide យ [j], yielding អ◌ៅយ [ʔaoj]; b) with the independent vowel ឲ [ʔao], appearing exclusively in this lexical item, modified by the subscript form of the glide យ [j], orthographically realized as ◌្យ, yielding ឲ្យ [ʔaoj]; and c) with the independent vowel ឱ [ʔao] modified by the subscript ◌្យ [j], yielding ឱ្យ [ʔaoj].[24] Due to the prominence of this lexical item, as well as its multiple possible orthographic realizations, it is considered separately from the other 'independent vowels' in the present study, as discussed in greater detail in the 'Data Analysis Procedures' section below.

[22] See note 19 above.
[23] Standard – i.e., 'dependent' – vowel characters in Khmer may appear preceding, following, above, or below the consonant character that they modify, or some combination thereof.
[24] One of the authors considered in this study occasionally writes the final glide in its full, non-subscript form, yielding ឱយ. This idiosyncratic usage is discussed at greater length in the 'Results' section.

The use of independent vowels is not always at the sole discretion of the author; certain lexical items are exclusively spelled using independent vowels, while many others in which the use of independent vowels would theoretically be possible are never written with them. In those lexical items in which both independent vowels and their glottal-stop-plus-vowel variants are realized, however, the Chuon Nath orthographic standard prefers the use of independent vowels, while the reformed standard of the 1970s prefers the use of the glottal stop modified by the relevant vowel.

Other Non-Standard Spellings

The Khmer orthographic system exhibits considerable phonemic redundancy, with many phonemes capable of being represented in multiple ways. At the same time, the language's long written history has allowed for the preservation of orthographic renderings for certain lexical items that reflect their Old Khmer phonemic realizations, with such words' contemporary phonemic realizations having diverged over the course of many centuries of linguistic evolution. Thus, in many cases authors may employ a phonemically-motivated non-standard spelling of a particular lexical item, either sporadically or consistently. Because such alternate spellings are, by definition, idiosyncratic and non-standard, and are not systematically aligned with or incorporated into a particular orthographic standard, such irregularities are, in the present study, considered on a case-by-case basis.

3. Methodology

This study involved the analysis of six distinct textual segments, discussed in further detail in the 'Data Collection' section below. Taken together, the six texts span a temporal period of more than eighty years, with the earliest text published in 1938 and the most recent published in 2022.

Texts were reviewed for instances of the orthographic variants described in the 'Linguistic Variables' section above. Scores were assigned to different realizations of each variant, with the orthographic standard established through the Venerable Chuon Nath's *Vachananukram Khmer*,

officially recognized as the orthographic standard by the Cambodian government since 2010, established as the 'unmarked' variant. Procedures for scoring each text and token are discussed under 'Data Analysis Procedures' below.

4. Data Collection

Data were collected from six distinct texts, representing works of journalism, literature, historical and linguistic academic research, and lexicography. With one exception, discussed further below, a segment comprising the first six pages of the work was selected for analysis. Each text is briefly described and historically situated below.

Various authors, *Nokor Wat (Nagara Vatta)* newspaper (1938). Published from 1936 until its shuttering by French colonial authorities in 1942, *Nokor Wat*[25] – headed by Son Ngoc Thanh and Pach Chhoeun, both ethnic Khmer from present-day southern Vietnam[26] – promoted overtly nationalist themes throughout its reporting and editorials, establishing a nationalist sensibility through which both domestic concerns and foreign affairs – its front page weekly featured an 'Announcements from Various Countries' section – were interpreted and understood.[27] The front page of the July 30, 1938 issue was selected for consideration in the present study, as it was in this issue that the publication of the first volume of the first edition of the *Vachananukram Khmer* was first reported.[28] As such, at the time of the newspaper's publication, no orthographic standard had as yet been established.

[25] Its name roughly translates as 'Temple City,' a reference to Angkor, and is occasionally transliterated, as on its masthead, as *Nagara Vatta*. *Nokor* is the Sanskrit/Pali term for 'city,' borrowed into Khmer (cf. the former Khmer name for Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), *Prei Nokor*); it is also the root for the Khmer term *Angkor*.

[26] Southern Vietnam was known to the French during the colonial period as Cochinchina, and referred to by many Cambodians – then as today – as *Kampuchea Kraom*, or Lower Cambodia, given its historical political continuity with present-day Cambodia and its significant ethnic Khmer population.

[27] Edwards 2007, 207-9.

[28] *នគរវត្ត* 1938. Incidentally, the brief paragraph announcing the publication of the *Vachananukram Khmer* appeared on the third, rather than the first – of four – page of the newspaper, and is consequently not included in this study.

Ieu Koeus, *Pheasa Khmer [The Khmer Language]* (1947). Shortly after completing the manuscript of his 1947 work on the Khmer language, Ieu Koeus served as a member of the Cultural Committee, the government body tasked with developing a new Khmer lexicon to replace loanwords, primarily from French, that predominated in various fields of the sciences and humanities.[29] His work with the Committee brought him into contact with the Venerable Chuon Nath, who chaired the committee between 1947 and 1957; while Koeus disagreed with Nath on certain points, he nevertheless held the *Vachananukram Khmer* in high regard, and lauded its potential to unite written Khmer around a common standard – and, with it, the Khmer national community as well.[30]

Chuon Nath, 'Introduction' to the *Vachananukram Khmer [The Khmer Dictionary]* (1967). The *Vachananukram Khmer*, first published in 1938, was the culmination of more than two decades of work by a number of prominent Cambodian scholars, foremost among them the monk and religious scholar the Venerable Chuon Nath. Nath was first appointed to the commission overseeing the dictionary's development in 1926, and quickly came to assume the role as the project's chief architect.[31] Nath would remain committed to the project for the remainder of his life, overseeing the publication of five separate editions, the last of which was published in 1967. Following the death of the Venerable Chuon Nath in 1969, the dictionary was unofficially renamed in his honor, and is now commonly referred to as the *Vachananukram Chuon Nath*, or *The Chuon Nath Dictionary*, its iconic yellow cover adorned with an image of the elderly monk.

Khun Srun, *Chun Choab Chaot [The Accused]* (1973). In January 1973, Khun Srun, then twenty-eight, completed the final pages of *Chun Choab Chaot*, a collection of essays alongside a semi-autobiographical account of his seven months in prison in 1971, under the right-wing Lon Nol

[29] Sasagawa 2015, 50-1; អៀវ កើស 1947, ង-ឆ.

[30] អៀវ កើស 1947, 17-20.

[31] Sasagawa 2015, 46-7; Harris 2005, 119; Edwards 2007, 192.

regime.[32] Srun had studied under Keng Vannsak, a former politician and public intellectual whose 1964 book *Principe de création des mots nouveaux* established the principles of the orthographic reform policies that were later adopted by the Lon Nol government in 1972.[33] Srun, an admirer of the French absurdist philosophers and novelists, was part of a broader Cambodian literary movement active during the 1960s and 1970s that sought to modernize the Khmer language and its literary forms. He died in December 1978, at the hands of the Khmer Rouge; *Chun Choab Chaot* was his final work.[34]

Ly Sovir, *Neak Reapcham Kae Samruel Aksar Khmer Mun Ke [The First to Reform the Khmer Alphabet]* (2006). Ly Sovir's work covers a range of historical and linguistic topics, with a particular focus on the orthographic politics of the 1960s through the 1980s. Sovir, a former professor at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, writes extensively – albeit critically – about the Venerable Chuon Nath's dictionary and associated orthographic and lexical standards. *Neak Reapcham Kae Samruel* was published in 2006, during a time when the 1972 reformed orthographic standard was still officially recognized by the government.[35]

So Phina, *Bophana: Phka Min Ruh Rouy [Bophana: The Flower that Does Not Wilt]* (2022). So Phina, a prominent contemporary author, publisher, feminist, social activist, and organizer of the Khmer Literary Festival, published her biography of Huot Bophana, exhaustively researched and imaginatively told from the perspective of Bophana herself, in 2022. The story of Bophana, a young woman who died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1977 following a lengthy imprisonment within the notorious Tuol Sleng, or S-21, prison complex, was first written by

[32] Thien 2016.
[33] Sasagawa 2015, 61.
[34] Shortly after the novella's publication, he was again detained for a brief period; upon his release, in early 1973, he fled the city, fearing further persecution (Vachon 2016). He traveled to Cambodia's eastern provinces, joining the revolutionary forces of the Khmer Rouge that, five years later, in December of 1978, less than three weeks before their fall from power, would have him arrested and executed, along with his wife and three of his four children (Galmard 2015).
[35] លី សុវ៉ីរ 2006.

American journalist Elizabeth Becker, and was later portrayed through a documentary film by Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh; as Phina writes, her work is the first instance of Bophana's story being told by a Cambodian woman, for a Cambodian audience.[36]

5. Data Analysis Procedures

Each text was reviewed twice by the researcher, with the following lexical items identified as tokens:

1) Any lexical items for which either the 'hanging syllable' or the 'separated syllable' notation is allowable, regardless of the notation employed by the author.
2) Any lexical items for which either an independent vowel or a glottal stop with a dependent vowel is allowable, regardless of the orthography employed by the author.
3) Any lexical items exhibiting a non-standard orthography, as measured against the Chuon Nath orthographic standard.

Given the current status of the Chuon Nath standard as the accepted orthographic standard recognized by the Cambodian government, this standard was established for the present study as the baseline, or unmarked standard, against which tokens were evaluated. Tokens were scored according to the following procedures:

1) Lexical items written using the 'hanging syllable' notation received a score of 0, while those written using the 'separated syllable' notation received a score of 1.
2) Lexical items written using an 'independent vowel' received a score of 0, while those written using a glottal stop and a dependent vowel received a score of 1.

[36] ស៊ូ ភីណា 2022.

a. Representations of *aoy* [ʔaoj] were evaluated according to a tripartite scoring structure, in which the Chuon Nath-preferred ឲ្យ received a score of 0, the form ឱ្យ received a score of 1, and all other forms, including ឱយ and អោយ, received a score of 2.[37]

3) Lexical items written using other non-standard orthographies received a score of 1.

Scores were then tallied and totals were calculated for each text, both across and within each lexical type. Proportional scores were also calculated, both as a whole – with the total tallied score for a particular text divided by its total number of tokens (n) – as well as by lexical type, in which the total number of 'separated syllable' usages was divided by the total number of both 'separated syllable' and 'hanging syllable' usages, and so forth.[38] As such, the higher a text's proportional score, the greater its divergence from the Chuon Nath orthographic standard.

Importantly, while the orthographic usages exhibited in individual works were thus able to be quantified, no corresponding quantifiable measure was established for the authors themselves. As such, this study seeks to identify patterns between the *quantifiable* degree of orthographic alignment or divergence of a particular text from the Chuon Nath orthographic standard, on the one hand, and, on the other, the text's author's *qualitatively* assessed sociopolitical positioning, vis-à-vis the regimes of social and political authority that typified the unique historical moment in which the work in question was produced. Such an approach presents both opportunities and challenges, considered in greater detail in the 'Discussion and Summary of Findings' section below.

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[37] Indeed, these latter two forms' dispreference for the subscript form of the glide ◌្យ [j], alongside their divergence from the Chuon Nath-preferred independent vowel ឲ [ao], may be understood as a dual, or two-point, divergence from the Chuon Nath orthographic standard.

[38] Note that proportional scores greater than 1.00 are thus possible, given the double-weighted score of 2 given to certain orthographic realizations of [ʔaoj]. Thus, a score of 1.00 should not be interpreted as a complete – or 100 percent – divergence from the Chuon Nath standard.

6. Results

Results from the analysis of each text, depicting the total incidence of each lexical type, are shown in Table 1 below.

Author	Work	Year	# tokens	HS	SS	IV	GS	A1	A2	A3	I
Misc.	*Nokor Wat*	1938	106	9	15	11	0	28	0	0	43
Ieu Koeus	*Pheasa Khmer*	1947	28	2	3	2	0	15	0	0	6
Chuon Nath	*Vachananukram Khmer*	1967	75	35	4	5	0	31	0	0	0
Khun Srun	*Chun Choab Chaot*	1973	34	2	11	6	4	1	0	5	5
Ly Sovir	*Neak Reapcham Kae Samruel Aksar Khmer Mun Ke*	2006	39	0	19	0	0	0	0	7	13
So Phina	*Bophana: Phka Min Ruh Rouy*	2022	83	23	13	23	0	0	23	0	1

Table 1. Results from the analysis of orthographic data from six Khmer-language texts. HS = hanging syllable notation, SS = separated syllable notation, IV = independent vowel, GS = glottal stop with dependent vowel, A1 = use of Chuon Nath-preferred independent vowel for [ʔaoj], A2 = use of non-Chuon Nath-preferred independent vowel for [ʔaoj], A3 = use of other consonant and vowel combinations for [ʔaoj], I = irregular spellings.

Proportional scores calculated for each text, both overall as well as by lexical item type, are shown in Table 2 below. Note that no separate score was calculated for irregular orthographic realizations, as every lexical item exhibited in any given text would, in theory, potentially be subject

to irregular, non-standard orthographic realization. Such non-standard spellings were, however, factored into the total score for each text.

Author	Work	Year	Total score	HS/SS score	IV/GS score	A score
Misc.	*Nokor Wat*	1938	0.55	0.63	0.00	0.00
Ieu Koeus	*Pheasa Khmer*	1947	0.32	0.60	0.00	0.00
Chuon Nath	*Vachananukram Khmer*	1967	0.05	0.10	0.00	0.00
Khun Srun	*Chun Choab Chaot*	1973	0.88	0.85	0.40	1.67
Ly Sovir	*Neak Reapcham Kae Samruel Aksar Khmer Mun Ke*	2006	1.18	1.00	-	2.00
So Phina	*Bophana: Phka Min Ruh Rouy*	2022	0.45	0.36	0.00	1.00

Table 2. Results from the scoring of each text. HS/SS score = rate of occurrence of separated syllable (SS) notations against total number of hanging syllable (HS) and SS notations, IV/GS score = rate of occurrence of glottal stop and vowel (GS) notations against total number of independent vowel (IV) and GS notations, A score = rate of occurrence of variously-weighted realizations of [ʔaoj] against total number of occurrences of [ʔaoj].

7. Discussion and Summary of Findings

As discussed under 'Data Analysis Procedures' above, this study presents particular challenges in its attempts to document patterned correlations between, on the one hand, the *quantitatively evaluated* frequency of occurrence of particular orthographic forms and their corresponding rates of divergence from the officially-recognized Chuon Nath orthographic standard, and, on the other, the *qualitatively evaluated* sociopolitical positioning of authors and

writers. Such difficulties notwithstanding, several notable patterns nevertheless present themselves in the data.

The first is the clear correlation between institutional alignment and adherence to a particular orthographic standard. As seen in Table 2, by far the lowest score (0.05) belongs to the Venerable Chuon Nath's introduction to the 1967 *Vachananukram Khmer*.[39] Given the fact that the orthographic standard established by this very dictionary was set as the 'unmarked' variety, this is unsurprising – indeed, this text consistently scores the lowest of any text considered in this study across all categories of lexical types – yet it is nevertheless noteworthy that Chuon Nath was, in 1967, a highly prominent figure within several institutions of traditional authority, as Supreme Patriarch of the Mahanikay Buddhist Order and as an influential political ally of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, then serving as head of state. A multitude of converging motivations might thus reasonably be speculated as encouraging the Venerable Chuon Nath's avoidance of heterodox orthographic forms and practices.

Similarly, albeit on the opposite end of the orthographic spectrum, Ly Sovir, in his 2006 *Neak Reapcham Kae Samruel Aksar Khmer Mun Ke*, adheres unwaveringly to the reformed orthographic standard established in 1972, with an overall score of 1.18.[40] As Sovir details in sections of his book, he himself took part in many of the debates in the 1980s around particular orthographic questions that had arisen in the decades following the publication of the fifth and final edition of Chuon Nath's *Vachananukram Khmer*, and would go on to hold a number of official government positions and posts. As such, Sovir's alignment with institutional authority may be reflected in his rigid adherence

[39] Notably, the sole reason that the introduction to the 1967 *Vachananukram Khmer* does not receive a total score of 0 is the repeated presence of a single lexical item that, while theoretically allowably written using the 'hanging syllable' form, is, for historical and etymological reasons, conventionally written using the 'separated syllable' notation. The 'imperfect' score of this particular text thus results from the imperfect use of the usage of 'hanging syllable' forms as an invariant indicator of adherence to the Chuon Nath standard, when in fact the Chuon Nath orthographic standard itself notes this form as an exception to the general preference for 'hanging syllable' orthographic practice.

[40] Indeed, this text is the only text to exclusively employ 'separated syllable' spellings, and to opt for a spelling of [ʔaoj] that avoids the use of any independent vowels, hence its 'perfect' score of 2.00 in the 'A score' column of Table 2.

to the official orthography of his day, much as the Venerable Chuon Nath communicated his own official and institutionalized position through his own orthographic practice nearly four decades prior.[41]

Following Ly Sovir's work in its score of divergence from the Chuon Nath orthographic standard is Khun Srun's 1973 novella *Chun Choab Chaot*, scoring 0.88 overall. Srun, as discussed under 'Data Collection' above, belonged to a modernist literary tradition, and had himself studied under Keng Vannsak, the scholar credited with introducing the orthographic reforms that were adopted by the Lon Nol regime in 1972. Indeed, much of Srun's literary identity derived from his innovative, often unconventional use of language – colloquial lexical items, syntactic formations, and so forth – and so it is in keeping with his modernist identity as an author that *Chun Choab Chaot*, his final work, would diverge significantly from the prevailing – and institutionally-aligned – orthographic standard of his day.

We may contrast the patterns observed in Srun's text with those exhibited in the works of authors So Phina (scoring 0.45), writing in 2022, and Ieu Koeus (scoring 0.32), writing in 1947. Both authors undoubtedly exhibit political tendencies – Ieu Koeus, a founder of the Democratic

[41] Importantly, we may also note that, as seen in Table 1, Sovir's work furthermore exhibits a relatively high number of irregular forms, second only to the front page of the *Nokor Wat* newspaper in the present study. Within Sovir's work, all such 'irregularities' in fact represent an application of the general principles of the reformed orthographic standard institutionalized in 1972. Sovir thus omits silent consonants from several lexical items that, according to the Chuon Nath standard, would properly be spelled with them (indeed, this is a defining feature of the orthographic standard promoted by Chuon Nath, who sought to preserve, through orthography if not through pronunciation, etymological continuity between modern Khmer and both Old Khmer and Pali), as the 1972 reforms targeted those orthographic forms and features seen as cumbersome, arcane, and archaic. Sovir furthermore employs certain coinages in his text that are derived through processes of derivational morphology – infixation in particular – that typified Old Khmer, yet that are no longer productive in modern Khmer; such derivations are a notable feature of the 1972 reformed orthography, as Keng Vannsak, the reformed orthography's chief proponent, was largely antagonistic towards the Chuon Nath-preferred system of word coinage using Pali-derived elements, and sought to return to the 'native' Mon-Khmer processes of derivational morphology (Sasagawa 2015, 60-1). Indeed, a more fine-grained analysis than that employed in the present study would consider each of these areas of orthographic reform as distinct lexical categories, rather than eliding their distinctions through inclusion in the catch-all category of 'irregular forms,' and would thereby enable further insights into the ways in which authors' literary identities have been consolidated and communicated through the strategic deployment of a wide range of orthographic forms.

Party in the late 1940s, was a vocal proponent of Cambodian independence and political sovereignty, and was in fact assassinated by hand grenade in 1950; today, So Phina writes extensively on contemporary social issues, many of which intersect with political structures and processes – and both furthermore exhibit clear interest in literary and linguistic topics and debates. Yet neither author situates themselves as firmly as did Khun Srun against a particular literary establishment, and nor do either of these two authors center their orthographic practice quite so strongly within their efforts to constitute a literary identity. As such, the scores of their texts do not exhibit extreme tendencies in either direction, displaying an overall alignment in the direction of the Chuon Nath orthographic standard while avoiding a dogmatic adherence to such.

Finally, we may consider the case of the *Nokor Wat* columns, scoring 0.55 overall. The *Nokor Wat* columns diverge from the other texts considered in this study in several notable ways. First, the newspaper fully aligns with what would become the Chuon Nath standard in its usage of both independent vowels in general, and of its usage of the [ʔaoj] independent vowel form in particular. In its variation between 'hanging syllable' and 'separated syllable' forms, however, the newspaper is less consistent, with slightly more than half – 63 percent – of eligible consonant clusters realized as 'separated syllable' forms, in opposition to the orthographic practice that the Venerable Chuon Nath would champion throughout the five editions of the *Vachananukram Khmer*. Most anomalous, however, is the newspaper's remarkably high number of irregular, or non-standard, lexical forms: on the paper's first page alone, 43 such forms were identified, more than three times the number of irregular forms identified in any other text considered in this study; furthermore, while many such forms recurred multiple times throughout the text,[42] a full eighteen such non-standard spellings are

[42] For instance, the non-standard representation of ទៅ [tɨɯ] as ទោរ [tou], a common pronunciation for this lexical item, appeared ten times; the vowel ◌ិ [ə] was used in words written today using the vowel ◌ឹ [ɨ] on a total of twelve occasions; and the representation of [mɨt] as មិត្រ, employing a subscript, word-final ◌្រ [r] that is not pronounced – reflecting a Sanskrit derivation, rather than the identically-pronounced, Pali-derived មិត្ត, with a subscript, word-final ◌្ត [t], similarly unpronounced – recurred a total of seven times.

represented within those 43 token occurrences. Here, too, then, we may not be surprised to see that, in 1938, prior to the establishment of a recognized orthographic standard for the Khmer language, such non-standard forms would be in regular usage; it is nevertheless important to note that the data do indeed support such an interpretation.

Taken as a whole, then, we may observe an overall pattern of correlation between, on the one hand, the extent of alignment of a particular text with the Chuon Nath orthographic standard, and, on the other, the broad sociopolitical positioning of the text's author(s) in regards to the dominant social and political regimes of authority of her, their, or his particular historical moment – findings that confirm the positive hypothesis put forth at the outset of this paper. We find the most dogmatic adherence to a particular orthographic standard among those authors who themselves were most thoroughly embedded within official institutions of state power and authority, reflecting such authors' ideological alignment with official state discourses of power. Among the more literary works represented in this study, we find that the extent of an individual text's divergence from the official orthographic standard largely correlates with the extent to which the text's author sought to define themselves and their literary practice and identity at least in part through their heterodox use of language within their body of work, as evaluated against the prevailing orthographic – as well as lexical, syntactic, grammatical, and literary – standards of their day. Finally, we find that the sole text considered in this study published prior to the establishment of a national orthographic standard exhibits an anomalously high incidence of irregular orthographic realizations of a wide range of lexical items, thereby providing evidence for the broader hypothesis that the introduction of a national orthographic standard was a critical moment within Khmer literature and letters, insofar as it introduced a particular paradigm against which subsequent generations of Khmer authors and writers would define their orthographic practice and establish their literary identity.

This study is not, however, without its limitations. Among the most significant is, as discussed above, its attempts to correlate quantitative data with qualitative data, a limitation that

presents challenges for the generalizability of the findings presented here. Furthermore, while this study exclusively examined orthographic variation among a limited subset of lexical items, variation in written language can of course be manifested through a variety of other means, including lexical variation, variation in syntactic structures and so on. Further studies, then, would do well to consider the social and political implications these and other forms of sociolinguistic variation within written Khmer.