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Cambodia
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13.1 Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, the Khmer language has been at the centre of a series of only partly successful attempts by Cambodian politicians to rework and re-present ethnic identities in Cambodian society into one with a unitary national core. Their lack of success reflects that of Khmer nationalist movements themselves, a failure all the more striking given the overwhelming linguistic hegemony of Khmer for a millennium in what is now Cambodia. The current Hun Sen-led political regime lacks a credible nationalist pedigree, and Cambodia now seems to be passing – some would say disappearing – into an era of Asianization within globalization, having never passed through a period of viable nationalist rule. Instead, after a series of at best weak and at worst catastrophically self-destructive regimes since the nineteenth century – late classical, colonial, royalist, republican, communist, and liberal democratic – Cambodia still lacks an effective modern state and a self-sustaining national identity.

This chapter begins in section 13.2 with an outline of pre-colonial Cambodian history, looking at language and identity from prehistoric times, through the renowned Angkor period to subsequent polities and the establishment of a French Protectorate in 1863. In section 13.3, it considers French–Cambodian interaction in the elaboration of the idea of a Cambodian nation and discusses the role of language and Khmerization in Cambodian nationalism and political contestation up until the end of the French domination in Cambodia in 1953. Sections 13.4–7 – covering 1953 to 1991 – document the at first fitful and then accelerating advance of linguistic Khmerization in often fraught political contexts, including war, revolution, genocide, and renewed foreign domination: in independent Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk, then during the ill-fated Khmer Republic, on through the catastrophic years of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge, and thereafter under Vietnamese occupation in the 1980s. Finally, section 13.8 looks at issues of Khmer language use, national identity, foreign involvement, and multi-ethnic revivalism in contemporary Cambodia.
since the United Nations peace-keeping intervention of 1992–3, bringing the account up to 2006.¹

13.2 Pre-colonial History: Before, During, and After the Angkorian Period

Khmer, the national language of Cambodia, is categorized as one of the Austro-Asiatic family of languages, closely related to Mon, distantly related to Vietnamese and possibly also to Thai (Huffman 1970). A written Khmer has existed since at least the sixth century, being standardized when a script based on the Pallava way of writing Sanskrit was formulated for Old Khmer. Speakers of the Austro-Asiatic languages that begat contemporary Khmer, Mon, and Vietnamese probably moved

¹ I would like to thank the following, among others, for their many comments, corrections, criticisms, and suggestions regarding various earlier drafts of this chapter: Michel Rethy Antelme, Chan Sambath, David P. Chandler, Mike Davis, Penny Edwards, Ian Harris, Khing Hoc Dy, Helene Lavoix, Henri Locard, Laura McGrew, John Marston, Laura Summers, and Touch Bora. All have contributed to important improvements in the text, although not always in the ways their remarks intended, and the matters discussed here will, I hope, be the subject of much further research and debate.
southward out of what is now south China into what is now Southeast Asia some 4,000 years ago. Those who spoke Old Khmer eventually established scattered, competing chieftainships around the Dang Rek escarpment which forms the modern border between Thailand and Cambodia and in the Mekong river delta and coastal areas that straddle both sides of what is now the frontier between southern Vietnam and Cambodia. The warring lowland chiefs flourished through interaction with maritime trade that produced multi-religious, culturally syncretic societies, but when these polities declined as sea-borne commerce moved elsewhere, the cockpit of Khmer political contestation shifted up the Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers to the plains north of the Tonle Sap Lake and below the Dang Rek, culminating in the seventh to eighth centuries with more state-like political creations that inscribed Khmer on stone. These were the precursors of the principalities that built the monumentally awe-inspiring Angkor Wat and other temple complexes between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. The temples were the cosmic-symbolic centres of classical ‘empires’ that at times stretched to the shores of the South China Sea and the Malay Peninsula. Their stitching together of widely separated centres of population – some primarily Khmer, others not – signified a quantum leap in political organization. However, it was not until the twentieth century that, in interaction with European political concepts, the temples were interpreted by Khmer as emblematic of a single and particular national culture associated with the Khmer language (Edwards 1999).

The word ‘Kampuchea’ was evidently first applied to these Angkorian polities (Mabbett and Chandler 1995), in which Old Khmer was the main vernacular language of elites and of many ordinary people alike, but in which other languages were spoken, constituting a cosmopolitan Cambodian civilization, in which a variety of cultural idioms were internalized. Thus, Angkorian civilization was heavily influenced by South Asian Brahmanist and varied Buddhist ideals, models, concepts, and vocabulary, and Chinese influences are also apparent. All of these were mixed and elaborated in fantastically creative ways that made the Angkorian polities re-creations of universal cosmic powers on earth (Wolters 1999).

Like most other such pre-modern empires, their inherent socio-economic and socio-political contradictions meant they experienced repeated episodes of political disintegration, as rivals challenged every established hierarchy, attempting to re-localize power and re-legitimate it as a new centre of the universe. Such claims to universality were, however, generally tolerant of diversity, culturally eclectic, and

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2 Note that some conventions contrast the word Khmer as a reference to the language and an ethno-linguistic group speaking it with the term Kampuchea and its Western-language derivatives such as Cambodia and Cambodge which have been used to designate a series of multi-ethnic polities existing from the sixth or seventh century through to the present. By such conventions, Kampucheans/Cambodians would include all these polities’ ethnically diverse entourages, followers, subjects, and citizens. However, these correspondences have been far from perfect and appear to have lost their applicability in the late twentieth to early twenty-first-century context.
subject to frequent reinvigoration by new ideas, in a context where multi-religiosity was often seen as an indication of power (Harris 2005).

During the Angkor period, many Sanskrit terms were incorporated into Khmer, and rich poetic and other literatures in Khmer and Sanskrit developed, the texts of which were often considered sacred (Jacob 1996). This increased the distinction between written and spoken versions of Khmer, which was loaded with linguistic markers of the relative social status of speakers. From the thirteenth century, with the increasing adoption of Theravada Buddhism, its sacred language Pali became a major source of loanwords into Khmer, adding a new layer to the dichotomy between high and low Khmer. All of this was indicative of a lasting pattern, according to which Khmer speakers at all social levels have ‘enjoyed using for effect vocabulary drawn from different foreign origins’ (Jacob 1993: 164).

Having flourished for over four hundred years, Angkor as the centre of Khmer civilization was eventually abandoned in the fifteenth century as the centre of power shifted southeast to downriver sites such as Udong and Phnom Penh, closer to the newly developing maritime trade and further away from exposure to attack by increasingly aggressive Siamese forces. For the next several hundred years, the Khmer kingdom remained under heavy pressure both from Siam to the west, and Vietnam to the east, and in the process forfeited significant amounts of territory as both Siam and Vietnam expanded their areas of direct and indirect control.

By the early nineteenth century, the Cambodian polity known as Krong Kampucheatheupatai had in fact become geographically isolated from the maritime trade that was crucial to the development of neighbouring kingdoms centred on Bangkok (Siam) and Hue (Dai Nam). It was less centralized and had not travelled as far down the path of proto-national ethnicization as its neighbours (Lieberman 2003), leaving its subjects with a weaker sense of shared identity and the state a much less formidable entity with a limited reach. Its realm was highly vulnerable to attack from without and susceptible to disintegration from within. During the first half of the nineteenth century, it was overrun by rapacious Siamese military expeditions, annexed by Dai Nam, and beset with civil wars and rebellions, devastating its population and creating difficult conditions for cultural continuity. Bangkok and Hue imposed their candidates on the throne, and, at times, the court was in some ways almost as Siamese or – briefly – Vietnamese as it was Khmer. Hue’s attempts to Confucianize and Vietnamize Cambodia violated the previous Southeast Asian pattern of expanding political control by multi-ethnic coalition-building and working through local rulers, not only provoking elite-led popular rebellion, but adding a persistent element of poison to Khmer–Vietnamese relations (Chandler 2000).

Krong Kampucheatheupatai had its court at Udong, and the largest population centre was at the riverside entrepot of Phnom Penh. Long-established towns and villages were populated primarily by Theravada Buddhist Khmer speakers, but were also home to more or less assimilated Chinese from various dialect groups and Muslims who spoke Western Cham, an Austronesian language written in an Arabic
script and with many borrowings from Arabic, Malay, and Khmer. Living near or in the hills were a multiplicity of Lao and other ethnic groups whose links to the realm were intermittent and primarily economic. Some of the uplanders’ languages were in the Mon-Khmer family, others related to Malay and Polynesian.

Although many Chinese were socially segregated into dialect groups, incorporation into the Khmer elite and Khmer society was relatively easy. Formally, any Chinese born in the kingdom was considered Kampuchean if he or she adopted Khmer customs and dress. In practice, many did become part of Khmer society and its elite, though maintaining a Chinese cultural distinctiveness, as no necessary connection was made between cultural and political loyalties. At this time, ruling over a multicultural realm was still seen as indicative of royal greatness, and because of this the palace did not hesitate to appoint Chinese, Sino-Khmer, and Cham as provincial officials (Edwards and Chan 1995).

Despite political turmoil, court and Buddhist literature (in Khmer and Pali) was diverse. Literary Khmer was a sophisticated mix of Sanskrit, Pali, and the high language reserved for royal and aristocratic discourse. After years of contact, Khmer had adopted much Thai vocabulary and even – it seems – syntax, especially at the court, but also in popular speech (Huffman 1973). This provided the linguistic groundwork for a nineteenth-century vogue for imitating Thai that contributed to a new wave of creative experimentation in literary style (Jacob 1996), paralleling a similar process on the religious front where the introduction of Siamese courtly and religious culture encouraged a renaissance in the practice of Theravada Buddhism. This was also a period of rising Chinese literary influence on Cambodian texts via bilingual Sino-Khmer writers (Nepote and Khing 1987).

Still, Khmer was the lingua franca of political administration and the language of religious communication between Buddhist monks and the laity. The many young peasant men who became monks often learned to read and write at least some Khmer. However, as in the past, most written records were not for commonplace consumption: they were holy objects. Moreover, texts were recorded on perishable materials. This and the unsettled situation meant few survived from earlier centuries. Thus, for most Khmer-speakers, spoken literature – folktales, songs, riddles, and proverbs – remained much more important than written texts.

### 13.3 Colonialism, Language, Nationalism, and Political Division, 1863–1953

Given the adverse geo-economic and geo-political circumstances Krong Kampuchea-eupatai faced, some personalities in the elite opted in 1863 to accept French protection for their position and the kingdom. They came from the most ‘Siamese’ circles of the royal family, those elements associated with Hue having been eliminated. The Protectorate resulted in a deal for joint French–royal administration with its capital
at Phnom Penh, a system which the French gradually subverted to the disadvantage of the traditional elite and developed further with a neo-traditional bilingual elite created from collaborative royals, aristocrats, nobles, interpreters, and hangers on (Tully 2002). The French recognized that a key part of their protectorate project was to transform the Siamese-educated, multilingual Kampuchean monarch from a petty kinglet whose royal ideology required him to be an exemplar of universal cosmic-religious ideals into ‘the living incarnation, the august and supreme personification’ of Cambodian ‘nationality’ (Aymonier 1900–1904: 56). However, the French also treated the Royaume du Cambodge as a backwater in a colonial construct that combined it with Vietnam (divided north to south into Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina) and Laos under the overarching administrative structure of Indochina, investing much less in the development of Cambodia than Vietnam. It was thus relatively untouched by the capitalist transformations and bureaucratic state-building that more quickly and solidly forged incipiently anti-colonial nation-states in Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, even where the raw material was more multi-ethnic and economically less advanced (Dixon 1991).

Meanwhile, the Angkorian temples were portrayed in colonial historiography as evidence that, since the fourteenth century, the Khmer and Cambodia had suffered some extraordinary catastrophe that proved they were either doomed to disappearance or needed rescuing and restoration to avoid extinction. A few French believed their colonialism should finish off the failed Cambodian state and incorporate it into the direct French colony of Cochinchina in southern Vietnam. For many others, French colonialism was seen to be the potential saviour (Edwards 1999).

With both visions in the background, the French imported and employed many Vietnamese to work in the civil service in Cambodia. Accompanied by an influx of Vietnamese artisans, traders, and casual labourers, their numbers rose to perhaps 200,000 in the mid-1930s. Some of these Vietnamese began to see France’s Indochina project as compatible with Vietnamese domination of Cambodia, raising the prospect of a relaunching of Dai Nam’s annexation project. Meanwhile, Vietnamese vocabulary began to seep into Khmer, joining numerous Chinese terms in common usage. However, while Khmer–Chinese intermarriage continued, such liaisons remained rare between Khmer and Vietnamese. Indeed, while the level of anti-Chinese animosity, popular and elite, was lower than perhaps anywhere else in Southeast Asia, anti-Vietnamese feeling seems to have undergone intensification.

Within the boundaries of Cambodia as frozen by French colonialism during the first half-century of its Protectorate, Khmer was spoken quite uniformly. Although local accents existed, the differences were not so great as to generate any recognizable regionalism. Beyond Cambodia’s borders, among Khmer who had been living under non-Khmer rule, differences were larger. Speakers of what came to be known as ‘Khmer Kandal’ (Khmer in the middle, within Cambodia itself) might have difficulty understanding some of the speech of ‘Khmer Kraom’ (‘lowland’ or ‘downriver’ Khmer) living in Vietnamese Cochinchina, and more problems conversing with
residents of border areas in Siam/Thailand, who referred to themselves as ‘Khmer Loe’ (upland Khmer).

The opportunity for promoting national unity on the basis of traditional Khmer texts was not grasped by the French, whose general attitude toward Khmer literature was dismissive. The capacity for reading and writing sophisticated Khmer literary works, already confined to a tiny elite, declined rapidly under the French, creating a cultural rupture with the past (Nepote and Khing 1981). Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, very little was being written or recorded and virtually nothing printed in Khmer. Religious and other palm-leaf manuscripts were still produced, many in Khmer but mostly in Pali, and printed materials circulated, but more in French, Vietnamese, and Chinese than in Khmer. Young Buddhist monks still learned the basics of reading and writing Khmer as part of their pagoda studies, but Cambodia as a whole suffered from having less functional literacy in the main local language than probably any other country in mainland Southeast Asia, such a situation extending well into the twentieth century.

Yet, out of all this grew the embryonic imaginings of a nation – which happened more slowly and later than in most of Asia, but happened nevertheless. The crucial shift came in the early twentieth century and gathered pace in the 1920s and 1930s. The growth of a secular elite, colonial patronage of reformist elements in the Buddhist monkhood, the gradual expansion of colonial schools, and the introduction of Khmer print production facilitated the emergence and popularization of a high culture intended for the masses and presented to them as their national culture. This process, however, began in French and was carried forward by French administrators in dialogue with Francophone Khmer. Together, they formulated the concepts of a Khmer or Cambodian ‘nation’, ‘soul’, ‘national character’, and ‘race’, whose place in the world was often defined with reference to the need to catch up intellectually, administratively, economically, and otherwise with Siam and Cochinchina. Those involved in such nationalist promotion produced printed French and Khmer texts intended to tell Cambodians who they were historically and how they could become better Khmer in the future by being more like the Khmer of yore, but simultaneously becoming modern, thus making it possible to restore past glories in new ways. They saw the vernacularization of Khmer as part of this nation-saving and nation-building project, and this was intended to give Cambodia’s nationalism what they called a ‘national language’ and thus a linguistic dimension cordonning it off from Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, although French remained the prime language of government and indeed of nationalist thought. Presiding over all this was King Sisowath, who although not highly proficient in French was in other ways ‘almost a Frenchman’ (Tully 2002: 135). At the same time, he saw himself as a pious Buddhist, and was thus a culturally hybrid embodiment of the emerging nation.

The establishment during the mid-1930s of Cambodia’s first, Francophone lycée, named after King Sisowath, was crucial in reorienting its formative generation of modern intellectuals away from any possibility of seeing themselves as Indochinese
and towards considering themselves as the leaders in creating a predominantly Khmer Cambodian nation. The French-founded, Cambodian-staffed Buddhist Institute had the same institutional effect vis-à-vis the Cambodian monkhood, presiding over the pinnacle of Buddhist/Pali schooling that promoted remaking Buddhism as modern and Khmer.

However, while some French colonial officials were fervently promoting ‘Khmeritude’, opening doors for officially approved expressions of Khmer culture, they practised intellectual repression more severe than in other parts of Indochina. Thus, it is not surprising that the first overtly political Khmer-language newspapers, magazines, and novels only appeared in the 1930s alongside the tardy beginnings of an organized nationalist movement, whose first leaders were graduates of Lycée Sisowath and staff of the Buddhist Institute (Tully 2002). The founding figures included Son Ngoc Thanh, a Vietnamese-Khmer Kraom métis, and other Khmer Kraom or Sino-Khmer Kraom. The inventiveness of Khmer nationalism is well exemplified by the background of the former: despite his ‘racial’ and cultural hybridity, Son Ngoc Thanh presented himself as more Khmer than the Khmer, someone who knew politically ‘more about what it means to be a Khmer than... Khmer born in Khmer-land’ (Nagaravatta, 1937). Similarly, the new Khmer literature that emerged from this time reflected a culture that was socially more rooted in the cosmopolitan Mekong delta, with its Chinese, Vietnamese, and French influences, than the Angkorian realms that it celebrated as the heartland of Khmer-ness (Nepote and Khing 1981).

This is the paradoxical context in which Cambodian proto-nationalists made one of their key objectives the ‘Khmerization’ of the civil service, and above all the displacement of Vietnamese officials, the latter move being part of a larger process whereby Cambodian nationalism formatively defined Vietnamese as a main Other and denied the possibility that a Vietnamese could also be a Kampuchean (Leonard 1995).

The flagship publication of this movement was the newspaper Nagaravatta (i.e. Nokor Voat or Angkor Wat). With the encouragement of some French believers in Khmeritude, Nagaravatta was able to attack Vietnamese and Chinese ‘domination’ of the civil service and economy, respectively, although Nagaravatta also advocated studying things Vietnamese and Chinese in realms other than language and religion, using what was learned to catch up with other nations (Edwards 1999). The writers of Nagaravatta stressed the need to use Khmer to spread Khmerism among the Khmer, and called for the use of Khmer in education and in official documents. This furthermore coincided with the beginnings of the coinage of neologisms, translating French terms into Khmer as an intended aid to the spread of Khmer through more formal domains of language use. Much of the translation/coinage work was carried out by Buddhist scholars quadrilingual in French, Sanskrit, Pali, and Khmer, and the unfortunate end result was that many of the new vocabulary items turned out to be
Pali-Sanskrit jawbreakers, unintelligible to virtually everyone in Cambodia except those who formulated them.

This difficulty was exacerbated by the tiny circulation of print media, as a result of which most people in the countryside simply never encountered the new vocabulary items. Even in urban areas, the neologisms were in fact little used, and those few members of the elite who were familiar with them often preferred to employ the original French expressions. Nevertheless, Khmer print media helped form a new generation of urban students and other readers coming of age as World War II loomed. The French colonial view that only reform could save Cambodia from extinction was recast by these new Cambodians into redemptionist nationalist projects, according to which Khmer/Cambodians themselves would prevent the final demise of the Khmer and Cambodia and relaunch the Cambodians as the people of a glorious nation-state. Importantly, however, the new generation was also politically divided. Most palace and aristocratic youth, including the future King Norodom Sihanouk, saw the Cambodian nation as intrinsically royal and requiring significant Francophonia. They were at odds with those – influenced by the likes of Son Ngoc Thanh – who came to insist it must be anti-colonial, and probably republican, democratic, or socialist.

The divergent streams of Cambodian nationalism emerging in the early 1940s were encouraged by Japanese forces that had established bases in Indochina in 1941, provoked by a fascist turn in French colonial policies and fanned by rumours of French plans to rationalize the increasing use of Khmer by Romanizing it, like the vernacular Vietnamese. This brought to the fore the inherent contradiction of French involvement in promotion of the Cambodian nation, which the nationalist elite in Phnom Penh saw as robbing the nation of its history and language. The nationalist opposition faced violence in 1942, when French police attacked a protest against the arrest of a monk accused of plotting a nationalist putsch, a demonstration in which other Buddhist clergy played a prominent role. Several leading monks and nationalists were arrested, and others fled to the countryside or abroad.

Several years later, following the end of World War II, nationalist activists successfully pressed Sihanouk and the French to institute a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy, and themselves formed the new Democrat Party. To the surprise of both Sihanouk and the French, the Democrats then managed to win a series of elections and used parliament as a platform to demand more rapid Khmerization of the bureaucracy, military, and police, that is, the replacement of Vietnamese, French, and aging aristocratic officials with Cambodians of their generation educated in French, as part of a drive for accelerated progress towards full independence. On the other hand, full-fledged linguistic Khmerization was not a burning issue for the Democrat nationalists, not least because their claim to political leadership rested on their status as intellectuals, as proven by their French-language education. Still, this group did show a concern to raise the standard of the Khmer spoken by the Cambodian elite and some wanted to rationalize and popularize (i.e. de-Sanskritize and de-Pali-ize) the language to facilitate this.
In another contemporaneous development, many of the protestors who had fled to Thailand after the demonstrations of 1942 became ‘Khmer Issarak’ (‘Emancipated’ or Free Khmer). This phrase, originally coined by Thai irredentists influenced by Siamese ideas of political freedom, promoted the concept of simultaneous liberation of Khmer from the yoke of White colonialism and from retrograde feudalism. The anti-French, anti-royalist Khmer Issarak movement was launched with covert Thai support and supplemented by assistance and behind-the-scenes direction from Vietnamese communists. It was also backed by a significant number of Vietnamese troops. The three Sino-Khmer Kraom who fronted the organization were Son Ngoc Minh, Tou Samut, and Siev Heng. None of these three spoke French, but all spoke Khmer and Vietnamese, and both Minh and especially Samut were literate in Pali. Led by Samut, they created a new communist Khmer language, translating basic Soviet and Maoist terms into Khmer. Like the neologism-makers in Phnom Penh, they often used Pali or Sanskrit in the coining of Khmer communist terminology. Influenced by Cambodians exposed to Thai Marxism, they also incorporated some Thai-isms into their political lingo. However, they relied much more than those in Phnom Penh on attempts to find colloquial Khmer equivalents for Vietnamese words and tried much harder to avoid unpronounceable and arcane polysyllabic Pali-Sanskritisms, while purging the language of royalisms and other terms marking social hierarchy among speakers. The resulting revolutionary parlance was quite accessible to peasant speakers of Khmer and was popularized with surprising ease and rapidity. In communist-controlled areas of the countryside in what these Issarak officially called ‘Nokor Khmaer’ (rendered ‘Khmeria’ in French), a political dialect of Khmer thus became current. The dialect was spread through the publication of communist Issarak periodicals.

Whether this new language qualified as a nationalist one is problematic, because despite every attempt by the Vietnamese and Khmer Kraom ICP members to deny it, the movement they led was under ultimate Vietnamese direction. Once again, there was a profound contradiction in foreign promotion of a Khmer nation. This time, by introducing and popularizing Khmer national-communist rhetoric, the Vietnamese provided the linguistic vehicle through which Cambodian revolutionaries and radicals could demand full national independence, and such demands soon began to be whispered in Khmer by some in the Cambodian Communist ranks, behind the backs of the Vietnamese (Heder 2004).

A third competing political dialect of Khmer that arose at this time was associated with the republican-leaning ‘Populo-Movement’ (pracheachalana). Like Communist Khmer, it was largely purged of royalisms, but maintained other linguistic markers differentiating persons of high from lower social status. It also maintained most of the elite neologisms coined in Phnom Penh, but had some of its own distinct political terminology.

Thus, political geography came to determine the words that Cambodians would use to signify parallel concepts. For the Franco-aristocratic elite, ‘the people’, for example, were the pracheareas or simply the reas, that is, ‘the subjects’, while for the communist Issarak, they were the pracheachun, the simplest formulation for ‘people’, and for the
republicans, they were *pracheapularaoat*, or ‘popular citizens’. In the countryside, peasants became adept at using one word or the other to indicate which warring political side they were on. So, too, did intellectuals who were exposed to all three dialects.

Quite generally, popular acceptance of a Vietnamese-led Khmer communism and the development of rural pockets of communist and anti-communist Issarak-speak reflected the weakness and incoherence of Cambodian nationalism, which in turn was at least in part a result of the continuing lack of nationally penetrative, Phnom Penh-based Khmer-language media. Circulation of Khmer-language newspapers and magazines remained very low – some 3,000 copies for a population of around five million – and was even outnumbered by Chinese publications. The ‘national’ radio station could not be heard in outlying areas and included much French-language programming, and personal radio receivers numbered only in the thousands, making the audience extremely limited. The situation with regard to education was hardly any better. According to probably optimistic statistics, a quarter of boys and half that proportion of girls attended primary classes, and these often only finished three elementary years of Khmer-language education, so functional literacy no doubt soon disappeared. For those few Khmer students who went beyond the third year, French was still the predominant medium. Outside of education, French and Chinese remained the default languages of administration and business, respectively, alongside Vietnamese.

13.4 The Sangkum Reas Niyum Regime: Royal Official Nationalism and Crisis, 1953–1970

In 1953, France granted independence to a Sihanouk-dominated Cambodian regime. General elections then took place in 1955, but with full control of the bureaucracy and security forces, Sihanouk managed to prevent the opposition from winning a single seat in parliament (Heder 2004). This meant that, in contrast to trajectories of decolonization elsewhere where Asian nationalist movements promoting a national language seized or assumed power, in Cambodia the victors were politicians whose history was one of collaboration with colonialism and whose claim to rule was intimately linked to their fluency in the colonial language.

Many Communists, Democrats, and republicans fled the country, and by the early 1960s, a combination of rigged elections and severe repression made it impossible for those still remaining in Cambodia to publish any political materials. Khmer literary production also stagnated, after an outburst of creativity in the 1950s, as Sihanouk’s regime deeply chilled the intellectual climate. Turgid, state-approved periodicals in royalist Khmer officialese instead dominated national language media. The main language of administrative record-keeping was still French, and most government effort was put into French-language publications praising Sihanouk’s statist economic policies and anti-American diplomacy (Mehta 1997).

This dearth of reading material in Khmer, however, contrasted with rising literacy in Khmer, the product of Sihanouk policies of expanding the national education
system at all levels, including setting up Cambodia’s first universities. The Sihanouk regime claimed its various educational efforts managed to raise functional Khmer literacy from 40 per cent in the early 1960s to 60 per cent at the end of the decade. However, such an expansion also lowered the quality of French-language instruction and thus the French fluency of secondary and tertiary school leavers, who furthermore often faced unemployment in a stagnating economy.

This was accompanied by a new, but still quite limited expansion in newspaper circulation. As of the mid-1960s, Khmer newspapers had 27,000 subscribers, Chinese newspapers 25,200, Vietnamese 6,000 subscribers, and French also 6,000. Official government-produced political magazines in French had much larger print runs (more than 30,000) than those in Khmer (8,000). Reflecting the continued importance of oral Khmer culture, radio raced ahead of print media as the main form of Khmer-language state communication, and Cambodia had perhaps the highest number of radios per capita in Southeast Asia at the time.

Meanwhile, covert organizing by Communists and republicans continued in the towns and countryside. The Communists and republicans recruited among dissatisfied graduates for whom language was increasingly an issue. The latter’s relatively poor education in French meant they thought politically much more in Khmer than the ruling elites, and their educational and socio-political progress was often blocked by failure to pass secondary school examinations set in French. Amidst a broad vogue for modernity manifest in a desire to take forms established elsewhere and reproduce them locally, with national but modern characteristics (Ly and Muan 2001), these young intellectuals struggled against Sihanoukism’s constraints to master what they believed was progressive knowledge and began, literally, to translate this into Khmer, while also calling for the further Khmerization of education. In Phnom Penh, political debate bubbled up in a nascent civil society. Underground Khmer language publications circulated, articulating grievances against the Sihanouk regime from various political perspectives (Heder 2004). At the same time, novel-writing in Khmer began to take off again, and some works of fiction contained trenchant criticisms of problems in Cambodian society, while displaying an obsession with modernity, a fascination with past glories, morbid worries about contemporary obstacles to progress, and a propensity to display cosmopolitan sophistication through demonstration of familiarity with Western literature and philosophy (Stewart and May 2004). Former Democrat nationalists working from abroad also began reviving the movement for expanding and improving Khmer vocabulary without over-reliance on Pali and Sanskrit. Works of martyrs of this movement reappeared as part of an upsurge of opposition to Sihanouk.

Following the occurrence of Communist-supported anti-government rural rebellions and student demonstrations in Phnom Penh in 1967, Sihanouk allied with his armed forces chief, Lon Nol, to bloodily suppress all left-leaning political activity. While vigorously attacking the left, however, Sihanouk made common cause with demands for the Khmerization of secondary education, and this began in 1967 under
the auspices of a National Committee of Khmerization, which published a glossary providing new or standardized Khmer translations for French terms appearing in textbooks used in the first two years of secondary school. Its policies – reflecting a resurgence of avoidance of Pali and Sanskrit in favour of derivations from Khmer – gave a fillip to the use of Khmer by urban intellectuals. As the leftists were either in prison or hiding in beleaguered Communist guerrilla bases, this worked to the advantage of liberal democratic and republican dissidents, who published Khmer-language texts contributing to the public reactivation of anti-Vietnamese nationalism. However, Sihanouk–Lon Nol repression caused the number of books published to drop by almost half, crushing a tide of creativity that therefore peaked in the mid-1960s.

This nipping in the bud of Khmer expression was accompanied by an upsurge in Khmerization aimed at minorities. With regard to Cham and upland peoples, the late 1960s saw a major intensification of Sihanouk policies of assimilation that made ‘Khmer’ the designation of citizen identity, officially referring to upland peoples as ‘Khmer Loe’ (a term these people themselves rejected – White 1995) and Cham Muslims as ‘Khmer Islam’, retaining Khmer Kraom as an implicitly irredentist reference to Khmer living in southern Vietnam, and referring to Khmer in Thailand as ‘Khmer Surin’. Policy vis-à-vis Chinese made an even more dramatic U-turn. Previously, the often Sino-Khmer, Francophone elite had allowed Chinese communities to maintain their dialect-based identities, Mandarin schools, and Chinese-ness, but also lowered colonial-era barriers to assimilation, as a result of which the ruling strata became even more Sino-Khmer. However, Sihanouk’s late 1960s turn against the left was accompanied by vociferous public tirades against Chinese schools for being hotbeds of Mao Zedong Thought, which slipped easily into anti-Chinese rhetoric generally (Edwards and Chan). As for Vietnamese, their communities always remained more segregated and distinct, with urban Vietnamese often speaking little Khmer, and more French than Khmer.

In short, by the end of the 1960s, Khmerization of minorities – other than Vietnamese – went hand in hand with Khmerization of state education, but both efforts remained half-way, leaving Chinese, Vietnamese, Cham, and upland languages spoken at home by 15 per cent of the population and French the language of higher education and elite political discourse. Although Khmer remained the oral lingua franca for 90 per cent of the people, there was a vast gulf between Khmer as it was enunciated in formal contexts by the urban elite and the ordinary speech of peasants.

13.5 The Khmer Republic, 1970–1975

The crises of the late 1960s culminated in the March 1970 overthrow of Sihanouk by Lon Nol. Following this, the next five years saw an acceleration of the trend toward Khmerization that had gathered steam since the 1960s, and indeed set the stage
for its triumph during the last quarter of the twentieth century. For the second time (since the communist Issaraks’ Nokor Khmaer), Cambodia was replaced by Khmer in the polity’s name, it being declared a ‘Khmer Republic’ in October 1970, and Lon Nol began the elaboration of a florid political philosophy of ‘neo-Khmerism’, reclaiming the mantle of earlier colonial-era nationalist Khmerism. Neo-Khmerism called for ‘the spread of traditional culture and absorption of the various philosophies of the world’s civilisations’ to promote prosperity for the people via ‘a special accelerated economic program’ to bring Cambodia rapidly to a high state of development, thus restoring it to Angkorian glory (Lon 1974). In the meantime, Lon Nol’s army units massacred thousands of Vietnamese civilians and ‘repatriated’ 200,000–250,000 to South Vietnam, halving the Vietnamese population of Cambodia. This move came with state propaganda that all ethnic groups in Cambodia, except Vietnamese and Chinese, belonged to a single ‘great Khmer race’, while Republican policy further restricted Chinese schooling and damned Chinese for ruining Khmer morals and sabotaging the national economy.

Popular republican nationalism was apparent within an outpouring of Khmer literature and non-fiction, the latter including anti-Vietnamese, anti-French, and anti-Sihanouk histories and general treatises on philosophy, religion, law, linguistics, literature, and social science. One current combined opposition to Vietnamese domination with promotion of liberal democracy in place of Sihanouk’s retrograde autocracy, in order to move politically to catch up with or surpass Thailand and Vietnam. This current turned against Lon Nol when it became obvious that virulent ethno-nationalism could not sustain a regime that did not deliver on other fronts. As tirades against the Vietnamese were replaced by angry criticisms of the corruption, authoritarianism, political violence, and incompetence of the Khmer Republic, Lon Nol imposed censorship.

Meanwhile, in the countryside, the Khmer Rouge insurgency led by Pol Pot’s Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) imposed increasing control over villagers and posed an ever-greater challenge to the republican government. As conditions deteriorated and CPK forces took the upper hand, the Khmer Republic collapsed in 1975 and was replaced by the state of Democratic Kampuchea (DK), ushering in four violent years of murderous domination.

13.6 Democratic Kampuchea, 1975–1978

Although Pol Pot and several of his senior ministers were French-educated Sino-Khmer, an important linguistic aspect of the DK regime was that it was more ethno-linguistically Khmer than any previous twentieth-century polity. The overwhelming majority of CPK local cadres and much of the top leadership spoke only Khmer, and insistently so, demanding that everyone talk in the political dialect originally devised by Tou Samut. For the first time in Cambodian history the speaking of foreign languages was also considered a dangerous political flaw and could result in the speakers’ execution. However, while pursuing violent linguistic Khmerization,
DK was also the first regime since colonialism not to formally extol Khmer-ism, proclaiming instead that all its people were Kampucheans, the aim being transformation of the entire population into proletarianized, atheistic worker-peasants with no ethnic differences (Heder 2005).

Notoriously, DK’s spectacular acceleration of previous trends toward linguistic Khmerization was connected to a nationalist political project involving massive murder, including genocide and other crimes against humanity. This project was driven by Pol Pot’s ambition to restore Cambodian glory and its ‘national soul’ (Pol 1976: 13–14) by building a cosmically perfect example of universal communism, combining the most radical aspects of the Soviet, Chinese, and Vietnamese revolutions in order to surpass all of them by a ‘Phenomenally Great Leap Forward’ in economic development. Everyone became an Other of this imagined perfect Marxist Kampuchea: US imperialism, French colonialism, Soviet revisionism, Vietnamese expansionism, and Chinese Communist interference internationally, national minorities and the recalcitrant Khmer majority itself domestically. Estimates suggest that during the less than four years of Communist rule, between one and three million Cambodians out of a population of 7–7.5 million died by execution and from famines and illnesses resulting from conditions created by the regime. One estimate suggests the dead included one in seven of the country’s rural Khmer, a quarter of urban Khmer, half of ethnic Chinese, more than a third of Islamic Cham, and 15 per cent of upland minorities, while Vietnamese who had evaded the CPK’s not-to-be-refused offer of deportation after April 1975 were almost totally wiped out in an overtly genocidal campaign of targeted killings that began in 1977.

During the self-destructive years of DK, Communist Party-speak created a new high political Khmer, with translated Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist-Maoist terminology comprehensible only to cadre initiates, if in fact them. At the same time, a middle-level of Khmer Rouge organizational and mobilizational vocabulary and of favoured Khmer colloquialisms also came into use and was much easier to master and widely internalized in ordinary conversation among cadre and people. This language was mainly spread to the people orally (by cadres who had been speaking it since before 1975) through slogans and songs, to a lesser extent by DK radio, and also by the written word (Locard 2004). The CPK did print internal Party magazines but access to these was restricted to Party members, whose ranks were increasingly devastated by murderous purges. Similarly, although the CPK additionally published a monthly magazine and a fortnightly newspaper for the non-communist masses, the print runs were extremely small, and hardly anyone outside the Party ever saw them.

The same fate befell a tiny handful of textbooks published by the Ministry of Propaganda. Having abolished the previous education system, the CPK planned to reintroduce a primary education programme from 1977 and to gradually re-establish secondary education starting that same year, to be followed by the reinstitution of a three-year tertiary education system later. However, neither the secondary schools nor the university ever appeared, and CPK intentions to set up primary schools were
carried out only in a very few model co-operatives and special schools for leading cadres’ children. Combined with widespread arbitrary executions of Party and non-Party ‘intellectuals’ suspected of opposing the CPK’s catastrophically radical policies, the result was a devastating drop in the number of literate people.

More generally, CPK rule during the DK period caused a total fracturing of the already weak and divided Cambodian nation. It not only turned Khmer against Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham, and other minorities and turned lower class (peasant) Khmer against upper class (urban) Khmer, it also provoked an extraordinary process of regional ethno-genesis rooted in the seven zones into which the CPK arbitrarily divided the country. For the most part, these were not congruent with any recognizably historical, geographic, socio-economic, linguistic, cultural, or ethnic regions. However, they were pitted against each other politically, competing to make a ‘success’ of the revolution and curry favour with Pol Pot, such that the cadre and people of zones began to take on proto-ethnic identities, characterized by tiny differences in their Khmer accents and in the way they wore their ‘revolutionary’ clothing. By 1978, the cadres of two zones, the Southwest and the West, were being used to purge and kill cadres and people of the others, before they were themselves subjected to systematic arrest and execution late in the year. The victims in other zones often identified their tormenters as ‘Southwesterners’ and ‘Westerners’, recognizing them by the guttural way rural folk from these areas spoke Khmer.


The CPK’s killing of Cambodians and divisive smashing of the Cambodian nation into murderously hostile splinters opened the way for a more long-lasting and decisive linguistic Khmerization but also destructive polarization of the nation under the auspices of the Vietnamese Communists and Thai army, among other international influences. This situation came about when the CPK provoked a Vietnamese invasion that precipitated the collapse of the DK regime, after which the Vietnamese set up a client regime in Phnom Penh, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), in January 1979.

Although the Vietnamese maintained control of the PRK from behind the scenes, it was under their direction that linguistic Khmerization was definitively carried out in Cambodia (Clayton 2000). The use of Khmer as the language of administration was nearly as complete as under CPK rule, a widespread national school system in which Khmer was virtually the only language of instruction was established for the first time in history, and a significant number of newspapers, magazines, and books were published in Khmer, while virtually nothing was published in other languages.

The PRK constitution of 1981 provided for the development of Khmer as the national language and for a campaign to universalize literacy in Khmer. By the mid-1980s, primary school enrolment had supposedly once again reached 1969 levels, and the reconstructed primary and secondary school systems were based on an entirely
Khmer curriculum, although foreign textbooks and teachers were used in tertiary and technical faculties. A serious problem, however, was quality. With many teachers having been killed or having died under CPK rule, many others having left the country when the Vietnamese took over, and a significant number of those who survived and stayed having taken up other government jobs, the lack of competent teachers available created a major obstacle to achieving progress. This was exacerbated by poor political morale, as the PRK curriculum was often not to teachers’ liking (Vickery 1986). Quite generally, such a situation in education was symptomatic of the broader problem experienced by the PRK that they and the Vietnamese could not actively promote ‘Khmer culture’ (in teaching materials and elsewhere) without precipitating anti-Vietnamese Khmer nationalism; yet, if they failed to promote it, they made themselves vulnerable to nationalist allegations that they might actually be smothering Khmer-ness, which had the potential to further excite a nationalist reaction.

As a result of these difficulties facing the regrowth of education, there continued to exist fairly widespread illiteracy, despite PRK claims to have achieved 100 per cent literacy in 1990, and informal channels of communication, overwhelmingly oral, remained crucially important. Compared to most of the rest of Asia, certainly, there was – as ever before – little habit of reading in the population at large, due to a lack of printed materials of popular interest.

Nevertheless, the broad move to linguistic Khmerization was an irreversible fact, and one whose triumph was furthered by PRK policies vis-à-vis minorities. Unlike the Khmer Issarak, the PRK presented itself as Kampuchean, not Khmer, and the PRK constitutionally recognized the equality of all nationalities and their right to maintain their languages, literature, and cultures. In practice, there was little or no political discrimination against upland people and Cham. However, like the Sihanouk regime, the PRK expected and encouraged them to learn and speak Khmer and – in a broader sense – to be ‘Khmer’, so their gradual Khmerization continued (Vickery 1986). The PRK policy toward Chinese who had survived Pol Pot’s DK regime, by contrast, was the most hostile of any previous regime except that of DK itself. This followed the Vietnamese Communist attitude of the time. It was justified by reference to Beijing’s support for insurgencies fighting the PRK within Cambodia and to the supposedly upper class and therefore exploitative historical class characteristics of local Chinese. Chinese language instruction continued underground, although fluency in Chinese, spoken and written, continued to drop and Chinese strategies to avoid discrimination led to further intermarriage and assimilation.

Meanwhile, with official Vietnamese encouragement, but over the objections of some senior PRK cadres, perhaps 100,000–250,000 Vietnamese civilians took up residence in Cambodia and came to enjoy protection and favouritism from Vietnamese political and military personnel in the PRK (Gottesman 2002). The presence of these Vietnamese returnees and new arrivals had little effect on the overall cultural situation in the PRK (aside from the spread of Vietnamese terms in urban Khmer
slang), but gross exaggerations about the size of the Vietnamese presence served to justify nationalist attacks against the PRK government by insurgent forces, including Pol Pot remnant communists, resurgent royalsists and former republicans, who jointly insisted in their three different political dialects of Khmer that only liberal democracy and an end to Vietnamese domination would make it possible for there to be real progress in Cambodia.

13.8 A UN Protectorate and Restored Kingdom of Cambodia, 1991–Present

Fighting between government and insurgent forces continued until 1991, when the Paris Agreements on Cambodia were reached, providing for an end to warfare, UN neutralization of Cambodia’s political environment, the organization of free and fair elections, and the transformation of the country into a multiparty democracy with a market economy. Since this time and the occurrence of elections in 1993, Cambodia has again become a monarchy under Sihanouk and then his son, Sihamoni, but has been largely dominated by the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), led by Hun Sen, a former member of the CPK, first as part of a coalition government with a regenerated royalist party, FUNCINPEC, and later in full control of political power, after violent sidelining of the royalists in 1997.

In the period since 1991 Cambodia has undergone unprecedented socio-economic transformation, largely driven by Southeast and East Asian capital in the context of a spectacular internationalization of the country. CPP policy has made Cambodia the most open country in Asia to foreign capital and is proudly turning it into an open economic crossroads between China, Vietnam, and Thailand. Further cosmopolitanism is provided by the presence of a plethora of foreign governmental, UN, intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations (Trannin 2005). Against such a background, Hun Sen’s CPP remains the primary champion of linguistic Khmerization. The hegemony of Khmer in its internal communications and with the population is overwhelming and unchallenged. Still closely linked to the Vietnamese, now economically and diplomatically dependent on China and mindful of the power of the United States, the CPP hardly has a nationalist Other. As the UN levelled the electoral playing field to the CPP’s disadvantage in 1993 and has criticized its human rights record since, Hun Sen occasionally uses the United Nations as a nationalist whipping boy. He has also sometimes sniped at Thailand, but after this provoked riots in 2003 that severely damaged Thai investment, this theme was dropped to attract Thai money back.

Linguistically, CPP co-optation of the royalist party FUNCINPEC since 1998 has helped revive royal- and aristocracy-speak, which confirms and reinforces the elevated social status of the parvenu CPP ruling class around Hun Sen, who is styled a *samdech* (‘prince’). These strata demand a kind of re-feudalized linguistic respect and mostly get it when those of the lower social order address them to their faces. More generally, the
Khmer spoken by elite and masses alike now includes much communist terminology and even a few republicanism. The resulting Khmer transcends twentieth-century political dialects.

It is in this fused Khmer that the CPP dominates the media. After a period following the UN’s implementation of the Paris Agreements when all political sides freely published newspapers critical of others, opposition print media have now again become politically tame and operate under constant threat. In the present climate where serious political criticism risks repression, freedom of the press has often been a licence for a bribery-driven gutter journalism, and there is no serious, independent Khmer-language news periodical. This leaves the field open for the pro-CPP tabloid Reaksamei Kampuchea, which has print runs of almost 20,000 daily.

Printed materials indeed still touch a very limited readership, being much surpassed by radio and now television. By 2003, television reached 52 per cent of all Cambodians, radio 38 per cent and newspapers only 9 per cent. As ever, this promotes oral over written culture, albeit in new ways. In one sense, the main successor to the previous oral literary tradition is in the lyrics of the booming music market, overwhelmingly sung in Khmer, although contemporary music is an eclectic mix of traditional melodies and influences from Asia and the West. Well aware of such shifts, the CPP has exercised tighter control over radio and television than the marginal newspaper sector, and has its own stable of pop stars. Television channels are entirely or predominantly pro-CPP, as are radio stations with the greatest range, although a few smaller, privately-owned or NGO-operated stations air programming critical of the government.

Meanwhile, with heavy foreign funding and involvement, the government has extended the Sangkum and PRK policies of expanding free basic education in Khmer, with significant but as yet very incomplete success. Despite recent increases, per capita public spending on education is well below what is needed to ensure basic education for all or reach adults who never learned to read or have forgotten how. Only 36 per cent of the population over 15 years is functionally literate. Of the remainder, 37 per cent are totally illiterate and 27 per cent are semi-literate. A claimed 70 per cent literacy rate thus masks much lower rates among older Cambodians, females, poor rural people, upland minorities, and people living in areas where armed conflict ended relatively recently. Cambodia remains behind – often greatly behind – almost all the rest of Asia in terms of school-going, literacy, and teaching professionalism. Figures from 2003 indicate that 80 to 90 per cent of children began primary school, but at best 20 per cent made it into secondary school and only 8 or 9 per cent finished this level. Nevertheless, enrolment is increasing, and government policy aims at doubling the number of those continuing on to the secondary level by 2008, having all children in primary school by 2015, and reducing adult illiteracy by 50 per cent by the same year. The achievement of these goals may however be difficult.

Khmer is the medium of state instruction at the primary and secondary levels, making textbook production the largest sector of Khmer-language publishing, albeit one very much bankrolled and influenced by international personnel, and many
textbooks are being translated from foreign works or modelled upon them. Reintroduction of English and French as required subjects in the state system – desired by parents – is foreseen by the government. In the meantime, language schools teaching English, Chinese, Japanese, French, Thai, and Korean have sprung up everywhere. A few are subsidized by foreign governments, but most are run by private Cambodian entrepreneurs. There is also a growing number of private ‘international’ schools teaching entirely or predominantly in English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or French, catering to foreign youngsters and the children of the Cambodian elite, whose parents are anxious to send them for further education abroad.

Despite a formal commitment to Khmerization at the tertiary level, use of foreign languages and reliance on international involvement is even more prevalent at the educational summit. Foreign governments, UN agencies, and international NGOs play key roles in curriculum design and even teaching, and many university-level texts are in English or French. There are now the same number of public secular and Buddhist universities as in the Sangkum period, plus two public higher education institutions offering postgraduate degrees. However, since the government authorized private and public–private universities, higher education has been driven largely by the needs of a market created and dominated by international capital, with highly mixed results in terms of educational quality. By 2005, thirty-one private universities had appeared, and the number of higher education students had shot up to 48,729, the overwhelming majority in private study. There are even more numerous private ‘institutes’, ‘centres’, and ‘colleges’, particularly for business, technical, and computer courses. However, Cambodian degrees generally do not qualify their holders for postgraduate study abroad, either in Asia or elsewhere, even though public higher education requires facility in English or French. Private universities are even more foreign-language oriented. They have many foreign faculty members and run at least some and sometimes most courses in English. This is certain to have a significant impact on the future of higher education, because government plans to have 90,000 students at this level by 2008 foresee that 52,000 will be in private institutions. The habit of reliance on English for intellectual and professional discourse is likely to be further enhanced because many training programmes for Cambodians working in the huge NGO sector are largely or entirely in English.

This is very much related to the limited world of print. Given the paucity of serious journalism in Khmer, especially on sensitive domestic topics, those in search of reasonably reliable, unbiased information instead read the English and French press, while those interested in economic developments rely to a significant extent on the Chinese publications. These sources are also sought after for international news, together with BBC and Radio France International, which transmit via FM in English and French, and television channels from all over the world, available via satellite.

The situation is somewhat different as regards lighter reading, as there is a growing number of glossy magazines in Khmer with articles on pop stars, cars, and computers catering to popular urban youth culture and the beginnings of a middle class. They
have bigger circulations than newspapers. A new generation of novelists and poets has also emerged, many publishing their works via newspaper serialization, as well as in popular magazines and book form. However, the most popular Khmer novels by far are those written in the colonial and Sangkum periods, in part because of political limits on what can be published. As for non-fiction and particularly sophisticated academic writing, such intellectually serious Khmer publishing is in some ways at a lower ebb than in the early 1960s and early 1970s, and the general lack of Khmer language publications continues to have severe negative effects on the flow of intellectual knowledge in all fields, including Cambodian history, politics, and culture, as most books on these subjects are written by foreign scholars in English or French and published abroad.

As for translations of foreign texts, with a few recent exceptions, the quality of translation is poor. The standard of Khmer taught in Cambodia’s schools is now so low as to be inadequate to equip Cambodians to write Khmer well, much less translate into it fluently. Moreover, along with re-feudalization in honour of ‘Sam-dech’ Hun Sen et al. has come a new avalanche of neologisms translating English terms, largely coined following historical practice of relying heavily on Pali–Sanskrit roots and manufactured helter-skelter as Cambodians working for different government, UN, NGO, and intergovernmental agencies come up with their own ad hoc solutions to vexing translation problems. On top of this, the hegemony of English is such that Khmer syntax is being mangled to conform to English usage. The net effect is not only that some translations are practically unintelligible. A new and widening gap is opening up between the few urban and elite Cambodians who can fathom the new Khmer and ordinary Cambodians who cannot. This deters them from making the effort to read and write books in Khmer and inclines them to read English and other foreign languages instead (Antelme 2004/5). Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the best-selling books in Cambodia are materials for learning and using English. And despite the shoddiness of translation work, translation of English books on business and technical subjects is the most active private book production activity in Cambodia.

It is also not surprising that some Cambodian nationalist intellectuals – surviving and new – see Cambodia as in cultural crisis, suffering from two great ruptures with its traditional heritage, that of the post-Angkorian decline and that following 1970 (Ebihara et al. 1994). The fact is, in contemporary Cambodia, the word ‘traditional’ is often used to refer to practices of the Sihanouk period, with some allusions to those of earlier periods, above all Angkor. In reality, substantive connections to the pre-1950 period are tenuous, due to a lack of written materials and living memories, and even thinner to the pre-colonial period.

There is evidence of a dying out of the rich, earthy Khmer vocabulary of country folk for dealing with their environment (Antelme 2001). The fonts of digitalized Khmer, popularized via freeware accessed by the computer literate, simplify its orthography in ways that cut it off further from its literary past (Antelme 2004/5). In such contemporary
works as are being written, there is little reference to the period from 1970 until the end of the century, almost as if it did not happen. Similarly, with regard to Buddhism, although there has been a vibrant revival, there has also arguably been an irreparable institutional and ethical break with colonial and post-colonial religion (Hansen 2003: 109). Some maintain that whereas through the 1960s, a sense of living in a moral community existed in the minds of many Cambodians, the country is now afflicted by ethical paralysis, leaving historical virtue a residual phenomenon. It is under assault by the lures of mindless consumerism, get-rich-quick schemes, rampant corruption, the drug trade, and the sex industry, all of which corrode a government that is thus uninterested in seriously supporting Buddhism as a corrective ethical compass. They note that the traditional Franco-Khmer culture of the colonial period is fast vanishing, and see a trend according to which anything that is seen as old but not deemed to reflect the magnificence of Angkor is considered inferior to the modern (Chy and Prak 2004). Although culture in the form of Angkor is a huge money-maker for the international and semi-governmental tourist industries, broader and deeper cultural preservation is starved for funds (Beng 2003/4). The most pessimistic argue that much of what now passes for Cambodian culture has ‘no roots, no substance, no spirit’, because an obsession with money is squelching possibilities for a revival of the creative hybridity of the 1950s and 1960s (Chheng 2001: 112–13).

Nationalist feelings of loss are exacerbated by the return of Chinese-ness and Vietnamese to the Cambodian scene. Since the 1990s, a massive regeneration of Chinese cultural identity has been taking place across the country, with the re-emergence of national, local, and dialect-based Chinese associations, schools, temples, circulation of Chinese materials from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, and local publication of Chinese newspapers, newsletters, and magazines. This has been stimulated by an enormous influx of Chinese capital and the key role played by Beijing as a backer and bankroller of the Hun Sen regime and is being enhanced by the arrival in Cambodia of large numbers of Chinese newcomers from China and Taiwan. Surviving local Chinese and Sino-Khmer have been re-Sinicizing themselves and their children on an extraordinarily large scale, though this supplements and does not obliterate the retention of a significant degree of Khmerization resulting from Khmer Republic, CPK, and People’s Republic policies. The resurgent Chinese-ness therefore has a great degree of ethno-linguistic hybridity. Cultural interpenetration facilitates love-match and arranged marriages, especially among the children of the CPP elite and rising Chinese business and commercial families. Along with all this has also come a resurgence of anti-Chinese stereotyping, especially among poor Khmer who see the Chinese as part of a rapacious, aggressive, exploitative, and oppressive juggernaut of power and money.

The contemporary Vietnamese community includes former residents of Cambodia (and their offspring) who returned from Vietnam at some point after 1979, many of whom consider Cambodia their ancestral home and who speak Khmer, plus large numbers of people with no previous connection to Cambodia, many of whom speak little Khmer and flow into Cambodia with CPP collusion. Their presence may be
having a re-Vietnamizing impact on those who consider themselves ‘Cambodians of Vietnamese origin’ (Bertrand 1995). Negative Khmer stereotyping of Vietnamese (and vice versa) abounds, even if it is not universal, and intermarriage remains unusual. Popular relations may well be worse than before 1970. In places with concentrations of Vietnamese, Vietnamese schools – some supported by the Vietnamese Embassy – provide a primary education in Vietnamese, although many Vietnamese children also go to Khmer schools, and this creates tendencies toward assimilation. The barrier to this comes from the Khmer side, because for many Khmer, Vietnamese can no more be Cambodian than they can be Khmer, and the notion that only ‘Khmer citizens’ can be Cambodian is enshrined in the Constitution to help prevent assimilation (Leonard 1995).

Even so, Vietnamese – like Chinese – is having a renewed influence on colloquial Khmer, along with English, especially but not only among urban youth. Like the elite, they relish sprinkling their speech with foreign vocabulary, to demonstrate their worldly sophistication.

Less threatening to nationalists but still potentially a source of nationalist concern about a drift towards officially-sanctioned multiculturalism is the situation with regard to uplanders and Cham. International NGOs have launched a process leading to an unprecedented programme of bilingual primary education for uplanders, in which children initially study in their mother tongue before they go on to study Khmer, so that they become literate in both languages. This innovation has been endorsed by Hun Sen, and the government stresses it is in line with constitutional guarantees of multi-ethnic equality. The government has also allowed restoration of Cham and Arabic language teaching and establishment of Qur’anic schools, many of them with international Islamic support.

Cambodian concern to recover, recreate, and reinvent the Cambodian nation through preservation of Khmer culture and tradition and promoting the development and use of Khmer, particularly in literature and scholarly writing, can be seen as a nationalist reaction to the Asianization and globalization of Cambodia, and some Cambodian intellectuals are suspicious of cosmopolitanism. However, foreign involvement in such efforts is not only considerable, it is greater and more multi-faceted than under the French protectorate or Vietnamese projects of the Issarak and PRK periods. Foreign funding and personalities, multilingual Cambodian exiles returning from abroad, and metis Cambodians are crucial to a variety of programmes and institutions dedicated to rescuing and reviving Khmer-ness and Cambodia as a nation. Although not backed by the same military presence and force employed by the French and the Vietnamese, they are embedded in – even if they are sometimes very critical of – the economic power of Asian and world aid, trade, and investment, which is much more penetrative, pervasive, and seductive than troop deployments.

Unlike under the French, however, foreign champions of Khmeritude do not aim to cordon it off from Thailand or Vietnam, but advocate building up cultural and intellectual links with these and other Asian countries, as well as the West. They and the Cambodians they support see multilingualism as a must for reviving and disseminating
Khmer studies, encourage critical reconsideration of ethnic stereotypes, and tend to call for making Cambodia not into a Khmeria but a Kampuchea, that is, a culturally plural society in which non-Khmer are neither assimilated nor transformed into artificially maintained ethno-linguistic museum pieces. In some ways, this seems like a return to pre-colonial and thus pre-national practices and imaginings of community and in that sense may be more deeply traditional than twentieth-century efforts at constructing and imposing an exclusivist and monolithic Khmer nation. Advocates of persevering in such efforts may be fighting a losing battle, or they may eventually benefit from a nationalist backlash arising out of the most recent contradictions inherent in foreign involvement in remaking Cambodia, including the ways in which it both promotes and marginalizes the use of Khmer.