Critical Asian Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcra20

YOUTH MOBILIZATION AND IDEOLOGY
Anne Raffin
Published online: 21 Aug 2012.

To cite this article: Anne Raffin (2012) YOUTH MOBILIZATION AND IDEOLOGY, Critical Asian Studies, 44:3, 391-418, DOI: 10.1080/14672715.2012.711977

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2012.711977

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
YOUTH MOBILIZATION
AND IDEOLOGY

Cambodia from the Late Colonial Era
to the Pol Pot Regime

Anne Raffin

ABSTRACT. This article, based on archival data, tracks the evolution of youth mobilization in Cambodia from the Vichy French colonial National Revolution during World War II through the country’s revolutionary implosion under Pol Pot in 1979. Successive regimes relied on young people to consolidate power and protect the nation from external and internal threats. An overarching ideology of agrarianism structured the political beliefs of the leaders and committed cadres of these youth corps, ranging from an ideology of civic agrarianism under colonial officials and Sihanouk, to Lon Nol’s military agrarianism, and finally to the Pol Pot regime’s mobilization of youth via an ideology of revolutionary agrarianism that aimed to create a utopian agrarian nation. While the lives of young Cambodians had traditionally been shaped by two institutions, the family and the sangha, the advent of state-sponsored youth organizations in the mid twentieth century provided a new space for young people beyond the family and existing religious organizations. In this respect, the author argues, the Cambodian youth corps was part of modernity. In spite of this development, those in power continued to mobilize young people via ideologies based on agrarian values, an idealization of the past, and the desire to create a “new man.” The state’s instrumental use of youth organizations during this period can thus be seen as a type of reactionary modernism.

This article aims to trace the state’s instrumental mobilization and organization of youth in Cambodia from 1941 to 1979 in order to chronicle the important role that youth played in Pol Pot’s genocidal Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime. Apart from personal accounts of survivors, no systematic long-term
historical writing has been done on youth policy or youth mobilization under the Pol Pot regime. Autobiographical recollections of Pol Pot survivors emphasize political change through breaks young people were forced to make with the past. By contrast, this article traces the continuities in youth mobilization from Cambodia’s colonial period through its turbulent postcolonial regimes by linking forms of social organization to ideologies of agrarianism and reactionary modernism.

Between 1941 and 1979, Cambodian leaders and state authorities put into place ideologies and institutional structures whose aim was to mobilize young people for political projects. Under the authoritarian French colonial Vichy regime (1940–1945), young Cambodians were mobilized through state-sponsored recreational youth corps. This approach was used up to the Lon Nol era (1970–1975), when it evolved into a military mobilization that would ultimately reach genocidal proportions under the Pol Pot regime (1975–1979).

In this article, youth is studied as an organizational unit brought from the Western world as one of a number of channels of change in colonized Southeast Asia. Among these channels was the creation of voluntary associations not based on ascribed membership. In Cambodia, such associations constituted a new way for the colonial power and postcolonial regimes to organize large groups beyond the family and sangha, or Buddhist community, and were a way the state could mobilize young people in order to counter international and domestic threats.

**Youth as a Social Category**

Before beginning our analysis, we must first examine “youth” as a concept. The French colonial definition of youth was less about age, per se, than about its associated functions and obligations, and such youth-related associations remained constant through successive political regimes. These functions included bonding young people to one another through practical and ideological activities and inculcating values of service and defense of the nation. Definitions of youth as a category changed over time, however: in colonial and postcolonial Cambodia youth was loosely defined as the period before marriage, when individuals were relatively free from family responsibilities. For the French colonial state, this period spanned ages seven to twenty-one. Later, when the Pol Pot regime sought to mobilize somewhat older individuals who were perceived as having “the most energy” and whose help was needed in order to realize the revolution and defend it from enemies, youth was redefined as being from eight-

---

1. Compiled by Dith Pran (Dith 1997). Chanthou Boua focuses more on the resettlement of refugee families and children in Australia (Boua 1990), whereas Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua chronicle a couple of young boys’ testimonies (Kiernan and Boua 1982). More recently, Kalyance Mam also deals with these issues in part (Mam 2004).

2. This article, which is an extension of Raffin 2005, probes to find whether any continuities exist between the Vichy era and the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. The 2005 book looks only at the continuity between the Vichy regime and Sihanouk’s era.


teen to thirty years.  

Complicating the definition of youth was its relation to the concept of childhood. All the regimes under study recognized the existence of both categories, although the distinction between the two was less marked in the Democratic Kampuchea era than in other periods, given the political importance of children as bearers of the future and as more malleable subjects who would be dedicated to the revolution. Throughout the Pol Pot era, children and youth were two contiguous and complementary stages in the life cycle of an individual—a time when a person could correct the errors of the past, unlike older generations who were presumed to have been corrupted by previous regimes. In this respect, youth also represented a politicized generational category. In order to capture young people’s loyalty and cultivate solidarity, political leaders during the time frame of this study, generally encouraged young Cambodians to think of themselves as members of this meaning-invested category.

The youth corps under the colonial regime, as well as under Sihanouk and Lon Nol, consisted mostly of young people from both small and large towns. By contrast, the Khmer Rouge targeted the offspring of peasants, whom they perceived as representative of the working class. Youth groups in all regimes from 1941 to 1979 included female as well as male members, and official discourses from the colonial to the Lon Nol period frequently highlighted the idea of youth as an important social identity over and above distinctions based on hierarchical ties, gender, and urban/rural dichotomies.

**Mobilization and Overarching Ideologies**

As Nasir Abdoul-Carime notes in his study of the Khmer identity, one significant challenge for all postcolonial regimes in Cambodia was creating a nation, i.e., a feeling of unity among the population, beyond clan and family networks. I argue that youth mobilization prior to and including the postcolonial period, up to 1979 was the state’s response to the historical need to foster a mass political commitment to the regime in the face of threats to Khmer nationhood. My argument is that such mobilization was to reinforce patriotic/nationalistic feelings toward the motherland.

In 1941, at a time when the colony faced the occupation by Japanese soldiers and Thai expansionist policies, the French created a large Cambodian youth movement called Yuvan Kampuchera, with King Norodom Sihanouk as its head. The Yuvan involved its members in socially-oriented activities. Sihanouk later used this movement as a tool to consolidate his power, forming the Royal Khmer Socialist Youth (RKSY) in 1957 to support his new mass political movement, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (Popular Socialist Community). The Sangkum aimed to unite all Khmers in the guise of a national union under Sihanouk’s leadership, and the movement’s electoral victory in 1955 placed power in

---

5. “Youth is the time when youngsters have the most energy” 1973.
Sihanouk’s hands for the next fifteen years.

Toward the later part of Sihanouk’s regime, the armed struggle launched by the Communist Party of Kampuchea against Sihanouk led to the insurgents occupying nearly a fifth of Cambodia’s territory. Although membership in youth organizations had been voluntary up to this point, it became compulsory from 1967 to 1970, as Sihanouk sought the total allegiance of youth. In March 1970, Sihanouk was overthrown and Lon Nol came to power. There were increased calls for youth to join the military effort, judging from evidence contained in speeches and magazine articles of the times. Thus, youth mobilization became more militarized during Lon Nol’s reign. In April 1975, Lon Nol resigned and fled into exile as Pol Pot’s communist forces captured Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge forces that subsequently controlled Cambodia until January 1979 sought to extinguish existing youth organizations, while at the same time Khmer Rouge leaders remobilized young people along utopian agrarian ideals. All group participation under the Pol Pot regime was compulsory.

Whether by choice or by force, youth groups from 1941 to 1979 represented a form of social modernization in that for the first time Cambodia as a modern state was organizing young people into large groups. Nevertheless, this new form of organization was not a complete rupture with the past; in fact, preexisting agrarian values were the foundation of this top-down institutional structure that aimed to socialize youth. Such existing agrarian values included the expectation that young people should engage in productive labor in order to contribute to society and that values of obedience and reciprocity between themselves and figures of authority should be upheld. For their part, those in authority owed youth moral guidance and the representation of an ideal. Over time, the state progressively replaced the family as an educator by providing training to young people in food production, playing the role of supervisor, and promoting ideas such as self-reliance, devotion, and obedience toward leaders.

From the colonial period to the Sihanouk era (1941–1970), leaders who perceived their country as subject to both internal and external threats stressed an ideology of civic agrarianism; accordingly, youth mobilization took the form of civic engagement in agricultural projects as well as expeditions to experience the natural world as a site of purification. By the end of 1972, political instability allowed the insurgent Khmer Rouge to gain control of more than half of Cambodia’s territory. This led the existing Lon Nol regime to stress a military agrarianism in which young people were expected to be peasants and soldiers at the same time as part of the war effort. In the wake of Lon Nol’s overthrow, from 1975 to 1979, the autarkic Pol Pot regime mobilized youth via an ideology of revolutionary agrarianism aimed at building a utopian rural-based society.

11. Methodologically, I am constructing the concept of youth based on the work of Robert A. LeVine and Merry White (1992, 273–93), who discuss this category within an agrarian model of life span in a society where most of the population live in small communities and work in domestically organized food production. Subsequently, I compare it with the idea of “youth” as
In sum, an overarching ideology of agrarianism framed the political beliefs of both leaders and committed cadres.

For all these regimes, ideologies of agrarianism were linked to issues of nationalism and modernity. Considering the ideology of the Third Reich, Jeffrey Herf used the term "reactionary modernism" to describe the notion of an ideology of reaction—dreams of the past and a rejection of liberal democracy, for instance—entangled with technical modernization. He linked technology not with capitalism, but with Geist (spirit) and will. Inspired by Herf's work, this article uses the term "reactionary modernism" to refer to each regime's attempts to mobilize youth corps by means of an approach that employed modern forms of social organization integrated with local traditions, Buddhism, an idealization of the past, and the projected creation of a new man. Because it represented a step beyond the family and religion and, at the same time, was reactionary in its idealization of the past, state intervention in youth mobilization was in this sense a variant of reactionary modernization.

The Colonial Period: National Cohesion and Civic Agrarianism

Threats: External, Internal, Actual, and Perceived

In 1941 the overall situation in Indochina was worsening for the French colonizers, who had suffered a quick defeat at the hand of the Japanese invaders. On the one side were 35,000 Japanese soldiers who had invaded and were now posted in Indochina, mainly in urban areas; on the other side were the French who wanted to retain national sovereignty over the territory. Because the priority of the Japanese was to continue an invasion of the rest of Southeast Asia, they allowed the colonials to continue administering this region. Given this precarious balance of power in the region, the governor-general of Indochina, Jean Decoux, advocated a rapid expansion of youth mobilization. According to Decoux, the Japanese occupation heralded a state of emergency and since the Japanese occupiers were co-opting and mobilizing young people, French-backed youth organizations had become "necessary and urgent." The objective of greatly expanding youth corps under these circumstances was to offer socially oriented activities under the guise of normality, while at the same time extending control over the country's young people and fostering "proper" patriotic feelings toward the motherland in an effort to police the population.

Posing an even greater threat than the Japanese occupation of Cambodia was...
Thailand’s expansionist ambition toward its neighbor. In late 1940 a war broke out between France and Thailand. Taking advantage of the militarily weakened French position, Thailand attacked the French with the aim of regaining territories in Cambodia and Laos that it had earlier lost to this colonial power. France was victorious at sea but defeated on land, resulting in the return of Cambodia’s westernmost provinces, excluding Angkor, to Thailand.  

Parallel to these actual threats were perceived ones that were mentioned regularly in official documents. French colonizers often portrayed Cambodians as a monolithic “lazy,” “weak,” and “moribund” population and such perceptions were embraced by the governor-general of Indochina, Jean Decoux. Writing to the résident supérieur in Cambodia regarding youth policy, he exhorted, “the main task which occurs to you is to maintain the energetic effort to revitalize the country, to prevent it from falling back into inertia and pessimism, to maintain the confidence in its destinies that it has acquired, and to keep it from withdrawing completely into itself.” In other correspondence, the résident supérieur in Cambodia described this protectorate as living a “contemplative existence” that made the country “heavy, restive, susceptible” and therefore challenging to manage; thus the need to “save” and revitalize it in the face of an expansionist Thailand.

I ideologies: Civic Agrarianism and Reactionary Modernism

In this section, we look first at the agrarian aspects of state projects involved in youth mobilization during the colonial era. By civic agrarianism, I refer to rural and agricultural activities that colonial leaders perceived to be beneficial for youth in that involvement in nature was thought to develop character, health, manual ability, and team spirit. Youth socialization measures were partially based on an orientation shaped by agrarian values that can be tracked across the various regimes under study here.

The scholarship of Penny Edwards and Agathe Larcher-Goscha on Cambodia and French Indochina in the 1920s and 1930s shows that youth mobilization and the emphasis on the social category of youth predated the Vichy period. According to Edwards, sports and Scouting were already quite popular in Cambodia by the 1930s, enjoying the support of both monarchy and protectorate. Leaders of young people in both movements, which often overlapped, saw sports as a way to affirm notions of the Cambodian nation, strengthening the body and mind as part of that project. Scouting also brought participants into closer contact with the country and agrarian society.

21. Edwards 2007; Larcher-Goscha 2003. The review Jeunesse Cambodge (1946) mentions that the résident supérieure of Cambodia, Achille Louis Auguste Silvestre, was the one who sponsored the creation of the Cambodian Scout movement in 1934 with the help of Prince Monireth. “Histoire du Scoutisme au Cambodge” 1946, 3.
Compared to these early origins, Cambodian youth mobilization during World War II was much larger in scale and grew particularly active as the country faced imminent threats from Japan and Thailand. While youth groups in the 1930s and during the Vichy regime aimed to teach Cambodians to love nation and country, by 1941 French officials actively began to shape a mass youth movement and recruit the involvement of King Norodom Sihanouk as the head of this movement, known as Yuvan.

A number of Sihanouk's speeches during the Vichy period emphasized the agrarian value of obedience and submission to the leaders' authority. Such devotion to leaders soon became transposed into a relation between the masses and Sihanouk (who was said to be descended from Theravada Buddhist monarchs) and was used to promote nationalistic feelings among the youth. For instance, during a public speech in 1942 Sihanouk stated that young people must submit themselves to the same discipline and be raised with the same sense of duty. They [Yuvan's members] are already 2,000 for whom the slogan is “to Serve.” To serve the family, because it is the foundation of the social and national edifice. To serve Cambodia. To serve France.... They [the youth] need to integrate in a group where they learn to work in common, to think in common, to take part in their games in common. It is only with such a discipline...that they will be able to confront happily the magnificent work of national recovery.

Through such activities aimed at serving the French protectorate and France, young people in Cambodia would in addition bond to one another as part of the nation-building process.

---

Other youth-related measures shortened the traditional distance between a king and his subjects. For instance, prior to 1941, the king’s birthday was celebrated in a small ceremony limited to the palace grounds. Starting in 1942, in an effort to manipulate the royal aura for their own purposes, the Vichy regime orchestrated the king’s birthday in a grand public ceremony outside the palace, during which the king reviewed 15,000 Yuvans, a measure emphasizing the osmosis between the leader and the youth. 25 This permeability was one that Sihanouk would later develop through his numerous visits to the populace throughout the country.

According to LeVine and White, at the core of an agrarian society is the belief that young people have economic value and should provide economic contributions to the family and to society at large. 26 Indeed, reciprocity between the generations was a key aspect of everyday social life in Cambodia. In the present case, the state promoted this notion against the backdrop of a wartime situation. For instance, Indochina had an urgent need for castor oil plants in 1942; thus, Captain Ducoroy, the head of the Indochinese youth and sport initiative, sought to organize young Indochinese to join vacation camps where they would help cultivate castor oil crops. 27 In the summer of 1942, leaders planned other group efforts where young people would similarly perform labor useful to the war effort. As conditions became further impoverished, the governor-general of Indochina stipulated:

The Youth must be oriented more and more toward utilitarian realizations and especially toward agricultural activities...in particular through the creation of markets and fruit gardens as well as small livestock breeding stations which can, besides, be called under the present circumstances to be of great services to the collectivity. 28

These youth projects also complemented “the dual role of agrarian parents as nurturers and supervisors,” as traditional subsistence skills were passed down from parent to child as they worked together. 29 With youth groups, the state sponsored outdoor activities for urban youth, such as trekking, swimming, and team sports. At the heart of agrarianism was Vichyist officials’ belief that direct contact with nature would help young people acquire self-reliance, courage, and integrity. Here, cadres of state-sponsored organizations imparted useful training while also nurturing the participants’ need for recreational activities. In the same vein, colonial authorities strongly encouraged camping. The newspaper Sports Jeunesse d’Indochine recorded 24,000 child-days of camp activities in Cambodia during the summer of 1942. 30 Camp activities were also a means to teach young Cambodians about their grandiose past.

During an earlier period in the 1870s, French scientists had reconstructed a

27. Ducoroy 1942, 3.
30. “Chronique...au Cambodge” 1942, 4.
portion of the history and chronology of medieval Cambodia. They presented an era of national greatness and cultural realization that reached its peak in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with energetic leaders, monumental arts, and imperial ambitions, followed by extensive decline. The French argued that this decline was due to Cambodians’ inability to behave themselves in “Angkorean” ways. One of the aims of the World War II wartime youth project was to bond locals with their ancient past as a means of inspiration under French guidance. French political discourse encompassed a call for “revitalization” involving a collective remembrance of and gratitude toward the country’s grand medieval past. The new Cambodian national anthem, created in 1941 under French supervision, stated that the remedy to current challenges was to reawaken this Angkorean spirit, as Angkor was a marker of the past superiority of the “Khmer race”:

[...] The temples are asleep in the forest
    Reminding us of the greatness of Great Angkor.
    As the rock of the Khmer race is eternal.
    Have confidence in the fate of Kampuchea
[...] In peace as during battles
    Kampuchea was the friend of France
    The blood of their heroes was not shed in vain
    Because a day will arise which will see the triumph
    As well as the unity of all Khmers.  

In August 1942, a youth camp of about five hundred people, governed by the French School of the Far East, gathered to restore part of the vast temple complex at Angkor. The goal was not only to develop a team spirit and bond with one another through specific activities, but also to teach young people to serve their country and reconnect with a glorious past.

Colonial propaganda stated that Cambodian youth had a “profound love” for their suzerain Sihanouk, who was presented as embodying a nationalism based on an “authentic” Cambodia. More precisely, a rhetoric of reactionary modernism portrayed Sihanouk as the heir of the Kingdom of Angkor—a past to emulate—as well as a symbol of “the Cambodia of today and the Cambodia of tomorrow,” now that the country was “embracing the modern world.” This “modern world” was represented by developments such as more advanced systems of agriculture. For instance, the Cambodian youth corps Yuvan included mobile companies whose task, among others, was to spread new agricultural techniques to increase productivity. Young people were key actors in the state-led process of modernization. Finally, not only the suzerain, but also the Cambodian people, according to the official propaganda “will not accept any longer that we distinguish a Cambodia of contemplation with a Cambodia of ac-

32. Nokoreach 1941.
33. "Visite au camp de jeunesse d’Angkor Var" 1942. The French School of the Far East is a French institute founded in 1900 and dedicated to the study of Asian societies.
34. Desjardins 1944, 4–7.
35. Mouvement Yuvan Kampuchera 1944.
tion...[and] following the example of his King, [reject] the artificial opposition between tradition and the ones who want novelty.\textsuperscript{35}

At another level, Jacques Lebas, the commissioner general of youth in Indochina until December 1941, stressed that "in the Métropole, as in all the Empire," high-ranking leaders were dedicated to finding the appropriate means of training young people and subsequently building new men, since their "immediate influence, if well-conducted, can be considerable," that is, the rejuvenation of society.\textsuperscript{37} Such perceptions mirrored discourses in the métropole itself, where officials often blamed the defeat of 1940 on the previous regime and especially on its left-wing teachers, who were accused of having undermined the courage and patriotism of the youth through their teaching.\textsuperscript{38} The will of the youth had been broken along with their bodies, necessitating reeducation.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, the ideal was to create a new citizen/subject who was physically healthy and strong as well as dedicated to the new regime; young Cambodians were likewise expected to become the future bearers of the Vichy youth project. The Japanese coup of August 1945 put a definitive end to these aspirations.

The Sihanouk Regime: Civic Agrarianism and Surpassing Angkor

\textit{Threats: External, Internal, Actual, and Perceived}

After the Japanese coup of August 1945, which overthrew French rule, Sihanouk’s propensity to settle with rather than oppose the French triggered a long fight between those who desired immediate independence from the colonial power and those who were willing to behave in a more circumspect manner. In addition, the real threats to Sihanouk’s power came from those who supported putting matters under the guidance of a strong parliament, rather than letting the king decide the fate of the country.\textsuperscript{40}

After a brief interlude during which Son Ngoc Thanh was prime minister, British and then French troops entered Cambodia in September 1945. With the return of the French, Sihanouk kept his throne and Son Ngoc Thanh left for exile in France. The French and Sihanouk signed the Modus Vivendi Agreement of 7 January 1946, giving domestic independence to Cambodia. This agreement promised a constitution and for the first time allowed the formation of political parties. France continued to maintain control over Cambodia’s foreign policy, however, and kept advisory relations with the government of Prince Sisowath Monireth. In September 1946, after new political parties were formed, elections for the consultative assembly were held in order to assemble a group of advisers to the king regarding a constitution for Cambodia. The Democratic Party won fifty of the sixty-seven seats. The constitution drafted in 1946 reduced the power of the king, while the 1947 constitution gave real power to the National Assem-

\textsuperscript{35} Desjardins 1944, 4–7.
\textsuperscript{37} Report no. 186-CGJ, Hanoi, 12 November 1941.
\textsuperscript{38} Raffin 2005, 28.
\textsuperscript{39} Giolitto 1991, 126–27.
\textsuperscript{40} Osborne 1973, 39.
bly and therefore to the Democrats.\textsuperscript{41} This situation created several years of fragile political regimes that battled with both France and King Sihanouk.

Another threat for Sihanouk was the 1951 return to Cambodia of Son Ngoc Thanh, who soon put together a guerrilla movement against the king and the French. By 1952, students were holding strikes against the monarchy and protesting Sihanouk’s handling of the issue of independence from France. In January that year Son Ngoc Thanh founded the newspaper \textit{Khmern Krauk} (Cambodia Awaken), which condemned Cambodia’s lack of independence within the French Union while fanning the flames of the opposition. In February 1952, Phnom Penh witnessed huge student-led demonstrations demanding Cambodia’s independence.\textsuperscript{42} This student self-mobilization threatened Sihanouk and the Sihanouk-led state. The state’s mobilization of youth was designed to co-opt young people away from competing political groups. As a means of suppressing the revolutionary forces challenging his power, Sihanouk also embarked on a mission to France and other countries to seek independence for his country. In 1953 he achieved his goal, and Cambodia became independent. With independence—after more than a half-century of French control—Cambodia had to face the challenge of establishing political institutions that would be functional and efficient.\textsuperscript{43}

By the late 1960s, Sihanouk was heading a country that was facing serious domestic problems: corruption, military coercion, a weakening economy, and an increasing polarity of right and left. Externally Cambodia’s challenging geopolitical situation involved a complex web of relations with Vietnam, China, and the United States. Attempting to counterbalance Thailand and South Vietnam, Sihanouk developed closer ties with China and North Vietnam. In 1965 he cut off all relations with the United States and sought to bring together an international conference in order to make Southeast Asia politically neutral and evict U.S. troops. He followed this up with a secret 1966 alliance with the Vietnamese as a means of assuring Cambodia’s independence under the patronage of North Vietnam, since Sihanouk perceived the Vietnamese communists as the ones who would win the war. With such a close association, North Vietnamese troops were permitted to operate on Cambodian soil and receive weapons through Sihanoukville’s port. These controversial actions would result in Sihanouk’s overthrow a few years later.\textsuperscript{44}

Such genuine threats were accompanied by symbolic ones, such as the decline of the “Khmer race.” According to Sihanouk, Khmer civilization had reached its peak during the Angkor era, before entering a period of “successive setbacks” followed by a phase of “resuscitation,” when the independence of Cambodia led to the “blooming” of the country under the Sangkum, the political movement created by Sihanouk.\textsuperscript{45} Cambodia was perceived by Sihanouk as a

\textsuperscript{41} Martin 1989, 54; Chandler 2000, 172–76.
\textsuperscript{42} Chandler 2000, 183–84.
\textsuperscript{43} Abdoul-Carime 1995, 78.
\textsuperscript{44} Martin 1989, 62–64; Chandler 2000, 192–97.
\textsuperscript{45} “Speech at Phnom Penh, 12 November 1967,” in \textit{Les paroles de Samdech Preah Norodom} Raffin / Youth Mobilization
nation that was “moribund” at one point and then resuscitated to a certain extent, depending on the regime in power. Such a duality of thinking (moribund–resuscitated) echoed the French colonial officials’ perception of Cambodia.

_Ideologies: Civic Agrarianism, Buddhist Socialism, and Reactionary Modernism_

Sihanouk’s civic agrarianism was in accord with that promoted during the colonial period. Both the French and the Sihanouk regimes viewed nature as an arena for cultivating a healthy younger population; in 1960 Sihanouk wrote that thanks to such activity, “a loyal, open mind, a clear judgment, mutual understanding and tolerance can be developed by [outdoor] sport.” In addition, both regimes intended for youth organizations to be utilitarian in nature. Under the Sihanouk regime, for example, “Cambodian youth participate[d] in manual works, that is, works of road construction, digging, building houses for inhabitants, etc.”

Young people were strongly encouraged to participate in the colonization of new lands. The official press showed members of the Royal Khmer Socialist Youth (RKSy) as young colonists in the Stung Kranhong area, for instance. In a seminar held in January 1969 and organized by the commissioner general of the RKSy and the Ministry of Agriculture, officials underlined the role of the RKSy in modernizing agriculture—selection of seeds, fertilizers, better use of water—as a means to increase rice production. As part of Sihanouk’s modernization plan, youth mobilization overall was a response to the agrarian need to foster economic growth and produce socioeconomic change. Further, agricultural activities were encouraged as an answer to urban unemployment. But Sihanouk had encouraged the development of education without planning for job placement. Thus, the education system was “producing an increasingly numerous class of useless people.” Most graduate students hoped to find employment in private businesses or government, expecting that these jobs would afford them a Western-style lifestyle in the city. They did not want to return to working in the rice fields.

Sihanouk’s vision for Cambodia was of a neutral country spared from the ravages of the Vietnam War. He intended to embark on modernization projects to gain recognition from the international community, and in doing so he hoped to mold a Cambodia that would not contest his absolute power. The Royal Khmer Socialist Youth (RKSy) was created in 1957 to play a key role in reaching this ideal future. As Sihanouk stated, “the nation’s vital ideals” that this youth organization needed to promote and preserve included the monarchy, the neutrality of the country as a means of safeguarding its independence, the country’s religious, institutional, historical, and cultural heritage, and its efforts at

_Sihanouk, 1964–1968_

49. “Unemployed” 1962, 10–11.

402  Critical Asian Studies 44:3 (2012)
modernization. He added:

The RKSy must drive towards progress, the understanding of other peoples, the assimilation of their culture, their technique and their science, without surrendering the traditions and assets inherent to our race, the true national institutions without which we would cease to be Khmers but would soon be lagging behind, and “assimilated” by our neighbors.\(^{51}\)

In 1964 an independence commemoration day was planned, but Sihanouk refused to let the Scouts participate because they were an international rather than a national organization. He contended that the Scouts promoted disunity among youth by diverting them from joining the RKSy, which offered a similar education to that of the Scouts. As a result, the Scouts decided to disband their movement and join the RKSy, displaying their obedience and helping to build a consensual “royal nationalism” centered on Sihanouk.\(^{52}\) Such consensual royal nationalism was again promoted when 70,000 youth celebrated the anniversary of Cambodia’s independence in 1968. The theme of the event was “the Khmer Nation will never die,” which stressed how Cambodian history had shown that the gathering of people around the throne had preserved the country’s independence.\(^{53}\) Sihanouk reinforced the importance of complete obedience to the

---

leader in 1967, when he made adherence to the RKSY compulsory.  

Combining political reactions—i.e., looking to the Cambodian Kingdom of Angkor as an idealized model—with technological progress, various strands of reactionary modernism appear in Sihanouk’s speeches. In his prolific Cambodian-language broadcasts using the new communication medium of radio, Sihanouk created a cultural space in which he reproduced and reshaped existing values, such as Buddhism; for instance, connecting the state’s ideology of “Buddhist socialism” to the welfare interests of Mahayana Buddhist King Jayavarman VII (1181–1220) as a model of good deeds and national development. In a speech addressing the youth, Sihanouk stated, “Jayavarman VII founded about 200 hospitals, while the Sangkum is now close to the 600 mark.”6 Thanks to state intervention and technology, the example of Jayavarman has been surpassed. The overall efforts promoted both modernist projects (economic growth, mostly agricultural, under the leadership of a strong state) and a “return” to the nation’s celebrated past as the way toward economic and social development for Cambodia.

Sihanouk’s state ideology was a Buddhist form of socialism that was national, not international, in character: it blended the compassionate approach of Buddhism with the redistributive aspect of socialism. As the propaganda stated: “the stronger must assist the weaker and the better-off must help raise the standard of living of the less fortunate to a proper level: ‘the leveling from the top’.” Based on traditional practices of mutual help, Buddhist socialism would cultivate brotherhood feelings among the youth through practical as well as ideological activities. Thus, young people were assigned to do social work, especially farming activities in the countryside, as a means to improve the lot of their fellow citizens and contribute to the development of the nation.7 As Yim Dith, the commissioner general of the RKSY, observed: “Our youth is also required to assist directly and actively in agricultural production by means of aid groups.” For instance, the youth participated in digging wells, which was part of a new national policy launched in July 1958 to supplement the water supply through the construction of wells, reservoirs, irrigation canals, and dams.8

Sihanouk’s agrarianism, like Korean agrarianism during the colonial era, offered a “third way” between the communist path and capitalism, calling for self-sufficient communities based on agricultural villages and on participation in local culture (Buddhism, and Angkor, the latter a site for the restoration of the Cambodian nation) that would produce this new young man dedicated to the building of this “third way.”9 The reference to Buddhism was not insignificant, since Cambodia was primarily a Buddhist country; the constitution

56. “Extract from Samdech’s Speech” 1968, 36.
57. Sihanouk 1960, 4.
designated Buddhism as the state religion. Hence, building on existing values, Sihanouk made a conscious effort to create a link between his political ideas and Buddhist doctrine. As a “political educator,” Sihanouk was able to communicate with the peasant population, whose life was molded by Buddhist precepts.\textsuperscript{60} Sihanouk was also building his power on existing cultural practices, such as the importance of oral expression in relation to the written word in the Cambodian culture. Indeed, Cambodian magazines of the time show him visiting various youth groups and youth camps and making numerous speeches on youth as a special group. Like a Buddhist monk or a local notable, he commented on and interpreted events for the population.\textsuperscript{61} Nevertheless, such politics did not prevent a segment of the Cambodian establishment from withdrawing its support for Sihanouk, which would eventually lead to a political crisis resulting in his removal from power.

\textbf{Lon Nol Era: Armed Conflicts}

\textbf{Threats}

After Sihanouk’s eighteen years of rule over Cambodia, during which he supported policies that he claimed would promote neutrality, the Sihanouk regime was replaced by Lon Nol’s Khmer Republic (1970–1975). The new regime faced Vietnamese incursions into its territory. Conflict was unfolding not only between Vietnamese and Cambodian communist groups throughout the country, but also between U.S. and South Vietnamese units, each side trying to gain a tactical advantage over the other. The Khmer Republic received support from the United States in its fight against the Khmer Rouge, which was backed by China. After his overthrow in March 1970 Sihanouk united with his former enemy, the Khmer Rouge, in asking Cambodians to combat the “illegitimate Khmer Republic.” This situation fomented a brutal civil war in which the economy was destabilized. Moreover, heavy U.S. bombing created impoverishment, displacement, and perhaps up to 150,000 deaths, pushing many survivors to join the Khmer Rouge.\textsuperscript{62} The Lon Nol regime quickly lost command of most of the countryside. By mid 1974, in spite of their losses, the Khmer Rouge were preparing confidently for victory, which came less than a year later.\textsuperscript{63}

Lon Nol’s anti-Vietnamese diatribes and policies foreshadowed the Pol Pot regime’s extermination of ethnic Vietnamese. After the March 1970 coup, Lon Nol briefly rallied support for his “Buddhist war” against the Vietnamese, who were perceived as a threat responsible for Cambodia’s situation. His supporters regularly intimidated and assaulted ethnic Vietnamese, some of whom ended up in detention centers. Many Vietnamese were killed. By August 1970 about 310,000 of Cambodia’s 450,000 ethnic Vietnamese were believed to have left the country.\textsuperscript{64} Xenophobia was used as a tool to unite forces and justify power.

\textsuperscript{60} Abdoul-Carime 1995, 95.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 85–86.
\textsuperscript{62} Hinton 2005, 8.
\textsuperscript{63} Chandler 1994, 94.
\textsuperscript{64} Hinton 2005, 217.
This was followed by the “Khmerization” of some economic activities such as fishing on Tonle Sap Lake—another anti-Vietnamese measure, given that other ethnic groups did not engage in this pursuit.63 By 1973 most Vietnamese communists had left Cambodia; U.S. bombing had ceased about midway through the year. While the urban population initially backed Lon Nol, over time they became disillusioned with the regime due to its corruption and evolution into a narrow military dictatorship.64

Iideologies: Military Agrarianism and “Neo-Khmerism” as Reactionary Modernism

Under Lon Nol’s regime, the civil war led to the state-sponsored mobilization of the entire population in order to fight for the Khmer Republic. As Lon Nol stated on the inaugural day of the National Assembly in 1972, “young and old, civil and military, all have risen to defend their country from danger.” He called for a popular movement uniting people in order “to fight...all the obstacles to the defence, building and expansion of the country.”65 At the outset young people were no longer singled out as a strategic sector since, due to the exigencies of war, the whole of society had to be mobilized.

Yet some specific youth corps did carry on. For instance, the pro-Sihanouk RKSY evolved into the pro-Khmer Republic Salvation Youth, which had a weekly publication, the Bulletin of the Salvation Youth.66 Within such organizations, a military brand of agrarianism was promoted in which young people were asked to support the soldiers, participate in economic production, and even fight against the enemy themselves if necessary. For instance, the Salvation Youth organized a “Soldiers’ Day” on 6 January 1971 to show symbolic support for the army by offering gifts to soldiers. This aim was reaffirmed in the following speech by a Salvation Youth representative:

We, who have cooperated closely with our fighters for many months, will always remember the solidarity between the soldiers and the youth. Now, although we are absorbed in our studies and cannot share the life of our soldiers, our thoughts go with them everywhere and we remain ready to continue our struggle against the enemy until final victory.

Lon Nol thanked the Salvation Youth, stressing that they were indeed the future of Cambodia and he noted that “the youth and the army will sacrifice all for a victory which will lead to peace, progress and the glory of the Khmer Republic, and will allow nobody to get in the way of this movement.”67

The examples that follow show how youth corps complemented socialization within the family by teaching agrarian skills, underscoring a social transition in how such skills were transmitted. “Youth colonies” were created for individuals to participate in local economic development through super-

63. “Siemreap renait à la vie” 1971, 14.
65. “Marshal Lon Nol Addresses the National Assembly on the Inaugural Day” 1972, 43–44.

vised farming and animal husbandry." 70 In addition, youth camps were organized in order to "inculcate notions of agriculture and breeding." 71 Meanwhile, as during the Sihanouk regime, unemployment among urban youth continued to be a problem and the state mobilized these young people for economic and defense projects. 72 The Khmer Republic responded to the employment challenge as Sihanouk had, by emphasizing the economic contributions that could be realized by making productive use of this group. By 1971 the commissioner general of the youth had established an "Economic Youth" corps, in which young people engaged in fish farming and other fruitful pursuits. To counteract the high price of food and to aid the war economy, the fish farmers sold their catch at a low price. Other young people took up chicken and pig farming. 73

During the same period, the commissioner general of youth experimented with the creation of "pioneer colonies," which required young people to participate not only in the economic development of the nation but also in its defense, while nurturing their sense of belonging:

Young people will have an opportunity on the one hand to become acquainted with their country, to reinforce and deepen their national consciousness, and, on the other hand, to devote themselves to activities of an economic and social nature, and, finally, beginning with youth techniques, learn to defend their country. 74

The propaganda emphasized indirectly the need to create a new man, highlighting a collective spirit dedicated to assisting the nation in its development. In addition, young people would "work under military discipline," where obedience to the authority figure and the Khmer Republic was cultivated. 75 Such a plan was inspired by the example of the Nahal villages in Israel, which were created by young Israeli soldiers along the country's borders and contributed to the economic development of the country during young people's period of military service. 76 The leaders of the Khmer Republic believed in cooperation among youth and romanticized the role of the peasants. Such beliefs were based on "the [misunderstood] traditional practice of mutual assistance, buon da kinear, whereby rice farmers shared their labour for ploughing, transplanting and harvesting so that all tasks could be completed within time limits enforced by the rains." 77

On 18 March 1970, Lon Nol took power, with Sirik Matak wielding actual control despite being officially second-in-command. Together they aimed to create a society free from communism, based on the motto "nation, religion, and republic." However, the regime did not offer a well-defined and well-conceived republican doctrine; rather, its existence was based on opposition to

---

70. Sarathy 1971, 37.
73. Ibid., 32–33.
74. Sarathy 1971, 37.
75. Ibid., 40.
77. Slocomb 2006, 389.
Sihanouk and his alliance with the communists. "Lon Nol believed that Cambodians needed to be united by patriotic feelings and that an independent, safe, and prosperous country required allies. Buddhist allies appeared to him to be a good choice, and he attempted to cultivate relations with other Buddhist Asian countries. As he stated, “one should note that in other parts of the world spiritual forces are organized into international institutions whose influence is as strong as international political organizations.” To counteract socialist ideals, Buddhist ones would be offered. Thus, Buddhist identity was promoted as well as a call for building international Buddhist political organizations that could influence world politics. “This will permit us to perpetuate our ancestor customs and above all to find solid moral support from the outside world for our external defense policy,” Lon Nol proclaimed."

Like Sihanouk, Lon Nol exploited existing values, in this case Buddhism, to gain support from the local population. Also like Sihanouk, Lon Nol found sources of power in the Khmer civilization. “Burnish the Khmer-Mon culture,” he declared, “for it is the basis of our civilization. It is this culture which gave to our country the grandeur of yesteryear and which still remains one of the most prestigious in Asia.”

78. Martin 1989, 135.
79. “Marshal Lon Nol Addresses the National Assembly on the Inaugural Day” 1972, 43–44.
80. Ayres 2000, 92.

408

Critical Asian Studies 44:3 (2012)
Indeed, he spoke of "neo-Khmerism"; the latter half of the term underlined a link with a grandiose past that Cambodians needed to identify with, while "neo" embodied the movement toward a modernizing future free from "totalitarian ideology." This neo-Khmerism was a vision of nationalism as a communal agricultural society inspired by the Kingdom of Angkor as well as enhanced by technical modernity. Pioneer colonies were subsequently established near Angkor, since "it is our duty to acquaint them [young people] with it, to have them preserve it, and the national pride born from contact with the prestigious past of the Khmer people will contribute to the reinforcement and crystallization of national consciousness.

Playing a key role in the vision of a collective national future were the youth, who had to be redirected to the countryside in order "to shoulder the gigantic task of saving the rural areas." Leaders believed that the creation of "rural family homes" was an answer to the problem of rural exodus by offering the youth: "...training adapted to his own environment and which impels him to outdo himself and to help others to realize that agricultural work is not humiliating or dull if one is sufficiently prepared for it." As the commissioner general of youth stated, with regard to fostering economic development and as a response to unemployment: "The moment has come to direct the youth toward the rural and not toward the urban life where they find themselves defenseless. Cambodia is an agricultural country; undeniably, agriculture constitutes the base of the country."

Modernization, especially the building of dams, digging of reservoirs, use of fertilizers, and use of tractors, had helped increase the yield of rice from one and a half to two tons per hectare. However, as Slocomb observes, the task of conducting war as well as running other state affairs was ultimately too much for these inexperienced republicans. Lon Nol’s regime did not last long.

Pol Pot Era: Reforming Society

Threats: The “Hidden” Enemies and the External Ones

By early April 1975, Lon Nol had been driven into exile and Pol Pot’s forces had assumed complete control. The Khmer Rouge preoccupation with the prospect of a Vietnamese invasion meant that national defense was a priority, to the detriment of ensuring an adequate food supply for Cambodia’s population. War with Vietnam eventually broke out in 1977. Perceived threats to the DK were the “hidden enemies” not only within the population but also within the party’s ranks. These threats, the regime insisted, needed to be eliminated. According to Alexander Hilton, the regime’s inability to reach its agricultural production quotas reinforced this perception. To meet these enormous quotas, local cadres

83. Sarathy 1971, 59.
85. Ibid., 15.
86. Slocomb 2006, 384.
would sometimes forward to Phnom Penh rice that was intended for consumption by the rural population. When party leaders learned about documents reporting people’s suffering in the countryside, they concluded that subversion was responsible for the situation. Like an illness, Pol Pot said, “civil microbes”—as he called internal enemies—had to be eliminated. The purges also targeted “non-trustful” ethnic groups, such as ethnic Vietnamese civilians living in Cambodia and ethnic Thais.

The Cambodian leadership not only had to fend off external enemies, but also enemies among themselves. An excerpt from the 1977 magazine Revolutionary Youth states:

It is notable that although American imperialists as well as other oppressive classes were basically knocked over politically and economically, they haven’t totally vanished yet. They all are enraged by the historical victory gained by the nation and the people under the correct, bright leadership of the Communist Party of Kampuchea…. Our revolutionary youths found it necessary to continue the revolution even more extremely so that a staunch, constant defense of the nation and the Communist Party of Kampuchea and the protection of our revolutionary interests can be assured.

Utopian Agrarianism, Influence of Foreign Models, and Reactionary Modernism

With the Khmer Rouge now fully in charge, young Cambodians became subject to the full weight of contradictions embedded in the party’s increasingly destructive measures to overturn society and remake it in a new image. In China the organized participation of young people had been integral to the realization of a revolutionary society, and a notable feature of youth mobilization under the Khmer Rouge was the extent to which it was modeled on ideology and practices employed by youth cadre in its communist neighbor. The quest to remake society in both China and Cambodia can be understood as a kind of utopian agrarianism—referring to the creation of an autochthone communist society based on national economic self-sufficiency and independence as well as modernization—with the proviso that agrarianism in Cambodia took on particular qualities such as Buddhist characteristics that distinguished it from the Chinese experience.

Agrarianism during the Pol Pot period was influenced by the model of self-reliance and rapid industrialization Mao Zedong had promulgated in China during the 1950s. One of the Khmer Rouge’s revolutionary goals was self-reliance, and Cambodian cadre used slogans similar to the Chinese in order to reach this objective. With this goal, Pol Pot intended to remove foreign influence throughout the country and take over the running of all Cambodian affairs.

Economically, Cambodian self-reliance translated into a major effort to boost

rice production and irrigation. Rice was a key element for the realization of a utopian agrarianism based on autarky and national modernization. Indeed, David Chandler explains that the Khmer Rouge planned to increase agricultural production in order to industrialize the country. Their country’s economic motto noted, “If we have rice we can have everything.” This echoed Mao Zedong’s proclamation during the Great Leap Forward that “with grain and steel, everything is possible.” At a Khmer Rouge conference on “The Meaning of Youth,” cadres advanced the slogan “Super Great Leap Forward Revolution” to remind young people of their duty to engage in constant labor in order to build a new nation. Cambodian youth were asked to participate in the economic goal of self-reliance and in keeping with the agrarian model they had to contribute economically to the welfare of the community. For example, referring to the activities of the Kampuchean Communist Youth League, or Yuvakak, created in 1971, the Revolutionary Youth Magazine noted its members’ exemplary behavior:

Yuvakak is a good and leading role model—brave and active—in all circumstances and characteristics of work, either small or big, heavy or light, difficult or easy as required by the party. Moreover, the league becomes involved in digging canals and ponds for irrigation systems. This helps solve water supply problems and allows the people to cultivate their farmland in order to improve the living standards of the base people.

Linked to self-reliance was the need for an instantaneous and total economic and social revolution. The leaders’ goal was for Cambodia to rapidly achieve a modern and industrial status via rice cultivation and cottage industries to be established in self-sufficient communes; youth were thus asked to promote “a very fast pace” of national development. For instance, in 1976, revolutionary youth were praised for their contribution in fulfilling the goal of producing three tons per hectare. Later on, this aim became part of an unrealistically ambitious four-year plan (1977–1980) to realize an average national yield of three tons of rice per hectare. Here Cambodian leaders copied Chinese agricultural campaigns without paying heed to the fact that rice cultivation had far higher yields in China than in Cambodia. As Scott shows in other contexts, such high modernist plans often failed to take into account local practices and workable possibilities, ultimately leading to disastrous consequences.

The agrarian model was redefined in order to preserve the dictatorship of the proletariat. As official speeches emphasized, a loyal Cambodian belonged to

92. “Instruction about the Meaning of Youth Conference” (n.d.).  
“the people,” comprising only “workers and peasants and the revolutionary army.” Echoing the Chinese model, a “moral revulsion” was expressed “toward the old ruling elite and its institutions,” which were described as debauched and corrupted.” Peasants and workers as collective entities were to assume the agrarian functions of the individual family, including the induction of young people into economic subsistence labor. Indeed, articles in the Revolutionary Youth Review often reiterated that workers and peasants were the only two groups capable of educating the youth: “They [labor and peasant classes] teach them [youth] how to live with other people and share.” Sharing hardship was a means of bonding youngsters not only to one another but also to the rest of the population. Workers and peasants would educate the youth about the goals of the revolution, and promote an appreciation for collective life; they would also see to it that young people attend political indoctrination meetings for self-criticism.  

Both Chinese and Cambodian leaderships saw young people as the nation-builders who required nurturing. As Mao stated in 1953: “New China must care for her youth and show concern for the growth of the younger generation. Therefore, full attention must be paid both to their work and study and to their recreation, sport and rest.”

Youth organizations in Cambodia and China—especially the Chinese Youth League, the most important of all the Chinese youth corps—were expected to assist the party and serve as schools for learning about communism. Created in 1960, the Cambodian Democratic Youth League, or Yuvakap League, was described in propaganda as an active, brave, leading promulgator and practitioner of the political lines, principles and decisions made by the party among Kampuchean circles, especially youth, workers, laborers, peasants and school age youths, as well as the entire population. It goes without saying that the Yuvakap League became the right hand of the party.  

Another parallel with the Chinese model was that propaganda and practice were closely linked through national economic development campaigns targeting young people. For instance, youth leaders in China mobilized their rural peers to participate in the great agrarian movement of the 1950s, while Cambodian youth propaganda echoed such initiatives in precepts such as those that urged young people to “work hard in the rice fields to increase production.”

Chinese and Cambodian youth organizations each had their own journals; Cambodian youth reviews as well as the Chinese Youth League claimed to be playing a key role in inculcating youth cadres with communist principles and

100. No title 1975.
103. This was one of four precepts, the other three being “to complete the work of the revolution”; “to study Communism in order to develop class consciousness”; “to save.” “The Work of the Revolution” n.d.
"training youth and turning them into both red and expert successors to the revolutionary cause," heralding new men and women building the utopian agrarian society.  

Without acknowledging its source, Cambodian youth reviews often borrowed Mao's famous saying, "serve the people," as a motto for its cadres to follow.

Notwithstanding similarities with China, utopian agrarianism in Cambodia nevertheless took on specific traits that distinguished it from the Chinese situation. While scholars have rightfully underlined the transformation of many Khmer values by the Pol Pot regime that served to undermine Buddhism, I would point out that some agrarian values, rather than being eradicated, were merely transposed. For instance, the values of discipline and obedience to one's parents survived but were transferred to "Angkar" (a term that meant "organization"), which included both the Khmer Rouge Party organization and the name by which the Khmer Rouge was known among the population. Mobilizing rhetoric implied that Angkar would propagate the same love and kindness toward young Cambodians that their parents had shown to them, but in return, young people would have to display an equivalent degree of faithfulness, respect, support, devotion, and subservient behavior that they had earlier shown to their parents and other benefactors. Youth literature further reinforced the virtues of obedience and discipline by insisting that young people should think of themselves as "serving the people, but not as the leader, [not as] the controller of people."  

Disturbingly, such agrarian values of obedience and discipline were carried to extremes when young people were given the right to kill in order to realize the utopian agrarian society. Indeed, one of the "twelve moral precepts" for the youth stated, "combat the enemy and combat obstacles with bravery, and dare

to make all sacrifices for the people, workers, farmers, the Party and the revolution without conditions at all times.\textsuperscript{106}

According to Alexander Hinton, the Khmer Rouge promoted a cultural model of disproportionate revenge and adapted it in accordance with Marxist-Leninist perceptions of class resentment and contradiction.\textsuperscript{107} It also borrowed values from the very culture it sought to destroy. For instance, both Buddhist and communist beliefs held that personalities could be wiped out and rebuilt from scratch, following their immersion in a collectivity such as the monk-hood or the Communist Party. For instance, propaganda in the Revolutionary Youth Review stated: “Most cadres in the Youth League were loyal, brave, and not afraid of any sacrifice, even of their lives, in the service of the Party. They were trained constantly on the ‘Twelve Moral Precepts’...so that they would become pure revolutionary.”\textsuperscript{108}

The Pol Pot regime often packaged theory in terms of ten points, six points, etc., an element that had “striking parallels to Buddhist scholastic categories.” Moreover, Radio Phnom Penh reiterated stereotyped slogans with mantra-like regularity. Pol Pot instructed his information minister, Hu Nim, that broadcasters should convey propaganda “like monks who lead the prayers at a wat.” By adapting with little alteration the repetitious nature of most Theravada Buddhist sermonizing to their needs, the Khmer Rouge gave the impression that they could inculcate ideas in people’s minds without great difficulty.\textsuperscript{109}

Similarly, Khmer Rouge cadres had to follow an extensive list of Angkar commandments clearly grounded on monastic precepts. For example, ascetic attitudes were reflected in the strong condemnation of male cadres who fell in love or enjoyed beer, the latter of whom were known as “CIA drinkers.”\textsuperscript{110} Such sanctions communicated the message that it was the revolutionary cadre, rather than the Buddhist Sangha, who were most worthy of the laity’s deference and respect.

Ian Harris has noted that throughout the Khmer Rouge period the regime showed a propensity to reconfigure and reuse Buddhist symbolism and patterns of thought, even while carrying out extreme harassment against Buddhist institutions. For instance, the language of the wheel, an old symbol of the Buddha’s teaching and the power of the righteous Buddhist monarch, evolved into the “wheel of history.” The wheel “never stops” and “will crush all who place themselves in its path.” Some revolutionary slogans were modified traditional didactic poems on moral themes, the very formulae learned by young monks during their training.\textsuperscript{111}

In addition, grand visions of Cambodia’s significance came to the Khmer Rouge from prerevolutionary times. Like previous regimes, the Khmer Rouge assumed they were the descendants of the colossal Cambodian Kingdom of

\textsuperscript{106} Quoted in Huy 2003.
\textsuperscript{107} Hinton 2005, 26-27, 46, 64.
\textsuperscript{108} Quoted in Huy 2003.
\textsuperscript{109} Harris 2007, 72.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibíd., 76.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibíd., 77.
Angkor. Subsequently, youth were encouraged to be “the mental Great Wall of China” in order to defend traditions, Khmer culture and literature, and the national heritage from foreign invasions. As with Sihanouk’s regime, the Khmer Rouge regime also desired to “surpass Angkor in greatness,” since this new society would evolve faster and more successfully toward a communist community than had any communist society.

Finally, like Cambodians from earlier generations, the Khmer Rouge also believed that foreigners, and especially the Vietnamese, were responsible for most of Cambodians’ hardships. Youth magazines often reiterated that “the youth should have strong feelings of nationalism...for fighting the enemies, especially the Vietnamese.”

Reflecting on youth mobilization under the Khmer Rouge, the juxtaposition of calls to return to an autochthone rural Khmer world, combined with campaigns to push productivity and build a new society, is best captured by the term “reactionary modernism.” Such hopes were linked to a narrative of the past, of the great Kingdom of Angkor, which had dominated most of Southeast Asia between the ninth and fourteenth centuries CE. However, attempts by a mid-twentieth-century communist leadership to realize such a utopian vision came at a high price. The sheer scale of lives lost as a result of Pol Pot’s revolution is estimated at 2 million, comprising a full 21 percent of Cambodia’s population. The Cambodian version of reactionary modernism reached its peak as the mobilization of young people turned into genocide. Even after the demise of Democratic Kampuchea and well into the 1990s, tens of thousands people, primarily young people, were still willing to give their lives to Pol Pot’s regime, which had granted them power and self-respect. Some of these dichards went on to form the backbone of Pol Pot’s guerrilla army in the 1980s.

**Conclusion**

This article has tracked the evolution of youth mobilization in Cambodia from French colonial Vichy during World War II to Pol Pot’s revolutionary meltdown in 1979, by way of the Sihanouk and Lon Nol regimes. In relying on young people to consolidate and protect their power, these authoritarian governments reinforced “youth” as a social category in an unprecedented manner. State-sponsored mobilization was modern in that it involved a new source of control of young Cambodians beyond the locus of family or monastery, and under various ideological guises, the trajectory of youth mobilization reflected the general expansion of state planning in Cambodia.

While making this argument, however, I contend that the mobilizing ideologies themselves were based on existing agrarian values and practices that remained in place from the late colonial period to the Khmer Rouge regime, in-

---

112. “Youth Has to Know How to Use Their Generation” 1975.
cluding the expectation for young people to make an economic contribution and uphold values of discipline and obedience to authority figures. Threats to nation and country drove leaders to draw upon agrarian ideologies as meaningful and effective tools for organizing youth. Hence, an overarching ideology of agrarianism structured the political beliefs of the leaders and of the committed cadres of these youth corps—from an ideology of civic agrarianism under colonial officials and Sihanouk, to Lon Nol’s military agrarianism, and finally to the Pol Pot regime’s mobilization of youth via an ideology of revolutionary agrarianism aiming to create a utopian agrarian nation. Overall, despite the dissimilar ideological viewpoints of various regimes, the desire to discipline, control, and homogenize young people in the face of internal and external threats underlay the top-down organization of young Cambodians from 1941 to 1979.

References


Instruction about the meaning of youth conference. n.d. Documentation Center of Cambodia. Call number D00524.


Schéma d'Organisation. 1941. In GGI (Gouvernement Général d'Indochine). *Unindexcd*, 1, 444 (41). 12 November: Aix-en-Provence, France: Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (Center of


To educate the youth. 1975. Revolutionary Youth Review 12 (December). Documentation Center of Cambodia. Call number D21385.

To fulfill the goals of three tons per hectare in 1976 represents a good future for the youth of our country. 1975. Revolutionary Yuweakchom Yuweakneya. Documentation Center of Cambodia. Call number D00905.


Visite au camp de jeunesse d’Angkor Vat. 1942. Indochine, 1 October.

The work of the revolution. n.d. Cambodian Youth Future. Documentation Center of Cambodia. Call number D90097.

Yim, Dith. 1969. Our youth will assume the heritage of its elders. Khambuja 48 (March): 25.


Youth has to know how to use their generation. 1975. Revolutionary Yuweakchom Yuweakneya (2 September). Documentation Center of Cambodia. Call number D0092.

Youth must carefully light the spirit of the time. 1978. Revolutionary Youth Review 1–2 (January). Documentation Center of Cambodia. Call number D21406.