Mistakes and their consequences: Why impunity in Cambodia is here to stay

Cambodia is one of those countries whose dominant claim to fame is that of genocidal horror. The perpetrators, called the Khmer Rouge (KR) by former King Sihanouk, conquered Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, in April 1975. The KR promptly emptied the city and all other urban centres of their populations, dispersing them across the countryside. This was the beginning of the most radical Maoist-inspired state to date. The communist experiment imploded through internal purges until it was overthrown in January 1979 by its Vietnamese neighbors. Casualties from executions, forced labor, malnutrition or untreated diseases, have been estimated in the range of one to two million. British journalist, William Shawcross, notes that the "Khmer Rouge misrule has since been called a form of autogenocide[1] conducted by the regime against both minorities and the majority Khmer alike; it left the country and the people in ruins." (2000, p.34-35)

In 1997 the current regime requested the United Nations (UN) to help establish a Khmer Rouge tribunal in an effort to try those responsible once and for all. After years of cantankerous negotiations the Cambodian government and the UN reached an agreement in 2003 to develop an in-country, mixed Cambodian-international court[2]. The central importance of the consequent negotiations and resulting tribunal lies in the public debate it has stimulated and thus the hopes for closure that the tribunal offers.[3] It is this debate about the horrors of the KR regime which stimulated the search for understanding described in this essay. Some of the terms and arguments are utterly baffling to a European. I explore one term in particular, the word 'mistake', because its (frequent) use to explain the actions of the KR regime sounds so 'wrong'.

Take the following example of a former KR ambassador at a public forum arguing for reconciliation rather than a trial:

"After decades of suffering, tragedy, revolutions and the bloodshed of war, the people are hungry for peace and to relieve the tension in their lives. They want to see development in their country and villages, and they welcome all activities that result in this purpose. They don't want to lose the present opportunities as they've happened so rarely during the last 30 years....All Cambodian people regardless of class or position they are in, should be together in brotherhood. Thus we shall help, care and like each other, as we are in one family. Any **mistakes** and shortages concern all of us. We should not see only **mistakes**. We should help, encourage and be proud of our Khmer people."[4]

One may brush such a statement aside as apologetic but what about the following from one of the most prominent human rights lawyers in the country?

"Some people say that the government would be better to spend money on development rather than spending it on a Khmer Rouge tribunal...Why do the civil society and myself support the existence of this tribunal? I support this tribunal because I believe if this tribunal is well setup and organized, Cambodia will achieve the following points: [among six points mentioned] To find the truth about why a head of state (Pol Pot) of a country killed his own people (finding the truth). It will be used as a lesson for other leaders in the world not to copy or repeat the same **mistake**."[5]

Mistake? These kinds of statements conflicted strongly with my linguistic intuition about what constitutes the appropriate use of this term. What causes this conflict? Undoubtedly, the gravity of the 'mistakes' contributes to my distress; we're talking about prototypical 'evil' here after all. The term 'mistake' normally connotes errors of a less serious nature. However, further examination of my concern reveals not the seriousness of the events but rather their intentionality. *Mistake* implies that actors are not intending the consequences of their actions. Even if the action has 'bad' intentions, when it is described as a 'mistake', it signals that the actor did not intend or expect its actual consequences.

The Cambodian understanding of 'wrong'

The use of *mistake*, in Khmer '*komhos*', to describe the actions of the KR strongly suggests that it denotes something as being 'wrong' rather than the more specific English 'mistake'. Reading the English-language press in Cambodia supports this notion. Although the word is often used in its more conventional context, it is also regularly used in the case of obvious crimes; and it sometimes appears in phrases such as 'criminal mistake', 'intentional mistake'[6] or 'mistake in good faith' which would normally not make sense in native English as simple descriptors but only within the context of very particular scenarios.

I am not the first non-Cambodian to have noticed this. A long-term English resident of Cambodia, Jenny Pearson, co-authored a book in 2006 on intercultural misunderstandings with a Cambodian colleague, Long Chhay. They have this to say on 'mistakes':

Box 1: Mistakes, responsibility and blame in Cambodia

"As I understand it, a mistake is something that is done inadvertently, a problem caused not by deliberate intent but by thoughtlessness or simply not knowing something. In Cambodian culture, the word *komhos* has a broader meaning. I have heard very deliberate behavior, even theft, referred to as a mistake. Cambodians appear to be forgiving of someone who confesses to their "mistakes" while judgmental of those who do not."

"Cambodians have explained to me that to take responsibility puts one in danger of being held responsible for something bad or negative, which is to be avoided because it could attract a detrimental impact to one's karma in the next life ... Another issue which appears to be closely linked to taking responsibility is blame ...The speed with which someone, when asked about any negative or problematic issue, will point a finger of blame at others is sometimes astonishing. Simply raising the issue of something amiss appears to promote an instant feeling that blame is apportioned and must instantly be deflected elsewhere." (p.26)

Obviously cultural interpretation is a tricky business, fraught with many pitfalls. So I've conducted some systematic checks on the actual use of 'komhos' and its customary English translation 'mistake' to substantiate these impressionistic observations . These checks are briefly described in an annex and confirm that the semantic field of *komhos* has a particular Cambodian flavor to it.

From informal discussions with Cambodian colleagues, the following description emerged: *komhos* is a very general and neutral reference to a 'wrong' activity. 'Wrong' conveys the meaning of 'transgressing a 'rule' or 'law''. These latter concepts are to be understood as expressing what is 'right' or 'good', the way things are supposed to be, 'order' as opposed to 'chaos'. The major domains of order are moral-cultural (i.e. 'the way we Buddhist Khmer do things'); legal (i.e. the laws of secular authority); and what I, for want of a better term, label the 'expert' domain, which covers things like correct math, correct spelling, and so on. Each domain has its specialists who are regarded as authorities; although regarding cultural conventions, community opinion is an authority in itself. *Komhos* can be anything from minor to major. Consequences of transgressions are on the one hand domain-specific because they are dealt with by the domain's authorities who have their own arsenal of punishments; but on the other hand they share an underlying unity: the 'universal law' of cause and effect, *karma*.

Two focus groups were organized to explore the understanding of *komhos*. A lively discussion occurred around the crucial role that Cambodians attribute to social rank. References to impunity were prominent, particularly the perception that the rich and powerful unfairly get away with wrongdoing; a reality normal people feel powerless to fight. A more puzzling observation was about the possibility of those with power, a possibility that is seemingly granted some inherent legitimacy, to offload responsibility for wrongdoing: "A big person [person with power and money] can make his mistake the mistake of a small person [a person with no money] and/or can make a small person accept the mistake instead of him".

And so what?

By now, the reader may wonder about this interest in the Cambodian concept of wrongdoing. Let me assure you, it is not academic. It is merely practical. Recent history has left the country and its people in ruins, and although not all is bleak, assessments of Cambodia's development are often negative. Numerous local and international Cambodia experts perceive it as a country with many 'wrongs', especially regarding the responsiveness and accountability of those in charge towards their populace. Box 2 contains some characteristic descriptions of the current exploitative relationship between power and its subjects.

Box 2: Foreign and Cambodian assessments of power and its wrongs

A Cambodian assessment

"The term 'system of lies' refers to a situation where the existing rule of law, the constitution and social order have been perverted in their meaning by the authorities...[with] a profound impact on trust among the general population...The system of lies exist when the authority talks about justice on the one hand but on the other they arrest and intimidate their won people without trial. Sometimes they publicize their intention to promote democracy and respect for human rights but in the meantime they threaten to use military action to undermine people's freedom of speech and expression. The armed forces, who are supposed to provide security for the community, become the major factor creating violence and insecurity....[This] has often put people in a state of confusion, where 'black turns to be white and right turns to be wrong'" (Meas, 2006:5-6).

A foreign assessment

"With both a weak state and a weak civil society, Cambodia relies heavily upon informal, patronage-based networks for the definition and pursuit of collective goals. The largest and most effective of these networks are embedded in the structures of the CPP[7]: but the identity and interests of the CPP itself are not stable, and there are numerous other nodes of power (the military, large commercial interests) with which different interests within the CPP must sometimes cooperate and sometimes compete. The symptoms of this weakly institutionalized political system can be summarized as a lack of transparency about how and why decisions are made, the irrelevance of formal mechanisms of accountability, a neglect of state functions that do not offer opportunities for rent-seeking, and a distortion to private ends of those public functions which do offer opportunities for the generation and capture of wealth. There is a pronounced short-termism to political behavior, with actors at all levels seeking to extract as much as possible in anticipation of the system – or their place in it – ending" (Hughes & Conway, 2004:65).

The debate about the prospect of a better governance system in Cambodia is dominated by two kinds of policy theories: an optimistic institutionalist approach and a pessimistic culturalist approach. Caroline Hughes describes the optimist assumption: "the creation of the appropriate democratic institutions, and their maintenance by sustained international intervention, can engender a process of local 'habituation' to internationally promoted procedures and processes." ; and the pessimist assumption: "...innate tendencies toward hierarchy, deference and intolerance of difference [preclude] the Cambodian people from either seeking, or being able to sustain, meaningful participation in peaceful debate..." or understanding and applying the principle of equality before the law. (2003, p.7)

Local understanding of what is 'wrong' and who can and/or should be held responsible is directly relevant to this debate. Does the Cambodian understanding legitimize the abuse of power, as the focus group results suggest? Or is the indignation regarding the impunity of the powerful an indication of 'habituation' to democratic principles? Do local understandings matter when assessing prospects about less impunity and better governance? Unfortunately, Cambodia neither has a substantial body of indigenous self-reflective intellectual production nor much solid colonial, academic or developmental social science literature analyzing local understandings. Nothing is available regarding the concept of 'wrong'. There is however, a general body of literature on social organization in Cambodia which is explicit about the importance of rank/hierarchy (see Box 3). The remainder of this essay is an effort to describe the conceptual linkage between social rank and wrongdoing in light of the Cambodian understanding of the social within which it is embedded. This description identifies me as pessimist rather than optimist but not for wholly culturalist reasons.

Box3: Social Organization in Cambodia

"The all pervasive guiding principle for Khmer social life is the notion of hierarchy. All social relations are hierarchically ordered. The hierarchy is primarily expressed in terms of age. An elder (*bong*) is a person who has authority through his/her higher social status. Such status is not exclusively a function of chronological age, but is determined as the sum of a number of dimensions including – apart from chronological age – gender, wealth, knowledge, reputation of the family, political position, employment, the character of the individual and religious piety. The social order is felt to depend upon everyone observing the status hierarchy and keeping his/her place in it." (Ovesen et al, 1996:34)

There are no set ways of 'distilling' a 'master story' from a variety of sources. Given the paucity of solid empirical evidence regarding Cambodian understandings, the exercise below is very much a 'bricolage' of selected texts which I consider relevant and valid. The habitus of most social science disciplines proscribes against making the 'bricoler' itself overtly visible in the end product. Extensive use of quotes is frowned upon. Admittedly, the restraint use of quotes is stylistically quite persuasive, but it has a methodologically questionable effect. Knowing how easily I myself am persuaded by a well-written piece I am acutely aware of the dangers of sharing only the end product. When none of the 'raw' material is included it is impossible for the reader to retrace the construction of the argument. Obviously, the selection of 'raw' material is in itself a rhetorical device and sets the reader up for the conclusions drawn. Nevertheless, I consider the advantages of tasting some of the original flavor, and some of the original complexity real enough to flaunt convention and go for a cut-and-paste approach.

Some Cambodian ingredients for understanding the social

The first source that goes into my mix is a paper by Peter Swift on violence in villages based on five weeks of fieldwork in four different provinces of Cambodia. Violence is clearly 'wrong'. Acting violently (*hingsa*)[8] is generally understood to be a serious *komhos* so it is a more specific form of *komhos* . But Swift's exploration of how people think about violence constitutes one of the few efforts to unpack a related concept in terms of local understanding. It makes for an interesting starting point.

Box 4 describes the prototypical scenario for most violent situations which emerged from Swift's interviews.

Box 4: The prototypical scenario for violence between individuals in rural Cambodian communities

"For some reason (either anger (*dhosa*), greed (*lobha*), delusion (*moha*), or a combination of them) one person (A) uses violence against another person (B). If B doesn't respond, A feels he or she has won, and his or her position relative to B has increased (or at least A thinks it has), and A feels he or she has benefited from the situation. If B does respond, and A loses, A is angry and the conflict is likely to continue. [Person] A may plot revenge. Thus there generally isn't any satisfactory resolution to violent situations.

At the end of a conflict, there is usually someone who wins and someone who loses. The loser may be afraid of the winner, or may just defer to him or her to limit the violence. Often winners interpret losers not responding to mean that they are afraid. Winning means raising one's position in relation to that of the loser, and the two people's new positions determine how they will interact in future situations. The loser is likely to be more prone to defer in the future. He or she may carry a grudge, particularly if his or her rights have clearly been violated." (Swift, 1999:14)

The central importance of power differentials stands out. Swift's analysis shows that social rank infuses every situation. It is not only the case that rank is a major factor in determining conflict outcomes. Outcomes of conflict also establish rank; thus, rank is an expression of right and wrong.

The above scenario does not yet include the socially sanctioning role of the wider context. Swift's paper mentions two major factors supporting the above scenario. The first is a wholly inadequate judicial system. Law enforcement in Cambodia is lax, biased and corrupt. Impunity of the rich and influential is rampant. For those at the receiving end of wrongdoing, the existing rule of law poses a threat rather than offering protection. The other factor supporting Swift's scenario is the general

reluctance to intervene in another's affairs for fear of the consequences. Although people are embarrassed by the use of violence and feel pity for the victims, they will often not express public support: "Honor (*kittiyuoh*) is granted to people because they are seen as good people, but ordinary social interaction (*kar roap an*) depends more on wealth and expectations of reciprocity. Often people *roap an* people they think are bad, people who are violent and so on. And they do not *roap an* the victims of violence. It is mostly a question of status and expectations that acts will be reciprocated" (p.16). Fearing friend-of-enemy-is-enemy-too consequences people tend to publicly pay allegiance to powerful winners and avoid powerless victims.

The second source is a 2001 study by Moira O'Leary and Meas Nee regarding the relationship between culture, values, experience and development practice in Cambodia. It is based on structured reflections, in-depth interviews and case studies. This source was selected because it sketches a comprehensive picture of what is socio-culturally acceptable and expected, mainly based upon self-reflections of ordinary Cambodians.[9]

O'Leary and Meas characterize appropriate attitudes and behavior of 'lower' people to those 'higher' in the hierarchy using the following denominators: "everything they say is right[10]; respect their role, bend lower; do not disagree with anything they say; even if they say something wrong behave as if it is right; flatter them; do not sit equal to them; speak softly and carefully; behave and dress in the correct way or they will think we are ignorant; ..." (p.49). Downward behavior is characterized as the following: "behave bigger than them; do whatever we want; they are below us; not so interested in what they say; do not respect their ideas or their rights; know more than them; expect them to listen to our ideas (those who are above always think that they are right); speak strictly; do not speak too much to those below; if we are friendly with them they will not be afraid of us; if we are quiet then those below are more afraid and will give more respect" (p.49).

Not behaving in the expected manner is perceived as misconduct and results in loss of face. Although there is an "undercurrent of resentment and a sense of injustice" about the social order and the way it is expressed in attitudes and behavior, there is also a strong sense of 'this is the way it is' (p.51). Most people tend to exhibit 'big' people behavior in dealings with those 'below' them and interpret the absence of 'big' behavior from someone who is supposed to be 'bigger' as a sign of weakness. The basic pattern described is of 'big' people being arrogant and the little people being afraid. 'Big' people are expected to show pity (*annit*) towards small people, who in turn are expected to show 'respect'. Education within the family and at schools strongly emphasizes this conduct, without much room for questioning.

The above descriptions refer to 'power', 'fear' and 'respect'. Two kinds of power are being referred to. One is the power over others that 'big' people have over 'small' people, called *amnach*, and which 'expects' *klach,* to be 'respectfully feared'. Chigas (2005) describes *klach* in his analysis of the Cambodian concept of justice as follows:

"This term literally means 'to fear' and connotes the meaning 'to respect'. A child *klach*s his or her parents. The people *klach* the king, and so on. In this sense the children obey the parents and the people obey the king both out of respect for their authority and fear of the consequences for noncompliance." (p.238)

The other kind of power, best expressed by the English word 'influence' (*aethapuol*), comes from being a 'good' person. It is typically wielded by an authority such as a Buddhist layman or *achar*. 'Good' people do not abuse their influence; they use it to help others. On the other hand, *Amnach*, 'power over', is seen as a zero-sum equation: the more one person has, the less another has. 'Influence' is responded to with 'real respect', respect that comes from the heart.

Whatever the balance of these components of the semantic field of *klach* and however dominant the non-fearful aspects, 'respect' is understood as directed upward from 'lower' to 'higher', whether as an outward expression of what is expected or whether from the heart. O'Leary & Meas (2001) confirm this in their study on transformative learning:

"It was generally agreed...that respect is shown so that you can get what you want...most of the time it was described as not really coming from the heart, it was seen as just pretence...It was said that these set ways of behaving made it difficult for people at different levels in the hierarchy to relate honestly." (p. 50)

Conversely, 'pity' is understood as directed downward. The resulting relationship is characterized more by the dependence of the 'lower' person on the 'higher' person than on mutuality. This dependency is not experienced as negative but often valued and actively sought. O'Leary and Meas describe the resulting relations of patronage as being perceived as "the natural system of exchange within a hierarchical social order. It is experienced as both beneficial (assistance and support in times of need) and exploitative (favoring the patron) at the same time. It is considered necessary for survival – regardless of position in the social order." (p.53)

Studies on social relations in Cambodia describe patronage customs, or patron-client relationships, as core to how the society operates. Unfortunately, no in-depth study of its Cambodian incarnation exists and one has to piece one's own picture together.

Ovesen et al.(1996) have argued that Cambodia's conditions are prototypically conducive to patronage:

"[It has been] suggested that certain political conditions are especially conducive to the existence and promotion of systems of patron-client relations. These conditions are the persistence of marked inequalities of wealth, status, and power which are afforded certain legitimacy; the relative absence of effective impersonal guarantees such as public law for physical security, property, and position; and the inability of either kinship units or traditional village community to serve as effective vehicles of personal security or advancement. It is hard to think of a country that fits these conditions as well as Cambodia." (p.71)

This argument is worth exploring. Because patronage is core to the functioning of Cambodian society, it is seen as core to its development. Development is overwhelmingly analyzed as highly inequitable and, in more extreme versions, as setting the country up for revolt or civil war (again). It is the above argument of uniquely supportive conditions for patronage, or rather the absence of checks and balances on patronage, which Adler and Aravind (2006) believe makes for the predominant view of its role as 'pathological'. Let me examine their claim point by point.

The first, the legitimacy accorded to hierarchy, has already been described above. Next, Cambodia's judicial system is indeed deeply flawed, meaning that effective impersonal guarantees through public law are absent. Regarding other sources of security: What is particular about Cambodian social organization is the lack of strong intermediary institutions between households and the state that could operate as loci of collective social responsibility and social sanctions. This is what Hughes and Conway (in Box 2) referred to when characterizing Cambodia as having a 'weak' civil society. There is some discussion amongst Cambodia watchers about this characterization. The emblematic title of the review that posed this attribute as defining the country's social organization, 'When every household is an island' (Ovesen et al. 1996) has been attacked (Ledgerwood et al. 2002). The critique refers to collective action by committees, often associated with the local pagoda, and collective labor exchange and other episodic mutual support (e.g. credit) arrangements among kin (*bong pa'on*)[11]. Nevertheless, in a regionally comparative perspective the lack of intermediary organizations with enduring governance structures and allegiances beyond the immediate living environment is undisputed. There are no larger kinship or caste groups, and religious affiliation is decentralized with an emphasis on the local pagoda (to the extent that 'villages' are administrative entities, rather than 'communities').

In line with this, traditional community-level leadership is normally described as 'informal'. There is leadership based on 'influence' rather than 'power', the *achar*-variety which is often referred to by the more general term 'elders' (*chas tum*); and there is an overlapping but more 'daring' variety called *mé khyol* as described below in Box 5 within the context of the informal leadership of collective action against land-grabbing.

Box 5: The *mé khyol* as a leadership figure in village level civil society

"Sometimes interviewees used the term *mé khyol* to refer to a person who leads dissent. The term is widely known and used in Cambodian society. Literally, *mé khyol* is translated as 'leader of the wind' (Collins, 1998: 27) or 'mother of the wind'... Collins describes the word '*mé khyol* as a category of individuals who were considered to have leadership skills or potential.' This type of individual can convincingly and informally take the lead or mobilize a group of people to do certain things. Collins also argues that, '[t]he *mé khyol* is an expression of community solidarity at the grassroots that is connected to a unique concept of participation and feeling about legitimate authority.' (1998: 29) Collins (1998) identified a number of observed common characteristics of *mé khyol*. Firstly, duties fulfilled by *mé khyol* tend to be temporary and connected to a specific project or task. The *mé khyol* would go back to being ordinary people once the task was complete. Secondly, *mé khyol* is observed as having 'salted spit' (*teuk moat pray*), which means that because of their wisdom, intelligence, and experience when they speak people will listen to them attentively. The *mé khyol* thirdly tends to get involved directly in the work they organize rather than just playing a supervisory role. Finally, the most significant characteristic of *mé khyol* is 'his daring' which suggests that taking leadership for the purpose of a specific task which benefits the community implies 'risk'. But this term has ambiguous connotations (Collins, 1998: 26). Working outside of the formal power structures the *mé khyol* can be a guide who takes people to cross the Thai border illegally for employment; an opposition political party activist who recruits members; or someone who visits villages recruiting women to work in the city...It was notable that in the cases studied, the leaders of village level dissent did not hold public office or represent an existing formal group. They were *mé khyol* in Collins' sense. Carving out public space between the state and the market, these individuals represent an important expression of civil society in the Cambodian context. In this text, we generally refer to them as 'informal leaders'. (CAS/WB, 2006:18)

Moreover, "in contrast to some Asian cultures, the Cambodian family is more loosely organized, with less importance given to the extended family" (Bit, 1991:46). Family is undoubtedly of primary importance and, as Ledgerwood explains:

"the only way to understand the connections that bind the residents of a village is to trace their bilateral kinship linkages (through both the husband and wife's sides of the family) by birth and by marriage over several generations ... Most of the households in the village [that Ebihara[12] studied] are connected not only by kinship but also by long-term friendships, with the complex reciprocal obligations that such relationships bring." (1998:6)

Yet, although the local understanding of *bong pa'on* is in need of more study (Adler & Aravind, 2006:76), in regionally comparative terms, kinship can only be termed as a 'loose' organizational principle.

So the claim of Ovesen and colleagues seems reasonable. In fact, it is often build upon by authors pointing out the exacerbating role of three decades of war and the resulting collective trauma. Box 6 gives a typical, albeit critical example of this.

Box 6: The mutually reinforcing nature of Khmer culture and recent violence and trauma

"The dominant assessment of Cambodian political culture in the current academic literature is quite 'monotheistic' in that it acknowledges a single 'doctrine' regarding that culture....[A]mong the recurring features are: exercise of power, social hierarchies, relational rigidity, patriarchal dominance, peasant docility, distance between the state and the people, a lack of general trust and social fragmentation. Cambodia's modern disasters could thus be understood as a 'natural' consequence of this culturally defined history....Moreover, the prevalence of crude authoritarianism and large-scale violence associated with well over three decades of revolution, Khmer Rouge rule and civil war serves to reinforce perceptions of a society ruled by sheer power and ruthlessness, where the strong always exploit the weak and where violence is the ultimate regulating mechanism. This perspective also places Cambodia in a recently invented category of 'post-conflict' countries suffering from pervasive violence and traumatic collective fragmentation....This seems to construe a self-perpetuating process which further reifies the perception of an ever-present and determinant, non-changing Khmer political culture." (Öjendal and Kim, 2006:507-508).

Before synthesizing all the sources offered thus far, I will add one more to my 'bricolage': Alex Hinton's (2005) *Why did they kill?*, an anthropological attempt at better understanding the motivations of the perpetrators of the KR killings. Hinton focuses on the established cultural understandings (cultural models and their subjective mental appropriations) that went into the meaning-making of perpetrators. In the course of this, he dwells in depth on some of the concepts described above (revenge, power, patronage, status, face and honor)[13]. Hinton's study is based on a year of multi-site ethnographic fieldwork. It confirms the importance of anger and revenge in the prototypical scenario of violent conflict and also brings in additional elements that were not highlighted by Swift.

Hinton claims that anger is 'hypercognized' (p.62) in Khmer, its elaborate vocabulary of emotional control indicating the importance attached to anger management. There are many universals in the Cambodian concept of anger, but its "ethno-physiology which centers on the notion of equilibrium... has been strongly influenced by Buddhist, animistic, Ayurvedic, and Chinese medical traditions" (p.62). Social relations and bodily health are closely related. Disturbances in the equilibrium by emotions like anger thus disturb the social fabric. There are many strategies to manage anger such as expressing it through somatic complaints, indirect avoidance or gossip and redirecting it to other targets. However, violence may be the preferred option especially in situations when honor and shame are at stake. At which point, "individuals may come to harbor a 'grudge' *(kum, kumnum, kongkuon*) against their foes that lasts until they exact revenge (*karsângsoek*), ideally in a manner that is disproportionate to the precipitating offence." (p.64).

Hinton's description of revenge in Box 7 below suggests that, notwithstanding the importance attached to non-violence in Buddhist ontology, there are enough alternative 'ontological resonances' to make this scenario perfectly understandable to Cambodians. Core to this understanding are, on the one hand, general conceptions of balance; and on the other, face and honor and their implication in (in)appropriate status behavior. What is also evident in Box 7 is the extent to which Cambodian understanding emphasizes the dangerous potential of discrepancy between behavior displayed and underlying 'true' feelings. This reverberates an observation made earlier by informants of the O'Leary and Nee study regarding "these set ways of behaving … [making] it difficult for people at different levels in the hierarchy to relate honestly" (p.50).

Box 7: Revenge

"Revenge (*sângsoek*)...has...linkages to the moral order, interpersonal ties, and reciprocal exchange. The root of the word, *sâng*, refers to the obligation to return (an object), to pay back (debt), to pay for damage. ... The participants in a reciprocal relationship are sometimes metaphorically portrayed as being 'tied' (*châng*) together ... Such bonds may also be forged by unequal or disproportionate exchanges, particularly when status issues are involved ... Exchange may thus involve the negotiation of status, since the act of giving and receiving inscribes relative standing ... Regardless of the difficulty, one is morally obligated to strive to repay (*sâng*) the 'kindness' or 'good deeds' (*kun*) of others ... In most contexts, those who receive a good deed are expected to acknowledge their debt through greater respect, loyalty, or attachment to the benefactor ... The increased respect given to the person who does the good deed signals the benefactor's elevation in hierarchical standing vis-à-vis the debtor … Revenge is largely premised on this logic of debt and reciprocity, but in a manner that is the inverse of a relationship based on gratitude and good deeds. Just as a person should return a good deed, so too should they repay a bad deed, ideally in a disproportionate manner that 'defeats' the offender and elevates one's honor (which was diminished by the instigating offence)" (p.66-68).

"Despite [a] desire to take revenge, however, most Cambodians recognize that it is often not propitious to repay a bad deed immediately. A grudge thus...is frequently long-lasting...By hiding their animosity from a foe, people who hold a grudge may be able to maintain an element of surprise and prevent their adversaries from taking the initiative. During everyday interactions, a person may therefore smile and act politely toward an enemy; when the appropriate occasion arises, however, they will act" (p.65).

The link between face and social hierarchy is explored in Box 8.

Box 8: Face and honor

"In Cambodia, one of the key dynamics informing group interactions is 'face' (*mukh, mukh moat*), an embodied metaphor for relative social standing...Because it is directly related to the positive and negative evaluations of others, face is loosely correlated with honor and shame. ...[F]ace...reflects one's place in the social order, a position that is strategically negotiated during social interaction, particularly with regard to the extent to which others *korop*, or respect, honor, and obey the person ... Most people are constantly concerned with how others evaluate them[14]... Lurking in the background of any public interaction is fear of the exposure and shame that results when others do not respond in accordance with the 'line', to use Erving Goffman's term[15], that a person is asserting. ... By enabling interaction to flow smoothly, the orderly performance of social roles and norms of etiquette helps people observe an important social principle: mutual face-saving. ...[W]e must be careful not to assume that face is just an artificial 'mask' used to hide a person's true feelings...it is [a mask that] reflects a person's self-image and identity. The 'lines' we take and the self-image we assert are an important part of who we are...[F]ace is directly related to duty, since a person gains or maintains face by properly carrying out his or her status tasks. In Western discourses, duty is often conceptualized as an external constraint, as something that is artificial and opposed to individual autonomy. Although similar discourses exist in Cambodia, duty is more often regarded as something positive, a reflection of who the person is and how they fit in...the larger social order in which all things have a place. … Finally, face is strategically negotiated and at times competitively structured, particularly insofar as it is bound up with *ketteyos*,...roughly translated as 'honor'.....*Ketteyos* may be gained through proper moral behavior, but it is largely focused on the external recognition and evaluation of one's glory, prestige, and reputation. Face and *ketteyos* are therefore closely linked, since both involve one's self-image and are highly dependant on evaluations of one's relative social standing. In fact, Cambodians sometimes use these words interchangeably, and the loss of either leads to shame" (Hinton, 2005, p.252-257).

And Box 9 describes the motivating force that the importance of face and social hierarchy has on many Cambodians.

Box 9: Cambodians are strongly motivated to increase their status

"Since everyone has the potential to rise or fall in stature, many Cambodians are strongly motivated to increase their status – to be 'higher' than others, to be the 'big person' who is respected rather than the little person who is looked down upon. One gains face and honor by being given respect, acting in a proper and dignified manner (dressing well, behaving politely, fulfilling one's duty), raising one's social status (increasing one's educational level, occupation, wealth). Since social standing is relative, Cambodians frequently evaluate, compare themselves to, and compete with other people for honor. Such 'honor competition' (*brânang, brâlang, brâkuot ketteyos*) often centers around a discourse of victory and defeat, as one person 'vanquishes' (*chneah*) or 'loses' (*chanh*) to another" (Hinton,2005, p.257-258).

Another concept extensively discussed by Hinton is 'power'. "Many Cambodians, like other Southeast Asian peoples, view the cosmos as permeated by an animating energy or divine radiance that is unequally distributed and continuously in flux. Since everything has a differential capacity to contain this divine energy, it becomes concentrated to a greater or lesser extent in objects, places, and persons. Such understandings have been shaped by a syncretic amalgam of animistic, Hindu and Buddhist traditions" (p.97). The Theravada Buddhist term *dhamma*, which "has an array of meanings, ranging from ontological reality to moral law...[also] connotes an animating energy that generates vitality and power" (p.97-98). Accumulation of *dhamma* endows people with power, authority, and charisma (*bareamey*). "Cambodians often say that such beings have *etthipol*, a term that is etymologically derived from the Pali root *etthi*, which means 'potency' and 'psychic power'...Many of the [colloquial] usages connote individual potency or a forceful inner capacity that enables one to be effective, to accomplish...deeds, and to influence others...*Etthipol* may be differentiated from the power that comes from having *amnach*. This term is related to the verb *ach*, meaning 'to dare, to be able (to do something)...not to be afraid, to not shrink back, to not hesitate, to not be obstructed'. *Amnach* implies 'raw power or the ability to act without hesitation or constraint because of one's political 'authority', connections, or wealth...The two terms are highly interrelated...since a person who is able to rise to a position of authority or wealth is often said to have potent power." (p.99-100)[16].

What is important in the above treatment of power is the connotation of amorality: one can choose to use potent and raw power in good or bad ways. There is, however, a moral source of potency that comes from religious merit (*bon*) that a person has accumulated in past lives and that rises or declines depending on how one acts in the present life [the law of karma] . This association of merit, rank, and authority is evident in Cambodian words like 'merit rank' (*bon sâk*) and 'merit authority (*bon amnach*). Merit and power are 'amorphous qualities' that cannot be seen directly but only inferred. The association between merit, rank and authority therefore means that rank, wealth, and success can be interpreted as signs of merit. Box 10 gives an example of this kind of reasoning in an analysis of the relationship between Cambodian politicians and pagodas[17].

Box 10: Merit, potent spiritual power and authority

"During the recent campaign and general elections in 1997-1998 Khmer researchers also found that Cambodia's political leader channeled surprising amounts of money and energy into rebuilding and repopulating the temples left derelict by the civil war and revolution (p.60-61).... [T]he word used for the power that the politicians are trying to access is *parami* [*bareamey*]... a Buddhist technical term for 'highest', 'mastery', 'supremacy' or 'perfection'.... in Cambodia the word *parami* has additional meanings of 'sacred force', 'magical power', or 'energy' ...[that] can provide real-time benefits...*Parami* can provide protection against enemies and help to accomplish certain goals. Access to *parami* , or at least the appearance of having access to *parami*, is a necessary component of political survival in Southeast Asia. Time spent as a monk in a monastery, like opposition leader Sam Rainsy, is one method of demonstrating access to this sacred power. Donating money to rebuild a temple or giving food to monks is another strategy...'The performance of bad deeds (*bap*) will inevitably result in the loss of power. Despite his royal background and privileged upbringing, [the head of Funcinpec Prince Norodom Ranariddh is widely believed to be lacking in power, at least since the 1997 coup. People speculate that whatever power he had after the 1993 election was squandered on corruption and associating with bad people. ... On the other hand, despite his human rights record, Prime Minister Hun Sen appears to be a *neak mean bon* (a man who has great merit) with access to large amounts of *parami*. His survival amidst Cambodia's turbulent political waters is proof of his parami as are the success of his religious construction projects such as Wat Wiang Chas" (Guthrie, 2002, p.70-71)

Hinton makes a direct link between a felt need for protection and the world being experienced as a dangerous place. It is dangerous because all its objects and beings are infused with a largely amoral force that can be exercised for good or evil. The possibility for evil is thus permanently present. The resulting need for protection is sometimes serviced by efforts to increase one's own potency. But people mainly "gain protection of powerful beings by entering into relationships of personal dependency with them. If possible, people establish such protective relationships in a number of domains, ranging from the supernatural to the political" (p.106). Examples are relationships with territorial/local spirits (*neak ta*); with Buddha and monks; and with a patron in the world of everyday life and politics. The prototype for all these 'diffuse', 'whole-person' dependency relationships is the "nurturing bond between children and their caretakers, particularly mothers" (p.111). The parallels in terms of expected behavior from the parent (care and protection, supervision) and the child (fearful respect, obedience, 'repay' the debts incurred) across domains are striking. For example, patronage relationships "frequently involve the use of kinship idioms" (p.113) and subordinates are expected to "honor and present [the patron] with money or food in a manner that often parallels the way villagers pay homage and make offerings to *neak ta*" (p.109).

"Cambodians often describe the linkage between people in a patronage network as a 'line' or 'string' (*khsae, khsae royeah, khsae chrâvak*)" (p.109), and the strings weave a sort of 'pyramid' that can theoretically connect the villagers to the highest levels of power. Strings are viewed as positive by those for whom they ensure the comforting link to a potent benefactor. From the perspective of others, however, this protection may be negative because it allows someone to act with impunity. The 'child' depends/relies upon (*ang*) the 'parent' who backs (*khnâng*) him.

Box 11: The importance of a having a 'back'

"An ordinary person must always seek a supporting back (*khnâng*), one that's big (*thom*), a person who has raw power (*amnach*)....If we don't have a big protector like this, others will start to look down on us. They won't really fear (*khlach*) us and will abuse us because they can do so. But if we have a back, they really won't dare. They'll fear our back. So in Cambodia society today...anyone who doesn't have a back has a really difficult life. A back is a protector." These relationships of personal dependency thus have a double edge: they both offer protection in a dangerous world and provide "backing that sometimes makes the world a more dangerous place" (Hinton:115-116).

A final issue explored in depth by Hinton is the structural instability of Cambodian patronage relations and the accompanying suspicion and distrust. Box 12 gives an explanation for this by one of Hinton's research assistants.

Box 12: Patronage and distrust

"If there is a problem, a person will hide it inside themselves. They won't tell others because they are afraid people will lose honor. ...Thus, a person must lie. If another individual comes and speaks with us, we will think that they are lying to us also, because we are accustomed to lying to others. ...Moreover, many Cambodians are extremely ambitious, desiring rank (*bon sâk*), power (*amnach*), and honor (*ketteyos*), wanting only to win. This leads them to betray and seize the position of people to whom they are close. But when they have rank, they too will fear that others will try to seize their power and defeat them. ...Thus, there is a saying, 'one should not trust other people'" (p.124).

What do these selected ingredients add up to?

It is obvious that the above does not neatly fit together. All of the described notions are to a certain extent similar to *dhamma*, syncretic amalgams from various traditions. So the dishes one can theoretically cook from these ingredients, each multi-flavored in themselves, are indeed manifold. Each notion is both 'over-determined' to some extent, and at the same time only one of the available 'cultural models'. So, it would not make sense to claim that the ingredients described above add up to only one national dish. And even where they do come together in a similar way, the taste can vary considerably. Obviously, at this level, that of larger storylines, the diversity and inconsistency of possibilities is even much larger than at the level of the already diverse understandings of the individual concepts. Nevertheless, both academic and common sense descriptions of Cambodian culture do emphasize the notions described above. And in the sources quoted, explanations do link various notions together in understandable and persuasive ways. Thus, without claiming too much for it, I will try to cook a kind of ideal typical national dish from these ingredients to help me think through some possible discursive implications of the Cambodian concept of 'wrong'.

As 'wrong' is a moral judgment, the natural starting point for this ideal typical storyline is the *dhamma*, which has meanings ranging from ontological reality, animating energy and power to moral law. The above strongly suggests that for ordinary Cambodians all these aspects are interrelated. Their understanding is basically magical, and any action is thought to contribute to one's moral 'bank account'. Philosophical Buddhism has an elaborate theory of *kamma,* linking the intentions behind actions (presence/absence of greed, anger and delusion) to their positive (*bon*) or negative (*bap*) existential effects. And it links understanding of the underlying law of 'dependent origination' to liberation of the world of existence. However, the aspects that stand out in the common sense, magical understanding are such that:

- The balance in this bank account is a mix of past actions, including those in previous lives, and constantly changes by what one does;
- The balance determines one's (current) position in life. Therefore, inequalities between people are 'natural'. All that goes with inequality, behavioral norms, etc. derives a certain legitimacy from this causal chain;
- The balance itself can only be inferred from what is, and success in life (i.e. wealth, power) thus bestows legitimacy on the actions responsible for the success;
- The balance expresses itself in the (amoral) power one wields, with a diffuse distinction between various forms of power (what Hinton labels 'potent' power and 'raw' power);

- How power is wielded does not depend upon one's stored potential. In other words, the world is a dangerous unpredictable place, full of powerful beings who might misuse their power;
- At any point in time, one either has much or has little power; those who have little power need protection when they are confronted by 'big' power used against them.

Evidently above, 'what is' and 'what should be' are intimately related in this understanding. In Buddhist philosophy, the relationship is conceptualized as mediated by 'intention'. In common sense understanding, intention certainly plays an important part, as Swift's exploration of violence clearly shows; however, the philosophical link between moral quality and intention is much less evident. Greed causes 'impure' actions with *bap* as their effect, but the 'impurity' is more part of the action than of its intention. In 'magical' thinking, existence is moral in essence, and actions in themselves are either good or bad. Another aspect of this moral understanding of reality is its focus on balance. Actions in themselves are amoral; it is in their effects on the balance of existence that they become 'good' or 'bad'. This focus on balance implies an acceptance of or tolerance for the 'negative' poles of any continuum. No high without low, so inequality is natural, and as Öjendal and Kim describe, no respect without fear.

Many other cultural understandings described above make sense in light of this: the acceptance of social hierarchy as the way the world is and the strong drive to compete for position in that hierarchy; as well as the urge to seek protection in patronage and the instability of patron-client relations. The existing hierarchy not only reflects the way the world is but also the way the world should be. Anything challenging this hierarchy will threaten imbalance and is therefore 'wrong' in general terms. The person challenged is thus legitimized to strike back. 'Face' is another, more motivational way of describing the same. The ontological-moral *dhamma* understanding and the psychological understanding in terms of 'face' are complementary in their explanations for why people are upset by conduct that violates the social order.

However, the causal chains of actions imply that the way the world is and should be is in constant flux. Obviously, one never knows for sure if changes are temporary and inconsequential or permanent and a sign of karmic (mis)fortune. On the one hand, changes in the social hierarchy derive some immediate legitimacy from this uncertainty, providing a strong incentive for status competition. Outcomes of conflicts have a self-fulfilling prophecy aspect to them: winning means one was 'right'. On the other hand, the outcomes are inherently unstable because the loser may feel the new situation to be a temporary imbalance in the order of things that can and should be righted at the first opportunity.

In such a Hobbesian world, trust does not come easily, as is mentioned by several of the sources cited earlier. Social interaction is best approached with caution, showing one's true colors is potentially dangerous. Behavior is closely monitored for signs of misconduct which might signal a challenge. When dealing with 'higher' or 'lower' people, best to stick to expected behavior and avoid trouble because the backlash of doing otherwise is unpredictable. The unequal distribution of power and the associated norms of behavioral interaction results in the establishment of personal relationships of dependency of small people on big people. All Cambodians are ultimately part of a limited number of interlocking pyramidal structures. These pyramidal structures are made of dependency relations that exist in an unstable balance with each other, and actively compete for status primacy. There is thus a constant need to monitor the fortune of one's own patron and, to the extent possible, his 'backers', in order to ensure one is still on a bandwagon that can provide protection in case of trouble. Loyalties therefore shift relatively easily, reinforcing the rationale for a generalized lack of trust.

The constant screening of visible signs of power and loyalty creates a positive feedback loop. The small people tend to behave smaller and the big people tend to behave bigger than they are, and both know that they might not get what they see.

One valid objection to the above description would certainly be that none of it is very specific. Why would understandings be different in other Theravada Buddhist countries? And even for a Dutchman, the above should have more than enough familiarity in its substance (not its terminology) to make one wary of accepting this as explaining anything specifically Cambodian. The answer to this objection in light of the sources cited earlier is that Cambodia does stand out. It suffers from two facts:

- A relative lack of countervailing forces to patronage as the major system of social protection, neither rule of law, nor intermediary institutions, nor larger kinship(like) networks;
- A recent history that exacerbated low trust and fear of collective arrangements and responsibility.

Given the paucity of anthropological studies on Cambodia, descriptions of Cambodian patronage are normally spiced with definitions taken from studies on other Southeast Asian countries (especially Malaysia and/or Thailand)[18]. However, one could argue that the Cambodian variety is actually the 'best' ideal type for this relationship because, in the absence of alternative social protection safeguards, it dominates the social fabric to a larger extent than is the case elsewhere.

As a concept, the broad and intentionality-independent *komhos* seems to fit seamlessly into the *boran* understanding of reality described above. Against the backdrop of a world where each action has a moral connotation, *komhos* indicates that the consequence of this particular action is going to be negative. Its usage for any kind of 'wrong', from a spelling mistake to a heinous crime, expresses the importance attached to moral-ontological *dhamma* as both the benchmark of what 'is' wrong and 'its' ultimate judge.

In a country with a rule of law as flimsy as Cambodia, money and connections can buy all, but the more legitimate the result looks the easier such abuse becomes. The above reading of reality does seem to contribute to such legitimacy. I would argue that the core of that contribution is the moral-ontological understanding of power in itself being an expression of legitimacy. The same magical aspect of this understanding also fuels fierce status competition. The two together make for a distrustful and dangerous world with much exploitation, deceit, and disproportionate revenge. Evident in quite a few of the quotes above, both phenomena are experienced as very negative aspects of their society by many Cambodians.

To summarize, the depth of 'wrongness' when someone commits a transgression is understood to be intricately linked to that person's social position. This understanding contains both rejection (power is exploitative) and acceptance (power is earned), moral 'should' and amoral 'is'. Impunity of the privileged is probably going to remain a characterizing feature of Cambodian society as long as this Gordian knot is not untied.

The social continuously changes

After all the above I'm bound to appear as a staunch believer in cultural determinism. That would put me in good company: political analyses of Cambodia's problems tend to either optimistically identify external forces as both a cause and a teleological solution to Cambodia's 'wrongs', or take a pessimistic culturalist view (see Box 6). But with all the tenacity of cultural templates, change is nevertheless equally evident. For example, Öjendal and Kim describe how recent (foreign-induced, but elite-condoned) institutional changes, such as political decentralization which has introduced elected local level government, do effect real changes in the relations between villagers and local authorities. Although it is impossible to predict what these changes (and change in itself does not yet warrant optimism) ultimately mean and how they are going to develop, cultural determinism as an explanatory model is clearly untenable. Caroline Hughes and Tim Conway, taking a political economy stand, similarly caution against taking culture at face value (see Box 13). Their argument recognizes path dependency and the importance of existing cultural templates, but, again, the argument is that continuity and change are not mutually exclusive categories.

Box 13: Invented tradition and resistance to reform[19]

"These resource flows are frequently described with reference to the idea of "patronage" – presumed to be an embedded practice in Cambodian culture. To an extent, the flows of resources that currently occur within the bureaucracy and military and the way that these are organized by senior officials through personal relationships with subordinates do conform to ideas of patronage that are customary throughout South East Asia. It is important to note, however, that the form of such patronage is specific to the contemporary era. In other words, the sources of these revenues emerge, not from traditional sources of wealth, but from distinctively modern ones, such as international aid, government public spending, and cross-border smuggling and trade in gems, timber and humans. The exploitative nature of these networks vis-à-vis the wider population, who are alienated from them, distinguishes these kinds of patron-client links from those described by anthropologists such as James Scott, as legitimating unequal relations between the rich and the poor in Vietnam and Malay villages[20]. May Ebihara comments that while extensive patronage of either the customary or the invented variety was not apparent to her, in her year-long anthropological study of Svay village in the 1950s, it had certainly come into existence when she returned there in the 1990s (personal communication).

Arguably, it is more accurate to describe these links as 'invented tradition' – in other words, as 'responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations' (Hobsbawm). Although the forms may employ customary practices in terms of etiquettes of interaction between leaders and followers, the resources at stake, the context in which they are pursued, and the relationship of these to wider society are distinctively modern….

Indeed, part of the motivating power behind these networks, and their apparent invulnerability to reform pressures over the past decade, may be their very instability. Fearful for their future in a changing environment, insiders may cling to their protectors, and seek to exploit as rapidly as possible opportunities forever viewed as potentially 'last chances', thus paradoxically shoring up networks at the expense of reform". (Hughes and Conway, 2004:19-20)

So, although I am indeed a staunch believer in the importance of the cultural, the described mutually supportive fit between Cambodian cultural – invented or not - understandings of right and wrong and its crude authoritarian state which is unable or unwilling to deal with the wrongs of anyone wielding power is not in itself reason for culturalist pessimism. However, I feel even less at home at the other end of the spectrum, described by Hughes as the 'habituation' perspective, wherein the creation of institutions and/or the reform of existing ones inevitably results – technocratic hiccups and elite obstructions aside – in a proper, responsive, accountable state.

One theoretical perspective for thinking about the possibilities for real change in Cambodia is the mechanism of 'preference falsification' as described by economist Timur Kuran (1995). What makes this an interesting candidate is that the above characterizations of Cambodian social reality frequently refer to 'lies' in social interaction. The quote in Box 2 even uses the expression 'system of lies'. The introductory chapter of Kuran's study[21] outlines the meaning of preference falsification, what it is and what it is not. He mentions that the best non-technical expression he had ever come across for this phenomenon was in Eastern European dissidents describing life under the communist regime as 'living a lie'.

Preference falsification is "the act of misrepresenting one's genuine wants under perceived social pressures" (p.3). Kuran shows that it is a ubiquitous phenomenon with huge (unintended) social and political consequences. These consequences are basically of two categories: "expressed preferences have social consequences, as when women choosing to veil induce conformist responses from women who would rather stay unveiled … [; and] the social climate fostered by preference falsification may transform the preferences people are trying to hide...Paired together, the two categories imply a circular causal relationship between social outcomes and individual choices" (p.16).

This is not the place to delve into the details of Kuran's theory. Suffice it to say that the basics of his model include several 'utilities': the rewards derived from one's private opinion; the rewards derived from conforming to the perceived social norm; and the rewards derived from truthful self expression. The susceptibility to social pressures and the psychological need for individual self-expression vary across individuals and cultures, but Kuran's theory is about the collective effects of these individual choices.

Some of the above quotes well describe Cambodia as a country where preference falsification is a way of life. One core element of the theory of preference falsification is that social change is impossible to predict but not that difficult to explain in hindsight.

Box 14: Deceptive stability and explosive change

"The possibility of unanticipated revolution rests critically on two factors: the imperfect observability of the criteria on which individuals base their public preferences and the interdependence of those public preferences. In combination, these factors allow small, unobserved changes in private variables to galvanize explosive changes in public opinion. By the same token, they allow private variables to undergo major changes without triggering changes in public opinion. That is, they make it possible for profound transformations to occur, and much tension to build up, in a society that appears asleep. Deceptive stability and explosive change are thus two sides of a single coin." (p.20-21).

Thus, Kuran's argument differs from the optimism of habituation perspective and the pessimism of the culturalist perspective in that it doesn't share the assumption of change being a linear process.

But impunity seems here to stay

The above quote (Box 14) mentions 'the imperfect observability' of the bases of public preferences. My argument so far has been to show that the magical undercurrent of Cambodian socio-moral reasoning is an important basis for public acceptance of, or lack of, resistance against impunity; but this understanding certainly has counterpoints. It might be the dominant and elite-propagated form of Buddhism but the Buddhist tradition is a potentially rich source of alternative arguments. Further, the last 15 years of international aid, with its promotion of democracy and rights-based approach to development, has introduced rival moral ideas. If and when these will trigger social change is unpredictable as Kuran argues, but change is well possible and may (again) be 'revolutionary'.

Ultimately, the judgment of what is 'real' change and what is '*plus ça change plus c'est la même chose*' is in the eye of the beholder. This being the case, this essay might as well indulge in a gut-feeling kind of conclusion. Change of institutions and change of understandings are closely intertwined. State institutions without a matching understanding, be they newly introduced or be they organizationally 'reformed' to good governance standards, remain façades. Socio-moral understandings regarding rights, justice, or the proper relationship between power and its subjects only make for a really changed reality when they become anchored within relevant institutions. A chicken and egg problem, maybe, but I think it is fair to say that over the last 15 years the erection of institutional façades has been more evident than changes of social understanding. For change to be more real than cosmetic, it seems necessary for Cambodia to develop more checks and balances in its repertoire of institutional mechanisms for personal protection. At present, patronage is still the only game in town. For other institutions, e.g. rule of law, to consolidate as alternatives (instead of being co-opted by patronage as is currently the case) the moral-ontological underpinnings of patronage need to be challenged. Indeed, there are challenges, and the strength of these challenges is less directly observable. An impression of 'plus c'est la même chose' may mislead, but I remain pessimistic. The challenges come largely from the outside. The human rights and good governance discourse has been newly planted and not grafted onto the existing socio-moral discourse. The adding of a new foreign species always changes a landscape; but it is telling that all post-colonial Cambodian regimes have opted for grafts, including the Khmer Rouge. Even while annihilating the *sangha,* the organizational and personal embodiment of moral authority, the so-called Khmer Rouge Maoist ideology, contained many arguments that were structurally Buddhist, as is evidenced in its use of specific Buddhist vocabulary.[22] This 'choice' (I'm not implying it signals conscious rational or strategic decisions) flags that local 'social engineers' themselves feel that their 'message' is going to be best understood if 'hosted' by what they see as the pre-dominant ideology. For the time being, results show they were right: piggy-backing on the dominant indigenous socio-moral discourse is already sufficient to hold on to power (unless one is dislodged by a military overthrow).

In theory Buddhism's rich tradition has plenty of resources for reinterpreting the *boran* legitimacy of power. However, the ruling elite explicitly sponsors this strand and neglects, if not suppresses, the potentially critical reformist tradition. What this political meddling with the *sangha* is going to result in is again unpredictable. (Patronage of the *boran* tradition may strengthen it but may also discredit it.) A real *moral* counterforce can only come from within the *sangha* itself. Catholicism in South America developed 'liberation theology' which became a considerable social force; however, in that case it was

the church reinventing itself, not outsiders 'using' the moral authority of the church to sell their ideology to the masses. So, until and unless the Cambodian *sangha* starts developing a moral counterweight to the *boran* Gordian knot I am not very hopeful about real but non-revolutionary change.

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Transliteration

No standard transliteration exists for Khmer script. Official consensus on how to spell in Khmer script does not exist either. Different authors use different transliteration systems. When quoting a text containing Khmer words, original transliterations have not been altered and thus transliterations in this essay are not always consistent.

Annex: Checking the intuitions against actual use

The counterintuitive use of the word *mistake* might be a 'simple' matter of translation. Translation is never simple but some basics can be ruled out. However, when an English text, accompanied by a Khmer equivalent, used the word 'mistake', the equivalent was nearly always the same word: *komhos* (this was verified by Cambodian colleagues). To get onto somewhat firmer ground I commissioned an empirical check on the use and translations of *komhos*. A Cambodian research assistant went through the Khmer section of all 2006 issues of the Cambodia Daily, Cambodia's (only) bilingual newspaper, and checked the English version of all 138 instances of *komhos* that he came across. The results, especially the predominance of the connotation 'guilty', showed that *komhos* covers 'wrong' in all its manifestations and not the much more circumscribed meaning of 'unintentional'; 'mistake' usually does not connote so serious a 'wrong' to a native English speaker.

Before moving on and risking the impression that Khmer is a primitive language, it needs to be stated that there are related terms with more specific meanings. Two are crucial: *bap* ('sin') and *tos* ('crime'). The first refers explicitly to the moral-religious domain and the second to the legal. However, when one compares the use of these domain-specific terms to the use of their equivalents in English, one notes how limited and restricted their use actually is. For example, in English, normally a criminal act would be labeled a 'crime'. Although it connotes that the judicial system will be involved, it leaves plenty of room for the actual consequences for the actor. In Khmer, the label *tos* is reserved for serious cases which require severe punishment.

Another fact-finding check similar to the first one was done but in the reverse order, starting with the English word 'mistake'. The first check, which started with the Khmer *komhos*, resulted in only 28 instances of the use of the term 'mistake', a rather meager basis for analysis. Therefore, for this second fact-finding check I decided to enlarge the corpus of instances by adding two more sources in order to gain a broader basis for understanding the use of 'mistake' in Cambodia's English-language press. The Cambodia Daily has a searchable database of headlines. This resulted in 20 additional instances of the word 'mistake' between October1995 to August 2006.[23] Furthermore, the bi-monthly magazine, the Phnom Penh Post, has a full-text searchable database which delivered another 194 instances from April 1998 to January 2007. The 214 instances in this corpus showed that approximately 30% of the 'mistake's were recognizably 'Cambodian'; that is, they did not refer to factual errors, performance errors and misjudgments but rather to the legal or moral domains or explicitly to Khmer Rouge crimes.

Thus, however we look at this, be it from the use of the English word 'mistake' or from the use of its Khmer 'equivalent' *komhos*, Cambodians are less likely than native English speakers to cut the domain of 'wrong's up into distinctly different types which are distinguishable by the individualistic attributes of the actor, such as intentionality or responsibility.

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[1] Genocide is a legal term, autogenocide isn't. It is used to express the massive scale of this crime against humanity.
[2] It effectively started working in 2006 under the official name of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (www.eccc.gov.kh)
[3] This statement is to be taken literally: for now we are talking hopes which might not be fulfilled at all.
[4] Suong Sikoeun at CSD public forum on 'Khmer Rouge and National Reconciliation' in Battambang, January 27, 2000 (unofficial translation), in PPP, 9(3), 2000.
[5] Sok Sam Oeun, attorney at law and director of the Cambodian defenders Project, in PPP, (14)/7, 2005
[6] Not in the sense of 'with the intention to fool someone' but meaning 'knowing it was a mistake while/before committing it'.
[7] The ruling Cambodian People's Party
[8] "...the word *hingsa* is much broader than the standard interpretation of the English word 'violence'. A religious leader in the village explained that *hingsa* is just the Pali translation of *kamhung* (anger), and this is consistent with the way people used the word: 'it was *hingsa* because I was angry" (p.4).
[9] However, these Cambodians were not 'average': all were educated professionals (development workers).
[10] The underlined statements were stated as characterizing the relationship by *all* participants in *each* workshop.
[11] This includes some measure of 'fictive' kin.
[12] American anthropologists May Ebihara wrote the first and only pre-Khmer Rouge, English-language village monograph: Ebihara, M. (1968) *Svay, a Khmer Village in Cambodia*. PhD Dissertation, Columbia University.
[13] No other academic text exists which explores these concepts in such depth.
[14] However: "While most people act in accordance with social expectations, some lack sensitivity to issues of face, honor, and shame, and therefore are said to have a 'thick face' (*mukh kras*). p.254
[15] Refers to Goffman, 1967
[16] This is a purposive selection of terms associated with power discussed by Hinton.
[17] This relationship of legitimacy in exchange for protection is an issue in all Theravada Buddhist states of Southeast Asia
[18] E.g. Scott, J. (1977)
[19] Hughes, C. and Conway, T. (2004)
[20] Scott, J. (1985) *Weapons of the weak; everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven: Yale University .Press.
[21] Kuran, T. (1995)
[22] Various authors have commented upon this, including Bizot (2003) and Hinton (2005)
[23] 19 of these 20 could be classified.