DOES CAMBODIA EXIST?
Nationalism and Diasporic Constructions of a Homeland

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In her 1995 article in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* on “Refugees and Exile,” Lisa H. Malkki criticizes much of the previous work in refugee studies. She argues that researchers should expand their horizons to include not only those who fled, but also those who stayed. She writes,

What does it mean to be, or to remain, emplaced? . . . the question also helps us to move on to more general theoretical terrain. In writing anthropologically about refugees, it is useful to also ask, What is the state of not being a refugee like? How is it denoted? These questions lead into considerations of citizenship and nationality, origins and nativeness, nationalisms and racisms, and of the concepts of identity, ethnicity, and culture—in short, all the theoretical surfaces that are still hot from recent rethinking in anthropology, cultural studies and other fields (1995:515).

This suggestion, that we include the homeland and perceptions of the homeland in order to link refugee studies to discussions of diaspora, hybridity, and transnationalism is the starting point for this chapter.

What follows is a discussion of the situation of Khmer living abroad in terms of the current literature on diaspora. Does the situation of Khmer refugees fit the criteria of a diaspora, both in terms of definitional models and in terms of what diaspora defines itself against: nationalism and the nation-state?

The Khmer case is intriguing because a contradiction exists between two of the key self-defining characteristics of the Khmer as a people. On the one hand, identity is rooted in being of a nation with an illustrious and ancient history and, on the other, of being a people who have endured genocide. This contradiction centers on a complex myth that Cambodia no longer exists. It is precisely because of this mythical death that diaspora Khmer can re-create a “deterritorialized,” imagined homeland.

The question as to whether Khmer refugees constitute a diaspora is further complicated by the related question of whether Cambodia constitutes a sovereign nation-state. If diaspora exists in contrast to, or contrapuntally with, the notion of nationalism, then what is the relationship among Cambodia, Khmer (residing inside and outside the geographical boundaries of the country), and nationalism?

Should the Khmer who live beyond the confines of the territorial boundaries of Cambodia be identified as a “diaspora”? Khmer refugees in the United States, France, and other countries are a people without a nation, adrift in
time and space, unrooted in their new countries of residence, seemingly a classic example of the diasporic condition. But, simultaneously, Khmer who have returned to Cambodia, and Khmer abroad who do not literally return but who live with social networks across both countries (Basch and colleagues’ 1994 “transmigrants”) are, I will argue, actively involved in “nation-building.” This chapter suggests that the notion of diaspora is useful for understanding the Khmer case, but that such an understanding must include “nation-building” efforts as linkages to transnational or tranmigrant networks.

Theoretical Tools

Diaspora

James Clifford, following Safran, gives the following definition of diasporas:

“Expatriate minority communities” (1) that are dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places; (2) that maintain a “memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland;” (3) that “believe they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host country;” (4) that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right; (5) that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland; and (6) of which the group’s consciousness and solidarity are “importantly defined” by this continuing relationship with the homeland (1994:304).

Clifford criticizes the idea that there is any one specific ideal type against which different diasporic forms might be compared in terms of “purity,” allowing for some flexibility in the definition. He also writes that diasporas are “defined against” the “norms of nation-states.” “The nation-state, as common territory and time, is traversed and, to varying degrees, subverted by diasporic attachments” (1994:307). But if diaspora communities are not enveloped in the boundaries of the nation-state, does that mean that they are not nationalistic? Clifford writes that diaspora cultures can have their own nationalist aspirations, but that “it is important to distinguish nationalist critical longing and nostalgic or eschatological visions, from actual nation building—with the help of armies, schools, police and mass media” (1994:307).

This chapter argues that Khmer communities abroad are diasporic, as per Clifford’s discussion, and are at the same time actively engaged in the process of nation-building. While this can be seen as a kind of contradiction, focusing on the multiple relationships that reach across the geographical divide between Cambodia and their host countries allows us to think of diaspora Khmer as “transmigrants.” Transmigrants, in the terms of Linda Basch and her colleagues,
whether or not they literally return to their homeland, have “familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political” relationships that span the borders of nation-states (1994:7).

The first three sections of the chapter focus on diaspora and explore disruptions of the Khmer “nation” in terms of space, time, and conceptions of sovereignty. The fourth addresses the issue of nationalism and the process of nation-building, both in a literal sense of physically rebuilding the country, and by engaging in projects of “cultural nationalism.”

**Cultural Identity**

The question at the outset is how we talk about cultural identity given Malkki’s (1995) warnings about essentializing the refugee experience, and the obvious discontinuities and new imaginings of diasporic communities. I face, as Khmer face, the problem of presenting a discussion of the lives of Khmer people in terms that are true to the complex realities of their daily lives and, at the same time, explain the kinds of bonds that Khmer say link them one to another as a group sharing a common “culture.” Diaspora Khmer consistently describe their culture to non-community members and to each other in ways that reify and essentialize their “Khmer-ness,” while at the same time living creative and contradictory lives that obfuscate or deny such reifications.

As a theoretical tool to address this problem, I employ Stuart Hall’s dualistic notions of cultural identity and diaspora. There are, he writes, two different ways of thinking about “cultural identity:”

The first position defines “cultural identity” in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective “one true self,” hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed “selves” . . . our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as “one people,” with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history (1990:223).

This aspect of cultural identity allows a way for imposing an “imaginary coherence” on the experiences of disruption and dispersal that are part of the history of diaspora communities.

The second view of cultural identity, Hall continues, “recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’ . . . what we have become.” In this second sense, then, cultural identity is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’” Rather than being bound to an essentialized past, cultural identities are “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall 1990:225). Cultural identity here is constantly changing, adapting, re-inventing itself.

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**Nation and Nationalism**

Benedict Anderson has proposed the following, now famous, definition of nation: “an imagined community--and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (1991:6). All nations have boundaries--limits in geographical space and in historical time. They are further imagined as sovereign, ruled not by external religious authority, nor, presumably, by external political or military forces. Is it possible to have a “nation” which does not fulfill these criteria? And what is the relationship of nationalism to nation?

“Nationalism,” Gellner writes, “is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent... Nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones” (1983:1). Khmer nationalism is about redefining boundaries and reasserting that those who live within those boundaries and govern within those boundaries are Khmer.

The Khmer, like so many other peoples in the world today, seek to collapse the hyphen in nation-state. Arjun Appadurai points out that this is true globally, that “the nation and the state have become each other’s projects” (1990:303). The particular disjunctures in recent Khmer history and the ways in which notions of nationalism are bound up with national identity as cultural identity are in some ways unique. We explore first these disjunctures.

**Space**

The third most common symbol of Cambodia after Angkor Wat, the famous temple complex, and skulls or other representation of genocide, is the map of the country.³ It appears in the place of Angkor Wat, on the flag of Cambodia used by the Supreme National Council, the body created to officially retain Cambodian sovereignty during the transition period between the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991 and the newly elected government taking office after elections in 1993.

The particular size and shape of the country today has important meaning for all Khmer. Children are taught in history lessons that Cambodia was once a great empire, stretching from the Mekong delta in what is now Vietnam across what is now Thailand as far as northern Malaysia and Burma. The ancestors of the Khmer, builders of the great temple complexes at Angkor, ruled mainland Southeast Asia. After the fall of the Angkorean empire, the country’s borders steadily shrunk until it is now a small shadow of its former self.

In history books, stories, songs, and popular commentaries, Cambodians view their land as a country caught between two forces bent on its destruction, between the tiger and the crocodile--between two much larger and expanding modern “empires,” the Thai and the Vietnamese. According to these accounts, both sides seek constantly to expand themselves at Cambodia’s expense, even
into the 20th century. Thailand governed the two western Cambodian provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap between 1795 and 1907, and again briefly during World War II. In 1963, Cambodia went to the World Court to argue that the temple complex on the border at Preah Vihear was on Khmer, not Thai, soil. Their victory in court was a major nationalist moment in recent Cambodian history, a sign that they had stopped, or at least temporarily slowed, this steady onslaught.

The threat from the east was seen as even more dangerous. Vietnamese southward expansion annexed the Mekong delta area in the 17th century, an area populated by ethnic Khmer and still referred to by Khmer as Kampuchea Krom, or “lower Cambodia.” Khmer assert that even today the Vietnamese have a master plan, supposedly authored by Ho Chi Minh, to conquer and colonize “Indochina.” Many, perhaps most, Khmer take as a given that Vietnam continues to covet Cambodia.

Thus, even before the years of bombing, war, and revolution, the Khmer worldview included the supposition that Cambodia as a geographical entity was disappearing. Since the late 1960s, there is a real sense in which it is true that Cambodia has never again controlled her borders. The Vietnamese used Cambodia’s eastern regions for transporting goods and personnel from northern to southern Vietnam during their “American war.” Without regard for borders and civilians, the United States bombed and then invaded Cambodia (Shawcross 1979).

Ironically, it was during the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime, from 1975 to 1979, when more than 1 and a half million Cambodians died out of a population of more than 7 million, that Cambodia’s borders were closed and relatively secured by its own government.

The maps of the country sold today in Cambodia’s markets as souvenirs are reprints of U. S. military maps, sometimes with the place names written also in Vietnamese. The next invaders, the Vietnamese army in 1979, used the same maps the Americans had made a decade earlier. The Vietnamese came as liberators, ending the brutal DK regime, but stayed ten years as an occupying army.

For those who fled the country as refugees during and immediately after the collapse of the DK regime, the presence of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia became a focal point for defining their own identities. They were refugees in France or America or Canada because they imagined that Vietnamese filled the geographical space of their country. Beyond all that, Cambodians had suffered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, supposedly their “own” people. They had now lost their country in the clearest possible terms: its borders had been breached by a foreign invader.

The reason Khmer living abroad perceived they could not return was that the country from which they had fled no longer existed. Perceptions varied in form, but not in meaning. Cambodia no longer existed because it had been destroyed by the Khmer Rouge in the sense of physical destruction--death of
people, loss of belongings, and spiritual destruction—the loss of Khmer culture. Cambodia no longer existed because those in exile came to believe the worst (and false) stories of the Vietnamese presence. These stories, common in Khmer diaspora communities, asserted that the Vietnamese too were practicing genocide, killing the Khmer people in body and in spirit. Millions of Vietnamese settlers were said to have entered the country. Children were allegedly not permitted to speak Khmer, dancers were not permitted to dance Khmer dances, and so on. In the swirl of these terrible images, return became unimaginable, because the Cambodia they knew “back home” was gone.  

In its place lay only danger, from the Vietnamese, from the remnants of the Khmer Rouge, from land mines, disorder, and the ghosts of those who had died. Between 1982 and 1991, the Vietnamese army and the government it had helped to set in place, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, fought a war with the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) which included the Khmer Rouge, royalists loyal to the former King Sihanouk, and rightists led by Son Sann.  

The coalition “government,” based in refugee camps along the Thai border, produced glossy color propaganda magazines with detailed maps describing their victories, and exhorted diaspora Khmer to send money to help support the fight against Vietnamese aggression. The magazines focused on body counts and were illustrated with photographs of coalition soldiers inside Cambodia. Photographing soldiers in different provinces to “prove” that the resistance was constantly expanding “liberated” areas was crucial to resistance propaganda. Maps of the country boasted arrows penetrating into the contested heartland, marking the infiltration of liberation forces.  

It was only in 1989, with the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops, that diaspora Khmer began to again imagine a new geographical Khmer nation. The government installed by the Vietnamese, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, changed its name to the State of Cambodia (SOC). The State of Cambodia adopted a new flag and national anthem, Buddhism was reinstated as the official religion, and the chanting of monks reappeared on state radio. The SOC also began to take its message directly to overseas communities. After the spring of 1989, Khmer began to return to visit their homeland, at first in a trickle, then increasing over the years to a steady flow.  

At the same time, the SOC government began to directly address the overseas communities as Khmer citizens. Government officials, including the Prime Minister, Hun Sen, came to speak directly to gatherings of diaspora Khmer. In a process very similar to that which Basch and her colleagues (1994) have described for nationals of Grenada in New York, the Khmer abroad were addressed as integral to nation-building efforts at “home.” The nation is, to use Basch and her colleagues sense of the term, “deteriorialized.” By coming to the United States to speak to these transmigrants as members of the Cambodian nation-state, officials of the SOC government were “contravening European derived conceptions of the nation-state in which territory and population were
seen as coterminous . . . In contrast, in the nation-state conceptualized by the participants at this meeting, social location, identity, and political loyalty were no longer geographically bounded” (1994:52).

It was to Cambodia as a deterritorialized nation, one where geographical boundaries were no longer relevant to “Khmerness,” that diaspora Khmer could contemplate returning. One can go back to a place that “no longer exists” only if the boundaries are no longer meaningful in the same way. This presents a contradiction: boundaries are no longer relevant if one considers that Khmer around the world are citizens of an imagined Khmer nation, but the boundaries are more important than ever for inspiring nationalist sentiment—a central issue to many Khmer who continued to perceive Cambodia as threatened by her neighbors.

**Time**

In modern Western discourse, time is linear and progressive. This language of nation-states permeates commentaries on Cambodia today: in the English language press, in the Khmer language press, in the publications of the United Nations, non-governmental organizations, and international bodies like the Asian Development Bank. In these commentaries, Cambodia is said to be “becoming” stable, a democracy, a trading partner; she is “developing” sustainable agriculture, a civil society, a set of democratic institutions.  

There are several reasons why this perception of time does not ring true for diaspora Khmer who came to the United States as adults. First, as Buddhists, Khmer are just as likely, or more likely, to discuss time as cyclical—to see events in the past, present, and future as linked in sets of causal relationships. Time works in cycles, or *kalpa*, and the Khmer Rouge period is generally explained in Buddhist terms as the end of a cycle, a preordained time period of death and destruction. The Buddhist text on this period, the *Buddhammeay*, is discussed and interpreted privately and publicly by diaspora Khmer and by Khmer in the country. The ambiguous metaphors and symbols of the text are constantly referenced in the interpretation of everyday events. Has the cycle been completed? Is the time of destruction finished? And if so, has the time come for the next Buddha, a messianic savior?

A second reason for adult Khmer to question or reject linear models of time relates both to the notion of cycles of time and to idealized memories of the homeland that are common among diaspora populations. Adult Khmer tell narratives of national identity that cling to a frozen time of happiness and prosperity—pre-revolutionary, pre-war Cambodia—which they use as a lens to see (and not see) what things are like in their homeland today. They imagine a return to that idealized time when one wage earner could support a family of ten, when fish were so numerous that a person could hit the surface of the water with a paddle and fish jumped into one’s boat.
Lest the power of the yearning for an ideal past be underestimated, we should recall that the 1993 electoral victory of the royalist FUNCINPEC (the United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia) Party was influenced by just such nostalgia. Friesen (1996) has shown that voters were opting for a return to the “idyllic” 1950s and 1960s under Norodom Sihanouk by voting for the party headed by his son.

A third reason that the linear vocabulary of advancement belies the Khmer experience relates specifically to the devastation they have faced in their personal lives. Clifford writes that “experiences of unsettlement, loss, and recurring terror produce discrepant temporalities—broken histories that trouble the linear, progressive narratives of nation-states and global modernization” (1994:317). This is certainly true for Khmer who survived war, Khmer Rouge atrocities, flight, the refugee camps, and resettlement.

Because of the very high death rates between 1975 and 1979, these experiences of discrepant temporalities are probably more true for Khmer than for any other group except holocaust survivors; and certain parallels can be drawn with regards to the two groups. Lawrence Langer's (1991) work on the differences between oral and written narratives of Nazi holocaust survivors discusses the idea that there are different kinds of memory that sit astride the “temporal rupture” of living with “Auschwitz” and “afterwards.” “Common memory” allows one to recall events from the vantage point of today, thus mediating the atrocity. Written survivor narrative, Langer argues, conforms to certain literary conventions, “chronology, description, characterization, dialogue, and above all, perhaps, the invention of a narrative voice. This voice seeks to impose on apparently chaotic episodes a perceived sequence...” (1991:41).

When memories are discussed orally, however, another kind of memory pattern is evident. “Deep memory” recalls “Auschwitz” or, in this case, Khmer Rouge prisons or labor camps as they really were. The narrator “disappears” before the eyes of the interviewer, and goes “back there.” For many survivors, the rupture that exposes deep memory lies in the world of dreams, but it can also break through into their waking lives. Deep memory narratives are not structured in chronological time, but are told as chaotic episodes. They tend to focus on the deepest of horrors: witnessing acts of extreme violence or being faced with what Langer and others have called a “choiceless choice,” such as dying or letting someone else die.11

Telling their stories as structured narratives can only partially explicate and ameliorate the temporal disjuncture, and diaspora Khmer who survived the Khmer Rouge times live constantly with the “counter-time” disruptive deep memories of those years. New nationalist narratives of progress and development ignore and attempt to override these temporal disjunctions, focusing attention on the future.
Sovereignty and the “Other”

Pol Pot, the infamous leader of Cambodia during the horrors of the DK regime, said in an interview in October of 1997 that his “conscience is clear.” He argued that, while the Khmer Rouge made some mistakes, Cambodia would have been swallowed by Vietnam if they had not acted as they did:

I do not reject responsibility--our movement made mistakes, like every other movement in the world. But there is another aspect that was outside our control--the enemy’s activities against us. I want to tell you, I’m quite satisfied on one thing: If we had not carried out our struggle, Cambodia would have become another Kampuchea Krom in 1975 (Thayer 1997:14).12

A year before, Ieng Sary, one of the top six officials in the DK regime, stood in front of a press conference and made similar comments: “Do I have remorse? No. I have no regrets because this was not my responsibility” (New York Times 1996). He went on to say that he thought he could be useful to the new royal government, as he had experience at fighting Vietnamese. What a remarkable idea—that the years during which he had helped preside over one of the most monstrous regimes in modern history could be offset by the notion that he is a nationalist, one who fights the quintessential “other,” the Vietnamese!

Penny Edward’s (1996) discussion of the imagined “other” in Cambodian nationalist discourse explores the roots of ethnic nationalism in French colonial constructions of Khmer, suggesting that for Cambodians, “Khmer” embodies a quintessential goodness. Khmer were “poor, sweet, and gentle” and as such, Edwards writes, “Khmer ‘needed’ French protection against the ‘mendacious, dirty, thieving’ Vietnamese and the ‘wily, greedy, heartless’ Chinese. The moral superiority of ‘the Khmer’ over the ‘yellow’ peoples was rooted in the ‘Aryan’ blood of the former, whilst the people of France ‘needed’ Cambodia because of the cultural riches of Angkor” (1996:54).

What began as a French construction of Khmer as the “other” has come to be adopted by Khmer as a way of defining themselves. In addition, a “Khmerness” rooted in the mythical grandeur of Angkor became the basis for national identity. Laws during the 1950s required that Khmer citizenship be limited to those who could speak the Khmer language, and who could demonstrate “an empathy for the ‘Khmer’ spirit and character and a familiarity with ‘Khmer customs’” (Edwards 1996:55). The imagined community could be expanded to include Sino-Khmer, the highland minority peoples and, occasionally, the Islamic Cham minority. However, the Vietnamese and, to a lesser extent, the Chinese remain vilified on the cultural margins of the Khmer nation.

These concepts took on a bloody reality first, as the Lon Nol regime in the early 1970s deported and massacred Vietnamese and second, when the
Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975 and exterminated any remaining Vietnamese they could find. The explanations for the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime are regularly laid beyond the bounds of "Khmerness." The now deceased Pol Pot and other remnants of the Khmer Rouge blamed any deaths in this period on the Vietnamese and their infiltrators, those with "Khmer bodies and Vietnamese minds" who sabotaged the revolution. Many Khmer claim that the genocide was conducted under orders from Beijing, the plan being to empty the country of Khmer and fill it with Chinese. "Doesn't Pol Pot (or Ieng Sary or Khiev Samphan) REALLY look Chinese (or Vietnamese)?" they ask.

The rhetoric of the Cambodian political parties in the run-up to the 1993 election continued to echo the charges and counter charges of foreign-ness that were the backdrop to 25 years of warfare and destruction. Khmer Rouge radio continued to postulate millions of Vietnamese settlers and armed Vietnamese soldiers everywhere in Cambodia at a time when the country was filled with United Nations observers, and when Khmer themselves had greater access to transportation and communications than at any time since 1975. The charge still held validity for diaspora Khmer, but within the country became increasingly ludicrous as people could see for themselves that the war was (and had been since 1989) Khmer killing Khmer.

These charges were repeated to greater and lesser degrees in the propaganda of the two main opposition parties, the royalist FUNCINPEC and the rightist BLDP (Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party). Their claim to national purity was based in the dual argument that while SOC was tainted by association with and dependence upon the Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge represented an equally alien and deadly Chinese Maoism.

SOC counter-charged that FUNCINPEC, the BLDP, and other opposition parties were in league with the Khmer Rouge (and perhaps with China and the United States) in plotting a Khmer Rouge return to power. Only the SOC was strong enough to prevent a return to genocide. Each group portrayed the other as poisoned by foreign-ness and bent upon the destruction of the nation, although behind the guise of nationalism.

This extension of "otherness" to Khmer who are disguised as "us" characterized all of the propaganda of the election period (Heder and Ledgerwood 1996). Amitav Ghosh writes that the notion of "disguise" has a particular charged meaning to the Khmer Rouge leaders.

The term disguise, with its connotations of hidden identity and masking has a charged meaning in the rhetoric of the current leadership of the Khmer Rouge: it embodies the ultimate pathology of nationalist thought, where the national and racial Other becomes so pervasive, so omnipresent, that he is no longer distinguishable from the Self except in death (1994:418).
The enemy is all around you and even appears the same as you. Hence Ieng Sary’s claim that he could again be useful to the nation because he, as an authentic Khmer, can recognize and fight Cambodia’s enemies.

The issue of whether or not Cambodia was a sovereign nation during all the upheavals, interventions, and wars is complicated still further by the United Nations peace-keeping mission. During 1992 and 1993, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) intervened in Cambodia with some 22,000 foreign personnel, including 16,000 soldiers. United Nations personnel were spread throughout the country, a new occupying army, but with a strange twist. Their stay was, at the outset, limited in time and scope. The soldiers would eventually leave, but the rhetoric of becoming, of development, democracy, and human rights remained, a United Nations kind of “ideoscape” (Appadurai 1990).

Amitav Ghosh has put forward the notion that United Nations’ actions in Cambodia represent a step toward a kind of global control mechanism. On the one hand, the United Nations “represents the totality of the world’s recognized nation-states, and the fundamental logic of its functioning is to re-create the image of its membership wherever it goes” (1994:421). Elections are one way that nation-states are formed, and thus the United Nations has entered the business of running elections. But, Ghosh argues, the results of these efforts are not “nation-states in the traditional sense, since the nation-state is by definition sovereign and, so to speak, self-created” (1994:421). Sovereignty, Ghosh continues, is found precisely where United Nations peacekeepers are not.

Ghosh’s notion that the “product” of the UNTAC mission was not a nation-state is certainly debatable. Rather, United Nations personnel, as a vividly identifiable and relatively isolated “Other” spread across the geographical area of Cambodia, allowed for a renewed construction of unified “Khmerness.” Here was a new imagining of community that had not been possible for years.

I accept Ghosh’s premise that the United Nations, as a creature of nation-states, acts to re-create the model nation-state through its actions. In Akhil Gupta’s terms, the United Nation’s “master narrative” is “of the world as a body of equal but different nation-states” (1992:67). Gupta wants us to problematize nationalism by looking at the ways that transnational relations can “reinscription and reterritorialize space.” The UN mission in Cambodia acted to trigger the reterritorialization of Cambodia as a nation-state.

The notion of Cambodia as an “equal” partner in a community of nations bordered on the absurd, given the circumstances of UN intervention. Yet the narrative of international involvement helping to re-create an independent democratic nation-state had a powerful impact on the ability of the population, both within the country and among diaspora Khmer, to imagine itself as a nation. This externally imposed notion provided a conceptual framework for local imaginings.

I would further argue that Radio UNTAC, frequently cited as one of the most successful components of the UN mission, and to a lesser extent UNTAC
TV, were successful precisely because they were embroiled in the reimagining of Cambodia as a nation. A full development of this argument is beyond the scope of this chapter, but a few comments about sample programming may illustrate this point. One of Radio UNTAC’s most popular programs was in a format in which letters were read on the air from all parts of the country. People from many provinces were able to hear their particular place “read” as a part of a larger nation. The fact that Radio UNTAC could be heard throughout the country and that “national” news could be received instantly, shifted the way that people thought about themselves as one nation. During the elections, when Radio UNTAC gave real time interviews with people at voting sites around the country, virtually the entire populous sat mesmerized at their radios. The whole nation, as a nation, was doing something together: they were hearing the voices of fellow Khmer from other regions also proclaim that they had voted—a chorus that framed the election as “national.”

One reason that Khmer within the country came out to vote in such large numbers was that they saw the opportunity to again be a sovereign nation. This was part of the central message of the UN propaganda as well as the platforms of the various political parties.16

Nationalism and Nation-Building

These disjunctures in space, time, and sovereignty suggest that the diaspora model is appropriate for a discussion of the lives of Khmer abroad. A problem remains: some Khmer have chosen to return to Cambodia, and actual return supposedly negates diasporic circumstances; and some Khmer have become involved in nation-building, including work with state institutions that would seem to run counter to Clifford’s discussion of diaspora above.

This section discusses patterns of “nation-building” activities by diaspora Khmer. The activities and commitments of these overseas Khmer span the borders of “homeland” and host country, and mire them as transmigrants in networks of relationships in both places. As such, these actions are of both sites and therefore are, in Clifford’s terms, both nationalist and not “exclusively nationalist” (1994:307).

Diaspora Khmer are involved in nation-building in two senses: in a literal sense, “overseas” Khmer participate in rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure of the country by contributions to rebuilding schools, temples, clinics, and so on; in a second sense, diaspora Khmer are involved in projects of “cultural nationalism.” Literal reconstruction takes many forms. Remittances, either sent from abroad through intermediaries or carried by visitors, make it possible for in-country relatives to build houses and purchase oxen, pumps, and other material objects which improve their standard of living. Groups of Khmer, including young people, collect money abroad to fund specific projects, such as assisting an orphanage or rebuilding a school building. Diaspora Khmer often
begin contact with their relatives by sending money to perform rituals and build religious monuments that will effectively lay to rest the spirits of relatives who died over the last twenty years and whose ghosts may still be wandering in the world of the living. Through their contributions, overseas Khmer act to re-create social order by re-installing the proper boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead.

Overseas Khmer also organized political parties to stand in the 1993 election and sent money from abroad to finance these campaigns, just as they had financed the resistance armies. Some returned from abroad to stand for office. Others formed “local” human rights organizations or non-governmental organizations to provide protection and services to the “local” population.

In a second sense, diaspora Khmer are engaged in re-creating Cambodia through projects of “cultural nationalism.” Cultural nationalism, Harumi Befu writes, “focuses on the creation, crystallization and expression of the cultural identity of the nation” (1993:2).

One way that Khmer identity is expressed, and contested, is through ritual activity. At the Pachum Ben ceremony, the annual “Festival of the Dead,” celebrated in Chicago in 1996, the organizers added to the religious ceremony secular and “nationalist” components. After the prayers, the organizers asked the crowd to stand for the national anthems of The Kingdom of Cambodia and the United States of America. Both flags were on the wall, on either side of a large painting of the Buddha. As “transmigrants,” these Khmer were “confronted with and engaged in nation building processes” of two nation-states (Basch et al. 1994:34).

In early 1996, the United Cambodian Community in Long Beach, California organized an “ancient flag raising ceremony” to honor the spirit of “a legendary Cambodian Army Commander who lived in the fifteenth Century” (soc.culture.cambodia, Feb. 20, 1996). The commander, “Lokta Oknga Klang Moeung,” and his wife were to be honored for sacrificing their lives to defend Cambodia against her enemies. The sacred flags were said to bring “unity, trust and prosperity to all people.”

When the announcement of this ceremony was posted on the Internet, it provoked on-line contestation among Khmer readers as to why this hero was chosen as a “true patriot.” The organizers were criticized for their lack of historical knowledge. The poster of this message argued that Klang Moeung had, in fact, raised an army to fight on the side of one Khmer contender to the throne against another Khmer claimant (and not, as the story is usually told, against the Thai). As such, Klang Moeung was engaged in civil war, “totally unrelated to the fate of his country [sic]” (soc.culture.cambodia, Feb. 21, 1996). The poster of the response argued that “patriots,” such as the grandfather of Sonn San [leader of the BLDP], who “preferred decapitation [by the Vietnamese] to the total abandon of the Khmer language, culture, and religion in Kampuchea Krom, are forgotten in a pile of dust . . .” By this definition, a true nationalist hero is one who dies fighting foreigners (and in this case, specifically Vietnamese).
An interesting description of the ceremony and its context (Yamada 1998) notes that the idea for holding this ceremony in Long Beach, California originated with the spirit of Klang Moeung himself, who gave his instructions through a medium in Pursat Province, Cambodia. The goal of the ceremony was the promotion of peace. The ceremony served to bridge the gap not only between the home country and America but also, Yamada argues, among different social classes within the Khmer community in Long Beach (1998).

A second example is found in the story of Ta Boh, the central figure in a religious cult that was popular in the mid-1990s that centered on the magical construction of a “museum.” The sun-dried clay blocks being used in the construction of the museum will be transformed into stone by the same magical process said to have been used to construct Angkor Wat. Ta Boh also reputedly has the ability to transform simple objects of clay, wood, and other materials into gold and bronze. The transformation takes place while the objects are buried in the ground; after three years the precious objects will be placed in the museum. Ta Boh’s movement drew strong support from diaspora Khmer. Videos of the construction process circulated among Khmer in the United States, and Khmer visitors to Cambodia regularly made pilgrimages to the construction site.

John Marston’s analysis of this cult (1995) emphasizes the construction of the religion as nationalist. It represents an attempt to symbolically re-create Angkorean greatness, while stressing Khmer autonomy in the project. Marston writes:

It (the museum) serves as a representation of Cambodia in relation to international forces; it also serves to represent the periphery in relation to central authority in Cambodia, both in terms of the religious hierarchy, and in terms of the hierarchy of political and cultural authority more generally. For overseas Khmer, the cult helps map the relationship between them and the Khmer nation, as well as, through that, their relations to the countries where they now live (1995:11).

Ta Boh and the diaspora Khmer who send him contributions and visit the site of the museum are engaged in cultural nation-building in multiple locations.

The third example, or set of examples, are found on the World Wide Web. While a wide range of home pages by Khmer-Americans and other diaspora Khmer exist, they display certain commonalties. These sites tend to open with an image of Angkor Wat, or another classic icon of Khmer identity. They often have information on cross linkages to historical and cultural information, or recent news from the country. Often the sites have photographs of its creator and his or her immediate family members. They often have photos or drawings of other Khmer cultural “products,” such as classical dancers or sculptures; several have the words written out to a collection of popular Khmer songs. These are deliberate constructions of reified notions of “Khmerness” that
are often very personal. They are also always "under construction," regularly being modified. As such, they are classic examples of Hall's second sense of cultural identity as being always in a process of "becoming."  

Conclusion

In each of these examples, diaspora Khmer are engaged in acts of cultural nation-building, even as their sense of identity (in both Hall's senses) re-adjusts to the moment. Khmer communities are both diasporic and actively engaged in acts of nation-building. They re-position themselves in relation to historical and cultural backgrounds even as they undertake new projects of imagining.

Theoretical discussions of the diasporic condition postulate acts of nation-building as forms of state action and therefore as beyond the definition of diaspora. I argue here that these acts of nation-building are embedded in the transmigrant networks that link Khmer abroad to both the world of their homeland and that of their host country. Sending funds to political parties in Cambodia is part of the competition for power within Khmer communities abroad. The building of burial monuments for the ashes of those who died in the Khmer Rouge period reestablishes the cosmic order for Khmer in Phnom Penh and in Massachusetts. The ceremony of Klang Moeung was about building community within Long Beach and between California and Pursat.

Disruptions of conceptions of space, time, and sovereignty that are characteristic of the diaspora are useful analytical concepts for discussion of the Khmer case. At the same time, Cambodians through literal return and through the reconstruction of social, political, and economic networks back to the homeland are more like "transmigrants," people who live in a "deteriorialized" nation (Basch et al. 1994). The definition of diaspora should be extended to include these acts of nation-building and the ways in which Khmer transmigrants, through these activities, are embedded in networks of relationships both within Cambodia and within the host country. Tracing these cross-linkages in our research in refugee studies helps respond to Malkki's call that we expand our discussion to include the "emplaced" as well as the refugee.

Endnotes

1. Acknowledgments I wish to thank John Marston, Andrea Molnar, Kheang Un, Susan Russell, and the CORI reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also greatly indebted to the organizers and participants of the 1996 Social Science Research Council workshop on Southeast Asian diasporas, for which this paper was originally drafted.
2. On the notion of deterritorialized nation-states, see Basch et al. (1994), and below.

3. A famous blending of the latter two, which I have discussed elsewhere, is the map made of skulls at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes in Phnom Penh (Ledgerwood 1997).

4. An image of Angkor Wat has been at the center of every national flag of the country since independence in 1954.


6. Malkki, in her criticism of some works in refugee studies, argues that researchers implicitly assume and write “as if the place left behind was no longer peopled” (1995:515). But in the Khmer case, many diaspora Khmer were themselves asserting that Khmer society no longer existed. When I came back from my first trip to Cambodia in 1988 and talked about Phnom Penh as populated almost exclusively by Khmer, many diaspora Khmer told me that I was incapable of telling Khmer from Vietnamese, or that I had been carefully guided through a “Potemkin” environment (see also Mortland 1996).

7. Examples of this type of publication included the NCR (Non-Communist Resistance) Bulletin and the FUNCINPEC ANS (Army National Sihanoukian) Bulletin.

8. In another context it would be interesting to relate this discourse to Arjun Appadurai’s (1990) concept of “ideoscapes,” and to explore how this Euro-American “master narrative” is being rewritten in Cambodia.

9. Adherence to Buddhism is much stronger for the generation who left Cambodia as adults. For this generation, Khmer identity is intertwined with Buddhism (see Mortland 1994). For the younger generation, educated in U. S. schools, the tie is much less strong, and Buddhist cosmological notions would not necessarily have been learned. There is a parallel pattern within Cambodia in that children raised in the DK and PRK periods did not receive any education in Buddhist principles. They were schooled in Marxist notions of “development.”

While this chapter talks about “the diaspora” in general terms there are, of course, important generational, as well as gender and class differences among Khmer refugees.

10. Two of the anonymous reviewers for this volume pointed out that this kind of idealization of a mythical time before exile is not unique to the Khmer situation. One reviewer specifically mentioned the case of Chinese migrants to Taiwan.
11. To mention only the most famous examples from published Khmer first person narratives, consider Pin Yathay’s decision to leave behind his son, and Haing Ngor’s decision not to operate on his wife and thereby expose himself as a physician (Yathay 1987; Ngor 1987).

There is an important unanswered question as to whether first generation diaspora Khmer suffer more from the psychological trauma of the Khmer Rouge years than Khmer in Cambodia. My sense is that they do, in part because they are removed from the social support system of their own cultural environment.

12. Here he is referring to the Mekong delta region, which was conquered by Vietnam in the 17th century. A longer version of this chapter could address the issue of the Kampuchea Krom, the residents of “lower Cambodia,” in what is now Vietnam. Some of Cambodia’s most important nationalists, heroes, and villains (including Ieng Sary), were born in the delta. An imaginary reterritorialized Cambodia for some Khmer would include Kampuchea Krom.

13. Ben Kiernan has argued strongly that the term genocide is applicable to the Khmer Rouge regime because of these policies toward the Vietnamese and Cham minorities (see Kiernan 1996).

14. For a discussion of the Khmer Rouge as beyond “Khmerness” in a variety of ways, see Frank Smith (1989).

15. And, I would argue, the other Khmer factions.

16. The Khmer in diaspora was much more removed from this process. They were technically allowed to vote as Khmer citizens, but were required to travel to Cambodia to register. Only a handful did so. But many people returned from abroad to work for UNTAC or the various political parties during the election period.

17. Some overseas Khmer received appointments in the coalition government formed in 1993, although many subsequently fled the country after military action ousted Norodom Ranariddh’s FUNCINPEC party in July 1997.

18. These are different senses of the word “local:” in the first case meaning Khmer as opposed to non-Khmer; in the second meaning Khmer who have lived continuously in Cambodia. This problem occurs in English, but not in Khmer where different terms mark such distinctions. UNTAC marked such categorizations very clearly by offering vastly different pay scales to “local”—in-country—staff.

20. This discussion of Ta Boh is taken from John Marston’s (1995) "Icons of National Identity in a Cambodian Cult." Marston emphasizes the cult’s peripheralness, that its appeal had already begun to fade a year later for many of the people with whom he spoke. This he sees as an example of the constantly shifting nature of the working out of symbols of national identity (Marston, personal communication).

21. For a discussion of these websites and notions of identity and community, see Ledgerwood and Siren, (1997).

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