Understanding Cambodia:

Social Hierarchy, Patron-Client Relationships and Power

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Radical social change has engulfed Cambodia in the 20th century, but there are some important normative ideas about social relationships, power and morality from premodern, pre-revolutionary society that remains relevant for our understanding of contemporary culture and politics. This essay discusses hierarchy, leadership and patron-client relationships in general, theoretical terms.

Social relationships in Cambodia, like those across Southeast Asia, are hierarchical. No one is considered equal to anyone else. While within the family social rankings are based upon birth order and sex; those outside the family rest on a combination of factors including (but not limited to): age, wealth, political position, religious piety and sex. The Khmer language reflects and embodies this hierarchical patterning. There is no general pronoun for "you," rather, pronoun choice is based upon the status relationship between the speaker and the person being addressed or referenced. Certain verbs will also change depending on the status of the person who undertakes the action. The words for "to eat," for example, vary for the king, a monk, an older respected person, a person of similar status, a person of lesser status, a child, an animal and so on.

While this hierarchical ranking is all encompassing -- everyone is ranked somewhere in the pattern – it is not fixed. People may rise or fall in social status over the course of their current life as well as over multiple rebirths. How well a person does – how free they are from suffering, and how effective they are at accomplishing what they set out to do -- is linked to Buddhist notions of "merit." Through their actions, people gain or lose merit. The key is selflessness, or the extinguishing of desire. Hanks writes, "like a dog snarling to keep his bone, a lower being is more covetous than a higher one who would generously give away his last bowl of rice" (1962:1247).

The rich and powerful man is reaping the rewards of generosity and compassion in previous lives. Hanks goes on to explain that social groups form when a person has accumulated enough resources to distribute them to others. When group members receive benefits from the person in a superior position, they enter an explicit or tacit agreement to reciprocate with some service. Hanks writes: “Groups themselves are tiny hierarchies with a superior showering benefits on his nearest inferior, who in turn relays a portion to someone standing beneath him…The coherence of Thai society rests largely on the value of becoming a client to someone who has greater resources than one alone possesses; a person is ill advised to try to fight one’s own battles independently. Security grows with affiliation… (1962:1249-1250).” These unequal exchanges between the wealthy and powerful and the poorer and dependent are referred to as patron-client relationships. Both sides provide goods and services to the

other. The patron possesses superior power and influence and uses them to assist his clients. The clients in return provide smaller services and loyalty over an extended period of time. The relationship is complementary, with both sides benefiting. The client is protected and assured a minimum level of subsistence. The patron in turn has followers, who serve to increase his power. The relationship between the patron and the client is a personal one. The clients are not united as a group; rather they are linked to the patron by personal obligation. This then works in a pyramid fashion, midlevel patrons know someone higher and they in turn know someone higher – up the social ladder. The only way to get something that is beyond your capacity is to attach yourself to a superior.

These relationships change over time. Clients may leave one patron and attach themselves to another, or may be attached to multiple patrons to access different kinds of resources. Patrons may rise and fall in fortune. Clients may switch back and forth between patrons over time and for different needs. The shifting of allegiances is seen as normal. Patron-client relationships have at their base what Scott calls "the legitimacy of dependence." People must decide if they see their dependence as "collaborative and legitimate or as primarily exploitative" (1977:24-25). This is calculated by what they must give in relation to what they receive. Problems arise when there are shifts in this reciprocity and it becomes difficult to assess net gains and losses.

Scott also discusses the morality of patron-client systems, what he calls "the norm of reciprocity" (1977:26-27). He writes: “What is notable here is that the normative order of the village imposes certain standards of performance on its better-off members. There is a particular rule of reciprocity – a set of moral expectations – which applies to their exchanges with other villagers. Whether or not the wealthy actually live up to these minimal moral requirements of reciprocity is another question, but there can be little doubt that they exist (Scott 1977:27).” For Khmer, as for Thais, the norm of reciprocity, the moral underpinnings of the system, are found in Buddhist notions of merit, karma and dharma. A leader is born into his advantageous position because of meritorious action in previous lives, this is his karma. This leader should then fulfill his dharma, or prescribed duty as a person of this status, by acting as a generous and righteous leader. He therefore redistributes goods and provides protection to those in his care. Changes in the positions of individuals within the hierarchy can also be explained by changes in karma. Merit (or demerit) from previous lives can make itself manifest suddenly and the person will rise or fall in status immediately.

This is an important theme in Khmer folktales and stories, the poor man can rise to be a member of the court, and the rich man can become a servant (see Thierry 1978). Individuals within the hierarchy possess power to varying degrees. Benedict Anderson’s definition of "power" with reference to Javanese thinking is useful here. Anderson writes that, "Power is concrete…Power is that intangible, mysterious and divine energy which animates the universe. It is manifested in every aspect of the natural world, in stones, trees, clouds, and fire, but is expressed quintessentially in the central mystery of life, the process of generation and regeneration" (1990 [1972]: 22). Since power exists independent of its users and is all of the same type, the quantum power in the universe

is constant. This means that a gain in power for one person is a loss for someone else. (This zero sum thinking is important in central conceptions of Khmer political thought.) Power is thus amoral; it antecedes questions of good and evil (Anderson 1990 [1972]: 22-23).

The central issue with regard to power is its accumulation. This can be done in a variety of ways: through ascetic practices, by education, by making merit through religious ceremonies, in Theravada Buddhist societies by becoming a monk, by proximity to sacred objects and powerful human beings, and through the accumulation of wealth. With regard to the latter however, it is important that the accumulation of wealth is not the objective. Wealth follows power, not vice-versa, and then the wealth is to be redistributed back down the social hierarchy, to benefit not only the patron, but also his clients. Since power exists separately from issues of morality, it is possible for people (or demons or giants) who are not moral beings to gain power. Anderson writes that the essential difference between the heroes and their adversaries is that "the latter eventually permit their Power to be diffused by indulging their passions without restraint, whereas the former maintain that steadfastness, that tense singleness of purpose, which insures the maintenance and continued accumulation of Power" (1990 [1972]: 25). Those who are able to maintain the concentration of power will demonstrate social signs: fertility, prosperity, stability and glory. Their power will be expressed through the maintenance of order. Followers will be drawn to them and these followers will share in the prosperity and stability of the kingdom/nation. Conversely, signs of the loss of one's power can be seen in both the social universe and in the natural world, in the form of floods and plagues and so on (Anderson 1990 [1972]: 33).

These ideas about individuals and power exist across contemporary Southeast Asia. In ancient times, there were likely similar ideas about men of "unequal souls" (Kirsch 1974) or "men of prowess," to use O.W. Wolter's phrase (1982). At the center of Southeast Asian polities were individual "men of prowess" who attracted loyal subordinates and created alliances that drew together disparate groups. Wolters argues that such leaders were not autocrats, but mediators or diplomats, holding together different kin networks and patronage entourages (1982:18-19). Ian Mabbett has argued that such "cliques, factions, personalities, clientage and patronage" were "essential elements" in Angkorian politics (1977: 429-442).

But while these normative models exist as ideals – meritorious leaders redistribute their wealth and are righteous rulers and good actions are rewarded in the future -- traditional Khmer society also recognized that these ideals are not always fulfilled. David Chandler's (1996 [1982]) classic article "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts" uses analysis of an historical chronicle and two folktales to explore conceptions of order, merit and power in 19th century Cambodia. Because this chronicle dates from a period of relative stability following social devastation through war and invasion, it has important resonance for understanding cultural conceptions of social order in the wake of the upheavals of the 1970s and 80s.

There are several points to draw from Chandler's analysis for our discussion of hierarchy and power. First, "order" in Khmer society, Chandler writes, is to rank things correctly, "arranged in the same hierarchical patterns (however ineffectual or unhappy) which they had occupied before. Wildness was to be feared, and so was innovation. 'Don't avoid the winding path,' says a Cambodian proverb. 'And don't (automatically) take a straight one, either. Choose the path your ancestors have trod" (1996 [1982]: 78). Second, the focus of Chandler's piece is on the edge, between the wild and the dangerous, the not ordered and proper hierarchical order, what Khmer society should be. In this historical context, like today, efforts are underway to try to "push back the wilderness" and reestablish social and political order. This means finding new leaders when the old ones have been killed or driven off. Leaders are tagged, marked, in part not by their duties but by their possessions. Identities are bestowed from above, including political appointments and symbols of links to the king/state. Leaders demonstrate their power by arranging ceremonies and rebuilding temples and other things that were destroyed. Leaders must maintain some semblance of security, order and prosperity – for example by opening schools and clinics, distributing rice, land and justice. Third, and most importantly, the piece explores hierarchy as an ideal versus what really happens in the world. There are gaps between what is normal or right and what really goes on. In the chronicle the hero is meritorious but still dies. In the folktale a mother abandons her children, something a mother should never do.

So if the normative model is only an ideal, is it useful for our exploration of recent Khmer history and contemporary society? I argue yes, that this is the case. Even if many social relations have been transformed, it is important to understand cultural ideals in any society. In a broad range of social situations, Khmer still organize their daily interactions with others by attaching themselves to someone higher in the social hierarchy, for example a village headman, a superior in the bureaucracy or a military commander.