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**SCAPEGOATING CAMBODIA'S "YUON": HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON KHMER ANTI-VIETNAMISM****Abstract:**

Despite macro-level advances in ASEAN regional cooperation, on the ground anti-Vietnamese xenophobia remains an unsavory reality in contemporary Cambodia. During the 2013 national elections the newly constituted Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), a merger of the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) and the Human Rights Party (HRP), has capitalized strongly on anti-Vietnamese sentiments, leading to some minor violent incidents and a prolonged discussion on a renewal of racialism in contemporary Cambodia.

Against widely held views that the strong anti-Vietnamese animus constitutes a century-old historical continuity, this paper argues that popular Khmer anti-Vietnamism is predominantly based on folklorist representations of the lower Mekong delta's early and mid 19th century social history and that it has undergone two significant – and closely interrelated – transformations in the course of Cambodia's political history throughout the 20th century.

The first transformative framework concerns times of crisis in the constitutive periods of Cambodian independence in the 1940s as well as the reconstitution of Cambodian statehood and nationalism in the early 1970s and again in the early 1990s. Building on René Girard's mimetic theory, this paper argues that the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia has been 'scapegoated' as a 'dispensable other' which could be sacrificed in order to re-establish social cohesion in times of intra-societal conflict. As a result, the colloquial Khmer term "yuon", formerly used as a neutral ethnic denomination, has assumed an increasingly derogatory meaning. Intrinsically related to the issue of 'scapegoating' is a second transformative moment which concerns the politicization of anti-Vietnamese sentiments in late 20th century Cambodia. It is argued here that this latter transformation has been fostered by ultra-nationalist tenants of Khmer Rouge ideology in the wake of the Third Indochina War. Ever since, divergent political camps have been prone to the use of anti-Vietnamese racialism in order to mobilize support from the Cambodian electorate.

By de-cyphering the historical repertoires of Khmer xenophobia against their Vietnamese neighbors, this paper suggests that contemporary Cambodian society continues to fail in its attempts to overcome the social legacy of decades of civil war and factionalist infighting.

**Keywords:**

Xenophobia ; Cambodia ; Vietnamese minority

## **Cambodia's 2013 National Election and the Revival of a Xenonym**

Belying the worries of civil society groups and international observers, the weeks leading up to Cambodia's national elections on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013, were unexpectedly calm and election campaigning in Phnom Penh was often akin to a cheerful popular *fête*, with supporters rallying the capital on trucks, motorbikes and stuffed *tuk-tuks*, waving their party flags and cheering, rather than shouting, slogans. Clashes between supporters of the rivaling parties were minor and rare. They would mock each other and demonstrate their allegiances with simple hand gestures: four fingers for the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and seven for its main challenger, the newly formed Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP).<sup>1</sup> Despite some of the common hints at dangers of instability and a possible descent into civil war – should the CPP not win the elections – even the ruling party's strongman and prime minister Hun Sen exercised unusual restraint during his pre-election speeches.

Having a traditionally strong support base in Cambodia's urban centers and gaining more and more popularity among the rural population – dissatisfied with decades of CPP mismanagement of infrastructure projects, increasing levels of corruption and factional nepotism, as well as forced evictions and land-grabbing – political change seemed to be within the opposition's grasp. "*B'do!*", the Khmer term for 'change' turned battle cry of the CNRP, seemed to be the order of the day. The promise of social justice, a more accountable government and ultimately a process of real democratization created a spirit of optimism. In the initial phases of the campaign, the CNRP's co-founder and vice president Kem Sokha, a renowned Cambodian Human Rights activist,<sup>2</sup> was the party's most visible representative in Cambodia and managed to lend a voice of conscience to the re-grouped opposition. A tremendous surge in its mass appeal occurred upon the return of veteran opposition leader Sam Rainsy from self-imposed exile in France, just two weeks short of the polls.

### *The Cambodian opposition and anti-Vietnamism*

Together with Sam Rainsy a poorly concealed anti-Vietnamese rhetoric reentered the political stage. It had not been completely absent from Kem Sokha's speeches too, but mostly it had been limited to subtle suggestions.<sup>3</sup> A rather flagrant blame-game, which would hold Vietnam responsible for all of Cambodia's ills and effectively reduce the CPP to be Hanoi's puppet, ensued and despite all optimism among Cambodian civil society groups, the opposition's election campaign left international observers with mixed feelings – and Cambodians of 'ethnic Vietnamese' descent in a state of agitation. At the same time, Cambodia's 'ethnic Khmer' civil society seemed disturbingly unconcerned and criticism of the CNRP's xenophobic rhetoric had been disappointingly scarce. An exception is a press release of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) – formerly chaired by CNRP vice president Kem Sokha – issued a month after the elections in light of "the high number of cases of discrimination and intimidation against Cambodian citizens of Vietnamese origin

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<sup>1</sup> A 2012 merger of the Human Rights Party (HRP) and the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP).

<sup>2</sup> He had been the founder of the now defunct Human Rights Party (HRP) and its president from 2008-2012 and had formerly chaired the Alliance for Freedom of Expression in Cambodia (AFEC) as well as the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR).

<sup>3</sup> An important exception to this is his alleged depiction of the Khmer Rouge's central detention facility S-21 as a Vietnamese invention (discussed in more detail below).

attempting to cast their votes.” In the statement, CCHR president Ou Virak comments:

“Anti-Vietnamese rhetoric has been a major human rights issue surrounding elections in Cambodia and one that has tainted the democratic process. With mass demonstrations looming and the potential for unrest, it is extremely important that political leaders come out strongly against any sort of violence or discrimination against vulnerable groups. CCHR welcomes the anti-racism position outlined by the CNRP and hopes that the party will honor this commitment when addressing supporters over the next few weeks and when forming new policies in the long-term.”<sup>4</sup>

He made his statement in response to a public announcement in which the CNRP stresses that the party “opposes violence, racism, xenophobia and discrimination”. It should be noted, however, that the same announcement somewhat opaquely adds that the party nonetheless intends “to address issues related to the presence of foreigners in Cambodia via measures furthering the aims of the 1991 Paris Agreements”.<sup>5</sup>

### *Sam Rainsy's ambiguities*

Whilst not blatantly denouncing him to be racist, it seems fair to argue that Sam Rainsy masters the art of ambiguity when addressing ‘Vietnamese issues’. In official statements, notably those made in English and thereby predominantly directed to an international audience, he is able to maintain an ironclad degree of differentiation and political correctness. His recently published memoirs (Sam 2013) exemplify this. When discussing the reasons for his self-imposed exile in France, for instance, he recalls:

“The sentence against me was accompanied by the incomprehensible claim that I was guilty of incitement to racial discrimination. It is not racist to protest about a border that keeps being adjusted to the detriment of Cambodia. It is a border dispute, no more and no less” (p. 160)

And to avoid any possible misunderstanding he adds:

“Racism and violence of any kind is abhorrent to my nature. [...] Anti-Vietnamese pogroms have been among the blackest chapters in the dark modern history of Cambodia. I am convinced that Cambodia will never be fully at ease with itself until we achieve reconciliation with Vietnam” (pp.160 f.)

Sometimes, however, he seems to be carried away by his clandestine suspicions of ‘Uncle Ho’, even in his internationally published memoirs:

“De Gaulle once asked to whom Indochina would belong if not the French. It’s a question that has yet to be finally resolved” (p. 12).

<sup>4</sup> CCHR welcomes CNRP commitment to universal human rights and anti-racism and expresses hope that actions will follow words, (CCHR Press Release, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Cit. in: “CNRP statement reassures critics party is against xenophobia”, *The Cambodia Daily*, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

To be sure, the latter statement is only an allusive hint towards the looming dangers of alleged Vietnamese expansionism, past and present. It can also be read as a concern about the currently growing Chinese influence in the region. It can be read as a reference to the present, or as a reassessment of the past. It certainly *should* be read, I argue, as an example of the sort of suggestive ambiguities that Sam Rainsy's rhetoric successfully exerts.

It is exaggerated to suggest, that a “kind of racist bile [...] seems to be a key part of their [Sam Rainsy's and Kem Sokha's] party's ideology”, as some commentators have done.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, whenever the CNRP's leaders attacked the social wrongs of contemporary Cambodia during the election campaign, they made sure to leave little doubt amongst their audiences that Vietnam and the Vietnamese were ultimately to blame. Attacking land grabbing and the destruction of Cambodia's environment meant to implicate Vietnamese logging companies, lambasting the poor implementation of the national immigration law was suggestive of a massive influx of illegal Vietnamese migrant workers, and even attacks against practices of corruption and nepotism within the ruling CPP had to be followed by unmistakable hints towards the party leaders' personal histories as members of a Vietnam-installed puppet government during the 1980s.

### *Yuon threats*

On the campaign trail, Sam Rainsy would not restrict himself to suggestive ambiguities. In some of his stumps, there is little left to the imagination. The menacing danger of an impending Vietnamese takeover is presented in plain view, and anti-Vietnamese sentiments are flagrantly expressed – to cheering crowds. Within a day after his return to Cambodia, addressing a gathering of supporters in Kampong Speu, he urged:

“All compatriots – this is the last opportunity, if we don't rescue our nation, four or five years more is too late, Cambodia will be full of Vietnamese, we will become slaves of Vietnam”.<sup>7</sup>

And a few days later, in Svay Rieng – the province where he had been convicted on charges of inciting racial discrimination – he promised the crowds:

“I'll collect all of Cambodia's property and give it back to Cambodia. It's been said that the Vietnamese are coming a lot and removing border posts in our territory. [...] I pity Khmers very much. They have lost their farmland, because the Yuons are always coming in, and the authorities do not protect their fellow Khmers at all, but protect the invading Yuons. Now they have brought Yuons to vote for Hun Sen, so Khmers should vote for Sam Rainsy to protect our territory”.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Roger Mitten: “A bit of re-education needed”, *The Phnom Penh Post*, July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> “Return sparks CNRP”, *The Phnom Penh Post*, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. “In border provinces, Sam Rainsy talks justice and lost territory”, *The Cambodia Daily*, July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013, and “At border, Rainsy plays old tune”, *The Phnom Penh Post*, July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

The use of anti-Vietnamese sentiments in Cambodian pre-election rhetoric is nothing new for Sam Rainsy. It was part and parcel of his campaign strategies during the UNTAC organized elections in 1993, then as a member of the royalist Funcinpec, as well as during the national elections of 1998, 2003 and 2008, which he contested for his Sam Rainsy Party (SRP)<sup>9</sup> after being expelled from Funcinpec in 1994 (cf. Albritton 2004: 106; Gallup 2002: 26). Problematically, the characteristics of Sam Rainsy's – and by extension the Cambodian opposition's – anti-Vietnamism do not simply reflect general sentiments of Cambodian society, but resemble the particular way in which the animosity towards Vietnam and the Vietnamese had been politicized by the Khmer Rouge since the early 1970s. This is not only apparent in frequent references to the feeling of being overwhelmed by illegal immigrants, which corresponds to ideas of “foreign infiltration,” or the depiction of the Vietnamese as “swallowers of land.” In semiotic terms, the proximity of Sam Rainsy's contemporary political rhetoric to that of the Khmer Rouge might be best exemplified by his invariable use of the term *yuon* when referring to Vietnam, the Vietnamese or Cambodians of Vietnamese background most generally,<sup>10</sup> an idiom with historically ambiguous connotations that is, by many, considered derogatory in present usage.

It has been pointed out that “[t]here is considerable debate over whether *yuon* is a racial slur, as Hun Sen claims, or a traditional Khmer usage to refer to the Vietnamese” (Albritton 2004: 106). Some scholars assert that it is simply “the usual term designating the Vietnamese” in Khmer, as well as Laotian and Thai (Martin 1994: 358) and that it is “neither derogatory nor flattering” (Phim 2007: 82), its pejorative connotation being imputed by “Khmer politicians and foreigners” based on the fact that “[t]he Vietnamese have not had a good press in these countries for a long time, and to name them is to speak of the long-standing enemy” (Martin 1994: 358). Others stress that the term “was officially defined as pejorative by the CPK [Communist Party of Kampuchea, i.e. the Khmer Rouge] and is now considered as such by most Vietnamese themselves” (Heder and Tittimore 2001: 33).

Is it then appropriate to continue using this idiom in current political discourses? Sam Rainsy, for one, defends it. In the running up to the 1993 elections he bemoaned the United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia's (UNTAC) censorship of campaign commercials he had arranged:

"it was just because I used the word Youn [sic] instead of Vietnam. [...] Maybe Youn is slightly pejorative. But it's a habit [...], since the Paris peace accords people feel more free to express themselves according to their habit and what they used to do in the past. So I used the word Youn".<sup>11</sup>

It should be noted that the way in which he chose to express himself was not different from the contemporary rhetoric of the Khmer Rouge, then still a political force to be reckoned with, who had launched staunch anti-UNTAC propaganda, including

<sup>9</sup> Founded as Khmer Nation Party (KNP), but renamed before the 1998 elections in order to avoid registration issues.

<sup>10</sup> By extension this does not only include Cambodians of ethnic Vietnamese background, but to everybody thought to be tainted by ‘Vietnamese’ culture, political affiliation or socialization, e.g. Hun Sen and the CPP, or ethnic Khmers from the ‘Kampuchea Krom’ (southern Cambodia, i.e. South Vietnam) territories, whom the Khmer Rouge called “Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds” (*khluon khmaer kuor kbal yuon*). Cf. Hinton 2002: 90.

<sup>11</sup> “Rainsy bemoans censorship, UN cites racism”, *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1993.

labeling the endeavor ‘YuongTAC’ (cf. Acharya 1994: 303). True to his taste for ambiguity and contradiction, two decades later Sam Rainsy would claim that the term might not be politically correct, but at the same time certainly *not* pejorative.<sup>12</sup>

### *Angkor Wat an the ‘politics of ruins’*

After all, at least for Sam Rainsy, *yuon* land grabbing was a historical fact and continued to be a major issue facing the Cambodian nation at present. Especially since, in the eyes of the CNRP, the alleged Vietnamese domination of Cambodian territory extends to the nation’s most iconic sanctuary, the temple complex of Angkor Wat.

Addressing a large crowd of supporters in Siem Reap a few days before the 2013 election, Sam Rainsy urged that “Khmers must take back control of Angkor Wat from Vietnam”.<sup>13</sup> The public debate was triggered due to the Sokimex conglomerate’s logistic control of ticket sales to Cambodia’s World Heritage site.

Sokimex is a multi-portfolio business and “shrouded in mystery”. Despite it’s control of key sectors in the Cambodian economy, few details about the company and it’s owners are publicly revealed. In 2000, Sam Rainsy branded Sokimex to be “the commercial, trading, and financial arm of the Vietnamese-backed and imposed regime” during the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).<sup>14</sup> After the company’s CEO, the CPP’s senator Sok Kong, had revealed his ethnic Vietnamese background in a 2004 interview, this case of corruption and collusion turned into another instance of alleged foreign domination. In the interview, later fiercely debated in the Cambodian blogosphere, Sok Kong acknowledges that both of his parents were Vietnamese, that – despite being born in the Cambodian province of Prey Veng – he considered himself a Vietnamese, and that he was “proud of that”.<sup>15</sup>

The case of alleged Vietnamese control of the very symbol of Khmer nationhood is, again, exemplary for Sam Rainsy’s awkward blend of warranted government criticism and xenophobic ultra-nationalism, and it fared well with Cambodia’s electorate. Considering the framework of a “politics of ruins” (cf. Pellegi 2002), in 2013 the impending danger of a Vietnamese “take-over” of Angkor Wat easily outdid the more acute issue of disputes with Thailand over the vicinity of Preah Vihear.

### *Tuol Sleng as a ‘Vietnamese exhibition’*

However surprisingly, the by far more contentious – and consequential – issues of the CNRP’s 2013 election campaign surrounded not Angkor Wat, but the probably second most notorious heritage site of the country: the Khmer Rouge’s central

<sup>12</sup> See “Vietnamese embassy official criticizes CNRP’s racial rhetoric”, *The Cambodia Daily*, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> “Come election time, xenophobia proves expedient”, *The Cambodia Daily*, July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013; cf. “Rainsy stirs passions in provinces”, *The Phnom Penh Post*, August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in: “All that glitters seems to be ... Sokimex”, *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> In the original article: “Tôi vinh dự về điều đó!” See: “Tôi là người Việt Nam!”, *Việt Báo*, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004; <<http://vietbao.vn/The-gioi/Toi-la-nguoi-Viet-Nam/40056609/159/>>, last accessed September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013. An English translation by ‘Wanna’ had been posted at <<http://www.xwanna.com>> in 2008 (now offline). As of September 2013, parts of this translation can still be found in a number of nationalist Cambodian blogspots, including <<http://ki-media.blogspot.com>> or <<http://khmerization.blogspot.com>>.

detention facility S-21, now the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes. And, maybe even more surprisingly, it was not the CNRP's president Sam Rainsy who stirred the debate, but his deputy Kem Sokha, allegedly questioning the authenticity of the site. His remarks during an election stump, later claimed to have been edited out of context, were to trigger mass demonstrations of Khmer Rouge victims and ultimately led to a doubtful law criminalizing Khmer Rouge denial:

“Why is the Tuol Sleng prison remaining there? I think that the Khmer Rouge were not stupid. If they [the Khmer Rouge] knew they themselves were murderers, why didn't they destroy [the evidence] instead of keeping the scene for display and photography. This was staged, brothers. I personally believe that it was staged.”<sup>16</sup>

Disturbingly, Kem Sokha's remarks are remindful of Pol Pot's depiction of Tuol Sleng as a “Vietnamese exhibition” during an interview on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1997:<sup>17</sup>

“I want to tell you - Tuol Sleng was a Vietnamese exhibition; a journalist wrote that. People talk about Tuol Sleng, Tuol Sleng, Tuol Sleng, but when we look at the pictures, the pictures are the same. When I first heard about Tuol Sleng, it was on VOA [Voice of America]. I listened twice. And there are documents talking about someone who did research about the skeletons of the people... They said when you look closely at the skulls, they are smaller than the skulls of the Khmer people”.<sup>18</sup>

Pol Pot's comments on the skeletal evidence, yet again, resonate an earlier Khmer Rouge radio broadcast of December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1994, that imagined the “exhibition at Tuol Sleng as part of a psychological propaganda campaign” of the Vietnamese occupation forces:

“Concerning those skeletons at Tuol Sleng, they are purely and simply part of the psychological war waged by Vietnam in its aggression against Cambodia. The communist Vietnamese collected skulls and bones from graveyards all over North and South Vietnam, brought them by truck to Cambodia, and displayed them”.<sup>19</sup>

## Histories of Cambodian-Vietnamese Relations

Today's political opposition in Cambodia – the CNRP and its supporters – would flatly refuse to be seen in a tradition of Khmer Rouge ideologies. However, it can be argued that the CNRP's distinct, and evidently successful, anti-Vietnamese rhetoric relies on historiographical tropes established and propagated by the Khmer Rouge movement since the 1970s.

<sup>16</sup> “Kem Sokha's S-21 remarks questioned”, *The Phnom Penh Post*, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Nate Thayer, “‘Am I a savage person?’ Denials from Pol Pot,” *Phnom Penh Post*, 24 October – 6 November 1997. – It is worthwhile noting that Sam Rainsy's recently published political memoirs, published just a few months prior to Kem Sokha's comments, include a reference to Nate Thayer's interview with Pol Pot, albeit in order to discredit the Khmer Rouge and not blaming Vietnam (2013: 37).

<sup>18</sup> Excerpts of the original interview have been published in the print media and echoed frequently in the scholarly literature, e.g.: Nate Thayer, “On the Stand”, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30 October 1997; Id., “I'm tired of talking about it”, *Phnom Penh Post*, 24 October – 6 November 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Cit. in Hinton 2008, p.75

Observers have rightly asserted that – particularly during the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and continuously after the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops – the “deeply held antipathy [towards the Vietnamese] transcends ideology and is embraced by Cambodian liberals and conservatives, royalists and communists alike” (Brown and Zasloff 1998: 295). However, caution is warranted when the same authors suggest that “the strong animus toward Vietnam” is in a way innate to Cambodians, “built into the Cambodian psyche” (p. 258), or “internalize[d] with their mothers’ milk” (p. 295). Scholars, missionaries and journalists alike seem to subscribe to this argument of a darkly irrational racialism. Some suggest that anti-Vietnamese “expressions and idioms [in the Khmer language] are manifestations of a collective unconscious, generating violence” (Ponchaud 1989: 154, fn. 1). Others point out invariably that the two nations’ “fearsome, bitter animosity dates back centuries” (Coates 2005: 71).<sup>20</sup> Despite some critical assessment, these primordialist arguments that often shape popular discussions have been tenacious in much of Cambodia scholarship too. Recently, Shawn McHale has pointed out that

“Cambodian animosity to the Vietnamese is often presented as a constant of Vietnamese-Cambodian interactions since the seventeenth century, and an anti-Vietnamese strain has influenced some foreign scholarship on Cambodia” (2013: 368).

While I am arguing that present anti-Vietnamese sentiments should be analyzed in relation to particular tenants of Khmer nationalism since the late 1960s and throughout the following two decades, as well as the racist politicization of ethnic stereotypes,<sup>21</sup> this is not to deny the contribution of earlier historical events to this situation.

### *Kingly power, suzerainty and dynastic disputes*

Historians have established that after the decline of the Angkorian empire in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Siamese (or Thais), who had been under Khmer suzerainty, were able to turn the tide in their favour and gain control over the area of present-day Siem Reap and Battambang, burning the city of Angkor in 1431 and forcing the court to flee southwards. A few decades later, the Annamites (or present Vietnamese) who gradually extended their political control further south along the coasts of Annam, to the east of Angkor, were able to sack the capital of Champa, formerly a kind of buffer zone between the Khmer empire and the Annamite rulers. During their southward expansion (*nam tiến*) they eventually annexed the Cham lands as well as parts of the former Angkorian empire.

The 15<sup>th</sup> century is commonly seen as the beginning of Cambodia’s ‘dark ages,’ and despite a brief period of economic prosperity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after the establishment of trading centers in the Mekong delta, Khmer society was in turns under the suzerainty of either Siam or Vietnam. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Khmers found

<sup>20</sup> See also, again, Ponchaud (1989: 154, fn. 1): “As for the conflictual ties between Khmers and Vietnamese, they were a constant throughout all regimes: such reflex of a defeated people directed at their subjugators is a legacy of three centuries of incessant struggle.”

<sup>21</sup> Berman (1996: 825, fn. 49) notes that “[m]ost scholars of Cambodian history use the terms of race and ethnicity interchangeably”.



themselves entangled between the 'Tiger' (Siam) and the 'Crocodile' (Vietnam) and the Khmer kingdom had become a vassal of its neighbours, expected to pay annual tribute during ritual ceremonies in Hué or Bangkok.

It has been argued that until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, both Siam and Vietnam were interested "to allow Cambodia to exist as a semi-independent buffer state", avoiding "an all-out military collision with each other" (Tully 2005: 70 f.). During the next half a century, the situation changed. An intensification of Siamese encroachments from the West and Vietnamese expansion from the South, in conjunction with Khmer factionalism and dynastic in-fighting, increasingly led to territorial assimilation and Cambodia as a political entity almost ceased to exist. Ironically it was the expansion of European colonialism that seems to have safeguarded the very existence of Cambodia as a sovereign state after King Norodom had signed a 'treaty of friendship, commerce and French protection' in August 1863. After the non-national "superspace" of French Indochina had been established in 1887, joining the territories of Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, Laos, and Cambodia, "a wide variety of imagined and actual communities could coexist without entering into conflict over actual territory" (McHale 2013: 367 f.)

Bearing in mind that contemporary anti-Vietnamese sentiments in Cambodia are unparalleled by an equally strong anti-Thai animus, simple historical explanations pointing at long-standing territorial disputes are clearly misleading. It is true that Cambodia's borders have been a matter of contestation for centuries, and they in fact continue to be until present times. In this context, however, it should be noted that the Thai-Cambodian border rather than the southern areas adjacent to Vietnam have been the spot for violent clashes in recent years. The vicinity of Preah Vihear temple has even been the subject of a legal dispute at the International Court of Justice during the 2013 elections – but yet the election campaign of the CNRP focused on the mobilization of anti-*Vietnamese* bias.

### *Cultural divides and social histories*

Possibly, if looking for unabated continuities, it can be argued that it was rather "a sharp cultural divide" between Vietnam's Sinitic society and Cambodia's strongly Indianized culture (Tully 2005: 70) that persisted throughout the centuries and became the basis onto which to build xenophobic sentiments. For Elizabeth Becker this divide is apparent in "different values, goals, traditions, temperaments", including ethno-linguistic boundaries as well as fundamental differences in dress, architecture and table manners, but most particularly in the significance of dance in Cambodia (and other Indianized cultures) on the one hand and the incapability "of understanding or feeling dance" among the Vietnamese on the other hand (1998 [1986]: 329 f.).

It is then Khmer perceptions of Vietnamese "otherness" that have made Cambodians throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century susceptible to anti-Vietnamese racialism in particular. With their Siamese neighbors, Khmers share not only adherence to a localized form of Theravada Buddhism, but also Indian cultural influences and some linguistic affinities. The Vietnamese, by contrast, have remained socio-cultural aliens to Khmer society, and their early- and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century attempts towards cultural assimilation of the southern Khmers, whom they regarded as barbarians, was to be self-defeating. The Vietnamese had "adopted the policy of 'civilizing' the barbarians, attempting to

introduce a Vietnamese-style taxation system and bullying the Khmer mandarins to wear Vietnamese-style bureaucratic dress,” and at some stage even “attempted to make the general population wear Vietnamese clothing and hairstyles” (Tully 2005: 73; cf. McHale 2013: 370).

Adding insult to injury, it was Vietnamese prisoners who were to teach the Khmers proper manners. General Minh Mạng, in charge of the “Vietnamization” campaign is quoted saying that

“military convicts and ordinary prisoners, if kept in jail, would prove useless. Therefore, it would be better for them to be sent to Cambodia and live among the people there, who would benefit from their teaching”.<sup>22</sup>

At this point, it seems, the political rivalry amongst kings was transformed into a cultural threat experienced by the general population, and indeed, the first popular anti-Vietnamese uprisings were to follow suit. Dynastic squabbles had already diminished the control of the Khmer court in the countryside, and since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Cambodia’s southeastern regions had effectively been ruled by ‘holy men’ (*nak se*), “endowed with magical powers and able to tap the millennial strains of popular Khmer Buddhism.” During Vietnam’s civilization campaign, “actions aimed at rationalizing the Cambodian administration were seen as attacks on the very foundations of the Buddhist state and social order” (Ileto 1992: 205 f.). Consequently, anti-Vietnamese uprisings from the 1820s to 1840s united the rural masses experiencing the threat of socio-cultural and religious, rather than political-territorial extinction. One of the rebels is quoted writing:

“We are happy killing Vietnamese. We no longer fear them; in all our battles we are mindful of the three jewels [of Buddhism]: the Buddha, the law, and the monastic community”.<sup>23</sup>

Apparently, this period of early socio-cultural clashes also left its mark in popular Khmer historical narratives and semi-mythical folklore:

“Memories of Khmer uprisings in the early nineteenth century and accounts of Vietnamese ruthlessness in putting them down have survived in Cambodian chronicles and folklore. Khmer mothers often used to frighten wayward children by telling them, ‘If you go far playing in the bush, *Yvon* [...] will get you!’” (Chanda 1986: 52)

Notably, Vietnam’s civilizing campaign coincided with a major development project in the Khmer-Vietnamese borderlands, the *Vinh Tế* Canal, ordered by Emperor Gia Long of the Nguyễn Dynasty and completed by his successor Minh Mạng. The maltreatment of Khmer laborers during the canal construction (see Nguyen 1999: 19) has subsequently contributed to historical narratives about the Vietnamese more generally. François Ponchaud asserts that “Khmers of all social backgrounds and political stripe make frequent use of such sayings as ‘Kom poup tè Ong,’ ‘don’t knock over the gentleman’s tea’” (1989: 154, fn. 1), referring to a semi-mythical narrative of the Vietnamese punishing a group of Khmer laborers for alleged laziness at the canal

<sup>22</sup> See Cahndler 1983: 126.

<sup>23</sup> See Chandler 1983: 131.

construction site. Nayan Chanda recalls the story, which he heard repeatedly during his interviews in Cambodia:

“The Vietnamese buried the hapless Khmers to their necks, so the story runs, and used their heads to support a kettle for boiling water. When the victims writhed in pain and spilled water from the kettle, the Vietnamese warned, “Don’t spoil the master’s tea.” The story later became a part of the Khmer Rouge propaganda repertoire to arouse the “revolutionary hatred” towards the Vietnamese enemy” (1986: 52).

### *Scapegoating the Vietnamese*

Shawn McHale convincingly argues that historical warfare in the lower Mekong Delta during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century may help to explain the lingering ethnic antagonism between Khmers and Vietnamese, but fails to provide a sufficient explanation for post-1945 enmity that frequently led to inter-ethnic violence (2013: 367 f.). The post-World War II years are seen as a “turning point” in Khmer-Vietnamese relations with massacres and other conflicts spiraling out of control, ultimately entrenching “an ethnic antagonism that had long-term consequences.” McHale believes that it was “the extensive ethnic violence of the 1940s, followed by France’s 1949 award of Cochinchina to the new state of Vietnam”, which “reshaped Khmer-Vietnamese relations and contributed to Khmer Rouge antipathy to the Vietnamese”, as well as “to the massacres of Vietnamese in Phnom Penh in 1970” (2013: 385).

There is much merit to McHale’s detailed analysis of the mid- and late 1940s *kap yuon* (“behead the Vietnamese”) incidents,<sup>24</sup> which have received surprisingly little attention in Cambodian historiography so far. However, his suggestion that the incidents of the 1940s merely “contributed” to later anti-Vietnamese campaigns seems too weak a conclusion. I argue that the increasingly nationalist politicization of anti-Vietnamism in Cambodia was initiated during this period and subsequent violent events throughout the 1970s need to be seen as reenactments of a scapegoating mechanism that was established during this time of early nation-building. Without wanting to give undue credit to primordialist lines of thought, I am also suspicious of McHale’s general neglect of socio-cultural explanations.

René Girard (1977 [1972] and 1986 [1982]) has shown how societies in times of crisis and uncertainty tend to descent into chaos based on the mimetic escalation of (intra-group) violence. Such times are commonly seen as periods of externally inflicted, often natural, disasters, but they may also include moments of social change with an uncertain outcome. In order to break the ensuing cycle of intra-group violence and mutual suspicion, it is necessary to reestablish communal cohesion. The most powerful way to achieve this, according to Girard, is the collective killing of a scapegoat, which generates a sense of complicity among those who take part in the sacrifice. In Girard’s mimetic theory the scapegoat is a surrogate victim chosen based on the display of observable signs of “otherness,” and marginal or dispensable to the community. Paradoxically, while being sacrificed, the scapegoat who had been blamed for the initial crisis is becoming fundamental for its resolution – although in the process of scapegoating the victims’ alleged guilt cannot be established, their sacrificial killing reconstitutes social order.

<sup>24</sup> Known among Vietnamese as “cáp duồn” (McHale 2013: 373).

Adopting Girard's theory to the Cambodian context, it can be argued that anti-Vietnamese massacres during the 1940s have been a prelude to later forms of scapegoating. If during this time an idea of post-colonial Khmer nationhood was still in the making, at later stages the modality of Cambodian nationalism was under contestation.

When the Vietnam War spilled over into Cambodian territory in the late 1960s, and Prince Norodom Sihanouk, then Prime Minister, was allowing the Viet Cong to retreat to Cambodian soil, the territorial integrity of Cambodia seemed under threat. The Western powers, first and foremost the United States of America were worried that Cambodia could become a 'domino' and fall to the socialist block. Supporting an ambitious general, Lon Nol, the CIA masterminded a *coup d'état* on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1970 and in the ensuing social uncertainty, unsurprisingly, Cambodia's Vietnamese minority was scapegoated. The call to "chop down the Vietnamese" (*kap yuon*) led to a massive massacre at Chruy Changvar on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1970, and pogroms ensued with thousands killed and other fleeing to Vietnam.

The Lon Nol regime was eventually demised when Khmer Rouge guerillas took power on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1975. Being split into pro-Vietnamese and Chinese-influenced Maoist fractions, the internal power struggles within the Khmer Rouge movement would soon result in a new episode of anti-Vietnamese scapegoating, now on an unprecedented scale, contributing to the Third Indochina War, and eventually transforming racial sentiments into a politicized version of anti-Vietnamism upon which later generations of nationalist Cambodian politicians could build.

As in 1945 and 1970, the transitional period of the early 1990s, marked by increased factionalism and socio-political disorder, posed threats to the unity of the nation. As Metzl observes, it was again anti-Vietnamese sentiments that helped Cambodians "to define themselves as a nation." Convincingly he suggests that "[h]atred was not merely the residue of prejudice; it seemed a defining element of Cambodian Identity" (1995: 275).

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