

Cambodia 1975 – 1982

Michel Vickery

Chapter 1: The Gentle Land

The" first thirty kilometers northwards from the main road were not too bad, and we covered them in half an hour. The next thirty over rough, dusty roads, took about twice as long, and toward the end of that stretch we saw something new to our experience — wild-looking boys, alone or in twos and threes carrying dead lizards strung, on sticks like freshly caught fish. They were obviously hunting them to take home for the family dinner — a type of beast not eaten at all in any other part of the country I had seen. The last thirty kilometers to the village took about two hours, for the road had become nothing more than a track across dried out former rice fields and there was a bump every few yards over what had once served as the embankments around the quadrangular plots.

On arrival in the village we stopped at the *sala*, an open pavilion found in all villages and used either for meetings or for temporary shelter. In fact, we expected that someone would invite us to his house to sleep and eat, as was common in Cambodian villages, but the people seemed strangely hostile. They grudgingly said yes, we could sleep in the *sala*, but they hoped we had brought our own food, for they had no rice — not having been able to plant for three years because of drought. We also heard mutterings to the effect that they didn't like city people anyway, for their arrival generally meant trouble.

The above is not an account of the arrival of 'new' people, former city dwellers, arriving in a revolutionary village after April 1975, nor the report of a journalist in Cambodia in 1979-80, but impressions of a trip I made in 1962 to visit the Angkor-period temple of Banteay Chhmar.¹ Three of the details, however, recur constantly in the reminiscences of urban refugees: eating lizards and other exotic fauna, no rice, hostility of villagers toward city people; and it is this which makes the anecdote relevant as a starting point for a book about Cambodia during 1975-81.

One of the most typical horror stories of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) is that of city families sent out to primitive villages or forest areas where there was little or no rice, where they had to forage for all sorts of unfamiliar food - lizards, snakes, field crabs, insects, roots; where the local people, if any, were hostile; and where

many of them died of hunger and disease, if not by execution.

The continuation of my own story is more cheerful. It is true that the Banteay Chhmar villagers had no rice, but they didn't miss it, because they could find wild tubers and other vegetables in the forest, while protein¹ was provided by chickens, pigs, fish caught in a pond not too far away, and of course the lizards caught by the boys along the road. Indeed it seemed to be one of the healthiest backwoods villages I had seen, with large families of cheerful, robust children.

There was also an interesting, and potentially valuable, cottage industry. The villagers made beautiful silk, handling every stage of the process from raising the worms to dyeing and weaving the cloth. Perhaps, I first thought, this was their secret. They took their silk down to the market at Thmar Puok, 25 kilometers away, to trade for rice, sugar and other goods. But my offer to buy some proved the contrary. The silk was for their own use; they had never sold any and didn't want to; and when I tried to convince them I would give a good price which they could later spend in the market, they said there was nothing in the market they wanted. And I never did get any silk.

Another interesting feature of the village was the people's dislike of anyone and anything from the towns of Cambodia. They had seen officials, some of very high rank, who had come to visit the temple or inspect the border area. The villagers hated their pretensions and false promises of aid and development. Most of all they disliked the officials' wives, who minced about the footpaths in high heels with handkerchiefs held to their noses. Such people meant only trouble and it was best to avoid them and to hope that they never came to the village.

Thus for reasons of climate, inaccessibility, and incompatibility Banteay Chhmar village had evolved a nearly autonomous, autarkic lifestyle, wanting only to be left alone. Such villages were numerous outside the central rice plain and their inhabitants probably felt they had made successful adjustments to fate. At best they seemed healthy and happy, but had no access to modern medicine or to schooling beyond the bare rudiments, and often, as in Banteay Chhmar, did not have even a Buddhist temple or monks.

Perhaps it appears idiosyncratic to start a book about contemporary Cambodia with an anecdote about an excursion in 1962. But a major fault of most writing about recent events has been its historical character, ignoring all that happened before 1970, 1975, or even 1979; and my purpose here is to emphasize that this is intended as an historical study, and to situate the events of 1975-81 within a view of earlier Cambodian society.

No precise estimate can be made of the number of such villages in pre-1970 Cambodia, or the percentage of the total population living in them; but it is at least fair to say that the region of happy, Buddhist, rice-growing peasants of conventional-wisdom Cambodia was restricted approximately to the inundated area shown on Map 2. Outside that area life was quite different, even if not to the extreme of Banteay Chhmar. This other Cambodia was virtually untouched by any kind of

ethnographical or sociological study, but from the few glimpses we have we can safely say that no assumptions about Cambodian life, attitudes, mores, and beliefs based on observations of the central rice-growing and gardening zones are likely to be accurate for the outer regions.

In some parts of the country these outer regions began within 8 kms of a provincial center. This was the case in Kompong Thorn where immediately to the northwest of the town was the forest homeland of the Kuy, who spoke a language related to Khmer but which was unintelligible to Khmer speakers, and whose way of life was very different from that of even the poorest Khmer peasants of the province.

The latter, in spite of appearing more 'civilized,' must nevertheless have wished on occasion that their own relative isolation was more absolute. Officials on weekend picnics, or entertaining guests, would often drop into a village and request a housewife to kill a chicken and prepare a meal - and a request in those circumstances was equivalent to an order. If a foreign guest was present, the officials would take the occasion to deliver themselves of a little homily to the effect that the Cambodian peasant was so prosperous that a sudden requisition of food was no burden, and so hospitable that the task was not felt as an imposition. It is true that in those days - the early 1960s - no peasant family was going to starve by giving away a couple of chickens and a few bowls of rice; but on an occasion I witnessed, there was no doubt about the resentment which was felt.

The resentment could sometimes turn into overt hostility. Downriver a few miles from Kompong Thom, and well within the inundated region of 'civilized' rice peasantry was a hamlet to which strangers were warned never to go, at the risk of being physically attacked. The precise reason was never made clear, but it was the result of some official action, possibly in French colonial days, which was perceived by the villagers as an atrocity and for which they threatened to take revenge if an opportunity arose.

In Siemreap the 'other' Cambodia began on the north side of the West Baray artificial lake and the park of Angkor and continued across the northern provinces to the Dangrek mountains. The population, at least between Siemreap and Phnom Kulen, were ethnic Khmer, living by forest gathering and hunting as much as by cultivation, and practicing strange rites rather than the official Buddhism. On the few occasions when I met them, while exploring the old temples of the region, they were not hostile, rather apprehensive in the presence of strangers, but clearly of a world entirely foreign to even a provincial town such as Siemreap, let alone Phnom Penh.

Exotic mores, as seen from Phnom Penh, could also be found well within the rice zone and among people who would count as ordinary, even comfortably prosperous, Cambodian peasants. On a trip downriver from Battambang to the Tonle Sap inland sea in 1966 I encountered a community where the most important ritual center was not Buddhist, but a spirit temple at whose foundation -

apparently within living memory — a live pregnant woman had been buried; where the men — former Issaraks — liked to joke over a fresh turtle dinner about the similarity in taste of that animal's liver to the human variety; and where a woman who swallowed the raw gall bladders of freshly killed black dogs as a tonic was considered only mildly eccentric.

In some places the line of demarcation between the two kinds of peasantry was apparently quite clear. One of my most useful informants at the Khao I Dang (KID) refugee camp, speaking of his native district in Kampot province, told me that north of the road running between Chhouk and Kampot the population was isolated, hostile to everything urban, and, incidentally, revolutionary from long before 1970, while south of that road the peasants interacted with the market, were familiar with urban ways, and considered themselves part of wider Cambodian society. My informant was himself from north of the road, but had gone through high school and on to the university in Phnom Penh where he was caught by the downfall of the Lon Nol regime in 1975, sent back to Kampot as one of the 'new' people, and forced to spend the next 3 1/2 years working as a peasant. In this capacity, although he at first went to see his parents and former neighbors, he found it advisable to settle in a different hamlet where he was less well known, because of the general hostility to city folk, even those who were originally local sons.

I also met one of his friends who had had the same experiences, but whose origins were south of the road. The contrast between the two with respect to their feelings about pre-war society, their experiences of 1975-79, cooperation in the running of the refugee camp, and productive work in general was a vivid illustration of the two kinds of villagers, and one which did not redound to the credit of the 'southerner.' In particular, and a subject which is a major concern of this book, in their accounts of the DK period these two men of identical economic, regional, and educational background and identical experiences during 1975-79 ordered their facts in such different ways and embellished them with such different value judgments that it would have been impossible to realize that they were telling, in essentials, the same story.

Cambodia, long before the enforced split into 'old' and 'new' people in 1975, was deeply divided. An important division was between town and country. But a more profound division lay between town plus town-related rice and garden peasantry and those rural groups who, through distance, poverty, ingrained hostility, or a conscious preference for autarky, remained on the outside of the Cambodian society which everyone knew and which Phnom Penh considered the only Cambodian society of any importance.

This outer society was not necessarily poorer. Food could be plentiful, and the people in Banteay Chhmar appeared healthy. Indeed, their knowledge of the environment and ability to cope with it were impressive. With no more than a sharp knife a man could go into the forest, build shelter and find food; and such knowledge

was still preserved among many of the real rice peasants as well.

Since they lived successfully in those conditions they probably saw no reason why other people, for instance the urban evacuees of April 1975, could not adjust; and they might easily imagine that failure to adjust was the result of laziness, corruption, or factiousness. Of course, there must also have been some *schadenfreude* at seeing the pretentious city folk brought down to their level, for villages like Banteay Chhmar, if they had not produced Communist soldiers or cadres, were at least part of the 'old' people, of the base areas, whose long-suppressed resentment occasionally exploded in violence, however unjustified.

I remember in particular one spy they caught. He was very tough and wasn't afraid of dying at all. He refused to confess, and only seemed to show some fear when they brought him to the edge of the burial pit. There at the edge the executioners hit him on the nape of the neck a couple of times with their clubs (made of *kranhung* hardwood, about one meter long, used to save bullets), he fell into the pit, twitched a bit, and then was still. For cruelty this was only an average execution, because the executioners were in a hurry. There were other methods really revolting to observe. One of them had a special name, *srangae pen*, literally 'a field crab crawling around in circles.'

First of all the victim was beaten senseless. Then his arms were tied behind his back with the elbows pulled together and he was made to kneel beside his grave. The soldiers stood around him in a circle and 'the executioner began to perform a ritual dance with a sword. While dancing he would suddenly come close to the prisoner and cut his neck just a little, just enough to make blood flow. Then he bent down and licked up the blood from the wounded neck and spit it onto the sword blade. This ceremony was repeated several times until finally the sword was plunged into the prisoner's throat and he fell into the grave.⁴ On another occasion a man believed to be an enemy agent was seized and interrogated. He denied the accusation and was threatened with death. He continued to deny his guilt and one of the interrogators struck him on the forehead with a pistol butt. Blood gushed from his head and mouth, but he still protested his innocence. Then they took turns kicking him in the stomach and he rolled on the ground in pain. Still he refused to confess and the group's political leader decided they really didn't have enough evidence on him. He was told he could get up and go away, but at about 10m distance from the group they shot him in the back and killed him. Eventually it was discovered that the man was innocent, but that the cadres were angry with him for protecting his sister against their attempts at seduction and had fabricated evidence that he was a traitor.

These stories do not come from Pol Pot's Cambodia, but from a book by Bun

Chan Mol, published in 1973 and relating his own experiences among the Cambodian Issaraks in the 1940s.⁵ He himself was political leader of the group carrying out the executions, the enemy for whom the prisoners were accused of working was the French colonial administration, and the title of the book is *Chant Khmer*, "Khmer Mores."⁶

Bun Chan Mol gave up Issarak activities in 1949; and one of the reasons, he tells us in his book, was his inability to either tolerate or suppress the gratuitous brutality of his underlings who considered such methods a *normal way of dealing with enemies* and who took obvious pleasure in it. Besides their delight in inhuman torture, he complains about their indiscipline, refusal to investigate thoroughly before taking action, arbitrary exercise of power, sometimes for petty personal reasons, and suspicion of anyone, including himself, their political chief, who objected. He calls these practices part of "Khmer Mores," the title of his book, most of which deals with the decline of Khmer politics in the 1950s and 1960s.

Swift and arbitrary capital punishment was also not foreign to those early Cambodian rebels whose standards of discipline were high, who had an immense popular following, and who for years afterward were idealized by non-communist progressives.

Son Ngoc Thanh, during his brief tenure as prime minister in 1945, was blamed for executions of political opponents, and later, in his maquis in northern Cambodia, harsh justice for infringement of rules was an accepted norm. In a French intelligence report of 1952 his lieutenant, Ea Sichau, who was considered both then and afterward a sincere idealist with high standards of morality, is said to have executed, on the grounds that they were enemy agents, a group of 8 students and teachers who had found jungle life too difficult and wished to go home.⁷

In this respect, the one difference between Thanh and Sichau, and the earlier Issaraks or later Democratic Kampuchea cadres, is that the regulations of the first were consistent, equally and fairly applied, and recognized in advance by the people who joined them.

Issarak violence was not the specialty of the politically unstable frontier area of Battambang and Siemreap. Just 30 km southwest of Phnom Penh, in a district of semi-urbanized rice peasants, "the Issarak were their own law ... killed anyone they wanted to kill ... sometimes siblings could not speak to one another because one was an Issarak and the other worked for the government in Phnom Penh"; and a number of families fled temporarily to Phnom Penh to escape from the threat of such Issarak extremism.⁸

Often the vocation of Issarak was no more than a device to give a patriotic cover to banditry, which had long been endemic in parts of rural Cambodia; and the 'bandit charisma' may have been as strong a motive as nationalism in attracting men to Issarak life.

Patterns of extreme violence against people defined as enemies, however arbitrarily, have very long roots in Cambodia. As a scholar specializing in 19th-

century Cambodia has expressed it: "it is difficult to over stress the atmosphere of physical danger and the currents of insecurity and random violence that run through the chronicles and, obviously through so much of Cambodian life in this period. The chronicles are filled with references to public executions, ambushes, torture, village-burnings and forced emigrations." Although fighting was localized and forces small, "invaders and defenders destroyed the villages they fought for and the landscapes they moved across." "Prisoners were tortured and killed ... as a matter of course." Even in times of peace, there were no institutional restraints on *okya* [a high official rank] or on other Cambodians who had mobilized a following."¹⁰

Sudden arbitrary violence was still part of the experience of many rural Cambodians in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. A woman acquaintance told me how her father, a Battambang Issarak leader at the time of which Bun Chan Mol was writing, used to keep his prisoners chained up beneath the house without food or water and then execute them on his own firing range a few hundred yards beyond the back yard. He was not a pathological sadist either, but a good family man remembered fondly by his widow and children. Later, in the Sihanouk years, the same woman was accused falsely by police of being involved in Dap Chhuon's movement and threatened with torture.¹¹ She was saved, not because she was innocent, but because an uncle, who was a colonel in Phnom Penh, found out about her arrest and intervened.

Probably few Cambodians entertained doubts that traitors, or even enemies, should be killed. When a teacher friend in Kompong Thorn in 1961, victim of a politically inspired denunciation, was accused of conspiring with an 'American agent' (myself) he had to resort to a highly placed uncle for protection. The latter intervened, but told his nephew that if he were really guilty of what had been alleged - in fact nothing more serious than political conversations with a foreigner - he deserved death. Likewise, a Cambodian student who returned from North Korea in 1976 accepted with equanimity that 'traitors' were killed in Korea in the 1950s and in Cambodia after 1975. Like all the 'left' bourgeoisie, he had expected to occupy a privileged position in the revolutionary regime, and he was only shocked by liquidations when he discovered that he himself fell into a category of political enemies. Another man, whose own brother, a pre-1975 acquaintance of mine, was executed, said, "it wasn't so bad that they killed people, that could be understood, but that they chose to use such cruel methods."¹² It should also not be forgotten that not until 1972 did the Lon Nol government, under pressure from unfavorable media attention to their own atrocities, announce that Vietnamese prisoners would be treated according to international conventions.¹³

In spite of the slant of the foregoing stories, however, I do not believe that discussion of the 'Khmer personality' or Khmer psychology is very useful in an explanation of the DK phenomenon. As Stephen Heder, a student of the Cambodian revolution, has noted, anti-communist refugees tend "to understand the nature of and explain the atrocities of the Democratic Kampuchea regime in very

clear class terms";¹⁴ and a search for such explanations in objective economic, social, and political circumstances is always preferable to nebulous psychologizing. It is important to realize, however, that Heder's informants analyzed the peasant class, who were their enemies, on the basis of their own subjective impressions of peasant culture and psychology. Furthermore, even if the genesis of a revolution is explained through a rigidly objective class analysis, the specific behavior of the victorious peasants or workers, or of other formerly oppressed people, will be determined, at least in part, by the old habits of their culture. Thus Ebihara's informants, along with some Cambodians I have met, and in particular Bun Chan Mol, are invaluable as participant observers who, beginning in the 1940s, saw as part of 'Khmer mores' some signs of what is now considered as Pol Pot extremism; and if the broad structure of post-1975 developments is amenable to explanation from objective circumstances and high-level policy decisions, the details owe something to those old 'Khmer mores.'

Much of the foregoing has dealt with traditions of violence, but what about the famous Khmer Buddhism with its "precepts and practices [which] pervade the values and behavior of the populace who accept this religion sincerely and devoutly" and which was "the very apprenticeship of tolerance"? Wasn't it supposed to be the source and guarantee of the gentleness which all observers believed they saw in Cambodia and which gave "inner serenity and the habit of kindness toward all"?¹⁵ Were the Issaraks of the 1940s and the DK cadres of the 1970s not Buddhists? (At first their enemies, the French in the first instance and the Lon Nol government in the second, tried to claim they were not Khmer, but Vietnamese.) And since they must once have been Buddhist — i.e., they were Khmer and all Khmer are Buddhist — what accounts for their easy rejection of Buddhist mores for (more purely?) Khmer?

Probably more arrant nonsense has been written in the West about Buddhism than about any other aspect of Southeast Asian life. Like every other major religion, Buddhism as it is practiced in the countries where it has ancient roots is a concretion of certain admirable philosophical and moral principles with beliefs and practices which date from pre-Buddhist times, prejudices peculiar to the society, special relationships with ruling classes, and the ability to rationalize the pursuit of material gain, as well as a good many other actions which are contrary to its principles. That Buddhists may torture and massacre is no more astonishing than that the Inquisition burned people or that practicing Catholics and Protestants joined the Nazi SS.

Ebihara got very close to what Cambodian Buddhism really means: "the villager himself rarely conceives of observing separate religious traditions [Buddhist, Hindu, folk]. Rather, for the ordinary Khmer, Buddha and ghosts, prayers at the temple and invocations to spirits/monks and mediums are all part of what is essentially a single religious system." Instructive also was the religious vocation of an 18-year-old girl who said, "I think I will go to three or four *Kathun* festivals this year

so that I will be reborn as a rich American."¹⁶

One of the most important functions of Cambodian popular Buddhism is the opportunity it gives for making merit — by participating in certain festivals, by giving food to monks, or, for men, by becoming a monk oneself. The desire to make merit results from the Cambodian understanding of Buddhism as a fatalist doctrine which holds that our condition in the present life is the result of our past conduct, while our conduct in this life, good or bad, will determine our fate in future existences.

Moreover, the opportunity of making merit was not the same for all, something which has hardly been touched on in the anthropological literature. Almost all forms of making merit depended on giving up some part of one's own economic surplus to, or for, the temple and monks. Cambodians did not believe that the poor man's mite equalled the rich man's gold. On the contrary, the more spent, the greater the merit accrued; and thus those who were already wealthy due to the supposed accumulation of merit in former existences had greater potential for accumulating further merit as insurance for the cosmic future.

Ebihara touches on this aspect of Cambodian Buddhism in her central Cambodian rice-village. She notes that about three-fourths of the men over age 17 had at some time been monks. But the poorest families could not always spare their young men from field work to become monks; and about 17 percent of all adult men fell into that category.¹⁷ These poorest peasants, then, were deprived by their poverty of the main merit-making and cosmic insurance function of their society's religion. We can surmise that some of them, at least, must have felt resentment, compounded perhaps by the fact that in traditional Cambodian society a period spent as a monk was essential to becoming a full adult with one's own wife and family.

One would expect a tendency on the part of such men to reject Buddhism, at least the idea of accepting fate, and in fact Ebihara found, already by 1959, just such a tendency, not only among the poor, but among wealthier people as well. Modern life and secular education impelled them to work for the present and to lose interest in religion. In her village the number of men who had been monks was in inverse proportion to age, and in the 10-19-year group none had any plans to follow this old tradition.¹⁸ I found similar attitudes among my teacher colleagues in 1960-61. Of twenty or so teachers between the ages of 20 and 30, half a generation older than Ebihara's youngest group, only one had served his term as a monk, and most of the others openly ridiculed religious traditions, considering monks to be social parasites. This last attitude, then, was not the exclusive property of Pol Pot fanatics, but already ten years before the war existed among peasants and *middle-class* youth, most of whom in 1975 found themselves on the wrong side.

Even earlier, during the first Indochina war, certain anti-clerical tendencies which have since been associated with DK were already manifest.

French intelligence reports of June-July 1949 gave some attention to a band of rebels under one 'Achar Yi,' who operated in Kandal and Prey Veng. They were

apparently non-communist, since on one occasion they announced an intention to "massacre the local Vietnamese, whether Viet Minh or not," but they were also noted for burning the sacred scriptures in temples they suspected of following modernist tendencies.¹⁹

Thus chauvinism, linked to peasant traditionalism in a form which could countenance destruction of religious paraphernalia, already had roots in the Cambodian countryside.

There was also an iconoclastic tendency among some non-revolutionary, law-abiding people, including monks. In 1971, visiting a monk I had known for some years in Battambang province, I remarked on the almost disrespectful way he seemed to regard Buddha images in his temple. He explained that the images were really only useless idols, unimportant to a real understanding and practice of religion. It is impossible to ascertain how widespread this monastic sub-culture was; and it may be only a coincidence that this man and all his relatives and acquaintances had been part of the early Issarak bands described by Bun Chan Mol in the northwestern districts noted for violence both in those days and under DK.²⁰

For those who wished to reject their religion, for whatever reason, poverty or modernism, it was, however, better to be Buddhist than Christian, for the former contains a nice escape clause for the backslider. As Pin Yathay put it, "you are responsible for yourself; you are your own master ... Buddha is not a god . . . only a guide. He shows you the way . . . it is for you to convince yourself that the way he indicates is good."²¹ Thus for those who rejected it there was no superior moral force to accuse or punish them. If in rejecting religion they also committed crimes, they would not be punished by a deity. They might risk cosmic demotion in a future life, but it was also possible to calculate that later good works could offset the bad on the cosmic balance sheet. Besides, the non-Buddhist folk practices which were a part of every Cambodian's religious heritage provided many other sources of protection, both physical and spiritual.

In the face of the gradual disaffection from traditional Buddhism which Ebihara noticed, the Cambodian elite sought to re-emphasize religion as a technique for repressing the new desires for social mobility. In 1955, when revolutionary forces were threatening, a newspaper representing Sihanouk's new coalition of the right maintained editorially that the country should be ruled by its natural leaders, who are the rich and powerful. The less fortunate should not envy them and try to take their places, for each person's situation in the present is determined by his past actions. The poor should accept their fate, live virtuously, and try to accumulate merit in order to improve their station in another existence.

At the same time, and perhaps in an effort to counter the anti-monastic disaffection of the youth, there were attempts to associate the monks with nation-building. Thus in one of Sihanouk's glossy magazines a photograph of monks at work on a road or dike construction site was accompanied by the caption "monks within the framework of our Buddhist socialism participate in the work of nation-

building."²³ This of course prefigures the DK treatment of monks, and for traditionalists could have represented sacrilege. Even violence could be linked with the practice of Buddhism if it was in defense of the established order upholding the official religion. One of Lon Nol's favorite themes, on which he composed a series of pamphlets, was 'religious war' in which he tried to identify the Vietnamese and Khmer communists with the *thmil*, the enemies of the true faith in old Buddhist folklore.²⁴ Violence in the service of the true faith could be used to link Khmer Buddhists and Islamic Chams, the largest indigenous minority in Cambodia. During the first two years of the war a Cham colonel, Les Kasem, gained fame with a Cham battalion which was reported to have systematically destroyed and exterminated 'Khmer Rouge' villages which they occupied. Their notoriety was finally such that the government realized they were counterproductive and the battalion was split up among other units. Pro-religious violence is also attractive to some Christians, like Ponchaud, who proudly retails the story of a Cham father who murdered his sons for accepting Communist discipline.²⁵

It is no wonder that poor peasant youth returned from short communist seminars full of anti-religious fervor.²⁶ Cambodian Buddhism was desecrated, long before the DK regime closed the temples, by the blatant class manipulation of the faith under Sihanouk's Sangkum, followed in Lon Nol's Republic by the designation of temples as military recruitment stations.

Long before the war the poorest had reason to feel some resentment against the religious structure, and the middle groups were losing interest for materialist reasons. For both, at bottom, the mixture of Buddhist principles, old Hindu rites, and ancient folk beliefs which together constituted Cambodian religion, represented techniques for ameliorating one's material life, either now or in the future. If the religion was seen to fail in that respect, disaffection occurred.

Such disaffection was massively apparent among the refugees in camps in Thailand, where in 1980 there were more registered Khmer Christians than in all of Cambodia before 1970. To accuse missionaries of manufacturing rice Christians misses the point. As one particularly sophisticated family whom I had known in Phnom Penh put it: "look at what happened to Cambodia under Buddhism; Buddhism has failed, and we must search for some other faith."²⁸

Some fifty-odd years ago another such large-scale disaffection occurred. Around 1927, at a time of economic and political difficulties, thousands of Cambodian peasants took an interest in the Cao-Dai religion — a faith of the 'hereditary enemy,' the Vietnamese - going to worship and participate in ceremonies at the Cao-Dai headquarters near Tay-Ninh. At the very least this "reflected the reaction of a disoriented peasantry ready to turn to the newly offered salvation that they believed would involve the regeneration of the Cambodian state."²⁹

Rejection of traditional religion and the proliferation of non-Buddhist violence are thus well within the Khmer cultural heritage, whether the specific manifestations are a temporary interest in Cao-Dai, Issarak savagery, modernist

derision, or DK official atheism.³⁰

If Buddhism proved to be no barrier to class antagonisms, or to violence, much in the country's social and economic structure tended to encourage both.³¹

Traditional Cambodian society was formed essentially of three classes — peasants, officials, and royalty. Very few Khmers became merchants, and to the extent that an urban population apart from the court and officials existed, it was composed mainly of non-Khmers, generally Chinese. This division of society probably goes back to the Angkor period when national wealth was produced from the land and collected by officials, who channeled it to the court and religious apparatus where it was used largely for building the temples and supporting the specialized population attached to them. A part of the wealth collected by officials remained in their hands for their support in lieu of salary, but this was accepted as the way in which the system naturally functioned. Each of the classes had a function believed essential for the welfare of the society, and in which the king's role was quasi-religious and ritual.³²

Although the Angkorean state declined and disappeared, the old divisions of society persisted. For the mass of the population, social position was fixed, and it would have been almost unthinkable to imagine rising above the class into which one was born. Occasionally, perhaps in time of war, or for exceptional services to a powerful patron, someone from a peasant background might rise into the official class and thereby change the status of his immediate family; and clever children might be educated in an official family or at court to become officials; but such occurred too rarely for any expectation of social mobility to be part of public consciousness.

The possibilities of wealth accumulation were also limited. Land was not personal property, but in theory belonged to the king. An energetic peasant could thus not accumulate land and wealth through hard work and abstemiousness and move up the scale to rich farmer, entrepreneur, or whatever. The only possibility for wealth accumulation lay in an official career. Even there life was hazardous. Officials were of course more or less wealthy, and the official status of a family might continue for generations; but their status was not assured by any formal legality, and could be ended precipitously at royal displeasure - for instance, if an official showed signs of accumulating too much wealth or power. Even if a career did not end in disgrace, wealth accumulated in the form of gold, jewels, other precious goods, or dependents, might revert to the state at an official's death rather than passing in inheritance to his family. There was thus no incentive, or possibility, to use wealth for long-term constructive purposes or entrepreneurial investment.

Village and family organization, especially if compared to China, Vietnam, or India, were extremely weak. Khmer villages were not cohesive units, as in Vietnam, dealing collectively with officials; and beyond the nuclear household, families easily

disintegrated. Family names did not exist, records of previous generations were not kept, ancestors were not the object of a religious cult. Corporate discipline over the individual by extended families or by village organizations was weak, and once a person had fulfilled his obligations to the state — as a tax or corvée - there was little constraint in his activities. It is thus likely that a paradoxical situation of great anarchic individual freedom prevailed in a society in which there was no formal freedom at all.

The relations among royalty, officials, and peasantry, which did not begin to change under colonial impact until after 1884, were organized in forms of dependency. Everyone below the king had a fixed dependent status which served to determine his obligations to the next higher level and also provided protection. The provinces of the realm were given in appanage to the highest officials of the capital whose agents in the provinces collected the taxes and organized the corvée which were the *raison d'être* for the system. Each peasant in theory, and in the central agricultural provinces in reality, was the dependent client of an official whose identity he knew.

Besides such dependence at all levels of society within the country, the Cambodian ruling class had for centuries been dependent on foreign overlords and protectors, usually Siam and Vietnam, but at one point in the 1590s Europeans;³³ and French protection against Vietnam was sought in the 19th century even before the French were ready to impose it.³⁴

There was thus no serious conception of self-reliance at any level of Cambodian society, and in a crisis everyone looked to a powerful savior from above or outside rather than seeking a local solution.

Kings looked to ever more powerful protectors both against their neighbors and their own people, a practice which even Sihanouk did not give up, in spite of his rhetoric to the contrary. His 'crusade for independence' was imposed on him by challenges from the left, and the independence granted in 1953 was in a way Franco-Sihanouk collusion to block a Cambodian revolution. All through the formally anti-United States years of the 1960s he never renounced the desire for an American protective shield against the communist Vietnamese.³⁵

Lesser members of the elite acted in similar fashion. The protest of Prince Yukanthor against the French protectorate in 1901 is often treated as an anti-colonial manifestation, whereas in fact Yukanthor was berating the French for neglecting to provide adequate protection for the traditional elite against upstart commoners who were taking advantage of the expanding colonial bureaucracy to advance themselves economically and socially.³⁶

At the lower levels of society peasants who felt oppressed would seek to change patrons, or if pushed to violence they turned to anarchic banditry which caused more suffering to their fellows than to the oppressive officials. In contrast to the Chinese or Vietnamese mass peasant rebellions which occasionally took state power and started a new dynastic cycle, no peasant or other lower class rebellion

in Cambodia before the 1970s ever snowballed into a movement which endangered the system.

This was no doubt in part due to the individual anarchy resulting from lack of corporate units above the family. The potential rebel wished to be bought off, not change the system. This is seen in the circumstance of the first stirrings of modern nationalist rebellion against the French, and contrasts with the earlier and more thoroughgoing organization in Vietnam. Soon after the murder of the only French official killed in the 20th century by ethnic Khmers while carrying out his official duties, the guilty villagers "returned, ashamed, to the village, and before long were turning one another in to the police"; and in the 1940s at the French political prison on Pulou Condore, the trustees, police spies, and torturers were all Khmers currying favor for individual special treatment, while the Vietnamese maintained a spirit of political solidarity and organized classes in Marxism.³⁹

The same client mentality persisted right on into the 1970s, at least among one part of the population. Not only did Lon Nol and his coterie rely on foreign protection, but so did all those outside the revolutionary camp who saw the hopelessness of the government position. When it was clear by 1972 that a Lon Nol government could not win, those generals and civilian officials who might have retrieved the situation, instead of simply taking power, kept hoping vainly for the Americans to act in their favor. I suppose every American in Phnom Penh at the time shared my experience of friends and acquaintances asking in desperation, "why doesn't the CIA do something?"

In the end their dependency led them to acquiesce in, or even encourage, the devastation of their own country by one of the worst aggressive onslaughts in modern warfare, and therefore to appear as traitors to a victorious peasant army which had broken with old patron-client relationships and had been self-consciously organized and indoctrinated for individual, group, and national self-reliance.⁴⁰

If the traditional system seems in retrospect oppressive, we must remember that before the 20th century Cambodians, like most Asians, knew no other, and that the demand for wealth by the elites was generally limited to what could be consumed or spent within the country.

Although much of the formal system was changed by the French, there was not a corresponding change in attitudes and values. Officials continued to see their positions as ends in themselves, as situations in which to accumulate, for consumption, part of the wealth extracted from the peasantry and passed upward to the rulers. After they were put on salary by the French, such additional accumulation was illegal, but as a traditional practice it was not felt to be immoral, and the corruption which later became such a serious problem began thus as a continuation of an accepted traditional practice. The exploitative character of colonialism thus merged easily with the exploitative character of traditional society, and intensified it; and for many of the Cambodian elites the evil of colonialism probably resided

less in its exploitative character than in the fact that they were not in ultimate control.

I do not intend to argue that the Cambodian revolution was caused just by economic pressure on the peasantry. That would be incorrect. If it had not been first for the revolutionary movement in Vietnam and then for foreign military intervention with its attendant destruction, Cambodia might well have gone on for years with a level of insurgency too strong for the government to suppress, but not strong enough to take over state power.

It is nevertheless important to stress that exploitation of the peasantry was increasing throughout the 20th century and if it alone did not push them to revolution it was responsible for serious rural-urban antagonisms.

Taxes were increased by the French, particularly after World War I, and were the highest in Indochina, with part of the funds funnelled elsewhere in the federation rather than used in Cambodia. In particular, taxation was "heavy in terms of any benefits... returning to the peasant"; and the murder of a French official in 1925 was due to his attempt to collect taxes in arrears. There were also onerous corvees for public works, first of all roads; and in one infamous project, the construction of a resort at Bokor, '900 workers' lives were lost in nine months, a statistic comparable to the human cost of a Pol Pot dam site.⁴²

French efforts to reimpose their protectorate regime after a brief period of Japanese-sponsored 'independence' in 1945 led to a multiplicity of guerilla operations by Issaraks representing all shades of the political spectrum, and in general directed against the French and the royal government of Prince Sihanouk. The years 1946-52 were increasingly violent, with the rebel forces eventually controlling large areas.⁴³

Independence in 1953 did not bring long-lasting relief either, even though taxes were not collected as energetically as before. Cambodia has been pictured as a lush food-surplus region, but its soil is generally too poor and natural water supply inadequate for optimum production of its main crop, rice. Cambodian rice yields have always been among the world's lowest, and after World War II increasing demands for export rice, which in effect were used to finance an increasingly luxurious urban lifestyle, began to squeeze the nearly constant supply which also had to feed a rapidly growing population.

Statistics are poor, and it was always possible to claim that most peasants owned their own land; at least landlordism and large estates were not the main problems of the Cambodian peasantry. The technique which insured that they continue to supply the market, whether or not it provided them much in return, was a never-ending cycle of debt with usurious interest, the collection of which was ultimately backed up by police power. Such pressure to squeeze ever more rice out of a resistant peasantry was one of the elements in the first really revolutionary revolts in 1967-68.⁴⁵

Some examples of peasant conditions in one of the central agricultural areas

close to Phnom Penh are instructive with respect to what happened after 1975. In the village of West Svay one-third of the households owned land but had no oxen, or only one ox, and they resorted to various cooperative arrangements to get their plowing done. Cooperation was also necessary to secure a water supply, since rainfall was often inadequate, or at the wrong time; and the primitive irrigation techniques for moving water from one field to another required permission of all the owners, and resulted in frequent quarrels.⁴⁶

When plowing and harrowing were performed cooperatively, the owner of the field being worked provided a small meal and cigarettes. Such meals had traditionally included rice gruel, soup, and various side dishes; but by 1959 "the villagers of West Svay had agreed among themselves that only rice gruel and dried fish need be provided . . . because the cost of additional food was too great an expense for many families."⁴⁷

Thus for Cambodian peasants in that area the conditions of existence imposed cooperative labor, but made outbursts of inter-family violence inevitable, and at certain times of the year forced them to accept a diet which since 1975 has become a symbol of communist oppression in Democratic Kampuchea.

Continuing in an historical vein, it is instructive to note that the forced exodus of urban people in April 1975 was not the first such disruption in Cambodia; it was only the first which involved the comfortable classes of the towns. If the population of Phnom Penh, as estimated, increased from around 600,000 in 1970 to over 2 million by 1975, at least half the increase, and a larger number of people than the entire urban population of 1970, consisted of peasants driven from their land by bombing and shelling. It is a strange kind of history which regards that displacement of people as somehow less abhorrent or more 'normal' than the reverse movement of 1975.

Further back in Cambodian history, but not so far that it would not have been remembered by still living people, between several hundred thousand and perhaps one million rural inhabitants, mostly in the provinces of Takeo, Svay Rieng, and Kompong Chhnang, and representing from one-eighth to one-quarter of the total population, were forcibly 'regrouped' during the first Indochina war of 1946-54.⁴⁸

Furthermore, if the latest war and revolution had not interrupted it, another forced exodus of from half to three-quarters of a million peasants was being projected and viewed with equanimity by the Cambodian administrative elite and their international advisers. That was the estimated number of people whose villages would have been flooded out of existence in northeastern Cambodia and southern Laos by Mekong Project dams which would have provided few alternative benefits for them, or even for Cambodia as a whole.⁴⁹

Thus for the rural 80-90 percent of the Cambodian people arbitrary justice, sudden violent death, political oppression, exploitative use of religion and anti-religious reaction, both violent and quiescent, were common facts of life long before the war and revolution of the 1970s. The creations of Pol Pot-ism were all

there in embryo.

When they emerged fully grown after 1975 they were directed first of all at the urban population which, to the extent it had been at all involved in the earlier violence described above, had always been associated with the apparatus dealing it out.

Some degree of resentment, even hatred, of the towns should have been expected. In his most recent, anti-DK, avatar Wilfred Burchett has alluded to this. Under Pol Pot, he wrote, "it sufficed to turn up the palm of the hand - roughened it saved - if not it was death."⁵⁰

I would not argue about that measure having occasionally been used in 1975 to distinguish urban evacuees, even though in most cases they were easy to recognize without looking at their hands and, as the following chapters will show, there was never a campaign to identify and dispose of urban folk in general. What I found interesting about Burchett's remark was that I had heard the same story in 1962 from a friend, an urban school teacher, who ten years earlier had been on a bus stopped by Issaraks ostensibly fighting for Cambodian independence from France. They entered the bus by the front and passed down the aisle turning up hands. If they were soft the passengers were led away. My friend, fortunately, was sitting toward the rear and government security forces arrived on the scene before his turn came.⁵¹

Who were these urban folk whose soft hands might have put their lives in jeopardy a generation before anyone had heard of Pol Pot?

Before 1945 there was scarcely a *Khmer* urban population at all. Phnom Penh (pop. 111,000 in 1948) and the provincial towns were primarily Chinese trading and commercial centers with smaller but important groups of Vietnamese traders and artisans, all overlaid at the highest levels by a French administration and business network along with the 'protected' royal Cambodian government in the capital and a Khmer administrative skeleton at provincial and lower levels. As commerce was solidly in foreign or non-Khmer hands, upward mobility for Khmers required entering the administration, and this was only possible in times of bureaucratic expansion when not all the positions open to Khmers could be filled by younger members of the traditional elite. A rough indication of the possibilities offered by the administration as a channel of upward mobility can be seen in a comparison of the estimates of government administrative personnel in 1940 (13,000) and 1967 (93,800), a seven-fold expansion in a period in which total population had not quite doubled.⁵³ Probably the main increase within that period was in 1953, after independence, and 1954, after the end of the Indochina War and total French withdrawal.

Another index of the growth of a Khmer urban elite, *and its problems*, is the expansion of education. Admittedly this was an area of colonial neglect. The first local high school diplomas, the French *baccalaureate*, were received by seven students, all of whom went on to prominent positions, in 1931; and in 1936 there

were only 50-60,000 children in primary school. By 1954 there were 271,000 in primary schools, 3,300 in secondary schools, and 144 students had received the full *baccalaureate*.

Thereafter, the numbers increased rapidly until 1970. Primary enrollment expanded to a million, secondary to over 100,000, and tertiary from 350 to 10,000. The percentage increase in university students alone was many times the percentage increase in the total population.

To what extent did this increase meet the needs of the country? Education had certainly been neglected, and after independence some degree of rapid development was desirable and laudable. The attitude of Cambodians', however, seemed to be that the maximum amount of modern education *in any field* at all for the maximum number of children was an absolute good in itself, without ever taking into account the absorptive capacities of the society. In contrast, the colonial authorities, as well as independent Thailand, had tried to limit educational opportunities in order not to create an unemployable class of semi-intellectuals.

Not only was the rate of educational expansion much greater than the rate of increase in population, which represented in part a catching up, but it also exceeded the capacity of government, commerce or industry to utilize the graduates. High school education, that of the traditional French *lycee* with some Khmer-language admixture, provided a general arts education of little practical value, perhaps "suitable for the children of the French bourgeoisie of the *belle époque* (and no longer suitable for children in France today) [but] not adapted to the needs of Cambodia." University students were also enrolled overwhelmingly in the arts courses which did not prepare students for much more than the career of government functionary.⁵⁵ The technical university founded in 1964 had yearly enrollment between 1,300 and 1,700, which might have represented just about what was needed, depending on the specific career orientation followed; but in a field such as agronomy where Cambodia needed specialists, there were only 117 students in 1970-71.⁵⁶

A majority of arts graduates from the *lycees* and universities in the first few years could find careers as teachers in the rapidly growing number of primary and secondary schools. By the late 1960s the number of primary and secondary school teachers had stabilized at around 20,000, most of whom had probably come from among the nearly same number who had received licenses, *baccalaureate's*, and lower secondary diplomas during the preceding decade.

For the remaining graduates and the five times greater number who had completed the courses of study only to fail the exams, government service was almost the only outlet. It would have been unthinkable for anyone with a high school or even lower secondary education, with or without a diploma, to go back to peasant life. The bureaucracy, however, was not indefinitely expandable, and even with the overloading of offices to take as many as possible, Sihanouk, by 1961, had to announce that the administration was full and could not possibly

accommodate the 600,000 or so students then in school.⁵⁷ He advised them to go back to the farm, but by then it was too late. His Sangkum had already awakened aspirations which could not suddenly be cut off, and even though dependence of the urban upper and middle classes on the state had been traditional, there had never before been such opportunities for mobility into that sector by people from less privileged groups.

Neither were there expanding commercial and industrial sectors to absorb the newly educated. Commerce was still mainly in the hands of Chinese, Vietnamese, and a few Khmer families who had always been dominant. Their children also went through the new schools and then returned to fill the empty places in that sector. Industry was virtually non-existent, a feeble internal market made development difficult, and what did develop could not make much special use of *lycee* graduates or people with university degrees in French or Khmer literature. At the top it needed engineers and technicians, and at the bottom barely literate (or even illiterate) workers with 2-3 years of primary education and direct from the village. The educational system was thus producing an increasingly numerous class of useless people.

Moreover, the class structure of Cambodian society meant that even usefully educated people might be denied suitable employment. In March 1972 Captain Chan of the Khmer Republic army told me that after having obtained a degree in agriculture from an American university he returned home hoping to work in a government agricultural service, but in spite of a recommendation from Sihanouk he was turned down because "the department is controlled by the bourgeoisie and I am not one of them and could not pay a bribe to get a job." He then joined the army as a private, before March 1970, and was given a commission after the war started.

Education in Cambodia, as in much of the Third World, did not develop as in the West or in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe after World War II where, beginning in the 19th century, education at all levels developed to supply skills needed in industrial societies. In Cambodia education grew as a demand for status and wealth by people who believed they had been unjustly deprived. The demand was first by Cambodians collectively against the French, and then by lower class Cambodians as a channel to escape peasant life and join what they perceived as the wealthier, easier life in the towns. Even if Sihanouk and his advisers perceived the dilemma in the beginning, political reasons would have prevented them from limiting education or trying to turn it into more useful channels. Precarious as their rule was,⁵⁹ they could not run the risk of accusations from their opponents that they were keeping people ignorant as the French had done.

Education, then, at least beyond lower primary, represented first of all a status, both socially and, where jobs were available, economically. It was not in order to acquire useful training, not even primarily to make money through the exercise of skills much in demand, but to obtain a piece of paper attesting the

acquisition of a status through which, *normally*, one should have been able to enter a service where salaries and perks would provide a comfortable life and the prerogative of commanding people of lower status. Thus the stories, partly apocryphal but based on observed circumstances, of Cambodians who would complete honorable university courses, then armed with their diplomas, sell off their books or at least never look at them again. Cambodia had not been and did not become a reading nation; and there was always a certain implicit denigration of learning and of intellectuals by the established elite. In fact, by the 1960s 'intellectual,' when used publicly by Sihanouk, was very nearly a term of opprobrium.

The holders of status positions, the bureaucrats, including teachers, received salaries which were princely in comparison with the money income of a peasant, artisan, or factory worker, or even in comparison with the income from a similar position in Thailand. In 1960-62, for example, a teacher at lower secondary level had a salary equivalent to about US\$100 per month at the official rate of exchange while his counterpart in Thailand was receiving about \$30. This was because in Cambodia, as in many former colonies, the first post-independence salaries were set to show some relationship to the colonial (European) salaries for the same positions, whereas in Thailand salaries were initially set on the basis of local living standards and class hierarchies.

Therefore bureaucrats, teachers, and even the unemployed with some education had a privileged status, were jealous of their position and presumed prerogatives and, particularly since so many of them had recently escaped from the village, were contemptuous of peasant life and determined to remain in an urban milieu. Often boys with no more than primary schooling considered themselves intellectuals; and the resulting diploma snobbery extended into unexpected quarters. In 1971 the *FUNK Bulletin* in Paris criticized the Phnom Penh General In Tarn as "personifying illiteracy in all areas," and said of another office, Hou Hang Sin, that he was "incapable of preparing a report without spelling errors."⁶⁰ The editors, supporters of the revolution, little realized that within a few years they themselves might face hard labor or even death for intellectual snobbery, or at the very least would be serving under men whose level of formal education was far below that of In Tarn.

Another illustrative case is the young university graduate who left Cambodia in 1973 and who in 1979 had an opportunity to meet and criticize Thiounn Mum, a DK senior official who graduated from France's *Ecole Poly-technique*. Among other things she upbraided him for agreeing to work under Pol Pot, "who has no university degree at all."⁶¹ She was also contemptuous of DK efforts, defended by Mum, to shorten certain courses of education, such as basic medicine and technical training, and appeared shocked when I pointed out that western medical teams in the refugee camps were having success with similar programs, teaching people to perform in a few weeks or months tasks which in traditional schools might take years. Because of its implicit attack on the status function of education, the notion of abridging

traditional educational programs, turning peasants into paramedics or basic mechanics, or producing 'barefoot' doctors, is even more shocking to non-peasant Cambodians than to bourgeois westerners. It was noticeable in KID that some of the emergency programs considered desirable or necessary by the international aid organizations were disliked by the refugees as being uncomfortably similar to what had been implemented in Democratic Kampuchea.

By the early 1960s it was already apparent that Cambodian towns were filling up with people who through education had acquired new status but who could not be put to use in the existing system, and urban economic sectors were not being expanded to receive them (aside from the fact that their education was nearly useless for those sectors). The expansion of the school system itself had been the last surge of bureaucratic growth, and was carried to its absurd extreme by the proliferation of universities after 1964. The latter gave a few more years 'employment' to several thousand 'intellectuals,' both as students and teachers, but in the process created even more educated unemployables. At the same time, as noted above, the demands made on the country's economy, that is on the peasantry, by the towns were steadily increasing.

In traditional Cambodia, before the French protectorate, people of status were rewarded, not with salaries, but by a cut of the fees, taxes, or products they collected for the crown, and with the privilege of using people of lower status for personal services or as direct producers of items of consumption. Although that system was formally ended nearly 100 years ago, the mentality which accompanied it persisted, and all state employment, which meant almost all employment open to Khmers outside the villages, was still ranked on a scale of desirability according to the opportunity it provided for private benefits, now termed graft.

Even when whole industries were set up as foreign aid projects, as was done by China in the 1960s, such industries were valued mainly for the possibilities of personal enrichment inherent in them. The Cambodians had discovered that even 'socialism' could be integrated into their traditions. The value of the term in modern international relations was apparent by the 1950s, and for foreign consumption the name of Sihanouk's new political party was rendered as 'Popular Socialist Community.' Of course, it was not to be Marxist socialism, but rather a Royalist-Buddhist Socialism, without class conflict - declared in-existent in Cambodia - and depending on the 'ancient' Cambodian practice of the sovereign providing for the welfare of his people. And since the sovereign by definition always provided for the people's welfare, any kind of criticism was seen as subversive or anti-monarchical.

Under Royalist-Buddhist Socialism the state industries and nationalized enterprises after 1964 became in effect appanages for Sihanouk's favorites, who grew wealthy while the account books showed red. Periodic scandals served to spread the wealth around, placing some in temporary eclipse while others took their

turn at the trough. It was a continuation of the traditional practice of officials extracting a percentage of what they collected for the state; and no one of the elite was ever severely called to account or forced to repay what he had collected from the public till.⁶⁶

Before the modern world impinged on Cambodian life the old system could work passably well. The wealth squeezed out of the peasantry by the officials and the court - the state apparatus - did not in general represent a loss to the national economy, for little of it was spent abroad. It would be redistributed through conspicuous consumption within the economy in the construction of temples and dwellings, the support of large service retinues which every wealthy and powerful figure collected, and the patronage of local artisans. Much of it was returned whence it came, and the propensity to accumulate wealth by the elites must have been limited by the limits of consumption, or use, within the country.

In mid-20th century, however, such a system was much more fragile and more oppressive. Conspicuous consumption indulged in by the elite was no longer within the economy, but involved the acquisition of expensive foreign products, frequent trips abroad, hard currency bank accounts, and the construction of amenities modeled on those of Paris and New York; and the large dependent clientele through which wealth was once redistributed were no longer needed or desired. Development, for such a consumption-oriented elite, meant luxury housing, western-style restaurants and bars, importation of automobiles. The type of growth experience of Saigon and Bangkok in the 1960s and 1970s, ending for the former in 1975, and which most westerners would consider tragic, was regarded by Cambodians with envy; and those who opposed Sihanouk's rejection of American aid in 1963-64 argued that such growth would thereby be impeded in Phnom Penh.

The upper strata among whom such new habits began set the tone for all those below. The elite had been to France, and often to other countries as well, had investments abroad, and considered that emulation of the lifestyle of wealthy Paris or New York was no more than their due. To this end Phnom Penh was to be turned into a city with all the western refinements, and luxuries were to be freely imported. On the one hand this made Phnom Penh one of the most attractive cities in the world, and on the other led to such absurdities as the "concours d'elegance automobile" sponsored by Sihanouk.⁶⁷ The beautiful city, though, had to be filled with private villas which few could legitimately afford and all the luxuries to go with them. From the highest levels the demonstration effect spread downward until everyone aspired to luxuries which neither the individual, nor the society as a whole, could afford, and the result was a generalized corruption and a draining of wealth into unproductive investments.

Among the impressionable recipients of the demonstration effect were all the superfluous young semi-intellectuals who flocked to the towns, particularly Phnom Penh. With the administration virtually closed to further expansion since 1961, only a rapidly expanding economy could have made room for them at the

level they desired. But Cambodia, after 1963, went into a recession. Rice production declined, and along with it the industries related to rice, such as milling, transportation, commerce, and alcohol. Construction and mechanical industries also probably declined, and in any case did not expand.⁶⁸

The only employment for immigrants to the city was in the personal service sector. Many of them found a place as clients, hangers-on, and quasi servants of the rich, thus perpetuating an old Cambodian tradition. Others were absorbed in the hotels, restaurants, bars, tailor and dressmaker shops, barber and hairdresser trades which constituted a sector seemingly unaffected by recession or austerity. (The contradiction here is not logical, but in the system itself. While productive activities stagnated, wealth, as in the case of state industries noted above, was being drained off into economic back channels and spent on frivolous consumption.) When the war began and the foreign aid and diplomatic community began a new expansion, there were new jobs as interpreters, secretaries, house-servants, drivers, gardeners, guards, etc.

Thus Cambodia's urban population, and in particular that of Phnom Penh, expanded. Already in 1968 greater Phnom Penh held nearly 10 percent of the country's total population, and together with the other towns over 12 percent, while urban and semi-urban (non-peasant) people were 21 percent.

Although these percentages may not seem high in comparison with many other countries, it must be remembered that the move from country to town which is considered a part of normal development means movement into industries producing goods both for the city and for a developing countryside. In Cambodia, however, industry, which had never been important, was declining as urban population expanded; and far from providing equipment for agriculture, the urban sector was intent on squeezing more and more wealth out of it. Among the 880,000 who constituted the true urban population, or 1 1/2 million who made up the urban plus semi-urban group, there were only about 110,000 industrial employees, many of them outside Phnom Penh, 93,000 in the administration, 48,000 in transportation, 13,000 in construction — the most important productive urban branch; but 60,000 in 'personal service' and 64,500 monks.

This situation was congruent with and exacerbated by traditional views about status. Respectable employment, for an ordinary person, had traditionally meant life as a formally free peasant, or artisan, or state functionary, or member of the entourage or domestic staff of someone of high status. Wage labor was somehow degrading, while service employment was not; and there was no value-neutral, or even non-pejorative, term for "work for."

Urban-rural distinctions increased, and became more invidious against the peasants, as the city became wealthier and more westernized. Ultimately city folk began to regard peasants, not just as people who were poorer and less refined, but, because of the agricultural slack season, as people who did not work enough.⁷¹

Already before the war then, there were several hundred thousand, perhaps

nearly a million, Cambodians who had escaped from peasant and village life, and many more who wished to, and they were to a large extent oriented toward a foreign ideal. Before the late 1960s there was a strong French element in even primary education and many French teachers in the high schools. Beginning with school books, and continuing on through the press, popular literature, and films, all Cambodians who shared in the least in the urban culture were made aware of the attractions of western life, in particular the life of the comfortable bourgeoisie. As it became increasingly clear that few of those who aspired to them would ever acquire those western trappings in Cambodia, and as the country declined economically before 1970 and deteriorated physically afterward, the prosperous West became a golden paradise to which all wished to go. This was a goal which few of them could attain, however, and as second best, reverting to old patterns in their culture, they saw salvation in dependency on a strong western country, preferably the United States.

The war exacerbated the trend toward urban immigration and rural-urban contradictions; and the war itself, whatever else it may have been, was also a war between town and country in which the towns fought increasingly to preserve privileges while the rural areas suffered. Although adequate statistics are unavailable, no one of any faction involved in the war has tried to deny that there were from half a million to a million war deaths, figures which compare with the more serious estimates — several hundred thousand to over a million — of abnormal deaths between 1975 and 1979.

Moreover, the rural half of the country, in 1970-75, suffered far more human and material damage than the urban.⁷² Again, no precise statistics are available, but impressionistic evidence is more than sufficient. The bombing and shelling of the countryside, particularly in 1972-73, and its attendant loss of life, are well known. Besides this, the rank and file of the Lon Nol forces, in contrast to the almost entirely urban officer corps, were country boys who from 1972 at least often found the army, even as corrupt as it was, the only way to an assured rice ration. The real urban population suffered hardly at all from war wounds or violent death; and the only section of them directly exposed to war were the officers, among whom casualties, as everywhere, were much lower than among the soldiery.

The existing class distinctions of Cambodian society were maintained and exaggerated in the military, particularly during the war. Officers came back from the front daily to wine and dine in Phnom Penh restaurants, paying their bills, if at all, with money extorted by the device of phantom troops or by withholding soldiers' allowances. As the city's productive function shrank during the war, much of its economy came to depend on such expenditure, financed ultimately by U.S. aid, and the military became a sort of mercenary force within their own country. An illustration of this class at its worst was the widow of a colonel in the Khao I Dang refugee center in 1980 who complained of living conditions there, saying that in the good old days before 1975 her husband's orderly used to bring

her bags of money twice daily. The person to whom she addressed her complaint, another refugee, retorted that it was because of people like her that they were all sitting uncomfortably in a refugee camp.

Among all the urbanites whom I had known from 1960 onward, by 1975 I had only heard of one personal acquaintance killed in action and one other case of a friend's brother who had been killed. A French friend with an even longer residence in Cambodia had similar experience. Only two of his acquaintances had died as a result of the war. Of course, it is possible that some of our earlier acquaintances from the 1960s had joined the Communists or remained in the countryside and been killed there, but that would only go to prove my point.⁷³

The city, or at least its poorer strata, and indeed anyone trying to live honestly on a government salary, did begin to suffer from hunger at least by 1972 — first because of inflation' and then outright lack of food; but anyone who would argue that it was thereby disadvantaged with respect to rural areas would then have to admit that the Communists, in spite of war losses and damages, were carrying out a very successful organization of agricultural production.

Although certain journalistic accounts vividly described the shelling of Phnom Penh, particularly during the last year of the war, those incidents, bad as they were for their victims, cannot compare with the artillery and air attacks on the countryside, some of which as early as 1971 were clearly visible just across the river from Phnom Penh where they served as an amusing fireworks display for city people on an afternoon promenade or sipping drinks on their balconies.

These were the people - spoiled, pretentious, contentious, status-conscious at worst, or at best simply soft, intriguing, addicted to city comforts and despising peasant life — who faced the communist exodus order on 17 April 1975.⁷⁴ For them the mere fact of leaving an urban existence with its foreign orientation and unrealistic expectations to return to the land would have been a horror, and a horror compounded by their position on the receiving end of orders issued by illiterate peasants. On the whole they cared little or nothing for the problems of the other half of their countrymen, and would have been quite content to have all the rural rebels bombed away by American planes. Even having seen the damage done to the country during the war they seem to exclude it from their thoughts, almost never mention it unless asked, and then seem astonished that anyone would take interest in what happened in the rural areas before *they* arrived there in 1975.

These are the people who, by the nature of the circumstances, have been the main object of study for most post-1975 research on contemporary Cambodia, and also until late 1980 the main source of information about conditions inside the country. Even without conscious misinformation or exaggeration their portrayal of those five years could not help but be very one-sided; and the straight reporting of what they wish to say will inevitably give a distorted, sometimes even false, picture, of little use in understanding the revolutionary regime or for situating it properly within wider contemporary history. The bias in their stories would already

be serious enough if they were again working at their old occupations, or some other useful task, in post-DK Cambodia; but it has been compounded by the frustrations and tensions of life in the refugee camps, and treated with insufficient perspicacity by many investigators, subjects to which we shall now turn.⁷⁵