

Khmerness and the Thai ‘Other’: Violence, Discourse and Symbolism in the 2003 Anti-Thai Riots in Cambodia

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On 29 January 2003, a Cambodian mob burned down the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh. This article explores the roots of this violence, arguing that the anti-Thai riots were linked in part to a set of discourses and imagery that have long been central to assertions of ‘Khmerness’ and constructions of the ‘Other’.

If this Thai actress said that she hates Cambodians like dogs, we would like to tell her that Cambodians throughout the country hate Thais like leeches that suck other nations’ blood If it is true, Kongying must lower her head to the ground and salute by placing palm to palm in order to apologize to Cambodians, who are a gentle and polite race and have never encroached on other countries’ land. It is insulting enough for Cambodians to hear Thais wickedly saying to their children, ‘You must not be born a Khmer in your next life’ and so on.

Rasmei Angkor, 18 Jan. 2003¹

At about 4:30 in the afternoon of 29 January 2003, a young man named Vannak observed a group of 100 to 150 high school and university students pull up to the Independence Monument in the heart of Phnom Penh. He recognized that they were students both from their dress and from the way they rode their motos, lights turned on and cheering as they made their way to the monument – just as they did after football games. Only this time the event had changed: for about 20 minutes, the students shouted slogans and waved a Cambodian flag, before driving off. Vannak, who had been reading the papers closely, knew that this demonstration, like those the previous day, was being held to protest comments allegedly made by perhaps the most famous Thai actress in Cambodia: Suvanan Kongying, who was often called by her character’s name in a popular Thai soap opera, ‘Morning Star’ (*Phkay Preuk*). In fact, the students at the

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¹ Quoted in Rachel S. Taylor, ‘Cambodia/Thailand: Reacting to rumors’, *World Press Review*, 50, 4 (April 2003) (<http://www.worldpress.org/Asia/1010.cfm>, accessed 19 June 2004).

Independence Monument had been yelling ‘Morning Star, Thief Star! Morning Star, Thief Star!’²

Putting in print a rumour that had been circulating for months, *Rasmei Angkor* (‘Ray/Light of Angkor’), a small, pro-government newspaper, alleged that Morning Star had ‘said that she would only ever accept an invitation to perform in Cambodia if the famous Angkor Wat [temple] was returned to Thailand and she looked down [on Cambodians] by saying that if she was reincarnated, she would rather be a dog than be a Khmer national’. Some university students subsequently reprinted and distributed these provocative remarks by flier. Given the centrality of Angkor Wat to Cambodian national identity, Morning Star’s comments, supposedly uttered in a cable interview, provoked widespread anger in Cambodia, particularly among young men like Vannak, who had graduated from the Royal University of Phnom Penh a few years earlier. Vannak noted that this feeling of outrage had intensified on 27 January, when Prime Minister Hun Sen made a televised speech during the opening of a school for the blind and deaf in Kompong Cham. Hun Sen proclaimed that Morning Star, whom he began calling ‘Thief Star’, was ‘worth less than a blade of grass at Angkor Wat’ and that ‘TV channels in Cambodia must reduce or stop showing Thai movies, especially movies starring Morning Star.’ His comments, like the broader controversy about her alleged remarks, made front-page news in Cambodian papers.³

While the riots were striking in a number of respects, they involved powerful discourses and imagery – of Angkor Wat, national heritage, royalty, territorial threat, and so forth – that have long been central to assertions of ‘Khmerness’ and constructions of the Other, which are two sides of the same coin of identity. Such imagery is always in flux, coalescing in a given moment – a fresh ‘imprinting’ of the coin – to meet the concerns of the day. Ironically, as Cambodian leaders have asserted images of ‘self’ and ‘Other’, they have frequently drawn upon repertoires of knowledge intimately linked to Cambodia’s colonial past. In doing so, they may reimagine and reshuffle these Orientalist discourses in novel ways to fit a particular historical moment. This article investigates the anti-Thai riots as, in part, another of these reimaginings, an assertion of national identity that juxtaposes the ‘Khmer’ against a foreign ‘Other’. It does so through an exploration of the origins of such imagery as it was evoked both during the riot itself and in subsequent cyberspace discussion of the violence.

In the immediate aftermath of the riots, this electronic dialogue began on the English-language Website of the Thai newspaper, *The Nation*.⁴ Over the course of several weeks, Thai and Khmer at home and abroad debated the causes of the riots, their own experiences and reactions and what their governments should do. At times, people of other nationalities chimed in, providing yet another perspective on the conflict. Many

2 Interview with Vannak, 11 Nov. 2005. All quotations from Vannak are from this interview. Interviews with Cambodian informants were carried out in a mixture of two languages; their comments in English have been quoted verbatim with no editing for grammar or style.

3 Quotations are from ADHOC (Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association), ‘Monitoring report on the riots against the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh from 29–31 January 2003’, 3 Feb. 2003 http://www.bigpond.com.kh/users/adhoc/riot_29_01_03/monitoring_riot_report.htm). See also ‘The momentum against Morning Star reaches a high point’, *Rasmei Kampuchea*, 29 Jan. 2003.

4 See <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/board/thaiso/view.php3?id=28&offset=0>.

people were outraged; some asserted the need for greater understanding, Buddhist compassion and rapid reconciliation between the Thai and Khmer, who were like 'brothers and sisters'. Many of the postings, however, are striking for their strong assertions of national identity, with their corollary constructions of the enemy 'Other'. These assertions were characterized by a rich repertoire of images and characterizations of the past, which are suggestive about the ways in which Orientalist discourses are made and reworked to fit the exigencies of given historical moments and social contexts, such as the riots or the consequent cyberspace discussion. As a transnational form of electronic media, this discussion board is of particular interest since it constituted a site at which Khmer and Thai, at home and abroad, asserted their identities in a global age.

Before proceeding, however, I want to note some potential benefits and shortcomings of using a cyberspace discussion in part as a basis for analysing the riots. On the one hand, questions arise concerning the extent to which it may be valid to use cyber-discourse to analyse the riots themselves. The *Nation* web-dialogue, as noted above, included Cambodians living in Phnom Penh, studying abroad and residing in other countries as part of the diaspora. There is no doubt that identity means different things to people occupying different geographical and structural positions, and further concerns have been raised about the reliability of identities asserted in cyberspace. These are all legitimate concerns, ones that I have had to consider since I was not in Cambodia at the time of the riots.

On the other hand, there are advantages to looking at such an Internet discussion and ways of addressing the aforementioned shortcomings. First, the cyber-discussion occurred in close to real-time, with the first posting made on 29 January at 22:12, just as the riots were ending. Moreover, in contrast to the interview situation, which poses its own set of methodological issues and necessarily takes place after the event, the postings were dialogic and self-initiated as events unfolded and other postings made and involved direct oppositions to and constructions of the imagined Thai 'Other'.⁵ Second, recent research on online communities has recognized that identity is not as free-floating and 'virtual' as once thought, particularly in newsgroups, but rather is structured by offline structures, power dynamics and cultural knowledge. Further, there are interesting parallels between the rioters, who appear to have been primarily young, urban, educated men or students, and the self-identifications of the participants in *The Nation* discussion board.⁶

Ultimately, however, the cyber-discussion is just one among several sources upon which my analysis has drawn. Other sources include articles from Khmer newspapers

5 Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording oral history: A guide for the humanities and social sciences*, 2nd edn (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2005) discusses interviews.

6 On the rioters see US Department of State, 'Report to Congress on the anti-Thai riots in Cambodia on January 29, 2003', Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 14 May 2003 (<http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rpt/20565pf.htm>). The issue of online identity is discussed in Christine Hine, *Virtual ethnography* (London: Sage, 2000) and Samuel M. Wilson and Leighton C. Peterson, 'The anthropology of online communities', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31 (2002): 449–67. Many young students in Cambodia find themselves in a difficult structural position since, despite their education, they face difficulties in procuring lucrative jobs. One difference between the cyber-discussion and the riots themselves (at least as overtly observed), was the greater participation of women in the cyber-dialogue.

around the time of the riots (though these have been difficult to procure); English-language newspaper articles and translations of some of the key articles related to the riots, such as the original *Rasmei Angkor* piece on Morning Star; secondary sources like the report on the riots produced by the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) and the US Department of State; and, perhaps most importantly, an in-depth interview with Vannak, who witnessed the riots, and a more informal interview with three young Cambodian men, one of whom was also at the riots. Whatever the differences among these sources, they all converge in placing the discourses discussed below at the centre of the controversy about Morning Star and the anti-Thai riots. After discussing the riots in more detail, I turn to an analysis of these discourses.

The riots and its aftermath

The value of Morning Star is cheaper than a few clumps of grass at Angkor Wat. . . . TV channels in Cambodia must reduce or stop showing Thai movies, especially movies starring Morning Star.⁷

Despite Morning Star's widely publicized denial that she had ever made the aforementioned remarks, a denial that appears to be true (indeed, the editor of *Rasmei Angkor* later told the *Phnom Penh Post* that the story was based on hearsay and never verified), several hundred protestors, most of them students, began demonstrating in front of the Thai Embassy around 10 a.m. on 29 January.⁸ (Other protestors jeered visiting Thai lawmakers at Cambodia's National Assembly that same morning.) The crowd burnt tires and pictures of Morning Star and demanded an apology for her alleged remarks from the Thai ambassador, Chatchawed Chartsuwan. In the late afternoon, the protest intensified after a rumour circulated that the Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok had been set on fire and several Cambodians killed by a Thai mob. Again, the rumour was false.

It was around this time that Vannak observed the protest at the Independence Monument. When he finished work at 5:00, the protestors had largely disbanded, but he saw a series of small groups of students on mopeds driving past the monument. Vannak got on his moped and 'started to follow one of these groups that was heading to the Thai Embassy. I wanted to learn what they were going to do.' When they arrived at the Embassy, 'the traffic stopped. . . . There were so many people on the street in front of the Embassy – students, non-students, journalists, and police.'

Eventually, the protestors grew more brazen and began throwing stones at the Embassy and burning Thai flags and automobile tires. Despite desperate calls from the frantic Thai ambassador to the Cambodian Foreign Ministry, police and Defence Ministry, Cambodian officials and police did little to discourage the crowd. In fact, top government officials were just down the street at the nearby Ministry of Interior and at the headquarters of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). As Vannak's group approached the Embassy, they found that the road was blocked by a bar that the police had lowered across the street. However, the police were doing nothing to prevent the

7 Prime Minister Hun Sen, 27 Jan. 2003, quoted in ADHOC, 'Monitoring report'.

8 'Miss Morning Star denies that she ever spoke down to Cambodians but instead is happy with and apologizes to the Cambodian people', *Rasmei Kampuchea*, 30 Jan. 2003; 'Step by step: The road to a riot', *Phnom Penh Post* (henceforth *PPP*), 31 Jan. 2003.

crowd from going around the blockade, and people kept pouring into the compound. Most of the people there, Vannak noted, were – like him – merely observing the protestors. While he was uncertain of the exact figure, Vannak estimated that there might have been 1,000 people present at the rally, but only a small number, perhaps 10 per cent, were directly involved in the violence.

The police were doing nothing to discourage the protest. When Vannak asked a police officer the reason for the protest, the officer mentioned the alleged incident involving the Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok. 'He said that's why the Cambodian students were angry and wanted revenge.' Emboldened, at about 6:00 p.m. dozens of demonstrators climbed over the fence and began looting and ransacking the compound, while Thai staff fled from the scene, fearing for their lives. The ambassador himself jumped over the fence at the back of the Embassy, barely escaping by boat. 'The mob came in so fast, I myself had to climb the fence behind the embassies compound [and flee to] the river. . . . We were lucky that some Thais brought the speed boat to pick us up.' He complained that, despite his increasingly frantic calls to officials in various Ministries, the Cambodian government did nothing to assist him.⁹

By early evening, the five million-dollar Embassy and ambassador's residence had been burned to the ground. Rioters painted slogans saying 'Thai thieves' (*chaor Siem*) on the outer walls of the Embassy, trod upon pictures of the Thai king, and threw Thai flags and even a picture of the queen into a bonfire. Vannak also noticed that the protestors, like the students demonstrating at the Independence Monument earlier that day, had cut up pictures of Morning Star, often placing her face on the head of an animal (like a dog) or on a naked or scantily clad body. Many of these mock-ups had 'bad words. You know, like "Morning [Star's] body is a thief's body". There were all sorts of pictures of her.'

Cambodian riot police finally arrived about a half-hour after the Embassy building had been put to flames and eventually managed to disperse the crowd by firing their AK-47s into the air. The protestors, however, were not finished; they began moving about Phnom Penh and attacking and looting Thai hotels (the Juliana and the Royal Phnom Penh); business firms (including the Thai Plastic Factory, the Elephant Cement Factory, the Red Bull M150 soft drink factory, Thai Airways and the Shinawatra and Samart telecommunications firms); and even a few residences.¹⁰ Hundred of frightened Thai diplomats, businessmen and civilians were later airlifted from Cambodia on Thai C-130 military planes; many returned home with highly publicized tales of how they barely escaped from harrowing situations, sometimes with the help of Cambodians. Several of these stories appeared on the *Nation's* 'Shattered Ties . . .' website, which included photos, an 'event chronology', a list of the 'the injured', and the 'webboard' discussion with over 200 entries.¹¹ Amazingly, only a handful of Thais were injured during the riots, none seriously; one Cambodian woman was killed and four other Cambodians injured by gunfire. Vannak had followed a small group of protestors as they

9 'Cambodia apologizes for riot', 30 Jan. 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/asiapcf/southeast/02/30/thai.cambodia>.

10 ADHOC, 'Monitoring report'.

11 See http://www.nationalmultimedia.com/specials/Cambodia_riot/index1.php.

drove around town looking for Thai companies, but his group was too small to do much. They eventually dispersed and Vannak went home, where he heard police gunfire in the distance as they tried to break up the crowds. He recalled, ‘When we heard the sound of the gunfire, we’d go, “Oh, I think that was the TV station”. “Oh, that was the telephone company”.’

The Thai response was immediate and strong, as the government downgraded diplomatic relations; closed the border; began evicting thousands of Cambodian traders, beggars and labourers; and demanded an apology, an investigation, arrests and compensation. Thaksin Shinawatra, Thai prime minister and head of the telecommunications firm that was ransacked during the violence, later revealed that in the hours after the riots, Thailand had assumed a military posture, readying F-16 fighter jets, commandos and Special Forces to enter Cambodia if the C-130s had been attacked.¹² The next day, a potentially violent riot at the Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok was only aborted by an appeal for calm by the Thai king. While some called for peace and forgiveness, many of Thais on the webboard were outraged about what had happened, particularly the highly insulting desecration of the king’s portrait, and called for military action (‘Khun Tui’ [#19]: ‘lets go to war with Cambodia’); Hun Sen’s resignation (‘Angered Overseas Thai’ [#53]: ‘You gutless, stupid SOB . . . Step down now or else you and your country will be in deep trouble’); the expulsion of Cambodian labourers, beggars and refugees from Thailand (‘Thai’ [#8]: ‘Chase the Cambodian out of Thailand’); and revenge (‘Mad Thai’ [#81]: ‘You have dug your own graves. Your barbaric acts have been permanently engraved in every Thai’s heart. We are resolved to make you pay for what you did, not matter how long it might take or how much it might cost us’).¹³

Cambodian officials helped defuse the conflict, both by immediately taking responsibility for and expressing ‘regret’ over the riot and by agreeing to undertake an investigation and pay full compensation, roughly 54 million dollars. More than 150 people were also detained, including two members of the media who were later released. The popular mayor of Phnom Penh, Chea Sophara, was sacked; the head of the Phnom Penh Military Police was also reassigned; and the government established several commissions to oversee compensation issues, the investigation and the normalization of diplomatic ties with Thailand.¹⁴

While the two countries moved quickly toward normalization, tensions remained. On 8 February, Thailand reopened its borders to Cambodians but continued to forbid Thais from entering Cambodia. This ban had direct economic effects, as it prevented Thais from crossing the border to gamble at casinos, purchase Cambodian goods or visit tourist sites. Frustrated by this situation, Hun Sen closed border checkpoints in early March, complaining that Thailand had a ‘superiority complex’ and that the Thai border policy was making Cambodians seem like beggars: ‘We have used all measures possible [to respond to Thai demands] . . . We did what Thailand told us to do and we bowed our head to the ground and I think that was enough.’ He added, ‘Our nation needs dignity.

12 ‘How close we came to war’, *The Nation*, 1 Feb. 2004. (http://www.nationalmultimedia.com/specials/Cambodia_riot/RD_war.php, accessed 28 June 2004).

13 Numbers correspond to the list of postings on the Webboard; postings are quoted verbatim.

14 ‘All quiet on the western front: The anti-Thai riots – seven months on’, *PPP*, 29 Aug. 2003.

As a sovereign state, we can't kneel to anyone', while suggesting that Cambodia was ready to turn to other Southeast Asian countries for trade.¹⁵

Prime Minister Thaksin replied that Thailand was still awaiting compensation. Within days, a compromise seems to have been reached; Thaksin was referring to the riots as a 'minor incident' that had been due to a 'misunderstanding', and the Thai government announced that an agreement had been made about the compensation issue.¹⁶ After Cambodia transferred almost \$6 million to pay for damages to the Thai Embassy, both borders were reopened on 21 March. In addition, the governments established a commission to examine their bilateral relations. Diplomatic ties were normalized on 11 April, and on 24 April Ambassador Chatchawed returned to Phnom Penh, saying, 'let bygones be bygones'. Finally, coming full circle, Hun Sen lifted the ban on Thai soap operas. At the time of writing, however, the Cambodian government has yet to produce an official explanation of the events.

Questions have remained about the origins of the riots. Upon his return to Bangkok, Chatchawed asserted that the violence had been orchestrated, a view that was shared by many diplomats. Rumours swirled in the aftermath of the riots, ranging from Chinese and Vietnamese plots to the alleged involvement of a Thai cosmetics company that was competing with the one Morning Star represented in Cambodia.¹⁷ Many of the participants in the webboard discussion, both Cambodian and Thai, asserted that Hun Sen and elements of the CPP were behind the demonstration. The initial story about Morning Star was put in print by a newspaper associated with the CPP, and Hun Sen fanned the flames of anger with his televised speech on 27 January. Thus, 'Hun Sen's Friend' (#80) wrote an ironic 'letter' online which began 'Dear Prime Minister, Congratulations. Please take a bow for a job well done' before turning to the inflammatory speech:

Last Monday, with your persuasive language and tone, we know you kick started something of an exciting proportion. Your verbal attack on a Thai actress whom you claimed wanted Angkor Wat was exceptional. You know nothing will stir the khmer emotion like Angkor can. . . . Presto, you brought the emotion of the Khmer people. . . . beyond a boiling point.

Moreover, despite being just down the block and getting frantic phone calls from the Thai Ambassador, high-ranking government officials initially did nothing to defuse the riot. In fact, the minimal police presence stood in strong contrast to other demonstrations, such as those held by garment workers or opposition parties. According to a US Department of State Congressional report on the riots, eyewitnesses recounted how the

15 The 'all measures possible' quotation is from 'Border politics: Cambodia shuts its border with Thailand, protesting against unequal ties', *Straits Times*, 7 Mar. 2003; the 'dignity' remark is in 'Hun Sen lashes out at Bangkok: "Superiority complex" behind border closures', *Bangkok Post* (henceforth *BP*), 7 Mar. 2003. Both articles were accessed via camnews@cambodia.org.

16 'PM softens Cambodia rhetoric', *The Nation*, 11 Mar. 2003. (http://www.nationalmultimedia.com/specials/Cambodia_riot/NR_rhetoric.php, accessed 27 June 2004).

17 'Whodunnit and why? The *Post* scores the theories', *PPP*, 14 Feb. 2003; for diplomats' views see 'Mobs go berserk in anti-Thai frenzy: Thai Embassy torched; businesses gutted', *PPP*, 30 Jan. 2003 and 'PM Hun Sen hints at more "removals"', *PPP*, 14 Feb. 2003.

demonstration began to intensify after the late afternoon arrival of the ‘Pagoda Boys’, a group of pro-Hun Sen students from the provinces whom the government often used to break up anti-government demonstrations. The report concludes that ‘the active participation by the Pagoda Boys gang in this demonstration, and their apparent leadership role, fueled the violence’, while ‘at no time did policemen at the embassy demonstrate the will to defuse the demonstration’.¹⁸ According to the report, high-ranking military police stated that they did not respond because they failed to receive authorization from their superiors, most likely referring to Hun Sen and his aides. The very group that the CPP had used to break up demonstrations (with minimal interference from the police), then, seems to have been used in this case to lead a riot (again, with minimal police interference). Some diplomats speculated that the CPP might have orchestrated the riot but had not expected it to get so out of control.¹⁹

Vannak, in contrast, viewed the protest more as an expression of nationalist sentiment. While he noted that the CPP often used students for political purposes, including staging demonstrations and counter-demonstrations against the opposition, he thought that both opposition and pro-CPP youths had joined together in the riots for nationalist reasons. When I asked him who the Pagoda Boys were, Vannak replied, ‘Even me, but especially the Pagoda Boys (*Krom Kmeng Wott*) are supported by the Prime Minister, Hun Sen. . . . I lived inside the pagoda for seven or eight years, though I was never involved with any [violent] group because I felt it was a waste of time to join them.’ He explained that the CPP recruited a leader in every pagoda and provided them with various types of support, such as land, rice, bikes and sometimes even scholarships. Vannak himself had been given a small plot of land at the pagoda on which he had built a small room. In a certain sense, he said, the ‘pagoda belonged to the CPP. I mean that it is under the control of the government’.

While these patronage relations generated strong support among the CPP – Vannak estimated that 60 per cent of the students at the pagoda supported the government – some students living there supported the opposition. Moreover, he noted that the term ‘Pagoda Boys’ referred both to all of the students living in the pagoda and to a smaller group of activists who joined in demonstrations and other pro-government activities. In fact, this group included:

even member of the CPP party who live outside the pagoda. They’re also involved. For example, I know a guy, because he is the brother-in-law of my brother. He is also involved with the Pagoda Boys. . . . He was a student [at] the Royal University of Phnom Penh, and he is an activist of the CPP Party. Later on he became a District Chief. . . . and he has a Land Cruiser [chuckles]. [So he was high up?] Yea, because all of the activists of the CPP Party have a good future. Because when you work hard and do something for the Party, after you graduate you will have a post. Even, you know, in a Ministry, a Cabinet, or Province post, you get that kind [of position]. [So he was a Pagoda Boy?] No, never lived in a pagoda . . . [but] he joined and he support [them], you know, in terms of finance. He supports them even during a demonstration . . . [providing] security because you never know what is

18 US Dept. of State, ‘Report to Congress’.

19 ‘All quiet on the western front’.

going to happen. So he dresses up civilian but I think he has a gun . . . This is a way to protect . . . because when we don't know what is going to happen [at a demonstration] . . . [But] he never lived in a pagoda, but he joined the pagoda group.

Vannak added that the leader in his pagoda, in which over 400 students lived, was given a mid-level job in the Ministry of Agriculture when he graduated and was allowed to continue living in the pagoda. While noting how the CPP cultivated the support of the Pagoda Boys, Vannak did not believe that they were behind the riots:

To me, it is not only the Pagoda Boys, not only a group of students who support Sam Rainsy, but in general students from the university and high school who joined together in the demonstration . . . because they feel that this is something that happened to the country so they need to join hands.

Several webboard postings, however, suggested that Hun Sen and the CPP had a number of motives for organizing the riots. With elections coming in July, the prime minister and his Party may have been trying to divert attention from recent border controversies involving Vietnam, to reassert their nationalist credentials, send a message to Thailand about controversial land and sea border issues, and/or devise a ruse for cracking down on opposition parties. Regardless of the extent of his organizational involvement, there is little doubt that Hun Sen attempted to use the situation to his advantage. He immediately blamed the riots on 'extremists', causing opposition leader Sam Rainsy to flee the country after briefly seeking refuge in the US Embassy. Someone in the government also released a misleading photograph of Sam Rainsy demonstrating with protestors in front of the Thai Embassy – a photo that had actually been taken several days before the riot during a protest about voter registration.²⁰

In addition, the government used the pretext of the riots to arrest Mam Sonando – the owner of Beehive Radio, one of Cambodia's only independent radio stations – along with En Chan Sivatha, the editor of *Rasmei Angkor* and publisher of the initial story about Morning Star. Mam was charged with disinformation and 'inciting violence' by 'disseminating the rumours regarding attacks on the Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok. The radio broadcast comments from callers repeating these rumours. However, the radio station did not begin its call-in program until about 8:30 p.m., long after the Thai Embassy was in flames.' Although Mam Sonando was released on 11 February after domestic and international protests about his incarceration (the Pagoda Boys showed up at one rally which was calling for Sonando's release and Hun Sen's resignation), his radio station, which had been critical of the government, was shut down upon his arrest. This action effectively eliminated one of the only anti-government media outlets during the election, though the station resumed broadcasting shortly after Mam Sonando's release.²¹

In addition, the riots gave the government a potential pretext to clamp down on anti-government protests related to the 2003 elections. According to Ministry of Interior

20 SRP [Sam Rainsy Party] Members of Parliament, 'Fabricated evidence against Sam Rainsy', 3 Feb. 2003 (<http://www.2bangkok.com/burnings.html>, accessed 17 June 2004); see also 'Opposition unhappy with registration at half-way mark', *PPP*, 31 Jan. 2003; Sam Rainsy's flight is mentioned in 'Mobs go berserk'.

21 The rally is mentioned in 'Elections: Hok Lundy reads the riot act', *PPP*, 28 Feb. 2003; the quotations are from US Dept. of State, 'Report to Congress'; see also www.sbk.com.kh.

officials, police began to be ‘equipped with smoke grenades, electro-shock batons, tear-gas canisters, Vietnamese-trained attack dogs, high pressure fire hoses, and other weapons to ensure that the “bitter lesson” learned at the Thai Embassy does not happen again’. Such steps were clearly in the CPP’s interest with a close election expected in 2003, and the anti-CPP ‘Democracy Square’ demonstrations – in which dozens of protesters, including monks, were killed or injured during a police crackdown after the 1998 election – still fresh in everyone’s mind.²²

Moreover, by shifting the focus away from domestic issues onto the Thai ‘Other’, Hun Sen and the CPP may have been trying to bring back a key constituency – educated urban youth – who constitute a substantial part of the electorate and who might end up voting for the opposition. A focus on the ‘Other’ might also redirect the worries of this group about their uncertain future in a socio-political system in which patronage remains key and lucrative opportunities more limited.²³ At the same time, the steps taken in the aftermath of the anti-Thai riots served as an implicit warning to potential anti-government protesters, ranging from these youths to garment workers to opposition political parties. Still, as Vannak suggested, the possibility remains that the riot was ultimately more of a nationalist protest against the Thai that, while initially orchestrated and enabled by the government, quickly escalated in violent ways that it had not foreseen, as young Cambodians from a variety of political orientations united against a common ethnonationalist ‘Other’.

Discourse and symbolism in the anti-Thai riots

I’d like to say one thing that every country in the world knows that the Angkor Watt and many other precious stone temples in Kampuchea belong to the Khmers, and only the Khmers know how to build such temples. They also know that much of Siam, the so-called Thailand of today, used to be part of Kampuchea. Not long ago, the Siamese people were barbarians to the Khmers, and the Khmers’ civilization is to be the most precious and beautiful on earth. We, the Khmers, were once the most powerful nation, country, in Southeast Asia, and we will be again forever!

‘Jason Jayavarman’ (#79)

THE RIOT IS WRONG BUT THE PROTEST IS RIGHT!

‘Kaymno’, (#155)

As illustrated by Morning Star’s alleged remarks and Hun Sen’s subsequent speech, Angkor Wat stands at the centre of the controversy, a multivalent symbol condensing a wide array of referents. It is an icon of Khmerness and a shared past, appearing on flags and currency; serving as a brand-name for Cambodian-made beer and cigarettes; included in the names of hotels and restaurants; adorning the walls of homes, businesses

22 The quotation is from ‘Elections: Hok Lundy’; see also ‘Demonstrations spread through capital: Old enemies of Hun Sen pulling strings’, *PPP*, 12 Sept. 1998 and ‘Corpses in saffron? Death toll climbs to 19’, *PPP*, 18 Sept. 1998 (http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue2/article_242_p.html, accessed 11 July 2004).

23 See David Roberts, ‘Democratization, elite transition, and violence in Cambodia 1991–99’, *Critical Asian Studies*, 34, 4 (2002): 520–38.

and government offices; serving as an insignia and logo, and so forth. Some of the participants in the *Nation* web-discussion board even gave themselves pseudonyms like 'Angkorian Khmer' (#157), 'Khmer Empire' (#64) and 'Jason Jayavarman' (#79). To make claims upon Angkor Wat, then, is to make claims upon not just Cambodia, but the very sense of self of those who identify as Khmer. 'Josh', a Khmer-American serving in the US military, commented on the powerful emotions this identification can generate in his posting (#78): 'In Cambodians minds, the great temple is their soul. No matter where they are, they always defending their [symbol]. . . . They would trade their bloods for that temple and their nation if the situations requires.'

Part of the emotional power of Angkor Wat stems from its signification of Khmer greatness, albeit a grandeur that contrasts with a perceived long period of decline into the present. Many Cambodian postings on the *Nation* discussion board referred to this association, as illustrated by 'Jason Jayavarman's' comments quoted above. Such remarks recall the glories of the Angkorean period (usually dated from the early ninth to mid-fifteenth centuries), when powerful kings like Jayavarman II (credited with 'founding' what became the Angkorean empire), Suryavarman II (the builder of Angkor Wat) and Jayavarman VII (Jason's probable namesake – the builder of the Bayon, viewed as Angkor's most powerful monarch) extended the empire's reach far into parts of what is now Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. As Jason Jayavarman's comments suggest, the Angkorean period is recalled by many as a glorious time when Khmer kings dominated their enemies – including Thai principalities – and engaged in impressive building projects, including a network of roads, a hydraulics system and, most prominently, the 'precious stone temples'. Many Cambodians regard these feats with enormous pride, investing in an ancestral past that is viewed, as Jason Jayavarman puts it, as one of 'the most precious and beautiful on earth'.

Implicit within this construction of the past, however, is a sense of decline and a longing for a return to greatness ('we will be again forever!'). Despite an ebb and flow in the extent of the Angkorean empire's power (with a more pronounced ebb after Jayavarman VII's reign, which ended in the early thirteenth century), 1431 is often marked as the 'fall' of Angkor. At this time, an army from Ayudhya, a Thai polity that had been steadily increasing in power and was displacing Cambodia in regional pre-eminence, sacked Angkor; this precipitated a shift in the location of the Khmer capital southward to Udong, Lovek and eventually Phnom Penh. While the metaphor of a 'fall' sounds precipitous, the Khmer empire's diminished political influence was more gradual and accompanied by an increased emphasis on commerce and trade.²⁴ A few Khmer rulers were able to regain some of their polity's lost grandeur, but the Khmer kingdom increasingly fell into tributary status *vis-à-vis* its two neighbours, Ayudhya and a Vietnamese polity based in Hue.

This positioning between the jaws of the Thai 'tiger' and the Vietnamese 'crocodile' has proven pivotal in Cambodia's post-Angkorean history, as the Khmer court was split by in-fighting, rebellion and war. A dismal cycle began in which contending rivals for the

24 David P. Chandler, *A history of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview, 1983), ch. 5 and Anthony Barnett, 'Cambodia will never disappear', *New Left Review*, 180 (1990): 101–25.

throne would ask for backing from either the Thai or the Vietnamese, paying for this military patronage with money, land, manpower and foreign domination. The size and power of the kingdom shrank as the court lost territory and revenue, ultimately leading Cambodian kings to seek French protection from the encroachments of these neighbours. Cambodia became a French Protectorate in 1863. By this time, it had lost two key tracts of land that would feature prominently in later ethnonationalist discourse. The southeastern territories in the Mekong Delta (which Cambodians refer to as ‘lower Cambodia’ or *Kampuchea Krom*), including Saigon (which Cambodians still call by its Khmer name, Prey Nokor), gradually passed into Vietnamese hands beginning in the 1600s, while the northwestern provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap, which included Angkor Wat, came under Thai control in the 1790s.²⁵

Ironically, it was the French who ‘re-discovered’ Angkor Wat in the 1850s and helped construct many of its symbolic associations. While it had by no means been forgotten by Cambodians, Angkor Wat was remembered more for its significance as a site of ritual and pilgrimage than for its history. This historical ‘forgetting’ of Angkor Wat was partly due to the destruction of Cambodian archives in the post-Angkorean era, as David Chandler explains: ‘Surviving royal chronicles say nothing about Angkor except in garbled form; instead, they commence their allegedly historical as opposed to mythological sections with the founding of Ayudhya, in 1350!’²⁶

The French were more than happy to give the memory of this ‘lost civilization’ back to Cambodians. On the one hand, it helped fashion a historical legacy for the Cambodian colony they were creating – one with a fixed race, culture, language, religion, territory and heritage – as another piece of the French empire. This history also could be used to reassert claims over Angkor Wat and the lost northwestern provinces, which were returned to Cambodia by the 1907 Franco-Siamese Treaty. On the other hand, the ‘gift’ of Angkorean history fits with French colonial ideology, which legitimated its dominion as part of a ‘civilizing mission’. Invoking turn-of-the-century stage theory, the French depicted Cambodians as a ‘fallen’ race that had ‘degenerated’ into a child-like state of ‘ignorance’ and ‘primitivism’.²⁷ The French would help the child-like race regain some of its former grandeur through modernization, the restoration of its (now reinvented) traditions and reconstruction of the Angkorean past.

At the same time, the French also essentialized and eulogized certain aspects of the national character of this ‘fallen’ race. If Khmer were lazy, backward and ignorant, they could still be commended for their ‘gentle’ soul. Here we find an origin for the stereotype of Cambodians as a ‘gentle, smiling people’ who, as Penny Edwards has noted, came to be characterized as altruistic, peaceful and morally superior. This moral superiority was often justified in racial terms as the more ‘Aryan’ Khmer were contrasted to ‘yellow’ people, the “‘mendacious, dirty, thieving” Vietnamese and the “wily, greedy, heartless”

25 Chandler, *History of Cambodia*; and David Chandler, ‘The tragedy of Cambodian history’ and ‘The tragedy of Cambodian history revisited’, in *Facing the Cambodian past: Selected essays, 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm, 2000), pp. 297–309 and 310–25 respectively.

26 Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, p. 300; see also Barnett, ‘Cambodia will never disappear’.

27 Ibid. and Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French colonial ideology in architecture, film, and literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

Chinese'.²⁸ At least four key bundles of discourses – all of which are interrelated, at times contradictory and linked to Angkor – emerged from the French colonial period and would recur in subsequent Cambodian ethnonationalist rhetoric: a sense of grandeur, decline, the possibility of renewal and threat.²⁹

All of these discourses circulated during the 2003 riots. The protestors, for example, spray-painted 'Thai thieves' (*chaor Siem*) on the entrance of the Embassy, an image that signified the sense of threat and resentment many Cambodians felt towards Thailand. In the past, Khmer ethnonationalist rhetoric, drawing upon French colonial stereotypes, had more frequently depicted the Vietnamese (often referred to derogatorily as 'Yvon') as dangerous 'thieves', ranging from Khmer Rouge portrayals of the 'expansionist, annexationist Vietnamese' to contemporary Cambodian political party descriptions of the 'land swallowing' or 'infectious invading' Yvon 'germs'.³⁰ Indeed, several postings on the *Nation* webboard asserted that the Vietnamese were ultimately behind the anti-Thai riots and were one of the causes of Cambodia's lack of development. Thus, Sovann Jandara (#77) asserted:

Hun Sen is Vietnamese puppet government. . . . So the nation behind this part of the riot and destroying the relationship of Cambodia and Thailand, I think Hanoi is responsible. . . . I am sure there was a lot of Vietnamese attending the riot. . . . There were a lot of them from my area went to join it.³¹

As the 'Thai thieves' spray-painting suggests, however, the Thai have also been viewed as a threatening foreign Other, one that may provoke strong emotions among Khmer. A number of Khmer postings on the discussion board inveighed against the Thai, such as the following one written by 'Khmer Blood' (#178):

I think Thailand is Cambodia's bad friend. Thai soldiers always kill Khmer people along the border and invade into our beloved Cambodian territory. . . . I am Khmer. I really love my

28 Penny Edwards, 'Imaging the Other in Cambodian nationalist discourse before and during the UNTAC period', in *Propaganda, politics, and violence in Cambodia*, ed. Steve Heder and Judy Legerwood (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 54.

29 Ibid.; Barnett, 'Cambodia will never disappear'; Chandler, 'Tragedy' and 'Tragedy . . . revisited'.

30 Edwards 'Imaging the Other', p. 68 (germs); on the Khmer Rouge see Alexander Hinton, *Why did they kill? Cambodia in the shadow of genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

31 This perspective was spelled out in more detail in an online essay by Khemara Jati in which Vietnam is depicted as the central mover in the riots, manipulating its proxy Hun Sen at will: 'We have just learned that there is serious negotiations in this moment for an American base installation in Thailand in order to fight against terrorism. It is very clear then. The destruction of the Thai embassy on January 29 is a warning of Hanoi against a possible agreement between Bangkok and Washington of the US base installation to fight against terrorism. Then the Chea Sophara dismissal covers another character. Besides moving the Vietnamese districts away of Phnom Penh, Sophara sold a significant piece of land by its dimensions and its site for the US embassy installation in Phnom Penh. For Hanoi it is just unacceptable. . . . Thus, by the destruction of the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh on January 29, 2003, the Vietnamese communists send serious signals to Bangkok and to Washington, saying that they are against the nearest installation of this US base, in Thailand, to fight against terrorism. . . . Pretending to ignore of these facts is to condemn itself to bury one's head in the sand: to close the eyes to try to escape to the enemy, the reality of facts. The Vietnamese communists domination on our Motherland is so obvious that Hanoi does not find anybody any more to defend its positions.' See Khemara Jati, 'Back to the destruction of the Thai Embassy on January 29, 2003', published on camnews@cambodia.org, 18 June 2003 (quotation reproduced verbatim).

people and my country. When I was in Thailand last year, Thai people did not respect me and looked down on me when they knew I'm Khmer. WHY? WHY? We are all human being even we are different nations but everything those thais did to me make me feel badly and hate Thais. Thailand is Cambodian enemy forever.

Like the comments of other Khmer posters, these remarks illustrate the fact that many Cambodians strongly believe that the Thai 'tiger', like the Vietnamese 'crocodile', covets Cambodian territory. If the French reinvented Cambodia's historical trajectory in terms of Angkor and gave the Thai a prominent role in the demise and territorial diminishment of the empire, a number of twentieth-century events reinforced the idea of a continued Thai desire to annex Cambodian land. As recently as the start of World War Two, for example, Thailand 'swallowed' a large chunk of Cambodia, taking back Battambang and most of Siem Reap (though not Angkor Wat) at the end of the Franco-Siamese conflict.³² While Bangkok returned the territories in 1947, the annexation occurred at a key moment in the Cambodian independence movement and contributed to ethnonationalist misgivings about Thai intentions.

This history also figured prominently in Vannak's account of the anti-Thai riots. When I asked him how Cambodians view Thais, he replied that many had a negative perception because Thais had taken Cambodian territory and mistreated Cambodians during periods of Thai 'colonialism' in their country. He said that the Thai had even stolen Cambodian script and later tried to claim that 'Cambodia had stolen the letters from the Thai!' To highlight the scheming and dangerous nature of Thais and the long-standing historical animosity between the two neighbours, Vannak then mentioned the story of Preah Ko (the Sacred Cow) and Preah Kaev (the Sacred Crystal) – a legend that was also mentioned in relation to the riots by Rith, one of the young men from Phnom Penh whom I interviewed. While there are numerous stories associated with these two sacred statues, both Vannak and Rith mentioned a variant linked to the downfall of the Cambodian capital of Lovek towards the end of the sixteenth century. In this legend, the Thai king is able to capture Lovek and take possession of the two statues, which contain books filled with sacred knowledge. To breach the dense bamboo fortifications surrounding Lovek, the Thai fire cannons full of coins into this bamboo forest. After the Thai retreat, the Cambodians cut down the bamboo to get the coins, thereby enabling the Thai to sack Lovek upon their return. At this time, the Thai took the statues, and the wealth of knowledge they contained, back to Siam.³³

After recounting this legend, Rith noted that the story of Preah Kor and Preah Kaev 'is a very matter to the Cambodian people. . . . The story tell of the Thai strategy to take our Cambodian base. . . . They took over Cambodian territory and killed many people.'³⁴ For Cambodians like Vannak and Rith, this highly symbolic legend condenses a number of referents: a history of Thai invasion, trickery and aggression; Cambodia's loss of knowledge and resulting inferiority to Thailand; and its decline and weakness in relationship to its neighbour after the fall of Lovek. The legend continues to be taught in schools

32 David Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, 3rd edn (Boulder: Westview, 2000), pp. 166, 174.

33 Ibid., p. 85; on the legend see Ang Chouléan, 'Nandin, vehicle and god', in *Sculpture of Angkor and ancient Cambodia: Millennium of glory*, ed. Helen Ibbitson Jessup and Thierry Zephir (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1997), pp. 62–9.

34 Interview, 9 Jan. 2006.

and has been invoked by politicians, as in the early 1960s when Prince Sihanouk had the National Theatre perform the story, which was broadcast on radio throughout the country over several nights.³⁵

This particular performance was linked to a territorial dispute that broke out in 1958 when Thailand seized control of Preah Vihear (known as Phra Wihan or Khao Phra Viharn in Thai), a tenth-century Angkorean temple located up a steep ravine in the Dangrek Mountains just a short distance from the border, where access to the temple is much easier from the Thai side. The events surrounding the seizure bear some uncanny similarities to the 2003 anti-Thai riots, with border closings, severed diplomatic ties, accusations and denunciations, military posturing and a violent protest over the temple by 10,000 Thais who menaced the Cambodian Embassy. The following year Cambodia filed suit for sovereignty of the temple in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which decided the case in its favour in 1962.³⁶ Once again mass protests erupted in Thailand, and the country initially refused to hand over the temple to Cambodia. Even when they finally acquiesced, the Thai interior minister said: 'History will remember this day as the day we lost our sovereignty over the shrine', adding that the Thai flag would soon be 'back where it belongs'.³⁷ Other Thais, including government officials, have made similar remarks over the years about Preah Vihear as well as the 'lost territories' (Battambang and Siem Reap) and Angkor Wat. Not surprisingly, such comments have convinced many Cambodians that Thais are still plotting to seize their land.³⁸

Cambodia greeted the decision with celebrations, and in early January 1963 Sihanouk formally retook possession of the temple in a festive ceremony.³⁹ (Diplomatic relations between the two countries, which were broken off in 1961, nevertheless remained severed for several years afterward.) Most Cambodians took great pride in this 'victory' over Thailand, and Preah Vihear's enhanced symbolic importance in terms of

35 Ang Chouléan, 'Nandin', p. 67.

36 On the ICJ case see David Chandler, *The tragedy of Cambodian history: Politics, war and revolution since 1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 98; 'World Court backs Cambodia; Thailand told to quit temple', *New York Times* (henceforth *NYT*), 16 June 1962; Norodom Sihanouk, *War and hope: The case for Cambodia* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 55. The court's ruling is at <http://www.icj-cij.org/icjwww/idecisions/isummaries/ictsummary620615.htm>. The Bangkok protests are covered in '10,000 Thais in riot', 'Thailand closes Cambodian border' and 'Thais to resume Cambodian ties', *NYT*, 8 Sept. 1958, 26 Nov. 1958 and 7 Feb. 1959 respectively. A scholarly study of the Preah Vihear issue is Peter Cuasay, 'Borders on the fantastic: Mimesis, violence, and landscape at the temple of Preah Vihear', *Modern Asian Studies*, 32, 4 (1998): 849–90.

37 Quotation from 'Thailand yields sovereignty over temple to Cambodia', *NYT*, 16 July 1962; see also 'Thai vows to fight to retain temple', *NYT*, 17 June 1962, and Charles F. Keyes, 'The case of the purloined lintel: The politics of a Khmer shrine as a Thai national treasure', in *National identity and its defenders: Thailand, 1939–1989*, ed. Craig R. Reynolds (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1991), pp. 261–91.

38 The sensitivity of this issue is illustrated by a more recent letter to the *Bangkok Post* written by Cambodia's ambassador to Thailand, which complained about an article implying that Preah Vihear is located in Thailand (Ung Sean, 'Preah Vihear is Cambodian', *BP*, 17 Sept. 2004, posted on camnews.cambodia.org). Likewise, a recent coffee-table book on 'Khmer art and architecture in Thailand' includes a substantial entry on Preah Vihear: Smitthi Siribhandra and Elisabeth Moore, *Palaces of the gods: Khmer art and architecture in Thailand* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992). On such 'politics of ruins', see Maurizio Peleggi, *The politics of ruins and the business of nostalgia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2002).

39 'Peaceful overture held in Cambodia at disputed shrine; reconciliation invited', *NYT*, 8 Jan. 1963.

Khmer identity and sovereignty began to resonate with that of Angkor Wat in many ways. It is likely that if Morning Star's alleged remarks had been about Preah Vihear, Cambodians would have responded with similar outrage.

Numerous other border disputes with the Thai have taken place since the ICJ decision, including border skirmishes, accusations over the movement of boundary markers, controversy over Thai support of the Khmer Rouge and other rebel groups opposing the Vietnamese-backed Peoples' Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) regime, competing claims on other temples located near the border and disagreements over land and water rights. Interestingly, there were a number of on-going disputes with Thailand in the months before the 2003 riots, including one involving Preah Vihear. From 1993–98, the temple was held by the Khmer Rouge with Thai support. In fact, the Khmer Rouge had originally taken the temple by sneaking through Thai territory (since it would have been nearly impossible to take the temple from the steep, heavily mined approach on Cambodian soil). When Cambodian government officials returned to the temple in 1998, they were met not just by Khmer Rouge defectors but by Thai military personnel, including a general.⁴⁰

The temple was reopened shortly thereafter, but Cambodia had to involve Thailand in the management of the temple due to the issue of accessibility. On 11 June 2000, tourism officials from the two countries reached an agreement giving Thailand partial management over the temple; the following month, however, the agreement was annulled and the Cambodian minister of tourism sacked after a public outcry over the ceding of even some control of the temple.⁴¹ Tensions over the temple escalated on 17 December 2001, when the Thai Army closed the border because of a sewage problem from the market vendors, effectively shutting down tourism there. Cambodia responded by sending hundreds of troops to Preah Vihear and accelerating efforts to build a road link on its side of the border and to de-mine the ascent to the temple. Some Cambodians viewed this closing as yet another Thai encroachment. Interestingly, Chea Sophara, the mayor of Phnom Penh who was 'reassigned' after the 2003 riots, was outraged by the border closing and spearheaded efforts to build the road link, support the vendors and construct a Cambodian village near the temple.⁴² Vannak recalled, 'Chea Sophara was trying to create a relationship between Phnom Penh and Preah Vihear a year or two before the riots. . . . He called for investment and was working to build up the local market and the road leading to Preah Vihear in order to attract tourists.'

Rith, who directly linked the 2003 riots to the disputes over Preah Vihear, told me that a song entitled 'Preah Vihear Temple', which he thought might even have been written by Chea Sophara, had been produced during the year before the riots. The lyrics of the song construct Preah Vihear as a symbol of Khmer ancestry, history and territory

40 'Preah Vihear: The jewel in the crown', *PPP*, 10 Apr. 1998.

41 'Preah Vihear dispute claims new victim', *PPP*, 20 July 2001.

42 Jody McPhilips and Phann Ana, 'Cultural frontiers: Cambodia determined to find own route to development in Preah Vihear', 30–31 Mar. 2002, (http://www.camnet.com.kh/Cambodia.daily/selected_features/temple.htm, accessed 4 June 2004); 'Border deadline passes', *PPP*, 4 Jan. 4 2002. On a similar dispute that broke out in May 2005, see 'Troops will remain at border' and 'Phnom Penh closes Khao Phra Viharn ruins: Gate ordered shut pending negotiations', *BP*, 15 and 20 May 2005 respectively (articles posted on camnews@cambodia.org).

while emphasizing the national love and responsibility for the temple. It concludes with the line, 'If you want to come seek my love, I will tell you that I already have a master/protector.' Both Rith and his colleague Sok interpreted this line as a warning to Thailand, which, they said, covets Preah Vihear like a person in love. They added that, while the song had already gained some popularity prior to the 2003 riot, it became a huge hit afterward and was often sung in karaoke bars.⁴³ One wonders if Chea Sophara's ouster was tied partly to his prominent role in the dispute over Preah Vihear, as the Cambodian government tried to satisfy Thai demands that those responsible be held accountable by removing the official who not only was in charge of Phnom Penh, where the violence took place, but had also irritated the Thais with his actions and nationalist rhetoric concerning the temple.

Thailand's border closure, which shut down most tourism at Preah Vihear, continued through the months leading up to the riots (the crossing was reopened in June 2003 after Thailand and Cambodia had normalized relations), a period rife with other border-related incidents. These incidents, some of which were mentioned in postings on the *Nation* webboard, included: a January accusation by the Students' Movement for Democracy that Thailand and Vietnam were moving border markers; April 2002 accusations that Thai soldiers had painted or placed Thai flags on two Cambodian temples in Oddar Meanchey; a May complaint by King Sihanouk about Vietnamese and Thai 'land grabs'; Thailand's sudden and unexplained closing of a border crossing into Banteay Meanchey in July; and a November human rights report claiming that Thai border guards had laid a 'landmine trap' and fired upon Cambodians who had illegally crossed the border the previous month, killing five and wounding six.⁴⁴

In January, just days before the *Rasmei Angkor* article about Morning Star was published, reports emerged that Cambodia had claimed two temples (Sdok Kok Thom and Ta Muen Thom) on the border. While denied by the Cambodian government, the rumour stimulated renewed Thai interest in the temples, including a new de-mining effort at Sdok Kok Thom. Similarly, the 16 January issue of *Rasmei Kampuchea* carried several stories (two on the front page) about Preah Vihear, including Chea Sopheara's efforts to develop the area around the temple and increase the links between it and Phnom Penh. This series of events provides a sense of the tense border relations prior to the riots, tensions heightened further by on-going disputes over maritime border delineation and the continuing Thai closure of the crossing at Preah Vihear. The disputes constitute an important backdrop to the riots and an important source of the protestors' anger towards Thailand, suggesting a reason why the Cambodian government may have been so slow in responding to the violence.

This anger had other sources as well, however, such as a broader perception that the 'Thai thieves' have frequently taken advantage of, abused and looked down upon Cambodians. For example, while some Cambodians remain grateful for the opportunity to seek refuge in Thailand during and after the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–79), others point out that the Thais often treated these refugees poorly. Thus, 'To Thai' (#168), stated:

43 Interviews, Jan. 2006.

44 Unless otherwise noted, the following incidents are reported on the following Website: <http://www.geocities.com/khmerchronology/2002>. 'Border deadline passes' discusses the January incident. On the violence at the border see 'Thai border guards set "mine trap" for Cambodians', *PPP*, 8 Nov. 2002.

Cambodian suffered enough to the point the riot took place last week in Thai embassy. To those who said Thai help Cambodian a lot is a wrong claim. your attitude to the refugees who escaped Cambodia, under Khmer Rouge, were sent back to the Khmer Rouge's killing machine. . . . The second wave, in 1979, gathering refugees, robbed them and send back down Phnom Dangrek resulted thousands death by steppin on landmine, some were shot by thai soldiers on the top. Refugees who lived along the border have disputed with Thai people about their trade were bombed by military airplane and shelled by Thai artillery. As refugees living in the camp, set up by UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], was surrounded by barbed wire made by Thai soldiers and Khmer refugees in there were mistreated by Thai authority, some was kicked, some was beaten just learning English or holding English book in their hand. The new refugees who tried to get in the camp were shot to death. There were many mistreatment beyond description that Thai did to Cambodian. Even currently, along the border there were incidents had happened many time, Cambodia was shot to death and blamed as robbers This just few example that Thai must review their attitude and stop looking down the people of your neighbors and act arrogant.

Along with a reference to the 2002 'landmine trap' incident, 'To Thai' remarks upon an infamous event – 'khmer kickboxer, kun khmer' (#2) refers to it as 'the dangrek genocide' – that took place at the Preah Vihear border crossing on 8 June 1979 after tens of thousands of Cambodians had crossed into Thailand seeking asylum. On this day, Thai soldiers began deporting 45,000 of these refugees, who were forced at gunpoint down the heavily mined and booby-trapped mountain below Preah Vihear. Many of the Cambodians were killed or injured during their descent down the ravine; some were even robbed or shot by Thai soldiers.⁴⁵ As 'To Thai' notes, those Cambodians who were allowed to remain on Thai soil in camps were sometimes abused by their Thai guards and administrators, who wielded enormous power over them and, ironically, often profited from local trade and the international aid pouring into the camps. Thai soldiers and businessmen also benefited from trade with various Cambodian 'resistance groups', including the Khmer Rouge, who sometimes operated from Thai soil and were receiving international support to battle the PRK regime.

Such profiteering increased after the 1988 election of businessman-turned-politician Chatichai Choonhawan as prime minister of Thailand. Chatichai initiated a new policy of transforming the Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese 'battlefields into marketplaces' for Thailand. In the following years, particularly after the 1993 Cambodian election, trade with Cambodia expanded on a number fronts, ranging from legal (the export of Thai building materials, manufactured goods, television programming, telecommunications, foodstuffs) to semi-legal (gambling and the extraction of Cambodian natural resources such as timber and precious stones) to illegal (money laundering, human trafficking and the smuggling of drugs, stolen cars, liquor, antiques and

45 'Thais deport 30,000 Cambodians while others continue to arrive', and 'Cambodia says Thai troops killed 300 refugees forced over border', *NYT*, 12 and 23 June 1979 respectively; William Shawcross, *The quality of mercy: Cambodia, holocaust and modern conscience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 88.

cigarettes).⁴⁶ Thai investment in Cambodia also increased dramatically, as Thai-owned or Thai-backed hotels, restaurants, factories, telecommunications firms, airlines, casinos and other businesses proliferated. The destruction of some of these Thai businesses during the riots was linked to the perception that the 'Thai robbers' were at it again, taking advantage of Cambodia's position of weakness to siphon money out of the country. As 'Thai/Khmer' (#91) put it, 'The Thai businesses in Cambodia are beneficial to the Cambodian people, but it's the Thais that gain the most out of it. They reap the profits.'

This 'economic imperialism' was accompanied by a 'cultural imperialism' of sorts, as Thai music, movies, cosmetics, fashion designs, shopping centres, soap operas, architectural styles, packaged foods, tourism and 'stars' (like Morning Star) became increasingly popular in Cambodia. Many people resented this new form of Thai 'domination', arguing for a return to authentic Khmer 'values'. Thus, while explaining that 'Thailand is Cambodian historical enemy' because of 'the old ideal of Siam annexing Cambodian territories piece by piece' and the 'past problems of Thailand putting Thai flags over Khmer temple and chased innocent civilian away from their villages and use it as new borderline between khmer and Siam', Sopinil Bunchoeurn (#175) called for an end to 'showing low qualities entertainment in cambodia. Many people did not enjoy it. Disgrace, It is Cambodia it is not Thailand . . . we are poorer than Thailand, but it doesn't mean we are that low to have Thai cultures dominated us.'

For many Cambodians, the fear of being culturally and economically dominated is intermingled with a strong belief that the Thai 'imperialists' also look down upon them. Several Khmer postings on the *Nation* webboard, like that of 'Khmer Blood', related personal anecdotes about how they were treated in a disrespectful manner by Thai, and many more complained about Thai condescension. Vannak, for example, complained that when Thai parents get angry with their children, they sometimes ask them, 'Were you born a Khmer?' He explained, 'When their children do something bad it means they are Cambodian. . . . Bad children are only Cambodian, good ones only Thai.' Similarly, when he attended a conference in Bangkok, he felt undertones of condescension that would be expressed indirectly, such as when a Thai participant said it was amazing that Khmer killed Khmer during the Khmer Rouge regime, thereby implying that Cambodians were worse or less civilized than Thais.

Such perceptions were borne out by some of the Thai comments on the discussion board, which characterized Cambodians as: 'undeveloped', 'stone age', 'primitive' and 'uncivilized' (e.g., anonymous [#67]: 'no wonder their country is still in the stone age'); deceptive and untrustworthy (e.g., 'Thai patriot' [#146]: 'I will never trust them again. I pledge'); 'barbaric' (e.g., 'Tenthpin' [#89]: 'Now you have crossed the line. Burning the embassy was barbaric and should be dealt as such. Now you stupid mob, wait until our commandos get there. Killing Field Part 2!'); 'violent' (e.g., Wanyda S. [#137]: 'Clearly, the riot happend in Phanom Penh showing . . . that people has less education and prefer violence'); passively manipulated, child-like, and stupid ('Outrage Thai' [#13]: 'Cambodians have been cursed, and it will never be developed as long as its people are still stupid and are used as domestic political pupetteers. Well, what can we expect from a country in which escalators have just been used for the first time last month?');

46 Lindsay French, 'Hierarchies of value at Angkor Wat', *Ethnos*, 64, 2 (1999): 170–91 and French, 'From politics to economics at the Thai-Cambodian border: *Plus ça change . . .*', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 15, 3 (2002): 427–70.

and a source of Thailand's social problems (e.g., Rattanawadee [#6]: 'Please expel the beggars . . . the Cambodian refugee out out out' or 'Castor vk' [#56]: 'a big portion of our social problems come from them [crime, drugs, the list goes on and on]).

To be fair, some Thai postings protested such characterizations and called for greater mutual understanding, as did some Khmer postings. Nevertheless, by constructing Cambodians in such a manner, many of the Thai respondents asserted their own national identity through an opposition, as illustrated by the remarks of Naowarat (#46):

That Hun Sen is no better than Pol Pot and his lot. The Khmer are vicious people. They have never been sincere with the Thais. It's us who always forgive them since the Khao Pra Viharn incident. Our hearts bled for them when they were slaughtered by their fellow countrymen. We helped them in every way we could. But deep down, they never did like us. They will always be ungrateful to us. . . . Despite all these, we must realize that they don't know any better. . . . We should continue to forgive them, but always bearing in mind that we must never trust them.

Implicit within such comments is a construction of the Thai as gentle and calm people (unlike the 'vicious' Khmer who slaughter each other), forgiving and generous (unlike the Khmer ingrates, who are insincere and cannot be trusted), and 'civilized' and 'developed' (unlike the backward Khmer who 'don't know any better'). Such comments also depict Thai as the true Buddhists, manifesting mindfulness, compassion and forgiveness, in opposition to the 'wild' Khmer.

Such discourses about Cambodians are partly linked to Siam's encounter with modernity, as Thai rulers began to contrast the Thai to the 'uncivilized' Khmer living on the outskirts of the kingdom.⁴⁷ Some later Thai scholars even attempted to co-opt the Angkorean legacy by claiming that it was a vanquished ethnic group called the 'Khom', not the Khmer, who had built Angkor Wat and the other great Angkorean temples. Thai contempt for and mistrust of Cambodians is also embodied in the legend of Phraya Lavek, which tells how in the sixteenth century, after the Cambodian ruler launched a surprise attack on Ayudhya, Thai King Naresuan took revenge by beheading and washing his feet in the blood of the Khmer King.⁴⁸

Conclusion: Reinventing Khmerness and the Thai 'Other'

Like the Thai, the Khmer discussants on the *Nation* webboard (and the Cambodian rioters in the street) drew upon a pool of discourses and symbols to construct meaning and negotiate identity in a given social context and historical moment. These constructions involved a debate over authenticity, as Khmer defended their heritage – and thus a key component of their identity – against the encroachments of the Thai 'Other' that had

47 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: A history of the geo-body of a nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Peleggi, *Politics of ruins* discusses the role that ruins have played in the formation of modern Thai nationalist identity.

48 Puangthong Rungswasdisab, *Thailand's response to the Cambodian genocide* (New Haven: Yale Genocide Studies Working Paper, 1999); on Thai reconstructions of Angkorean history see Bora Touch, 'A Khmer view of the Thai view of the Khmer', *PPP*, 17 Sept. 1999; Charnvit Kasetsiri, 'Thailand-Cambodia: A love-hate relationship', *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 3 (2003), (http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue2/article_242_p.html, accessed 11 July, 2004); and Keyes, 'Case of the purloined lintel'. See also 'Journalism curbing racial hatred: Cambodian media calls for more caution in news coverage', *BP*, 15 June 2005 (posted on camnews@cambodia.org, accessed 22 Feb. 2006).

in the past and present laid claim to their land and tradition. From this vantage point, the Thai 'Other' becomes a foil to reinvent Khmerness, as illustrated by the comments of 'Thai/Khmer' (#91):

My mother was Thai, but I don't agree with how many educated Thais still try to convince their youngsters that Angkor Wat belongs to Thai. I read many Thai written materials claiming that Angkor Wat is Thai's. Also, I was upset for the fact that many thais claim that the Cambodian multi-tiered roofs of the Cambodian buddhist temples are copying from Thai's buddhist temples. Please, look at the Cambodian ancient temples which predated the Thai temples, so many of them has multi-tiered roofs. Please use your own judgements and make research before believing anybody. Also, the Thai traditional dance, it's originally copying [from] the Khmer. The thai people advertise to the world that it's 'Thai dance' without giving credit to the Khmer. By not accepting where they got things from, to me, these Thais are disrespecting the Khmers.

Here 'Thai/Khmer', like other Cambodian participants, asserts an 'authentic' Khmer identity by fending off devious and unjust Thai claims to the Angkorean legacy, ranging from Angkor Wat itself to associated architectural styles and dance; other Khmer postings added Thai kingship and kickboxing to the list, while Rith and Sok mentioned traditional Khmer music and the dish *amok*. By characterizing the Thai 'Other' as deceptive, unjust, devious, arrogant and malicious, the Khmer construct themselves in an opposite fashion as the noble 'children of Angkor' ('Komnit Khmer', #65) who embody goodness and occupy a morally superior position, even in their current state of decline. These discourses of Khmer identity, which are partly linked to French colonial imagery, are sometimes tinged with a sort of noble innocence and sense of tragedy that both explain away their current state of demise and offer the hope of renewal.⁴⁹ For even if the Thai have attained a higher level of economic development, their 'tawdry' goods pale in comparison to the glories of Angkor and thus the Khmer. Several postings imply that it is precisely by rejecting Thai products and embracing what is authentically Khmer that Cambodia may regain its grandeur.

Suwanan Kongying occupies an interesting symbolic position in this regard. On the one hand, she personifies a number of qualities that contributed to her popularity in Cambodia. Both in real life and in her character, Suwanan, whom Thai journalists have likened to a 'Thai Julia Roberts' or a 'soap opera Helen of Troy', embodies an appealing 'rags-to-riches' story and many of the qualities of the ideal Cambodian woman, or *srey kruap leak* ('perfectly virtuous woman'). If the character of Morning Star represents the 'values of hard work, gratitude and gentleness', Suwanan's own rise to fame is attributed to her hard work and virtuous comportment as a person who 'does not smoke, does not drink, does not spend the night out at bars and dresses properly'.⁵⁰ Moreover, as a star

49 Barnett, 'Cambodia will never disappear'; Chandler, *Facing the past*; Edwards, 'Imaging the Other'.

50 Suwanan's character is discussed in Thanong Khanthong, 'OVERDRIVE: Suwanan is a soap-opera Helen of Troy', *The Nation*, 31 July 2003 (http://www.nationmultimedia.com/specials/Cambodia_riot/ED_helen.php, accessed 20 June 2004) and 'Editorial: Lessons on the power of a Thai Julia Roberts', *The Nation*, 1 Feb. 2003 (http://www.nationmultimedia.com/specials/Cambodia_riot/ED_julia.php, accessed 20 June 2004). On the ideal Cambodian woman see Judy Ledgerwood, 'Politics and gender: Negotiating conceptions of the ideal woman in present day Cambodia', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 37, 2 (1996): 139–52.

from Thailand, a relatively 'developed' country, Suvanan signifies the modernity longed for by many Cambodians, particularly the educated, urban youths involved in the riots. This modernity is manifest both in her own hairstyle, dress, wealth, beauty, glamour and possessions and in the 'modern' social space in which she and her characters live. Prior to the disputes she was also a commodity that could sell in Cambodia and was therefore given commercial endorsements, including a deal to represent a 'modern' Thai cosmetics line that was about to be launched in Cambodia when her alleged remarks were published.

On the other hand, Suvanan as an actress could also potentially be exposed as a charlatan and come to signify the inauthentic. Her alleged comments, making claims on Angkor Wat and disparaging Khmer as being lower than dogs, seemingly revealed that everything she had done was an act and that, at root, she was really one of the arrogant 'Thai thieves' who laid false claims to Khmer lands and heritage.⁵¹ Moreover, Suvanan's association with 'the modern' contained a flip side, as she could readily be linked with a 'lack' and a 'decline' (in terms of what Cambodia once was, no longer has and secretly covets) and an economic and cultural 'invasion' that threatens to overwhelm authentic Khmer traditions and thus Khmer identity itself.

Such discourses and symbolism were manifest in the performative aspects of the anti-Thai riots as the protesters manufactured categories of identity and difference. One of the most overt displays was the marking of Thai as 'thieves'. While this association had been clearly made beforehand through media commentary and Hun Sen's remarks about 'Theft Star', it was literally displayed by the spray-painted inscriptions of 'Thai thieves' on the Embassy walls. More figuratively, this characterization was enacted through the riot itself. Through their demonstrative acts and, ultimately, their assault on the Embassy, the most prominent icon of Thailand and Thainess in Cambodia, the protesters symbolically portrayed themselves as 'defenders' of Cambodian sovereignty and territory. The 'conquest' of the Embassy was a symbolic rout of these 'enemy invaders'; in fact, many of the protesters screamed 'victory to Kampuchea' during the riot. Interestingly, a *Phnom Penh Post* photo collage of the riots includes a shot of several youths victoriously parading a sculpted image of Angkor Wat that had been 'reclaimed' from the looted Embassy.⁵²

By ransacking the elaborate 'Thai-style' building, the protesters were also making a symbolic repudiation of the perceived inauthenticity, economic and cultural imperialism and arrogance of the 'Thai thieves'. This repudiation was enacted in other ways as well, ranging from the destruction of Thai businesses (symbols of economic domination) to

51 Interestingly, a couple of years earlier a Thai pop star, Nicole Theriault, was the centre of another controversy for having allegedly having described Laos 'as a 'dirty' nation and not worth visiting' ('Pop star hits the wrong note', *Asiaweek*, 28 Apr. 2006, <http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/magazine/2000/0428/as.people.html>, accessed 9 July 2004). This earlier incident may have contributed to a willingness to believe that Thai stars like Suvanan were really arrogant fakes. The 'Nicole' controversy was mentioned by Norak (#85), a Thai commentator on the webboard who stated that rumours about Suvanan (whom he refers to by her Thai nickname, 'Kob') had been in circulation well before the *Rasmei Angkor* story broke: 'I also hear stories about Kob making inappropriate remarks with regards to Cambodia two other times before – one where she said she doesn't like Cambodian kids and the other is that she doesn't want to ever be born a Cambodian. I don't know whether these stories are true but the people who told me said they have proofs. And until I see the proofs, I won't believe these either.'

52 'Mobs go berserk'.

the rejection of 'Theft Star' and other Thai media images, fashions and consumer goods (symbols of a perceived cultural assault). Besides Hun Sen's explicit call for a ban on Thai soap operas, there were also movements for a boycott of Thai goods.

Through a resurgence of national pride in Cambodia and its traditions, the protesters were also mitigating the feelings of inferiority and lack that the Thai 'Other' could engender. In a sense, the riot was also a performative assertion of Cambodia's perceived lost grandeur, as the Khmer once again 'defeated' the Thai, heaping scorn upon this arrogant yet inferior neighbour through the assault on its Embassy, sacred icons (treading upon pictures of the King and burning the Thai flag and a picture of the queen), imperialist structures and institutions (Thai businesses, media programming, and products), and its symbolic representatives, such as Morning Star (upon whom scorn was heaped through the insulting imagery on the mocked-up posters and phrases in student slogans and poems).

Through such actions, the rioters also symbolically took revenge.⁵³ Vannak noted two key motives behind this anger: first, the belief that the Embassy in Bangkok had been burned and Cambodians injured; and, second, anger over the long history of conflict between the two countries:

Angkor temple is the soul of Cambodia and represents [our national] spirit. Angkor is even displayed in the flag. It is a symbol of Cambodia and it was captured by the Thai. Also Cambodians feel that they endured a lot of suffering from the Thai. And when just a film star say something [like that], you know, it insults Cambodians, and that's why they got upset and took revenge.

Such status issues, which dominated much of the discussion on the webboard, took centre-stage in the events that took place before, during and after the riots, beginning with Morning Star's alleged remarks and Hun Sen's reply that she was worth less than a clump of grass at Angkor and continuing into March with his complaint that Cambodia had been forced to 'bow down' to Thailand. Vannak recalled that after the riots many Cambodians said that the violence had a positive side in that it served as a warning to Thais that 'Cambodia is not as weak as you thought. They are strong now . . . [and] can protect their culture and their heritage. And Cambodia will not accept any bad words or insults from other countries.' In addition, the riots reversed the flood of Thai products into Cambodia, ranging from suits and socks to toothbrushes and movies – a reversal that has enabled Cambodians 'to show their culture', a return to the authentic.

Hun Sen's rhetoric illustrates how inflammatory speech may elicit strong reactions among a general populace, particularly when it draws upon powerful, emotion-laden discourses and symbolism – as was the case with the 2003 riots, with their invocations of foreign threat, the Angkorean legacy and Khmer national pride. Such ethnonationalist themes, which are partly rooted in French colonial ideology, have been prominent in Cambodian politics, playing into the hands of demagogues who tap into the nascent prejudices, insecurities and fears of their constituents. These leaders gain political support by casting blame and redirecting anger onto enemy 'Others' who are, as

53 See also Alexander Hinton, 'A head for an eye: Revenge in the Cambodian genocide', *American Ethnologist*, 25, 3 (1998): 52–77.

the Khmer Rouge so often stated, portrayed as 'burrowing from within'. In recent Cambodian political history, such ethnonationalist demagogues have portrayed themselves as saviours who can eradicate this contaminating scourge and lead the more 'pure' Khmer back to their perceived lost grandeur.

Even as they invoke such imagery of 'us' and 'them', however, these leaders are reinventing tradition, reworking a powerful set of images to fit the present. In the context of the current moment, as exemplified by the 2003 riots, the foreign 'Other' is being reimagined to mesh into Cambodia's rapid encounter with capitalist modernity and democracy, as these 'Others' are associated with a 'development' that is simultaneously both desired and perceived as threatening. Cambodian leaders are all too often playing upon local discontents, inflaming suspicions that various socio-political problems (poverty, the lack of desired commodities, land disputes, food shortages, problematic political reforms) and an overall lack of 'progress' are somehow attributable to foreign 'Others'. If the sacking of the Thai Embassy is one of the latest examples of ethnonationalist 'Othering', we will no doubt see further invocations of such imagery in the future.

To conclude, however, I want to emphasize that it would be a mistake to view the 'masses' as blind followers of such demagogues. While these leaders may powerfully influence their followers, the Cambodian people are not simply their passive and obedient minions, another Orientalizing image that is linked to the French colonial legacy.⁵⁴ As the comments on the *Nation* webboard suggest, each person constructs meaning and identity out of the pool of available discourses and symbolism, doing so in ways that are both distinct, and that share family resemblances. Thus, though I have emphasized imagery of the threatening foreign 'Other' in this article, there were alternative streams of discourses, from both Thai and Khmer, such as those calling for peace and understanding, often through an invocation of Buddhism. While acknowledging the power of the ethnonationalist demagogues, their media outlets and their invocations of discourses linked to an imagined past, we would do well to keep in mind that such influence is not hegemonic. Cambodians like Vannak, Rith and those participating in the web-discussion critically reflect upon events like the 2003 anti-Thai riots as they unfold, and, in the process, creatively construct meaning and identity.

54 See the article by Penny Edwards in this issue.