

The Politics of Gifts: Tradition and Regimentation in Contemporary Cambodia

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This paper seeks to elucidate the symbolic and coercive dimensions of gift-giving in contemporary Cambodia. It is argued that gift-giving is enacted in such a way as to make self-conscious references to aspects of Cambodian 'tradition', but that these references are less important, in compelling assent, than the overt sense of threat that accompanies the donation of gifts. It is argued that the hitching of traditions of giving to mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion is widely rejected as lacking in any kind of cultural legitimacy, but that there are few opportunities available for the poor to make such rejection explicit. In this circumstance, acceptance of practices of regimentation as 'traditional' represents a strategy of surrender, rather than a culturally induced response.

Since the beginning of Cambodia's economic and political reform process around 1989, two entwined imperatives have emerged for the central government: the need to extract material resources and the need to win votes. This paper examines the strategies used by the current ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), to fulfil these two goals, with particular focus upon the giving of gifts by national-level politicians (the 'high level' or *tnak loeu*) to individual voters or communities.¹ The giving of gifts, as performed by the CPP in post-reform Cambodia, offers an interesting exemplar of use of invented traditions, as Eric Hobsbawm defines the term, in an attempt to imbue with customary legitimacy policies of resource extraction that in recent years have amounted to the rampant dispossession of the rural poor through privatization and expropriation of land and natural resources.² Legitimation has been pursued both to overcome actual or potential

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1 Other parties aside from the CPP engage in the practice of gift-giving, in ways that vary to a greater or lesser extent from the CPP model. However, the CPP is the self-proclaimed 'superpower' of gift-giving, and no other party approaches the scale of its munificence or has used the tactic with the same degree of success. Consequently, analysis of the activities of other parties in this respect is beyond the scope of this article.

2 The impact on the poor of government policies towards land and forests is discussed in Caroline Hughes and Tim Conway, *Towards pro-poor political change in Cambodia: The policy process* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2003). On 'invented traditions', see Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction', in *The invention of tradition*, ed. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–14.

resistance to immediate 'development' plans and to win the votes necessary to retain ascendance in an internationally scrutinised electoral democracy.

Observers of Cambodian politics over the past 15 years have frequently denied the customary nature of CPP gift-giving, regarding it as a barely disguised form of vote-buying.³ Arguably, however, the phenomenon is more complex than merely an attempt to insert habits of patronage into the business of democracy, and cannot be understood merely as a transaction within which material benefits are swapped for political support. Rather, the practice of gift-giving in contemporary Cambodia incorporates both symbolic and coercive dimensions which operate simultaneously through the cooptation of discursive resources in Cambodian political myth and memory, the politicized deployment of material resources and the mobilization of menace. This combination has made resistance to gift-giving difficult both to think and to enact, except in exceptional circumstances.

The contemporary phenomenon of gift-giving as practised by the CPP draws upon two familiar strands of Khmer tradition. The first is the figure of the *saboraschon* or meritorious benefactor; this is an individual who earns personal merit through the making of generous contributions to communal projects such as the construction or repair of temple buildings. The second tradition is the pursuit of *khsae* or networks of support and protection, which operate through patron-client or kin relationships that combine pyramidal hierarchies of power and respect with personal dyads of favour and reciprocity. Prominent within such networks, particularly in post-reform Cambodia, is the menacing figure of the *bang thom* or 'big brother', who sits at the apex of the pyramid; his personal power and ruthlessness anchor the system, and his reciprocal relationship of loyalty and support with his subordinates and clients contrasts with the other-worldliness of the *saboraschon*. These traditions have become entangled in the contemporary practice of gift-giving. Mobilisation of the first tradition erects a notion of innate and unassailable spiritual power, portrayed as clinging particularly to the person of Prime Minister Hun Sen, as a means of elevating the CPP to the status of natural power-holder and disinterested guardian of the national good. Mobilisation of the second tradition draws upon a secular ethic of reciprocity as a means of garnering votes among the population and consolidating the power of the party through personal links of protection and favour which underpin and harness the considerable coercive powers of the modern state, and backing this with the deployment of a palpable sense of menace.

In delineating the ways in which these traditions have been harnessed to a modern and secular view of political power in contemporary Cambodian politics, this article argues that the politicians in question are not merely operating in a manner that is dictated by centuries-old tradition, nor are they merely oppressing their constituents. Rather, they are doing three things. First, they are playing upon the familiarity and persuasiveness of genuinely existing forms of political relation, forms which Serge Thion has described as 'the backbone of the traditional political structure'.⁴ Second, the contemporary CPP, like Sihanouk in the 1960s, are transposing these traditional

3 See, for example, Human Rights Watch, 'Don't bite the hand that feeds you: Coercion, threats and vote-buying in Cambodia's national elections', Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, July 2003, <http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/asia/cambodia/elections.htm>, accessed 8 Nov. 2005.

4 Serge Thion, 'The Cambodian idea of revolution', in *Watching Cambodia: Ten paths to enter the Cambodian tangle*, ed. Thion (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1993), p. 84.

structures into a modern bureaucratic and militarized context, in terms of the kinds of gifts they are offering, the kinds of mobilization they seek to effect and the kinds of power outcomes they envisage. Third, as they bureaucratize and militarize these structures, rationalizing them into a means of domination operating across the national territory and placed at the service of the Cambodian state, contemporary politicians are ossifying these traditions, precluding and specifically resisting normal processes of cultural change and adaptation that might be the result of the emergence of new social forces amongst the Cambodian poor.

For the poor who are on the receiving end of these processes, pressure is exerted both by the mandated responses enshrined in cultural tradition and by the awareness that, unlike historically documented patron-client relations in Southeast Asia, this cultural practice is not open for negotiation. David Chandler describes patron-client traditions in pre-colonial Cambodia as 'shifting networks of subordination and control, chosen or imposed, benevolent or otherwise', but as primarily local, face-to-face and to an extent 'responsive' and renegotiable in times of stress. Relations with distant authorities, such as the king, were distant and vague.⁵ In its reinvented form, this paper will argue, the tradition has been rendered uniquely inflexible and used to tie villagers across the territory more tightly to a more interventionist state. Moreover, the power of those who dominate the tradition is garnered from the mix of traditional relationships with modern bureaucratic ones, and consequently cannot be delimited merely by the scope of the tradition itself. The price of resistance will be modern forms of exclusion and punishment, bureaucratically administered, that would not have been available to pre-modern patrons.

For these reasons, the practice of gift-giving, with respect to both the *saboraschon* and the *bang thom*, goes beyond the mobilization of customary legitimacy through references to pre-modern notions of political power designed to invoke culturally mandated responses. There is a distinctly modern aspect to the practice that is both due to its bureaucratic and coercive organizational overtones and is also inherent in the stories told about power and leadership by the givers. These stories combine pre-modern notions of predestined greatness with modern notions of bureaucratic control of territory, resources and populations designed to disempower the population with respect to their own cultural tradition, and to present the leaders who currently preside over the culture as operating both within *and outside* its norms. In many ways, these stories reflect and develop to new levels of administrative efficiency the 'tradition' of Sihanoukism in the prewar era, which itself conjoined tropes of Angkorean kingship and Buddhist cosmology with the preoccupations of 1960s developmentalism.⁶

The layering of memories and connotations arguably represents an attempt to erect a thread of cultural authenticity that can be projected backwards from golden age to

5 David Chandler, *A history of Cambodia*, 2nd edn (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1993), p. 106. Chandler's account corresponds with accounts elsewhere in Southeast Asia; see Lucien Hanks, 'Merit and power in the Thai social order', *American Anthropologist*, 64 (1962): 1247–61; and James C. Scott, *The moral economy of the peasant* (London: Yale University Press, 1976).

6 Fabienne Luco points out that much of what is considered 'tradition' in Cambodia today only dates back to the Sihanouk years of the 1950s and 1960s; Luco, *Between a tiger and a crocodile: Management of local conflicts in Cambodia, an anthropological approach to traditional and new practices* (Phnom Penh: UNESCO Culture of Peace Programme, 2002), p. 29.

golden age across the millennia, and to which the contemporary era of CPP dominance can be tied, but which is nevertheless not tied by it. The less-than-runaway success of this project of cultural reinvention – ‘manipulation’, as Thion terms it with respect to practices of the CPK (Communist Party of Kampuchea, also known as the Khmer Rouge) – can be assessed from the fact that the ways in which gifts are given is designed also to mobilize a powerful sense of surveillance and menace, which underpins the stabilization of insider–outsider distinctions within rural villages and the bureaucratic regimentation of their inhabitants.⁷ Ultimately, gift-giving offers villagers the choice between, on the one hand, cooperating with an invented cultural order that offers the security of physical protection and the comfort of a link (albeit a strained one) with memories of happier times and, on the other hand, being cast adrift in a militarized and threatening environment. Because gift-giving thus operates on a number of discursive, administrative and coercive levels, it is difficult to either conceive of or enact resistance. This article will conclude by briefly reviewing some emergent forms of resistance evident between 1998 and 2003, the discourses they have drawn upon and the forums within which they have been expressed.

The *saboraschon* and economic development

The figure of the *saboraschon* or meritorious benefactor is a familiar one in contemporary Cambodia, where donations from prominent individuals inside and outside the country have been significant in the rebuilding of the country’s infrastructure – particularly Buddhist temples – since the beginning of the reform era. However, this image has been co-opted overwhelmingly by the activities of Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has embarked upon a programme of giving which is quite remarkable in scale and which has left a deep imprint upon the landscape of Cambodian community life across the country. This is in part because of the public nature of the gifts and Hun Sen’s habit of having his own monogram emblazoned in large gold letters on the roof of each building, and in part because the CPP’s control of the electronic media has ensured that television and radio news are saturated with stories about such donations.⁸

Hun Sen’s diary for June 2003, in the weeks leading up to the start of that year’s national election campaign, indicates the importance of these development activities. In the three-and-a-half weeks prior to the start of the campaign on 26 June, Hun Sen attended 27 engagements. Of these, 21 were inauguration or ground-breaking ceremonies for infrastructure developments; four of them were funded by donations from the Japanese government, and one by private entrepreneurs, but the remaining 16 were funded by either Hun Sen himself, other high-ranking CPP officials or various party funds such as the Disaster Relief Fund. Projects celebrated in ceremonies presided over by the prime minister that month related to the construction or improvement of eight temples, one bridge, four roads, four schools, and one district office. At each of these ceremonies, he took the opportunity to offer more gifts. According to the public records posted by his Cabinet, such gifts for the month in question amounted to almost US\$170,000 in cash, 58 school buildings, five bridges, 43 kilometres of road, more than

7 The ‘manipulation’ comment is in Thion, ‘Cambodian idea of revolution’, p. 90.

8 This has been measured by election monitors monitoring media coverage of government and parties around elections; see, for example, Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia, ‘Final report of the media monitoring for the period from January 4th to February 8th 2002’ (Phnom Penh, 2002).

400 tonnes of rice, 130 tonnes of cement and 320 sewing machines, as well as computers, printers, photocopiers, generators, televisions and other electronic equipment.⁹

The populism and personalism of Hun Sen's development activities clearly draw upon both a historically documented form of social organization that has persisted in Cambodia since pre-colonial times; and contemporary nostalgic memories of the Sihanouk years, in which Sihanouk is fondly remembered as having spent much of his time swooping over Cambodian ricefields dropping gifts for the peasants out of his helicopter and personally overseeing the creation of schools and other infrastructure across the country.¹⁰ In turn, it echoes contemporary myths of Cambodia's greatest Angkorean king, Jayavarman VII (r. c. 1181–c. 1220), who endowed the nation with hospitals and resthouses for travellers. A popular story regularly retold in contemporary Cambodia is of the way in which Jayavarman used to inscribe his gifts with the legend, 'The suffering of the people is more painful to the King than his own suffering.' Echoes of this are found in politicians' speeches, self-consciously presenting current political practice as in accordance with the best-known stories of the Angkorean tradition.¹¹ During this campaign, for example, Hun Sen remarked that 'I never compare myself as a prime minister to get tired more than other prime ministers, but I always say that my tiredness as a prime minister is not comparable to that of our people who are in need of assistance at all.'¹²

There is, however, a determinedly modern aspect to the provision of public infrastructure by both Sihanouk and Hun Sen, based upon notions of territorial integrity and national development which are significantly different from those pertaining in pre-modern Southeast Asia.¹³ Both Sihanouk and Hun Sen deploy absolutist notions of power based upon cosmology and destiny, but the power they envisage is the power to bestride the nation, to unite and defend its territory, and to penetrate and exploit its resources, both human and natural. The combination of these elements can be found in Sihanouk's view of the body politic as 'a democratic, creative organism whose members would live together as one family in social and racial harmony, in accordance with what is best and most progressive in our Buddhist precepts and our ancient Angkorean heritage'.¹⁴

Hun Sen has not expounded a philosophy of nationhood so directly; however, the CPP's campaign rhetoric continues to prominently include taking the credit for the

9 The details of Hun Sen's programme given here are taken from his website, www.cnv.org.kh, accessed 9 Aug. 2004.

10 Sihanouk's reinvention of ideas of Khmer kingship, and his harnessing of these to a policy of populism and a drive to modernization, are discussed in Milton Osborne, *Politics and power in Cambodia: The Sihanouk years* (Camberwell: Longman, 1973); John Girling, *Cambodia and the Sihanouk myths* (Singapore: ISEAS Occasional Paper, 1971); and Michael Leifer, 'The Cambodian opposition', *Asian Survey*, 2, 2 (1962): 11–5. In the discussion below, 'Sihanoukism' refers to rosy and nostalgic contemporary accounts of Sihanouk's ideology, rather than any historical reality.

11 The use of memories of Jayavarman VII as a symbol of rightfully exercised power is widespread in modern Cambodia; the opposition Khmer Nation Party attempted to adopt his head as its logo, but subsequently use of his pictures for political purposes was banned by the Royal Government.

12 Cabinet of Hun Sen, 'Selected adlib address at the inauguration of achievements in the pagoda of Chum Kreal in the Kompot District, Kompot Province', 12 June 2003, translation available online at www.cnv.org.kh, accessed March 2004.

13 I take as my reference point here Benedict Anderson's 'The idea of power in Javanese culture', in Anderson, *Language and power: Exploring political cultures in Indonesia* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 17–77.

14 Wilfred Burchett, *Norodom Sihanou: My war with the CIA* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 186–7.

nation's salvation and 'second birthday' in 1979, its reconstruction in the 1980s and reconciliation in the 1990s. In speeches to villagers, Hun Sen frequently recounts vignettes from his own autobiography, focusing especially upon visits to, or passages through, the area in which he is speaking, during the years of war. A typical speech delivered in Kompong Cham during the 2003 election campaign included the following account:

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to return to see you all, and those who offered me help about thirty years ago. . . . I have a good knowledge of this district as I stayed here in the time of hardships and it was one of the hotbeds of war in Kompong Cham province. In fact the district office of Dambe has changed its location four times already. In 1979 the office was at Phsar Stoeung of Ponnheakrek, and later was moved to the pagoda of Chong Cheach, then again to a place between Ponleak and Chong Cheak, and it was in this last one that the office stayed for a rather long time and I used to spend a night out there as well. . . . In 1982 I came here with the then Governor of Kompong Cham HE. Preap Pichey and we stayed in Ponleak, where there were Pol Pot fighters around.¹⁵

In such accounts, Hun Sen uses his own autobiography, with its tale of the rise of a poor farm-boy to prime minister, as a metaphor for the resurgence of the nation from the ashes of Democratic Kampuchea. In particular, his reminiscences regarding his travels through the war-torn territory serve to knit together the personage of the prime minister with the history of the war and the CPP's eventual victory, and the space of the nation, which the CPP was responsible not only for 'liberating' from 1979, but also for 'integrating' and 'reconciling' in the 1990s.

The story incorporates a patchwork of contending images of power. Hun Sen's personal prowess and destiny figure prominently; the speech quoted above continues with a tale of his encounter with a fortune teller in the market at Suong, who predicted future successes for him. However, his crusade against the Pol Pot fighters requires the solidarity of villagers, help that is now being repaid through the award of development assistance, personally provided.¹⁶ The continued provision of such assistance is both a function of personal efforts, and dependent upon further support from the villagers: 'In this term I could only offer to build a red soil road but in the next term, if I were to be re-elected, I would try to have it paved and asphalted.'¹⁷ This account combines personal destiny with the rhetoric of socialist fraternity in the face of danger (from the war years), the post-war rhetoric of the CPP as the 'economic party' and a fairly overt reminder that the appropriate response to patronage is political support, melding traditional and modern concerns and imposing a view of patronage relations as extending far beyond the level of the village to an impersonal, modern notion of the nation and the state.

15 Cabinet of Hun Sen, 'Selected adlib address at the inauguration of the District Office and the Road 73 in the District of Dambe, Kompong Cham Province', 17 June 2003, www.cnv.org.kh, accessed March 2004.

16 Autobiographical accounts of such journeys through war-torn Cambodia and the lucky escape of the protagonist through his own efforts and the help of villagers are quite common in contemporary Cambodia, and were particularly evident following the fighting of July 1997. Sam Rainsy gave a similar account of his own travails as opposition leader in election speeches in the 1998 election, while Nhek Bunchhay's autobiography, telling of his various flights to the border to launch resistance movements, is organized in much the same way; Nhek Bunchhay, *Somnang muey knong muey poan krueh tnak/A luck [sic] in a thousand dangers* (Phnom Dangraek, n.p., 1998).

17 Cabinet of Hun Sen, 'Selected adlib address' (17 June 2003).

It is important to note, however, that Hun Sen has repeatedly denied that such activities are anything to do with vote-seeking. Indeed, his presentation of himself is only ambiguously that of the classic patron, who exists in a dyadic relationship of instrumental friendship with his clients, featuring reciprocal exchange of protection and/or benefits for support.¹⁸ Hun Sen's relations with his public are superficially personal and friendly – as evidenced by depictions of him in the press as being on terms of easy camaraderie with villagers – but are in fact highly stage-managed by local and national networks of intermediaries. Personal relationships clearly exist between local authorities and villagers, but a visit from Hun Sen is regarded by the latter as a visit from far beyond the realm of local affairs. Although he emphasizes his origins, Hun Sen is equally clearly not a 'local boy', but a member of the *tnak loeu* – somebody who has risen beyond the scope of the district, and who descends to intervene periodically from a national and international stage.¹⁹ Although he wears a *kromaa* (peasant scarf) and reminisces companionably with villagers about the old days, at the end of the visit he enters his helicopter and leaves. In particular, he does not engage in election campaigning, and he is not available to participate in a reciprocal or negotiable relationship, as evidenced by his refusal to engage in the grubby business of soliciting votes. The figure of the aloof donor is more akin to that of the *saboraschon*, whose gifts are disinterested and focused upon personal merit rather than upon forging relationships with beneficiaries, yet here the merit conferred is not only spiritually derived authority but hard power.²⁰

This is a distinctly modern form of power, one that emphasizes effectiveness, the ability to transform the landscape, to traverse the territory and penetrate its remotest areas with one's authority.²¹ The scope and scale of Hun Sen's gifts stamp his mark upon all facets of public life, and the effortlessness with which this largesse is scattered before villagers living on the margins of subsistence renders the Hun Sen who appears periodically in the village a larger than life figure, beyond the mandate of customarily informed relationships and yet at the same time personally and intimately entwined with village

18 See the definition offered by Scott, *Moral economy*, pp. 124–5.

19 Recent research suggests that the gap between the *tnak loeu* and the realm of the village is seen by villagers as vast, and that they do not expect to have influence on happenings beyond the village; see Robin Biddulph, 'Civil society and local governance: Learning from Seila experience' (Kuala Lumpur: UNOPS, 2001), pp. 12–13; Malin Hasselskog, Krong Chanthou and Chim Charya, 'Local governance in transition: Villagers' perceptions and Seila's impact' (Phnom Penh: UNDP, 2000). 'Seila' ('foundation stone') is a programme for channelling donor funds through local government for community-based development projects.

20 John Marston has suggested that in the Cambodian context, at least beyond the state, patron-client relations should be redefined to take into account the fact that reciprocity is a less prominent feature of hierarchical relations than the negotiation of dependence, which may or may not feature some aspect of exchange; Marston, 'Cambodia 1991–94: Hierarchy, neutrality and etiquettes of discourse' (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1997), pp. 69–71. This reformulation accords with the lack of emphasis upon vote-winning, which might be expected if gift-giving was merely an exchange transaction – in effect, dressed-up vote-buying. Part of Hun Sen's image of power is that he portrays himself not as reliant upon the support of villagers, but rather as hovering above them in a manifestation of innate superiority; the intervention of local authorities is required to mobilize support. Nevertheless, the relation between Hun Sen and the villagers he patronizes differs from the 'etiquette' of patron-clientism described by Marston in that it is one of forced, rather than negotiated, dependence.

21 Hun Sen's rhetoric of 'effectiveness' in the period of political tension and military confrontation between FUNCINPEC and CPP from 1996 to 1998 is discussed in detail in Caroline Hughes, "'Dare to say, dare to do": The strongman in business in 1990s Cambodia', *Asian Perspective*, 24, 2 (2000): 121–51.

affairs, through his self-portrayal as custodian of security and national ‘rebirth’. As portrayed in the media, the prime minister’s traversals of the nation in his helicopter put him outside the scope of village-based interactions, literally on a level to which the ordinary villager can never expect to ascend.

Across the scope of gift-giving activities, the CPP have mastered the ability both to co-opt customary ideas of power and to transcend them through entangling them with modern forms of control. By this means, the administrative effectiveness of the party is both a result of the prime minister’s personal merit and strength, and an administrative prop to his ability to continue to enforce recognition of these qualities from villagers. The CPP’s central political message in the 2003 elections, for example, was that theirs was the party that ‘gets things done’. This message, which accorded with villagers’ own experience of who holds power in the villages and who is marginalized, is not primarily an assertion of competence but an assertion of power. The giving of development assistance is both a means to power and a sign of power; re-election offers the means to go on exercising such power, but is not presented as being the source of it, even though in fact the CPP is heavily dependent upon, among other things, donor politics and relations with entrepreneurial military leaders for its political functioning. In using the iconography of cultural tradition as a smokescreen to obscure these modern aspects of state functioning, while at the same time maintaining a situation in which villagers are very much aware of the incipient threat and promise of military and external forces, the CPP manipulates cultural orientations to its own advantage, bolsters the party’s effectiveness, and appears as at once in keeping with tradition and in charge of it, empowered by it and wielding power over it.

In this the CPP draws a lesson from the political rhetoric of Sihanouk, following his formal abdication as king and the (theoretical) subjection of his own power to democratic process in the 1950s and 1960s, as a means to strengthen his position through harnessing modern state powers to the power of popular custom. The following comment from a pro-CPP newspaper in 2003 contrasts the king’s development activities with those of the declining royalist party FUNCINPEC under the leadership of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, implicitly calling to mind the development activities, and the claims to effective power, of the CPP as well:

Ranariddh tries to talk like the King and do development like the King. The people understand that this talk, that has occurred since the 1993 election, the 1998 election and the 2002 elections, is the same talk, but . . . immediately we see that this is a lot of wind. His Highness talks about the story of *Euv* [a commonly used term for Sihanouk] a lot but doesn’t do anything good like *Euv*.²²

In the CPP media, FUNCINPEC is portrayed as self-important and ineffectual and prepared to stoop to the lowest tricks to gain the approbation of the people, who are nevertheless not duped by these antics. For example, one news story that ran during the election campaign described how a joint CPP-FUNCINPEC project to build a school in a temple in Sihanoukville was largely funded by the CPP. According to the report, FUNCINPEC gave a minimal donation in order to maintain its connections with the project for political purposes but then objected to having the words ‘gift of the

22 ‘Workshop discusses reasons why FUNCINPEC lost’, *Reasmei Kampuchea Daily*, 7 Aug. 2003.

People's Party' inscribed on the inscription stone customarily used to list the names of *saboraschon* who have contributed to a temple's rebuilding. The newspaper *Kampuchea Thmey* (New Cambodia), which ran the story, editorialized that it was a 'political trick of the cruellest sort' but that nevertheless locals saw through the charade and 'still continue always to support the People's Party'.²³ Denigration of gifts given by opposing parties – as poor quality, cheap, liable to fall down and the subject of ridicule by canny recipients – is a staple of all politically aligned newspapers in Cambodia, as are disputes over the source of particular gifts.

Thus, the logic of *saboraschon* development combines the modern ambition of projecting power – through provision of security, development and other 'gifts' – across territory, and the use of modern technologies of government and mobility to achieve this, with customary views regarding the source of power in merit. For a politician, election to office facilitates the process of power projection, but the source of power is portrayed not as the democratic mandate itself, but as the personal characteristics of the power-holder. The highly personalized nature of Hun Sen's gift-giving – his personal attendance at inaugurations, the tendency to present gifts from foreign donors as having been the result of his personal intervention, the habit of inscribing his monogram on the public works he sponsors – all point to an effort to present the rebuilding of Cambodia's infrastructure as a personal gift of the prime minister, rather than as a result of the extension of institutionalized governance in the course of post-conflict rebuilding, and to disguise the extent to which modern forms of administration are relied upon. However, the programme of gift-giving demonstrates the prime minister's mastery over population and territory and powers to transform these. This is evident from the types of gifts given: the temples and schools which form the basis of spiritual and secular ambition for the rural population; the tonnes of rice for use in food for work programmes which command the labour of villagers; the roads and bridges which both knit together and penetrate the national territory; and the electronic gadgetry to bring the outside world into the village.

Yet while demonstrating the mastery of the giver, such gifts have a regimenting impact upon the recipient. As Penny Edwards notes in her contribution to this symposium, the building of roads represents a regimentation as well as a facilitation of movement, and the distinction between travelling power-holders and trapped villagers has been important in constructing notions of power in colonial and post-colonial Cambodia.²⁴ From 1979, under the CPP's progenitor, the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Party, travellers were required to have written permission from their commune authorities before they could set out on a journey and were assumed to be 'Khmer Rouge' if they could not produce this. In the 1990s, overt state surveillance of travellers was replaced by a more entrepreneurial approach, as local military sections posted unauthorized checkpoints along the roads to levy taxes on taxi-drivers and passengers. Although such checkpoints largely disappeared after 1997, they reappear periodically in times of instability, and are supplemented by less visible taxes which continue to be

23 K. S., 'Cambodian People's Party in Sihanoukville explains the story of the accusations of stealing at the Pali school in Wat Mony Sal Preksaa', *Kampuchea Thmey Daily*.

24 Edwards, 'Tyranny of proximity', in this issue.

levied by local power-holders on regular travellers transporting goods to market, and by the erection of checkpoints to monitor travel during times of high political tension.²⁵ Equally, the 1990s expansion of the road network occurred alongside the increasing exploitation – and privatization – of Cambodia’s natural resources, in a manner which significantly benefited power-holders in a position to grant or block investment applications. Control over roads represents control over population, trade, territory and jungle.

Sponsorship of pagodas has similarly modern, regimenting aspects. Although primarily serving spiritual purposes, particularly for the villagers who use them, from the government’s perspective pagodas are also vital public spaces in rural Cambodia, used for formal and informal meetings. At election times, Commune Election Committees are housed in pagodas and stage training sessions in temple buildings for officials and activists. Temple grounds also host voter registration posts, campaign rallies and polling stations. Pagoda committees are an important institution in village affairs, frequently viewed as a form of ‘civil society’ useful for mobilizing labour and resources for communal development projects at the grassroots level. Donating money and equipment such as generators, lighting and sound systems to pagodas (and mosques) does not merely indicate an admirable level of piety but also permits the donor to have his or her name inscribed, literally, on a public space that is important in both secular and spiritual affairs. The CPP’s *devada* (angel) logo is prominent on temples across Cambodia.

The emphasis in this kind of development is upon the power of the giver to dominate and visibly transform the environment by moving through it, building on it and marking it with their personal sign. In this the CPP’s development drive echoes in important respects those of both Sihanouk’s time and Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea. Repeated criticisms of the sustainability of these projects in terms of mobilizing local participation and ‘ownership’ miss the point that such gifts are specifically intended to differentiate between the power of the giver to get things done and the powerlessness of the recipient in this regard. In both Hun Sen’s own speeches and media coverage of his sponsorship of development projects, there is little analysis of the type familiar from NGO or donor reports regarding the impact of development projects sponsored. For example, a typical article in *Koh Santepheap* (Island of Peace) newspaper during the 2003 election campaign, describing Hun Sen’s visit to a project to improve infrastructure in Kandal province, included 27 column inches devoted to the numbers of bridges built, the lengths of road constructed, the hectares of ricefield irrigated by new canals, and so on. The only reference to the impact of the project on local inhabitants was a sentence which reported that ‘Each and every one of the people showed their great joy that His Excellency helped to develop the roads and bridges.’²⁶

Yet in this context, there is little scope for the villagers to stray in their response from the banal script of joyous gratitude, both because of the pressures of cultural validation of this form of development and because of the regimenting power of the form of gifts

25 The author was stopped at a checkpoint on National Route 3 following the elections in 2003, as police and military were deployed to prevent demonstrators from converging on the capital.

26 ‘H. E. Hun Sen goes to inspect bridges and roads in the countryside’, *Koh Santepheap Daily*, 20–21 July 2003.

given. The power of the *saboraschon* to give gifts is not accountable to the nitpicking criticism of development analysts because of its customary provenance. In the context of democratic transition and post-war development, the gifts given are designed to increase the dependence of recipients on the good will of the *tnak loeu* and to promote the power of the *anyator mouletaan* (local authorities) in mediating that relationship, rather than to promote local ownership or participation. Democracy and the vote give villagers the choice of opting into the source of bounty, or of opting out. That this logic has been successfully imposed upon electoral choices can be inferred from survey data gathered prior to the 2003 elections, which suggested that significant proportions of voters made voting decisions primarily in response to the demonstrated power of parties, rather than the attractiveness of their ideas. An Asia Foundation survey found that 34 percent of voters voted for parties who achieved ‘development’ and 30 percent said they were voting for their party of choice because it had ‘got things done’. Only 28 per cent of voters said they were swayed by a party’s policies or ideology.²⁷

The *saboraschon* and the *bang thom*

That only 28 per cent of voters said they were swayed by a party’s policies or ideology is significant, particularly in the context of a fragile peace and fairly flimsy political institutions, and in view of the fusion in the person of Hun Sen of the *saboraschon* with another cultural icon that has become increasingly familiar in contemporary Cambodia, that of the *bang thom*. Hun Sen has cultivated both images – he refers to himself as a ‘strongman’ who protects his followers and is ruthless towards their enemies, who is above politics and does not campaign for votes but who watches for troublemakers and deals with them decisively.²⁸ Laying claim to the spiritual power of the *saboraschon* and the menace of the *bang thom* encourages voters to wonder whether democratic processes can command the allegiance of the independently powerful, or whether electoral defeat of the powerful will lead to instability and war. The manifest inability of other Cambodian political parties to combat this centre of power is a significant incentive to voters to accept the inevitable and vote for the CPP in order to avoid instability. In the Asia Foundation survey almost a quarter of the population said that their voting choice was determined by a concern to ‘keep the peace’.

The combination of the *saboraschon* with the *bang thom* allows the display of wealth and power described above to be backed by a significant degree of menace. The *bang thom* sits at the apex of a state system that is ever-present in the village, through the extension of party relations down to the level of the village chief. The *saboraschon*, although presenting himself as empowered with a store of power that is innate, is in fact dependent upon clients tied to him through extensive *khsae* (‘strings’ or connections) to perform the necessary surveillance, mobilize villagers to receive gifts, exclude non-supporters from the bounty and imbue the whole process with an element of threat. The regimenting aspect of gift-giving requires an organized network of apparatchiks.

This aspect of gift-giving was very evident in the CPP’s ‘membership drive’ of 1998, which involved the provision of a personal gift to every voter in the country who had not already been identified as a supporter of an opposing party. Villagers were gathered into

27 The Asia Foundation, *Democracy in Cambodia – 2003* (Phnom Penh: Asia Foundation, 2003), p. 49.

28 See Hughes, “Dare to say, dare to do”.

groups of ten and lined up to receive gifts from party leaders. In return they were required to surrender their thumbprint and, often, their voter card to the group leader; to undergo a series of 'voter education' sessions in which they practised voting for the CPP; and to be led by their group leader to registration and polling.

Gift-giving was at the heart of this strategy, as millions of voters across Cambodia were inducted into the CPP at public ceremonies in village after village, during which individuals were called by name to receive their membership cards along with token gifts – usually a tee-shirt, *kromaa*, or sarong and a bag of monosodium glutamate – from a member of the party elite. Participation in such ceremonies was organized by local authorities – usually village chiefs – and assumed rather than elicited. Few villagers refused to participate, although some – known supporters of opposition parties – were excluded. While voters were continually assured by the media and by pollwatch organizations that their ballot was secret and they did not have to vote for a particular party just because they were a member, there were widespread concerns about the effect of this campaign on voters' understandings of their rights and obligations *vis-à-vis* the election.²⁹

The stylized nature of the membership campaign arguably contained two messages for voters. On the one hand, it was intended to signal the traditional orientation of party leaders who arrived in the villages to distribute largesse. On the other hand, the ways in which villagers were mobilized to receive their gifts signalled clearly the power of the party and incorporated them into a disciplinary regime of surveillance and threat, which was represented as both bureaucratic and 'traditional'.

In bureaucratic terms, the membership drive was based upon the explicit message that by accepting gifts villagers were agreeing to submit to party organization of their participation in the poll. Villagers were placed in groups of ten under the auspices of a group leader, and this organizational structure was given a quasi-official status through the enactment of a number of bureaucratic rituals which, meaningless in themselves, were designed to suggest that the villagers' participation in the election was henceforth to be conducted via the group, rather than as a function of their individual rights as citizens.

For example, frequently voter registration cards were collected and held by group leaders, to be redistributed on the morning of the election, thus ensuring that voters attended the polling station as one of the group, rather than alone. Equally, there were many complaints that group leaders or village authorities recorded voters' registration numbers – a practice that had no value in itself except to suggest to villagers that their status as voters was in some unexplained way subject to the purview of the authorities. Rumours that voting card numbers were being entered into a mysterious computer programme with powers of surveillance, like rumours that polling booths were being monitored by satellite, emphasized the threatening nature of these pseudo-bureaucratic measures.

At the same time, gift-giving ceremonies incorporated elements that were intended to place real pressure on individuals to believe that political support to any party other

29 See, for example, Thomas Hammarburg, *The situation of human rights in Cambodia: Report of the Special Representative for Human Rights in Cambodia*, UN Document E/CN.4/1998/95, 20 Feb. 1998, p. 12, available online at http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?m=107; Human Rights Watch, *Cambodia: Fair elections not possible* (Washington: Human Rights Watch, July 1998), p. 13.

than the gift-giver would violate customary norms. According to accounts given by individuals who had taken part in these ceremonies in both 1998 and 2003, voters were called by name, through their group members, to attend rallies in which gifts were distributed by party leaders. Voters were required to wait in line for gifts and to *sompeah* (make a physical gesture of thanks) in return for their donation. This stylized enactment, in which villagers were required to accept their gift publicly and show their gratitude by the use of traditional gestures – gestures that had been frowned upon during the period of socialism in Cambodia – was clearly intended to award a traditional resonance to a newly invented ritual. The accompanying use of Buddhist oaths, sometimes sworn in a pagoda, contributed to giving the impression that in participating in the ceremony, the villager was submitting to the imperatives of a system of loyalty in which stores of merit and honour were at stake. These oaths of loyalty to the party, taken in front of a statue of the Buddha, used traditional forms of language, implying karmic fall-out should the oath later be violated. This concern was taken sufficiently seriously for opposition party leaders to offer publicly to take upon themselves the store of demerit accumulated by voters who broke ranks, and to undergo public rituals purported to release voters from pledges sworn in temples.

Symbols of specifically modern threats were incorporated in such ceremonies. Alongside the use of written documents to symbolize the threatening bureaucracy of the modern state, reports were widespread of voters being required to drink ‘oath water’ from a glass containing a bullet. Such rituals appear designed to contrast the comfort to be gained from immersion in a hierarchy of protection and reward – a status that can be morally validated as time-honoured tradition – with the dangers of existence outside this order as a vulnerable individual adrift in a militarized society under the purview of an omniscient modern state. There is a self-consciousness about this symbolism that appears designed to play upon a widespread mood in contemporary Cambodia of nostalgia for the old days. This is effected by erecting an opposition between the comforts of ‘tradition’ – conceptualized as hierarchy, deference and acquiescence to political direction by personally known leaders – and the threats of ‘modernity’ – conceptualized in the form of the firepower and technology prevalent in the world of the *tnak loeu*, in which the humble villager cannot hope to survive as an individual without backing (*khnong*) or connections (*khsae*).

Although the 1998 membership drive was not repeated in quite the same blanket fashion in subsequent elections, the provision of individual gifts to individuals drafted into the party continued. It also illustrates an ongoing feature of Cambodian political life – the reliance on networks down to local level of high-ranking figures who control access to gifts, stage-manage reception of them and mobilize support for gift-givers through elections and other means. These aspects of gift-giving turn the apparently disinterested gift into a regimenting mechanism. For example, in Kraingyov Commune (Kandal Province), the site of a famous development project funded by Hun Sen, reports emerged that distribution of goods such as irrigation pumps were managed by local authorities, who maintained lists of names of individuals eligible to receive them and who stood ready to repossess gifts if the recipients showed signs of disloyalty. Throughout the mid-1990s, Kraingyov was frequently shown in the media as an area of solid political support for Hun Sen; on one occasion, he declared his intention for his ashes to be scattered there after his death. However, in early 1998 a secret ballot of Kraingyov residents by the CPP

to gauge support for various political parties reportedly delivered a massive defeat for the commune's benefactor, resulting in a drastic curtailment of funding.³⁰

Possibilities for resistance

The combination of bureaucratic regimentation, threat and a veneer of customary legitimacy has been effective in limiting possibilities for resistance. Yet the grafting of an invented tradition onto a coercive and disciplinary regime is awkward, and there are many examples of fragmentary efforts to resist awarding customary legitimacy to these kinds of practices. Claims by CPP officials in 1998 that the donation of gifts represented the Cambodian custom of giving presents during visits and the traditional 'sentiment between old and young, high and low, official and people' were unconvincing in the eyes of voters. While local resistance to the membership drive does not seem to have been particularly common in 1998, there was widespread resistance to the idea that the CPP's activities represented customary practices. This resistance most often took the form of derision of the gifts and the sentiments behind them. Adverse comments were widely heard about the quality of the donations, in particular the traditional skirts that were reportedly very poor quality and did not stand up to washing.³¹

Perhaps the most telling response was the nicknaming of the People's Party as the MSG Party – the *Konapak Pracheachon* thus became the *Konapak Beecheng*. Memories of this ridicule lasted a long time. During a group interview in Tumreang Commune (Kompong Thom) in January 2003, when villagers were asked what kinds of assistance political parties had provided to the commune, they paused for a long time and then one person answered 'beecheng', to the great mirth of the other interviewees. The discomfort of commune officials at this response was evident.³² The ridicule to which the party was subjected for its donations programme arguably represents the refusal of voters to accept a coerced surrender of their valuable votes in return for cheap goods as either a fair bargain or a legitimate form of patron-client exchange. Kate Frieson found similar sentiments in the 1993 elections, reporting that Cambodians resented the fact that 'their avowed patrons . . . had prescribed relationships rather than negotiating them; that their power was inflexible and harshly enforced'.³³

However risible the gifts, they represented a much more valuable commodity, namely inclusion in the system of protection and support that the party represents. For villagers, however poorly integrated into the privileged *khsae* of the local authorities, to be branded as politically excluded is a fate to be feared. Threats recorded during election campaigns have frequently focused upon this issue. United Nations human rights monitors reported that a Sam Rainsy Party activist named Lith Pras, murdered ten days before the 1998 election in Siem Reap, had been told by officials after she joined the party that

30 Reports of this ballot were given by a number of informants in 1998; Hun Sen's remark is quoted in 'Hun Sen: The "worms" that must die', *Phnom Penh Post*, 1–14 Dec. 1995.

31 Fieldnotes, May to July 1998. The comment on donations is from Oum Mean, chief of Secretariat, Central Committee Cabinet, Cambodian People's Party, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 22 May 1998.

32 Group interview, trainees at an NGO workshop on leadership for members of Village Forestry Committees, Tumreang Commune, Kompong Thom, 2003.

33 Kate Frieson, 'The Cambodian elections of 1993: A case of power to the people?', in *The politics of elections in Southeast Asia*, ed. Robert H. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 240–1.

‘now you live outside of society’.³⁴ Equally, shortly before the commune elections of 2002, Sam Rainsy wrote that an SRP agent who had been the victim of a shooting and robbery ‘remembered a famous rumour generally known in his home town that: nobody is responsible for any difficulty facing to people who believe on Sam Rainsy Party’. Rainsy commented that ‘a status of social exclusion is confirmed by such an armed robbery’. The SRP also reported in January 2002 that a candidate in Oddar Meanchey province was told by the CPP chief of his village: ‘Once Sam Rainsy does not win the election, you will be chased from the village.’³⁵ Similar threats were recorded during the 2003 election campaign.³⁶

Perhaps the most sustained and challenging post-1993 resistance to the reassertion of CPP power occurred immediately after the elections in 1998, when those who had been overtly branded as excluded and threatened as such following the membership drive fled their villages after the announcement of a CPP victory and gathered in the temples and public parks of Phnom Penh. For these outsiders, finding themselves suddenly numbering in the thousands and protected by the supervision of a concentration of opposition politicians, foreign correspondents and international human rights monitors, the sudden sense of power was exhilarating.³⁷ Their coalescence in a safe space for protest suddenly transformed these political outsiders into a powerful political force. It is significant that in 2003 the CPP-led government established a heavy police and military presence in public spaces in Phnom Penh and on checkpoints on roads to the capital from the day after the election, which remained in place until all risk of demonstrations was past.

More mundanely, villagers have few forums in which to express their discontent or criticism, since to do so would be not only to lose access to the gifts themselves, but to cut themselves off more broadly from the flow of protection and assistance. This is something that villagers have been reluctant to do, except in situations where the protection and assistance on offer are seen as inadequate to support even bare subsistence. Examples of these latter situations can be found in cases where gifts have been given in an attempt to sweeten the bitter pill of economic dispossession. Two such cases are those of Tumreang Commune, where a *chamkar* or market garden tended by villagers was razed to make way for a rubber plantation, and Samakki Village in Kandal, which was created as a resettlement site for squatters evicted from Phnom Penh.

Samakki Village was established following the forced expropriation of squatters from an prime piece of real estate in the centre of Phnom Penh on the banks of the Tonle Bassac River. It was created on land donated by the state, and plots were allocated to households who had lost their homes following a terrible fire in the squatter development and the subsequent bulldozing of remaining homes by the Phnom Penh municipality in May 2001. Although no connivance by the authorities in starting the fire has been proven, the destruction of the squatter settlement fitted in well with the plans of then-governor of Phnom Penh, Chea Sophara, whose ‘beautification plan’ for the city

34 Thomas Hammarberg, ‘Monitoring of election-related intimidation and violence, Report August 19 – Sept. 23 1998’, Phnom Penh, 23 Sept. 1998, p. 5.

35 Sam Rainsy Members of Parliament, ‘The rule of terror’, press release, 18 Jan. 2002 (armed robbery) and ‘A state of anarchy’, press release, 14 Jan. 2002 (Oddar Meanchey); accessed online at www.samrainsyparty.org.

36 Human Rights Watch, ‘Don’t bite the hand’.

37 Fieldnotes, Aug. 1998.

featured the exclusion of the poor (regarded as producers of stink and filth) in order to facilitate the raising of living standards and the creation of health-giving parks and gardens.³⁸ Those who lost homes at Tonle Bassac were removed to the Samakki site, where UN agencies and NGOs were involved in donating materials for building houses. Later political leaders donated a school and a training institute.

The relocation of families to Samakki Village was presented as a development initiative under the personal patronage of Hun Sen, who gave the village its name – ‘Samakki’ meaning ‘Solidarity’ – and attended the inauguration of the new village personally to indicate his concern for the displaced families being resettled there. However, the donation of goods for the village resulted in a bonanza for local authorities and even grassroots NGO representatives rather than for families themselves. Borough (*sangkat*) and commune officials profited from the donation of goods by international agencies in the form of expropriation and the demanding of ‘transportation fees’ from recipients, and in the powers awarded to determine the allocation of plots. The latter process was marked by allegations of corruption; squatters interviewed on the site in 2001 asserted that family members of government officials had claimed plots of land to rent or sell, while genuine members of the community, some of whom had lost their identity papers in the fire, had been excluded from the village because they lacked the appropriate connections.

At the same time, inclusion in the distribution of goods was specifically linked to the importance of cooperation and governability on the part of villagers. One family who waited for a week in the rain to be allocated land said they had not dared to complain: ‘We don’t want to be thought of as rebellious. We are afraid that if we are thought of as rebellious, there’ll be some problem.’ Equally, attempts to resist the relocation were quelled by the threat of exclusion from any benefits that might be made available. One villager in 2001 gave a sense of the way this threat operated:

I felt frightened that it would be too late for me to come here if I stayed over there too long – I rushed to come here, but even so I didn’t get such a good place – it’s not near the market. If I’d come early, I could have got a place near the market. Some families wanted to stay at the old place, but we were told that if we came too late, all the land would be shared out already and we wouldn’t get anything.³⁹

For groups whose land has been expropriated, the choice offered is fairly stark: risk losing everything or accept a donated alternative. Frequently, villagers accept the alternative, but it is important to note that the exchange is considered a poor bargain. Most interviewees had bought their land and houses on the Tonle Bassac, and many had paid *sangkat* officials for family books (household registration documents) and other forms of paperwork that recognized their residence in the squatter area. Many interviewees said they had believed that this gave them ownership rights, and until the bulldozers came to destroy the remains of their houses, they had not realized their own vulnerable status. In this context, attempts to portray the gift of new land as coming from *saboraschon* were problematic for villagers. On the one hand, interviewees said that they acknowledged the land as a gift, rather than as something they claimed as of right, and were grateful in

38 Chea Sophara, personal interview, Phnom Penh, Aug. 2001.

39 Both quotations are from Samakki Village residents, personal interviews, July 2001.

consequence. On the other hand, they resented the presumption that the gift in any way made up for what they had lost; and, in particular, they resented the overt intrusion of *khsae* into the distribution of goods.⁴⁰

A similar situation arose in the course of economic development projects at Tumreang Commune. Here, the award of a land concession to the Chup Rubber Company to build a rubber plantation had resulted in the clear-cutting of land that had been used for 30 years as *chamkar* by local villagers. Although the villagers had continually used the land, they had no title to it, and it was regarded by government land registry officials as degraded forest and thus not protected by forestry laws. Protests by the villagers, supported by forestry NGOs, prompted a response by the prime minister, who attended the inauguration ceremony of the plantation in August 2001. According to local villagers, the prime minister announced that, as compensation for the loss of their *chamkar*, each family should receive 3 hectares of land from the plantation, from which they could make a living by cultivating rubber to sell to the company.

In both these cases, when forced incorporation under adverse terms into a notional *khsae* stretching up to the prime minister was portrayed as a generous and disinterested offer made by a *saboraschon*, it stretched tradition to the breaking point. According to villagers at Tumreang, the so-called ‘compensation’ suggested by Hun Sen was received with such disapproval that ‘when [he] asked if you agree, please clap, some people didn’t clap. Only outsiders clapped’. This show of defiance, however, could not be translated into the voicing of outright disagreement, largely due to the connivance of local authorities who allegedly had significantly more to gain from the deal. An NGO worker in Tumreang commented, ‘The people wanted to express their concerns, but some people that the authorities knew might complain weren’t allowed to participate in the ceremony at all, and the people who were most affected by the rubber plantation were made to sit at the back of the meeting.’⁴¹ This account accords with a description by a villager at Samakki of a visit by Hun Sen:

There’s no one we can complain to. Even though one day Prime Minister Hun Sen came to speak, we were not given any right to complain. In the meeting we just sat down and we were told not to make any complaint. . . . The organizers of the meeting and also the police told the villagers here before Hun Sen arrived that if we have any problems, we shouldn’t ask him about them, we should just sit quietly and not make any complaints.

This villager’s son, who was listening to his father’s account, added, ‘but actually, we don’t want anything besides jobs’.⁴² Here it is not merely an appeal to cultural norms that disempowers villagers, but the direct coercion of police and local authorities stage-managing rallies.

40 Judy Ledgerwood and John Vijghen note also that under normal circumstances concerns about the distribution of gifts are more likely to be focused upon the possibility of establishing oneself as a member of the relevant *khsae* than on criticism of the partisanship in distribution itself; Ledgerwood and Vijghen, ‘Decision-making in rural Khmer villages’, in *Cambodia emerges from the past: Eight essays*, ed. Ledgerwood (De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Southeast Asia Program, 2002), p. 128. However, my field interviews with squatters and villagers in Tumreang showed that the latter were also concerned about the sheer inadequacy of the gifts themselves, and emphasized that their cooperation was due to a combination of threat and a lack of options.

41 NGO worker, Tumreang Commune, personal interview, Mar. 2003.

42 Resident, Samakki Village, personal interview, July 2001.

The inability to voice discontent or to engage in any sort of negotiation is an indication of the extent to which this model of gift-giving departs from the reciprocity of customary relations of patron-clientism in Cambodia. It is also clear that the most common form of resistance to these kinds of efforts at regimentation has simply been flight. In Samakki, the poor left the village in the hands of those who had sought to profit from it and disappeared back into the city, where they could make a better living. In Tumreang, one village has successfully resisted the expansion of the rubber plantation by forming a picket line of 70 to 80 people to protect their *chamkar*, although according to the local Village Forestry Committee chairman, the company simply ‘moved to another village in the commune’. More broadly, the response of villagers has been to eschew land on the plantation in favour of retreat deeper into the forest to plant new *chamkar*.

The enactment of stage-managed ceremonies where *saboraschon* visit grateful communities to receive thanks for the provision of various often substandard gifts, and the broadcasting of images and descriptions of these ceremonies on the national media, reflect attempts to promote a particular image of the Cambodian People’s Party, Prime Minister Hun Sen and the government he heads. It is an image of a united party, a grateful nation and a leader who embodies the best aspects of the Khmer tradition that has emerged from the rhetoric of Sihanoukism, socialist fraternity and developmentalism. However, the practical impact of these ceremonies and practices, as evidenced by the discontent that they engender and the level of stage management they require, is as much a function of the sense of menace that accompanies them, their role in consolidating the discretionary power of politicized local authorities, and their impact, arguably, in presenting the party and its leader as having the capacity to reinvent Khmer tradition without significant challenge. They present Hun Sen and the CPP as keepers of the tradition – not so much in that they require continued observance of the tradition, but that they can bend it to their will, with sufficient menace that overt challenge is not possible.

Increasingly, however, there are forums that do allow public challenges to these claims. One such forum is the pro-CPP press, where tensions between the exclusionary tendencies of local *khsae* are frequently contrasted with the inclusionary and disinterested generosity of the *saboraschon*. For example, an account of the cooptation of gifts from the *saboraschon* by networks of lower officials was reported in *Koh Santepheap* newspaper during the election campaign in 2003. The newspaper reported complaints by trainee civil servants at the government’s Centre for Training and Planning that a number of computers donated by Hun Sen for use by students had been removed by senior officials, who had apparently taken them home for their own use instead. Similarly, 3 million *riel* donated by Hun Sen for buying tables to stand the computers on had gone missing. The students complained that formal applications by students to use the money were rejected, but that the money ‘slipped away’ informally through the Ministry *khsae*.⁴³

Such stories arguably operate to strengthen the symbolic power of the *saboraschon* by regarding the latter’s intention as distinct from the subversive activities of lower-level officials. This is a story of *saboraschon* development undermined, rather than a challenge to the notion of *saboraschon* and the way it is deployed in contemporary Cambodia.

43 ‘Some of 40 donated computers removed’, *Koh Santepheap Daily*, 20–21 July 2003.

This kind of story posits a distinction between the meritorious leader and his corrupt underlings – a familiar story in legitimizing authoritarian regimes headed by charismatic personalities. This story elides the extent to which the leader exists by virtue of his garnering of support of underlings by presiding over a system in which the continued operation of *khsae* to protect and enrich insiders at the expense of outsiders is not merely permitted but encouraged. Indeed, a distinct advantage of the *saboraschon* development system is the extent to which it strengthens rather than challenges existing politicized networks of power, by providing resources to which local authorities can then control access. However, the emergence of such stories does suggest the rejection of the system of *khsae* which are necessary to transform gift-giving from a merely disinterested show of power to a mechanism for gaining votes. By criticizing the control of access to gifts, these stories arguably reject the politicization of the *saboraschon* icon, asserting an ethic in which gifts are not subject to repayment through political support. This forms a basis for rejecting the sense of menace associated with gift-giving, which has rendered the practice so powerful in electoral periods in Cambodia.

Other tentatively emergent strategies of, and forums for, resistance reflect the process of political change and externally sponsored reform. For example, NGO activists working with villagers whose gathering of non-timber forest products has been challenged by logging companies have adopted a strategy of arming them with copies of the recently adopted Forestry Law, in which their customary rights are protected. One activist reported that the presentation of such documents by villagers to local officials ‘shuts the mouth of the government officers because it proves that the villagers are not wrong, and the law supports them’.⁴⁴ Even though the villagers are unlikely to be able to gain the backing of the coercive power of the state, their ability to refer to the law places them in a position of moral strength, and unsettles the general presumption by local officials that their superiors will support them in their exercise of personal control over local resources.

Reference to rights and law are essentially a bluff, since recourse to the courts is an expensive and intimidating option for most ordinary villagers, and the outcome of a judicial case is itself more likely to depend upon the making of gifts and the operation of *khsae* than on the formal provisions of law. However, this bluff can be successful on occasion, particularly in remote areas where local officials are themselves unlikely to be very familiar with the operations of the *tnak loeu*, and unwilling to take the chance of higher institutions becoming involved. The lack of institutionalization of state roles means that uncertainty regarding the intervention of higher levels is a problem for local officials, as well as villagers; as one NGO worker put it, ‘In Cambodia, it is very difficult to understand the extent to which anyone has the right to make a decision.’⁴⁵ Here, villagers can sometimes exploit the emergence in Cambodia of a formally democratic constitution and the commitments of the government, in international and national forums, to ‘pro-poor policy’ and legislation.

In this regard, forestry NGO activists emphasise in their work with villagers the importance of refusing offers of ‘compensation’ from logging companies who have

44 Forestry Network activist, personal interview, Phnom Penh, Mar. 2003.

45 Ibid.

destroyed valuable *chamkar* or resin trees, and of refraining from requesting the building of schools or roads by private companies or government agents. In doing so, they seek to reject the relevance of gifts as a legitimating tactic for activities that are offences under the law; they preempt claims that villagers have been willingly complicit in their own dispossession; and they seek to replace a framework of patronage and *khsae* with a notion of three-way relations between state, society and business as appropriately based upon legal right. However, the experience of Samakki villagers also indicates the limits to this strategy. One reason for the vulnerability of these villagers was that the rights they believed they had acquired to land or housing in the Tonle Bassac squatter settlement were not, in fact, legal rights. A number of villagers said they had paid local officials in Tonle Bassac to have their residence in the squatter area recorded in their family books. Many believed that the payment, and the subsequent recording by officials of their residency, gave them a legal right to occupation of dwellings which most of them had bought from previous owners. In fact, the law grants no such right, leaving squatters with little choice but to fall back on the poor gifts of officials and NGOs, precisely as a result of their lawless status.

Conclusion

Gift-giving in contemporary Cambodia is frequently described by its perpetrators as a culturally valued strategy for 'economic development' and by its detractors as straightforward vote-buying. However, its main function is arguably as a dual strategy for projecting a symbolically redolent image of power and promoting the regimentation of a stage-managed population. Designed to invoke memories of happier times, render resistance both uncomfortable and frightening, and coopt villagers in the invention of tradition, gift-giving represents not the purchase of votes but a form of threat that can be at best morally validated away and at worst complied with reluctantly. The response to gifts of monosodium glutamate in 1998 suggests that villagers considered their votes worth considerably more than they were paid for them. Equally, where poor gifts have been offered in exchange for the basis of livelihoods, the inadequacy of the exchange is clearly perceived, and resistance attempted. However, as with the 'compensation' offered to the inhabitants of Tumreang and Samakki, if dispossession will occur anyway, inadequate compensation is better than no compensation at all, and in both cases concern to gain such minimal compensation and to avoid being marked out as a dissenter or 'rebel' quickly undermined attempts to formulate strategies of resistance based upon solidarity.

The most evident resistance at present is to the linking of gifts of *saboraschon* to the *khsae* of local authorities. The politicization of *saboraschon* development, presented by the giver as a nationalist project of inclusion and incorporation, is regarded as illicit, even in the pages of pro-CPP newspapers, and decried as injustice and corruption. However, there are no institutional mechanisms by means of which villagers can go over the heads of the local authorities and appeal to the *saboraschon* to return and redistribute gifts more inclusively. The *saboraschon* remains a remote and unapproachable figure.

The effectiveness of gift-giving, then, emerges not from its self-consciously 'cultural' aspect, but from the lack of forums within which it can be challenged. The courts are no alternative, space for protest is increasingly scarce and there are no political parties who can offer a realistic alternative at village level and thus resurrect the value of the vote as a means of promoting political change. The language of right and law

is tentatively emerging as a framework within which gifts can be challenged, but this is ineffective when confronted with high-ranking figures who are clearly above the law or with local authorities who are confident of working the system. In this context, villagers have little choice but to compete for meagre hand-outs and to console themselves with the belief that in so doing they are re-enacting the exploitation of their forebears in the past, in the hope that more generous benefactors will emerge in the future.