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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Time to break up with the international community? Rhetoric and realities of a political myth in Cambodia

Katrin Travouillon[1]* and Julie Bernath[2]

[1]Department of Political and Social Change, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs (ANU), Acton, Australia and [2]Center for Conflict Studies, Marburg, Germany
*Corresponding author. Email: katrin.travouillon@anu.edu.au

Abstract

The international community is as ubiquitous as it is elusive and its universalist pretensions remain unchallenged in political and academic discourse. In response, this article turns to Bottici's work on political myths. Against the notion of myths as falsehoods, we argue that they create their own sphere of shared social and political reality. The analysis centres on the case of Cambodia, a country that served as an experiment of liberal interventionism. It draws on archival and field research on two consecutive international interventions, a review of public statements by international actors, and interviews with Cambodian actors and activist. We argue that to understand the ideas actors use to orient themselves as they press for change, it is necessary to consider how decades of engagement with the myth have shaped the political imaginary. Our empirical analysis points to three different phases in the use of the myth: Its production during UNTAC, the reinforcement of its narratives through subsequent legal, aid and development interventions, and finally its contemporary use in a post-liberal context. We observe that Cambodian actors increasingly engage the myth to question the terms of transnational cooperation for democracy. Our work has implications for assessments of the legacies of liberal peacebuilding.

Keywords: Cambodia; International Community; Peacebuilding; Post-liberal

Introduction

The international community and its place in political thought and discourse remain untouched by the intense political and analytical scrutiny otherwise afforded to the assumptions, pretensions, practices, and aspirations of the global liberal peacebuilding project. Speaking to NGO representatives[1] from around the world attending the 1999 UN civil society conference, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan confidently asserted in an epitome of the liberal optimism that was so defining for these times:

> What binds us into an international community? In the broadest sense there is a shared vision of a better world for all people, as set out, for example in the United Nations Charter. … Some people say the international community is only a fiction. Others say it is too elastic a concept to have any real meaning. … I believe these sceptics are wrong. The international community does exist. It has an address. It has achievements to its credit. And it is the only way forward.[2]

[†]The original version of this article was published with the incorrect received date. A notice detailing this has been published and the error rectified in the online and print PDF and HTML version.

[1]More than three thousand representatives of over eight hundred NGOs registered for the conference. See UN Press Release, 'Fifty-Second Annual DPI-NGO Conference to Take Place at Headquarters from 15 to 17 September' (9 September 1999), available at: {https://www.un.org/press/en/1999/19990909.note5572.doc.html}.

[2]UN Press Release, SG/SM/7133, 'Kofi Annan, Secretary-General Examines "Meaning of International Community" in Address to DPI/NGO Conference' (15 September 1999), available at: {https://www.un.org/press/en/1999/19990915.sgsm7133.doc.html} accessed 10 April 2018.

Two decades later, analysts overwhelmingly agree that the UN-led collaborative effort to reshape societies around the world has failed to attain many of its objectives. The urging to accept the existence of the international community and treat it as the embodiment of the presence and potential of a liberal force on a global scale, however, has been an unmitigated success. The discourse of the aid and development community remains organised around the perceived ideas, plans, and concerns of the international community, and state and non-state actors alike routinely address their demands to an entity that is presumably capable of observing the situation at hand, is aware of its implications, and equipped with the means (if not always the will) to effectively intervene in political and humanitarian crises around the world. Academic discourse is overwhelmingly complicit in its reification and rarely challenges the international community's universalist pretensions.[3]

In this light, it is perhaps unsurprising that references to the international community constitute a prominent feature in the political discourse of a country like Cambodia. With the deployment of the UN peacekeeping mission in the early 1990s, Cambodia became a testing ground for the liberal peacebuilding project. Under the guidance of a UN Transitional Authority the intervention set out to implement the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements with its commitment to establish a liberal democratic order. Ever since, Cambodia's political landscape has been shaped by and through the ongoing interactions between interveners, donors, representatives of foreign governments, the Cambodian elite, and the Cambodian population. For almost three decades, the unquestioned claims and assumptions inherent in the transition paradigm structured the distribution of and access to resources committed to the country's political and economic transformation.[4] Representatives of international organisations and foreign states habitually praise the international community's achievements, confirm its good intentions and concerns, or threateningly refer to its next steps. Prominent opposition politicians boast of their special relationship with the international community, while the Cambodian government angrily rejects its relevance and opinions. Civil society actors, activists, and even ordinary citizens are just as likely to muse about the international community and its attitudes towards their problems and pleas and actively try to engage it to further their goals.

From a distance, this combination of intense criticism and praise from seemingly distinct factions of government and opposition supporters appears to confirm that the international community still functions as a strong leitmotif among like-minded promoters of a Western-style liberal pluralist democracy in this 'dependent community'.[5] This article challenges this notion as overly simplistic and misleading, predominantly because it disregards that a new generation of Cambodian civil society actors and progressive political leaders have shown themselves to be sceptical towards the international community. These actors try to maintain meaningful spaces for political engagement *vis-à-vis* an increasingly authoritarian leadership that has refused to yield its control over the government since 1979. They acknowledge and express gratitude for the international community's contributions to Cambodia's 'economic development and transformation of the country into a more democratic government' and continue to engage actors and donors from liberal democratic countries in their causes.[6] Simultaneously, they ask to what extent the international community's past decisions, its relationship to selected leaders, and its treatment of Cambodia as a 'Western project' may have ultimately entrenched a political culture of personalist leadership and dependency in a population 'that [continues] to expect others to rescue us'.[7] What explains this attribution of qualities and actions to the international

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[3]Katarzyna Kaczmarska, 'Reification in IR: The process and consequences of reifying the idea of international society', *International Studies Review*, 21:3 (September 2019), p. 357.

[4]Caroline Hughes, *Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East Timor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Programme, 2009).

[5]Ibid.

[6]Interview (Julie Bernath) with leading member of a human rights organisation, Phnom Penh, 30 November 2018.

[7]Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with Ou Virak, president of Future Forum, Canberra, 5 July 2019.

community and the resulting ambivalences these actors express? In engaging with this question, the aims of this article are twofold. It firstly seeks to demonstrate that the scepticism of these progressive activists and actors towards the international community and their assertion that its role in Cambodia's political transformation needs to be renegotiated is born out of their diagnosis that the realities of a post-liberal order have long outrun the global-liberal rhetoric of their Western allies and donors. By making this point, the article further seeks to argue for the relevance of an analytical approach that engages with the phenomenon of the persistent mobilisation and ubiquitous referencing of the international community in conjunction with the qualification of political change.

In the first part, we identify our article as a response to the call by constructivist scholars for an empirical and localised analysis of the discursive use of the international community. This call was motivated by the observation that assessments of the idea's impact on global politics are limited to descriptive or normative approaches. We concede that such studies can still yield important insights into the institutional and ethical underpinnings of global cooperation. Because of their theoretical and ontological perspectives on the international community, however, they are blind to or dismissive of the ambiguities, contradictions, and paradoxes created by the simultaneously assertive and elusive presence of the international community in different spheres of transnational engagement. As such, such studies are ill suited to developing the analytical tools to capture how actors collaboratively assign the international community with different actions and meanings over time and how the idea comes to orient actors in a given political context because of these continued engagements.

To present these dynamics we conceptualise the international community as a political myth.[8] Bottici argues that myth 'is best understood as a process involving a multiplicity of subjects, a process of continual work that responds to a perpetually changing need for significance'.[9] This work involves the telling and retelling of the *mythologeme*, a 'basic narration pattern' that evolves over time and acquires new meaning with changing circumstances.[10] Against the notion that the political effects of the international community can only be assessed accurately if we disaggregate it into sets of actors or define actors' true intentions, our analysis uses the concept of myth to acknowledge that as such it is 'self-fulfilling'.[11] Myths create their own shared social and political reality. Importantly, our perspective on the international community as a process does therefore imply that the experiences actors make with and through this collaborative work cannot be (in) validated through recourse to the international community's presumably 'real' actions, achievements, or intentions.

The second part of our article describes the production of the myth in Cambodia in the context of the Western-led international state- and nation-building efforts that commenced in the early 1990s, before turning to the analysis of contemporary dynamics. We demonstrate that the doubts and scepticism expressed by our Cambodian interviewees are expressive of the ongoing collaborative work of and on myth. Shared understandings about the international community are not reducible to commonly held views about the sets of actors or the norms and values it represents. Instead, they result from a telling and retelling of a basic narrative pattern in response to changing political circumstances. Myths are characterised by their intrinsic plurality. References to 'single myth' as stories are in this regard deceitful because they 'are only the final products of myth, the reified traces of the work of myth'.[12] Shared ideas about the actions

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[8]Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Chiara Bottici, 'Towards a philosophy of political myth', *IRIS, European Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate* (April 2011), p. 38; Katarzyna Kaczmarska, 'The powerful myth of the international community and the imperative to build states', in Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (ed.), *Myth and Narrative in International Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), p. 210.

[9]Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 131.

[10]Ibid., p. 99.

[11]Bottici, 'Towards a philosophy of political myth', p. 34.

[12]Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 99.

and decisions assigned to the international community are therefore treated as evidence for the ongoing work of and on myth, not evidence for the existence of an established group of actors or a coherent and well-defined set of practices. Attending to the contexts and particularities of the term's invocation allows access to the imaginary dimension of cooperation instigated under conditions of global liberal optimism. Put differently: we show that where collaborative efforts for political change are concerned, the international community is not what we see but what we see with. The recognition of these understandings is pertinent for scholars who aim to capture how the dynamics of a global shift towards a post-liberal, multipolar order come to bear on actors' experiences and expectations. One of the core functions of myth is to provide cohesion to sociopolitical orders. As such, myths also tend to try to fix in place what is already moving.

Methodological considerations and data

We ground our analysis in our long-term research on two consecutive UN interventions in Cambodia, namely the UN Transitional Authority (UNTAC), which took place in 1992–3, and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, also known as the Khmer Rouge tribunal, that the UN and the Royal Government of Cambodia established in 2004. Both of us were surprised by the persistent presentation of the international community as an actor intimately invested in Cambodia's political trajectory in the narratives of development and decline that the documents and people related to us. This research can attest to the early phases of the production and reproduction of the myth. To illustrate the life of myth in its broader sociopolitical context, we turn to interviews and observations conducted from 2012 to 2014. We examine actors' references to the international community in relation to established patterns of shared understandings, and discuss the role of these understandings in shaping how actors imagine and pursue the possibility of political change. We complemented this research with interviews with Cambodian political analysts and activists in 2018 and 2019. We asked these interview partners directly to explain what they associate with this term and invited them to comment on the prevalence of the international community in Cambodia's public discourse. To assess how core elements of the myth have been reworked by different actors over time to provide significance in changing political circumstances, we analyse public statements and speeches by domestic and international actors, as well as interviews with Cambodian political actors and activists in 2018, 2019, and 2020. Here, we assessed their perception of the international response to the dissolution of the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), the prospect of democratisation, and the electoral win of Hun Sen and his party. We relate the opinions our respondents expressed about the international community and their assessment of the actions assigned to it to the collaborative processes of the telling and retelling of the myth.

In total, this article draws from 39 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with Cambodian political actors and activists (directly citing 27), as well as informal conversations and observations conducted from 2012 to 2014 and 2017 to 2020. This include interviews with members of a new generation of progressive Cambodian politicians, political analysts, and human rights activists, which emerged in the context of 'a legitimacy crisis among traditional political parties' and increasing boundary-crossing between what is often conceptualised as neatly separate spheres of 'electoral politics and civil society'.[13] These respondents can be characterised as highly mobile, with access to academic education abroad, and whose engagement encompasses work in newly established political think tanks, civic education, and educational activities targeted towards Cambodian youth, as well as political parties. Rather than being characterised by a single, homogenous political platform, these actors share the idea that bringing about political change in Cambodia requires finding new avenues outside of the established political parties. In

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[13]Astrid Norén-Nilsson, 'Kem Ley and Cambodian citizenship today: Grass-roots mobilisation, electoral politics and individuals', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 38:1 (2019), p. 78.

Cambodia, the main site of data collection was the capital city of Phnom Penh. Additional interviews and conversations took place in the provinces of Kandal, Kratie, and Kampong Thom. We further draw on interviews conducted with Cambodian activists and members of the exiled opposition in the United States and Australia. We conducted the interviews in Khmer, English, and French. Taken together, we use this data to sketch out the political dynamics and effects of the international community as a collaborative process that establishes meaningful relations between actors through an ongoing cycle of production, reception, and reproduction of this political myth.[14]

The international community: Attempts to fix the blurry borders of a powerful idea

The need to get a conceptual grasp on the international community stems from its power to shape global policies. This is true regardless of whether one argues for the existence of an organisational or merely a virtual entity.[15] For many, it is the 'sense of intimacy and responsibility embedded in shared identity that gives international community its force as a political legitimizer'.[16] It is said to constitute a *we-feeling* that can inspire or bind together actors who share the same norms and ideals; a summative term for all that is *more-than* the parochial interests of nation states, whether this surplus is defined in aspirational terms or to refer to the capacity needed to address pressing global issues. Acting in or appealing to the international community is therefore often intertwined with the claim to be morally on the right side.[17] If one attends to the characteristics of the concept in active, public usage, one can identify a few commonalities. Firstly, the international community is used as a singular term; both the rhetoric employed by state actors and their organisations, and the appeals by non-state actors, suggest that it exists as one entity.[18] Moreover, the uses of this term imply the idea of a sustained existence of a singular agentic international community; whether or not an organisation acts in a time of crisis, and whether or not key actors temporarily suspend or abandon certain principles to solve a specific problem, there are no prominent attempts to write multiple histories of multiple international communities.

International Relations scholarship closely shapes the discussions on the existence, relevance, and contours of the international community. However, given the discipline's predominant concern with the politics of drawing and maintaining borders between nation states, it is perhaps unsurprising that the international community largely reflects the schools' various ideas and attitudes towards these entities. From a (neo)realist standpoint, for instance, the international community can only be an 'oxymoron in a world of states pursuing their national interests'.[19] Other authors concur that the international community is, at best, 'a dangerous reference point for the naïve'[20] as it serves to conceal 'national interests that are presented as a common good'.[21] From the perspective of liberal internationalism, on the other hand, the international community

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[14]Bottici, 'Towards a philosophy of political myth', p. 40.

[15]David C. Ellis, 'On the possibility of "international community"', *International Studies Review*, 11:1 (2009), pp. 1–26.

[16]Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzales-Pelaez, '"International community" after Iraq', *International Affairs*, 81:1 (January 2005), p. 34.

[17]Kofi A. Annan, 'Problems without passports', *Foreign Policy*, 132 (September 2002), p. 30; Larry May, 'The international community, solidarity and the duty to aid', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 38:1 (2007), pp. 185–203; Robert A. Rubinstein, 'Intervention and culture: An anthropological approach to peace operations', *Security Dialogue*, 36:4 (December 2005), pp. 527–44.

[18]Arjun Appadurai, 'Broken promises', *Foreign Policy*, 132 (September 2002), p. 42; May, 'The international community, solidarity and the duty to aid', pp. 185–203.

[19]Tod Lindberg, 'Making Sense of the "International Community"', Working Paper, Council on Foreign Relations, International Institutions and Global Governance Program (2014), p. 2, available at: {https://cfrd8-files.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2014/01/IIGG_WorkingPaper14_Lindberg.pdf} accessed 3 October 2019.

[20]Ruth Wedgwood, 'Gallant delusions', *Foreign Policy*, 132 (September 2002), pp. 44–6.

[21]Evgeny Roshchin, 'The Hague conferences and "international community": A politics of conceptual innovation', *Review of International Studies*, 43:1 (January 2017), p. 180.

reflects the diffusion of universal norms and ethical concerns and the development of common standards for political action at the international level.[22]

In objection to this idea, those who criticise persistent economic inequalities argue that even as a guiding concept for cooperative action the international community is incompatible with the competitive and protectionist nature of interstate relations. Tested against its lofty aspirations it is viewed as 'trapped between increasingly outdated but still powerful conceptions of realpolitik and a more expansive future freed from the bonds of exclusionary conceptions of citizenship and sovereignty'.[23] David C. Ellis criticised that the 'contemporary international political reality seems to lack the common ethos, identity and interest among states for a meaningful international community to emerge'.[24] Rather than contributing to careless use of the term, scholars should work to identify the necessary conditions for and ways to support the emergence of a meaningful international community. In contrast to the notion that the term is used by individual actors to obscure states' interests or deflect responsibilities, this line of reasoning perceives the international community as a sort of collective smoke screen, a common moral reassurance that fosters complacency among politicians and academic thinkers.

In engaging with the most defining feature of the international community, namely, its persistent evasion of a clear definition, scholars exhibit two broad tendencies. Depending on their theoretical and normative outlooks, the international community's elusiveness either serves to confirm that references to it fall on a continuum from meaningless to manipulative, or it is taken up as a challenge. To strengthen it as a normative concept or make it more amenable to analytical inquiries, this second group of scholars devotes its attention to critiques of the groups of actors, institutions, values, or norms that can or should claim to represent the international community.

The international community as a political myth

The prevalence of the 'international community' in the aid and development discourse and the academic exploration of the idea's potential and limitations in structuring global cooperation show to what extent the term carries a 'heavy normative, teleological and political baggage'.[25] Instead of accepting this baggage as the unavoidable by-product of competing views and debates on international politics of a higher order, a third strand of literature, embedded in a constructivist approach, decided to put the concept and its ambiguities centre stage. Importantly, this implies a different approach to the ubiquitous and assertive yet elusive presence with which the international community works in public discourse. Instead of approaching the question of the idea's political effects through an *a priori* determination of its facticity or normative content, this literature proposes to attend to 'the interplay between practical politics and [the international community's] discursive construction, including the different meanings assigned to it by different actors in different situations'.[26] To develop an analytical approach that can capture these interactional dynamics we conceptualise the international community as a political myth by drawing from the work of Chiara Bottici.[27]

In arguing for the political relevance of a new approach to the conceptualisation and analysis of myths, Bottici criticises the prevalent tendency in the social sciences to treat them as objects

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[22]Karen Kovach, 'The international community as moral agent', *Journal of Military Ethics*, 2:2 (August 2003), pp. 99–106; Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse, *Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary Conflict: A Reconceptualisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge: Polity, 1996); Jerzy Zajadlo, 'Legality and legitimization of humanitarian intervention: New challenges in the age of the war on terrorism', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48:6 (February 2005), pp. 653–70.

[23]Caroline Hughes, *The Political Economy of the Cambodian Transition, 1991–2001* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. 90.

[24]Ellis, 'On the possibility of "international community"', p. 6.

[25]Roshchin, 'The Hague conferences', p. 179.

[26]Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Florian P. Kühn, '"The international community needs to act": Loose use and empty signalling of a hackneyed concept', *International Peacekeeping*, 18:2 (April 2011), p. 148.

[27]Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*; See also Kaczmarska, 'The powerful myth of the international community'.

that '[advance] a claim to truth'.[28] Consequently, myths continue to be associated with falsehoods and academic engagement with them is limited to attempts to deconstruct their claims. In contrast, Bottici argues that myths are relational processes that provide groups of actors (including societies) with significance in ever-changing circumstances. With Hans Blumenberg she argues that it is the 'work on myth [that] is constitutive of the concept of myth'.[29] The work on myth implies a process of telling and retelling of a basic narrative pattern. To respond to changing circumstances its elements are continuously transformed. The frequency and intensity of the work on myth is therefore also contingent on context. Actors may engage in a new cycle of telling and retelling because they observe or experience a change in their circumstances that recalls other situations during which the work on myth provided significance. The 'return of the identical, linear sequence, proximity in time, correspondence in places'[30] can serve to establish a situational context that motivates actors to engage in the work on myth. Over time, actors thereby collaboratively create whole webs of meanings that serve to orient action and integrate new events into a narrative plot. To develop an understanding of these shared understandings and meanings, Bottici directs the attention of analysts to the relationships between the narrators, receivers, and renarrators in their present political conditions. Myths engage the imagination, but they are contingent on and live through the opportunities they provide people to interpret the normative and material dimensions that enable, constrain, and shape their everyday experiences.[31]

We acknowledge that frequent references to the international community in Cambodia are an integral part of conscious political strategies or tactics of convenience: foreign actors use the concept to enhance their legitimacy or conceal their lack of cooperation and coordination.[32] Domestic actors call upon the international community in desperate attempts to bolster their position when confronted with repressive state policies, or to increase the resonance of their messages among specific international actors. However, in contrast to analysts who either dismiss these incursions as empty rhetoric, or criticise them for the intentions that drive them and the interests they conceal, we hold that these tactics have political consequences that last beyond the concrete moments of the idea's mobilisation.

By conceptualising the international community as a political myth, we draw attention to the collaborative process that determines how the international community can work in a given political context. The meaning the international community can provide actors with and the meanings assigned to it are a result of actors' ongoing efforts to address the specific political conditions they confront. Bottici argues that there is a dramatic element to political myths, in that their narrative structures tend to organise events into a plot that assures actors of the 'triumph of their cause'.[33] The process of telling and retelling does therefore have a marked affective and motivational dimension. Considering the strong deterministic element inherent in the idea of the international community, we consider this characterisation and the analytical perspective on actors' engagement that it entails particularly pertinent.

For the purpose of this article, we will focus our attention on the intense work on the myth of the international community instigated by two key events in Cambodia's recent political history. First, the 1993 election, organised and supervised by the UN after the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements with the aim to establish the country's first liberal democratic government and

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[28]Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 8; Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt, 1979).

[29]Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 100.

[30]Ibid., p. 127.

[31]Michael Loriaux and Cecelia Lynch, 'Mythography: No exit, no conclusion?', in de Guevara (ed.), *Myth and Narrative in International Politics*; Nicolas Lemay-Hébert and Stefanie Kappler, 'What attachment to peace? Exploring the normative and material dimensions of local ownership in peacebuilding', *Review of International Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 895–914.

[32]Thorsten Gromes, 'Probleme der Komplexität, Koordination, Konsistenz und Beendigung von Interventionen', in *Interventionskultur: Zur Soziologie von Interventionsgesellschaften* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010), p. 178.

[33]Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 179.

second, the 2018 parliamentarian election. Prior to the 2018 elections, Cambodia's Supreme Court had dissolved the country's only viable opposition party, the CNRP, arrested and exiled their leaders on trumped-up charges, and banned 118 parliamentarians from any political activity for five years. The widely criticised election predictably saw the victory of Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party (CPP), who claimed all available parliamentarian seats. Protests by CNRP opposition leaders in exile and diaspora communities, public statements by international organisations and foreign governments, as well as the widespread media coverage contributed to organise these two events into a dramatic plot that cast the election of 1993 as the birth and the election of 2018 as the impending death of democracy in Cambodia. This conceptualisation invited direct comparisons between these two events and heightened the perceived importance of transnational cooperation for many actors invested in the project of Cambodia's democratisation.

The liberal peace and the production of the myth in Cambodia during UNTAC

In our subsequent analysis, we will first illustrate how the myth's basic narrative pattern was firmly established during the UN-led intervention in the early 1990s. Public figures consistently assigned the international community with agentic properties and evoked ideas of a caring, watchful, and exceptionally powerful entity that felt pity and sympathy towards the people. In the dense cycle of production and reproduction of the myth, the lines between tellers and re-tellers quickly became blurred. Core themes developed around the notion of a special relationship between the international community and the Cambodian people, yet also a principle of conditionality that attached itself to the idea of a collaborative project on a scale that transcended hitherto distinct lines between local, national, and international spheres of interaction. Statements by the mission's leaders repeatedly highlighted the independent existence of an international community with ideas and intentions in excess of the institutions they represent. These rhetorical moves can illustrate the track of epistemic circularity that anyone attempting to trace the international community's actor composition will get caught up in. It is what enables the international community to inhabit every conceivable position in complex systems of interaction, often simultaneously. The international community effortlessly appears as instigator, author, addressee, and guarantor of economic and political reforms.[34] Taken together, this intense phase of production indicates that in Cambodia, the myth of international community became contingent on presenting the liberal peace as a promise that is as valid as it is unfulfilled.

The UN mission arrived in Cambodia with the claim that liberal reforms would bring peace and prosperity. In a country ravaged by decades of war and devastating international embargoes, this promise evoked high hopes. The 1991 Paris Peace Agreements (PPA) explicitly envisaged the transformation of Cambodia into a liberal democracy with the Wilsonian assumption that free political competition creates the best conditions for a stable and lasting peace. Cambodia was designated to set a global example for the superiority of this interventionist blueprint and support the UN's claim to global leadership. This idea figured prominently in the rhetoric of the UNTAC leadership and established the international community as an agent with a clear interest in Cambodia's political transformation. During a visit to Phnom Penh in 1993, UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali reminded the leaders of the twenty newly formed political parties that 'what is happening in Cambodia today is the most important experience currently lived by the international community … The success of this mission in Cambodia will be a success for the entire planet.'[35]

UNTAC oversaw the implementation of the PPA and pursued two main goals: end the conflict between the four Cambodian factions and set up a government through national, democratic

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[34]Kaczmarska, 'The powerful myth of the international community', p. 135.
[35]'Compte-rendu de la réunion du Secrétaire général avec les représentant de partis politiques cambodgiens'. UNTAC protocol of meeting on 8 April 1993, original French.

elections. In an intense information campaign, the UN regularly appealed to and engaged with the public. The messages of UNTAC's leading officials, predominantly broadcast via a newly established radio station, reinforced the exceptionality of the situation and evoked ideas of a global audience with a personal stake in the mission's success. Yasushi Akashi, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of UNTAC, for instance, made the following appeal:

> I think the Cambodian people are well aware that they have the precious opportunity of, probably the last chance for establishment of real peace, national reconciliation and democracy in this country. And we have to make sure that the sympathy and the solidarity of the international community for Cambodia will not be dissipated … I can feel that we have the support of the great majority of Cambodians in this effort. We cannot fail in that sense.[36]

Somewhat paradoxically, the possibility of recognising the international community in a diversity of actions rests on a language of universals. The rhetoric of the international community thus commonly evokes the claim to act on behalf of the people and the claim to act out of concern for their lives, freedoms, and dignity. Yet, as the UN leadership frequently underlined, the received sympathy from the international community simultaneously established a clear principle of conditionality. If you 'do not demonstrate by your courage, by your sense of responsibility, that you can be truly the champions of democracy', Akashi urged, 'than you may have lost a very precious chance'.[37] The possibility of ending political and economic isolation and joining the frequently cited 'developed countries' was thereby framed as contingent on the ability of the Cambodian people to demonstrate their worthiness on the newly established world stage. In their own appeals to the Cambodian people, the actors competing in the 1993 election picked up on these themes:

> This situation can under no circumstances go on like this. All the twenty parties and the Cambodian people have to solve this problem together, if we don't do this, then there is no doubt that the internationals will abandon the Cambodian people and we will again be isolated.[38]

Cambodia's would-be leaders reiterated both the sense of urgency, as well as the importance of compliance with the newly established rules, lest Cambodia be relegated to its previous pariah status. 'If [the people] do not vote … The future will be the same for them.'[39] Party officials impressed on their compatriots the importance of a high voter turn-out as a visible manifestation of this compliance:

> Today they regard us as people living under the rule of the jungle, today there is nobody who recognises us; so if we do not all go to the elections, if we can't be bothered to vote, then we will continue being a country that is excluded from the global community.[40]

The materials and programmes produced by the interveners, for their part, further reified the international community by emphasising its affective and caring attitude towards the Cambodian people – themselves effortlessly conceived in singular terms by virtue of the common aspiration for democracy ascribed to them. Through carefully scripted 'economic lessons' listeners to Radio UNTAC learned, for example, that 'reconstruction and economic development of Cambodia is …

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[36]Akashi Interview 1, *News Magazine*, no. 8 (17 August 1992).
[37]Programme broadcast, *Radio UNTAC*, 29 March 1993.
[38]LDP representative, UNTAC Roundtable Discussion, December 1992, original transcript in Khmer.
[39]Programme 56, *Radio UNTAC*, prod. A. Z. Rijal, broadcast 8/9 April 1993.
[40]UNTAC Roundtable Discussion, Democratic Party representative, December 1992, original transcript in Khmer.

a top priority for the international community' and received updates on donor activities.[41] A Cambodian news moderator announced excitedly: '[The] eyes of the world are on Cambodia. … Ambassadors and high-ranking officials were talking about all of us Cambodians, and our daily lives!'[42] The notion of a special relationship between the Cambodian people and an international community tirelessly working on their behalf was also put in relief by contrasting their efforts with the obstructionist actions of a local elite portrayed as dangerously capricious and self-interested, jeopardising not only the political reforms, but also the promised economic progress. When a much-publicised donor conference ended in disagreement, Radio UNTAC moderators commented:

> But I thought that UNTAC and the foreign Ambassadors have been saying that Cambodia needed help urgently? – That is right, it is very disappointing that the four factions could not agree.[43]

Focused on relating basic human rights principles to the public, these materials also never featured Cambodians who felt confident enough to demand accountability from a local authority. Instead, they consistently deferred this job to international actors, who were unfailingly capable and willing to take on their cases.

> UNTAC official: Please explain to me what happened to you. First, was it only yourself or your whole family who was intimidated?
> Cambodian woman: My whole family Sir. [But] UNTAC police came this morning to look for me and to explain me my rights. So, I am not afraid of anything anymore.[44]

References to universal norms, and the swift and decisive actions they triggered, suggested the opening of a new space of engagement that collapsed existing hierarchies by making local grievances directly relevant to a solvent and powerful new judge. 'Don't forget', one radio report denouncing political intimidation concluded, 'the world is watching!'[45] Importantly, interveners insisted that this space would remain open even after the end of the mission. As tensions built ahead of the May election in 1993, the radio station was 'flooded daily by dozens of letters', many pressing for answers to the question of what would happen after the end of the mission.[46] Leading UNTAC actors reassured the people that while UNTAC did not have a mandate to provide 'physical protection' they certainly possessed 'a political one: by informing the international community'.[47] Violations of the PPA and its principles, was the message, would not be tolerated. Keeping the government in check became concomitant to making its infractions visible to yet another higher authority – the international community.

The 1993 election saw a voter turnout of almost 90 per cent and ended with the formation of a coalition government between the election winner Norodom Ranariddh and his FUNCINPEC Party and Hun Sen as second prime pinister, in an awkward arrangement designed to keep the Cambodian People's Party from using its military power to challenge the results. The UN mission left Cambodia in September, yet representatives of international organisations, as well as the Cambodian elite, continued to emphasise that 'the international community's obligation toward Cambodia is not yet over'.[48] Differences, however, quickly emerged over whether this obligation should be conceived in purely financial terms or rather more broadly as the international

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[41]Programme 22, *Radio UNTAC*, prod. Roy Head, undated document.
[42]Ibid.
[43]Programme 27, *Radio UNTAC*, prod. Roy Head, 10 March 1993.
[44]Dialogue No. 9, *Radio UNTAC*, 29 July 1992.
[45]Programme 35, *Radio UNTAC*, 18 March 1993.
[46]Programme 60, *Radio UNTAC*, prod. Amadou Moctar Gueye, 12/13 April 1993.
[47]Telephone interview with Lt Col Healy, UNTAC Headquarters, 4 May 1993.
[48]Hun Sen Discusses Khmer Rouge, Other Issues, FBIS document, 30 November 1993, p. 7.

community's 'right and a duty to ensure that the democratic process begun by UNTAC is maintained'.[49]

The reproduction of the political myth after UNTAC: Commitment to the liberal peace

In the wake of the UN's far-ranging peacebuilding intervention, various actors continued to engage with this myth beyond the professionalised political sphere, in an ongoing process of telling and retelling that often centred on the core narratives of the myth: a watchful, caring international community that is ready to act on behalf of the Cambodian people, defend universal rights, and intervene as a corrective to deviant political elite behaviour. Beginning in the early 1990s international actors – representatives of international or multilateral organisations, representatives of foreign governments and donor countries – have established a continued, visible presence in Cambodia. Though these actors and groups differ with regard to the stakes and claims they have in Cambodia's political and economic transformation, their interactions are demonstrably moderated through the liberal transition paradigm and its associated conceptualisations of a state still in the making. This sphere of interaction continuously provides the triggers and opportunity for the ongoing work on myth.

When asked who the international community actually is, our Cambodian respondents emphasised that it consists of those 'powerful' and 'developed countries' that respect universal values such as human rights, peace, democracy, and justice, and stand on the side of the disempowered.[50] The international community was clearly conceived in relational terms, as a group of powerful countries who 'have an influence on Cambodia, in order to help Cambodia to have more peace, freedom of speech, and human rights'.[51] A representative of a community in Rattanakiri province affected by land grabbing observed: 'Now, from what I follow on the radio, Cambodia is only a small country but there are other countries, the international community, who looks at the direction and steps undertaken. [Another civil war] is not possible, because the international community controls and looks at the situation.'[52]

The myth of the agentic, caring 'international community' intimately invested in the country's political trajectory continues to fold local and global dimensions of engagements into one another. Activists who fought against the violent land-grabbing practices of the government in the capital city often displayed photos of American political leaders. When asked for their reasons to do so, one activist noted:

> We couldn't find any more support from the national level. So, we tried to look for support from the international community, and those people are from the democratic countries as well as our donors. We thought that on behalf of the donors, they have a positive influence on our government, such as bringing our government to help its people.[53]

As '*barangs*'[54] conducting research on consecutive UN interventions in Cambodia, both authors have been approached with questions about the international community's intentions

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[49]Tom Martin, 'Cambodia after UNTAC: The domestic limits to international intervention', *Policy, Organisation and Society*, 13:1 (1997), p. 18.

[50]Interviews (Julie Bernath) with former CNRP district councillor, Kandal province, 22 May 2018; Boeng Kak lake activist, Phnom Penh, 10 February 2018; former CNRP commune councillor, Kratie, 7 May 2018; leader of civil society advocacy organisation, Phnom Penh, 7 February 2018.

Interview (Julie Bernath) with former CNRP district councillor, Kampong Thom, 21 May 2018.

[51]Interview (Julie Bernath) with former CNRP district councillor, Kandal province, 22 May 2018.

[52]Interview (Julie Bernath) with community representative from Rattanakiri province, Phnom Penh, 9 February 2014.

[53]Interview (Julie Bernath) with Boeng Kak lake activist, Phnom Penh, 11 February 2018.

[54]'Khmer word that designates a foreigner, European, or French person' (as quoted in Ovesen, Jan, and Ing-Britt Trankell, *Cambodians and their Doctors: A Medical Anthropology of Colonial and Post-Colonial Cambodia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010), p. xi.

and people have directly urged us to act as messengers or in other capacities that were clearly outsized for the roles we introduced ourselves with. Strategies like these demonstrate the prevalent notion that the international community can indeed be addressed anywhere whenever a situation is perceived as an impasse.[55] A representative of a community affected by land grabbing in the remote province of Rattanakiri used an interview about the Khmer Rouge tribunal to reiterate that the international community should take action, because 'I have already requested [help] at the commune and the district level, but that is pointless.'[56]

One respondent declared it unsurprising that the persistent rhetorical incursions of an international community in conjunction with the visible presence and proven financial commitment of foreign states and international organisations to the country had contributed to the idea of a powerful entity with both rights and obligations to which one can appeal:

> What we have fought for, as political parties, civil society working in democracy, advocacy, good governance, human rights and so on. We have received funding to educate people about these universal values. So when these values are … blatantly violated by the power in place … It is natural that we think that they should be beside us, stand up, … alongside us to fight. That is why we call to the international community because the values that we are defending, it was educated to us, by them.[57]

Human rights NGOs set up in Cambodia in the wake of UNTAC were being referred to by senior UN officials as 'the children of the UN'.[58] Beside the material support provided by international actors through training and funding, this quote illustrates the recurrent work on the myth of international actors operating in Cambodia, even after UNTAC. This is particularly visible in the discourses of international human rights organisations in moments of political crisis. Amnesty International's report published in the aftermath of the 1997 coup, for instance, read:

> The international community has invested heavily in Cambodia, both politically and financially. It therefore has a position of special leverage, and thus also a special responsibility. It needs to continue to send a clear and unequivocal signal to the Cambodian authorities of its concerns about the fundamental rights and freedoms of Cambodia's people, not just in the lead up to elections next year, but in Cambodia's long term institutional development. Human rights were integral to the 1991 Peace Accords. So too will they be integral to securing the country's future.

Similar efforts to establish meaningful relations between international actors and the general population through the ongoing work on myth can be observed in the context of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as the Khmer Rouge tribunal. Established in 2004 as a hybrid tribunal by the UN and the Royal Government of Cambodia, the ECCC led to a second, large-scale intervention of the UN in Cambodia after its peacebuilding mission of the early 1990s. Here again, international actors aligned the destiny of the Cambodian population with that of the UN intervening in Cambodia. A statement of then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in the 2008 ECCC information booklet distributed in outreach missions across the country, for instance, declares: 'If we succeed in achieving our goals, the

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[55]Among many interview encounters, this came up for instance during the interviews with two representatives from Rattanakiri conducted by Julie Bernath, Phnom Penh, 9 February 2014; and the interviews with members of the Boeng Kak community conducted by Katrin Travouillon, Phnom Penh, 19 November 2012.

[56]Interview (Julie Bernath) with community representative from Rattanakiri province, Phnom Penh, 9 February 2014.

[57]Authors' interview with independent political analyst, Phnom Penh, 6 and 10 February 2018.

[58]1995 quote from Michael Kirby, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Cambodia from 1993–6. As quoted in Caroline Hughes and Vanessa Pupavac, 'Framing post-conflict societies: An analysis of the international pathologisation of Cambodia and the post-Yugoslav states', *Third World Quarterly*, 26:6 (2005), pp. 873–99.

Cambodian people will have reached a landmark on their road to justice, peace, liberty and well-being.'[59]

This work on myth is most visible during times framed as moments of political crisis. In such moments, the reiteration of the myth of the international community as continuously monitoring – if not measuring – developments in Cambodia against the country's projected political trajectory towards a liberal democracy is particularly striking. During the protracted negotiations for the establishment of the ECCC, one of the main issues that emerged concerned the degree of control over the tribunal of the UN vs the Cambodian government. During difficult moments of impasse, both sides used the same argument that 'Cambodia' needed to prove its legitimate place in 'the international community' to advance opposed views. In 2000, US Senator John Kerry asked during a press conference in Phnom Penh: 'Is [Cambodia] going to join the international community of nations in a legitimate and open way or are we going to continue to have great difficulties?' In his letter to Prime Minister Hun Sen, he further elaborated:

> On more than one occasion, you have stated your desire to have Cambodia accorded the full measure of respect, which it is due as a sovereign nation. Cambodia's commitment to achieve accountability for the most serious crimes committed during a very difficult period of its history will have an enormous impact on the willingness of the international community to embrace Cambodia as a respected member and to help Cambodia develop in the years ahead.[60]

Such allusions to an open-ended engagement of the international community in Cambodia, repeatedly put forward by international actors, is also a central aspect of the political opposition's strategy in Cambodia. As early as 2003, Caroline Hughes observed how 'campaign[ing] for greater intervention by the international community' constituted a key feature of the opposition politics of Sam Rainsy, along with the belief that 'reform is most likely to be successful if it is to be internationally-sponsored and top-down, implemented on behalf of, but not by, the Cambodian people'.[61] Reflecting on the rhetoric of the CNRP, the leader of a smaller opposition party observed in 2018: 'Cambodians generally rely on the international community, and because Cambodians think that way, the opposition always tells Cambodians that they have the international community, especially the UN and Western countries behind them.'[62]

The work on the myth of the international community has thus clearly outlasted the departure of the UNTAC mission. It takes place in different arenas, with various actors reiterating similar patterns of characteristics that are attributed to the international community, most visibly so in situations viewed as an impasse or political crisis. In this context, mentioning or addressing the international community effectively collapsed the distance between the village or commune level and the international sphere and permitted them to frame local events as relevant to, and part of, an ongoing political transformation in which the international community partakes.

Post-liberal irrelevance? The contemporary life of the myth and its failures to produce significance

The following part analyses the collaborative work on myth in response to Cambodia's most recent political crisis. Previous crises were framed as instigated by actors who saw themselves

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[59]ECCC, 'An Introduction to the Khmer Rouge Trials', Information booklet, 3rd edn (2008), available at: {www.eccc.gov.kh/sites/default/files/publications/an_introduction_to_Khmer_Rouge_Trials_3th.pdf} accessed 20 July 2020.

[60]Excerpt from the 16 May 2000 Letter from John Kerry to Hun Sen, as quoted in Rebecca Gidley, *Illiberal Transitional Justice and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 197.

[61]Hughes, *The Political Economy of the Cambodian Transition*, pp. 85, 202.

[62]Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with Kem Veasna, leader of the League for Democracy Party, Phnom Penh, 17 July 2018.

threatened by the constraints of a liberal peace. In contrast, the dissolution of the opposition in 2017 and the ruling party's orchestrated electoral win in 2018 reinforced the notion that the very promise of the liberal peace itself is in doubt. To confront the present political conditions domestic actors continue to engage the basic narrative pattern. However, due to the myth's inability to organise events into a coherent plot that would reassure actors of the 'triumph of their cause', it now often fails to produce significance. Instead, domestic actors increasingly draw on the understandings shaped in the process of the telling and retelling of the myth to challenge its universalist pretentions and criticise structures of political and economic dependency. Importantly, our observations and interviews show that international actors, who use the narrow and limited temporal and organisational frameworks of individual negotiations, intervention, and reform projects to orient themselves, are often unaware that they gesture towards shared understandings forged in decades of collaborative work. Despite the fact that they thereby engage in the work on myth, they do therefore not actively partake in the experience of its contradictions and are hence unable or unwilling to solve them when challenged by their domestic counterparts. This disconnect and the resulting interactions are a feature of many situations that domestic actors related to us in order to express their frustrations. We demonstrate that the resulting references to a weak, indecisive, partisan, and inattentive international community are the reified traces of the increasingly fraught attempts of the myth to organise relationships and calls to collaborative actions in a meaningful manner.

The Cambodian government's oppression and harassment of the free media and the opposition ahead of the 2018 election unleashed waves of criticism. After the Human Rights Party and the Sam Rainsy Party had merged in 2012 to form the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), they won 44.5 per ceny of the votes in the 2013 national elections and 43.8 per cent in the 2017 commune elections.[63] The ruling CPP, anxious to secure its continued grip on power, increasingly used its control over all state institutions to oppress challengers and dissent. On 16 November 2017 the Supreme Court finally dissolved the CNRP. Several senior officials fled the country and remain in (self-imposed) exile. In the public appeals and statements that attested to the abysmal state of Cambodian democracy, the PPA continued to figure prominently as the foundational document of the country's modern political history and the special bond between the Cambodian people and the international community. The agreements have, as a 2017 summary of a US conference emphasised, 'a start date but no end date' and can therefore 'be considered as still in force for both the Cambodians and the international community'.[64]

The efforts by the exiled CNRP leadership to build momentum and a transnational alliance to prevent the scheduled election from going ahead without them, did therefore quickly take shape through appeals to the idea of an ongoing historic partnership that decades of collaborative work on myth have rendered almost intuitive. Politicians of the ousted opposition penned open letters calling upon the PPA signatory countries to 'come out' and 'fulfil their promise to bring Cambodia back to a democratic path'.[65] On various occasions Cambodians living abroad gathered in front of the UN in Geneva and staged large protests in the US, Australia, and South Korea, often with the support of large groups of Cambodian migrant workers, with signs that implored the international community to prevent the 'death of democracy' in Cambodia and intervene again.

On the 26th anniversary of the PPA, 55 international and regional civil society organisations delivered an open letter to the UN Secretary-General, as well as the acting Presidents of Indonesia and France – the two countries that co-chaired the 1991 Paris Peace Conference – asking to

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[63]See, for example, Duncan McCargo, '(No) country for old men?', *Asian Survey*, 54:1 (January/February 2014), pp. 71–7.

[64]Laura McGrew and Scott Worden, 'Lessons from Cambodia's Paris Peace Accords for political unrest today', USIP Peace Brief 224 (May 2017), p. 4.

[65]Kimseng Mem, 'Rainsy calls on international community to intervene in Cambodia', *VOA Khmer* (17 June 2016), available at: {www.voacambodia.com/a/rainsy-calls-on-international-community-to-intervene-in-cambodia/3380918.html} accessed 13 September 2019.

reconvene the Paris Peace Conference. There is, the authors emphasised, 'urgent need for decisive action from the international community, to ensure that the democratic vision for Cambodia outlined in the PPA is not completely foresaken'.[66] Most democratic countries and their organisations withdrew support from the election and did not send any observers. Election Day itself came and went without any major incidents. A total of twenty registered parties competed and the CPP celebrated an official voter turnout of 82.89 per cent and votes from 76.78 per cent of those who voted.

In the public commentary that followed, Cambodians and the international community continued to appear as one, united in an idealised fight for democracy, peace, and development. In a report released two months after the election, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Cambodia stated that:

> Utmost priority should be given to building a culture … where the possibility of a peaceful change of Government from one party to another through genuine elections is accepted as the norm rather than resisted by any means. Unless Cambodians and the international community strive for this, the vision of the Paris Peace Agreements and the Cambodian Constitution will remain a distant dream.[67]

In these highly publicised tributes, the meta-narrative of Cambodia's political transformation is easily recognisable. Indeed, much of the literature that assesses the trajectory of Cambodian politics fits its observations into the mold of its basic assumptions. This includes in particular publications by international and Cambodian authors of the 1990s,[68] but also more policy-oriented pieces.[69] In the aftermath of the 1997 coup, Frederick Z. Brown and David G. Timberman, for instance, write that 'Cambodians and the international community, and of course the contributors of this volume, have been forced to confront the prospect of a Cambodia once again under the control of an authoritarian leader …'. In her 2017 book on neopatrimonialism and peacebuilding, Barma demonstrates that 'peacebuilding outcomes' are 'the result of a dynamic contest between two alternative visions of post-conflict political order – that of the international community and that of domestic elites.'[70] Overall, this body of literature does therefore confirm Katarzyna Kaczmarska's observation that 'scholarly discourse follows rather than questions the policy practitioners' discourse that agentifies "international community"'.[71]

To observe the concrete work on myth, however, it is important to shift attention away from its reified traces and towards the efforts of actors to engage the basic narrative pattern of the original mythologeme in order to provide significance when they address their present political conditions. Here, one can observe subtle but notable changes. The fate of Cambodia's main opposition party fueled political engagement in the diaspora communities.[72] Cambodians living abroad rallied to support party officials and activists that had fled Cambodia to escape harassment and

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[66]See Request to reconvene the Paris Conference on Cambodia, in light of the Cambodian government's dismantling of democracy (23 October 2017), available at: {https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/joint_open_letter_-cambodia_france.pdf} accessed 14 August 2020.

[67]UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Cambodia, A/HRC/39/73/Add.1, 'Human Rights and the 2018 National Elections', Addendum 1 to the Report to the UN Human Rights Council (7 September 2018), available at: {https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/270/69/PDF/G1827069.pdf?OpenElement} accessed 13 April 2019.

[68]See, for example, Frederick Z. Brown and David G. Timberman (eds), *Cambodia and the International Community: The Quest for Peace, Development and Democracy* (New York: The Asia Society, 1998).

[69]McGrew and Worden, 'Lessons from Cambodia's Paris Peace Accord', p. 4.

[70]Naazneen H. Barma, *The Peacebuilding Puzzle: Political Order in Post-Conflict States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 3.

[71]Kaczmarska, 'Reification in IR', p. 357.

[72]Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with three leading CNRP activists, Melbourne, Australia, 1 February 2020; Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with leading CRNP activist, Washington, DC, 11 and 12 March 2020.

arrest. An important element of their strategies was the staging of large protests, including the much-hyped attempt of CNRP acting president Sam Rainsy to return to Cambodia in a march across the Thai border to confront Prime Minister Hun Sen.[73] Instead of evoking a watchful and caring international community that can be addressed and rallied for a common cause, interviewed CNRP activists frequently described such strategies as necessary to ensure that the international community continues to 'look into their direction' and 'realise what Hun Sen is capable of'.[74] Simultaneously, the notion of a decade-long partnership has prompted actors to reflect on their position through the eyes of an international community that had clear expectations in the ability of the people to hold up their side of the bargain. As a former CNRP district councillor put it:

> I believe that these days, they seem to set Cambodia aside that they don't really care about it like before anymore. This is because each time they came, things always messed up. We can see that during the UNTAC regime, they spent quite a lot of money already to develop Cambodia to prosperity. And this Khmer Rouge Tribunal to prosecute the Khmer Rouge, it costs them quite a lot as well, plus it doesn't provide any benefits to the civil parties yet either. Thus, I believe that they may be fed up with us now.[75]

A CNRP activist in the United States echoed this sentiment. Asked about the obvious efforts to downplay divisions within the opposition movement over its leadership, the activist emphasised the importance of maintaining the trust of the international community in their ability to provide a strong alternative to Hun Sen: 'The international community is getting impatient with us. If you are in a fight, you are in it to win and this has been going on for too long now.'[76]

In observing these dynamics from within Cambodia, the collaborative work on myth provides a new generation of activists and politicians with opportunities to demonstrate and discuss important elements of their political differences with the established political elite in government and opposition. Simultaneously it allows them to emphasise why and where they see the need for different approaches to sociopolitical reforms. NGOs that depend on foreign money for their advocacy, for instance, have long taken note of the fact that their country's status has changed from 'pet project' to 'question mark', to 'cautionary tale'.[77] In their day-to-day interactions with international actors and donors, they are no longer able to count on the self-evidence of the deterministic presumptions that used to moderate their allies' expectations. Rather, it is now up to them to 'show the dynamics in the system' in order to convince sceptical donors that Cambodia's political progress is still a cause worth investing other people's taxes in.[78] Ongoing declarations of trust in a special relationship with the international community by virtue of claims to shared moral standards, as those regularly evoked by the exiled opposition, were therefore interpreted as expressive of a profound detachment from the political realities on the ground. 'The Cambodian diaspora believes that the international community can influence …

[73]See, for example, Michael Dickinson and Tran Techseng, 'Rainsy fails to board flight to Bangkok', *Voice of Democracy* (7 November 2019), available at: {https://vodenglish.news/rainsy-fails-to-board-flight-to-bangkok/} accessed 14 August 2020.

[74]Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with three leading CNRP activists, Melbourne, Australia, 1 February 2020; Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with leading CRNP activist, Washington, DC, 11 and 12 March 2020; Fieldnotes and observations (Katrin Travouillon) of a public event of the Minnesota section of the CNRP, 7 March 2020 in Minneapolis. At this event, the former members of the Cambodian parliament Eng Chhai Eang (Co-Vice President of the CNRP) and Long Ry were in attendance, as well as CNRP activists who had participated in Sam Rainsy's attempt to return to Cambodia on 9 November 2019.

[75]Interview (Julie Bernath) with former CNRP district councillor, Kampong Thom, 21 May 2018.

[76]Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with leading CRNP activist, Washington, DC, 12 March 2020.

[77]Sophal Ear, as quoted in Andrew Nachemson, 'Cambodia: From pet project to problem child', *The Phnom Penh Post* (27 November 2017), available at: {https://www.nationthailand.com/opinion/30332655} accessed 15 September 2019.

[78]Interview (Julie Bernath) with leader of civil society advocacy organisation, Phnom Penh, 7 February 2018. Conversation (Katrin Travouillon) with head of policy research institute, Phnom Penh, 5 July 2019.

they don't see the hesitations from the international community that they also [have economic interests or other issues].'[79]

Faced with the oppressive tactics of an increasingly authoritarian government,[80] the work on myth now frequently fails to provide significance for these activists and other emerging leaders within the country. Their observations further attest to the fact that many of its core narratives now disproportionally benefited the Cambodian leadership. In an apparent gesture to the rhetoric that international actors had used to mobilise people to vote in 1993, opposition leader Sam Rainsy had called on Cambodians to abstain from voting in the 'fake elections' of 2018. Deprived of its electoral legitimacy, as he underlined, the prime minister would become an international outlaw, thus providing the exiled opposition with the necessary leverage to return and reclaim their place. The call had little effect, other than providing Prime Minister Hun Sen with the opportunity to demonstrate his ability to reappropriate the myth by exploiting the noted paradox of an international community that may have the power to morally, but not structurally exclude him.[81] 'Let me ask what is the international community?' the prime minister challenged a crowd in May 2018, after Rainsy had renewed calls for an election boycott. 'What defines the international community? … Have they seen how many countries continue to support and to work with the Royal Government?'[82] These public confrontations were clearly not lost on attentive observers. In assessing the international response to the outcome of the election, a Cambodian youth leader remarked that international actors continue to 'integrate [Hun Sen] in the international community, he still goes to Geneva, to Europe, to speak about trade, so it looks like he is a legitimate government'.[83]

The increasing inability of the myth to fulfill one of its core functions, namely to integrate new events into a plot that reinforces a common goal and purpose and incite people to action, was on particularly clear display in 2019. In February, the EU had officially launched the procedure of withdrawing the preferential trade agreement 'Everything But Arms' (EBA) because of persistent human rights violations by the Cambodian government. The public and representatives of those groups most likely affected by the withdrawal overwhelmingly welcomed this move as a means to temporarily increase pressure, but strongly opposed its actual termination due to the fact that it would first and foremost affect the poorest members of society.[84] The exiled opposition, for their part, had lobbied intensely for this outcome and made great efforts to impress on the public that its primary objective was to guarantee the return of the CNRP. The negotiations between the Cambodian government and the EU were still ongoing, when Rainsy – much to the annoyance of EU officials involved in the negotiations – announced in June 2019 that to end his exile, several EU parliamentarians would accompany him back to Cambodia to confront Hun Sen.[85] Inevitably these highly publicised messages reinforced perceptions of partisanship. '[In] Cambodia we have a hard time to understand what the international community means. Do they support democratisation or do they support an individual?'[86]

[79]Interview (Julie Bernath) with leading member of a human rights organisation, Phnom Penh, 30 November 2018.

[80]Kheang Un, *Cambodia: Return to Authoritarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[81]de Guevara and Kühn, 'The international community needs to act', p. 137.

[82]Prime Minister Hun Sen, 'Selected Off-the-Cuff Speech at the Ground-Breaking Ceremony to Rebuild National Road 3 from the Chaom Chao to Kompot City [unofficial translation]', *Cambodia Vision* (7 May 2018), available at: {http://cnv.org.kh/rebuild-national-road-3/} accessed 23 June 2020.

[83]Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with Ou Ritthy (youth leader), Phnom Penh, 6 July 2019.

[84]Two interviews (Katrin Travouillon) with two Cambodian union leaders, Phnom Penh, both 9 July 2019; interview (Katrin Travouillon) with a group of four representatives of garment factory workers, Phnom Penh, 30 June 2019.

[85]Ben Sokhean, 'Minister bans foreigners from returning with Sam Rainsy', *Khmer Times* (25 July 2019), available at: {www.khmertimeskh.com/50627078/ministry-bans-foreigners-from-returning-with-sam-rainsy/} accessed 15 September 2019; Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with senior EU official, 2019; informal conversations and field observations (Katrin Travouillon), Phnom Penh, June and July 2019.

[86]Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with Yang Saing Koma, President of Grassroots Democratic Party, Phnom Penh, 11 July 2019.

The degree to which the collaborative work on myth served to situate and evaluate the actions of the EU was also evident during a public Q and A on the EBA.[87] Probably unaware of the broader context he thereby evoked, the attending EU representative attempted to downplay notions of partisanship by emphasising that the measures were not designed to support a party, but 'about supporting the Cambodian people'. His audience, overwhelmingly composed of young, politically engaged Cambodians, was demonstrably unimpressed with the statement. A question they raised repeatedly was why the EU chose to 'give up' on Cambodia, but continue to engage economically with one-party states like Vietnam or China. Substantially, this particular criticism is easy to dismiss, given the different legal basis of the trade agreements in question, as the EU representative was quick to point out. However, these comments certainly did make sense as gestures towards the shared understandings instigated and reinforced through the work on the myth of the international community and one of its core themes. Namely, that Cambodians' efforts and commitments to democratic norms and principles would assure a superior consideration of their concerns and that abiding by these terms of conditionality would accord them a particular status in the international hierarchy.

It is therefore as a result of the myth's inability to respond to or solve the ever-more apparent contradictions between the rhetoric and practice of meaningful collaboration that its mobilisation now often contributes to create a context that serves to undermine rather than reinforce a sense of common purpose among otherwise like-minded actors. During interviews, progressive politicians and human rights activists in Cambodia, for instance, overwhelmingly rejected the persistent labelling of 2018 as the 'death of democracy' as dismissive of their ongoing efforts to push for democratic changes. Demos, as they repeatedly pointed out, stands for the people and neither the Cambodian people nor their spirit had died. These actors showed themselves conscious of and critical towards stereotypical views of Cambodians as fearful or passive people, waiting to be rescued by outside forces. From their perspective, such dramatised narratives and the related emphasis on the necessity of a strong partnership among the Cambodian people and the international community, to unite in a common fight against a 'tyrant', calls for dramatic solutions that invalidate or undermine their own low-profile and pragmatic efforts to address the increasingly narrow spaces of political engagement through emancipatory approaches to political mobilisation and education.

Ahead of the 2018 election, for instance, the leaders of a relatively new opposition party were criticised for their decision to register their participation, thus bestowing legitimacy on a fraudulent process. 'They think that if we don't participate, then the international community can help beating Hun Sen, this won't work, it is impossible … This is what we try to explain them.'[88] From their point of view, calls by other Cambodian opposition leaders and activists asking them not to compete in the elections expressed a naïve belief in the continued validity of a special relationship between Cambodia and the international community. Insofar these demands were raised by international actors, they were seen as little more than a request to take the fall for a pointless exercise in moral grandstanding, performed for the benefit of an audience that would soon turn its attention elsewhere. A party official recalled pressing international actors on this point ahead of Election Day: 'We asked the EU, the international community, is there any alternative? You tell me. They didn't have an answer either.'[89]

What becomes apparent by observing the work on myth in these highly charged moments is that in this particular political context the myth of the international community has long begun to create the conditions of its own demise. Set in this context, it also becomes clear why a new

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[87]Field observations (Katrin Travouillon), Phnom Penh, July 2019.

[88]Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with Sam Inn, secretary general of Grassroots Democratic Party, Phnom Penh, 21 July 2018.

[89]Interview (Katrin Travouillon) with Yang Saing Koma, president of Grassroots Democratic Party, Phnom Penh, 11 July 2019.

generation of progressive Cambodian politicians and human rights activists see the need to actively confront, circumscribe, and renegotiate the people's relationship with the international community. Their aim is to rephrase the terms and practices of Cambodia's national dialogue and political culture, emphasising self-reliance, independence, and greater trust in the Cambodian people. The international community is still described as an important political and economic partner, and actors noted that they hope for continued financial and technical contributions or low-key partnerships for the type of attention that can still provide a degree of safety against excessive harassment by the state authorities.[90] In this new vision, however, the international community has already lost its affective and motivational grounding in the core narratives of the original mythologeme and consequently much of its 'cosmopolitan charm'.[91] Neither the scepticism expressed by these progressive actors, nor their assertion that the international community's role in Cambodia's political transformations needs to be renegotiated are therefore the result of their dissatisfaction with the actions or commitments of a specific group of actors. Neither do they indicate an abandonment of democratic principles on their part. Instead, these arguments are born out of their observations and decade-long experiences with the myth of the international community, the collaborative work on it, and its political effects, demonstrating, that where myths are concerned 'scepticism and hope' are indeed 'not necessarily antagonistic'.[92] Implicit in their continued engagement with its narratives is their expressed need to scrutinise the rhetoric and practice of transnational collaboration for democratic change and make more deliberate efforts to align it with the realities of a world in which the end of history has been postponed indefinitely.

Conclusion

This article used Bottici's account of political myths to conceptualise the international community as an ongoing collaborative process that actors engage in to create significance in addressing their present political circumstances. We focused on the case of Cambodia to demonstrate the extent to which this collaborative work on myth is constitutive of the shared understandings Cambodian and international actors draw on to orient themselves when they evaluate political changes and organise transnational calls to action. Through archival research and interviews with Cambodian political actors, activists, and analysts we illustrated the life of this myth in Cambodia since the UN intervention in 1992, and discussed the sites and the triggers that compel actors to engage its basic narratives in an ongoing cycle of telling and retelling. Early representations of the international community as powerful and caring and the contemporary criticism of an international community that is naïve, inattentive, or partisan are but the reified traces of increasingly fraught attempts to engage the myth in order to organise actors and events into a coherent and meaningful plot. We argue that many of the ideas that political actors and leaders use to orient their actions cannot be understood without taking into account how decades of collaborative work on the myth have shaped the imaginary of political change. Myths are part of the glue that binds sociopolitical orders, but can also serve to dissolve them.[93] The fact that emerging progressive actors now engage the same narratives that once served to create an intuitive sense of cohesion and purpose to scrutinise the terms of meaningful transnational cooperation for democratic change demonstrates the validity of this observation.

Many actors and analysts will undoubtedly argue that it is precisely in this moment of crisis and in view of the Cambodian government's sustained attack on liberal norms and values that the

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[90]Interviews (Katrin Travouillon) with two civil society leaders, Phnom Penh, 2 and 11 July 2019.

[91]Rob Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 141.

[92]Loriaux and Lynch, 'Mythography'.

[93]Bliesemann de Guevara, 'Introduction: Myth and narrative in international politics', in de Guevara B. (ed.), *Myth and Narrative in International Politics*, p. 16.

existence of a caring and watchful international community needs reassertion. We disagree. Decades after Carothers declared the end of the transition paradigm, it remains difficult to think and discuss the nature of political changes in Cambodia without couching them in the very terms of linearity and determinism that Kofi Annan conveyed so enthusiastically when he designated the international community as 'the only way forward'.[94] Based on our observations we see the ongoing collaborative work on myth as an important reason for this difficulty. Our research does therefore have implications for those who aim to capture the creative work on new visions for political change in the context of ongoing shifts of global power and order, for we showed why and how the international community can render self-evident and static what is actually ambiguous and moving.

Dr Katrin Travouillon is a lecturer at the Department of Political and Social Change at the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs (ANU). Katrin is interested in the discursive and affective dimensions of political change in Cambodia. Author's email: Katrin.Travouillon@anu.edu.au

Dr Julie Bernath is a visiting researcher at the Center for Conflict Studies of the University of Marburg, and a senior researcher at swisspeace. Her research focuses on the politics of transitional justice in the contexts of Cambodia and Syria. Author's email: Julie.Bernath@swisspeace.ch

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[94]UN Press Release, SG/SM/7133, 'Kofi Annan, Secretary-General Examines "Meaning of International Community" in Address to DPI/NGO Conference', 15 September 1999, available at: {https://www.un.org/press/en/1999/19990915.sgsm7133.doc.html} accessed 10 April 2018.