Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 47(2), pp 210–233 June 2016.
 doi:10.1017/S0022463416000059

Narrating the national border: Cambodian state rhetoric vs popular discourse on the Preah Vihear conflict

Kimly Ngoun

Existing studies of the Thai–Cambodian conflict over the Khmer temple of Preah Vihear tend to focus on the historical and legal dimensions of the contested claims and on Thailand's role. This article examines the conflict from within Cambodia, through the rhetoric of the Cambodian state elites and the views of residents of Preah Vihear province. The state has endeavoured to create and propogate a view that development projects in this province are an expression of Khmer pride as well as important for nation-building and border defence. Residents of the border region, however, view such nationalist discourse through their everyday experiences, giving local meaning to terms such as development, nation and heritage.

On 23 April 2012, I went on my first extended field trip to the border province of Preah Vihear in northern Cambodia and I was surprised. I was expecting to see very few people travelling on the bus to an undeveloped border province. However, the bus was completely full when it departed Phnom Penh station. The driver stopped regularly to pick up more passengers, who were squeezed into the aisle. The driver said, 'My company started a daily bus service to Preah Vihear just a few years ago after the government built good roads.'[1] A long-time Preah Vihear resident sitting next to me on the bus commented, 'Many of the houses you saw along the road are new settlements. Previously it was all forest.'[2] After spending approximately seven hours on the bus, I arrived in Tbeng Meanchey, the capital of Preah Vihear province. The city also looked different from what I had imagined. I had pictured a dilapidated rural backwater. But there were concrete houses, guesthouses, hotels, banks and other signs

Kimly Ngoun is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Political and Social Change, the Australian National University (ANU). Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: ngounkimly@yahoo.com. The author would like to thank Andrew Walker, Philip Taylor, Nick Cheesman, Tyrell Haberkorn, Nicholas Farrelly and Anthony Reid for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article. The author is also grateful to Greg Fealy, Edward Aspinall and participants in his post-fieldwork seminar at the ANU for their suggestions. Special thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers and the editor of *JSEAS* for their helpful comments. He would like to thank Allison Ley for her language editorial assistance. The Department of Political and Social Change, ANU, and the Australian Leadership Award kindly funded his fieldwork in Cambodia.

1 Informant 1.
2 Informant 2.

of modernity. A resident expressed my thoughts, 'The city has changed so rapidly over the last few years.'[3]

After spending five days interviewing people in the city, I went to Preah Vihear Temple by taxi. It took us two hours to travel the distance of approximately 100 km on the new asphalt road. Along the way, I saw patches of cleared forest, cash crop plantations and new settlements. About 30 km from the temple, there was a new border town called Sra Em. A tailor in the town, a migrant from Kampong Cham province, told me, 'I came here two years ago. It is easier to earn a living here than in my home province.'[4]

These first impressions of life in the province made me realise the disjuncture between the Cambodian state elites' nationalist narrative and Preah Vihear residents' everyday views of the situation. The ruling elites through the state-affiliated media constructed a discourse of a conflict that threatened the nation, describing their responses to this threat as a defence of Preah Vihear Temple and the border territories. However, my research found that the provincial residents' everyday discourses on the conflict differed dramatically from this nationalist narrative. There were many different local ideas of nation, nationalism, and heritage site.

This does not mean, however, that people in the province were indifferent to nationalism, or that they did not support the government's nation-building projects. It is just that their views of Preah Vihear Temple and development projects have localised and nuanced meanings, different from the state's nationalist discourse. In spite of the state's massive propaganda campaigns, it has not convinced Preah Vihear residents to adopt its nationalist narrative wholesale.

Although there are many English language studies on the Preah Vihear temple dispute, many of them tend to focus on the historical and legal dimensions of the contested claims, including the roles of Thailand, and of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).[5] My study, however, examines the conflict through the rhetoric of the Cambodian state elites and the views of residents of Preah Vihear province. Inspired by Eric Hobsbawm's suggestion that the study of nation and nationalism should incorporate both top-down and bottom-up approaches,[6] my research includes analysis from below. My bottom-up approach examines popular views of the Thai–Cambodian border conflict and of the Cambodian state's nation-building projects in Preah Vihear province. Many ordinary people view the state-built roads and other public infrastructure as practical improvements benefiting them and enhancing

3 Informant 6.

4 Informant 23.

5 See, for example, P. Cuasay, 'Borders on the fantastic: Mimesis, violence, and landscape at the temple of Preah Vihear', *Modern Asian Studies* 32, 4 (1998): 849–90; Charnvit Kasetsiri, Pou Sothirak and Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Preah Vihear: A guide to the Thai–Cambodian conflict and its solution* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2013), pp. 1–104; Shane Strate, 'A pile of stones? Preah Vihear as a Thai symbol of national humiliation', *South East Asia Research* 21, 1 (2013): 41–68; Victor Kattan, 'The ghosts of the temple of Preah Vihear/Phra Viharn in the 2013 Judgment', *Asian Journal of International Law* 5, 1 (2015): 16–25; Hao Duy Phan, 'Institutional design and its constraints: Explaining ASEAN's role in the temple of Preah Vihear dispute', *Asian Journal of International Law* 5, 1 (2015): 7–15.

6 Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 10.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

local potential, not grand symbols associated with national meaning, border defence and Khmer pride.[7]

The research followed a qualitative methodology. In addition to relying on primary and secondary data, I made observations, conducted 45 in-depth and 4 focus group interviews, and recorded 14 informal conversations during multi-sited fieldwork in Preah Vihear province between April and July 2012 and again in December 2013.[8] A total of 77 individuals participated in the interviews. The informants included villagers, urban residents, market vendors, economic migrants, traders, transport operators, public servants, soldiers and border police. I also interviewed members of the indigenous Kuy minority in Sra Em (see Appendix A).

This article begins with an overview of the changing relations between the Preah Vihear border region and the Cambodian state, followed by an examination of the government's nationalist discourse on these borderlands. Then I present popular views from Preah Vihear province. Throughout this article, I use 'popular views' or 'popular discourses' in contrast to 'elite nationalist discourse'. I also use the terms 'border', 'borderlands' and 'frontier' interchangeably to refer to the Preah Vihear temple border region.[9]

Borderlands and the state: From resistance towards engagement

Borders between nation-states are a political construct as a result of the spatial rearrangement of the world into modern states. The idea of fixed boundaries was intended to give states a well-defined sovereignty over their territories.[10] In Southeast Asia, the concept of boundaries as strictly defined lines is the result of the colonial encounter. The idea derived from the competition among the European colonial powers for control over territories, people and resources in the region.[11] The establishment of modern borders in the region shifted indigenous spatial knowledge, in which frontiers were perceived as fluid, unbounded, and sometimes waxing and waning depending on the power of the competing centres,[12] to fixed lines

7 Informants 3, 4, 5, 7–9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 22, 24, 25, 26, 39, 41, 49, 69.

8 I employed semi-structured interviews with probing questions for the in-depth analysis and discussion questions for the focus groups. My provincial fieldwork sites included Tbeng Meanchey, Sra Em, Preah Vihear Temple, and two newly established villages, Sen Chey and Samdech Techo Hun Sen Nature, about 10 km and 20 km from the temple, respectively. The capital city of Tbeng Meanchey is about 100 km from the temple. Sra Em is about 30 km from and the final gateway to the temple.

9 In border studies, the terms 'border', 'borderlands' and 'frontier' are sometimes differentiated. See Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and state formation in the modern world* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), pp. 9–10; Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, 'Toward a comparative history of borderlands', *Journal of World History* 8, 2 (1997): 213–14.

10 Baud and van Schendel, 'Toward a comparative history of borderlands': 216–17.

11 Alexander Horstmann and Reed Wadley, 'Centering the margin in Southeast Asia', in *Centering the margin: Agency and narrative in Southeast Asian borderlands*, ed. Alexander Horstmann and Reed Wadley (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2006), pp. 8–9.

12 The traditional precolonial indigenous knowledge of political space between states followed the concept of a *mandala*, which consists of a centre and its surrounding satellites. The farthest domains from the centre were often overlapping zones also claimed by other competing centres. Stanley Tambiah coined the term 'galactic polity' to refer to this spatial *mandala* arrangement of traditional Southeast Asian kingdoms in *Culture, thought, and social action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 3–31.

on modern geographical maps.[13] These maps created 'the geo-body of a nation', significant for the national imagination of the modern nation-state.[14]

Post-colonial Southeast Asian ruling elites took great pride in gaining independence, and they were eager to implement homogenising nation-building projects. However, the lack of state institutional capacity and revenue often constrained such political objectives.[15] Furthermore, the departure of colonial rulers created a power vacuum in the newly independent nation-states, which had not had 'an indigenous strong state tradition',[16] making them vulnerable to political fragmentation.[17] These constraints prevented post-colonial states in the region from exercising effective control over their outlying borderlands. Thus, central governments viewed borderlands as zones of lawlessness, smuggling and secret activities.[18] Some border regions even became sites for separatist movements or armed insurgencies against central governments.[19]

Upon independence from France in 1953, Cambodia began nation-building projects in the country's remote mountainous border provinces in the north and northeast. Provincial administrations were set up, introducing the culture of the Khmer majority. Since the government viewed the uplands minorities as uncivilised and their regions as unruly and prone to rebellion,[20] Khmer soldiers and their families were resettled in these areas to help persuade the various indigenous groups to adopt Khmer civilisation and order.[21]

Weak institutions, a lack of revenue and political instability constrained these attempts at nation-building, as elsewhere in post-colonial Southeast Asia. Unlike the cases of Aceh, Southern Thailand, and Myanmar's borderlands, however, where

13 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: A history of the geo-body of a nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).

14 Ibid.

15 Dan Slater, *Ordering power: Contentious politics and authoritarian leviathans in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 3; Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, 'Introduction: States of imagination', in *States of imagination: Ethnographic explorations of the post-colonial state*, ed. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 11–14.

16 Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian drama: An enquiry into the poverty of nations* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1968), cited in Anthony Reid, *Imperial alchemy: Nationalism and political identity in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 26.

17 Paul Battersby, 'Border politics and the broader politics of Thailand's international relations in the 1990s: From communism to capitalism', *Pacific Affairs* 71, 4 (1998/99): 474.

18 Carl Grundy-Warr, 'Coexistent borderlands and intra-state conflicts in mainland Southeast Asia', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 14, 1 (1993): 45–56; Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret trades, porous borders: Smuggling and states along a Southeast Asian frontier, 1865–1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 16.

19 See, for example, Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity* (London: Zed, 1991).

20 The highland minorities had a history of resistance even under the French. See Margaret Slocomb, 'Cultures and histories of resistance in Cambodia', in *Conservation and development in Cambodia: Exploring frontiers of change in nature, state and society*, ed. Sarah Milne and Sango Mahanty (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 231–3.

21 Conny van den Berg and Phat Palith, 'On people, roads and land: Immigration and its consequences for highland communities in Ratanakiri', *International Development Research Centre* (Oct. 2000): 4; Ronald Bruce St John, 'Land boundaries of Indochina: Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam', *IBRU Boundary and Territory Briefings* 2, 6 (1998): 99; Ian Baird, 'Different views of history: Shades of irredentism along the Laos–Cambodia border', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41, 2 (2010): 199–201.

armed groups have fought for separation or autonomy from central control, in Cambodia's remote northern borderlands various Khmer resistance groups vied to take over the whole country. Their ultimate goal was to return from their frontier bases and seize the machinery of state in Phnom Penh.

The forested highlands of the north and northeast, combined with the relative ambiguity of the borderlands, provided attractive sanctuaries and bases for opposition leaders. For about half a century, these borderlands hosted various Khmer rebel groups. In the 1940s and 1950s, its border with Thailand was a refuge and a resistance base for Son Ngoc Thanh, an ethnic Khmer from Kampuchea Krom in southern Vietnam's Mekong delta, who along with his supporters was attempting to sabotage Prince Norodom Sihanouk's government.[22] In the 1960s, Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot and other senior communists escaped Sihanouk's political harassment and took refuge in the northeast, from whence they established their bases.[23] Highland minorities were sympathetic to these movements.[24] After the Vietnamese army overthrew Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea regime in 1979, Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge leaders and their soldiers retreated from Phnom Penh to the Cambodian–Thai border, from whence they fought against the Vietnamese-backed Phnom Penh government. The last of the Khmer Rouge only surrendered to the government at the end of the 1990s. The border region of Preah Vihear Temple was thus one of the Khmer Rouge's last strongholds. Notably, Thailand supported the Cambodian resistance forces during the Cold War, allowing them to use the borderlands for resistance bases.[25]

The end of the Cold War, the shift in Thai foreign policy towards Indochina in the late 1980s,[26] and the re-engagement of the international community with Phnom Penh after the 1993 general election have had a profound impact on the state's interactions with its borderlands. These shifts transformed the centre–borderlands relationship from hostility towards more productive engagement. For example, Cambodia's most important border crossing with Thailand — at Poipet in Banteay Meanchey province, next to Thailand's Sa Kaeo province — was opened in the early 1990s, allowing for the first time in decades large volumes of trade between

22 Michael Leifer, 'Cambodia and her neighbours', *Pacific Affairs* 34, 4 (1961/62): 362–5.

23 David P. Chandler, *Brother number one: A political biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992), pp. 82–3; see also Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to power: Colonialism, nationalism, and communism in Cambodia, 1930–1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

24 Chandler, *Brother number one*, p. 84; Jan Ovesen and Ing-Britt Trankell, 'Cambodia', in *Ethnicity in Asia*, ed. Colin Mackerras (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 198.

25 See Leifer, 'Cambodia and her neighbours'; Charnvit Kasetsiri, 'Thailand–Cambodia: A love–hate relationship', *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 3 (Mar. 2003); http://kyotoreview.org/issue-3-nations-and-stories/a-love-hate-relationship/ (last accessed 16 Dec. 2015); Milton Osborne, 'Preah Vihear: The Thai–Cambodia temple dispute', *Open Democracy News Analysis*, 29 Aug. 2008; https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/preah-vihear-the-thai-cambodia-temple-dispute (last accessed 16 Dec. 2015).

26 When Chatichai Choonhawan became prime minister of Thailand (1988–91), he announced Thailand's new foreign policy on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. His government wanted to forge new relations with the three Indochinese countries by transforming them from 'a battlefield into a marketplace'. Unlike his predecessors, Chatichai viewed Thailand's borders with Indochinese countries as zones of trade and economic activity. For details, see Battersby, 'Border politics'; Lindsay French, 'From politics to economics at the Thai–Cambodian border: Plus ça change…', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 15, 3 (2002): 444–9.

the two countries. In addition, the surrender of the Khmer Rouge and Cambodia's admittance into ASEAN in the late 1990s further enhanced the government's engagement with its own frontier regions through state building and cross-border economic development projects.

Damaged by more than two decades of civil war, Cambodia had only limited funding and relied heavily on foreign aid and loans to reconstruct its public infrastructure. Consequently, the government prioritised Phnom Penh and other more populous provinces. Remote and sparsely populated Preah Vihear remained neglected until 2008. Prime Minister Hun Sen admitted as much in his launching of the construction of National Road 62 from Tbeng Meanchey to Preah Vihear Temple:

> I would like to ask for understanding from the people in Preah Vihear Province … since the Royal Government has not restored these national roads in a timely manner, resulting in limited infrastructure development in this region and distant Preah Vihear Temple … away from Cambodian people. … On the other hand, because Preah Vihear Temple can only be accessed via Thailand, Cambodia has lost ownership in development of this cultural and natural tourism site. Originating from these issues, I made a serious commitment to build this road at whatever cost.[27]

It had long been the government's plan to propose the inscription of the temple as a UNESCO World Heritage site.[28] However, it was the military dispute with Thailand near the temple that spurred the acceleration of nation-building projects, infrastructure development and connectivity in Preah Vihear province.[29] This is clearly shown during the years of border tensions (2008–11). New infrastructure built included the section of National Road 62 from Kampong Thom to Tbeng Meanchey; National Road 67 from Siem Reap; National Road 56 from Banteay Meanchey running through Oddar Meanchey and Anlong Veng to Sra Em; and National Road 214 from Stoeng Treng. These roads allow the province to be accessible from four different directions. Besides these roads, the government has built a two-lane concrete mountain road to Preah Vihear Temple, so it is no longer true that people can only easily access the ancient temple from the Thai side.

In addition to new infrastructure, many new buildings were constructed in the provincial capital and near the temple, including: the Preah Vihear Provincial Municipality, Department of Culture and Fine Art, Department of Posts and Telecommunications, Department of Information, Provincial Red Cross, 16 Makara Provincial Referral Hospital, Provincial Training Centre, Provincial Police Department, and the Tourism Office.[30] A large new barracks for Royal Cambodian Army Intervention Division 3 was built, about 60 km from the temple, in addition to several battalions stationed in other parts of the border region. A new museum

27 Hun Sen, 'Keynote address at the ceremony to launch the construction of National Road 62 from Tbeng Meanchey to Preah Vihear Temple, and road segment from the intersection of National Road 62 to Srayorng–Koh Ke', *Cambodia New Vision*, 5 Apr. 2008; available at http://cnv.org.kh/tag/pvh/ (last accessed 7 Jan. 2016).

28 See Kingdom of Cambodia, *The Temple of Preah Vihear inscribed on the World Heritage List (UNESCO) since 2008* (Phnom Penh: Kingdom of Cambodia, 2010), pp. 9–13.

29 Informants 17, 19, 21, 44, 76.

30 Informants 19, 21, 43, 44, 45, 74.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

called the Samdech Techo Hun Sen Eco-Global Museum of Preah Vihear was set up about 20 km from the temple. Sra Em hosts a Bayon TV and Radio Broadcast Relay Station.

What is more remarkable than the flurry of development is the reconfiguring and institutionalising of the frontier's human and spatial geography in the hierarchy of the state administration. The Cambodian government introduced a migration scheme to the Preah Vihear border region. Between 2008 and 2012, the government established two new communes and twenty-one new villages, along with new schools and Buddhist pagodas. All the new villages, except one, are in Choam Khsant, the district which includes the temple itself.[31] In 2009 Hun Sen affirmed the government's wish to populate the country's isolated border region to protect it from Thailand's encroachment.[32]

In 2012 the prime minister also revealed that permission for casinos to operate at border crossings with Thailand and Vietnam were part of a strategy to defend Cambodian territory from its two larger neighbours' incursions. All licensed casinos in the country, except the Naga World Casino in Phnom Penh, are located at international border crossings with Thailand and Vietnam. He said that Vietnam and Thailand could not move their respective border posts into Cambodian territory when there were multi-storey casino buildings in their way.[33] Hun Sen's statements reveal not only the persistence of Cambodian elites' traditional views of Thailand and Vietnam as threats, but also the continuing potency of the image of the national 'geo-body' in contemporary politics.

Developing, connecting, and populating the borderlands

As described above, the Preah Vihear border conflict with Thailand triggered unprecedented public infrastructure development in the province. The prime minister mobilised state resources and funding from his patronage networks and obtained loans from the Chinese government. Hun Sen visited the border province four times during the dispute while his senior government and military officials made countless trips. The state-affiliated media also reported daily on the border situation and high-ranking officials' visits.

Through its nationalist rhetoric conveyed via the state's media, the government tried to construct a narrative of the prime minister and his government as guardians of Cambodia's territorial sovereignty and the Preah Vihear Temple. Its new

31 Preah Vihear Municipality, 'Banjee chhmors krung srok khom sangkat noeng phum robos khaet Preah Vihear samrab brerbras chea plov ka' [List of names in the city, districts, communes and villages of Preah Vihear province for official use], 28 Sept. 2012.

32 Thet Sambath, 'Bayon to seek more donations for Preah Vihear road repairs', *Phnom Penh Post*, 11 Mar. 2009.

33 Prime Minister Hun Sen's address to the National Assembly on 9 Aug. 2012. The speech was later compiled and published as a handbook, which excluded Hun Sen's comment on border casinos. See Royal Government of Cambodia, *Atthabotkol robos Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen neayuk roat montrei nai preah reachea nachak Kampuchea samrab atthibay pdol ka bampler sdei pi ka ngea bos bangkol khansema prumdaen kork noeng ka kamnot prumdaen samut roveang preah reachea nachak Kampuchea noeng sathearonak roat sangkumniyom Vietnam* [Principle statement of (…) Hun Sen, Prime Minister of the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia, to clarify the land and sea border demarcation between the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam during the plenary session of the National Assembly, 9 Aug. 2012].

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

infrastructure and nation-building projects were promoted as a means of restoring Khmer national pride and defending the border. Hun Sen himself said good road networks would attract settlers to the remote region and that a more populated frontier would safeguard Cambodia's border territory against Thailand's encroachment.[34] Three important factors underlying the construction of this nationalist discourse should be noted: the potency of Preah Vihear Temple in Cambodian nationalism; fears of a loss of territory and national decline; and the political opportunity the border temple dispute offered Hun Sen to counter domestic critics.

First, to the Cambodian elite, Preah Vihear Temple has come to represent the nation and Khmer pride. The border temple emerged from obscurity to symbolise Cambodia's cultural and national identity during Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum (People's Socialist Community) government (1955–70). In the context of the discourse of historical humiliation and decline since the age of Angkor, Cambodian nationalists interpreted the 1962 judgment by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) granting ownership of the temple to Cambodia as a proud victory in the battle with Thailand. Professor Sorn Samnang, a former president of the Royal Academy of Cambodia and a former adviser to Hun Sen, said:

> If we talk about Khmer's victories after the Angkor era, over the last 500 years we have had very few. We have been mostly defeated. Preah Vihear temple victory at the ICJ is Khmer's most impressive victory. It is the one I am really proud of.[35]

Nearly half a century later, the Cambodian government reinvigorated the discourse of the temple representing Khmer pride when UNESCO inscribed Preah Vihear Temple as a World Heritage site in 2008. This episode was a replay of 1962: there were strong protests in Thailand and joyous national celebrations in Cambodia. Sihanouk's government had raised the Cambodian flag at the temple following the ICJ judgment. Following the World Heritage inscription, the Hun Sen government erected a billboard at Preah Vihear: 'I am proud to be born Khmer'. Similar sentiments were also expressed by senior government officials on state-affiliated television upon the construction of a road to the temple.

Second, despite significant post-Cold War changes in the meanings and functions of state borders,[36] the aura of the border in nationalist thought has not faded away. Globally, the promotion of nationalism in the defence of borders remains a powerful resource for mobilising popular support, as demonstrated by the ability of Thailand's People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to mobilise tens of thousands of people in Bangkok to protest against Cambodia during the Preah Vihear border conflict. The border's appeal for nationalists derives from its potent representation of a modern idea of state sovereignty. The state has to demonstrate it can defend its borders and reinforce its statehood at its borderlands through displaying flags, posts, stones,

34 See Sambath, 'Bayon to seek more donations'.

35 Interview with Professor Sorn Samnang, Phnom Penh, 7 Sept. 2012.

36 State borders have started to lose their traditional meaning as a result of the increasing multidimensional flows of people, goods, trade, and information across the globe. See, for example, David Newman and Anssi Paasi, 'Fences and neighbours in the postmodern world: Boundary narratives in political geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 22, 2 (1998): 191–3; Vladimir Kolossov, 'Border studies: Changing perspectives and theoretical approaches', *Geopolitics* 10, 4 (2005): 622–4.

fences, border guards, checkpoints, and other landmarks.[37] State frontiers were also favoured by nationalists as markers of national identity. Anderson writes, 'Frontiers, in this sense, are part of political beliefs and myths about the unity of the people, and sometimes myths about the "natural" unity of a territory.'[38] In mainland Southeast Asia, Thongchai Winichakul shows how modern state boundaries played a role in the construction of the modern Thai nation-state. The 'geo-body' of Thai nationhood created a sense of 'Thainess' as being different from the non-Thai 'others', who live on the other side of the borders.[39]

The notion of national borders is sensitive in Cambodia's long-standing nationalist tradition. It represents both the survival of the Cambodian nation and the vulnerability of the Khmer race. This reverence of national borders derives from both geography and history. Being sandwiched between Thailand and Vietnam has long created a perception of threat for many Cambodian nationalists who fear that their larger and more powerful neighbours will 'swallow' more territories if Cambodia does not pay adequate attention to border defence.

Cambodia's national history encompasses warfare with its neighbours in the post-Angkorian era; and of the struggle for survival and independence of the Khmer kingdom from Thai and Vietnamese dominance.[40] Both neighbours are portrayed as having ill intentions towards Cambodia.[41] The Khmer empire of Angkor controlled vast territories including parts of present-day Thailand, some parts of Laos, and the entire Mekong delta. The nationalist historical discourse emphasises Cambodia's loss of land to both Thailand and Vietnam as an explanation for the nation's subsequent decline. It draws a direct relationship between territorial loss and the decline in Khmer cultural, political and ideological power and prestige.[42]

Third, we need to examine Hun Sen's domestic political vulnerability to understand why his government has portrayed the development of the Preah Vihear borderlands as a means of defending the border against Thai aggression. Although Hun Sen has consolidated enormous power and prevailed over his rivals during his long rule, civil society and opposition parties have criticised his government for being corrupt, repressive, and supportive of widespread land-grabbing and illegal logging.[43] Moreover, many critics and nationalists have argued that his government is submissive to the Vietnamese government and has shown little willingness to defend

37 Baud and van Schendel, 'Toward a comparative history of borderlands', p. 226.
38 Anderson, *Frontiers*, p. 2.
39 Thongchai, *Siam mapped*, pp. 164–72.
40 Eng Soth, *Prahreach pong savada Khmer: Mohaboros Khmer* [Khmer chronicles: The Khmer heroes] (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1969), Part III.
41 Ibid.
42 See, for example, Michel Tranet, *Pravatasas nei preah reachea nachak Kampuchea: Sampornapheap roveang prochea chun Khmer–Thai chab tang pi so.vo.ti 13 nei ko.so.* [A history of the Kingdom of Cambodia: Khmer–Thai relations since the 13th century] (Phnom Penh: no pub., 2005).
43 See Steve Heder, 'Hun Sen's consolidation: Death or beginning of reform?', *Southeast Asian Affairs* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), pp. 113–30; Duncan McCargo, 'Cambodia: Getting away with authoritarianism?', *Journal of Democracy* 16, 4 (2005): 98–112; Global Witness, 'Cambodia's family trees: Illegal logging and the stripping of public assets by Cambodia's elite', www.globalwitness.org, June 2007; Human Rights Watch, '30 years of Hun Sen: Violence, repression, and corruption in Cambodia', Jan. 2015, https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/01/12/30-years-hun-sen/violence-repression-and-corruption-cambodia (last accessed 16 Dec. 2015).

Cambodia's border territories against Vietnam's alleged encroachment. Such suspicions date back to the rise of Hun Sen and many senior members of his government to power under Vietnam's patronage in 1979. According to this narrative, Hun Sen is not a nationalist and cannot defend Cambodia's borders. Allegations that the prime minister is a 'puppet' of Vietnam or that he has been 'ceding' Cambodia's border territories to Vietnam have appeared in opposition-affiliated newspapers and on anti-government nationalist blogs such as *KI-Media, Khmerisation*, and *Sacravatoons*.

Such nationalist sentiment is embedded in the electoral politics of the opposition parties' challenge to the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP).[44] With their weaker financial, institutional and coercive resources, the opposition parties have relied on this anti-Vietnamese rhetoric to mobilise support and gain votes.

The most prominent opposition politician who has used anti-Vietnamese nationalist rhetoric against Hun Sen is Sam Rainsy. In 2009, he went to Cambodia's Svay Rieng province to remove border posts allegedly placed inside Cambodia's territory by Vietnamese officials. His actions prompted the Cambodian government to issue a warrant for his arrest for obstructing demarcation work along the Cambodia–Vietnam border. Sam Rainsy was forced to flee the country.[45] He returned to Cambodia with a royal pardon shortly before the July 2013 election to lead his Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP).

The Preah Vihear border conflict with Thailand thus presented a perfect opportunity for Hun Sen and his government to reduce their political vulnerability and at the same time to construct themselves as nationalists and defenders of Cambodia's borders. His government's firm defence of the Preah Vihear border received wide support from segments of the population. Michael Hayes, the former publisher and editor-in-chief of the *Phnom Penh Post*, observes, 'In the 20 years I've been in Cambodia the Preah Vihear issue is without question the only one I've seen that has united the entire nation.'[46]

Popular views from the border

My empirical analysis here draws from the theories of everyday politics and popular nationalism. Benedict Kerkvliet categorises everyday forms of peasant politics in their relations with state authorities into four categories, 'support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance'.[47] His work describes the 'modifications and resistance' category. He shows how peasant households' deviation from the Vietnamese state's prescribed collective farming policies pressured the state to change its policy to household farming.[48] James Scott's work on everyday forms of peasant resistance shows villagers employing various methods in their daily lives to resist

44 Kheang Un, 'Cambodia's 2008 election: The end of opposition?', *openDemocracy*, 5 Aug. 2008; https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/cambodia-s-2008-elections-the-end-of-opposition (last accessed 16 Dec. 2015).

45 See Sam Rainsy and David Whitehouse, *We didn't start the fire: My struggle for democracy in Cambodia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2013), p. 159.

46 Michael Hayes, 'The view from Cambodia', *Phnom Penh Post*, 17 Feb. 2011.

47 Benedict Kerkvliet, 'Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours)', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, 1 (2009): 227–43.

48 Benedict Kerkvliet, *The power of everyday politics: How Vietnamese peasants transformed national policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

against what they perceive as forms of dominance, control and exploitation.[49] Yoshinori Nishizaki's study shows that people in Suphanburi province, Thailand, supported prominent politician Banharn Silpa-archa because he tried to secure state funds to develop provincial infrastructure. Suphanburi people are proud of Banharn, the politician from their province, although at the national level Banharn is viewed as bad and corrupt.[50] And Andrew Walker's recent study of a village in Chiang Mai province offers fascinating insights into the dynamics of state–rural society relations. The villagers try hard to cultivate productive relations with various sources of power and state authorities near and far in their daily lives.[51]

All these studies share one thing in common. Whether the villagers resist, avoid, modify, support or engage with state power, they put their individual and local interests first. Knowing villagers' general tendency to put their everyday, local concerns first, it is not surprising then that the residents of Preah Vihear look differently upon the Hun Sen government's nationalist propaganda about their province and its borderlands.

Apart from the villagers' interests differing from those of the state, the state itself has its own limitations.[52] The state is neither monolithic nor coherent. It is contradictory and fragmentary, with multiple hierarchies. Different state institutions often have different and sometimes conflicting views and interests, preventing the state as a whole from forging a coherent policy or articulating a coherent narrative.[53] This is what happens in Preah Vihear province. People meet senior government or military officials from Phnom Penh less frequently compared to their nearly daily encounters with local officials — police, village chief, commune council members, forest rangers, etc.

A market vendor in Tbeng Meanchey told me, 'I saw *neak thom* [big people][54] from Phnom Penh passing through the city to the temple once or twice a month during the conflict, but I never had a chance to talk to them.'[55] Those she met most often were the market officials who collected fees every day and talked to her mostly about market-related issues, such as the provincial authority's plan to increase fees.[56] These interactions suggest that the market officials, like other local government officials, are more concerned with provincial than national issues. Although Hun Sen and senior

49 James Scott, *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); James Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).
50 Yoshinori Nishizaki, *Political authority and provincial identity in Thailand: The making of Banharn-buri* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell SEAP, 2011).
51 Andrew Walker, *Thailand's political peasants: Power in the modern rural economy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).
52 See Joel Migdal, 'The state in society: An approach to struggles for domination', in *State power and social forces*, ed. Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 9; Akhil Gupta, 'Blurred boundaries: The discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state', *American Ethnologist* 22, 2 (1995): 375–402.
53 Gupta, 'Blurred boundaries', pp. 375–84.
54 A term used by ordinary people to refer to high-ranking officials. Its antonym is *neak toch tarch* (small people).
55 Informant 25.
56 Ibid.

government figures often appeared on television, talking about defending the nation and the border, local officials did not echo the national narrative.

Studies of popular nationalism contain two interesting insights. First, national audiences are not homogenous. They comprise of diverse groups of people with varied social, economic, political, religious, gender, and ethnic backgrounds.[57] This heterogeneity constrains elites from inculcating a coherent view of the nation. Studies show there are cases in which national elites have failed to influence their countrymen's views.[58] The elites' nationalist discourse appeals to only some segments of the population.[59] Some studies show that certain groups within the population are not enthusiastic about or even hostile to their national identities.[60] Second, ordinary people are not passive consumers of national identities produced by nationalist elites. Instead, in their daily routines they are active producers of popular national discourse.[61] Ordinary people often express or interpret what represent national identities or national interests in ways that relate to their daily lives and interests.[62]

The literature on everyday politics and popular nationalism presented above is important to understand dynamism and complexity at local levels and the limitations of the state. The local contexts and people's everyday experiences are important factors influencing popular views. Local circumstances and practices are inherent in many of my conversations and interviews with Preah Vihear inhabitants. These conditions have, to a large extent, defined the provincial residents' nuanced views of both the border conflict and nation-building projects.

The state portrays roads to and within the border province as symbols of border defence and Khmer pride. However, many people in the province view them as enhancing mobility, interconnectedness, trade, transportation, livelihoods, and local potential, all of which bring daily benefits.[63] Several residents recounted their direct experiences of using the roads before and after they were asphalted. According to long-time residents, when the roads were in poor condition, travelling between Phnom Penh and Tbeng Meanchey, a distance of approximately 320 km, took more than a day, longer in the rainy season.[64] A phone vendor in the city said, 'When I came here in 2000, I left Phnom Penh at 7 a.m. and arrived in the town after 1 a.m.'[65] An NGO project manager confirmed, 'The road was very bad. In the

57 See Michael Billig, *Banal nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 71; Michael Skey, 'The national in everyday life: A critical engagement with Michael Billig's thesis of banal nationalism', *Sociological Review* 57, 2 (2009): 336–7; Michael Billig, 'Reflecting on a critical engagement with banal nationalism — reply to Skey', *Sociological Review* 57, 2 (2009): 347.

58 Joseph Whitmeyer, 'Elites and popular nationalism', *British Journal of Sociology* 53, 3 (2002): 321–41; Rogers Brubaker et al., *Nationalist politics and everyday ethnicity in a Transylvanian town* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

59 Whitmeyer, 'Elites and popular nationalism', p. 322.

60 See, for example, Steve Fenton, 'Indifference towards national identity: What young adults think about being English and British', *Nations and Nationalism* 13, 2 (2007): 321–40.

61 Tim Edensor, *National identity, popular culture and everyday life* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, 'Everyday nationhood', *Ethnicities* 8, 4 (2008): 550.

62 Cynthia Miller-Idriss, 'Everyday understanding of citizenship in Germany', *Citizenship Studies* 10, 5 (2006): 541–70.

63 Informants 3, 4, 5, 7–9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 22, 24, 25, 26, 39, 41, 49, 69.

64 Informants 6, 7–9, 14, 15, 18, 20, 21, 74, 75, 77.

65 Informant 14.

rainy season it took a few days to get to the province from Phnom Penh. Travellers had to sleep along the way and sometimes we were robbed by bandits.'[66] A woman who had been a local rice trader in the 1990s, who sat beside me on the bus from Siem Reap to Sra Em, said:

> At that time travelling over a distance of only 70 km by a truck loaded with bags of rice along this road [National Road 67] could take a few days because the truck often got stuck in the dirt road. Passengers had to cook rice and spend the night sleeping on the roadside.[67]

The asphalted roads have given people new experiences to compare with the past. Travelling from Phnom Penh to the provincial city now takes only about seven hours, and travelling from Siem Reap to Preah Vihear Temple takes about three. Another woman, a long-time resident of Tbeng Meanchey, told me on the bus about her travels before there were good roads and daily private bus services:

> Before, there were no direct bus services to the province. We had to hitch a lift on pickup trucks in Kampong Thom to get to Preah Vihear. Sometimes I sat at the rear part of the vehicle and had to expose myself for hours to the heat from the sun and rainfall and dust and dirt from the dirt road. Now we are lucky to travel by air-conditioned bus. It's very comfortable.[68]

The taxi driver with whom I travelled from Tbeng Meanchey to Sra Em town observed, 'Before, it took one whole day to get to the temple from Tbeng Meanchey. Now it takes only two hours. It makes my life much easier.'[69] Many residents also said that the improved roads had given them easier mobility, more frequent interaction with other places and, from these experiences, some entrepreneurial thinking.[70] A provincial grocery vendor said, 'Previously I rarely travelled far from home. Since we have good roads, I have been to Phnom Penh and other provinces several times.'[71] An old villager in Sra Em said, 'When the roads were bad, I could not sell my rice for a good price because there were few rice traders coming here. Now there are many coming and they offer competitive prices.'[72] Another city resident said, 'Before, although it was a provincial town, it was very rural and quiet. Many of the residents were farmers. Now more and more have become market vendors, small traders, motor-taxi drivers, and transport operators.'[73]

The good roads, daily bus services, and improved telecommunications connectivity and broadcasting services have transformed the province from a once remote and sparsely populated border area into an attractive place for migrants from other parts of Cambodia who are looking for land and opportunities to conduct small

66 Informant 75.
67 Informant 49.
68 Informant 2.
69 Informant 22.
70 Informants 2, 6, 7–9, 15, 18, 22, 77.
71 Informant 77.
72 Informant 30.
73 Informant 15.

Table 1: Population growth, Preah Vihear province, 1998–2012

Years	Provincial Population
1998	119,261
2008	170,852
2012	211,598

Sources: Kingdom of Cambodia, *General population census of Cambodia 1998; General population census of Cambodia 2008* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Planning, Aug. 2008); Preah Vihear provincial Department of Planning, *Tarang sojanakor tam srok-khan khaet Preah Vihear 2012* [Statistical Report by districts of Preah Vihear Province 2012].

trade.[74] Far from scaring people away and damaging the local economy, the border dispute and the episodic eruptions of fighting between Cambodian and Thai soldiers around Preah Vihear has spurred state developmental responses that have created conditions attractive to new settlers. As noted earlier, the province experienced remarkable population growth during the years of the border military standoff (see Table 1).

New settlements, markets and towns have emerged and expanded along the newly asphalted roads.[75] The provincial capital and its markets have changed from being quiet and sleepy to bustling and dynamic. One motor-taxi driver said, 'Before, the city market was much smaller than now and opened only half day in the morning.'[76] A local NGO director said before the border conflict, 'It was completely different. Most houses in the city were wooden. There was no electricity. At night it was dark.'[77] Now there are banks, microfinance institutions, and major companies from Phnom Penh opening their offices in the provincial capital. There are hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, and private English-language schools. Long-time residents said that these elements of city life were recent. They have witnessed the rapid transformation of the city since the period of the border tensions.[78]

These spatial and socioeconomic transformations have influenced both the older and newer residents to adopt benign views of the Thai–Cambodian border conflict. A public servant in the capital made a sarcastic comment: 'I want to thank Thailand for causing the conflict. Otherwise, my province would be left isolated like a frog in the well.'[79] This statement was also echoed by other public servants and local residents.[80] An official working with the municipality told me, 'This big municipality building was

74 Informants 11, 12, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 40, 42, 46, 47, 48, 64, 65, 66, 67.
75 I also travelled on the new asphalted roads linking Preah Vihear province to other border provinces, where local residents told me that their provinces had seen major changes since the roads had been built.
76 Informant 6.
77 Informant 76.
78 Informants 6, 7–9, 10, 14, 15, 18, 20, 21, 77.
79 Informant 17.
80 Informants 6, 18, 19, 20, 45, 77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1. Roads to Preah Vihear province and Temple (© The Australian National University CartoGIS CAP)

built recently. Before that we worked in small building and did not have appropriate work space.'[81]

Many residents said they had not been very worried about the border tensions.[82] A provincial city market vendor said that during the border skirmishes, 'Our market opened as normal and life in the city went on as normal.'[83] A school teacher said, 'The

81 Informant 21.
82 Informants 3, 5, 7–9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 18, 20, 24, 25, 27, 39.
83 Informant 11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

soldiers are at the border, but serious fighting took place only a few times, but they were confined to only the temple region. Villages are far from the conflict zone.'[84]

Nowhere else in Preah Vihear province has there been as much visible change as Sra Em, the town that acts as a gateway to the ancient temple. Its growth is a vivid example of how complex interplays of different forces during the Preah Vihear conflict have transformed a small sleepy village into a bustling border town. A cloth shop owner said, 'When I arrived in 2008, it was a quiet village and did not yet have a market.'[85] Sra Em's changing spatial and socioeconomic landscapes owe a great deal to the government's road construction, large military presence in the area, new villages, and booming Siamese rosewood logging trade in nearby forests during the conflict. Cambodian tourists to Preah Vihear Temple have also pumped cash into Sra Em's local economy. Sra Em is a convenient stopover for tourists on their way to and from the temple. The conflict with Thailand attracted national interest in Preah Vihear province, and there was a five-fold increase in the number of Cambodian tourists visiting the temple between 2006 and 2012 (fig. 2).

When I went there on my first fieldwork trip in April 2012, Sra Em already had one market of about fifty stores, several food shops, five guesthouses, souvenir shops, salons, furniture shops, etc. When I visited it again in December 2013, the town was more populated and busier. There were a few more guesthouses, a high-class hotel, three petrol stations and more shops. The town's market had doubled in size to about a hundred stalls and was busier. Some new settlers in Sra Em earn additional income from growing rice. A motor-taxi driver from Battambang province, said, 'My family bought a plot of land to build our house. We also bought two hectares of paddy. The land yielded five tons this year. We kept one ton for consumption, and we sold the rest.'[86] Many new settlers said it was easier to earn a living in Sra Em than in their home provinces.[87] A motor-taxi driver who has lived there since 2008 said, 'Some days I could earn more than ten dollars a day from tourists to the temple. Back in my homeland of Kampong Cham, I earned less than five dollars. It's very hard to earn a living there.'[88]

Many new settlers in Sra Em have prospered. There were signs of affluence. They own motorbikes, mobile phones and cars. According to the Preah Vihear Department of Planning's statistical reports, the number of cars owned by people in the province increased from 268 in 2008 to 762 in 2012. And the number of motorbikes increased from 11,108 to 20,097 over the same period.[89] An old villager in Sra Em said enviously, 'Many of these newcomers were poor when they arrived. They had nothing. Now they have houses, new motorbikes, cars, while we old villagers remain poor.'[90] Such

84 Informant 20.
85 Informant 27.
86 Informant 40.
87 Informants 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 40, 42.
88 Informant 26.
89 Preah Vihear Provincial Department of Planning, 'Tarang sojanakor tam srok-khan khaet Preah Vihear 2008; Tarang sojanakor tam srok-khan khaet Preah Vihear 2012' [Statistical list by districts of Preah Vihear province in 2012]. There are no statistics on how many migrants and new settlers already owned vehicles when they came to the province.
90 Informant 41.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

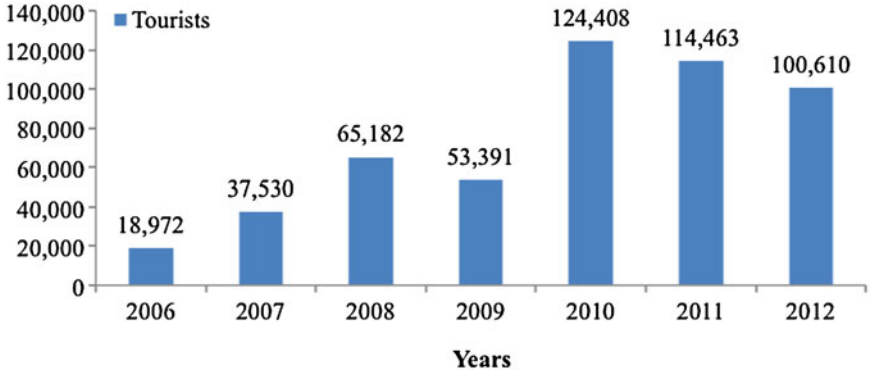

Figure 2. Cambodian tourists visiting Preah Vihear province, 2006–11
Source: Adapted from Preah Vihear provincial Department of Tourism, *Tarang sa thek tek phnev tesachor tusana khaet Preah Vihear 2006–2012* [Statistical report of tourists to Preah Vihear province, 2006–2012].

memories of the transformation of places and people in the province help explain why local views of the border conflict differ from the state's narrative.

As mentioned, senior government officials articulated the state-facilitated establishment of many new villages near the temple as symbols of border defence. However, many villagers I interviewed in two of the new villages, Sen Chey and Samdech Techo Hun Sen Nature, had different impressions. To them, the new communities represented opportunity: owning a house and land for cultivation, and providing hope for their families.[91] Residents in both villages were happy with Hun Sen's distribution of land for housing and agriculture.[92] A Sen Chey woman expressed her feelings:

> I am full of joy to have received this house and the land from Samdech the prime minister. I would never be able to afford owning a proper house and land like this in my life if Samdech had not given them.[93]

A woman with four children whose husband was a barber in the village-market of Samdech Techo Hun Sen Nature said,

> Our previous house in Kampong Cham had limited land space. I am happy I have large acreage here. I can grow vegetables and fruit trees at the front yard and I still have the backyard to grow rice.[94]

As of December 2013, while many Sen Chey villagers had already received additional land from the government to grow rice, Samdech Techo Hun Sen Nature villagers had not received theirs. A male villager said, 'We are happy to receive house land. We would be happier if we received land for growing rice. Then, there would be no

91 Informants 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67.
92 Ibid.
93 Informant 61.
94 Informant 66.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 3. Sra Em market

more worries for us.'[95] Some Sen Chey villagers, though they had received rice-growing land, had not yet started cultivating crops because they lacked manpower and money to turn the forested land into cultivable land.[96]

When asked about the significant loss of forested areas in the province as a result of establishing new villages and opening up new land for cultivation, the villagers showed little concern. This contrasted with the environmental views of Cambodian NGOs and the national environmental discourse. A middle-aged man in Sen Chey asked rhetorically, 'If we don't clear the forest, how can we have land for housing and rice?'[97] An old woman in Samdech Techo Hun Sen Nature said, 'It is good to clear forest around the village to reduce the number of wild animals coming out to prey on my chickens.'[98] Their views show that they are more concerned about their everyday needs. They do not see forest clearing as damaging the health of the Cambodian nation as environmental activists argue.

But not everybody is happy. Many border police and soldiers deployed in the Preah Vihear temple region expressed resentment.[99] Although they said that their duties were to defend Cambodia's border against Thailand's aggression, my interviews showed that their discontent with the government's services outweighed their concerns about protecting the border. A border police officer at Preah Vihear Temple

95 Informant 64.
96 Informants 60, 62, 63.
97 Informant 63.
98 Informant 67.
99 Informants 31, 32, 33–35, 36, 37, 50, 51–58, 59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 4. Sen Chey village

said, 'My small unit was assigned to the temple in 2002. We felt we were abandoned in the forest. Life was difficult. We had to find food in the forest and survived by ourselves.'[100] Another police officer in the focus group interview said, 'It was only when the border conflict erupted, the government started to pay more attention to us in terms of raising our salary and providing daily food rations.'[101] According to many soldiers I talked to, the Cambodian government increased their salary from about 100,000 riels (roughly US$25) per month before the conflict to more than 200,000 riels during the border tensions.[102] A soldier from Brigade 911 said, 'In addition to a salary increase and donations from generous people, the government also provided daily cash incentives. However, since the border has become peaceful, they cut the incentives.'[103] He also said the donations were not distributed equally:

> They reached our hands only when generous people from Phnom Penh and from abroad hand delivered [the donations] to us. … From the piles of donations you saw on television, only about 20 per cent of it reached us. Most of them went to the prime minister's Bodyguard Unit and commanders and their families.[104]

Many soldiers harboured resentment over unequal access to benefits. I sat down with a group of eight Intervention Division 3 soldiers during their lunchtime. One of them

100 Informants 33–35.
101 Ibid.
102 Informants 31, 32, 50, 51–58, 59.
103 Informant 50.
104 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

told me, 'For ordinary soldiers like us, our daily routines are clearing grass and do this and do that according to the orders. If we are lucky some tourists pity us, and give us money.'[105] Another soldier in the group said, 'For those well-connected to the commanders, only their names are deployed to Preah Vihear. They enjoy time making money from logging and other business and are promoted quickly. We sleep in the forest defending the temple but gain nothing.'[106] The oldest soldier in the group said, 'Many commanders own hectares of land in the province, and they get a lot richer.'[107] My motor-taxi driver to the temple who was a soldier himself said, 'Many of the drivers at the temple are soldiers and border police.'[108] When I asked him how he managed slip away and drive a motor taxi, he replied, 'I am close to my unit commander. He allows me to drive as long as I do not go far and I can return to the base quickly if he needs me.'[109]

The stories told by police and soldiers are underpinned by their interpretations of the meaning of nation, state and heritage in the context of their everyday encounters. The police and soldiers consider the Preah Vihear border conflict to have empowered them in terms of a government salary raise and donations from the public. However, since the border tensions eased, they note that the state's attention, incentives and donations have decreased. On the other hand, the Preah Vihear conflict created opportunities for some military commanders and well-connected soldiers to consolidate their economic interests in terms of acquiring land, and make money from logging and trading.

A marginalised indigenous minority

I now present yet another case of local views differing from the state's nation-building narrative. As argued by Walker, state regulation of borderlands results in the unequal distribution of economic and social benefits.[110] The Cambodian government's nation-building projects in Preah Vihear province have affected the indigenous Kuy minority, whose livelihood traditionally depends on forests. I interviewed Kuy living in Sra Em about the impact of the government's recent activities and the socio-economic transformations in the province.[111]

The Kuy minority relies on swidden cultivation of upland rice, hunting wild animals, and collecting forest products, especially resin. Their modes of subsistence and traditional practices are different from those of the lowland ethnic Khmers. The Kuy in Sra Em were able to maintain their traditional lifestyle and practices for many hundreds of years largely due to the limits of the central state, the remoteness of these borderlands from lowland areas, and the area's reputation as dangerous and ridden

105 Informants 51–58.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Informant 38.
109 Ibid.
110 Andrew Walker, *The legend of the golden boat: Regulation, trade and traders in the borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), p. 17.
111 For studies of the impacts of socioeconomic changes on indigenous minorities in Cambodia's other provinces, see van den Berg and Palith, 'On people, roads and land'; John McAndrew, 'Tampuan villagers adapt to a rapidly changing economy', *Cambodia Development Review* 5, 3 (2001): 5–8.

with malaria and other diseases. In more recent times, civil war and insurgency forces protected them from frequent contact with lowland people and the state.

However, when the civil war ended in the 1990s and lowland migrants moved to the border in unprecedented numbers in search of land and trade opportunities, this sudden influx of newcomers affected the indigenous minorities. Large swathes of forests have disappeared and semi-urban new settlements and cash crop plantations have replaced them. The Kuy at Sra Em find it increasingly hard to maintain their traditional modes of subsistence and cultural practices in the face of this rapid encroachment by the state and lowlanders into their realms.[112] Worse still is that land in the border region has now become either privately or state-owned: the state has categorised mountains, forests and land as national parks, economic concessions, social concessions, and special border economic zones, etc.

In light of these rapid changes, the Kuy at Sra Em have grievances, but are uncertain about what to do.[113] Those affected by the integration of border regions into national policy do not have mechanisms to contest their resulting marginalisation.[114] An elderly woman in one focus group said, 'We have lost some of our cultivated land. Who can we ask for help?'[115] A middle-aged man said, 'I am upset about the new villages. Large forests have gone because of them. I don't know what to do. I used to collect lots of resin before.'[116] A young man said, 'Before, when I walked in the forest, I saw a lot of animals. Now I rarely see them.'[117] When I asked whether they thought of the possibility of migrating to work in cities, another man in the group said, 'We are proud of our way of life. We are not in the habit of working for other people for money. We cannot leave our place.'[118]

Some Kuy living in Sra Em are unhappy with the new settlers. They complained that newcomers have stolen their vegetables and fruits.[119] One elderly man said, 'This had not happened before the arrivals of the newcomers.'[120] Another old Kuy villager complained of the crowdedness and perpetual noise since the new settlers arrived.[121] Some expressed regret that the old villagers did not have the trading skills of the new residents.[122]

Their modes of subsistence and traditional practices have been affected, but they cannot reposition themselves to reap the economic benefits from the transformations in the borderlands. However, they too have benefited from easier mobility through good roads. A female villager, aged 52, said:

> Before, I went to Choam Khsant town [about 30 km from Sra Em] once a month. We had to go by foot. It took a day to get there and a day to get back. I rarely went to the provincial

112 Informants 30, 41, 68, 70–73.
113 Ibid.
114 See Caroline Hughes, 'Soldiers, monks, borders: Violence and contestation in the Greater Mekong Sub-region', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 41, 2 (2011): 181–4.
115 Informants 70–73.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Informants 30, 41.
120 Informant 41.
121 Informant 69.
122 Informants 68, 70–73.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

town because it was very far. I have been there several times since we have good roads.[123]

The Kuy also benefited from better access to information through broadcasting and telecommunication networks. Many in Sra Em said they had just started to own mobile phones.[124] A male villager told me, 'Mobile phones make it easy for us to contact people in our village when we are away in the forest.'[125] They also had access now to public and private healthcare services. When I asked a woman, aged 27, 'What do you do when your children are sick?' She replied promptly, 'I take them to see a doctor.'[126] When asked why she did not use traditional medicines or rituals to cure the sick children, she said, 'I have already seen a few in our village die from such treatments.'[127]

It is difficult to say what the future holds for the indigenous Kuy minority. One certainty is that their subsistence lifestyle and traditional practices has already been altered.

Conclusion

The Cambodian government has tried to position itself as the defender of the Preah Vihear Temple and of the nation's territorial sovereignty. Through its propaganda, the Cambodian state has tried to create an homogenous view of its nation-building projects in Preah Vihear province as expressions of border defence and Khmer national pride.

However, while ordinary people identify themselves as part of the imagined community of Cambodia, their local contexts and everyday experiences give them different notions of the nation. Older and newer urban dwellers, older villagers and new migrants, police, soldiers and indigenous Kuy highlanders have different stories, memories and interests which underpin their notion of nationhood. To different people in Preah Vihear province, the state's nation-building projects cannot be expressed simplistically as 'to defend or not defend the border' or 'hostility towards Thailand or friendship with Thailand'.

Preah Vihear Temple does not have a monolithic meaning as a representation of the Cambodian nation or of Khmer pride. Instead, it has diverse local meanings. In the contexts of the stories told by the border police and soldiers, the temple symbolises unequal access to benefits and the state's unequal distribution of resources. The stories told by the indigenous Kuy minority in Sra Em reveal that they view the state's nation-building project as symbols of threats to their traditional modes of subsistence and cultural practices. The stories told by the new settlers and economic migrants show the state's nation-building activities as representing livelihood improvement opportunities. While both the Cambodian state elites and the various kinds of residents in Preah Vihear province used the border dispute to narrate the nation, the latter understood and expressed the nation in more complex and nuanced ways depending on their everyday experiences and discursive contexts.

123 Informant 69.
124 Informants 30, 41, 68.
125 Informant 30.
126 Informant 68.
127 Ibid.

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Appendix A: List of Informants

No.	Occupation	Place of interviews	Interview date
1	Bus driver	Preah Vihear province	23 Apr. 2012
2	Trader	Preah Vihear province	23 Apr. 2012
3	Motor-taxi driver	Tbeng Meanchey	23 Apr. 2012
4	Guesthouse receptionist	Tbeng Meanchey	23 Apr. 2012
5	Petrol station staff	Tbeng Meanchey	24 Apr. 2012
6	Motor-taxi driver	Tbeng Meanchey	24 Apr. 2012
7–9	City residents	Tbeng Meanchey	24 Apr. 2012
10	High school student	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Apr. 2012
11	Market vendor	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Apr. 2012
12	Market vendor	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Apr. 2012
13	Market vendor	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Apr. 2012
14	Mobile phone shop owner	Tbeng Meanchey	26 Apr. 2012
15	Cold drinks seller	Tbeng Meanchey	26 Apr. 2012
16	Motor-taxi driver	Tbeng Meanchey	26 Apr. 2012
17	Public servant in Department of Tourism	Tbeng Meanchey	26 Apr. 2012
18	Food shop owner	Tbeng Meanchey	26 Apr. 2012
19	Public servant in Department of Culture	Tbeng Meanchey	27 Apr. 2012
20	High school teacher	Tbeng Meanchey	27 Apr. 2012
21	Deputy head of Provincial Administration Office	Tbeng Meanchey	27 Apr. 2012
22	Taxi driver	Sra Em	28 Apr. 2012
23	Tailor	Sra Em	28 Apr. 2012
24	Market vendor	Sra Em	29 Apr. 2012
25	Market vendor	Sra Em	29 Apr. 2012
26	Motor-taxi driver	Sra Em	29 Apr. 2012
27	Shop owner	Sra Em	29 Apr. 2012
28	Waitress	Sra Em	30 Apr. 2012
29	Guesthouse staff	Sra Em	30 Apr. 2012
30	Farmer, indigenous Kuy minority	Sra Em	30 Apr. 2012
31	Soldier	Preah Vihear Temple	15 July 2012
32	Solider	Preah Vihear Temple	15 July 2012
33–35	Border patrol police	Preah Vihear Temple	15 July 2012
36	Border patrol police	Preah Vihear Temple	16 July 2012
37	Soldier	Preah Vihear Temple	16 July 2012
38	Motor taxi driver/soldier	Preah Vihear Temple	16 July 2012
39	Bus ticket seller	Sra Em	17 July 2012
40	Motor-taxi driver/soldier	Sra Em	17 July 2012

Continued

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Appendix A. Continued

No.	Occupation	Place of interviews	Interview date
41	Farmer, indigenous Kuy minority	Sra Em	18 July 2012
42	Hairdresser	Sra Em	18 July 2012
43	Deputy director of Tourism Department	Tbeng Meanchey	19 July 2012
44	Deputy director of Information Department	Tbeng Meanchey	20 July 2012
45	Public servant in Department of Labour	Tbeng Meanchey	20 July 2012
46	Barber	Tbeng Meanchey	21 July 2012
47	Tailor	Tbeng Meanchey	21 July 2012
48	Motor-taxi driver	Sra Em	19 Dec. 2013
49	Rice trader	Sra Em	19 Dec. 2013
50	Soldier	Preah Vihear Temple	20 Dec. 2013
51–58	Soldiers	Preah Vihear Temple	20 Dec. 2013
59	Soldier	Preah Vihear Temple	20 Dec. 2013
60	Villager	Sen Chey village	21 Dec. 2013
61	Villager	Sen Chey village	21 Dec. 2013
62	Villager	Sen Chey village	21 Dec. 2013
63	Villager	Sen Chey village	21 Dec. 2013
64	Villager	Samdech Techo Hun Sen Nature village	22 Dec. 2013
65	Villager	Samdech Techo Hun Sen Nature village	22 Dec. 2013
66	Villager	Samdech Techo Hun Sen Nature village	22 Dec. 2013
67	Villager	Samdech Techo Hun Sen Nature village	22 Dec. 2013
68	Farmer, indigenous Kuy minority	Sra Em	23 Dec. 2013
69	Farmer, indigenous Kuy minority	Sra Em	23 Dec. 2013
70–73	Farmers, indigenous Kuy minority	Sra Em	23 Dec. 2013
74	Deputy director of Planning Department	Tbeng Meanchey	24 Dec. 2013
75	NGO project manager	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Dec. 2013
76	NGO director	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Dec. 2013
77	Grocer	Tbeng Meanchey	25 Dec. 2013

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