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Enduring Holocaust, surviving history: Displaced Cambodians on the Thai-Cambodian border, 1989–1991

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Harvard University, 1994

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Enduring Holocaust, Surviving History: Displaced Cambodians on the Thai-Cambodian Border, 1989-1991

A thesis presented

bу

Lindsay Cole French

to

The Department of Anthropology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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in the subject of

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the dynamics of social relations in Site II, the largest of several camps built for displaced Cambodians on the Thai-Cambodian border in 1985. The people living in Site II in 1990 had endured four years in Cambodia under the infamous Pol Pot and ten years of civil war on the border following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime. The research was conceived as a study of the effects of great social and cultural trauma on social relations and cultural institutions in a community of survivors. It addresses such questions as:

- What is the nature of social organization in a post-holocaust situation?
- What processes do communities go through in the re-establishment of social structures when virtually all prior relationships and institutions have been smashed?
- What are the enduring effects of an experience like "Pol Pot time" on the social life of a community?
- What priorities and values organize people's behavior in the aftermath of such an overwhelming devastation?
- How do the specific circumstances of a refugee camp affect these processes?

The thesis begins by exploring, following Appadurai, the particular nature of this 'locality' in 'a globalized deterritorialized world.' It examines several different domains of social life in Site II, including economic relations, political power, family relationships, and spiritual beliefs and practices. It situates Site II in the middle of several arenas of power, at the convergence of multiple interests and agendas that were local, regional, and international in their scope. It suggests that what went on in Site II was a result of the interaction of all of these interests; that there was no hegemonic the structure of power and meaning to

provide overarching coherence. Rather, there was an essential ambiguity about the meaning of things that was built right into structure of support for the camp population: a political compromise among the Khmer leadership, the Thai government, and the international agencies who provided material assistance.

The thesis suggests that in all areas of social life a combination of local needs and conditions and larger, situational truths determined the shape of processes and practices. Enduring processes of reconstruction were difficult to discern, however. Since the border camps were temporary, everything that went on in them was provisional and subject to change. Moreover, the experience of holocaust made it difficult to sustain belief in the possibility of a future worth living. People pursued their own individual efforts to construct or der and meaning in their lives, but there was an overall failure of collective social and cultural institutions to provide structure and continuity.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ANS Armée National de Sihanouk ARC American Refugee Committee ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations BBC British Broadcasting Corporation CARE (an American relief agency) CGDK Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea COERR Catholic Organization for Emergency Relief to Refugees CONCERN (an Irish relief agency) DK Democratic Kampuchea DPPU Displaced Person's Protection Unit FUNCINPEC Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Independent, Neutre, Pacifique, et Cooperatif (Sihanouk's political party) INS Immigration and Naturalization Service International Committee of the Red Cross ICP Indo-China Communist Party IO international organization IRC International Rescue Committee KBA Khmer Buddhist Association KBRC Khmer Buddhist Research Center KID Khao I Dang KP an abbreviated form of "KPNLF" KR Khmer Rouge Khmer People's National Liberation Army KPNLA KPNLF Khmer People's National Liberation Front KPRP Khmer People's Revolutionary Party KWA Khmer Women's Association NGO non-governmental organization PAVN People's Army of Vietnam PRK People's Republic of Kampuchea RTA Royal Thai Army RTG Royal Thai Government SLO Security Liaison Officer SOC State of Cambodia **UN** United Nations UNBRO United Nations Border Relief Operation UNHCR United Nations High Commission for Refugees UNICEF United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund VOA Voice of America WHO World Health Organization

"Angkaa" the Khmer Rouge 'organization'

[&]quot;Aran" Aranyaprathet

[&]quot;barang" Westerner

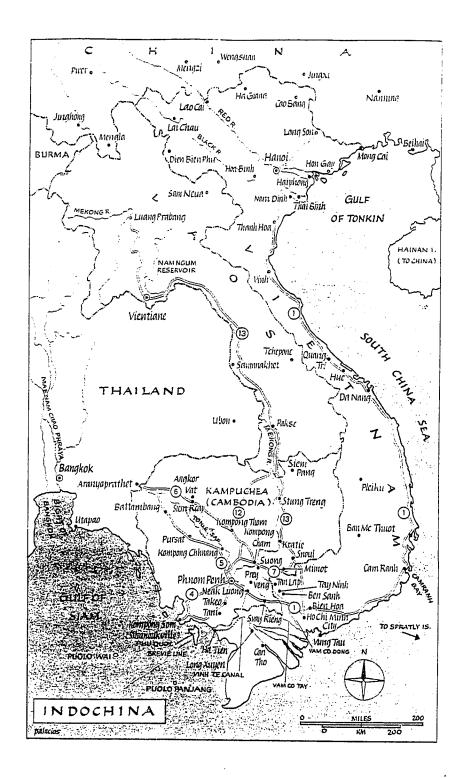
[&]quot;ilot" a subdivision of the residential sections in Site II volag" voluntary agency; used synonymously with "NGO"

Chapter 1: Historical Introduction

In the early hours of Christmas Day 1978, a long column of Vietnamese tanks rumbled across Cambodia's eastern border from the Central Highlands township of Ban Me Thuot, followed by truckload after truckload of Vietnamese soldiers. To the south two additional columns of tanks began their push toward the Mekong across the famous Parrot's Beak and Fishhook regions of southeastern Cambodia, while in the north, troops moved down the Mekong from Laos toward the provincial capitol of Stung Treng. This pre-dawn mobilization of the People's Army of Vietnam marked the start of a major military offensive that would, in a remarkably short period of time, bring down the infamous Pol Pot regime. By January 1 important Khmer Rouge strongholds in Kratie Province had been taken. By January 4 the Vietnamese army controlled all the territory east of the Mekong river: seven out of Cambodia's eighteen provinces. By January 7 Pol Pot and his associates had fled the capitol and tanks were entering the city (Chandler 1991: 310-313; Chanda 1986: 313-348). (See map 1.)

Although the Khmer Rouge were not fully routed from their bases in the north and west of Cambodia until mid-April (Chanda 1986:347), the fall of Phnom Penh marked the effective end of their revolutionary control. It was a revolution that had been, to that point, largely shrouded in mystery, as the Khmer Rouge had cut off most channels of communication with the outside world when they took control of the country in April 1975; the few first-hand accounts were often wrapped in such politicized rhetoric that they were difficult to interpret. But as

¹ The Khmer Rouge put a premium on secrecy in all areas of operation. Only a few visitors from socialist countries or marxist political parties in the west had been allowed into Cambodia since April 1975, and their visits had been tightly controlled and closely monitored. In addition, highly politicized opposition to American involvement in the conflicts in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos made it difficult to get an accurate view of the revolutionary movements themselves.



Map 1. Indochina (source: Nayan Chanda, Brother Enemy.)

Vietnamese soldiers spread out through the city and army divisions moved westward along national routes one and five, as the Cambodian population was liberated from Khmer Rouge control and reporters were invited into the former "Democratic Kampuchea" [DK] to witness the results of this revolution, the grim outlines of Pol Pot's ruthless policies and practices began to be revealed.

The first people into the capitol found an all-but-abandoned city. Phnom Penh had been evacuated in the days following the Khmer Rouge victory, and most of its inhabitants moved at gunpoint to the countryside. Throughout Cambodia towns and provincial cities stood empty. Schools and hospitals were abandoned; libraries and Buddhist temples had been sacked, or else converted into granaries, pig sties, fish sauce factories, or ammunition dumps. There were no monks left in the country: all had been disrobed or killed. DK intended to build its revolution from the ground up and no prior scholarly, religious or political authority was tolerated. A high school in a residential neighborhood of Phnom Penh had been used as an interrogation and torture center for the revolution's alleged "traitors"; the corpses of its most recent victims still lay in the cells. Tuol Sleng contained the forced confessions and photographs of as many as 20,000 Cambodians who had passed through the prison and were executed by the Khmer Rouge for their "traitorous" activities. Outside the city a mass grave at Cheung Ek was just the first of DK's notorious "killing fields" to be discovered.

The Khmer Rouge had attempted no less than a total socialist revolution in Democratic Kampuchea. All vestiges of the old society were obliterated by the revolutionaries. The new society would be built upon a centralized socialist economy based on the production of rice. To this end almost the entire population had been relocated to agricultural villages and collective work sites

Refugee reports tended to be either exaggerated or discredited in the press depending on the political persuasion of the editor. See Chandler 1991:253.

throughout the countryside, where they were organized into labor teams. The goal was to increase the country's annual rice production by a factor of two to three, thereby achieving the economic self-sufficiency that would sustain the revolution. But the Khmer Rouge had worked the population like animals, and the DK kitchens had provided less and less rice as the revolution failed to meet its production goals and came increasingly unglued. Death from disease and starvation was commonplace. Executions, a common form of revolutionary discipline, had become increasingly frequent in 1977 and 1978. These devastated not only the enemies of the revolution but ordinary peasants and the ranks of the revolutionary movement itself. The Cambodians the Vietnamese Army encountered as it moved north and west were exhausted, sick and hungry. They welcomed the Vietnamese soldiers, their traditional enemies, with a dazed and wary gratitude.

The Cambodian radicals who came to be known as the Khmer Rouge were part of an evolving and less than cohesive left wing movement that had been active in Cambodia since before independence in 1953, when the French still maintained a colonial grip on Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The Khmer Rouge victory in 1975 followed seventeen years of crafty but capricious, and increasingly inept and autocratic government under the Prince (and former King) Norodom Sihanouk, and five years of out and out civil war with the Lon Nol government, which replaced Sihanouk in a coup d'état in March 1970. To understand why the Khmer Rouge mounted the revolution they did, and how the Khmer people reacted to both DK and to the socialist government the Vietnamese installed, it is useful to know something about Cambodia's short history of political independence.

Norodom Sihanouk is considered by most Cambodians — has managed to convince most Cambodians — that he was the father of Cambodian independence. A member of one of Cambodia's royal lineages, he was placed on the throne by the French Protectorate in 1941 at the age of eighteen, in part because of his perceived malleability. But Sihanouk surprised both the French and the Khmer in the 1950s with his substantial political talents. While the events of World War II hastened the demise of French Indochina, Sihanouk managed to pre-empt an incipient anti-colonial uprising and secured the credit for his country's independence from France in 1953. Two years later he abdicated the throne to replace the parliamentary system of government set up by the departing French with a neo-patrimonial autocracy, and proceeded to dominate Cambodian politics for the next seventeen years.

To his credit, Sihanouk initiated a process of social and economic development that would awaken Cambodia from an enforced ninety year colonial slumber and usher it into the 20th century. But his ability to plan and follow through on his development schemes was limited, and by the mid-1960s the Cambodian economy had begun to falter. A communist revolution was underway next door in Vietnam, and the difficulties of treading a neutral path around this conflict ultimately overwhelmed his talents. But perhaps most problematically (and despite his official abdication), Sihanouk never ceased to rule like a feudal monarch (Chandler 1991:122-191; Kiernan 1982:166-205). Sihanouk could not abide any threats to his power. In the end he had resorted to brutally repressing his political opposition and disbanding any government that challenged him. By the time Lon Nol and Siri Matak launched their coup in 1970, most committed

members of the left-wing opposition had fled for their own safety to remote bases in Cambodia's hinterlands to prepare for more dramatic revolutionary change.²

The radical left in Cambodia dates to World War II, when the anti-French Khmer Issarak (Free Khmer) movement was established in Cambodia's northwest provinces, then under Thai control. Initially supported by Thai communists, the Issarak came under the influence of the Viet Minh, who lent guidance and leadership to the Cambodian radicals under the umbrella of the Indochinese Communist Party [ICP]. The ICP was Vietnamese in origin and overwhelmingly Vietnamese in its leadership and membership. In 1951 the ICP was dissolved and three separate "national" revolutionary parties were established in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Thus the Kampuchean Peoples' Revolutionary Party [KPRP] was created. But the KPRP remained under the influence of the Vietnamese communists; it was, in effect, a local branch of the larger Indochinese liberation movement envisioned by the Vietnamese. When the Geneva Conference consolidated Sihanouk's control of Cambodian independence in 1954, many KPRP members and Khmer Viet Minh combatants were moved to Hanoi where the climate was more conducive to revolutionary strategizing. Others stayed in Cambodia to work underground toward revolution (Chandler 1991:46-51; Kiernan 1985:151-153).

At the same time the Vietnamese were trying to coordinate radical subversion in French Indochina, a generation of Khmer revolutionaries were acquiring a somewhat different though no less radical education in Paris. Most of the important leaders of the DK revolution were among the first generation of

² The communist party was created in Cambodia in either 1951 or 1960 depending on which party history you subscribe to (Chandler, 1991:50-51; 113-115). At the time of the coup the Party's Central Committee was located in the remote northeast province of Mondulkiri, but there were guerrilla bases in seventeen of Cambodia's nineteen provinces and communication among these bases was poor.

Cambodians to pursue tertiary studies in Paris in the late 40s and early 50s.³ Of the approximately one thousand students at French university at that time, these few formed a political study group and read Marx and Lenin, learned about the Chinese revolution, and studied the lessons of Stalinism. Many became members of the French Communist Party during that period (Chandler 1991:51-56; Kiernan 1985:118-124).

This group of politically engaged students came eventually to distinguish themselves from the rest of the radical left in Cambodia — the Issarak, the left-leaning Democratic Party in the National Assembly, and the Cambodian communists with links to the Vietnamese. But the split did not emerge immediately. Many of the university-educated radicals joined up with Viet Minh units when they returned to Cambodia in the 1950s. They worked together with the Issarak communists and the KPRP, and continued to accept political guidance and military assistance from their Vietnamese counterparts until 1972. Some of the radical Paris intellectuals (Khieu Samphan, most notably) even participated in the governments that Sihanouk organized after independence in 1953. But as the limits of open political opposition to Sihanouk became clear, all eventually sought refuge in bases in the forests to work toward a revolutionary solution to Cambodia's problems there.

By the time Sihanouk was overthrown the Khmer radicals, or "Khmer Rouge" as Sihanouk dubbed them, had raised a small army and had the active support of both the Vietnamese and the Chinese communist parties. But the coup of 1970 was a coup of the disenfranchised and frustrated would-be bourgeois elite: Sihanouk's own prime minister and the head of his national military

³ This group included Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), Son Sen, Hou Yuon, Hu Nim, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Thionn Prasith, Mey Mann, and the sisters Khieu Thirith and Khieu Ponnary, who married Ieng Sary and Saloth Sar, respectively.

apparatus were responsible for it. The new Khmer Republic was even more objectionable to the Khmer Rouge, however, because of its close ties to the U.S. government, which had begun its "secret" bombing of Vietnamese bases in eastern Cambodia that would so destabilize the country. The coup afforded the Khmer Rouge an opportunity to strengthen its popular appeal by drawing Sihanouk into revolutionary opposition to the Lon Nol government. In a classic—and characteristic—political about-face, and at the urging of both China and Vietnam, Sihanouk signed on with his former enemies in the Khmer Rouge in their armed struggle against U.S. imperialism and "social injustice" in Cambodia (Chandler 1991:201).

In fact, there was a good deal of social injustice in Cambodia, although it was not much different from what people had experienced under Sihanouk. What was different was that Cambodia had been drawn into the American war in Vietnam, and the country was "sliding toward chaos" (Chandler 1991: 192-235). The economy was in desperate shape, incompetence and corruption flourished throughout the government and army, and even those politicians with good intentions were overwhelmed by the consequences of the U.S. air attacks and the intensifying war with the Khmer Rouge.

The Khmer Republic's pursuit of political and economic support from America came at the price of greatly expanded U.S. military activity in Cambodia. In addition to the ongoing bombing of communist bases throughout eastern

⁴ In the early sixties Sihanouk had "allowed" the North Vietnamese government to build a major military supply route from the north to the south of Vietnam down along the eastern side of Cambodia: the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Unable to prevent this from happening in any case, Sihanouk hoped in exchange to be able to hold the Vietnamese to their promise to keep the Vietnam war east of this line. The "secret" U.S. bombing began in 1969; it did much to turn the countryside against the Lon Nol government, which had pursued closer relations with the U.S. in its effort to rid the country of <u>all</u> Vietnamese, civilians as well as North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers (Chandler 1991:130-147; Chanda 1986:62-66; Shawcross 1985:118-120,1320134).

Cambodia, in 1970 the U.S. launched a major land invasion aimed at destroying the headquarters of the Vietnamese communists in the south (Chandler 1991:204). In April and May seventy thousand U.S. and South Vietnamese troops poured into Cambodia, pushing the Vietnamese communists deeper into Cambodia. An estimated two million refugees from these attacks crowded into Phnom Penh. The situation was so desperate that many middle-class Khmer actually welcomed the Khmer Rouge into the city when they arrived in April 1975. There was reason for revolution in Cambodia, and some hoped that the idealistic socialist approach of the Khmer Rouge might be an improvement over the increasingly corrupt and ineffectual governments of Sihanouk and Lon Nol.

What the Khmer Rouge imposed on Cambodia was beyond the imagination of its late bourgeois supporters, however. DK undertook no less than a total socialist transformation in Cambodia, a revolution which claimed to take no other as its model. A mixed market economy based on the production and sale of rice was turned virtually overnight into a centrally controlled, collectivized agricultural state. Money was abolished, as were markets, private enterprise and private property; everything was controlled by the Angkaa or party organization. The DK revolution was characterized by rejection of all prior forms of religious or political ideology, status, and power; leveling of economic or social differentiation; radical collectivization of all forms of production; brutal enforcement of top-down discipline; insistence on unrealistic agricultural goals; and increasing paranoia as these goals failed to be reached.

Although many factors contributed, xenophobic paranoia could be said to have been primarily responsible for the downfall of the Khmer Rouge. From 1976 the regime had mounted brutal attacks against Vietnam, in an effort to deter perceived Vietnamese threats. In fact these attacks ultimately provoked the invasion that brought the Khmer Rouge down. Midway through its less than four

years in power, the ruling clique within the party's central committee began purging its ranks of anyone suspected of disloyalty to the Angkaa. These purges targeted in particular anyone believed to be influenced by the Vietnam Communist Party. The Khmer Rouge revolution, or the goals of its ruling clique, were characterized by a fanatical insistence on political and economic self-sufficiency, and an increasingly aggressive and belligerent stance toward the Vietnamese communists, whom they had come to regard as dangerous regional hegemonists. By the time the Vietnamese army moved in to put an end to their destruction, over a million Cambodians had died from a combination of overwork, starvation, disease and execution.

Although the years from 1975 to 1979 stand out in Khmer history for the extreme lengths to which economic and social engineering were taken, peoples' experiences under the Khmer Rouge were hardly uniform. One's experience depended on one's political, economic and/or social position prior to 1975, and on who controlled the region of the country to which one had been re-located. The revolution targeted anyone tainted by association with earlier political regimes, a background in commerce, or western education or training. (All foreign ideologies were considered corrupt and counter-revolutionary.) But rural Khmer, largely beyond the reach of imperialist education or capitalist corruption, were celebrated by the Khmer Rouge for their "pure" native wisdom and awarded positions of local responsibility. The country was divided into seven military regions or zones. These were run semi-autonomously by their own commanders, who reported to a central committee which set revolutionary policy and production quotas. But living conditions varied from zone to zone, as well as by

district and even village, according to the zealotry of the zone commanders and the literal-mindedness of the local cadre, few of whom were trained in anything more revolutionary than rhetoric.⁵

On the other hand, certain experiences were common to almost everyone who lived through "Pol Pot time". This list include:

- reversal of the power relations that had existed in Cambodia before 1975: those people respected for their age, wisdom, education, prior status and/or influence were targeted for particularly harsh treatment or execution, while the young, rural, and uneducated people, some of whom had been subjected to intense indoctrination, were often given power over life and death.
- collectivization of work, which typically involved breaking up families, sending husbands and wives to different work sites and children to separate, often mobile, work brigades.
- abolition of Buddhism, formal education, and western medicine.
- outlawing of money and private property of all kinds.
- complete lack of privacy: everything was done under the watchful eye of the Angkaa. Surveillance was extended through fear and the use of informants. Children were encouraged to report any "counter-revolutionary" conversations they might hear in their families to the local cadre.

⁵ The population was divided into "new people", brought into the revolution after April 17, 1975, and "old people" who had come under Khmer Rouge influence before that, most since the time of the coup in March 1970. "New people" and "old people" had a different relationship to the revolutionary authorities and were treated significantly differently. Old people often became cadres, and were given positions of responsibility in the local hierarchies of power. New people were given the most arduous tasks, and shown no mercy when it came to revolutionary discipline.

- restrictions on movement.
- lack of information about what was going on elsewhere in the country.
- absolute, arbitrary, and often deadly use of power by the cadres.
- increasing shortage of food, beginning especially in 1977.

The Vietnamese invasion, which reflected a justifiable outrage at DK's brutal purges and violent aggression against its borders, involved a core group of defectors from the Khmer Rouge, especially cadres from the eastern zone, and Cambodian communists who had been living in Hanoi since the Geneva conference in 1954. It was the culmination of years of a shifting and often uneasy cooperation between these two national revolutionary movements, and reflected the not-entirely-congruent goals of the Vietnamese and Khmer communists. For although the Khmer communists had made use of Vietnamese support and even revolutionary leadership until the Vietnamese were forced out of Cambodia by the terms of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, there had always been a subgroup of radical Khmer who were suspicious of Vietnam's motives. Many believed that the real goal of the Vietnamese was regional hegemonic control. The Vietnamese, for their part, were no longer willing to allow their erstwhile brothers-in-arms to continue to abuse their long standing, if carefully calculated, support.

But the invasion also reflected the conflict between Vietnam and China, the only real patron the Khmer Rouge had apart from the Vietnamese. Relations between Vietnam and China, which had supported Vietnamese revolutionary efforts since the 1950s, had begun to deteriorate in the 1960s. The rift became serious in early 1978 when members of Saigon's large Chinese merchant class were targeted in a move to nationalize private businesses in the south, and historical tensions between the two countries were revived. Relations worsened

through the year, and were only exacerbated by China's provocative support of the Khmer Rouge who were behaving in such an aggressive manner toward the Vietnamese.

The invasion came at a moment of dramatic realignment in power relations in Southeast Asia: Vietnam's increasingly aggressive stance toward China coincided with increasingly friendly relations with the Soviet Union, while the U.S. was pursuing an historic rapprochement with China, after almost four decades of suspended diplomacy. Less than two months earlier, as Chinese and American envoys were making final arrangements for the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, Vietnam had signed a twenty-five year treaty of friendship and cooperation with Moscow. This Cold War re-alignment, which brought the U.S. together with China and the Khmer Rouge in strategic opposition to Vietnam and the Soviet Union, was to be of central importance in the way the Vietnamese invasion played itself out on the international scene over the next fifteen years.

The Vietnamese invasion was meant to overthrow the Khmer Rouge and establish loyal Cambodian communists in positions of power in the central government. But the entire country fell much more easily than the Vietnamese seemed to have expected (Chandler 1991:312; Chanda 1986: 345-47). As the Vietnamese army spread out through Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge army retreated to remote bases deep in the countryside, taking as many as 300,000 civilians with them (Chanda 1986:370). But by May a second major offensive had overrun these bases too. The Khmer Rouge were forced to abandon their camps and much of the food and ammunition they had gathered there to sustain them through a protracted siege. They fled in disarray for the safety of the forests near the

western Thai border, taking very little with them for support (Heder 1980a:66-77).

Meanwhile, the rest of the country was in a state near chaos. As people were released from the constraints imposed on them by the Khmer Rouge, they broke into storehouses looking for rice, slaughtered cows, pigs and chickens wherever they could be found, abandoned their work sites to look for family members, or went to the towns in search of food, relatives, information, and abandoned wealth. In the first weeks after the invasion virtually the entire population was on the move and nobody thought much about the future — there were too many other more immediate concerns. Over a million people had been killed in the previous four years, and those who had survived needed to find out who and what remained intact (Heder 1980:18-30).

But as the months passed the damage to Cambodia's organizational infrastructure became more and more problematic. Rice fields had been abandoned and the country's productive industries were in a state of chaos. The country's administrative structure was essentially destroyed, and with it the obvious means of organizing relief for the population. The Vietnamese quickly set up a new administrative structure under the nominal leadership of the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea [PRK]. This party had been created in the days just before the invasion by its Cambodian participants and was meant to give the impression of Khmer leadership to the events that followed. But Vietnamese control of almost all aspects of administration in the People's Republic of Kampuchea [PRK] was obvious to most Khmer.

Vietnamese efforts to organize the population through new regulatory measures were not appreciated. Their somewhat desperate attempt to recollectivize agriculture to get a rice crop planted was very negatively received, especially when they re-imposed restrictions on movement, emptied the towns of

unauthorized returnees, and sent people (once again) to the countryside to work. Very little rice was planted in 1979, in part because so many people had left their DK work sites and were not yet resettled in their former villages. But in addition, first drought and then floods destroyed much of the crop that did get planted. Thus there was virtually no rice to be harvested, and the population was (once again) faced with famine conditions in the first year of their "liberation" (Heder 1980:33-37, 40-43).

Although most Cambodians had welcomed the Vietnamese when they first arrived in Cambodia, enthusiasm began to fade as people realized there would be no return to the pre-1975 days, and that another socialist government was being installed in Cambodia. Skepticism about the intentions of the Vietnamese increased as people watched machinery, rubber, cloth, and Khmer statuary as well as rice disappearing in trucks in the direction of the Vietnamese border (Heder 1980:31). Resentment mounted as the new administration failed to provide rice for the once again hungry population. Old images of the Vietnamese as crafty, rapacious plunderers (Ebihara 1971:580-581) began to resurface. As word of international assistance filtered back from the Thai border, the idea of abandoning the whole enterprise for Thailand or the West became increasingly appealing to many Cambodians. Vietnamese efforts to intercept fleeing Cambodians and prevent them from "defecting" to the border only intensified the sense many had that they had to get out while they still could (Heder 1980: 8-9, 18-25).

During the first half of 1979, as the numbers of Cambodians crossing into Thailand grew, the Thai army began pushing refugees back into Cambodia. In

spite of protests by the UN High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR] in Thailand, and direct appeals by both the High Commissioner and the UN Secretary General, the Thai government insisted that this was a local problem and rejected any outside interference. These pushbacks culminated in June 1979 in an infamous incident at Preah Vihear where, over the course of several days, between 43,000 and 45,000 Cambodians who had crossed into Thailand were bussed to a remote location on Thailand's northeast border with Cambodia, and pushed down a steep mountainside back into their own country. The area into which they were repatriated was thick with landmines and the Vietnamese army, from whom they had just fled, waited on the far side of the minefields (Lawyers Committee 1987: 28). Thousands of people were injured or killed in this forced repatriation, which remains one of the starkest instances of abandonment that Cambodians have experienced in a decade not noted for the understanding shown to them by their "allies." 6

The international outcry precipitated by this incident was immediate and vociferous. The Thai government had grossly violated one of the most basic tenets of the international conventions concerning the treatment of refugees: non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of refugees to the territory from which they have fled, where their life or freedom has been threatened by virtue of their race, religion, nationality or membership in a political or social grouping. But

⁶ Another, more serious, and far too often overlooked abandonment occurred in April 1975 when the U.S. ambassador to Cambodia, John Gunther Dean, folded the American flag and helicoptered out of Phnom Penh six days before the country fell to the Khmer Rouge. Having contributed immeasurably to the rise in popularity of the Khmer Rouge by supporting the corrupt government of Lon Nol while simultaneously bombing the Cambodian countryside, the U.S. government simply abandoned the Khmer to their fate when it became clear that the state department's reading of Cambodian politics was hopelessly out of touch with reality. See Shawcross, 1986, chapter 23, especially pp. 358-64.

7 Collection of International Instruments Concerning Refugees, Article 1(2) (Geneva: Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, 1979) p.11, cited in Mayotte 1992:39.

Thailand was not a signatory to either the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, nor to its 1967 Protocol, which broadens and extends the definition of a "convention refugee." ⁸ The Thai government did not want to assume responsibility for this large and very needy population of Cambodians. Since World War II Thailand had absorbed three significant populations of political refugees from China, Vietnam, and Burma, respectively. There were already 160,000 refugees from the 1975 communist victories in Indochina in camps in Thailand under UNHCR care, and refugee-generating conflicts at all of its borders. The Thai government did not want to be burdened with yet another major refugee problem.

But Cambodians continued to arrive at the border in great numbers in spite of the pushbacks, and the international agencies continued to press the Thais to allow them to provide emergency relief. In September the Thai government permitted a limited amount of food and medicine to be distributed to refugee encampments across the border, but the people themselves were not allowed into Thailand. In early October the Vietnamese army attacked that part of the western border to which most of the Khmer Rouge had retreated, forcing a large number of civilians associated with the Khmer Rouge across the border into Thailand. These people had been living on leaves in the forest since being routed from their bases in the interior of Cambodia in April; as many as one third of them had died of starvation already, and those who appeared at the border were like the walking dead (Heder 1980:66-77). The Prime Minister of Thailand

⁸ The 1951 convention protects people living outside their country of origin and unable to avail themselves of its protection, or unable or unwilling to return to that country, "owing to a well-founded fear of persecution by reason of ... race, religion, nationality or political opinion" (see Zolberg et al, 1989, pp.24-25). But the convention was written in the aftermath of World War II and only covered Europeans who had become refugees before 1951 as a result of the events of World War II. The 1967 protocol extended the definition to include anyone, at any time, who becomes a refugee for reasons stated in the convention.

visited this area in mid-October; he was so shaken by what he saw that within two days he had authorized the UNHCR to open a feeding station and temporary holding camp for 40,000 in the border town of Sakeao. In December another camp was built north of Sakeao for non-Khmer Rouge refugees, and a much larger rice distribution program was initiated to assist Khmer on the other side of the border. This was the beginning of an international relief and assistance program that was to continue in one form or another for thirteen years (Shawcross 1985: 169-190).

Apart from those people associated with the Khmer Rouge, most of the earliest refugees to the border were Cambodia's urban elite who had suffered greatly under the Khmer Rouge, and Sino-Khmer merchants who saw no future for themselves under the Vietnamese. But as the months passed more and more Cambodians became disillusioned with the PRK regime. Some people came to the border in hopes of escaping to another country, some came to trade in the border markets that had sprung up almost immediately, some came to join the resistance movements that were forming there and, as the rice crop failed in Cambodia and the international border relief operation was established, many came for rice. By the end of 1979 not just townspeople but rural folk were giving up on the PRK regime, temporarily at least. The numbers of refugees at the border swelled. By January 1980 the population of the second camp, Khao I Dang, had exceeded 150,000. The Thai government, fearing that the whole population of Cambodia might cross into Thailand, closed the border once again and shut Sakaeo and Khao I Dang camps to new entrants. But several hundred thousand Khmer remained just inside Cambodia, in border encampments controlled by local warlords, black market racketeers, and the leaders of the Khmer Serei, the Free Khmer, or noncommunist resistance (Shawcross 1985:225-252).

Almost as soon as the Khmer Rouge grip on Cambodia had been broken, several different resistance movements had begun organizing on the border, with the common goal of regaining control of the government from the Vietnamese communists. Their leaders came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were officials from the "old society" days: military men and civil servants from the Lon Nol and Sihanouk eras, who had survived the Pol Pot years and wanted to ensure a non-communist future for Cambodia. Many had challenged these governments from within the political process in earlier years; they represented the (largely ineffectual) legal opposition. Some had been on the border since 1975 trying to organize an anti-Khmer Rouge resistance, surviving through private arrangements with the Thai army. Others were little better than black market profiteers, who had gathered a civilian population around their markets, controlling access and egress. The best organization was provided by high ranking officers and intellectuals who had escaped to the U.S. or France before April 1975 and formed anti-Khmer Rouge resistance organizations abroad (Heder 1980:80-101).

The most powerful of these was Brigadier General Dien Dael, who returned to the border in February 1979 from France with the former Prime Minister, Sonn Sann, to set up a loose umbrella organization of non-communist resistance fighters. This organization was called the Khmer People's National Liberation Front [KPNLF, or KP]; expanded and consolidated, it controlled the camp that is the subject of the rest of this thesis. In 1979 and 1980 the KPNLF was a much looser and more anarchic organization, however. Each leader controlled his own soldiers and encampment — there were about a dozen on the border at that time— but they coordinated their anti-Vietnamese activities through the organization of the KPNLF. Both north and south of the KP camps the Khmer Rouge had established military encampments as well. Eventually the KP would coordinate their military

activities with the Khmer Rouge, although at this point they were regarded with as much hatred as the Vietnamese.

Since civilian Khmer who arrived at the border after January 1980 were prevented from crossing into Thailand, they settled in these border encampments along with the soldiers and traders, and became the focus of international humanitarian concern. The small amount of assistance provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] and UNICEF in late 1979 was greatly expanded as the numbers of border Khmer increased, and a "landbridge" was set up to provide rice for the interior of Cambodia. But almost immediately, the provision of aid to the border encampments became a highly political issue.

assistance for the population inside Cambodia as well as at the border. But the PRK refused to accept aid from any organization that supplied the border resistance, especially the Khmer Rouge, forcing a choice between aid to the border and aid to the rest of Cambodia. The Thais, on the other hand, refused to allow any rice to be distributed on the border if the Khmer Rouge encampments were not fed. They were interested in resuscitating the Khmer Rouge for the purpose of keeping the Vietnamese at a distance from Thailand, if not forcing them out of Cambodia altogether. The international organizations made a case for humanitarian aid to needy civilians irrespective of politics — and it was clear there was a real humanitarian need, both at the border and inside Cambodia — but it was impossible to feed the civilian refugees without also feeding the soldiers. Thus the provision of humanitarian assistance at the border was wrapped up in the politics of support for the PRK government or the border

resistance from the very beginning (Shawcross 1985:112-154; Niland 1991:19-44). 9

Despite the fact that their invasion had brought down the murderous Khmer Rouge regime, the Vietnamese were widely condemned internationally for establishing a new regime under their control in Cambodia: only the Soviet Union and a few nations in the non-aligned movement supported them. The U.S. and the ASEAN countries were particularly unhappy with Vietnam's efforts to institutionalize its influence in Cambodia, which they denounced as aggressive and imperialistic. They sought to isolate Vietnam internationally by imposing an economic embargo on both Vietnam and the PRK and preventing the new PRK government from being seated at the UN. In one of history's hard-to-believe political contortions, the General Assembly voted in September 1979 to allow the "legitimate" state of Democratic Kampuchea to retain its seat in the UN rather than seating the "illegitimate" government of the PRK. This vote was repeated every year for the next ten years; the embargo it sustained had serious consequences for the PRK government's ability to rebuild the shattered country (Chanda 1986: 376; Mysliwiec 1988:passim).

In the face of such concerted international opposition Vietnam sought to consolidate its position in Cambodia, emphasizing the moral and legal insupportability of the Khmer Rouge regime while it worked to strengthened the

⁹ Thailand, for example, was negotiating with China around providing assistance to their client, the Khmer Rouge. The U.S. and the ASEAN countries opposed the Khmer Rouge but were interested in supporting the non-communist resistance, and pushed for humanitarian aid to the civilian refugees. Thailand, which supported both resistance groups, was not especially interested in providing humanitarian aid to <u>civilians</u> at all – it was felt this would just draw more refugees to its border. The Thai government wanted the Khmer to stay in Cambodia and support the resistance factions that were organizing on the border. Thus they required humanitarian organizations to provide assistance across the border <u>inside</u> Cambodia where the resistance armies would benefit from it too, and demanded that the Khmer Rouge be fed as a condition of providing assistance to the rest of the border Khmer.

political viability and control of the PRK government (Chanda 1986: 376). To that end the Vietnamese army continued to attack resistance bases along the Thai border. Meanwhile those countries which opposed Vietnam's presence in Cambodia joined forces to strengthen the resistance. Increasingly the conflict among the Vietnamese/PRK, the Khmer Rouge, and the non-communist resistance became a stage for both regional security issues and international strategic maneuvering among Cold War allies and opponents.

Thailand, for example, had been negotiating with China around support for the Khmer Rouge, and was willing to rearm the Khmer Rouge in order to ensure its own security vis a vis Vietnam. ¹⁰ But the other ASEAN countries, while threatened by Vietnam's continued presence in Cambodia, could not sanction support of the Khmer Rouge without some visible change in its leadership. To continue to support the DK government at the UN the Khmer Rouge leaders would have to modify their program and accept a coalition with Cambodia's respected non-communist leaders. ASEAN urged China to pressure the Khmer Rouge in this direction. The United States also believed the DK's position in the UN had to be strengthened with a new, morally acceptable leadership. But the U.S. was working to consolidate its own new, cooperative relationship with China, and was unwilling to push for too many concessions from the Khmer Rouge. Moreover, it believed that a militarily powerful Khmer Rouge was necessary to counterbalance the strength of the Vietnamese army.

A tactical coalition which incorporated the Khmer Rouge but strengthened the non-Communist factions in relation to them and improved the moral tone of

Thailand had received secret assurances from China that it would stop supporting the Thai Communist Party and provide Thailand with a cut of the weaponry if they agreed to facilitate the re-armament of the Khmer Rouge (Chanda 1986:348-9, 380-82). This Sino-Thai agreement was the cornerstone of the arrangements set up to support the resistance across the Thai border.

the resistance seemed desirable to both the U.S. and ASEAN, although for somewhat different reasons (Chanda 1986:386-89). China was willing to accept such a coalition as long as the Khmer Rouge were not required to disarm, knowing that the Khmer Rouge could not survive logistically without this agreement. (The KR would, in fact, use the arrangement to strengthen its position vis a vis the other Khmer factions.) The coalition would remain loose, allowing each faction to maintain organizational and political autonomy. The glue, in some sense, was provided by Prince Sihanouk, who had worked with all parties in the coalition in the past and lent his charismatic authority to the arrangement. The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea [CGDK] was created in June 1982, with Prince Sihanouk as its president, the KPNLF's Son Sann as Prime Minister, and Khmer Rouge Khieu Samphan as Vice President and Foreign Minister. The CGDK occupied Cambodia's seat in the UN on behalf of the DK state.

This was not a coalition the Khmer agreed to easily. Sihanouk voiced loud resistance — he had spent enough time with the KR not to want to get involved with them again soon. And most of the leaders of the KPNLF, including Son Sann, considered themselves as anti-DK as they were anti-Vietnamese. It was hard to accept any agreement with the Khmer Rouge, especially one that did not require them to disarm. The Khmer Rouge, for their part, could only have agreed to participate because the Chinese, their sole remaining patron, gave them no choice about it. But it took eight months of hard bargaining as well as ASEAN and American threats to withdraw support from both the KR and the KPNLF before all three parties would agree. It was, in other words, a tactical alliance, not one based on any deep commonality of perspective among its participants.

The creation of the CGDK had the immediate effect of strengthening the anti-Vietnamese resistance, something that was on the face of it advantageous to all three parties. But what would come of this coalition ultimately was a bit

unclear, as there was no political agreement among its members. From the point of view of its international patrons, it served the important purpose of keeping the Vietnamese occupied with an ongoing guerrilla war, with the long term effect of wearing them down over time. How this strategy would affect the Khmer themselves over time was not a central consideration. It was the framework through which the Khmer conflict would be carried out over the next ten years, but it was designed to meet the needs of its patrons as much if not more than its participants.

At the same time this political coalition was being created, humanitarian assistance to the border population was becoming regularized. ICRC and UNICEF, which had led the relief effort on the border since the beginning of the crisis in 1979, had both withdrawn. Neither organization was willing to continue to provide assistance to Khmer Rouge encampments when it was so clearly being used to support the Khmer Rouge army. But assistance to the Khmer Rouge encampments was the Thai prerequisite for providing any humanitarian assistance at all in Thailand. The UN High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR], which would seem to have been the obvious organization to take on the job, was prevented by its own charter from getting involved, as the border Khmer were no longer "refugees" according to the UN definition. They were now under the protection and control of an internationally recognized government, the CGDK.

At the peak of the refugee crisis in 1980 and 1981 over a million Cambodians had been drawn to the border by the food assistance program and hopes of resettlement in the west. Most had returned to Cambodia once a proper rice crop was planted and harvested, and it became clear that resettlement was

only an option for those few Khmer who had gotten into Sa Keao or Khao I Dang camps before January 1980. 11 But in 1982 a population of several hundred thousand Khmer remained on the border in encampments run by the various resistance leaders and jungle warlords. The majority of these border Khmer were civilians; they were living in overcrowded, unhealthy conditions without adequate food, shelter, or medical care. A new, ad hoc, and temporary UN agency was created by a special vote in the General Assembly to deal with this ongoing situation of humanitarian need, called the United Nations Border Relief Operation [UNBRO].

UNBRO provided food and medicine to the border encampments by day, but the camps remained under the control of the resistance, and continued to come under attack by the Vietnamese army. This was hardly an ideal arrangement from the point of view of the humanitarian organizations, whose job it was to provide protection and assistance to victimized civilians. But neither the Khmer leadership nor the Thais would allow civilians to be separated from the resistance soldiers, so it was impossible to prevent humanitarian aid from supporting the military. There was little to be done about this, however, in part because the whole humanitarian effort relied on the cooperation of the Thais, who had their own agenda for it, in part because the international donors that funded the relief operation were the same governments that supported the resistance

¹¹ The original residents of Sakeao and Khao I Dang camps were granted official refugee status by the UNHCR, with the agreement of the Thai government, and ultimately became eligible for resettlement in the West. But this option ended when the camps were closed to new entrants in January 1980. Although Cambodians continued to make their way into these camps illegally after this date and 200,000 were eventually resettled from them to third countries, it was a small number when compared to the total number of Khmer who spent time at the border between 1979 and 1992. See Mayotte 1992:43.

itself.¹² Thus there were larger political goals served by this arrangement than the humanitarian organizations were able themselves to resist.

Between 1982 and 1985 there was a seasonal pattern to life on the border: during the wet season, when the Vietnamese could not get their tanks through the mud to the border, aid was distributed, the black markets flourished, gardens were planted, and people lived the kind of hardscrabble, tenuous lives of the war displaced. In spite of the dangers presented by landmines, bandits, and several different armies, there was quite a lot of movement back and forth between the border and the interior: the camps had become a kind of semi-permanent fixture in this landscape of conflict. When the rains stopped and the roads dried up the fighting began again, and for six months the camps came under Vietnamese fire. When their camps were attacked, the Cambodian civilians routinely evacuated up against the Thai border, where they were routinely prevented from crossing over by the Thai soldiers. UNBRO oversaw ninety-five evacuations of the border camps during those three years; sixty-five of these were under fire (Mysliwiec 1988:97).

The treachery of everyday life on the border mirrored the treachery of war. Robbery, rape and extortion were commonplace in the camps. There was massive corruption in the distribution of UN rice: camp leaders who controlled the distribution used it to advance their own personal and political standing, not necessarily to see that all their people were fed. The UN could do little about this because they did not have any real power or influence among camp residents or their leaders (Mason and Brown 1983, pp. 34-90.] And there was serious, ongoing infighting among the KP leaders, and among the three parties to the

¹²UNBRO was a temporary agency, created by the General Assembly to address a specific crisis. It had a mandate but no charter or independent governing council. Nor did it have an independent budget; it had to rely on the support of donor countries from the General Assembly, solicited through pledges at donor meetings twice a year. This left UNBRO particularly vulnerable to political manipulation.

coalition. Often incoming fire came from the so-called "allies." The war, local politics, and lawlessness both inside and outside the camps made the border an extremely treacherous place to be.

Although many of the early refugees to the border returned to Cambodia in 1980 and 1981 when life in the PRK settled down a bit, people continued to flee the constraints and restrictions of the PRK government, although in smaller numbers. Many young men came to the border to avoid conscription, into either the PRK army or the notorious "Plan K", a massive work project designed to clear the jungles where the Khmer Rouge had hidden to deny them sanctuary. (Plan K work assignments were universally hated for the triple threat they presented of landmines, Khmer Rouge attack, and cerebral malaria.) In 1983 a widespread crackdown on subversive activity in the PRK sent another 10,000 Khmer fleeing to the border (Heder 1983:47-50). For people who remained on the border for any amount of time it became increasingly difficult to return to Cambodia. The border Khmer had become personae non grata with the PRK government by virtue of their presence in the resistance camps and posed a danger to their relatives if they returned home.

Meanwhile the guerrilla war dragged on, sustained and supported by its external patrons. USSR supplied the Vietnamese, China supported the Khmer Rouge through Thailand, and the U.S. and ASEAN supported Sihanouk and the KPNLF, also through Thailand; so did China. The political stand-off over Vietnam's invasion/liberation of Cambodia continued in the United Nations, with devastating consequences for the PRK. As the General Assembly did not recognize the PRK government, its own rules prevented it from providing development aid to Cambodia (Mysliwiec 1988:71-92 and passim). The economic embargo which the U.S. imposed on Vietnam and the PRK was observed by much of the western world as well. Thus most of the assistance the PRK received came

from Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and the communist countries of Eastern Europe. All the resistance factions depended upon outside support as well — they had no means of sustaining themselves on their own. 13 Their aspirations were grandiose; their performance much less so. Only the Khmer Rouge had managed to re-establish a disciplined and effective fighting force on the border. It maintained a string of military bases up and down the border, stockpiled large amounts of Chinese weaponry, and routinely sent guerrilla raids into Cambodia to attack PRK bases. All of this activity was supported by a special, semi-covert unit of the Royal Thai Army, called Task Force 838, whose job it was to facilitate the resistance's military activities.

In early 1985 there was a change in the status quo: between Christmas 1984 and March 1985 the Vietnamese/PRK army made a concerted effort to destroy all the resistance bases along the border, this time pushing the entire border population across into Thailand. Faced with a kind of <u>fait accomplis</u>, a new deal was struck among the Thais, UNBRO, and its donor nations in the UN Civilians would be separated from the fighting forces and moved to holding camps inside Thailand, where the UN would support them materially until the political/military conflict was resolved. These populations were still not classified as "refugees" — they remained under the control of the "legitimate" government of Cambodia, the CGDK, and ultimately under the jurisdiction of the Royal Thai Government [RTG] — but the humanitarian organizations would be responsible for their maintenance. The resistance armies would carry on independently from bases

¹³ In fact, by the mid 1980s the Khmer Rouge had established both timber and ruby-mining concessions in the parts of Cambodia they controlled. These became important sources of income for them, which they were able to exploit through the participation of Thai middlemen. These concessions continue to provide the Khmer Rouge with a major source of income through this same arrangement today.

elsewhere on the border. In theory this would separate civilians from the military, and provide a safer environment for the provision of humanitarian aid.

Thus in 1985 UNBRO built eight new camps just across the border in Thailand to accommodate the civilians displaced from the resistance encampments. Each camp continued to be run by civilian administrators from one of the three resistance factions, so they retained their political affiliation, although the U.N. had a much larger presence in these camps than they had had in the border encampments. The Thais were concerned about the future of the civilian camps — they did not want them to become permanent fixtures on Thai soil — and to that end required that they be kept at a low level of comfort and safety, for the purpose of "humane deterrence." ¹⁴ They were also concerned about Khmer "disappearing" into Thailand, so they kept a close guard on the camp perimeters. The Thai army's attitude toward the civilian camps was, essentially, that they were an irritating but unavoidable condition of their support for the armed resistance.

What the civilians gained in safety they lost in mobility and economic options in the new camps in Thailand. Although they had been living in the middle of a war zone in the resistance encampments, they were still living on Cambodian soil; they could come and go from the camp within the constraints applied by their own leaders; they could trade in the border markets, visit their relatives from time to time, grow a few vegetables, and search in the forest for wild

¹⁴ The idea behind this policy, often called "inhumane deterrence" by the humanitarian organizations, is that if the camps are uncomfortable enough they will not draw any <u>more</u> Khmer across the border into Thailand. The Thais did not want these new camps to become an incentive for more Khmer to leave Cambodia. See <u>Indochinese Refugees in Thailand</u>, The Public Affairs Institute, Bangkok, 1989, and <u>The Kampuchean Problem In Thai Perspective</u>, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1985.

foods to eat. It was a difficult and dangerous existence, but people were mostly their own masters.

In the UNBRO camps, however, people were fenced in by the Thais, and constrained by UNBRO regulations. UNBRO rations were dependable but considered insufficient, and it was difficult to supplement this tedious diet with so little space available in the camp for growing vegetables. For the first two years markets were outlawed altogether in UNBRO camps, so trade was reduced to the circulation of goods inside, and limited barter with those people who could come and go from the camps. Later, Thai merchants were permitted into the camps to sell their wares, and the problem became one of coming up with the cash to buy what they had to offer. Worries and dangers persisted from the ongoing guerrilla war, which was never very far away, and sometimes frighteningly close. But these worries were now compounded by the problems of long term confinement in a hot, crowded, resource-poor camp under the ultimate jurisdiction of the Thai government.

Having lived through a holocaust in Cambodia in the 1970s, and five years in the middle of a guerrilla war, the border population was entering a new phase of post-traumatic experience, characterized mainly by the frustration of waiting for a change in the status quo. The desperate humanitarian crisis that presented itself at the border in 1979 (Carney 1981) had been routenized into a relatively smooth relief and assistance operation that began to focus its energy on long term human development activities rather than crisis management. The chaotic mix of soldiers, traders, politicians, city folk and farmers that characterized the population of the resistance encampments had given way to a status quo of coordinated but fairly separate civilian and military domains. Although the civilian population remained closely tied to the resistance army, UN humanitarian assistance freed up the resistance to pursue its military goals without the

distraction of civilian concerns. But the future for the civilian Khmer hung in the balance of this conflict, which had reached a political and military impasse by 1988. Their stay in the UNBRO camps was temporary by definition, but there seemed to be no end to the political standoff that prevented them from returning home, and very little that the ordinary civilian could do about it. Life both does and does not go on in such a situation. The remainder of the thesis looks at that life, a "sort of" life, where children are born and grow up and marry, but very little that is solid and enduring can be established.

Chapter 2: Introduction to the Research

This thesis looks at the dynamics of social relations in Site II, the largest of the U.N. border camps that were built for displaced Cambodians in Thailand in 1985. The project was conceived as a study of the effects of a great social and cultural trauma on social relations and cultural institutions in a community of survivors.

What is the nature of social organization in a post-holocaust situation?

What process do communities go through in the re-establishment of social structures when virtually all prior relationships and institutions have been smashed? What are the enduring effects of an experience like "Pol Pot time" on the social life of a community? What priorities and values organize people's behavior in the aftermath of such an overwhelming devastation? And how do the particular circumstances of a refugee camp affect these processes?

My research was based on the premise that human social and cultural life is, among other things, meaningful; that collective values and meanings are complexly involved in all social actions and institutions; and that much of what makes everyday life meaningful — or not — are the values embedded in these relationships and institutions that organize daily existence (Erikson 1976; Marris 1986). Further, it identified the source of much of the <u>shared</u> trauma of collective devastation in the destruction of this social and cultural infrastructure. It took as its central question how social relations and institutions come to be re-invested with meaning in a situation in which the meaningful world has literally been "unmade" (Scarry 1986; Good 1994:116-134).

These questions developed out of my work with one survivor of the Khmer Rouge disaster, a deeply troubled Cambodian woman who had been resettled in Boston in the early 1980s along with her husband and six children. She came from

a rural rice-growing region in northwest Cambodia; she had been resettled in a tough mixed Black and Hispanic neighborhood in Dorchester. I was doing my best to teach her a little "survival" English, but she was not having an easy time.

Ley Cheung's troubles were complicated, but it seemed to me a significant part of her difficulties in Boston had to do with being in such an utterly alien environment, without the reassurance and support of a community of Cambodians, an extended family network, a familiar daily and weekly rhythm of work and rest, a Buddhist temple where she could go to make merit and pray. As it turned out, however, Cheung was deeply suspicious of the other Cambodians she knew. She deliberately avoided Cambodian people and tended to get into conflicts with those with whom she was obliged to interact.

As I learned more about those parts of Boston where resettled Cambodians were concentrated — East Boston, Chelsea, Revere, Lynn — I discovered that the Cambodian communities themselves were riven with conflict and strife. Whether personal or political in nature (or both), these conflicts had created deep divisions among the Khmer, which people seemed incapable of resolving. It seemed that the events of "Pol Pot time" had both exacerbated existing community divisions (Erikson 1994:236) and devastated the most basic structures of sociability; that people were struggling not only with personal loss and pain but also with the decimation of those social structures and cultural institutions that had provided a framework for social interaction in the past, and some measure of cultural stability and continuity over time.

This situation was not limited to resettled refugee communities in the West. All Cambodians, regardless of where they ended up after 1979, had experienced this devastation to the social and cultural infrastructure of their lives; this was part of the legacy of the Pol Pot holocaust. An important aspect of the process of putting

life back together after these events, it seemed, was collective, interactive, and social, not just individual and psychological.

There is a large literature on the individual experience of trauma and loss, and its effects on the personal psyche (Krystal 1968; Barlow 1988; van der Kolk 1987; and Herman 1992, for example). And there is some very good writing about the Cambodian trauma specifically, from a psychological point of view (Mollica 1988; Mollica et al. 1987; Kinzie 1987; Kinzie et al. 1984; Eisenbruch 1991). My research grew out of a desire to understand better what happens to communities in the aftermath of a devastation that is as destructive of social structures and institutions as it is of personal lives and psyches.

This question has relevance for any community of survivors of the Cambodian holocaust and, for that matter, for the survivors of any great social and cultural devastation. But I wanted to embed my own research in the process of social and cultural reconstruction of the Cambodian nation. That is, I was interested in community process as it related to a larger societal process of reconstruction. I was, therefore, less interested in working in communities of resettled Cambodians in the West; more interested in looking at communities that were engaged in some way in the conscious rebuilding of Cambodian society as a whole (Moore 1993: 8).

When I began my research in 1989, conditions in Cambodia were not favorable for conducting ethnographic research. Visas were extremely hard to get, travel was restricted outside the capitol city of Phnom Penh, and Westerners were regarded with enough official suspicion that ongoing contact between a researcher and individuals in the community could be expected to cause problems for one's interlocutors. There were, however, several large populations of Cambodians living in camps on the Thai-Cambodian border. While the camps were "constructed" environments with dependent, supported populations, the people

themselves and their civilian leaders were working toward a future in Cambodia itself, not a community in exile or integration into another society. The border camps seemed a plausible site for the kind of research I wanted to do.

The entire Thai-Cambodia border was under martial law, which ruled out a standard ethnographic research project — the Thai Social Science Research Board does not grant permission for research in areas it considers politically sensitive. But I was fortunate to be offered a job with one of the voluntary agencies that had been working on the border for ten years, collecting oral histories from Cambodians for a book about life in the border camps. This provided me with a pass into the camps, which were closed to anyone without official business there, and a credible reason for asking people to talk to me about their lives. I chose to focus my work on Site II because it was the largest of the border camps, it housed a complex and well-developed Cambodian community, and the agency that had hired me — the International Rescue Committee —was already working there so it was easily accessible to me. I lived in the Thai border town of Aranyaprathet, and commuted 85 kilometers into Site II with other IRC employees each day.

When I arrived in Aranyaprathet in June 1989, I had a certain understanding of what the border camps and the international relief operation that supported them were about. I knew this was a humanitarian operation, designed to provide assistance to civilians who had been victimized by an ongoing war but for various political reasons did not qualify for protection under the UNHCR. I knew that Site II was a "holding" camp, where displaced Cambodians were staying until a solution to this conflict made it safe for them to return to Cambodia. I knew the relief program was funded mainly by donations from the

United States, Japan, and European Community governments, which did not recognize the Vietnamese-installed government in Phnom Penh, but supported instead the non-Communist resistance with which this population was associated. And I knew that the camp population, while supported by the UN, continued to recognize the authority of its own leaders in the KPNLF. I had envisioned Site II as a kind of community of refuge, where Cambodians who had been displaced for ten years finally had the security to construct a genuine social life, albeit a somewhat artificial and dependent one, in anticipation of their return to Cambodia. I had envisioned a sort of self-contained social system; in Goffman's terms, a "total institution" (Goffman 1961); in short, an ideal set-up for social research.

Certainly Site II looked like a total social institution. Approaching the camp from its access road to the south, one gradually became aware of row after row of bamboo and thatch dwellings, low to the ground, blending in with the color of stubble in the abandoned rice paddy that abutted this end of the camp. To enter the camp one passed through a Thai military checkpoint; everyone had to show a pass issued by the Thai Military Supreme Command to get in. Driving down the main road that bisected the camp, laterite dust kicking up behind the truck, one was impressed by how orderly and neat Site II appeared. Down the side roads small houses were crowded together in residential sections, but the main road was lined with large and impressive bamboo-and-thatch structures that housed, for example, an Out-Patient Clinic, the KP Agricultural Office, the CARE kitchen, the Khmer Red Cross, the UNBRO Construction Compound. The road was busy with agency vehicles, water trucks, people walking or on bicycles. If it was "rice day" many people would be carrying sacks of rice on their heads or balanced on the back of their bikes, taking their weekly ration home from the distribution field.

At first glance, Site II seemed not only to be a well-organized, self-contained community, but even a fairly acceptable if rough place to live. And in fact Site II was a model refugee camp in terms of the effective delivery of goods and services to its populace. But appearances are deceiving. I did not know then that Site II functioned essentially as a behind-the-lines support camp for the KPNLF army; that UNBRO had accepted this accommodation with the KP and the Thai military as the best way to provide some protection to affected civilians; that while one department at the U.S. Embassy was overseeing the provision of humanitarian assistance, another was providing military advice and equipment to the KP guerrilla army; that many Westerners who had come to the border to help alleviate the suffering of a victimized population had left convinced that the border relief operation served mainly to sustain the guerrilla conflict, and actually got in the way its ultimate resolution (Nilnad 1991:135-141). I did not understand the extent of Thai interest in the border Khmer that had nothing to do with the protection of de facto refugees. And I had no concept of how all this would affect the questions I had come to the border to try to answer.

The greater complexity of the border situation was impressed upon me one evening a couple of months after I arrived in Aran, when I was asked to represent my agency at a dinner to meet the new man in charge of the U.S. Embassy's Refugee Division in Thailand. This man had come out from Bangkok to tour the border, meet the heads of the voluntary agencies working there, and acquaint himself with the issues he would be dealing with in his new job. The dinner was held in the best restaurant in Aranyaprathet, on the second floor, which was enclosed and air-conditioned. (Most restaurants in town were much smaller, had

¹ One man I knew told me he called Site II an "international zoo" because, he said, "A lot of Westerners visit Site II and take a lot of photos, but they never solve the Khmer problem. They just walk around nodding, and say, "Good; good; very impressive!"

only one floor, and were open to the street.) I arrived a bit late, found the party upstairs, and sat down at one end of a long table where about twenty other agency staff were seated already. The man from the embassy was at the other end of the table; he had been cornered by three or four field coordinators making emphatic points about the inadequacy of protection for Cambodians under the current arrangements on the border. This was an ongoing complaint of the relief agencies working in Site II.

It was clear I would have no contact with this man that evening, but it did not really matter. At my end of the table were two people I was glad to have the chance to meet. One was Father John, a Jesuit priest who had been working for a Catholic relief agency on the border for eight years; he was an avid supporter of the resistance, wore Khmer Rouge sandals made of recycled tire treads, and was famous for repeating (often) "Cambodians don't need peace, what they need is freedom!" The other was Kem Sos, a Cambodian who had worked for years for the U.S. State Department, first at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington, and for the last decade here at the border. He was potentially a very valuable contact, and I had a plausible introduction, as he was a good friend of my Khmer teacher in the United States. I wanted to ask him about the man I had heard had been sent from Site II to the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, sponsored by the Asia and Ford Foundations. Yes, he said, Ngeth Sophon. He is the head of Ampil camp.² He is very talented. I think he will do well.³ It was difficult finding someone we trusted would come back to the border after a year in the United States. Most would find a way to stay, and the education would be wasted. I was startled to hear Sos, a man I knew supported the non-communist resistance,

² Ampil is one of the five "camps" that made up the composite camp of Site II. See below.

³ See "Cambodia's Ngeth Sophon: A Profile in Courage" by Stephanie Southwick, The Kennedy School of Government Bulletin, Harvard University, Spring 1989.

speak so cynically about the KP leadership. It also surprised me to see how involved the U.S. Embassy was in behind-the-scenes support of a particular leader. I had a lot to learn.

I was aware that another large party had been seating itself at a table on the other side of the room while we were talking. When I looked over I was startled to realize it was a contingent of high ranking officers from the KP army. I recognized Generals Dien Dael and Pan Thai, both from the upper echelons of the KP military organization, men I had seen before only in pictures. As the bottles of Johnny Walker and Corvoisier appeared on the table, I realized they must be celebrating their recent victories in a new military offensive that had been audible to us on the border daily for the last couple of weeks.⁴ I had heard there was a KPNLA office just outside Aranyaprathet, but I was surprised to see these military commanders showing themselves so openly in town. Weren't their activities in Thailand supposed to be quiet, discrete, and basically out of sight? There was a kind of cynical irony in the fact that the international relief staff were worrying about how to better protect their people while they occupied themselves with the business (and pleasure) of war. I wondered if the new head of the Refugee Division understood what was going on twenty feet to his left; knew he would know soon enough as his colleague beside me had become very quiet suddenly, giving his full attention to his food.

While it was clear that the other party was just getting started and would continue for a long time, much of the agency staff still had work to do that evening, and would be getting up early the next morning. As our party began to break up, Father John went over to shake hands and congratulate the men he knew at the next table. Others looked over curiously at the other party as they got up to leave -

⁴ Since the fighting in this war took place just across the border, the explosion of artillery shells were often audible in Aranyaprathet and Site II.

- it was hard to tell how many people recognized who these men were. Kem Sos kept his head down, and headed downstairs without stopping.

What exactly was going on here? What kind of humanitarian operation was this that worked so cooperatively with the perpetrators of the war that displaced the very people it was serving? Were the people in Site II refugees or resistance fighters, or both? Was the U.N. providing protection or cover? What was the relationship between the camp population and these military leaders? What really was going on in Site II? Clearly the framework of social interaction in the camp had to be drawn much wider than I had initially imagined. But what was the relationship between those things that happened "on the ground" in Site II and these wider frames of reference, which extended as far as to encompass my own university?

The more time I spent in Site II the clearer it became that while the factors affecting individual decisions and actions might be local, the meaningful context for these actions extended far beyond the limits of the camp. To understand almost any action in Site II one had to be able to uncover these wider frames of significance, which affected people's actions whether or not they were aware of it themselves (Moore 1993:5).

Arjun Appadurai has written that the task of ethnography is the unravelling of this conundrum: What is the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world (1991: 196)? This seems a particularly apt question to ask about Site II which, in spite of its physical isolation, was emphatically not an isolated locale, understandable solely in terms of itself. Neither was life simply organized around the provision of international assistance, the public face of things in the camp. This was only one part of a much more complex reality, that involved an ongoing guerrilla war, a range of economic interests, regional security issues, and global strategic Cold War concerns.

How was the situation in Site II shaped by the convergence of these local, regional and international interests, all different, in this particular place? How did these different forms of power intersect to produce different possibilities for social action in the camp? How did the constantly shifting arenas of power contribute to an essential epistemological ambiguity, a lack of fixity about everything that went on in the camp? If, in Foucault's terms, power produces knowledge (Foucault 1973:78-108), how does the absence of any stable center of power, produce an absence of knowledge, a fundamental lack of certainty about everything that occurs? And how does this context bear on the questions posed at the beginning of the chapter, vis: how communities re-establish a social and cultural infrastructure in the aftermath of a great collective devastation? What is the process through which social life is reconstituted in a situation like this, and what are the enduring effects of an experience like "Pol Pot time" on the relationships and institutions of the community itself?

These initial questions opened onto several different issues in the context of Site II, which are inseparable in real life but may be distinguished here for analytic purposes. Each issue raises a different set of questions and problems, and calls upon different scholarly literatures.

First, there is the question of holocaust and its after-effects: of what happens in the course of massive, man-made devastation and destruction, and how people carry on after such experiences. Here it is important to make at least an analytic distinction between individual loss and pain and social and cultural devastation (Erikson 1994:233). What gets reconstituted in the realm of social structures and relations? What stays broken? How are past practices brought to

bear on present circumstances, and how do people move forward into the future? What inhibits people from working together productively? What facilitates the process of moving on?

Literature on survivors of the Nazi death camps and the hydrogen bombs dropped over Japan in World War II has been especially useful, both in describing the overwhelming psychological impact of a devastation of this magnitude and in documenting the long-term effects of such a holocaust over several decades (Langer 1991; Lifton 1967; Spiegelman 1986, 1991). These events literally change the world, and one's place in it. They are not experiences one "recovers" from. Rather, one must (try to) learn to live with one's own changed self in a world now permanently altered by that event. The struggle to reorient one's self to the changed world continues over generations.

There is a literature which explores the situated political and social meanings of violence -- and the production of violence through specific political and social processes -- which has been helpful in working out the particular meaning the Khmer Rouge atrocities had for different Cambodians, and the repertoire of responses available to them (Das 1990b). And there is a literature on the cultural construction of political terror, and its cultural consequences (Warren 1993a and 1993b; Nordstrom and Martin 1992). But terror also creates its own "culture" as Taussig (1987; 1992) has pointed out: a "culture of terror", or a "political ethos" of violence and fear (Jenkins 1991), within which certain actions and emotions are possible and certain others simply are not. These cultures of terror are characterized by "fragmentation, instability, and uncertainty" (Warren 1993: 3, citing Taussig, op.s cit.), qualities well-represented in the daily life of Site II.

Violence and terror did not end for the border Khmer when the Khmer Rouge were overthrown in 1979, and much of the difficulty of reconstructing a social existence had to do with the ongoing, intermittent violence of life on the border. This kind of punctuated violence is comparable in many ways to situations of long-standing political conflict in Palestine, Northern Ireland, and Sri Lanka (see Wood 1993; Aretxaga 1993; Kelleher 1993; Tambiah 1990; Spencer, forthcoming). Analyses of the structural violence of extreme poverty (Scheper-Hughes 1992) and the internalization of structural violence in crack houses in Spanish Harlem (Bourgeois, forthcoming) speak to the routinization of victimization and violence that was a part of the experience of living in Site II. And analyses of the Cultural Revolution in China address problems of living under a political regimein which history is radically misrepresented, and one's own response to world-shattering events cannot be openly expressed (Watson forthcoming; Schwarcz 1992; Kleinman 1986; White 1989).

A second set of questions surrounds the issue of displacement and refugeeism, which includes its own set of terrors and dangers. What are the consequences of long-term physical confinement and material dependence, ongoing insecurity, and open-ended homelessness? What are the effects on social life of profound uncertainty about the future? How did these circumstances of displacement affect people's understanding of themselves and the way they were able to live with each other in Site II?

Although much of the writing on refugees emphasizes the problematic, even pathological, aspects of displacement (see Malkki 1992) there is a useful literature on the question of what it means to be a refugee (for example, Zolberg et al 1989: 3-33), how refugees are "produced" (Zolberg 1983), and the law and politics of asylum (Suhrke 1983; 1992). There is both theoretical and ethnographic writing on the social world of refugees (Marx 1990; French 1990). And there is an interesting and provocative literature on the way in which relief operations impose their own priorities and structures on the displaced, creating

new imperatives within the populations, and transforming both individuals and social institutions in the process (Harrell-Bond 1986; 1992; Mortland 1987).

Many people have written about how refugees' political and/or cultural identity is challenged by or transformed through displacement (Edwards 1990, Forbes 1989, and Nowak 1984, for example). More recently, the issue of cultural identity has been taken up from a new angle which questions the taken-forgranted isomorphism between people, culture, identity, and place (see for example Ferguson and Gupta 1992). This new writing notes the increased mobility of all kinds of people across national boundaries. It suggests that in the contemporary world, identities may no longer be "rooted" in a particular locale, but rather may define themselves in terms of diasporic political solidarity, occupation, or even a kind of transnational cinematic imagination (Appadurai 1991). This writing not only challenges us to examine the assumptions that lie behind our "refugee" terminology, but points to ways in which refugees are more "like us" than we ever imagined.

A third set of questions concerns social organization and social process: how the structures, or arrangements, of social life get established over time, and how they are maintained or transformed. Implicit in a question about recovery from holocaust is an assumption about the direction of social process, which may or may not fit the facts of the case. Something is carried on — life does not stop — but whether this constitutes "recovery" or "reconstruction" in any meaningful sense is a question for research. What did happen over time in this Cambodian border camp, and why? What kind of habitus was established, to use Bourdieu's terms (1977), and how did this relate to the habitus of people's lives in Cambodia before 1975? What influenced the direction of the changes that occurred? Is it possible to discern larger social processes from the smaller processes that can be observed "on the ground"? What is the relationship between these low-level, on-

the-ground processes and a more abstract, diffuse process like "social reconstruction" (Moore 1978, 1987, 1993)?

The five chapters that follow consider these issues in relation to particular domains of social and cultural life in Site II. These chapters, together with the historical introduction, group together logically in three pairs which develop an overall line of argument about social life and social process in this post-holocaust situation.

Chapter 3 looks at the different ways the Thais, the Khmer, and the United Nations understood the space that Site II occupied, and how each group imposed its own conceptualization on this space, with different consequences for the camp population. It develops the idea introduced in Chapter 1 that Site II constitutes a transnational space, a point of intersection of multiple powers and interests, and that what went on in Site II had as much to do with these different interests as it did with the concerns of the Khmer themselves. Chapter 3 looks in detail at how the three most immediate interest groups - the Thais, the Khmer, and the UN -shaped what went on in the camp through their varying ability to structure the camp space, and how the people in Site II pursued their lives in and around these different spatial constructs. It considers the fact that none of these three interests could dominate the space in Site II entirely, that no single system of power and knowledge was hegemonic. Rather, there was a constant shifting from one plane of meaning to another, and a fundamental ambiguity about the situatedness of any action. This unfixity of space led to an unfixity of knowledge in the Foucauldian sense in Site II, and contributed to the overall instability of social life in the camp.

An important reason for the shifting nature of space in Site II was that the Cambodian conflict engaged the interest of regional as well as international powers, who exerted their influence from outside the camp in ways that affected

what went on within. Thus powerful <u>distant</u> forces were shaping the situation in which the Khmer found themselves in Site II, as well as those more immediate interest groups. This chapter considers the relationship between these outside interests and the processes of social construction and reconstruction in the population itself. What was the relationship between on-the-ground individual actions and the larger goals of the structuring agents? Were the people in Site II simply pawns in a strategic international chess game or did they have some influence on the direction their lives took? What was the connection?

Chapters 4 and 5 explore in detail the effects of local, regional, and international interests on politics and economics in the camp, and the political economy of behavior. How does one characterize the material economy of a non-productive, dependent, and supported population, when the structure of assistance clearly does not encompass the range of economic activity in the camp, and the goal of much of this activity bears little relation to the population anyway? Most of the people in Site II lived within a local economy of dependence, but this did not exhaust the economic activity in the camp. Chapter 4 looks at this economic activity as a convergence of several different economies of value and meaning, which extended well beyond the limits of the camp and served interests that often had little to do with the people in Site II.

Chapter 4 asks, whose interests were being served by these different economies? How were these economies sustained? How did they intersect, and who had access to what resources and opportunities? Who benefitted from this peculiar convergence of economic interests, and how did people with the least power and access operate within the situation? What kind of ethic informed these various economic activities and what did any of this have to do with the rebuilding of social relations and institutions?

Chapter 5 looks at the political agenda of the KPNLF leadership in Site II, and at the way the leaders exercised their power and maintained political control in the camp. If the UN regarded the population of Site II as civilian refugees and treated them as such, the KP considered them the popular base of their political movement, and expected certain kinds of support in exchange for their leadership. The KP leaders maintained their control through classic patronage networks, providing protection and certain material benefits to "their" people but demanding political loyalty and support in return. This chapter explores the reasons for the particular balance of voluntarism and coercion in these asymmetrical if reciprocal patron-client relationships. It suggests that while limited resources and the overall dependence of the camp population meant the balance of power greatly favored the KP leadership in Site II, the KP itself depended on the financial backing of external patrons for its power. Thus dependence was part of the experience of Cambodians at all levels of the political hierarchy. This chapter explores the role of fear in the maintenance of exploitative patronage relationships, and the ongoing significance of violence in the exercise of political power.

Chapters 6 and 7 consider the effects of recent history and this particular camp context on two quintessentially cultural domains: family and religion. These chapters look at how these institutions, which had constituted meaningful, "structuring structures" (Bourdieu 1977) and provided some cultural continuity for Cambodians in the past, were reconstituted in the border camps and how they functioned in this new, changed context.

Chapter 6 considers how families, as the single most important and enduring social institution among Cambodians, absorbed the traumas of Pol Pot time and adapted to the changing conditions in Site II. In what ways were families affected by Khmer Rouge rule, and how did families adapt to the peculiar

combination of violence, mistrust, material scarcity, and political danger that existed in the border camps? How did people without kin get by in Site II? What substituted for kinship when real kin were not available? What accounts for the evident fragility of marriages in Site II, and what were the consequences of this fragility in terms of re-establishing the kind of on-going, reliable relationships upon which enduring social structures and institutions may be built?

Chapter 7 takes Buddhism to be the touchstone of Cambodian culture, the underlying philosophical principle of virtually all social relationships and cultural values. In Bourdieu's terms, Buddhism was a structuring principle of the pre-1975 Cambodian habitus. This chapter asks, in what ways did this Buddhist orientation help people to cope with the great challenges of Pol Pot time and after? In what ways was Buddhism itself challenged by these events? How were Buddhist institutions and practices reconstituted on the border? In what ways were these useful to people, which people, and in what ways were they not especially helpful? Why wasn't institutional Buddhism a more powerful force in the face of such spiritual challenges? And what was the outcome for these survivors — how did people carry on, and what kind of meaning, if any, was salvaged in the process?

The final chapter brings together ideas about time, history, memory, and the place of peoples' memories of suffering in the larger social processes under way in the camp. The shallow and provisional nature of everyday interactions in Site II contrasted with the depth of difficult memories that everyone over the age of 16 carried with them. These kinds of memories are intrusive: they demand some sort of attention. But concerns about "understanding" and "meaning" were often overwhelmed by more immediate concerns in the camp, and the generalized sense of deprivation and victimization seemed to create its own moral world.

A "political economy of meaning" could be discerned in Site II that was understandable in relation to historical, political, economic and spiritual circumstances, but it was grounded in the indeterminacy of life in the camp itself. Memories were difficult to address under these circumstances, which conspired against the establishment of enduring social relations and institutions. There was a kind of narrative breakdown on the border, an inability to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of the past, upon which a future could be conceived and built (Good 1994:128; 139-165). The past could not be incorporated into a present that projected no future, and shifted continually in any case. The interpretation of holocaust awaited a stability of referents that was not to be found in Site II.

The final chapter also considers the nature of social process, as it was illuminated by the situation in Site II. In Site II, as everywhere, social life was ongoing and therefore, inevitably, in a process of change. But the direction of change was never clear in Site II, or at least not for long: the direction of the changes kept changing. This was due in part to the fact that those factors that determined how things could change in Site II -- for example, the level and kind of external support for the KPNLF, the willingness of the Thais to facilitate this support in various ways, the strength of the Phnom Penh government and army -- were themselves unstable and shifting. Things were very much in flux in Site II at the end of the 1980s; it was extremely difficult to discern trends from the middle of this process.

This situation is not, in itself, especially unusual. As Sally Falk Moore has written, "Processualism [the analysis of social process] addresses a complex mix of order, antiorder, and nonorder" (Moore 1987: 126). In Site II, for a range of reasons, this mix was extremely complex however, and the level of indeterminacy in everyday life caused anguish for the people who lived there. The difficulty of

discerning (or producing) directionality was not just an abstract analytic problem for me but a painful existential problem for the people who lived in Site II. But—and this is the lesson it seems—history moves on anyway. Much social change occurs in precisely this way: in fits and false starts, with a great deal of ultimately wasted effort, in spite of the concerted and often (but not always) good intentions of many of its participants.

Jeanne Favret-Saada (1990:198) has written that "since we cannot approach ethnographic 'facts' except through and in a communicative relationship, these 'facts' are therefore the products of this relationship between the ethnographer and his natives (sic). Thus, to describe an ethnographic 'fact' is also to describe the situation of intercommunication...."

The "situation of intercommunication" at the border was complicated in the extreme. As the dinner meeting at the restaurant in Aranyaprathet begins to demonstrate, I was living in the middle of a transnational traffic jam of differently motivated actors and interests. In addition to the Thai army, the KP leadership, and the international agencies, there were exploitative Thai rice merchants, CIA agents and U.S. military advisors, gun runners and black marketeers, Asia Watch and Amnesty International investigators, Cambodians from the U.S. and France involved in their own private political conspiracies, rogue journalists, ABC news, the French cultural attaché, an Australian movie crew. Everyone was operating on the basis of different information, different motivations, and radically different perspectives — there was often very little possibility of mutually intelligible communication. In this situation one was constantly trying to figure out who was

who, what they were doing at the border, and how this might alter one's understanding of the border situation in general.

In this heady mix there were times when the Khmer themselves seemed to fade into the background. It was sometimes possible to learn more about what was going on in Site II by sitting in the night market in Aran than by talking to Cambodians all day in the camp. Still, ultimately much of this was distraction. In the midst of this swirling and seductive scene one searched for points of clarity and stability. For me stability came with an increasingly clear sense of my own position on the border, and of the kinds of relationships I could (and wanted to) have with the people in Site II and Aranyaprathet.

As an employee of the International Rescue Committee, an American voluntary relief agency, I had a certain automatic identity both in Site II and in the international relief community. This bothered me at first. I was not sure I wanted to be encumbered with the generalizations many Khmer seemed to make about the Western relief staff (we were rich, we were easily manipulable, we were mostly interested in their stories of suffering). I soon realized it did not matter how I might distinguish myself from other Westerners, because structurally we were indistinguishable in relation to the Khmer. And as automatic identities go, this was a fairly benign and unproblematic one. It was clearly better to be identified as a garden-variety relief worker than to be unidentifiable, since people without a transparent purpose in the camp, especially those gathering information, were automatically suspect and were often assumed to be spies.

And, of course, the international relief community was my community.

These people were my colleagues, my friends, and frequently my informants. I learned a great deal from UNBRO and agency staff who had been on the border much longer than I. But in the beginning I was regarded with as much suspicion by UNBRO staff as I was by the Khmer. Everyone had stories they preferred to

keep under wraps which they felt reflected badly on themselves or the UN. Since UNBRO depended on voluntary donations from the General Assembly for its operating budget bad news about the camp or the organization was felt to jeopardize its ability to provide any aid at all. But as time passed and no scathing critiques of their operation appeared, UNBRO staff loosened up and were more forthcoming with information. I was trusted, it seemed, to understand the context of the information provided, and to be sympathetic to the challenges the operation presented to them.

Trust was a very big issue for the Khmer in Site II as well, and something that will be addressed in several places in this thesis. One indication of the overall level of mistrust in the camp was the amount of talk one heard about spies: this person was a spy for X, that person for Y, etc. At first I thought people were being perhaps understandably but unnecessarily paranoid. Then I began to think about all the people who were gathering information for someone else in Site II. The American Embassy had people interviewing every new arrival to the camp. Khmer staff kept their UNBRO bosses informed about the KP's activities and plans. The camp administrations kept their Khmer leaders informed about anything that might affect their political standing. Certainly there were people in Site II spying for the Phnom Penh government -- the KP had its own extensive network of spies throughout Cambodia -- but the coalition partners were all spying on each other as well: there were people in Site II reporting back to bosses in the Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk camps. The Thai military hired Cambodians to provide information about all three coalition partners; robbers hired informants to point out the houses of the rich; journalists hired to keep them informed of the latest camp scandals. What was a spy, after all, but someone who gathered information for someone else, without concern for the way that information would be used? I

wondered who people in Site II imagined I was gathering information for, and began thinking more about my own agenda.

My insistence that I was collecting people's stories for a book about Site II sounded implausible to many people, even though it was true. Why would anyone want to read about the lives of ignorant rice farmers? Who cares what uneducated people think? My claim that I was engaged in this work because I personally wanted to understand better what happened in Cambodia in the 1970's sounded hollow even to my own ears in the face of peoples' blank stares. How can you afford to spend so much time and money just to come over here and talk to people? What do you get out of the deal? People's incredulity forced me to admit that at some level I was in this for a professional degree: I would (I hoped) get a PhD out of the deal. This was much easier for people to understand than an abstract claim about the quest for enlightenment, and helped me to think about what I was doing in the strategic terms that the Khmer used to evaluate all social actions and interactions. It helped me to recognize how important my structural position was in terms of the way people regarded me.

Once it was clear in my own mind that I was not on the border to (for example) expose abuse, relieve suffering, or promote the KP's political cause (underlying goals of various members of the international relief community), but rather to collect ethnographic "facts" toward an understanding of how Site II worked, it was easier to know what kind of relationships to try to establish. I wanted straightforward, readable relationships, and I needed to be readable myself. Verifiable facts and great revelations mattered less to me than to be able to interpret why someone was telling me a story in a particular way, and why the story was significant. Trust was in short supply on the border so I tried to be as transparent and trustworthy as I could be. I presented myself in pretty much the same way to everyone in the camp, which meant that some "big" people could not

be bothered with my questions, and some "little" people were terrified of my attention. My easiest interactions were with people who had some education and some experience with westerners, but these were not necessarily the most enlightening. As always, mess-ups and misunderstandings were very illuminating.

The structure of the relief operation shaped relationships between the "barang" (the Khmer term for Westerner) and the Khmer in many ways. Chapter 3 discusses in some detail the consequences of our limited time in the camp; none of the international relief staff was allowed to stay over night in the camp; everyone had to be out by five o'clock each afternoon. Our first-hand knowledge of the camp was thus limited to one-third of each day, and our relationships with the Khmer were correspondingly limited as well. Although individuals might develop complex friendships, fundamentally we represented resources in a resource-poor environment to the Khmer. We had things, knew things, could go places and do things that they could not. There were many ways we could be useful to the Khmer, and this fact underlay all relationships and interactions between us.

Chapter 3 also discusses the fundamentally different goals of the UN and the KP leadership in Site II. Much of the overt activity that contradicted UNBRO's humanitarian agenda occurred at night after the Westerners had left the camp. But the need to hide that part of their existence from the UN created a fundamental communicative gap between the Khmer and the barang that was difficult to bridge. Moreover, the Khmer had seen many Westerners come and go from the border over the years. Most no doubt were genuinely concerned about their Khmer colleagues and staff, and worked to develop close, trusting relationships. But almost all of them left the border after a year or two or three, and this constituted yet another loss for the Khmer. People tended to protect

themselves from this loss by keeping an emotional distance between themselves and even their closest barang colleagues and friends. This contributed to the difficulty of getting to know Khmer as well.

Given this population's experiences over the previous fifteen years, I knew there were some things people would not want to talk about with me. Nor did I feel comfortable probing topics that could be psychologically destabilizing. I left it to my interlocutors to decide how much they wanted to tell me about their traumatic past. I usually took a Khmer interpreter with me when I conducted formal interviews, an unmarried man of 24, but I conducted the interviews myself, in Khmer, except when someone spoke better English than I spoke Khmer. Although I sought out interviews with a cross-section of the population in Site II, I learned most from those people with whom I had ongoing, working relationships, the Khmer staff who indexed, transcribed, and translated my interviews. For the various reasons outlined above, it was not easy to develop close relationships with the Khmer in Site II. But the oral history project provided an opportunity to work closely with several talented young adults, and I got to know them quite well over my twenty months in Site II. They numbered among my most valuable informants.

There are a number of reasons why the material from Site II was difficult to work with, difficult to figure out. The first is simply that the pain and suffering one encountered in this population elicited an emotional response that made it hard at times to be analytic. It demanded a consideration of certain issues that were not the immediate focus of this work, although they have ultimately informed the writing. I have tried to focus here on social facts and social

processes in the aftermath of the Cambodian holocaust. But in real life social and cultural trauma is experienced by individuals, so in fact I was working with individual, personal trauma after all, in spite of my careful analytic distinctions. One could not escape that fact. It was hard at times to get enough distance from the emotional force of people's stories to be able to think about them critically, and not always clear that critical analysis was the most appropriate kind of response. As Favret-Saada (1990: 198) has pointed out, certain things really cannot be expressed; I think that goes for anyone trying to write about such traumatic events as much as it does for the people who have experienced them.

A second difficulty was the tremendous, at times overwhelming, ambiguity of the situation in Site II. It was never clear whether, for example, the most important thing going on at any given moment was the coercive nature of the leadership in Site II, the black market in weaponry donated to the resistance by its supporters, the human rights abuses of the Thai guards in the camp, the high rates of depression and domestic violence in the camp, or the decision by the United States to cease recognizing the CGDK in the U.N. General Assembly. What were the most important questions to be asking when the context of the border situation changed weekly if not daily? One could simply choose a set of issues to write about, but part of the task, I felt, was to pay attention to the issues that emerged as important in a situation like this.

The fact is, the questions changed as the situation changed on the border. When I arrived in 1989, protecting the human rights of the border Khmer was a big issue. At that time the people in Site II were regarded as pawns and victims

⁵ I am left with the realization that there there is no best way to write about these events, no one way that addresses the range and complexity of issues raised by the Cambodians' experiences in the last twenty-five years. These events need to be written about in many ways, from many different angles. My efforts to be analytic will, I hope, prove useful, but other kinds of responses are required as well.

of their own leaders' guerrilla war; UNBRO was concerned with protecting them from the KP's exploitation and abuse (Niland 1991:116-118). By the time I left a peace agreement was about to be signed by the four warring factions, and it no longer mattered whether the Khmer in Site II wanted to be repatriated or not (some didn't). Their repatriation was part of a political settlement that was finally acceptable to all the key players in the Cambodian conflict. Of course they would be represented by the KPNLF — they had been under KP leadership for 12 years. Their individual rights to international protection were no longer an issue. Thus their ambiguous status in the international arena had shifted from "refugee" to "KP citizen" as the political circumstance surrounding their displacement changed.

These constant changes in the context of the border situation were an everpresent complication in the research. We were right in the middle of something
on the border in 1990, and it was not at all clear how the situation would turn out.
Perhaps the conflict would remain unresolved and the border population would
be stuck in these camps for another ten years, forgotten as the focus of
international attention shifted to other parts of the world. Perhaps the peace talks
would fail and an even larger, regional war would break out. Perhaps the Khmer
Rouge would overwhelm the government in Phnom Penh after the border Khmer
were repatriated, and once again take control of Cambodia. Any one of these
outcomes seemed possible in 1990, and each would change the way the border
situation ultimately would be understood (Moore 1987:125). Both field research
and analysis required a constant re-figuring of my interpretive angle. It was not
until the Paris Peace Agreement was finally signed in October 1991 that the
lasting significance of the border camps began to come clear. But my own sense of
confusion was nothing compared to the much more profound confusion of the

Khmer, who continued to struggle to find an interpretive framework wide enough to encompass the terrible events of the previous fifteen years.

Prologue:

Kathin, a Buddhist celebration that occurs at the end of the rain retreat in October, is one of the most popular events in the Khmer people's annual cycle of Buddhist rituals and festivities. It is organized around the presentation of new robes to the monks who have just emerged from three months in the temples, the annual meditation retreat that all Buddhist monks undertake during the rainy season. More than just robes are presented, however; kathin is an opportunity for organized merit-making through the presentation of all manner of gifts to the monks and the temples. Often a particularly wealthy individual will sponsor a kathin festival at a particular temple, which may involve substantial amounts of food, music and entertainment; sometimes the entire congregation of a temple will organize a kathin (Ebihara 1971: 403-407; 1977:178-179). It is an opportunity to make merit while providing support to your favorite temple, or the temple in your community. Kathin festivals can occur anytime after the full moon in October, which marks the end of the rain retreat, and before the full moon of the following month.

On a Monday morning in late October, 1989, when I had been working in Site II for about five months, I was informed that a decision had finally been made by the camp administrators: this was the week that <u>kathin</u> would be celebrated in all the temples in the camp. (Since the date was not fixed on the calendar, the decision of when to hold a <u>kathin</u> was made by its sponsors.) This was to be a somewhat unusual <u>kathin</u>, however, because the goods collected would be donated to the pagodas in Thmar Pouk and Banteay Chhmar, two villages close to Site II across the border in Cambodia, in an area newly "liberated" by the KPNLF.

This had been an active fall for the KPNLF army. In September, amid much fanfare and international attention, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) had withdrawn from Cambodia after ten years of occupation. This marked the official withdrawal of Vietnamese involvement in the government of Cambodia as well, and the start of a genuinely Cambodian-run Cambodian state. The resistance armies saw the withdrawal of the Vietnamese as an opportunity to spread their influence inside Cambodia, however, and in early October began a major military offensive aimed at taking control of the northwestern part of the country (see map 2).

The army of the recently re-named State of Cambodia proved stronger than expected without Vietnamese backing, but the resistance nevertheless managed to take control of a strip of territory 20-35 kilometers in from the Thai border running from Oddar Meanchey Province to the north of Site II to Pursat Province in the south. The KP got to work immediately in "the liberated zone", providing assistance to villages affected by the fighting and support to local schools, district offices, and temples. The camp-wide dedication of its <u>kathin</u> contributions to temples in the "liberated zone" was part of the KP's campaign to win the hearts and minds of villagers in this once-again contested border area.

All week the section leaders had been canvassing their neighborhoods with megaphones, collecting contributions for the upcoming <u>kathin</u> ceremony. I was therefore surprised to find the courtyard of Wat Prasat Serei empty and quiet on the Friday morning when the goods were to be presented to representatives from the temples inside Cambodia. I wondered if I might have gotten the day wrong and felt very exposed and self-conscious as I parked my agency truck and walked

¹ Concurrent with the withdrawal of Vietnamese advisors and the PAVN was the adoption of a new liberalized constitution and a change in the the name of the country from the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) to the State of Cambodia (SOC).

Heading Back to Year Zero?



For the Khmer Rouge, it is the early 1970s all over again. Then, they were part of the communist guerilla movement that gnawed away at

Lon Nol's government, which had ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970. Nobody quite believed the resistance could

topple the U.S.-backed régime, but on April 17, 1975, its blackclad fighters burst upon Phnom Penh. The bloodiness of Pol Pot's years in power before Vietnamese troops ousted his faction in early 1979 has become legendary. But Khmer Rouge patience is legendary, too. The group has fought a resistance war from its bases in the wild, malaria-infested hills of the Thai border ever since. Now, with Hanoi's men declared withdrawn, its guerillas are again advancing, this time against the government Vietnam replaced them with. The question now: will history repeat itself?

The Khmer Rouge are not declaring that Phnom Penh is their eventual prize, but they certainly say they intend to capture Battambang. On Oct. 26 they warned citizens of Cambodia's second largest city to flee "in order to stay alive." Since taking Pailin, the gem centre in western Cambodia, on Oct. 22, the resistance group has been moving in several directions. It claims to have taken Samlaut, to the south of Pailin, and a string of small towns southeast along Route 43. To the east and north, up Route 10, it says it has driven the Phnom Penh army's 4th and 196th divisions. 32nd and 93rd regiments and 95th brigade out of the villages of Treng, Snoeng and Phnom Sampeou. It says it has cut the road between Sdau and Phnom

Sampeou — a claim that would put it just 13 km away from Battambang.

True to guerilla form, Khmer Rouge troops are also reaching beyond the battle fronts. They claim to have infiltrated to Route 5 between Battambang and Moung town, attacking the road around Kompong Preah and Krakaoh villages. They also say they have hit the railway line south of Phnom Taphde. Resistance soldiers

have also been active west of Battambang and south of Thai border town Aranya-prathet, announcing they had "smashed and swept" enemy positions between Bavet village and the hill base Phnom Ampil. Holding that line would hamper Phnom Penh's supply route to its forward base at Phnom Malai. The Khmer Rouge already hold nearby Phnom Mak Hoeun and have been moving troops to the west of Phnom Ampil, including Phnom Chakrey.

The overall picture is of a multipronged offensive aimed at holding large tracts of the west and northwest and closing in on Battambang. As back-up, the group has an entrenched network around

BATTLING ON THAILAND Samraong ODDAR MEANCHEY Arenyaprathet BANTEAY MEANCHEY SIEM REAP E Point Sisophon PHNQM_m MAK HOEUN ::: Route 5 ... PHNOM MALAI Siem Reap PHNOM AMPIL Bavet PHNOM A CHAKREY. BATTAMBANG Battambang Phnom Sampeou Samaur. Speed Treat *Peirlin Semiaut. Pursat PURSAT KOMPONG **KPNLF** offensive CAMBODIA **CHHNANG** Sihanoukist offensive Khmer Rouge offensive **KPNLF** activity KOMPONG Sihanoukist activity KOH KONG SPEU Khmer Rouge activity

the country, particularly to the south of the Tonle Sap, or Great also, says a Phnom Penh offic southern province of Takeo, cl capital itself. As they advance, the are keeping a careful hold on contiony. In both Pailin and Sar have set up "provisional mili mittees" to defend their gains "evolves loss of life." This, reckons

ern diplomat in Bangkok, "tells us the Khmer Rouge are on to something different. It is certainly not guerilla strategy."

Comments one European diploma "There's no denying that Phnom Penh on the defensive." Yet the Khmer Roug claims may be to some extent exaggerate and the guerillas, both Khmer Rouge ar their allies of the Khmer People's Nation Liberation Front and Prince Sihanouk faction, are now girding for renew efforts by Phnom Penh. "We are co-solidating our gains and waiting for counter-attack." says the KP's Abd Gaffar Peangmeth. The two smaller grow have had less success in their own battles

the north. They still ho Thamar Puok on Route 69, b it came under heavy shelling a Nov. 1. They have failed reach their targets, Sisopho capital of Banteay Meanch Province, and the market tow of Samraong in Odd. Meanchey.

Phnom Penh has bec putting on a brave face. "The has been no significant chan; in the military situatic throughout the country," said Defence Ministry spokesma on Oct. 30. "The enemies' ope ations were aimed mainly at o regional forces, that is, the tried to avoid confronting o regular forces." But no regular troops are crucial to th front line. Armed forces chief staff Gen. Bou Thang ar Deputy Defence Minister Nhi Vanda have both made tri into the country recently drum up enthusiasm among ti self-defence forces. Says of Cambodia-watcher: "Mo than its columns of Sovice made T-54 tanks or AK-47 m chine guns, Phnom Per leaders are grasping the vital in portance of fighters at the grasroots levels that can keep th Khmer Rouge out of the villages."

As the world wondered juwhether Pol Pot real intends to reinstate "Ye Zero," as his faction rename 1975, or just to push h

Map 2. CGDK Offensive, Fall 1989 (source: Asiaweek, 11/17/89)

Map published in November 1989, showing the location of the resistance armies during the CGDK's fall offensive, undertaken after the Vietnamese army withdrew from Cambodia. (Site II is marked by a (*).)

across the open space toward the <u>salaa</u> where the ceremony was supposed to be held. The courtyard was empty except for a couple of small boys playing in the dirt; there were no other cars at all. With me, or rather, <u>taking</u> me to the temple, were my assistant and co-worker Mam Samnang, a young, unmarried man of twenty-four, and Phath Vanny, an older, twice-widowed woman in her late forties who had been my guide at many Buddhist events in Site II.

When we got to the sala it was clear that this was the right day after all: the large hall was half full of monks in their orange robes, older nuns dressed in white, achaa2 wearing the customary long-sleeved white tunics and black pants, and a number of important looking laymen whom I did not recognize clustered at the front of the salaa. All sat with their legs folded beneath them in the proper Buddhist attitude of respect, attending to the speeches under way up front. Off to one side was a large pile of blankets, straw mats, sacks of rice, umbrellas, cooking pots, folded robes, and orange cellophane-wrapped gift packages of cigarettes, sugar and soap -- all gifts for the monks. But the general public was missing from this small crowd. There were a few people, mostly men, who had the hard, sunburned look of rice farmers who might have walked two days to get to Site II, but very few other lay Khmer. The three of us were noted as we entered at the side of the sala, and room was made for us to be seated, but otherwise we were paid no special attention. This in itself was noteworthy since, as a barang, it was usually difficult for me to go anywhere in Site II without being watched closely and tendered elaborate, often obsequious attention.

As we watched and listened to representatives from each of the temples in Site II formally present goods to the monks from across the border, I felt increasingly that I had stumbled into unfamiliar territory, even though I had been

² Achaa are laymen schooled in ritual practice who assist the Buddhist monks.

to this sala many times in the past and had never felt more than an expectable awkwardness before. There were many events hosted by the Khmer administration, the temples, and even individual families in Site II at which barang guests were considered an honor. But this was an event my presence clearly did not honor, an activity those present seemed likely to prefer I did not witness. The speech by the cau attika, the head monk from the hosting temple, referred to the ten year struggle against communism in Cambodia and the fact that Khmer on both sides of the border were bong/p'oun (brother and sister) in this struggle and must love one another, help one another This speech had nothing to do with me, or the humanitarian premises upon which any of the barang were working in Site II. It had to do with Khmer reasons for being at the border: with political struggle and war. These underlying political agendas were kept opaque in the presence of barang because they contradicted the UN's humanitarian principles; although I knew they were a part of everyday life in Site II, it was startling to see them so explicitly articulated here and to feel my presence so explicitly ignored. It struck me powerfully at this moment on how many different levels people functioned in Site II, and how much went on here to which I had no direct access.

Vanny, Samnang and I spent some time talking with people who had come from Cambodia to accept the donations, about their lives in the newly liberated zone. A group of eighteen had come from one village; they had walked two days to get here with the help of a guide who had been sent from Site II to lead them around the minefields and help negotiate their way into the camp. But arrangements for their entry into Site II had already been made at higher levels, and the Thai guards gave them no problem when they arrived. In fact, one man said, people come and go all the time between Site II and the area near where he lives. It is not difficult to arrange, in spite of the ongoing fighting. This fact

became increasingly clear to me the longer I worked in the camp. The whole eastern side of Site II was highly "porous", although nobody came and went without making some kind of arrangement with the Thai guards and the journey was never safe.

The ceremony concluded and people began to load up handcarts with the goods, shoulder their own sacks of belongings, and move out of the temple. They were heading for another ceremony at the temple in Sanro (one of the five "camps" that make up Site II — see below) before returning to their own villages. Our interlocutors did not want to be left behind, and excused themselves to join the others, but we convinced a few people to ride in our truck to the temple on the other side of Site II so we could talk a bit longer. Several others threw their loads into the back of the truck; we would meet up with them in Sanro. One man was carrying a string of ripe coconuts which he said were for his children who lived in Site II. But he did not know how to locate them, so was returning home without having delivered his gift.

We had to drive a different way than the people were walking because not all the roads in Site II are passable by truck. I didn't know exactly where the Sanro temple was, so I headed for a place I could see the procession passing, out by the eastern edge of the camp. We waited for awhile to see if we could find the people whose loads we had carried, but eventually someone told us they had caught rides on bicycles and gone ahead. So we drove on ourselves, following the long line of people with loads on their heads, spread out along this road that passed through a large field and into some trees farther on in the distance.

I had thought we were heading for the temple in Sanro camp, but gradually came to realize that we had gone by a checkpoint and passed out of Site II altogether. We were on a road that wound along the eastern edge of Sanro for awhile but eventually led away from the camp into a wooded area that lay between

Site II and Cambodia. There was something exquisitely quiet and pastoral about this scene — we were far from the hustle and bustle of the middle of Site II, moving deliberately toward a destination somewhere beyond in the quiet — but also, suddenly, terrifying: we had left the camp. We had moved into an area where the United Nations meant nothing; where the Khmer lived by their own law of war and wits. This was territory I knew nothing about. Vanny shivered a little and asked me if I was scared. I think her fear was mitigated somewhat by being in an UNBRO truck, but I knew this truck was somewhere it should not be and I would have to turn around. I could not follow these people into Cambodia, or even to the temple at the <u>old Sanro camp</u>, recently retaken from SOC troops by the KP army. It was against UNBRO rules to cross the border into Cambodia, or for that matter to take an UNBRO vehicle anywhere off the main roads in this border area. I would risk losing the job that provided me the opportunity to carry out the research I had come to Thailand to do. I would have to go back.

But, it gradually became clear to me, I had done something worse than simply mistake our destination in my eagerness to explore this new level of ethnographic understanding. Rather than entering the world of these farmers from Thmar Pouk, however temporarily, I had pulled them into my world, which was shaped and constrained by UN regulations. But now I had to leave them to get back to where they had come from on their own, separated as they now were from the people with whom they had come. I had to let my passengers out in the middle of the road. But there was also this pile of baggage in the back of my truck. I looked at it helplessly, knowing its owners were far ahead of us in a place I could not go. A few people picked up some of the bundles as they passed, but in

³ This was the source of my confusion, I finally realized: the Khmer had been talking about an <u>old</u> resistance camp called Sanro, located a short distance from Site II, while I assumed they were speaking of the section of Site II that went by the same name.

the end two large burlap sacks remained. Eventually my two riders added them to their own loads, and stumbled away, muttering. Samnang was embarrassed. He looked at me, then looked away. "Did you hear what that man was saying?" he asked. "He said, 'Oh, kamm awey mleh, Khmer! [This is our karma, we Khmer -- we are destined to suffer!]' "

Introduction

For dis-placed people, "place" by definition has a heightened significance. In Site II, people's lives were defined by both where they were and where they were not. That is, all had fled to the Thai border some time in the previous ten years, most in the immediate aftermath of the Pol Pot regime. But in so doing they had become exiles from Cambodia, as their association with the resistance movements along the border rendered them politically suspect to the new government in Phnom Penh. For most, who had come to the border for non-political reasons, this was an unanticipated consequence of their flight. But for all who remained on the border, "Cambodia" was an increasingly emotionally charged concept, which grew in significance the longer they remained apart from it. "Cambodia" had become an important focus of energy and longing by the time I arrived in Site II, a place as idealized as it was inaccessible, a confusing construction of memory and misinformation well on the way to becoming myth.

At the same time, the daily lives of the people who lived in Site II were shaped by the peculiar characteristics of this enclosed space, which they could leave only at their own peril. For if people did not, for the most part, feel safe to return to Cambodia, most were not free to leave the camp under any other pretext either. Neither settlement in Thailand nor resettlement in a third country were options for the border Khmer, since the Thai government did not recognize them as legal refugees under the UN refugee conventions. Without the rights and

protections guaranteed by these conventions, the border Khmer had little choice but to remain in Site II until a settlement between the resistance armies and the government in Phnom Penh was achieved. They were, in a sense, hostages of this ongoing conflict.

This chapter began as a deceptively simple undertaking: to describe the physical space that Site II occupied, and its significance for the people who lived there. Clearly bounded and laid out in a grid pattern of laterite roads and sections, it had a self-evident surface organization that did not seem as though it would be difficult to describe. But the more I tried to nail down the space with diagrams and maps, the more the essence of Site II eluded me. The more concrete and precise I strove to become, the more I was reminded of a kind of vertigo I often felt in Site II, a sudden sense of uncertainty about my bearings, of being unsure of exactly where I stood.

My problem, of course, was that I was trying to describe Site II as though it really was an isolated and self-contained space. In fact, Site II was a part of several larger regional and even global networks of power and interest, and the space of the camp was shaped by these transnational geographies as much as it was by anything going on in the camp itself. Daily life in Site II was directly affected by decisions made in Washington and Beijing, to say nothing of Bangkok and Hanoi and Phnom Penh. Even the apparent isolation of its inhabitants was deceptive, as some Khmer came and went regularly from Site II, not just to Cambodia but to the other border camps, to Aranyaprathet and Trad and Surin, to Bangkok, and even to Paris and New York. Other people had never left the camp, and many had lived their entire lives on the border. Their understanding of this space was very different from that of their more mobile compatriots, to say nothing of the Western relief officials or the Thai soldiers who guarded the camp. Indeed, I will argue that the sense of isolation, dis-placement, and separation from Khmer

territory, Khmer "space", was a central aspect of the meaning of Site II for many, if not most of the Khmer who lived there.

In the end it was clear that Site II could <u>not be</u> described accurately as a unitary, bounded "place", that no single framework of symbols and meanings did justice to the complexity of interactions and structures that were produced through them, which delineated the space of social action for the people who lived and worked there. Site II, it seemed, was better understood as a place of convergence of several <u>different</u> geographies of power and meaning, which came in and out of focus for different people at different times and places, and extended far beyond the boundaries of the camp itself.

I am speaking about space as it was constructed and used not just by the Cambodians who lived in Site II, but also by their political leaders, by the Thais who guarded it, and by the UN and voluntary agency people who commuted in each day to provide material support. Each of these groups were operating with a different set of assumptions, toward a different set of goals, through different modes of power. And each constructed the geography of the camp differently through their actions and interactions within and between their distinctive cultures. Like transparencies these different geographies were superimposed on the landscape of Site II, drawing on the same physical features but investing them with very different meanings.

But there was no dominant epistemology in Site II, no hegemonic structure of power and meaning (Foucault 1973: xxii). Rather, the control of space shifted in Site II and with it the basis of interpretation of events. There was an essential ambiguity about the meaning of things in Site II that was built right into the way the camp was set up. It was the result of an elaborate if unspoken compromise among the Cambodian, Thai, and barang leadership, which enabled them to pursue their own agendas in Site II in spite of the often contradictory nature of

their goals. That is, by agreeing to a basic framework for activity in the camp, they could all simply ignore much of the ideology of the other two groups, and pursue their own agendas more effectively than they could without this agreement.

The official goals and agendas of the three groups imposed, or attempted to impose, a normative structure of meaning on peoples' actions in Site II (Mitchell 1988:34-62). These official agendas are significant in the way they did shape social interaction, and will be discussed below. But it is worth noting here that official agendas are never wholly determinative when it comes to individual action. In part because there was no controlling epistemology in the camp overall, because the ground was, in a sense, always shifting in Site II, there was always room for individuals — be they Khmer, Thai, or barang — to pursue their own private goals in the space to be found between official agendas. In fact, a great deal of everyday activity in Site II took place in these unmarked, unorganized spaces where private interest prevailed.

⁴ Sally Moore points out that it is not so uncommon to hold contradictory interpretations of the world concomitantly; that "at the level of action there is evidence of simultaneous conformity and resistance to authority claims" (Moore 1987:131). The demands of several authorities can be simultaneously "conformed to and eluded, piecemeal. Their prefabricated totalizing ideologies are both fragmentarily adopted and intermittently resisted" (Moore 1987: 130).

My dramatic encounter with the camp boundary caused me to think much more carefully about the different ways in which space was constructed and used in Site II, about who or what was responsible for particular constructions, who had access to the space produced, and who was particularly constrained by these spatial constructs. It sensitized me to the particular positioning of every action and response in Site II. And it helped to clarify my own position and task in the camp: that is, to understand a Cambodian space to which I had only limited access, but about which I could learn a great deal by attending carefully to those who had much greater access than I.

This chapter considers the various consequences of the way space was produced by the Khmer, the Thais, and the barang in Site II, and how these multiple constructions absorbed and resisted each other in the physical space the camp occupied. I am most interested in the space of meaning, emotion and possibility — of social practice — in which the Cambodian populace (the prochiapoelroet) dwelt in Site II. But because this space was so dramatically shaped by the interests and concerns of the Thais, the barang, and the people's own leaders, I will consider these official goals and agendas in some detail as well.

Thai space

Site II occupies an area of dry flat scrubland at the base of the Dangrek escarpment, a chain of small mountains which marks the northern rim of the Cambodian basin. The Dangrek chain rises 1,600 feet to meet the wide Khorat

⁵ Space was "produced" in several significant dimensions in Site II: there was physical space, social space, mental space, and emotional space, all infused with their own particular significance. Together, following Lefebvre, they made up the space of social practice. The Khmer, the Thais, and the Western relief staff all produced a "space of social practice" in these various dimensions through their actions and interactions in Site II. See Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 1984, especially pp.11-12.

plateau of eastern Thailand and drains southward into the Great Lake of Cambodia, the Tonle Sap. In the twelfth century the Angkor empire extended up over the Dangrek mountains well into the Khorat plain; the temple at Phimai 130 kilometers northeast of Site II marks the northern point of a chain of temples extending out from the great Angkor Wat complex in northwestern Cambodia (see map 3). This fact was not lost on the better educated residents in Site II, who pointed out that much of the eastern Thai provinces of Nakon Rachasima, Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket were part of the Khmer Empire in its days of glory. Over the centuries, however, the polities of Siam and Annam (precursors of the present-day states of Thailand and Vietnam) gradually eroded the Khmer Empire until only a much reduced area remains of its past expanse.

Now the Dangrek mountains mark the northern boundary between Cambodia and Thailand, and the Phimai temple, along with several other smaller Angkor era temples, fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Fine Arts and the Tourist Authority of Thailand (Wong 1992, and Coedes 1986). This causes deep pain in the hearts of those Khmer who interpret the last 800 years of history as a steady decline from those days of greater glory, and understand Cambodia's current misfortunes as just the most recent in a long history of cruel injustices perpetrated upon them by their neighbors to the east and northwest. 6

Site II was the largest of six UNBRO camps spread out the length of the Thai/Khmer border from Trat province to Sisaket. These were what remained of eight original camps established in Thailand in 1985 when the PRK government's 1984-85 offensive pushed more than 230,000 Cambodians across the Thai border. The UN's interest in building the border camps in 1985 was to provide a safe place for the civilian Khmer, away from the fighting that had threatened their

⁶ See David Chandler, "Seeing Red: Perceptions of Cambodian History in Democratic Kampuchea" in Chandler and Kiernan, eds., 1982.

+ = socient site



Map 3. The Angkor Empire (source: Madeleine Giteau, The Civilization of Angkor.)

Map of Cambodia during the Angkor Era. Site II is located just above Banteay Chmar, and the Dangrek Mountains are sketched in; currents national boundaries are left to the reader's imagination. safety in Cambodia. From the UN's perspective, this part of the population were innocent victims of the war, and the further the camps could be located inside Thailand the better. Their concern was for the safety of civilians, and the effective provision of ongoing humanitarian assistance. The Thai government's concern for the border Khmer was different however, and the land that was provided for the camps reflects their different interest. For the Thais, the disposition of this large civilian population was just one part of the much larger operation in which they had been engaged for five years on the border: namely, the ongoing support of the Khmer resistance itself.

The Thai Army began assisting the resistance in 1979, when the Vietnamese overthrew the Khmer Rouge and installed a new Communist government in Phnom Penh, leaving its army in Cambodia to defend the new PRK government. The Thai government regarded the Khmer resistance as its own best defense against Vietnamese expansionism, in Indochina in general, and into Thai territory in particular. But the hundreds of thousands of civilian Khmer who fled to the border in 1979 were considered a threat to the safety and integrity of Thai villages across the border, and humanitarian assistance was a moral and financial responsibility the Thais were not eager to assume.

For the first five years the Thai Army provisioned the resistance, it allowed limited UN access to civilians across the border, but carefully guarded its own territorial integrity, using force when necessary to prevent Cambodians from entering Thailand. The fact that UNBRO was providing assistance to civilians associated with armed resistance factions, and in particular to civilians associated with the Khmer Rouge, caused problems for the international agencies and NGOs from the very beginning, committed as they were to remaining impartial in the conflicts in which they get involved. The suggestion that this relief effort directly assisted the resistance (including the Khmer Rouge), and therefore contributed to

the ongoing conflict between the Phnom Penh government and the resistance, was difficult at times to refute.⁷

But the political consequences of this assistance were from the start an important positive factor in Thailand's cooperation with the international relief efforts. While humanitarian considerations may not have been completely absent, it is safe to say that security concerns combined with the practical need for help with this enormous refugee problem figured most prominently in the Royal Thai Government's decision to facilitate humanitarian assistance to the civilian Khmer. To the extent that this assistance provided support for the resistance movements with which the civilians were associated, the RTG was interested in cooperating with the relief effort. In the final analysis, this was their overriding concern.

Thus when the government finally agreed to allow civilian camps in Thailand, official Thai attitudes toward these Khmer were well-established. Fundamentally, they constituted a security threat to the Thai border villages, but their assistance, it seemed, given the UN presence on the border, was an

⁷ The rhetoric of impartiality notwithstanding, all humanitarian relief operations have a political context, and this context affects the provision of assistance. On the border, UNBRO strove to maintain neutral and non-partisan working relations with all the various resistance factions. But the larger context of the provision of this relief was the UN General Assembly, which must approve any operation like UNBRO, and the individual donor countries which pledged their support for the operation twice each year. It is clear that UNBRO would not have been so well funded if the resistance itself did not have the political support of wealthy Western donor countries, such as the U.S. and European Community nations. At the UN support for the resistance was counterposed with support for the Vietnamese-imposed government of the Peoples Republic of Kampuchea, which came up every year for recognition by the General Assembly, and every year failed to be approved. Thus donor support for UNBRO tended to be part of a political "package", which involved opposition to Vietnamese aggression and expansion in Cambodia and a political and economic embargo of the PRK government. The fact that the resistance' military muscle came from its inclusion of the Khmer Rouge was to its supporters either an unpleasant political necessity or a fortunate political and military fact, depending on each country's ideological orientation and interest in the resistance. See Shawcross 1985:328-361 and Niland 1991:62-82.

unavoidable part of its support for the Khmer resistance. While the UN pushed for land that would provide greater protection for a civilian population caught up in war, the Thai government's policy toward the disposition of these civilians was tied to three very different concerns.

First, despite the UN's best efforts to separate civilians from the resistance's military activities, the civilian population remained centrally important to the resistance's operations. In a general sense the civilians constituted the "popular support" that justified the resistance's very existence. But more specifically, the UN camps could provide a "home base" for the resistance armies, which were quartered at military bases elsewhere on the border. While the soldiers were away on military operations their families would be provided for in the camps; they were also useful R & R camps for off-duty soldiers, and were good recruiting grounds for the military as well. In fact, each civilian camp was directly associated with a military unit, every top civilian administrator with a military commander. Although communication between the civilian and military components of the resistance had to be kept out of sight for the UN to proceed with its humanitarian assistance program, this relationship was understood by all who worked on the border. Thus from the Thai perspective the civilian camps had to be reasonably close to the Khmer's military bases, and easily accessible by road.

Second, given their ongoing connection to the resistance's military activities, the civilian camps continued to constitute a military target for the

⁸ Personal attachment to a particular commander is an important aspect of the way the Khmer military operates. Usually a commander will recruit his troops from the men known to him from his home village or district in Cambodia. Thus the families of these men constitute a "natural" civilian group as well; these groups often formed the nucleus of a neighborhood or section in the border camps. This arrangement was a direct outgrowth of the pre-1985 arrangement on the border, in which each camp was run by a single commander and there was no separation between the civilian and military components of the camp. See below and chapter on political patronage and power.

Vietnamese/PRK army. This being the case, the Thai government did not want the camps located much inside Thailand, or close to any Thai villages that would be in danger if the camps ever came under attack. The camps, in other words, should not provide any reason for the war to spill over into Thailand; they must be located as close to Cambodia as possible.

Finally, although the UN sought safety for the civilian population, a certain level of danger was consistent with the Royal Thai Government's policy with regard to the displaced Khmer, namely, that of "humane deterrence". That is: the camps should provide no more than a minimal level of safety and comfort so as to discourage any additional Khmer from abandoning Cambodia for refuge in Thailand. (This policy was often referred to as "inhumane deterrence" by international agency staff, angered by the uncomfortable and often unsafe conditions that the RTC insisted on maintaining in the border camps.)

Thus the land provided for UNBRO camps fell far short of the UN's hopes for safety, but remained consistent with the Thai government's policy toward the displaced Khmer. They were close to the border, with access to their respective armies, and they did not unduly displace or endanger Thai villagers by their presence. Civilian camps were established along the length of Thailand's border with Cambodia, approximately opposite one or more of the previous

^{9 &}quot;Humane deterrence" was not a policy developed specifically for the displaced Khmer; it applied to all the displaced nationals encroaching on Thailand's borders, both land and sea: Burmese, Lao, Hmong and other hill tribes from both Burma and Laos, Chinese, and Vietnamese as well as Khmer. It reflected the Thai government's sense that it must protect its national integrity and stability against the political instability of its neighbors, and provide for its own people at least as well as it took care of the region's legion distressed. It was also a constant reminder to the international organizations, which had pressed Thailand hard to provide temporary asylum for many distressed Southeast Asians, that Thailand did not accept ultimate responsibility for these displaced persons, and reserved the right to repatriate them to their own countries at whatever time it deemed necessary to do so. The Thai government did not intend to be caught in a position in which the international organizations were dictating its internal policy.

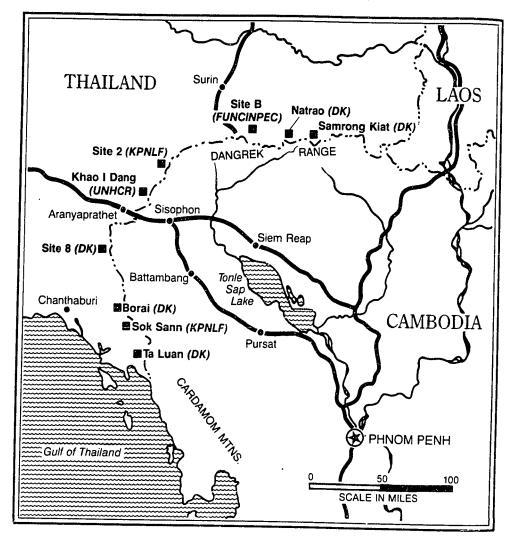
encampments affiliated with one of the resistance factions. In the south, two small DK (Khmer Rouge) camps and a KPNLF camp were built in the Borai region. Just south of Aranyaprathet, Site 8, the DK's largest "exhibition camp", was established. To the north, in Surin Province, Site B was built for Sihanouk's faction, FUNCINPEC, and two other small DK camps were built further north and east in Sisaket province (see map 4).

With the exception of two DK bases, all of the encampments along the central border from Aranyaprathet to Taphraya and beyond were associated with the KPNLF. To take advantage of economies of scale the populations from all these encampments were combined in one large KPNLF camp. But given the density of Thai village settlement between Aranyaprathet and Taphraya, there was from the Thai perspective only one place suitable for the location of a camp this size: in a triangle of no-man's-land northeast of Taphraya, wedged between the Khmer border to the southeast and the Dangrek mountains to the north (see maps 5 and 6).

Located just beyond where the border road ends, Site II covered 7.8 square kilometers of dry, flat scrubland that had grown thick with underbrush in the years since Pol Pot had come to power. Close to both Cambodia and a jungle-y chain of mountains that provide good cover for outlaws, this area was known to harbor Khmer soldiers and bandits and had been avoided by the local Thai for years. But no Thai would be displaced by the government's decision to locate Site II in this place, and only the odd cowherd was likely to get hurt if the camp ever came under attack. It was close to the border road and easily accessible to KP soldiers, but the routes out of the camp into Thailand were limited, and could be easily monitored by Thai guards.

In fact, the eastern edge of Site II was less than a kilometer from the official Thai-Khmer border, and only slightly further from the effective border, a tank

MAP OF THAI-CAMBODIAN BORDER REGION

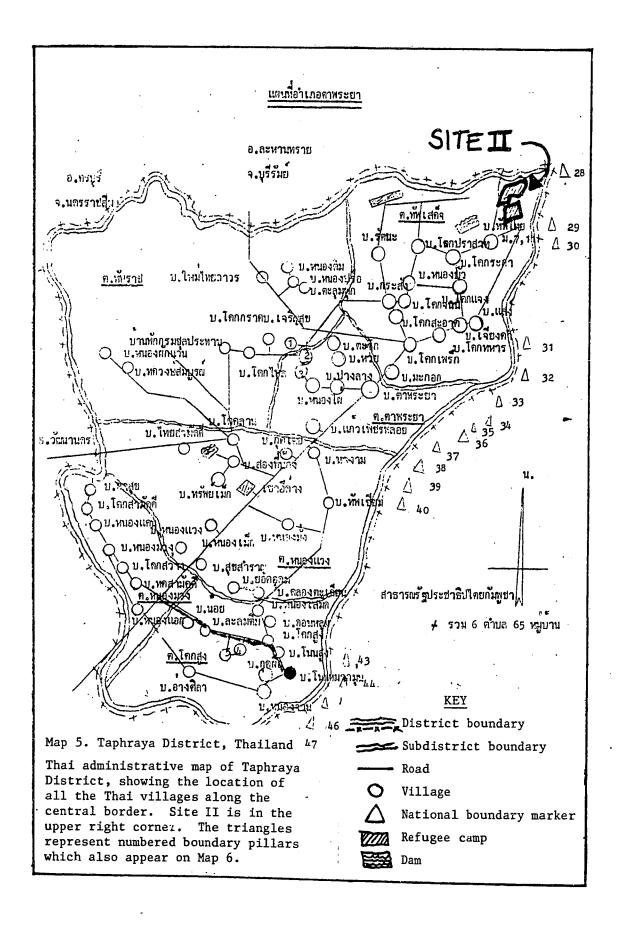


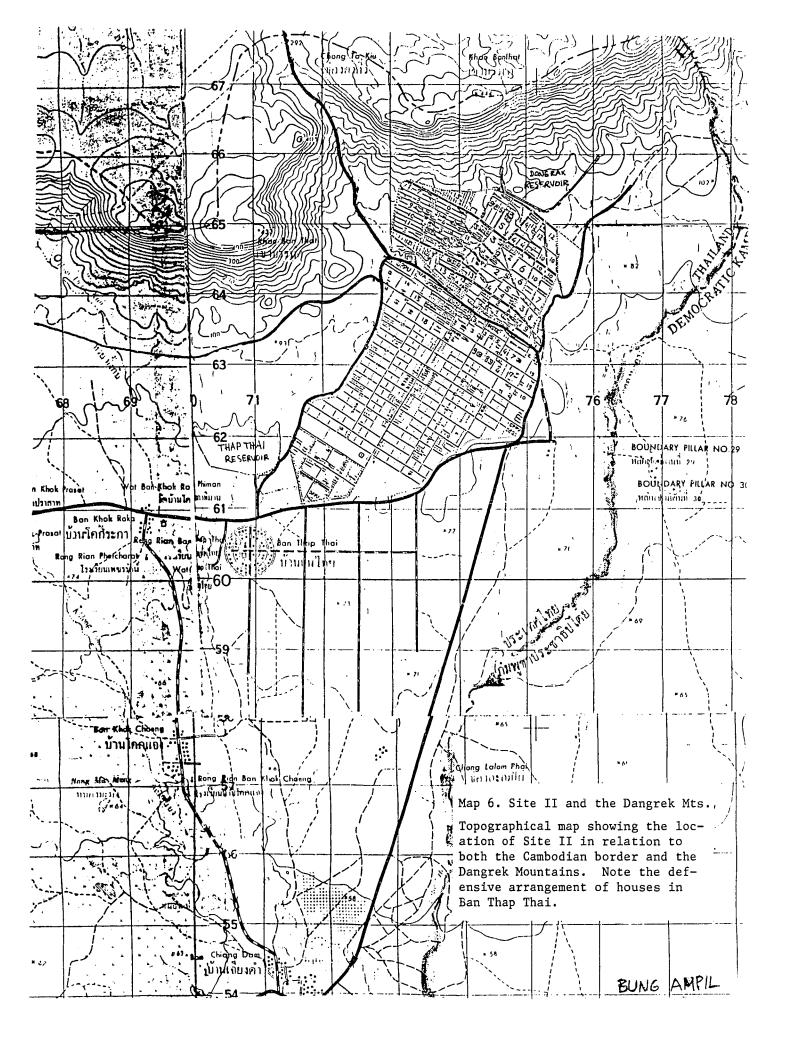
Camps holding displaced Cambodians, under the control of:

- DK—Democratic Kampuchea
- FUNCINPEC National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia
- KPNLF Khmer People's National Liberation Front
- UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Map 4. Thai-Cambodian Border (source: Lawyers Committee, Seeking Shelter.)

This map shows the location of the border camps in 1987. By 1989, Samrong Kiet and Natrao had been combined into one camp; the same was true for Borai and Ta Luan.





ditch constructed by the RTA just inside Cambodia to ensure that Vietnamese tanks would have no way of crossing into Thai territory. It was well within artillery range of several former KPNLF camps which had been overrun and occupied by Vietnamese/PRK troops in the 1984-85 offensive (see map 7). This fact was clearly understood by the Khmer in Site II, who also understood that there was no place to run from an attack. The mountains blocked their escape to the north and the RTA guarded the roads to the south and west. Even Site 3, the evacuation site prepared by UNBRO for the eventuality of an attack, was well within range of Vietnamese artillery, and the evacuation route was neither safe nor adequate for moving 180,000 people in a hurry (Lawyers Committee 1987: 60-64).

Although Site II was never the target of a sustained attack, there was no question about its vulnerability. As well as being situated right next to the border, it lay between the border and the KPNLF army's largest behind-the-lines surgical hospital, where KP soldiers were brought for treatment if their wounds were too serious to be handled by field hospitals in the battle zones. Chiang Daoy, as the hospital was called, was an obvious military target. ¹⁰ Artillery aimed at the hospital would have to be fired over Site II, putting the camp population in considerable danger. Even the KPNLF military command did not put itself at such risk. Until the fall of 1989, when the KP command moved back into Cambodia

¹⁰ Chiang Daoy was visible from the northern perimeter of Site II; like the KP army itself it was provisioned by various outside patrons, including the U.S., and was rumored to have an American surgeon on its staff. (Since it was a military installation and therefore strictly off-limits to international agency staff, these rumors were impossible to confirm or disconfirm.) Many of the medicines that disappeared from hospital in Site II ended up in Chiang Daoy, although we were told by the Khmer in Site II that people got much higher tech treatment there than in the camp. For example, amputees would be fitted with American-made plastic prostheses at Chiang Daoy, rather than the home-made wooden and leather limbs that came out of the Handicap International workshops in Site II. In theory this hospital served only the military, but family members of the soldiers could be treated there as well. On any given day there was a discrete but steady traffic between Site II and Chiang Daoy.

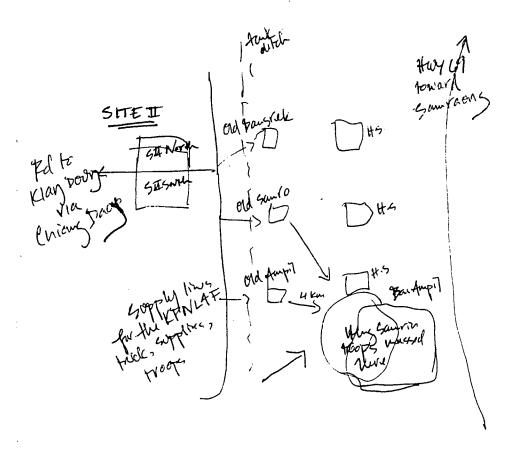
following a series of military victories, its headquarters was located several kilometer further back from the border, in a dense area of mountains well out of range of Vietnamese shells (see map 7).

enough to keep its inhabitants on perpetual edge about their safety. People's sense of vulnerability rose and fell with the proximity of the fighting, but during periods of sustained artillery fire, when shells were landing close to the camp, many families packed up all their possessions each night so as to be prepared for a possible evacuation. Some families dug bunkers in their front yards, in which they slept; others spent the "noisy" nights huddled up against the camp's northern perimeter so as to be in the best position if they needed to flee. 11 By insisting on this particular location for Site II, the Thai government constructed a space for the Khmer less of refuge than of ongoing insecurity and fear.

On four occasions shells actually did fall on Site II, causing injuries on each occasion and deaths on all but one. 12 The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which was the designated representative for human rights problems on the border, raised the issue of civilian security in Site II with the Thai government on multiple occasions. But each time the answer was substantially the same: the Cambodians in Site II were in no more danger than the Thai villagers living along the border; to move the camp further away from the border would provide greater protection to the Cambodians than to the Thai, and would send the wrong message to people still inside Cambodia (as well as to the Thai), namely

¹¹ The people in Site II had much better information about the fighting that was going on nearby than the international agency staff ever did, because they had fathers and sons and brothers who were in the KP army. They had become very skilled at identifying not only the distance of a particular explosion but the kind of shell that had exploded. These were important survival skills.

¹² These attacks occurred on January 26, 1987, May 29, 1987, August 29, 1988, and April 26, 1989. See Lawyer's Committee 1989: 60-64 for details.



taphray

Wongellian

Map 7. Important KPLNF Positions Around Site II.

Map drawn by my assistant in 1989 to show the position of Phnom Penh government troops (H.S.= Heng Sam-rin) in relation to Site II and the old border encampments. Klang Doun is their military headquarters; Chiang Daoy is their military hospital.

that better protection was available in Thailand than in their own country.

Additionally, it would be much more difficult to monitor the comings and goings of Cambodians if the camp were moved further inside Thailand. 13

Responses like this made it clear that in spite of UNBRO and ICRC's best efforts to provide <u>protection</u> for the displaced Khmer, the RTG did not consider protection the most important issue. Too much concern for the well-being of the border Khmer just created political problems for the government with its own population. The camps themselves represented the RTG's best solution to the <u>containment</u> of what was, for them, a <u>security</u> problem for their own people.

Over the years official Thai policy toward the Khmer shifted somewhat. The nature of the security threat the border Khmer actually posed changed since the first agreements made between the RTG and the international agencies in 1979, and the policy of "humane deterrence" enunciated then was softened as conditions in Cambodia changed, and fewer and fewer Khmer felt compelled to flee to the border. But when Site II was first established in 1985, security and containment were the overriding concerns of the RTG, and shaped the way that Thais both regarded the Khmer and treated them in the context of the border camp. This attitude was experienced most directly by the Khmer through the behavior of the Thai military unit created to monitor the border camps, and enforce Thai policy with respect to the Khmer. This unit was called Task Force 80, or TF-80 for short.

TF-80 was created in 1980 to patrol the first camps for displaced Khmer built in Thailand, Sa Kaeo and Khao I Dang. Its role was greatly expanded in 1985

¹³ Although the guards tried to monitor all traffic in and out of Site II, they did not prevent Khmer from returning to Cambodia if they so chose. Because the camp was so close to the border, it was pretty clear who was going back to Cambodia and who was not. If the camp were moved further inland, the RTG argued, there would be no way to distinguish between those returning home and those slipping into Thailand illegally.

when an additional eight camps were built to house the civilian portion of the border population. The command structure of this new unit was drawn from several different parts of the complex Thai military organization. But while TF-80 commanders were regular army officers, its troops came from the ranks of Thai "rangers", local militia originally recruited to suppress communist insurgency in Thailand in the 1970s. Along the Cambodian border this involved protecting Thai villages from Khmer Rouge hostility during the Pol Pot years, as well as pushing back the great wave of Khmer refugees that spilled into Thailand after the 1978 Vietnamese invasion. The rangers were thus inclined to regard the border Khmer with suspicion if not outright hostility, as they were responsible for bringing all manner of trouble into Thailand.

In a country with a dizzying array of different military units, the rangers were among the lowest paid, worst trained, and least disciplined of all Thai soldiers. They were at the bottom of the military status hierarchy: a poorly educated group who could not have made it into the more prestigious units. Indeed, they were regarded in some circles as little better than local thugs in uniform, who had been issued guns at a time when Communism was considered an immediate threat to Thailand's stability. With little supervision and a long history of often personal experience with the border conflict (many were local recruits from those villages that bore the brunt of the violence that spilled across the border), the rangers were not hesitant to take out their frustrations and aggression on the Khmer. Their "protective" presence often created more conflict than it prevented.

One of TF-80's main functions in Site II was to monitor the comings and goings from the camp. They were charged, in effect, with maintaining this space for the purposes for which the RTG intended it. They facilitated communication with the KP army, prevented Khmer from slipping into Thailand, and -- implicitly --

- discouraged more Khmer from entering the camp from Cambodia, through their harassment of new arrivals. Although the rangers were not supposed to prevent new arrivals from entering the camp, they successfully inhibited entry by "taxing" everyone who passed through their checkpoints, if not robbing them outright of all their valuable possessions. ¹⁴ In theory, TF-80 protected the camp from bandits; in fact, they were as susceptible to the bribes of bandits as they were to those of any other Khmer seeking entry.

TF-80 was also responsible for enforcing regulations about what the Khmer could and could not do or own in the camp. Because the entire border area was considered insecure and had been placed under martial law, activities in the camps were highly circumscribed. A long list of proscribed activities and items considered potentially dangerous or disruptive was drawn up by the Thai military. These included many clearly dangerous items like guns and grenades, other items that could be put to destructive use (e.g. gasoline or machetes) but had a clear function in the everyday life of the camp, and many items that could only be considered dangerous or subversive by the greatest stretch of the imagination: batteries, flashlights, radios, TVs, cameras. Because the border area was under martial law, the rangers were the primary enforcers of these regulations in camp. But they were selectively and arbitrarily enforced, so that no

¹⁴ These checkpoints encouraged the growth of the "guide" business: Khmer who made a living guiding people back and forth through the treacherous war zone between Cambodia and the border camps. One of the most dangerous aspects of this journey was one's encounters with the various soldiers or "guards" one met along the way. The guides, or mei kchall, cultivated relationships with various military groups and guards along a particular route through the payment of a standard bribe; supposedly this insured a safe arrival at one's chosen destination. Often it did not, but the alternative was even more dangerous, and many people paid outrageous rates to the mei kchall, who often continued to extort payments long after one arrived at one of the border camps.

¹⁵ The prohibition of this last category of items seemed to have more relevance to the policy of humane deterrence — i.e., to make life as stark and unappealing as possible in the camps — than it did to the question of security. In fact many Khmer did manage to acquire many of these items.

Khmer ever really knew what they might be punished for owning or doing. People in Site II were thus kept on perpetual edge by the rangers, never knowing when to expect a crackdown or seizure.

This was a complicated situation. The first few years in the border camps were a terrifyingly treacherous time. The devastating attacks on the resistance encampments inside Cambodia in 1984 and 1985 had left the civilian population newly traumatized, and the resistance itself in a state of disarray near chaos. Early evacuation sites and the first all-civilian camps, including Site II, were plagued nightly by the brutal attacks of Khmer bandits. For the first time KPNLF solders were not allowed inside these camps and this left them particularly vulnerable to attack, although often as not the bandits were themselves soldiers or former soldiers in the resistance armies (Lawyer's Committee 1987:49-52). Discipline among the KP troops was acknowledged by their own leaders to be very bad at this time, ¹⁶ and camp residents lived in nightly fear of these attacks.

Not surprisingly the Thai rangers were not keen on inserting themselves into the middle of Khmer on Khmer violence. The TF-80 command structure supported the rangers in this, claiming that it was the Khmer leaders'

¹⁶ KPNLF President Son Sann had been concerned about discipline - and indiscipline -- within the KP ranks virtually since the KP's inception in 1979, and frequently exhorted his commanders to cultivate a proper esprit, correct discipline, and a morally sound code of ethics among their troops. He made efforts throughout the 1980's to set up a KP Disciplinary Code and Committees for the Provision of Justice, to have jurisdiction over all KP-held area (Lawyers Committee 1990: 140-146). But the KP army consisted of a not-very-unified group of individual commanders, several of whom had been rather notorious warlords on the border before coming under the umbrella of the KPNLF, and had done little to change their behavior since then. In 1987, when bandit attacks became particularly severe in Site II, KP Army Commander-in-Chief General Sak Sutsakhan pledged to disband two particularly notorious battalions and investigate and punish those soldiers under his command believed to be responsible for recent attacks (Lawyers Committee 1987:150-160.) But actual prosecution of military personnel was rare, in part because the KP organization itself was rife with factionalism and at the highest level commanders were wary of alienating their troops. See chapter on political patronage and power.

responsibility to police the camps internally. This was consistent with the Thai position that the CGDK represented the legitimate Cambodian government in exile, and was therefore responsible for the internal affairs of the camps. On the other hand, the rangers <u>did</u> insert themselves, often and often violently, into internal affairs in the camps. The Thais justified their behavior by claiming (correctly) that they understood the Khmer much better than international agency staff did, that the barang were taken in by all manner of Khmer ruses (also true), and that the only way the Khmer could be made to respect the camp rules was to be violent with them. On this point there was little agreement with the international agency staff.

In August 1988, after a particularly well-publicized incident of brutality (Lawyer's Committee 1987:144-147) the Thai Military Supreme Command replaced the TF-80 rangers with a completely new, specially trained paramilitary unit called the Displaced Persons Protection Unit (DPPU), created expressly to provide security for the border camps. DPPU's seven segments were led by retired regular officers from the army's Civil Affairs Battalion. They received eight weeks of special training, including instruction by UNBRO staff and English language lessons to facilitate communication with the relief workers. In the agreement worked out between the UN and the Thai Supreme Command, UNBRO would foot the bill for this new unit in exchange for a more cooperative relationship with its commanders, and better training and discipline of the troops. 17

In fact, under this better trained, better paid, and better supervised unit abuses diminished considerably. Except in emergency situations, the DPPU were supposed to be unarmed and remain on the perimeter of the camp, leaving internal conflicts to be handled by a Khmer police force also created in 1988, and

¹⁷ The cost to UNBRO in 1989 was estimated to be three quarters of a million dollars U.S. (Lawyer's Committee 1989:56-59).

under the control of the KP camp administrators. When I was working in Site II, between 1989 and 1991, DPPU abuses tended to occur at night when international agency staff were gone and DPPU moved unchallenged through the camp. The fights that broke out at night typically involved alcohol and Khmer women, prostitutes or otherwise, with whom the DPPU often took great liberties. Periodically the DPPU exercised their power by making sweeps through camp confiscating radios, TVs, VCRs, etc., and there remained many opportunities for abuse in the monitoring of Khmer entering and leaving the camp, as well as in certain illegal but lucrative trades (see chapter on economy). DPPU worked on three month rotations in the camp; abuses tended to increase at the end of a rotation. But the unarmed DPPU, with their blue uniforms (in contrast to the rangers' black), visible name tags, and large quotient of women (30%) were a clear improvement over their treacherous predecessors.

In spite of this change, during the time I spent in Site II the DPPU in particular and Thai people in general almost always elicited a reaction from the Cambodians I worked with. Their sense of vulnerability at the hands of the Thais, the memories of past abuse, and the awareness that they had absolutely no recourse when confronted with Thai demands ("What can we do? We are on Thai soil.") were deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the Cambodians in Site II. Among the young men with whom I worked there was a smoldering if well-hidden anger toward the DPPU, and a deep suspicion of the motives of almost any Thai vis à vis the Khmer. Outwardly, they behaved with extreme circumspection, based on their plain fear of what the Thais could do and had done to them in the past. A typical Khmer response to the appearance of a DPPU soldier was to fade into the background and avoid any kind of interaction. The DPPU were a constant reminder that in Thailand, Khmer had no rights whatsoever.

UNBRO space

If the Thai government saw the civilian Khmer on the border as a security problem to be contained and controlled, and created a space for this project that fit into its larger strategy of support for the Khmer resistance, UNBRO constructed the civilian Khmer as victims of an ongoing political and military conflict, and sought to establish a space of refuge away from the violence of war. Unable in the end to convince the Royal Thai Government to provide a genuinely safe space for the camps, and unable to influence the military arrangements between the Royal Thai Army and the Khmer resistance (explicitly prohibited, in fact, from getting involved in the military aspects of the border situation) UNBRO focused its energy on the camps themselves, with the hope of creating a neutral ground for civilians in the midst of this ongoing conflict.

This was UNBRO's mandate: to provide protection and material support to a civilian population in need of humanitarian assistance. 18 The border Khmer did not qualify as refugees under the terms of the UNHCR's Refugee Convention because technically they were not without the protection of a state: the CGDK was recognized by the United Nations General Assembly as the legitimate government of the state of Cambodia. 19 But this "government" was unable to provide either protection or support for its people, who could not return to their homeland because an "enemy" government controlled it. Moreover, they were not welcome

18 Information about UNBRO's goals and mandate come from various public relations/information materials and internal policy memoranda.

¹⁹ Indeed, it was partly on these grounds, and partly because the Royal Thai government did not want to strip the CGDK of the legitimacy it derived from the civilians associated with it, that the RTG refused to recognize the civilian Khmer as "refugees." This also provided a useful pretext for avoiding the establishment of a massive 3rd country resettlement program, something that would have inevitably occurred if the border Khmer were classified as refugees under the UNHCR conventions and the resistance lost its control over them. The General Assembly continued to recognize the CGDK as Cambodia's legitimate government until 1991, when a UN-sponsored Comprehensive Peace Plan for Cambodia was signed in Paris and the CGDK was dissolved.

to remain in Thailand except on a temporary basis, and were prevented by the Thai government from applying for resettlement in a third country.

The United Nations construed this as a "refugee-like situation" in which a victimized population qualified for outside assistance. The border Khmer were classified as "displaced persons" under UNHCR definitions, and UNBRO was established as the lead UN agency to coordinate and provide material assistance and support. UNBRO neither recognized nor refused to recognize the legitimacy of the CGDK's political and military goals; it simply pursued its own agenda in the midst of theirs, dealing with the leadership that presented itself from the civilian population as long as it was willing to abide by the terms of UN humanitarian assistance. ²⁰ In spite of the complicated political circumstances surrounding this population (or rather, because of these circumstances, since the border Khmer

²⁰ UNBRO operated on the basis of five working principles, laid out in an internal memo on policy guidelines dated July 1991. Four of these had implications for its relationship to the Khmer leadership that took responsibility for the civilian populations. First, UNBRO is a humanitarian operation which remains neutral in areas of religion, politics and nationalistic alignment. This meant that assistance was to be provided equally to all full-time residents of UNBRO assisted camps, regardless of their political affiliation. Second, UNBRO camps should be managed by Khmer as much as circumstances on the border allowed. UNBRO recognized a civilian administration consisting of a chief administrator and his deputies, the Khmer Women's Association, section leaders, and various administrative committees (see below). These civilian administrations, and not the KPNLF, DK, or FUNCINPEC were considered UNBRO's interlocutors. Third, the Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should be used as much as possible as a guideline for all aspects of camp life. This meant that no one was to be removed by force from an UNBRO camp for any reason; free thought, free speech and free access to education and information should be guaranteed for all; the camps should be free of political or any other kind of coercion; and protection and justice for camp residents should be provided by the DPPU, the Khmer Police, and an internal justice system. Fourth, UNBRO assists displaced civilians only. This meant that UNBRO expected the camps to be free of military influence of any kind, and that no military activity was to take place in or through UNBRO camps at any time. The fifth principle concerned UNBRO's equal commitment to upholding operational efficiency as well as humanitarian principles. In theory, UNBRO could have withdrawn its support from the border at any time it could not guarantee these principles; in fact, they functioned as goals which UNBRO strove to achieve in its ongoing negotiation with the Khmer leadership and the Thai military (see below).

were victimized as much by the politics of the situation in which they found themselves as they were by anything else) UNBRO endeavored to create a neutral, safe and humane living environment inside the camp for as long as the population required it.

Thus UNBRO's view of the border camps differed significantly from that of the Thais, and, as we shall see, from the view of the Khmers as well. But it was handicapped in its ability to shape these spaces to its own image by two important limitations. First, while UNBRO had use rights to the land the RTG had donated, it could claim no overarching control. The Thai government retained final control over what went on in the camps, and UNBRO's use of the space was limited by a variety of Thai restrictions. Indeed, its very presence in Thailand was the result of a special dispensation from the Thai cabinet, and was subject to review and revocation at any time. Thus UNBRO's humanitarian vision was constantly running up against the hard edges of "humane deterrence", and constantly forced to accommodate its humanitarian goals to restrictions imposed by the Thai's very different vision of the purpose of these spaces. 21

Second, UNBRO had no real authority within the population it served. In contrast to UNHCR camps, where the UN effectively takes over the role of the refugee population's "government", the KPNLF leadership never gave up its position of authority in agreeing to accept UN assistance. In fact, in many ways its authority was enhanced by UNBRO, which had no choice but to work through the existing leadership structures in order to implement its programs. This in itself

²¹ For example, until 1988 the RTG did not allow UNBRO to provide any educational assistance to the Khmers, and its social service programs were severely limited. Very few visitors were allowed into the camps who were not there on official business and the Khmer themselves were never allowed to leave the camp on UNBRO-related business. In an effort to suppress black market trade in the camps the RTG prohibited any cash payment to Khmers for services rendered (UNBRO and volag's Khmer staff were all paid in rice), and until 1987 there was no legal market in Site II at all.

was a controversial arrangement because while the UN claimed to be neutral with regard to the politics on the border, in fact it contributed to the strength of Khmer leaders who had very explicit political agendas (see chapter on political patronage and power). The fine distinction UNBRO made between supporting a political leadership structure and supporting a civilian population through the good offices of that leadership was lost on the vast majority of the border Khmer (and on most other observers of the border situation as well). The net effect was that UNBRO's programs did support the CGDK. But the UN's need to maintain a neutral stance meant that it could not involve itself in the political or military agendas of the Khmer. It was obliged simply to ignore them and pursue its own task of providing humanitarian assistance according (as much as was possible) to the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the guideline for all its activities.

In many ways this flew in the face of a powerful other reality on the border, the reality of war and the dominating influence of both Thai sovereignty and Khmer political leadership. But the whole border relief operation functioned through a complex, elaborate and ongoing negotiation among the Thais, the Khmer and the barang, and in these negotiations UNBRO held some powerful cards. The most important of these were the resources it brought to the border: between \$55 and \$60 million U.S. a year in the years between 1989 and 1991.22 UNBRO could do little directly to affect the political conflict which created the original (and ongoing) need for the border camps. But because it provided food, water, shelter and other basic materials upon which the border population depended, it could influence how the camps were organized through its control of

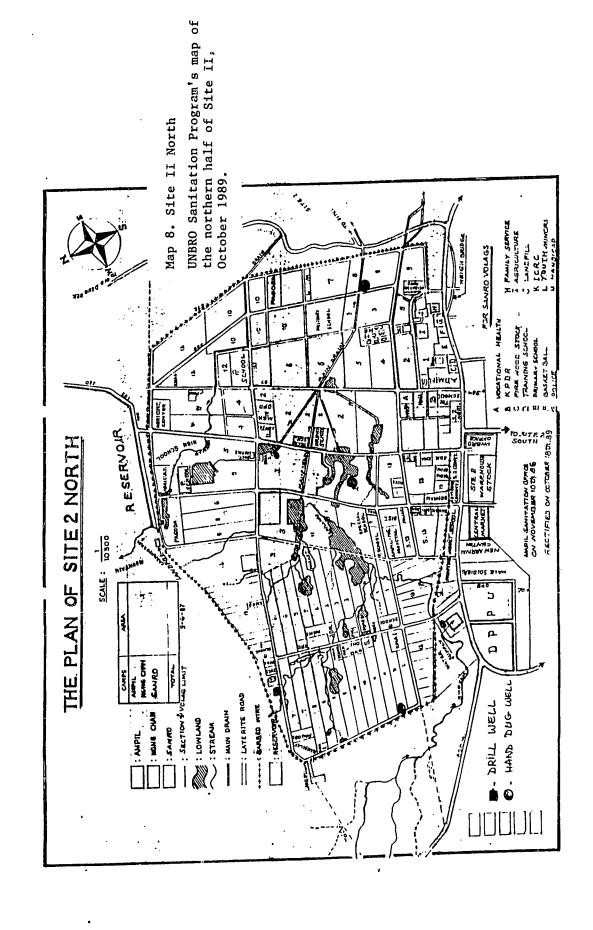
²² This was UNBRO's annual budget; not all of this money ended up in Thailand or was spent on the Khmer directly, as much of it went to paying expatriate staff salaries. The figure is striking when compared to the Gross National Product for the State of Cambodia at the same time, however: a total of \$14.5 million U.S. for 1989 (private communication).

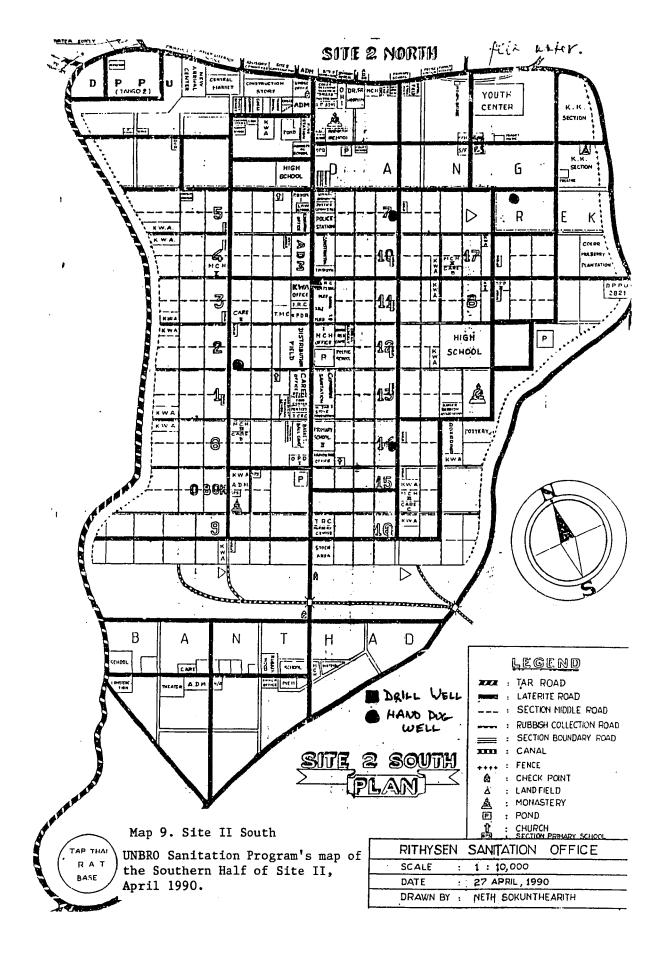
these resources. UNBRO divided the spaces, laid out the camps, and set up organizational systems according to its own vision of a peaceful civil society. It used its resources both material and human to reinforce that vision; indeed, much of the daily and weekly routine in the camps revolved around UNBRO priorities, UNBRO schedules, UNBRO distributions.

UNBRO's mandate on the border was humanitarian, but to fulfill its mandate its task was first — and always, at base — logistical. In Site II this meant it had to find ways to feed, house, protect, and possibly evacuate between 140,000 and 195,000 Khmer²³ within the constraints (both physical and political) of the space provided by the Thais. That is, Site II was first and foremost a <u>logistical</u> space for UNBRO, to be utilized in the most effective way to fulfill its humanitarian goals. Indeed, UNBRO's logistical operations were in many ways the foundation of its humanitarian efforts, as they underlay the actualization of its vision of an orderly, safe, clean living space, in which everyone received adequate food, housing, and medical care.

The boundary of the camp was established in early 1985. Access roads were built out to the border road, and an evacuation route to Site III, an abandoned rice paddy 10 kilometers to the west to which the population would be evacuated should it come under fire. Drainage from the Dangrek mountains had to be controlled and diverted through culverts and ditches to prevent flooding in the rainy season; an internal laterite road system was established for moving supplies around inside the camp; and a reservoir and water treatment plant were built at the northeast corner of Site II to collect whatever runoff from the mountains could be conserved and put to use (see maps 8 and 9). In sum, a

²³ When Site II opened in 1985 it had a population of 141,000. When I left in 1991 there were somewhere around 195,000. See Lawyer's Committee, 1987, p.32, and UNBRO's information brochure, July 1991.





physical infrastructure was established to support UNBRO's vision of humanitarian refuge.

The overall space was divided into five different "camps" to house the civilian populations of the five KPNLF encampments that had been combined to create Site II: Nong Chan, Sanro, Dangrek, Ampil, and Rithysen. 24 The camps were further divided into numbered sections housing from one to three thousand people, the sections were divided into four to eight ilots, and the ilots were divided into four or five rows or groups of houses. People were assigned to house plots within their camp, and houses were built with bamboo, wire, and thatch provided by UNBRO. Each row or group was built (or supposed to be built) a certain distance from the next for reasons of sanitation. UNBRO dug and installed pit latrines for every one to four houses, depending on their size and the distance between the houses. The pits were pumped out periodically and the sludge was treated out on the eastern edge of the camp, although in the more densely populated neighborhoods drainage ditches designed to control runoff absorbed the overflow and functioned much like open sewers.

Each of the five camps was run by a Khmer administrator who had been a leading figure in the former KP encampment; thus the "admins" each maintained their own domains of authority within the overall structure of Site II. Camp administrators appointed their section leaders, and either they or the section leaders chose ilot and group leaders. Each position had well-defined responsibilities within the camp administration (see below). Thus the physical division of space corresponded to political divisions within the population. What for UNBRO were at base administrative and logistical units were for the Khmer important political domains.

²⁴ Two other small encampments, O'bock and Nam Yeun, were incorporated into Rithysen and Ampil camps, respectively.

The layout and use of physical space in Site II reflected a combination of UNBRO's logistical requirements and programmatic concerns, together with the Khmer administrators' decisions about how to use the area within their own camps. Space along the main roads that linked the different camps in Site II was given over to UNBRO, DPPU and top Khmer administrative offices, UNBRO programs that served the whole camp (Construction, Sanitation, Water Treatment, etc.), and large "volag" (voluntary agency)programs like hospitals and supplementary feeding kitchens. Some important Khmer-run programs were located along these main roads as well: the Khmer Red Cross and two KP schools for management training, for example.

Secondary roads, which were passable by truck, were the location of programs and offices which served the individual camps or sections: Out-Patient Departments, Maternal-Child Health centers, Khmer Women's Associations, schools, pagodas, restaurants, and section offices, etc. These were the roads that brought water to the sections (see below). Most of the houses and most Khmer activities that had nothing to do with UNBRO (neighborhood markets, small businesses, cock-fighting rings, etc.) were located back in the sections, where the small lanes that divided the sections into ilots and rows were passable only by foot or bicycle. No place in Site II was more than 300 meters from a driveable road, but life in the sections was largely out of sight of most UNBRO and volag workers (see maps 8 and 9).

UNBRO's mandate was to provide humanitarian relief to a needy population, but from the beginning of its work on the border the UN had been obliged to work through existing Khmer leadership structures to get food and support materials out to such large numbers of people. In the early years, it was difficult to sustain the support of the camp leadership for its endeavors. Distribution was chaotic and virtually impossible to monitor, in part because the

early resistance encampments were open and people came and went at will, so population figures were in constant flux; in part because overall control of the camps was in the hands of the military leaders, for whom the support of its civilian population was not the highest priority. Although UNBRO dealt with civilian officials in the earlier border encampments, these officials had limited authority independent of their military counterparts.

With the physical separation of the KP's military and non-military functions in 1985, however, the civilian administrators in the UNBRO camps gained a measure of independence and authority that they had not enjoyed before (Reynell 1986: 68). The admins remained linked to the KP military: each camp was associated with a ranking commander and his unit, and the military leaders continued to expect a certain amount of support from "their" civilian camps. 26 But the civilian admins were basically free to run their camps according to their own lights, and support of the civilian population was more of a priority. Significantly, however, they understood their work with the civilian population to dovetail with the work of the military: both civilian and military leaders were part of the same political organization, working toward the same political goals.

For UNBRO, however, the political affiliation of neither the leadership nor individual Cambodians was relevant. For their purposes, the authority structure in Site II provided the organization needed to get relief materials to their designated beneficiaries. UNBRO camp officers worked directly with the admins

²⁵ See Mason and Brown, 1983, especially chapters 2 and 5, for a detailed description of the early years of the relief effort across the border in the resistance encampments.

²⁶ These connections were kept hazy, as they contradicted UNBRO's requirement that all military activities be kept separate from its civilian camps. As long as the military connections did not interfere with UNBRO's programs, UNBRO could afford to — indeed, had little choice but to — ignore them.

toward this goal, through a system which put the distribution process in the admins' hands but still (in theory) enabled UNBRO to monitor the process. Control of the distribution of UNBRO supplies provided the admins with a significant source of power; it was primarily the threat of curtailing or limiting this power that enabled UNBRO to exact the admins' cooperation with its own systems for ensuring that the supplies were distributed as equitably and honestly as possible.

Documented residents of its camps received a daily water ration and a weekly food ration. Mosquito nets, mats, blankets, buckets, and basic cooking utensils were provided upon their registration with the distribution system, in addition to a limited amount of bamboo, thatch, wire, and nails with which to build a small house. Materials were distributed through a "family book" system: household units received UN supplies according to the number of members recorded in their official UNBRO family book. 27 Data from the family books was kept on computer at the UNBRO office in Aranyaprathet, updated monthly, and provided the information needed for purchasing appropriate amounts of food and other supplies for the camps. Thus the camp population was monitored through the family books, and the entire distribution system was centrally controlled. It was a classic example of the disciplinary effect of bureaucracy, à la Foucault. The organization of space and the distribution of materials according to this spatial grid imposed particular kinds of relationships on the Khmer and the barang, and shaped the daily and weekly rhythms of camp life.

The success of the distribution system, from UNBRO's point of view, depended on the maintenance of accurate census figures, which were based on

²⁷ This was one of many reasons why almost nobody lived alone in Site II: the distribution system was set up for families. Even if someone had arrived at the border alone, he or she almost always attached him/herself to a household. In fact, family books would have been more accurately called "household books", as the members of a household who shared a family book were often not all related by blood. See chapter on marriage and families.

periodic "headcounts" and ongoing systems for keeping track of births, deaths, new arrivals to the camps, and recent departures. UNBRO held headcounts approximately once a year in the late 1980s, to get an updated, accurate figure of the number of camp residents. These were awesome logistical undertakings, in which the entire population of the camp was lined up in rows in various locations around Site II, and each person was given a ticket. The tickets were numbered so that UNBRO could calculate how many they had given out; they were later redeemed with their camp administrators for updated family books, which the camp residents needed to collect their weekly food rations and other supplies.

Headcounts involved a tremendous amount of organization and planning, and required the active involvement of the Khmer administrators, since the admins had to get all the people in their camp lined up in the census fields on the designated day to collect their tickets. Headcounts were a curious exercise in trust, mistrust, and mutual self-interest on the part of UNBRO and the admins. The actual date of the census remained a secret until the day itself, to make it more difficult to "import" people into the camp to collect extra tickets. ²⁹ The population had to be divided into groups of approximately equal size and the distribution of tickets synchronized at the various locations around the camp, so that people would not be able to collect more than one ticket in the course of the headcount. With the entire population of Site II lined up and seated in rows in the sun, and the entire UNBRO/volag community ³⁰ standing with bags of

²⁸ Headcounts were held more frequently in the earlier years of UNBRO's operation, when the size of the camp populations fluctuated much more.

²⁹ Because the approximate date of the census could not be kept secret, the camp always filled up around that time with soldiers, relatives of camp residents who lived close to the border, and even poor Thai villagers. All hoped to be in Site II on the day of the census, so they could collect a numbered ticket and sell it to someone who wanted to add a "ghost" to his or her family book. Census tickets fetched a good price in Site II.

³⁰ Since they were such an enormous logistical undertaking, UNBRO recruited every agency staff person it could find to help with the headcounts.

numbered tickets at the head of the rows waiting for the signal to begin distribution, there was no more graphic representation of the underlying relationship between UNBRO and these Khmer: UNBRO held the tickets to their survival in Site II. Resources were too limited inside the camp for most people to get by without UNBRO's assistance.

Once a basic census figure for each camp was established the admins were responsible for documenting any changes in the population. They were therefore obliged to keep close track of the people living in their camps so as to receive supplies for all of them. This was accomplished through the administrative structure of section, ilot, and group leaders, who kept their admins informed of any changes in the populations for which they were responsible. The admins had an interest in keeping their population figures high because UNBRO provided rice for an additional 10% of this figure to support their administrative structure — to say nothing of the extra supplies that could be acquired through inflated figures. But they had to document all new arrivals to their camp, and take responsibility for feeding them out of their own surplus until they were entered officially into the UNBRO census. This could take up to several months.

In addition, they had to reimburse UNBRO for any supplies that "their" new arrivals had been given if these people failed to show up at any of three "callback" interviews that UNBRO initiated over the first six months of their arrival. This was to ensure that the new arrivals were still living in the camp and had not just come to the border to collect free supplies. The systems were complicated enough that, while the admins all found ways to obtain rice and materials for more people than they actually supported, they had to work hard to keep the systems functioning to be able to come out on top.

This was one way UNBRO maintained accountability for a complex distribution system it could not monitor directly: it placed the burden of

monitoring on the admins themselves. In so doing it drew the admins into its own centrally organized disciplinary paradigm; at the same time it provided a perfect set-up for exploitation by the admins (see below).

UNBRO programs and daily activities like school and office work typically took place Monday through Saturday in Site II, but on "rice day", which was held on a different weekday in each camp, all other everyday activities stopped. Virtually the entire camp administration was occupied with the distribution, and every family had to have someone available to send for rice. Weekly work cycles were thus organized around UNBRO distributions, and rice day had its own particular spatial and temporal organization.

Collecting the family ration was a tedious process for which people began lining up long before the trucks were actually unloaded: one had to wait for the rice to be unloaded, wait for one's family book to be verified, and wait one's turn until one could actually collect the rice. It was always possible that supplies would be gone if one was late, and one also had to be careful not to be cheated out of one's due. Dented measuring cans and cans with false bottoms meant that less than one's full ration got measured out; it also meant that there was a greater surplus at the end of the day, which was divided among the distribution workers. There was anxiety involved in family book verification as well, as family books were valuable and could be stolen or sold, and the inspector could reject the validity of any one that was presented. Tempers were short after hours of waiting in the hot sun and fights often broke out over these issues. All the tension produced from dependence on an imperfect system of support was focused on the distribution fields on rice day.

UNBRO relied on the admins to police their own distributions, but with such enormous quantities of rice there was plenty of room for skimming off the top. UNBRO monitored for large-scale "corruption" at the level of inflated

population figures and half-empty supply trucks, but recognized that the success of the system depended in part on the admins finding it worth their while to cooperate. This was all part of the ongoing "negotiations": the admins needed enough slack to be able to make it worth their workers' while to make the system work (see chapter on political patronage and power). A certain amount of skimming off the top was expected; too much meant the intended beneficiaries were not receiving what the whole system was set up to provide. On the whole UNBRO considered this distribution system successful; much more successful than previous systems in terms of reaching its intended beneficiaries. ³¹ But there was constant grumbling among the population at large about cheating that benefitted the administration workers. ³² And to a great extent the admins used the power derived from their control of the distribution to further their own political goals, which often did not square with UNBRO's humanitarian agenda. (See chapter on political patronage and power.)

If weekly work and household routines were organized around "rice day", daily domestic activities always waited on the delivery of water. Site II had no natural water supply adequate to the needs of 180,000 people. A small percentage of the camp's water came from the reservoir at the north end of the camp, but most of it had to be trucked in daily from several reservoirs located at

³¹ When the border camps were established in 1985, a distribution system was used that had been developed for use in the early resistance encampments in Cambodia, to try to avoid feeding soldiers in the resistance armies: only women and children were given rice. That system was finally abandoned in 1987 since it was always the women and children who went hungry if there were men around to be fed. Later, in spite of its stated purpose of supporting civilians on the border, UNBRO bent over backwards to include men in the family book, even if they happened to be out of camp on military business during a census or family book verification procedure, to make sure nobody else went hungry in their place.

32 To address this problem, in 1991 UNBRO introduced a monitoring system whereby people could weigh out the rice they were given to verify that they had received their full portion.

varying distances from the camp.³³ A Thai transport company was contracted to provide this service, and over 270 trucks drove back and forth between the reservoirs and the camp, delivering millions of liters of water to Site II each day. The water was brought to a treatment compound along the main road that runs through the center of Site II, where it was chlorinated, then transported to metal water tanks in each section, which were filled, emptied, and refilled several times each day.

The water tanks only held enough water for a few ilots but they had to serve the entire section, which is why they were refilled several times daily. The ilot leaders were in charge of overseeing water distribution, but not a whole lot of monitoring went on. They informed their ilot when water for their area had arrived, but beyond that it was up to each household to get to the tanks to collect what the household was due before the water ran out. This meant that someone in each household had to be watching for the water truck each day to insure that the family got its water ration. Wealthier families often hired someone to watch for the truck and collect their water for them, as this was an arduous and timeconsuming chore that disrupted whatever else was going on when the truck arrived.

Because there was such a scarcity and its delivery wasso unpredictable, water was a major preoccupation for the people in Site II. People devised all sorts of methods for obtaining more water. For reasons of health it was illegal to dig wells in Site II, but some people did anyway, to gain a little extra for washing or

³³ When it became clear that there was not sufficient water <u>in</u> Site II for the population, UNBRO constructed a large reservoir at Ban Wattana, approximately 12 kilometers from the camp. Most of Site II's water was trucked in from the Wattana reservoir, but in the dry season even this source was insufficient for the camp's needs, and the trucks had to travel much greater distances. Late in 1990, UNBRO began drilling several deep wells in Site II, which ultimately provided a significant portion of the camp's water.

watering kitchen gardens. Others dug shallow wells outside the camp fence, and sold whatever surplus they had to people who could afford to pay for it. People constructed gutters to collect rain water, and sent their children out with basins to gather drips from the leaky water trucks when they stopped to fill the section tanks.

Many people in Site II came from places in Cambodia where seasonal drought was a chronic problem, but their confinement in such a limited space made the problem especially acute in Site II. The scarcity of water and the tyranny of the water delivery system contributed to an overall sense of containment and regulation that the relief operation necessarily imposed on the Khmer.

In addition to maintaining the physical infrastructure of the camp and coordinating the distribution of food, water, and basic supplies, UNBRO provided or contracted with various voluntary agencies to provide basic medical services; sanitation; public and environmental health programs; supplementary feeding and other assistance to "vulnerable groups"; assistance with primary education, special education, adult literacy, and teacher training; and support for social service programs run by the Khmer Women's Association and the Khmer Buddhist Association, as well as various activities defined as "self-support": water jar and cooking stove construction, tinsmithing, weaving etc. It also maintained a small team of Protection Officers, whose job it was to monitor the human rights situation in the camps.

Along with providing specific services, these UNBRO and volag programs established the framework for interaction between barang and Khmer in the

camp. Every program had a budget, built structures, brought in supplies and hired Khmer. Taken together these programs created a kind of political economy of assistance that organized the way barang and Khmer related to each other in the camp. At the most basic level the programs represented resources in a resource-poor environment: material resources, human resources, information resources (see chapter on economy). As such they constituted the ground for interaction between providers and receivers, and a field ripe for exploitation by the Khmer.

One way to think about how these assistance programs shaped social relations in Site II is to consider the ways in which they were oriented to space: that is, how these programs produced a particular <u>kind</u> of space in Site II and how Khmer interacted with that spatial construct, and incorporated it (or didn't) into their own.

First, and most importantly, UNBRO and agency staff did not live in the camp. Thai regulations restricted UNBRO access to the hours between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., so barang drove to the camp in trucks each day, arriving in the morning and leaving again in the afternoon. Their own lives were based in the Thai towns of Taphraya and Aranyaprathet, thirty-five and and eighty-five kilometers away respectively. Their ability to enter and leave the camp at will importantly distinguished barang workers' orientation to Site II, an enclosed space that constituted a kind of prison for most Khmer. Thai restrictions on the hours of access also meant that most barang were only inside the camp during the same one third of each day. With a few exceptions, none of the barang staff ever saw what life in Site II was like between the hours of 5 p.m. and 8 a.m., when UNBRO programs ceased to organize activity in the camp. Very few barang came to the camp on Sunday, when virtually everyone took a day of rest and the pace of life changed completely. Thus barang staff experienced Site II during "working

hours", in terms of activities that related to their own programs. Their familiarity with any other organizing structure was limited by the work itself.

Program offices were located along the primary and secondary roads in Site II (roads passable by truck) and most agency staff worked out of these offices. With the exception of UNBRO employees, who tended to stay in their jobs longer than most of the volag personnel, very few barang in Site II spoke more than a few words of Khmer. This meant they had to rely on their English-speaking Khmer staff and other barang for their understanding of much of what went on around them. It also meant that their experience of the camp itself tended to be limited to what occurred in program offices, Khmer admin offices, hospitals, pagodas, and along the main roads — i.e., public spaces where English was spoken, spaces for the most part mediated by UNBRO's presence. Few barang spent much time back in the sections where people actually lived; their work mostly did not call for this. Barang drove trucks around the camp and communicated with each other by hand-held, two-way radio. The Khmer travelled by bicycle or foot, ³⁴ and communicated by word of mouth. Between these two different communicative loops there was often remarkably little intersection.

Although many barang struggled against this in their own relationships with their Khmer staff, the very structure of UNBRO and volag activities in the camp reinforced the differences in power and position between them. Some of this derived from the "security" protocols that all UNBRO and agency staff were obliged to follow. UNBRO was responsible for the safety of all UN and volag staff in the camp. To protect barang safety and keep track of threats to the Khmer UNBRO

³⁴ A few Khmer, if they could afford it, bought and rode motorcycles around Site II, and high level political and military leaders, who maintained offices elsewhere in Thailand, came and went by car. Admins and some important program heads also carried radios; needless to say, they communicated on a different channel than UNBRO did.

monitored the security situation in the camp, and required all barang staff to keep in close proximity to a radio handset, aware of the "situation" call. If anything threatened the security of the camp, people were notified by radio and required to leave. Since there were over 200 agency personnel working in the camp and nowhere near that many radios, each agency had procedures for keeping track of its staff and notifying each other of the situation calls. Thus most agency staff tended to be oriented more to the movements of other barang workers than to the activities of the Khmer themselves.

Ironically, although the Khmer were encouraged to stay inside the camp for their own protection since UNBRO could not monitor the security situation outside the fence, whenever any real danger threatened the camp (whether from artillery, violent internal conflict, fire in the sections, etc.) all UNBRO and agency personnel had to leave the camp.³⁵ Their reliance on trucks and radio communication even in situations devoid of danger was a constant reminder that the barang moved over and through Site II, while the Khmer lived <u>in</u> it, and could not leave.

Initially UNBRO and volag programs were limited to the most basic support services: medical care, public health programs, sanitation, construction, skills training in areas directly related to the running of the camp. This was in keeping with the Thai policy of humane deterrence, and the sense that the camps should in no way take on the character of permanent settlements, or provide a level of assistance beyond what the Khmer could expect to find at home. As the years passed without a political settlement among the Khmer factions, however, problems relating to long term confinement began to be manifest, not the least of which were boredom, frustration, depression, and a kind of enforced helplessness

³⁵ This did not mean that the Khmer were totally abandoned: ICRC delegates, whose mandate and training prepared them to operate in combat situations, came into the camp to provide assistance when UNBRO and volag staff were forced to leave.

that UNBRO's distribution system seemed to feed right into. There was also an alarming rise in the incidence of domestic and neighborhood violence in Site II, as well as an increase in the number of attacks by bandits entering Site II from outside the camp. The level of violence in itself was cause for concern. But UNBRO was forced by the concerns of its donors to take actions to ameliorate the situation; it was threatened with the withdrawal of donor support if it did not address these increasingly acute "social" problems.

This raised serious questions for UNBRO with respect to its role in the protection of the displaced Khmer. The concept of protection was central to UNBRO's purpose in Thailand, as it was the victimization by war of civilian Khmer that motivated the establishment of the border relief operation in the first place. While acknowledging that "physical safety is impossible to ensure and constantly at risk" in the border camps, UNBRO nevertheless outlined a broad definition of protection which it took as a goal toward which all its activities would be oriented. This included protection from persecution by any military source, physical or political coercion, criminal victimization, extortion and/or the threat of violent revenge, as well as protection from the negative effects of severe overcrowding, 90% unemployment, limited educational opportunities, etc. 37 UNBRO recognized that the camp itself and the kind of life that was possible in it were creating many "protection" problems for the Khmer.

Its response to this protection "crisis" had two parts. The first was to initiate and expand the number of educational and social service programs which it supported in the camp. Prior to 1988 UNBRO had very little to do with

³⁶ An internal UNBRO document dated November 1988 noted that the level of reported violence in Site II had tripled in the previous year, with two or more murders each month and violently inflicted injuries of at least eighty people. ³⁷ Quoted from an internal memo on UNBRO's Protection Mandate, dated November 1988.

education in Site II - this kind of assistance was prohibited by the Thais. All educational activities were organized by the Khmer themselves, and most of the existing social service activities were run by the Khmer Women's Association, a branch of the camp administrations. Both sets of activities were closely tied to the political agendas of the KPNLF. In 1988, with the agreement of the Royal Thai Government, UNBRO launched a major new educational assistance program, focussing at the primary level and providing support for curriculum development, the printing of educational materials, teacher training and the training of teacher trainers, the provision of supplies, and the construction and equipment of classrooms. It also greatly expanded its support for social service programs targeting vulnerable and neglected groups, and initiated new programs aimed at the development of life skills that would be useful in Cambodia upon repatriation. In all of these programs it strove to exclude political content and ensure that services would be provided equitably to all camp residents, regardless of their political orientation. It promoted an ethic of egalitarianism, and a system of reward based on merit.

These changes represented an acknowledgement that the Thai-Khmer border situation might be temporary but it was an ongoing situation; that UNBRO needed to shift away from an emergency relief model toward a model of assistance oriented toward development. UNBRO drew a direct link between the level of support for social services and the overall safety and security of the camp's population. It regarded its involvement in the provision of social services as a means of monitoring and ameliorating some of what it considered the more disturbing trends in Khmer behavior in the camp.

It also meant that UNBRO was becoming much more involved in the daily lives of the Khmer. By the time I arrived in Site II there was a print shop which produced most of the camp's textbooks as well as a bi-weekly newspaper for all of the border camps, a clinic for treating prostitutes with sexually transmitted diseases, and a Khmer People's Depression Relief center, all supported with UNBRO funds. None of these programs could have existed in the first couple of years of the border camps; they represented an evolution in UNBRO's understanding of its role on the border, and a response to changes in the larger political context of the border camps.³⁸ They also reflected a softening of the Thai government's policy of humane deterrence.

UNBRO's second response was to hire an international team of Security Liaison Officers (SLOs), high ranking policemen with experience working with international police forces, whose job was to address the violence in the camps directly. The SLO's job was to develop a Code of Justice for the camp based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, train a Khmer police force to monitor this code in the camps, oversee the creation of Justice Committees to adjudicate the code, and serve as a liaison to facilitate communication among UNBRO, the DPPU, the RTA, the Khmer admins, and the Khmer police. This was a major new area of involvement for UNBRO. It brought UNBRO into direct contact with existing systems (or non-systems) for adjudicating and meting out justice in the camp, and often into direct confrontation with Khmer power structures, which had until then operated outside its purview (see chapter on political patronage and power). It represented a deeper penetration into the dynamics of social life in the camp.

UNBRO operated on the model of the camp as a safe haven, even though everybody understood that safety was a relative concept in Site II. Nevertheless, this was the goal, and the Khmer were encouraged to stay within the confines of

³⁸ These changes included greater political openness in Cambodia itself, which made the border a much less sought after destination, the acknowledgement on all sides (however tacit) that the guerrilla conflict had reached a kind of stalemate, and a gradual reorientation of expectations toward political negotiation rather than a military settlement.

the camp where UNBRO maintained some authority and abuses could at least be investigated. Protection Officers promulgated the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, followed up cases in which people were victimized either deliberately or through poverty, neglect, or "system failure", and encouraged people to come to them when they felt their human rights had been abused. They clarified the responsibilities of the different organizations providing protection in Site II: ICRC was specifically concerned with war crimes and political crimes, and communicated with the Thai government about human rights violations that involved Thais; DPPU were responsible for protecting camp boundaries, preventing bandits from entering the camp, and responding to requests for assistance by the Khmer police and admins; the Khmer Police took care of traditional police functions within the camp itself. UNBRO operated as though Site II were at least potentially a manageable social situation, even while they acknowledged that the level of protection these systems provided was still inadequate.

In all of these endeavors UNBRO made an effort not simply to impose its will on the Khmer admins but to negotiate agreements, since little could be accomplished in Site II without the admin's cooperation. But ultimately UNBRO was attempting to set up new structures of authority (the Khmer Police, the Justice Committees, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) which it could not itself empower. These structures had to be empowered by the Khmer themselves. And because they often came up against the interests of Khmer authorities (section leaders, admins, political leaders in Bangkok, the KP military) their effectiveness was limited in Site II. In spite of its not insignificant efforts, the limits of UNBRO's impact on the social fabric of the community were made clear in these attempts to

provide protection to the people in Site II.³⁹ Part of what people needed protection from were the complex and subtle abuses of a political system that provided them with the only real protection they could count on, a political system for which the protection of civilians was simply not the highest priority. Certainly UNBRO could not provide real protection when it left the camp every afternoon at five, and very few Khmer were interested in UNBRO's protection if it brought them into conflict with their own political leaders. In spite of all the programs that UNBRO coordinated in Site II, only about 30% of the population had any sustained contact with them. Indeed, many people in Site II only had the haziest idea of what UNBRO was all about.

KPNLF space

If UNBRO regarded Site II as, at base, a set of logistical and programmatic problems organized around certain specific humanitarian concerns, the KP leadership saw it as a space from which to advance their struggle for the "liberation" of Cambodia from Communist aggressors. Although the political and military headquarters of the KPNLF were located in Aranyaprathet, Bangkok, and elsewhere on the border, Site II constituted the KP's main base of popular support, as well as a ready pool for labor recruitment.

Of all the spatial constructs and meaningful domains that shared the area that Site II occupied, the political domain of the KP leadership remained the most opaque to me. This was, of course, the admins' intention. From eight a.m. to five p.m. the political agenda of the KPNLF remained under wraps in Site II, and the

³⁹ This is not to suggest that these efforts were all for naught, or that they had no impact whatsoever on social life in Site II. This is not true: the nature of acceptable behavior shifted slowly but surely over the period of time that the Khmer were on the border, and this had everything to do with the constant steady pressure that UNBRO (and others) kept up on the KP leaders. See chapter on political patronage and power.

admins played by UNBRO's rules. But when the last UNBRO vehicles left at five o'clock each day the camp reverted to Khmer space, and KPNLF authority became paramount. 40

Not all the KP leadership's goals were inconsistent with UNBRO's goals in Site II. Both UNBRO and the KP leadership shared an interest in maintaining a healthy living space and providing their people with adequate food, water, housing, medical care, and education. These goals were pursued from eight to five each day. In certain parts of the camp people quietly went about the political work of the KPNLF in the daytime hours as well. The KP Information Service, for example, produced propaganda sheets and recorded music and newscasts for broadcast every day from a secluded location in the middle of Ampil camp. Small groups of KP employees came and went discretely from Site II by car, to their offices in Aranyaprathet and Bangkok, or else to the "liberated zones" to engage in the KP's political work there. Occasionally one would stumble on a gathering of off-duty army officers discussing military matters in one of the camp restaurants in the middle of the day. Occasionally one would encounter something like the kathin ceremony I witnessed in Wat Prasat Serei.

But in the evening, when UNBRO was gone and the space belonged to the Khmer again, the real purpose of the KP's presence on the border emerged. Truckloads of soldiers came and went from the camp to their military bases elsewhere on the border. Political meetings were held. People got together in restaurants and homes to discuss the progress of the war, and hear about what was going on in the liberated zones. Military recruitment took place. KP

⁴⁰ In 1990 UNBRO received permission from the Royal Thai Army to keep one Protection Officer in the camp over night, to maintain an international "presence" after the rest of the relief community had departed. Needless to say, one UN representative in a camp of approximately 180,000 did not have a tremendous impact on activities. See conclusion.

commanders sprang their soldiers from the Justice Committee's jails. The DPPU moved through the camp unchallenged. Banditry flourished.

All of this took place out of sight of the barang. But it all took place under the aegis of the five admins, who understood Site II as a space of political engagement, and "produced" this space through their authority in the camp (Lefebvre 1991). That is, the admins represented the KP's political agenda in Site II. Through their authority with the camp population they organized the space of the camp for this use, pursuing their political goals directly in the evenings and on Sundays — whenever and wherever the barang were not to be found — and indirectly in all their interactions with UNBRO and the Thais. How the admins actually accomplished this will be discussed in detail in the chapters on economy and political power.

Living space of the Khmer populace

The KP leadership, the United Nations, and the Thai government and army all had various powerful means of imposing their interpretations on the space of Site II. Most of the people who lived in Site II had no such means, however. They were obliged to simply work with the situation they were dealt. Most of the border Khmer understood Site II as just the most recent in a long series of unsatisfactory and essentially unchosen living situations that stretched back to 1975, each of which was bound up in a particular set of political constraints and marked by its own special deprivations. In Site II these deprivations had to do with being confined indefinitely in a much-too-small space, far from home, with too little to do beyond trying to make their interminable if ultimately temporary existence in the camp more bearable. Most Khmer were simply stuck in Site II, cut off from the places that had meaning for them, struggling to maintain a plausible existence

through the micropolitics of social interaction with their families, their neighborhoods, and their work.

Chang'iet nah! people would tell me when I asked what was most noteworthy about living in Site II. Chang'iet peet. Ot sapbaay; ot I'aa. [It is so narrow here! Too narrow. It isn't pleasant; it isn't good.] Time after time this word came up in conversations about Site II: chang'iet, spoken with emphasis.

Narrow. Crowded. No room to move, to breathe. Not relaxed, not easy. Not good. In Site II as many as 195,000 people were crowded into a space less than eight square kilometers. For the Khmer to live in such a narrow space, in small houses built one right next to another, created a strain that had emotional, spiritual, and even sensual connotations, and accounted for all manner of domestic and neighborhood problems. People told me countless stories of violent altercations in the sections that were precipitated by some innocent thing a child had done.

Mme. Yueh Korn, who was head of the Khmer Women's Association in Rithysen, described the situation this way:

Our space is very narrow. There is no room for the children to run and play; no place to put the latrine, with free flowing water; no place which attracts the senses, where one can go to refresh oneself. Like today, for example, the weather is very hot; we are all very hot and agitated; we need to relax in the evening. But if my children want to play, or cry, or whatever, and the old people want to relax, to have quiet -- well, they have the opposite idea. If I don't have children I am going to be upset with the other children. If I am sleeping and the children laugh or the children cry, I have to get angry. This is a very small example of the problems caused by the narrow space.

The Khmer in Site II had a clear sense of the importance of maintaining a kind of physical/emotional/spiritual equilibrium in their everyday life. 41 For the Khmer, all of these aspects were important to one's well-being, and were

⁴¹ This was, you could say, an effort to find the Buddha's Middle Path as it wound its circuitous way through Site II, but it was a particularly <u>Khmer</u> Buddhist response. See chapter 7.

inseparable in their own experience. It was a real challenge to maintain one's equilibrium in Site II, however, given the variety of frustrations and pressures that daily life in the camp presented. A younger man described in somewhat stronger language a similar response to the crowded conditions in the camp:

Normally, people want to be happy, and work to fulfill that need. They need to listen to things, and watch things — above all they need to do those things that make their lives comfortable and happy. But living here is not comfortable at all. It is too narrow: we are too crowded here. We are like a docile dog that has been tied up for too long until it becomes mean and vicious, and finally begins to bite people. Like that dog, a man becomes mean, almost crazy, from being in this camp too long.

People told me it makes your heart narrow to live in such a narrow space.

What people missed in Site II was a particular kind of space, the open space of rice paddies, sugar palms, vegetable and fruit plantations. Cambodia is an overwhelmingly rural and agricultural country, and the vast majority of the population in Site II came from farming families who lived in and worked out of small villages.⁴² It was this landscape and the village life that organized the landscape to which people were comparing their current life in the crowded sections in Site II. One man told me:

We used to live in our own villages, separated by fields and fresh air. The village was the cell of the nation. The government might change but the village never changed. At home we were surrounded by fruit trees, flowers and rice paddies. We breathed the fresh air every day ... But Site II is crowded; there is no space between people here.

⁴² From age and occupation figures gathered in a survey sample in 1989, I estimate that at least 80% of the population old enough to be employed in 1970 were employed as farmers. Statistical data comes from Border Khmer; A Demographic Study of the Residents of Site II, Site B, and Site 8, an independent research project conducted by James F. Lynch and funded by the Ford Foundation.

The landscape was inseparable from the work that organized time and space in the villages most people came from. Daily and seasonal rhythms were tied to the agricultural cycle; everyday life revolved around the preparation of fields, planting, transplanting, waiting, then harvesting the rice; catching fish in the hot season and making prahouk, the fermented fish paste that is a staple in the Cambodian diet. But in Site II only the UNBRO agricultural program had space to grow rice, and less than two percent of the population had access to a fish pond. There were a few places near the reservoir or close to these fish ponds where people could grow vegetables, but more than half the population in Site II North grew nothing at all, and in Site II South, where there was a more favorable ratio of land to people, 23% harvested nothing from their household gardens (Reynell, 1989, pp. 92-98). Both space and water were limited but additionally, the soil was poor in Site II, so that even those people with access to a garden plot near a water source were not likely to produce much. 43

The absence of this familiar work, the daily agricultural activities which filled and marked the proper passage of time, caused a great deal of anguish for most adults in Site II:

Khmer people have a habit of making <u>prahouk</u> in the dry season for eating in the rainy season, because there are fish in abundance at this time of the year when the water level is low. In this season they can select any kind of fish to eat that they want. This is why they remember and miss their homeland when this season comes. Moreover, harvest-time reminds them of the rice fields covered with golden paddy and the good smell of flowers that make the farmers feel enthusiastic and happy.

Nowadays people in Site II are idle. They have only two things to do: cook and carry water. If anyone fails to collect their water they will not have water to cook their rice. So everyone has to wait for the water truck.

⁴³ In spite of this, people who had garden space worked diligently at it. Garden produce was a source of additional income and gardening was a comfortingly familiar activity. People with large plots near the reservoir stayed all night in huts by their produce to make sure nothing was stolen.

Another man who spent half an hour describing to me the methods he used to grow oranges and pineapples in Cambodia concluded by pointing out the futility of trying to grow anything in Site II, because "this land does not belong to us":

Now we can make very little money [through the cultivation of crops] because we move often from one place to another, and the land here in Thailand is not our own. That is why it is useless to grow something: we don't get good results. When we lived in old Rithysen camp, across the border in Cambodia, we grew a lot of crops, but we could not take anything with us when we fled away from there.

That was not a happy time. I had to flee after my crops were grown, my child was killed, my family was separated, and all our possessions were destroyed. That is why I don't want to talk about it; why I am not happy ... Nowadays I grow papaya, mangoes, custard apple, pineapple and kapok at my house [in Site II]. I am happy when I can grow these things, but it is very difficult because this land does not belong to us. When we go away we must leave everything behind.

This man's acute awareness of his transience in Site II, on a piece of land that did not belong to him (or any other Khmer) made it difficult to sustain any real sense of purpose in his work. The lack of agricultural land in Site II and the inability of farming people to do the work they knew had profound consequences for domestic economies, the household division of labor, the daily activities, and the mental health of people in general in Site II, especially the men. These issues will be discussed further in chapters on marriage patterns and the economy. For the moment it is worth noting the profound emotions that went along with the absence of a familiar agricultural landscape: sadness, nostalgia, futility, and a tremendous sense of loss.

The agricultural villages that people missed were not just meaningful physical and economic entities, they were social and political units as well, and social life in Site II differed in important ways from social life in the villages of Cambodia. In a Khmer village before 1975, one had relatives, and one knew one's

neighbors and one's neighbor's relatives well — because one had lived close to these people, worked with them, and observed their behavior over generations. Bonds of trust (or mistrust) were built up over time in the context of mutual assistance (or lack thereof); people knew how to interpret these relationships; they depended on them and did not abuse them lightly. In a face-to-face society in which communication over distances was difficult, people trusted what they knew, and knew the world of their village best — or neighborhood, or school, or work place, if one lived in the city. Trust was not granted easily, what was unknown was potentially dangerous, and outside the village only personal ties breached the often frightening chasms of uncharted social terrain.

In Site II, however, people from all over Cambodia with no prior connections were brought together to live cheek by jowl in an extremely limited area. The social bonds and divisions that organized this space were complex, irregular, often unstable, and not always easy to discern. But the five camps that made up Site II had distinct political — and spatial — histories that extended back to their establishment in Cambodia in 1979 and the early 1980s, and these provided the foundation for socio-spatial divisions in the camp as a whole (see chapter on political patronage and power). In fact, it was conflict within the KP leadership and among the camp admins that laid the foundation of loyalties and alliances that bound and divided the population in Site II.

While UNBRO tried to ignore or minimize the differences between them, the history of relations between the various KPNLF administrators in Site II were far from smooth. There had been long-standing disagreements at the highest level of the KP leadership about how the party's political/military effort ought to be pursued, and in late 1985 these disagreements came to a head in a formal split within the party. Many top military commanders and the civilian admins in Ampil and Rithysen shifted their support from the President of the KPNLF, former

Prime Minister Son Sann, to the Commander-in-Chief of the KP armed forces, General Sak Sutsakhan. The admins in Nong Chan, Sanro, and Dangrek remained loyal to their president. The conflicts between these two factions within the party leadership had dominated KP politics since 1985 and profoundly affected social life in Site II, as loyal followers of the different camps often felt compelled to carry their leader's conflicts into their own interactions. These conflicts were significant enough that representatives from opposing factions often simply refused to work together on UNBRO programs or issues of general concern within the camp.⁴⁴

The five camps were administered separately, and all Khmer were very clear about who their own leaders were and just how far their jurisdiction extended. Within the general population, loyalty to a local leader involved in everyday administrative activities was much more significant than loyalty to an abstract political figure like President Son Sann or General Sak. Although movement was not formally restricted in Site II, people's activities tended to be based in their own camps, among people who recognized the same political authority and with whom most shared at least a recent history of camp life along the border. 45

Mobility outside one's own camp depended a lot on one's status: if one was in a position of authority in the camp administration or an UNBRO program one might have business in another camp — or at least other people were likely to

⁴⁴ This was a constant and major source of frustration for UNBRO, which worked through the camp administrators to develop programs that could be implemented camp-wide. The willingness of certain Khmer leaders to jeopardize these programs over political conflicts with their rivals was a reminder that the underlying priorities of the civilian leadership in Site II were fundamentally different from the priorities of UNBRO.

⁴⁵ These were not insignificant histories: most of the early border camps had been evacuated under fire and the entire camp populations moved to a new location several times.

think so, and less likely to question one's presence there. Liaisons were made across camp boundaries through schools and training programs, which provided safe "corridors" for travel, and people would visit old friends and relatives who lived in other camps as well. Men also travelled around Site II more freely than women, who tended to stay close to their own households. But on the whole people stayed in their own camp unless they had a good reason to be elsewhere, and felt especially uncomfortable in a camp whose factional affiliation differed from their own.

Within the camps themselves the degree to which neighborhoods functioned as cohesive social units varied a great deal, and depended a lot on the camp's history. In Nong Chan and Sanro, for example, the two camps which contained the most families of soldiers, whole villages had been transplanted from Cambodia to the border, and the men from these villages all served under the same military commander. In these camps the sections functioned in much the same way villages had in the past: everyone knew each other very well. In Rithysen, on the other hand, a camp which had been organized originally around the early border markets and had attracted traders from all over Cambodia, the residents of any given section often lacked a common history. Having been forced by the war to move often in the previous ten years, people were frequently thrown together in the sections, among strangers they did not know and therefore could not trust. In these parts of the camp social relationships were much more circumscribed and limited (see chapter on political patronage and power).

People spoke often about the danger of living among people they did not know, and the need to withhold trust from anyone who was a stranger. The level of generalized mistrust in Site II was one of its most striking features. Given the circumstances of the Pol Pot era, when survival often depended on the ability to lie about one's past, given the treachery of those years and the years that followed on

the border when what seemed in retrospect like unthinkable acts were committed daily in the struggle to stay alive, and given the near impossibility of distinguishing now between the victims and the victimizers — given all these conditions, the past was a dangerous territory and nobody's accounts could be trusted. Strangers were always potentially threatening, and there was still plenty of desperation on the border in 1990.

Under these circumstances, attitudes toward strangers ranged from circumspection to outright paranoia. Any new social interaction proceeded slowly, conditionally, and almost always through the mediation of a mutual acquaintance. Without an introduction two people could live or work side by side for years and never even acknowledge knowing the other person's name. On the other hand, extraordinary levels of trust were extended to what seemed (from the outside) like the most tenuous of connections to acquaintances from before 1975. But given the trustworthy basis of those former ties (and, perhaps, the tremendous need to find people to trust in Site II) old friends and acquaintances were considered the most reliable. Thus in the confusion of unknown and unfriendly territory in Site II, each person constructed his or her own individual map of safety zones, based primarily on the location of relatives, close colleagues from work, and old friends from the past. People navigated the social terrain of Site II on the basis of these invisible maps, which often bore little relation to the schematic grid of roads and structures that UNBRO used to orient new staff members to the camp (see maps 8 and 9). Many Khmer, in fact, were completely baffled by UNBRO's map of Site II.

There were other, more publicly agreed upon zones of safety and danger in Site II, however, and additional characteristics of space/place that were salient for the Khmer. "Real estate", for example, had a value that was based on the security of its location, its proximity to the section office and water tanks, and/or its

commercial potential.⁴⁶ "Real estate" changed hands often and desirable locations fetched a good price. Space along the primary roads was mostly taken up by UNBRO and agency buildings, but secondary road frontage was prime location for restaurants and coffee shops, and larger businesses that catered to customers who travelled by car, motorcycle, and bike. Small-time traders who transacted business with people travelling on foot (most of the population) were clustered in markets deep in the sections, and these were regulated by the section leaders. Video parlors and cock-fighting rings, as well as goldsmiths, tailors, watch repairmen, cassette tape-dubbers — all manner of entrepreneurs — operated back in these areas, paying the section leader a fee for the right to transact business there. Most camps had a "red light district" somewhere in the sections as well. This was quintessentially "Khmer space": for the most part completely out of sight of the barang. Here everyday transactions could proceed without the disruptive gaze of western relief workers, always on the lookout for "victimization" and "abuse".

In spite of the presence of a Khmer police force in camp, real protection lay in connections to the political leadership of the camp, and/or ties to the KP military (see chapter on power). If there was trouble in camp people went to the admins, or else to the hospitals — there were Khmer medics on duty twenty-four hours of the day, and radio links to DPPU and the ICRC hospital fifty kilometers away. Within the sections the safest place for a house to be located was near the section or ilot leader's house, and in spite of the commotion the closer one's house was to the water tanks the better, because one was less likely to miss the truck's daily visit, and would not have so far to carry the water. In spite of all their complaints about space, most people preferred to live in a crowded section in the

⁴⁶ No Khmer "owned" the land s/he had the use of; most of the space in each camp was the admin's to allocate.

middle of their camp rather than in the open areas out near the camp's edge because it was safer: one was less vulnerable to attack by bandits, and there were more people around to help out if one was in trouble. It was a less isolated, more "civilized" part of the camp.

The closer one got to the edge of the camp, especially the eastern edge toward Cambodia, the closer one was to dangerous, uncivilized territory. The Khmer make an important conceptual distinction between prey and srok, forest and town, wild and domesticated space. This juxtaposition of savage with civilized space has to do with not only man-made, cultural forms of order and disorder, but also with the supernatural world: with the spirits that inhabit the forest, whose behavior is unpredictable and often threatening. The Cambodian landscape is alive with a multitude of different kinds of spirits. Some are benevolent, some are malevolent, and many are specific to particular locations: house spirits, water spirits, spirits of the rice fields or a particular part of the forest. Khmer people are careful to acknowledge these spirits and treat them respectfully in their daily interactions: every house has a small shrine to its neak taa, or ancestor spirits, and farmers and woodsmen make offerings to the spirits of their fields and forests before they take anything for themselves. The wild parts of the forest are without order, however, and the spirits are, in a sense. emblematic of what is beyond human control in the prev. 47

In fact the "forest" around Site II <u>was</u> extremely dangerous. It was a space of unpredictable dangers, sometimes benign but often, and suddenly, deadly.

Because the camp was located right next to a highly contested piece of Cambodia

⁴⁷ For an excellent discussion of some of the meanings of order and disorder in Khmer culture, see David P. Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts" in <u>Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays in Southeast Asian Thought</u>, David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside, eds, 1984.

elsewhere, these remained a serious threat. Although many people left Site II routinely in search of wild vegetables and fuel wood in the surrounding area, they also routinely lost legs if not their lives in landmine accidents. Other dangers outside the fence included bandits, threatening soldiers (both Khmer and Thai) who demanded bribes for the right to pass, and vengeful Thais who took out their resentment against the Khmer in often violent ways. Stories of violent victimization by Thais, which grew in Site II like thunderheads in the rainy season, fed on the sense most Khmer had of being extremely vulnerable in Thailand and, not coincidentally, completely dependent upon their own leaders for whatever protection they had (see chapter on power). 48

But for many Khmer just being in Site II was like being in the middle of a forest: in dangerous, unfamiliar territory, apart from the known structures of domestication and order. People were physically separated from the culture they knew, and without it things often seemed to be falling apart. Disorder was endemic in many areas, and rules that had governed behavior in the past often seemed to carry little weight in Site II. There was a sense among many that people were becoming almost feral in the camp. One man told me, "Those who have lived on the border for too long call themselves 'border people', or else they call

⁴⁸ It was important to the political leadership in Site II to be regarded as indispensable by its people, and stories about Thai victimization of Khmer combined with UNBRO's ineffectuality in the face of it were useful in the promotion of that idea. One particularly grisly story serves as an example. In the summer of 1991 twelve Khmer men allegedly left Site II in search of agricultural work in Thailand. This was dangerous because they were undocumented and liable to arrest, but some Khmer were desperate enough for income to take this risk. According to the one man who escaped to tell the story, the twelve were caught, identified as Khmer, shot and their bodies burned by Thai rangers some fifty kilometers from Site II. UNBRO has no jurisdiction outside its own camps, and repeated calls and pressure for an investigation by the Thai military yielded no results. The lesson that people in Site II took away from this was not only that Thai soldiers would stop at nothing in their savagery toward the Khmer, but that UNBRO could provide no real protection for them in the face of Thai abuse.

themselves 'monkeys', because they have lived here in this forest for a long time without ever seeing a town. People say that they have almost grown tails." This image was a powerful one, with corollaries in Cambodian folk literature, ⁴⁹ and many Khmer seemed to find it apt. It was repeated to me often over the course of my twenty months in Site II.

In Site II the land itself was unfamiliar to the Khmer; its history was unknown to them. When I asked people about the spirits in Site II I was told, this is Thailand; we don't know much about the spirits here. This fact alone could be very frightening. One day I came into the school where my office was located and found all the teachers in an extremely agitated state. Someone had found a bit of cloth embedded in the dirt floor, and in trying to pull it out had discovered the cloth was wrapped around the body of a small child. The body had been buried a long time; probably it dated to a time before Site II had been built. But what other spirits might be lurking about, and where, if something like this could be found in the floor of an elementary school ?50

For the most part, though, people simply had no connection to the land. It had no meaning, no significance one way or another, beyond its immediate utility in one's daily existence. Outside the temples, there was no sacred space in Site II,

⁴⁹ Chandler, 1984, discusses the story of "Koun Lok", a folktale which explains how three small girls who are abandoned in the forest by their mother, sprout feathers and eventually acquire the shape of magpies, after their smoldering ember has gone out and they are forced to eat their food raw, like animals. The lesson, it seems, is that people begin to lose their humanity when they live without the benefit of human culture. This story, needless to say, resonates with the experience of many Khmer who were forced to eat wild foods like ants and snails in order to stay alive during the Pol Pot era. People drew the connection: just as we were forced to live like animals, so we came to behave like animals under Pol Pot.

⁵⁰ The conclusion to this story is emblematic of the Khmer's sense of helplessness in the face of what were for them unavoidable supernatural threats. The teachers wanted to invite a monk to come chant at the school: to calm the disturbed spirits and bless the place. This proved impossible, however, because they could not afford to host the appropriate ceremony.

and the temples were only sacred in a conventional sense. There was no history of sacred presence, no antiquities or Buddhas to consecrate the space and give depth to people's devotions. Everything in Site II was shallow and temporary. The houses fell down in a year or two if they were not repaired regularly, although bamboo and thatch were in chronically short supply and people often did not have the materials to make repairs. There were no legendary places, no mountains or villages with origin myths in Site II.⁵¹ Everything meaningful for the Khmer was elsewhere. It was a place of exile and longing, a dis-placement.

What people felt most acutely about Site II was their isolation, their separation from what was meaningful to them: their families; their homes, the places they knew and felt comfortable in; the sense of being in Cambodia, where they belonged and had a right to be. People felt cut off in Site II. In spite of the various kinds of traffic coming and going from the camp -- KP officials, military men, traders, mei kchall -- over 90% of the people in Site II had not had any contact with relatives since coming to the border. One old man expressed this particular anguish eloquently:

I am not happy when I think about my life in this place. I feel very depressed. It is hard to breathe; I am prone to cry. We think often of our past life. If my family can be reunited together we will be happy. Today I am not happy because I am separated from my children. I think a lot here but if I could join my children ... I would not think so much and would just live happily. I only think bout the reunion of all my children. If my children and I are reunited I will definitely live a long time."

In addition to their families, people felt cut off from their culture in Site II.

There was a sense that what was uniquely Khmer was being lost in this place

⁵¹ The Khmer have many legends about specific places in Cambodia: how Battambang got its name, for example, or Siem Riep; what caused a particular mountain to be shaped the way it is, and why there are so many caves in it. These legendary histories become part of the meaning of a place, and teach people about their own culture through its history.

⁵² See James F. Lynch, <u>Border Khmer</u>, 1989, pp. 28-29.

where people could not live like Khmers, where children grew up thinking that rice came from trucks and could not identify a water buffalo. There is a strong sense of "natural" identity between people, culture, and place among the Khmer that was shattered in Site II. Thus on top of the personal tragedies and losses of the Pol Pot era there was a lurking fear that the culture itself was disappearing in this place where Khmer were forced to be dependent on the handouts of foreigners to survive. One man in Site II told me, "Our children heed little of what their parents tell them these days. They now look upon UNBRO as their mother and father. They think they owe their life to UNBRO." This is a powerful comment in a culture in which parents are worshiped as their children's first god, and incur a debt of gratitude in raising their children that takes a lifetime of service to repay.

If people felt cut off from the place, the life, the culture of Cambodia, this often came with a sense of betrayal in Site II: most people felt they had been forced to leave Cambodia by the oppressive policies of the Heng Samrin government in Phnom Penh. Most often these policies were blamed on the Vietnamese, who had installed the government in 1979 and were felt to dictate everything the Phnom Penh government did. (This was the position of the KPNLF leadership, a position the people in Site II heard with relentless consistency day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year.) But people felt betrayed by their own leaders in Site II as well, because their leaders had failed, after all these years on the border, to rectify the situation, and because they often seemed more concerned about their own fortunes than the fate of their followers, whose future lay in their hands. This sense of betrayal and abandonment contributed significantly to the isolation people felt in Site II.

But if Site II was a negative space for most of its inhabitants, defined through its relationship to the positive but inaccessible space that Cambodia

represented, this relationship was a conflicted and troubled one for most Khmer. For if Site II was a space of longing, it was even more a space of deep nostalgia, of mythic remembrances, and of limited and often apocryphal information about Cambodia today. One aspect of the isolation people were subjected to in Site II was isolation from information. Cut off from any regular contact with Cambodia, most people relied on rumor and the information their leaders provided them, in print and over the radio, for their knowledge of what was going on outside the camp. The image the KP portrayed of Cambodia was of a dangerous place, infiltrated and subtly controlled by the Vietnamese aggressors, a Communist dictatorship whose sole purpose was to absorb Cambodian resources, labor, and culture into an expanding Vietnamese empire.

The KP's projection served a particular political purpose. But most Khmer had additional and often contradictory memories of life in Cambodia under Pol Pot, memories of unspeakable brutality and human suffering at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. It was hard to find a place for these memories in the images projected by their leaders, however, since the KP had been pursuing their objectives through a political and military alliance with the Khmer Rouge since 1982. Thus the images of "Cambodia" that people had to oriented themselves to in Site II were a strange mixture of pre-1975 nostalgia, post-1979 treachery at the hands of the Vietnamese, and a terrifying collection of memories from the Pol Pot period, which were inconsistent with any moral structure that had come before or since (see chapter 7). This made for extremely shaky ground upon which to build any sort of stable existence in Site II. It is an issue we will return to toward the end of the thesis.

Chapter 4: Economic Relations

This chapter is about the material basis of social life in Site II: about the peculiar configuration of resources upon which the camp economy was based, the differential control of and access to these resources, and the effect of this economy on the dynamics of social life in Site II. The wider context of economic activity in the camp — overall dependence on outside assistance; of significant material want in spite of that assistance; generalized physical and economic vulnerability following on the heels of extreme deprivation and victimization under Pol Pot; an overwhelming sense of impermanence about the current situation combined with great uncertainty about the future — and the effect of this context on people's sense of the value of things will be considered as well.

I argue that while the UN provided the people in Site II with material assistance designed to sustain a dependent population, this was only one part of a more complex economy — or more accurately, a convergence of several different economies — that extended well beyond the limits of the camp itself. The KPNLF was engaged in an overarching political/military project for which it received material support quite separate from the U.N.'s humanitarian funding. Some of these resources entered into the Site II economy, but more importantly, the political goals of the KP's civilian leadership shaped the way the UN's humanitarian assistance was utilized in the camp. Thai interests were involved in the way other resources got into Site II; Thai interests were implicated in market systems that were set up in and around the camp, and the prices that were paid for goods as well. But the economy in Site II was less a system of markets and prices than it was a framework of relative values, produced through the interaction of differently empowered agents and interests operating within and around this peculiar camp context.

Within the camp population different economic goals and opportunities were evident. Some people had access to resources outside the camp, and interacted in a fairly wide universe of economic opportunity. Most, however, made creative use of the resources available inside the camp: a peculiar configuration of material and non-material means. This approach fit into a broad economic strategy which I will call, following Hufton (1974), an "economy of makeshift." It was developed in its most extreme form during the period of universal deprivation under the Khmer Rouge, and continued into the 1980s during the resistance's early years on the border, before the UN relief operation had acquired such a totalizing character, when both individuals and the KPNLF organization were struggling to survive.

This strategy of "makeshift" continued into the 1990s in Site II in part because people found the UN distributions insufficient, but more generally because their own understanding of their situation was broader than that of the UN and the resources available to them included more than just UN assistance. They did not see themselves primarily as refugees. They had personal histories, social identities, political commitments, and hopes if not plans for the future. They incorporated the UN resources into their personal economic strategies for survival, which reflected this more complex reality of needs and desires.

Nevertheless, the limited opportunities for work in Site II and the inability of many people to make productive use of their primary economic skills had a significant effect on social life and social process in the camp, and on the local evaluation of things. Subsistence patterns developed under these conditions that flew in the face of many "traditional" values previously embedded in structures of the Cambodian agricultural economy, to which most people nevertheless

continued to pay lip service. Site II constituted a particular "local moral world" in which both the productive economy and the moral economy were importantly if not exclusively shaped by these local economic conditions. But this material is best understood through the struggle of differently situated individuals trying to make their economic way in the camp, not through the delineation of some overarching economic model.

Veasna worked for me as a part-time typist for about ten months in 1989 and 1990. He was recommended to me by the Khmer director of one of the hospitals in Site II, a quiet but influential man; they had worked together previously at the Khmer Buddhist Research Center (KBRC). Veasna had run the typing center at the KBRC for several years. A conflict at the research center caused him to leave this good job; at the time I hired him he had been supporting his family driving a taxi-bike around the camp, and was badly in need of work. He had three small children, a wife who was sickly, and no relatives from either his own or his wife's family in Site II to help out in this time of particular need. His employment history is illustrative of the conditions under which people labored to support themselves and their families in Site II, and helps to illuminate the ways

¹ This concept was developed by Arthur and Joan Kleinman, who have used it in several recent papers (see for example, Kleinman and Kleinman 1991). It is a term which lends itself to multiple uses. In an essay entitled "Pain and Resistance: The Delegitimation and Relegitimation of Local Worlds" Kleinman's emphasis is on the intersubjectivity of bodily experience within these local worlds, and somatized resistance to the political and economic structuring of local morality (Kleinman 1992). I have explored the intersubjective aspect of experience in Site II, with special reference to the political economy of emotions, in an essay on amputees on the border (see French, forthcoming). In the context of this chapter, I am using the term to emphasize the local aspect of moral worlds, however: the fact that moral worlds are constructed through specific local political, economic, and social conditions.

in which an evolving local economy contributed to shaping a political economy of value in Site II.

Veasna came from Phnom Penh; he was born in 1956 and completed six years of elementary school and five years of secondary school before his family's economic difficulties forced him to quit school and go to work. He was a rather well-educated Khmer. His father worked in commerce for the government, first under Sihanouk then under Lon Nol; his uncle was a wealthy financier who moved to the United States in 1973. Although his father had fallen on hard times by the time the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia, Veasna's family were known as prosperous Phnom Penhois in his mother's natal village, to which the family fled when the city was evacuated in April 1975. This fact no doubt contributed to the devastation of his family under Pol Pot: both his parents perished, and of his two siblings only one sister survived the DK period. Veasna himself survived eighteen long months in a Khmer Rouge "re-education" (read "forced labor") camp, where he was imprisoned in 1977 for being "the son of a capitalist."

When the Khmer Rouge were overthrown in 1979, Veasna returned to Phnom Penh in search of his family, from whom he had been separated in 1975. There he learned of their fate and was reunited with his one surviving sister. He began working as a school teacher in the city to support the two of them. Within two months the new government in Phnom Penh, desperate for educated staff, took him to work in its education office. After a year in this office he was asked to switch jobs and began working as a government accountant. He stayed in this job for three years.

In 1980, Veasna received a letter from his uncle in America, delivered to him personally by one of the first academic researchers to visit Cambodia from the West. The letter included a check for 500 dollars and advised him to take his sister and go to the Thai border; from there his uncle would try to get him to the

U.S. But travel was restricted in Cambodia in the early 1980s, and Veasna did not know anyone who "knew the route" — that is, he did not know anyone who could guide him safely to the border camps — so he did not go. In 1984, however, he got a job as a driver between Phnom Penh and Battambang, the northwestern province that borders Thailand, and through this learned how he could get to the border safely. He arrived in old Rithysen camp in 1984 without his sister; she had stayed behind until he was sure the route was safe and could send for her. Unfortunately, however, all his money was stolen along the way by PRK government troops; moreover, he was unable to contact his uncle, who had moved since writing four years earlier. For the time being anyway, Veasna was alone and stuck in old Rithysen camp.

One of the first things he did was get married. Although UNBRO supplied rice to many of the border encampments at that time, in an effort to avoid feeding soldiers, only women were given a ration. Veasna had no money for food; he needed a wife who received UNBRO rice and could share it with him. Most single men on the border at this time found it prudent to marry. Veasna's new wife had also come to the border alone, but she had relatives in Chicago; Veasna hoped that these people would sponsor them to the U.S. if his uncle could not be found. Many marriages were made at the border in these early years on the basis of similar concerns about material support, security, and prospects for resettlement.

²The "women only" ration system in use at that time was supposed to simplify the distribution of rice, prevent the theft of large amounts of rice by corrupt camp leaders, and avoid feeding the guerrilla soldiers. Each woman and girl over the age of eight was provided with 2.75 rations, a multiplier chosen to reflect the ration of girls/women to (non-military) boys/men in the camps. The consequences of this distribution system were many (see below and chapter on marriage); one was that men had to attach themselves to a woman's household if they wanted to benefit from the UN's distributions. See Reynell 1989:73-124 for a complete description of the "women only" distribution system.

But family re-unification from the border was difficult to arrange even with the proper documentation and family connections, and almost always had to be worked out in Khao I Dang, the one camp on the border from which third country resettlement was taking place. But it cost money to arrange safe passage to Khao I Dang, to get in (which was illegal — the camp had been closed to new entrants since 1980), and to support oneself illegally in the camp until the paper work was accomplished; even then resettlement was never guaranteed. Veasna no longer had the money to undertake these things; he and his wife had no choice but to remain in old Rithysen. They moved to Site II in 1985, and had been living there ever since when I met them in 1989. Their hopes for resettlement had faded when it became clear that Veasna would never be able to make enough money to get into Khao I Dang.

Until 1988 anyone who wanted to work in the border camps, for either the KPNLF or the relief agencies, was required by the KP to complete a course at its Political Warfare School (salaa sangkriem niyobaay). This course taught about the political goals and agendas of the KPNLF, and laid out the KP's relationship with the western agencies providing services in the camp. Veasna's education and abilities were recognized at this school; he graduated at the top of his class and was recruited for work by both the Khmer Buddhist Research Center and the camp administration in Rithysen. He went to work for the KBRC because it enabled him to engage with issues that were of serious concern to him, namely the revival of Buddhism and Khmer culture, and the development of political and social action based on the principles of Buddhism. (Veasna had hoped to become a sociologist before the civil war changed his life in the early 1970s.) The KBRC was an elite group of intellectual Buddhists whose work was closely linked to the KP's political

agenda, but attempted to be scholarly and educational in nature.³ It was formed in 1984 and by 1985 was well and consistently funded by a German philanthropic organization.⁴ Thus, in addition to the status his job brought him, Veasna received a monthly salary of 600 baht (24 dollars), plus access to books and typewriters and periodic cash bonuses. He was also provided with a house on the grounds of the KBRC. This was a very good job in a place where most people received only an extra rice ration in payment for a week of work.

For reasons I was never able to clarify (but which I came to believe involved some kind of serious insult to Veasna's pride, or "face") Veasna left this job in 1989. He had hoped to get a job with COERR, an NGO which provided many educational services in Site II, because it would enable him to improve his English, and he could take COERR classes while he worked. COERR also tended to pay its staff better than the other relief agencies. But he found that when he needed work, COERR was no longer hiring new staff. He continued to receive basic UNBRO food rations for himself and his family each week, but almost everyone in Site II agreed that you could not survive on UNBRO rations alone. Furthermore, his wife had been ill since the birth of their last child and he needed money to buy her medicine. Thus while he looked for a "real" job he made a little money driving a

³ The KBRC's publication entitled Buddhism and the Future of Cambodia, for example, intersperses highly polemical articles by top KPNLF figures Son Sann, leng Mouly and Son Soubert with articles by well-known Buddha scholars Trevor Ling and Somboon Suksamran. See Khmer Buddhist Research Center, 1986.

⁴ The KBRC was funded by the Konrad Adenaur Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the German Christian Democratic Party, which supported several educational programs of the KPNLF.

⁵ COERR — Catholic Organization for Emergency Relief to Refugees — was the one Thai NGO working in Site II. Because it had close ties to the Thai military, which maintained overall jurisdiction and control over the camp, it was able to circumvent some of the regulations with which agencies working under UNBRO's aegis had to comply. This included the regulation prohibiting cash payment to Khmer employees. COERR also had the reputation of providing more perks to its employees than the other agencies in Site II, so it was a popular employer. 6 There were three Western-run but largely Khmer-staffed hospitals in Site II, and

taxi-bike: an ordinary bicycle with a flat platform built behind the seat, that was used to transport people around the camp.

Driving a taxi-bike was very low-status work, comparable to driving a cyclo-pousse in Phnom Penh. One needed no education to drive a cyclo-pousse: many cyclo drivers were rural folk who came to the city to make some cash in the off season when there was no work to be done in the rice fields; they were doing the only work they knew how to do in an urban environment. In Site II driving a taxi-bike was also a kind of occupation of last resort: no ride generated more than a couple of baht (1 baht = 4 cents) and there was a lot of competition for rides. One also needed the resources to buy a bicycle. Men too poor to own their own bicycles could rent a taxi-bike for 10 baht a day, but this left them with even smaller earnings.

Veasna was not in good shape when I hired him. He had some kind of chronic respiratory infection, missed work about one day a week, and was visibly burdened with a heavy load of emotion along with his weighty family responsibilities. He was clearly deeply ashamed of his current poverty, which he would not talk about but could not prevent himself from referring to, indirectly, often. He spoke a bit about the difficulty of living in Site II without the support of relatives, and the vulnerability of being without savings when a family member fell ill. But it was not until he had been asked to run a typing school connected to the camp newspaper, a job that had some of the status if not the salary of his

camp residents. But the Khmer complained that the hospitals never gave out anything but "para" (paracetimol), no matter what was wrong. On the other hand, a wide range of prescription and non-prescription drugs (much of it stolen from these same medical programs) were available for purchase in the camp markets, along with traditional Chinese and Khmer medicines. Medicines are an important part of many Khmer therapies, and those Khmer who could afford it bought medicine in the market and treated themselves when they were ill.

previous position, that he was able to speak more openly about his financial situation.

Veasna explained that when he left his job at the KBRC he had received a cool reception with almost every program in Rithysen, because the KBRC was an influential group with ties to the camp administration, and he had been effectively blackballed by its leadership. Furthermore, he had had to give up the house that had been provided for him on the grounds of the Research Center. He was able to get a broken down house inexpensively through a friend who worked as a section leader in Rithysen, and had no choice but to take up work as a taxibike driver. But he explained that this was an insecure job, because he could only make money when he rode, but was often forced by circumstances to stay at home with his family. When he started working with me, for example, his wife had just come home from three weeks in the hospital; during that time he had been unable to work at all because he had had to take care of his children. He had no relatives who could help out with the children, and could not afford to pay someone to look after them. A job with a regular weekly salary was better than taxi-biking, he explained, because one still got paid even when one was unable to work.

Veasna said that when he was working at KBRC his life was "not so good but not so bad." He had a place to live in a safe location, and 600 baht a month meant he had 20 baht (80 cents) a day to spend. This was enough to buy a couple of vegetables and some fruit, or a piece of meat each day. He might buy a shirt or two for his small children with 20 baht, but a good shirt for himself or a new sarong for his wife would cost at least 50 baht in the market. If he needed thatch to repair his house it cost him 1 baht per piece of thatch; 100 pieces were needed

⁷ Since each "camp" in Site II had its own social history dating to when it was first established on the border, people's connections were for the most part within their own camps. This was their home territory; people rarely sought employment in other camps, where they were unlikely to be either known or trusted.

to make any significant repair and at least 500 to make an addition to the house. 20 baht a day was enough to buy the small necessities that made life a bit more comfortable, but it was almost impossible to save enough to affect his life in a significant way — to rebuild his house, for example, set himself up in a business, or pay his way into Khao I Dang.

Veasna did not make much money working for me: I was obliged to pay him a standard UNBRO worker ration for his time, which was worth about 240 baht (a little less than 10 dollars) a month. But he received his ration even if he had to stay home some of the time, and there were a few benefits to working in my office (access to books and newspapers, the use of a typewriter, coffee and fruit most days, someone to mail and receive letters for him, and to buy things in Aranyaprathet that he could not purchase in Site II). Through his work at the newspaper typing center he made an additional 160 baht a month, but this was potentially a much more important job because of the contacts he was establishing. The typing school produced copy for the UNBRO-supported camp newspaper, and Veasna's job put him on the inside of another fairly elite group of Khmer responsible for the newspaper's production, as well as making him known to several UNBRO staff involved with the paper. Both sets of contacts could be very valuable for him in the future, as both had access to resources and jobs. 9 For a

⁸ All agencies working in Site II were required to pay Khmer staff the standard UNBRO salary: an extra 7 kilogram ration of rice each week. In theory this was to inhibit the development of cash markets in Site II that would draw other Cambodians across the border into Thailand. In fact, most people turned around and sold their worker ration to a Thai rice merchant for cash as soon as they received it. See below.

⁹ For a while Veasna maintained both of these jobs, in part I think because he wanted to keep both sets of contacts active. Eventually he quit his job with me and went to work full time for the newspaper. But there was a period before he quit when he had to decide which connections ultimately would be more valuable to him, and he quizzed me in detail about IRC's plans to set up programs in Cambodia in the future. probably he would have stayed with my project if he thought I could guarantee him a job in Cambodia later on.

man without family connections in the camp, these contacts were especially important.

Veasna continued to suffer a great deal from the loss of his extended family as well as from overall poverty in Site II. But he also suffered from the loss of self-esteem that accompanied his inability to maintain the economic and social status he was born with. This was an important part of his sense of identity and self-worth. Except for his wife he was truly alone in Site II, making a living whatever way he could manage, and that had involved frightening periods of poverty over the last ten years. Still, as he himself was quick to point out, his lot was better than many in Site II because he had an education; he had skills and could find ways to adapt to these circumstances. Think of all the people who only know how to grow rice, he said. These people have no work to do here at all. Without an education they have no way to earn the money to purchase what they are lacking, like fresh food, firewood, and extra water. UNBRO provides all these things, he said, but they don't provide enough. The only thing we have in sufficient quantity is rice.

In fact, Veasna was wrong: even people without his education found ways to get their hands on items not supplied to them, or else not supplied in sufficient quantity. In fact, his economic situation was similar to the situation of most other people in the camp: his UNBRO ration was a part but not the only part of his personal economic strategy; his prior work experience was largely irrelevant to the kind of work he was able to find in the camp; he used of all manner of available contacts and resources to construct his own individual economy of "makeshift"; but even so he was never able to save more than a tiny amount of his earnings,

¹⁰ For an interesting comparison, see <u>Falling From Grace: The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class</u>, Katherine S. Newman, 1988.

and was extremely vulnerable to costly life crises and emergencies such as his wife's illness or the loss of his job at the KBRC.

When Site II was built in 1985, no one expected the camp to be self-sufficient. UNBRO's task from the beginning was to separate Cambodian civilians from the war-zone society of the CGDK encampments and relocate them inside Thailand, away from the dangers of the ongoing war. UNBRO was to provide assistance that would sustain the displaced Khmer at a subsistence level until their repatriation to Cambodia could be safely assured. This assistance included a basic weekly food ration designed to provide adequate daily caloric intake established by the World Health Organization. On a per person basis rice, canned or dried fish, one egg., and a vegetable were distributed weekly along with a portion of fuel wood; dried beans, oil, salt, and wheat flour were given once a month. A dry pack of supplementary food items was provided for pregnant

¹¹ Not incidentally, UNBRO support also relieved the KPNLF and its coalition partners of the need to provide for those civilians and military dependents who constituted their "popular" base(s) of support. Thus in addition to regularizing assistance to civilians, it freed up both money and attention to be devoted to the military operations, now conveniently separated from the distractions of a mixed civilian-military camp. The relief operation also confined the civilian population inside Thailand, restricting peoples' movements and relieving the KP of the need to hold onto the population through political (or some other kind of) popularity. The people in Site II had become, in effect, a captive political audience, a guaranteed base of popular support. Despite the fact that they were de facto refugees, their political status — as "citizens of the CGDK" — made it impossible for the UN to provide the protections afforded official refugees. See Zolberg et al, 1989:3-33.

¹² Exact amounts for the weekly and monthly rations in 1990 were as follows: rice: 3.4 kilograms/week; eggs: 100 grams/week; vegetables: 500 gram/week; fish products: 210 gram/week; dry beans: 500 gram/month; oil: 700 gram/month; salt: 280 gram/month; wheat flour: 700 gram/month; soap: 120 gram/month. This ration was designed to meet a minimum daily average of 2,457 calories per person, the emergency caloric requirement set by the UN. In 1991 lowered

and nursing mothers; there was also a therapeutic feeding program for underweight children and a feeding program for people confined to hospital beds.

Additional food was distributed to certain groups identified as particularly "vulnerable": single women with children, widows, the elderly, etc.; and certain non-food relief items, including housing material, cooking pots, buckets, clothing, mosquito nets, mats, blankets, and soap were distributed periodically to all households. Additionally, a rice ration of seven kilograms was provided weekly to every Khmer who worked for UNBRO or one of the NGOs, and the camp administrators received rice adequate to pay worker rations to ten percent of their population for the work that went into running their administrative apparatus and distributing UNBRO supplies.

Each person in Site II was alotted twenty liters of water a day, for bathing and washing as well as consumption. In a climate as hot and dry as this part of Thailand is much of the year, this was a minimal ration. But often the water trucks broke down, or the Wattana reservoir where most of the water came from ran dry and the trucks had to travel greater distances for the water, making fewer trips into Site II each day. The upshot was that water was scarce and the water trucks were unreliable, arriving at different times each day, and sometimes not arriving at all.

The distribution program was designed to provide the assistance necessary to sustain a population without any other means of support. 14 UNBRO's definition of "necessary" notwithstanding, few Khmer considered the UN rations

pledges at UNBRO's donors meetings forced UNBRO to reduce the amounts of this basic food ration slightly.

¹³ Water arrived every day; fuel wood, once a week; soap, once a month. The rest of these non-food items were distributed upon registration in camp, and once every year or two thereafter.

¹⁴Details about UNBRO rations and distributions may be found in Reynell 1989:73-92.

adequate to their material needs, however .15 But despite the fact that both the Thai military and DPPU regulated the movement of people and goods in and out of camp, UNBRO rations were by no means the only resources in circulation in Site II, although they did provide the only reliable source of "income" that much of the camp population had at its disposal. Both cash and goods entered, circulated, and left Site II by a number of specific routes, the relief agencies came to be understood as a "field of (economic) opportunity" by the population, and cash acquired a peculiarly inflated importance in the camp. Thus while UNBRO relief was designed to provide the resources for a complete (if dependent) subsistence economy, a far more complex economic system developed in Site II through the exchange of a wide range of goods and services that had nothing to do with UNBRO at all. On the other hand, the non-productive, dependent nature of this economy remained one of its defining characteristics.

It is useful to think about economic activity in Site II in 1990 in relation to the border economy of the first half of the 1980s. 16 By 1983 almost ninety percent of the 1990 adult population of Site II was living on the border, in encampments just inside Cambodia run by a variety of KP-affiliated commanders and guerrilla warlords involved in the resistance. 17 These encampments were

¹⁵ A significant issue concerning the adequacy of assistance relates to the difference between "basic needs" in an emergency situation and "basic needs" in a period of prolonged confinement, as in the situation in Site II. But even in terms of baseline nutritional adequacy, the UNBRO rations were only minimally sufficient. See below, note 22. On the other hand, some poor Khmer and even some poor Thai came to live in Site II because they knew they would be given rice every week, and could not even count on that where they came from. The medical care provided in Site II was another pull factor.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Steve Heder for his analysis of the economy of the resistance in the early 1980s, presented in an unpublished paper on market activity in the border area during that time.

¹⁷ These figures come from Lynch (1990:36), who conducted a demographic survey of three border camps, including Site II, in 1989. Included in his survey were questions about people's date of arrival at the border. According to Lynch, 88.9% of the adults in Site II in 1989 had arrived at the border by 1983.

for the most part extremely insecure, coming under attack by rival faction leaders almost as often as by the combined Vietnamese/PRK army. Because civilian and military personnel lived together in these early encampments, the UN was more restricted in its distributions, ¹⁸ and people received considerably less support from UNBRO than the people in Site II were later to receive. The KP was neither well enough endowed nor organized to provide for its dependent population. People were thus forced to figure out personal survival strategies to get by in this treacherous environment.

In the early years most people relied on the border markets to support themselves. These markets appeared almost immediately in 1979 and expanded to become a major focus of entrepreneurial activity, drawing many people to the border specifically to trade. While control of the markets had some important political ramifications, ¹⁹ they were also a key source of individual income. Officially "illegal" since they remained outside the control of both the Cambodian and the Thai governments, the markets were unpopular with the KPNLF leadership as well, mainly because the KP often could not control them either, and they detracted attention from the military agenda. But the markets were tolerated, first, because it would have been difficult to get rid of them (and politically suicidal, since the KP could provide no direct support for its dependent population), and second, because they generated much needed revenue for the KP, through the taxation of traders. The markets were the site of both large, wholesale transactions between Thai merchants and Cambodians who transported

¹⁸ In theory the UN was providing assistance to needy civilians. But since the civilians could not be separated from the military elements in charge of the camps, and UNBRO was not willing to support the KP leaders directly, the assistance program was much smaller than it came to be after 1985.

19 Often it was the more independent warlord types who actually controlled the markets, soldier big-men whose support the KP needed and hence were obliged to tolerate, even though the markets tended to be lawless places, and their "control" was often highly exploitative. See Heder, n.d.

goods in bulk back to Cambodia to sell, and small-scale, individual buying and selling, which sustained the household economies of many families.

Thus while UN provided considerably less support in the early years on the border, entrepreneurial options were greater for individual Khmer. Although people were constrained by the threat of bandits as well as the treacherous politics of location, 20 there was more movement among the border camps than there was to be later from Site II, a greater variety of resources available for exploitation because of this, and more entrepreneurial flexibility. In spite of the dangers, people travelled back and forth between their homes and the border markets to take advantage of what resources existed in both places, traded with Thais on the black market, planted gardens, trapped wild animals, collected roots and vegetables in the forest, gambled, extorted, stole, etc. This was an especially difficult time. Personal resources were extremely limited and the population, still very close to the frightening deprivations of the Pol Pot period, was living in the middle of a guerrilla war. Survival depended on individual resourcefulness under these difficult conditions, as neither the UN nor the resistance leaders could be relied upon to provide adequate support.

Thus the people who were moved into Site II in 1985 were experienced in making imaginative use of whatever resources they could find. While the relief programs in Site II were designed to provide adequate overall support, for this population UNBRO supplies constituted only part of a much broader set of resources that were utilized to advantage in Site II. Although many people played up their neediness to the Westerners in the camp, this was often at least partially a strategic stance. In fact, most people lived on very little. Having

²⁰ Given the number of rival political factions on the border at that time, anyone moving on his or her own between the different camps was considered politically suspect and was therefore in danger.

survived the deprivations and dangers of the Pol Pot years, people did what they felt they had to do to get by. The move to Site II constrained their movement, provided greater protection and certain specific resources and opportunities, and significantly limited their access to certain others. How people oriented themselves to this situation and supported their material lives under these circumstances, and how this material economy affected the political economy of value in Site II, is the subject of the rest of the chapter.

As the previous chapter has shown, Site II had offered very little in terms of productive natural resources. Space was limited, the soil was poor, there were practically no natural sources of water, what undergrowth once existed was long ago stripped for fuel, and trees were almost non-existent. Large scale cultivation was out of the question — there was neither space to plant nor water to sustain crop growth. For a population which was almost 85 percent rural this was one of the most significant facts about Site II: there was no room to grow rice. 21 This might not have been a major issue for a similar population temporarily housed in a refugee camp. But for people who were completing their fifth year in Site II and their tenth year on the border, for whom a "temporary stay" had become "ongoing" and "without any end in sight," it was very significant indeed. Most of the population had been accustomed to supporting itself through a rural agricultural economy, which involved men and women, young and old in a complex, integrated, and deeply meaningful way of life, in which "work" and its

²¹ This figure is derived from the statistics for age distribution and occupation in Lynch's 1989 demographic study of the population of Site II. See Lynch 1989, pp. 20 and 52.

"products" were the central features (Delvert 1961, Ebihara 1971, and Martel 1975). In Site II neither the work nor its products was available to people. This left many people with material shortages, time on their hands, frustration, ²² and the need to find some way to supplement their UNBRO "income."

In Site II the limitations on cultivation were felt especially keenly because there was a real need for more, fresh, food. Until 1987 UNBRO had continued to use the indirect distribution system that Veasna had encountered when he arrived at the border, through which only women and girls received rice directly. This made the need for additional food immediate and urgent for many families. In late 1987, a direct distribution system was adopted, through which every member of a family was registered in an UNBRO family book, and each person over the age of five received a full rice ration. (Children under five received a half ration.) The new system acknowledged that, the separation of soldiers and civilians notwithstanding, indirect distribution excluded many men and boys, and this created an overall food deficit throughout the camp population.

In spite of the improvements, few people were entirely satisfied with the new distribution system either. The rations were minimally sufficient, they contained very little fresh food and, after years of the same subsistence diet, people were tired of canned fish and rice.²³ Families used various tactics to get

As one man told me, "Many people here would like to have more space for growing vegetables; however, there is no land for planting. It is very narrow here. If we had more land for planting, some of our troubled thoughts would be relieved."

According to a 1985 WHO report on protein and energy requirements, normal requirements for girls and women range from 2025 to 2950 calories per day, while requirements for boys and men range from 2300 to 2850 calories per day. These figures presume a moderate level of activity. When the direct distribution system was initiated in 1987, the energy supplied by a basic UNBRO ration was 2,237 calories per person per day. In 1991 budgetary constraints forced UNBRO to reduce this basic ration to 2,027 calories per person per day. Thus there was an objective basis to peoples' subjective evaluation that UNBRO rations were insufficient. See Reynell, 1989, pp.75-76.

extra people listed in their family books in order to increase their weekly take. Additionally, most families tried to supplement their diet by growing a few vegetables in kitchen gardens, although the water shortage limited this kind of cultivation to the rainy season. Those lucky few with access to garden plots near the fish ponds and reservoir ²⁴ cultivated year round with a fierce dedication, sleeping in huts by their gardens to guard their produce from thieves. Any surplus that families did not use themselves was sold in small markets in the sections. Typical vegetable crops included green onions, garlic, lemon grass, morning glory shoots, squash, cucumbers and papaya.

Other people raised chickens, ducks and/or pigs in an effort to supplement their diet and generate a little household income. Over half the camp population was involved in some sort of small animal "husbandry." Chickens and ducks were the cheapest to raise, and the agricultural departments of two administrations ran poultry breeding programs, supported by a volag, which provided chickens and feed to poor families in exchange for a weekly "pay-back" of eggs. Other administrative departments received hens which they raised to provide their workers with eggs. Pigs were more expensive to feed, so fewer people raised them, but they provided much more meat when full-grown, and could bring in 2000 baht (80 dollars) when the meat was sold. The favored food for pigs was a nutritious cracked-rice-and-mung-bean mixture, distributed in a dry pack to pregnant and nursing women, which the Khmer found unappealing and rarely ate. Those women who received it routinely sold it to pig-owners.

Families with a little extra income could buy fresh food in the Central Market, where Thai vendors came by day to sell fresh meat, fish, produce, and consumer goods. Initially the Thai government had prohibited markets in Site II,

²⁴ According to Reynell, 3-7 percent. See Reynell 1989, chapter 5.

fearing they would draw more Cambodians across the border into Thailand, and had tried to limit the amount of cash in circulation by prohibiting cash payments for work. But cash found its way into Site II by a number of routes anyway and, in the absence of legal markets, people simply conducted their trade surreptitiously. But these "grey" markets were the site of considerable violence. UNBRO put pressure on the Thais to allow a legal market in camp that could be regulated, and eventually they realized they could profit more by controlling the markets than by prohibiting them. Beginning in 1987 local Thai vendors were permitted to enter Site II each morning to sell their wares at a central location next to the DPPU office. By the time I got to Site II the Central Market was quite extensive. Smaller markets had been established in the residential sections throughout the camp as well, where people resold goods bought in the Central Market and offered various services closer to where people lived.

People without productive gardens or livestock, and no resources with which to purchase additional food, utilized a less desirable strategy for supplementing the family diet: they collected wild foods in the forest outside the camp.²⁵ The DPPU prevented people from walking in the direction of Thailand, "taxed" anyone coming in from Cambodia, and not infrequently shot at people trying to avoid their taxation. UNBRO strongly discouraged people from leaving the camp for any reason, as the border was a contested area thick with landmines and soldiers from several different armies. But poor people came and went from Site II in spite of these dangers, the women to collect vegetables and fuel wood, the

²⁵ Reynell's figures (1989:97) put the number of people who consumed wild plants at 19.0 percent for Site II North and 16.8 percent for Site II South. It is unclear whether these people gathered the plants themselves or bought them in camp from other people who had collected them, but reasonable to assume that a somewhat smaller percentage actually left the camp to collect vegetables themselves.

men to catch animals, trade with local farmers, and bring back bamboo and thatch for construction or sale.

In some cases people collected goods for their own use, in others to sell in the markets. Men tended to be more involved in commercial endeavors, as bamboo, thatch, and local Cambodian pigs required longer trips to procure but fetched good prices in the camp. Collection of vegetables and fuel wood was a domestic duty that traditionally fell to women, and this continued to be the case in Site II. But the dangers "outside the fence" were always present, and many people lost limbs if not their lives in the quest for food or other resources not available to them in Site II. Everyone seemed to know of someone who had been injured or killed in this way. 26

UNBRO's indirect distribution system had a shaping influence on the way people approached their economic situation in Site II.²⁷ While some pressure was relieved when the system was changed in 1987, food shortages from earlier years on the border had made a lasting impression on the Khmer's evaluation of the reliability of UNBRO support. The experience of hunger was very close and real to people. Thus while many Khmer depended for their basic subsistence on what was provided by UNBRO, most felt vulnerable in their dependence. This sense of vulnerability was reinforced every time UNBRO had to substitute or cut back on the items it supplied.²⁸ The Khmer are familiar with dependence: asymmetrical patron-client relationships are at the heart of most non-kin social

²⁶ I can include myself in this population of "knowers." One of the elders from the Rithysen temple whom I interviewed several times was killed while collecting bamboo outside the camp between my first and second trip to Site II.
²⁷ See Reynell, 1989, pp.73-123 for a detailed description of this earlier

distribution system and its ramifications.

²⁸ This happened periodically, as UNBRO's budget was dependent on pledges from U.N. member states, and pledges had to be re-secured at donor meetings every six months. This meant that UNBRO's programs had to be revised, and cutbacks in the basic ration were sometimes required. This happened twice while I was working in Site II between 1989 and 1991.

relations in Cambodia (see Scott and Kerkvliet 1977 and chapter on political patronage and power below). But true patronage includes some kind of reciprocal dependence which ties the patron to his or her client as well as vice versa. There were no such reciprocal needs that tied UNBRO to the Khmer and guaranteed their support. The UN, in general, was considered an unreliable patron.²⁹

In addition to basic subsistence, UNBRO and the volags contracted by UNBRO also provided a range of medical, educational and social service programs in Site II. These programs constituted a field of economic opportunity for the Khmer, which people often utilized in ways that had little to do with the program agendas. There were thirteen voluntary agencies and over 200 foreign aid workers employed in Site II in 1990. Not only did they provide jobs for some Khmer, they also brought large amounts of material resources into the camp for their programs. Khmer staff gained access to these resources through a variety of means: they borrowed, embezzled, extorted, and outright stole, in addition to using the goods for the purposes they were intended. Certain jobs were highly prized for the materials they gave one access to: the people who ran the warehouse for UNBRO's construction program, for example, made a good income from the bamboo and thatch they were able to sell on the side. Considering the low rate of remuneration for UNBRO and volag jobs (one, or at most, two worker rations per week), most jobs were evaluated in terms of the perks they carried with them. Veasna, for example, had these perks in mind when he left my office to work full time with the camp newspaper.

²⁹ This is not to say that genuine and productive patron-client relationships did not develop between individual U.N. and agency staff and their Khmer counterparts — they did. Indeed, the success of the U.N. programs depended to a great extent on the personal involvement and commitment of its Khmer staff, which was usually based on a personal relationship with an UNBRO or volag "boss" (see below). But UNBRO was linked in obligation to its donors, not to the Khmer. Understanding this made it easier for Khmer to take advantage of the UN's naivete in many areas, as the reciprocity of true patron-client ties was usually absent.

Some of the perks were educational: most UNBRO programs were designed with the idea of developing skills as well as providing services, and included a significant training component. Different training programs were evaluated differently by the Khmer, however. Medical training tended to be highly valued, for example, because it could be put to use in Cambodia in the future (or such was the hope anyway). It was also useful in Site II outside the framework of the Western-run medical programs: medics and mid-wives often ran "private practices" out of their homes. Western-trained midwives in particular did a good private business, as many women preferred to give birth at home, but the better educated and wealthier women often wanted a hospital midwife in attendance. In other programs — public sanitation or construction, for example — it was only the high level Khmer staff, who worked directly with Western environmental health experts or engineers, who gained a lot from the training provided. In all cases the Khmer heads of programs had considerable status and power because of the resources and jobs they controlled. 30

Foreign relief workers also constituted an exploitable resource for the Khmer. Relationships with foreigners were useful and potentially very valuable to the Khmer, although this did not preclude the possibility of complex, non-exploitative mutual friendships. As well as gaining access to program equipment, supplies, and office space after UNBRO hours, top Khmer staff had privileged

³⁰ Two of the most powerful men in Site II not associated with the KPNLF were the Khmer heads of the sanitation and construction programs. Each supervised a couple of hundred workers (and hence had control over a large number of worker rations), had houses built at program expense in the program compound, drove UN trucks around the camp and carried the hand-held radios that UNBRO staff used to communicate in the camp. These men, in fact, walked a narrow line of loyalty between the political leaders in Site II and their UNBRO colleagues. Unlike most people in Site II they did not depend on the Khmer leaders for their power and influence, and could conceivably make decisions for their programs independent of the political interests of the KP. Although neither had political ambitions, each one's independence made his loyalty somewhat suspect. See chapter on power.

access to the barang program staff themselves. These people came and went from the camp each day, and provided links to a vastly wider network of resources and potentially useful contacts. Khmer staff used their barang "bosses" to do small favors like mail and receive letters for them, cash checks sent by relatives resettled in the West, and purchase certain products in the Thai markets not available in Site II. The barang were also likely sources of gifts and loans, and fairly reliable contributors to weddings and holiday celebrations. The Khmer were skillful at manipulating an underlying sense of obligation and pity that many barang felt toward them, and playing on barang ignorance of Khmer etiquette and traditions of reciprocity. This is not a new talent for the Khmer: the subtle cultivation of a sense of moral obligation in others is one of the "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985)t hat the Khmer have developed to a high art. Barang staff were very good targets for this particular strategy.

But barang staff also served the Khmer as confidants, teachers, and important sources of information about the world outside the camp. In an enclosed space where almost all sources of information were controlled by the KP leadership, 32 reliable information was an extremely valuable resource. And in a

³¹ Khmer relationships with the Thai staff working for the UN and volags were very different. The Thais understood the Khmer much better than the barang (both linguistically and culturally) and held them to a higher standard of honesty. The Thai staff tended to treat the Khmer like younger brothers and sisters—naive, unsophisticated, a little bit stupid at times, but not to be trusted. They were more demanding of the Khmer but closer, more familiar, in their friendships. The Khmer knew what they could and could not get from the Thais and did not push them; with the barang, they were always on the lookout for a soft touch or a bleeding heart.

³² Most Khmer got information about the world outside the camp through radio broadcasts, and word of mouth. Both were rather unreliable sources. Those who could understand English could listen to VOA and BBC newscasts, but this was a relatively small number of Khmer. Most people listened to the KP station, broadcast from elsewhere on the border. UNBRO supervised the production of a camp newspaper, Poelroet Khmer, and screened it for blatant propaganda and gross errors of fact. But the KP Information Service produced its own news publication, an instrument of the political/military struggle, and the camp heard KP political rhetoric at all of its meetings and public events. The information

situation where every adult carried a great weight of personal sadness and loss, and very few people could afford to open themselves to the difficulties of others, a sympathetic ear could be welcome indeed. Some Khmer got into the habit of commodifying their trauma, using their own enhanced life stories and the Westerners' guilt and pity like blunt tools. But most Khmer were very private with their deep grief. For many the education and amusement of working with a barang were the main attractions, although there was always hope that he or she could be developed into a generous patron.

In fact, however, relatively few Khmer actually benefitted from UNBRO and volag positions: only 7 percent of the Site II population was employed by the barang. The people who benefitted most from the programs were the camp administrators, who received worker rations equal to 10 percent of their populations to pay their staff for carrying out the distribution of UNBRO supplies. The admins paid an office staff, section leaders, and ilot leaders and sub-leaders for their role in the distribution of rice, water, fuel wood, construction and household supplies. But these people constituted much less than 10 percent of their populations. The admins benefitted directly from the difference, although their staff benefitted as well since they had first dibs on all supplies.

Water, for example, was in chronically short supply in Site II, but according to people on the UN sanitation staff, this was not primarily because insufficient water was delivered to the camp. Rather, it was because the section and ilot leaders were taking more than their designated allotment. The admins and military commanders routinely used extra bamboo and thatch to build their own (large) houses, and diverted UN supplies to construct unauthorized buildings for

brought into camp by the foreign staff burst this information bubble for those relatively few Khmer who could and did interact with them.

their political activities (for example, the KP Information Center and the Political Warfare School.)

Many of the resources in circulation in the camp had nothing to do with UNBRO or the voluntary agencies, however. They came in through a different set of networks and relationships with which UNBRO had no connection, and was obliged to ignore as long as they did not disrupt the humanitarian nature of its own operation. Cash, for example, entered Site II in a number of different ways. Remittances from relatives resettled abroad came to a relatively small number of people in the camp, but were very important to the household economies of these families, and in general helped to fuel the local cash economy. 34

Other people received salaries directly from the KPNLF, for their work in the political and administrative offices in Aranyaprathet and Bangkok as well as in Site II, in the KP Information Service, and in the KP army. These salaries were paid out of the KP's budget, which came from donations from the U.S., a "working group" of ASEAN supporters (Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia), and sometimes from China. The KP's budget was completely separate from the UN's

³³ The existence of wealth in Site II was problematic for UNBRO, in part because it seemed to contradict the image of "needy refugees" that was the basis of their appeal for donor support. It also undermined their claim to be providing assistance to civilians in a non-partisan manner, as much of the wealth originated with the KP or the KP Army, now freed from the burden of supporting its civilian population. In fact, most of the people in Site II did depend on UNBRO's assistance, but the existence of a wealthy elite was a constant reminder that UNBRO was participating in something much more complicated than a simple humanitarian operation.

³⁴ In 1987 Reynell estimated that over 5 percent of the people in Rithysen, Dangrek and Ampil camps received remittances from abroad, while less than 2% of the people in Nong Chan and Sanro received this kind of money. The difference in these figures reflects the different demography of the camps: the populations in both Nong Chan and Sanro were almost exclusively rural and poor, while the other three camps included significant numbers of prosperous farmers and urban, professional people, many of whom had relatives resettled in the West who were able to send money occasionally.

humanitarian operation. The KP was supported directly by governments interested in its political/military objectives in Cambodia. This direct assistance was divided into lethal and non-lethal aid. Non-lethal aid went to KP President Son Sann to support a main office in Bangkok, a field office outside Aranyaprathet, a radio station, and diplomatic travel. Lethal aid, in the form of money and materiel, went directly to the Commander-in-Chief of the KPNLA, General Sak Sutsakhan. Although many people on the KP payroll worked outside of Site II, the families of most of them lived inside the camp so at least some portion of their salaries became part of the circulating economy.

Money also entered Site II via black market trade. The KP army was involved in much of the organized, high-level illegal transactions across the Thai-Khmer border. It was selling timber concessions to Thai merchants in areas close to the Thai border which it had "liberated" in 1989 and 1990.35 There was a gun-running operation between the Cambodian and Burmese borders: high level KP commanders sold weapons donated by their international sponsors to Thai middlemen, who transported them to the Burma border to sell to the less wellendowed Karen resistance.³⁶ Khmer antiquities were appearing with increasing frequency in the Bangkok art markets in 1990, supplied by the various resistance armies that came and went regularly from Cambodia. This kind of commerce was facilitated by the 838 division of the Royal Thai Army, which was responsible for overseeing the border area and maintaining contact with the resistance armies. 37How much of the profits from this trade got into circulation in Site II is unclear. It

³⁵ The sale of timber concessions was the source of much larger Khmer Rouge revenues, in part because the Khmer Rouge controlled so much more territory than either of its coalition partners. See "Now It's the Jungle the Khmer Rouge Decimates" by Philip Shenon, The New York Times, February 7, 1993. 36 See "Cambodia Arms Flow Back into Thailand" by Philip Shenon, The New York

Times, March 7, 1993.

³⁷ See "In Big Threat to Cambodia, Thais Still Aid Khmer Rouge" by Philip Shenon, The New York Times, December 12, 1993.

is clear is that there were some very wealthy people connected to the KP, who had used their political positions to enhance their personal wealth considerably. The disparity in wealth between these top KP figures and most of the rest of the people who lived in Site II was not lost on the population at large.

High ranking soldiers received enough pay for the ordinary soldiers, who got paid next to nothing, to resent the difference.. But men with few skills and no other employment options often enlisted with the KP army because it gave them access to the (now somewhat diminished) border markets, and enabled them to engage in low-level smuggling and cross-border trade. There was, for example, a good market in Thailand for wild animals from the forest where the soldiers spent much of their time. Giant monitor lizards and tiny barking deer appeared in Site II periodically when the soldiers had not been able to sell them in Thai villages. Soldiers also traded household goods distributed by UNBRO with Cambodian villagers, bringing back items they could sell in Site II like local tobacco, chickens, or Cambodian piglets. And soldiers were in a position to extort "tax" from anyone passing through their "liberated zones."

In addition to the soldiers' petty trade there were full-time professional smugglers who made their living bringing silk, gold, and local gems from Cambodia to sell in Thailand. This was a dangerous but often lucrative business for men who knew the territory near the border well — it was often ex-soldiers who took up this line of work (see chapter 6). Some of these smuggled goods were sold through Site II to Thai and barang; some were sold directly to Khmer. Gold and gem stones were prestige goods for the Khmer; they were also the preferred form for holding onto any extra wealth in the camp. Gold especially 38 was easily

³⁸ Gold and jewelry could also be worn to display one's wealth and power, if one felt safe enough to do so. Many people in Site II who were reputed to have a lot of money did not display their wealth however, choosing to hide behind a modest style of life out of fear of inviting theft.

hidden, transported, and traded or converted into cash, all important qualities for wealth on the border where theft and the need to be ready to move at a moment's notice had been the facts of daily life for years.³⁹

Gold and rice were the primary coins of exchange in the early years on the border, when Cambodian currency was valueless and everyone was hungry. A remarkable number of people had managed to hold onto some gold through the Pol Pot era, although much of this flowed directly into Thailand after 1979 as the early refugees had little else to trade for food. Even people who came later tended to use up whatever gold they came with if they had no other source of income. Because of this there was so little gold left on the border in 1990, so when smugglers brought gold into the camp there was almost always a market. But even given the low level of subsistence in Site II and the relatively small amount of gold in circulation, almost every woman wore a pair of gold earrings, and goldsmithing/jewelry-making was one of the more popular professions in the camp. 40 To have some gold, even a little, gave a small sense of security to people who continued to be vulnerable to displacement and dispossession.

In the absence of many other forms of wealth (e.g., cultivable land, durable structures, draft animals, trucks, cars, trucks, businesses) money acquired a kind of exaggerated importance in Site II. In spite of the Thai's initial efforts to limit

Although people were more secure in Site II than they had been in the earlier border encampments, the potential threat of having to move without warning was never far from people's minds. One day after about a week when shelling was clearly audible from Site II, I learned that the man taking pictures for my project had hocked his camera for cash. He was afraid the whole camp might have to move again, and cash was more concealable than his expensive camera. When I relayed this story to another man working with me I was told, "It's true, many people are selling off their possessions these days, afraid they will lose them if we are evacuated. Yesterday my father told me to sell my bike."

⁴⁰ There was the sense among many Khmer — in my opinion, false — that one could get rich on the border if one dealt in gold. In fact, the amount of money one actually made as an amateur goldsmith, with neither money to buy gold nor customers to sell it to, was quite small.

trade by prohibiting markets and requiring that Khmer workers be paid in rice, trade was ubiquitous in Site II from the very start. Since worker rations provided more rice than most families needed, these rations usually were converted directly into cash, as were non-food items distributed by UNBRO that were not immediately needed. Cash from these and other sources enabled people to buy fresh food, clothing, and other items from the Thai vendors who came to Site II six days a week. Although certain commodities considered a security risk by the DPPU were prohibited in Site II (these included flashlights, radios, pocketknives, and batteries) just about anything could be got past the guards for a price. This meant that, with enough cash, people in Site II had access to anything they could arrange for someone to buy for them.

Not surprisingly, it was the DPPU guards who "taxed" the vendors and the Thai rice merchants who bought back the Khmer's worker rations who benefitted most from this trade. The rice merchants had worked out a system that took blatant advantage of both UNBRO and the Khmer, but seemed to be foolproof as they had an exclusive contract for supplying UNBRO with rice. (Part of the arrangement with the Thai Government when the border camps were set up in 1985 was that all rice for the camps be purchased in Thailand.) The rice merchants bought back the Khmer's rice for less than half of what they charged UNBRO for it, creating a circulating system of profit that put money in their pockets with every transaction. Both the Khmer and UNBRO knew they were getting ripped off but neither could do much about it. The UN understood it as part of the compromise that the whole border arrangement entailed. The Khmer saw it as emblematic both of their own structural powerlessness on the border and of the way the Thais regarded them — that is, fair game for blatant exploitation.

The deals the Khmer made amongst themselves were often exploitative as well, however. Really poor families often had to borrow money or rice to get

through a difficult period when someone was sick or a job had been lost. Moneylenders were infamous for their usurious rates, although the Khmer admins made no effort to regulate the interest they charged, and Cambodian law was traditionally on the side of the money-lenders. Debts accumulated and people sometimes were jailed for failing to pay them off. Some families, in fact, were forced to sell or hock their family books in a cash emergency. Others had ongoing arrangements with wealthier families to provide daily domestic service such as child care and/or water collection in exchange for rice. These were generally quite traditional patron-client relationships, whereby the client provided whatever service the patron desired in exchange for some assurance of basic support in times of need.

Given the importance of cash in Site II as the main means of making life more comfortable and the only possible hedge against disaster, most people worked hard to make a little extra money. There was a huge amount of entrepreneurial activity in Site II. Petty trade flourished. Anything that could be made or raised or bought and resold in the sections was: silk and jewelry from Cambodia, food from the Central Market, clothing, piglets, eggs, tobacco, medicine. With inventory and equipment bought through the Thai merchants people set up drugstores, tailor shops, watch repair businesses, video parlors, tape dubbing services, dentist offices, sandwich carts, noodle stands, barber shops, beauty parlors, blacksmithies. Other people offered English language classes, French language classes, even Japanese language classes — in anticipation of Japanese investment in Cambodia in the '90s — in their homes for a monthly fee. People manufactured charcoal out of the firewood they collected, and made and

⁴¹ According to Lynch's survey (1989:51) the greatest increase in job interest in Site II occurred in the field of commercial activity. This is not surprising since commerce was one of the few areas open for exploitation, without any barriers to participation.

sold soot protectors for cooking pots from the flattened cans of their fish rations. Plastic bags were collected and melted down for lamp oil. Stills were constructed for the manufacture of rice alcohol.

Although there were obvious signs of (relative) wealth among a small segment of the population (camp administrators and other KP big-men had cement floors in their houses, and TV antennas could be seen over certain sections of the camp), 42 most of the population competed hard for the limited resources in circulation in the camp. People shifted jobs often to take advantage of new opportunities, or their perception of new opportunities -- people were always looking for a better opportunity than the one they had. In many cases there was little advantage to investing the time to learn a job well, since there was no real future in any job in Site II. Everything was going to change sooner or later and anything could change tomorrow. The uncertainty of the future had a profound affect on the way people regarded their commitments. Few people who had learned new occupations or skills on the border had any faith that they would be able to transfer their experience to work in Cambodia (Lynch 1989:50). But these new occupations typically were not what people would have chosen to do if they had had a choice about it. Very few people were working with the skills they had brought to the border.

This was an "economy of makeshift" for all but a very few KP elite in Site II, even those who seemed to be doing well by camp standards. Fortunes changed very quickly on the border, where economic as well as physical vulnerability was one of the defining characteristic of people's existence. Olwyn Hufton has used this phrase to describe the economic strategies of the poor in 18th century France,

⁴² Televisions, radios, and cassette players were run off car batteries recharged at "charging stations": neighborhood businesses built around a generator bought from a Thai middleman.

who were "not necessarily suffering from hunger, cold, pain, or physical deprivation but who lived under the constant threat of such" (Hufton 1974:22). This describes the situation of the border Khmer very well. It was the experiential knowledge of food shortage, the acute consciousness of their dependence, and the intimate understanding of disaster that caused people in Site II to do whatever they felt they had to do to make sure they had enough to survive.

In Site II people's circle of concern was, of necessity, narrow. This meant not only limiting one's responsibility to immediate family and one's oldest, closest friends but also -- not infrequently -- engaging in illegal and/or exploitative and/or violent practices aimed at acquiring extra cash. This was one of the harsh and brutalizing consequences of deprivation. Having known what it is to be deprived, few people were willing to risk being in that situation again. The level of ostensibly self-protective victimization in Site II was sometimes shockingly high. UNBRO employees who resisted pressure to steal from their programs might have their houses burnt down. Guides who knew from past experience where the families of certain wealthy border Khmer lived might kidnap and hold a family member hostage until a ransom was paid. In 1990 a young Khmer woman was found in the house of a Thai villager near Site II, and a kidnapping-forprostitution ring was uncovered. Young women were being lured out of the camp by a Khmer accomplice, then kidnapped by Thais and taken to Bangkok to be sold. The threat of robbery was constant in Site II, and people were killed for resisting the theft of as little as an eight-dollar gold chain.

James Scott has written about the conservative, risk-averse behavior of subsistence farmers in Southeast Asia, who live with a very narrow margin of loss. He writes, "There is a correspondence between the logic of the subsistence ethic and the concrete choices and values of much of the peasantry of Southeast Asia"

(Scott 1976:55). He suggests that there is a moral as well as a logical economic basis to this subsistence ethic: "These preferences grow out of the precarious human condition of subsistence farmers but they also take on a moral dimension as a claim on the society in which they live" (Scott 1976:55). Scott points out that the subsistence ethic is rooted in social exchanges as well as the economic practices of peasant society (ibid:6).

According to Scott, poor farmers accept exploitative relationships with patrons and social institutions as long as their own subsistence is guaranteed. But once these "safety first" arrangements no longer guarantee their subsistence, all deals are off. "Peasants whose subsistence formulas are disintegrating do what they can to stay afloat" (Scott 1976:26). These things include, among others, banditry as a common fall-back strategy. In Site II not only was there a sense of precariousness about subsistence, but the KP administrators and high level commanders in a position to act as patrons -- and who expected their populations to behave like political clients -- demonstrated a striking degree of selfservingness in their own behavior. People knew that their camp administrators were skimming off rice from the distributions that was supposed to go to them. People knew that KP army officers were using their positions to enrich themselves as much if not more than they were advancing the cause of the KPNLF. This offended peoples' sense of justice when ordinary soldiers got paid next to nothing and the admins taxed people's weekly food rations "to support the army." As one man said to me, "I don't mind that our leaders take something for themselves -that's part of the privilege of power. But when they take so much that the rest of us have to go without, that I cannot accept."

In Site II, as Hufton has suggested, the threat of insufficiency if not the actual experience of it promoted a survivalist ethic among even those members of the population who were not in particular need. One community leader in Site II

told me, rich people have learned to behave like poor people on the border.

Everyone looks out for him or herself. In fact, the rich had adopted strategies that the poor only used when pushed to their very limits, when the morality that underlay the subsistence ethic had given way to the sense that anything was justifiable in the pursuit of one's own survival.

In summing up her explanation of how the poor in 18th century France survived, Hufton states, "They made out ... by their own efforts, as devious, ugly, cruel and dishonest as these might be ... Transcending any standard of ethics is the obligation to stay alive. It was the observance of this sovereign imperative that the poor perforce gave their first loyalty and their abundant resourcefulness" (Hufton 1974: 367). In Site II the genuine efforts of many to recover a prior standard of behavioral ethics were challenged by very real conditions of economic dependence and vulnerability, if not outright insufficiency. In a context where a survivalist ethic predominated even among those who were not in real need, the hardiest souls often resigned themselves to strategies of protective self-interest.

Chapter 5: Political Patronage and the Exercise of Power

The camp administrators, or "admins" as they were called by the barang, were the senior political figures in Site II. They were responsible for the civil administration of their camps, and they represented their populations in their interactions with both UNBRO and the KPNLF. Although President Son Sann and several other high ranking figures occupied more senior positions in the KP hierarchy, the administrators of the five major camps (Ampil, Dangrek, Nong Chan, Sanro, and Rithysen) constituted the highest political authority in Site II.

Lay Khaek was the admin in charge of Sanro camp. He stood at the apex of an administrative pyramid of section leaders, ilot leaders, and group leaders who were responsible for organizing UNBRO distributions, monitoring water collection, maintaining order in the camp, and communicating information to and from the population (see chapter on space). Khaek maintained close contact with both the KP president and various military commanders in the KPNLA, as well as with his own population, through his administrative apparatus. He was his population's "leader."

Serge Thion has written that "the backbone of the traditional [Cambodian] political structure was the patron-client system of dyadic relationships" (Thion 1983:11). That is, political power and control traditionally has involved the accumulation of an entourage of assistants, employees, and loyal followers who provide support in exchange for various forms of protection and assistance. These people in turn build up their own patronage networks with the resources provided by their patrons. In this kind of vertically integrated system of "stratified clusters" (Anderson 1972:34) of patron-client dyads, power inheres in the number of followers one can attract for support, which in turn depends on the

resources one can command and the level of need amongst one's followers.
Among Cambodians these asymmetrical exchange relations are couched in an idiom of respect/fear (<u>klach</u>) for people of higher status and power, and legitimated through the Buddhist hierarchy of merit and virtue which underlies all social relationships in Cambodia.
The basic dynamic of patron-client relations, in which a structurally less powerful person submits to the authority of a more powerful other in exchange for protection and/or material support, is an aspect of virtually all reciprocal hierarchical relationships in Cambodia, kin and non-kin alike.

3

Historically, protection has been the central, organizing need of Cambodian peasant existence (Chandler 1983: 17; 22-26; 104-106;110). The local leader who could provide protection from exploitation, banditry, war, and seasonal food shortages was well worth his people's loyal service. But patronage became, if anything, more important in urban life as people who no longer grew their own food had to rely on various associations with others for subsistence as well as protection. In a fundamentally face-to-face society in which strangers continued to be regarded with suspicion, the connections and support of a powerful patron

¹ It is, of course, a simplification to reduce the discussion of political power to patron-client relationships. But this dynamic is an important <u>axis</u> along which power was deployed, and was especially salient in the context of Site II. See Benedict Anderson, "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture," 1972, pp. 33-36 especially.

² See Lucien M. Hanks's classic essay "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order" for a discussion of the relationship between Buddhist merit and secular power in a Theravada Buddhist society. See also Anderson, op.cit., and chapter 7.

³ Ebihara (1986:22) has suggested that an "idiom of kinship" distinguishes hierarchical relations between kin from those between non-kin — that while social superiors are treated with deference, respect and obedience, elder kin are placed in the position of protectors and providers, which creates a moral bond between them and their junior kin that is lacking in relationships of mere social hierarchy. But I would suggest that patron-client relations deliberately imitate this idiom of kinship — that this is part of what gives patron-client ties their moral force. While patrons do not always live up to their moral expectations, kinsmen are often disappointing as well.

were invaluable. In Site II, where resources were scarce, security was a significant concern, and protection could not be guaranteed by either community solidarity or the rule of law, patronage flourished from the highest to the lowest levels of the politico-administrative structure.⁴

Lay Khaek came from Trapeang Thmaa, a rural, agricultural area on the northeastern edge of Battambang Province. He was forty-eight years old. He had attended primary and secondary schools in Battambang, then completed senior high school (lycée) in Phnom Penh. He received his basou tii-pii (final baccalaureate degree) there in the early 1960s, then went on to get a degree from the Faculté Pedagogique at Phnom Penh University. He taught for one year in a lycée near the capitol, then returned to his family in Battambang where he taught for another eight years, until the Khmer Rouge took control in 1975. He came from what must have been a locally prominent family, as all of his brothers worked for the government in some capacity: two were officers in the national army, and one was a school teacher like himself. When I asked what kind of work his father did Khaek replied that he did not really work. "He owned some land; he helped people. He was ... ah ..." "Neak mien" (a wealthy man)" I suggested? Yes, he agreed.

As a high school teacher with a university education, Khaek was a prime target for execution under the DK revolution. He managed to avoid this by moving his family to the Tonle Sap when the Khmer Rouge took control of his area, to a place where nobody knew him. He worked there as a fisherman for the duration of the DK period. We worked very hard, he said, but we lived with our

⁴ Scott and Kerkvliet (1977:443) suggest that three structural conditions tend to promote patron-client networks: first, the persistence of marked inequalities of wealth, status, and power which are afforded some legitimacy; second, the relative absence — or collapse — of effective impersonal guarantees such as public law for physical security, property, and position; and third,the inability of either kinship units or the traditional village community to serve as effective vehicles of personal security or advancement. All three of these conditions were present in Site II. ⁵ See Vickery 1983 and Kiernan and Boua 1982, especially pp.338-352.

families, we kept quiet, and sometimes the cadres forgot to check biographies. In the end we were safe.

When the Vietnamese army overthrew the Khmer Rouge, Khaek traveled to the Thai border to join one of the growing anti-communist resistance organizations, known then collectively as the Khmer Sau (White Khmer). He hooked up with several local leaders he had known from his native region, who had managed to flee into Thailand in 1975 and had tried (unsuccessfully then) to build up an anti-Khmer Rouge resistance along the border. 6 With the Khmer Rouge overthrown, the Khmer Sau met with greater success, organizing in the areas they knew well east of the Thai border in Battambang, with the double goal of ousting the Vietnamese and ensuring that the Khmer Rouge did not regain power. In March 1979 these independent movements were brought under the umbrella of the Khmer People's National Liberation Army (KPNLA), the military wing of the soon-to-be-created Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). They pledged their loyalty to the overarching leadership of former Prime Minister Son Sann, and submitted to the military command of Brigadier General Dien Dael. Each resistance leader maintained control over the small army he had raised, however, and the soldiers' loyalty was to their own commander much more than it was to the rather abstract entity of the KPNLF.

While the KPNLA was working out its command structure, the KPNLF began setting up administrative committees to organize the civilians living in the resistance camps. Khaek was one of the first civilian administrators, in old Ampil camp, which was both the base camp of his old Khmer Sar associates and the headquarters of the KP Army's new General Staff. He helped set up systems to

⁶ These included Leung Sinak (Ta Mang), Siem Sam Un (Ta Luot), and Chea Chhut, all prominent figures in the early Nen Raung Movement who went on to positions of importance in the KPNLA as well. See Heder 1983, and below.

coordinate health, education, information, security and economic matters in the camp, as well as to oversee the distribution of international relief assistance. As an educator, he was also involved in establishing the KP's first Political Warfare School, which trained people to take up administrative positions in the camps, as well as to engage in political organizing inside Cambodia. By 1984 old Ampil camp had grown too big to be managed easily, and the camp was split in two. Khaek was given half the population and, together with a military counterpart, set up Sanro camp ten kilometers to the northeast.

In contrast to the other camps in Site II, Sanro was unusually socially cohesive. Most of the population (approximately 13,000)7 came from that area close to the border southeast of Site II which had been organized early in the resistance by Khaek's Khmer Sau associates. Poor, rural, and far from Phnom Penh, this area had received little attention from the governments of Sihanouk and Lon Nol. Leadership had been provided by local bigmen, and functioned on the basis of classic patronage ties, in which prosperous, educated, and/or otherwise powerful figures provided the guarantee of protection and basic assistance in exchange for periodic labor and loyal political support. Local resistance fighters had raised a loyal following through their leadership in the weeks and months after the Khmer Rouge were overthrown. In Sanro, some sections of the camp represented entire villages that had picked up and moved en masse to the border with their military commander. There was no meaningful distinction between soldiers and civilians in this camp. The civilians were all family members of soldiers, and everyone was working toward the same goal: the "liberation" of Cambodia from Vietnamese aggression and Communist control. Sanro was a genuine resistance camp.

 $^{^{7}}$ UNBRO's estimate of the population of Sanro in 1990, cited in Mollica et al, volume I, p.18.

In Sanro a sense of solidarity built upon close relationships between commanders and soldiers, local administrators and their populations, remained strong in 1990. Khaek had a good rapport with the military leaders associated with this population. He chose people he knew and trusted to be his section leaders. He considered it his responsibility to provide security in the camp, and to organize the population so as to ensure that they would receive the food, water, and building materials from UNBRO that were their due. The level of services this population enjoyed under Khaek's leadership was often much higher than anything they had received from the government in Cambodia before 1975. They appreciated the value of his organization and leadership, and repaid it with the kind of loyalty that is the foundation of a mutually satisfactory patron-client relationship.

Khaek was in many ways a classic patron: he had resources and abilities that exceeded those of his clients and he expected a certain kind of loyalty in exchange for his support (Scott 1977a and 1977b). But he held up his side of the bargain. As I was often told, "he took care of his people" — he paid more attention to the well-being of his population than was typical of Site II admins, and his associates knew they could count on him to help them if they were in trouble. Khaek was unusual in using his authority as a successful patron to try to teach "his" people to think for themselves, not just defer to the ideas of their leaders. He was deeply committed to the principles of democracy, but he knew these were foreign concepts to most Cambodians. He knew that people would need to be taught to think in new ways about power and authority if democracy was truly to succeed in his country, and he had dedicated himself to this educational task.

Although he was an unusually talented leader in many ways⁸ – no other admin in Site II enjoyed the kind of smooth relations he had with his population – there were some structural reasons for Khaek's success in Site II as well. With the exception of Nong Chan, no other camp population was as closely knit through prior relationships with each other and with its leaders. People had come to the border from all over Cambodia in 1979 and the early 1980s; those who ended up in Dangrek or Ampil or Rithysen often neither knew nor trusted their neighbors in the camp, to say nothing of their section leaders or the admins themselves. This affected the quality of their attachment to their leaders: many were loyal out of a sense of necessity and fear of the consequences of disloyalty, not because they felt any genuine dedication.

In Sanro, there was a community of purpose within the population — virtually every family was involved in the military resistance. But many people in the other camps in Site II had come to the border for different reasons. They came to trade, to look for lost relatives, to receive food assistance, to get resettled in the West. These people had gotten caught up in the border conflict in the early 1980s, and found it difficult to return to Cambodia while the war continued. Many were left with a great sense of frustration and disillusionment about their leaders, as the war dragged on and nothing seemed to change in spite of an ongoing rhetoric about solidarity, victory, and liberation (sammakki, chey chamneh, sereikar). After ten years on the border these words had a hollow ring for many people. They seemed to be spoken primarily for the benefit of the KP leaders themselves.

⁸ Khaek was unusual in being both well-educated and genuinely close to his largely poor and uneducated population; in understanding the importance of free thought and expression while still appreciating the positive value of hierarchy and loyal service. He was, for example, deeply committed to the leadership of KP President Son Sann. He had no patience for those admins who hedged their bets with Son Sann, supporting his rival General Sak Sutsakhan when Son Sann was not around.

Additionally, for most people life in Site II did not represent an improvement over what they had known before 1975. What their admins could offer them did not come close to the kind of life they considered baseline normal. Thus the genuine feelings of gratitude and respect that Khaek received from the people in Sanro were largely absent in most other camps. The nature of political patronage and the exercise of power was quite different in much of Site II, where diverging concerns and a lack of shared purpose between the people and their leaders resulted in a level of political coercion that was unusual to find in Sanro.

This chapter looks at political patronage and the exercise of power among the Cambodians in Site II, from both a structural and an experiential point of view. It considers who had political power in Site II and why, how political control was maintained, and how secure or insecure that control really was. It looks at the reasons for the particular balance of voluntarism and coercion in patron-client relationships in Site II, and at how "clients" understood and dealt with their relative powerlessness. It looks at continuities and changes since before 1975 and asks, how much are these culturally embedded relationships and how much are they generated by the particular situation in Site II? And it looks at the wider, international context of political activity in Site II, and considers what ultimately affected these power relationships the most.

James Scott and Benedict Kerkvliet have suggested that all patron-client relationships involve a balance of affective and instrumental aspects, but that the balance of reciprocity between patron and client depends largely on the bargaining position of the two parties. "How much more does the client need the patron than the patron needs the client?" they ask (Scott and Kerkvliet 1977:441). These

bargaining positions, they point out, are greatly influenced by the context and concrete structural conditions surrounding the exchange.

In Site II, the balance of exchange between the camp admins and "their" people greatly favored the admins. The admins enjoyed this high level of influence in large part because the population depended on their services — the admins controlled most of the key resources available to most people in this otherwise resource-poor environment — and because there were no serious rivals to their political power. While the camp boundaries were semi-permeable, most of the population did not, in fact, feel free to leave Site II. Thus the population was a captive political audience. The admins were, in effect, the only real patrons available.

That is, while UNBRO provided the materials upon which most of the population depended, it was the admins who controlled the distribution of these resources, and accrued the benefits of their distribution. The admins used UNBRO resources to maintain their own political organizations: to support an administrative staff which represented them to the population, and to provide the surplus needed to pursue their own political goals, which were both personal and related to the KP's political/military efforts outside the camp. UNBRO could not fulfill its humanitarian mandate without the cooperation of the admins, but in entrusting them with the distribution of subsistence materials they provided the admins with their material base of power in the camp. 9

⁹ In the earlier resistance encampments across the border that UNBRO had partially provisioned, control of UN rice was a very big business and the basis of large scale corruption among the less scrupulous camp leaders. See Mason and Brown, Rice, Rivalry and Politics, 1983, for a detailed account of the UN's efforts to maintain control of their distributions. In Site II, the relationship between UNBRO and the admins over the distribution of supplies was orderly and civilized by comparison. But the admins still benefitted enormously from their control of the distributions.

The admins controlled several other key resources in the camp as well. Given the limited employment opportunities in Site II, most of the official jobs were awarded by the admins, either directly, through the hiring of their own administrative staff, or indirectly, by requiring that anyone wishing to work with UNBRO or an NGO complete a course at the Political Warfare School before they were eligible for employment. This requirement ensured that all the Khmer heads of major UN or NGO programs had been well-versed in KP political ideology before they were hired into positions of responsibility in the camp. It contributed to the feeling that everyone was dependent upon the KP for his or her job — and could lose it if someone in the KP hierarchy was displeased with their performance. Examples like the story of Veasna's extended unemployment reinforced this idea (see chapter on economy).

The KP also controlled official movement in and out of the camp. ¹⁰ Special passes from the Thai military allowed KP soldiers and employees in the KP offices in Aranyaprathet and Bangkok to come and go freely from Site II (although their superiors decided when they would enter and leave). Occasionally Site II residents had the opportunity to travel to a third country to study or receive technical training. Through his senior position as Prime Minister of the CGDK, ¹¹ KP President Son Sann controlled the issuance of passports to the people under KPNLF control. A group of high level figures in the Son Sann faction passed judgement on who would have the opportunity to travel. Did you ever notice, a friend asked me, how it's not the most qualified people who go abroad to study, but the people who

¹⁰ There was a fair amount of unofficial traffic in and out of Site II, but this was both dangerous and expensive, as one had to pay extortionary rates to the Khmer guides and Thai guards who controlled this illegal traffic. See chapter on space. 11 Because the CGDK was the officially recognized government of Cambodia (i.e., it was recognized by the U.N.) it was authorized to issue internationally valid passports. These passports were signed by Khieu Samphan, the Khmer Rouge representative to the CGDK, who occupied the position of Foreign Minister.

are friends with leng Mouly (Son Sann's executive assistant)? But evidence of support for the KPNLF in general, not just Son Sann's faction, was a necessary precondition to receiving a passport — an outspoken critic of the administration in Site II was pointedly denied a passport to travel to the United States after all the arrangements had been made for a year of study at university there.

A final resource over which the KP maintained significant control was information. Because of the physical isolation and restrictions on movement in and out of the camp, people in Site II were cut off from information not just about Cambodia but about the rest of the world as well. News and information about the outside world came into the camp through a limited number of newspapers and magazines, KP news bulletins, radio broadcasts, and word of mouth from people who were able to travel in and out of the camp (soldiers, KP employees who worked in Aran or Bangkok, new arrivals from Cambodia and their guides, Thai traders, relief workers, visitors from the West). Since relatively few people in Site II understood a language other than Khmer, ¹² the influence of foreign news sources was rather small. Khmer language newsprint included the KP's weekly news bulletin and <u>Poelroet Khmer</u>, the UNBRO-supported camp newspaper. Both had a reasonable circulation, but only those people oriented to print were likely to read them. ¹³

In fact, most people's primary source of information (apart from the constant circulation of rumor/gossip/news) were the KP radio broadcasts. In addition to printing a weekly news bulletin, the KP Information Service broadcast several hours a day from a transmitter elsewhere on the border. These broadcasts

¹² There are no figures for the number of Khmer who spoke English or French or Thai in Site II, but one long-time UNBRO employee estimated the figure to be less than 5 percent.

¹³ Literacy figures do not really reflect the percentage of people who got information from printed sources. Many people in Site II knew how to read but did not read for news or information.

were popular for their entertainment value — Khmer songs and traditional Khmer music played regularly — but they also included several news casts each day. The majority of households in Site II had a battery-powered radio, and 56 percent of a survey sample in Site II reported listening to the radio every day; only 18 percent reported never listening to it. 14 The KP broadcasts seem to have been people's primary source of information about what was going on in the world outside the camp.

What people got from these daily broadcasts, the KP info sheets, and the periodic meetings called by their section leaders and program heads was constant re-enforcement of the KP's political perspective: the dangerous evil of the Vietnamese aggressors, the meaning of various UN and international donor actions that affected the border population, and the need for solidarity, support, and sacrifice for the KPNLF. Given the isolation of the camp and the dearth of information from other sources, the KP was able to a great extent to construct the sense of political reality within which the Site II population dwelt. 15 One of the effects on the camp population of this control of information and the interpretation of events was an increased sense of dependence on the KP in general and on people's own camp leaders in particular.

Dependence was not, in itself, bad: the most mutually satisfactory patronclient relations are based on a reciprocal (if asymmetrical) dependence. But there was a coerced quality to the compliance dependency engendered in this population which was not appreciated. The KP in general and the admins in particular were in the unusual position of having <u>no</u> significant political rivals in Site II. There

¹⁴ See Mollica, et al, "Repatriation and Disability: A Community Study of Health, Mental Health and Social Functioning," volume I, p.36.

¹⁵ Lack of information that could challenge their leaders' political interpretations limited the imaginative possibilities of the people in Site II, and hence the possibility of independent social action.

was no alternative power base in the camp equal to the control of basic distributions. Given the limited resources in Site II, the limited employment options, and the limited ability to leave the camp, the admins were in a very powerful position vis à vis their populations. Although they needed their people's support to validate their political control, Site II was a seller's market. There were very few constraints on the admins' ability to secure their people's cooperation for whatever they needed. ¹⁶ This situation was something the population of Site II understood very well. It did not matter whether they genuinely supported their admin — or their section leader, or the head of the program they worked for — or not. The price of non-compliance in Site II could be the loss of a job, a conspicuous absence of police protection, or a few nights in jail for insubordination. While it was difficult to know how often this kind of thing actually happened, it was easy to see that the fear of it happening had a disciplinary effect on the population. ¹⁷ Regardless of what people said about their leaders in private, virtually everyone demonstrated public support.

If there was not much threat to the admins' political control from within their own populations in Site II, there was a good deal of conflict among the admins for influence within the KP organization itself. The tensions among the admins, and

¹⁶ This cooperation included command performances at political rallies, preparing food for the KP soldiers, and, at times, portering supplies to the front lines, a form of service usually associated with the Khmer Rouge. See Scott and Kerkvliet 1977: 444-449.

¹⁷ Part of UNBRO's mandate was to protect the camp population from blatant exploitation by their own leaders. This was a delicate enterprise, though, because UNBRO could not provide real protection, as it was absent from the camp for more than half of each day. It could be worse for people to have their cause taken up by the barang because of the loss of face it entailed for the admin involved.

within the KP leadership in general, ran deep and had a long history. Throughout the first half of the 1980s there had been constant conflicts among the various KP leaders, as some vied for ascendancy within the KP organization, and others resisted the overarching control of a centralized leadership. The KPNLF coalition was created out of a commonality of purpose in 1979, but there was little commonality of perspective among the diverse figures who had agreed to join forces to fight the communists in Cambodia at that time. Stephen Heder has identified three distinct socio-political groups in the early KP leadership, all of which had rather different ideas about how to fight a war of resistance, and what kind of government should be put into place afterwards: 18

- First, there was an older, well-educated, urban elite, many of whom had been active in the anti-colonial movement in the 1950s and had maintained a critical stance within the parliamentary system that resulted after independence. Many were members of the opposition Democratic Party during Sihanouk's rule, and fought against the excesses and incompetence of the republican period as well, either in the National Assembly or from a critical distance in France.

- Second, there were high-ranking, professional military men from the Sihanouk and Lon Nol eras; a bit younger and less politically-minded than the first group, they were nevertheless experienced officers who had acquired their vehement anti-communism from their old school military training. They included several generals and the former head of the armed forces under Lon Nol, General Sak Sutsakhan. These men also tended to come from relatively privileged backgrounds, although their education was acquired at a professional military academy not in university.

¹⁸ See Stephen R. Heder, "The National Army for the Liberation of the Khmer Populace and the National Front for the Liberation of the Khmer Populace" (unpublished manuscript).

- Finally, there were local, non-elite resistance fighters with no formal military training, limited education, and no prior involvement in government or politics except as local bigmen (protean phum or meikhum — village headman and sub-district chief, respectively). 19 These men had distinguished themselves as talented guerrilla commanders; they were valuable allies (and dangerous rivals) for the rest of the leadership, who needed to be incorporated into a unified non-communist resistance.

These diverse factions within the leadership reflected some of the sociological and political heterogeneity in the population of Site II as a whole. There was no strong unifying political force at work within this population. People's political loyalty (such as it was) was to their local patrons or leaders, who provided them with something concrete, and with whom they felt a personal connection. This sense of personal connection rarely extended to the abstract political entity of the KPNLF, except insofar as it represented opposition to the "Vietnamese," whom most people accepted as their enemy. And their own leaders — the admins of the different camps — were anything but unified in their support of the KP leadership.

Moreover, the agonistic nature of relations between the admins -- the long-standing conflict between those loyal to Son Sann and those loyal to General Sak -- raised the stakes in their demands for loyalty among their own people. The more embattled the admins felt on other fronts, the more they demanded strong support "at home." This increased the intensity of coercion in the compliance these patrons exacted. Individual "clients" were highly expendable since there were so

¹⁹ Village headman and sub-district chief, respectively.

²⁰ Hatred of the Vietnamese was both an entrenched aspect of popular Cambodian historiography and an important goal of the KP's political propaganda efforts. See Chandler 1983, especially pp. 50-51, and French 1994, "The Search for Interpretive Logics on the Thai-Cambodia Border or: The Uses and Abuses of Popular History".

many other people eager to be part of the admins' inner circles — as one person put it, "When we are no longer useful to them, they just throw us away." Disloyalty was not tolerated in such an embattled atmosphere. But if anything this just made people's sense of the need for protection and support greater. Fear was an important motivating factor in Site II, where violence or the threat of it remained the final arbiter. Security could never be taken for granted, and political support was often produced through fear in this environment.

Conflict within the KPNLF organization ultimately took the form of an unresolved stand-off between those leaders who supported KP President Son Sann and those who supported the KP Commander-in-Chief, General Sak Sutsakhan. 21 The rivalry between these two factions within the KP organization had a profoundly divisive effect on social life in Site II, as the five admins lined up on either side of this conflict. Cooperation across lines of loyalty in the conflict was difficult at best, and often virtually impossible. The effect on the camp as a whole was to create a power struggle in almost any cooperative undertaking among the five camps, as program heads and lower level administrators took the side of their admin in the factional disputes that inevitably arose. Thus despite their near-monopoly control of political power within their own camps, there were constant conflicts among the admins over their position and influence within the KP.

If the admins maintained a near monopoly of control over their populations within Site II, their power was nevertheless highly vulnerable to certain factors and

²¹ General Sak came to the border from France in 1982; as the highest ranking military officer in the KPNLA, he replaced Dien Dael in the position of Commander in Chief.

conditions <u>outside</u> the camp. The admins' power and the power of the KP in general was to a great extent produced through and contained within the border conflict itself, and this conflict was entirely sustained by external sources. That is, the KP's very existence as a viable political/military force depended on the material and logistical support it received from the U.S., Thailand and other ASEAN countries, and China. But donors' interest in the conflict was different from the KP's, and funding levels often depended much more on the politics of assistance within the donor countries than they did on the needs of the KP army.

The KP had been hamstrung in its early years on the border by the lack of resources needed to fight a genuine war of resistance against the Vietnamese army. One of the positive outcomes for the KP of the establishment of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) was its generation of reliable sources of external support. The CGDK constituted a political entity that was acceptable to all those governments opposed to Vietnam's presence in Cambodia, and could serve as a recipient for their material assistance. By creating a political alliance between the KP, the Khmer Rouge, and the Sihanoukists, the United States, China, and the ASEAN countries were able to cooperate in their support of an anti-Vietnamese resistance in Cambodia, and give life to that resistance through their support.

But the coalition also rendered all three factions in the CGDK vulnerable to the interests of their international sponsors: the resources that enabled the Cambodian resistance to pursue its struggle put limits on its autonomy within that struggle. With the creation of the CGDK the Cambodian war became an arena for the playing out of international conflicts and tensions, most notably the strategic stand-off between the U.S., China, and the Soviet-supported Vietnamese. The power struggles among the Khmer were ultimately subordinated to these larger concerns.

KPNLF donors used their support to try to influence the conduct of war, although their interest in the conflict was often as different from each other's as it was from that of the KP.²² Thai influence was most evident, since the Royal Thai Army controlled the movement of CGDK soldiers on Thai soil, and managed the delivery of material assistance. But the U.S. also exerted as much control as it could, through the monitoring of its own material support.²³ Even China made its influence felt from a distance by withholding support when it disapproved of KP actions. Needless to say, this kind of interference was not always appreciated. After receiving a reprimand from U.S. officials for speaking publicly about the extent of U.S. support for the KP army, top KP field commander General Dien Dael was reported to have commented wearily that it might be time for him to retire, as he did not know how to fight a war according to other people's rules.²⁴

There was an increasing cynicism within the KP leadership as a whole as their own goals and strategies were overridden or undermined by their international patrons' concerns. The tenuousness of their power -- they were big fish in a small puddle that could dry up at any moment -- led many people to try to make the most of what power they had before this was lost to them altogether. It was common knowledge, for example, that all the admins had passports for their

²² The U.S., for example, while it pushed hard for the creation of the CGDK, could not for political reasons encourage anything but the most cursory cooperation with the Khmer Rouge. China, on the other hand, cut off its support for the KP altogether at one point when relations between the KP and the Khmer Rouge became especially acrimonious.

²³ The U.S. Embassy maintained a residence less than a kilometer from the KP army's logistical headquarters outside Aran, staffed with several military advisors and monitors.

²⁴ This is a great example of how differently military assistance was interpreted by American and Cambodian officials. The U.S. had an interest in keeping its military assistance quiet, as involvement in Indochinese wars was not popular at home, and support for the KP was often construed as support for the Khmer Rouge. For Cambodians, on the other hand, it was an added boon to be able to advertise U.S. assistance because it contributed to the <u>impression</u> of power that was such an important component of the KP's strength.

families and visas to the United States, to be used if the situation got too hopeless on the border. Several of the generals in the KP army had already resettled their families in the U.S., and visited them yearly in the rainy season when the fighting was slow. Even Khaek had sent his two oldest children to live with a brother in California. This did not do much for their credibility among their people — many believed that their leaders would simply abandon them when they lost hope in the viability of their political cause.²⁵

The more tenuous the connections between the admins and their people, the more likely it was that violence would be used as a means of political control. Conditions changed over time on the border; by 1990 it was more difficult for people to take justice into their own hands, and control through blatant, violent intimidation. But in the earlier years on the border, the threat if not the exercise of overwhelming force was what established someone as a political figure to be reckoned with. In 1983, at a time when old Rithysen camp had been terrorized nightly by violent acts of banditry, local policing was so ineffective that the bandits could brag about their exploits in the market the next day. Needless to say, this was damaging to the reputation of the camp leadership. Finally, after a particularly blatant act of violence, three bandits (who had identified themselves in the market the day before) were found with their throats cut at the edge of the camp. Banditry decreased significantly in Rithysen after this performance of

²⁵ The flip side of this was that outside support sustained people in positions of power who would not otherwise have been able to maintain a following. It was suggested to me more than once that certain powerful figures in Site II were more interested in staying on the border than in resolving the conflict because they would never be able to hold onto such powerful positions in Cambodia.
26 In 1988, after three years of steadily increasing violence inside the camp, UNBRO's donors demanded that a code of criminal justice be instituted, a Khmer police force trained, and several justice committees established to adjudicate criminal cases. While the justice committee could not touch the real power in the camp — the admins and the military leaders — their presence required more subtlety in the exercise of power.

superior force. The camp leadership had demonstrated its willingness to use summary execution as a means of maintaining order. This violent response sent a message to the population at large as much as it did to would-be bandits. The message said, "We can protect you. Stick with us."

Given this history at the border and people's experiences under the Khmer Rouge, the fear of violence was never far from the surface in Site II. Nobody doubted that the worst could happen in any situation. Anything could happen, at any time. It was often impossible to explain the violent things that did occur, even after the fact. The apparent arbitrariness of much of the violence in Site II accounted for much of the terror it held for people. Paut arbitrary or capricious violence was an important part of the exercise of power as well. Indeed, for Cambodians, arbitrariness was part of the definition of power. Real power consisted of being able to do anything with impunity, because nobody dared challenge it. The arbitrary exercise of power was not considered, in itself, bad. It was simply the way power was. People just wanted to be on the side of the most powerful, because then they would be protected.

It is hard to overestimate the role of violence and the fear of violence in the politics of Cambodia, both personal and national, over the last twenty-five years. It is not that people have had not thought deeply about their own history or held passionately to particular ideologies and positions. It is rather that ideological

I am thinking here of the violence that could and did erupt without warning in the sections: a grenade might be thrown into a video hall because a competing hall owner did not like the price-gouging of his competitor. A young woman might be kidnapped by a soldier and forced to marry him. Houses rumored to contain money or gold were violently burgled. It was impossible to defend oneself against this kind of violence.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, comparing the traditional Javanese concept of power to modern European conceptions, writes: "[Javanese] power ... antecedes questions of good and evil ... Power is neither legitimate nor illegitimate. Power is." His discussion of Javanese concepts of power sheds much light on the exercise of power among Cambodians.

reason has almost always been overwhelmed by the more powerful logic of force. For most Cambodians survival and self-protection have been the overriding concerns in the years since 1975. In this quest for security attachment to a powerful patron has been the best hedge against vulnerability. But these relationships are shaped by the circumstances which surround both patrons' and clients' needs. In Site II these circumstances included a great deal of everyday, unpredictable violence, and a dearth of available protection. This situation affected the kinds of relationships people were willing to accept with their patrons. Two examples of the search for security on the border will illustrate how these circumstances shaped the nature of hierarchical relations, social reciprocity and the exercise of power in Site II.

Ran Reth had worked for the KP army since 1981. He was thirty years old in 1990. He had been separated from his parents during Pol Pot time, and sent away to work in a mobile youth brigade (kong chalat); he did not know in 1979 if his parents were living or dead. He came to the border in 1981 to try to find them, and was recruited to join the propaganda unit of the KPNLA. He worked as a military photographer, taking pictures of the fighting rather than participating in it himself. When I asked him why he had decided to become a KP soldier, he said he was alone; he had no job; there was no one he could count on "to take care of him." His commander served that function for him now.

Reth was critical of the conduct of the war but firmly committed to his commander. He described a situation he had encountered in the "liberated zone," an area close to the border that the KP had taken in recent fighting in the fall of 1989. He said that when his regiment was sent "inside" they were expected to eat in the villages where they spent the night. But they were given only five baht a day (twenty cents) to pay for their meals. This sum was not enough to compensate the villagers for the food they were obliged to take. Moreover, many villages had

had to feed three other armies before their regiment arrived.²⁹ It was not a question of support or lack of support, Reth said – they could not afford to feed us. It is a very difficult situation, but it has been like this for a long time. I was reminded of other stories I had heard from people who were forced to flee to the border when PRK government officials learned they had provided food to resistance soldiers who had passed through their town. Protection was a slippery and shifting commodity in this war.

Reth was cynical about the five baht allowance. He had seen the way high level army officers lived and did not believe there was a genuine lack of resources for basic rations. He himself worked hard — the work was demanding and there was very little time to rest when he was on assignment in Cambodia. If the war ended tomorrow he would just rest, he said. And then what? Up to my commander. Will you stay with the army? I asked. Yes. Are you happy in the army? No, I am not happy, he said. But I have no place else to go. What if you had a family in Site II? Would you stay in the army then? If I had a family, I would quit immediately, Reth said. But at the moment I have nobody but my commander, so I must stay with him.

Reth's story suggests the physical vulnerability that many people in Site II felt. So many institutions of protection and support had been smashed in the previous fifteen years — in this case, most obviously, Reth's family, but also an intact community of known and trusted neighbors — that people like Reth felt deeply dependent on anyone who could provide some measure of protection and support. The admins — and the KP army commanders — certainly understood this level of need; they could expect much more from someone like Reth because he did not have anywhere else to turn.

²⁹The PRK troops, the ANC (Sihanouk's army), and the Khmer Rouge.

Vibol's story is similar in many ways to Reth's, although the lessons are more dramatically drawn. He was also an "orphan," in his late twenties. He had run a home for orphans and unaccompanied minors in Rithysen camp; I interviewed him to learn about the situation of children without parents in Site II. Vibol was fifteen years old when his parents died of starvation under Pol Pot; he was taken to live with a Khmer Rouge cadre who supervised a hospital in Battambang. He worked as this man's servant, washing his clothes, cleaning his house, serving his family. When DK cadres from the southwest took over his area in northeast Battambang his boss was purged, and Vibol was sent to work in a mobile youth brigade. When the Vietnamese arrived he was given a gun and became a soldier in the Khmer Rouge army. The reason I became a soldier, he said, is because when the Vietnamese invaded Kampuchea I did not know anyone I could trust. So I had to go with the Khmer Rouge.

In 1980 Vibol was badly injured by a landmine, and was taken eventually to the ICRC surgical hospital in Khao I Dang. He stayed there for three months recovering from his wound. While he was in Khao I Dang several people in the hospital urged him not to go back to his unit; to stay in the camp and try to get resettled in the west. But I did not know anybody in Khao I Dang, Vibol said. And I wanted to have the chance to return to Kampuchea to make a proper funeral for my parents. So I went back to my unit, where I had friends. Vibol stayed with his DK unit for another three years.

In 1983, by chance, while visiting one of the Khmer Rouge civilian camps, Vibol ran into his godfather, an old friend of his father from Battambang. Vibol cried when he saw him, and this man, who was a trader and travelled from camp to camp, urged him to leave the DK army and go with him to old Nong Chan camp, where he had a house. I left that night, Vibol said, without asking anyone's permission.

From Nong Chan Vibol went to old Rithysen camp and eventually, in 1985, he was moved to Site II. I wanted to study but I had no money, Vibol said, so worked in construction to make some money to support my studying. I worked very hard. I had to, because I had no one to rely on. I needed to study so I would have the knowledge to be able to support myself. When he completed an English language course in 1987, he was asked by the admin in Rithysen to work in an office interviewing new arrivals to the camp and gathering statistics for the U.S. Embassy. It was a job of considerable responsibility and Vibol worked hard at it. I use what I have learned to try to do my job well, he says. Because I am an orphan. I must avoid mistakes. I work hard for my boss. Because if I do something wrong, he will hate me, and I will have no place to stay, no support anymore.

Several things are significant about this story. First, there is the lack of choice about what one does when faced with the frightening power of the Khmer Rouge. Vibol became a Khmer Rouge soldier because there was no alternative for him — he was young and alone, he knew nobody in the area, there was nowhere he could go but with them. It made no difference who the Khmer Rouge were or what they stood for. He had no choice but to do what they told him. The importance of personal relationships in guaranteeing one's safety is critical here. Vibol did not stay in Khao I Dang (where he would have been under the protection of the UNHCR) because he did not know anyone in the camp — there was nobody there he could trust. He preferred to return to his unit in the DK army, where he knew what he was dealing with. Three years later he walked out of the Khmer Rouge camp and never looked back because he had found someone he knew from the past and trusted intimately who was willing to guide him. This was worth much more to him than the abstract protection of the UN.

Vibol was keenly aware of his vulnerability as an orphan; he worked to be able to study because he knew he would have to take care of himself — he would

never have family to fall back on. But he also cultivated his relationship with a powerful patron, the admin in Rithysen camp. He recognized the value of this connection — of the benefits of being the admin's "client" — and tried hard to do nothing that might jeopardize that relationship. His admin's politics were of concern to him only insofar as they might affect their relationship.

Many people in Site II never questioned what their leaders were doing or asking them to do — there was no point in questioning since they had little choice but to do what they were told. This attitude was not new for many Cambodians who considered themselves "low" because of their poverty and/or lack of education, and felt a combination of respect and fear (klach) for those more powerful than they. They had to take care of themselves, and attaching themselves to powerful figures through clientage was an important strategy of protection. Moreover, they had good reason to fear the power of their patrons, as even civilian admins maintained control through the threat of violent sanctions.

On the other hand many people felt anger and resentment when their leaders behaved in blatantly self-serving ways. Reth did not appreciate the fact that his commander lived so comfortably when he and the rest of the soldiers were not even provided with adequate rations. I don't mind when my leader takes something for himself, a friend of mine told me. That's part of the prerogative of power. It's just when they take so much that there is nothing left for the rest of us - that I cannot accept.

In fact, my friend had little choice but to accept his leader's behavior, but he was not obliged to accept passively. Even the poorest and most evidently powerless were not without resources when it came to dealing with the capricious behavior of people more powerful than they. There are long-standing patterns of dealing with "powerlessness" in Cambodia, which I would characterize, after James Scott (1985), as "strategies of the weak." The most ubiquitous is to acquiesce publicly to a

powerful person's demands, while privately working out ways to use that power to one's personal advantage. This dynamic is so common as to be a standard component of classic patron-client relationships in Cambodia, and a smart patron understands the hidden conditions of his client's compliance.30

In Site II, where resources were limited but individual fortunes changed rapidly — new UNBRO programs were introduced, which created new employment (and exploitation) opportunities; other programs might be cut suddenly, obliterating jobs; military victories occurred, which brought rewards to the commanding officers; donor support shifted, and the very future of the KPNLF might be called into question — people were constantly striving to identify the best patron, the best job, the best opportunity. The balance of power within the KP shifted back and forth on the border as well, as first General Sak then President Son Sann's star rose or fell in the context of international diplomacy and donor support. A lower level patron's promise might not mean much in Site II when the source of his own power was tenuous. Thus there was constant wheeling and dealing on the border, as the political landscape shifted and people rushed to position themselves favorably relative to each new configuration of power. The result was that people's commitments to each other, as patrons and as clients, were often rather shallow. People made their commitments to the main chance.

Some people tried to anticipate these shifts in political power in Site II, so as to be on the winning side when the shift occurred. The story of Soeurn's employment dilemma perfectly illustrates this situation. Soeurn had worked for several years in a responsible mid-level position in the office of the KPNLA General Staff. He had been sent twice to Malaysia to receive training in communications from U.S. advisors, made careful, strategic use of his connections with high

³⁰ UNBRO and the NGOs, on the other hand, often did not understand these hidden conditions, and did not consider <u>themselves</u> indebted at all.

ranking military officers, and was well enough positioned to cultivate a few clients of his own. But a conflict with his immediate supervisor caused Soeurn to quit his appointment and distance himself from the source of whatever influence he had had, i.e., the KP military hierarchy — the General Sak faction.

Soeurn was at loose ends for a couple of years after that, having, it seemed, burned his bridges to all the relationships and hierarchies that had sustained him in the past. He worked for me briefly, but felt that interviewing rice farmers was beneath his status, and he quit after a few months. He worked on and off as the secretary of a justice on one of the justice committees, but the justices did not have much power, and this man could not do much for Soeurn.

Soeurn's dilemma emerged when he was offered an administrative job in a new office that President Son Sann was planning to open in Aranyaprathet. Although his relations with General Sak's people were not good, Soeurn was reluctant to cast his lot so publicly with Son Sann, whose influence was currently on the wane in the KP.³¹ On the other hand, Soeurn was afraid he would offend the President by turning down his offer, and wind up without any allies at all. In the end he was able to finesse the dilemma by pleading that he was needed at home, and could not leave the camp for work at that time. He managed to save face without offending anyone, and still keep his political options open.

At one point when he still had not decided what to do about the job offer Soeurn remarked, "One thing's for certain. If I take this job Prom Sat and Bun

³¹ Because of the conflict between them, there was a strict division of responsibility and labor within the KP. Sak dealt with military matters; Son Sann with political and diplomatic concerns. Because of this — and presumably because of the close relationship between Sak and the U.S. military, which dated to the Lon Nol era — all U.S. military assistance was being sent directly to Sak, while Son Sann received a much smaller stipend to cover his diplomatic travel. This meant that Sak had much more money at his disposal to promote his people and his cause. When I asked Soeurn what Son Sann would need to improve his popularity and power, he replied, "Money. If he had more money lots of people would want to work for him."

Thep will go with me." In a classic manner he was working his patronage connections both up and down the status hierarchy; maintaining good working relations with his own clients even as he contemplated a new form of clientage for himself. Soeurn had more autonomy and flexibility than either of the younger men whose stories are recounted above. He also was without family support in the camp, but he was older, better educated, and rather well-connected in spite of his problems with the military hierarchy. There were, in fact, many more work opportunities open to him than to either Reth or Vibol, if he could swallow his pride enough to consider them. But pride was not an insignificant matter. Having lost so much in his precipitous departure from the military, his pride helped him avoid the demoralization and despair that had overcome many in Site II. 32

This kind of angling for the best opportunity, keeping a sharp eye out for the main chance even as one put forward a respectful, compliant face, is a classic Cambodian "strategy of the weak." It was often taken to extreme lengths in Site II, where everything was temporary and provisional, and the moral basis of patronclient ties was undermined by insecurity and need on all sides. The losses people had suffered in recent years and their sense of vulnerability on the border seemed to justify almost any behavior that could be construed as "self-protective."

Among the Thais, for example, most Khmer were considered untrustworthy — they will tell you one thing then do something completely different, I was told by Thai friends. But the Khmer had good reason to mistrust the Thais, and few Khmer were deceitful in a relationship they were trying to protect and cultivate. With the barang, Khmer subtly promoted a sense of moral obligation, insinuating

Weasna is a good example of someone who suffered greatly from his loss of pride. In fact, Soeurn's scheming paid off in the end. As it turned out, Son Sann never opened the office in Aranyaprathet after all. But not long afterwards Soeurn was offered the opportunity to go to the U.S. for a year to study. Needless to say, he took it.

that it was our responsibility as wealthy Westerners to support this wedding or that holiday feast. Thais were immune to this kind of insinuation. But the barang, while more manipulable than the Thais, did not make especially good patrons because we were not familiar with the kind of mutual obligation that went along with these patron-client ties. We tended to give out of a sense of charity, neither expecting anything in return nor accepting an ongoing relationship of obligation with the recipients of our gifts. In short, we could not be counted on to reciprocate servility with support.

In spite of all the wheeling and dealing that went on in Site II, the sense of being victimized by circumstances, of being pawns in other people's political games, was a constant and oppressive part of the experience of living in the camp. Using strategies of the weak does not change one's position, it just ameliorates some of its consequences. The Khmer often felt powerless in the face of the Thais and the barang as well as their own political leaders, who were capable of pursuing their own interests directly. They, on the other hand, had to be patient, to swallow their anger, to pursue their goals indirectly. One man said to me, "When we find something we cannot abide, cannot accept here, we have to swallow it. We have a Khmer proverb; it says: 'Follow your kamma; let it go; be patient with your destiny (Trong taam kamm tiw).' To bear, to follow your fortune, to be patient: that is the goal. Instead of seeking more solutions for the victims, the victims are often told to just bear their injustice, to swallow their grave! dinner." The oppression that people lived with became more evident over time in Site II. After awhile, what people did not say spoke louder than what they did.

To summarize: the main mechanism of political control in Site II — patronage in exchange for protection and/or support — was well-known to camp residents. The patron-client dynamic was a part of most dyadic non-kin relationships in Cambodia, and many kin relationships as well. What was striking was the level of violence and coercion involved in the maintenance of control, in spite of the fact that the balance of power clearly favored the patrons in these exchanges. A number of factors contributed to this situation. One was the lack of strong political solidarity between most of the population and their leaders. Most people — patrons and clients alike — regarded political patronage in an instrumental light. Another factor was the uncertainty of the admins' positions within the KP organization, given the ongoing conflict between President Son Sann and General Sak. Finally, the admins' own dependence on external support and the differing interests of their external sponsors made what power they did have seem tenuous, uncertain, unreliable at best.

Violence, however, cut through uncertainty and confusion with unquestionable authority. In spite of its horror, the clarity of violence had a distinct appeal in Site II where so much was unstable, unreliable, untrustworthy, unclear. People resorted to violence out of frustration but also, I think, out of a need for certainty, a need to make something <u>definite</u>. There were leaders in Site II who constructed and exercised their authority in subtler ways — Khaek was one—but violence was always the higher power in the camp.

Interestingly, the tight grip the admins held on their populations had begun to loosen when I returned to Site II in the summer of 1991. At this point the peace negotiations between the resistance leaders and the government in Phnom Penh,

which had been taking place intermittently since 1988, had progressed to the point that a peace agreement was clearly going to be signed soon. Repatriation to Cambodia was becoming a certainty not simply a dream without real substance. Suddenly the admins were looking ahead to a much wider political and social field, in which the balance of reciprocity between themselves and their "supporters" would be significantly altered. No longer would they have a captive political audience at their disposal. Persuasion, not coercion, was the new form that politics would have to take in Cambodia. Donor support would play a much smaller role in their overall power.

Earlier, Lay Khaek had told me, "Some admins in Site II have the support of their people and some do not. But it is very important to have popular support. If you don't have that support, things could be very dangerous for you in the future." He meant, it seemed, that people would remember how their admins had treated them, and that the admins would not always be in such an invulnerable position as they were in Site II. "It would be difficult for anyone to hurt an admin in Site II; there is no place here to hide. But in Cambodia" In Cambodia it would be easy for someone to seek revenge if he or she had been ill-used on the border, and much more difficult for the admins — or anyone who had used his power in a cavalier fashion — to protect themselves. The balance of power between patron and client shifts dramatically when people are free to move where they like, and can chose among several possible patrons (Scott and Kerkvliet 1977:448-449).

A new balance of power loomed ahead in Site II in the summer of 1991. Everyone looked forward to repatriation. Whatever else it would bring, the move would leave the KP leadership with much reduced political leverage and control. I was told that summer that several admins had become quite anxious about their personal safety, and had noticeably changed their behavior toward the people who worked for them.

Chapter 6: Households, Marriage, Family

Vanny was an incredible saleswoman. I got to know her early in my time in Site II, because she came regularly to my office with items to sell: cotton kramahs, silk from Cambodia, silver rings and bracelets, gold earrings. Sometimes she brought brass figurines, or carved apsaras; other times she had an entire traditional Khmer orchestra carved in miniature. I never knew what she might bring. I began to dread her appearances and would tell her, no, no, I can't buy anything today, even before she had a chance to show what she had brought. But Vanny had an uncanny ability to make a sale. She always managed to have something unusual, or unexpectedly beautiful, and I would find myself spending all the money I had on something I would never have imagined wanting to buy, like emerald earrings, for example, or four meters of exquisite deep purple silk. How she managed to come up with these things was an ongoing mystery. Much of it had been smuggled across the border from Cambodia on somebody's back. Other items were made in Site II itself. But she seemed to have a line on the best weavers in the camp, who used the loveliest colors of cotton and silk, and the really talented woodcarvers. She was masterful at what the Khmer call "putting a hook in your heart (peak tuk cet menous)." She could always come up with something I felt I had to buy.

Vanny's talent for finding what one needed was not limited to souvenirs, and I soon began using her advice to locate people to interview. She was a devout Buddhist and turned out to be a very good informant about Buddhist practice in the camp. She was also a spirit medium, and from time to time would invite a particular spirit into her body which could be consulted about situations of illness or misfortune, her own or somebody else's. When I finally began to focus on her life story, I found a tragedy of near-mythic proportions. But it was an ongoing

story: Vanny was in the middle of it, and her ways of coping with her evolving situation were a continuing education in, among other things, survival, and the ways that families absorbed the impact of Pol Pot time and afterwards. Because her story illustrates so many of the conflicts and strains that Cambodian families had endured in the previous fifteen years, it is presented as an introduction to this discussion of households, marriage and family relationships in Site II.

Vanny was forty years old in 1990, although she looked easily ten years older than that. She was born in Phnom Penh, the daughter of a civil servant. Her father worked in the military police, first for the French and then under Sihanouk. She had an aunt who worked in the royal palace, and she spent a lot of time at the palace growing up. In general, she had a rather indulged childhood, a privilege of the bureaucratic, urban, middle class of which she was a part. She was married at age seventeen to a young policeman, someone her parents had chosen for her. Vanny worked in a pharmacy in Phnom Penh for six years after her marriage. But when her mother died, she had to quit her job to take care of her household herself. She had three children by that time; she would have three more before her husband died in 1977.

In April 1975 Vanny and her family were evacuated along with the rest of the population of Phnom Penh, and sent to Battambang Province. There they were put to work with three to four hundred other people cutting grass for thatch. Within three months two of her children had died of diarrheal disease. There were no medicines then, Vanny said, only roots and leaves which the kru khmer boiled to treat illnesses. No funeral ritual was allowed. Vanny buried her children together in the same grave, said her own prayers and dedicated what merit she

could to their spirits, since there were no monks to perform this service. I was devastated by this, Vanny said. I cried every night.

In 1977 the Khmer Rouge discovered that Vanny's husband had worked for the Lon Nol government. He was separated from her and sent away to a reeducation camp, where enemies of the revolution were worked particularly hard under extremely harsh conditions. Three months later he was sent back because he could no longer work. His whole body was swollen with edema from malnutrition, and he died a few days later, leaving Vanny alone with three children and another one on the way. Three months later her eldest child died, and a fourth child died before the Khmer Rouge were overthrown. My suffering was unimaginable, Vanny said. I almost lost my mind.

But Vanny did not lose her mind, and when the Vietnamese liberated Cambodia in 1979 she took her two remaining children and made her way to Svay Sisophon, a market town near the Thai border. There she began making money to support herself trading in the market. Actually, there was no money at that time, Vanny said. You bartered or bought things with rice or gold. For example, if you wanted something to eat you would take a tin of rice to exchange for it. When Pol Pot time was over I did not own any gold, but in Sisophon I saved a lot of rice. I traded rice for fruit, and traded fruit for medicine, and then I traded the medicine for more rice. Finally I exchanged the rice for gold, and kept it. My children were very small then, and skinny as monkeys.

After four months in Sisophon, Vanny decided to move to the border because she had heard there were foreigners there providing food and medicine. She arrived in old Rithysen camp and worked for two years for the Irish relief agency, CONCERN, in a feeding program for underweight children. Then she moved to old Ampil camp, but there her luck began to turn bad again. First, her husband's family contacted her, and took her remaining two children to live with

them in Pursat province. They did not have many children of their own so they wanted to keep my children, Vanny said. My sister-in-law told me, we will never see our brother's face again, but his children can remind us of him. In Cambodia, children legally belong to the husband's family; in a dispute or a divorce the husband has the right to custody (Ebihara 1971:113). I was told it was not uncommon for the family of a man who has died to ask his wife to give them his children to raise, although the reverse would never occur: a wife's family has no right to ask for her children. Vanny felt she had to do what her husband's family requested. So now, she said, I have two children in Pursat. But she herself was left alone.

Soon after, Vanny was arrested by the political authorities in Ampil on suspicion of spying for the Vietnamese. She was held in jail for one month, and ended up marrying a man who worked in the office of the KPNLF administration and helped to get her released. It was not until I knew Vanny fairly well that I learned this marriage had not been entirely voluntary on her part. I did not love him, Vanny said, but if I did not marry him I would have had to stay in jail indefinitely. Many soldiers coerced women into marriage in similar ways in the early years on the border. As she was unaccompanied by male kin, Vanny was particularly vulnerable to such coercion. In fact, it seemed to Vanny that the

¹ On the other hand, it was more usual for the wife to take the children in a divorce, unless she had abandoned the household, thereby demonstrating herself unfit to raise them. (It was more common for the husband to abandon the household; rarely would these men press claims for their children.) The fact that husbands had greater rights than wives over their children seems to relate more to the "pervasive and multi-leveled inequality" (Eberhardt, in Ledgerwood 1990:40) that characterizes Buddhist societies, and places women in an inferior position vis a vis men, than to a bias in the kinship system itself. See Ebihara 1971:113 and 1986:2. Ledgerwood argues that gender inequality in Cambodia is based in these fundamental Buddhist understandings, which are institutionalized throughout Cambodian culture in custom as well as law. See Ledgerwood, 1990, especially pp. 33-64. Vanny's in-laws seem to have been invoking a kind of male prerogative that has more to do with custom than law.

accusations of espionage were simply a set-up for the soldiers. All the woman who were accused of spying had light skin and pretty faces, she said.²

Vanny and her new husband stayed together, however, and she had three more children with him. In 1985, when everyone in the KP-affiliated border camps was moved to Site II, her husband quit his work with the KPNLF and began working as a smuggler. Because he had good connections with the KP, he could travel in and out of Cambodia with the KP soldiers, taking Thai consumer goods into Cambodia and bringing back Khmer silk, gold and gemstones to sell in the Thai markets. The soldiers were supposed to provide him with some protection, but in 1987 he was caught in a skirmish between KP and Vietnamese soldiers, and was killed.³ It was a dangerous job, Vanny conceded, but if he had not done it we would not have had enough money to feed the children.

Vanny reminded me that until late in 1987 only women and girls over the age of eight were provided with a rice ration. One ration was supposed to feed 2.75 people, a multiplier meant to accommodate the number of civilian men and boys in the camp and children under the age of eight. UNICEF devised this system in 1980 in an effort to avoid feeding those men in the border camps who were working as soldiers (see chapter on economy and below) and UNBRO inherited it in 1982. Needless to say, the soldiers got rice anyway, and the system particularly penalized those families with both a civilian husband and several young children.

² Whatever the merits of Vanny's case, traders who moved between Cambodia and the border areas held by the various resistance factions always risked arrest on suspicion of traitorous activity. Because they did not submit to the political control of any faction, they were considered suspect by all of them.

³ In addition to the dangers of cross-fire, smugglers like Vanny's second husband risked violent death at the hands of both dacoits "patrolling" the trade routes, and soldiers of any of the resistance factions, suspicious of their political loyalties. Stephen Heder has suggested that the killing of traders may have been the most common cause of violent death along the border in the early 1980s, after the battle related deaths of military personnel. See Heder, n.d., p. 9.

This was Vanny's situation: the one rice ration she received was insufficient to feed all five members of her family.

When I met her, 'Vanny was living alone with her three children, aged seven, four, and almost two. She said it was dangerous for a woman to live without a husband in Site II — people did not treat her with respect⁴ and men sometimes tried to enter her house at night — but she did not want to marry again. She said she was afraid that if she remarried, her husband would not treat her children well because they would not be his. She could support herself well enough through her sales, and she had learned to trust her neighbors to help her when she was in trouble. A husband, she thought, would be more trouble than he was worth. She said, I don't think about my own life now, I just work for the future of my children.

Vanny did marry again, though, to a shy young man in his mid-twenties, who had lived in her household for several years as an adopted son. Keng had arrived at the border in 1979 in search of his father and brother, from whom he had been separated under Pol Pot. He was fifteen at the time and completely alone. Vanny took him in, and he stayed in her house for five years, at which time she urged him to ordain so that he could get an education. He did ordain, and remained in the wat studying for five years more. But he began to miss people after awhile, so he disrobed in 1990, returning to Rithysen camp where Vanny was living. They decided to marry, according to Vanny, because she loved him and knew that he loved her children and would treat them well. In spite of her earlier insistence that she would never marry again, Vanny clearly felt safer and happier with Keng in the house. Keng had no family at all — his mother had died

⁴ She meant by this not so much that people were rude to her but that they did not treat her like a respectable woman; that is, they treated her as though she was a prostitute.

when he was a child and he had resigned himself to the death of his father and brother. He married Vanny, he said, because she was sympathetic and understood his difficult situation much better than a younger woman would. In fact, however, without money or a family to vouch for him, he would have had a difficult time finding a respectable young woman whose parents would agree to a marriage.

Families, in their nuclear, stem, or loosely extended form, have traditionally constituted the fundamental unit of social organization in Cambodia (Ebihara 1981:110-114). Households, organized around one of these three family structures, have been the locus of production, consumption and reproduction in rural agricultural Cambodia (Martel 1975:199-211). While not all work was family-based in the towns and cities, association and mutual assistance proceeded through family ties. In most societies families are the repositories of cultural knowledge and values, and an important site for their transmission. In pre-Pol Pot Cambodia this was particularly true since, outside of organized Buddhism, there was no enduring social institution beyond the family, and no larger organized kin structure (Ebihara 1971:92-148). Such fundamental sociological understandings as gender relations, status hierarchy, and the basis of power and authority have been communicated to children in and through family activities and relationships in Cambodia. Marriages were important events in the consolidation and enactment of a family's social status, and weddings were a public display of filial piety and respect, as well as family honor (Ebihara 1971:466-488).

In the DK period, all prior forms of power and authority were subjugated to the <u>Angkaa</u>, including most of those previously invested in families. Families

were physically divided, and the traditional authority of elder kin was undermined through insistence on the equality of all people in the eyes of the Angkaa, the deliberate fostering of suspicion between children and parents, and the Angkaa's assumption of many of the functions that had been the domain of families before 1975. DK even tried to extend its control over marriage and sexuality by arranging marriages between strangers and consecrating these in mass bureaucratic weddings. The net effect of these practices was to undermine the moral basis as well as the structure and function of Cambodian families (Ebihara 1986:18-19; 1987:28-31).

The traditional form of Cambodian families was further undermined during the years of war and displacement that followed the overthrow of DK, and in Site II in 1990 marriages and family units continued to be the locus of considerable conflict and strain. New marriage patterns and household arrangements had appeared in response to the new needs and constraints of life in a border camp. But despite or perhaps because of this there was also a reassertion of the traditional authority structure within these family units, and an insistence on adherence to certain traditional standards of conduct even when this seemed, under the circumstances, unrealistic in the extreme.

This chapter looks at the dynamics which have produced particular marriage patterns, household structures, and family relationships in Site II. It considers reasons for the changes that have occurred since Pol Pot time, as well as reasons for the reassertion of traditional authority relations within families, and the often hyper-conscious public display of family status through the marriage of daughters. Vanny's marriages illustrate the range of conditions under which new families have been created over the last twenty-five years, and a range of different marriage patterns which reflect both the constraints of these conditions and an insistence on maintaining certain "family values" from the past.

In Cambodia before 1975 the most important kinship ties were between husbands and wives; parents and children; siblings; grandparents and grandchildren; and, depending on proximity, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and first cousins (Ebihara 1971:93-99). Kinship ties were based on a deep sense of loyalty, affection, respect, and moral obligation in the context of a Theravada Buddhist universe in which age is an important status gradient, men and women occupy different positions in the Buddhist hierarchy of virtue, parents are responsible for protecting and "raising" their children, and children are taught to regard their parents as their first god.

As Ebihara has described, Khmer kinship organization is fundamentally bilateral: there is no institutionalized weighting of paternal or maternal lines in property ownership or inheritance, in kin terminology, or in the recognition of or behavior towards kinsmen (Ebihara 1986:2). Beyond the close kin listed above, most people recognized a "personal kindred" of more distant relatives by blood and marriage with whom, for individual or circumstantial reasons, they maintained an especially close relationship (Ebihara 1971:148-173). Kinsmen and women, or bong p'oun (literally, "older and younger siblings") constituted a social category clearly distinct from non-kin within which trust, affection, and mutual support were shared in a way that was not easily extended beyond the kinship network (Ebihara 1968 and 1986).

From the ethnographic literature (Delvert 1961; Ebihara 1971 and 1977; Kalab 1968; Martel 1975) we know that households were flexible domestic and economic units organized around a nuclear or stem family, but often including more distant kin and/or adopted relations, either temporarily or permanently. In

the countryside households were the economic unit of production and reproduction: members worked together in the fields or woods and/or contributed to the household economy through their wage labor. The composition of the household depended on what stage in its developmental cycle the family was in: at different times there might be only a couple and their young children, or an older couple living with one or two married and unmarried children, or a widowed grandparent with a married child and that couple's children. It also depended on the needs and resources of the various family members, and the number of people a particular household's resources could support. It was within this household unit that the strongest family ties of loyalty, affection, moral obligation and mutual assistance were found. (See Ebihara: 1971 140-148; 1977:52-53; Martel 1975:199-223.)

Marriages ultimately created a new family and usually a new household, although newlyweds often lived for a year or two in the house of one of their parents until they were economically independent. Although marriages often involved love and/or mutual attraction, it was more important that they be based on the mutual recognition of good character. While couples might choose each other, their parents' approval of the match was important. The background of each was thoroughly researched and if either one was considered not worthy of the other the parents usually prevailed upon their son or daughter to call the relationship off. In practice this meant that people usually married someone of roughly equivalent social status. Economic considerations were taken into account, as were the horoscopes of both parties, but of first importance was that the prospective bride be a woman of high moral virtue and the prospective groom be prepared to take on the responsibilities of husband soberly and responsibly. 5

 $^{^{5}}$ See Ebihara 1971:466-474 and 1974:315-319 for the considerations that go into choosing a marriage partner.

A traditional wedding was a two-day affair involving multiple rituals and ceremonies and considerable expense (Ebihara 1971:474-487). Weddings were given by the bride's family, but their size depended in large part on the size of the "gift" that the groom traditionally paid to the family during the pre-nuptial negotiations, and the expectation of return from the guests who were invited to sii kaa, or "eat the wedding." To accept a wedding invitation involved a commitment to contribute to it financially. Weddings thus activated ongoing social obligations, since a wedding gift entitled one to expect a similar contribution when there was a wedding in one's own family. Weddings were an important display of wealth and family connection; they were also understood to reflect the virtue of the bride and the honor of her family. While a young man paid respect to his parents by becoming ordained and dedicating merit to their souls, a young woman repaid the effort her parents put into raising her by remaining chaste and virtuous, attracting meritorious suitors, and making an impressive marriage.

A new wife was expected to pay honor and obeisance to her husband and his family, maintain a clean and thrifty household, bear and take major responsibility for the raising of children, and manage the household purse. A husband was expected to provide his wife with adequate means to fulfill these tasks, respect her position in the domestic domain while dealing as necessary with the wider world, and maintain overall responsibility for the family's well-being. This meant making all major decisions involving economic, domestic and extradomestic affairs. These expectations were deeply embedded in the Khmer understanding of what it meant to be a good woman and a good man; they had

moral and religious implications as well as the more obvious economic and practical ones related to the household division of labor. 6

As far as we know, Vanny's first marriage followed the traditional pattern. She was married at a young age to a man of her parents' choosing, who was roughly her social equivalent (he did the same kind of work as her fauler). By remaining near her parents and taking advantage of her mother's assistance, Vanny was able to work in Phnom Penh for the first six years of her marriage. When her mother died, however, Vanny had to quit her job and take full responsibility for her household. Her eldest children no doubt grew up spending a lot of time with their grandparents, and probably with their aunts and cousins as well.

Under Pol Pot, in the years between 1975 and 1979, the integrity of family units was undermined in many ways. The physical integrity of families was destroyed as husbands and wives were separated to work at different tasks in different locations, and children and teenagers were sent away to work in special youth brigades. The economic and domestic significance of families was undermined by the instigation of massive work crews and collective dining halls,

⁶ See Ledgerwood 1990, pp. 65-124 for an excellent discussion of the attributes of virtuous women and men, and the ways these attributes are inculcated in young Cambodians through various literary genres.

Teenagers were subjected to particularly intense political indoctrination in these isolated, mobile work groups, known as kong chalat. Later, in Site II, older people would talk about this cohort, then in their late twenties and early thirties, who had grown to adulthood under the influence of the Khmer Rouge. How can they raise decent families of their own when they grew up with the Khmer Rouge as their parents? people would ask. There was concern about the reproduction of communist values as this group began raising their own children, having lost out on a proper upbringing themselves.

as well as long evening meetings which came at the end of an exhausting day's work, and left no time for family members to be alone together. The moral basis of family relations was undercut as kin terms which recognized traditional distinctions of age and status were discouraged or prohibited, and children were taught to be suspicious of their parents' behavior. In theory, everyone had become equal under the Angkaa, to which all duty and moral obligation was due. 8 Angkaa even tried at times to regulate marriage and sexuality by allowing certain DK soldiers to marry whomever they chose, and compelling strangers to marry, often abruptly, in mass weddings. These marriages were ordered without regard for the economic and social class background of the couple, and resulted in many incompatible matches. 9 They also effectively obliterated the families' role in the marriage arrangements. 10

Overwork and inadequate food further undermined the affective basis of even close kin relations under DK. One young man told me, "In the Pol Pot era, we didn't think about anyone but ourselves. Even our beloved parents we forgot about, because we were so hungry. We wanted something to fill up our stomachs

⁸ In fact, of course, there were hierarchies of power and authority in Democratic Kampuchea as well, they were just based on different criteria than the hierarchies of earlier eras.

⁹ Often these marriages did not last beyond 1979, and in marriages that did survive, there was much ambivalence. Soeurn had been married by the Khmer Rouge to a woman who was an inappropriate match. He came from Phnom Penh; he was the son of an architect. She came from rural Battambang; her parents were rice farmers. As if to confirm the mismatch, they were physically at odds: he was slight and pale, and she was dark and enormous. The two had gone their separate ways in 1979, but had met again a year later and decided to get back together, since both were essentially alone in the world. When I met Soeurn in 1989 he and his wife had three little boys, to whom they were both devoted. But Soeurn's wife did not fit in the kind of circles he wished to be moving in, and his feelings toward her were mixed. I learned that the year before he had left his wife and sons to try to get himself resettled in America by bribing his way into Khao I Dang. But in the end he did not feel right about leaving his family, so he came back to Site II.

¹⁰ For a concise discussion of the impact of DK on family life and kinship, see Ebihara 1987:28-31 and 1986:14-23. See also Ledgerwood 1990, pp.199-202.

and we didn't have any feeling for anyone else." Fear of even inadvertent betrayal to the <u>Angkaa</u> poisoned trust among kin, and deaths by disease, starvation, and execution left virtually no family intact. The deaths of Vanny's first husband and four children, while devastating, were not unusual during that period, in certain parts of the country especially. 11

Families were further divided by the flight of hundreds of thousands of Khmer to the Thai border beginning in 1979. Although many people came to the border looking for relatives after the overthrow of Pol Pot, families were separated by the enmity between the resistance movements at the border and the government in Phnom Penh. (If a Khmer was known to have spent time on the border it was not safe for him to return to his family in Cambodia. He was considered an enemy of the state, and he put his family at risk as well as himself.) Even if an entire family managed to get to one of the border camps intact and remain together there, people lost the support of extended and trustworthy kin networks in their home towns and villages. Trust was a fundamental issue on the border, and long term deprivation meant that people did not extend their trust and support beyond those with whom they had the closest and most enduring relationships (Muecke 1992). Those arriving without the support of close and trustworthy kin were vulnerable indeed.

There was a great deal of treachery on the border in the early 1980s, as the story of Vanny's second marriage clearly illustrates. Much of the resistance was poorly organized and poorly disciplined (Lawyer's Committee 1990:140-146). Many people lived in encampments run by what were essentially local warlords, soldiers and civilians together, with no law to speak of beyond the point of a gun.

¹¹ Several people have written about variations in conditions in different regions of Cambodia during Pol Pot time. See especially Kiernan and Boua 1982; Kiernan 1983; Vickery 1983 and 1984.

It was particularly unsafe for a single woman, without the protection of a husband or some other male kin. Many women married for protection under these circumstances, or else through coercion, like Vanny. Several women spoke to me of being essentially taken for wives during that period by men they had no way of resisting. Some of these marriages lasted, some did not. What seems clear is, there were very few social constraints on marriage at that time. Marriage did not constitute an arrangement between families because most families were not intact enough to regulate the marriages of their offspring, nor was there a stable social context within which such negotiations made sense.

People's reasons for coming to the border varied, but many came hoping to be resettled in a third country. Many marriages were arranged at that time to take advantage of perceived resettlement opportunities; equally, marriages were abandoned if a spouse found someone else s/he thought would provide a better resettlement prospect. Frequently husbands would come to the border in advance of their wives; not infrequently, their first family would be abandoned or a second family started at the border. Many intact families were divided through people's efforts to get themselves resettled in third countries, and through the seemingly arbitrary resettlement review system at Khao I Dang. 12 Reliable information about resettlement was scarce, the situation changed quickly, nobody really knew what was happening or what was going to happen, but everyone was looking for a

¹² See "Looking For Phantoms: Flaws in the Khmer Rouge Screening Process," an issue brief prepared in 1986 by Stephen Golub for the United States Committee for Refugees. Golub's argument is that INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) officers were incapable of evaluating the veracity of the stories that Cambodian refugees told them about their recent past, so many people were rejected for resettlement on false grounds, while many others who had been involved in DK atrocities slipped through the screening process.

way to improve his or her situation. A lot of marriages were staked on hopes for a future that never materialized. 13

When Site II was built in 1985 and people were moved into Thailand from the border encampments, certain conditions changed that affected the way marriages were contracted and households put together. First, it was a more stable situation, and safer: the soldiers were separated from the civilian population, the camp was located inside Thailand away from the fighting in Cambodia, and it was run by a civilian administration not by the KP military. There was the possibility of developing more stable, ongoing daily routines in Site II, and people could begin to re-establish some of the traditional social practices which life on the border had been too chaotic to sustain in the earlier years.

On the other hand, access to and egress from the camp was closely regulated by the Thais. Because of this it was difficult to get in and out of Site II, and most people lost access to the border markets, an important source of income before 1985. Since direct distribution of food rations did not begin until late 1987 men who were not connected to the military still needed to be attached to a woman's household, either through marriage or some sort of fictive kin relationship such as Keng had with Vanny before they were married. 14 That is,

¹³ Until December 1987 there was a powerful practical reason for single men on the border to find a wife as well: only women and girls were given United Nations rice. Since 1980 the UN had been providing food and medical assistance to several of the border encampments just inside Cambodia. Soldiers and civilians were mixed together in these encampments at that time — there were no exclusively civilian camps. In an attempt to avoid feeding combatants the UN devised a ration system that provided each woman and girl over eight with enough rice for 2.75 people: in theory enough to feed whatever boys and younger children there were in the family. Needless to say, this did not keep food from the soldiers. But since men living in these camps could not receive food from the U.N. directly; they had to be attached to a household which included women and girls if they wanted to eat. It was difficult to get by on the border without a wife at that time, and many marriages were contracted for that sole reason.

¹⁴ The issue of adoption, temporary adoption, or simply raising someone else's child was a big one in Site II, largely because so many families had been broken apart, and there were so many orphans after 1979. Sometimes a child would be

in spite of UNBRO's intention to provide a more complete package of assistance in Site II than had been provided in the border encampments, many families were still scrambling to get by. And because Site II would only be a temporary refuge, of unknown duration, there was a sense of provisionality about everything people did in the camp. This had a profound effect on many aspects of life, including marriage and family relationships.

When I arrived in Site II in 1989 I was struck by the tension that seemed to exist between husbands and wives, and the amount of talk circulating about problematic marital relations. I came to realize that this was partly the fallout from those especially difficult years between 1975 and 1985, when people were forced to marry someone the <u>Angkaa</u> chose for them, or else married for strategic reasons. When these marriages failed to achieve their intended results, there was much bitterness and disappointment.

taken into a household with the expectation that he or she would work like a servant rather than become a full member of the family. Often, in a re-marriage, stepchildren would not be treated as well as the full-blooded children of both parents. But not infrequently, children were simply taken in by strangers and raised as a family member. This happened a lot in the first few years after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge. Soeurn had an adopted son, a teenager when I met him, whom he had found in 1979: a little six year old boy crying by the side of the road, alone and frightened, his parents dead. Soeurn said he could not just leave the boy like that, so he took him in, much as Vanny had taken in Keng in 1979. When I asked Vanny, how could you afford to do this? You had nothing then -- she replied, you don't understand the heart of the Khmer. Stories of this kind of generosity and open-heartedness were told side by side with the stories of treachery in those early years. It seemed that people had become more cautious and calculating as the years passed on the border though. Vanny admitted that it was much less common in 1990 to hear of someone taking in a stranger than it was in 1980. The situation on the border was less fluid in 1990. People's lives had become more carefully managed, and household economies were more carefully worked out than they had been in the chaotic first years on the border when the situation often changed daily.

Marriages rarely entailed a traditional two-day ceremony in those years. A much shorter ceremony can be performed which propitiates the ancestors of the man and woman to avoid bad fortune, and that is that. The weightiness of the longer wedding ceremony is lost when a <u>saen kmouc</u> is performed, along with the involvement of family and friends, and the exchange of ritual gifts. But most people simply could not afford to hold traditional weddings in those days, and the marriages themselves rarely reflected a negotiated arrangement between two families anyway.

But another important reason for the weakening of marital bonds is that under these circumstances it was difficult to know much about the person one was marrying. In the past no one would marry before he or she could vouch for the good character not only of the prospective bride or groom, but of his or her parents and grandparents as well. This knowledge was supplied by relatives or a trusted go-between who helped to arrange marriages; it was available through the networks of personal connections within which people lived prior to 1975. But because people came to the border from all over Cambodia and did not necessarily know anything about the people among whom they were living, it was often not possible to feel confident about the character of the person they were planning to marry.

People repeated this to me over and over in Site II: "We do not know anything about the people we live next door to. How can we know if they are good people or not?" This situation breeds a kind of pervasive cautiousness and mistrust, even between husbands and wives. Coming on the heels of the Pol Pot era, in which trust was often destroyed between even the closest of family members, it is not surprising that new husbands and wives should withhold some confidence in each other, nor was it foolish. Given the rice distribution situation, many men with families at home in Cambodia did take second wives on the

border. Marriage was a strategic move in a situation of great insecurity, in which survival depended largely on one's ability to make the most of small advantages. When people spoke to me about this time these conditions were taken as given: One just had to accept the consequences of knowing so little about one's spouse. There was nothing else one could do.

It took me awhile to understand how much treachery and violence had occurred during this earlier period on the border, as people tended not to talk about it much. Among other things, it was tremendously shameful. Only after pursuing some completely different topic would I discover, for example, that a woman I worked with each week for several months was not, in fact, a widow but that her husband had taken a second wife while working in another camp for the KPNLF; that the two had gone together to Khao I Dang and been resettled to the U.S., leaving my friend alone with three daughters and an aging father.

Traditionally, a Khmer wife's role is to respect and serve her husband, to maintain his household thriftily and comport herself in a manner that is above reproach, and above all never to question his judgement, no matter how questionable it might seem. These ideal expectations had been maintained (or revived) in Site II. It is a difficult standard to maintain for women who can not count on their husbands' trustworthiness, however. The woman whose husband had abandoned her could understand why he had taken a second wife when he had to move away for his work: his life was too difficult without anyone to care for him, she said. It was understood that men would take up with another woman if they were forced to be separated from their wives for an extended period of time. This was nothing new. It was only when her husband renounced his responsibility to their family and left for the United States that his behavior went

beyond the pale.¹⁵ However, she acknowledged that she had married him as a widow in 1980 and that only one of the three children in the family was his. Her husband's attachment to <u>her</u> children could not be counted on.

The situation of widows with children and without resources on the border was especially difficult. Their re-marriage prospects were poor, and yet they were in particular need of a husband's assistance and protection. They were prime targets for robbery and rape, of which there was plenty on the border, as adult women not identified with a male figure (either kinsman or husband) were assumed to be "loose," and available for the taking. Vanny's (initial) decision not to re-marry after her second husband's death was a brave one, considering her vulnerability. But she was an unusually resourceful woman — she knew she could support herself — and she was convinced that a new husband would not treat her children well. Her decision was made on the basis of what she thought would be best for them.16

Vanny's subsequent decision to marry her adopted son Keng points to a new marriage pattern found not infrequently in Site II: young men without family, connections, or resources marrying older women, generally widows, who are

¹⁵ One of the most devout Buddhists I knew in Site II, a deeply thoughtful man who was a key informant in matters concerning morality, had taken a second wife when he was forced for political reasons to leave his family and flee to the border in 1984. Eventually his first wife and their three children joined him in Site II; by that time he had a son with the second wife as well. Although she was deeply resentful, he left this woman and set up house with his first wife and children when they arrived at the border. He justified this by saying he did not think it was right to separate the boy from his mother. But he remained interested in his youngest son's upbringing, and I often found the boy at the house with his father's other family when I came to visit.

¹⁶ The issue of step-parents mistreating children is not a new one for the Khmer. There are stories of abusive step-parents in Khmer literature as well as in the personal histories of several older women with whom I spoke. Step-parents were a well-known category of evil. Perhaps because of this, people on the border were hyper-conscious of the possibility of abuse. But also, there were many more step-fathers on the border where men continued to die in the ongoing civil war, and hence many more situations where abuse might be suspected.

financially self-sufficient but too old to be good marriage prospects. He got a place to live and someone to wash his clothes and cook for him without having to come up with a large wedding gift; she got a man in the house to do the heavy work and protect her from robbery and abuse. This was not the preferred marriage for a young man, but it was a good arrangement for someone without family or resources. He was freed of some of the burdens of supporting a family as well, and might or might not make some other arrangement with a younger woman, whether she be a prostitute or a second wife. ¹⁷ Widows usually made an effort to remarry as long as they had a household to maintain, although this was often not possible — according to one survey, 25 percent of the adult women in Site II were widows. ¹⁸ But besides widows, most unmarried adults in Site II were poor young men, without family in the camp, who could not afford to make a marriage. ¹⁹

By 1990 families had once again become involved in negotiating the marriages of their children, and the cost of a marriage was an increasingly important issue for young men in Site II. In this resource-poor environment, a virtuous and attractive daughter could be a valuable family asset. An ideal Khmer bride is young and innocent, and most parents were anxious to arrange an advantageous marriage for their daughters before they became too old to be

¹⁷ Ebihara reports that in 1960 "a man normally seeks someone of his own age or younger [to marry] although at some marriages the woman is several years older than the husband" (Ebihara 1971:470). Thus it was not unheard of for a young man to marry an older woman. But there seems to have been few occasions to contract this kind of marriage in the past.

¹⁸ See Lynch 1989:23. Widowers, unlike widows, almost always remarried: less than 2 percent of the men in Site II were unmarried widowers.

¹⁹ There was also a small but identifiable cohort of women in their early to mid thirties who had never married. They had been a little too old to be considered desirable brides in the early '80s (— and, said one, "We all looked like old women then anyway"—) and/or they had too much to do taking care of younger siblings and parents to think about marriage. By the time they could think about it many had lost interest, and/or were not considered interesting by any man. It was difficult for women not to marry unless they had a family to live with, but that was an adequate arrangement many who did have families.

desirable brides. In Site II most young women married by the age of twenty-one, although younger brides were not at all uncommon. Men usually married a bit older, between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-six (Lynch 1989:22).

In the past men often waited to marry until they had ordained and/or completed their education, or had acquired the skills and resources needed to support a family, as this was the most important responsibility of a husband. This was true in Site II in 1990 also, although the evaluation of what skills and resources were necessary varied, and many poor people considered no skills and resources necessary since by then every legal resident of Site II received food and housing from the UN. It seemed that people without education or resources tended to marry earlier in Site II (-- "What else is there to do?" I was asked, somewhat rhetorically --) than people who had the chance to further their education or otherwise improve their situation through employment in the camp. Poor men who aspired to a good marriage often had to wait until they had acquired some status through their work to be able to make such a match.

Thus there was a whole generation of young men and women coming of age on the border for whom the issues surrounding marriage were rather different than they had been for those marrying ten or even five years earlier. The relative stability of the previous five years in Site II enabled these young people (and their parents) to pursue more traditional goals in their marriages: to find a spouse of good character and comparable social standing, to go through traditional preliminary negotiations between the two families including agreement about the size of the brideprice, and to hold a wedding that does justice to the bride and her family's honor. In Site II parents were increasingly holding to these standards for their daughters, and increasingly money was the most important issue in determining who would be an acceptable son-in-law.

This has to do in part with the fact that in Site II resources were limited, and almost everything one needed in the camp had to be bought. Money had acquired an exaggerated importance in Site II because there was so little of it in circulation and so few other valuable resources in the camp to offset its importance — no land, no livestock, no houses of value, no cars or trucks. In the past it was possible to be largely self-sufficient in the countryside; many rural folk did not have a great need for cash. Financial status was a concern, in the middle and upper classes especially, but good character was still of the highest importance in arranging a marriage. In Site II, however, money had become the paramount consideration because it was the one thing that was sure to make a difference in the possibility of stability in a couples' life.

A wife was expected to keep a good house and provide tasty meals for her husband, in spite of the fact that her ingredients and supplies were limited, her housekeeping was complicated by a chronic shortage of water, and the thatch and bamboo provided by UNBRO were insufficient to maintain a decent home. A husband was expected to provide his wife with the money to do this, in spite of the fact that there was very little work to be had in the camp, and wages were very low. Men with no other means of support often joined the KP army even though this left their wives alone in the camp because it gave them a chance to trade on the black market outside Site II. Others risked their safety and health by going into the mine-strewn forests around Site II to cut bamboo to sell, or by travelling to malarial parts of Cambodia to trade for rubies (like Vanny's second husband, for example). The explanation for all of these dangerous pursuits was, "We need the money to survive." Many men said their wives pushed them into these activities to generate income for the household. Thus there was a strong sense of economic vulnerability in spite of UNBRO's support.

For men who were not employed, time hung heavy in Site II.²⁰ One way men relieved their boredom was by gambling. Men gambled on everything in Site II: cards, cockfights, games of chance, volleyball games, boules matches, and so on. Often a poor man would wager all his money in hopes of augmenting his meager resources with a win. Like as not he would lose what little he did have, provoking his wife's anger and causing him to lose face as well as cash. Arguments between husbands and wives frequently erupted into violence in Site II, in part because they often involved shame on the part of the husband, combined with anger at his wife for calling attention to his own sense of inadequacy.

A husband with resources could avoid bringing these strains into his marriage and might help the wife's family financially as well. A young man I knew who had been courting a woman for three years in Site II, carefully saving his baht and cultivating his relationship with her family, came to me one day with the news that his sweetheart had been promised to another man literally over night, someone neither she nor her family had met before the previous weekend, but who had money and wanted a young and pretty wife. His sweetheart's family was as poor as he was, and the lure of money was not to be resisted. The woman was married within a week.²¹

²⁰ According to a sample survey taken in 1989, the unemployment rate in Site II was 32.5 percent for the population as a whole. As 51.5 percent of the respondents in this survey were women, and over 45 percent of the women gave "housewife" as their occupation, it is safe to guess that most of the 32.5 percent unemployed were men. See Lynch 1989:50-52.

²¹ In fact, because there were no strong ties to bind the husband to the girl's family on the border, there was little to guarantee that either the girl or the family would benefit much from this match. It was the hope of support rather than the assurance of it that made the girl's parents eager for her to marry this man. In circumstances like these both the family and the girl were often disappointed. The man was already reasonably well set up with the KP and did not need to augment his position through a "good" marriage. That is, he did not need much from this girl's family that might encourage him to maintain respectful relations with either them or her.

It was hard for me to understand why this young man's intelligence, industriousness and obvious devotion would not count for more with his sweetheart's family. He seemed like a very good marriage prospect, in spite of his poverty. It turned out that he was driving a hard marriage bargain himself. He had relatives in Seattle and the possibility of being resettled in the United States through the family reunification program. If this came through, he would not be able to take his wife with him. He wanted her to agree to wait faithfully for him during the five years it would take to obtain his citizenship and sponsor her himself. No doubt her family was weighing the possibility of this never happening, as she grew older and her chances of remarriage dimmed. In the end it was clear that even in a situation of genuine mutual devotion both parties to the marriage were thinking hard about the prospects for their own futures within it.

Another factor in the re-establishment of traditional expectations for marriage was a more general re-assertion of traditional structures of authority in Site II. The population in Site II included a good percentage of people who came from the relatively well-off, urban, educated class of Cambodians who were both particularly targeted by and particularly bitter about the Khmer Rouge revolution. More importantly perhaps, the political leadership of the KP and of Site II was drawn from this class of pre-1975 civil servants and professionals (Heder 1983, pp.1-13). It is possible to see in these status-conscious marriages a re-assertion of both the parents' previous status (now often largely invisible) as well as their right to exert influence over their children's marriage decisions. Much talk was devoted to traditional expectations for husbands and wives as well, even though people's ability to fulfill these expectations was limited. New husbands tended to assert their authority as head of household with a vehemence that was inverse to their actual power in the camp.

Even older, stabler marriages cracked under the strain of poverty, insecurity, frustration and boredom in the camp, though. Neither husband nor wife could easily live up to the expectations each formerly had for the other. In Site II, many people clung insistently to these expectations however. Khmer counsellors talked about the need to teach couples to have more understanding of the difficulties their spouses had in meeting those expectations in the camp. More often their arguments led to wife-beating and/or the husband seeking female companionship elsewhere.

Although there were no statistics, it was the common and widely discussed perception that wife-beating and the taking of second and third wives was significantly more prevalent in Site II than it had been in Cambodia before 1975. Wife-beating was viewed somewhat differently by Cambodians than it was by most Westerners working in the camp. If a woman was disrespectful to her husband, failed to fulfil her wifely duties, or embarrassed him in any way, it was not only the husband's right but his duty to beat her, so that she would understand her error and learn to behave correctly in the future (Ledgerwood 1990:185). Typically in the past this type of discipline was regulated by the proximity of the wife's natal family. If she was truly out of line they would be embarrassed by her as well. But if her husband was excessive in his discipline some pressure would be brought to bear by her parents or brothers in a way that was sensitive to her husband's "face" and would not jeopardize her safety further. But for the most part close knit village communities simply did not exist in Site II, and often there were no family members to stand up for the wife's interests. Women were much more vulnerable than they had been in the past to the abuse of their husbands.22

²² See Ledgerwood 1990, pp.184-185.

The practice of taking more than one wife was not unknown in Cambodia in the past. Polygyny was legal, as was maintaining a mistress, although perceived infidelity, no matter how innocent, was automatic grounds for divorce from a wife (Ledgerwood 1990:146). But polygyny had occurred in a different way and, it seems, on a completely different scale in the past. Only wealthy men who could afford to support more than one family had more than one wife. Typically these were men whose businesses kept them away from their first wives for extended periods; they maintained another wife in another city. The two women often never had to meet. In practice, polygyny rarely occurred except among royalty and the wealthy elite, and especially not in village settings. It was too costly and tended to create too much conflict within the husband's first family (Ebihara 1971: 492-494).

In Site II, however, a man did not need to be wealthy to convince a woman to become his second or third wife. There were plenty of young widows willing to accept almost any ongoing relationship with a man. No man had to support his wife — UNBRO did that — and many men took advantage of this situation. 23 The number of widows and grass widows was high, and many women were so poor they would accept any arrangement if they thought it would bring them a little extra money and protection. Sometimes women with little education and no other means of support would agree to be the wife of another man while their soldier husbands were out of the camp. This arrangement involved less responsibility for

²³ Any woman involved in an ongoing intimate relationship with a man was called his propun, or "wife" by the Khmer, whether or not they were officially married. A linguistic distinction is made between "first" or "main wife" (propun daem) and "second wife" (propun chong) but the term that comes closest to "sweetheart" (sangsaa) generally implies either "fiancee" or "mistress", depending on the context (see Headley et al, 1977). There is really no conceptual category for "girlfriend" because men and women do not have intimate relationships outside of marriage, except those involving a prostitute.

the second husband, although it was often the cause of violent fights when the first husband came home and discovered what had been going on in his absence.

Since polygyny was legal, a first wife had little recourse if her husband took up with another woman. The proper thing to do was be patient, continue to be a good and devoted wife who was beyond reproach, and hope that the husband would give up his outside interest eventually and devote full attention to his original family again. Perhaps because they had so little recourse, "good" women had nothing but outrage and contempt for women who took up with other women's husbands. This behavior was violated everything that was deemed proper for a good woman, who derives her self worth (in part) from devoting herself to the service of just one man (Ledgerwood 1990, 243). Prostitutes, of which there were many in Site II, were beneath the contempt of decent women, and were held responsible for luring men away from their lawful wives.²⁴ Husbands' liaisons with women other than their original wives accounted for a good deal of the marital conflict in Site II.

A final story will illustrate how, by 1991, marriage considerations in Site II were once again being adjusted to external circumstances, this time in anticipation of the return to Cambodia. In October 1991 a peace agreement was signed in Paris between the four warring Cambodian factions, and the civil war that had kept the border Khmer in exile for twelve years officially ended. The

²⁴ This is in contrast to Ledgerwood's finding among resettled Cambodian women in America, who regarded it as inevitable that their husbands would have greater sexual needs than they. These women considered occasional visits to a prostitute much less threatening than the prospect of a second wife. See Ledgerwood 1990, pp.144-145.

peace agreement included detailed plans for the repatriation of all border Khmer. Thus the repeatedly dashed hope of so many border Khmer to return to Cambodia was finally becoming a reality.

A few months after this my twenty-four year old field assistant was engaged to be married. Samnang was exceptionally bright, personable, and capable, spoke excellent English, and had gone to work for the KP as a logistical liaison officer with the American Embassy in Bangkok after I left Thailand. He was the son of a former village headman in Cambodia who had served as an ilot leader in Site II—a man respected for his wisdom and stability. Samnang, it seemed to me, was poised to make a very good marriage, and I often wondered who he would end up marrying. He played his cards close to his chest, however, and while I knew he had secret feelings for some young woman, I never figured out who she might be.

As it turned out, his bride-to-be lived next door to him in the ilot. She was Sino-Khmer, young, and "not very beautiful" according to his own report. She was not his secret sweetheart — that much was clear — and the marriage, it seemed, had been arranged almost entirely by their parents. But Samnang had acquiesced to this choice with characteristic good grace, and was trying to figure out how to get to know his fiancée better. Her family, as it turned out, had quite a lot of land in Battambang province, where his own family came from. His family had no land whatsoever. Although they had once been prosperous farmers, none of their relatives had remained in Battambang to protect their land, and it was unlikely they would be able to claim what had been theirs in 1975 when they returned in 1992. As the story emerged, Samnang's father worried about returning home with no place to live, and no land to work. He had gotten to know the Sino-Khmer family well during his years as ilot leader, and believed them to be decent and trustworthy. Since daughters as well as sons inherit land in Cambodia at the time of their marriage, and newlyweds typically take up residence wherever they can

make the best living, Samnang's marriage would give his whole family some assurance of a place to settle when they returned to Battambang. By 1991 the border Khmer had stopped strategizing for the present and had begun to make plans for life back in Cambodia.

" ... there is really no choice, here or elsewhere, between redemption and negation; for to choose either is to read reality in the simple language of loss."

M. Steedly, <u>Hanging Without A Rope</u>1

Prologue: Bun Sout, or Blessing the Bees

Yesterday a monk and an achaa from the O'bock temple came to the school where my office is located to perform a blessing ceremony. Actually, it was more of a peace-making ceremony, directed towards a swarm of bees that had recently taken up residence in the school yard. I first learned about this ceremony when a couple of kids pointed out a large, grey, papery nest in a bougainvillaea tree just outside the office door. The nest looked threatening and the bees clearly scared them, so I went to ask Kru Than, the school administrator, if he had plans to get rid of them. No, he said; he wanted to invite a monk to come and bless the bees, otherwise they might cause bad things to happen at the school. It was important to welcome the bees and make peace with them, he said, so that they would protect the school rather than bringing bad fortune. He was going to ask Khun Sophon, the Thai man in charge of the NGO project that funded the school, for permission to do this. The way he said this I got the impression the ceremony was as much to make peace and obtain a blessing for the school in general, after all the disturbing things that had happened there recently, as it was a ceremony for the bees per se. Serious conflicts between Khun Sophon and the Khmer staff had all but caused a mass resignation the week before, and the entire school was edgy and tense. The bees, which were too dangerous to risk angering, had to be won over and made welcome at the school. They would then act as protectors and could bring the

¹ Mary Margaret Steedly, <u>Hanging Without A Rope</u>, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, p.173.

school good fortune. There was much that needed appearement and blessing at the school at that moment.

On the day of the ceremony all the furniture that could be moved was emptied out of the office except for the bookcase and file cabinet, which were pushed up against the back wall. Khun Sophon's desk, which was too big to be moved, served as a table for ice and the big bottle of Sprite that had been purchased for the monk and the barang visitors. A plastic linoleum floor was laid down on the dirt for people to sit on. Against the front wall the headmistress had hung several brightly colored cloths that she had brought from home to serve as a back drop for the monk, and a pillow was placed at the middle of the wall for him to lean against. Bougainvillaea blossoms and little bachelor's buttons were arranged together and stuck into banana trunk "vases" along with incense sticks. Two buckets of water made fragrant with flower petals and talcum powder were placed near the spot where the monk would sit.

All of the teachers had assembled in the office and were seated on the floor when the monk arrived on the back of a taxi-bike, accompanied by an achaa on a second taxi-bike. They came from the O'bock temple. Kru Than had asked for a monk from the larger temple in Rithysen where he went to make merit and pray, but the Rithysen monks had not wanted to bother with such a small ceremony. Neither had the monks from the Dangrek temple, which was the second place he tried. This monk was small, middle-aged and alert; he took in the staff's preparations with a kind of acknowledgement that spelled approval, and settled himself on the cushion while Kru Than served him tea and explained a bit about the school and the presence of barang. (I was the only Westerner there at that moment; later, two of the school's NGO supervisors — not Khun Sophon — showed up with another barang friend who was visiting the camp for the day.)

The monk asked who I was and when he learned that I spoke Khmer he launched into a little lecture about Buddhism, in Cambodia and in the camp itself. He told me that in Site II they had no resources, no facilities to perform Buddhist ceremonies properly; that they had to settle for make-shift arrangements such as this; that in Cambodia there were many beautiful temples where they had maintained a devout practice in the past. Buddhism in Cambodia had changed, he said: now the monks just did what the communists told them to do -- it wasn't real Buddhism. But monks from Site II were going into the areas across the border that had been "liberated" by the KP soldiers to restore the true Buddhist practices. He asked me if I had I ever been to Cambodia; told me I would have to go into the liberated zones to see this for myself. In the meantime he invited me to come to the O'bock temple the next day, where the monks would be celebrating Miec' Buccia (the anniversary of the Buddha's sermon at Deer Park) to learn more about Buddhism from him. Clearly he did not want to have Khmer Buddhism represented to me by this diminished demonstration. He wanted me to see things done properly at his temple; to understand that in Cambodia in the past Buddhism was far more impressive than it is here, now, on the border. But in spite of its diminished form, what went on here was real Khmer Buddhism, in contrast to what was happening in Cambodia, under communist control.

Eventually the monk turned his attention away from me and began to focus on the <u>bun sout</u> ceremony. With the achaa seated slightly in front of him and crouched over so as to be lower than he, the monk started in on a series of Pali chants. Throughout the ceremony the achaa explained in Khmer to the assembled group what was going on, and handed the monk whatever accourtements he needed as they were required. Part of the achaa's job was to lead the group in responsive chants, all very basic as far as I could tell. But most of the teachers were young women barely into their twenties and did not know the responses. The

only people who could follow the chants were Kru Than, Kru Phally (the headmistress of the school), and a couple of translators for the barang supervisors, young men in their twenties and thirties with considerably more education than the entirely female teaching staff.

After ten or fifteen minutes of chanting the monk began to sprinkle the fragrant (and now blessed) water about the room with a banana stalk brush. Then the teachers lined up to be blessed and have water sprinkled on them as well. Throughout the monk's chanting most of the teachers, who could not follow the Pali words, whispered together, peeking up at the monk (and me) over their clasped hands and giggling with embarrassment. When it came time to be sprinkled things got a bit raucous: the young women smothered shrieks when flower petals got in their eyes; laughed and flicked water at their friends as they left the school building. With the solemn part of the ceremony over, the teachers were in a good mood, happy to have the rest of the day off. I made an appointment to meet with the monk the next day at his temple, and he left with the achaa on the back of two taxi-bikes.

One day two or three weeks later, while Kru Than was at home for his midday break, he felt restless and returned to the school to find the bees had swarmed and were preparing to fly away. He told one of his staff, who passed the comment on to me, that he imagined the bees had called him back to the school because they knew they would be leaving soon. Later, when I asked him about this, he said it was good: they had left in peace, there was no trouble, everything had turned out alright.

In fact, everything was not alright at the school. The conflicts with Khun Sophon simmered on just below the surface, and not long afterwards Kru Than's wife, who also worked in the office, resigned her job and sought employment elsewhere. Several weeks later, after increasing conflicts with Kru Phally, Kru

Than retired from the school as well, in a cloud of anger and resentment over some vicious rumors that were circulating about his personal utilization of program resources. He refused to be disrespected in this way; he had lost too much face at the school to stay on in any case. He quoted me a Khmer proverb as he left, saying, "We can support a heavy weight on our backs, but a heavy weight on our hearts we cannot endure [Pibak kamlang ac' troem traw baan; pibak cet min ac' troem traw te]."

Introduction

This chapter looks at the social relations and institutions of Buddhism in Site II, in the context of the devastations of the recent past and in relation to the Buddhist tradition of the Khmer people. It considers the effects of this devastation on the Buddhist sensibility or "disposition" of the Khmer, as well as their devotional practices. It asks, how did people understand what had happened to them over the previous fifteen years? What did they draw on to make sense of their recent history, their present, and their future? How well did the Buddhist orientations and practices from their past serve people in the aftermath of Pol Pot, under the peculiar conditions of life in Site II? In what ways were these traditions not helpful in providing spiritual refuge and moral solace on the border, why weren't they more helpful, and how did people carry on anyway? What other resources did people draw upon?

These are enormous issues, which bear on the meaning people made of the world itself from Site II, as well as on the structures and institutions of their beliefs. The prologue is offered as an illustration of the way such questions got played out in very down-to-earth, unremarkable interactions on the border; how big issues were implicated in the small conflicts that arose as people conducted their affairs from day to day.

Thus, for example, questions about the continuing importance of the Khmer Buddhist tradition were expressed as concern about the disruption of Buddhist education in the years since 1975, about young people's ignorance of basic Buddhist precepts, and about the level of resources available to support Buddhist practice in the camp. Questions about the vitality of the sangha came out in frustration at the preoccupations of the religious hierarchy and the monks' unwillingness to officiate at neighborhood rituals. Questions about the solace that Buddhist practice could provide were raised by the overall inconclusiveness of all ritual efforts on the border. In this chapter I suggest that the Khmer people's Buddhist sensibility was deeply shaken by their experiences under Pol Pot and after, but that it wasn't a simple story of loss. It was an equivocal story, like the story of the bees, which can not be called redemptive but is much more complicated than its opposite.

The physical devastations of the Pol Pot era are still being documented but their grim outlines are fairly well known to us. Cities and towns were evacuated and their populations relocated to collective work camps in the countryside. All institutions of spirituality and learning were desecrated or destroyed. Over one million Cambodians died of starvation, overwork, illness and execution, out of a total population of approximately eight million.**** We have evidence of such atrocious brutality that many survivors can not bring themselves to speak about it, in photographs of Cambodia at the time the Khmer Rouge regime was overthrown, in documents from the Tuol Sleng detention and torture center, in the narratives of survivors who https://example.com/have-found-a-way-to-write-about their experiences. Less visible and harder to document are the effects on the survivors of the four-year

obliteration of the meaningful world, a world of particular meanings, a Buddhist world. This chapter addresses the consequences of that obliteration of meaning for the border Khmer, and looks at their efforts to recover a sense of balance, a foundation of moral and spiritual stability in the context of life in Site II.

Pol Pot's greatest challenge to the Khmer Buddhist tradition was frighteningly simple. Not only did the Khmer Rouge destroy of the concrete institutions of Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia, their actions threatened the very Buddhist foundations of the society itself. By systematically undermining the most elemental kin-based and non-kin social relationships, relationships deeply embedded in Buddhist understandings of hierarchy and value, the Khmer Rouge challenged the assumptions around which Cambodians had constructed a coherent universe in the past. And by committing atrocities against their own people on such a massive scale without any evident shame or fear, they called into question the plausibility of a karmic explanation of action and retribution, an explanation that lies at the heart of Khmer Buddhist cosmology and cosmography. This challenge to the fundamental moral structure of their lives is part of what made the aftermath of the Pol Pot period so difficult for people on the border, where the ability to engage in any redemptive activity was compromised by a shaken trust in the universe they thought they had known.

For anyone who has lived through Pol Pot time there is, behind all else, a very real and serious question about the possibility of coherence in a world in which such appalling atrocities can occur. As outlined above, the very terms in which people in Site II understood their world were challenged by the events of the 1970s in Cambodia. But additionally, the social world from which people had

² This issue will be discussed in greater length in the conclusion; however Lawrence Langer's work with Nazi holocaust survivors, in particular, <u>Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory</u> (1991) addresses this issue directly.

to cope with this situation had been shattered. This contributed to the crisis of meaning as the taken-for-granted structures of a (once) coherent and meaningful world no longer existed. Everything had to be reconstructed from scratch.³ But this "crisis of meaning" was generally not what motivated individual behavior under these circumstances. And the concerns that did motivate people on the border and the circumstances under which social life was reconstituted were anything but conducive to the establishment of secure and stable social and cultural institutions. People drew upon what they knew from the past to help them address the issues of the present, but the "habitus" of the border camps was very different from the "habitus" of life in Cambodia before 1975. And familiar "dispositions" had different meanings in such a radically changed context (Bourdieu 1977:72-95).

This was not simply a matter of old structures, old ways being inadequate to meet new challenges, because the old structures were never wholly adequate in the first place. What we refer to as "social structures" are never more than partially satisfactory or effective, and are generally only "structural" in an analytic sense anyway. That is, Buddhism, and any other other religious or spiritual or cultural practice, is not just functional, and is never completely explanatory or "integrative", although it is possible (and often tempting) to write about them in these terms. But they are, or can be, part of what makes the universe coherent: a

³ On the violent dismantling of the meaningful world see Elaine Scarry (1985) <u>The Body in Pain; the Making and Unmaking of the World.</u> On the difficulties of reconstructing a social world when the social structures that constitute the community have been shattered see Peter Marris (1986) <u>Loss and Change</u>, Kai Erikson (1976) <u>Everything in Its Path</u>, Anastasia Shkylnik (1985) <u>A Poison Stronger Than Love</u>. For a contrasting example, where community reconstruction was relatively straightforward in spite of massive physical destruction, see Margaret Rodman and William Rodman (n.d.) "The Eye of the Storm: Cyclones and the Social Construction of Space in Vanuatu."

place in which in spite of inconsistency and contradiction, there is an overarching sense of the connections between things.

Bourdieu explains this sense of coherence in terms of the concept of "habitus": coherence created by the fact that social practices <u>are</u> materially and structurally related. All people have historically and socially constructed "dispositions" which (partially) structure the social and cultural institutions of our lives, which in turn function as the structuring structures of our dispositions. This is not simply a mechanical process. Even if one never goes to a wat one may still dwell in a Buddhist habitus — one shows respect to the monks one encounters; one knows that one's wife and mother make merit regularly; one accepts the Buddhist precepts as one's guiding principles even though one may not follow them with any consistency. One's world is organized around certain understood connections between things, and one acts on the basis of those understandings.

The concept of "habitus" is based on the idea of class interest: of shared experience founded on a shared position in the larger social world; shared orientations or dispositions, organized around structurally common concerns. How widely one casts the net of "class" depends on one's analysis; what is salient about "dispositions" is their aspect of shared-ness and the fact that while they are fundamentally mental orientations, they are based on a common experience of the same set of material and structural constraints. They are neither immutable nor entirely predictable, but they <u>are</u> deeply embedded in historical and material structures and institutions. They are therefore continually reproduced through social action and tend to be slow to change.

In Site II, however, there was an overwhelming sense of the <u>dis</u>connectedness of things; of a <u>lack</u> of overarching coherence. There was an absence
of social structures and institutions which reproduce themselves and their
motivating dispositions over time, and a profound inability to construct such

institutions in the camp. There was a marked absence of the sense of shared interests, and great difficulty in recognizing and organizing around common concerns.

The circumstances on the border in 1989 and 1990 were such that virtually nothing was solid or reliable, not physical security, material assets, or social relationships. Anything could change at a moment's notice in the camp; no situation was secure. Thus everything constructed on the border was provisional, and abandonable. Under these circumstances it was not possible to build strong, enduring social structures and institutions even though that is precisely what was lamented: the apparent desire for stability was great. It was unwise to get too attached to anything in Site II, because whatever it was, it was bound to change. What was shared on the border was a habitus of isolation, insecurity, and temporariness.

This combination of fundamental insecurity and a profound underlying crisis of meaning was a central aspect of the experience of living in Site II. There was a pervasive sense of unease in Site II, a combination of mistrust and determined self-protectiveness among the people who lived in the camp. Because so many of the familiar structures of social life were lacking in Site II, because the habitus of the camp and its dispositions were different in many ways from before, there was a sense of irrelevance among many about much of what had been taken for granted as "culture" in the past. And a whole generation of Khmer was growing up in the camp with no knowledge of the old culture except what they were learning in this new habitus of insecurity and constant change.

Different people responded to this situation in different ways. Some people, especially the articulate Khmer who interacted with the western relief staff, identified it as a "problem," talked about ways it could be addressed, and worked on relief programs designed to ameliorate what they called "the

breakdown of culture." For others there was simply an awareness of the unreliability of things, and the need to do whatever was necessary to get done what had to be done. Lacking a familiar habitus around them, some worried about the fate of traditional values and cultural forms and worked hard to construct or reinforce "culture" wherever they could. Others simply experienced the lack of coherence and did what they needed to do to survive. Everyone lived in a kind of vertigo; found ways to survive the disorder. What choice did one have, after all? This was the situation they were in now; what else could one do but go on?

People drew on all manner of spiritual resources in Site II to help them "go on" — they went to the temple, they propitiated their ancestors, they consulted spirit mediums, they had their fortunes told, they bought magic handkerchiefs (konsaen yon) and got magic words tattooed onto their arms and chest. Some were Muslim, and prayed to Allah for purification and strength. Some were Christian, and prayed to Jesus for redemption. Some became Christian — there were many Christian missionaries working in the camp through NGOs. Operating within a

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⁴ The Cham people are decedents of the kingdom of Champa, an important early mainland Southeast Asian polity that flourished from the 3rd to the 15th century, when it was conquered by and absorbed into central Vietnam. Many Cham fled to Cambodia at that time, and have remained a small but distinct ethnic minority in Cambodia since then. The Cham were converted to Islam sometime in the 16th century. All are Sunni muslims, but they are divided into an orthodox and a more archaic, traditionalist branch. See Russell R. Ross (ed) 1990: 99-101; 122-124. The Cham were subjected to particularly brutal repression under the Khmer Rouge; Ben Kiernan estimates that over one third of an estimated 1975 population of 250,000 Cham were killed during the D.K. regime. See Kiernan 1988:30.

⁵ Christianity was introduced to Cambodia in 1660 by Roman Catholic missionaries. In 1972 there were about 20,000 Christians in Cambodia, most of them Roman Catholics. Many of these people were European, however. There was a much smaller population of Protestant Christians

⁻ the Christian and Missionary Alliance set up a mission in 1923, and the Baptists had missions by the 1950s -- but the 1962 census counted only 2000 Protestants in the whole country. Many more than this were converted in camps on the border in the 1980s. See Ross 1990:124.

habitus of inconsistency and confusion, people did whatever they thought might work. But this, if anything, only created a greater sense of disjuncture, because who could say why one thing worked at one time and something else worked at another? There was no meaning to it. By utilizing what was at hand people were not rebuilding a "culture" they could recognize, they were simply acquiring survival skills for the forest, where there is no culture. And this only reinforced for them the fact that they were living in the forest like animals, and not in their own country where they belonged.⁶

One thing seems clear — there was little meaning to the concept of "cultural authenticity" in this context because there was no enduring context to be authentic in. 7 The scene shifted constantly, the materials available for use today might be gone tomorrow, but so might the reason for using them be gone; and the meaning of using them might have changed as well. There was little possibility of orienting activity around a goal in this context because what served as a goal one day might well be irrelevant the next. We tend to think of meaning in our lives in terms of master tropes or trajectories, of movement over time with an overarching direction. But there were no real trajectories in Site II. There were very few tropes that were sure to be anything more than expedient in this or that situation. The essence of living in Site II was the experience of waiting for real movement to begin. In such a context consensus is virtually impossible and the significance of

⁶ One man said to me, "We have lived in this forest a long time without ever seeing a town. We have lived here so long some people say we have almost grown tails." This was an image that came up often when people talked about what it was like to live in Site II. It draws on traditional concepts of forest and village or town, which are equated with savagery and civilization, chaos and order, animal and human, respectively. See Chandler, 1984, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" for a discussion of the use of these concepts in Khmer literature.

⁷ See Brackette Williams in Richard G. Fox, ed, 1990, on authenticity. See also Langer 1991:138. In this passage Langer considers the presentation of several different versions of the self in the testimony of one Nazi death camp survivor. "Which is authentic?" he asks. "The question confirms the folly of searching for authenticity in the moral quicksand of atrocity."

social action is radically changed. Many individual lives and efforts were truly heroic, but it was an unheroic situation, and the outcome of heroic acts were rarely redemptive. And some people acted in ways that were truly depraved; as one man put it, these people had forgotten about anything outside themselves. It wasn't a simple story of loss. It was a story in which loss had to be incorporated into a situation of powerlessness, insecurity, great need, and constant change, where treachery and heroism were swallowed up together in the next thing to come along.

How does one salvage meaning from a situation like this?

As Pak Tua, a spirit medium from another time, another country, said about a less dramatic but not so dissimilar situation of the break-up of shared understandings in Northern Sumatra, "You can't go on any longer in the proper way, but you have to go on anyway The old ways, the old stories, they can't be discarded. But they can't followed either Well, that's the situation now" (Steedly 1993: 207; 221).8

This chapter is about the ways people "went on anyway" in Site II, drawing on the spiritual resources they knew from the past, working to construct coherence in their individual lives even though they could not seem to create it through their collective efforts. It is about the spiritual institutions that were established in Site II and the degree to which they were able to provide a sense of coherence for the border Khmer. It is an effort to understand the overall lack of coherence and dis-connectedness that characterized the habitus that was created on the

⁸ Steedly's 1993 ethnography presents an extended analysis of Pak Tua's situation. For shorter but equally provocative case study of the kind of problem see Steedly 1988: "Severing the Bonds of Love: A Case Study in Soul Loss" in Social Science and Medicine 27(8): 841-856.

border, in spite of the persistence of so many orientations and practices from the past.

Cambodian Buddhism

Cambodia is an overwhelmingly Buddhist country: over 90 percent of the population is Buddhist, ⁹ and have been so for a long time. Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to Cambodia some time in the 3rd century of the Christian Era, but it took the back seat to the Hindu and Brahmanical practices brought from India around the same time. Hindu cults which associated Khmer emperors with Shiva and Vishnu dominated the Cambodian court through the Angkor Era, although inscriptions from the reign of the last, most powerful, and most famous Angkor emperor, Jayavarman VII, show a self-consciously Mahayana Buddhist cakravartin. But the cult of the god-kings faded with Jayavarman VII, and a more popularly based Theravada practice was introduced in Cambodia sometime in the 13th century. Theravada Buddhism spread rapidly in Cambodia; combined with Brahmanical remnants and indigenous 'animist' practices, it quickly became the religion of the Khmer people. ¹⁰

The Theravada tradition in Cambodia has been fundamentally village-based, local, and practice-oriented rather than scholarly, although the Khmer sangha has been influenced by the more scholarly Thai tradition since the 16th century, and developed its own center of study at Wat Unalom in Phnom Penh. Thai religious reforms were introduced to Cambodia through the Khmer court in the 19th century, and a Thammayut sect similar to the Thai Thammayut was created in 1864. 11 But

⁹ Vickery, 1986, p. 161.

¹⁰ See Sam, 1987; Tambiah, 1986; Chandler, 1983.

¹¹ See Sam, 1987, pp.7-8; Kiernan, 1985, p. 3; and Martini, 1955, pp.416-18. Wat Unalom became the center of Mahanikay administration and scholarship when the Thammayut sect was introduced to Cambodia; Thammayut activities

the Thammayut has been mainly associated with royalty in Cambodia; its influence never spread widely through the population. The older, and more tolerant, Mahanikay sect has always dominated Khmer Buddhism. It was was a liberal branch of the Mahanikay sect that revitalized Buddhist practice in Cambodia in the early 20th century, in part in response to the threats of French colonial reforms (Kiernan 1986:3). Several monks were active in anti-colonial activities in Phnom Penh in the 1930s; in this way the intellectual, urban sangha became associated with early nationalist sentiments. 12 Later, after independence, Sihanouk promoted a philosophy of government based on the traditional Buddhist model of interdependence between the sangha's moral leadership and the political wisdom of an enlightened secular leader. 13 Thus from village life to national government Buddhist concepts have pervaded Cambodian's understanding of the world in which they live.

Buddhist philosophy and monastic practice were incompatible with the Khmer Rouge philosophy of radical egalitarianism, however, and the principle of individual as well as national economic self-sufficiency (Ebihara 1987;33-35). When the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia in 1975, they set out deliberately to destroy the institutions of Buddhism by disrobing and killing monks, burning libraries, desecrating temples, and prohibiting all Buddhist practice (Hawk 1989: 211-212). But perhaps more insidiously, the natural, social and moral logic of Khmer society was subverted by this extreme, Mao-inspired revolution. Through separation, terror, deprivation, and their insistence on absolute obedience to the

were centered at Wat Botum. See Ministère de l'Information, Royaume de Cambodge, 1962, p.27.

¹³ See Sam, 1987, pp. 11-16.

¹² These political monks were part of a forward-looking, activist group that formed within the Mahanikay sect in the 1920s, and later came to be known as the Thammakay faction. See Kiernan, 1985, pp.3-4; 43-44; 48-50; see also Sam, 1987, pp.16-22 and 29-32; and Chandler, 1983, pp.160-170.

angkaa, or "organization," the Khmer Rouge undercut reciprocal obligations between parents and children, trust between husbands and wives, and the most basic attitudes of respect for wisdom, age, and experience: relationships deeply embedded in Buddhist understandings of hierarchy and value. 14

Many Khmer came to interpret the Khmer Rouge as the fulfillment of an old apocalyptic prophesy that foretold such a reversal of the moral and natural order of things. Called <u>puth tumniey</u>, or "the prophesies of Puth," these stories proliferated in the years leading up to the overthrow of the Khmer Republic (1970-75). 15

They foretold a time when evil would rule in Cambodia: when a blood-thirsty demon would enter the hearts of the people and cause them to believe that wrong was right, good was bad, and black was white. During this period there would be no food or water and people would die in great numbers. The roads would be emptied of travellers, the houses would be emptied of people, and blood would flow to the height of an elephant's stomach. During this time a <u>tmil</u> (the traditional Theravada devil) would ascend to the throne and destroy the religion of the Buddha. Wise men would not be allowed to lead, and hooligans and drunkards would sit in judgement of the people. 16

The origin of these apocalyptic stories was obscure. Some people said they were the Buddha's prophesies; others said they were predictions of an old wise

¹⁴ See May 1986; Ngor 1987; Szymuziak 1986; and Yathay 1987, passim.

¹⁵ Conditions were ripe for the proliferation of such stories as U.S. B-52s continued to bomb "communist areas" from their bases in South Vietnam, the national economy crumbled, the Khmer Rouge seized control of more and more of the countryside, and the population of Phnom Penh swelled to twice its size with internally displaced refugees (Shawcross 1986:222). But President Lon Nol, himself an extremely superstitious man, fueled these stories for political reasons as well, believing that such characterizations of the Khmer Rouge would increase support for his "good" government (Becker 1986: 129; 204-205).

16 For a detailed and well-documented discussion of the puth tumniey and other

interpretative models of Khmer Rouge behavior, see Frank Smith, 1989, "Interpretive Accounts of the Khmer Rouge Years: Personal Experience in the Cambodian Peasant World View".

man named Buddha (<u>Puth</u>). Wherever they came from, they proliferated at a time of terror and uncertainty in Cambodia when a sense of impending disaster prevailed (see Williams 1969). They were taken up and repeated by educated and rural peasant Khmer alike. Later, looking back at the 1970s, people recalled these stories and found in them prescient omens of the destruction wrought by the Khmer Rouge. The prophesies placed the predicted events outside the range of human activity, in the area of black magic and supernatural evil. They described events that do not occur within the realm of natural human behavior. This was an important part of what was so terrifying about the Khmer Rouge: they behaved in ways that were outside the scope of normal human consideration, like beasts or devils, without morality. ¹⁷ They defied their place in the moral order of a Buddhist universe, and they were not afraid of the consequences of their actions. They were, it seemed, defying the existence of karma itself. ¹⁸

For the Khmer in Site II, it was not so easy to dispense with the idea of karma, however. Most people, when they talked about Pol Pot time, looked to Buddhist concepts for guidance and explanations. This was the vocabulary of suffering with which they were familiar, the language they were accustomed to using. But to accept a karmic explanation of the events of the 1970s carried certain liabilities. For most in Site II the memories of Pol Pot time produced a deep sense of

¹⁷ This theme came up constantly in my discussions with the Khmer in Site II: the Khmer Rouge behaved in inhuman ways; we were worked like animals, as though we had no brains, and were fed the kind of food we give to pigs.

¹⁸ Smith 1989 argues convincingly that by referring to images of evil from the known pantheon of supernaturally evil characters the Khmer have located the Khmer Rouge in their conceptual universe, which is the beginning of an "explanation" for their existence. I do not dispute this interpretation, but would add to it in suggesting that part of what is so terrifying about supernatural evil is that it falls outside the range of human behavior as defined by Buddhist cosmology. If human beings do behave in these un-human ways it suggests that the natural divisions between the different cosmological realms have begun to break down, that the creatures from hell have begun to infiltrate into the human world. It is a terrifying vision.

degradation and shame. It was impossible to avoid asking, under these circumstances: what kind of people are we to have brought this kind of retribution down on ourselves? It was difficult <u>not</u> to think about these events in karmic terms. 19

Charles Keyes has suggested that in most Theravada contexts, karma carries "few if any connotations of personal responsibility" for bad action in previous lives; "rather.... karma is construed as an impersonal force – the law of karma – over which one has no control" (Keyes 1983:15). People did <u>not</u> usually interpret their own suffering or escape from death in terms of personal karmic retribution in Site II; it was too hard to reconcile this with the inexplicable and meaningless deaths of others. Why, for example, did my little children have to die, one woman asked me. Or, from a young man who watched his father led away to be killed, then lost his older brother to the Khmer Rouge: Why was I spared when my brother, who was so much better than me, was killed? The arbitrary injustice of death under Pol Pot left people struggling to understand why such a tragedy should have happened, and why it happened in the particular way it did. 20 There were very few satisfactory explanations for individual tragedy.

But there <u>was</u> a tendency to look for explanations of events in the notion of collective karma: we Khmer as a group are paying for something we caused or allowed to happen.²¹ In Site II this came out in discussions about the decline of Khmer culture in recent decades. People talked about the corruption in Khmer society during the Lon Nol years just prior to Pol Pot, and the beginning of this

¹⁹ All situations of appalling devastation leave survivors with the sense of degradation and shame. My argument here is that a particular understanding of karma shaped the experience of shame, not that it produced it.
²⁰ See Hansen and Phath, 1987.

²¹ For a discussion of the concept of collective or group karma see James P. McDermott, 1976, "Is There Group Karma in Theravada Buddhism?" in Numen, vol. xxiii, facs. #1. See also Martel 1975: 254.

degeneration of culture in the final years of Sihanouk's reign. In these discussions, counter to what Keyes claims, there was a sense of collective involvement. Although people often spoke as though they felt caught in a downward spiral of history, for which they held their leaders primarily responsible, 22 there was also the sense that "we allowed this to happen to us; we are indirectly responsible." This was shameful. "It is true when people say Khmer killed their own people," one young man said to me. "That is why Khmer are called madmen. Khmer deserve to be called this."23

People were ashamed of many things in Site II. They were ashamed of living in such reduced circumstances on the border, where everything was cheap, and low, and dirty. They were ashamed of their dependence on the UN's support, and their failure as parents to provide their children with the things they needed. They were ashamed as children who had failed in their filial obligations to their parents: one man told me he cried whenever he thought about the fact that he had been unable repay the debt he owed his parents before they were killed.²⁴

This attitude is congruent with traditional Khmer ideas about the nature of political power, in which the prosperity of the realm depends upon the righteousness of the ruler. This is a basic tenet of the classic devaraja and cakravartin ideas, in which the king embodies the fortunes of his population, and is responsible for their well-being. Collective bad fortune could thus be blamed on the ignorance and/or corruption of a king or leader (see Tambiah, 1976). These ideas carried over into the way Khmer talked about their leaders in Site II: many seemed to feel they were no more than the hapless victims of their leader's follies in an overall karmic sense, not just a political sense. But this did not alter peoples' feeling that they were somehow being punished through these incompetent leaders. And there was little sense that the people themselves could do anything to alter their leaders' ignorant and destructive behavior. A leader was a leader; their role was to follow. See chapter on power.

For many, this was the most shameful and difficult aspect of Pol Pot time to accept. The Khmer Rouge were Khmer; in many cases they were peoples' own relatives. It was hard not to see this as an intrinsically Khmer problem. This reinforced the sense that people were somehow involved in as well as victimized by the Khmer Rouge.

This is a central Theravada concept: that parents are responsible for caring for their young children, and children owe their parents a lifelong debt for protecting and raising them from birth. For boys this debt is acknowledged through ordination and the dedication of merit accrued to first their mothers and then their fathers. For girls the debt is repaid through a lifetime of virtue, obedience,

Shame and fear were mixed in the sense of being caught in a cycle of karmic retribution in Site II: shame at what one had done or failed to do, and fear for the consequences of one's actions. The stakes for this kind of thinking were high when one considers what people had had to do to stay alive under Pol Pot. Although few people talked explicitly about these matters with me - they were, I think, literally too shameful to discuss -- we know from written accounts that the Khmer were often faced with situations in which Buddhist "right action" simply did not exist as a possibility. To survive in the 1970s, people were forced to lie, steal, deceive, and even kill.²⁵ People lived with the knowledge that they had committed these acts, and would pay for them in the future. To hold onto a karmic understanding of action and retribution was to see yourself as degraded and low. 26

For many Khmer in Site II this kind of moral degradation seemed to be experienced as permanent and unredeemable. Many people said to me, I have no hope for my own life now; I only work for the future of my children. At first I thought these comments reflected peoples' discouragement about their prospects for a decent life in the foreseeable future. (This was a fairly realistic assessment of the situation on the border at the time I was there.) Later, I came to believe they were much more deeply pessimistic statements, and reflected people's belief that their own lives were somehow spoiled beyond redemption by their experiences. Only in the lives of their children, who had been born after the worst atrocities and had avoided this karmic stain, could they hope for escape from the cycle of evil.

and respectful service. Virtue is confirmed through the ability to make a good

²⁵ See, for example, Criddle, 1987; May, 1986; Ngor, 1987; Szymusiak, 1986; Yathay, 1987.

²⁶ Langer discusses a similar situation in his brilliant study of Nazi death camp survivors, Holocaust Testimonies. He suggests that some survivors preferred to take moral responsibility for events they could not have prevented rather than accept 'the law of systematic caprice' that governed events in the death camps. This was preferable to giving up moral faith altogether. See Langer 1991:187.

In a 1987 video about post-Pol Pot Cambodia (entitled, appropriately, SAMSARA) a similar sentiment is expressed. A young mother asserts that Khmer put their hope in the children born after 1979 now, since "children raised during Pol Pot time are like cotton that is stained with blood and dirt: they cannot be made clean." This is an interesting variation on a well-known traditional Khmer aphorism which says that women are like cotton cloth: if they are dropped in the mud they can never be clean again. Men on the other hand are like pure gold: when they are dirtied they can be wiped clean as though nothing happened. 28 Both uses of this metaphor suggest the karmic nature of a stain that cannot be removed.

Not everyone I spoke with interpreted the action of karma in such oppressive terms. One woman was familiar with this interpretation but rejected it, suggesting it was like double jeopardy: first you suffer, because of your degraded nature, then you pay again for what, because of your nature, you could not avoid doing. How could this be? this woman asked me. It is not just; it is not fair. 29 A different attitude was expressed by a young man in Site II who told me: We never compare Pol Pot time with the present. Because when we think about the past it does not help us to move forward, to develop our country. So we just try to think about what will happen in our future. This comment reflects a more open, hopeful attitude vis a vis the action of karma, but it was not especially common among the people with whom I worked. A more typical attitude was the more traditional (and more oppressive) one, expressed in the proverb about stained cloth and gold.

Although it was clear that this kind of oppressive interpretation lay behind many people's remarks, most people in Site II still managed to carry on with their

²⁷ See SAMSARA, copyright Ellen Bruno.

²⁸ See Ledgerwood, 1990, p.112.

²⁹ Not insignificantly, the woman who made this comment had been a Christian since she was a child.

daily lives to a remarkable degree. Pondering their fate and the reasons for it was a kind of philosophical and emotional indulgence that few could afford on the border. People lived with contradictions and carried on in the midst of what often seemed like a kind of karmic hopelessness because they had to: there was water to collect, children to feed, employment to worry about. There was no choice but to carry on. Caught up in the ongoing demands of daily life most people of necessity moved the enormous existential questions to one side, or else submerged them to a different level of conflict and distress (see below). At the most down-to-earth, basic level people took care of themselves in Site II, re-engaging with the dhamma through ritual practice in the camp wats, propitiating various ancestor and tutelary spirits at home, and protecting themselves directly with amulets, tatoos, magical charms and consultation with the horoscope.

These strategies were not always satisfactory, and certainly were not always "successful." In the past spirits and magic had been an important component of the Buddhist cosmos in which the Khmer lived, part of an integrated universe of power and meaning in which the Buddha stood at the apex. Now very little was integrated, and power in particular often seemed to bear little relation to meaning. Power was power; it demanded respect but it did not necessarily mean <u>anything</u>. People still looked to their religious and spiritual traditions for comfort but these traditions no longer defined the habitus in which they lived. They were simply the resources upon which people drew, from within a habitus of uncertainty and confusion.

The big questions remained, unanswered, in Site II; in a sense they lay behind everything everyone did in the camp. But life did not stop because of this, and people continued to make use of a range of religious and spiritual resources in their efforts to carry on in the face of them. The remainder of the chapter looks at these resources, considers their usefulness to the people in Site II, and speculates more generally on the

relationship between spiritual practices, cultural coherence and social integration on the border.

The Importance of the Sangha in the Immediate Aftermath of Pol Pot

As most Khmer had a practical, experiential understanding of Buddhism (as opposed to a scholarly understanding of the doctrine) one of the most important tasks for the Khmer sangha, decimated by four years under the Khmer Rouge, was simply to reconstitute itself for the Khmer people: to once again provide a Buddhist "field of merit" (Keyes 1983: 274) through which the population could re-engage with the dhamma and begin to cleanse itself spiritually. The sangha was the vehicle through which people could receive the basic precepts, hold ceremonies for their relatives who had died under Pol Pot, re-activate the yearly cycle of Buddhist rituals, and in general be comforted by the re-assertion of a Buddhist routine in their lives. Through their interaction with the sangha the Khmer could do something concrete to counteract their own bad actions in the past and cultivate right action for the present and the future.

All monks had been forced to disrobe under Pol Pot, and those who survived were technically supposed to be re-ordained before they could provide these services to the lay population. But in 1979 few Khmer stood on such ceremony. Many men who had been monks in the past resumed their ecclesiastical roles and duties on the border before the requisite, properly ordained six monks could be gathered for an official re-ordination. Makeshift temples appeared almost immediately in the early border camps: of the seven wats in Site II in 1990 all but two had been established in 1979, as soon as the Khmer had reached the border. 30

³⁰ See Carney, 1980, pp. 44 and 60.

The resumption of Buddhist ritual provided a kind of release for many Khmer that seemed to get right to the heart of their pain.³¹

Large numbers of young men were ordained for the first time in 1979 and 1980 as so many wanted to make merit for parents who had died without the benefit of a cremation or funeral under Pol Pot. Some young men, in fact, came to the border specifically to be ordained since, for several years, government regulations limited ordination to men over the age of fifty in the People's Republic of Kampuchea.³² But simply taking refuge in the ritual of receiving the basic precepts was an important consolation for people who had been denied access to them for so long. It is hard to over-estimate the importance of this in Site II, for the older generation especially.

Organization of the Sangha in Site II

In 1990 each of the five major camps in Site II had its own wat; there were additional pagodas in O'bock camp (within Rithysen) and in the Kampuchea Kraom³³ section of Dangrek camp. The sangha hierarchy in each of these wats was officially represented on a Buddhist Ecclesiastical Council, which constituted the authority structure for all of the Buddhist temples and institutions in the two KPNLF

³¹ See pp. 17-18 of Jack Kornfield's introduction to <u>Step By Step</u>; <u>Meditations on Wisdom and Compassion</u> by Maha Ghosananda, for a moving description of the awakening of Buddhist sentiment in Cambodians just emerging from four years under the <u>Khmer Rouge</u>.

These ordination regulations were promulgated in the PRK in 1981 in an effort to prevent the diversion of able-bodied young men from productive and reconstructive activities. Vickery (1986, p.162) says these regulations were not always strictly enforced, as families' desire to have their sons ordained was often very strong, and they were officially revoked in late 1980s. I spoke with people in the wats in Site II who said they had come to the border specifically so their sons could be ordained, however.

³³ Khmer Kraom (literally "lower Khmer") are ethnic Khmer who come from the southern part of Vietnam that used to be part of Cambodia. They have maintained a distinctly Khmer identity and the Vietnamese do not trust them, but Cambodians do not trust them entirely either. Their Vietnamese nationality renders them suspect in most Cambodians' eyes.

border camps, Site II and Sok Sann.³⁴ That is, the ecclesiastical organization of the sangha paralleled the political structure of the KPNLF. But since each camp in Site II had its own administration, and political leadership within the KP was rife with jealous conflict, each wat tended to have a closer relationship with its own camp administration than with the wats in any of the other camps. Not all camps, in fact, participated in the Ecclesiastical Council. There was resentment among some about the elevated position of Wat Prasat Serei where the council was located, and a lack of consensus about the authority of its head monk, who was supposed to serve as abbot for all the wats under KP jurisdiction. Thus divisions within the political leadership of the KP were reproduced in ecclesiastical relationships as well. There was no Buddhist organization on the border that included monks from all three factions of the CGDK (Gyallay-Pap 1990:9-11).

Each wat compound in Site II consisted of a <u>vihear</u>, or temple, where the main alter of the wat was located; a large <u>salaa</u> with a small altar where many everyday rituals were performed and the monks held meetings and ate their meals; a separate building for preparing food for the monks; classrooms for studying; rows of small huts where the monks and novices slept; and a somewhat larger structure where the head monk had his office and living quarters. In most of the wats there was an outdoor stage where traditional dramas were performed by the camp's art troupes. Some had open-air pavilions where temple musicians practiced and performed on Buddhist holidays, and two of the temples maintained crematoria, one on the north and one on the southeast edge of the camp. In appearance these compounds were not unlike the village wat compounds in pre-1975 Cambodia (see Ebihara 1971: 363-423; Kalab 1968: 528-536; Martel 1975: 227-254).

³⁴ Sok Sann was a KPNLF camp of approximately 10,000 located south of Aranyaprathet in Trat Province. It was one of the five other camps that UNBRO supported along the Thai-Cambodian border.

During the rainy season in 1990 there were a total of 346 samenavs (novices) and bikkhus (monks) in Site II (Gyallay-Pap 1990:9). As before, young men in their late teens and early twenties in Site II ordained because it was customary to do so at that age. To make merit for his parents and have a chance to study Buddhist prayers and texts was considered to ripen a young man, and prepare him for marriage. But most of these men had ordained because their parents wished them to, few had a strong commitment to the sangha, and few remained in the wat for longer than one rainy season. There was little to draw young men to the sangha in terms of a genuine Buddhist education (see below), and the need for secular education and/or employment usually took precedence over the general sense that it was a good thing to be ordained. Most young men ordained for a specific reason (i.e. to make merit for their mother or father, or on the occasion of a parent's death) and for a specific and limited amount of time. 35

Some young men became monks to avoid the pressure to serve in the KP armed forces: it provided them with a credible temporary occupation.³⁶ This was perhaps especially true of "unaccompanied minors": young men or boys who had lost their families during Pol Pot time, or had come to the border alone to avoid being drafted into the PRK/SOC army. For these men the sangha provided a safe

³⁵ In this, the situation was not so different from the situation in Cambodia thirty years ago. Ebihara (1971) reports that while ordination was a cultural ideal for all young men in the village where she worked, a son would be ordained only if or when the family could spare his labor. In addition, both secular education and material success had begun to compete for the prestige and status that a monastic education had once carried. Kalab (1976) reports this as well. But unlike in Site II, when men in Ebihara's village were ordained, they remained in robes for two to three years on average. No man ordained for less than a year. This suggests that while other occupations and endeavors may have begun to rise in importance, the value of a monastic education remained significant in Cambodia in the early 1960s. It would be hard to make the same claim for a monastic education in Site II. See below.

 $^{^{36}}$ In 1990 there did not appear to be any organized conscription in Site II. Earlier in the 1980s this was not the case: I heard many reports of young men who had had to find ways to avoid being compelled to fight in the KP army.

and supportive environment, a kind of family and a home for them³⁷, and they tended to stay in robes longer than those who had families in the camp. Thus the sangha also served as a kind of refuge for young men without family support on the border. Younger boys were sometimes "given" to the service of temple because this relieved the pressure on their families to feed them.

The main activity of the young monks was dhamma study, and until 1989 each wat took responsibility for its own monks' education independently. The scope and quality of these classes varied considerably from camp to camp, but was, in general, low. In 1989, out of concern for the quality of Buddhist education in Site II, a Khmer monk who had received Australian citizenship in the 1980s set up a central Buddhist school through UNBRO's Social Services Program to provide classes for young monks from all of the camps together. By centralizing the available educational resources in Site II and using UNBRO's support to draw upon new resources, both material and human, the Central Buddhist School improved the quality of education to the sangha considerably. However, even under the direction of a Khmer from Australia (i.e., someone who stood outside the factional disputes of the KP) this effort at cooperation among the different wats (read "different political camps") was difficult, and the school fell into disuse when the founding monk left UNBRO to work in Cambodia in 1991.

The monks' daily schedule was similar in all of the wats, and resembled a typical schedule in a wat in Cambodia before 1975:

³⁷ It was neither safe nor logistically possible to live alone in Site II — one needed the support of a household. For young men arriving alone at the border, without relatives with whom they could stay, the alternatives included living at an orphanage, working as a servant for room and board, joining the army, or entering a wat. In Rithysen, section leaders sometimes assigned unaccompanied minors to households made up of people in similar positions. Anyone who was alone in Site II was vulnerable, so it was important to find a home of some kind. Young women arriving alone at the border were often drawn into prostitution by a pimp or a madame, and ended up working under their supervision and "protection".

4-6 am: rise for prayers and chanting in the temple; breakfast

7-9 am: class

9-10 am: food collection

10-11:30 am: chores in the wat

11:30-12: lunch 12-1 pm: rest; bathe

1-4 pm: class

4-5 pm: rest; bathe

5-7 pm: prayers and chanting in the temple

7-9 pm: study 10 pm: bedtime

Senior monks involved in the running of the wat did not necessarily follow this schedule exactly, and on holidays and the weekly sabbathday or thnay sel, when lay Khmer came to the wat to receive the five precepts and listen to the head monk preach, this schedule was altered as well (Gyallay-Pap 1990: 3-8). On a typical day there was not a whole lot of activity at the wat. Except during the rain retreat, when the numbers of monks in the temples increased significantly, it was often hard to find more than an odd monk and a few lay chanters, or achaa, hanging about the wats.

In addition to monks and novices the wats were home to a number of lay religious women, <u>yiev chii</u> and <u>mae chii</u>, who had dedicated themselves to a life of prayer and service to the wat.³⁸ Mostly older women whose families were grown or separated from them and whose husbands were dead, they shaved their heads, dressed in white, observed eight precepts, took responsibility for the upkeep of the wat, and spent much of the rest of their days in meditation and prayer. Although the <u>yiev chii</u> were not allowed to ordain³⁹, they were often far more devout that the young monks and usually had many more years of study and practice behind them. Motivated by the sense that they were approaching the end of this life, one

³⁸ There were approximately 250 yiey chii in Site II in 1990, although not all of them lived at the wats. Some stayed at home with their families, and came by day to the wat. See Gyallay-Pap, 1990, p. 9.

³⁹ Although the Buddha ordained nuns in his lifetime the continuous order of Buddhist nuns, or <u>bhikkunis</u>, was broken five hundred years after the Buddha's death, and women are no longer allowed to ordain in the Theravada tradition. <u>Yiey chii</u> take the place of nuns in Theravada contexts.

could see these women every day in the late afternoon performing a slow walking meditation around the wat compounds. Old women survived Pol Pot in numbers disproportionate to the men of their age, ⁴⁰ and the wats provided a safe place for them to stay and serve when their obligations to their families were no longer pressing. These older women had a kind of detachment from everyday strains and worries that was unusual to find in Site II. They seemed genuinely oriented to religious study much more than they were to daily life in the camp.

Religious education for the lay population in Site II was coordinated through the Khmer Buddhist Association, established on the border in 1981 for the purpose of overseeing Buddhist activities in the KP camps. 41 In addition to serving as a resource for the religious instruction of monks and nuns, the KBA ran classes for lay men and women, both older people and youth, in an effort to promote Buddhist values and understanding in the camp. For the older people these involved study of the Buddha doctrine, usually with an achaa for an instructor; classes were held in the sections and were attended primarily by women. Classes for young people, between the ages of ten and seventeen or eighteen, included certain key non-religious topics such as English language and typing in an effort to draw young Khmer into the KBA program. Instruction about basic Buddhist principles, proper behavior, and prayer were interspersed these more "relevant" topics. 42

⁴⁰ See Ebihara, 1987, p.39.

⁴¹ The Khmer Buddhist Association had been active in Cambodia before 1975, but the scope of its activities was more narrow and specific. The sangha was in charge of its own instruction then; the KBA simply provided additional classes, and helped to arrange for monks to go abroad to study. Additionally, the KBA coordinated classes on Buddhism for lay men and women, and conducted research on Buddhist topics. See below.

⁴² In this the KBA may have taken a lesson from the Christian missionaries who were active on the border. The best English classes in the camp were taught by a couple of Catholic and Protestant NGOs; several Khmer who converted on the border told me they were first exposed to Christianity through these language classes.

In the past the wats had been the center of much cultural activity in a Khmer village: they were the local center of literacy and instruction, ⁴³ the center of artistic production, the center of traditional music-making, and often the center of traditional healing as well. Monks, especially the older monks, had the time to develop their literary and artistic skills, and to the extent that the rules and formulas for these kinds of activities were written down, these <u>cbap</u> and <u>kbuen</u> were stored in the temples where only the literate (men) had access to them.

In Site II the wats made some effort to be the kind of cultural centers they had been in the past. There was an awareness among many senior monks that people needed more activities to keep them busy in the camp, and the wats were an obvious place to conduct certain cultural programs. The degree to which the wats were actually able to provide these kind of activities depended on the level of outside support they received for the programs, however: from the international agencies in the camp, from funding sources outside the camp, and from the KP hierarchy. In Site II the most well-endowed temple in all of these categories was Wat Prasat Serei, in Rithysen, and its cultural programs were impressive. It had gathered together several master musicians who were living in the camp and maintained three traditional orchestras; it provided instruction in traditional sculpture, painting and drawing, and in 1989 it had begun a program to construct traditional leather shadow puppets (lkhoun sbaek) and performed these shadow

⁴³ Before independence in 1953 virtually all instruction, secular as well as sacred, took place in the <u>salaa wat</u>, or temple schools. Even after Sihanouk had inaugurated a state system of public education in the 1950s, the schools were often still located at the wats, especially in rural areas. The wats already had the classroom space and many of the resources needed to offer secular instruction.

44 Ordinarily a wat runs on the support it receives from its community, and in Site II monks continued to depend for general upkeep on their daily food collection and donations from their congregations. But they also received support from UNBRO for everyday temple activities and service to the community, assistance from various NGOs for specific arts programs, and general support from the KPNLF.

plays at the temple after dark. The motive behind all of these programs was "cultural preservation", but this had a distinct political dimension as well. The monk in charge of the arts programs at Wat Prasat Serei explained his programs this way:

"In the past ... culture and art ... were under the control of the government. But later, when there was war, the government's control was not always maintained. Because of this the historical documents, Buddhist scripts, and canons which are proof of the identity of Cambodia were taken to be kept in the monasteries where the monks were obliged to take care of them ... We want to preserve all these things that belong to our nation. We do not want them to be lost because they say something about our civilization, race, and nation. As we are Khmer who are devoted to Buddhist liberal democracy⁴⁵, we must try to preserve all of our national possessions. [We] don't want to allow Khmer traditional culture to be lost."

The nationalist aspect of this kind of cultural preservation in Site II is indicative of the close ties that existed between the sangha and the camp's political leadership. Their mutually supportive relationship was further exemplified in the work of the Khmer Buddhist Research Center, another program of the KBA. In part because the president of the KPNLF, Son Sann, was a devout Buddhist and understood his own political activity in terms of Buddhist goals and principles, the KBRC was engaged in an ongoing practice of political/religious exegesis. Its most visible work was a bi-monthly publication of essays which discussed Buddhist principles in relation to situations and events familiar to the inhabitants of Site II, and interpreted such events and situations in terms of their Buddhist implications. 46 These essays, printed in both Khmer and English, reveal a good

^{45 &}quot;Buddhist liberal democracy" was a catch phrase for KP President Son Sann's political agenda, and became the name of his political party when he made the final split with his KP rival General Sak Sutsakhan in 1991.

⁴⁶ The KBRC's "Principle of Research Work", as printed on the first page of each publication, is:

^{1.} The concept of Buddhism as the basis of political and social action.

^{2.} The reason for the failure to prevent the catastrophe and the holocaust in Cambodia.

^{3.} A strategy for the future: a more dynamic Buddhism as a stimulus to overcome the resignation in worldly issues.

deal about the political philosophy of one branch of the KP leadership.⁴⁷ But they were not widely disseminated and did not seem to reflect a common understanding of the relationship between Buddhism and daily experience in Site II. They represented an elite and scholarly effort, which mainly occupied just a few religiously oriented intellectuals in the Son Sann faction.

For most people in Site II the most important work of the sangha was its reactivation of the annual cycle of Buddhist rituals and holidays. Most significant among these were Coul Chnam Thmey, Prachum Bun, and Kathin. Analogous in many ways to New Year's Day, Memorial Day, and Easter, these holidays combined Buddhist ritual and prayer with more secular festivities, and people involved themselves in the festivities with a kind of enthusiasm that had little to do with Buddhist devotion. For the religiously inclined there was plenty of opportunity to be devout, but for most they represented the chance to reclaim a festive holiday that had been denied them for too many years. What was impressive to me was how much fun people seemed to have at these events. Holidays were a chance to dress up; to meet relatives and friends; to eat, drink, and sometimes dance together; to play games; to be silly; to flirt with the kramom; 48 to forget for a moment the daily grind of life in the camp. Other smaller and more sacred Buddhist rituals attracted smaller numbers of genuine devotees to the wats. During the major holidays, however, the Khmer indulged a taste for relaxation and fun that, in their everyday lives, they had far too little opportunity to gratify. (See Tambiah 1970 for comparison.)

48 Literally, "unmarried girls."

^{4.} A Buddhist concept to rebuild the national economy.

⁴⁷ The KBRC was very clearly a project of Son Sann and his supporters within the KPNLF. The General Sak faction did seem to pay particular attention to the Buddhist aspect of their endeavors. See <u>Buddhism and the Future of Cambodia</u>, Khmer Buddhist Research Center, Rithysen, 1986.

In addition to the common collective rituals at which the sangha presided, Buddhist monks also chanted and prayed at various private rituals for the population in Site II: at weddings, funerals and cremations, sraok tik. 49 buong suong. 50 house blessings, etc. This put the participants in these rituals into a good position in relation to karmic retribution: of good actions, bad actions, and their consequences. Monks were always present to bless any important KPNLF event. President Son Sann wanted the KP political struggle to be understood as a Buddhist struggle for compassion and justice, and freedom from foreign aggression. 51 These included military ceremonies. More than once I arrived at one of the wats only to find it deserted, and was told that the monks had all gone to the nearby KP military headquarters to sanctify some military event. On an individual level, many of the KP soldiers gathered blessings from their favorite monk along with tatoos, magic handkerchiefs, Buddha images, and strings of Pali prayers before they went back into battle from Site II (see below). The Buddha represented the most powerful of all these protective stratagems.

In spite of the presence of monks at many official camp events, in spite of the habitual way in which people sought the monks' assistance for both special ceremonies and the more commonplace annual ritual cycle, in spite of the seriousness with which those people involved in Buddhist study pursued their endeavors in Site II, the question arises how much Buddhist orientations and practices managed to integrate social and cultural life in Site II, or for that matter how much the Buddha dhamma was really being disseminated through the wats.

⁴⁹ <u>Sraok tik</u> is a ceremony of ritual purification and cleansing, which individuals undergo at times of misfortune and/or trouble.

Boung suong is ceremonial propitiation of the spirits of ancestors or teachers, performed at the beginning of an artistic undertaking or at times of individual or collective misfortune, to invoke the protection and assistance of the dead. See Cravath, 1985, pp. 563-69.

⁵¹ See Khmer Buddhist Research Center, 1986, pp.157-163.

This was a question that many Khmer in Site II asked themselves. Their discussions suggest that while many people maintained a Buddhist "disposition" in their own personal lives, there was an overwhelming sense of fragmentation rather than integration in Site II.

Buddhism and Culture in Site II

Since 1979 the Khmer sangha, like most Khmer social and cultural institutions, had functioned under extremely difficult conditions. Divided by the politics of local leaders and operating independently in multiple locales (i.e., in Cambodia, in several western countries where Cambodians have been resettled, and within the three different political factions on the border) Khmer monks have had to pick up the pieces of a tradition and a practice that was decimated in the last half of the 1970s. Not only were temples desecrated and practice forbidden under the Khmer Rouge, many of the venerable, well-educated monks were murdered, and thousands of irreplaceable scriptures were destroyed. 52 Many of the resources needed to re-establish a vigorous Buddhist practice were simply obliterated by Pol Pot, and very little of what remained could be found at the border. Of the seven monks in charge of the temples in Site II, some had not even been ordained before 1975. There was a serious dearth of knowledge of the scriptures among the monks in Site II, and very few Khmer with a solid Buddhist education who were able to teach them. 53

⁵² See Hawk 1987: 130-134.

⁵³ In fact there were quite a few laymen in Site II with a substantial Buddhist education — men who had spent six, ten, or twelve years in a monastery before 1975. But most of these men, who had disrobed before 1975, had families to take care of and could not afford to devote their time to educating a new generation of monks. In a general sense, the camp communities could not support a vigorous sangha — there were too many pressing concerns to claim the attention of those men who might have been ordained other other circumstances.

The Buddhist leaders in Site II recognized this problem, and over the years greater attention was paid to the need to support Buddhist education among outside sponsors as well as the Khmer. These included UNBRO and NGOs working in the camp but also local and international Buddhist organizations and funding agencies. Among the sponsors of these programs there was a belief that Buddhism provided something important for people in the camps, not just in terms of the solace of scripture and meditation, but also in terms of the values Buddhism espouses and the social and cultural solidarity it can engender. Buddhism was regarded by many as a way to return to what was truly Khmer, a means for people to find their way back to something essential that had been lost in the chaos of the Pol Pot years.

There was a problem, though, in that life had been so disrupted under Pol Pot and in the ensuing years on the border that many people under the age of twenty had never been taught the most basic precepts of the Buddhist scripture, and could not recite even the most basic prayers. Moreover, much of what the older people understood to be deeply philosophically and culturally Khmer was largely unknown to the younger people in the camp. What had been ingrained as natural history, world view and teleology in Khmer over forty years of age often made little sense to those under twenty or twenty-five, who had grown up in a time of civil war, physical and cultural devastation and displacement, when Buddhist

⁵⁴ The KBA began to receive regular support from the German Konrad Adenaur Foundation in 1985, and the Japan Shotoshu Relief Committee started reprinting Buddhist texts at its printing facility in Khao I Dang camp around the same time. UNBRO opened the Central Buddhist School in January 1989, and later that year the German Freidrich Nauman Foundation sponsored a "Monks and Community Development" workshop, which involved monks from the three major border camp. In 1990 the Asia Foundation sponsored a month-long workshop on Buddhism and community development at the Mahachula Buddhist University in Bangkok. Several other Buddhist organizations have provided educational workshops in Site II, including the Bangkok-based International Network of Engaged Buddhists and two small American projects called Cambodian Mission for Peace and the Khmer-Buddhist Educational Assistance Project.

practice was intermittent if not outlawed altogether. As Marjorie Muecke has described it, "The Khmer Rouge has broken the bond of religious philosophy between two generations" (Muecke, 1992, p.9). This idea was expressed in a very concrete way by a young man in his early twenties who worked for me in Site II. He said:

The young people are not interested very much in religion, especially not in Buddhism. They think there is no benefit for them. Because whenever they ask the elderly people about Buddhist actions the elderly always reply saying, you will receive the good rewards in the next life.

... The old people say, if God really offers rewards to people in the next life, then we won't worry about this life. And for every activity God promises to hand us in the next life, then in this life we will do our best and we shall wait to receive [our reward] in the future life. But the modern day people have different ideas ... The young people ask the old people, please lend me 1 million Baht and I'll pay you back in the next life. In the next life you won't have to do anything, just wait for the money I will pay.

The young people ... say that when they bring food to the monks in a bowl, the only thing they bring back home is an empty bowl.

This "generation gap" created by the different life experiences against which the events of recent history were understood was not limited to religious philosophy. There were profound differences in education, knowledge, experience and sensibility between those who had grown up in Cambodia before 1975 and those who had known little else beside war, terror and displacement. Especially for youths who had been separated from their families, undergone heavy indoctrination, and sent to work in Pol Pot's mobile youth brigades, the understanding of kin relations, reciprocity, social hierarchy, power, authority, and value were often dramatically different from that of their elders. 55

⁵⁵ People in Site II talked about this cohort of young adults who had been teenagers under the Khmer Rouge as though they were significantly different from the rest of the population, and particularly problematic. Children a bit younger had remained with their families throughout the Pol Pot years, and had usually managed to acquire some kind of education as teenagers on the border. Those a bit older had been educated and had consolidated their identity before Cambodian society had been turned upside down by the Khmer Rouge. Those

The Khmer Buddhist Association made a conscious effort to address this problem of the difference in sensibility between young people and adults through its youth programs. The head of the KBA, Chea Chhum, told me that in the early years on the border the young men were "out of control." They had been changed by their experiences with the Khmer Rouge, he said; they behaved differently, and people were afraid of them. The youth program was designed to teach a Buddhist perspective on action and its consequences. The problem, from Chea Chhum's point of view, was a cultural one. In the disrupted situation since Pol Pot time there had been a failure to transmit the knowledge of ordinary, everyday, proper behavior, which for the Khmer is codified in rules based on Buddhist understandings of reciprocity, hierarchy and value. It is the sort of thing people learned from their parents in the past, and from their teachers, in school. But, Chea Chhum asserted, many parents did not teach their kids proper behavior anymore and there were problems with both the quality and continuity of the formal education on the border. 56 What the KBA addressed in its youth programs -- Buddhist behavior, Buddhist morals, a Buddhist way of thinking in everyday life -- was essentially a cultural curriculum.

caught in the middle were adults by the time the 1970s were over; they were too old to go back to school and their experiences made it difficult for them to take instruction in any case. Especially worrisome was the fact that these young adults, who had never had the opportunity to "learn what real Khmer culture is", were now raising children of their own.

⁵⁶ Schools were abolished in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, and it was difficult to maintain any continuity of education in the early years on the border, when the camps were routinely shelled and people were forced to move frequently. Education was considered important by the KPNLF leadership, however, and primary schools were established in 1980. In 1987 these schools began receiving both supplies and teacher training from UNBRO. When the camps were moved across the border into Thailand in 1985, the Thai government limited educational support to the primary schools as part of its humane deterrence policy. But this policy was gradually stretched to allow several kinds of technical and vocational training programs, and in 1988 a high school assistance program was established by COERR. But in spite of the numbers of programs on the books in Site II, there was a dearth of qualified teachers, and a fair amount of discontinuity and disruption in these programs. In 1990 only 5 percent of the students who had begun elementary school in 1985 had made it all the way through the five year program (personal ommunication, UNBRO Education Unit).

This is not surprising since, for the Khmer, Buddhism and culture are hard to separate. The Khmer word for "culture" – <u>voappathoa</u> – means, literally, to cultivate or sow the dhamma. There were certain cardinal signs of "culture" for the Khmer – a respectful attitude toward elders, for example, and a proper greeting with one's hands raised together as in prayer – but the essence of culture in most areas was to go about things with a Buddhist sensibility: with an awareness of one's place in a Buddhist universe and of the karmic consequences of one's actions. This is what parents and teachers had been responsible for teaching young people in the past. But the nature of life in Site II made it difficult both to teach and to learn these lessons. One teacher described the situation this way:

In Cambodia, education is formally the responsibility of the <u>krus</u>. The word "kru" comes from the Pali word "garu" and the Sanscrit word "guru". That means a patient person, a respected person, a person who teaches knowledge and arts to his disciples. A model, or a good example.

"Kru" means many things to a Cambodian villager. There are many kinds of kru. There are the healers: the herbalists, the medics, and the doctors: the kru peet. There are also the kru pleeng: the music teachers, and the kru bangrien: teachers in the schools, and the monks: the kru oppecia ... People respected these teachers wherever they went.

In the past the young people respected parents, monks, teachers, krus. They taught <u>savoir vivre</u>; ethics; how to live — this was the overall sense of what krus taught. They were wise in the ways of living ethically. They could take advantage of how much people respected them. They could teach an effective lesson.

But many young people nowadays are rebellious; they ignore all tradition. The young people here feel foolishly free: they falsely feel no constraints. How to behave as a young Khmer man or woman, this has all been codified; there are books about the proper way to behave. These books are around Site II, but teachers must find the truth in these <u>cbap</u>, or rules, and transfer it to the young people. This is the value of a good kru.

Unfortunately, our kru now lead miserable lives ... In Sihanouk's time teachers were more respected by the people, both students and parents, and salaries were higher then ... Now, in Site II, a simple kru must be a taxi-biker just to support himself. It is very low status job. Maybe he taxis his own students to school ... Their difficult lives have led many to give up their positions as kru. This is a hindrance to those who want to become teachers. They don't get any encouragement at all

The parents are also considered to be teachers. The teachers at school are Teachers Number One and the parents are Teachers Number Two. The teachers are also counted to be the second fathers of the school children. So, much depends on the parents and on the teachers. If they feel themselves to be Khmer then they will do their best to bring up their children in the Khmer way. Because there will always be outside influences which have an impact on our young generation.

We can think about the Khmer in Kampuchea. Although they are educated in the Khmer society, although they are living amidst Cambodians, there is still an influence from the outside from the Vietnamese, and from the Russians. So everywhere there is danger. In Cambodia there is danger of Vietnamization, and in America, there is danger of Americanization, and here in Site II, there is danger of Siamization or UNBROization.

I will introduce you to a new idea found in Site II. Our young generation do not think that they are the daughters and sons of their own parents. They think they are the daughters and sons of UNBRO. They heed little to what their parents say. Even their own parents they do not pay attention to, so how could they pay much attention to the teacher who is counted to be the second father?

They think they owe their life to UNBRO. It's UNBRO that provides them with what they need: with food. Their parents are no longer able to provide for the family. Thus there is a lack of respect inside the family, the cell of the Site II community.

Another man told me,

.... In school today children don't respect or listen to the teacher the same as before ... It is really different from when we were in Cambodia. We always respected the rule of the school. But here even though we have the rule of the school nobody respects it because ... at the time when those children should have been learning to respect everything, they just learned how to work together [in a collective work group], how to plant rice, etc., and they learned "don't respect your mother and father." This is one bad influence that Pol Pot as had on Khmers between the ages of 20 and 30. Less than ten years old never mind, because it is Site II that influences them. They are the menous samay kroep ploung: the children of the shelling time.

A third man said.

In Site II many parents do not pay attention to their children's education. Many of these people grew up in Pol Pot time, so they did not learn much about Khmer culture or literature. And now they live in the camp which is like a prison. No one teaches them about Khmer culture ... For example, typically a child would join hands together in a gesture of respect and appreciation toward the person who gives him a cake. Nowadays children do not give such a response. Now, when they have the cake in their hands, they just run away.

In all of these comments an explicit connection is drawn between the morality of individuals and the nature of the society in which they live. (This is a very Buddhist notion.) In all there is the lament that certain basic social institutions such as family and education do not function in Site II the same way they functioned before in Cambodia. In the past teachers were wise in the ways of living ethically and taught savoir vivre, but the society itself and parents especially reenforce these lessons and taught their own lessons about culture. In Site II there was a clear sense that children were picking up bad habits from the environment in which they were living.

The Khmer concept of culture consists of certain ideal behaviors and practices that never change, and are difficult if not impossible to achieve; the ideal society reflects and reinforces key cultural values through its social and cultural institutions. Site II was badly out of sync with this ideal society. Most Khmer were very conscious of the fact that their social and cultural institutions had been decimated under Pol Pot, and that those institutions that had been reconstituted on the border did not add up to the kind of society they had had before. For the culturally attuned, Site II was a very disturbing place. There was a great deal of talk about "culture" among these people, and a great concern that Khmer culture was disappearing here "in the forest", where "people have lived so long without ever seeing a town" that "they have almost grown tails."

This powerful image, which bespoke the gravity of people's concern about proper behavior as well as cultural survival and continuity, came up frequently in conversations about life in Site II. It reflected the feeling shared by many that life in the camp was savage and uncivilized, and degrading to those who were forced to live there. There was a certain resignation in the way people talked about culture in Site II, as though no matter how hard they tried they would never be able to live in a way they considered proper and appropriate. Under the current circumstances, this was simply not possible. 57

⁵⁷ For example, several women I knew who were deeply disappointed in the way men treated their wives in the camp told me they didn't think anything would

On the other hand, people's talk did not necessarily reflect their behavior. There was an ongoing rhetoric about morality and values in Site II and people seemed to locate themselves in relation to the moral confusion of life in the camp through this debate. But daily life was tedious, people were tired, tempers were short, and many activities that were considered both ordinary and essential to a Khmer way of life fell by the wayside in Site II, even among those who criticized the most. Story-telling, for example, an activity that had a specific pedagogical function as well as more general cultural significance to the Khmer, rarely occurred in Site II:

In the old days most of the old people told stories to the children, especially at the full moon, when they had finished their work. But here when the night comes people just get into their mosquito nets and sleep. Here the people have a lot of time, but they are too bored with their life to want to tell stories together. They take the time to sleep rather than telling stories to the children. Very few people tell stories here anymore.

In uncomfortable surroundings, with little productive work and almost no way to improve their situation through their own efforts, life was quite literally de-moralizing. People did what they had to do in Site II, and what they felt they could do. But everyone had learned to protect themselves under Pol Pot, and scarcity, loss, and necessity were used to justify almost any behavior.

In the past in times of moral confusion people often sought refuge in the dhamma. But for many, especially those who had grown up without an Buddhist education, the sangha was no longer the obvious place to go for clarity and comfort. Moreover, what the monks in Site II could provide in terms of moral guidance was limited. There were several reasons for this. First, the educational

change until they got back to Cambodia, where the situation was more "normal". Their point was that in Site II there was nothing to force these men to behave any differently, whereas in Cambodia neither the economy nor their wives' families would allow husbands to carry on with other women or neglect their responsibilities toward their own children. See chapter on families.

qualifications of the monks were limited. Most had received their entire religious training on the border. Many were simply incapable of providing adequate interpretations of the dhamma to the troubled who might seek out their counsel. Second, there was a tradition of what might be called "pastoral detachment" in the Khmer sangha. In all Theravada traditions, but in the Khmer tradition especially, the sanctity of a monk has been measured in terms of his detachment from worldly affairs. Since so many of people's difficulties in Site II were rooted in the very concrete problems of living on the border, the sangha was not always the most appropriate place to go for assistance. Finally, many problems in Site II stemmed from conflicts among rival political factions in the camp. The sangha itself was deeply implicated in these political divisions through the wats' dependence on the patronage of the political leadership in their camps.

The interdependence of sacred and secular power is nothing new for Theravada Buddhists, and is certainly nothing new for the Khmer. ⁵⁹ But it was especially problematic in camps on the border where people were so dependent on their political leaders. There was a great need for moral authority independent of the political leadership in Site II; a need that the sangha, for the most part, could not meet. But there was really no way for things to be otherwise in Site II: there was no detached, disengaged place for the sangha to stand. Or rather, the more detached and disengaged it became, the less useful the sangha was to the people in this particular situation of need. This conflict was no different in essence from the conflict the sangha always faces between its material

This issue was given a slightly different twist by one of the more outspoken and active monks in Site II, a man who did not subscribe to the tradition of pastoral detachment. As the director of the KBRC, he was both politically engaged with KPNLF colleagues and active in lobbying UNBRO for additional goods and services for the people in Site II. Criticized at one point for not providing more spiritual guidance to his people, he retorted that spiritual guidance was of little use to people who did not have adequate food and shelter.

59 See Tambiah 1976:pp.2-264.

dependence upon the population it serves, especially the leadership of that population, and its spiritual need to remain detached from worldly affairs. But because both the material and spiritual needs of this population were so great, and its resources so limited, the conflict was perhaps of greater consequence in Site II. The sangha, it seemed, had lost some of its status through its inability to be more centrally important in peoples' lives.

Spirits, Medicine and Magic

But the sangha was not the only place people sought assistance and comfort for their distress in Site II. Doctrinal Buddhism only addresses a part of the Khmer's overall understanding of natural and supernatural power, and Khmer Buddhist practice has traditionally accommodated a range of spiritual powers. If Buddhist practice could not always provide relief adequate to the great and varied needs of this population, people in Site II sought remedies for specific ills through a number of other, more immediate therapeutic means. Khmer healers were known throughout the region for their power and efficacy with a whole range of media. Thais considered the Khmer especially skilled at communicating with spirits and powerful in their work with magic, and Khmer monks were often well-known locally for their herbal remedies.

Typically in the past these healing arts were best developed in rural areas where the population had little access to Western medicines. But even city folk's experience with western medicine was limited in the early 1970s, and there had been no western medicine in Cambodia at all under the Khmer Rouge. No doctor trained in a western medical tradition could practice openly in Cambodia during that period, for fear of being denounced as an imperialist and killed. 60 The

⁶⁰ See Haing Ngor 1987, pp.323-339.

entire population had grown accustomed to seeking protection from threat and relief for their ailments through spirits, herbal treatments, amulets, tatoos, and magic.

The spiritual solace of "religion" slides into medicinal and magical remedies here, as we consider how people actually "got by" day to day, week to week in Site II. These people were essentially a captive population, stuck in Site II indefinitely, unable to ameliorate the fundamental conditions of uncertainty and danger, and the level of physical distress was extraordinarily high. An extensive survey of health, mental health and social functioning conducted in Site II in 1990 revealed that more than 87 percent of the adult sample considered their overall health status to be "fair to poor." 61 83 percent of the survey population "felt deep sadness inside themselves," and more than half reported feeling worried and hopeless. 55 percent met the Western psychiatric criteria for major depression, and 20 percent reported moderate to severe bodily pain. In spite of this, the same percentage of adults were working in Site II as had been employed before 1975. Thus feelings of ill health did not seem to prevent people from carrying on with their daily lives. The number of respondents with actual physical handicaps or serious medical diseases was low.

In fact, poor health status was associated with a number of common Khmer medical complaints and "folk" diagnoses (see Mollica et al, p.6), and people typically sought relief from a range of traditional Khmer healers, or kru khmer. Traditional remedies for pain included coining, cupping, and the application of monkey balm and/or mentholated adhesive strips. (It was common to see people walking around the camp with dark coining marks on their chest, red circles on

^{61 &}quot;Repatriation and Disability: A Community Study of Health, Mental Health and Social Functioning of the Khmer Residents of Site Two" (a working document of the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, the Harvard School of Public Health and the World Federation for Mental Health).

their forehead, or white tape at their temples, all signs that they had been using these home remedies for aches and pains.) For more serious or persistent problems spirit mediums were consulted, and particular spirits were propitiated for protection. Magic spells were invoked against specific dangers, and herbal treatments were prepared for ailments in which the emotional and physical components were typically not distinguished. A rich and varied indigenous medical tradition was brought to bear on what were often chronic or intractable symptoms of physical distress.

People also sought spiritual protection from a range of misfortune and evil intent. Khmer often wear small Buddha images around their necks and give their children amulets to protect against bad spirits, malevolent spells, and other kinds of misfortune. In Site II people were especially conscious of being on spiritually alien, and therefore potentially dangerous, ground. This was Thai land; they did not know the territory, did not know the spirits that resided there. It was hard to feel safe in this kind of environment. Khmer pay close attention to signs in the natural world, and the unknown character of the place combined with their own powerlessness in so many situations made people acutely conscious of signs that seemed to suggest something about their future. People consulted their horoscopes frequently for information about the future, and always before an important event like a wedding or a trip into Cambodia. But they protected themselves against bad luck or ill intention in all sorts of small ways as well; being careful, for example, about where they ate, how they disposed of their hair and nails, and how many people were captured together in a photograph. 62

⁶² People did not like to eat in places where they did not know who had been preparing the food (they worried that something might have been done to the food to make them sick); were careful of how they disposed of the hair that fell out in their combs (this was good material for making evil charms) often collecting it in a ball and keeping on the household shrine; and never allowed themselves to be

There was a great elaboration of supernatural protection for the men who were fighting in the resistance and routinely faced the dangers of war. Most soldiers wore two or three Buddha images or amulets on chains around their necks. Many wore several small metal strips which were incised with Pali words of protection and prayer, then rolled around a string and tied around the waist or neck. Others had handkerchiefs made with a whole pattern of these Pali words and symbols inscribed in ink. Like the metal strips, these konsaen were blessed by the kru khmer who made them, then worn for protection around the waist or neck. The most visible signs of protection that many soldiers displayed were tatoos of these same Pali symbols. Most men who fought in the KP army had some kind of protective writing tatooed across their chests; many had Pali letters covering their chests and backs and marching in rows down their arms. A few had these tatoos, call sak, on their legs as well. The tatoos were intended to confer strength to the soldier and to make his skin impervious to bullets. Their efficacy depended on the skill of the kru khmer who applied them, as well as the conduct of the soldier.63 (Since the tatoos were sacred words, the soldier had to be careful not to desecrate them through his own bad conduct.)

In addition to traditional protections and cures, people in Site II had access to fairly high quality western medical care through the voluntary agencies that worked for UNBRO. There were three western-run hospitals in Site II, run

photographed with just two other people, as three was considered an inauspicious number.

⁶³ These tatoos were very common in Site II, and were similar to the kind of tatoos one could see on Thai soldiers in the area around the border as well. I was therefore surprised to find no tatoos among the SOC army soldiers I saw in 1991 when I visited the State of Cambodia. It seems that the tatoos are somewhat local to the northwest provinces of Cambodia, Battambang and Oddar Meanchey. These provinces not only border Thailand, they were part of Thai territory from 1794 to 1907, and again briefly from 1941 to 1947. It seems likely that the tatoos are Khmer in origin, and were adopted by Thai soldiers sometime in the past. In fact many magical Thai spells are written in "Korm", an ancient version of Khmer script. See Rajadhon 1964 and Umemoto 1982.

primarily by Khmer staff who were trained by small medical teams from Europe or America. Very serious cases were sent to an ICRC surgical hospital⁶⁴ and medical ward in Khao I Dang, which served the entire border population.⁶⁵ The quality of care in these hospitals was much higher than anything in the State of Cambodia outside of Phnom Penh. In fact, many people came from northwestern Cambodia to be treated on the border, for TB, leprosy, malaria, and surgical problems, especially. Drug treatment was limited by ICRC emergency protocols but far more western medication was available on the border than in Cambodia itself.

In spite of very strict accounting procedures and a ruthless dismissal policy for any of the Khmer staff caught with unauthorized medical supplies, many of these drugs and hospital materials found their way into the camp markets. In addition, Chinese medicines and virtually anything that could be purchased in a Thai pharmacy were available in the camp through the Thai traders who served as middlemen for the Khmer markets. Thus for camp residents who were aware of their options, there was a wide range of therapeutic services available, from western medics to kru Khmer and Chinese-Khmer doctors; from western pharmaceuticals to herbal and home remedies; from spirit mediums to healers adept in the use of magic spells.

People tended to chose their treatment according to the kind of complaint they had and the medicines they were most familiar with. Thus while the

⁶⁴ The KPNLF also ran a military hospital for soldiers and their families, called Chiang Daoy, which focused primarily on war-related trauma wounds. The hospital was located within sight of the northern edge of Site II, and was rumored to have an American surgeon working there. (Since KP military installations was strictly off limits for UNBRO and its affiliated agencies, these rumors could never be verified!) Supplies from the camp hospitals routinely ended up at Chiang Daoy, as well as in the camp markets, in spite of very strict accounting procedures and a ruthless dismissal policy for any Khmer caught stealing or selling medical supplies.

⁶⁵ A fair number of soldiers with war-related injuries were brought to Khao I Dang from the border by the ICRC ambulance team as well.

hospitals were known to be good for certain kinds of problems and particular kru khmer for others, certain remedies had a kind of cachet and were popular regardless of their apparent efficacy. Many people injected B vitamins for strength, for example, or took them through an IV drip that could be purchased in the market. The western hospitals recognized much illness that had no organic cause, and often referred people to a well-organized Traditional Medical Center where they thought people might be better served. Conversely the talented kru khmer in the camp sent patients with bronchitis and infectious diseases to the hospitals, while they treated madness caused by spirit possession themselves. All kinds of healers commented on the level of distress they encountered in the camp. All kinds of therapies were utilized, often. But at a certain level, nothing really worked.

People did what they <u>could</u> do in Site II; did whatever seemed right at the moment. Conditions changed constantly, and people had to re-adjust their strategies constantly. In a very basic way everyone was on their own in Site II: one had to fight for most of what one got even if it was supposed to be provided automatically. One had to find one's own ways of protecting oneself. A particularly poignant example of this were the tatoos a man I knew had imprinted on his body: the outline of his mother's hands on his chest and his father's feet on his back, so that no matter where he went his parents' protection would always be with him. These tatoos were unique — no one I spoke with had ever seen anything like them — but they combined two forms of protection commonly engaged by the Khmer (tatoos and parental blessings) in a way that was as brave and hopeful as it was innovative.

People did look for and find ways to take care of themselves in Site II but their efforts tended to be individual and private, rather than collective and public. Collective Buddhist practice had been undermined in Site II by the destruction of the the community of monks in the 1970s, and by the changed nature of reciprocity between the monks and the lay population in the camp. The sangha no longer depended on the lay community to support its activities as the lay community had not the means to support itself let alone the monks. Instead the sangha relied on the UN and Khmer political leadership for their support; it was indebted to these institutions rather than to the population as a whole. Thus the reciprocal material/spiritual dependence that had been the foundation of the relationship between the religious and lay communities was lost.

People still engaged in Buddhist practices in the camp, along with a range of other spiritual activities, and these practices were important to many. But these were, like people's economic strategies, makeshift practices. They added up to a bunch of individual acts of devotion and self-protection, not a collective rebuilding of institutions of spiritual comfort and support. They did not partake of a unified universe of power and meaning, but rather reflected and contributed to a habitus of alienation and insecurity.

Chapter 8. Enduring Holocaust, Surviving History

A week before I was to leave Thailand, in December 1990, a friend who worked for the UNBRO Protection Unit came by my house in Aran to say he had finally received permission for me to spend a night in Site II. It was Sunday, around eleven a.m.; he was planning to go into the camp at four that afternoon; could I be ready then? After eighteen months working to construct second-hand what went on in Site II at night ...? Well, of course.

We did not actually get to Site II until 5:30 or 6:00; by that time my friend was more interested in eating dinner than driving around the camp. So we sat in the UNBRO office and ate the food we had brought with us; talked for awhile about what these one-man UNBRO patrols were worth in terms of protection; talked about a number of things, in fact. It was clear that my friend was happy to have someone to talk to — it was lonely in the office at night — and the sun had gone down before I could convince him that we should get out and do some patrolling.

As we drove down the main road that bisects the camp, my friend told me we weren't going to go out to the western edge of the camp because bandits had been active in that area last week, and we weren't going to go out to the eastern edge of the camp either because we did not want to run into whoever might be coming in from Cambodia. It was eerily quiet in Site II, and dark. At 8:30 the roads were already deserted. The only lights we could see were a few lamps flickering inside people's houses. As we turned off the main road onto a secondary throughway, a group of figures lit up suddenly by our headlights divided and disappeared into the sections on either side of the road. Other than these shadowy figures, we saw nobody.

We drove out to a road that marked the edge of the residential area, though not the edge of the camp itself, turned left, and headed for what looked like a fire in the distance. It was a fire: a small bonfire built at the intersection of two roads; four or five young men in Khmer Police uniforms were clustered around it. It seemed they were supposed to be guarding this edge of the camp, but they had built this fire and gathered around it for their own comfort and protection. They looked at each other, frightened, when we stopped to say hello and ask if there were any problems. No, no; no problems. We drove on.

A bit further down the road we could see a searchlight sweeping through the sections. As we got closer to the source of the light, we made out a truck full of DPPU soldiers, bristling with AK-47s. The searchlight was mounted on the back of the truck, which moved slowly up and down these secondary roads, its light trained on the houses. We stopped to speak with the DPPU officer in the cab; no, no problems tonight, he smiled.

Up ahead several small lights flickered, and people were moving about the bamboo stalls that marked a small market in the section. Some of the lights were colored and music was playing from a boombox in one of the stalls. I realized that we were in Rithysen camp, Section 7, famous for its <u>srey pehsia</u> or call girls. The lights and music were warm and inviting. This was the only place we visited that night that did not feel dangerous and forboding. We drove on into the dark.

A few moments later our truck's shortwave radio crackled into the silence. We could hear a message being transmitted from one of the camp hospitals to the DPPU headquarters. The radio was hard to understand but the voice seemed to be asking for an ambulance to be sent from the ICRC hospital at Khao I Dang. Something about a landmine; something about new arrivals. We headed over to the hospital to see what was going on.

There was a powerful light on in the Ampil/Nong Chan hospital when we got there, and ten or fifteen people were milling quietly about. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something to happen. It was hard to tell who was in charge. A family of new arrivals had just been brought over from the hospital at Chiang Daoy. KP soldiers had found them that afternoon about ten kilometers from the camp: a family of Kampuchea Kraom, ethnic Khmer from southern Vietnam, on their way to Site II to find their husband and father who had come a year earlier. There was a woman in her mid-thirties and four children; the oldest, a girl of twelve, had stepped on a landmine. The medics at Chiang Daoy had brought her here because she needed emergency surgery that the ICRC doctors in Khao I Dang could provide. They were waiting now for the ambulance to arrive.

I wasn't sure I wanted to see the girl, but someone took my arm and drew me over to her. She was shivering under a blanket, obviously in shock. The blanket was lifted for me to see: her left foot had been blown off. I looked for her mother and found her in the shadows: terrified, alone, and ignored, holding onto one of her other children. Someone had been sent to try to find her husband, but he had not turned up by the time the ambulance arrived.

I began my discussion of this research by stating a basic premise: that human social and cultural life is, among other things, meaningful. While I will stand by the idea that collective values and meanings are complexly involved in social actions and institutions, and that much of what makes everyday life meaningful — or not — are the values and institutions which organize daily existence, I would no longer state my original premise in the same way. Social life

is not, in fact, always meaningful. Much of what happens in life has no particular significance, and some of what happens positively resists any effort to find a meaningful framework to account for it.

There are many kinds and levels of "meaning," but the kind I was speaking about in Chapter 2 is the shared meanings embedded in the most basic cultural traditions and social institutions that organize our daily lives — "the symbolic apparatuses of language, aesthetic preference, kinship and religious orientation, rhetoric of emotions, and common sense reasoning" (Kleinman 1992:172) — in short, those aspects of the world that cause us to recognize it as <u>our</u> world, a familiar world in which we belong and can act purposefully.

But none of this is given. Nothing is intrinsically meaningful; all things are made meaningful through our perception of and relationship to them. It is the relationships among things that we recognize and elaborate, the organization we give things, that makes them meaningful to us. Teleology, order, is man-made; it is not out there in the world. But there are many things we do not have the ability to organize according to our wishes, and some things we are unable to fit into any explanatory framework at all. These things have no meaning for us; they must simply be endured.

When I wrote, following Scarry (1985), that the events of Pol Pot time "unmade the world" for Cambodians, I meant this in two senses. The first is the sense in which Scarry uses the term: that terrible trauma or great pain makes the world we know and trust frighteningly unreliable. Or as Good explains, "With the irruption of mortality comes the sense that the world itself is untrustworthy ...

The world of everyday consciousness and experience is systematically subverted" (Good 1994: 127). This is a phenomenological statement. The "world" Good refers to is the lifeworld, the experiential world of (in this case) a traumatized

person. His description fits the lifeworld of many Cambodians I knew in Site II, as they described it to me. But the events of Pol Pot time also "unmade the world" in a concrete, literal sense. The known world — the social and cultural world of Cambodians — was dismantled by the Khmer Rouge and by the events that followed on the border in the early 1980s. Economic structures, political relations, religious institutions, families, even the structure of language (Marston 1985) were reorganized by the <u>Angkaa</u>. So the task of "rebuilding" had two parts for the Khmer. One was to rebuild the social and cultural infrastructure of their world. The other was to recover a sense of meaning in what was rebuilt. These two processes, as I learned in Site II, do not necessarily entail each other.

This is where, perhaps, the distinction between individual and social process is most important. Individually, we all attempt to make sense of our experiences. One way we do this is by constructing narratives around them. "Narrative is a form in which experience is represented and recounted, in which events are presented as having a meaningful and coherent order, in which activities and events are described along with the experiences associated with them and the significance that lends them their sense for the persons involved" (Good 1994: 139). Narratives "emplot" experiences and events in time, constructing a meaningful progression, a meaningful process. But this process is anticipatory as much as it is retrospectively interpretive: "Narratives not only

The relationship between story and experience is not unproblematic. Byron Good addresses this question directly in an essay entitled, "The Narrative Representation of Illness" (Good 1994: 135-165). His contention is that narrative theory provides valuable tools for understanding how people (all people?) organize and understand their experiences — that we make experiences meaningful by "emplotting" them in a story with a logic, a direction, a teleology that makes sense to us. It is a question for research whether this narrative approach to meaning-making is valid cross-culturally or is a culturally embedded way of thinking. But it resonates well with the way Cambodians I knew struggled to find explanations for their experiences, and can be usefully contrasted with the different process of constructing collective understandings.

report and recount experiences or events, describing them from the limited and positioned perspective of the present. They also project our activities and experiences into the future, organizing our desires and strategies teleologically, directing them toward imagined ends or forms of experience which our lives or particular activities are intended to fulfill" (Good 1994: 139).

But life is not a story we can structure for ourselves, it is a string of events that happen to us (and that we make happen), with which we must cope. We can find stories and construct plots out of the raw material of our lives, and revise our stories with the next thing that comes along. But constructing plots and finding personal meaning in our experiences are reflective activities that affect but do not confer collective meaning on social processes like establishing a family under the difficult conditions of the border, reviving Buddhist practice in a community, working with a new political authority structure, making a living in a refugee camp. These are ongoing, interactive, social processes; if they are to be meaningful they must be invested with meaning collectively. We do not have the same kind of control over these events that we have over the stories we tell about ourselves, and revise. We cannot omit events from our lives because they do not fit into the story we are telling. Social process is very little under our individual control, and much of what we are obliged to do in our lives may have no particular meaning for us at all. Certainly this was true for the people in Site II.

A social infrastructure was established in Site II, but it did not, in itself, provide meaning for people. Collective, shared, public meanings are built up over time, through ongoing conflict over the institutions in which they are embedded.²

² Marris (1984) proposes the thesis that social conflict is an important aspect of the resolution of collective loss. He suggests that as the collective loss of social institutions is worked out on the ground through a conflict of different interests, these interests become institutionalized and come to have meaning for people just as the lost institutions once had. His thesis is, I think, overly optimistic, but it

As Sally Moore points out, the work of establishing public meanings, especially new meanings, is hard, political, contested, continuous, and never achieved once and for all (1993:2). In Site II, where the social infrastructure was, by definition, temporary, and the concerns that organized the Khmer leadership had little to do with establishing stable and enduring social structures and institutions in the camp, it is hardly surprising that people found their public institutions less than deeply meaningful. Thus the question of how social relations and institutions come to be (re-)invested with meaning remains unanswered in this thesis, because relations and institutions were not, on the whole, (re-)invested with meaning in Site II. Indeed, the political context in which Site II existed made it virtually impossible for enduring – and potentially meaningful – structures and institutions to be established.

This is not to say that for individuals the experience of living in Site II had no meaning, or that nothing important was at stake. To the contrary, for the people in Site II the personal stakes could scarcely have been higher. Security was uncertain, food was minimal, the future was completely up in the air, and they were dependent upon the favor of three different authority structures (UNBRO, the KPNLF, and the Thai military), none of which was especially reliable. But for the most part it simply did not matter what their experience was or what it meant to them, because they were not able to do anything to alter their situation. They simply had to live with the situation they were dealt. The collective meaning of the institutions that structured their lives in Site II was not something they were in a position to influence. They were created by other, more powerful people, and the Khmer had no choice but to work with them, whether or not they found them

brings together social and psychological dynamics in an intriguing and provocative way. See <u>Loss and Change</u> (1984), especially pp. 84-103.

meaningful or even legitimate. Many Khmer did not even form opinions about those things they had no power to affect.

Also, I realize now that my initial questions about social reconstruction in Site II assumed a certain social and cultural coherence in Cambodia before 1975; I assumed, however hazily, that some sort of meaningful "totality" was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. I reject that idea now, without rejecting the idea that life was on the whole less integrated, less "total," and less meaningful for people in Site II than it had been before 1975. Life before 1975 was, of course, conflictual and contested; there would not have been a revolution had that not been the case. But if "social whole" is not a useful way of thinking about life in Cambodia before 1975, neither was Site II comprehensible as a "self-contained social system" in spite of its obvious physical boundedness. It was, rather, a social field, or more accurately, a convergence of multiple social fields. As the chapter on economy suggests most clearly, it was not possible to describe Site II as a unitary "system," not in political, economic, social or even religious terms. Site II was not a unitary thing in any sense of the word. It was, rather, a "complex, moving, transformable composite" (Moore 1993: 11) more usefully understood in terms of its various relations to larger frameworks of meaning than in terms of itself.

Moore suggests that the very idea of social and cultural fields as complex composites raises questions about the elements which compose the aggregate. "What, if anything, can drive the aggregate, and what, if anything, moves its components separately?" (Moore 1994:11)." In this thesis I have discussed how "aggregate" life in Site II was shaped by the regional and international context of the Cambodian conflict, suggesting that little escaped the influence of this wider framework of political interests, which dwarfed the concerns of the Khmer leadership, to say nothing of the ordinary Cambodian in the camp. Site II could

hardly be a more appropriate example of a particular "locality" in Appadurai's "globalized, deterritorialized world."

One of the remarkable things about working on the border was the ability to actually <u>see</u> the connections between the different levels of influence in the camp; to watch how decisions made in Paris and New York directly affected what happened "on the ground" in Site II. When, for example, in the spring of 1990, the U.S. State Department let it be known that it would no longer be supporting the CGDK as the legal representative of Cambodia in the UN, people in Site II were talking the next day about returning en masse to Cambodia. "What is the point in staying here if the U.S. no longer supports our cause?" I was asked. (People calmed down a good deal when word was passed down through diplomatic channels that withdrawal of recognition in the UN did not mean the U.S. would stop supporting the KPNLF financially.)

On the other hand, it was much harder to figure out what any of these things meant. Was this a diagnostic event? If so, what were the lessons? Was there some sort of political process being worked out? The local, regional, and international context of the guerrilla struggle changed so often that even if an event seemed diagnostic it might only remain so for a week or two. Then the terms of the conflict changed and a new set of issues would rise to the fore. If there was any sort of underlying political process, it seemed to have more to do with the dramatic changes taking place on the international scene — the reunification of Germany, the gradual break-up of the U.S.S.R., and the overall disappearance of a Cold War rationale for international relations — than it did with Cambodian politics per se³ (although Cambodian politics has always been

³ For example, the abrupt cessation of Soviet aid to the State of Cambodia in the summer of 1991, together with the Vietnamese government's need to focus more on its own economic problems and less on Cambodian affairs (Vietnam was also adversely affected by the decrease in Soviet aid) created a climate in which the

conducted around and through regional and international concerns). The Paris

Peace Agreement which officially ended the twelve-year Cambodian conflict was
signed in October 1991 because there was irresistible pressure from international
patrons on all sides of the conflict to do so, not because the Khmer factions
themselves felt suddenly conciliatory.

If the "aggregate" was "driven" by decisions made in foreign capitols for reasons that had little to do with Site II, the factors that moved its "component parts" were for the most part local. I have tried to show how everyday activity in Site II reflected a combination of past practice, present need and circumstance, a pervasive atmosphere of mistrust within the camp population, and a moral economy in which just about any action could be justified as self-protective. In this sense Site II constituted a unique "local moral world," a habitus that differed in many ways from local Cambodian worlds in the past, even as it showed itself to be unmistakably "Khmer." How much the social practices developed in this local context stay with the border Khmer after they leave Site II is a question for future research.

I want to say something about the three issues cited in the introduction as having an important bearing on the questions this research addresses. First is the issue of the effects of holocaust, which both underlay everything that went on in Site II and was peculiarly inaccessible to consideration, at least in directly. There were several reasons for this. There was little free space to address the

SOC government was much more inclined to negotiate for peace than pursue an unwinnable military conflict. The international climate within which the 1991 Peace Agreement was signed had much to do with its conclusion.

traumas of the past: most people were occupied with the more pressing and immediate concerns of daily life in Site II. There was literally no time to think about the past. But more importantly, there was no safe place from which to address these traumas because there had been no definitive break between the horrors of the past and the ongoing, intermittent traumas of the present. The great tidal wave of disaster that had swept up every Cambodian in 1975 had yet to let the people in Site II down. They were still living a life of displacement and deferral fifteen years later. The threat of the Khmer Rouge returning to power was a real and present, plausible danger. They were still in the middle of it all.

But people in Site II were still caught in the Khmer Rouge terror in a subtler way as well, because their own leaders were working in alliance with the Khmer Rouge, through the CGDK. The KP's official history, drummed into the populace through its "information" channels with relentless consistency, was that the Khmer Rouge had made some mistakes but it was the Vietnamese who were responsible for the worst atrocities of the DK period (see Khmer Buddhist Research Center 1986 and French 1994). There was no official discussion of Khmer Rouge atrocities. One could not feel safe criticizing the Khmer Rouge openly in Site II—this had become, in a sense, tantamount to criticizing one's own leaders. The situation produced a repressed anxiety that was never very far from the surface in Site II, and a moral confusion that comes with the realization that the murderers of your family have become your political allies, whom you cannot afford to offend.

This fact was impressed upon me one day when I went to visit a nun who was living in one of the temples in Site II. I had struck up a conversation with this woman the day before; she proved to be a garrulous old granny who told great stories about her past and had a lot to say about the Khmer Rouge. But when I returned the next day with my tape recorder, hoping to get some of her stories on

tape, she refused to be recorded, would not meet my eye, and told me, in direct contradiction to her earlier remarks, that the past was past and all Khmer worked together now toward the same goal: to rid Cambodia of the Vietnamese aggressors. Her anxiety about her earlier remarks was striking, and I asked her if she knew anyone who had gotten into trouble talking about the Khmer Rouge. Yes, she said, her neighbor was killed last year when someone threw a grenade into his house after he was heard speaking disparagingly about the Khmer Rouge. Whatever the reason this man's house had been attacked, the lesson was clear to the old nun. She was terrified of the possible consequences of her indiscretions with me.

There is an extensive literature on the individual and especially psychological effects of the Nazi holocaust, and much of it provides useful comparative material for the Cambodian situation. I will point out just two aspects of that literature here, because these have direct relevance for social life and social relations in the post-holocaust situation of Site II. These are: the impossibility of incorporating holocaust memories into a moral present, and the way these memories destroy the sense of historical chronology and one's place in such a chronology. Both relate to Scarry's phenomenological description of the "unmaking of the world."

Langer (1991) writes at length about the fact that the events of holocaust occur in a time/space where normal social and moral structures have been obliterated. One is obliged to witness things and behave in ways that cannot be incorporated into the moral world of before and after. It is not possible to integrate the memory of those events into a unitary moral self. One must live with the knowledge that one behaved in ways one cannot now accept, that the social and cultural framework of one's life crumbled before the superior force of an

⁴ It is no wonder some people in Site II questioned their Buddhist precepts. No religious tradition has an answer for the nihilism of incomprehensible evil.

utterly evil power. One consequence of this is a lost faith in the efficacy of those social and cultural structures. Having experienced the narrowing of one's lifeworld down to the imperative of self-preservation — "We were so hungry we could not think about anything else. Even our beloved parents we forgot about" — it is often difficult to put one's trust in the structures of social life again. Knowledge of such a poisoned past and the failure of one's social and moral order can crush the spirit and frustrate one's inclinations toward reconstruction or social renewal (Langer 1991:79).

There were many examples of this in Site II. Some were people who had been community leaders in the past, but who seemed to have simply given up hope for the possibility of a better society. They were living out their lives quietly in Site II, taking care of themselves and their families, refusing to get involved in community undertakings. Others were leaders who had finally just lost the energy to act in the best interests of their people when everyone around them seemed to be looking out for him- or herself. And there were people who seemed to have never left the twilight world of holocaust, victimizing others in the camp with a chilling disregard for any moral consideration.

The second point is really an elaboration of the first. The experiences of holocaust cannot be fit into any acceptable moral order. They represent only the failure of order, meaning, efficacy, will. There is no continuity between that period and the present — or at least one hopes there is none. There is no fitting the knowledge of that past into a meaningful chronology, no future one would choose that can be projected from such a past. Langer writes that "the raison

⁵ In Site II there <u>was</u> some continuity between the period of Khmer Rouge atrocities and the present, though. At any rate there was no definitive break. This may explain the sense one often got of moral ambiguity in the camp: as though the moral framework was not quite fixed; as though things could slide back at any time into that time in the past when anything was possible.

d'être of historical enquiry is its ability to shed light in two directions [backward and forward] simultaneously." But what future can the knowledge of such a past possibly serve (Langer 1991:81)? Memory leaves one "still victimized by the blind power of facts, shorn of explanation or value system " (Langer 1991:84). There is no meaning to be drawn from these facts. The chronology of the self is destroyed. The possibility of a future is spoiled by the memories of this horrific past. Narrative progression becomes impossible.

This phenomenological "destruction of chronology" was mirrored in Site II by a more literal "suspension of chronology" that had to do with the temporary nature of people's stay in the camp. Time was ongoing but going nowhere in Site II. Everyone knew that the border situation was provisional and temporary; meanwhile years went by. If the experience of holocaust made it phenomonologically difficult to imagine a future, the experience of living in Site II made it literally impossible to envision one: people had no idea how long they would be in the camp, or where they would end up afterwards. This made it very hard to plan for anything more than the short term, except in the vaguest of ways. These conditions were anything but conducive to the establishment of enduring social structures and institutions.

The effects of displacement, physical confinement, and material dependence were pervasive at all levels of social life and social relations in Site II. The chapters on space and economy address this second set of issues most directly. But equally important was people's consciousness of displacement and exile, their longing for what they no longer had, and their nostalgic idealization of the past and of "real" Cambodian culture. Post-modern re-evaluations notwithstanding, most Khmer felt there was a great natural connection between

themselves and their land,⁶ and separation from <u>srok Khmer</u> (the land of the Khmers) caused many people great emotional anguish. "Khmer culture", a set of ideal images, attitudes, and rules for moral conduct, was invoked constantly to criticize what was felt to be lacking in the social and cultural life of the camp.

If people's memories of the past were idealized, and their complaints about Site II exhaustive, these complaints served the useful purpose of indexing their dissatisfaction with conditions in the present which they could do little concretely to alter. The rhetoric of complaint was moral in tone; it enabled people to pursue what they felt they had to pursue to "get by" in Site II while covering themselves publicly in a mantle of moral rectitude, thin though it often proved to be. And Khmer culture, rigid as its proclaimed representations were, was at least a known and enduring framework that people could argue over and refer back to from the shifting ground of life on the border.

The in-between-ness of displacement was experienced with respect to time as well as place in Site II. If the experiences of holocaust destroyed the possibility of progressive, cumulative narrative thinking, being stuck in Site II interrupted the progress of time in a more literal sense. People had come to the border in 1979 or 1980 for one reason; ten years later they were still there for entirely other reasons that often seemed to have little to do with them. People had gotten caught up in the life of the border camp, but to what end was never very clear. To quote Homi Bhabha quoting Althusser, this was "Space without places; time without duration" (Bhabha 1994:142).

⁶ Note that the connection was between <u>Khmer</u> people and the territory of the ancient Khmer empire. Although this connection is also the basis of a fair amount of "nationalist" rhetoric, it is important to realize that most "Cambodian" nationalism excludes Sino-Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese, to say nothing of longstayers of more obscure origin. Thus this "natural bond" is used to exclude people from the national project, rather than to justify the unity of all Cambodians. National consciousness (as opposed to cultural consciousness) is in its infancy in Cambodia; it has never yet been the basis of the Cambodian state.

Refugees (and de facto refugees) are by definition cut off from their own local and national structures of support; they are vulnerable and in need of protection (Zolberg et al 1991: 3-33). Refugees are people who are defined through their vulnerability. It is their lack of power, their victimization, and their suffering that gets emphasized in most contexts, especially those in which support is being solicited. There is no question that the people in Site II had suffered, were vulnerable, and were in need of some kind of support. And there is no question about their relative powerlessness. They had become the political and moral pawns of everyone from the local Thai rice merchants to the permanent five members of the UN Security Council (Niland 1991; Reynell 1989).⁷

But an analytic emphasis on the difficulties of the present not only obscures the resourcefulness with which refugees usually deal with their difficulties, it deflects attention away from the underlying political, social and cultural processes at work in the situation. These underlying processes often turn out to have more lasting importance than the drama of the immediate refugee disaster. I got some sense of this when I asked one old women in Site II to tell me about her experiences with the Khmer Rouge and she replied, "Oh, the Khmer Rouge. First there were the French, then the Issarak, then the Vietnamese, then the Americans, then the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer people have suffered for a long time!" Not only did this woman serve me notice that her suffering under Pol Pot, while great, was not qualitatively different from the suffering she had had to endure all her life, she put the Khmer Rouge into a political context that suggested

⁷ The "Perm Five" provided steady pressure on the final negotiations that led up to the signing of the 1991 Peace Agreement in Paris.

⁸ The Khmer Issarak were an armed anti-French resistance group, active in the 1940s and early 1950s. They had a reputation for generalized lawlessness; their violence often did not have an obvious political purpose.

I might be pointing my questions in the wrong direction. Why <u>did</u> the Khmer people have such a history of suffering?

This leads to the third set of issues, which relate to social process. In a paper entitled "The Anthropology of Suffering" J. Davis (1992) suggests that suffering is not an exceptional occurrence, that in fact it is an ordinary human experience, and that even cataclysmic suffering is usually an extreme example of a set of recurring conditions which have a history, and which a great many people have had to endure throughout that history. This was manifestly true for the Khmer. To be the pawns in somebody else's political games, hostages to a history being written elsewhere with other people's concerns in mind — this has been the fate of the Khmer people from the Angkor Era to the American war in Vietnam; from the beginnings of French colonization in 1863 to the Vietnamese invasion in 1978 (Chandler 1973, 1983a, 1983b, 1984, 1992).

This period on the border in the 1980s, when the utter failure of the Cambodian political system had been made tragically clear and a unified national government had yet to be created, could be seen as a moment in the embattled process of developing a modern national and political consciousness in Cambodia. This, at any rate, is the perspective that makes most sense in 1994, now that the border Khmer have been repatriated to Cambodia, UN-sponsored national elections have been held, and a new government of "national reconciliation" is struggling along in Phnom Penh.

At the time, though, there were many possible futures, many different historical narratives that could have become "Cambodian history." I have not written much about the specific political efforts of the KPNLF, in part because I did not have good access to that kind of information (serious politics were hidden from the barang in Site II), but also because on the border the political

machinations of the KP were almost always overshadowed and superceded by decisions made at higher levels of influence. It was not clear then how important the KPNLF would turn out to be in the historical sweep of Cambodian political processes, although the persistence of internal conflicts within the KP suggested it would not be very important, in spite of steady political and financial support from the U.S. and ASEAN countries. This has proven to be the case: the KPNLF finally split into two separate parties in 1991, and between them managed to win only three positions in the new national government. But for the people living in Site II in the late 1980s, the KPNLF all but defined their world.

What political processes were being played out in Site II? What was the enduring importance of those thirteen years on the border? In retrospect it seems that the years in Site II may ultimately have been a meaningless exercise in isolation and constraint, before the propped-up KPNLF was allowed to fade into obscurity. But that does not make those years any less agonizing for the people who lived through them on the border. This seems to me the real tragedy of the border situation. The personal stakes were as high as they get for the people who were struggling along in Site II, but their struggles may prove to have been meaningless in the enduring narrative of their history.

People were not constructing their history on the border in the 1980s. They were working to preserve some small measure of personal meaning and coherence in the face of larger historical processes that were beyond their ability to influence. They were not reconstructing their society. They were surviving their circumstances, working with whatever was available to them. The habitus that grew up around them was the unplanned outcome of UNBRO engineering, Thai restrictions, KP manipulation, international influence, and individual efforts

to carry on in the midst of this confusion. It was not, for the most part, a heroic struggle.

It is an old, old story.

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