Navigating a river by its bends

A comparison of Cambodian returnees’ contributions to the transformation of Cambodia

Gea D.M. Wijers

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Gezina Dina Margarethe Wijers
geboren te Zevenaar
promotor: prof.dr. H. Dahles

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Abstract

This PhD dissertation grew out of the question why Cambodian American and Cambodian French returnees employ different strategies in working for Cambodia. Why does the first group often start an NGO and the latter rather work for Cambodian government? The study explores, describes, analyzes and compares narratives on migration, institutional entrepreneurial activity and return by a small sample of these returnees. This has resulted in the construction of multiple case studies that illustrate the experiences and activities of Cambodian American and Cambodian French transnational institutional entrepreneurs. The central research question is: “In what ways do first generation Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees create and employ their social capital in institutional entrepreneurial activities upon return?” This subject is linked to the societal debate on the ways in which the broad spectrum of institutional entrepreneurial activities, as visible in, for instance, (inter)national aid organizations and the government sector, may impact the development of an emerging nation.
To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour

William Blake (1801-1803) ‘Auguries of Innocence’
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I would like to thank the members of my reading committee: Dr. Ellen Bal, Prof. Leo Dana, Dr. Hein de Haas, Dr. Philippe Peycam and Prof. Dr. Jan Rath for their positive evaluation of the manuscript. Also, I want to gratefully acknowledge the support of the NWO-WOTRO Science for Development organization through the Cambodia Research Group, as well as the support of the Graduate School of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the VU University Amsterdam in facilitating this PhD trajectory and all activities and publications that have evolved from it.

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In my private life, also, there are so many people who have helped pave the way to this dissertation that I cannot name you all here. To all who have blessed me with their interest, listened to my accounts and shared their stories: a heartfelt thank you. It is not the
destination but the shared physical and mental journey that make achieving this work a pleasure and a privilege.

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This PhD trajectory has provided me with many moments of awe in conversation with the exceptional people I have been allowed to meet and spend time with. In this last paragraph of these Acknowledgements, I would like to put them in the limelight and emphasize the Cambodian refugees deserve the respect of a more positive image and the acknowledgement of their societal progress. I need to say a big “Thank you” to all my Cambodian friends and my Cambodian French, Cambodian American and “Cambodian Cambodian” informants as well as their families for sharing your thoughts, your contacts and your experiences in the Cambodian community. You are the survivors of tragic times, survivors that have been able to readjust to a changed sociocultural context and restore your dignity. Many of you, indeed, have recreated your overseas worlds from the proverbial ‘grain of sand’ after literally witnessing your old lives disappear in the eternity of an hour. Today, the Cambodian communities in France and the United States are vibrant examples of the Cambodian survivors’ achievements. This study hopes to bear testimony to your remarkable history and make a small contribution to your proud future.
Preface

“Well, you know how it is with those that come back from overseas.” he whispers to the young woman on the seat next to him, blocking my view of the panel discussion on the stage in front of us. Reappearing in my field of vision, he continues: “The French always seem to want to work for the government, while the Americans start their own NGOs.” From the seat behind I can just overhear them. As their bodies turn I can even read the nametags. They label him a translator and her a student at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. “Those guys think they are going to change something about Cambodia: human rights or freedom of speech or whatever”, the translator’s neighbor starts to nod emphatically in agreement. She hums “uuuhh.uuuhh” in typical Cambodian fashion. As he sits back, finally, I can just see the last speaker taking a sip of water. End of scene (Phnom Penh, September 2005).

Little did these two participants at an Ecotourism workshop in Phnom Penh realize that they would plant a seed in the mind of the Barang* (see the glossary at the end of this publication) advisor witnessing their exchange. “He has got a point there,” I was thinking, “they are right, actually”. Then I could not come up with satisfying explanations why this would be so. All that day, and the next, I was not able to put these questions in my mind to rest.

So here we are. An innocent remark, questions that formed and lingered with me for all these years. They eventually expanded and deepened into a research question that kept me busy during a full four year PhD. My research explores the exile and return of Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees as institutional entrepreneurs. It compares their experiences in exile and upon return as well as their aims and contributions to transformative change in Cambodia. As the Cambodian saying goes, this research wants to “navigate the river by its bends” to analyze dynamic convergences of people, places, and their perceptions of a shared past in order to understand their contributions to new outlooks for Cambodia.

Cambodia is of interest to me since early 2005 when I started a two year assignment with the Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) in Phnom Penh. I was placed at the Ministry of Environment in order to share my skills and knowledge as a strategic and communication advisor. As I had never been to Asia; had never visited a developing country; did not know the first thing about Cambodian history, language or customs, in the story of my life, my time in Cambodia has become epic in every respect. Indeed, when I left Cambodia at the end of 2006, I did not expect Cambodia to stay with me. As time would show, the country had burned its way into my heart, crawled under my skin and kept on riddling my brain with questions on the
causes and consequences of its political, economic and social situation. While many issues found tentative answers throughout the Master degree studies in Political Sciences I started to pursue upon return, eventually, my interest in the divergent motivations and achievements of the Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees turned out to be so much more profound that it required a PhD trajectory in order to be explored.

It has been a privilege to have benefited from the support and advice of many experienced and inspiring academics in the formulation and implementation of the research design to work on this question. First of all, a masterclass with Alejandro Portes brought the idea to start the inquiry in overseas Cambodian communities in France and the United States. As he stated: “The community leaders there, will know exactly who has gone back, and why. Also, they will probably know why other people don’t, so you will get a good impression of what is going on in these communities”. And he was right.

To start with, it has been quite an endeavor to formulate a research question that would address an activity that I could only vaguely describe as the returnees’ ‘wanting to do good’. Heidi Dahles proposed that I might work from the perspective of entrepreneurship and look at ‘institutional entrepreneurial activities’ which turned out to be a relatively new and inspiring field of study that has brought me valuable insights especially. She inspired the combination with the focus on the effects of social capital in, among others, the theory of “bounded solidarity” (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993) and “structural holes” (Burt 1992) which gave content to this concept that is sometimes defined in the vaguest of terms. Also, building on this, Juliette Koning suggested that the theoretical framework might be extended with a precision of the transnational perspective to Yeung’s idea of structural multisited institutional influence on transnational entrepreneurs (Yeung 2002) as well as Kloosterman’s notion of “mixed embeddedness” and the accompanying opportunity structures for entrepreneurs to take advantage of (Kloosterman 2003). This has greatly enhanced the analysis of my findings and I am very thankful to them both. Nevertheless, the arguments made with these ‘tools’ remain my own and I take full responsibility for any imprecisions and ambiguities that may have evolved from the large number of concepts that have entered into the theoretical framework.

This multisited research thus took place in Lyon, France and Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 2010 and in Long Beach (CA), USA and Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 2011. This chronological order of datacollection has also guided the ordering of chapters in this
dissertation. Each location became my home for approximately three months which allowed me to find people and organizations to interview, spend time with them with as well as find other documentation and information about issues of interest to my research and write these up in draft articles for feedback. For an overview of these people and organizations see Appendix A, B and C. Explicitly, this was not a traditional ethnographic research and may lay no claims to that extent, as the methods were inspired on notions of ethnographic fieldwork, participative observation and ‘thick’ description, they were not applied rigorously nor consistently. However, the resulting case studies do show the turning points in the returnees experiences in resettlement and in initiating their institutional entrepreneurial activities. These case studies, built around key informants and illustrated with examples in Appendix D, have provided the data for analysis in this dissertation.

There are several issues I have not been able to address extensively, due to the limitations of this research. Entire books could be, and have been, written about concepts such as ‘institutions’ and ‘transformative change’ as well as ‘social capital’ in relation to other ‘capitals’ described by Bourdieu. In comparison, my treatment of these important notions would seem rather ‘loose’ and superficial, providing only the most basic of definitions in an endnote. Trusting, however, that both these definitions and the references used will equip the reader with sufficient information to follow my arguments as well as find those works that do provide profound discussions on these concepts, I have chosen to not enter all possible debates and prioritize between concepts.

The draft articles eventually developed into more complete products that were submitted for publication at peer reviewed journals. At the time of writing this (April 2013) some have been published, others are accepted and in need of some extra editing, others are still under review. While the Introduction will remain a singular publication in this dissertation, the second chapter, on methodological issues, has been submitted to Forum: Qualitative Social Research and is currently under review there. The third chapter discusses the Reception of Cambodian Refugees in France and has been published in the Journal of Refugee Studies in 2011 (Vol. 24 (2): 239-255). Following the Cambodian French returnees to Phnom Penh, the fourth chapter addresses their experiences as institutional entrepreneurs and is accepted as a book chapter for the Ashgate publication Entrepreneurship in the Polis: contested entrepreneurs and dynamics of change in diverse contexts (Narbutaite Aflaki, I. and Petridou E. (eds) 2014). Exploring the Cambodian community in Long Beach (CA), the fifth
Next to the articles and chapter included in this dissertation, four other articles I have written on Cambodia for peer reviewed journals merit mentioning here. First, there is the article “Determinants of the digital divide. A study of IT-development in Cambodia” that was published in Technology in Society in 2010 (Vol. 32 (4): 336-341). Second, the French article “L’Accueil des réfugiés cambodgiens à la Région Rhône-Alpes” has just been revised for Migrations Société. Third, the article “Brokering, Building and Bargaining for the Transformation of Cambodia. A study on returnees as institutional entrepreneurs” has been accepted by Institutions and Economies and will be published later this year. Finally, the article “Beyond Democracy…? Questioning transformative change in emerging nations: the case of Cambodia” will also be published in Amsterdam Social Science in 2013 (Vol. 5 (2)).

Next to these academic publications, moreover, there have been several more public presentations such as newspaper articles (among others: Cambodge Soir, 14 Septembre 2010) and periodic contributions to the Cambodian Americans’ blog www.khmerican.com

While I want to stress that the Cambodian French and Cambodian American overseas communities in Lyon and Long Beach are not to be perceived as homogeneous single actors, and therefore cannot be reduced to a single, essentialized identity, the research findings do form the basis for discussions on broader issues of importance based both on the differences as well as the similarities found. This also goes for references to ‘Cambodian French’ or ‘Cambodian American’ experiences as they are tied to either distinct localities in France and the United States as well as for the collected and compiled experiences from individual informants. There are as many ‘truths’ as there are participants in this research and I will not lay claim to having discovered a single overriding one but rather emphasize similarities and distinguish differences in their stories.