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Conclusion

Within the context of a booming Cambodian silk weaving industry the aim of this thesis is to generate empirical knowledge about migration movements, business networks, identity politics and modernization processes. Elaborating on concepts of ethnicity, transnationalism and materialism on the one hand and postmodern and post-Marxist theories on the other I have attempted to answer the following research question:

'How does the ethnically complex organization of the silk weaving industry relate to diverging modernization narratives and which interests do these narratives serve in the contemporary Cambodian nation state in general and its silk industry in particular?'

One conclusion to be drawn from this research it is that the Cambodian silk weaving industry sits uncomfortably in between two narratives of modernization; i.e. a dominant cultural narrative referring back to the glorious Angkor empire and a re-emerging economic narrative singing the praise of the commercial qualities of the ethnic Chinese population. As the dominant modernization narrative about the silk weaving industry holds, Khmer women manufactured silk skirts and used an *ikat* weaving technique also referred to as '*hol*' as early as the twelfth century. This dominant narrative describes how the '*hol*' *ikat* weaving techniques disappeared from the Cambodian landscape during the *Khmer Rouge* revolution and returned again in the 1990s, mainly due to the efforts of foreign development agencies.

The Cambodian population and their political leaders are extremely proud of this craftsmanship and consider the '*ikat*' woven *sampot hol* as an important 'totem pole' of their nationhood. In the run-up to the UN-sponsored elections in 1993, the veteran Cambodian politician

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Son Sann even proposed a ‘*sampot* test’ as a means of discerning the true ethnic identity of Cambodians. This patriotic remark was made during a heated debate about the voting rights of Vietnamese residents of Cambodia, and it was believed that only pure *Khmer* (*khmae sot*) could pass a *sampot* test, a feat deemed impossible for Vietnamese who commonly wear trousers.

Precisely because narratives about cultural objects in Cambodia are loaded with ethnic pride, breaking cultural codes or making ‘false’ statements about their origin can lead to demonstrations or even outbursts of anger. In January 2003, the popular Thai TV soap-star Suvanant Kongying remarked in an interview with a Cambodian newspaper that she would visit Cambodia only under the condition that they would return Angkor Wat to its right owner, Thailand. In the week that followed the publication of this interview, raging Cambodians destroyed \$47 million worth of Thai property (Thai embassy, Thai hotels, Thai cars) in Phnom Penh and evicted more than 700 Thai nationals, including Ambassador Chatchawed Chartsuwan and his staff. A few days later, the left-wing Cambodian politician Sam Rainsey made things even worse declaring that prime-minister Hun Sen had purposely used and blown up the phrase of this young and naïve soap-star to promote his campaign for the coming elections and win souls for his CPP party.

This incident once again illustrates that postcolonial Cambodian political leaders use to seek legitimacy in the imagery of the twelfth-century temple complex of Angkor Wat, as Penny Edwards (1999) argued, making this temple complex the dominant cultural and political framework for national identity building, in which images of history, place, landscape are envisioned. Yet, going against the narrative that Cambodia modernized in a Khmer way, colonial scholars emphasized the constructive character of Khmer culture and

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argued that French colonial art institutions authenticated the *sampot hol* as a symbol of Khmer ethnic pride (Edwards 1999, 2002; Muan 2001). In an attempt at critically assessing this ‘total colonial fact’ (Ben Ari 1999) both Edwards and Muan remind us that Cambodian nationalism must not be seen as a colonial allergy but as its avatar, because postcolonial state leaders adopted the French Oriental discourse.

Although the colonialism/modernism continuum of Edwards (1999) and Muan (2001) is refreshing, they seem to be just as trapped in the total colonial fact. Exhibiting an orientalist perspective (Said 1995), these writers seem to have established a blind spot, as only one possible modernization claim exists for them: the French one. Yet, establishing a historical perspective on the origin of the Cambodian silk weaving industry in chapter three, this thesis indicates that the origin of the present-day Cambodian silk weaving industry neither lies in the Courts of Angkor nor in French colonial art institutions, but that it is the result of Chinese migration and a demand for authentic silk clothes by the Khmer elite in late nineteenth-century Cambodia. I deliberately refer to the origin of the present-day silk weaving industry, because academic research has shown that the Chinese again adopted the weft *ikat* weaving techniques from Tai speaking groups (cf. Howard 1999). Still, adopting the weft *ikat* weaving techniques from the Tai, it were the Chinese immigrants who manufactured a silken cloth they referred to as *sampot hol*.

After being hegemonized by the Siamese and Vietnamese courts for centuries, Cambodia was ‘liberated’ by the French in 1863 and the Khmer elite was desperately searching for a dress to mark their independence as Khmer. The Cantonese silk merchants recognized the Khmer desire after an indigenous identity and marketed the *sampot hol* as authentic Khmer. Filling this silk ‘niche’ was profitable for both parties, because the Khmer elite, as customers, got their much-

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wanted identity and the economic Cantonese elite, as producers, was presented with an opportunity to continue their silk businesses. At stake was thus the establishment of a pre-colonial 'winning hegemony' (Gramsci 1971) between two different social categories, who had joint political, cultural and economic interests to depict the *sampot hol* as authentic Khmer.

Often, Chinese migration to Southeast Asia has been described as the effect of poverty, wars and a colonial demand for their labor. This study has shown that the ethnic Chinese dominated the silk weaving industry long before the arrival of the French colonists. In fact, the French silk industrials could not compete with the Cantonese silk merchants at all and depended on their revenue farms for the supply of raw materials, labor and export channels. The Cantonese silk immigrants, therefore, were not naïve opportunity seekers, starting up a whatsoever business under the patronage of French colonists. Instead, their migration movements were business-oriented and many of them had already been conditioned for centuries to respond to various kinds of market niches abroad (cf. Kuhn 2006), in this case silk producing and weaving in Cambodia.

To understand how this modernization process continued I have attempted to answer the second research question in chapter four: 'How did the present-day silk weaving industry transform into a multi-layered silk weaving network?' Initially, the Cambodian silk weaving industry was a humble household affair in which silk weavers cultivated their own mulberry trees, reeled their own silk yarn and peddled their own *sampot*. From the late colonial period onwards, however, silk yarn was imported from Japan, China and Vietnam and the village-based silk weaving industry transformed into a transnational multi-layered business network.

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Going against the capitalist argument that increasing global competition, mass production and the emergence of the consumer as the driving force behind capitalism will flatten ethnic Chinese business networks (cf. Yeung and Olds 2000), this chapter has pointed at the fact that descendents of the Cantonese silk immigrants still organize their production and trade relationships within the pyramid structure of the 'colonial' revenue farm system their ancestors once introduced (cf. Trocki 1997; Wilson 2004). As indicated, small wholesaler conglomerates hold some 75 per cent of the total amount of 20,000 silk weavers in a firm credit grip, controlling the cross-border silk yarn trade (cf. Dongelmans, Seng and Ter Horst 2005). In line with political-economic writers such as Khan and Jomo (2000), Wedeman (2003), Duara (1988) and Case (2000), this chapter comes to the conclusion that rents are essential for maintaining social order and also necessary for economic growth in Cambodia.

Although Cambodia became a member of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) in the 1990s and openly promoted an 'open sky policy', silk weavers and middlemen, who notably live in the borderlands, cannot buy silk yarn themselves at the Tan Chau spinneries. The idea of the border as an excluder of economic opportunities for the weavers and middlemen clearly goes against the 'cultural optimism' of globalization theorists such as Samudavanija Chai-Annan (1994), Robin Cohen (1997) and Andrew Walker (1999) who have applauded the re-emergence of ethnic-based cross-border relationships in the Mekong region. Instead, the results of this study bring us much closer to what Donnan and Wilson (1999) once said about border crossings, namely that they implicate the twin narratives of inclusion and incorporation on the one hand and of exclusion and dispossession on the other hand. Due to their good connections with high ranked government officials only the powerful wholesalers in

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Phnom Penh have the opportunity to cross the border and buy raw silk from the Tan Chau spinnery.

In Marxist terms, the institutional alliance between a small political and an economic elite may be dubbed as unproductive, exploitative and corrupt. However, in the Cambodian context, the silk weavers and middlemen do not feel exploited by the business practices and power position of the wholesalers. As James Scott (1976) stated, exploitation is not a scientific concept but a moral one, and silk weavers and middlemen account for their lack of power in the officialdom as part of their rank in the silk weaving network. In this regard one should not forget that Buddhist monks in the village pagoda also put silk weavers and middlemen into place, and remind them continually of how much *merit* powerful traders must have collected in a previous life and how justly they are reaping the rewards of generosity and compassion.

Yet, the cultural, economic, institutional and political arguments do not explain the ethnic differences that exist between present-day Khmer silk producers and Chinese silk traders. Often 'ethnic economies', 'diasporas' and 'transnational business networks' are seen as homogenous entities that operate within the boundaries of shared group affiliations. In its early days, the Cambodian silk weaving industry was organized within the boundaries of an ethnic Chinese diaspora. As illustrated on the cover of this thesis and more explicit in chapter four the nineteenth century silk weavers lived in houses decorated in a Chinese style and wore black farmer pants from China. Today, however, silk weavers no longer wear black farmer pants but spin the wheels in a cotton *sarong* or a silken *sampot*.

In chapter five I have attempted to shed light on the processes of ethnicization that occurred under the ethnic Chinese modernization conditions and to answer the third research question: How do silk producers and traders negotiate their identities within the economic domain of the silk weaving industry? Undoubtedly, the 1929 land law

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and the repression of Chinese identity in the 1970s and 1980s has left their marks on the Khmer self-presentations of the silk weavers, but this does not explain why wholesalers and middlemen wear 'Chinese' pants and why silk weavers dress themselves in a *sampot* resembling the image of an indigenous Khmer. Embracing a materialist view on the subject, this study comes to the conclusion that Khmer and Chinese self-presentations must not be seen as primordial affiliations or as outcomes of state bio-politics (cf. Foucault 1978, 1980, 1991), but instead as lifestyles, cultural repertoires and codes of conduct rooted in a territorial division of labor and local community networks.

Although there is nothing new about shifting and strategic identities, transnationalism scholars have neglected to connect the flexible identities of the ethnic Chinese to their social position in the 'bamboo' networks (cf. Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996). As Philip Yang (2006) indicates, transnationalism scholars have extensively written about diverse home and host experiences (cf. Ma and Cartier 2003), but failed to write about the network experiences 'in-between'. Although this study does not have the ambition to institutionalize the reductionism of classical Marxist theories, it illustrates how production and trade relationships became ethnicized according to distinctive and unequal positions in silk industry.

Chapter five has shown how the silk entrepreneurs in Cambodia moulding themselves as ethnic Chinese and downgrade the silk producers, whose labor they consume, as Khmer. The ethnic distinctions between silk producers and traders give credit to Abner Cohen's view on ethnicity pointing out that it is a useful heuristic concept tailored to make sense of particular, historically delineated economic processes such as colonization, urbanization and modernization. In his own words:

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'one need not be a Marxist in order to recognize the fact that the earning of livelihood, the struggle for a larger share of income from the economic system constitute an important variable significantly related to ethnicity' (Cohen 1990 [1974]: 91).

Culturalist literature emphasizes that reciprocal relationships within ethnic groups enforce harmony and consensus towards the lineage (cf. Fukuyama 1995; Kotkin 1993; Redding 1990). However, this study (cf. chapter five) shows that middlemen and wholesalers used ethnicity to antagonize and downgrade kin members and fellow ethnics as lower ranked weavers. In the working place regimes of the wholesalers and middlemen the *sampot hol*, the house on poles and Khmer religious relics are symbols that express the poor economic position and subsistence ethic of the silk weavers. In contrast, the Chinese housing style, dress system and Confucian religious orientation exhibit a lifestyle that legitimizes a trader to reap the benefits of the commodity and 'own' the labor of the weavers, kin member or not.

This brings me to the conclusion that identity is a both a material and a symbolic affair in the Cambodian silk weaving industry, and that the trick for weavers and traders is to play the correct role that belongs to someone's economic and political position in the network. Playing the correct role as a peasant or trader is not uncommon for Cambodians. As chapter two has shown, underneath the myth of an all-Khmer nation rests an extremely diverse and pluralistic society that has been hegemonized and 'civilized' by both domestic (especially the Khmer Rouge regime) and foreign powers for centuries. As a consequence, the Cambodian subject is used to adapt to different codes of conduct and deploys multi-layered identities for strategic use.

As anthropologists argued, identities are symbolically constructed in social processes, like in the case of mimetic practices, in which one literally adopts cultural codes from powerful others to climb socially (Jackson 2006: 326). Especially in preliterate societies where most

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practical learning is a matter of direct observation and ‘prestige imitation’, role-identities are important sources of symbolic capital (*ibid.*). In this regard the American sociologist Erving Goffmann (1959) observed that front-stage performances are most visible and are used as forms of ‘impression management’ among marginal people who are discriminated and must hide their ‘stigma’ to successfully interact with others. In Goffmann’s notion of ‘impression management’ human beings, called actors, play roles and give impressions of how they would like to be seen. At the front-stage actors stage a public face that depends on the audience they are confronted with and the context they are situated in, while once leaving the public stage and entering the backstage, they feel much safer and closer to their ‘real’ mental, moral and psychological self (*ibid.*).

Still, linking the symbolic identities of the silk weavers and traders to unequal production relationships and subsistence ethics alone is not sufficient to understand the gap that exists between the ethnic Chinese dominance of the industry and the Khmer modernization claim vested on the silk products by a range of stakeholders including the ethnic Chinese silk traders. According to Marx, the state usually secures the interests of the capitalist class in society and deploys ‘ideologies’ that mask the true, class-based exploitative nature of society (Inglis and Hughson 2003: 23). The story that the majority of the Cambodian parliament still consists of ethnic Chinese [as a remnant of French colonial policies (Osborne 1969; Meyer 1971)] should be interpreted in this light. However, the political and capitalist elite in Cambodia proliferates the culture of the workers and not the one of the capitalists. In other words, there exists a gap between the ethnic background of the political and economic elite in Cambodia and between the ways they advertise Cambodian culture publicly.

In chapter six I have attempted to shed light on the gap that exists between the Khmer and Chinese modernization processes and to answer the fourth research question: Why do ethnic Chinese silk

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traders and other crucial stakeholders (the state, NGOs and local communities) market silk weaving products as authentically Khmer? Following Walter Benjamin's (1940) notion of 'traditional modernity' and Jean Baudrillard's (1998 [1970]) concept of 'consumer societies' this study comes to the conclusion that all stakeholders, including the ethnic Chinese silk entrepreneurs, had an economic interest to market the silk products as being the 'traditional' ones of the Khmer silk weavers. First, to cope with the trauma of the Pol Pot regime postwar national leaders re-introduced the *sampot hol* as the national dress and nostalgically linked it back to the glorious age of Angkor, like their forebears used to do. Mythologizing Khmer culture to create national unity was put to the extreme by the PRK regime, which, demonizing Pol Pot, wanted to reverse a 'reality' in which Cambodians had killed each other during the war into a 'new' narrative of Pol Pot survivors sharing the same traumatic event and Angkorean roots. Converting aggressors into victims the postwar regime needed the 'fictive' Khmer *sampot hol* again to unite all Cambodians as members of the same destroyed Khmer community.

Secondly, the return of king Sihanouk from exile in 1991 and members of the royal household publicly advertising the *sampot hol* as authentic Khmer, the Angkorean origin of *sampot hol* became an important symbol of community, peace and liberty. After all, the Royal family is beloved by the majority of the Cambodian population and traces its genealogy back to the glorious era of Angkor, a genealogy that the war-stricken population needed to be reminded of in order to heal the wounds of the failed *Khmer Rouge* era. Albeit cruel, a 'trauma dress' supported by both the state and the royal family was lucrative for the silk entrepreneurs, because it guaranteed them a huge regular clientele, mainly in the busy April-November ceremonial season.

Thirdly, as the case-studies organized around the silk retailers in chapter six indicated, the Cambodian diaspora also had emotional and economic reasons to present silk weaving as authentic Khmer.

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Forced to leave their homeland in the 1970s and having lost many relatives in the Pol Pot working zones, the Cambodian diaspora framed a narrative of diasporic nostalgia around the silk industry as authentic Khmer. Allowed to visit their homeland again in the 1990s, Cambodian expatriates filled their suitcases with *sampot hol* and re-distributed these among Cambodian diaspora communities in the US, Europe and France. Silk traders such as Mrs. Bun and Youn Malis recognized this diasporic demand for Khmer authenticity skillfully and had no reason to market the *sampot hol* as Chinese.

Fourth, after Angkor became listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1992, the number of tourists increased from a mere 9,000 in 1993 to around one million in the year 2005 (Ministry of Tourism 2005). In particular the temples of Angkor and sites relating to the Pol Pot era became the focal point of a 1990s post-conflict 'Restoration Culture' led by international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Ollier and Winter 2006). The arrival of millions of dollars of financial assistance integrated Cambodia further into a dense web of Khmer consumer culture, in which it again became very lucrative for the silk entrepreneurs to advertise silk weaving products as authentically Khmer.

In sum, and coming to terms with the gap that emerged between the Khmer modernization claim vested in the silk products and the ethnic organization of the silk weaving industry, this study comes to the conclusion that this gap must be seen as a political strategy to imagine a nation (cf. Anderson 1991 [1983]) and a marketing strategy to meet consumer demands for Khmer authenticity. In negative terms, the strategic silence around the Chinese origin of the *sampot hol* can be valued as a superstructure (cf. Marx 2000 [1867]) that covers up the story that the ethnic Chinese are not only economically powerful, but also dominant in the political domain of Cambodia.

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But, to paraphrase Fink (1995: 25), canceling out the real does not mean the symbolic becomes a postmodern phantasm, because the symbolic creates a new 'reality', a reality which is named by language and can thus be thought and talked about in a meaningful way. As Walter Benjamin (1940) pointed out, myths are not only negative indices of the real but also have a positive productive dimension for the future. Or, in the words of Glynos and Stavrakakis (2004: 207), myths can be traumatic in the sense that they threaten identities but they are positive in the sense that they serve as the foundation on which new identities are constituted.

Although it is true that the business practices of the businesspeople in the silk industry operate vertically within the boundaries of ethnic Chinese ethnicity, their business practices also filled a gap in 'Khmer' culture and gave millions of Cambodians a sense of ethnic pride after the horrifying Pol Pot regime. Conversely, the grand Khmer narrative can be regarded as a myth that silences other truths, but we must acknowledge that Cambodian history was a painful one which had to be eclipsed by a fallacious Khmer symbol. To eclipse a painful history of war and poor economic conditions, a myth about an ancient Khmer-rooted silk weaving industry is meaningful for the emotional, symbolic and economic recuperation of the nation. Making whole what has been smashed, silk weavers and traders had to silence their Chinese backgrounds and stage themselves as descendents of the 12th century Khmer. This also means that progress in Cambodia is interwoven with silence because, resembling Walter Benjamin's (1940) 'angels of progress', silk weavers and traders have to enter the 21st century with their faces to the past and their backs to the future.

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