

Cambodian returnees' contributions to transformative change

The turbulence of a civil war (1970-1975), the Khmer Rouge takeover (1975-1979) and the Vietnamese intervention (1979-1989) forced many Cambodians into exile. Among the nations that offered refuge, America and France stand out in terms of numbers of Cambodian refugees accepted. Decades after these conflicts, members of the first generation refugees are returning to Cambodia. This first generation has combined their personal experiences of pre-conflict Cambodia, a prolonged stay in the country of exile, and a 'reacquaintance' with a post-conflict Cambodia that is emerging from its position as a 'weak state' under authoritarian leadership, to economic growth and relative political stability.

Gea Wijers



Above: Integration and Cambodian tradition: generational differences in the celebration of Khmer culture during Cambodian New Year in Lyon (photo by author).

IN THE HISTORY of Cambodian refugee resettlement, America and France have (since 1975) served as 'safe haven' for three waves of Cambodian refugees. Contributing to current discussions on the influence of migrant communities in origin and host countries, the focus of this research is on first generation Cambodian refugees who entered France or the United States before 1979 and who returned to Cambodia after the 1991 Paris Peace Accords. This group of informants may be distinguished in the Cambodian refugee community, in general, by their relative independence in resettlement, their language proficiency, the displayed cultural awareness of their new surroundings and their social belonging to the Cambodian middle or upper classes.

Creation and employment of social capital

My research fills a gap in the research on remigration and transnational entrepreneurship by taking a multidisciplinary, multi-sited and multi-embedded perspective on the study of institutional entrepreneurial activities by Cambodian returnees that are using their transnational networks as resources for their contributions to transformative change in their home country. These institutional entrepreneurs are defined as "actors with sufficient resources who see in the creation of new institutions an opportunity to realize their interest" in the governmental or non-governmental sector.¹ Their activities are designed to bring about transformative change within the profound socio-economic and political development of Cambodian society. The focus is on the creation and employment of the 'social capital' available in (trans)national social networks in these institutional entrepreneurial activities. It is proposed that these transnational social networks affect their institutional entrepreneurial activities by offering multiple opportunities at achieving the social legitimacy needed to make transformative change happen.

The research was designed as a comparative multiple case study, in the acknowledgement, nevertheless, of individual differences and social contexts. It was not meant to bring forward a set of structural cultural and ideological differences between host countries. Moreover, the social capital created and employed in social networks was not quantified systematically. Rather, evaluations were made on the basis of informants' stories about the social networks' cohesion by analysis of their 'narrativizations' on themes related to conflict and solidarity.²

Data collection took place in Lyon, France (2010), Long Beach (CA), USA (2011) and Phnom Penh, Cambodia (2010 & 2011). In the localities studied, members and leaders of Cambodian community organizations were contacted systematically and asked to assist in the recruitment of other informants. In four three-month periods of data collection in Lyon, Phnom Penh, Long Beach and then again Phnom Penh, the experiences of individual and key informants were collected through 129 semi-structured interviews.

Comparison and analysis

In the comparison and analysis it was established that a country's resettlement policies and immigration infrastructure have (had) a determining effect on many of Cambodian communities' actions. Laws and policies can bind the form, aims and extent of community organizations and the support they offer, thus affecting the refugees' social adaptation process and the social capital they create.

For the Cambodian French, remigration experiences have resulted in a discourse that implies that, although making a contribution to transformative change in the homeland is important, it is not necessary to resettle in Cambodia to do so. For instance, even while claiming their lawful French benefits and fulfilling their mortgage obligations, my informants in Lyon and Paris proudly mention their feelings of 'homecoming' in Cambodia. The Cambodian French returnees they refer me to are, also, best characterized as 'circular migrants'.³ Upon return, their transnational networks and their positive linkages to overseas Cambodian French communities and organizations have initially provided the Cambodian French returnees with a relatively generous bargaining power. This seems to be related to perceptions of their social status both before and during exile. In this way, historical ties with Cambodia brought returnees from France the benefit of their preferential treatment and expedient inclusion in certain local social networks both in the home and host country. They had a lot of overseas and local social capital to share transnationally. Since the 1997 clashes, however, colonial associations with France, the Cambodian French's traditional attitude of middle and upper class superiority towards the local Cambodians, and the English language barrier, have all contributed to processes that exclude the Cambodian French from reintegration at other levels of society.

The Cambodian American informants in Long Beach generally express high expectations of a return. Extensive and visible homeland attachments and involvements show that transnational activities in the Long Beach community are not necessarily 'choices' but may provide an 'escape' from a socially marginalized existence in the United States. For example, political rhetoric during public events and a history of support for military activities that were initiated on the Thai border during the Vietnamese takeover (1979-1989), demonstrate aspects of diasporic nationalism in this overseas Cambodian community. Informants interviewed in Cambodia express that the relatively cautious reception of Cambodian American returnees has, during the last decades, evolved into a warmer welcome to people from a country that is perceived to be rich and powerful. Cambodian American trade relations and American investments in Cambodia are still growing. Cambodian American transnational networks have professionalized and returnees are taking advantage of the available Cambodian as well as American opportunity structures. These intensifying relations seem to be appreciated in both the USA and Cambodia. Nevertheless, it can prove difficult for returnees to seize these opportunities effectively.

In general, however, returnees from both France and the United States, to a different degree, get stuck and become isolated in following the flows imposed on them by host land and homeland institutions. Both the Cambodian American and Cambodian French informants explain how perceptions of group and individual identities, their feelings of 'belonging', 'homecoming' and being a part of a social network, are re-evaluated and renegotiated upon return. As a result, the returnees' transnational resources and distinct histories have sometimes even actively led to dynamics of cultural exclusion, self-exclusion and marginalization upon return in Cambodia.

When it comes to the institutional entrepreneurs' roles as builders, their activities do not lead to the significant

contributions to transformative change in Cambodia they intended. The social capital these returnees have created in the host country is hard to employ in Cambodia, while their transnational social networks have a varied impact on their 'success'. Resistance, opposition and disinterest towards their institutional entrepreneurship by fellow Cambodians, as well as local distrust, can counteract their ambitions to make change happen.

Conclusions

One of the more significant conclusions to emerge from this study, which looked at the ways in which first generation Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees create and employ their social capital in institutional entrepreneurial activities upon return to the home country, is that the social capital in (trans)national networks is even more versatile than previous research would have us believe. Not only can it provide individuals with benefits through their membership of these networks, but also, in the dynamics of social relations, 'negative social capital' may be produced, which actually restrains relationships and contributions to transformative change.

Upon return, the comparison and analysis of the Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees' cases show that neither group can freely employ the social capital in their (trans)national networks to realize their ambitions for Cambodia. When the returnees first arrive in the country, and their social legitimacy in Cambodia is not yet established, they are often met with suspicion by local parties. The questions of loyalty, 'foreignness' and 'ethnicity' are put to them and affect their access to resources as well as their initiation of institutional entrepreneurial activities. Only a few returnees are well-established socially, both overseas and in Cambodia, and are allowed to work on the basis of trust in multiple localities. Those individuals are often perceived as the most 'successful' institutional entrepreneurs by the overseas Cambodian communities.

Returnees to Cambodia may not remain neutral. In the long term, they are not able to remain unaffiliated and have to choose sides, socially and politically, in order to survive. Their transnational connections that push for transformation of the country may prove a burden as the traditional Cambodian patronage system hardly allows for a type of change that follows contested western models for development or democratization. Moreover, populist rhetoric on 'foreigners' posing a threat to the Cambodian nation, affects the reception of returnees. A lack of social legitimacy, trust and acceptance thus limits the returnees' opportunities to initiate institutional change in this context of cultural competition, political contestation and looming social conflict.

Of course, individual informants differ from one another in their abilities, skills and personality traits. On a group level, however, distinct differences that seem to exist between Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees confirm that:

- the geopolitical position of their host country may positively or negatively affect the returnees' reception as well as their social legitimacy upon return;
- language barriers may restrict the returnees' opportunities to find a livelihood as well as restrict the employment of the social capital available in their transnational social networks;
- levels of cultural exclusion related to the host countries' migration policies and ideologies are evident in processes of resettlement in host countries as well as the employment of transnational resources by returnees.

The conclusions of this research support policy makers' efforts to establish efficient and effective institutional mechanisms for (re)migration. Future research will have to produce more detailed insights in the ways these may facilitate and open up opportunities for returnees from a diversity of countries.

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Notes

1 DiMaggio, P.J. 1988. 'Interest and Agency in Institutional Theory', in L.G. Zucker (ed.) *Institutional Patterns and Organizations: Culture and Environment*, Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Co, pp.3-21 (see p.14)

2 In contrast to personal narratives, such as life stories, a narrativization focuses on particular 'selected' experiences considered pivotal by the narrator in semi-structured interviews.

3 These returnee institutional entrepreneurs chose to remain 'transnational' and 'unbounded' in the sense that they only return to Cambodia for several months a year and live in France the rest of the time thus making 'circular' movements between countries.

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