Penny Edwards, *Cambodge, The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945* (first revised edition). Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2008, viii+349 pp. Paperback ISBN 978-974-9511-39-8

The very title of Penny Edwards' book is a telling stroke; the use of the alien, French name of the country underscores her central contention that the Cambodian nation was invented—or cultivated—during the colonial era. The book itself does not disappoint after so auspicious a title. A real tour de force, beautifully written and crafted, it reflects the author's vast knowledge of Cambodian history and culture. Hardly a word is superfluous in a dense text marvellously compressed into a scant 250 pages excluding the end materials. Edwards' scholarship is meticulous and her book is based on a huge collection of French and Khmer archival, literary and periodical sources. The book is packed with pithy aphorisms, fascinating details and keen insights. One observation that springs readily to mind is the line, "Whereas Marx had set out to turn all peasants into citizens, Saloth Sar [Pol Pot] was determined to turn all citizens into peasants." (If Marx set Hegel on his feet, Pol Pot has kicked the feet from under Marx, one might add) Edwards is also keenly aware of Edward Said's strictures against "Orientalism". It is refreshing that she allows the Khmers to speak through her translations, such as when the poet Suttanprija In writes of the peasants conscripted by the French for restoration work at Angkor:

> Coolies are hired as labor
> Chopping wood and hauling stone slabs to and fro
> …seeing our Khmer race as coolies
> I am overcome with pity for the Khmer race, dirt poor,
> Working as coolies for somebody else's money.
> I watch their bodies, frail and flat-bellied
> Hair thick with dust and grime, stinking like otters.

The Khmers in the Angkor of the colonial period were invisible—even edited out of the illustrations to Henri Mouhot's posthumously-published book on the ruins, as Edwards tells us. Yet while the French physically appropriated the monuments and incorporated them as a central part of their discourse on colonialism (and misunderstood their original purpose) the modern Khmers themselves took over that body of ideas and gave it a nationalist twist. My old teacher David Chandler often drew attention to the fact that the towers of Angkor Wat have featured on all Cambodian flags since independence. "What," he would ask, "is the significance of this?" Some students shrugged: wasn't it obvious, given Angkor's cultural and political significance for the Khmer people? Nationalist politicians might have given similar answers. Penny Edwards' book is a marvellous riposte to such uncritical and ahistorical thinking. For many Khmers in the early period of the tricolour, it was a pile of

old stones, but they came to see it as the central symbol of a newly-minted sense of nationhood. The myth became so pervasive that, as Edwards puts it, "The hypnotic appeal of Angkor Vat as a sacred symbol uniting Khmers in time and space has seduced some observers of modern Cambodian history into accepting nationalist myth as historical fact." Moreover, she continues, "The dominant paradigm of Khmer national sentiment as a primordial continuum linking pre- and post-colonial Cambodia is a shibboleth."

Given our familiarity with Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community", there is nothing startling in such observations. Some nation states were literally invented: Belgium, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Iraq, for example. The political act of creation was preceded by cultural invention, and this was also the case in long-established states recasting themselves as cultural-ethnic entities. Thus as Eric Hobsbawm tells us, the Lowland Scots appropriated and even invented the symbols of Highland culture in their bid to create a nation, and Jewish nationalists revived a dead language. Cambodia is not Scotland or the Eastern European ghetto, however, and while Edwards takes Anderson and Hobsbawm as her point of departure, she has adapted and enriched their ideas in this highly original study.

Cambodian nationalism, Edwards explains, was produced by the colonial encounter of Khmers and French. Again, the idea of Europe providing new models is not new in itself: Marx argued that colonialism inadvertently acted as its own gravedigger by providing Asian revolutionaries with the intellectual ammunition of nationalism, democracy and socialism. But again, this is a generalisation, and generalisations notoriously fail to illuminate the specific circumstances of social and political phenomena. Marx, of course, stressed politics and economics in such processes. In Cambodia, as Edwards acknowledges, the growth of nationalism was partly a result of resentment against repression, economic exploitation and a stunted educational system. However, she argues, this has led to historians being preoccupied with the "political manifestations of nationalism as opposed to the cultural context". Indeed she insists that the nationalists did not produce a culture, but rather it produced them. That culture itself resulted from the complex interrelationships between the French colonialists and the Khmer colonised. Without agreeing to sideline politics and economics, we should concede that it is necessary to bend the stick back in the direction to which Edwards points if we are to understand the richness and complexity of the historical processes which led to the Cambodian nation.

The book comprises nine chapters. As a history of ideas it is not strictly chronological, with the chapters concentrating on themes. There are three chapters on Angkor and three on Buddhism, interleaved with three more chapters on what she describes as "more urbane

themes" of literature and politics. The chapters on Angkor in particular are superb, and contain fascinating details probably unknown even to specialists. As she shows, too, the example of Angkor led the French to create a hybrid "national style of architecture", particularly in the capital, Phnom Penh. For the French, the Khmers were a "decadent" people, whose glory days were in the long-vanished past. Their role, as they saw it, was to preserve that past, whether it be manifested in art and crafts, religion, music, high art, the plastic arts, or ceremony. Thus, Edwards shows how the funeral rites of Ang Duong were much less elaborate than those of Norodom, despite the latter being a figurehead and the former the last reasonably sovereign ruler of the country. French scholars and erudite administrators also played key roles in the production of *Khmerité*—"Khmerness". One she examines in some detail is the polymath Suzanne Karpelès, who played a key role in the establishment of the Buddhist Institute and the National Library. In the process of establishing Buddhism as a textual religion and excluding popular strains with their provenance in Hinduism and animism, Karpelès helped establish a national religion – a crucial ingredient in the cement of the newly created nation.

The outcome of the French period was the creation of the idea of a Khmer nation, and of a nationalist ideology which eventually turned on France. It did not have to be a historically tenable discourse, but it presented a triumphalist vision of the past that was seamless and simple to understand: Cambodge was the inheritor of two thousand years or more of unbroken history and culture. In September 1938, Edwards records, a *Nagaravatta* editorialist claimed that Angkor had been built "to demonstrate to the great power of the Khmers in the world, both to the West and to neighboring countries (like Tonkin)." It was pretty poor history, but it illustrates the great hold that the newly created national myths had on the Cambodian literati, and which were to percolate in coming years to the rest of the people.

John Tully
